



**BOY @
THE WINDOW**

A MEMOIR

DONALD EARL COLLINS

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To Noah M. Collins and Brandie B. Weston,

for reminding me of youthful joy and of the shortness of life

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Preface

I'm always amazed by the smallest of things. A wide receiver tiptoeing the sideline of a football field after making an acrobatic catch. He barely keeps his left foot in-bounds by tapping his big toe in the two inches of space between the clumpy green grass and the thick white line in front of him. A note in a song that is so inspiring, so well balanced between rhythm and harmony, so well sung that the hairs on my neck stand up and my spirit feels like soaring. Pictures are among those smallest and most awesome of things. Perhaps because so few of mine survived to adulthood.

But it's not just what's in the picture that's important. It's the sliver of difference between success and failure in our lives that pictures, at least when magnified, can confirm. Especially when failure could mean irreparable damage, a life of wondering what could've been, even the possibility of death. In the case of a receiver, it could be the difference between a Super Bowl ring and MVP trophy and being on the bad end of an NFL highlight reel for eternity. In my case, it would've been the difference between going to college and having a home versus a lifetime of poverty, homelessness or finding myself in the hospital. Or even dying young, by my own hands or someone else's.

I've only five surviving photos of me as a child, and only three taken between first grade and my freshman year of college. And that includes my high school ID mugshot! This fact is only a pixel of the total picture that represents my life as a tweener and teenager growing up in Mount Vernon, New York in the good old '80s. There are many who say something to the effect of "There but by the grace of God go I" in reference to people like me. But as someone who has experienced so much of the dark side of life, the grace of God is far simpler and more complicated than comparing the relative situations of two different people. The grace of God ultimately is about holding on to hope, maintaining your faith in yourself and in a higher power, and nurturing that faith and hope in order to cultivate your dreams and live out your vision for a brighter and better future.

With a family life, school district and city like the one I lived in and with, it's hard to believe that I managed my way to a life worth living. You could say that I did this *despite* my upbringing and tutelage. Or that I achieved all that I have *because* of what I managed to learn from my parents and teachers. I'm sure that both are true. But I can't credit all of the mistakes in my life growing up to others. I stumbled my way to college, to friendships and

Preface

relationships, to God and an understanding of my nonfunctional family. That's what this memoir's about. Overcoming the odds, especially in getting out of my own way so that I could take my own pictures and make my own sideline catches.

Not that I'm into such things, but I think that it would be interesting to meet up again with all of the people who were a part of my life during the '80s. From my Mount Vernon High School Class of '87 classmates at our twenty-fifth year reunion to my father's long lost and mostly dead-watering hole buddies. From confronting my ex-stepfather to meeting with teachers who didn't think I would graduate high school, much less become a professor. From those who are alive and well to those souls who are no longer a part of this world. I'd even go back in time, to visit the young women I fell in love or obsession with, to give sage advice to my younger self, to my older brother, to Mom and father. This book is the best I can do to make all of these things possible.

The title's inspired by a song by the one-time hip-hop soul duo Groove Theory (Amel Larrieux's pre-solo artist beginnings). Unlike the boy in the song, I didn't destroy my life by giving into the temptation of "lookin' to the corner" and ending up at a window "enclosed wrought iron bars" — a windowless cell block. My "corner" was one that mixed a few drug dealers and winos with hard-working, middle-aged Black and Afro-Caribbean men and women and a group of diverse middle class families. From our living room or bedroom window in our third-floor apartment, I dreamed of a world that was tailor-made for me. It didn't matter what the dream was. I just wanted the chance to be me, to discover myself and the wonders that other people possess, to understand my calling in life.

1. About A Boy

I loved Charles Schulz' *Peanuts* comic strip and his Charlie Brown and Snoopy books growing up. From the time I turned seven all the way through sixth grade, they helped expand my mind and world beyond 616 East Lincoln Avenue, apartment number A32 and Mount Vernon, New York. So much so that when I had read all of the books available to me through Mount Vernon Public Library, I took the idea of Charlie Brown to heart. I saw myself as the Black version of the lonely misfit of a kid, who could almost grab the brass ring but couldn't quite hold on to it, who had some friends, but not close ones.

World Book Encyclopedia literally changed my life between December '78 and April '79. And with that change came my ability to use Charles Schulz' *Peanuts* as the image in my mind's eye for understanding it all. It was after running away from home and from my new stepfather, the now-and-forever abuser and idiot Maurice Washington, whom had married my mother in October '78. Because my stepfather had pissed me off with another one of his rules, and because I knew that my guardians had already started to argue about money, I ran away from home. I packed two days' worth of clothing and walked out with the plan that I would get to New Rochelle, find a boat, stowaway and eventually get to Europe or France. There, I could be free.

The Pelham Manor Police found me three-and-a-half hours later, having lured me into the squad car with the promise of hot dogs and orange soda. My mother gave me the belt-ass-whuppin' of my life at the time, as it seemed to last forever, with her screaming, "You do this again, you won't be around to cry about it!" I was on lockdown in me and my older brother Darren's bedroom for six weeks afterward.

It was during those six weeks of no TV and no going outside that I decided to punish my mother and stepfather by ignoring them with books. I cracked open the "A" volume of the '78 edition of *The World Book Encyclopedia* and began reading. And reading. And reading. "I'll show them!" I thought. Pretty soon I didn't miss TV. I didn't have lots of friends, so going out to play became less and less of a hardship. So I kept reading.

By the time I decided to go outside again, it was April '79, well past my six-week grounding. But going outside to play for the first time in four months felt more alien to me than what I had been doing after reading sections of *World Book Encyclopedia*. I'd taken what I had learned about city government, taxes, urban planning and population density,

and created what I called “Peanuts Town” in our bedroom. Charlie Brown was the mayor, and Lucy Van Pelt was his wife. Snoopy, of course, was the deputy mayor and in charge of law enforcement. Once my father Jimme came back into our lives that spring, I’d buy Matchbox cars to drive around the city, and created a restaurant and entertainment row of the city that included a McDonald's Big Mac styrofoam and Burger King fries containers as restaurants. This was underneath my twin-sized bed, where my city frequently needed constant protection from the intrusion of dust bunnies.

By the end of fifth grade in June '80, my encyclopedic world view had expanded to include national and international issues, including American history and World War II. I made “Peanuts Town” the capital of “Peanuts Land,” and Charlie Brown was the president. By this time, Charlie and Lucy had kids, just like I had a younger baby brother in Maurice. I made up maps of this country, including its natural resources and its naval bases. I'd make ships out of aluminum foil and stamp them into shapes using the old, heavy wooden frame windows we had in our bedroom. I made at least fifty battleships, aircraft carriers and cruisers, preparing for the Soviet threat. All without the prospect of nuclear war.

As I kept reading and using my imagination, my SRA tests for fourth and fifth grade confirmed that all of this deep thinking was paying off. I had raised my reading score from 3.9 (just barely at the fourth grade level) to a 7.4 (the equivalent of an above average seventh grader) by the end of fourth grade, and to an 11.0 by the end of fifth. A story of irony, imagination and naïveté, the story of my young life, a boy at the window.

That boy, as naïve as he was, saw education as his way to a successful life. College was on his mind, but not too much. It was a distant thought, like traveling to Europe or winning one million dollars at Lotto. Education — especially grades — was as important as breathing to this boy. It was the one thing that his journey to college and through life would teach him to give up, the high of good grades. And along with that, the budding idea of life as a writer. What mattered instead was who his parents were, what he believed about life *after* life and how to use his imagination to make himself a better student and person. All of which he'd learn through hard life lessons and vivid dreams and revelations, giving him the ultimate education.

For me, this boy, this tweener, an active imagination and an even more animated dream life was critical. Living in between the hustle and bustle of “The City,” — Manhattan and the other four boroughs of New York — and the relative quiet of the ritzy

suburbs immediately north of it was everything and everyone I knew before the age of twelve. Just three blocks after the elevated 2 Subway line ended at East 241st Street in the Bronx was where Mount Vernon, New York began. From the hard concrete sidewalks and green street signs of New York to the crumbling light blue slate and dark blue signs were my only indications that I had truly left the city. This despite the claims of so many I knew that upstate New York began somewhere above 125th or 207th Street in Manhattan. I knew by the time I was twelve that, sleepy bedroom suburb or not, Mount Vernon had more features in common with the Bronx and upper Manhattan than most city folk were willing to recognize.

My only links to the great metropolis to the south were WNBC-TV (Channel 4), Warner Wolf — with his famous “Let’s go to the video tape!” line — doing sports on WCBS-TV (Channel 2), and WABC-AM 77 and WBLS-FM 107.5 on the radio. I found the AM station more fun to listen to, but I also liked listening to the sign-off song WBLS played at the end of the evening, *Moody’s Mood for Love*, with that, “There I go, There I go, The-ere I go...” start. Music had been an important part of my imagination in ’79, with acts like Earth, Wind & Fire, Christopher Cross, Billy Joel and The Commodores. Not to mention Frank Sinatra, Queen, Donna Summer and Michael Jackson’s *Off The Wall* album. The music also made me feel like I was as much a part of New York as I was a part of Mount Vernon. It left me thinking of the ozone and burnt rubber smell that I noticed as soon as I would walk down into the Subway system in Manhattan. But aside from my occasional slip of the tongue — “warda” for “water” and “bawwgt” for “bought” — I didn’t sound or act much like a New Yawker. Still, I discovered something about New York from afar. I could sneak up to the rooftop of my apartment building, 616 East Lincoln, a five-story complex of three connected brick buildings with Tudor-style facades and a concrete-stone foundation. I’d find the exit to the roof unlocked and see the tops of the Twin Towers floating over some low-lying clouds on an otherwise sunny day. The symbols of the greatest city on Earth seemed to float toward the heavens on those days, and me with them.

Besides the occasional reminder of life outside of my world, of Mount Vernon, I was the center of my own universe. Mount Vernon was but a stage on which my life played out, a place I hoped would stay this way forever. I was an eleven-year-old who thought that my world was *the* world. I lived my life like Philip Bailey and Maurice White would’ve

wanted me to. I came to see “victory in a life called fantasy” as my own life, living as if my imagination and dreams could be made into reality. All I had to do was wish it so.

As part of my world at eleven, I thought I had a best friend in Starling Churn. Ours was a friendship that began and ended with a fight. In one sense, the reason for our preteen brotherly bond was also a key reason for our two fights. We were fighting over who was the smartest in our school. Silly, immature, nerdy and geekish I knew, but all so true.

Our school was William H. Holmes Elementary School, one built in the mid-'50s with the best of modern school architecture in mind. The back of the two-story building included two softball fields, another field that was often used for flag football, a small asphalt playing area which sometimes subbed as a fifty-yard dash track, and a sloped wooded area that covered nearly a quarter-acre. Next door was the Mount Vernon Board of Education, giving the school immediate access to the district's offices, if not its resources. This was a truly suburban K-6 school, one that justified some of my naiveté. This was also the location of my first and last fight with Starling, one in April '79, the other in May '81. In between were two years of serious intellectual conversations and friendly academic competitions.

Starling was the first person of the same age I had ever talked to about politics, race, religion, girls, science, music, math and war without being made to feel like I was an oddball. We talked during playtime before school, we ate our lunches together, hung out during recess and walked home together after school. Our classroom conversations would draw our teachers — especially our sixth-grade teacher Mrs. Bryant — into one philosophical debate after another. We'd even get our other classmates Roger, Eric, Christopher, Anthony and Ronald to participate in our carping sessions. We were two goofy preteens who had yet to discover the need to lighten up. But this was our world, one in which this friendship could take root and grow.

Starling was the son of a Southern Baptist minister. He was a boy that may have been Black, but in spending so much time with him, I could see Caucasian, Cherokee Indian or even East Asian features in his face and skin. It made him interesting. These features didn't go that well with his metal braces, ones that he'd worn for all the years we were at Holmes. I could sometimes see small pieces of bread or lettuce caught between his teeth and metal at the end of the school day.

Still, we were the smartest kids we knew. This fact would become more obvious

after the ringing of the 3:10 pm final bell. Our walks home took us in one of two possible directions. One was from the back of the school, a left onto East Sidney Avenue, and then a winding series of uphill and downhill streets toward Lorraine Avenue. In between were avenues lined with or named after trees — Esplanade, Mersereau, Darwood, Magnolia and Sycamore, all lined mostly with tall oaks and chestnuts, with a few magnolias and sycamores here and there. I got hit in the head so many times by those chestnuts falling from trees in September and October, at the end of the growing season, I guessed. Along the way to Starling's home on the cul-de-sac of Lorraine Terrace, we'd pass quite a few nice homes with garages and well-kept lawns, and walk down a couple of blocks without a sidewalk, which surprised me the first time I'd done this walk with Starling. We'd also passed the Metro-North and Conrail train tracks on top of an elevated wall that split this part of Mount Vernon in two. We'd sometimes walk uphill on Lorraine Avenue to get to Lorraine Terrace, passing the old Alamo-looking facade of the old Mount Vernon train station, built back in the 1850s.

Our other and more common after school walk home took us out from the front lawn of Holmes onto East Lincoln Avenue, but not directly. We waited for all of our classmates and other students to clear out first, as we took our time walking toward the front lawn and gate. Then we'd walk on top of the long and sloped stone wall that indicated the front of our school, as it rose with the hill that it was holding up at the front of the school, to about eleven feet. A seven-foot high steel fence ran all along this hill from the front to the back woods area of the school, with trees lined right next to it, the roots sometimes growing underneath this fence. It intersected with the top of the front stone wall, where me and Starling would grab the steel fence post with our hands and with our backs facing the edge of the wall. We'd swing around this obstacle while avoiding the branches of an oak tree, then walk down the short hilly lawn on the other side. That would put us on East Lincoln and in front of an elegant, Victorian-style Mount Vernon fire station with a semi-circular driveway. Sometimes we'd go into the s firehouse to buy locally-made, twenty-five cent grape sodas, at least on warmer days. Then it was seven blocks to Lincoln and Lorraine, where Starling would turn right to get home.

It was on one of these walks at the end of October when Starling asked,

“Have you thought about what we talked about?”

“What?,” I said, not know what Starling had on his mind.

“Have you thought about getting baptized and giving yourself to Christ?” Starling asked with an intensity and weight that was unusual, even for him. We had several conversations about his father’s church, about Jesus and the afterlife since the end of fifth grade, but none about what *I* would do about my own soul.

“Oh. Yeah, I’ve thought about it,” I said. I *had* thought about it. I had started reading the Gospels and had watched some guy named Frederick Price on TV in September talking about “We walk by faith and not by sight.”

“And?” Starling asked with passion and hope in his eyes.

“I’m still thinking. I’ve got time, I think, before I decide, right?”

“Of course, but the sooner the better,” Starling responded, with a bit of disappointment in his voice

The end of the month — and the end of that day — had turned cold, with northwest winds and a clear suburban evening sky. As I sat in our bedroom, on my bed, gazing out at the stars as evening turned into night, I wished on one of them. I wished for God to come in and provide me the knowledge I needed to know him. I lay in my bed afterward, opening up a 1931 edition Bible, and read the Gospels once again. I felt like I was close to understanding who Jesus was, what Christianity was all about and why Starling cared so much.

But I wasn’t there yet. I didn’t feel the same sense of urgency for water immersion and John 3:16 as Starling did for me. I preferred our talks about Blondie, Queen, Pink Floyd, Sugar Hill Gang and “this thing called rap,” Carter versus Reagan and Begin versus Sadat.

Then Maurice Eugene Washington came back into my life. My stepfather and Mom had separated in October ’80, two years and one child (my younger brother, also named Maurice Eugene) after marrying at Grace Baptist Church, then the largest church in Mount Vernon. My brother Maurice was a new addition to what had been just me and my older brother Darren for nearly a decade. Unknown to us was that Mom was pregnant again. I knew that Mom and Maurice were fighting over money, especially after Maurice lost his taxi-driving job in April ’79.

Maurice left us, but not without taking with him half of our food and the only working TV. I hadn’t missed him or the TV during the six months he’d been gone, thanks in many ways to Starling. Maurice returned to our lives in April ’81, claiming that he was a

different man, a changed man, thanks to an allegedly reincarnated Balkis Makeda (Queen of Sheba and wife of King Solomon of the ancient Israelites) and his Hebrew-Israelite conversion.

This was the religion my stepfather converted to after he and Mom had separated. In the period before his return, my stepfather had been working on Mom, attempting to convince her that he was now a good man and could be trusted as the man of our house. He loved Jehovah, had stopped smoking, and had learned how to love himself. And he had changed his name to Judah ben Israel, not legally, mind you. The name literally means “Lion of God and of Israel,” and referred to my stepfather as a royal descendant of Jacob/Israel, the immediate father of the Israelite people. It was in this context that my stepfather gained a sense of himself and control over his world, which was what convinced Mom to end her separation from him.

I didn't know what to think at first. After I had watched Maurice load up on lamb shanks and pork chops on the first Saturday in October six months earlier, I hadn't expected him to come back at all. I already thought of the man as the great pretender after three and a half years of living in the same 1,200 square-foot space with him. That, and eating like he was Dom DeLuise at a banquet, were his only true talents. I couldn't understand how men and women on Mount Vernon's streets could enjoy his talking game, and the bad cigarette and food breath that came with it. He used to boast how he killed Viet Cong in the final days of the Vietnam War, only for me to find out while going through some of his papers one day that he had served as an MP at Fort Bragg for a year before being dishonorably discharged for going AWOL. For a few months before he lost his job at Reliable Taxi, he used to carry around a briefcase while telling me and Darren that he was a doctor *and* a lawyer.

Maurice's biggest pretending project of all was attempting to play the role of father for Darren and me. His definition of discipline was a belt for an “ass whuppin',” and his idea of play-time was teaching us how to be “men” through karate. When we first moved in at 616, and began complaining about all the new chores we had to perform, Maurice said, “You and your brother are gonna be my house servants.” As few and far in between my visits with my father Jimme were after Mom's divorce became final in '78, I'd always seen an inebriated Jimme as more of a father than Maurice could be if he really tried.

Coming home from school to see Maurice at 616 as if six months of separation

hadn't occurred left my head spinning. Still, despite my confusion and skepticism, I worked extremely hard to convince myself that Maurice's conversion was real. Especially since Mom had decided to welcome him back into all of our lives.

The next step, of course, was our acceptance of the Hebrew-Israelite religion. This wasn't exactly a process in which free will was involved. Our mother told us that this would be our religion "for the rest of our lives." Then our stepfather came to explain this "way of life" to us, and we put on our white, multi-holed, circular kufis for the first time. I had no idea what Mom and Maurice had pushed us into. A part of me was on the outside looking in, thinking, "This is crazy!" But as nutty as this sudden conversion seemed, I convinced myself into acceptance. We were already the children of one divorce, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to see another one so soon. Darren, to his credit, played along as if being a Hebrew-Israelite was just a role in a school play.

I lost many of my sixth-grade friends when I showed up to school one morning soon after Maurice's return with a kufi on my head. Starling stopped speaking to me immediately and entirely. We'd recently celebrated — prematurely I might add — Reagan being shot by John Hinckley, Jr. on the last Friday in March. Now our friendship was over. This was what our second fight was about, our friendship, my bizarre religion and my acceptance of it. After school on Friday, May 1, I grabbed Starling as we left the back entrance of Holmes and said, "Let's go!"

"You wanna throw down? Let's throw down!" he yelled with bitter glee.

I really didn't want to fight. I just wanted Starling to be my friend again, to stop walking by me as if I were a ghost. We hadn't talked — not one word — in more than two weeks. We threw a few punches as we stood toe-to-toe in the middle of the back woods behind the school. This wasn't our fight of two years earlier, where we ended up rolling around in the dirt and springtime grass while punching each other. No, it was a boxing match, as if we were grown men. But Starling's punches hurt, much more than I expected. What hurt was that I just couldn't believe that Starling could end our friendship over my kufi, just like that. He won that day, with him and his — our — other friends laughing along with him. I was fighting for our friendship, literally. Starling beat me up in order to end it. None of that really mattered. The fight left me embarrassed, angry, alone, and in despair — heartbroken.

I guess that Starling at twelve was definitely his father's son. I certainly understood

where Starling was coming from. I'd betrayed him when I came to school and professed that I was a Hebrew-Israelite. Starling had been talking to me for months about becoming a Christian, a Baptist, and now here I was embracing Black Judaism, similar in many ways to the Nation of Islam in its views of Black Christians. The practitioners I'd been around in those last weeks in April tended to see people like Starling and his dad as "weak," "out of touch" with "their heritage," and as "worshiping the wrong God." So I understood why Starling was angry. I understood it, but couldn't accept it.

I did have one bit of good news soon after, though. My sixth-grade teacher Mrs. Bryant pushed for my acceptance into Mount Vernon's Humanities Program at the beginning of May. This meant that I could spend as much as the next six years taking accelerated courses with the brightest students in Mount Vernon. When Mrs. Bryant told me about her recommendation, I bounced the seven blocks home to tell Mom about the opportunity. Mom asked, "Are you sure about this?," as if I was planning to become a Catholic priest. I responded with an emphatic, sportscaster Marv Albert-esque "Yes!"

I was accepted into the program by mid-May, and asked to pick a language of study. This would be a language I would study for the next four years! I didn't think much past the next couple of weeks, except when waxing philosophic, so four years might as well have been forty. I opted for Italian over Spanish and French, mostly because of my love for spaghetti and pizza and Italian cheeses, a desire to visit Little Italy, and because the other six Holmes School classmates who had been accepted into Humanities chose the other languages. Mrs. Bryant's encouragement, her insistence that I was "one of the best students" she "ever had," made sixth grade a joyful time. But with the loss of Starling as my best friend, it was hard to celebrate without feeling lost.

I spent most of the summer before Humanities writing my first book. It was a book about the top-secret military hardware the Department of Defense didn't want the rest of America to know about. I remained consumed with reading about war and military technology in my spare time — I wouldn't have learned the word "fortnight" otherwise! Everything from the B-1 bomber to the M-1 Abrams tank to the Trident submarine and MX missile was to be in this scoop on the latest in military high-tech. I even wrote a letter to the Pentagon for declassified pictures of these weapons, which I received in mid-July. By the time of my brother Yiscoc's birth (one form of Hebrew for "Isaac" and pronounced

“yizz-co”) later in the month, I’d written nearly fifty pages on these weapons and why they were so cool for the US military to have. Especially in light of the Soviet military threat. Unfortunately, they didn’t declassify the fact that America’s latest tank used depleted uranium in parts of its hull or in its cannon shells. That would’ve been a real scoop at the time. But I deferred on finishing this book, not really sure that this was what I was meant to do and be.

My older brother Darren did what he and I both had been doing since ’77, summer camp at Clear View. I’d gone to these camps with him from ’77 to ’80. I thought that I was better than this. I was older because of what had happened with Starling, smarter because of my Humanities Program acceptance. But despite his continued association with a private school for the mentally retarded, Darren in many ways was the smarter one. The real tragedy, of course, was that Darren wasn’t retarded at all. He’d taught himself to read at three and had taught me to read in full sentences just after my fifth birthday. I can still remember him sitting with me for what seemed like hours during one holiday afternoon stepping me through one “Dick and Jane” sentence after another. Yet because Mom and Jimme interpreted Darren’s severe public shyness for stupidity, he’d spent the last seven years at a private day school for the retarded that cost New York State \$33,000 a year.

Darren’s school was The Clear View School, a school for the mild to severely mentally retarded in Northern Westchester County. Despite all other evidence of how smart Darren was, my older brother’s extreme shyness was cause for concern. So much so that my father took us to Clear View in the spring of ’74 and allowed the school to give Darren a battery of IQ and other psychological tests. The shrinks determined that he was mildly mentally retarded.

Mom wasn’t directly involved in this decision. At least not at first. Jimme did this while she was at work at the hospital one day. Yet Mom didn’t attempt to take Darren out of Clear View until ’80, six years later. He threw a temper-tantrum, kicking and screaming on the floor of our neighborhood laundromat when Mom suggested that she should send him to Holmes. Mom gave up, saying that “Darren only listens to White people,” and Darren stayed at Clear View. This was typical Mom, always giving up and in, always taking the path of least resistance.

For me at least, this was a calm summer, like I was sitting out by a lake with only a slight breeze blowing around me. I was enjoying the peace and quiet of being near still

water, of an occasional rustle of trees, of a plop or two of something that dropped into the lake. This was a time for me to imagine our lives as better, better than they actually were. I was on an end-of-elementary school and Humanities-acceptance high. I couldn't have been any higher than if I had snorted coke at one of those drug-fueled parties Mom would drag us to while hanging out with her Mount Vernon Hospital buddies. (Luckily, Mom didn't do drugs.)

Combined with having become a part of a bizarre religion, I now had a new point of view on my life. We all served Yahweh and I saw myself as the unofficial valedictorian of my elementary school class. In the three years prior to seventh grade, I had straight A's, won a Dental Awareness Month award for Best Poster, came in second in a city-wide writing contest, and read at the twelfth-grade level. I figured out that I earned an A on forty-eight out of fifty-two quizzes and tests in sixth grade. The lowest grade I earned that year was an 88 on a spelling quiz. At my elementary school graduation in June '81, I served as the opening speaker, introducing the city councilman who served as our keynote. I even wrote the short introduction that I delivered on that wonderful day. I firmly believed that no one in the world was smarter than me. It wouldn't have been any funnier if I'd pretended I was Mr. October himself, Reggie Jackson, saying his words, "Sometimes I underestimate the magnitude of me."

Yiscoc's birth at Metropolitan Hospital in Manhattan helped me stay in this temporary state of insanity. To see new life enter the world at this stage seemed so encouraging. Three weeks after Yiscoc came into the world, all of us spent the afternoon at White Plains Public Library. I did some more research for my military book, while Darren worked on his school comic series "Dwayne and Cindy." His series of illustrations were as good as any as I'd seen in the *New York Daily News*. Darren's dialogue was lacking, but with time, it could've really been something. This was a really good day, almost too good to be true.

Meanwhile, my father Jimme was still recovering from his brush with death courtesy of another drunk and a Louisville Slugger from earlier that summer. For over a week, my father had lingered in an ICU bed in Mount Vernon Hospital after he'd been reported dead in the Obituary section of the *Mount Vernon Daily Argus*. Jimme ended up in the hospital because he'd made fun of another, bigger drunk, calling him a "po' ass muddafucca" at what we called "Wino Park" on South Fulton and East Third. So much

was the humiliation that the man marched home, grabbed a baseball bat, and returned to repeatedly smash my dad in the head until he was unconscious.

His near-death experience was not all that shocking for us, at least not obviously so. My father's life in the New York City area had turned into a slow motion tragedy of errors long before I was old enough to witness one of his drinking binges and hangovers. And Jimme *regularly* went on benders, ones that began on payday Friday and ended on Monday or Tuesday. As he liked to say, he "got to' up" almost every weekend — "tore up" for those unfamiliar with Jimme-ese. This was going on for years before Mom had filed for divorce in July '76. Jimme also had a habit of saying, "O' bo', I can't do dis no mo'. Gotta stop doin' dis. Nex' week, nex' week. I'll stop drinkin' nex' week." All while shaking his head, his eyes down, ashamed of how he felt and looked once the binge had ended. Jimme never said "now" or "this week." It was always next week with him.

Because he was prone to fits of jealousy, bitterness and rage while drinking, Jimme constantly found himself in violent episodes at home and in the streets. An argument occurred at a Fourth of July get-together that Mom had put together for her friends when I was five. Jimme had come home just as the party was ending, in another one of his jealous drunken rages. He'd gotten into it with Mom and went after her with a kitchen knife, one of those types you'd cut up chicken with. All I witnessed was the result of the struggle. Jimme was bleeding from his right leg and torso. Mom was all right but highly agitated and upset. The neighbors on the first floor had called the cops, Mount Vernon's finest, who were in the stairwell checking Jimme out and laughing hysterically.

Jimme took more than stab wounds to the stomach and leg as he lived the '70s in a stupor. He had ruined his teeth with alcohol, cigarettes, and maple syrup over the years, so much so that he'd started wearing dentures before he had turned thirty-five. Jimme lost his left eye in '79, as he had lived with a detached retina for nearly nine years, after Mom had hit him in the head with her heavy lead-crystal quartz ashtray to protect herself, Darren and me when I was ten months old. This after Jimme had come home from a party in a rage, wielding a knife and threatening her.

Darren and I had the privilege of witnessing this once again after Jimme came back into our lives after the divorce. From April '79 until someone attempted to put Jimme's head in orbit two years later, we spent time with our dad about once every three weekends. He'd call every Saturday to say that he was on his way, usually from a phone

booth or from a bar, only to not make it over to 616.

I looked forward to the times that we did go out with Jimme, though. Despite his addiction, Jimme was fun to be around most of the time. He went out of his way to take us to Mickey D's, to take us down into the city, to show us where he worked and the "big shots" that he knew. He'd take us over to his drinking buddies' homes, including our one-time babysitter Ida. When Darren and I first started hanging out with our dad, he'd take us to visit his brother Michael, who also lived in Mount Vernon (he later moved back to Atlanta). Jimme would sometimes attempt to cook us dinner, would tell us stories about growing up on the Collins family farm in rural Georgia, about his work and all of the things he saw in Manhattan. "You a Collins," he'd often say, adding that "Gill's" (Mom's family) "is dumb."

Our last time with Jimme before the aggravated assault incident was somewhat memorable. We'd gone down to the city to see the movie *Popeye* with Robin Williams and Shelley Duvall. I didn't need Siskel & Ebert to tell me that this movie really sucked. It was so horrible that we left in the middle of it. My dad had brought some beer in the theater with him, so he was to' up by the time we decided to leave. Jimme was so to' up, he said, "That Robin Williams a funny man dere." I just glared at him, thinking that he must be joking. After taking the Metro-North back to Mount Vernon, we stopped off at a one-time restaurant on the corner of "The Avenue" — downtown Mount Vernon — to pick up some roasted chicken parts and fries for a late-night dinner. We went to Jimme's place, a sleeping room in someone's house, ate and watched Eddie Murphy on *SNL*. It might have been his "Buckwheat" episode. A good, if alcohol-filled Saturday outing. Only to learn a few weeks later that my father technically died for a few seconds before coming back to life after a row at Wino Park. Mom asked if I wanted to visit him, and, with the hesitation of someone who felt a bit confused, I said, too emphatically, "No!"

Soon after our family outing at White Plains Library, my chronically unemployed stepfather had started acting strange, expecting us to run errands for him without question or comment. Armed with the conviction that comes with a recent religious conversion, Maurice began to demand that we call him "Dad." We were required to wear our kufis whenever we left 616, which identified us immediately as our stepfather's kids. Maurice also made it mandatory to pray every night, giving us a four-page, single-spaced document full of "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe..." lines to recite as part of

our daily Black Jewish ritual. The first time we went through it, in both Hebrew and English, it took well over an hour. If we started to nod off, Maurice would slap us upside the head, or actually give us one of his “whuppins.”

His language was also changing, becoming coarser and more threatening as '81 turned into '82. For just asking, “Why?” or “What?,” my stepfather would often say, “Take that base outta ya voice, boy, before I cave yo’ chest in!” Maurice would sometimes sing his threats, bellowing “I’m gonna beat yo’ ass, jus’ like a car burns gas,” adding, “And ya *know* that!” at the end, something he pulled from a song by a disco group called The Jammers. His language was worse now than it had been before he had separated from Mom eighteen months earlier. I found myself scratching my head, and not just because it itched. I wondered if Maurice being back in our lives was good for any of us.

By April, Maurice had become a hanger-on at a newly opened Karate studio down the street from 616, next door to the old dry cleaner business on East Lincoln Avenue. He made me come to the studio because he wanted to show me “how to be a man.” But when I’d see him on my almost daily runs to the grocery store, he mostly hung out with young Turks and wannabe thugs from the Pearsall Drive projects across the street. Maurice smoked up a storm of Benson & Hedges Menthol while talking about women, being a Hebrew-Israelite, and about me as *his* kid, at least when I happened to walk by. My stepfather made it known that he thought of me as “soft,” a boy who spent too much time in books and not enough time on New York’s mean streets. This despite the fact that we lived in Mount Vernon, a quietly violent city whose meanest streets were on the South Side, the part of town that bordered the Bronx. Not that 616 and the Pearsall Drive projects (consisting of six five-story buildings) down the street didn’t qualify as “mean.” They were tough by North Side standards, but at least people didn’t go into parks with baseball bats attempting to head hunt.

Maurice had tried to teach me and my older brother Darren Isshin-ryu Karate two years earlier. Despite myself, I did pick up a few moves. Now he decided that I would learn how to fight no matter the consequences. It was all about breaking bones and inflicting maximum pain to him. When I told Maurice that I didn’t want to learn, he said “You will learn because I’m your father” as he started to throw hard punches into my midsection. After I yelled, “You’re not my father!,” he drop-kicked me to the floor. Maurice, all six-foot-one and 270 pounds of him, then pulled me up by my arms, slammed me back-first

into a mirrored wall, and punched me several times in the head, chest, and stomach until several of the men in the studio surrounded him. My stepfather, completely exasperated and winded, yelled “Don’t you EVER say that again, muthafucka! I’ll kill you next time!” I ran for home with a knot on my forehead that didn’t go down for almost a week.

By the time that knot on my forehead began to shrink, I had been feeling lonely and betrayed for nearly a year. I retreated into my pretend world, one where I still felt like a kid with friends. It was where I learned how to talk to myself, as if I were figuring out all of the problems of this world, of my world. The one place at 616 where I felt most like myself, pretending or otherwise, was the window in our bedroom. From there I could watch the other kids in my building play in a carefree way, as if their lives were more secure than mine. From the window facing East Lincoln I watched recent model Chrysler K cars and Oldsmobile Cutlass Supremes glide up and down the two-way street and wondered when the day would come when I’d be driving *any* car. I stared aimlessly at those young men and women just a few years older than me and contemplated if I’d ever be normal. Then I would say to myself, “No, I’ll never be normal.”

2. Humanities

No matter what else was happening at 616, at least I had school. And with Humanities, I thought that my life in the classroom would remain as great in seventh grade as it had been in fourth, fifth and sixth. I remained optimistic as September '81 approached.

I couldn't have asked for a better late summer morning to begin my new life in Humanities. The morning of the ninth of September, the second Wednesday of the month, was absolutely beautiful. A cloudless powder-blue sky had unfolded over the New York City area that day. It was eighty degrees with no humidity. I wore a pair of navy-blue dress pants, a pair of white Adidas sneakers with blue stripes, and a white, short-sleeved Izod Lacoste (the "alligator" logo) knockoff to A.B. Davis Middle School that morning. I felt like a beautiful person with endless possibilities in front of me. Out of my league was what I really was.

What immediately put me at odds with my classmates was my kufi, not my mouth or my new, cheap clothes. The cap atop my almost jet-Black hair was as bright and white as my shirt that day. I no sooner sat at my assigned and alphabetically-arranged seat than both Mrs. Sesay and my new classmates of 7S began to ask me questions about my background. A very attractive Italian classmate named Marianne, who sat two seats in front of me, asked me right after my introduction

"Have you ever been to Israel?"

"Yes, once. I've been to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem," I lied.

"That's wonderful. Oh, I'd love to travel. Maybe you can tell me more about it later," Marianne said in response.

I'd only traveled outside of New York four times, including my fetus travels in '69. I lied so quickly that I spent the next several minutes thinking about why.

It was the first of my several *A Christmas Story* moments. I was like the character Ralphie, who was forced by his adoring mother to wear a pink bunny suit made by his aunt. Except that he was never made to parade his social suicide clothing all over town and school so that he could bring even more ridicule and scorn his way. There was no one in my circle who could've saved me from the ostracism that would follow me because of my kufi. The fact was my circle had fallen apart in sixth grade anyway.

Marianne's question let me know immediately that I was in trouble with these Humanities kids. My elementary school classmates would've never asked me if I've ever been to Israel. Marianne's question gave me my first indication that I was poor. It made me think, if this whole Hebrew-Israelite thing was so wonderful, then why in five months hadn't we gone to Israel? Why had we only been to temple once? Why, then, didn't I have an allowance? Marianne wasn't the only one who had questions. This was the beginning of my other education in Humanities, one beyond facts and grades, one about trust and people not like me.

I thought of all this as other students introduced themselves. Jean-David, or JD, was a deliberate individual, "one-half Russian, one-quarter French, one-quarter English," and already well-traveled, having spent part of his summer in France. I noticed his khaki-colored OshKosh pants the moment I walked into our classroom. Nellie introduced herself like a good little daddy's girl, much like the spoiled character that was Laura Ingalls' nemesis in *Little House on the Prairie*. Her nearly elderly father was a founder, editor, and cartoonist at a prominent comedic magazine. Jennifer Y. was smart, cute and taller than me, like nearly half the girls in 7S. Her dad was a New York State Assemblyman that I'd met the year before at Mom's polling place next to Holmes School.

All but two of my classmates were Black or Latino prior to now. Many of them were kids who lived at 616, the more drug-ridden 630 East Lincoln next door, or at the Pearsall Drive projects down the street. About half of my 7S classmates lived in or near the mostly White, very upper-class Fleetwood section of Mount Vernon, with its huge homes, condo high-rises, and expensive shops. From hearing their stories about their trips to France, or complaints that their parents weren't making more than \$150,000 a year, I knew that their parents made more money in a month than Mom made all year. They could practically print their own money while we tortured every dollar we had into submission. It was a shock to my system, one that left me feeling very, very weird. "What's so special about me, about my parents, besides this idiotic kufi on my head?" I thought.

What's more, I learned that many of my 7S classmates had taken classes together since the second, fourth and fifth grades at the Grimes Center for Creative Education, which was now Pennington-Grimes Elementary, now located in the ritzy Fleetwood section of town. They were already each other's friends. They hung out together and talked about the latest in music and sports, politics and fashion together.

By the end of that first period of that very first day of Humanities, I felt like someone had played a cruel joke on me. It was as if someone had given me the keys to the kingdom, only to find out that I was the street sweeper. The keys were really only to the kingdom's utility closets. No teacher had told me that most of my classmates would be White, and that most of their worst days never involved going without food or falling behind on rent. Mrs. Bryant never warned me that Humanities would be overwhelming because my social skills outside of Holmes were as well developed as a spoiled seven-year old's.

I tried to cope as best I could, mostly by bragging about how smart I was. I talked about all of the books I read, the near completion of every entry and volume in the '78 edition of the *World Book Encyclopedia* except for "spider" and "tarantula," both of which left me with nightmares. I couldn't keep my mouth shut in those first days of intimidation and the flaunting of affluent experiences by others in 7S. I'd even sometimes say, "I'm the smartest person in the world," out loud, to myself and to anyone within a five-foot-radius, just to make myself feel better about being in a classroom full of people smart but unlike me in every other way.

My first big mistake was Brandie, who hated me with a passion even before Humanities. Her mother and my father Jimme were drinking buddies in '79 and '80. Brandie's mother was a jazz singer, my father the supervisor of a high-class janitorial crew in the city. Both occupations lent themselves to hanging out at bars all over Manhattan and the Bronx.

A year and a half before Brandie and I were together in 7S, Jimme took me and Darren to his "girlfriend's" two-bedroom apartment on Mount Vernon's South Side. The place felt bigger to me than it actually was. Maybe it was because of the day we made this visit. It was a Saturday in early May '80, when early May used to mean early spring. It was sunny, and that sunshine found its way into that apartment that day, highlighting heavily polished wood and making the yellow walls brighter. Even though Brandie's mother and Jimme were having drinks and paid me and Darren little mind, it was nice getting out of our sparse space at 616. It was good that Jimme actually showed up this time.

About an hour into the visit, Brandie walked in through the apartment door. She held several bags in her hands from shopping. All I noticed was that Brandie was taller than me, and wider too. I saw her as a woman of massive girth, somewhere nearing six feet in

height, the stereotypical Black woman that people like Mom had spent the previous decade of my life making fun of.

I couldn't resist. Like a mindless idiot, I said "Wow, she's fat!" with glee in my eyes and a welcoming smile all over my face. For me, it was as if I had said, "Wow, you're gorgeous, and your skin has a wonderful glow!"

Brandie's reaction was one of stone-faced, speechless shock. Jimme gave me a semi-chuckled "Donald!" to let me know that I had said something inappropriate, but other than that, nothing. Brandie didn't scream or holler. Brandie's mother said nothing about it, and everyone — including Brandie — carried on with conversations until we left for home. I learned that Brandie attended Grimes and about Humanities for the first time. I didn't know that I'd be a classmate of hers sixteen months later.

I had no doubt that Brandie told her friend and fellow 7S classmate Wendy about the incident as soon as she saw me in class on the first day of seventh grade. Every time I saw them, my shy "Hi's" were greeted with grunts, names like "dumb ass" and "idiot," or just plain ignored. Since Brandie and Wendy were friends, I figured Brandie's impressions had to be hers also. Since Wendy was also well-liked by my other classmates, I assumed that everyone knew about my incredibly stupid comment about Brandie being fat too.

My cold war with Brandie became a fight only weeks into seventh grade. It wasn't much of a fight, though. It was in Mrs. Sesay's classroom, our 7S homeroom where we started the day, ended the day, and had our first-period English class. At the end of a day in late-October, Brandie was clearing out of room from the back, passing by my seat on the left side of the classroom toward the door.

"Dumb ass," Brandie said out of nowhere, as usual.

"You're stupid," I said, not even bothering to look up as I put my plastic Mead, three-ring and five-subject notebook in my book bag.

Within a couple of seconds, I got pushed from behind. I turned, and Brandie threw a punch into my chest. I threw one back into her right arm as she recoiled from landing her first punch. We were fighting in the back of the classroom. It was two semi-nerds in a fight of words, lots of shoves, and a flurry of half-hearted punches. It was an ugly display, like watching a Larry Holmes fight or Muhammad Ali in his last days before his retirement. In one corner, at five-foot-two and 120 pounds was me, in the other, at five-foot-seven and about 150 pounds was Brandie. I certainly didn't want to fight a girl.

Brandie seemed to think that she could pound me into the ground by hitting me on top of the head a few times. At one point I punched Brandie in the chest, only to find that her chest felt spongy. It dawned on me that *Brandie had breasts*. I stopped pushing and punching her right then and there, somewhat in shock from the revelation.

“You’re a pervert!” Brandie yelled while her friends Wendy and Nellie pulled her away from me.

I didn’t know what “pervert” meant — not that I would’ve admitted such a thing, since I was the “smartest kid in the whole world.”

“Well, you’re an adverb!” I yelled in response. Somehow I pulled *that* out of my brain to call Brandie in response. Of all the words — *adverb*? That ended our fight in horrific laughter from Brandie and the classmates who witnessed it, including Wendy. It was another *A Christmas Story* moment. It was a weird moment, even for me. I was embarrassed, all but sure that my classmates thought that I was incredibly dumb.

My fight with Brandie had awakened some sleeping wolves, Alex in particular. Alex saw himself as a super-cool wiseass who believed he was a good-looking twelve-year-old equivalent of John Travolta from *Welcome Back, Kotter* or, in other ways, like the Fonz of the show *Happy Days*. After the fight, I became his primary target. I wore a kufi to school, dressed as if my clothes had been found in airplane wreckage, didn’t exactly have the social skills of a typical tweener, and I spoke at the speed of a tape record set to slow. Whenever I said “My name is Da...nald...Col...lens” in my pregnant-pause, sing-song way, it took nearly five seconds. Alex must’ve thought that I had put a bulls-eye on my forehead when I introduced myself the first day of seventh grade.

Alex was far and away the leader of what I started calling “The Italian Club” by the end of October. The way Anthony N., Anthony Z., Andrew, Joe and Danny. spent time with him, you would’ve thought he was a rock star, someone like his fave, Mr. “White Wedding” himself, Billy Idol. The way some of the Italian girls would seem to swoon over Alex and laugh at his constant banter in class, you would’ve thought so. All except for Marianne, who told him to “Shut up!” on more occasions than I could count. Alex sat in the next row almost directly across from her, making his regular advances annoying Marianne and the rest of us. Of course, the first thing Alex ever said to her was “Are you Puerto Rican?” because of her dark olive tan, an amazing conversation starter.

But Alex wasn’t cool, at least not to Marianne and the rest of us, and certainly not

to me. He was a smart ass who didn't know when to stop making light of folks and their faults. Like the times he'd just go after Brandie about her being fat. I don't remember his multitude of comments, just the fact that he made them. It wasn't that Brandie didn't respond. But how often would anyone want to get into a war of words with Alex, especially since the more you said the more excited he was about saying something even more outrageous in response? After a few weeks, I learned to just lodge my own protests but otherwise ignore him. It wasn't worth the time and effort to yell, complain, plead and threaten Alex when he went into his Rodney Dangerfield mode.

Alex couldn't just stop with touching a nerve by joking about any fault he noticed about you. Your identity was often a topic to poke fun at, especially if you seemed uncomfortable with it or if you were more than a little different. It wasn't just me that Alex went after. Nellie got to hear Alex's rendition of The Beatles' "Hey Jude," where he'd sing "Nah, Nah, Nah, Nah, Nah-nah-nah-nah, Nah-nah-nah-nah, Hey Jew. . . ." Although he never said it to Wendy or Anthony Z. directly, the terms "mixed" and "mutt" were ones that he'd use if they peevied him in any way. It was meant for only Andrew or Anthony N. to hear, though.

Alex must've fallen in love with the Eddie Murphy film *48 Hours*, because every chance he got he sang The Police's "Roxanne" refrain the same annoying way Eddie Murphy did in the film. I can still remember his "Roxxxxanne" yelp as Alex walked into class on many a morning. Alex also loved to belt out Devo's "Whip It" as a subliminal message to some of our Italian female classmates.

Being the leader of Italian cool that he was, his entourage quickly followed in his trail-blazing footsteps. Anthony N. and Anthony Z., Andrew and Joe and Danny all participated in calling me an assortment of names, including, "dumb ass," "idiot," "idiot savant," and "stupid ass." There were so many other ones that I couldn't keep track after a while — they made my head spin sometimes. Then again, others in 7S called me at least three of those names as well, especially Brandie, JD, Wendy, and Nellie.

Anthony N. and Andrew treated me like the inferior Negro they thought I was. The two of them instigated the beat-down I received in November '81, about two weeks after my fight with Brandie. Two weeks of ignoring nearly constant verbal abuse from Alex, Anthony N. and Andrew weren't good enough, I supposed. They and about ten other 7S classmates attacked me after school as I was on my way out the door to walk home. They

grabbed, punched, and kicked me, and called me everything but a child of God. That was my third *A Christmas Story* moment. Except I'd been better off wearing the pink bunny suit! Bullying is a funny thing, even when you're one being bullied.

What was different about the two of them was the fact that they seemed ready to resort to violence if their attempts at teasing didn't work. In Anthony N.'s case, I was sure he had family in the mob. He often sounded like a young Robert De Niro ready to break out in broken Italian in *Godfather II*, except that Anthony N. was an English-speaker with *zero* acting chops. And if I didn't know that Andrew was the half-Black, half-Irish grand nephew of a famous actor, I would've guessed the same thing for him as well. If Andrew and Anthony N. had been born in '48 or '49 instead of '68 or '69, they might've been candidates for the John Gotti award for deranged and possibly murderous teenagers.

I saw them as Italians who saw themselves as better than the Blacks, Afro-Caribbeans and Latinos, and cooler than the other, nerdy Whites in Humanities. They often acted as much outside of our Humanities classrooms, which were in a new wing that had been added to Davis to accommodate the new program in the late-'70s. The rest of the school had been built in the '20s, and it showed. It was a dark and dingy place, like an old ink factory, made more so by our idiot principal Dr. Gerald "Jerry" Zucker and his Italian subordinates. They emphasized brutal discipline for a school full of Black and Latino students outside of Humanities.

Our first general assembly at Davis was where Dr. Zucker introduced us to "his enforcer," Mr. Gentile, an ironic name as far as I was concerned. Zucker also introduced us to "The Pit," their version of The Inquisition. If any of us became involved in fights, or attacked a teacher, or did anything of significance like arriving late for school without a note from our parents, we would end up there. "The Pit" was a darkened room with black-painted windows in the bowels of the school. Students with issues could be stuck in "The Pit" for upwards of a week, or be suspended for that long or longer. Mr. Gentile was in charge of running "The Pit."

Not only that, we had special observances to uphold. Zucker had what he called "silent passing." Every day, between second and third period, we'd walk through Davis' halls as we went from one class to the next silently, without talking or running. Teachers monitored the halls to make sure we didn't violate silent passing. Anyone caught in violation could end up in "The Pit" as well. It was as if we were mourning the death of a

president. All they needed to give us were rose petals, ashes and sack cloth to make this scene of 1,700 silent kids walking through the halls of an always under-lit school complete.

I thought that the way principals like Zucker and Gentile treated the Black students gave the Italian Club its cue to act like they were in charge. My Italian classmates somehow saw themselves as the coolest kids in the school because they weren't the target of Zucker and Gentile's disgust and stereotypes. With the school operating like a prison for twelve to seventeen-year-old Blacks, it made it easier for the Italians in my Humanities class to cluster together. I thought that they were a bunch of jerks who didn't want to admit that they were scared of the older Black males at Davis. It was a hostile and unwelcoming place, made worse by these cliquish cannoli-eating assholes.

Danny and Joe were exceptions to the Italians who tormented me in the months after the beatdown. They were the best of friends as soon as they met in seventh grade. Danny and Joe played the roles of Potsie and Ralph Mouth to Alex's Fonz-like personality in this junior-high-school version of *Happy Days*. They hung out all the time, and helped bring out the other's hidden qualities. Danny was the extrovert minus Alex's "coolness," while Joe was the nerdy intellectual between the two of them. Together they were a good academic team, putting together the kinds of projects you'd typically see of kids at school in Hollywood films. For our seventh-grade science class, they and Alex put together a scale model of a clam with gray molding. It opened and closed and contained all of the clam's major organs, and they were all color-coded. The model was in working order, meaning that it looked like it was actually real and alive.

I was impressed and jealous at the same time, but not too jealous. It was nice to see quality craftsmanship. They got an A to my B. I attempted to build a scale model of a human heart using only red and purple clay. I think I got a B because the heart looked like it had been dipped in blood, as if a cardiothoracic surgeon had used a steak knife instead of a scalpel to get to the aortic valve.

Besides that, cars were the only thing that Danny and Joe had on their minds from the moment they entered Humanities until the beginning of our senior year. Joe's auto-mechanic-father had allegedly set it up so that Joe could build his own car from scratch when he turned fourteen. Joe also claimed that he already knew how to drive. Danny couldn't get enough of *Car & Driver*, *Hot Rod*, *Motor Trend* and other horsepower magazines. Danny didn't have the car he wanted in mind as early as Joe did, but anyone

who knew them knew that if Joe was getting a Mustang, Danny was getting an American muscle car as well. Theirs was a match made in race-car heaven.

The one thing we were all supposed to have in common was that we were “la crème de la crème” — or “the cream of the crop” — as the Davis Humanities coordinator Mrs. Doris Mann often told us in one assembly or another. Our smarts mattered more than anything, including our race. But it felt obvious to me that Humanities wasn’t exactly built for students like Alex, Andrew and Anthony N., not to mention me. Even with the recent beatdown, I *knew* I was a much better student than that crew. They weren’t from well-off or high-prestige families in Mount Vernon. These were kids from working-class families. Kids like Alex, whose mother worked at Chemical Bank, or like Joe, whose father owned an auto shop or others, whose parents worked at the GM plant in Tarrytown. They did have one advantage, though. Their relatives were teachers and administrators at Davis, or school board members in the Board of Education, or in the case of Dawn, my 7S classmate, the superintendent of schools himself, William Prattella. They were in no way like JD, Nellie, Mary, Jennifer Y. and other affluent Whites. It was *whom* they or their parents knew that got them into Humanities in the first place, a real revelation to me. All this talk from teachers like Mrs. Mann about an “equal playing field” was a bunch of bologna when it came to the Italian Club and Prattella.

That’s not to say that *some* of them weren’t smart. Anthony Z. was a nerd, a good-looking nerd, but a nerd nevertheless. Joe was probably the smartest of the Italian Club from Columbus, Hamilton and Lincoln Elementary. And Marianne, despite the big ’80s hair, Sergio Valente jeans, and constant gum chewing, was probably one of the most inquisitive people in 7S. Still, all that really meant was that *they* were exceptional, and that I wasn’t, at least, not in the interesting ways that they were. I was Black but not “Black” enough. I was Black, which was another strike against me. But I was also smart, smart-mouthed and immature, each one counting as an additional strike. Being a practicing Black Jew was the ultimate double-whammy for me.

All the flack I received from Alex and the Italian Club boys was still surprising, though. I would’ve expected more hatred from the White Jews in my class — it was virtually nonexistent. But I couldn’t say that they had no reason to be at odds with me. Nellie got on my nerves more than any girl I met from Pennington–Grimes. We sometimes exchanged words. I was “stupid,” “unsophisticated” and “an asshole.” To me, Nellie was “a

spoiled little girl,” “really not all that smart” and a “slut.”

Nellie symbolized everything that I couldn't stand about Whites with money. She was privileged and entitled, a person who name-dropped all the time. She was someone who worried openly about her grades as if they were pimples and she was trying to go to the prom with the star school athlete. Nellie also worried about her social status with the assumption that everyone around her could understand where she was coming from. I understood it on some level, but I really didn't want to hear through Nellie's chattering and whining that she was a high-achieving worry-wart. It often affected my performance to be around folks like her, who worried too much about something like a test, as if they hadn't put in the time to prepare for it. There wasn't much I found friendly in Nellie, except for the fact that she had a nice round butt, a rarity for White girls. In our brief and ridiculously stupid exchanges, I called her “rump roast” all the time because of that butt. I knew it would make Nellie uncomfortable, and I knew she would think that I was stupid for saying that. I didn't care — she was such a brat, a self-important teenager who thought she was cool because of her father. Even with that, we never argued about, fought over, or attempted to discuss the Hebrew-Israelite thing.

My first sign of depression came around the same time Brandie started calling me a “pervert” and Alex began to clown on me. I was not only about to earn my first C+ in math since third grade. I was sub-par in all of my other subjects. It wasn't so much that the material was any more difficult than it had been the year before. I didn't exactly feel at home in 7S. My classmates called me “stupid” and “idiot” so many times that sometimes I honestly thought I *was* dumb. I was already all by myself in a class of thirty students. Most simply avoided me. It was as if I was part of the goyim, a stranger in a strange and sordid land. I was alone, and feeling that way was worse than any bad grade I'd earn. I had no friends, and that really did make me feel stupid. Even then, I knew that I'd have to overcome my feelings of inferiority in order to be a better student, or give up altogether.

I seriously thought about quitting Humanities by the beginning of the third marking period, early February '82. My grades were unimpressive. I struggled in every subject except social studies, where three years of reading *World Book Encyclopedia* and forty books of all kinds on World War II made me a nerdy standout among my mostly nerdy peers. My social studies teacher Paul Court was so much fun and so inept that he played games with us to keep our class interesting. Anyone who could find factual errors in his

teachings on American history would earn twenty-five cents. I'd already earned more than three dollars by the end of the second marking period. Meanwhile, I barely averaged a C+ in math. My Italian teacher Ms. Fleming told me that my "Italian sounded British." And I was averaging a C+ in art. In Art! All because Doris Mann, who was about as good an art teacher as I was at making friends, said, "I don't give A's for effort. I give out grades based on your ability to create good art." I couldn't believe that she gave me C+'s while the art world fifteen miles away cheered folks who smeared blood, paint, and feces on canvasses!

I thought that I was the only one who felt like a failure. I was certain that I was more of a failure than my Holmes or other, non-Pennington-Grimes students in Humanities, at least. If other students appeared to have problems, I believed that they were faking it.

I had good reason to. It was around this time that Mary had become anxiety-ridden prior to a test in our English class. She began to sweat, her hands and face turned colors, like Arthur Miller's female characters in *The Crucible*, his famous Salem-Witch-Trial play. Within a few seconds, Nellie, Wendy, and Jennifer L. joined this tortured soul in this expression of fear. The one girl kept saying, over and over, "I know I'm going to fail!" The other three huddled around her and joined in *séance*, as if they expected God to witness this physical expression of pressurized fear and take pity on them. That this involved the Pennington-Grimes group of Humanities girls was not lost on me. They loved their grades, almost as much as they loved their Jordache Jeans, The Gap or Benetton.

We received our exam grades from Mrs. Sesay a few days later. My grade: a 78. The Fear Bunch's lowest grade: a 92. Understanding how quickly fear can destroy your confidence: priceless. Their fears had left me thinking more about failure — theirs and mine — than it did about the task at hand. Then it was my turn to act demon-possessed. I went to the back of the classroom at the end of that day and chanted, "I'm silly, I'm stupid. I'm silly, I'm stupid. I'm silly, I'm stupid." over and over again while pounding the back of my head into the side wall. But I learned a valuable lesson that day. That doing well required me to ignore the worries and grades of others, to concentrate on me and my own emotions on test days.

There were other things affecting my performance besides the growing realization that I wasn't in fact the "smartest person in the world." I was also without lunch at school for a full week out of every month, starting at the end of October. I qualified for the free

lunch program because of Mom's income-to-kid ratio, but I was too proud and embarrassed to take advantage. It had been drilled in me by Mom that we "didn't take handouts."

But I wasn't being completely honest with myself. I drew on the free and reduced lunch program all through sixth grade. What made the difference in seventh grade was that the White and middle class Black kids in Humanities weren't part of this program. And how would they know? The regular kids knew. In the lunch line at Davis, a sterile, hospital-like, eggshell-white and tan colored room, kids noticed when a free or reduced lunch student didn't pay or only paid a quarter for lunch. Admitting that we didn't have the money for me to buy lunch every day at school would've sealed my fate as an unworthy welfare child. I could only imagine how much comical mileage classmates like Alex would get out of that.

It would've helped if the school district actually cared about unusual dietary restrictions. On a day just before Halloween, my lunch consisted of an ice cream sandwich as hard as a rock. The lunch that day was a grilled ham and cheese sandwich with fries, not exactly a Hebrew-Israelite's diet. It was also about thirty degrees outside and partly cloudy, unusually cold for early fall in New York. So I stood near the steps leading down to the back of Davis, which led to the athletic field below. The field had turned a dirty yellow-green, the color of mid-fall. It matched how I felt about my life on that day.

So much for discovering my inner Hebrew-Israelite self through fasting and eating kosher foods! I very quickly grew to hate hearing the words *Hebrew-Israelite*, especially since I'd never been to a traditional synagogue, much less Israel, Palestine, or even Ethiopia. But when asked, I explained that being a Hebrew-Israelite was like being an Orthodox Jew mixed with being a part of the Nation of Islam. Especially when it came to separating ourselves from Whites and other Gentiles. I often said, "It's about us being the descendants of the ten Lost Tribes of the kingdom of Israel." All we believed in included the ritual circumcision of male babies (it was already too late for me and Darren, since Mount Vernon Hospital did ours as infants). Meat couldn't be consumed unless it had been drained of its blood. Meat and dairy products must *never* be cooked together, and pork couldn't be eaten at all. Males were supposed to wear kufis or yarmulkes and females were required to cover their hair with cloth in public. The Friday-evening-to-Saturday-sundown Sabbath day was a mandatory practice, and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and Pesach

(Passover) were the high holy days on the calendar.

I learned some Hebrew, enough to quote the prayer, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who sanctifies us with his commandments, and commands us concerning washing of hands.” Except that my “melekh ha-olam.” sounded more like “Menelek a oil-um,” and my “le’olam” I butchered into “leg o’lamb.” Forget “ga’al Yisrael.” It might’ve meant “redeemer of Israel,” but I might as well have said, “goal for Israel!” when I attempted to pronounce the words. About the only ancient practice we didn’t follow was the sacrificing of an unblemished lamb during Yom Kippur to cleanse us of our sins. Even as committed as I was to making this work, it all seemed about as normal as Jim Jones and Jonestown.

We had other, more bizarre practices and beliefs that we followed because “Balkis Makeda” was our fearless leader. For starters, we were supposed to believe that she was the reincarnation of the Queen of Sheba in the flesh, living among us in the twentieth century as an average person and showing us the way to Yahweh and ultimate truth. We stopped using Ivory Soap at home because our leader had once dreamed about rats gnawing on a bar of it. Baby Maurice couldn’t use a soap that’s 99.44 percent pure because of Makeda’s dream, and we switched to Zest. We weren’t allowed to use the word “Hello” when greeting someone in person or when answering the telephone. Maurice explained that “Hello’s got the word Hell in it, you know, Hell-*low*!” We’d somehow be committing someone to eternal damnation with a universal English greeting. We could say “Hi.” to folks in person, but Maurice and Mom expected us to say “Yes?” to the people calling us at home. My Uncle Sam, for one, thought that we were just being “downright rude.” Soon we didn’t get too many calls at the house to matter anyway.

By the beginning of ’82, our Hebrew-Israelite ways had left us with little to eat when I was at home. Besides myself, Darren, Maurice and Yiscoc were at home. My stepfather remained unemployed, but Mom still needed a babysitter because his parenting skills would make Ike Turner and Joan Crawford *Family Circle’s* Father and Mother of the Year by comparison. There just wasn’t enough money for things like three decent meals a day and a certified daycare provider.

There was a benefit to all of this. It made the *fasting* part of fasting and prayer easier. Not easy, just easier. My first Yom Kippur ceremony was difficult. We fasted on fruit for three days, and I barely made it through school each of those days. I almost passed out from

the lack of food. Darren, meanwhile, had decided that “the day of atonement” and all things Torah didn’t include his stomach. By the end of October, I’d watch him take his kufi off as he boarded his bus for school. I caught Darren walking near our apartment building with the last of a Hostess’ Apple Pie and its wrapper during Yom Kipper. He had snuck around the building to eat his contraband. What made this transgression worse was that Hostess used lard to create its desserts. And Darren, once caught, just stared at me and smiled.

Mom was too busy and tired for me to think about complaining to her about this or about the issues I faced with Starling or my first days of Humanities. For more than three years, Mom’s income had dropped so much compared to rising food and energy prices that we didn’t have food in the house for the last ten days of every month. Sometimes we didn’t have heat either, because we were usually two or three weeks behind on the Con Edison bill. I also knew that we were consistently behind on rent. I knew that we weren’t alone, that one in five Mount Vernonites were also not doing well. Still, I felt as isolated as a kidnapped preteen chained to a radiator in a walled-off-window basement.

Lack of food and heat at home weren’t the only problems. Mom had popped out two of my younger brothers in the previous three years. We lived at 616 in a 1,200 square-foot, two bedroom and one bathroom apartment, so overcrowding had become an issue. Me and my older brother Darren were sharing a bedroom with our two siblings. With no one to talk to and my grades as low as I’d ever seen, I needed inspiration, and fast. If not from 616, then from my time at school.

3. Ballerina Wendy & Captain Zimbabwe

Inspiration would come to me in the form of a five-foot-four girl that I noticed, but just barely, my first day of Humanities. It was Brandie's friend Wendy that somehow began to dance in my imagination as the third marking period began. Without realizing it, I made my way into Wendy's doghouse long before my crush took its hold. No conversations or expressions of hubris were necessary. All it really took were my feeble attempts at interaction with the affluent crowd, making me inconsequential to her. None of this stopped me from noticing Wendy. It was such an appropriate name for such a beautiful and headstrong young woman, like the character from *Peter Pan*. "Wendy, Wendy, Wendy!" as said by both Peter Pan and Bob the dummy doll on the TV show *Soap*. I didn't have an immediate crush on her. But I found her fascinating from the moment I laid eyes on her. I'd never met or seen someone, especially a girl, who was as intelligent, athletic and vocal as Wendy. Hers seemed a world of free-spirited expression, one where anyone who was anyone wanted to be around her.

She got along and could relate to anyone in our class and in Humanities it seemed. Not just her multicultural and upper-middle-class White clique from Pennington-Grimes. Wendy was the one person who could cross cliques and racial lines without experiencing ridicule or without having to wave a white flag. This despite her rather humble life at home, as folks like Nellie, Mary and Jennifer L. likely found her fun and exciting. Male or female, Italian, Jewish, Black or Afro-Caribbean, if Wendy saw something in you that was interesting, she at least gave you the time of day. She liked hanging out with boys apparently because it appealed to her tomboyish side. She spent time around the Italian girls at a time when their clique was almost exclusively Italian, bumming meatballs off of Sandra B. at lunch regularly in the process. For her friends and close acquaintances, Wendy was this creative and high-spirited force of nature, outgoing beyond all belief, and someone you *absolutely* had to spend time with.

Once in Mrs. Sesay's English class, we had to do presentations on our talents. Since I didn't know I had any at the time besides being smart, my presentation was underwhelming — I thought that it sucked. Wendy's presentation covered her ballerina talents, and it was breathtaking, at least for me. Wendy's grace was the theme for this presentation, pirouette by pirouette and jump by jump. Between the flexing of her calf and

thigh muscles, that beautiful face, even her hairy forearms, I was hooked. She had tiptoed, split, jumped, spun, and danced her way into my mind and heart. Her friend Bobby proceeded to call her “Ballerina Wendy,” a nickname that stuck immediately and for the next five years. For me, this was more than about Wendy’s athleticism, smile, beauty, or grace. Just listening to her speak with her friends in class made me smile.

She also didn’t put up with a lot of crap. Making fun of her in a way that wasn’t funny to her would earn you one of her biting responses. Even wisecracking Alex knew to steer clear of her most of the time. No one said “asshole” the way Wendy could, as if you were lower than pond scum in the deadly August heat, as if you should’ve never been born. And poking fun at her circle of friends could also put you in Wendy’s doghouse. My fight with Brandie in the first weeks of seventh grade had succeeded in doing just that. Since everyone else in her circle either detested me or found me an oddity — from Bobby, Nellie and JD in 7S to Danny P., Joshua, Cynthia and Denise in the other Humanities homerooms — I assumed that she felt the same way. I was the class freak. I was arrogant.

And I had fought with another one of her friends. The week before the mid-February winter break, our English teacher Mrs. Sesay was home with the flu. Our substitute’s idea of managing a classroom was reading a newspaper, sometimes with her feet up on the gray metal desk. All while the class engaged in verbal and physical combat. It seemed that no one was safe from strife that week, including me. JD decided that it was his turn to give me a hard time. A ten-second scuffle took place on Tuesday over the usual tweener issues of communism versus capitalism. JD also didn’t like that I had corrected him the month before about Australia’s official language, which he said was “Australian.” I laughed when he gave that as his answer, especially since he had traveled to Europe and the Middle East before. I learned that day that you should never correct a preteen contrarian when they think that they’re right.

When I walked into the boys’ locker room for gym class that Thursday afternoon, I was greeted with two punches to my chin and face. He walked away and went through the green double doors to his locker, arrogant enough to think I wouldn’t respond. He muttered “stupid” as he walked away. I think it was the combination of being caught by surprise and being called “stupid” by Mr. OshKosh that got the better of me. Or maybe it was five months of enduring public humiliation combined with the sense that things at 616 were spinning out of control. Whatever it was, I finally snapped. I stared blankly at the

red lockers, green doors, and uranium beige-yellow-colored walls for a couple of seconds, and then my mind exploded into violent colors. I threw my entire being into JD as he had started to undress at his locker, knocking him to the floor.

I choked and punched him until I had bloodied his mouth and made his nose turn red. JD attempted to fight back to no avail, as I kept my weight on his legs while I head-locked him with my left arm and wailed away with my right hand. Just as I began to run out of energy, the gym teacher came in to break us up. He yelled at us and asked “Do you want to be suspended?” I went into the break with an emotional boost. One that I hoped would lead to better things for me at school.

That might’ve been the highlight of seventh grade for me if it weren’t for Wendy. She picked a fight with me right after we got back from winter break. Or, I accidentally picked a fight with her, just by being me. It was the end of another day of school, with all of us in our 7S homeroom with Sesay. She had discussed our upcoming test on parts of speech, conjugation and compound sentences. Wendy asked, “Does a compound sentence have one or two commas in it?” I snickered quietly in response as Sesay explained compound sentences again.

Thinking nothing of it, I began to pack up after the 2:15 pm bell rang. Wendy came up to me and pushed me from behind.

“You’re an ugly, arrogant asshole!” she said with the distaste of a ballerina being asked for money by a junkie.

“Well, you’re a stupid, Ms. Goodie Two Shoes!,” I said, really thinking that “sellout” would’ve been better to say.

“You’re an idiot!,” Wendy yelled as she threw two punches into my chest and a third at my jaw.

It was a short fist exchange, one where I found myself feeling every hit. Wendy really knew how to throw a punch! I was surprised by how quickly we went from words to fists. But I was more surprised by how my fist landed as a soft thud onto Wendy’s chest. It was the second time in six months I had a minor scuffle with a girl, and both happened to have breasts in full bloom! I stopped fighting with her immediately, embarrassed and more attracted to Wendy than I was before, and not just because of making contact with a bouncy boob. I didn’t know what to do with that feeling. Wendy’s friends — including

Brandie — had to pull her away from me, calling me “pervert” all the while. I just stood there for a moment, blinded by Wendy’s light.

We fought, despite my thinking that she was incredibly gifted and intelligent. I didn’t think I mattered to people like JD, Brandie, Bobby, Nellie and the rest of Wendy’s crew, so why would anything I said or did matter to her? I figured that folks like Wendy thought so little of me that there wasn’t anything that I could say that would hurt them.

I made a point after our first skirmish to learn more about the beautiful, tomboyish ballerina that was Wendy. But I wasn’t the only boy who had my eyes on her. Almost every guy I had contact with in Humanities, from Alex to JD, whether they attempted to downplay it or not, liked Wendy. I’d never seen anything like this, ever. As far as Humanities students were concerned, Wendy was Lynda Carter, Rita Moreno and Sade wrapped into one. It felt intense, and I was only Pluto when compared to the solar glow that shined from her.

A couple of crazy rumors emerged. None of which I could believe in their entirety. One was that she was part White and Black —or “mixed” or “Oreo” as the rumors about Wendy’s background were worded —especially from Alex. It was based mostly on sightings of her eventual stepfather, who was White. I thought it was part of the reason some of my affluent White classmates found Wendy interesting. There were times I thought Wendy took advantage of the assumptions made about her at the same time. She was invited to their homes, occasional parties, and was a part of a circle that I called the Benetton Group, the true cool of Humanities. With so much going for her, though, it wouldn’t have matter to me if her parents were John Amos and Esther Rolle from *Good Times*. Just thinking about her made me sigh and smile.

The other, more convoluted piece of gossip, was that she was “West Indian,” either Jamaican or Haitian or both. I had relatively limited exposure to folks from different backgrounds, including ones involving more than one ethnicity. This was where I had a case of “Whatever.” I didn’t care what Wendy’s background was or how she got here. Whatever it was, I assumed it made her who she was. And I was just beyond happy that she was whom she seemed to be. She couldn’t have done, said or been anything that would’ve offended my sensibilities, Hebrew-Israelites be damned.

We did have a second angry exchange, but other than raising my hands to keep her from hitting me in the face, I didn’t make a fighting move. I didn’t want to fight Wendy. I

was afraid of losing all right. I was afraid of losing the image of her that I'd built up in my head.

My crush brought me an emotional and euphoric high that I can only describe as love, infatuation and admiration beyond all of my experience. I didn't have much theme music to play in my head for this unusual spell that I was under. Sometimes it would be The Police's "Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic," which I heard every once in a while in '82. There was also Stevie Wonder's "That Girl" and "As," both of which invaded my daydreams about Wendy on occasion. "I'll be lovin' you always — until the rainbow burns the stars out in the sky," too deep for immature and pre-puberty me, might explain a bit of how I felt during these weird halcyon days. Except that none of them consistently captured how I felt, certainly not in the awestruck way I walked around Davis every morning that spring, anticipating seeing her again. Plus, secular music wasn't allowed much at the home of Hebrew-Israelite bizarreness, so I was stuck with no melody to go with my mood most of the time.

For the last three months of seventh grade, I daydreamed about Wendy several times every school day. It wasn't in a sexual way. What I did imagine, though, was just as shattering to my world as sexual imagery would've been at twelve. I daydreamed about us hanging out, talking, and possibly kissing. I did find opportunities, however limited, to help her with answers to questions in a couple of our classes, especially social studies, and occasionally forced short conversations with her.

A typical conversation was me saying "Hi!" with a bit too much enthusiasm. Not "Hi, Wendy" or "Hey, Ballerina Wendy," just a higher-pitch "Hi!" than I ought to have come out of my mouth. Wendy either grunted or reluctantly said "Hi" back. Ever so often, I tried to crack a lame joke, like when we were talking about Richard Nixon in Court's social studies class. There, I did my "I am not a crook!" imitation of the ex-president, as stolen from a *Saturday Night Live* bit, with both of my hands in the air, "V" signs for victory and all. By June, I sometimes could get Wendy to laugh with me instead of at me.

My unintended focus on Wendy was so strong that I barely noticed that some of my classmates actually began to talk to me without beginning the conversation with an insult or some sort of slur. I found myself feeling more comfortable around most of my classmates, even in cases where they still weren't comfortable with me. The Wendy effect,

her serving as a weapon of mass distraction for me, had gotten me to focus and mature a bit simply because her words about me affected me.

Another side effect of my all-consuming thoughts of Wendy was that I relaxed academically. Given that I didn't want to be on her bad side anymore, I made a deliberate if laid-back pact with myself to raise all of my grades to A's and B's by the end of the year without any verbal moments of hubris, which I did with room to spare. I finished Mr. Court's class with an A+, this despite my growing boredom with his frequent historical errors, making two dollars off of him in April and May. Wendy served as my academic muse, my inspiration to be a better person than I was. I guess that this change in my emotional state made it easier for Wendy to talk to me as seventh grade began to wind down. Maybe it was because I wasn't frontin' and I wasn't trying to amp myself up either. I don't know what changed in those last few weeks.

But there remained a straitjacket on my heart and mouth regarding Wendy. I didn't see myself as someone in her league, someone worthy in her eyes to be liked in a serious way, at least after Memorial Day. I wasn't JD. I wasn't someone who was cultured — even if by cultured standards JD was merely faking his way through highbrow knowledge of the world. JD was someone who could take karate, play tennis, quote Marx and Engels, wear OshKosh, listen to The Police, and speak French already. I certainly wasn't considered cool like Alex and Andrew or different in a good way like Anthony Z. or Bobby. I wasn't even a decent-looking guy. My biggest claim to fame other than the kufi thing was my literally encyclopedic knowledge of any subject in *World Book Encyclopedia* except for spider and tarantula. I was a rather ordinary person living in extraordinarily bad circumstances that were well on their way to getting worse.

I did see Wendy as special, partly because she was an original and partly because of her enigma of a background. Maurice and Mom could claim to be the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all they wanted. I knew that Mom was from Arkansas and "Judah" was from Virginia by way of New Jersey. From where I stood, I was way out of Wendy's league. For the last few weeks before the school year ended, I did consider ways to make myself stand out in a good way to Wendy, but all of my ideas fizzled under the pressures of end-of-the-year exams and thoughts of the summer.

Not to mention one more blitz of verbal harassment from the Italian Club. “CAPTAIN . . . ZIMBABWE!” was what Alex spontaneously yelled out loud to me one day in Sesay’s class during our afternoon homeroom time, just before Memorial Day weekend in May ’82. I didn’t know where Alex got the idea for his new nickname for me. All I can remember was that I was wearing the same white shirt I’d worn on the first day of school, but after about fifteen washes, it wasn’t nearly as white anymore. Of course I had my white kufi on. I’m sure it needed some washing. I probably needed a haircut, and being the tweener I was, I didn’t exactly wash, clean, grease up and comb out my knotty roots the way I needed to. My best guess was that Alex took a look at me in class and decided I looked like some primitive African attempting to wear Western-style clothing for the first time. From his vantage point, I looked as if I were in a Tarzan film or some other movie with Whites on safari.

It pissed me off that Alex would say something so obviously mean and racist. What made it worse was that the “Captain Zimbabwe” moniker stuck in the minds of the other 7S Italian Club classmates. Anthony N., Anthony Z., Andrew, Joe and Danny all picked up on Alex’s cue and took turns calling me “Captain Zimbabwe” for the rest of the year. I protested as much as I could. I said, “You’re a jerk.” It made me want to hide, or better still, see Alex run over by a Ronzoni spaghetti truck. Even Wendy attempted to defend me, telling Alex, “Shut up!” But nothing really helped. Even if they didn’t call me “Captain Zimbabwe” in homeroom or in English or in art class, we all had Italian together, and there weren’t any other non-Italian classmates around who’d step in to help. So for the last month of the year, I’d occasionally have to hear this weird chant of “Captain Zimbabwe” from the Italian Club in Italian class, not much different than a “Howard Stern” chant in Central Park. It was probably the closest, wittiest term they could come up with without calling me a *nigger*. And it made me feel like a chump.

I never understood “Captain Zimbabwe” as anything other than a racial slur. Something that Alex and company thought that they could get away with because it wasn’t obviously racist, at least to their dumb asses. They assumed that others in 7S would have their back. Once they realized that other classmates weren’t all that cool with the “Captain Zimbabwe” taunt, they were smart enough to just do it in Italian class before our teacher Ms. Fleming — who was usually late — showed up. Somehow, though, I thought that Fleming, Mann or Sesay would’ve noticed the problems I was having with the Italian Club.

None of them attempted to stop Alex's antics or the "Captain Zimbabwe" thing. Nothing about how we were supposed to treat each other was discussed even once in 7S. I didn't know what to do about it, but I did know that I didn't feel welcome by my teachers either. They, knowingly or not, sanctioned the boys-being-boys behavior of Alex and his crew. No wonder they were happy to act like bullies!

Besides the looks of meanness and glee that appeared on Alex's, Danny's, Joe's, Michael's, and Anthony N.'s faces during these rounds of calling out "Captain Zimbabwe," something else struck me as weird. Of all the folks in our class, I was surprised that Anthony Z. was involved in this. Not that Anthony Z. didn't enjoy cracking on me. But he was part *Black* as well as part Italian. It would've made sense for him to have sat this one out. That he didn't was interesting only in understanding how much more he identified more as *White* and Italian in Italian class versus how he may have seen himself outside of Italian. He certainly didn't identify himself as similar to me. I was too weird, too different to be considered "Black" by him. He let me know as much on any number of occasions. That ability to play up different parts of his identity in different settings may have justified Anthony Z.'s participation in the "Captain Zimbabwe" teases, but I saw it as a betrayal anyway. It made me look forward to summer at 616, taking my Wendy daydreams and putting them away, along with my clothes from this miserable school year.

4. In Memoriam

Just when I'd gained enough courage to *think* about approaching Wendy to tell her that I liked her, disaster struck, and not just in the form of Alex and "Captain Zimbabwe." It was Memorial Day Monday, a restless, nothing-to-do-but-lay-around-and-read day. Mom had the day off, and Maurice was at home bellowing into the telephone.

"I'm sick and tired of you treating me this way. I'm sick of you not lovin' me!," he yelled.

"What do you mean 'love you'?" Mom said. "Most women wouldn't even put up with your stinkin' ass. And now you want more money for a business that I'm not even a part of? You must be kiddin'!"

Mom was on the phone in the bedroom, while my stepfather yelled into the phone in the kitchen, back in the days when land-lines ruled the world. She picked up the bedroom phone because my stepfather had made a long-distance call to his wayward mother in California, at a time when we were seriously behind on paying the bill. I didn't understand why he'd want to continue to talk to a woman who abandoned him as a baby to his relatives in Richmond, Virginia and Trenton, New Jersey in '50. She spent fourteen years in California away from Maurice, chasing the man of her dreams and otherwise having the time of her life. It seemed to me that Maurice was wasting time and money on a woman who cared for him about as much as he cared for us.

I was lying down on my bed across the hall from the master bedroom, trying my hardest not to pay any attention to the unfolding drama. With both of them yelling over the phone, though, I couldn't block their argument out any longer, between Maurice in the kitchen and Mom across the hall from me in the master bedroom. So I sat up in my bed — giving me a view from our room across the hall into Mom's bedroom — and continued to listen.

This was one of their many arguments over bills and my stepfather's wack attempts to start a telecommunications business. He had used \$2,500 of Mom's precious money to get a state business license for "Sun-Lion Communications." The idea was to build the nationwide equivalent of BET, which was only in Washington, DC and Atlanta. Maurice hadn't held a steady job in three years. At one point, the idiot somehow figured that his unemployed behind could secure \$100 million of capital through Mom for his grandiose

venture. Mom's \$15,000-a-year income was supposed to be enough to feed six people *and* get a business off the ground floor? "Their arguments are insane," I thought. I usually could tune them out. But not this time.

"I'm about to go off on you, woman!," my stepfather threatened, as Mom kept up with the argument.

"You don't do anything for me or for my kids. You sit on your big fat ass all day and tell people what to do and . . ."

Maurice had hung up the kitchen phone during Mom's soliloquy. I heard him rumble from the kitchen, through the living room and saw him motor from the hallway into the master bedroom.

"Who you talkin' to, bitch!," Maurice yelled as he punched Mom in the jaw. He followed up with a kick to her stomach and a forearm that knocked her into the queen-sized bed. My stepfather must've slapped and punched her about a half-dozen times.

With each hit he shouted "Are you gonna gimme some respect, bitch!" I sat there and watched the whole thing and started to cry. It soon became clear that my stepfather knocked Mom unconscious. A moment later, Maurice poured an industrial-sized bucket of water on Mom to wake her up, but that didn't completely work.

It was like I witnessed a nuclear blast. I was temporarily blinded by my tears and unable to move. I was frozen with fear, anger, and a sense of utter nakedness. I felt helpless and didn't know what to do. Maurice apparently didn't either. He left the house and didn't return for a couple of days. Darren had hidden under his twin bed on the other side of our room, crying and shuttering with fear. My tears were forming streams on both cheeks. I didn't move off the edge of my bed for several minutes after Maurice left.

Then I snapped out of my shock. I went over into Mom's bedroom and shook her until she woke up. She was groggy with a concussion. I gradually got her alert enough to stand. We walked down the hall from the bedroom to the living room, where she lay on the couch for a bit.

About two hours later, Mom had regained some state of consciousness, but not before going through a period in which she couldn't remember her name. She was suffering from temporary amnesia. I tried to help her remember all the basics, but she kept drifting in and out of consciousness. "Mom can't even remember her name," I thought.

The rest of the evening was spent making all of us beef bologna sandwiches for dinner and giving Yiscoc a pre-made formula bottle.

After I stopped crying, I became angry with myself. “Why don’t I call the police?” I kept asking myself. “Why didn’t I defend Mom?” Of course I was frozen with fear, but that hadn’t stopped me from attempts at heroism in the past. I thought for a moment about when I was five. Mom and Jimme had gotten into another one of their semi-violent arguments. It was during their last two years of marriage, during our time living at 425 South Sixth Avenue, on the second floor of a house two doors down from Nathan Hale Elementary. My father was drunk and had accused Mom of cheating (which she happened to be guilty of), calling her a “Black bit” — “Black bitch” for the untrained ear — and threatened to cut her up. I didn’t want to see either of them get hurt. So during this latest argument, I snuck into Mom’s bedroom to call the police. It was ’75, so I don’t think 911 existed as an emergency call number yet. I must’ve learned the full number in school or had an emergency card at home.

Just as I was about to tell the dispatcher what was going on, both Mom and Jimme were standing over me. Mom had pushed the green rotary telephone’s receiver button down to end the call. I don’t recall them saying anything to me, their look of disappointment telling me all I needed to know. Their expressions said, “Don’t EVER trust the cops, don’t EVER call in outside help!” I guess that I absorbed this lesson, maybe too well.

Even after all I’d seen in the past, I just couldn’t believe that violence of this sort was possible. I thought about killing myself, that my life, my world, had been destroyed forever. I wanted to throw myself off the East Lincoln bridge that went over the Hutchinson River Parkway, the one that connected Mount Vernon to Pelham. I thought about telling my teachers and classmates at school on Tuesday. But how could I go to school, face my neighbors, face Wendy, live in Mount Vernon, knowing that Mom had married a monster? I knew that Mom would’ve been embarrassed to no end if I would’ve aired our dirty laundry, even in the face of danger. We didn’t trust anybody, least of all the police. And tell my teachers or classmates? Are you kidding? I didn’t even want them to know that I was poor. My classmates made fun of me because of my mouth, my religion, how slowly I spoke, and because of my skin tone. Abuse would’ve just been added to the list. And telling any authority figure about this would’ve destroyed my family and me — at least that’s what

I thought. There wasn't much of a family here to destroy, and I somehow knew that I had a self-image to reconstruct. I had nothing to be sure about in my life, no firm ground in which I could stand. I felt betrayed, stripped bare of all ability to pretend to be someone other than the helpless person I now was.

I went to school the next day not sure if Mom would ever regain her memory. I didn't pay any attention to what was going on in school that day. After getting home, I saw Mom recovering on the living room couch with an ice bag on her head. "What happened?," she asked about an hour later. "Judah beat you up. Don't you remember?," I said. "Nah, nah, I don't remember," Mom said. She told me that she "couldn't remember nothin'" after her phone exchange with Maurice. That's when I started to think about making Maurice pay.

My Wendy crush came to a crashing halt. If my first love had been an M-1 Abrams tank going a hundred miles an hour, then witnessing my stepfather beating up Mom was like that tank getting smashed into by a Japanese bullet train, the fastest high-speed train in the world. The bullet train was Mom, in need of help, and I thought that I was the one that needed to step up.

While the crush was damaged, smashed, in a twist of emotional and psychological metal, it wasn't gone. It's not like when I looked at Wendy I didn't feel anything. I still smiled whenever I heard her laugh or say something sarcastic. I looked at her bushy eyebrows, her light gold-brown skin, her hairy forearms, her shapely calves and her enchanting eyes and still sighed. I just didn't think that I could do anything about it anymore. If I had been Wendy, knowing my family troubles, I would've stayed as far away from me as possible. So I suffered on, hoping that the end of the school year would provide some much needed relief from Wendy, Alex and Humanities.

I made another pact with myself on the twenty-fifth of June, the last day of seventh grade, to keep the humiliation that I endured that year from ever happening again. After school that balmy Friday afternoon, me, Mom, Menelek (baby Maurice's Hebrew-Israelite name), Yiscoc, and Darren's Clear View School "counselor" Mrs. Karen Holtslag went to Wilson Woods Pool. The pool and the park were about two blocks from 616, the largest park in Mount Vernon. It included large picnic areas, a children's playground, a large municipal pool (one of the few public pools in the city), and a concessions stand.

Mom and Mrs. Holtslag met to discuss Darren's "progress" and his psychological needs. Menelek, Yiscoc, and I were there just to have fun. It was one of those rare times where I got a chance to spend time with my younger siblings without thinking about their terrible fate, to have Maurice as their literal father. It would be like having Damien from *The Omen* movie series as a son. Baby Maurice and Yiscoc needed this time out of the house more than I did. I witnessed their father abuse baby Maurice and neglect Yiscoc on too many occasions. My stepfather once beat the six-month-old Maurice to keep him quiet because he was trying to sleep, and would forget to change his diapers while we were in school. Mom eventually found a babysitter to watch baby Maurice, but the damage was already done. Even though nearly three years old, baby Maurice had never said a word. The eleven-month-old Yiscoc had been stunningly quiet since his birth. Maybe Mrs. Holtslag should've been counseling Mom about them, not Darren.

Mom gave me a \$10 bill to buy some snacks at the concession stand for everyone. As I walked over dreaming of hot dogs and mini-pizzas, carelessly I had the bill only half in my right hand. A big kid magically materialized, ran by and snatched the money from out of my hand. It seemed like God suspended the rules of time as soon as it happened. The moment that the thief grabbed the bill it felt as if a lightning bolt had ripped through the clear blue sky on that bright summer day. I knew deep down that my summer would mirror the previous fall, winter, and spring.

When my stepfather found out about my tragic error, he demanded that I tell him exactly who stole the money. "I'm not sure. I think it's some guy named 'Pookie,'" I said. Maurice walked over to me, poked me in the chest, and told me to get the money back from Pookie in two weeks. I said, "I can get the money from Jimme," but he didn't want to hear that, shaking his head in the process. I pointed out that Pookie was much bigger than me, and that I didn't know where he lived. Maurice told me to "find out where he lives!" Otherwise I would get a "whuppin'."

I spent nearly two weeks asking questions and running around the Pearsall Drive projects looking for the thug. I learned that Pookie was sixteen, about five-foot-ten, and lived with his mother on the fourth floor of one of the six buildings in the project community. I hadn't seen him once in my eleven days of snooping since the robbery. I was terrified to be at 616, and too scared to be outside. I spent my afternoons when I wasn't out on one of my Pookie hunts in 616's stairwells and basements crying and thinking,

“Why me?” But I knew why. I stopped acting like Maurice was my father and a changed man after what he did to Mom. This was punishment for not fulfilling the Torah’s law regarding fathers and mothers, “Honour thy father and thy mother, that thy days be long on the land that the Lord hath giveth thee.” “Yeah, right!” I thought. We had no land, no promised land, and no prayed-for-land either. And Maurice, well, if he was my father, then what did that mean for me, Darren, and Jimme? Torah or no Torah, I swore that I’d never call my bastard stepfather “Dad” again.

My stepfather cut my Pookie hunt three days short on the sixth of July. Because I wasn’t man enough to actually find and confront Pookie to get the money back, it was now time for my whuppin’.

Whap! Whap! Whap!

“Are you gonna do what I say nigga!,” Maurice kept saying as he kept whipping me with his belt.

I stood there with my arms and legs stretched out — and with my pants and underwear pulled down to my ankles — in front of a grimy white wall in my room being whipped by him with his leather belt. I could hear the belt cut through the air before it landed on my nearly naked body. I assumed that he pulled this straight from the ABC miniseries *Roots*. Whap! Whap! Whap!

“I’m yo’ father and yo’ gonna listen to me!” he barked.

As the inquisition continued, my room started to spin in my head, and the white walls turned yellow and red. Whap! Whap! Whap!

“Are you gonna listen to me? Are you gonna listen to me?” he kept saying as each hit became harder and harder on my back, butt, and legs. I started seeing pools of blood forming on the ceiling and nothing but hatred was forming in my mind. Whap! Whap! Whap!

“Are you gonna listen to me?,” he screamed.

“I hate you! I hate you! You’re not my father, you’re just a bully!” I yelled.

My stepfather then paused from whipping me. Punches and kicks followed about a second later. First came three punches to my head and jaw, after he spun me around from the wall.

“You hate me, huh nigga?!?”

Then he kicked me in the stomach and the mouth as I lay on the floor, at least until I started to spit blood. After I threatened to go to the police, Maurice picked me up and threw me by my arms four feet into a corner wall, almost knocking me unconscious.

“Go to the police, muthafucka! I dare you! If you talk to the police, I’ll kill you!” he said.

When I came out of my daze, my stepfather told me to move out and go live with Jimme. He told me, “This is MY house. If you hate me get out!” A suitcase then greeted my head as my stepfather said, “Start packin’!”

Mom arrived from a long day at work, around 3:15 pm, as Mount Vernon Hospital was about to go on strike, and she wasn’t a part of the union. “My poor mom,” I thought. When she came into my room, she immediately became angry. “What happened?” she asked. I told her the story, and she told me to unpack.

After five minutes of quiet, I heard her arguing with Maurice in the living room.

“He’s a defiant child. We have to get rid of IT!,” he said.

“Who pays the bills? Who feeds your fat black ass? If this child of mine leaves, we’re gonna turn this mutha out, and you’re gonna be the one goin’ to hell!,” Mom said in response. I guess she *really* didn’t remember what happened to her on Memorial Day.

My stepfather then walked into my room to say “Unpack, nigga.” I finished unpacking, and then I sat in my walk-in closet and began to cry. I hadn’t cried in the closet since the day I finished third grade, because Mrs. Shannon was no longer my teacher. I had a crush on her all through that year. Now I closed the closet door, wanting no light to shine on me.

I felt trapped, with no place to escape from the wrath of my stepfather. I thought about poisoning his food, the fat slob. Or slitting his throat when he was asleep, because he could sleep through a thermonuclear detonation. Then I thought about killing myself again. I could jump out of the window in the living room and land flat on the blue-gray slate walkway between 616’s front door and the five stairs leading to the sidewalk and street. I thought that one of us would have to die to end this senseless ordeal.

I discovered that my waking nightmare had just begun. It turned out that my ribs and stomach were bruised, I had another knot on my forehead, my lower lip was busted, and my butt and right leg had bloody scars on them as a result of the belt.

Not only did my stepfather forbid me from the outdoors or from reading because I refused to acknowledge him as my father, but he forced me to do every conceivable household chore. He invented them on a whim to keep me busy every day. His justification, of course, was the Torah. “Honour thy father and thy mother . . .” was what I’d allegedly violated as a sinful Hebrew-Israelite. I scrubbed behind our two refrigerators on a Saturday afternoon — our so-called Sabbath day — while they were turned on, burning myself on coils and cleaning walls with plain water. I whitewashed the bedroom, living room, foyer, and hallway walls on Saturdays and other days, again without any soap. Maurice inspected my work for any mistake, and if there were any, I’d get beat and would have to start the whole thing all over again. All while he laid on his unemployed ass farting and watching the ’30s *Tarzan* movie series starring Johnny Weissmuller on WNEW-Channel 5. On a Sanyo TV set my father Jimme had bought us the year before, just before his Louisville Slugger incident! I scrubbed those kitchen walls as if I were scrubbing Maurice with a steel rake tipped with Brillo pads. It didn’t matter that I didn’t have anything but water to clean them with.

Both Jimme and my Uncle Sam tried to see me during this torture. My stepfather threatened to kill Jimme, practically running him off. I got in trouble for chasing after my father down East Lincoln Avenue after Maurice threatened him. Maurice yelled at me, “If you go after him, you betta keep goin’!” Mom stopped my Uncle Sam from confronting my stepfather about his abuse of her and me when he came over for a visit at the end of July. He was obviously frustrated beyond belief. Uncle Sam said, “Don’t s’pect me to keep comin’ over while that son-of-a-bitch’s still here!”

I was completely exhausted by then. I dreamed every day of slaughter. I thought about cutting up my stepfather in his sleep with a steak knife and feeding him to wild dogs. I’d start with his balls, then his whale-blubber belly, and then his throat. Then I would stuff his balls down his throat. These wonderful thoughts probably kept me from committing suicide.

These thoughts somehow didn’t protect me from fists or a leather belt. I thought hard about how to end this summer of discontent and abuse. So I pretended to be something I wasn’t — a loving, wayward stepson. I begged for my stepfather’s forgiveness and even called him “Dad” while he beat me for about the sixth time in a month. He stopped, finally, and gave me a hug. I cried tears of rage and hate, because I couldn’t even

stand to touch or smell the man, much less being pressed against his overabundance of fat. I prayed for his death to be long and painful, as if I had a dagger in my right hand. Yet I soon discovered that I didn't need to do what I did to bring my summer of abuse to a close. The following week, my stepfather found a part-time, night-shift job as a security guard at the closed Vicks factory in the middle of Wilson Woods. His useless carcass would now spend twenty hours a week elsewhere.

I decided to write it all down, all of the arguments and the abuse. I wanted to document my "summer of discontent," as I called it. For what purpose, I didn't know. A week after my shuckin' an' jivin' with my stupid stepfather, I put my journal away, not knowing when I'd open it again.

Despite it all, the idiot had failed to break me. Off and on throughout my summer of torture, I did think of Wendy. She'd sometimes show up in my dreams. Or I'd think of her as I walked the streets of North Side Mount Vernon, as I passed her Park Avenue block, on the way to pick up a new stroller for Yiscoc or to go to Waldbaum's or some other grocery store. Then I started thinking that this was a pitiful waste of time. After all that had happened, "there was no way someone as great as Wendy would ever be interested in me," I thought one day in early August, a few days after my five weeks of continual abuse had ended.

I assumed that I was damaged goods, a person no self-respecting human would see as having any value. Kids, even poor kids, made fun of me all the time, my religion was a sham since my stepfather had become a worse person. Mom was making dumb decisions, and my grades despite my end-of-the-year rally didn't meet my usual standards. It was August '82, and I didn't know if I'd make it to the end of the year.

If masturbation were the only thing that I discovered that month, I might've begun aspiring for some other kind of life. Instead, I decided on another boring August day to do something else novel. I didn't want to go to Wilson Woods again. We didn't have any money anyway. I decided to take my siblings on a walk on the wild side, to walk outside our immediate neighborhood. First Darren and I took baby Maurice and Yiscoc in his new stroller out of 616 and walked to Pelham. We went to the top of a rocky mound that jutted out next to Hutchinson Elementary School, the fenced-off school next to the strip mall that included our laundromat.

It was such a great experience that we did it again, only this time we didn't stop at Pelham. The four of us walked and strolled down East Lincoln Avenue, across the stone bridge over the Hutchinson River Parkway into Pelham, and turned left on Fifth Avenue to go north. This was uncharted territory for all of us, especially me. I hadn't been down in the city all year, and my life for most of the summer was spent between Wilson Woods, Pearsall Drive, and 616. North Pelham might as well have been Helena, Montana to me.

"We don't know where we're going," Darren said.

"Yeah, *and?*," I said in response.

"Okay, but it's your fault if we get lost, Donald," Darren said.

We didn't get lost. We walked until we hit Chester Heights, the beginning of the village of Eastchester. It was amazing in that it was much more suburban than Mount Vernon or the part of Pelham that I'd known up until that moment. The homes were luxurious by my standards. Everyone seemed to own a BMW, Volvo, Mercedes-Benz, or Peugeot. There weren't many sidewalks around, only well-manicured lawns. We had walked into a ritzy community without any warning. But instead of becoming depressed or angry, it made me introspective. "Look at these houses!" I said to Darren as we walked by one Tudor-style home after another three-story mansion, broken up only by a few cul-de-sacs.

We walked across another bridge, this one with an overhanging meshed metal fence, across the Cross-County Parkway, and ended up in Mount Vernon for a brief moment. We veered right as we walked up a hill and out of Mount Vernon again. After walking through what appeared to be an enchanted forest, we discovered we were in Bronxville. Even at twelve, I knew that Bronxville was just about the richest community in America. And it looked like it, too. I began to think that the world was a cruel place, having rich Whites living so close to us yet their lives were so far apart from ours. Darren, having been around rich Whites through ClearView for nearly eight years, didn't think too much of it.

That's when it hit me. If I wanted to live a better life, to have a nice house and a car and a family, it seemed to me that I needed an education, a college education. I wasn't going to get there just graduating from high school, especially in Humanities, where the expectations for college were so high that some kids already *knew* that they were going to law school. I just knew that I couldn't go through another summer of abuse. So I said to myself, "I've got to get through the next five years. I've got to go to college." I knew

almost intuitively that my choices were to continue to experience abuse without reaching for something that I thought I could do based on my smarts. Yet it seemed like an impossible task.

So as we walked through the villages of Bronxville and Tuckahoe, ending up on North Columbus Avenue/Route 22, I began to think about what I wanted to get out of eighth grade. It seemed to me that the most important class for my future was Algebra, since that led to higher forms of math. I knew English and Social Studies would be really easy, but with success in Algebra, I could go into high school with a little more confidence. That's when we passed by a ranch-style home with a stone facade. I looked and saw someone out in front I hadn't seen since the end of the school year.

It was Phyllis, outside in the front yard with her sister, apparently back from bike riding. She called us over, and the four of us talked. Phyllis asked what we'd been up to over the summer. This was the first Black family I'd seen during our two-hour walk. Of course I didn't go into any detail about what we'd been up to. After all, the one thing that the past year had taught me was *not* to open up my mouth and say *everything* that was on my mind! So I let her and her older sister Claudia do most of the talking. They'd gone somewhere, somewhere down South to visit family. It looked like they were having a good time, the time of their lives compared to us.

"Do you live around here?," Phyllis asked."

Oh, we're on a long walk and just happened to be in the neighborhood," I said.

"Okay," she said in response.

In the neighborhood. Sure, if Bronxville, Eastchester, Pelham and 616, all part of our eight-mile trek, was *all* part of one gigantic neighborhood. After about ten minutes, we continued home. Darren was more excited about seeing Phyllis and her sister than I was.

Yet it wasn't that I was unexcited. Phyllis was far and away the nicest person to me in 7S all year. She stepped up when others made fun of me. I liked Phyllis, but I wasn't in any way interested in her. She seemed smart enough, sure of herself, a bit stuck-up and personable at the same time. I just took her being nice to me the same way Laura Ingalls from *Little House on the Prairie* probably took it when Mrs. Olsen was nice to her. As far as I was concerned, Phyllis felt sorry for me, and I didn't like that feeling.

I had more important things on my mind by the time we got home. I finally had a plan, a long-term plan, for dealing with the situation at 616. I knew that there would be a

lot of smaller steps that I'd have to take before even getting to college, much less getting a degree. But in looking at where Phyllis and Claudia lived, I at least knew that someone in their family must've taken similar steps at a time in the not-too-distant past. "I have no time to think about Wendy or Phyllis or any other girls," I thought. And I certainly didn't have time to sit and contemplate the world at my bedroom or living room window. No, if I wanted to help myself and Mom, I had to make the vision of leaving Mount Vernon and going to college happen. Otherwise I really didn't have anything else to look forward to, except what I thought would be a very painful life and an extremely early death.

5. Welfare

Our family faced other pressing problems. Mount Vernon Hospital's employees went on strike for higher wages and increased job security in mid-July. Although Mom was a sixteen-year veteran of the organization —nearly fifteen of those as a Dietary Department supervisor —she never joined the union. Mom didn't want to pay "them bloodsuckers" dues, and said that she "couldn't afford them" anyway. Yet who could blame the union? Unemployment nationally was at ten percent, and Mount Vernon's rate was probably double that. Inflation had wiped out any cost-of-living raises over the previous four years. Management had refused a five-percent-per-year increase in wages over three years.

Despite this, Mom's co-workers and friends — all union members — hoped that she would join them at the picket line. She refused, citing parental hardship and the need for money as reasons. I can only imagine how much spit and venom Mom faced on her way to work every day for three weeks. Considering our money situation —which I knew because I checked the mail and looked at our bills every day —picketing and getting union benefits might have been better than working. It wasn't as if there was food in the house to eat anyway. She was bringing food home from her job for us to eat for dinner at least three times a week. As much as I enjoyed Mount Vernon Hospital's Boston Cream Pie, I thought that picketing for a better wage was the way to go.

We were ending '82 as if we jumped off a cliff without a parachute and with lead blocks around our feet and ankles. The only good news was that Maurice was working at his night-shift security guard job. Combined with school, once that started up in September, I only had to see his fat ass a few hours a week. No, the center of our swirling toilet bowl of a world was Mom. Soon after I started eighth grade, the other shoe dropped. Mom, so insistent on not joining Mount Vernon Hospital's union, was the odd woman out. The hospital's concession of five percent increases per year over three years left them looking to cut costs. The only personnel left vulnerable were non-union service workers and their supervisors. Mary Louise Gill Collins Washington, a sixteen-year veteran with nearly fifteen years of supervisory experience in the Dietary Department, had been cut to half-time by her boss Mrs. Hunce. Of the two other supervisors, one was a "West Indian" woman — Mom's language, not mine — with seniority. The other was a "White girl" with

less than three years of experience, but she had a union card. Mom was screwed, but it was a screwing of her own making.

We were screwed too. Mom didn't tell us about the demotion. I learned about it because I noticed she was home much more often when I came home from school. For as long as I could remember, Mom worked the morning shift. She got up at 5:30 am to get to work by 7, got off at 3 pm and came through the front door between 3:15 and 3:45. Whether I took the school bus or walked, I usually beat her home by a half-hour.

One day I walked through the door, and having noticed her, said, "Wow, you're home early!" This was when she told me about the change in her employment status. I wasn't surprised. I begged her to stay with the union that summer. The *NBC Nightly News* with Roger Mudd, Jessica Savitch and Tom Brokaw reported regularly about the climbing unemployment rate — it had approached eleven percent by October — rising interest rates, and union-busting across the country. In a rare place where a union had won concessions, Mom had lost.

The news made me ask myself "What else could happen?" After all, our Hebrew-Israelite diet had declined to the point where the last week to ten days of every month was spent eating Great Northern Beans and rice, and that was when Mom worked *full-time*. The first month after the work reduction, all we had left to eat in our two-refrigerator kitchen was a box of Duncan Hines' Devil's Food cake mix, Pillsbury All-Purpose Flour, and some sugar. And this was *six days* before Mom got paid again! That weekend, we truly ate like Torah-era Jews. Mom made us pancakes out of the flour, without baking powder, eggs or milk, and cooked down some sugar in water to make us a crude glucose syrup.

The worst, though, was on its way. A couple of weeks before Thanksgiving, I noticed something else interesting about Mom. At a time when we all looked starved, Mom looked round. Her stomach and cheeks were telltale signs. So I asked her, my tweener voice cracking all the while.

"Mom, are you pregnant?!?"

"Yeah, Donald, I'm pregnant," she sighed.

"What! You got to be kidding! You mean you're still having sex with *him*?"

"Watch your mouth, boy!"

"Mom, what are we going to do? You can't have a baby, not now, not with all these mouths to feed!"

“Donald, what I’m supposed to do?”

“You need to get an abortion, that’s what!”

“I don’t believe in abortion. It’s against God’s will.”

“Well, we can’t feed the kids that are here now, so how can you feed *it*? Get an abortion Mom, before it’s too late!”

Before Mom could say anything else, I stormed out for yet another store errand for milk, diapers, and all the things I couldn’t eat. I wanted to cut Maurice’s balls off and shove them down his throat. I wanted to shake Mom until her eyes rolled back in her head. Most of all, I wanted to get her to an abortion clinic yesterday.

It was time to do something desperate. We needed money just to eat bread and water, and the water was free. We hadn’t done a full clothes wash since the beginning of September. Me and Darren both needed a new pair of sneakers about every other month. The ones I had were forming holes on the sides and bottoms.

So I turned to Jimme. Mom was always complaining that he didn’t pay child support anyway. And I knew where he lived now. It was 149 South Tenth, not far from the East 241st Street station in the Bronx, the end of the line on the Subway’s 2 and 5 lines running from Brooklyn and Manhattan. There were a bunch of watering holes nearby.

I’d actually started going over to Jimme’s in August, a consequence of my first long walks through Mount Vernon and Southern Westchester County. But this was different. I was going to Jimme’s for money and sneakers. I decided to wait for him at the 241st Street stop after school one Friday at the end of October, figuring I’d catch him just before he started his weekly drinking ritual.

Unbelievably, my first idea for tracking Jimme down worked! I caught Jimme coming down the rickety Subway steps, completely shocked by seeing me there.

“Bo’, wha’cha doin’ here?”

“We need money, and I need some sneakers.”

“Why don’ you aks Maurice for them?”

“‘Cause you’re my father and you haven’t been paying any child support. If you had, I wouldn’t be here!”

With that, Jimme laughed and shook his head. Of course he was also mad. I was in the way of him “gettin’” his “pep-up,” virtually anything with alcohol in it.

“Bo’, what I’m gonna do wit’ you? You got me,” he said. I negotiated fifty dollars from him. He promised to get me some sneaks.

The following Tuesday, I went over to his place. Not only did I get my sneakers - a pair of size eleven-and-a-half Nike walking sneaks. I got a brown Members Only jacket to boot. I could tell, though, that they once belonged to someone else. Still a bit hung over, Jimme said, “Man, lo’ at all dese suits! You gotta lo’ like a big shot when you work in the city.” The suits were too big and a bit mismatched. I was just relieved that Jimme cared enough about my feet to get me the right size.

Darren would usually come with me on what gradually became our weekly hike from the land of 616 to the near Bronx and the city. Jimme being Jimme, he would grab me by one hand while giving me the money and put his left arm around my shoulder, whispering in my right ear, “Don’ give Darren nothin’.” Or “you keep fitty for yo’self an’ give Darren ten. You a Collins, don’ be sharin’ nothin’ wit’ them Gills,” he’d often say. I almost always broke with Jimme around this. Yes, Darren often was a selfish goofball and my 616 family was just a step or two above total chaos. Yet I couldn’t go to eat at a good pizza shop with Jimme and Darren and let them subsist on bread, water and milk. I couldn’t watch them run around in graying underwear and just wash my own clothes. Not as hard as Mom worked, not as long as I lived there. I wanted to help as much as I could and still take care of my needs.

Jimme knew I was helping out at 616, too. So he would say things like “Don’ be givin’ your motha my money. Those ain’t my kids. Dis jus’ for you and Darren.” Or, “don’ give them muddafuccas nothin’,” which would start a brief argument between me and him about the needs of innocent children. Even with that and his drunken ups and downs, Jimme helped save the day for us and me as we plunged into the watery abyss of welfare poverty.

For some reason Mom didn’t listen to me, giving birth to my only sister, Sarai Adar Washington on the ninth of February ’83, in the middle of a snowstorm. I refused to visit Mom in the hospital in New Rochelle. I didn’t want Sarai, and was tired of watching Mom make incredibly bad decisions. Maurice tried to force me and Darren to go. Since I refused, it was my job to clean our increasingly sparse space. This would’ve normally been a hard task, but with so little furniture, it was mostly a matter of sweeping up dust and

garbage. It was the way I hoped our problems would disappear, I thought as I dumped the piles of dirt in a garbage bag.

We hit our financial rock bottom just as Jimme's money started to supplement our needs. In November '82, Mom took out a \$2,000 loan from Chemical Bank — at an interest rate of 22.5 percent! Payments started immediately. I figured out in my head that she was about to spend two years paying off this loan, including \$750 in interest charges. Just a couple of points below usury.

After Sarai, I knew that the final nail was coming. Working twenty hours a week, with baby Maurice, Yiscoc and Sarai all at home and in need of childcare? We went on welfare in the spring of '83, just before Passover. This was the ultimate embarrassment for me. And I thought it was for Mom too. She had spent my whole life up to that point telling us not to take "handouts," that she'd "never be on welfare."

Mom came from a long line of folk whose lives were hard and impossible ones, where they couldn't take handouts even if they wanted to. She was born to Samuel and Beulah Gill in October '47, their first of twelve children and her father's second overall child of thirteen. The Gills of Bradley, Arkansas were tenant farmers who lived in the Red River valley in the southwest corner of the state and five miles north of the Arkansas-Louisiana border. The town was a one-flashing-yellow-light-four-corner one. Just over five hundred people lived there, with farms, shotgun houses, and ranch-style homes neatly segregated between a few affluent Whites, lots of po' White trash and the abundantly poor Black side of town. The conditions she grew up in included corrugated tin roofs and outhouses to boot.

Being born into this family in the late-'40s meant that Mom's life would be a difficult and emotionally tortured one. She started doing household chores when she was five, helping with her siblings when she was six, and graduated to hoeing and picking cotton by the time she was eight. There wasn't the time, energy, and experience in the household for Mom to receive any affection or nurturing.

With all that and her mother's constant neglect and occasional abuse — she was once beat with the back of a hair brush for not getting ready for church on time — it's amazing that Mom wanted to get married or have kids. Yet I knew that what little nurturing and affection Mom received came from her great-grandmother, her aunt, and high school basketball. All served that role as Mom grew into an attractive six-foot woman.

Her great-grandmother, half-Choctaw and half-Irish and originally from Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), taught Mom to see herself as beautiful despite her dark complexion. Her Texarkana, Texas aunt taught Mom her basic adult survival skills. And high school basketball took her as a senior to the segregated state quarterfinals in '65, an amazing feat to say the least. Still, it was a hard life, one that Mom had vowed she'd never live again. That's why she moved to New York in the first place. I'd heard these stories for years, and like her, I believed that our lives would get better through sheer hard work. Welfare was never supposed to be something we would live with.

After nearly seventeen years in the New York area, *never* had finally arrived. Yet welfare brought some much needed stability. Our Great Northern beans and rice meals began to decline in number, and our Passover feast had more lamb to it than it did the year before. Still, it felt like Jehovah had abandoned us, left us to the whims of Reaganomics. It was as if God was punishing us like ancient Israel for our wicked transgressions. I was completely disillusioned. What my stepfather hadn't been able to destroy with his fists, malnutrition in the midst of puberty was much more effective in doing. At the moment, I had nothing or no one to believe in. I wasn't completely without help or hope, but the task ahead remained daunting. I had no Wendy to imagine, no Jehovah to pray to in faith. And Mom, Maurice and Jimme had all proven incapable of providing the psychological stability necessary for hope to take firm root in us.

Despite all this, the summer of '83 would be the most peaceful and least disruptive one I'd have for the rest of the decade. I didn't get mugged, I wasn't abused, and I didn't witness any major beefs between Mom and Maurice. I thought that we as a family were reeling from the fall into welfare. It was quiet at home most of the summer. Most of what I did between eighth and ninth grade was to help Mom out as much as I knew how with my siblings. I went on frequent walks with my brothers Maurice, Yiscoc and sometimes Darren to Wilson Woods, Holmes School, Hartley Park (the park near downtown Mount Vernon) and the occasional escape to Pelham and Eastchester. I also watched soap operas like *Days of Our Lives*, *Another World* and the *Young and the Restless*.

The one thing I did do that brought on another round of contemplation was help with taking care of my sister Sarai. She was a sickly newborn thanks mostly to Mom and my stepfather not doing their jobs as parents. Apparently they both had the sickle cell trait and had given Sarai sickle-cell anemia. By the middle of the summer, Sarai was obviously

in trouble. She hardly gained any weight, all of her food had to be fortified with iron, and she only had “three strands of hair,” as Mom put it. It was more like a few dozen in three spots on Sarai’s scalp. She always needed help. Mom would say to me, “See, that why you shouldn’t wish for an abortion,” as if I was supposed to feel guilty because Sarai was sick. As if I had anything to do with her being here. If anything, she should’ve felt guilty about bringing a child with Sarai’s condition into our idiotic family. I just gave Mom a weak smile whenever she’d say something stupid like that.

Mom decided at the beginning of August that it would be a good idea to celebrate Maurice’s thirty-third birthday and Sarai making it to six months old. It was a great feast of grilled chicken, hamburgers and hot dogs, macaroni and potato salad, fruit salad and lemon and chocolate cake, potato chips and Kool-Aid and lemonade. I would’ve been in a good mood to eat, too, except for the fact that we were also celebrating the fat slob’s birthday. It pissed me off to no end that me and Darren had to shop and help with the task of grilling food for the asshole to eat a rare feast.

What should have been a fun gathering was one of the most surreal experiences I ever had. Mom had invited my Uncle Sam to the picnic at Wilson’s Woods, along with Dennis, one of Maurice’s friends, the best man at their wedding five years before. Neither of them wanted to be there, but my uncle was beside himself with anger. He hardly ate, which should’ve been a red flag to Mom. Uncle Sam *always* ate. She didn’t seem to understand why her brother would be upset that she was spending a week’s worth of food stamps to throw a party for her abusive and adulterous husband and a daughter with sickle-cell anemia. To his credit, Uncle Sam stayed to help us clean up. I knew after he hugged me “Good-bye” that I wasn’t going to see him anytime soon.

Soon after, I saw my stepfather and Pookie in the middle of a conversation near the Pearsall Drive projects. I was on my way home from grocery shopping in nearby Pelham. I saw them from a distance, and figured that they didn’t see me. So I hid behind a tree across the street from the Getty gas station and a closed grocery store, where Maurice and Pookie talked. They were laughing and joking around, having what appeared to be a friendly conversation. I thought that I was mistaken, but how could I forget who my mugger was? My stepfather, who knew where we were that day in June ’82, had paid Pookie with Mom’s money to mug me at the pool. My carelessness had only made it easier for Pookie to do his job. It was my stepfather’s warped way of making me a man.

It was strange to know that after all that had happened, Mom still threw a birthday party for a person that she despised. I hated the man as well, so much so that I'd developed a minor stomach ulcer soon after the picnic celebration. Even though the year since the summer of '82 had been a relatively peaceful one, it was only that way because I had made some moves toward changing my life. But I knew I needed something more to change. Jehovah wasn't it for me anymore. Neither was staring out of a window all afternoon waiting for something beyond my experience and courage to happen. I was in search of something real, something that didn't involve pain, someone who'd accept me as I was. I just hoped that I'd find that something and someone sometime soon. A little more than a year before, I'd thought Wendy was that "substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." But now, I knew that it was up to me to save myself so that I could be in one piece emotionally by the time I finished high school. I just needed to figure out how.

The *how* included a routine, at least at first. We had developed a routine, Darren and I, around our time at 616. Our school week afternoons were spent on grocery runs to and from C-Town or Milk-n-Things in Pelham, sometimes as many as three times between three-thirty and seven-thirty.

About shopping with food stamps. It'd always been a struggle to shop for my family, to find kosher food, to buy strange things like matzos or kosher salt. It became stranger for me once we ended up on welfare. Food stamps embarrassed me to no end. I'd maybe used Mom's food stamps a half-dozen times in the months since April '83, including when we had to shop for the barbeque picnic in August. Most of the time, I'd used Jimme's money to pay for the groceries, the indignity of using food stamps was so great.

But I couldn't avoid using food stamps forever. One evening in September, at the start of ninth grade at Mount Vernon High School, I went shopping for groceries at the C-Town grocery store near the corner of Park Avenue and East Prospect Avenue in Mount Vernon. I shopped there after 7 pm after a quick stop at Mount Vernon Public Library to study and read. It was a Wednesday or Thursday night, right after Rosh Hashanah. I was buying some pinto beans, Carolina Long Grain Rice, beef neck bones and other healthy yet cheap things to eat for the next few days.

I was very aware of the possibility that I could bump into one of my better-off classmates while paying for groceries with my stereotypical food stamps. As far as I was concerned, they already had too many things they could make fun of me about as it was.

So as I finished combing the slender and short aisles of C-Town for kosher bargains, I began my trek to the cash registers at the front, relieved that I hadn't bumped into any folks I knew. Only to run into Wendy, having beaten me to the cashier that was open at the time. "Damn," I thought, one of the few times before the age of twenty-one that the word *damn* ever invaded my thoughts. She was polite enough to say

"Hey, Donald."

"Hey, Wendy. Doing some shopping, huh?," I asked to hide my nervousness.

"Yeah. My mom wanted me to pick up a few things."

"Same here," I said

"What brings you over here?," Wendy asked.

"Oh. I had to go to the library to study, and C-Town's on the way home, so..."

Although I was usually grateful to be in my first love's presence, all I wanted to do at that moment was run away, get out of the store as fast as I could. Instead, I went through the motions, answering her questions and asking a couple of ones about the teachers we had in common that year, like Cuglietto and Murphy. Luckily for me, she didn't linger long after she paid the cashier, and said, "Later" while I was still being rung up. I quickly handed the cashier my \$20 in food stamps, told them to keep the Monopoly money change, and walked around the corner and down Prospect to 616 at Warp Factor 3.

Besides shopping and avoiding crushes and classmates, we'd wash dishes, straighten up around the apartment, help with Maurice, Yiscoc and Sarai, and somewhere in between do our homework. I really didn't have a place to study. By the last three weeks of the first marking period in ninth grade, I did almost all of my homework assignments in study hall. And, like on the day I bumped into Wendy at C-Town, I also sometimes went to Mount Vernon Public Library to do homework, but study hall seemed to be the best bet.

This despite the fact that there were two girls in my afternoon study hall who dressed like they were dating college seniors who were stars on their basketball team. I'd see them every Friday evening hanging out at 241st Street like fresh cuts of meat in the middle of a butcher shop. Sometimes I'd see them jump into guys' cars, guys who were at least three or four years older than them. It's a wonder that they didn't drop out of school *that* year. All of this while looking for Jimme at all of his typical watering holes. My Friday searches for Jimme were so much a part of the weekly ritual that I actually looked forward to the chase. I found him about nine weekends out of ten, and he would have money that

would support our needs at least sixty percent of the time. On those occasions I couldn't find him Friday night, we'd go to his place, some South Side bars and liquor stores and back to 241st first thing Saturday morning. If we didn't find him by noon on Saturday, we'd be lucky to get thirty dollars. I usually called off the search by ten if it looked particularly hopeless.

Saturdays were split between going to the store to get ourselves some hard-earned snacks, buying extra food for 616, buying the occasional new pair of sneakers, and pretending still to be good Hebrew-Israelites when we were home. The moment we walked out of 616 to go over to Jimme's after sundown, we had violated the Sabbath. Yet Maurice and Mom never called us on it. By the end of '83, we didn't even pretend that Saturday was the Sabbath day.

It was strange watching Jewish families go to and disperse from their synagogues and temples while we were on our way to track down Jimme or to spend the money he gave us. They were doing what we'd been doing for the better part of three years, chanting "Blessed art thou the Lord our God, King of the Universe . . ." and other Anglicized Jewish prayers. We passed a synagogue on the corner of East Lincoln and Claremont every Friday evening or Saturday morning with that prayer inscribed on its cornerstone in Hebrew and in English. They had the opportunity to explore Judaism in a way we never could, whether we believed that we were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or not. The world accepted them, not us.

Saturday evenings or Sunday mornings were reserved for washing clothes. We began this part of the weekly ritual a year earlier, sorting clothes, bagging them up and putting them in this old and rusty yet sturdy pewter-colored cart that Mom had bought in '76. We would then push this cart down the street three blocks into Pelham. The laundromat we frequented was two doors down from Milk-n-Things, in a strip mall across the street from a Mobil gas station, off a Hutchinson River Parkway exit, and next to Hutchinson Elementary School and Pelham Library. We spent a lot of time on that school's playground in those days. We talked about wanting a better life. I constantly asked Darren what he wanted to do for a living. He'd say, "I want to be a cartoonist." I chuckled usually in response. When it came time for him to ask me the same question, I had no clue what I wanted to do in life. All I kept saying was "I want to go to college."

6. The Old & The New

My relations with my classmates were significantly better once I made it to eighth grade. The first new person I noticed was Allison. She immediately struck me as attractive. I actually noticed the way she smelled first. It was lotion — something with aloe vera in it — and baby oil to go with a scent of cleanliness, so fresh and sweet that I could've sat there smelling her all day. Maybe Brandie was right about me after all!

I looked at Allison's golden-brown freckled face and skin, well-kept brown hair, wonderful smile and general sense of pleasantness. That combination was unusual for me to experience in Humanities — I spent three months in love with Wendy, after all — where attractiveness was just another way for folks to act as if they were better than you. Allison seemed older and more mature than the rest of us. It was partly because she was. Allison's family had moved to the US and Mount Vernon when she was eight. And like most British-system schools, primary schools in Barbados didn't take in students until after their sixth birthday. So Allison was already approaching fourteen years old at the start of eighth grade.

Allison and Dahlia, the latter my classmate since Holmes School and third grade, hit it off immediately. Dahlia's Afro-Caribbean background, with her being Jamaican, likely made their becoming acquainted easier. They were both shy but not necessarily introverted, although I thought of Dahlia as less outgoing than Allison. Up until then, I remembered Dahlia having a few friends at Holmes and in seventh grade. She was usually quiet yet answered enough questions in class to let all of us know that she was there. With Allison, Dahlia was more outgoing, friendly even. I'm sure that some of my classmates must've noticed the change in later years. I just happened to have a front-row seat in watching their friendship develop.

Kim also stood out as a new classmate. I'd first met and seen Kim in seventh grade, usually in passing and sometimes in Wendy's company. I had the impression that they knew each other before Humanities. It turned out that they had gone to Longfellow Elementary together for a few years. This was how our first conversation started. It was after school, during the Wendy crush. Kim was standing on the sidewalk outside Davis' prison-like stone walls, waiting for her father to pick her up. I'd seen her talking to Wendy earlier that day.

I walked up to her, said "Hi, I'm Donald," and stuck out my hand to shake hers.

“Nice meeting you, Donald. I’m Kim,” she said while laughing and shaking my hand.

I guess my overly formal greeting was what made Kim laugh.

“You’re that kid that everyone makes fun of in 7S?,” Kim asked.

“Yeah, I’m that kid. What homeroom are you in?”

“7U.”

“Oh. Okay. So you’re in that class with Denise, Sam and Cynthia, right?”

“Yeah,” Kim said, as she looked a bit harder to see if her father was coming down Gramatan to pick her up.

“So, how do you know Wendy?,” I asked, not realizing how awkward my transition was.

“Wow, you’re nosy!,” Kim responded “We went to elementary school together.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, just as Kim’s father pulled up in a black four-door car.

“Thanks for talking to me,” I said.

“Thank you,” Kim said with a smile, as she put herself in the front seat next to her father. They drove off, and I walked home.

Kim was attractive in her own right, about my own complexion or slightly lighter. She had large eyes, bright brown and white, and a smile to match. She was a bit on the skinny side, something that I was beginning to understand all too well that year. Most of all, Kim was Kim, the all-Black American girl. She was a picture-perfect-poster-child of middle-class Black life in the generation since the good-old ’60s I kept hearing about through TV and newspapers. I looked at her and saw another person who outclassed me, if only in an unaware-of-how-other-Blacks-live-way. I liked Kim, mostly because I saw her as a well-adjusted, truly sincere and nice person. Except she seemed more sincere and nicer than anyone had the right to be.

Then there was Laurell and Sam, White and Black, female and male, two of the most competitive forces in all of Humanities. They’d gone to Lincoln Elementary together before Davis. They’d already made names for themselves the year before as Mr. and Mrs. All A’s. Laurell was above all else a classic grinder, a nerd par excellence. At five-foot-seven, she was one of the tallest folks in class. She was also blond-haired, blue-eyed and blandly pale, a stark contrast to Sam’s chocolate-brown skin. Laurell was always prepared, always ready for the next task at hand even then. Sam seemed like he was always running for class president,

constantly seeking others' confidence in him. His A's seemed more natural, as if he didn't have to study at all. Still, they weren't literally cutthroat or constantly seeking to put down others.

About me and Laurell. She was the biggest Billy Joel fan I'd ever known. Schmaltzy or not, everything Billy Joel from "Piano Man" to "New York State of Mind" to "Pressure" — the entire Billy Joel catalog — was in her head as if she were double our age. By the time I'd met her, she'd already been to at least one Billy Joel concert. I liked some Billy Joel — the operative word being *some* — but I would've needed a glass of Manischewitz to listen to some of his more obscure work. This was one of our first conversations, about music and her love affair with the singer-songwriter from Long Island.

It was on one of my many walks home from Davis to 616 after school that year, a mile-and-a-quarter-trek that took about twenty minutes for me to complete. I hated spending forty-five or fifty minutes on the TFD yellow school bus as it snaked its way through every Mount Vernon neighborhood. Mostly, I hated feeling alone on a bus full of kids acting out on too much Bubblicious and way too many Now and Laters.

I saw my 8U classmate Laurell, on her way home and alone, too. I sped up to catch up with her.

"Hey, Laurell."

"Hey, Donald. You live around here?" she asked.

"No. I live on East Lincoln, near Pelham. What about you?"

"I live on Rich, near Lincoln," Laurell said.

"Oh. Okay. So how are you doing?," I asked.

And that was all it took. In the eight blocks we walked to Rich and East Lincoln, right across from Lincoln Elementary, I learned that Laurell had a younger sister, loved our science teacher Mrs. Mignone, and that we both liked Billy Joel's "Movin' Out." It amazed me how easy it was for me to talk to girls when I wasn't in love with them.

It was through these walks home or to school that I met her mother and her sister and learned that her mother had an illness. What kind of illness I didn't know, but an illness that didn't seem too serious to me, at least at first. I assumed it was serious to Laurell. She was upset a lot in eighth grade, and certainly not just because folks like Alex called her "weird" and "brainiac" at every opportunity.

I guess the fact that I learned about her mother's illness early on gave me sympathy for her. Whatever else might've bothered me about my situation, I knew that Mom wasn't sick or had a serious medical condition like, say, Lou Gehrig's Disease or multiple sclerosis. So I quickly learned that Laurell didn't come from a healthy family of means. This despite that fact that her father was on Mount Vernon's City Council. It was something we had in common, poverty based in large measure on two fathers not involved in our daily lives. I knew that Laurell would never admit it, but that common bond was the reason we were able to form a sort of friendship that year.

Joshua was another story. The only time he said anything to me was to call me something, like a "dickweed" or a "shithead." The shrimp even tried to pick a fight with me during eighth grade. It was crazy for Joshua to think that he had a shot at doing any damage. I was already five-eight and had refused to let anyone at school put their hands on me or my kufi. Joshua was lucky if he was four-eleven and one hundred pounds *with* lead for bones. This wasn't a fight. It was a pushing and shoving match, with me doing all of the pushing and shoving and Joshua landing in bushes or on his ass. Josh kept running at me, trying to throw a punch or kick me. I caught or blocked his attempts, grabbed him, and shoved him into the bushes near the boys' entrance to Davis.

By the sixth time, Joshua was crying and his cheeks were fire truck-red. I was laughing and shaking my head, and the other Black boys at Davis were asking me what was going on. When I told them, they started laughing as well. I never knew what his wanting to fight me was all about. I guessed that Joshua was playing out the role of Esau (the hairy brother of Jacob from the Bible, Torah and Qur'an) and didn't like the fact that I claimed to be a descendant of the father of ancient Israel and his people. Or he was somehow envious of me because puberty had brought me a major growth spurt that had not done the same for him.

People like Joshua served as reminders that even as things turned better for me at school - and I became acquainted with more of my classmates - that many saw me as a dangerous enigma, too dangerous to just be left alone. I was a person who was weird, but smart and not so weird that ignoring me would be enough. I remained leery of Alex and the Italian Club, even as I continued to take Italian with these jerks. Alex and Anthony N. came up with the brilliant "kufis-on-the-half-shell" joke to make fun of my multi-holed hat, the most expansive thing their minds could think of in eighth grade. My other, more

affluent and cultured classmates generally ignored me, or were so polite that it was obvious they'd rather be bothered stomping roaches than talking to me. Who could blame them after seventh grade?

So, I wasn't surprised to see them. It must've been everyone I'd come to know. About twenty-five or thirty of them in all. Led by Wendy, JD, Alex and Andrew, they all were marching down East Lincoln near where I lived, sticks and stones in hand. More like bricks and baseball bats and chains as they got closer. They were all dressed in Sergio Valente and Jordache, Benetton and OshKosh, Levi's and Gap attire. They were all after me, my kufi, my life, my eternal soul. They weren't running after me. They were marching in formation, like Soviet troops in Red Square, only with ridiculous smiles of mayhem giving away their intentions. I felt scared. But I had resigned myself to my fate. If I was goin' down, gosh darn it, I was gonna put up a fight and take some of them with me!

I knew that dreaming about your classmates in any other way than out of adoration or infatuation wasn't healthy. They served as a metaphor. They were an obstacle between me and my inner peace, a constant reminder that the odds were against me escaping 616 and Mount Vernon for the brighter pastures of a life and education elsewhere. They were symbols all right, symbols for everything from abuse and fear of abuse to undying and unrequited love. I woke up, sweating and with a panicked heartbeat from the nightmare. I looked at all of my body parts to make sure that I still had them in place before getting out of bed.

Later that snow-melt Saturday in early '84, Mom sent me to the Fleetwood Station post office in the northwest corner of Mount Vernon to pick up a certified package. She had a PO box there, set up originally to protect sensitive documents from thieves in the building. I assumed that she was using it now to keep Maurice from getting his hands on any checks or other sensitive information. This was yet another task that I'd become the go-to-child for. I got dressed in my hand-me down winter coat and blue sweats and began the slushy trek to Fleetwood.

Then *déjà vu* struck. I found myself standing at the northeast corner of Lorraine and East Lincoln, unusually quiet because of the snow and the cold front that came with it the night before. This was where the metaphorical forces of destruction had lined up and marched against me. I laughed out loud, hoping at the same time that no one saw me. I

looked down at the curb and sidewalk as the slush-ice was turning into mini-glacial streams and rivers, all blending as they ran toward a storm drain. In a semi-frozen pack nearby lay ten dollars. It had been trapped by the icy H₂O. “My luck is getting better every day,” I said to myself. This happened to *me*, someone who never found more than a penny at a time on the streets and sidewalks of Mount Vernon. Despite all my worries and nightmares and other self-inflicted thoughts, things, at least at school, felt like they were getting better

About a week before the start of the school year, the freshman class had to go to Mount Vernon High School to fill out our class schedules and meet with our guidance counselors. My guidance counselor was Mrs. Sylvia Fasulo, and meeting her was a sure sign that I hadn’t stopped growing. I towered over the four-foot-nine middle-aged woman. But boy could she smoke up a storm!

I wondered to myself, almost aloud, *why* Fasulo was a guidance counselor at MVHS. The woman had a B.A. (or an A.B., as some Ivy Leagues and other pretentious universities still call them) from Vassar. Class of ’49 as a matter of fact. Her diploma was on the wall in her small office, letting every one of her students know that she wasn’t exactly from humble beginnings. My first meeting with her was the first of many conversations about her glory days at Vassar. That said, I had no trouble scheduling my first set of classes with her. I’d selected Level 1 Biology, Geometry, Italian, and Afro-Asian History and Literature. I had two study halls mixed in with Gym, and I learned I already had one high school credit because of my 92 on the Algebra Regents exam the June before. “Only eighteen more to go,” I thought.

What really grabbed my attention that day was the California-style architecture. The school was only twenty-one years old and made Davis look like the prison it was by comparison. The school smelled fresh, like it was surrounded by pines and evergreens and oaks, which, of course, it was. If I hadn’t known any better, I would’ve thought that 100 California Road was *in* California, as different as it was from Davis. I’d been to MVHS only one other time, as part of Holmes School’s choir singing with the high school orchestra two and a half years earlier. The size and cleanliness of the school impressed me. It had this immense courtyard area, with the cafeteria and other sections of the school letting in lots of light. The outer front walls of the school were covered in a turquoise blue mosaic tile. The gymnasium was the largest one I’d ever seen. It was home to the school’s

basketball team, the Mount Vernon Knights, who had won the state championship twice during the '70s and had turned out four eventual NBA players, the McCray and Williams brothers. The Williams brothers, Gus and Ray Williams, were younger and were still in the NBA. And Gus Williams had won a championship with the Seattle Supersonics just four years before. Despite it all, I was looking forward to going to school here. It would be a fresh start for this freshman

The first day of school was one that introduced me to the reality of self-fulfilling prophecies and the damage that low expectations can do. On a day in which we were beginning Humanities at the high school level, our principal announced over the public address system that the freshman class was to assemble in the auditorium. It was third period, my study hall time, so I saw this as an opportunity to learn more about MVHS. Our principal, Mr. Richard Capozzola, was welcoming our incoming class to high school. He was an old-looking man in his late-forties, I guessed, balding but doing the comb-over thing to cover his hairless middle. He was short, like most of the Italian administrators, wore a bushy mustache and generally acted as if he were a warden instead of the chief administrator for an educational institution. After welcoming us, Capozzola said, "There are 1,075 of you here today. Four years from now, only half of you will graduate."

My mouth fell open, and not just because of what he said. I couldn't believe that someone whose job it was to make sure that we'd graduate would assume that only half of his students were capable of finishing. For a moment I thought what Capozzola said was just to catch our attention. But the look on his face and the words that followed said it all. Capozzola talked about "discipline" and "behavior," "detention," "suspension" and "expulsion" throughout the rest of his speech. Nothing about grades or test scores, Regents exams or graduation. The *only* message he was trying to send was that he'd prefer if the students who didn't plan on graduating drop out by the end of the day. If I'd been a student who really had struggled before high school, that's the message I would've taken with me out of the auditorium that morning. I was pissed with Capozzola and anyone who thought that this was the way to make students feel at home. They were taking the easy way out. It felt racist, reminding me that I'd have to fight my way through MVHS, too. It was going to be education as war.

Day two of high school was just as memorable. After a day of assignments and learning the names of our new teachers, I went to Louis Cuglietto's eighth-period

Geometry class. It was on the first floor of the school, just to the right of the front entrance and the cafeteria. As I milled around the classroom looking to take my seat, Nes came out of nowhere and snatched my kufi off my head. When I turned to confront him, he already had the look of a student who was going to throw my kufi around the classroom.

“Give it back now!” I yelled.

“Make me!” Nes responded with a bit of sarcasm.

Just as he was about to throw it to another classmate, I grabbed Nes and knocked him to the floor. There we were, on the floor by the dark green chalkboard, me on top of Nes, who was struggling to hold on to my kufi. I lay on top of him, punched him in the face a couple of times, and took my kufi back from him just before Cuglietto came into the room. By now, everyone in our class had formed a circle to watch the spectacle. I don't remember all of what Cuglietto said, but he did ask, “Do you want to get suspended?” After we dusted ourselves off — and me the dust bunnies off of my kufi — we went to our desks and got back to work. After school, I did get a couple of kudos from other classmates for standing up for myself.

This was when I began to question more consciously my motives for defending myself as a Hebrew-Israelite. “Why do I care if Nes steals my kufi from me?” I said to myself on the way home from school. It wasn't as if I truly believed in any of the teachings anymore. I definitely didn't want anyone messing with me at home or in school. At the same time, I didn't want to use up energy defending something in which I didn't believe. I was happy that I defended myself, but also very confused.

I thought about the prospect of not wearing the kufi to school anymore. At least I wouldn't get weird looks, have kids laughing at me, and draw unnecessary attention to myself. This was a cop-out, a cowardly way of solving a problem that was about more than a piece of clothing. Wearing the kufi every day was just as bad. Not so much because of others' reactions. If I didn't believe in the religion of Mom and my idiot stepfather anymore, that meant that I didn't believe in anything else. If I turned away from their version of Yahweh, who would I turn to as The One? I'd been defined by what I wore on my head, what I ate for lunch, what holidays I celebrated, and what I looked like to others for almost two and a half years. Now I was questioning whether I believed in any God at all. If I gave up wearing my kufi now, I might as well have said that the last few years of my

life were a waste of time, an unnecessary denial of things and foods, peoples and cultures that I could've embraced all along. If I continued to wear it, I was a hypocrite, someone who'd rather go through the motions of a dead and bizarre religion than stand up for my spiritual well-being. I felt trapped in my own logic, not to mention the warped thinking of Mom and my stepfather. I needed answers, and lots of them.

My classes served as a vehicle for me to begin my search for answers. Cuglietto's Geometry class wasn't one of them, though. Louis Cuglietto was a fine enough teacher. But his style wasn't the most encouraging. Whenever I didn't know an answer, he was always sure that I wasn't "working hard enough" to give him the right one. Cuglietto never assumed that I simply didn't know or didn't understand what he was doing at the chalkboard, a compliment in a way, I guess. It might've been part of his "tough love" approach to teaching gifted Black boys. Yet he seemed to go out of his way to provide his mathematical expertise to the girls in the class, especially Wendy.

Cuglietto was in his late-twenties when we had him for Geometry. Before too long into the year, I'd learn that the Brooklyn native got his job in part through Mount Vernon's Italian Civic Association. Although Cuglietto did work us hard all year to get us all up to par for the Geometry Regents, especially at the end of the school year, it felt to me like he had greater aspirations than teaching. More than a few times, Cuglietto's briefcase was packed up by the start of class. He was out the door, rushing to his car in the parking lot as if his wife was in the middle of labor, by the time that final 2:50 pm bell rang. I thought that he was of two minds, one to be the best teacher he could. The other was to move away from teaching — and teaching at MVHS — as quickly as he could.

While Geometry with Cuglietto was strictly about math, Bio with Mr. Graviano did provide some answers for me beyond the science. The man was also an assistant coach for MVHS' basketball team. Although I know he loved basketball, Graviano was a heck of a science teacher. He didn't do anything particularly exciting. He just made it seem as if we were learning how to tie our shoes when he was teaching us binomial nomenclature or the difference between mitosis and meiosis. Graviano began the year with Charles Darwin's trip aboard the HMS Beagle to South America and the Galapagos Islands in the 1830s, observing finches and developing his theory of natural selection. We were learning about Darwin and evolution, something I knew flew in the face of my family's Hebrew-Israelite beliefs. Despite that, what I learned in Biology every day made more sense to me

than attempting to interpret the first chapter of Genesis or Balkis Makeda's dreams warning us against the imperfect science of intellectual types like Darwin. What surprised me more was the fact that no one in our class questioned Graviano or the fact that he was teaching evolution, at least not in the open.

Biology gave me food for thought. I understood the science, the process of natural selection and mutation, the reality that over numerous eons life gradually evolved on earth to include intelligent mammals, primates, and humans. At the same time, we were being taught in temple that God had created or reclaimed (depending on interpretation) the earth in six days or six thousand years. The reclamation interpretation left room for everything that science said had occurred prior to the ascent of modern humans. The creation story obviously didn't. I was confused, having to reconcile the scientific method with religious beliefs. I solved the problem in my own mind by choosing to stand on the reclamation interpretation of Genesis' first chapter. But that didn't completely satisfy me.

If Graviano opened my eyes to modern science and the understanding of life on its most basic level, Yom Kippur '83 opened me up to understanding why I no longer put my trust in Maurice's God. I spent part of another September fasting and going to temple to atone for my sins. The temple was on Fifth Avenue and Second Street, just down the street from Washington Elementary School. I'd gone to temple maybe a half-dozen times since the spring of '81, three of those times to have some rabbi with a ragged beard tell me that Yahweh had forgiven me for my wicked ways. And it left me thinking, "Well, what about Maurice? His sins are many, and we get treated the same? Does he get forgiveness even if the sin is still in progress?" It didn't make sense to me that I needed to starve myself for three days and ask for forgiveness in a situation where a fat, greasy SOB for a stepfather could steal from, cheat on, beat up on, and lie to Mom, get forgiveness, and keep on trying to do what he'd done before Yom Kippur. I said to whoever was a higher power, "What did I do to deserve this?" I didn't get an answer, and nothing anyone at temple said gave me any answers either. I felt empty, as if everything I thought being in this faith was about was a farce, a morbid, diabolical joke that was played on me and my family. And Maurice was the devil himself.

Then there were my classes in Afro-Asian Literature and History. The two classes came almost back-to-back, with a study hall in between. Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. Flanagan were the respective teachers for the two classes. Mrs. Murphy was an older teacher,

probably in her mid to late-fifties. She was a decent teacher, a nice person, kind of like the older version of the mother from *Leave It To Beaver*. Mrs. Joyce Flanagan was both our social studies teacher and the coordinator for the Humanities Program at MVHS. She was in her late-thirties or early forties, and dressed like a professional White woman in a Virginia Slims ad. If it wasn't for her obligations as a teacher, all we would've heard from Flanagan all year was that we were "the cream of the crop," or "la crème de la crème" or that Humanities was the greatest program since "sliced bread." She made Mrs. Mann's speeches about our abilities to change the world seem reasonable by comparison. I knew what they were trying to do, but we all obsessed about our grades too much as it was. I wanted more, needed more really to maintain my sanity.

Flanagan wasn't all bad, at least for us. She was a good, if not great teacher, combining the names-dates-and-events history with new experiences in the classroom. We heard music from all over the world, practiced transcendental meditation, watched films on cultural practices in ancient China or in sub-Saharan Africa. In her own snooty way, Flanagan was trying to get us to see how different and rich the world was, that the Benetton side of our class was just a small sample of how wonderful and different the cultures around the world were. The problem was neither she nor we could appreciate what she was attempting to do. Transcendental meditation was five minutes of "Om," nothing more and nothing less, for most of us.

There was something interesting about having Afro-Asian Literature and History as a sequence. I felt liberated learning about something other than the history of Western Europe or the US. We started the year with Russia and Eastern Europe, learning about the multiple and sometimes deadly influences that led to the age of the Czars and the growth of an empire. In Murphy's class, we were reading short stories by Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn's work on the gulags. We also read Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*, not exactly *Russian* literature, but given our Cold War times, it made sense to learn about Stalinism from a *British* author. Once we escaped Russia for the history and literature of the Arab world, India, China and Japan, sub-Saharan Africa and other sections of the non-Russian world, my interest level went from medium-high to red-hot.

It was when we came to India and the Arab Muslim world that my struggle over my spiritual identity and what was occurring in class meshed. Flanagan's class covered the basics about Hinduism and the untouchables and reincarnation, the rise of Buddhism and

its spread to China and Japan, and the explosion of Islam through the teachings of the prophet Muhammad. Murphy's class covered everything from *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* to South Asian epic stories. The stories were funny and somewhat interesting. My interests were more about understanding the different philosophies and religions, though. By November, I was either going to the library at the high school to learn more about different religions or going to Mount Vernon Public Library to read from the Qur'an or more about Buddha's life, the Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path. I wanted to end my inner turmoil.

Toward the end of October we had an incident that drove Maurice nuts and would put me on the road toward some enlightenment, a few relevant answers to my questions about my life. On a usual Sunday, I was washing, drying, and folding clothes at the Pelham laundromat on Lincoln. Darren had left me there alone and wandered off somewhere, leaving me to do everything. I was pretty tired when I left. As I pulled the cart up the street from the laundromat and crossed into Mount Vernon, there Darren was talking to Reginald Paylor and his entourage of bullies. Darren told me that I needed to give Reggie some money. Otherwise he would beat us up. Because Darren would've left me there with a cart full of clothes to fend off three folks almost as big as us, I gave Reggie five dollars and told him to leave me and my brother alone. They laughed and left. I got on Darren for putting me in that position.

"What do you want from me?," Darren asked.

"I want you to act like you're my older brother and stop acting like a coward!," I grinded out.

Maurice somehow knew about the incident. I know I didn't tell him. Neither did Darren. Either one of Maurice's buddies saw what happened and told him or he set me and Darren up for another one of our masculinity lessons. It was another sorry attempt to break us while making us men. Maurice got in my face, grabbed me by my shirt and said, "This better not happen again," as if I had a choice in the matter.

It did happen again. For whatever reason, December '83 was spent without food in the house. Mom either hadn't received her welfare check on time or there weren't enough food stamps to put food in the house. This was after a weekend where I failed to find Jimme for the first time in nearly a year. We were in dire straits food-wise again, and could've used the food Mom bought up for fat ass Maurice back in August. Mom went to

Maurice for money to buy groceries. I'd rather gone to Alex or Nes for grocery money than to my stepfather. He came to me and gave me twenty dollars to go to the store. Because it was Monday and after 7 pm, my only option was Waldbaum's on East Prospect Avenue, around the corner from Wendy's apartment building and near the Metro-North station. It was a mile and a half walk each way. "Donald, do not lose this money. I don't want no excuses. I want all my change back. If you have to, catch the bus," Maurice said to me. I had already missed the last 7 bus going into Mount Vernon, and I knew that by the time I'd finish shopping that I would miss the last 7 for the return. I could've also waited for the 40 bus to White Plains, gotten off at North Columbus and East Lincoln, and walked the eight blocks to 616, though.

After shopping for beans and rice and some beef neck bones and spinach — which cost \$6.50, by the way — I walked out of Waldbaum's with the intent of cutting down Park Avenue to East Lincoln and avoiding most of the potential for a mugging. But it seemed that Maurice's God had other plans for me. I barely got to the corner of Prospect and Park before I was ambushed by four guys, all around my age and size. Part of it was my fault, as that corner was poorly lit and the Arthur Treacher's Fish & Chips that held it had closed the year before. I saw other people around, but none of them came to my aid.

So here it was that I was jumped by a bunch of dumb kids with dumb parents trying to beat me up and take thirteen dollars from me. My first thought was about how stupid these kids were. Didn't they know that I hardly had any money, that it wasn't worth the effort to take so little? Weren't there easier prey, older folk with more money that they could've mugged? That thought quickly passed as I began to defend myself. Apparently I must've learned something from my idiot stepfather, because I was able to kick, punch, and bite my way out of the mugging at first. I kicked one person in the balls, bit another's arm, and punched someone else in the jaw. I kept going until someone was able to hold me just long enough to reach into my pocket and take the money. Then they took off, running across one of the bridges into the South Side.

Brown-paper grocery bag torn to shreds, food on the ground, shirttail hanging out, I took off after them, now thinking only about what I'd face at home if I didn't come in with Maurice's money. They went east up First Street, turned right up South Fulton, and then left on East Third. With groceries in tow, I just couldn't keep up. I had lost them by the time I got to East Third and South Columbus. I walked home, thinking of the

punishment that awaited me. But then another thought came over me, not one of fear, but one of boldness. I realized that after what I'd gone through with Maurice in the past that he'd already done his worst to me. Short of killing me or putting me in the hospital, there wasn't anything he could do to me that I hadn't experienced already. At least I was coming home with food.

It was after nine by the time I got back from Waldbaum's and my mugging. Mom was worried, actually worried, while Maurice was just pissed.

"I told you not to lose my money! You're gonna pay me back every cent you owe me," he said.

I thought about saying something smart, something like "I owe *you*? How much do you think you owe me, *my* Mom, *your* kids, my family, you stupid asshole?" I wisely kept my mouth shut, saying that I'd get his money for him the next time I saw Jimme.

"You better, or it's your ass!," Maurice said.

Mom was more concerned about what happened during the actual fight. I told her about what happened.

"Why didn't you catch the bus?," Mom asked.

"Because I didn't want to spend any more of *his* money than I had to!," I said.

"You see someone you know?"

"I think one of them's named Corey," I said.

Corey and his older brother lived in the equally impoverished building next door, 630 East Lincoln. It was home to drunks, loose women, and semi-suburban drug dealers. Corey's older brother was in fourth, fifth, and sixth grade with me at Holmes. I hadn't seen either of them much since elementary school, but I recognized him immediately as the one who said, "Give me the money muthafucka!" Those were some ugly kids, inside and out.

In an unbelievable turn, Mom took me the next morning to the Mount Vernon Police Station, its juvenile division, to have me press charges, look at mug shots and ID my attackers. Maybe we should've gone downstairs and talked to some cops about Maurice as well. It didn't take me long to ID Corey and his henchmen, all of whom had juvenile records. Before I left, they had hauled Corey into the station for booking. I was glad to see that my fists had done some damage to his face.

I went to school that day with Mom and ended up signing in around sixth period. Vice Principal Carapella talked with me for a few minutes after Mom left, about the mugging and about my kufi. “You know that you can’t wear hats around here young man,” he said. “It’s a religious symbol, not a hat,” I said. For whatever reason, the powers that were hadn’t noticed my kufi and occasional yarmulke for three whole months. Carapella was Capozzola’s enforcer, a ball-buster who would’ve been better off as a bouncer at some biker club. He was big and not-so-tall, bearded, bald and rotund, but unlike most of the Italians in administration, he actually looked like he could kick some ass. Carapella said that I or Mom should have registered my kufi as a religious exception at the start of the school year. “Well, you know now,” I said with as much sarcasm as I could muster. Asshole or not, I wasn’t going to let this guy intimidate me. He laughed, asked me again if I was all right, and sent me on my way.

The first person who came up to me to ask what happened was Craig. He saw me as I was leaving Carapella’s office, on my way to gym. We talked for several minutes about what had happened. He gave me a high-five, which completely surprised me. It was maybe the second or third time in three years that anyone cared to ask me about what was going on with me outside of school.

It wasn’t just Craig. From Phyllis and Wendy to Joe and Danny, they all seemed to care that I was all right. It was the first time in three years that I knew anyone actually cared about me even in the most basic sense. That whole twenty-four-hour period was overwhelming. Fighting off four muggers and chasing them for over a mile, Mom responding by taking me to the police and their tracking down of Corey, to my classmates’ genuine concern left me emotionally exhausted. I spent most of that evening at 616 asleep.

It was the last of four muggings and robberies in four years, at ages nine and twelve, and two at thirteen. People said that Harlem was rough, and from my trips on the Subway through and times in Harlem with Jimme, it was. It didn’t mean that Mount Vernon was soft or a place for only wannabe-thugs. Within a couple of months, Corey and his gang had all gone to juvenile detention for what they had done to me.

It would also be the last straw for me as far as my identifying myself as a Hebrew-Israelite. The fifth and sixth of December had taught me a lot about the human condition. My classmates had shown me their maturity upon learning about my mugging. Mom took more initiative on my behalf in taking me to the police than I’d seen her take in years. The

police actually cared about my case and didn't play around in tracking down my assailants. It took about three weeks, but I tracked Jimme down, and, after collecting some money for the holiday season, gave Maurice his thirteen dollars.

I guess I also learned a small lesson in redemption. The fact that I had even a teaspoonful of support was very different from the way my classmates might've treated me if Corey and company had gone after me two years before. I must've done something right in middle school and in ninth grade, enough to where I redeemed myself as a decent human being in the eyes of my classmates. Despite this, I didn't trust it, not completely. I realized that things would get back to normal in a week or two, and I'd go back to my loner role. And while I was happy that Mom came to my aid, I knew that this was a rare event. Expecting Mom to be there to support me was really too much to ask.

Most of all, I was pissed with Maurice and Maurice's God. Maurice had sold us a bill of goods, and by the end of '83 I wasn't buying it anymore. Chanukah was just before my mugging. Yet we didn't even have candles for the menorah, much less gifts celebrating the holiday. Maybe it was because we were among the Lost Tribes and Chanukah didn't necessarily apply to us. That didn't matter to me. If we really were Hebrew-Israelites, then we should've honored all the major holidays. That Maurice was begrudging to his own children in putting food on the table - forget about giving them gifts - was enough for me to see that this was a religion for fools. Eating only kosher foods, living the Hebrew-Israelite lifestyle was quite expensive. Even with consistent income from welfare, we still had days without enough food in the house because of the kosher food issue. And where was my bar mitzvah? I was about to turn fourteen, and not one word about making me a man through a quintessentially Judaica tradition. This was the rite of passage that I should've had a year earlier. But setting up your stepson for a mugging? Was that really the best you could do? What an idiot!

Maurice worked, but no one benefited from the fruits of his labor. My stepfather spent more and more time away from 616. I'd see him sometimes at one of the local Chinese restaurants, eating everything they served, most of it as kosher as fried eel. I discovered that he'd knocked up a young Hebrew-Israelite woman within months of Mom becoming pregnant with Sarai. Nosy me also found out in '82 that he'd been forging Mom's signature to cash checks in her name. Chemical Bank had called to verify Mom's signature, and Maurice was almost arrested for fraud and forgery.

This man was a lying bastard beyond belief. And knowing that made me think that the God that Maurice had brought into our lives was a bastard as well. “How could Yahweh leave us out here with this man, this fool, this evil person?” I thought over and over again during the holiday season. I wanted God to answer my questions, to explain to me why our lives were so horrible when we worshiped him. If I could’ve, I would’ve grabbed God by the shirt and demanded an answer. Why did we fall into welfare, why did Mom marry Maurice, why was I such a mess? Despite my recent episode of bravery and receipt of support, all I felt in my heart of hearts was turmoil over my eternal life. I was no longer a Hebrew-Israelite, all right. I had no identity, no belief system, no spiritual foundation from which to move forward with in my life. I was a stranger in a stranger’s land, even a stranger to myself.

7. Redemption

I spent the first half of my holiday break contemplating suicide. I thought about two methods really. One involved getting hold of a samurai sword and committing seppuku, or suicide by ritual self-disembowelment. I certainly felt ashamed enough. But it was too messy, too painful, too much for skinny me. The other was an elaboration on my earlier thoughts of jumping off the bridge on East Lincoln that connected my part of Mount Vernon to Pelham. The Hutchinson River Parkway ran underneath.

I went down and around this bridge on my fourteenth birthday. There was a path, a hiker's path under the parkway and a pedestrian bridge that went under the overpass, crossing the Hutchinson River (really a stream at this point of its run) into Pelham. I looked at the bridge height sign from that spot as cars flew by on the parkway. It read "13.2 Ft." Then I walked from the river and made it back up to the bridge. I looked down at the cars underneath as I put myself, one leg at a time, atop the short stone wall, meant to keep young kids from falling off the bridge. As I stood there, I kept thinking, "What do I have to live for anyway?" Tears started to well up as I continued to look down at the cars zoomed by on both sides of the four-lane parkway.

Then I had thoughts. And having *any* thoughts at all, especially thoughts of anything other than suicide, will short-circuit any attempt to kill yourself. One was of the remote possibility that taking my life could actually hurt someone else, Mom, my family, maybe even my classmates or teachers. A second, even more sobering thought was that I could survive the thirteen-foot jump. Only to be run over by a car going at fifty or fifty-five. And I could possibly survive that, too. But I'd end up brain-damaged or paralyzed or a vegetable or in a coma. There were too many risks involved to just jump off the bridge. For a few seconds I stood there, lost and not sure of what to do next. My next thought, my third one, was that maybe, just maybe, this is what hitting bottom really feels like. Maybe something good for me and my life was just around the corner. Maybe if I hold out a little longer, I'd find a reason to live my life and live it well. My fourth thought brought me to Maurice. "Wouldn't that be the best revenge, that I overcome every situation in my life and become successful? Wouldn't making the ultimate comeback from the edge of the cliff be better than ending it all now?" I thought. With that, I got down from the stone wall and

went on a long walk through Pelham before going home. I wasn't relieved, but I wasn't ready to take my own life yet either.

I spent the rest of my time off going through everything I could find at home and at Mount Vernon Public Library about Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the three major religions west of India as I saw it. I wanted to know once and for all what to believe and who to believe in. I didn't want to wake up at thirty only to realize I wasted another fifteen years, ready to commit suicide again. I picked up an old Bible we had in a storage bin underneath my bed. I went to the library to compare Biblical texts with the Qur'an. I read key Talmud scriptures that matched up with key Islamic ones. Two revelations came to me from these exercises. One was that there wasn't much of a difference between Islamic and orthodox Jewish law. The other was much more significant. Forgiveness and redemption wasn't automatic in either belief system. You had to go through some form of ritualized spiritual purification process to gain Yahweh or Allah's amazing grace. You had to earn your forgiveness if you were a Jew, a Muslim, or a Hebrew-Israelite. Messing up even in the smallest of ways left you on the spiritual outside looking in for a connection to The One. It was like being disconnected over the telephone with no way to dial back in except through a holy day of atonement.

In reading the Gospels, it started sinking in that Jesus' life was about providing a path for each of us to gain unconditional and unearned forgiveness, including me. I read the New Testament at home late at night so that I wouldn't get caught venturing into forbidden scriptures. Somewhere between Matthew and Mark I found myself, maybe for the first time, realizing that I've been searching for someone to save me. From myself, from my family, from a life without meaning, from a life of hell-on-earth, and certainly from an afterlife without my proper place in it. I was finally in a place where I felt like I could turn myself over to God, possibly through Jesus.

But I wanted to be as sure about this decision as I could be. After the last few years of watching Mom, Maurice and Jimme make so many horrifying and almost fatal ones, I wanted this decision to be more correct than any 100 I'd gotten on any test. I wanted my potential conversion to Christianity to feel as good as I did the day I served as the introductory speaker at my elementary school graduation. And above all else, I wanted to be at peace with my decision so that if anyone asked me about the Hebrew-Israelite thing

again, I could respond to their questions — and their questioning of my decision — with honesty and good information.

After the holiday break, much of what I did other than watch the Raiders trounce the Redskins 38-9 in Super Bowl XVIII was to use my Afro-Asian Literature and History classes to compare and contrast the various belief systems with each other and with Christianity especially. I went from Taoist yin and yang to Zen Buddhism and the need for balance to Confucianism's ethical standards and the practice of Animism in various cultures around the world. The common theme in every major philosophy or belief system I looked at was achieving a state of spiritual balance. This kind of balance would lead to balance in my physical world. Some philosophies, like Buddhism and Hinduism, discussed the need to seek a path to full enlightenment and some sort of ultimate balance. That seemed a bit like Judaism and Islam to me. The need to take a long and difficult spiritual journey in order to gain a connection to this essence, or higher being, which would lead to an ultimate state of balance and being. The long history of castes and unfairness in older and wiser civilizations like India, China and the Arab World, also left me wondering. How much were these belief systems about maintaining social order for a few fortunate people, and how much were they about providing true enlightenment to every person who was willing and able? Nearly three years as a Hebrew-Israelite had left me feeling like I was part of an oppressed group within an oppressed group within a naïvely freedom-loving society. Despite the attractions of balance for and in my xi, the idea of accepting poverty, abuse, and ignorance just wasn't going to work for me.

Then I turned to Christianity in the everyday lives of folks around me, not my classmates necessarily, but in Mount Vernon generally. Most Blacks were Baptists, most Latinos and Italians were Catholic, while other Whites ranged from Presbyterian to Episcopalian. Afro-Caribbeans were all over the denominational plain. By the time I turned to Christianity in all of its sectarian forms, the beginning of March, I'd already read enough of the New Testament to understand that the writers were all concerned about the creation of sects. It seemed to me that denominations were idiotic. Didn't everyone who claimed to be Christian worship the same God and believed that Jesus was his son? Does it really matter if one form of Christianity forbids its pastors from having sex and another allows its pastors to marry? Without a full knowledge of the long and weird history of

Christianity, I just assumed that Christians formed different sects because they simply didn't like each other.

Catholics in so many ways reminded me of Hebrew-Israelites and orthodox Jews. Although they already had spiritual redemption, they lived their lives as if they didn't. Between Confirmation, Easter, and confession, not to mention the dress of popes and priests, Catholicism didn't seem all that different from what I knew about Judaism. The other denominations didn't seem to do much in the way of really making sense of how to reconcile salvation and redemption with how to live my life while waiting for the inevitable.

But more than anything else, I wondered about the brutality of life and how to understand that in the context of other belief systems. I lived in a world where whenever I made a mistake someone was there to jump down my throat about it. At school, if I screwed up, someone like Alex or Anthony N. was there to crack on me. Or a teacher like Dr. Demontravel was there to make light of my mistake. If I made a mistake at home, if I said or did the wrong thing, Mom would yell at me or I'd have to go back to the store for the third time in one evening. I lived a life where I had to hide my emotions. I couldn't cry or fly into a rage at home, no matter what happened. I might've ended up in the hospital if I did that. So most of the time, I didn't allow myself to feel much more than occasionally goofy and constantly sarcastic, and my face was a constant blank. I felt like I had no margin for error, and any error I did make led to swift and severe retribution.

That's what being a Hebrew-Israelite had come to feel like by the time I was in ninth grade. An unending, broken-down-mule kind of burden. Becoming a Hindu, Buddhist or Taoist seemed much more attractive but didn't provide any immediate or beyond life answers for me that I could put faith or hope into. Becoming a Muslim, a more traditional Jew, or a Catholic would've been like trading in one overwhelming, earn-your-salvation-for-the-rest-of-your-life belief system for another. Denominational Protestant Christianity, despite all of its appeal, didn't seem so different from what it had protested 500 years earlier.

I was left with one choice. Christianity, plain and simple. If the New Testament said that the only things I needed to concern myself with was putting God and Jesus first in my life and loving others as I should love myself, then that was enough for me. I sat back on the morning of Easter Sunday '84 — no one at home was awake at the time — and after

watching televangelist Frederick K.C. Price preach about the power of redemption, I found a corner in my room and prayed for Jesus to come into my heart and life. In my mind, I thought I'd feel a thunderbolt hit me in my stomach. Or at least I thought I might cry or become giddy or something. Instead what I felt was a sense of relief. Nothing more, nothing less. I knew that, maybe for the first time in my life, I made a conscious decision for me, not for anyone else, not influenced by anyone else, at least not anyone bound to earth.

My objective was first to find some sense of peace with myself, enough where my only thoughts late at night weren't about suicide or nuclear war, taking out Maurice or leaving 616. First I decided not to tell anyone about my spiritual conversion and rejection of the Hebrew-Israelites. Despite the outward contradiction with the kufi, I knew who I was in my heart of hearts, after all, a follower of Christ. I thought that with a little bit more than three years left before the possibility of college and life away from Mount Vernon that I would focus more energy on my classmates and my siblings than I would on Maurice. I also made a pact with myself to never consider suicide a serious option unless the God I now believed in betrayed me in some way. To me, that only would've been the case if my stepfather killed Mom or if we ended up homeless. I also decided to think of myself as being someone who had some worth, if for no other reason than because I was a child of God. If I couldn't find anything else worth preserving about me, being one with The One would have to do. This meant doing something else that had been difficult in recent months. I had to not give up on me.

8. Imagination

My grades didn't at all reflect our family's slide into poverty, my ongoing issues with my idiot stepfather, my suicidal struggles or my search for a real relationship with God. Starting in eighth grade, I had developed a different rhythm in Humanities. I was more focused on maintaining a lower profile than the one I had in seventh grade. I had learned the hard way that as smart as I was, I probably wasn't the smartest person in 7S — Wendy was — much less the “smartest person in the whole world.” And even if I was, it was just plain rude for me to say so at every turn. I figured that without shining the spotlight of my inferiority complex on myself, I could concentrate more on my classes, maybe even make some friends. It was a good plan, and it obviously worked for most of eighth grade and for my first year at MVHS.

What I did have to lean on, more than my amazing memory or *World Book Encyclopedia*, my parents or even God, was my imagination. It was the same imagination that enabled me to pick up my academic game in seventh grade, channel all of the psychic energy that had been unlocked by my Wendy crush into imagining myself with her and getting A's at the same time. And it was this imagination that worked almost without ceasing and without prompting to give me something to hold on to when there didn't appear to be anything to grab.

Because of my height, I was able to do things that I could only dream of a year before. We had one stretch in eighth-grade gym where we played basketball for a couple of months. Danny, Joe, Alex, Akbar and a bunch of others were playing basketball. I had to guard Joe, who jumped up to shoot a short J. I jumped with him and swatted the ball out of bounds just as he let it go. It prompted Alex to say, “If I had your body with my brains . . .” I thought, “and if I had a fist for your mouth...” I knew I didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't care, especially since I knew that Alex would never be as tall as I was. Apparently my height and reflexes could make up for a certain lack of experience playing sports.

The sport I became most interested in early on was football. The strike-shortened '82 NFL season combined with the formation of the USFL and the coming-out party for soon-to-be draft pick Herschel Walker to get my attention. The vicious hits, the acrobatic catches, the powerful throws were things that I'd seen before. I saw them through the lens

of an underdog now, a downtrodden member of an abandoned family who wanted to see other folks who'd overcome impossible circumstances achieve great things. The first person who represented that for me in sports was Joe Montana, quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers. The only ending to a football game I'd ever watched was the end of the NFC Championship Game the year before, with the play known as "The Catch." I didn't even know who Joe Montana was, even after watching Dwight Clark go up and catch a ball that was only meant for him.

A year later, and I at least knew the difference between him and most NFL quarterbacks of the early '80s. The media portrayed Montana as the Comeback Kid, someone who could overcome any obstacle and drive his team up and down a field with the pressure on, get the necessary points, and end up winning the big game. It was what he'd done at Notre Dame in '78, it was what he'd done against the Dallas Cowboys in January '82. He was the kind of person I wanted and needed to be in order to overcome what I thought was an impossible deficit. As far as I was concerned, I had to score about a hundred touchdowns to go from welfare to college, let alone anything after college. Yet it didn't stop me from dreaming about rolling out right to the sidelines on fourth down, sucking in Dallas' defense, and throwing a ball toward the right-side of end zone, toward the back line, just high enough for Clark to catch and Emerson Walls not to.

It was a dream that required some theme music, and luckily for me it was '83. Michael Jackson's *Thriller* had come out at the start of eighth grade, The Police were big, Toto and Rick Springfield were at their peak, and New Edition had put out their first hit, a Jackson 5 remake. All of it gave me something more modern to move forward with, to get silly about, to "march down field" to when I needed to gear up to get an important A. I'd accidentally found a way to escape my life without ever leaving Mount Vernon.

Demontravel's and Carraccio's classes were the first two places in which I applied this approach to my life and studies. In Carraccio's case, it was the reading and essay assignment for Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) a muckraking tale of first-generation, Eastern European, Chicago meatpackers who worked and lived in grueling conditions and where some of them gave their lives — and livers — to Swift and other companies. I'd caught a cold, had a fever, was going to the store for Mom, and had just heard Toto's "Africa" playing at C-Town in nearby Pelham. The song served as my background music, giving me the energy and drive I needed to finish the book. I read *The Jungle* in one night,

three hundred pages of it in four hours. I think Carraccio gave me a 95 or 98 on my essay. She pulled me aside to say, “You know, if you wanted, you could be a really good writer.” It might’ve been the only thing she said that I thought was right on the mark all year.

Demontravel’s (pronounced “de-mon-tra-vall” — I usually called him “Demon Travel”) demand for a typewritten three- to five-page essay on a World War II topic of our choosing led me to choose the battles of the Philippines and the almost comical errors of both the Japanese and the US there in 1942 and again in 1944-45. My stepfather, who hadn’t cared about what we did for our so-called Sabbath days since the end of the previous summer, all of a sudden cared that I was typing up a paper for my social studies class. He grabbed my typewriter — one that Jimme had bought me for this assignment — and threw it at me for typing on a Saturday afternoon. The typewriter grazed my head as it eventually met the wall in the corner of our bedroom. I was upset, thought for a moment about whether anything I did mattered at all. And then I thought about the reality that I wouldn’t have to be home in four years. I refocused, struck up some Michael Jackson as my mental theme music, took my typewriter and waited for sundown. At that point, I typed until I was done with my four-page paper. Demontravel gave me a 96 on it, putting me in a virtual tie with classmate Jennifer L. for the History Award in early May.

But I still didn’t win it, not because my grades weren’t better. I had dared to challenge the now *Dr.* Demontravel about the way World War I had ended on the Eastern Front, which he completely goofed up in one of his rare lectures. I drew a picture of him. It was a naked and graphic picture that would’ve earned me an A in Mrs. Mann’s “best and brightest” art class had she understood art at all. The picture included a potbelly worthy of Santa Claus and a ball sack about the size of two Grape Nuts. When Alex saw the picture I’d drawn in Italian class, he practically passed out laughing while he passed it around the room. I hadn’t planned to show it to anyone as Alex grabbed it off my desk without permission. After almost everyone in the class had seen it, the picture reached Anthony N.’s desk just as Ms. Fleming walked in. Since his seat was closest to the classroom door, our teacher got a first-hand view of my artwork. I immediately admitted it was mine. “Alex, you asshole,” I thought. I received a ten-minute verbal reprimand from my guidance counselor, a forty-five-year-old White man whom I called Mr. Naturally Greasy Hair.

1A funny thing happened on the way to not winning the history award even though I had the best average. I gradually became acquainted with Jennifer L. With me

walking home from Davis nearly every day after the middle of February, not only did I sometimes walk home with Laurell. I'd sometimes bump into Jennifer L. We'd talk about school and music mostly, nothing too serious or deep. When she'd talk about her music, it involved '70s hard rock bands like The Who, Led Zeppelin, even The Cure or The Police. After a couple of conversations, I stopped calling Roger Daltrey and company "The Who, What, Where, When, Why and How." Even I found myself annoying and corny when I did that. She lived almost as far away from Davis as I did, on the corner of East Lincoln and Esplanade. One day, as I said, "See ya later," on yet another walk toward home with her, I took a closer look at her corner house. I'd walked by this house for years, yet never paid attention to the fact that it was some sort of group home. All I knew was that Jennifer L. lived there. I also got to see her father and mother a few times as they greeted her in their driveway. Both of her parents seemed like immigrants to me, West German or Dutch or South African, I wasn't sure. There was one thing I was sure about, though. Jennifer's parents were nice enough to me. Yet they also gave me the impression that if I had any intentions beyond talking to Jennifer on our walks home that I should eliminate them immediately.

Things were much better for me my freshman year at MVHS. From the end of October '83 through the end of ninth grade, I managed to keep my grades in the high B's and low A's. This despite the fact that I barely studied anything other than Afro-Asian History and Literature during the middle part of the year. Looking at my GPA throughout ninth grade made me laugh. First marking period, 3.96. Second marking period, 4.22. Third marking period, 4.46. The Level 1 courses, five in all, were all weighted, giving my GPA a twenty percent boost. My grade-point average without the extra weight of Level 1 Humanities would've been a decent 3.5 or so. It was a sweet deal, given the higher level of work that our teachers expected from us.

Funny thing is, if I'd taken Level 0 classes and done as well in those classes as I was doing in my current set, my GPA would've been between a 4.7 and 4.8. Even as much of a learner as I was, I didn't think that taking the hardest possible course would've been a good idea. I figured out early on in the year that if a student could take every one of their classes at Level 0 (including gym) and could earn an A+ in all of them, the maximum GPA for them could be a 6.3 on a 4.0 scale. Somehow something about this seemed unfair, at least when I thought about the regular students. On the other hand, if I'd been serious about

committing suicide at a time when everything at school and in my Level 1 courses was going well, I could only imagine what I would've done if I was struggling in Level 0 Geometry or Biology.

Some in my cohort, particularly Laurell and Sam, Denise and this new person Suzanne took on every opportunity to take the hardest courses and to participate in as many activities outside of class as they could. About Suzanne. She was the only new addition to our cohort during the MVHS Humanities years, not to mention the only White one. Suzanne apparently hadn't attended public school since kindergarten, and it showed. Outside of class, she seemed lost and bewildered by the whole MVHS experience. In the couple of classes I had with her, Suzanne was as inquisitive as anyone at the top of our class. She asked questions, made comments, even joked around. She was a five-two, milky-white, blue-eyed dynamo in the classroom, and apparently just trying to survive in the hallways otherwise. Her father made the decision to move Suzanne to MVHS from her Ursuline education, I assume to teach her about the real world. MVHS would've been a shock to anyone with Suzanne's private school experience. Yet she did manage to find herself taking the toughest courses with the highest-level academic achievers in the school.

The end of ninth grade brought with it finals and New York State Regents exams. I managed an 86 on the Geometry Regents despite seeing too many proofs, a 91 on the Biology Regents, and scores in the high-80s and 90s on my Literature and History exams. I got a 73 on my Italian final, a sure sign of things to come with me and Romance languages. My fourth marking period GPA was a 4.48, and for the year it was a 4.26. If I could keep this pace up, Humanities in high school would be "as smooth as a milkshake," as Craig would've said.

By now, Humanities, which had been majority White in seventh grade, was now majority Black and Afro-Caribbean. In June, Marni, Craig, Cynthia and so many others who had made it with us past Davis were on their way to private schools, other towns, or New York City's public academies. The Whites who were left after '84 were mostly Italian. As a group they had become a part of Humanities' lower academic tier. This despite Marianne's language prowess, Joe and Danny's general success in the classroom, and Alex's continued antics.

The year before, Jennifer L. and her family left for next door Pelham, where she went to high school and where I would occasionally bump into her. Jennifer Y., Anthony

Z. and Mary would all be part of the emerging White flight out of the school district between Davis and MVHS. They all left for truly suburban public and private high schools in Mamaroneck, Pelham, Eastchester, Scarsdale, Bronxville and the Wykagyl section of New Rochelle. All affluent and stereotypical of what most people we knew thought of when someone would say the words “Westchester County.” The difference between them and my ninth grade classmates was that they never had a chance to experience the dangers of MVHS firsthand. I guess their upper-class liberal, bohemian parents thought the curriculum wasn’t challenging enough while the violence of the high school literally scared them into spending money for private school. I was a little sorry to see Marni, Craig and especially Jennifer L. go. I liked the competition that had developed between us, and I liked the fact that I could make fun of her being a Who and Zeppelin fan. Where would I get that kind of banter from among the rest of my classmates?

My first taste of salvation and real consistency in school for the first time in three years left me time to explore other interests in my life. By the time I turned fourteen, I was just over six feet. I’d grown something like eight inches since the end of seventh grade, and ten inches since my first day in Humanities. With so many food shortages to put up with at home, my weight hardly kept up with my height. I weighed about 145 pounds. I was lean, sometimes looked mean, and often felt hungry. What I also discovered was that height had its advantages. I found myself catching balls in gym class that I couldn’t reach even at the end of eighth grade. My reflexes were considerably faster than I would’ve expected two or three years ago. I was surprisingly stronger and faster than I’d been in the past. And despite my malnourished state, I had periods of time where I had lots of energy, too much energy and not enough mental power to harness it. I had moments where I could get off the floor in gym to slam a volleyball over a net and into the corner without thinking about technique or setting up to do it. I had moments of athleticism, of catching hit softballs barehanded and maneuvering to easy lay-ups. Only to be followed by teenage clumsiness, tripping over my own feet, getting my arms and legs tangled up, dropping the easiest of passes. Most of all, I’d get tired, my legs and especially my knees would hurt by the end of the school day.

By the time spring rolled around, I was itching to see if I could play football. I bought a red Nerf football, NFL regulation size, and I’d toss it around before the doors to

MVHS opened with Patrick & Clyde or Richard or Craig. Or I'd go out to Holmes School with Darren on weekends with Maurice and Yiscoc tagging along and spend a couple of hours throwing and catching the football.

I didn't throw it well at first. But after watching highlights of Dan Marino's first season in the NFL, with his quick release, short throwing motion and heavy wrist action, my throws went farther and faster after I figured out how to do the same thing. I'd never really applied myself to anything athletic before. Though this wasn't in the heat of competition, I now had a topic that I could start a conversation with that I understood, enjoyed, and thought about doing myself.

Football and my athletic potential weren't the only things I began to contemplate for my life. After years of listening to the horrible meshing of Black spirituals with Hebrew-Israelite prayers, I was gradually getting up-to-date on current pop, some R&B and some rock. My main ways of keeping up with music came through classmates and what I'd hear blaring out of someone's car or boombox or playing at a grocery store. Three years as a Hebrew-Israelite and I'd all but missed The Go-Go's, Luther's second album, most of The Police before their *Synchronicity* album, not to mention Prince, Rufus & Chaka Khan, Grand Master Flash and the rise of Doug E. Fresh, and so many others. I always had a tune in my head, even when I was walking around in an abuse-induced haze. The difference now was that I was seeking tunes for inspiration, imagination and infatuation. Tunes that could match who I thought I was, a Christian in need of a back-up band.

Mom freed me from some of my domestic duties in the middle of July. That gave me the chance to do something that I was scared to do, but I knew I needed to do for my own peace of mind. I decided to try out for junior varsity football at the end of August. Almost every day for nearly six weeks, I took Darren, Maurice and Yiscoc with me to the grassy fields of Holmes School or to the practice infield at MVHS and threw and caught as much as I could. I took some of our Jimme money and bought a "real" football at Pelham's centrally located hardware store. It was regulation size, but it was a synthetic, hard plastic one. I was throwing passes, catching them, kicking and punting footballs, and running just to be in shape for the tryouts. Unfortunately for Darren's fingers, I hadn't learned the art of soccer-style kicking yet. I dislocated two of them on his right hand that summer. I also popped them back in, not good for sibling relations between me and him. I did manage to

kick a fifty-yard field goal in one of our outings that summer. Little weak me kicking a ball 150 feet - awesome! I had also developed a throwing style, ala Marino and Montana, a quick and tight spiral that couldn't make it more than forty yards except with a gust of wind. With that, I could occasionally throw fifty yards.

No one other than Mom and Darren knew that I was getting ready to tryout. They didn't exactly offer me words of encouragement. Mom said, "I just don't want you to get hurt," while Darren said nothing. I guess seeing me focused on one project probably surprised them. I briefly tried to put on a few extra pounds, everything from eating more eggs to eating a pound of hamburgers for lunch. That made me sick for a few hours. I calculated one day that I was going through between four and six thousand calories a day in the weeks prior to football tryouts. I don't think I gained a pound, but it was the most food I'd gone through in years.

I had a couple of setbacks just before the tryouts. I knew nothing about stretching as a part of a workout routine. One day I cocked my arm to throw an out-pattern to Darren, a twenty-yard throw from the middle of Holmes' back field. I felt something pull in the back of my shoulder, and it really hurt. I sat down for a few minutes and did arm rotations to see if I could work out the pull. It didn't work. I wanted to try out at quarterback, which would've been beyond bold for someone who didn't know who Joe Montana was two and a half years ago. My right arm had made the decision for me. I couldn't throw the ball more than ten yards without a twinge of pain.

The other was a function of Mom's almost deliberate attempt to keep me from hurting myself. I had worn out my latest pair of sneaks, size thirteen, and I didn't have time to go to Jimme for money or for another stolen pair from his job. That meant relying on Mom, who hadn't bought me a new pair of shoes in almost three years. She went to The Avenue - Fourth Avenue in downtown Mount Vernon - stopped at the Army-Navy store without me, and bought a new pair. It was a pair of blue-suede, size-fifteen Pumas. Mom said, "I'm tired of you growing out your shoes. Least you'll have these for a while." I was really, really, really pissed off! This was the best she could do after three years, a pair of sneaks two sizes too big? Tryouts were in two days. I didn't have much of a choice.

Monday morning at MVHS trying out for football was a new, exciting and scary experience for me. I brought in my signed permission slip, dressed in my too-big Pumas, kufi, t-shirt and shorts and socks and hit the practice field at 8 am. Boy it was hot, at least

ninety degrees! Both the JV and varsity starters were out there on the practice field warming up, along with MVHS cheerleaders and other female gawkers. One light-skinned brotha they spent a lot of time staring at in infatuation was the future Al B. Sure!, the one-album R&B wonder who caught the eye of Quincy Jones. He was Albert Brown then, a year ahead of me and the rising tenth-graders trying out with me. Even classmates I knew, like Vanessa and Kiam, were there calling out his name. I thought it was bizarre, but then again, I could kind of understand. There weren't exactly a whole lot of good-looking guys in *Mount Vernon*, forget about MVHS.

Despite all of my fears of embarrassing myself, I found most of the drills surprisingly easy. Then I took part in the wide receiver drills. Since I still couldn't throw, I didn't want to press my luck going out for quarterback. The coaches had these one-handed catch drill, where you'd run straight up field for ten or fifteen yards and catch a pass with one hand. On my first duck-footed run, I tripped over my Pumas as I reached out to catch the pass with my right hand, fell to the ground and cut up my right arm in breaking my fall. My kufi fell to the ground as well. Some of the folks on the field laughed, but a couple of players gave them mean looks and they got quiet. I caught the next five passes thrown to me, mostly with my left hand and its two crooked fingers.

We were doing two-a-days, which meant breaking for lunch and coming back for two hours or so of afternoon exercises and drills. With no money, I'd go down to the deli near the high school, on New Rochelle Road in Chester Heights, and buy a plain roll or a brownie to keep me going. By the end of the second day, the coaches had me lined up to see if I was mean enough to block anyone. As skinny and scared as I was, I held my own for five minutes blocking a guy who thought going up against me would be a piece of cake. After that set of practices, the coach talked to a bunch of us individually to tell us their news. In my case, I'd made the team, but they wanted to "bulk me up this year for next year. With your feet and height, you should play offensive line." Didn't they look at the physical exam they did the day before? I was six feet and one-half-inches tall and weighed a whopping 151 pounds. If I went to the bathroom to pee, my weight would drop a full pound! I didn't know whose logic was more warped, the coaches or Mom's. I walked home that day exhausted, hungry, angry and confused.

I had a decision to make. I could fight to make wide receiver, finding a new pair of sneakers along the way. I could do what the coaches wanted and try to get closer to 175.

Or I could drop out of the tryouts, which might've been what they wanted anyway. Given the level of talent I saw, I doubted this. Otherwise why waste their breath stringing me along? What decided it for me was when I came home from tryouts the second day. To think that I could play football, maintain my academic success as a Humanities student, and come home, run errands, help take care of my siblings, wash clothes, go over to Jimme's, and so much more? I knew I couldn't do it all, certainly not this year. I didn't show up the next day. Or the day after that. My feelings were mixed, weighing pros and cons that added up to too much for me to handle. The decision would've been easier if I'd made the team as a receiver. After the fourth and final day of tryouts, I was on my way home from the store, walking up East Prospect past Mrs. Sesay's old house when a group of varsity football players spotted me and pulled over.

"Why weren't you at practice, man?," one of them asked

"You know you made the team, right?," another said.

Not knowing what to say, I said the truth. "There's too much going on at home for me to play this year."

And no one laughed. A couple of them gave me fives as they took off. "Hang in there" one kid said, while another said, "See you at school."

I guess I still had a lot to learn about people, and about Black males especially. Not everyone was out to get me, and some people actually had enough humanity to care if what I wanted to happen in my life actually did. Still, even with that, there were too many other folks in my life, including members of my own family, who worked against my goals and needs. They made it hard to trust folks. I could trust what someone said to me at a specific moment in time. But I couldn't trust anyone, not in total. Mom's mixed signals throughout the year confused me more. Did she really buy me those Pumas because my feet were big, or because she didn't want me to play football? I didn't really know. One thing did happen because of those tryouts, besides me figuring out that I really did have athletic potential. That I needed to try hard not to allow my family to limit me and my options if I could afford to. After those football players went their way, I took my kufi off in public for the first time. If I have to be there for my siblings and Mom, at least I could be there with the courage to stand up for what I *didn't* believe in anymore.

9. Jimme

Part of the reason my attitude changed on the home front had to do with my father. After not making it down to Manhattan at all in '82, Jimme took us to Midtown in July '83, where we learned about two of my father's watering holes between 43rd and 47th. They were both near Mickey Mantle's Restaurant on West 47th. He also had an Irish pub he'd like to go to around East 59th and Third, an upscale drinkery near his job on 64th and Columbus, and a couple of places near Macy's on 34th Street. Because of our height and the times, when it was still legal for eighteen-year-olds to drink in public establishments, me and Darren were allowed into these fine places. I learned a lot about vermouth, vodka, Cosmos' and Long Island Iced Teas that summer.

Talking about his work was one area in which my dad tried to spin the truth. He was a janitor, a carpet-cleaning, wood-varnishing, tile-buffing technician who worked for Glen and Bruce, the Levi (pronounced Lee-vy) brothers. Their offices were on West 64th and East 59th, near Jimme's Manhattan bars. It was a job that he could and did show up to drunk. It was a job that he'd already held for nearly six years, longer than any other job he'd gotten while in the Big City.

And it was a job that reflected Jimme's New York rise and fall. Back in the late '60s, my dad worked as a janitor for the Federal Reserve Bank in lower Manhattan making nearly \$300 a week. It was good money for many people in '69, and for a Black man with only a middle-school education, it *was* the American Dream. A dream so good that it was too good to stay true. He eventually lost that job because of his addiction, as well as numerous others. At the time of the divorce in '76, he worked as a janitor at Salesian High School in New Rochelle. The divorce process left Jimme wounded in many ways, and sent him deeper into alcoholism than I could've fully understood when I was six. Salesian fired him as well. It was in '78, after Jimme finally signed the divorce papers, when he became a "big shot doctor and lawyer" who worked for the Levi brothers in Manhattan.

I learned a lot about Jimme's use of language that summer. It was interesting to hear how my father sounded when he'd been on a bender for two or three days, slurred speech included. "Lo' a' dis po'ass muddafucca!" was his significantly slurry version of "Look at this poor ass motherfucker!" Jimme's "Sah my dict, muddafucca!" was his way to say "Suck my dick, motherfucker!" Both would make me blush and snicker as the barroom guys Jimme

talked about would turn around and look at my father. That's when I'd say, "You know what happened the last time you said that to someone. He beat your brains in!"

"Donal', take that shit off," Jimme would often say about my kufi after we came over to his place. He couldn't stand when I continued to wear that cap. I didn't believe in being a Hebrew-Israelite, but I had nothing or no one else to replace Yahweh, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Israel, Moses or Joshua. I still wasn't going to eat pork, no matter how many times Jimme tried to shove some ribs or pork chops in front of me, and McDonald remained off limits because their meat wasn't kosher. I'd eat Hebrew National and other kosher hot dogs, though, and that at least made Jimme happy. Darren never really pretended to wear it at all.

I didn't come to fully understand the gnawing sensation I'd feel when walking through the different poor, middle class, affluent and ethnic sections of Mount Vernon until I started working for my father in September '84. Jimme thought it'd be better for us to work for his money rather than us just coming over every week to get a few dollars. So off and on during that fall, Darren and I spent part of our weekends working for Jimme on various cleaning jobs on the Upper East Side going into Spanish Harlem, or on the Upper West Side between Lincoln Center and the West 72nd Street Subway station. Whenever anyone asked me what Jimme did, I usually said, "Oh, my dad's a carpet cleaner." I didn't see him as a simple janitor, although it was true that he cleaned stuff. But Jimme didn't clean toilets or latrines or bathroom sinks and tubs. He cleaned the floors of office buildings — carpeted, wooden, or otherwise — thoroughly treating any surface he encountered with industrial cleaning machines. He cleaned high-rise co-ops and condos where the mortgage or rent payment per month was more than our rent at 616 for a year. It was an important job in his eyes, and I wasn't going to diminish it because other folks couldn't understand or wouldn't have a clue as to the amount of labor involved in Jimme's work.

I didn't have much of an idea beyond seeing him mop a floor at Salesian until I started working for him. Spending a Friday night or a Saturday or Sunday morning working with Jimme was no easy task. We'd have to walk over to Jimme's — or catch the 7 and get off in downtown Mount Vernon and then walk over — and get him, then get on the 2 at East 241st and get off at 72nd Street, a two-hour trip each way. If we were lucky Jimme might've had the cleaning machines at home with him and we'd take them on the

Subway to the job. If we weren't lucky, we'd have to walk over to Jimme's job at 20 West 64th to get them, all the while dealing with the Levi brothers Glen and Bruce and Jimme's sometimes partner John.

Glen and Bruce Levi were in their mid-thirties living life as if they were a decade younger. They wore gold chains and gold rings and walked around like they were in the movie *King of New York* with Christopher Walken. Their bodies looked tan, like they went to Florida several times a year, and their hair was a blondish-brown, as if they colored it themselves. All these guys talked about was money. About how much they made, about how much they planned to make, about what to invest it in, about what they planned to spend it on. My father would often remind me, "Dis ain't where the real money is. Milstein's the one who own dese buildin's an' hands out the contracts." I didn't know who Milstein was and I didn't care, but I knew Jimme was right. These Jewish-mafioso types were close to the top of the money chain, but not at the top.

At first Glen and Bruce talked to us as if we only had a second-grade education, practically patting us on the head as if we were little pickaninnies or something. It took me getting into a debate about money and investing for them to at least treat us like teenagers. It was over junk bonds, and I argued what the good folks in *The Wall Street Journal* were starting to say, that the bottom was going to fall out of the market. They thought that they could invest and pull out at any time. "Anytime might be too late for *you*," I said in response. They thought I was funny, and I thought that they were the weirdest Jews I'd ever met. I didn't like their look and their outlook on life. I didn't like the fact that Jimme worked for them either, but if Jimme was my way to more cash for my needs, then the Levi's were his and my meal ticket, in more ways than one.

We'd often pick up the machines from the storage room in the bowels of this high-rise, which included one of several cleaners that the Levi's owned, and went our way to clean offices and condos across the city. For most of that fall, me and Darren were with Jimme between East 84th and 90th Street, mixing harsh chemicals with hot tap water, making sure the suds were at the right level, making sure we didn't under-clean or over-clean the carpeting on the floor or over-wet the wood before waxing and buffing. Jimme would often drink while working, regardless of who was around. Condo residents would come out and pass us by, and Jimme would mumble about how "dese muddafuccas don't know how good dey got it." The residents would do double-takes, looking at us as if we

were homeless aliens. His co-worker John would sometimes be with us, a strong man of Jamaican descent and able to lift ten-gallon buckets of hot water with each hand without a struggle. Jimme would show us his calloused hands and look at ours. "See, dese hands are the hands you need fo' dis here kinda work. You got girl hands," he'd say.

The work was hot, hard, and boring, and with my imagination, I'd sometimes forget that I was buffing a floor, drawing anger from Jimme. "Bo', don' be messin' around with them machines," Jimme would say. Sometimes he would mumble in anger, so much so that I thought that we were about to fight. So one thing we did to help us pass the time was to buy a standard AM/FM radio with an antenna. It kept us from getting lost in thought. This was the way I could keep up with music, with my Mets, Giants, Knicks, and Rangers, all while concentrating on the work.

Jimme decided after a couple of weeks to treat us to a Mets home game. Not only was this our first time at Shea. It was the first time we'd been to *any* sporting event, unless you count the Ice Capades with '76 Olympic gold medalist Dorothy Hamill at Madison Square Garden in March '78 as one. It was a Tuesday night game near mid-September, the Mets desperately trying to catch up with the Cubs and first place in the division. It didn't happen that cold night, as it dropped into the thirties. They lost to the St. Louis Cardinals 9-5. Keith Hernandez and George Foster hit home runs, and Darryl Strawberry got one little hit. We left after the Cardinals rallied late in the game, playing the role of spoiler and keeping a permanent underdog team like the Mets from making the postseason. As disappointed as I was, it was a wonderful experience going to see a game in person for the first time.

We spent a lot of time that fall with Jimme, getting to know more and more of his ticks and topics of conversation. He loved talking politics as if he read the *New York Times*, but with one working eye and a middle-school education, his paper was the *Daily News*. He tried to pick arguments with me about Jesse Jackson and his Hymietown statement about the Jewish influence in New York and about Reagan. "Jackson's right, man, Jews run everythin' in New York," he'd say, or "That Reagan's a good man dere," both of which would raise my temperature a couple of degrees. It wasn't as if I hadn't given these things much thought. I didn't always think that a drunk Jimme was the best person to talk to about serious politics.

Besides that, most of what Jimme talked about was money, drinking, his drinking buddies, and occasionally, women. He had this whole language that he used once he started drinking. At work, it was in shorthand, not particularly dirty language, but in bars or on the streets or at a drinking buddy's place, Jimme was in his element. After he had his "pep-up," which was what he called his Miller Beer, he started mouthing off like someone tried to pick a fight with him, pointing out some out-of-it-slob sitting at a bar stool.

"I'm a big-shot muddafucca. I make fitty-million dollas a week. Look a' dis po'ass muddafucca! That muddafucca cain't do shit for me!," he said at least once a week.

Jimme would take it to another level if anyone dared question his analysis of himself and his money situation.

"Muddafucca, you ain' got shit nobody want! *I* buy an' sell *muddafuccas* roun' here! I kick yo' muddafuccan ass!," he'd say as if he had a machine gun in his hand.

"I'm da boss of da bosses. No one tell me what ta do!," was another one of his drunken stock phrases.

If you as a fellow alcoholic didn't buy what he was selling up to this point, there was always Jimme's ultimate saying, one that came with a wicked laugh.

"I make fitty-million dollas a week, muddafucca! . . . I make eighteen thousin' dollas an' hour. . . . My name JC — Jesus Christ!"

That usually was the end of his expletive-filled tirade.

As a new Christian, it was difficult, to say the least, to listen to his pronouncements of savior-hood. It was hilarious at the same time, though, watching Jimme making a fool of himself, which in turn was embarrassing and made me feel a bit ashamed. Often, though, Jimme would turn his drunken talk on us. On the weekends we'd come over to find just about ready to give away his paycheck, the first thing out of his mouth to me was, "Did you get yo' dict wet?" The first time he did it, I said "What?," not thinking I'd heard what I'd heard.

"Did you get yo' dict wet?," Jimme asked again.

"No, I didn't, and if I did, I certainly wouldn't tell you."

"YOU'RE A FAGGAT!"

"Why I got to be a faggot?"

"I don' give no money to no faggats. If you a faggat, I don' want you as my son."

This first exchange did hurt me a little bit. “Where did this come from?” I said to myself after getting about fifty dollars out of Jimme. I knew I wasn’t gay or a faggot. I also knew I was nowhere near ready for sex in any form. This was verbal abuse, plain and simple, and I decided that I’d be ready the next time Jimme tried to throw my virginity in my face.

Jimme had figured out a way to avoid me and Darren on the weekends we didn’t work with him, when he just wanted to get his drink on. He went straight from work on Fridays for a watering hole of his choosing, often staying out until about noon on Saturdays. The fall of ’84 was uneven money-wise because Jimme started changing his Friday evening habits. So I changed tactics too. If I couldn’t find him at South Tenth on Fridays, I went through my mental checklist of all the nearby bars and clubs that Jimme went to, and, one-by-one, checked them out. If I didn’t find him then, which was the case about fifty percent of the time, I’d call off the search and we’d go home. Then I’d get up Saturday morning, usually by seven, get dressed and go with or without Darren back over to Jimme’s. The key was to catch him before he left a bar or club. If we didn’t, we were sunk. About eighty percent of the time, we found him, at a bar on 241st and Wakefield, or at bars a few blocks away. Once I found Jimme at a bar in Manhattan near his job on West 64th Street, but that was really more work than it was worth.

When I found him, usually at the 241st Street bar, he was hanging out with his group of drinking buddies. Including a Black woman named Martha who lived at 616, a Bee-Line bus driver whose 41 route took her right by this bar on the Mount Vernon/Bronx border. She was a thick woman, the kind that Jimme generally liked. But she was also assertive to the point of bossy, something that Jimme couldn’t live with. So much for her!

There were a bunch of older White men who were regulars, with bad teeth, bad hair, and bad breath. The poorly lit bar had the smell of alcohol, cigarettes and dried sweat, not a great combination for my nostrils on a Saturday morning. There was a jukebox next to the bar stools that I’d put quarters in while attempting to drag Jimme out. It had the latest songs, like Naked Eyes’ “Always Something There to Remind Me” or Prince’s “When Doves Cry,” the big hit of the year. It also had “Ol’ Blue Eyes” Frank Sinatra on there, along with Dean Martin, Tony Bennett, Sammy Davis, Jr. and a host of oldies from the ’40s and ’50s. Not to mention The Beatles, Al Green, The Four Tops and The

Temptations, The Mama and the Papas, and everything in between. In between stints of ridiculous conversations with Jimme I was catching up on the old and the new in music.

This wasn't all fun and games. Jimme would start cussin' and fussin' when we'd come in. "Bo', how you find me, huh?" could also be "Wha' da fuck ya wan' from me now?" or "I don' hav' to give you a *gotdamn* thing, muddafucca!" Jimme would also yell, "You're a FAGGAT!" in the bar out of nowhere, in front of me and his bar mates. At that point, either Martha or the bartender would step in and say, "You need to take that shit outside," a warning shot that usually meant Jimme would calm down. Once during these slow-motion verbal battles at the bar, a White guy on a stool stepped in, saying that we were "too young to be in here." When I said, "This is my dad and I need to get him out of here," the guy's response was to pull out his NYPD badge. Drunk as *he* was, he had the presence in mind to act like a responsible adult and tell us that we were under eighteen and couldn't be in a bar that served alcohol. He said, "Go wait outside. I'll make sure your father joins you." We waited nearly a half-hour before Jimme came out, walking sideways as usual, pissed off that we had messed with his buzz, and threw us the money he had left, about sixty dollars in all.

We saw Jimme almost every day for the first three weeks of the summer of '85, cleaning the carpets and floors of one high-rise after another on the Upper West Side, especially between 67th and 72nd near Broadway. We did mostly night work, in office buildings and in condos. We also had a couple of stints on the Upper East Side around 86th. We schlepped industrial carpet cleaning and floor equipment for stripping, buffing, and waxing on the 2, 5, and 6 trains at three in the morning. Jimme didn't drink much during these weeks of withering toil and sweat. He was constantly irritated with us, though. "Got no reason to be tired, bo'," he'd say. "Hurry up an' dump out that water!" Jimme would yell. And with a killer's cold, strangled look, he'd say to us, "I dun told you how to do dis shit right, now I got to do it my *gotdamn* self!"

It was fascinating seeing Jimme work - and work us - as hard as he did. Darren didn't complain much, but then again, he didn't do much work either. It was up to me and Jimme, and with my dad in a perpetual state of irritation, I was getting pissed too.

"I feel sorry for the people who work for you during the day! I hope I never have to work for you again!" I yelled over the roaring machines on several occasions.

“Shut up ya faggat!” Jimme would yell back. Or he’d just mutter in anger, and look at me as if he were ready to stab me in the neck.

In some of the condos we’d clean, Jimme would help himself to whatever he thought wouldn’t be missed — sport coats, shoes and socks mostly. Sometimes we’d take breaks to go to this Jewish deli that used to be on 65th and Broadway/Columbus, across from the Lincoln Center. They made turkey, hot pastrami and corned beef sandwiches stuffed with meat and loaded with every ingredient you could think of — all for five dollars. That, a bag of Doritos, their blondie desserts and a sixteen-ounce carton of Hershey’s chocolate milk made the torture of working for my dad during his brief period of sobriety more bearable. Otherwise we’d tune the radio we had with us to the Mets game while we were working, broadcast by WHN, an AM country oldies station (as in ’40s and ’50s oldies) that was obviously on its last legs.

Though Glen and Bruce tended to treat us as extensions of Jimme, at least they talked to me like I was an adult now, and asked me to watch after Jimme, as if I could stop him from drinking. The thing that always bothered me about Glen and Bruce besides the fact that they indirectly supported Jimme’s alcoholism was their condescending attitudes about all people, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, White and Black. It was as if they saw themselves as better than the rest of the world, especially other Jews, because they weren’t bound to Judaism and their Jewish-ness — they seemed more like wannabe gangsters than legit businessmen — and because they employed Blacks, Latinos, Whites and Afro-Caribbeans. But Jimme loved them. I would’ve too if I were him. He got paid every Friday, usually under the table, whether he was drunk on the job or as sober as the Biblical Noah during the Flood.

We’d work these high-rises at night, sleep during only part of the day, with Maurice, Yiscoc, Sarai, and Eri at home, after all, and catch the Subway for another night of work. Until the week after the fourth of July. Jimme decided that it was now all right to have some of his Miller Beer “pep up” while we were working. Besides the usual “I make fitty million dollas a week” and “I buy an’ sell muddafuccas,” Jimme decided that a Subway car was a good place to take a piss at two in the morning one night. The lack of sleep, my dad’s crankiness, and now his verbal abuse and drinking while working had all caught up with me. After that week, I quit. I told Jimme, “I’m not doing this anymore. You’ll have to

find someone else to drink with.” Those were good times, good times! At least when compared to living at 616.

10. Teenage Angst

My conversion, developing interests and different exposures to the world couldn't have come at a better time. The week before Memorial Day '84 was when Mom gave birth to my baby brother Eri. The little porker came in at just under seven pounds. Two weeks before that, my stupid stepfather invited his Hebrew-Israelite matriarch "Balkis Makeda" to stay with us. She was moved in before Mom could seriously object. What a situation! Six kids, including me, plus Mom, Maurice, and an old woman living together in a 1,200-square-foot, two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment. We now needed to behave like good little Hebrew-Israelites with this woman in our house, so as to not embarrass my stepfather. Yeah, right!

One of the wonderful rules of our absurdly orthodox practice was that Mom couldn't cook or do any familial tasks for the next three months. She was "unclean" because she'd just given birth to Eri. This might've made sense in the deserts of ancient Canaan, with no antibiotics and drugs to deal with "unclean issues of blood" and other bodily fluids. It didn't now. Plus I didn't remember Mom *not* cooking for three months after Yiscoc and Sarai were born. This was suck-up time, plain and simple.

Maurice made what was an abyss of bad even worse by cooking dinner for three days. Three straight nights of over-boiled and under-ripened cabbage drenched in its own juices and seasoned to high heaven with red and black pepper. My stepfather could've been the founder of a new weight-loss diet. If he'd actually eaten his own cooking, that is. Man, a week of cabbage like his would've left skinny me in an emergency room in need of an IV drip! As it was, my younger siblings couldn't even eat a mouthful of the gruel. We needed someone else to cook, and soon. Mom knew just who to ask.

So from the end of May until mid-July, I cooked dinner night after night for my family of eight. Makeda refused to eat my food on principle. My stepfather or a female servant apparently was supposed to cook. Before this crisis, I'd only cooked a few things, like baked chicken leg quarters, fried and boiled eggs, sticky-bad grits, and toast with butter. I immediately learned to control temperatures on our gas stove to fry chicken Southern-style, started making spaghetti and meat sauce, figured out how to season meats and the difference between that and seasoning veggies. All while still doing my other chores, helping out with my siblings and getting ready for Regents and final exams.

I learned how to make the five-dollar-spaghetti meal for eight. For that amount of money, I'd shop at C-Town, buy a pound of ground beef (two dollars), a box of Ronzoni spaghetti (eighty-nine cents), a can of Hunt's spaghetti sauce (ninety-nine cents), and a box of frozen chopped broccoli (fifty-nine cents). With the fifty-four cents left over, I could buy two packs of grape and lemon Kool-Aid or a pack of Wise Crunchy Cheese Doodles as payment for my shopping expertise and culinary services.

It was a sharp learning curve, but I wanted to learn. I'd been asking Mom to teach me how to cook since I was nine or ten, when I thought I wanted to be a chef. That was mostly because there was never enough food in the house. Now I was learning under a bit of pressure. Our health and my continued psychological wellness depended on me making food we not only could eat but enjoy as well. The one thing I did learn was that my sense of smell was more important than my eye sight when it came to cooking. I instinctively knew that when something smelled done, it probably was. Or to smell for more salt or for too much garlic in my fried chicken or spaghetti. It was a lot of hard work, but it was also fun. By the middle of my second week as 616's master chef, even idiot Maurice was complimenting me on my skills at the stove and oven. Mom was the only holdout, constantly saying that my food was only "okay," or "It needs more seasoning," or that my gravy was "oily and lumpy."

Summer vacation brought me face-to-face with my only remaining sign of spiritual hypocrisy, my kufi. I had stopped speaking the language of a good Hebrew-Israelite, the "Thou Shalt Nots," as I liked to call it, for at least six months. I might've not been saying "In the name of Jesus" in front of Balkis Makeda, but I wasn't exactly hiding the fact that I was reading the Bible either. I was listening to an AM Christian radio station on our radio in the living room, in between playing WPLJ, Z-100, and WBLS on the FM side, which kept me musically current. Somewhat. My summer was one where I was caught between my new identity as a Christian, my role as the "oldest child," and my old identity as a know-it-all nerd.

These were really confusing days, negotiating Jimme's world, getting ready for tenth grade, and trying to figure out how to be a good Christian at the same time. School and home life didn't help me much in my attempts to fold my spiritual identity in with the rest of my being. It started with the first day of tenth grade. After football tryouts, I stopped wearing my kufi out in public except near 616. Boys from my building, like Terry or

Ernie, would go by and say, "I'm gonna tell yo' dad" as a threat. "Go ahead and tell him," I said, adding "He's not my dad anyway!"

On the first day of school, as I was about to walk out of the house with kufi on head, I got really pissed. I couldn't live another day like this, pretending to be something I wasn't. I took the symbol of my oppression off my head and threw it on top of the refrigerator by the front door and foyer. I knew that I'd have to answer to Maurice when I got home that day. But I didn't care anymore. Maurice or not, I was going to live my life as a Christian, on my own terms.

My whole first day of school was spent hearing words like "Congratulations!" and "Wow, what happened?" and other exclamations of pleasant surprise. No one was happier for me than Phyllis. She gave me a brief hug. It was the second time in less than a year that my classmates had come out in force to support something I'd done. I felt euphoric, like I'd been on-stage performing at a concert in front of a sellout crowd, one that gave me a standing ovation in the process.

Most of my teachers had no idea why my presence in class had caused such commotion. I knew some people would be surprised by my religious coup d' état. I even knew that a few folks might be happy for me. But almost to a classmate, it was as if I'd escaped the gulags and defected from the Soviet Union. Five years before the Berlin Wall fell, my Shalom Aleichem wall came tumbling down. If my idiotic mouth was a reason for some of my first problems with my classmates, my kufi and all that it represented must've created a permanent sense of separation between me and them. I felt overwhelmed, like I'd won a prize that I wasn't expecting to get. I also felt ill-at-ease. They might've been a few months older, but weren't these the same folks who hardly talked to me this time the year before?

When I arrived from school that afternoon, Mom was practically waiting for me at the front door.

"You forgot your kufi this morning," she said, looking as if she knew what I was about to say.

"I didn't forget. I'm not wearing it anymore. I'm a Christian now," I said. Mom pleaded with me to wear my kufi when I left for my regular grocery run.

"You know what Judah's gonna do when he sees you left it?," Mom said, almost begging me to put the kufi on again.

“I don’t care!” was what flew out of my mouth as I left for the store.

That evening was when I faced Maurice’s anger. Apparently someone in the neighborhood who went to MVHS told him about my transgression.

“Boy, where’s your kufi?”

“Where it belongs. Off my head.”

“Why didn’t you wear it to school today?”

“Because I didn’t want to. I’ve converted to Christianity.”

“Listen here. I’m gonna whup yo’ ass if you don’t wear it tomorrow.”

“You can kill me if you want to, but I’m not *ever* going to wear that thing again! I’m a Christian now, and if you kill me, at least *I’ll* go to heaven!” I yelled.

At that point, Mom stepped in. “Leave the room,” she said as she got in between me and Maurice in the middle of the living room. I went into my old bedroom, which wasn’t my bedroom during our Makeda days. Even with the door closed and the TV on, I heard them.

“That boy’s defiant. I won’t tolerant it in my house!,” my stepfather half-yelled and half-whined.

“You lost, Judah. If someone’s leavin’ this house tonight, it’s that woman or you!”

About five minutes later, I went back in the living room. Maurice had left, presumably to get some kosher pork fried rice, one of his favorite after-dinner meals. My do-or-die stance had caught Maurice completely by surprise. I never heard about kufis or yarmulkes again.

The stress of our living situation had pushed me to the point where I questioned everyone’s authority. No one was safe. The month after I came out of the religious closet, me and Mom got into it. I got fed up with doing every chore under the sun and moon for her, my younger siblings and my stupid stepfather. All while sleeping on a broken-hand-me-down of a couch in the living room with Darren and sometimes with my younger brother Maurice. Mom, my stepfather, Yiscoc and Sarai were in our bedroom. Eri was shuttled between the master bedroom where Makeda was and our old room. Boxes of the master bedroom surrounded the living room and cluttered our tiny foyer. It was like we’d just moved in with our landlord and been told not to unpack. I was tired of being ordered around and not getting anything in return.

“What’s wrong?,” Mom asked as I stomped back and forth in the living room, muttering to myself.

“Nothing,” I lied sarcastically, thinking that Mom wasn’t wise enough to read my mind.

She kept asking me to tell her what was wrong, unusual for her.

“Why can’t we get rid of the old hag? Why is she still here? Are you still scared of *him?*,” I asked in rapid succession.

Mom looked like she was in shock by what I said.

“You don’t understand,” she said.

To keep from starting an argument Maurice would hear, I kept my voice to a low grinding tone of pent-up frustration.

“What’s there to understand? I have to do everything around here, and *he* gets to lay on his sorry ass and Darren doesn’t do anything.”

“Oh, you think you grown now? I take care of you, don’t I? I take care of my kids. I feed you, put a roof over your head, buy the clothes and pay the bills. I . . .”

“Yeah, right Mom! And who helps with that? I do! Who has to go over to Jimme’s to get money for food? I do! Who has to pay for it by not having any friends, any free time, a girlfriend? I do! Because of you, I’ll never live in a house, own a car, have a girlfriend, have sex, or get married! And, by the way, we’re on welfare. The federal government pays for the ‘roof over our head!’”

“You don’t have to live here you know. Why don’t you go live with your father?”

“You know what? That’s the best idea you’ve come up with in a long time. I should go live with Jimme, become a drunk like him. At least he doesn’t run me all over the place like you do!”

With that, I grabbed the same suitcase I packed two days’ worth of clothes in when I ran away from home six years before, hoping to stow away on a merchant ship headed to France. I couldn’t take living with him then, and I couldn’t take it now. I grabbed three garbage bags and started stuffing my clothes in all of them. I didn’t want to forget a thing. Under my breath, I was calling Mom a “bitch,” the first time I’d ever thought of calling her anything other than Mom or Mary.

But I was really scared, for me and for her. Moving in with a drunk appealed to me less than screwed-up 616. I’d probably have to find a steady job, maybe even end up

working for the Levi brothers. I'd have to study at the library every night. I needed to do that anyway. Jimme and I would fight every single week. That didn't appeal to me at all, having to track him down before he gave away his \$500-a-week paycheck as if he were Rockefeller or something. My already chaotic life at home would spiral into unimaginable neglect living with Jimme. Mom would be without my help, and Maurice would probably turn more of his attention to her and Darren, Or, more likely, things at home would spiral out of control, leaving Mom the only adult in the house, with Maurice out of the picture and Darren living somewhere else. I really didn't want to leave, but Mom had to realize that she couldn't dump everything she couldn't do on me either. It had gotten to the point where I was making monthly deposits into her Chemical Bank checking account for her, where I'd end up in conversation with Alex's mother, a teller at the bank.

As for Mom, she walked around the house threatening to take me "out of this world," eyes daggered and hands balled into fists. She was serious, but not about that. I knew I'd wounded her in some way. I felt really bad about it, and hoped that there was an opening where we could reconcile before I left.

This time it was Maurice's turn to intervene. How strange was that! He pulled me over and said, "You know, if you walk through that door, you gonna tear your Mom up. She's really gonna be upset for a long time. Just tell her that you're sorry." I was sure that he told me that because Mom's attention would be focused on him and getting him out of the apartment once I left. Maybe he thought Mom would turn her hurt and anger toward him and find the courage to kick him to the curb and call the cops about his abuse. Who knows? I walked over to Mom, apologized with arms out and gave her a big hug. We stood there for a couple of minutes crying. Three weeks later, Makeda was gone, and along with her, any remaining pretense that we were Hebrew-Israelites. The matriarch died three months later in Section 8 housing on Mount Vernon's South Side. I wasn't sorry to hear the news.

Bad as home life was, it was school that emerged as a royal pain by the fall of '84. I reached my sophomore year finding that I had teachers who didn't know how to teach or simply didn't care to know. Tenth grade was turning into a year of teachers that varied from mediocre to atrocious.

I scared at least one of them right from jump street. Mary Zini was our Level 1 World History teacher. If Dr. Demontravel kept Scan-Tron in business, Zini had stock

options with them. My first problem with her, though, was over my Bible. After my first couple of weeks of school, I figured my best way to use my spare time and not get caught up in the sinful ways of a secular world was to carry the new red-covered Bible I'd bought at the end of summer. I carried it everywhere I went. I read it sometimes during my one study hall period. I read it when I rode the Subway. I read it when I took the bus to White Plains. I'd occasionally quote from it. Mostly I read it to figure out the realness of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and how much of that really could be applied to my situation. I read it because I hoped that it would make me a better person and make my life a better one.

So after finishing one of Zini's tests early - fifteen minutes early, as a matter of fact - I handed it in and pulled out my Bible. When she noticed what I was reading, she panicked and yelled at me from her desk in her Cyndi Lauper-Brooklyn accent. "Put that away! Put that away now!," she said, exasperated. The exchange we had occurred while other classmates were finishing their exams.

"I'm just reading my Bible."

"You can't read that in school!"

"I know my rights! I have a First Amendment right to read the Bible in school, and you're not teaching right now anyway!"

She threatened to send me to the principal's office. I called her an "atheist" and put my Bible away. It was the start of a confrontational relationship between me and her.

Mary Zini was a teacher who almost automatically rubbed me and my other classmates the wrong way. She assumed that she was right about everything, which was annoying enough considering the way I'd been toward my classmates three years before. But she was significantly older than twelve. At the time, I thought she was in her mid-forties, but like most teenagers, I gave my teachers a five or ten-year curve, especially the ones I didn't like. Zini was no exception. She looked like an older, worn-out, schoolmarmish version of Madonna to me, a woman whose best days were long past. She was about average height with blonde-gray hair, which looked like it had been freeze-dried. She dressed like a woman who didn't realize we were in a public school and who didn't see herself as a real person. Her voice was a slow whine, the kind that made me think that she was talking down to us. It irritated the heck out of me when she'd call one of us "Peaches" or when she'd say, "When they're slow they're slow," a reference to how

long it would take us to answer one of her idiotic, non-history history questions. A personable person with emotions and empathy, the kind of person equipped to teach a diverse student body, Zini was not.

Her class was as cold as she was. This was supposed to be World History, but it was anything but. It was Plato to NATO, plain and simple, and not even a good version of that. Zini might as well have been teaching Western European Art and Architecture. All with a bit of history stuffed somewhere between Ionic pillars, Roman arches and mosaics, Bach's *Fugue in G* and Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. We spent precious little time on ancient Greece, a bit more time on Rome, tons of time on Western Europe's Dark Ages and serfdom, and most of the year yawning at another regurgitated lesson plan that we could have easily pulled out of our textbooks ourselves. Zini's exams were badly written multiple-choice questions, including true-and-false, designed only for the purpose of tripping us up.

The class wasn't hard. If and when I studied and memorized dates for sculptures and paintings and music compositions, periods for architectural and art styles, and absorbed key concepts like serfdom, it was an easy A. I didn't want an easy A. I wanted to learn something new, something interesting. I wanted to learn, most of all, how it came to be that Western Europe was in charge of the world. I wanted to know the role that my new belief system, Christianity, played in that rise. Zini, determined to avoid as much discussion of religion as possible, only talked about Christianity in the context of art and music. This was one of my most frustrating classes, and it was just first period!

We got into it quite a few times. The first time was over what she was teaching in class, what exactly I don't remember. What I did in response to it was to blurt out "Is this what you call history? All you talk about is art and music!" She banished me to the hallway outside of class for that one. I called her a "stupid atheist" on my way out. The second one was over my grades. For the first time in any history or social studies class, my grades were consistently in the mid- or upper-80s. I got my occasional A's, but only if I decided to study artwork, architecture, and music of a particular period. The actual history of Western Europe rarely appeared on our Scan-Tron exams. I even got a 75 on one of her exams. It made my blood boil because when I looked at her answer key and my answers and compared them to the textbook, some of my answers appeared to be correct. I didn't exactly bring my case to her attention in a rational way. I saw Zini as out to get me. The

day after receiving my 75, I raised my hand as class began and accused her of deliberately taking points off of my exam.

“Why are you shaving points off my grade?” I asked with a set look on my face and with some “base to my voice,” as my stepfather called it when my tone became confrontation.

“I’m not even going to answer that question,” Zini said.

“Well, you’re gonna have a lot to answer for if I can prove that you deliberately changed my grades!” I shouted. She kicked me out again.

If I’d been the only one who couldn’t stand Zini, you could argue I was just taking my moodiness from 616 out on her. Several of us got into it with her that year, though. Patrick and at least three other classmates went over to her house off East Lincoln and Claremont on Halloween night. They egged it and her recent-model blue Volvo, slashing her tires in the process. They told me about it before class the next morning. Zini came in late that day all disheveled and angry, saying that “Some kids slashed my tires last night. I don’t know who they were, but I’m going to catch them.” It took everything within me not to laugh at her misfortune.

Alex couldn’t stand her either. I did an Alex one day as we were waiting for her to come in and unlock the classroom door so we could get her class over with. When she came walking down the ramp into the hallway where her classroom was, I broke out in song. “Whoa-ho here she comes, watch out boy, she’ll chew you up . . .” Alex, Joe, and several others immediately joined in. It was “Maneater,” a Hall & Oates song written just for her. By the time Zini got to the classroom door we were all crackin’ up. Our favorite nickname for her was “Baked Zini,” corny but appropriate given her beaten look.

Zini wasn’t the only teacher who got on my last nerves. Paul Lewis was another unimaginative instructor. He was our Level 1 Chemistry teacher. We started his class in a very tense situation. There were fifty-one students in our class to start the year because Mrs. Flanagan and the school administrators had failed to hire a new Level 0 teacher for Chemistry. Laurell, Sam, Denise and other Level 0 folks spent a month protesting to the head of the Science Department, Estelle Abel, as well as Flanagan about the overcrowding and the mixing of the two levels. It took nearly two months before the situation was resolved. By that time, none of us wanted Lewis for a teacher.

His was a class that could be fun and entertaining, but not usually educational. Sometimes our chemistry education came with errors and miscalculations. If we were already chemists, understanding the nature of trial-and-error was a good thing. Since Lewis was our *teacher*, we needed to learn the correct way of building molecule chains, getting the periodic chart right, and mixing chemicals in experiments without getting them on our hands. Perhaps his mistakes piled up because it was seventh period and near the end of the school day. Or maybe we were tired and inattentive.

The truth was that Lewis was a teacher with a serious chemical addiction. His was a chain-smoking world. The man and his classroom reeked of cigarettes when we walked in at a quarter after one. When he opened up the door to the storage room where the test tubes and Pyrex jars were, more stale cigarette smoke entered the room. His teeth were a pasty yellow, and they had a film that seemed to build up on them and in his mouth by the time we had him at the end of the day. On more than one occasion, Lewis would get phlegm caught in his mouth while in the middle of one of his lectures. Then he'd pause as he gulped down the phlegm, and then he kept going. It was absolutely disgusting. His nicotine addiction was as serious as any I'd ever seen.

One day I met with Mr. Lewis after class to discuss my struggles with the material. He was at the front lab table sitting on a stool. In front of him on the table were fifteen Marlboro cigarettes, all lit and neatly lined up in a row. During our ten minutes together, he smoked one cigarette after another, sucking them down so fast that he had to pause to clear his throat from time to time. By the time I left, he'd gone through twelve out of fifteen, and I smelled like I'd been at one of Jimme's bars. I was more than sure that Lewis' nicotine dependency was a factor in his inability to teach Chemistry to us as well. But at least I knew why Lewis was so skinny and had bad skin.

Our Trigonometry teacher Addie Viggiano was even worse in some ways, so bad that I couldn't remember her name for most of the year. She was an Italian woman with thick, dark, curly hair, the kind that shampoo commercials were made for. Besides that, the only thing distinctive about her was her atrocious knowledge of all things sine, cosine, and tangent. She made so many errors that after about mid-school year, I went down to the local bookstore and bought Barron's Trigonometry test-prep book to get ready for the Regents exam, a full four months early.

My Italian teacher, Mr. DiFeo, was distracted all year long. His mind was somewhere else, apparently on his car dealership, one that would become the largest in Westchester County. Most of what we did in class was memorize verbs and tenses for his fill-in-the-blank exams. We had our official Italian Club meetings in the middle of class. In April, we learned that he'd been fired, either for insubordination due to his other career or because he was flirting with one too many Italian girls. The highlight of the year in his class was going to Little Italy the month before. Four years of Italian paying off. I could read a menu and know the difference between "quattro formaggi," "tiramisu," and "cappuccino," saying "molto bene" to everything I ate and drank.

Mrs. Carol Buckley would've won our "Laziest Teacher of the Year" award if we had one. She was a woman who really was "slummin' it" at our high school, living in a big Tudor-style home on a hill overlooking Chester Heights. Buckley talked the talk of Humanities, calling us the "crème de la crème" almost as much as Flanagan had the year before. Her classroom was part desks and chairs, part garden, and part rest area. She had a couch in one part of the classroom, where she sometimes lounged during class. Buckley would "teach" our Level 1 English class from this position, as if we were all eating grapes, sipping wine or ale and having intellectual discussions about Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope's "Rape of the Lock," or Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." What I did most in that class was daydream about girls, food or money, play Trivial Pursuit on days Buckley didn't feel like teaching, or count the minutes before the last bell rang and school was done for the day. I should've paid more attention, at least to the fact that being involved in activities like the school newspaper or the yearbook meant going through this wannabe high-society schoolteacher. It would be a long and boring year, with not much to look forward to but my Bible and the occasional jackoff session.

11. Sometimes Starvation

By May '85 we were in the middle of a period where food at 616 was difficult to come by. Jimme was at the start of a drinking binge that went on almost nonstop for nearly six weeks. I did occasionally pick up a few bucks from him, but our secondary source of income was almost dry. With my younger siblings Maurice, Yiscoc and Sarai now between the ages of two and six, and Eri almost a year old, food could never stay in the house. We were going through three to four gallons of milk a week. By myself I could drink a half-gallon a day. Even with WIC, food stamps and welfare checks, we'd struggle to make it through the last week or ten days of each month. Sometimes my stepfather would chip in with a bag of Great Northern Beans, occasionally with beef neck bones, and a box of rice. It was another case of "Not again!" for me.

I struggled through most of tenth grade attempting to manage all of the various tensions in my life. Between 616 and Jimme and Zini and other teachers and girls and music and chores and kids, I just wanted to be able to have a serious relationship with God and have my problems somehow disappear. It was abundantly clear that God was no Houdini, Jesus no Merlin. By waiting for the big miracle to happen, I neglected everything I could do to make my life at home better and at school even better than it was. And I'd found a new way to alienate a few of my classmates. My Bible-reading self had put up a thinner, less formidable wall between me and a few of them.

That wasn't all that felt difficult to manage. After DiFeo, a Spanish teacher temporarily took over our Italian class. As good a teacher as our sub was, she wasn't going to make up for nearly four years of instruction that sat somewhere between average and woeful. I'd been given A's all year by DiFeo. (Who knows, it might've been the reason MVHS terminated him!) Our new teacher believed in language immersion, but she figured out pretty quickly that other than Marianne, none of us could go completely into Italian-only mode. I felt my anxiety level rise as the last semester of the year progressed. I tried to deny it as much I could, but I didn't feel at all ready for the Italian Regents exam.

The same was true for Trig and Chemistry. In both classes my exam grades going into the last weeks of the school year had ranged between a 70 and an 87 since September. Even with maximum effort I was barely scoring in the B+ range. Both teachers were nonchalant in their initial assignments to prepare us for the Regents. Lewis went as far as

to say, “There’s nothing to worry about” on the subject of organic chemistry. “There will be hardly any organic chemistry on the exam, anyway,” he said. After eight months of listening to his blathering, I thought “That’s it! Whatever he says to do, I’m doing the opposite!” The next time I got money from Jimme, I went out and bought the Barron’s Chemistry Regents exam prep book. It was just before Memorial Day, and I had a month before the exam.

Where I didn’t have a Regents exam but I did have a problem — at least indirectly — was in Zini’s class. Going into the last weeks of the third semester, I had an 84 average. Not bad considering I’d given up on learning anything from her or her class. But when it came time to sign up for next year’s classes with Sylvia Fasulo, my Vassar-educated guidance counselor, the first question I got was

“Are you sure you want to take AP American History? It’s Advanced Placement, with college-level material. This may be too hard for you.”

The smug-looking Fasulo was smoking me and her office up as she continued to talk to me like I was mentally retarded.

“And anyway, you have an 84 in Ms. Zini’s class. You need an 85 to automatically qualify for AP. Or, you can go to Ms. Zini and get her permission to take the class,” Fasulo said.

How ironic! The person whom I could barely stay in the same room with had the authority to say whether or not I could handle AP American History? Boy was I in a bind!

“Couldn’t I just bring my grades up to at least an 85 and sign up for the class?,” I pleaded.

“No, no, you need to talk with Ms. Zini first,” Fasulo said, gesticulating toward the door all the while.

So later that day, I went to Zini’s classroom and asked for her to fill out a permission form for me to take AP.

“Oh sure, I’ll do it. Harold Meltzer’s a really good teacher. This class will be really good for you,” Zini said, in an unusually understated way, especially for her.

“Are you kidding me?,” I thought, caught completely by surprise by her willingness to further my education — or to see me fail. Maybe she got a good night’s rest, had a good cup o’ Joe, *and* had an excellent massage during lunch.

“Thank you Ms. Zini,” I said, still shocked by her generosity.

She filled out the form on the spot, signed off, and I ran-walked my way back to Fasulo's office. She seemed surprised to see the completed form.

"Are you sure you want to do this? This is gonna require a lot of hard work," Fasulo said. Why she continued to ask me these questions, knowing what my answer would be, I never understood!

If only my Regents exams and finals had been as easy. My last four weeks of tenth grade were spent pouring over Trig equations and understanding the multiple combinations of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and sometimes other elements like nitrogen or sulfur. These combinations could yield anything from glucose and fructose to coal and petroleum. Some combinations could kill humans but be good for the soil. I spent the remainder of the time doing practice Italian Regents exams, building up some sense of security that I could salvage a C or even a C+ on the test. I didn't even bother studying for my World History or English finals.

Finals began in earnest the third week in June. We had virtually nothing to eat at home that wasn't stale or frozen, and I had five dollars to work with over three days. Still, I had to be tough and go into MVHS and kick butt. Monday was finals in World History and English. World History was unamazingly easy, as I memorized both dates and names and artwork and music compositions the morning of the test. I knew I'd aced it by the speed with which I went threw the multiple choice sheet. English was easy because Buckley was too lazy to develop new questions for us to answer. Our essay questions were drawn from exams given earlier in the year. I'd later find out I got a 92 on my World History exam and an 88 on my English. The next day was Trig, a Regents exam I dreaded for half the year. The test seemed easier than all of the practice exams I worked on over the last four months. I scored an 87 on the exam, ten points over my average for the year. Not a bad start!

Wednesday was the big day. Two Regents exams. Italian in the morning, Chemistry in the afternoon. I already knew I had eight points to start with on the Italian exam, from the oral section that I took the week before. That gave me a brief boost in confidence. I listened to WPLJ for some theme music before going to school that morning, so I had Simple Minds' "Don't You Forget About Me" in my head. Unfortunately, the song was also in my belly. If I just swallowed spit, I would've heard an echo as it landed at the bottom of my stomach. And I didn't eat much the night before either. I got to the exam classroom, sat

down, and my blood-sugar level dropped immediately. By the time I started looking at the exam questions, we were a good twenty minutes in, and I never fully caught up. Even with four years of *poor* instruction, I should've been able to tell the difference between singular and plural, masculine and feminine, and past, present and future tense on the test. I couldn't, I tried for three hours and I couldn't tell in more cases than I cared to count. By the time I was done, I had Howard Jones' "Things Can Only Get Better" playing in my head instead.

I *knew* I'd blown the exam. I refused to admit it, but in my heart and mind, I knew that I hadn't done well. How much of this was my bad preparation, test anxiety, stage fright, or my teachers' incompetence in teaching Italian, I didn't know. What I did know that I had a headache and was extremely light-headed. I had forty-five cents to my name and an hour to spare before the Chemistry Regents. I walked over to the nearby deli in Chester Heights, slowly at first, and bought the most substantial meal forty-five cents could get me, a single Sara Lee brownie. I choked it down, and drank as much water as I could from a fountain before going over to Lewis' Chemistry classroom on the first floor in the southwest corner of the building. I sat down for the exam, completely pissed with everyone, including myself and Mom.

When I opened up the Regents booklet I started snickering. Question after question on the test had something to do with organic chemistry. I was looking at the questions and thinking, "Thank God I didn't listen to Mr. Lewis!" Thank God I had the sense to use the intuition and wisdom that The One had given me. It was like taking a fastball and hitting it half a mile. Every answer was so easy that I felt great, the opposite of how I felt just three or four hours before. I finished the exam early, so early that I briefly worried if my mind was playing tricks on me.

Two days later I came back to school for my first meeting with Mr. Meltzer to learn about his AP American History class. Before that I went to find out about my Italian and Chemistry grades. I flunked Italian with a 45 on the Regents. That meant I scored a 37 out of a possible 90 on the written part of the test. I knew then that the lack of food played a bigger role than I thought it would in my demise. The only good news was that because my regular class grade was an 84 — which counted as two-thirds of my total grade — my final grade was a 73. I wasn't happy at all, but I salvaged something because of grade inflation.

On my Chemistry Regents I scored a 95, the third or fourth highest grade in the school. Laurell and Sam respectively scored a 99 and 97 on it. But they had a Level 0 Chemistry teacher who taught them nothing but organic chemistry the second-half of the year. My score raised my final grade in Lewis' class six points, from a 79 to an 85. My score left me feeling jaded and disillusioned. "Wow," I thought. "My teachers really don't know much more than I do." I knew that a lot of my Level 1 Chemistry classmates didn't fare so well on the exams, because they believed Lewis when he said that there wouldn't be much organic chemistry on the exam. By my own count during the exam, between thirty-five and forty of the 100 questions were organic chemistry ones. I didn't understand why teachers who didn't know what they were doing were teaching the allegedly best-and-brightest in the school. I didn't understand why it took me stepping up and eating a brownie to turn a day of disaster into one of relief and triumph.

Confused was how I felt by the end of tenth grade. I couldn't have been any more confused if Wendy — who had recently started dating JD — had planted a big kiss on my lips and asked me out. I thought that by virtue of inviting God through Jesus into my heart that my life would *automatically* get better. That reading, toting and quoting the Bible would be enough for God to come in and just change my life into the way it ought to have been. That me being faithful, chaste, and masturbation-free would make all the difference in the world.

Then I thought about the year and half since I stood at the bridge considering how I should take my own life. I realized that every change to my life since then had been based on a decision, *my* decision, to take a step that needed to be taken, to make a stand where I needed to make one. That faith, whether as a Christian or a confused teenager, was a universal and indispensable intangible. That faith generated by hope in a future worth living, maintained by the smallest of miracles, even by the smile of a classmate. Everything that happened to me in the past eighteen months was either a result of me putting my faith into action or because I was too confused to make any decision at all. From converting to Christianity to trying out for football, from freeing myself from being a Hebrew-Israelite to freeing my mind from my Chemistry teacher, I'd taken all of those steps and they had all worked in my favor.

As for Italian, or my contentious relationship with Zini, or the fact that I was still afraid to find out if any girls actually liked me, these were all signs of confusion or the

inability to make a determined and deliberate decision to do something about the situation. In the end I salvaged a C out of Italian and learned how to order food in the language, swallowed my pride and got a gift from Zini, and no longer acted like I was ten around *every* girl I met. These initial lessons, good as they were, still came at a price. I now thought that my teachers, almost all Humanities teachers, were about as competent at their profession as fashion models were at doing algebra. I couldn't trust my guidance counselor or administrators for Humanities to look out for my interests. I still trusted God, but I also learned that I needed to trust myself. What I also needed to learn was to trust my teachers and classmates as well. The question was, which ones could I trust, and how could I learn to trust them?

12. Summer of '85

I had a summer of me and Darren working for Jimme in the city to look forward to after the hungry end to tenth grade. But after three weeks of torture with my father, I had more important things to do. Watching Dwight Gooden pitch the Mets into a pennant race they'd almost fallen out of, for starters. I either listened to or watched Gooden win sixteen straight decisions between May and the end of August. And the Mets, losers to Philadelphia 26-7 in a game in late-June, made the '85 season one to remember. Despite working nights, I managed to watch a rain-delayed Independence Day game with the Mets playing the Braves in Atlanta at the old Fulton County Stadium. The Mets won in nineteen innings, 19-16. The game ended at 4:05 am on the fifth of July, and the Braves still set off their fireworks at the end of the game.

Yeah, you could say that my summer was going better than expected, having worked and watched my Mets play quality baseball in July and into August. I had my usual set of chores to be sure, runs to the store, weekly washings of clothes and watching after the kids. I took Maurice and Yiscoc out for walks, would sometimes respond to the occasional bill collector on Mom's behalf, would check the mail and give Sarai and Eri baths. I'd cook weekend brunches of fried beef bologna, scrambled eggs and grits and occasional spaghetti and broccoli dinners for my siblings. I'd long since known that I'd become the first-born of the family, in that I was filling Darren's role on so many levels.

That doesn't mean that it was incident-free. Once Darren and I had stopped working for Jimme, we'd sometimes go out with Maurice and Yiscoc for walks and to play basketball and football. After a while, we dropped the basketball. Darren played at the center spot on Clear View's basketball team, which made sense since he was already between six-three and six-four at seventeen. Of course they crushed every team they played. It was truly unfair. Darren towered over his classmates and his opponents, and being the only non-mentally retarded person on the floor, he could run rings around folks.

Still, Darren could knock down any jump shot within thirty feet of the hoop. His shot was smooth, like Isiah Thomas' or Bernard King's. It was the kind of shot no one on MVHS' basketball team had at the time. Knowing this, I wanted to — no, I *had* to play my brother to see this shot up close. There were two well-maintained courts near 616, one in Pelham near its main street of Fifth Avenue, the other a longer walk in Chester Heights. We

chose Chester Heights for most of these battles. Their court felt like a good outside court should, surrounded by trees, with level, quality-painted asphalt, and bright-white mesh nets.

The first few times we played that summer, he just killed me. Every time I left him open for a jumper, he buried it. It was obvious I hadn't touched a basketball other than in gym class since I was ten. I didn't have a jump shot, had never worked on my footwork, and could dribble only moderately well with my right hand. Forget about using my left hand! I was so afraid of hurting my two crooked fingers that the left hand's role for me was to block shots, not to catch passes or take shots.

My semi-buried competitive nature got the better of me. I knew I couldn't beat Darren in a shootout. But I knew I was quicker than my taller brother. So I decided after another embarrassing performance (I lost 23-2!) that it would be easier to play defense and try to steal a few balls to keep the next game close. Amazingly, the plan worked. It worked so well that I took Darren completely out of his game. After three blocked shots and a couple of steals, I discovered that Darren couldn't play me one-on-one if I drove hard for the hoop, that I could beat him with my first step. So every time I got the ball I attacked the rim. The last two games we played I won by a combined score of 50-18. I started feeling bad when Darren started forcing long jumpers. After a while, he just gave up. I wanted to win, but I wanted it to be competitive, too.

Darren was so upset that we didn't talk on our way back to 616. He then walked to the back of our apartment building and threw his basketball down the garbage chute. I wanted to continue to play because I thought it would make both of us better and give us something positive to build on in our relationship. Instead it just made Darren mad and made it even harder for me to talk to him about what was going on at 616.

I really did feel awful about how Darren felt after the game. I had shattered confidence in one of the few areas in his life in which he had any. I had humbled a star basketball player at his own game, a game I'd yet to learn. I'd given my older brother yet another reason to be jealous of me. It was shocking to watch him throw the basketball away. I really didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry, Darren, for beating you two straight games, for making you look bad at your favorite sport?" I guess I could've said that. What fifteen-year-old with as much on my plate as me would, though, especially in an environment as competitive as ours when it came to basketball? It made me pity Darren

for his situation at Clear View, but also left me angry with him. I was trying to help him, after all, not break his spirit. The incident left me shaking my head.

This would've been the extent of my troubles for the summer if it weren't for my stepfather. We got into it over the "Dad" issue again. He told me to do something, and I only said, "Okay." I didn't say "Okay, Dad," and my "Okay" wasn't exactly enthusiastic. This was the one thing about Maurice that I refused to accept — him as anything other than the leech and bully that he was. He certainly wasn't my dad, and he gave up the right to be called "stepfather" three years before. Yet he insisted on *me* calling *him* "Dad!" I usually walked a fine line between open defiance and acquiescence with him, not referring to him by anything at all. He had no name, no title, no label. Maurice was nothing and meant nothing to me other than the reason I'd eventually have to leave 616. Our incidents had become less frequent only because he worked nights as a security guard and slept during the day. And I stayed home as little as I could when he was around.

So on the last Sunday of August '85, we had another round.

"I'm your father, and the Bible says to 'honor thy father and mother' . . ."

"You'll never be my father. My father lives at 149 South Tenth Avenue."

"As long as you live under my roof, you're gonna call me 'Dad'."

"No, I'm not," I said shaking my head at the same time.

"I'm gonna show you how to respect me, niggal!," he said as he balled his fists.

Luckily I had fast feet. He tried to grab me and then hit me at the same time, not a good tactic when you're significantly overweight and off balance. I slithered past him, got out of his grasp, and dashed down our long hallway to the front door. I ran down the stairs that led to the back dirt courtyard area of 616 and didn't stop running into I ran into the woods nearby, Wilson Woods. It was a mostly cloudy late summer day, thank God, because I wasn't in any shape to be bothered with anybody.

I wound my way through Wilson Woods on its serpentine path toward the southeast side of Mount Vernon. I saw a few folks who recognized me as I walked from the woods toward East Third and South Columbus, but the walk was mostly a blur. I made my way to Jimme's place on West Third and South Tenth, all the while thinking about the reality of my long-lost childhood and quickly evaporating time as a teenager. Jimme wasn't home, and I didn't feel like going on a hunt for him at one of his watering hole after a meandering three-mile walk. So I waited there for a while, maybe an hour or so.

I made my way past downtown Mount Vernon, up Gramatan Avenue, taking on the hill on which Davis Middle School sits. From there I reached Fleetwood and walked past homes and cars that I thought me and my family deserved but would never own. I likely walked by the homes of some of my classmates without even knowing it. Tudors and townhomes, beamers and Volvos populated this neighborhood. I turned right on Birch Street and headed east, eventually meandering past Pennington-Grimes Elementary. I noted that this was the place where the remaining affluent and most assertive Humanities classmates went to as kids. It made me think for a moment about the reality that when put together, Mom, Maurice and Jimme had no clue about what it was like for me to be in a program like this, with students whose parents owned their own homes or were able to take a vacation overseas. These compadres were more sophisticated than I was, even after four years in the program. Just thinking about it made me clench my teeth.

I kept walking on Devonia, realizing that I was approaching North Columbus and MVHS. "This might be a good place to hide out," I thought. I reached the high school about half past six. I'd been walking for nearly four hours, from one end of Mount Vernon to the other. When I reached the high school, I was surprised to find that all of the front doors were open. Then I smelled charcoal. I realized that a group was using the school to hold a picnic in the courtyard. This was a lucky break. I didn't want to go home and face Maurice, and I was tired of walking. I walked around the huge building to see if anyone else was there, but other than the barbeque group, the school was empty.

My next step was to find a place to sleep. After finding one locked door after another, I found that the door to the Humanities Program offices, which included Mrs. Flanagan's, was unlocked. I also noticed that there were two desks to sit in, a carpeted floor, and no security cameras. This was a perfect place to hide. The offices were on the second floor, in a fairly isolated wing of the school. Someone would actually have to be looking for me in order to find me here. I closed the door and used the two desks as a place to hide. I lay down between them and fell asleep.

I woke up around 8:30 pm feeling cold, as the school's air conditioning was running full blast. In sprinting out of the house, I didn't have a jacket, just a t-shirt, cheap jeans and well-worn sneaks. I walked around a bit, thinking about what would happen if the police found me there or if my classmates were to find out about this episode with Maurice, not

to mention all of the other ones. That scared me, so I went back to the Humanities Program offices, cuddled up and set my Timex watch for six in the morning.

It was a long night, but I did manage to sleep for most of it. My dreams were mostly about life away from 616. Those dreams scared me, because they were well beyond my fifteen years of experience and because no one among my family or classmates was in them. I did eventually collapse, only waking up when I snored too loud or to turn my neck and body to keep each side from going numb.

I spent the next morning splitting time between the faculty bathrooms while attempting to wash up and walking around the school, looking at the honor roll board. I wondered how someone like me could make the honor roll consistently while being tormented by people like my stepfather. I also looked at the new “Hall of Fame” display case honoring famous folks who had gone to MVHS. It included Ralph Branca, the guy who gave up the “Shot Heard 'Round The World,” the home run Bobby Thompson hit in the '51 playoff for the National League pennant between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants. It also included the McCray brothers and Gus and Ray Williams — all NBA players — along with actor Art Carney of *The Honeymooners* fame and Dick Clark, Class of '54. I didn't feel any pride looking at this. What I did feel was light-headed. I hadn't eaten in nearly twenty-four hours, and I hadn't been on a deliberate fast in nearly a year and a half.

I noticed around 7:30 that the janitors had unlocked the school doors. I attempted to sneak out unnoticed, only to bump into my idiot counselor Fasulo. She asked, “What are you doing here so early?,” of course. I lied, telling her that I wanted to ask her about the classes I'd signed up for in the coming school year. After a few minutes of Fasulo making my head hurt from her cigarette smoke, I excused myself. I said, “You're right, it is too early for me to do this. I'll see you in a couple of weeks.”

In a literal and figurative haze, I walked from the high school south to East Lincoln, turned right and stopped at St. Ursula Catholic Church on North Fulton, a white-trimmed place of worship I passed many times before. I went inside, sat down at one of the pews, and started to pray. I spent nearly three hours in prayer. I prayed for my suffering to end, for food, for my success in getting to college, for my success in finishing college, for Mom to find the courage to get a divorce from Maurice. I even prayed for a girlfriend, thinking that I might as well ask for a miracle, too.

Meanwhile, a priest had been at the altar chanting in Latin. I understood some of what was said, after four years of Italian. Some of the words in his chant were similar enough. But I didn't understand enough to allow a Catholic priest to disrupt my own prayers. I had stayed out long enough. On the walk home, I thought about the first thing Mom would say to me when I got back. I also thought about what my stepfather would do to me.

When I did get home, around two in the afternoon, I saw that Mom and the kids were the only ones there. There was no "Are you all right, Donald?" What I got instead was, predictably, "Why did you leave and stay out all night?," "Why did you say *that* to him?," and "You know how that fat slob is!" But after telling her my little story about walking and spending the night at the high school, she calmed down and fed me leftovers from the night before, a dinner of chicken and dumplings.

Soon after I ate, my stepfather came home and told me in his cold, dispassionate manner to "go pack up your things and live with Jimme." I responded just as unemotionally and started to pack. Then Mom intervened once again. She said, "Since I pay the bills, I decide who lives here. He's my son, and if you don't like him livin' here you can move out your damn self." It was quiet for a moment after that. The next thing I knew, she was telling me to unpack. It was the third time in three years I had started packing to leave 616, only to have to unpack my rough clothes. A part of me wanted to keep going, never to return. I took a long nap instead. I vaguely remember my siblings bugging me, but not much else for the rest of that day.

The one thing I resolved after this incident was to step up my efforts to get into college. I knew I needed a good score on my SATs, a "5" on the AP American History exam, and to stay in the top twenty of my class in order to guarantee not only acceptance, but a scholarship of some sort as well. Yet the reality of needing to step up meant finding time to study at 616. After my latest run-in with Maurice, I knew studying more was out of the question unless I went to Mount Vernon Public Library more often.

I discovered something rather interesting about myself toward the end of the year. I understood, maybe for the first time, how much walking and nocturnal self-pleasure had replaced sitting on the radiator at the living room window as my after school and weekend distraction. Walking allowed me to continue to contemplate my future, to make sense of

my senseless world. Very early on in my junior year, I went on a Saturday walk straight up Route 22, from East Lincoln and North Columbus. I ended up at Concordia College in Bronxville, a small liberal arts school in the middle of one of the richest towns in America. It was a cloudy and crisp early fall day, those first series of gray days you experience after a long, hot summer. I wore my gray hooded and zippered sweat jacket with my beat-up multi-colored and checkered long-sleeve shirt and some cheap, made-in-Taiwan blue jeans.

Even with that and my tall, Black male self on a mostly White campus, I seemed to blend in. Not a single person looked at me as if I didn't belong there. Some of the students actually said "Hi" to me, and not that overly enthusiastic greeting, either. I walked across the campus, walked into some of the buildings and walked around some of the empty classrooms. After a bit more wandering around, I ended up at the library. It was surprisingly small, but the books it did have were the kinds I used to like reading. Old and dusty historical texts and subjects of interest only to old writers and historians. I saw students at tables studying or talking softly while studying. Then it dawned on me why the students didn't automatically assume that I wasn't a college student. I was dressed like they were, or, I guess, they dressed like me. Sloppy, but not too sloppy. It also dawned on me that you needed a college ID on the campus in case the guards suspected that you weren't a college student. So I made my way off the campus and trekked back home.

This was my first and only college visit. And though I hadn't stopped by the admissions office or spoken with a financial aid counselor, my wandering walk gave me much food for thought. The visit reinforced my thinking on what I needed to do in eleventh grade to guarantee both college acceptance *and* a scholarship. I assumed an academic scholarship, but an athletic one was still in the realm of possibility. I knew, again, that this was my make-or-break year to bring my grades up as far as possible. I had no idea what my class ranking was, but I assumed that I needed to be in the top fifteen or twenty to have my best shot. So I set the largest goal possible — making it to the top ten of my class.

In the case of an athletic scholarship, I knew I wanted to play baseball, but I should've been thinking basketball. My gym teacher that year just happened to be the head basketball coach at MVHS, the only other pressure-packed job in the building other than principal. This was to be expected. Mount Vernon had won the state championship twice

since '71. My gym classes weren't tied to Humanities, so for the first time since elementary school, I was in gym class with only the regular kids. This was a good thing, and deliberate on my part. What I didn't plan for was my gym teacher to be the basketball coach and my gym classmates to include four starters from the basketball team.

We played some pick-up basketball one day when we couldn't go outside to play flag football. I found myself as the second or third tallest guy on the court, being guarded by Mount Vernon's starting center or point guard. I'd apparently lit both of them up, making five of six shots in an easy win for our team. The coach immediately pulled me aside to ask if I wanted to try out for basketball. I said, "No coach, not interested." He gave me this puzzled look and asked me why. "Basketball's too easy. All you do is run around and throw the ball into a hoop." It wouldn't be the last time the coach would ask.

There was a degree of fear involved in my decision to go out for baseball instead of basketball. Basketball was a Black sport in New York in general and especially in Mount Vernon. The coach, the towel boy and Joshua as statistician were the only Whites involved in the day-to-day with the team. Baseball was a more interesting sport for me. Besides, I couldn't see myself playing basketball at the level of Len Bias at the University of Maryland or Dr. J or Magic Johnson or Bernard King. Despite what most people thought at the time, I was barely six-one, and I didn't have Isiah Thomas' floor speed. If I thought I had that level of athletic talent, I probably would've accepted coach's offer.

The Concordia College tour also left me with a degree of fear about how well I would do once in college. If for some reason I couldn't raise my grade point average, what would I do after high school? I didn't want to spend my years after high school working some dead-end job, like Mom at Mount Vernon Hospital before she lost her job. And where did I want to go to school? Concordia looked nice, and the students seemed nice, but the school was within walking distance of 616. The question of what it would take for me to get into college remained on my mind all during the fall of '85.

I took the SAT for the first time in October. You could only take the exam a few times a year, including October and December. I chose October, to give myself some idea of what to shoot for when I took it again later in the year or next fall.

I didn't study for it at all, figuring that since I did well on my PSATs the year before that this shouldn't be so bad. After three-and-a-half hours of words like "assiduous," "facetious" and "loquacious," complicated math word problems and reading

comprehension essays, I felt drained. But I also found myself thinking about what this test had to do with college. It didn't test me on my knowledge of trig or ask me to understand the distinction between noble gases and heavy metals. The SAT didn't ask me to write anything. The word analogies made for a good game show for some of us. Yet would you say "assiduous" when you could say "consistent" or "diligent," or "facetious" when you could say "sarcastic" or "smart ass?" To me the process was a joke. Making people spend \$11 so that they could be tortured!

The joke was on me. I received my scores about five weeks later. Verbal: 480 Math: 570. A 1050 when put together. Now I knew that this score could get me into most colleges, especially when year after year, the newspapers put out national average scores between 890 and 910, and Blacks were only scoring about a 740. Of course, my classmates said things like "you get a 400 just for putting your name down," meaning that I only *earned* a 650. I didn't really know what a great score would be, but I figured that I should study and shoot for a 1200 next time.

The stress of my classes, the beginning preparations for college, and my athletic options didn't help my grades in the middle part of the fall. Home life wasn't as horrible as it had been, but it still wasn't supportive. My sixteenth birthday, the twenty-seventh of December, was the first time since I turned nine that anyone bothered to give me a cake. This was a spontaneous decision, as I sat around 616 all day with little to do but watch after my younger siblings. Mom and Maurice agreed to buy me a birthday cake. Since it was Maurice's money, I didn't want any cake! I especially didn't want the Carvel ice cream cake he thought I should have. I mean, it was a cold last Friday in December day, and all he could come up with was ice cream cake?

The kicker was *I* had to go get the cake! It was my birthday cake, but I had to leave 616, buy it and bring it home so we could celebrate *me* turning sixteen. I wasn't thankful for this assignment, and it showed. I wished that Maurice would just go somewhere and die. Not a violent death or one that I had to be the cause of. Just a death that he deserved, like a massive coronary blockage due to a diet rich in saturated fats.

All of this added up to many sleepless nights. With Darren, Maurice, Yiscoc and me now sharing the same room, sleep was difficult. Our collective snoring would constantly wake each of us up. Since I had trouble getting to sleep, I gradually devised a method for getting there. On a normal night, I would start off with the same image, usually Joe

Montana throwing me a touchdown pass or me throwing a strike in the end zone to someone like Mark Bavaro or Art Monk or James Lofton. By the time I went through a few plays, a slant here or a skinny post there, I'd get drowsy enough to fall asleep without incident.

Sometimes I could focus on the bathroom light, as my bed was still next to the corner window in my bedroom. From it you could see the side of the apartment building, the west side of our block, and the bathroom window. But about two or three times a week, my emotional state wasn't stable enough for any of this. So I went to another place, what I saw as a dark and not-so-innocent place in my mind. I focused on someone I'd seen at school or in the streets that day or week. The people I conjured usually had either chocolate-smooth or cookie-dough colored skin with a proportionate shape to match. Some were tall, some weren't, all had round, juicy butts, while others had bouncy breasts. They all dressed as if they were in a Run-D.M.C. or Prince video. I found myself an extra pillow to put in between my legs, to provide some cushion. The music in my head bounced between Teddy Pendergast, Freddy Jackson, Chaka Khan, and Luther most of the time. By the time I moved to a third song, it was all over and I was in full snore mode.

I felt uneasy about this gradual turn of events. As a Christian, these semi-nocturnal emissions seemed outside of God's will. But it was so much easier to go to sleep after a tough day through them than to use my developing frontal lobes to cancel out the combination of lust, hatred, rage, anxiety, and envy that I lived with more and more as the end of high school approached. I needed something and someone to focus on that could help me concentrate on the task at hand, to boost and channel my energies into something positive rather than jerking off at least once every three days. I needed a small miracle, a new drug ala Huey Lewis. It would come in another teacher, another crush, another chance to feel like a normal person again.

13. Meltzer

The previous two years had led me to believe that almost all of my teachers were lazy and arrogant and that my guidance counselor, Sylvia Fasulo, didn't exactly like my kind. All the times I sarcastically said "Yeah, right!" to my classmates and friends were signs that Humanities' promise was all but unfulfilled in my eyes. I thought that becoming a devout, Bible-toting and quoting Christian would help change my life for the better, not make it seem as difficult as ever.

Then that fateful day came. Meltzer had summoned me and thirteen others to "Room 275 of Mount Vernon High School," as the invitation read. After the last year of DiFeo, Viggiano, Fasulo, Zini, Buckley and Lewis, I was thinking on the walk up the stairs to the second floor, "Oh boy, what now? Another stupid teacher." Yet I also knew that this was different. Not since Mrs. Bryant and sixth grade had any of my teachers wanted to spend time with us when they didn't have to. Especially since this was *their* last day of school before their summer vacations. In that confused, "What's this all about anyway?" way, all of us filed into Meltzer's classroom to learn more about him and AP American History.

Even by Humanities "crème de la crème" standards, ours was an all-star cast of the best and brightest characters. Laurell, Sam, Wendy, JD, Dahlia, Allison, Denise, Dara, Suzanne, Marianne along with André, Rosa, and one other besides myself had made it to Meltzer. To a person, we were all exhausted after two weeks of class finals and Regents exams. In some ways, we'd begun the slow process of tiring of each other — though no one would've dared to have said so in mixed company. After my week of malnourishment, failure and excellence, I wanted see if this Mr. Meltzer would be like every other teacher in our program.

Meltzer started off talking to us about Morison and Commager as we sat in this classroom of old history books and even older dust and chalk. Meltzer himself looked to be in his fifties, tall and lanky except for the protruding pouch in the tummy section. His hair was a mutt-like mixture of silver, white and dull gray, and his beard was a long, tangled mess. The way he spoke, and the way his eyes looked when he spoke made me see him as a yarmulke-wearing tweener on his way to temple. He seemed old and young at the same time. The force with which his words would leave his mouth hit me immediately and

literally. If I believed him, Morison and Commager had created the greatest textbook in the history of history as a subject. As much as I noticed how frequently spit would spew out of Meltzer's mouth, the rhythm of his speech was slow and sing-song, like an elder or grandfather taking you on a long, winding, roller-coaster-ride of a story.

Yet I remained skeptical. Meltzer spent at least twenty minutes explaining the Morison and Commager textbook as if the book alone was the key to scoring the precious "5" on the AP American History exam. As he went on and on about how this was his college textbook "at Hunter College in 1958" and how it changed his life, he gave each of us a copy of Morison and Commager to read in preparation for the next school year. Upon receipt of the black hardback book, I turned it over and looked at the last page because the book was so thick. It was 508 pages long! I gasped at the thought of reading so many pages over the summer and during the school year. I could only think of trying to read this book — one almost completely absent of pictures, maps, and other visuals that could take up space — in my home of horrors and hysterical young'uns. Then I looked up to find a couple of classmates snickering or looking overwhelmed as well.

The next two things Meltzer did moved me from jaded to interested in him as my teacher. One was to change the subject of his lecture from the consensus history textbook to a story about his understanding of American history. He told us a story about a little boy who grew up to become president — the little boy being Abraham Lincoln. But this wasn't a Lincoln-as-a-great-man story. Meltzer laid out the issues and dilemmas that Lincoln faced throughout his life, dragging equality, slavery, and the need for vision in leadership into the story. It was the first time I'd ever seen anyone attempt to teach history this way.

The other was so out-of-the-way goofy that it made me want to show up for class in the fall. Like most of our teachers, Meltzer had assigned us our seats alphabetically by our last names. He noticed that one of my classmates had completely zoned out on his elevator speech on the importance of American history via Lincoln. Then a blackboard eraser zipped past my right ear and landed on the floor by JD in the back second row. I don't know about JD, but Meltzer got *my* attention. Meltzer said, "If I catch any of you napping or not paying attention . . . a book" or eraser will "zip by your desk." It surprised me, made me laugh, and had me ready to see what the quirky Meltzer would do next.

As we left Meltzer, my classmates were in shock. “I can’t believe how much work we have to do!” Laurell said. Most of the rest mumbled or grunted angrily as we walked down to the first floor and out of MVHS. It was now officially summer vacation time, and *we* only had summer travels to Italy and France, driver’s exams, SAT preparation, and college visits to think about. As for *me*, my thoughts turned to another summer at home at 616, another ten weeks before the start of our junior year, another roller coaster ride with my family. I wanted something good and miraculous to happen, something along the lines of getting saved. Only it would take a year to realize that a smaller miracle had already happened.

And there was the immediate task of writing an essay for Meltzer and reading as much Morison and Commager as I could before the start of the new school year. We had to read and analyze an essay by colonial women’s historian Mary Beth Norton on the role of women in the American Revolution and in the early republic. This opening assignment was a tall task, one that egghead college students would easily struggle with. Of course I did the best I could, which for me, at least, still wasn’t good enough. I didn’t know exactly what the terms “egalitarianism” and “domesticity” meant, and the dictionary we had was missing entire letters of the alphabet, including the letters D and E.

I was even less successful with reading Morison and Commager. The book was boring, and since two consensus historians had written it, there was much to be desired regarding the story of America’s development. Just from reading the table of contents, I could tell that there was next to nothing about slavery or civil rights, Indians or inequality, but plenty on Founding Fathers and the American Revolution. There wasn’t much about the Civil War or the Great Depression. “Great,” I thought, “another textbook that wasn’t written for me.” I stopped reading after eight pages. I decided that I didn’t need the textbook to get the high score on the AP exam. My extensive *World Book Encyclopedia* knowledge of American history would have to do.

Eleventh grade started well enough. For the first time in five years, I didn’t have Italian to look forward to. Despite my Italian Regents performance, I remained interested in learning a second language. I just didn’t want to take another language while still at MVHS. Mrs. Warns, a woman with a noticeable lisp, was our Level 1 English teacher, an interesting irony. We had David Wolf for Level 1 Physics in a classroom that wasn’t exactly well-equipped for Physics experiments. For some of us, Andy Butler was our Pre-Calc

teacher, a waste of time from the start. And I elected to take Carol Walters' Pascal class. I'd traded in Italiano for a computer language. For the first time since Jeanne Longerano and eighth grade, I'd mated my interest in high-technology with a class that would unlock its secrets. I'd unknowingly set myself up for a dilemma that would take college to solve. Despite Fasulo's "Are you sure . . . ?" protests, I was taking an even heavier load of classes than I did the year before. I understood better than her — better than anyone except for Meltzer — that this was my make-or-break year for getting into college and possibly getting a scholarship.

But above all else, I looked forward to Meltzer and AP American History. It was my second-period class, coming right after Warns and English. She seemed like the warm-up band before the main attraction when compared to him. After the first week of school, Meltzer took us on this long-and-winding road on the topic of egalitarianism, toward the American Revolution, the Founding Fathers and the US Constitution through an unusual set of stories, testing us in the process. He'd tell us stories about his first trip to the Metropolitan Opera House in Manhattan in 1939 (I later learned that he would've only been three at the time) and somehow tied it to Jefferson's vision of an egalitarian society. Meltzer would take us to eighteenth-century Britain's House of Commons, giving us an image of photographic-remembered savants as newspaper reporters and connect this to freedom of the press. Because Parliament apparently didn't allow the outside world to record their words in those days, London newspapers would send men with proven photographic memories to observe the two Houses while in session. These recording reporters would then leave in a rush and jot down what they memorized from the proceedings for their employers. Somehow the need for accuracy, as Meltzer explained it, was related to the freedom of the press clause in the Bill of Rights, specifically the First Amendment. Or Meltzer would tell us about some Broadway show — like *Oklahoma* and Rodgers and Hammerstein — and connect it in his wandering way to social mobility or slavery and inequality.

My life experience up to that point meant there was nothing for me to relate to in Meltzer's stories. The Metropolitan Opera House or Lincoln Center? The New York Philharmonic or Marian Anderson? Other than Mrs. Mallory and eighth-grade music class, WNET (the local PBS station) and the occasional *Playbill* booklet, I knew next to nothing about going to a concert hall. And forget about Broadway shows. But I could imagine

Meltzer as a boy or a younger man going to a play or concert. For him, it would've been a special treat, like going to see the Mets at Shea or Run-D.M.C. at Madison Square Garden would've been for me. Seeing him as a younger person gave me some insight as to where his often nutty stories were taking us.

We all needed to see the shape and direction of Meltzer's stories. He'd ask us questions throughout the class, asking us to draw unlikely connections between obscure opera singers, concert conductors and violin virtuosos and US expansion, the Constitutional Convention, and the Civil War. It was completely counterintuitive to what we normally did in any class, Humanities or otherwise. A normal class was *us* asking the teacher questions to make sure we'd know everything that we needed to do for the next test or writing assignment. This "What do *you* think?" stuff was new and should've been exciting. It felt bizarre, but it was also a breath of fresh air. Right, wrong or somewhere in between, my hand was almost always up and I was fully willing to participate in Meltzer's eccentric student engagement process of learning. On the few occasions my hand wasn't up, he'd call on me anyway, saying "I know you've got something to say." He was teaching all of us the critical thinking skills we needed for college, and most of us didn't even know it.

Some of my classmates complained, a couple bitterly, about Meltzer's methods. Laurell said on more than one occasion, "I just don't get it!" usually with some exasperation. JD wasn't exactly a fan of him either. Meltzer easily threw more chalkboard erasers and books JD's way than toward the rest of us. He'd talk in class, usually to Wendy, and sometimes in a semi-disrespectful passive-aggressive way. Most of my comrades just smiled wryly when Meltzer came up as a topic over lunch or when we saw him in the halls.

The most interesting aspect to all of this was how quiet our all-star class would get when Meltzer did ask his questions. It was because my classmates were used to knowing the answer *before* the teacher asked the question. To memorizing facts, figures, names and places without thinking through the hows and whys of any historical event. Court, Demontravel, Flanagan, and Zini had prepared us so well for this kind of teaching and learning. Now, Meltzer was asking us to put ourselves *inside* of history, think about history as if we were living it.

It took most of the year for even a few classmates to really “get it.” Sam and Denise understood Meltzer well enough and participated in the class in ways that showed it. Laurell, well, Laurell never fully understood what Meltzer was trying to do for us. “Why can’t he just ask a direct question?” she asked me once. For her, Meltzer was forty-five minutes of torture because he didn’t teach the way she thought teachers should. Sam did and didn’t get him. Meltzer loved Sam and understood immediately the pressures he was under as the high-achieving, multi-talented and popular African American male he was. But Meltzer didn’t cut Sam any slack either. In some ways, Meltzer might’ve been harder on him than most of our teachers because Meltzer wanted Sam to stretch himself, intellectually and otherwise.

As for me, I had eyes “like rakes, raking through leaves to find jewels, and whenever you did find a jewel, your eyes, they lit up, they sparkled, And you didn’t really care if anybody else got it or not, but nevertheless you did look to your right and glanced . . . you was too busy absorbing and synthesizing . . . but you never dared to be spirited enough to form a coalition of persons who were like-minded,” Meltzer told me one day. I loved his stories, and I loved that Meltzer was forcing me to think differently about history, about learning.

The man wanted all of us to stretch as he pushed us, reached us in our zones of discomfort. Meltzer was also attempting to burst our arrogance-filled bubbles of years of Humanities programming. We may’ve been the “cream of the crop” at MVHS, but there were others, many others, with our gifts and skills whom we’d have to compete with one day, and soon, as we all planned to go to elite colleges. We needed to be prepared for the shock to come. He was giving us something we weren’t getting from our other teachers — tough love in a safe space.

Meltzer was especially tough on all of us as writers. I honestly hadn’t felt challenged by any of my teachers to improve my writing since sixth grade. Since the four-page term paper I’d typed up for “Demon Travel’s” eighth-grade social studies class, I hadn’t written anything longer than the standard five-paragraph exam essay since my first days in Humanities. Counting my Johann Sebastian Bach paper for Zini’s class the year before — it was six handwritten pages — was nuts, since all I did was paraphrase *World Book Encyclopedia* and our textbook and cite some sources. Big deal. Meltzer wanted all of us to

“Come to the point at once!” His “onccccceeee” would hang in the air, as if defying gravity, which at the time I thought he was asking us to do.

I took Meltzer’s charge literally at first, writing one or one-and-a-half-page essays on our first exams during the year. My essays, though, were far shorter than they should’ve been. I didn’t ask Meltzer what he meant exactly by “coming to the point at once,” but I gradually figured it out. Like most folks, I wrote the way I spoke, as if I was telling a story to a friend or co-worker. Meltzer wanted us to state our basic, stripped-down answer to an essay question with the exactness of all those *New York Times* headlines he would read from and quote in class. “Come to the point at once!” was a mantra that would do much us good in writing essays for the AP American History exam, in our college courses, and in communicating with the real world.

Meltzer’s safe space extended beyond our academic needs. He was the first teach I had since before Humanities who asked me if things at home were all right. He was the first to ask me about how poor my family was. And he was the first teacher ever to ask if I had a girlfriend. Needless to say, those questions were unexpected. Yet through those questions, Meltzer had begun to crack my hard wall of separation between school and family. Meltzer had done something invaluable for me. He convinced me through his teaching ways that I could trust others, even my teachers.

To make history as real as possible to us, Meltzer took us out of the classroom. In October we — meaning our AP class and folks from Meltzer’s Government class — went to Albany to meet our state representative and to learn a bit about the history of New York State government. We also made a stop to visit the FDR mansion in Hyde Park. The trip to Albany was itself a three-and-a-half hour school bus ride.

Besides the standard exaggerated bouncing up and down we did whenever the bus hit a bump, somewhere along I-87 North, there were a couple of things to note. It was my first time outside the New York metro area since ‘78, when Darren, Mom, my soon-to-be-stepfather and I went to Amish country in Pennsylvania. The Roosevelt’s master bedroom and “king-sized” bed was much smaller than I thought. FDR and Eleanor both looked pretty tall to me in their pictures and in those ‘30s newsreels. The pop band a-ha had climbed to the top of the Top-40 pop charts with “Take on Me” a few days before.

A-ha? Suzanne had a brand-new, blue-gray, \$150 Aiwa Walkman with a state-of-the-art design and stereo system, including Dolby noise reduction and equalizer controls.

The entire trip to Albany and Hyde Park and back she played a-ha's *Hunting High and Low* album nonstop on the bus. After hearing the beginning of the song for what seemed like the 117th time, I chimed in, and Suzanne briefly sang out loud with me: "Talking away, I don't know what I'm to say..." I'd heard the lead singer's "TAAAAAKKKKEEE!" without the need for an interpreter so many times already, since Suzanne sat a row or two behind me. So me being me, during the return trip I attempted to hit the same high falsetto note to see if I could compete with a Norwegian pop star.

As soon as I hit the note for "TAAAAAKKKKEEE!" — badly, as it was in my balls-strangled version of high falsetto — the window in the row behind me on my right shattered and scattered glass all around Dahlia and Allison's seats. Dahlia was closest to the window, and she was unhurt, but we had to stop for about ten minutes. Everyone was laughing this nervous, "this-is-funny-but . . ." laugh, like audience members laughing at a Richard Pryor joke. Laurell, Sam, Wendy, JD and André all but gave me a sarcastic standing ovation. After all, it turned out that no rocks or stones were found on the bus, and there wasn't a sign of a sniper anywhere. All we could think was that I'd dialed up the correct frequency and shattered a glass window that may've been weak already from everyday wear and tear. I thought it was amazing to generate that kind of power with my voice. Even if it meant that I'd get flack for it.

I had already made the decision to raise my academic game another level, to bring my "A" game to my classes by the time December '85 rolled around. I found myself averaging a C in English, a C+ in Physics, a B+ in AP History, and a B in Pascal. In Butler's Pre-Calc class I had an A, but only because Butler gave us one test every semester, a test based on math problems already in our textbook. Between my jaded view of school and my time spent building up my skills for a possible baseball tryout, I'd neglected my courses. I'd forget about assignment due dates and when our next exams were. I nearly failed a Physics test early on simply because I forgot we had one. For Ms. Warns' class, we had a presentation assignment that I didn't even remember existed. The first day of presentations came, and she designated me as the first presenter. I was caught completely off-guard. I didn't have time to whip up something, so I did the only thing I could think of. I balled up a piece of paper like I normally did a few times a day, stood up and walked to the front of the classroom. I took a shot at the garbage can and missed like I usually did, this time

deliberately, and proceeded to ramble for a couple of minutes about how to recover from mistakes when you make them or something. Ms. Warns was so cross with me. “I’m very disappointed in you. You obviously didn’t prepare at all for your assignment,” she said in her Brooklyn accent. She gave me a D for my presentation, adding “and you should feel lucky to get that.” I learned later that Ms. Warns had given Sam an extension on his presentation. I should’ve at least been smart enough to ask for one myself.

That’s the way the year had gone through the end of November. I had no idea why I was as distracted as I was. I watched my Giants play football virtually every Sunday, but that didn’t interfere with my studies. I did the same chores and tasks at 616 that I’d been doing since the end of ninth grade. Why was I having trouble now? The only thing I could think of was the fact that I had no mental space at home to study or to go into photographic memorization mode. It was the secret to most of the academic success I had in Humanities. I used the energies I could generate through my imagination to study without actually studying. Through a visual cue, like Phil Simms throwing a touchdown pass on a crossing route or post pattern to Mark Bavaro, I could remember how to solve a specific function or recall a series of “if-then” statements for a Pascal program. Hearing Madonna’s “Crazy For You” – a terrible song really – would help me remember a line from a book or poem that I could quote from later on an English test. Some of this would even happen in my sleep.

Apparently I’d been doing this for years without realizing it. Meltzer’s story about the London news reporters with the photographic memories appealed to me because it reminded me of me. I knew that my memory wasn’t perfectly photographic. But I also knew that I could absorb specific bits of information without the need to spend hours or even minutes memorizing — it often only took a few seconds under the right set of circumstances. During Thanksgiving Break I decided that what I needed more than anything else was to find space at home, in my head, in my sleep, and in Mount Vernon to engage my imagination in order to study as quickly and efficiently as possible.

The results of my new knowledge around my strengths and how to use them were immediate. I started building a great deal of momentum. From about the middle of December through the end of February, I scored an A or a high B on almost every assignment or test. Every time I studied was like sitting behind center, taking the snap, dropping back to pass and surveying the field, throwing to the right receiver and picking

up the first down or scoring a touchdown. My lowest grade during that stretch was an 84 on a Physics exam. In the meantime, I started scoring in the 90s consistently in Meltzer's class as my essay answers became longer and longer, with much more analysis than before. I was tearing up Warns' reading assignments, from Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* to Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. I found reading fun again and another way to engage my imagination, to put myself in the time period these books covered. Amazingly, my Physics and Pascal grades rose as well. Right after holiday break, we had a big Physics midterm, and I scored a 94 on it. I almost couldn't believe it. Pascal was now a place where I could get A's using Radio Shack "Trash 80s," as we used to call them. The TRS 80 was a computer that had about as much horsepower as a Yugo but was even slower. Still, I wrote a successful three-hundred line program in Pascal that earned me a 92 from Ms. Walters, a gruff but generally easy-to-get-along-with teacher. It might've been only the first or second assignment I gotten an A on in her class.

There were two songs that kept my efforts in and out of the classroom in overdrive. Simple Minds' "Alive and Kicking" almost became my mantra in the months that straddled '85 and '86. Every time I heard that song, especially the album version, was like going on a game-winning touchdown drive at the end of the fourth quarter. Studying was time to throw screen passes or seven-yard slants, to run the ball on a power sweep or on a draw play. It was methodical, the drums and synthesizers, and put me in a determined, methodical mood as I prepared for a test. The other and easily most significant music for me was Mr. Mister's "Kyrie." Short for "Kyrie Eleison" Latin/Greek for "Lord have mercy," it became my go-to song for every big academic play I needed to make for the rest of the year, even for the rest of high school. "Kyrie" combined all of the elements that my vivid imagination relied on. My faith in The One, my hope for a better future, lyrics that made me think, music that evoked a big play, like throwing it deep and completing it for a game-changing score. It was as methodical as "Alive and Kicking," but the bigger bass guitar and heavier synthesizer as the background gave me the feeling that God's grace was with me wherever I went and whatever I did. It was a true underdog's song.

I earned my first grade below a B at the beginning of March, a 79 on a Physics test. It took about a week for me to regroup after my failed attempt to make the varsity baseball team. With that out of the way, I knew what I had to do now to finish the rest of the year strong. Just in time, the pop music authorities released two songs that would help me

regroup for the stretch run. Mike + The Mechanics' "All I Need is a Miracle" and Level 42's "Something About You" would enhance my collection of imagination tunes.

I now owned a twenty-dollar Walkman, my passport to another world, a world where I could make anything happen and no one could hurt me. Taking the Subway to go to The Wiz or Crazy Eddie's or Tower Records was as much a part of mine and Darren's Saturday ritual as our tracking down of Jimme. I no longer had to wait for WPLJ or Z-100 or WBLS to play the music I wanted to hear. I could buy a cassette tape for as little as six dollars. In the month after I'd bought my Walkman I'd gone out and bought more than twenty tapes. Whitney Houston, Simple Minds, Phil Collins, Sting, The Police, Mr. Mister, Mike + The Mechanics, Tears for Fears, even Sade. All were welcome who could contribute to my all-consuming effort at conquering my courses.

In the weeks before the AP American History exam, Meltzer practically locked us in his classroom, sweeping through nearly a century of American history in the month before the exam. We covered Reconstruction, industrialization and Woodrow Wilson, both World Wars, FDR and the Great Depression as if we were in a time machine. The last week before the exam was critical for everyone in the class, except for me, of course. God had created a mind and imagination such as mine for this moment, where analysis was as important as knowledge for this kind of exam. After school that week was one of Meltzer ordering pizza and buying sodas for us so that we could grasp how to tackle the AP exam using his methods. I stayed because I loved Meltzer's stories and because of five days of free food.

Speaking of food, one of the stories Meltzer told me that week was about hunger in all its manifestations. Meltzer said that "the most serious problem" he had "in all his years of teaching" was "hunger." Though I was baffled by exactly what he meant, I also knew that he was correct. It clicked for me how physical hunger can determine the level of intellectual and imaginative hunger you can have as a student or in life. Tenth and eleventh grade had already served as a good example of it.

Watching my classmates sweat it out while asking Meltzer every conceivable question on American history, especially the parts he didn't cover, was the most entertaining part of the week. They grilled him to the point where Meltzer had walked them through the exam point-by-point. All while telling us "Not to worry, kiddos. You're all gonna do just fine!" Laurell and Denise were probably the most anxious and most

diligent in their inquisition of Meltzer. They had all but outlined Morison and Commager page by page to get answers to issues and events they didn't understand. We covered the women's suffrage movement, immigration, the Great Depression and the New Deal, the League of Nations, the Cold War and McCarthyism, and so many other events that I was tired just listening to them ask. All this time with Meltzer and they still didn't fully comprehend Meltzer's master plan for preparing us for the exam.

Doing well wasn't so much about knowing what happened and when. It was more about interpreting what happened, why it happened and what it meant for the people affected. History for me and Meltzer was about the good, bad, and ugly of human relations and interactions that led to the events we studied, not the events themselves. I knew that Laurell, Denise, and others would do well. I also knew that they wouldn't come away having learned anything of significance around history or have the motivation necessary to think critically about it.

Most of all, I knew that this was the most significant exam I'd take before college, one certainly more reflective of my skills than Regents exams or the SAT. Yet I was absolutely as relaxed as I could be. My only concern was making sure I had a good breakfast before taking the exam. The weekend before, I scored over a hundred dollars off Jimme, and after distributing the spoils to Darren and Mom, I still had fifty left. The night before the exam, I went to the store and deli and bought all my little morning snacks, yogurt included. I slept well that night, dreaming about the exam and how well I thought I'd do.

Tapes prepared and Walkman somewhat in working order, I walked to school the next morning fully charged and as well-fed as my boney butt could be. It was the thirteenth of May, a brisk and windy Tuesday. I made sure not to go into MVHS' library, our exam room for the morning, until about a minute before we were going to start. If I learned anything from my classmates, it was to be as calm and cool as a cup of ice. They still generally ran around acting all nervous and stressed before a major test, turning colors and breaking out in hives, which sometimes drove me nuts. Why couldn't they just chill? So my solution was to avoid their stress for as long as I could before coming into the room.

Once I sat down, I didn't even remember what the proctor or Meltzer had said. Once they said "Go," I hit the multiple choice section and just blew through it. The only

problem I had during the exam was understanding what the word “pluralism” meant. And when I saw the term “cultural pluralism,” I felt slightly more baffled. What I did in response was read the questions and answers to form context, which seemed to me to be around American society having groups of people from different races and parts of the world living in the same country. About fifteen or twenty of my one hundred bubble questions were on pluralism or cultural pluralism. I did wonder for a moment, “How come Meltzer didn’t talk about this last week?”

Then we began the essay portion of the exam. Two essays to write and we had forty-five minutes to write each one. The first one was also on the topic of pluralism. “This must be the word of the day,” I thought. It dawned on me that there might’ve been a relationship between these pluralism questions and the century anniversary of the Statue of Liberty’s opening on Liberty Island. The other essay, by comparison, was a piece of cake. By the time we finished they exam, I was tired but pretty happy with my performance. It was basketball season, and I felt like I’d been knocking down jumpers left and right in going after these questions, like Isiah Thomas or Bernard King. I looked within and knew I’d nailed the exam. I wouldn’t know by how much until sometime in July.

I looked at my classmates. They all seemed tired and bent out of shape by the exam. Some, like Laurell and JD, looked a little frustrated. I was a bit surprised. I knew that most of them had done well, and I assumed that Laurell and Sam had done at least as well as me. Yet they weren’t at all happy. Their moods varied from relieved to downright surly after the exam was over. Meltzer was happy for us all.

The aftermath of the AP exam was an upswing in my overall confidence. I took the momentum from the exam and applied it across the board. The rest of the year from that point was pretty much a blur of exams and working a new and steady job. I scored a 98 on the Social Studies Regents, an 89 on the Physics Regents, and an 88 on the English Regents. I pulled out a solid B in Pascal, and fell to an 84 overall in Higher Math. The high I had from the AP exam was so intoxicating that I hadn’t noticed the kind of year I was setting myself up for academically and socially in twelfth grade.

My first sign should’ve been Darren’s reaction to my AP score, which arrived in the mail just after the fourth of July. I scored my coveted 5, meaning that I had earned six college credits before choosing my school. I expected this score, but what I didn’t expect was how perfectly I performed. The College Board’s breakdown showed that I’d gotten

ninety-four out of one hundred multiple choice questions correct and that two of my three essays had received the highest possible score — I scored a 4 on one of the free-response essays. I wasn't just happy. It was like winning the lottery. I was in another world the rest of the day.

The next day I checked the top drawer of the beat-up old file cabinet Mom had put next to the doorway between the living room and the kitchen to see my score again. The sheet and the envelope it came in were gone. I was in shock for a moment, and then I got pissed. There was only one person who'd throw away something that important. I went back to our bedroom.

"Darren, what did you do with my AP score?," I said with the expectation of an answer.

"I don't know," he said in his usual Goofy (the Disney character) way.

After a couple of minutes of interrogation, he told the truth.

"Yeah, I threw it out," he said with a sad smile.

He admitted that he was jealous. I was angry, but not too much because I could call the College Board and get another copy sent to 616. It made me wonder though if anything of mine was really safe at home.

14. Baseball

Outside of the world of Meltzer, in which all things really did seem possible to all who believed, it was business as usual at school, at home, and in my world. My year slipped a bit in October and November as football and baseball provided distraction, which was why I had to refocus in early December. And not just because I spent my time watching TV. Richard P. — for me an almost unknown person — had invited me to practice with the varsity baseball team. He might've been in my gym class or friends with Suzanne. Richard P. was a senior and a star pitcher who'd been clocked throwing a ninety-mile-an-hour fastball — absolutely awesome! Of course I said “Yes” without thinking about my reality at home. I never owned a baseball glove, never played on any Little League team, and had only used a baseball bat during softball and gym class three times between seventh and eleventh grade. I had Jimme take us to Modell's Sporting Goods store in the city and bought a \$55 outfielder's glove.

I still needed to break it in, which would be even harder with the crooked ring and pinky fingers on my left hand. With Richard P. and the other members of the baseball team, some of the breaking-in happened pretty quickly. I went to three of their practices in October and saw the difference that the years of athletic experience I *didn't* have made in the case of the varsity players. Frank dived for a ball at his shortstop position on our indoor Astroturf practice field, caught it, got up, and gunned the ball to first base. His right arm had two purple rug burn marks on it. “There's no way I'd ever want to dive for a ball like that,” I thought. The next thing I knew I was out there with the team taking grounders at shortstop and catching balls at first base. We were practicing double-plays. One grounder came up on me faster than I expected. I got down for the ball, got it in my glove, but then it popped out as I rose up to throw it to second. The ball popped out and went right to Frank at second, who then threw to first, a real double-play. I got cheered and jeered at the same time.

My first-base experience was less memorable. I caught several Richard P. throws to first in holding-the-runner simulations. Every time I caught one of his balls I wanted to scream from the pain. I needed to get calluses on my left hand fast if I was going to hang with these guys!

Yet too much admiring and hanging around with jocks was only part of my problem at school in October and November '85. To say that my teachers were mediocre and were a major part of my troubles in the early going would be like saying that Biz Markie is *only* a mediocre rapper. My Higher Math (Pre-Calc) class might as well have been a study hall with function formulas. Around the end of October I began to notice what I thought was a strange every day occurrence. Andy Butler brought a can of the new Diet Coke to class every morning without fail. We met for class during fourth period, around eleven o'clock. Well, he never seemed like he was awake considering he was drinking Diet Coke in front of us at a particularly high energy point of the day. The other thing I noticed was that his can seemed to have the same dents in it day after day.

I spent about a week in Butler's class just figuring out the dents in his can. If his can had been a map, the dents would've been in the southeast corner, down and to the right of the red-brown Diet Coke logo (in the white area) and just above the aluminum gray bottom. When I mentioned what I'd seen to the seniors in my class, Adam, Anthony and Richard all thought that I was crazy at first. By mid-November, though, we'd figured out the dents and the truth.

On one of my after-school runs to C-Town in Pelham, I stopped at the deli down the street from 616. Butler was there buying three cases of beer for home. It was about 4:30, just ninety minutes after school had ended, and it wasn't even Friday.

"I'm going through a rough divorce," he said, before I could say anything. As if I really wanted to know. "I'm sorry," I said.

As far as my nose was concerned, Butler was getting refills. I'd solved the mystery, which included Butler's long disappearances from class for no apparent reason. I kind of wished I hadn't.

David Wolf was another character who was sometimes funny but otherwise sucked as a teacher. It would've been hard for me to know what Butler had been like as a teacher when he was happily married. Wolf was a mediocre teacher on his best days because he simply didn't care if we learned anything in his class. Of course that didn't make him much different from most of our other teachers. What made Wolf different was the fact that he went out of his way to embarrass students, as if the shock of being outed by him would somehow make us better.

Wayne was the best example of this. He was a senior in Wolf's other physics class. Now anyone who knew Wayne — which included almost all of the seniors in my class — understood that he was a lazy student. Still, upon walking into our eighth-period Physics class, Wolf was embarrassing Wayne by sharing with us the fact that he earned a 58 on his latest exam. Wayne was half-joking and half-begging for a passing grade. Wolf asked him if he was “ever going to pass a test this year?” Like the others who witnessed this episode, I laughed, but I also thought what Wolf had done was cruel, maybe much more than cruel.

Although he wouldn't talk about it openly, Wolf was also going through a break-up. Wolf's way of dealing with the trauma of his relationship's crash-and-burn was to take his anger out on us. He would get this disgusted look on his face if you couldn't give him the correct answer if he called on you or if your assignments weren't in on time and complete. And asking questions about Newton's Laws or the properties of perpetual motion were out of the question unless you liked having him torment you with comments about your intelligence versus his great knowledge of the sciences, like he was Isaac Newton himself.

Wolf was the only science teacher in the school who wore a lab coat, particularly ironic since we hardly did any experiments, and none of our physics experiments rose to the level of needing one. His thick black hair was always disheveled, his thick rimmed glasses too '70s in our '80s world. Wolf's belly gave his otherwise frail yet doughy body the look of someone who was pregnant with a litter of puppies. He'd take himself, lab coat and all, out into the hallway between periods, and randomly yell at students. It was as if he were high on something, or off his meds.

Mrs. Warns wasn't going through a divorce, at least not that year. What she was going through was her attempt to get our class to respect her as our teacher. Her lisp was the main issue, and while no one in our class made fun of her, they showed disdain for her in a number of more subtle ways. We debated in class once over the correct pronunciation of “water,” which may have come up because of Warns' very Brooklyn accent. She rightly responded to us, “So, how do each of you say ‘warder?’” One by one, each of us said “warder” or “warda” in our best New York-area accents. “None of you know how to say ‘warder’. . . . There's no ‘r’ in the middle of ‘water’. It's ‘water’,” she said, emphasizing the “t”, and pointed out that this is how the folks who invented the English language say the word. Warns said, “Everyone has an accent and everyone says the same words differently,” like the difference between how we say water in different parts of the Northeast.

Telling the truth became a habitual part of this class. Once, we had a discussion of our travels to different parts of the world. Wendy had been to jolly old England, JD all over Europe, and the rest of my classmates all over North America. Marianne had missed the first three weeks of tenth grade to spend time in Italy, and was interested in traveling to places like Spain and Mexico, as she was quickly learning Spanish to go with her virtually fluent Italian. When the class conversation turned to me, I admitted that I hadn't been out of New York State since '78, and had never left the country. Marianne's mouth dropped open, as if I'd admitted that I was a drug addict. Her eyes glared at me, letting me know that she remembered what I'd said the first day of seventh grade. I stared blankly back at Marianne, not even so much as shrugging my shoulders in response.

If Warns had earned my respect for the most part, she couldn't reach Sam, Suzanne and Laurell. Sam got Warns to give him more extensions on assignments than any teacher we had in common during Humanities. He brown-nosed her as if her A's were toilet paper. Suzanne saw Warns as one of her worst MVHS teachers, one who "hated coming to our school," she said about Warns with disgust. Laurell and her, though, would get into to it. Laurell simply didn't like her, I couldn't quite figure out why. One critical incident involved the only time I can remember Laurell receiving the lowest class grade for any assignment in any subject. It was an essay exam looking at James Baldwin's writings, a pretty bold assignment for a White teacher to give us. Warns had warned us after the last exam to underline book titles and put quotation marks around essays or we'd get twenty-five points taken off our grades. Laurell, unfortunately, was the only one who failed to follow these instructions, of which Warns had reminded us just before the exam.

Sure enough, Laurell's 92 became a 67. She protested, became angry with Warns, and walked out of class in tears. We walked with her to Meltzer's class, we being me, Dara, Denise, and Suzanne. It was our attempt to console her. Except I didn't really feel like giving Laurell emotional support at that moment. It wasn't as if she was going to fail the class or, God forbid, end up with a B, not for even one marking period. So her 5.6 GPA would drop maybe to a 5.5! Laurell herself wasn't a supportive person academically-speaking anyway. I had mixed feelings about Laurell's response, but I understood perfectly why Warns did it.

It was obvious to me that our teachers, mediocre or not, were struggling with the arrogance that had built up in many of us about our high levels of intelligence, our

academic successes and our bright futures. In different ways, all of our teachers were attempting to send us the message that success for us wasn't written in stone and that academic success didn't mean that we had the right to discard teachers as if they were outdated books. For me, the only person who reached me with that message without creating any feelings of ill-will was Meltzer.

And I didn't need that lesson anyway. I came home to that lesson every day. Every time I looked around our place at 616 and saw my stepfather laying on the living room floor in nothing but his graying, size-fifty-four, Fruit-of-the-Loom briefs watching Sade on BET late at night. Every time I saw Mom and my four younger siblings and Darren. Every Friday evening I walked the two miles from 616 to 149 South Tenth or East 241st and sometimes took the Subway to 20 West 64th to track Jimme down for some money. With every roach, every piece of aging, messed-up piece of furniture we had, and with every interruption of any train of thought I had about my future with "Donald, go to the store and get me . . ."

I was distracted again in March '86, this time by the prospect of trying out for the varsity baseball team. As much as I loved football and liked basketball, I really loved America's favorite pastime. Having worked out with the baseball team in the fall had given me the confidence to pursue the week-long process of elimination. Suzanne spent some time encouraging me, although I didn't doubt that she had doubts about me making the team. Suzanne was one of a number of classmates in Humanities who was also an athlete. She was on MVHS' swim team and was an excellent swimmer. This was in addition to the school newspaper, Meltzer's mock trial team, the National Honors Society and a thousand other things she was into. Oh yeah. Suzanne also had a boyfriend named Craig, a senior who was also on the swim team. Out of all of my classmates, the only person I knew who was busier was Sam, and that only because of band practice. Suzanne's day started around 5 am, with swimming at 5:30 or 6. As much as I thought that I couldn't do what she was doing, I was often up at 5:30 or 6 am myself, ready to start the day.

Despite her ambivalent encouragements, I went for baseball as hard as I could for the most part. The second week of March was to be four days of constant competition followed by frustration. The tryouts were all after school, from three to five o'clock, in the indoor practice facility for the baseball and track teams. We did calisthenics and stretching,

followed my more calisthenics and stretching, followed by defensive practice. Beyond the competition, the first thing I noticed was that out of the thirty-two of us, including the team, only four Blacks were a part of this entire process. All four of us were trying out. The team itself was all-White and virtually all-Italian. The coach was a fat Italian man in his late-thirties and not exactly the nicest guy in the world. If you made an error, even if you managed to work it out, he called you off the field immediately and tried someone else in that spot. None of us had much margin for error.

But I made two errors that week that stuck out for me. One was on Tuesday. The coaches took us outside to practice catching fly balls. I'd never practiced catching anything in the outfield, whether to run up on a ball or to back up, or even how to hold my glove. There was one hit directly to me, a line drive of a fly ball. It hit my glove fine, and then I allowed it to drop. As soon as I dropped the ball, the coach took me off the field.

My second error was on Wednesday, but it did more damage to *me*. We were doing infield drills, and they had me at shortstop. I must've fielded eight or ten balls while I was out there, backhanding balls, spinning and throwing to first pretty good. One ball hit to me took a hop right off my balls. I caught it in my glove and threw it to first before I fell down and grabbed myself. It took about forty-five seconds before I felt the full force of the pain, which went away just as quickly. There was certainly a lot of laughter around that, drowning out the fact that I still made the play. The coach just shook his head.

The last day of tryouts was spent in the batting cage. Each of us was supposed to take whacks at an eighty mile-an-hour ball coming from the ball machine. When my turn came up, I had a total of four balls to swing at in the simulator. I was already over-thinking the scenario before I got in the cage. My mind went to a situation in gym last year, to softball on a humid upper-80s day. Before we started the game, I took some practice swings with a gym mate throwing the softball overhand as hard as he could. I swung as hard as I could and hit the pitch just about a hundred yards. My arms and hands, though, were numb, and my crooked left fingers in a lot of pain. I'd conjured up my own downfall. I was scared to make full contact with the baseball. And, for the first three swings, I swung and missed, swung and barely tipped the ball, and swung and missed again. I thought to myself, "This is ridiculous. If I want any chance to make this team, I have to make contact." I slowed down the last pitch, swung and made contact, and it didn't hurt. I wished that I'd done that sooner.

There was only one other Black guy trying out by the fourth day, someone I didn't know, but was really athletic. He got in the cage and tore up the baseballs, making crisp, clean consistent contact with them. I knew he was a shoo-in after that. There was another kid, a kid I recognized from the neighborhood. It was the son of the pizza shop owner, the one whose pizzeria was just down the street from 616. This guy had missed all three days of tryouts, but was invited to batting practice on the fourth day. He too went in the batting cage and clobbered the baseball. At that point my heart sunk. I knew I wasn't going to make the team.

The coach posted the names of the guys who made the team the following week, with my name not on the list. I was disappointed. "He says that you're pretty good, but you're also a danger to yourself," Suzanne said with a bit of a giggle. I smiled, but I wasn't in a joking mood. Of the thirteen people who were on the team, twelve were White, and eleven of those twelve were Italian. The one token Black guy was easily the best athlete on the team, head and shoulders over most of last year's starters. And the kid, the one whose father owned the pizza shop near 616, the one who only showed up for tryouts on the fourth day, was among the guys on this year's team. I may or may not have been good enough to make the team. I just felt the Italian coaches had rigged the process, tainted it in some way to favor kids who were one of their own or played Little League with their nephew or second cousin. The experience left me with a bitter taste in my mouth. "How is this even fair?" I thought to myself as I looked at the list. "Mom really is right. You *do* have to be ten times better to be equal in this society." I knew that there was a track coach and a basketball coach still interested in me, but the racial thing stuck out. To recognize that baseball was an Italian's club while only Blacks played basketball and ran track, Whites did almost all the swimming and football was the only sport where the spirit of integration lived on really bothered me. I didn't want to play this game of race and sports at MVHS anymore.

My attentions turned to my end-of-the-year-drive for "5," and included my annual struggle with Fasulo over classes for the next year. I had to take Health, Humanities Art and Humanities Music next year. But I decided that the best way to avoid senioritis and make college less expensive was to take even more challenging classes. I told her I wanted to take AP Physics, AP Calculus, AP English, and Philosophy. "That's *really* challenging. Are

you sure you want to do this?," Fasulo said. She'd been wrong about my ability to rise to the challenge last year. "I could certainly do next year what I did this year," I thought.

15. Phyllis

Meltzer and baseball weren't all that helped make the last two-thirds of my junior year at MVHS worthwhile, or at least, eye-opening. Phyllis was probably the first person who noticed that puberty had transformed my body. Maybe it was the Christian conversion too, but I did notice that she attempted to talk to me more in and out of class. One day after school and after hanging around the building for a few extra minutes, I went to the bathroom. After going downstairs to leave by the side entrance, I bumped into Phyllis and her sister Claudia. They were both there in their obligatory denim skirts waiting for their mother or father to pick them up. Obligatory because it was either a religious thing or because it was one of their familial ticks — they *never* wore pants or jeans.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hey,” Phyllis said back. “Looks like you’re having delusions of grandeur.”

Phyllis was being coy and clever with me again, as she had been throughout tenth grade. For about three-quarters of a second I had no clue what she was talking about. Then it hit me.

“Oh, my zipper must be down,” I said. Phyllis and Claudia chuckled at my response. I managed a comeback without as much as a blush. What I didn't say was that the zipper on my ten-dollar, Taiwanese jeans was busted.

“See ya later,” I said, thinking, “at least I know *someone* finds me interesting.”

By the end of '85, I'd only been mildly interested in dating girls since the crush to end all crushes. But there were brief moments of attraction. A couple of months into living off the high of being a new Christian, I played around with being cool for one day. Mom lent me her black V-neck sweater and some gold chains, not all that different from clothes someone like LL Cool J would wear. I already had a pair of black dress slacks, added a pair of black shoes and went to school in those digs that day. All day long, I attracted attention, from Wendy and Phyllis in Trig to older girls like Leslie and Gabrielle to other girls I didn't even know by name. I was so uncomfortable that by the end of the day I had decided not to wear anything like that to MVHS again.

Not since Wendy had I had a crush that lasted more than a couple of days or beyond a nocturnal relief session. Besides a handful of nameless faces who I'd occasionally

see dressed to dream of in bed, the only crushes I had in the first part of eleventh grade were on two graduating seniors, Leslie and Gabrielle. They were friends, and Gabrielle only lived three blocks from 616, on Sheridan and near East Lincoln. So almost always, if I saw one I saw the other. Even superficially, it was easier to talk to them than it was to talk to most of my classmates, low-level crush or not. They both seemed to know what they wanted out of life and school, and weren't exactly afraid to express themselves.

It was funny. Leslie and Gabrielle never laughed at my music likes or dislikes. It was something that I was always keenly aware of, this need to listen to different kinds of music, to not be stuck on Doug E. Fresh, Grandmaster Flash, or Run-D.M.C., to always listen to Prince, Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam (with Full Force), to only listen to ABC, Simple Minds, or Billy Idol. I liked what I liked, and that was that. And it seemed like the only people in my life who understood this, even on the most peripheral level, were Leslie and Gabrielle.

Over time, music had become my best escape into myself, the only place where I allowed myself to express any emotion other than anger or sarcasm. After my twenty-four hour disappearance from 616, it became more important for me to listen to music every day than it was for me to try out for baseball or any other sport. When Darren and I washed clothes on Sunday mornings, I'd plug in the radio, tune it to WPLJ-FM and listen to Casey Kasem count down Billboard's Top 40 songs of the week. This almost weekly ritual had reached the point where I could completely lose myself in lyrics or the mood of a song.

I liked a lot of crap in those days of my renewed interest in music. And the last four months of '85 was a great period of some really good music and great schlock at the same time. I liked Mr. Mister, Tears for Fears, some Heart, Sting, Simple Minds, some Madonna or a-ha, and U2 even before I knew who U2 was. I also liked Kool In The Gang, Billy Ocean, Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam (with Full Force), Run-D.M.C., early Whitney Houston, some Freddy Jackson, Sade, and Luther. The problem was, I had trouble combining these divergent interests in music. Sade would make me feel sad. "Another woman out of my reach," I often thought. While I liked Run-D.M.C. (especially "My Adidas"), the lyrics were sometimes silly, and I couldn't be silly *all* the time. Kool In The Gang had gone from cool to wack in the last year or so. For me, most of the R&B from the mid-'80s was boring, romantic yet stiff. I wasn't feelin' it. Certainly the pop of '85 wasn't exactly full of

passion, pride, or pain. It often had the feel of folks working off a high in a recording studio.

But at least some of it was different. It was easier to listen to “Broken Wings” or Sting’s “If You Love Someone, Set Them Free” or Heart’s “What About Love” because my “wings” needed some mending, I wanted to be free of my family’s so-called love, and I wanted to know what love as an emotion really felt like. I needed inspiration on a weekly basis because of what I saw at home and in Humanities. R&B rarely provided that kind of fuel for my mind and spirit. Most of the pop from this period was almost completely soulless even with some help from R&B artists as backup singers and writers. So I found it in the lyrics, the liner notes, the pace of the music, the ability of a voice or synthesizer (as the case often was) to make a song soar. Given my situation, it was a no-brainer for me to choose lyrics like “take these broken wings and learn to fly again, learn to live so free . . .” over “rock . . . steady . . . steady rockin’ all night long . . .” in the mid-’80s.

I also needed to feel goofy, a bit silly at times because life for me had grown serious and overwhelming. Getting into college with a scholarship of some sort and surviving at 616 for another two years absorbed much of my time. R&B was a lot of things during its weak period in the mid-’80s, but it usually wasn’t silly (Prince’s “Raspberry Beret” is an exception). Pop was often silly. How else can you explain how popular Talking Heads, Cyndi Lauper, Starship and Thompson Twins were between ’83 and ’86 otherwise? I listened to this just to give myself the space to be weird, to act somewhere near my emotional age, where I was still a twelve or thirteen-year-old.

And I was a natural rooter for underdogs, whether in sports or music. Certainly Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, Lionel Richie, and Michael Jackson were all much more popular overall. I could relate to some big hits, like Springsteen’s “Born In The U.S.A.,” because I was truly “born down in a dead man’s town,” where “the first kick I took was when I hit the ground..” The diamonds in the coal fields that I listened to, though, were ones I really and truly wanted to see go all the way, if only for a week, and even if I didn’t feel that their music wasn’t particularly good. I felt a little sense of vindication when one of my silly or off-beat, or — dare I say it — White acts scored a number-one hit. It was my Black classmates who’d frequently tell me, mostly in their not-so-subtle “They’re wack!” ways, that I had somehow sold out to the other side. I had, I guess, if only because I got things out of the music of our times that R&B alone was incapable of providing. After

several years in a multicultural Humanities setting and years of working to escape my rough life, embracing music that wasn't "Black" became normal for me. I liked what I liked, and that was that.

I escaped deeper into music in November and December. Songs from my favorite artists at the time were topping the charts, and that reality helped build up a renewed sense of motivation for my current academic situation. I wasn't in danger of failing anything. Yet outside of AP History and Higher Math, my grades generally hovered between a B- and a C+. The Thanksgiving holiday and Mr. Mister's number one status gave me a sense of renewal going into December.

Then Cupid struck me in a way that I couldn't have explained if someone had put a gun to my head. It was the third of December, a cold and frosty Tuesday that would make someone think twice about going outside. It was after school, and I happened to be on my way to the library. I stopped home first to grab a bite to eat, to see if Mom wanted anything from the store after my time at the library, and to listen to some music. The last song I heard before walking out the door was Tears for Fears' "Head Over Heels," their third major hit in the US in '85. The hard tones of their synthesized piano were hypnotic for me. "Head Over Heels" reminded me of my own failed attempts to get past myself when it came to saying more than "Hi" to any woman or girl whom I thought interesting. Besides having a family that I saw as an embarrassment, I simply didn't have the tools of "cool" necessary to break through with any female. My voice usually cracked under the stress of not knowing what to say, and when it didn't crack, the slow catch in my voice made everything I said sound like it was deliberately at half-speed. My ineptitude also included my automatically taking anything a girl did say about liking me as if it were a sick and twisted joke. Like there was no way in the universe any female would want to spend time hanging out with me. Something like this had occurred just a month before. A group of tenth graders tried for a few minutes to set one of their friends up with me, and I automatically shut them down. I really didn't think they were serious.

That's what "Head Over Heels" had conjured up in my mind as I walked down East Lincoln toward Lorraine. For whatever reason my thoughts turned to Phyllis. I thought about her smile, her always-wearing-a-skirt style, her standing as a popular student at MVHS. She was always nice to me, always friendly, to the point of being coy about it. The brief flash of Phyllis' face and smile put a smile on my own as I started singing to "Head

Over Heels” out loud. “I wanted to be with you alone, and talk about the weather . . .” was coming out of my mouth in high falsetto as snow started to fall. My thoughts had turned to the cold, the snow flakes and the stark bareness of the wintry landscape as I reached the corner of East Lincoln and Darwood. I was singing “something happens and I’m head over heels . . . don’t break my heart, don’t take my heart, don’t, don’t, don’t throw it away.” Just as I was about to cross the street, a black two-door Mercury Topaz, circa ’84 or ’85, pulled up, with Phyllis’ mother driving and Phyllis in the front passenger seat. Phyllis’ sister Claudia was in the back. Phyllis mouthed a “Hi” and waved at the same time as the light turned green for their car. What I remember as they pulled away was the smile that she flashed me. It didn’t seem fake to me. It looked like an I-really-like-you kind of smile to me. I was caught completely off guard!

I’d seen many a classmate whiz by me in their cars or in their family’s car over the past few years. Few ever smiled, and most of the time those smiles were as fake as the meat in McDonald’s Chicken McNuggets. Phyllis had the perfect teeth and lips for a smile to begin with, the kind you could use in a Colgate commercial. So it was possible that her smile was photogenically fake. I really didn’t know one way or the other. I spent the rest of the walk to the library debating whether the smile was genuine or a nicety, what the smile meant for her, and how I felt about it. By the time I got to the library, I could only reach one conclusion. I liked Phyllis, and not in an “I like her but only as a friend way.” I liked the girl, simple as that. Those lips and that smile were worth at least a thousand kisses a day!

Whether it was a premonition or a predisposition to proportionate young women, I was wondering what happened and why. It had been nearly four years since the Wendy crush. Now I was infatuated with another mutual classmate? Why did I get a Phyllis thought just before I bumped into her? Was it destiny? Scientists said that these kinds of things are fairly common, yet they couldn’t explain it in any rational way. Why did “Head Over Heels” come on the radio just before I left the house? Why did it start snowing when it did? I wondered, too, would I have felt any different if The Smith’s “How Soon Is Now” — a punk rocker’s suicide or depression theme song — had been the song I heard on my way out the door? I had more questions than answers. Especially about how I could suddenly develop an attraction to someone I hadn’t seen any other way other than as a classmate for more than four years.

My biggest question, of course, was whether she liked me too, not the hows and whys of what occurred that afternoon. I didn't even know where to begin. At first I thought about asking Wendy about Phyllis. They'd been friends for a while. But I immediately decided against it. Wendy and Phyllis weren't spending as much time together as they had in ninth or tenth grade. Wendy was spending a lot of time with JD, and Phyllis' closest friend was April. April and Phyllis made for a formidably cute pair of fairly tall Black girls. Both were at least five-foot-seven, and everything they wore accentuated their long legs. Because Phyllis wore skirts all the time and we didn't have gym class together, I didn't know if her butt was just as cute as the rest of her. April didn't have much of a butt, but she did have some. They were together all of the time, so much so that I had little chance of having a conversation with her one-on-one as part of my reconnaissance to find out if Phyllis was attracted to me.

There weren't any better candidates. Kim, Rhonda, Heather, three Vanessa's, LaJuan, Kiam, Niecy, two Lisa's, Tomika, and so many others were among her acquaintances. None of them with the exception of maybe Heather would've known for sure if she was just being nice to me or if she actually saw me as boyfriend material. And I wasn't going to risk rejection and embarrassment by causing hilarious laughter in approaching one of her peers about this. There was also one significant piece of reality. I had only one class with Phyllis in eleventh grade, English with Ms. Warns. It was first period, not the greatest time of the day for me to engage in banter or to probe the possibility of her liking me. There was before school and after school, but that would only work if I deliberately bumped into her by accident. And lunch wouldn't work either. We both often got our lunch off-campus, especially her, since she lived a ten-minute walk from school.

I sighed, once again realizing that I was doing myself in before I'd even begun. I admitted to myself that I was scared of being rejected. The thought that someone like Phyllis could tell me that they didn't like me made me cringe. She had been so nice to me over the years, one of the few classmates to defend me at a time when no one else dared to. Phyllis was the only person who, day after day, said "Hi" to me like I was a normal human being and didn't laugh at me every time I did something goofy or stupid. Even with all that in the past, she seemed interested in me. I didn't and couldn't trust my intuition on this, because taking the wrong step here would've been costly. As much as I liked Phyllis, I needed irrefutable evidence of her infatuation with me.

With Phyllis, the conversation was almost always about music. “What’cha listening to *now?*,” she’d ask on a regular basis. If it was something she liked, she’d smile and sometimes ask to see the tape case for the liner notes. If it was outside her tastes, she’d *just* smile. One day I walked into English class, and Phyllis asked me about that song of the day, which happened to be Level 42’s “Something About You.” When I told her who it was, she started snapping her fingers to it. LaJuan, an on-and-off again classmate since third grade at Holmes, walked by as we were talked. “Are they Black?,” she asked. When I said “No,” LaJuan just shook her head and walked away. The difference between their reactions should’ve been my indication that Phyllis really liked me. But it wasn’t.

16. The F-Bomb

By the time I'd gotten a crush on Phyllis, my sexuality was no longer in question, although I'd never seriously questioned it before. My father, though, still had his doubts. I'd hardly seen Jimme most of the summer before my senior year, only coming over occasionally to see how he was doing or to bum a few bucks off of him. I saved enough money from my Technisort job to cover the cost of my three AP classes — \$159 to cover the \$53 fee for each of them. The College Board and MVHS didn't grant fee waivers for these courses. Even though I had put that money in Mom's checking account, I knew that with our money issues my savings were gone. So I found Jimme one Saturday morning near the end of August hanging out on the street corner and having drunk his fill.

His mood was especially foul that day, like his body odor. He refused to give me any money. "I don't give my money to no faggats!" Jimme yelled at me as he came walking down his block toward me. He'd seen me come out of the front yard of the house in which he rented a room. I wasn't in the mood for his crap. "I'm not a faggot and I'm not gay," I yelled back. When he got closer, I could see that he'd been out too long already. Jimme's clothes were a mess, and his face was in a twisted rage. He grabbed me by my right arm.

"Did you get yo' dict wet?," he asked as usual.

"Even if I did, I wouldn't tell *you*," I said.

"YOU'RE A FAGGAT," he yelled again.

I was so pissed with him that I said, "Forget it. I don't want your money. I'll find a job somewhere."

That was when the conversation got ugly.

"Ain't no one gonna giv' no faggat like you no job."

"You're a drunk and you've had a job for years," I said with bitter sarcasm.

"Watch who you talkin' to bo'. I da boss of the bosses. No one tell me what to do."

"Why should I? I'm a faggot, right? Faggots don't have to listen to alcoholics like you"

"I yo' father, an' if you wan' my money, you do what I say."

"I don't have to listen to you or anybody else!," I yelled

"Come here bo'!"

At that point, I came over and Jimme grabbed my arm. Then he tried to punch me in the face. I caught his right arm, twisted it away from me and toward him, and then pushed him away. The push sent him to the ground, tipsy as he was.

“I can’t believe you hit yo’ dad,” Jimme said, momentarily surprised.

“I didn’t hit you, I pushed you. Besides, you tried to hit me first. You’re not acting like much of a dad right now, anyway.”

I started to walk away, only to be hit in the head with folded up money, about \$200 in all. “Take it all, faggat! I don’ wan’ yo’ aroun’ here no more,” he said.

This time I grabbed him and stuffed half the money in his pocket. “Don’t you still have to eat, pay rent, get some more to drink?,” I said.

I kept all the rest because I figured I earned it that day. Darren, par for the course, just stood around and watched.

As I saw it, I was now a year away from college, and I was still in the streets dealing with my drunk ass father, my jealous and institutionalized older brother, a sham of a marriage at 616 and four younger siblings who were high on sugar all of the time. I’d done so much to change my life and yet almost everything in my life was the same. The only outlets I had were walking, sports, music and masturbation. Up to this point the only things that had kept my head from exploding were God and school. And it was a foregone conclusion in my mind that I was going to a good college in ’87, with me helping myself as much as God had when I first got saved. I was already resentful and bitter about my experience, but it had been tempered by the need for God in my life, by music that kept my occasional moodiness in better check, and by my singular goal of getting into college. As my senior year approached, I wondered how much longer I could maintain emotional control before I finally just lost myself in years of growing pain, like a volcano about to super-erupt.

Everyone around me was in some sort of dating mode. Wendy and JD had been dating for about fifteen months when the summer of ’86 hit. Although JD was on European travel again, I was sure that the two of them stayed in regular touch. Wendy and JD were in their own world most of the time, so much so that I doubt they noticed all of the daggers that people’s eyes were stabbing at the two of them. They weren’t the first two people I’d known involved in an interracial relationship, but they were the first two people *my age* who I knew were. If this had been ’82, and I didn’t have a crush on Phyllis, I

would've been suicidal. As it was, my attitude on the Wendy-JD thing was along the lines of "it figures." Not a negative thought, just a fact of a contrarian White guy with a beautiful and brilliant girl of ambiguous identity.

Sam, meanwhile, was supposedly dating some girl named Rhonda, a rising sophomore at Harvard. That seemed unbelievable to me, for reasons that included both distance and psychological disposition. My Mom had personality traits that fit Sam's tastes better than Rhonda's, in that she wasn't a total basket case, at least from all outward appearances. Allison occasionally went out on dates but wasn't with anyone steady yet. I wondered how long that would last. Even Dahlia was involved, with Jeff no less, one of the few guys at MVHS actually taller than me. Her relationship started with him at the end of the school year, and I didn't think she could look any happier. Dahlia, the quiet one, had snagged one of the few good-looking guys in the school. Suzanne had her Craig, Laurell had dated Leo, and so many of my most immediate classmates had at least dated a couple of times. I hadn't kissed a girl like she was my girlfriend in ten years. It was disappointing, to say the least, to witness others form more serious bonds when I was barely at the acquaintance level with most folks.

I thought for a bit about whether I should have applied for college in eleventh grade instead of now. Folks like Marcia, Janice and Nes graduated in June, a full year early to pursue marriage or college. I only needed one-quarter of one credit in order to graduate. I could've taken care of that with gym class in the summer or something! Instead I had signed up for a brutal senior year. Even I knew that taking three AP courses might be too much. Yet I also thought that even if it were, at least I'd know what to avoid taking when I did go to college. The other reason I wasn't thrilled about going through with my senior year was Phyllis. "I'm tired of being the odd man out," I thought.

I did hang out a little bit with Laurell the summer before our senior year. Her life was fully dedicated to finishing college before she started. Besides her job as an assistant with Dr. Mignone - a dentist and the husband to our former eighth-grade science teacher - she was working hard at home taking care of her mother and her younger sister Naomi. I know I had it hard at 616, but Laurell's life was comparable in a few ways. One thing that was definitely different was her ailing mother, who had reached the point where she was using a cane to walk. Her mother was maybe four or five years older than mine, but they looked twenty years apart, her disease as degenerative and progressive as it was. I knew why

Laurell worked as hard as she did, given her situation. It was something we had in common, becoming an adult long before our teenage years were over.

She was also blowing through our textbook for AP Physics. Laurell apparently borrowed a copy from Wolf at the end of the school year and was going through it during her spare moments. She was also working her way through Calculus, just so she could take the tougher version of the two AP Calculus exams. I thought she was crazy working as hard as she was to prepare for next year. I also realized that this was her secret, taking her time during the summers to study as if she was preparing for the state bar exam. Based on what I saw, I figured that Laurell was going to spend about two hundred hours studying for the two AP classes that summer. Unbelievable, absolutely unbelievable! I worried for her mental health, hoping that she wouldn't burn herself out trying to be the perfect student.

17. True Colors

All of this was on my mind as twelfth grade began in September '86. I tried to use the same formula that worked so well for me the year before, in fact, the formula that I'd used for most of Humanities. I would do well enough in my AP courses to pick up three or six more credits for college. I would hold my own in the other classes. And I'd continue to keep a low profile while applying to college. Almost nothing I planned worked out exactly the way I wanted. Except for my Mets and Giants winning the World Series and the Super Bowl three months apart, most of what I remember from my senior year at MVHS was a lot of stress and strife boiling over, with more than a small portion thrown in my direction. Unlike Cyndi Lauper's "True Colors," many of these thoughtless, missile-like comments were hardly "beautiful, like a rainbow." They were meant to make me miserable during my last days at MVHS.

I should've been happy, and I was for those brief moments both teams dominated the local airwaves and national headlines. The problem was that I'd become restless about my life and world again. My loneliness was obvious to me and bothered me like an internal itch that I couldn't possibly scratch. I couldn't change it if I wanted to, and I *did* want to. My need to escape my world took ever increasing amounts of time and energy, as I went on more late night, weekend, and early morning walks, found more imaginative ways to jack off, and spent more time daydreaming than I had in the past couple of years. Even new albums from Steve Winwood, Anita Baker, Toto, Genesis and Janet Jackson didn't have the same kick as the pop and occasional R&B from '84 or '85. It'd been nearly five and a half years since I had a friend I could trust and talk to about what was going on with me. Sure there were classmates like Laurell, Allison, Dahlia, and to a lesser extent, Denise, Wendy, Dara, Gina, Kim and Suzanne who I talked to from time to time. But they were deep into their own lives, cliques, friends and boyfriends and, for the most part, were oblivious to everyone outside their immediate circle. Forget about Sam, JD, Joe, Danny or any other male classmates. I was too weird for them, too much of a loner and too uncool to be bothered with other than on a superficial level. For others who were in Humanities but weren't always in my classes, like Gordon, Guy, Ward, Obitaye, Mandume, Sean and Jamie, I wasn't one of them because I talked too slow and "too proper" — read not "Black"

enough here. I was really, truly alone outside of 616, even though I was literally surrounded by classmates and acquaintances the last year before college.

I wasn't a kid in many respects, though I would've preferred to have been one from time to time. Like when Mom decided to sit down with me to explain sex. It was a few weeks before my seventeenth birthday. I guess she somehow thought that I'd be dumb enough to do what she and Maurice had done, to have babies when the money to care of them didn't exist. "If you're gonna have sex, you should use a condom," Mom said. It was the only piece of advice she ever gave me on the subject, and she seemed weirded out just telling me that. "I won't," I said as sarcastically as I could. Mom, as usual, didn't pick up on the fact that when it came to relationships and sex, I held her in contempt. "What possible advice could she give me that would make any sense?" I muttered to myself as went on another store run.

About a month earlier, I was looking for some of my old school notes in one of the hallway closets next to our bathroom late one night. The upper shelf at the very top of the closet had something blocking it. When I yanked on what felt like a cord, I pulled a bunch of stuff down on me and on the jackets hanging up there. What I found myself holding were a bunch of porn magazines. *Hustler*, *Penthouse* and *Players* - the only major Black adult magazine - had all fallen into my hands. I went into the bathroom and spent the next hour or so looking through them, noticing the naked details of the women in them and feeling both disgusted and in awe at the same time. I put the magazines back where they came from, thinking "So *that's* what *he* does late at night."

For the next couple of months, I'd occasionally sneak into the closet and grab some of Maurice's stash, usually to look at, for I already had a masturbation routine. Airbrushed or not, the women in these magazines looked a hundred times better than almost all of the girls I saw at school every day. Then one day I found that several of the magazines had centerfolds with a wet spot on them. I was thoroughly disgusted. Maurice didn't even have the decency to wipe his magazines down!

As if my sudden turn to porn wasn't conflicting enough, Jimme got into the act of "making me a man." A month before turning seventeen, me and Darren went through our usual Friday evening routine of tracking him down, only to find that he was already home. We went upstairs to his attic room, and there she was, a prostitute not much older than me.

She looked like someone I remembered seeing at MVHS a year or two ago. I couldn't remember if she graduated.

“Man, I got a girl fo' you! Look at dis bit'! Dis yo' chance to git yo' dict wet!” Jimme said excitedly.

I looked just long enough to get angry. I walked out of his room, embarrassed, asked for fifty dollars, which he gave me, and started to leave.

“What I s'posed to do wit' her? I paid her fitty dollas,” Jimme said.

“Then *you* sleep with her!,” I yelled.

“You're A FAGGAT!,” he yelled over and over again as we walked down the stairs to leave.

Jimme didn't even bother to offer Darren his rented pleasures. I assumed that Jimme went ahead and got his money's worth. “Maybe I should've gotten it over with,” I thought. “Who'd it hurt if I'd gotten laid for the first time at Jimme's?” The bottom line was that I was scared, scared of disease, especially AIDS, and scared that I'd get someone pregnant. With our family's luck, I'd bust a condom and end up getting a girl pregnant on the first try.

If anything, the only young woman I had on my mind was Phyllis, and I already had elevated her from a sexual being to an idealized person on my pedestal. For whatever reason, I couldn't reconcile how I felt for her with the need to jackoff to other women at least once a week. Her interest level in me had declined during our senior year, so much so that by the time Jimme had introduced me to his hooker, I thought of and sighed for Phyllis less and less.

There were other minor interests that I'd bump into on occasion throughout my last year, including Tomika. I didn't know much about her before, just that she was popular and guys fell all over themselves to holla at her. She was a classic redbone, tall, slender, pretty with that “good hair” that Mom's generation talked about all the time. I seldom talked to Tomika even though she frequently tried to talk to me and asked what I was up to after school. I figured that I was mistaken, that someone as popular as Tomika couldn't be interested in me. Or worse, that she was part of a game to get me interested in her, only to then crush me emotionally. Either way, I wasn't falling for it. Besides, Tomika didn't seem at all interested in me, just my status within the school as the second-highest ranking Black male nerd.

Home life was changing in ways that I hadn't completely understood just as the reality of being overwhelmed was sinking in. My youngest brother Eri was two and a half years old, and constantly acting out. He broke the only thing that had survived the fights between Mom and Maurice, a full-length mirror in the master bedroom, just because he didn't get his way. Yiscoc was in kindergarten and being moved into Special Education — he didn't know his ABC's and was acting out in class. The folks at Holmes School labeled him "emotionally mentally retarded" within the first semester of '86, with an IQ in the mid-80s. My brother Maurice was already in second-grade Special Ed, labeled as mildly mentally retarded with an IQ of 78. I looked at Sarai and Eri and hoped that Special Ed wasn't in their futures, too. "How could this happen?," I thought one day after I picked up Maurice and Yiscoc from school. I blamed Mom, my stepfather and the school district. Years of chaos and lack of food must've had some impact on my younger siblings. Putting them in Special Ed at five or six years old seemed rash, a cruel punishment for kids barely old enough to understand what was happening around them. I refused to believe that any of them were actually retarded. Certainly life at 616 had stunted their mental development. Retarded? Sure, if by that they meant Mom and stepfather never read stories to them, took them places to learn about the world, or even took them to the park to play. That role usually fell on my shoulders.

I was caught between serving as their babysitter, nurturer, semi-parent, older brother, laundry man, cook, and grocery shopper. I gave them baths, took them outside when my schedule and the weather allowed, played games with and music for them, and kept them out of Mom's hair when she was too tired to deal. I helped with potty-training for Sarai and Eri, went shopping for their clothes with Mom on The Avenue, sometimes took them to school or picked them up. I was an au pair without a paycheck or fringe benefits. I often said to Laurell that "I'm John Vanbiesbrouck" at home, the besieged goaltender of the New York Rangers, who in those days played with a team that played mediocre defense and couldn't score unless they were down two goals. "I made forty-two saves today" or "Glove save and a beauty!" would be the things I'd say to her when she asked me about the goings-on at 616.

The reason Laurell, among other classmates, even knew to ask me was because my constant walks and errands were no longer anonymous ones. By our senior year, Laurell, Suzanne, JD, Joe, Danny, had cars or had access to one. They drove often enough to see me

walking up the street with the laundry cart on Sundays or with groceries during the week or out with my younger siblings at other times. I couldn't avoid my 616 life and Humanities life coming together the way I could a few years ago. During our junior and senior years, Laurell, Suzanne, Joe and Danny all gave me rides home, and I'd usually ride shotgun with JD and Wendy when we went off campus for lunch. So in those non-school conversations, the reality of being more than just an older sibling became more obvious as it became more demanding. The fact that no one really knew what to say in those rare moments of revelation said to me that I might've made the right decision not to tell my classmates about the abuse of four years before.

My stepfather Maurice wasn't around for much of my senior year. Tired of poor-paying security guard work, he decided to go to a truck driving school outside of Allentown, Pennsylvania. He was in and out of 616 for nearly four months, which was good considering my need for space. That didn't mean that we didn't have run-ins when he was around. We had a snow-storm after his time at his truck driving school, one that buried his car. He demanded that me and Darren dig his car out. I didn't want to do it. It wasn't my car, and I sure as heck hadn't been in it, even for a ride to the store. He'd bought this late-'70s model green Cadillac Coupe de Ville the previous spring and never offered me or Darren the opportunity to sit in it. Not that I would've accepted anyway. Whatever I said and however I said it, Maurice said, "Take that base out ya' voice, boy, 'fore I cave your chest in!" in response. He said that a lot, as if I was still supposed to sound like a kid.

I also had two run-ins with my high school principal in April '87, a couple of months before I graduated from MVHS. It was a day in which I managed to escape Wolf's AP Physics class and was awarded a small college scholarship. I was about to find out how quickly life can turn full circle.

That morning, I already had survived one confrontation with our wonderful principal, Richard Capozzola, with emphasis on the syllable "Capo." I was standing outside the school waiting for the doors to open to start the day, like I had for the past four years. I had my Walkman on as usual, when Capozzola walked up to me and demanded that I turn it off and take it off.

"No, I don't have to do that," I said.

"What did you say?," the balding, rug-wearing runt said to me in response.

“I’m well within my rights. I have headphones, which is all that sign requires,” I said, pointing at the various “No”s that MVHS prohibited on its grounds. A Walkman with headphones wasn’t on the list. I continued.

“The first bell hasn’t rung, and I’m outside of the school building, and you have no right to tell me to turn my Walkman off.”

“You and me better not cross paths anytime soon,” Capozzola said, slightly flustered by my barrage and turning pinker by the second, before walking through the front doors and then to his office.

“Capo” was the one who gave us such great encouragement four years ago in announcing that most of us wouldn’t graduate and that him and his crack security team would make every effort to punish us for any misdeed. By ’86-’87, this included tardiness for getting from one class to another. We had five minutes to get from one class to another on a twenty-three acre, two-story building and campus. Because students would take more than five minutes to arrive to class, Capozzola, Carapella and company created a random “sweeps” policy. At random times each day, the security staff would lock down various parts of the school, temporarily trapping students who hadn’t made it to their next class on time. The guards would then “sweep” up the miscreants, who’d either end up in detention or, depending on their frequency of being caught by the guards, suspended from school.

That afternoon, I was called out of AP Physics in the middle of class by Division E principal Dr. Zollicoffer’s office, one of the few Blacks in authority at MVHS. He was a very tall and big man, at least six-four, and well over two hundred and forty pounds. He apparently had been aware of my existence for the past four years. In his gravelly, football-player-like voice, Zollicoffer said, “The Afro-Caribbean Club has decided to honor your achievements with dinner and a \$500 scholarship.” I sat there, completely shocked. I hadn’t heard of this club, barely knew who Zollicoffer was, and hadn’t been expecting anyone to give me a scholarship, at least not anyone from Mount Vernon. He spent the next few minutes chatting me up about how significant a person I was to the Black and Afro-Caribbean communities in Mount Vernon, my responsibility to “give back” to “my people and my community,” about where I was going to college and what my major would be, and so on. The period-ending bell had rung and students had been shuffling through the hallways by the time he gave me the chance to say “Thank you. Thank you very much!” and leave. I ran through the hallways and around the building to get my stuff from AP

Physics, and proceeded to the gym on the other side of the school when the second bell rang. At that point, I was about eighty feet from the gym, and trapped between two gates.

The guards escorted me to Capozzola's office, who immediately smirked at this turn of events. Even though this was my first offense, he wanted to make an example of me.

"I can make it so that you're not only suspended, you won't graduate with your class," Capozzola said.

"I was in Dr. Zollicoffer's office and on my way to gym when the sweep happened. You can ask him yourself," I said.

Reluctantly, Capozzola picked up the phone and called his Division E principal, whom I heard laughing on the other end of the phone at one point, as Zollicoffer explained that I'd been awarded a small scholarship.

"You can go, but I've got my eye on you now," he said, almost with a sigh, after he hung up the phone. I was smart enough not to say anything else in return. But my sarcastic smile probably said it all.

It was like no one could help themselves from showing their disdain for me or for people like me. It moved me to fight harder to insulate myself, to find ways to escape from all things MVHS as the school year drew to a close.

18. Parting Shots

My counselor Sylvia Fasulo was at the top of what I began to call in my mind the “Parting Shots” list. Like Capo, Jimme and a couple dozen other folks, Fasulo began to say things to me my senior year that seemed more geared toward putting me down than giving me any sense of encouragement. “There goes Donald, always daring to be different,” she said to me with a sarcastic sigh as I shuffled down the second-floor hall from AP English class early on in the school year. She had used that “daring to be different” phrase before, at the very beginning of twelfth grade. It referenced my refusal to join our chapter of the National Honor Society and my insistence on carrying three AP courses and applying to schools like Columbia, Yale and the University of Pittsburgh.

When it came to *helping* me work through my preparations for college, Fasulo was about as helpful as a redneck would be in giving me directions to my White girlfriend’s house on the White side of a Southern town — if I had one, of course. It’d be an exaggeration to say that Fasulo had it in for me. Maybe. Yet she wasn’t exactly helping me with good advice about the quality of the schools I wanted to apply to, whether they had good history or computer science departments, or whether the schools had more than a handful of Blacks attending. These were the questions I wanted her to help me answer. I did almost all of that research myself.

Fasulo emphasized “safety schools” over and over again, as if I didn’t stand a chance in heaven of measuring up with the more selective schools. “You need to pick a safety school,” she’d say. Or “SUNY Buffalo’s a good safety school,” she said a fair number of times. Per her constant advice on this, I wasted an application and applied there. But not without insisting that Columbia, Yale, and Pitt would stay on my application list. Pitt, of course, was the one school that didn’t fit and the one that Fasulo shook her head about the most. “They’re *out of state!*,” she said to me in a bit of exasperation about my choices. I explained that the University of Pittsburgh’s out-of-state tuition was actually less than the in-state tuition of any of the New York State schools, and by a wide margin. Not able to resist, Fasulo responded, “There you go again, daring to be different,” adding a frustrated chuckle. Because of my research, I also ended up applying to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Rochester Institute of Technology, the University of Rochester and Hobart &

William Smith Colleges. Five schools in Upstate New York, two Ivy Leagues, and Pitt. No wonder Fasulo was confused!

Fasulo was condescending, demeaning and chain-smoked up my clothes for my troubles. Most of all, I hated having to reveal things about myself to her that I otherwise wouldn't have shared. Like my family's financial situation. Fasulo became only the second person I told that we were on welfare while I was in high school, that Jimme and Mom had divorced and that he hadn't made a child support payment since '78. I had to talk to her about my role in my family as acting first-born child and my responsibilities. The only thing more humiliating would've been revealing my secret crush on Wendy from four years before.

Of all the former teachers I decided to ask for a letter of recommendation, I went to Andy Butler! How stupid was that? What he wrote was eighty-four words of qualified support of my pursuit of postsecondary education. I was "a good student" when I "worked hard," but I could also become "distracted sometimes." I knew I probably should've asked someone else — almost anyone else — for a letter. Cuglietto, Flanagan and Warns would've been better choices. Heck, Zini would've been a better choice! Even some of my senior-year teachers would've done better by me. I just didn't trust anyone who practiced "tough love" like Cuglietto, put on airs like Flanagan, or compared me to Sam or any other student like Warns did. So I went with Butler's lousy letter, figuring that Meltzer's would at least tip the balance.

And he did, he really did. Meltzer helped out in numerous ways, more than making up for Fasulo and Butler. He helped me get over some of my embarrassment as I wrote my college essays about my life as the adult teenager at 616. I needed to write this type of essay, since I had some explaining to do about my lack of extracurricular activities. Meltzer helped me interpret the multi-page, green-and-white financial sheet that came from a line printer, one that I picked up from the local welfare office. It outlined Mom's income between '83 and '86. We figured out that Mom's average income was \$16,600 per year as a welfare recipient. Meltzer also set up an interview with a Columbia University alum living in the Wykagyl section of New Rochelle, a rich neighborhood full of small mansions and near a professional-level golf course and country club. The pompous fool seemed as interested in intimidating me with his soliloquy about Columbia's great traditions as he was in helping me get in. He never asked why someone like me would want to attend. I

guess he thought that, “of course this Black boy would want to go to an Ivy League school like Columbia,” with his ridiculous baritone voice banging on my eardrums. “Why do I have to go through this to get into college?” I thought.

What Meltzer did that probably helped me most was to bolster my confidence in the college application process. His letter of recommendation was six pages of unrestrained praise. He used so many superlatives to describe my academic success and college potential that I thought that I was the great Dwight Gooden by the time I finished reading it. I was “a great kid,” a “diamond in the rough,” hard-working,” a “critical thinker,” the “best student I ever had,” an “intellectual,” smart “beyond belief,” and, well, you get the picture. It made me laugh and blush over and over again after I first read it. I said to Meltzer the next day, “You know more about me than I know about myself.” He just laughed and laughed about that.

My confidence needed all of the bolstering it could get. Not that anyone other than Meltzer really noticed. To the casual eye, everything should’ve been great. A couple of weeks into the school year, MVHS released our class rankings. Out of the 545 students eligible to graduate as part of the Class of ’87, I was ranked fourteenth with a 3.83 average. Fourteenth! I understood that this was pretty good, but I was also disappointed that I hadn’t cracked the top ten. Laurell, of course, was ranked first, our valedictorian with an unearthly 5.45 GPA in a class of 545, an interesting symmetry. Sam was second with a 5.17, followed by Dahlia, Suzanne, Allison and Denise with GPAs between a 4.7 and a 4.4. Other notables ahead of me included Dara, JD, Joe, and Wendy. Joy G., a junior graduating a year early, was ranked eighth or ninth. In fact, the top twelve students in our class all had GPAs above a 4.0, all because of our weighted Level 0 and Level 1 courses. Wendy finished just ahead of me, thirteenth in our rankings, something I saw as ironic. I was fine with the fact that my junior-year performance had propelled me into the top three percent of my class. Still, I hoped and wished for more, and spent several late-night walks over the next few weeks second-guessing my work in tenth grade.

My classmates started to show their darker sides, some for the first time since the days of 7S. Danny came up to me after my AP Calculus class a couple of days after the rankings were posted. “The only reason *you’re* in the top twenty’s because of history!,” implying that I was an average student in all of my other subjects. Joshua chimed in a few days later, saying that “the only thing you can do with history is play Jeopardy.” I wasn’t

walking around school celebrating my good fortune. I chalked it up to the stress of years of academic competition, the boiling over of senioritis and the rage associated with college preparations. The possibility that jealousy was involved didn't cross my mind until much later. I didn't think that anyone could be envious of my standing. I hadn't even cracked the top ten!

I wasn't the only one who was on the receiving end of this stress. Laurell and Sam had their own run-in after the rankings were posted. Laurell had said to Sam, "You'll have an easy time getting into to Harvard because you're Black." My guess was that she'd seen that terrible movie *Soul Man*, the one about a White guy who took tanning pills to get a scholarship meant for Black kids who couldn't afford to go to Harvard. I didn't see it either, but I did see Siskel and Ebert's not-so-nice review of it. Sam responded to Laurell, "The only reason you're ahead of me is because I *have* a life." Their friendship was pretty much over after that. These kinds of arguments were the reason why I'd chosen not to do extracurriculars like the yearbook committee.

Rankings weren't all that was at stake for us in our pursuit of postsecondary happiness. We learned right at the beginning of the school year that three of us — me, Laurell and Denise — all scored 5's on the AP American History exam. That meant that three of us had earned six college credits *a full year* before enrolling in any university. There were at least three others who scored a 4, guaranteeing them three college credits. Five others scored a 3, including Sam, considered a passing score by colleges and the College Board. It was the best an MVHS AP class had ever done on any AP exam, and should've been a crowning achievement for Meltzer and the school. Yet instead of praise or at least a "Congratulations," Meltzer was treated as if he'd shown up MVHS by his boss, Social Studies Department Chair Larry Smith, who snickered at me every time he saw me with Meltzer. Neither Prattella nor Capozzola saw fit to honor Meltzer or our class for our achievements. It was ironic, because MVHS won a Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence award from the US Department of Education a few months later, off the work of teachers like Meltzer, as well as the other Humanities students.

There were rumors that some of the White parents were unhappy with Meltzer's methods of teaching. What wasn't a rumor, though, was that Smith was looking for an excuse to take AP US History away from Meltzer, especially since it was so shocking that both White and Black students did equally well on the exam that year. For our part, our

cohort stopped talking to Meltzer altogether. Sure he was eccentric, even a bit strange and unorthodox as a teacher, but at least he cared. And by the way our scores turned out, he didn't deserve the cold shoulders he received from most of my classmates our senior year.

Our attentions turned toward our SATs. I knew I had to take mine again. My 1050 from last fall wouldn't cut it, not for Yale, and not for Columbia. Scholarship money was on the line as well, as the combination of my GPA, my AP score, and a higher SAT score would all but guarantee college acceptance and some academic scholarship money. So what little studying I did in September and early October was to go through Barron's SAT prep book and its sample exams. By the time of the test, I thought I had a chance at a 1200, which was what I set as a goal. There wasn't anything memorable about this day. I went through analogies and other useless sections of the Verbal section and struggled, as if I hadn't studied at all. It felt easier than last year, but not by much. The Math section seemed about the same.

In our AP Calculus and AP Physics classes the following month, we were all talking about our scores. Laurell and Sam were neck and neck again as best SAT test-takers. Laurell scored a 1360 and Sam scored a 1350. Dahlia and JD both scored 1280s, while Suzanne got a 1220. Even Josh scored in the 1200s, prompting him to say, "only an idiot would score under 1200." I assumed that the comment was directed at me, since Josh looked directly at me when he said it. Given that I only scored an 1120, I kept my mouth shut. Later I learned that most of my more entitled classmates had gone through an SAT test-prep course like Kaplan and Princeton Review.

So given my mild sense of disappointment and the pressure I felt in putting together my college applications, I was re-motivated to do well in my classes that year, right? No, not really. I spent a good portion of September and all of October being a diehard Mets and Giants fan. It was life and death for me, really. I watched or listened to every playoff game, to the point where I was listening to the National League Championship Series between the Mets and the Houston Astros in between classes on my Walkman. I felt it was more important to see someone — anyone, really — whom others had labeled as underdogs achieve the greatest prize in their profession. It felt like it was *me* out there in Shea Stadium hitting Mookie Wilson's ground ball that went under Boston Red Sox's Bill Buckner's glove at first base in Game 6 of the World Series, the Mets within

a strike of losing the whole thing. Or when Jesse Orosco struck out the last batter in the deciding Game 7, throwing his glove up in the air in euphoria.

It didn't help that my teachers were committed to working us harder than we probably had in all of our Humanities years. Rosemary Martino became one of my favorite teachers that year. But our AP English teacher wasn't a favorite of mine at the beginning of the year. She was immediately disappointed with us because we weren't particularly motivated to do the readings and the work. We started with Albert Camus' *The Fall*, a bit of swirling existential thinking about the nature of inhumanity in human nature. We moved on to Fyodor Dostoevsky's classic *Crime and Punishment*, a seven-hundred-page marathon read of humanity at its worst that took us from mid-October through early December. Martino's choices, though impressive in complexity, didn't exactly inspire.

AP Calculus was a tad worse for me. Butler's Higher Math did nothing, absolutely nothing, to prepare me for *any* Calculus. I might as well have been taking Algebra in second grade the way those first derivative equations looked to me on the blackboard that first week of the school year. Those equations could've been laughing at me, and I wouldn't have understood the giggles.

Yet nothing was as horrible for most of us than taking AP Physics. David Wolf was still having a bad time of it, and it seemed like it was his intent to make our year as miserable as possible. He taught the far more difficult AP Physics C version of this Physics course, involving mechanics, electricity and magnetism. It was the equivalent of second semester Physics right from the start, and most of us needed at least a semester of Calculus to keep up with him.

At first I saw this as a new challenge that I could take on and will myself through. But after the first two months of the year, it crossed my mind that struggling through this course wasn't worth it. The case in point was a big exam in mechanics during the third week in October. It involved the elaborate use of equations such as $F=ma$, $W=Fd$, $E_k=1/2mv^2$ — or the physical property of force is the mass of an object multiplied by its rate of acceleration, the physical property of work is force times the distance an object has moved, and kinetic energy as the relationship of an object's mass multiplied by an object's velocity squared. We were looking at Newton's laws, the motion of objects and the general energy they produced. Things like understanding wind drag and gravity, velocity and the physical properties of work, meters per second squared and foot-pounds, Joules and amps

took me most of the year to grasp when Laurell was practically using third-semester Calculus to build the Great Pyramids by comparison.

Add my Mets-watching during the month, and it was a bloodbath. With the exception of Laurell and Sam, our class was pretty much killed by this exam. Laurell scored a 95, Sam an 84, JD a 45, Josh in the teens, and Joe an 8. I scored a 22, putting me in the middle of a very bad pack. After receiving our grades at the end of class the week of Halloween, we joked morbidly about our dismal scores. A few of us chuckled. “The only equation I used was $F=ma$,” JD said, getting Wolf to laugh. “If you turn the 8 sideways, my grade is ‘infinity,’” Joe said embarrassingly. Josh finished the comments with, “You can shoot me now!”

Wolf berated us in class the following week. We were “lazy” of course.

“You’re too smart for your own good . . . and you don’t deserve to be in this class,” he said to all of us, having excluded Laurell and Sam from this part of the class period.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, Wolf’s supervisor, Science Department Chair Estelle Abel came into our class just for this hearing. In three-and-a-quarter years of MVHS, I’d never met the woman, never seen her in the hallways, and never heard a classmate speak of her, except for the want of a Level 0 Chemistry teacher two years earlier. For about fifteen seconds, I found myself surprised by the fact that she was Black. Then she opened up her mouth.

“I suspect that all of you realize that you’ve gotten in over your heads. I expect each of you to drop this course before you embarrass yourselves any further,” she said with the attitude of a New York City police officer looking for a confession.

She then directed some of her attention to me. “And you should be ashamed of yourself!,” she said in a raised voice.

Wow! I knew a 22 was way below my own standards, but there were at least three other students with lower scores than me. Wolf having his boss come into class and embarrass us into dropping just left me pissed. Given the previous years of work in Humanities, arrogant or humble, most of us wouldn’t exactly be walking around showing our AP Physics grades to our other classmates. The grades were hard enough to deal with. Each of us refused to drop AP Physics after that. “I’ll be watching you,” Abel said after we told her we weren’t dropping the class. That was a warning. If we had a failing grade overall in the course by the end of mid-terms, she could force us out.

This was the first time that we had a teacher who was more interested in humiliating us than in teaching us. We had plenty of teachers in the recent past who weren't interested in being good and energetic teachers. This was different. Wolf had an ax to grind. When I learned from Laurell that he was in the midst of a break-up, it explained far more than any of our grades. Laurell, of course, didn't care, and didn't need to, given her dozens of hours of pre-work for the class. Sam was struggling, but not so much that any of us felt like he was one of us. The rest of our time with Wolf was spent attempting to stop the bleeding and to avoid his ire. Meltzer was already the best teacher I ever had. Wolf was the equivalent of the worst, a sink-or-swim teacher with no ability to help other students grasp his material, and no sympathies for students other than his best ones.

I used the holiday break as an attempt to regroup from a disaster of a school year, only to find that things weren't going much better. Danny, Joe and Josh weren't talking to me at all. They'd walk by me in the hallways, look at and through me, and keep going without so much as a nod. The popular Gordon S. and Jamie grew smirks across their faces whenever they saw me walk by. Granted, I was walking at my typical warp speed whenever I was between classes. My more immediate circle of classmates seemed preoccupied with tearing apart their cliques and so-called friendships. Laurell and Sam's was only the first one to fall. I noticed that Brandie and Wendy were no longer speaking to each other, that Allison and Dahlia's friendship were showing some cracks, and so many others were have mini-arguments. Bobby and Suzanne — never friends to begin with — stopped talking to each other over their campaigns for class president. Or, rather, the election results. Bobby believed that the election was rigged, that he was robbed because the MVHS powers that were liked Suzanne more, found Bobby's eccentric and openly gap ways unappealing, and stuffed the ballot boxes in her favor. For her part, Suzanne never liked Bobby.

With all of that going on, I made a couple of decisions. One was to escape from MVHS as frequently as possible, which meant spending more time in the library or on the Subway or at 241st's magazine shop, where I could find every conceivable porn magazine. The second was that I wasn't going to my senior prom. I couldn't be so bothered as to get caught up in senior-year drama birthed from six or more years of stress and trauma.

Several things changed my attitude, at least around the prom. The Giants won Super Bowl XXI, blowing out and brutalizing each team they faced along the way. My underdog team had become a juggernaut in three seasons, meaning that there was hope for me yet.

With the end of my half-year of Philosophy and Humanities Music meant some more free time to turn around my grades and to think about the immediate future of college.

Most importantly, I realized that there were a few people around me who cared. Despite all of Laurell's nerdy and arrogant foibles, I liked her as a classmate and she liked me, probably because I was still nice to her. Me and Allison talked during and after school, this despite her busy schedule of dual-enrollment classes at Pace University in White Plains. At lunchtime, Kim, Vanessa, Dara, Rhonda, Debra and others would deliberately sit next to me in the senior's section of the cafeteria and pick with me. "We're gonna get you out of your shell," Debra said to me one day. By the beginning of February, with a second marking period GPA of 1.95, I decided to go to my prom, even if it meant going by myself, and to do what I could to salvage the school year.

Getting as much out of the year as possible proved to be a most difficult task. I was so far behind in terms of my understanding of AP Physics that the only goal I set was to pass the class and score at least a 2 on the AP exam. AP English and AP Calculus were a different story. In both the teachers made a real difference. Martino shifted gears from the existential novel to poetry and plays for a while, from Archibald Macleish's "You, Andrew Marvell" and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* to Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. She even threw in a creative writing assignment. The assignment was for us to write a short story. I wrote a short story titled "The Way It Is," corny I realized even at the time. A better title would've been "On the Brink of Obsession" or "Role Reversal" or "A Pathetic Tale." The story was about me and Phyllis and a take on some of our more coy conversations over the previous three years. Except that I was "Phil" in this story, and Phyllis "Donna." I handed the essay in, talked about it in class, and yet not a single person, including Martino and Phyllis, picked up on the not-so-subtle hint in the story.

We also read Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. This time around, the post-modern, post-structural, neo-Marxist perspectives on dehumanization and the end of the world as some of us knew it didn't bother me. My grades went up, again, even though my concentration and my time-to-task had dropped. I wrote my essay on *Catch-22* the night before it was due, in Mom's bedroom, in front of my stepfather's portable TV, with the Rangers winning a close game. I started doing so well that Martino said to me one day before class, "you know, if you'd

work harder, you could become a really good writer.” It was the second time a teacher had said that to me in four years.

I looked at her for a second. Martino was a very attractive teacher in her late-twenties, with that burning-the-candle-at-both-ends look around the eyes. She had short brown hair and was about five-three or five-four. Besides that, she was an aspiring writer in her own right. Martino had published a few short stories, was a big Anne Rice fan, and wanted to follow in her footsteps. So when she paid you a compliment, you tended to pay attention. Despite the backhanded nature of her praise, I thought very quickly of the image of the starving artist, the famous-after-death ones like Edgar Allan Poe, Vincent Van Gogh or Emily Dickinson. “I don’t want to become a starving artist,” I said in response. The idea of being a writer was still an attractive one to me, but I wanted to do and be something that would at least make it possible to have three squares a day. Martino didn’t push the issue. I thought I hit a sore spot with the “starving artist” image. She still talked with me first thing in the morning about the news and about *her* writing, but left my aspirations alone.

Wolf’s class remained the most painful academic experience I’d have in Humanities. Period. Gauss’ Law, Maxwell’s equations, Planck’s constant, neutrons and quarks, anti-matter and $E=mc^2$ were all things I generally understood. Equations and detailed physics problems that were supposed to help us get to the right sets of equations for determining answers were over my head. Wolf continued to berate and belittle us, wondering, “Why are you still here?,” or exclaiming “You decided to show up today!” On the rare occasions I managed to solve a problem at the chalkboard, he gave me a Bronx cheer, the kind good Yankees fans gave when their team was down ten runs and a Yankee hits a home run to close the gap to nine. I did manage to squeeze out a 79 on one exam before the AP test, and earned a 75 on a paper on the significance of Maxwell’s equations to a unified notion of electromagnetism.

Some of this disconnect between a constant yearning for a place to escape to and the need to embrace my reality was reflected on my performance on three AP exams. Over a two-day period in the second week of May, I took AP English Monday afternoon, and was cruising through the exam until I hit the essay questions. I managed my time so poorly that I barely started the second of two essay questions before time ran out. AP Calculus was

the next morning, and I felt much, much better about that. It was the easier of the exam's two versions, Calc AB. I figured that I scored at least a 3 on it.

Then there was AP Physics B and C. All but Laurell took the easier version. But for us, this was hardly easy. Josh, who had Laurell as his paid tutor in the weeks before the exam, just started laughing in the middle of it all, knowing that he was putting the nails in his own coffin. "You get a 1 for just signing your name," he snickered. I was determined to get at least a 2, but that would've meant learning something useful from Wolf other than how to hang students out to dry. I knew as the proctor asked us to put our pencils down that I scored a 1 on the exam. It was confirmed a month later. I also scored a 3 on AP Calc, good enough for earning college credit at some schools and a disappointing 2 on the AP English test. Laurell scored a 5 on the AP Calc BC, AP Physics C, and AP Biology exams, and a 4 on the AP English exam. She guaranteed herself twenty-seven college credits, counting her 5 score from the AP American History exam. Laurell was a college sophomore before she'd been given her high school diploma.

I did find a few ways to escape the stressful madness that was the end-of-the-year AP festivities. One of them was through the college acceptance letters that started rolling in. I pretty much kept control of the mailbox key and hid my acceptances in my textbooks throughout February and March. Darren likely would've have thrown those away, too. The first letter I received was from Yale, in a regular business-sized envelope, a clear sign of rejection from that vaunted university. As it was, I had no idea why they rejected me. Over the next five weeks, I received one acceptance and packet of materials after another, including Columbia and the University of Pittsburgh. All but Columbia gave me a full financial aid package of one kind or another. All offered either a partial or a full-tuition scholarship for four years except for Columbia. Pitt had offered me one of their inaugural half-tuition academic scholarships, one that they called the Challenge Scholarship, meant specifically to attract low-income students and students of color from across the country to the university.

Columbia was the only school that assumed that someone in my family could afford to cover a significant portion of my tuition. I called their financial aid office in mid-March to ask why they hadn't offered me any kind of academic scholarship. They called

me back to tell me that they wanted to “make sure” that I really couldn’t afford to go to Columbia.

“But you have my Mom’s financial paperwork,” I said.

The man on the other end of the phone, ignoring what I had just said, then made an offer. “Well, we could send a private investigator out to track down your father and take a look at his finances. If everything checks out, he can cover part of your tuition or we can offer you a scholarship.”

“My dad hasn’t paid child support in eight years,” I said, floored by the arrogance that reeked like Polo cologne on an unwashed body coming out of the phone.

“We want to make sure that he doesn’t have money for your tuition,” the creditor responded.

“Thanks but no thanks! You either trust me or you don’t,” I said, and hung up the phone.

I was really and truly torn between having some idiot private investigator digging through Jimme’s pitiful life and finances and saying “Go to Hell!” to Columbia. I didn’t want to see the worst case scenario occur, which was that some fool would come back to Columbia and say that Jimme could afford to pay \$3,000 of my tuition per year. In the last *three* years, Jimme had given me \$3,500 total.

Then I thought of other pros and cons, and as I thought of them, I wrote them out. Columbia was an Ivy League school, the University of Pittsburgh wasn’t. Heck, no one in our class other than Josh — who thought about applying to Carnegie Mellon University at one point — even knew where Pitt was. Yet, Columbia was more expensive than Pitt by more than two dollars to one (\$18,000 per year versus \$7,500) and the students at Columbia would likely be similar in education, socioeconomic background and attitudes to my Humanities classmates.

But the most important factor in saying “No” to Columbia besides their financial aid sleaziness was 616 and Mount Vernon. If I went to school there, where would I live and where would I study? Home? You got to be kidding! Mount Vernon Public Library? They only stayed open until 9 pm, and were never open on Sundays. On campus? That would only work if I were able to get a decent paying part-time job on campus. After sorting through this, I knew that Columbia was out.

The look on Mom's face when I told her said it all. She was as shocked as I'd ever seen her. She kept trying to convince me to go upstate to Hobart and William Smith, to see about going to Columbia for their private investigator. Mom had tried all year to influence my college decision without any sense of my needs or attitudes about her or 616. First it was "Apply to West Point" because they would "make a man out of me" and "provide me good discipline," and because "women love men in uniform." When that didn't faze me, she wanted me to go to a Black college like Morehouse or Howard because she "gave the United Negro College Fund some money." It was \$25, not enough to buy a book bag. Too many of my Black classmates planned to go to an HBCU. These were the cool folks, the Rick James and Eddie Murphy "Party All The Time" folks, going to schools with reputations for cliques, partying, and low graduation rates.

I wanted a mix of people, White, Black, Hispanic, older and my age, male and female, nerdy and normal. With those suggestions, I pretty much shut Mom and everyone else out of the decision-making process. Except for Meltzer. He could tell that I'd made up my mind to go to Pitt, though. "Do what you have to do, Donnie. I support your decision one-HUNDRED percent!," he said.

I felt bad for Mom, for my younger siblings, for Darren. I wanted to be at home to help out as much as I could. I also knew that I'd be of no help to anyone in the future if I didn't go to college and knock out a degree. I promised Mom that I'd be home during the holidays and summers and that I'd use my degree to help her out when I moved back to New York. My plan was to get a bachelor's in Computer Science, get a job paying at least \$25K a year as a software programmer, and help Mom and my younger siblings out as much as possible. I got the "Are you sure?" question from her again about. Then we hugged and cried.

My classmates were unimpressed with my choice. "Where's that?," some of them said. "Is that near Philly?" was also a common question. Fasulo just shook her head when I told her. She didn't have the nerve to say "daring to be different" to me again. I'd chosen an out-of-state school that might as well have been in the Sahara as far as my classmates and guidance counselor were concerned. Especially given their choices. Laurell chose Johns Hopkins, where she got a full-tuition scholarship, so that she could major in pre-med there. Privately, she chose the place because she planned to move her ailing mother and tweener sister to the DC area, where they could live with or near Laurell's aunt and uncle-

in-law. It would enable her to help her family out if anything happened to her mother, who was now wheelchair-bound and a diabetic.

Sam chose Harvard, because he wanted to do pre-law and because his girlfriend Rhonda was there. Dahlia decided on Tufts University and its pre-med program, Allison chose Vanderbilt because she had friends from the Class of '86 there, Denise went with Cornell and Dara and Wendy both decided to go to NYU.

Suzanne's choice was the Naval Academy, something her guidance counselor Ms. Farrah attempted to discourage her from choosing. "Why are you wasting your time?" Farrah apparently said. Suzanne's decision was based on her relationship with her father and his money. She wanted to make it to and through college without her father's dollars. "Senior year was a disappointment for me . . . I really want to do something on my own," Suzanne said. Most of the schools she applied to accepted her but didn't offer her scholarships because her father's income was too high. West Point and the Naval Academy became her best choices for escaping the shadow of her father for a while, with Annapolis winning out at least in part because Maryland was farther away from Mount Vernon than West Point.

JD's choice was perplexing to me, and even more perplexing to Wendy. Given the choice between Cooper Union, where he'd be a few blocks from Wendy and NYU, and Cal-Berkeley, JD opted for Northern California at the last minute. The choice only made sense if he wanted to travel and to spend time away from her, especially since he planned to major in engineering, the very reason for Cooper Union's existence. Josh, meanwhile, picked Georgia Tech for engineering and because they had a good basketball program, where he could be a statistician or an announcer for the games, like he'd been at MVHS. Other notables included Phyllis and Akbar at Rutgers, Kim at Temple, Joe at Manhattan College, Danny at Syracuse, and Mandume, Gina, Jamie, Tomika and about twenty others listed Howard, Lincoln, Hampton, Spelman, Clark-Atlanta, Morehouse and other Black colleges and universities.

Meanwhile, I'd put off looking for a date in a serious way for the prom until I knew for sure if Phyllis had one. Through idle chatter with her, Sam and her best friend April one day in the hallway outside of the Music Department, I knew she had a date, with whom I was never able to find out. I wasn't shocked by any stretch. I just felt like a dumb and bumpy toad who only wished and hoped for something to happen.

Allison was my next and best potential prom date. In Allison's case, I assumed that she was dating someone, likely a former upperclassman now at Vanderbilt, so my hopes weren't high to begin with. Plus it would've been a friendly date, no out-of-whack emotions to hide or control, no expectations beyond a friendly hug. Other young women who were in their various cliques and relationships had their prom dates lined up months ago, whether they seriously liked the person or not. I didn't want this to be a big deal. I just wanted to go so that when I got older I wouldn't regret not going. So I decided on Dara, if only because she was a friendly acquaintance whom I thought would help make the evening fun.

I was prepared to be the perfect gentleman. I made Jimme cough up \$250 and rented a tuxedo with a vest and a peach cummerbund. I worked on my limited repertoire of Michael Jackson dance moves from his *Off the Wall* days, since the Hebrew-Israelite period had deprived me of the opportunity to update myself. And I put in my fifty-dollar share for the limo that Allison and Gina rented for the occasion. I was prepared to buy an orange-carnation corsage and to open doors and pull out seats and the whole nine years. Because even though this was a friendly date, I still wanted Dara to feel good about the experience.

What told me that maybe Dara wanted more out of this arrangement than I did was at our Humanities Program honors convocation. It was a week before the prom. Flanagan and the Board of Education wanted to honor us collectively for making Humanities a grand success. We had a keynote speaker who was a recent college grad and MVHS alum. She had started her own business and wanted to talk to us about the value of the education we were about to pursue. It was an opportunity for our parents to share in our success. Mom decided to come to this event, only the second time she'd been to MVHS in four years.

We got there, with Mom dressed in her best business dress, with high heels, hair done, light-brown makeup powder and black cherry-red lipstick on. I was somewhat dressed up, with a collared shirt, cheap black shoes and the polyester black pants my mother mail-ordered for me at the beginning of the year. The event was in the school cafeteria, where we were to have punch and snacks before the festivities began. The first person I introduced my Mom to was Dara, whose mouth fell open like I'd slapped her in the face. She looked at Mom as if I'd been cheating on her with Lisa Lisa.

“Dara, this is my mother,” I said a second time. Dara just stood there, angry. Then she walked away in a huff.

“What’s wrong with her?,” my mother said in complete disbelief herself.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Wendy must’ve seen the whole thing unfold, because she came over right on cue, gave me a hug, and then politely introduced herself to my mother.

“Thanks, Wendy,” I whispered as I walked over to talk to Dara while Wendy had a conversation with my Mom, something I’d hoped my prom date would do.

“That’s not your Mom,” Dara said coldly when I reached her table. *As if* I would lie about something as serious as that.

“Yeah, Dara, she is,” I said, pissed that she’d assume that quiet me would suddenly become bold enough to bring an older woman to a Humanities event.

I knew Mom looked young, but she still had twenty-two years on me. Since she didn’t want to talk about it, I just walked away and joined in the conversation between my former crush and the woman who was the reason Wendy was my former crush.

The prom itself was fun and relatively uneventful, since all six of us looked like we were out with friends and not potential lovers. Allison, Gina, and Dara were out with two former upperclassmen from the Class of ’86 and me. The limo had already picked up Gina and her date and Allison’s date by the time it arrived at 616. I had to walk through the smoke of hydro in the lobby before getting in, giving me a contact high. Once we picked up Dara and stopped at Allison’s - meeting her mother and various family members at her house just around the corner from Jimme’s place - we were off. We went to White Plains for the prom dinner, down to the city to dance at the Copacabana on West 34th, and then back to the Bronx to pig out at a White Castle’s on White Plains Road. Other than the fact that everyone had unknowingly drunk rum punch from the limo bar and started feeling tipsy, everything for us went well. I warned folks the whole night about the punch but no one believed me. I had a good time, as well as could be expected. Especially when considering what was about to happen.

19. More Parting Shots

We went into June ready to end four years of MVHS and six or more years of Humanities. But we weren't going into the final month of high school together. The small tears and mini-slights of earlier that year and in years past had become chasms. Laurell and Sam's friendship was over. Wendy and JD looked as if they were under their first signs of strain. Even Joe and Danny, Patrick and Clyde, and Bobby and Brandie didn't seem as close anymore. But the one friendship I thought would last well into adulthood, with graduations, med schools, weddings, vacations and children to share along the way, was Allison and Dahlia's. At least that's how I saw them.

Their four-year friendship ended more strangely than all of the other ones. It also ended my ten-year acquaintanceship with Dahlia in the process. Dahlia and Allison spent the year growing apart, even as their educational paths were taking them in the same direction. With Allison taking dual enrollment courses at Pace University, the two of them didn't spend as much time together at MVHS. Plus, Dahlia was dating her hottie Jamaican guy Jeff, deeply involved and apparently even more deeply jealous. On multiple occasions when I walked by Dahlia's locker and saw the two of them talking and flirting, I'd also see the other girls at school looking at her, as if they were wondering, "What the hell does he see in her?" Some of those young women were bold enough to flirt with Jeff within sight of Dahlia, whose generally proper language became more violent and more Jamaican under those circumstances. It was like the difference between Whitney Houston on an album cover versus Whitney Houston in an interview, the difference between Black girl-next-door and the ultimate ghetto girl. Dahlia changed right in front of us. She even changed how she wanted her name pronounced. No longer was it like the flower. It was "Dale-lia" now, a change I didn't understand.

Apparently Dahlia's jealousy knew no bounds. She accused her best friend Allison of wanting her man. Allison's crime was talking to Jeff and laughing with him outside of Dahlia's presence. With nowhere to go but down, Allison stopped talking to Dahlia, and by April, the friendship was over. Soon after that, "Mr. Lovermon" was gone too, likely tired of being accused of cheating. Or, maybe, he had the desire to do so. I unwittingly ended up getting involved because I was at the acquaintance level with both girls. I'd known Allison for four years, and Dahlia since third grade. I just hoped that they could mend fences. "The

girl's really changed, Donald. She thinks everyone's after her man," Allison said to me at the end of the school year.

I didn't know for sure if Allison was right about Dahlia or not, but something must've sunk in on an unconscious level. A week before MVHS' senior awards ceremony, we had a dress rehearsal in the auditorium after school. I was rushing from my locker, just outside Wolf's classroom, turned right to go down the hall and past the windows facing the courtyard on the right before entering the auditorium on the left. I bumped into Dahlia, who was talking to our classmate Georgia in the hallway by the courtyard windows. As I'd been doing for more than three years, I was walking at warp factor three when I decided at the last second to tap Dahlia on the shoulder and say "Hi" for a second. I spun around so fast that I never got my arm extended. The momentum carried my right hand onto the left side of her hip and butt. I was immediately surprised and embarrassed, and started to mumble an apology without thinking. Dahlia looked somewhere between angry and confused. She kept saying, "I can't believe you did that," as if I was actually trying to get her attention that way.

"I'm sorry, I saw you in the hallway, and I tried to get your attention, and. . . ."

"Why, I never thought you would do such a thing to me!"

"I wasn't trying to slap your butt. It was an accident. I'm sorry."

"Of all the people, I wouldn't expect this from you!"

"We've known each other since third grade. Why won't you believe me when I say. . . ."

"I just can't believe that you would do this to me!"

I got angry myself at that point. I took my left hand, grabbed her left arm and I slapped her on her left butt cheek, all in one motion.

"Now you know what a real butt slap feels like!" I said while in mid-slap.

Dahlia immediately tried to slap my face, first with her left hand, then with her right. I caught her left and right arms and held them together, but not before the concussion of her fingernails from her left hand had hit my right cheek. I then let Dahlia go, and walked away with the thought, "How did this happen? I was just trying to say 'Hi'." This was the last time I really laid eyes on the woman.

I felt bad about what happened, but I also felt like I'd been put in an impossible situation. No matter what I said, I would've been wrong. If I'd said, "Look Dahlia, my only

school interest is Phyllis, no one else, so accept or don't accept my apology and move on!" I would've hurt her more than any sting I left on her ass. If I refused to apologize, I'd been wrong too. The only thing I could've done was to walk away without discussing it at all. No matter what I could've done to limit the damage, I realized that somewhere in my unconsciousness was both a sense of compassion and contempt for Dahlia. She was a little girl who wasn't so little anymore, but seemed desperate to crawl back into her shell of shyness.

The awards ceremony itself was the most painful ceremonial experience I'd ever known, especially for my own butt. I didn't doubt that the classmates I saw fidgeting in chairs all over the auditorium stage felt the same excruciating sensation in their butt cheeks and in their heads as I did. It was the night before our final day of school in MVHS, Humanities, and Mount Vernon public schools. We were all as dressed up as we could be, short of the graduation ceremony that would occur the following week. Our parents and relatives and their friends were there, an audience of nearly a thousand people. We were there for over two hours, seated neatly on stage to hear Prattella, Capozzola, and the Division principals give out awards, scholarships, and more awards to Laurell and Sam. Those two names were called so many times that I felt insulted sitting up there. Between the two of them, they probably had enough scholarships and checks to pay for at least three of us to go to college ourselves!

It wasn't a complete shutout. Between Allison, Dahlia, Denise, Suzanne, and a few others, Laurell and Sam probably got about eighty percent of the awards, scholarships, plaques and other memorabilia that the school and the sponsors gave out. Sam, unsurprisingly, won the History Award for the best history student in our class. At that point, I knew the ceremony was rigged. Even if I didn't win it, I would've expected someone like Laurell, Denise, or JD to win the award. I knew that Meltzer's boss Larry Smith had something to do with who was selected. I did win two awards, the Presidential Academic Fitness Award (which all of us Humanities types won), and the Perfect Attendance Award (I missed thirteen days of high school in four years, not exactly perfect). That evening, I became Darren for a moment. I dumped those awards in the garbage on my way out of the building.

There was a post-Convocation reception, as the *Mount Vernon Daily Argus* reported. There, Laurell and Sam continued to share much of the spotlight. Some of it, though

shined on Suzanne because of her acceptance at Annapolis. Prattella made sure to make special mention of it during the award ceremony and at the reception that followed. Given her father's connections with the ICA and prominence in the Mount Vernon community, this shouldn't have been a surprise. Meltzer attended the reception and confided to me that this "special treatment," as he called it, was "sickening" for him. I guess that it was true, that this was special treatment on some level. But if I had a daughter or a son who graduated at or near the top of their class, attended an award ceremony and basically got bupkis for two hours, I likely would've wanted to give her some recognition of her own myself. No one in Humanities or in MVHS deserved that level of humiliation. Who'd want to go to the Oscars if Johnny Carson kept saying, ". . . And the Oscar goes to . . . Meryl Streep . . . for" everything? Or if the GRAMMYs were to give Michael Jackson seventy awards in one year? Even Wayne Gretzky hadn't won *every* award in hockey. If I'd been at MVHS another year, I wouldn't have been able to bear it after that disgraceful event.

The next day was my last at MVHS. It was a complete blur of "goodbyes" to teachers and classmates who I considered friends and "good riddance" to some classmates and Fasulo. After my eighth-period Health class, the last class I'd ever have in Mount Vernon, I walked down the second floor steps and the first floor halls of the high schools to my locker one more time. While clearing out my locker, Estelle Abel walked by and asked to meet with me. I went over to her office, and for the next fifteen minutes, she attacked me for being a slacker.

"You've been a disappointment, young man," Abel said.

"What?," I said, completely shocked.

"Your work this year is nothing to be proud of."

I stood across from the tall, witchy-looking lady, speechless, but telling her "Fuck you" in my head.

Abel claimed that I had underachieved throughout my four years as a student, that I should have been ranked in the top ten of my class, and that my performance in AP Physics was beyond abominable. All I could focus on was the amount of anger and emotion she possessed in her voice and eyes. You'd have thought that I'd been expelled from school or had raped her daughter!

“By you not graduating in the top ten of your class, you’ve let everyone down. Your family, your friends and our community,” she said, as if anyone around here really cared about me.

Abel continued. “You could’ve been a shining example of achievement to us,” all but hinting at Sam as the person I should’ve been like.

I guess I did let my Black classmates down. I only ranked *second* in GPA among Black males and eighth among all African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans in my class. I guess I should’ve been taking out back, blindfolded, with cigarette in mouth, and executed by a firing squad.

Abel finished her soliloquy. “You don’t have any excuses! There is nothing going on at home that could justify your performance!”

“Well, that’s not true...” I interrupted. I felt rage rising up from the pit of my stomach. If she’d been anywhere near my age, I would’ve taken all of the Jimme-ese I knew and laid it all on her stupid ass.

Her face turned stern as she cut me off, determined to make some sort of point, to prove that I was a worthless Black man in her eyes.

“Nothing going on in your life would ever compare to what we went through back in the ’60s . . . I marched with Dr. Martin Luther King!” My mind clicked off my eardrums at that point. Short of showing her my war wounds and having her meet my family, what could I possibly do or say to that? I left her office feeling like my years at MVHS and in Humanities were just bullshit. Abel’s tirade reminded me of the fact that I simply didn’t fit in anywhere.

My high school graduation ceremony at Memorial Field in South Side Mount Vernon went about as well as I could’ve expected for me the loser. It was a hot, humid mid-June day, about eighty-seven triple-H degrees. It was likely hotter for the guys, as many parents — Mom included — made us wear suits underneath our heat-absorbing burgundy polyester gowns. The girls, at least, wore yellow, the other school color for caps and gowns.

It was a good day all right. Except that an eighty-eight year-old White guy stole the show. George Gibson graduated with our class, having fulfilled his requirements for a high school diploma some seven decades later than the kids from his generation. At least the few who made it to high school back then. Jimme showed up to the ceremony drunk as a

skunk. Mom and my Uncle Sam, whom I hadn't seen in almost three years, had to keep him from insulting the other parents. Laurell and Sam got the opportunity to represent our class on stage, each giving an overworked speech. That wasn't bad, except for the fact that they had stolen the show the week before at MVHS. That was the *good* thing about the old White guy. WNBC-TV Channel 4 and the *Mount Vernon Daily Argus* covered Gibson instead of Laurell and Sam.

After throwing our burgundy and yellow caps in the air, we went over to our now former classmates — who were now friends, lovers, acquaintances, and in some cases, foes — to say good-bye, to embrace and hug, to cry and scream and dance and twirl around in the air with. Along the way, Alex grabbed me and gave me a hug. “You made it, man,” he said. It startled me that he did that. Brandie and I hugged, but not before saying, “You’ve changed a lot over the years. You used to be an asshole you know!” I caught up with Wendy, giving her a long hug and a mug as a gift. “I’m really going to miss you,” I said. I also gave a mug to Allison, Laurell, and Phyllis, telling them all that “when you’re drinking coffee late at night and trying to finish a paper, think of me.” When I gave a mug to Wendy and embraced her, Tomika apparently was nearby watching the event unfold. I went over to her to say “Good-bye” afterwards. Tomika snorted and raised her nose up in a huff, as if I’d given her the coup de grace. I thought, “If you really liked me, then how come you never showed it in any way until now?”

Right after the ceremony at Memorial Field, it started. I’d walk down the street to the store, see, say Gordon or Kiam, say “Hi,” and got no response at all. The few times I bumped into Tomika, Ms. Red Bone would stare straight at me, then straight through me, all as I said “Hi.” She just kept on walking, as if I had phased out of our space-time continuum into a parallel universe. By the beginning of August I honestly thought that these people, my classmates for so long, were showing their true colors. They just didn’t like *me*, not me because I’d been a Hebrew-Israelite or me because I was poor or me because I listened to Mr. Mister. It was all about me, something within me that they detested.

“You can’t pay any attention to that. They’re all just jealous,” my new friend Erika said when I told her about the ghost treatment over lunch one day. She and I worked for General Foods in Tarrytown that summer.

“Of what? Of me?,” I asked in disbelief.

“It’s because you’re not trying to be anybody except yourself,” she said.

“That’s a good theory,” I thought, but I didn’t really believe it. Erika was fully in my corner, and much more obvious about it than anyone else.

It seemed like the entire year was about me realizing that I was no longer a kid doing adult things. I really was an *adult*, whether I wanted to be one or not, even though I’d been acting as such for years. I had to stop seeing myself as the twelve-year-old I used to be. Somehow, though, I couldn’t. Others saw me for whom they *thought* I was. A tall, young and dangerous African American male.

The day after MVHS graduation day, the disconnect between my view of myself and the view of people —especially Whites - toward me smacked me in the face like the way Dahlia wanted to two weeks earlier. With high school now officially over, I was in a celebratory mood. I took the 2 train from 241st to 72nd and walked the six short blocks to the great Tower Records. I had my latest Walkman, my first Sony Walkman, actually, and my book bag with my recent tape investments, including a few I’d bought at Tower Records the previous Friday. Investments like Fleetwood Mac’s *Tango In The Night*, Genesis’ *Invisible Touch*, Whitney Houston’s *Whitney* and Glass Tiger. Glass Tiger, by the way, was a good indication of my state of mind. Boy was I pathetic!

I went into the store and began to browse the R&B and Pop/Rock sections for tapes. There I noticed some plastic wrapping on the floor, as if someone had taken a tape out of its case and stolen it. While I thought about the wrapper on the floor, three White security guards grabbed me and dragged me to a storage room downstairs.

“We got you for stealing,” one of them said in his obvious New York accent, presumably the store’s head of security.

“You don’t have me for anything. Is this because I’m Black?”

“Well, how do you explain the wrappers we found on the floor and the tapes in your bag?”

“The wrappers were on the floor when I got there and the tapes . . .”

“You’re going to jail, asshole, when we bring the cops in here!,” another idiot chimed in.

“First of all, I’m not going anywhere. The tapes are all mine, and some of them I bought in this store last Friday. I have the receipts at home to prove it. Don’t you have ways to verify my purchases?”

“We don’t believe you!” the first guy yelled.

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe me. I’m under eighteen. You can’t hold me or turn me over to police without calling my parents. I’m not even from here, I’m from Westchester County, and my receipts are back home there.”

“If we were outside instead of in here, I’d slap you around wise-ass!”

“Then I guess I’m the lucky one. Why don’t we check the receipts from your cash registers up front for my purchases from last Friday? I know they’ll show that I’m right and you’re wrong!”

The hotheaded White man who did almost all of the talking got up and made a threatening slap gesture with the back of his left hand before the other ones grabbed him and told him to calm down. They let me go. On my way out, I said, “I hope you learned that not every Black person coming into your store is a thief.” I swore that I’d never go into Tower Records again.

20. Questioning Manhood

I worked most of the summer before college. It was a job I got because of Fasulo and Sam. Fasulo suggested that I apply for Operation Opportunity, General Foods' summer internship program for Black and Latino students. They had a few spots open for the summer, one because Sam had left the program to take an internship at a Wall Street law firm paying \$450 a week. He worked in Operation Opportunity the previous two summers. I'd get paid \$7.20 an hour, but would only see half of that money during the summer. The other half would be held in trust as a scholarship to help pay my school bills. Five days after Tower Records-gate, I started working for the good-hearted folks at General Foods.

It was my first office job, and it showed. The job was at the General Foods' scientific testing facilities in Tarrytown, just down the road from the GM plant and the Tappan Zee Bridge over to Rockland County. I had to take two buses to get to and from work and walk the seven blocks from the bus stop at the corner of North Columbus and East Lincoln to 616. I took the 40 or 41 bus to downtown White Plains and transferred to either the 13 or the 1W to Tarrytown. For the first three weeks, I was consistently late to work, not even knowing that I should've called in to let folks know I was going to be late.

About a week into the job, I boarded the bus for White Plains on my way home from work and decided to vary my routine. I got off at the White Plains Galleria, a state-of-the-art mall back then. It was five stories of concrete and a glass ceiling, of shops, eateries and a movie theater. It was where I'd seen my first movie in a theater in six years, just after graduation. It was *The Untouchables* with Sean Connery, Kevin Costner and Andy Garcia, a movie I and millions of other Americans enjoyed immensely.

The mall had a mom-and-pop cookie store that had the best chocolate chip-walnut cookies this side of Mrs. Fields. They also had a McDonald's, a luxury for me for most of the decade. I stopped to buy my ultimate pre-dinner snack: a six-pack of McNuggets with that sweet-and-sour sauce, small fries, a vanilla "milk"shake and two gooey and warm chocolate chip-walnut cookies. It was heaven-on-earth food for me. When I went outside to wait for the 40 bus back home, there she was. Phyllis was standing there, also waiting for the bus. We exchanged "Hi"s and started some small talk about college, music and movies.

It turned out that Phyllis had a summer job in White Plains just a couple blocks from the Galleria.

Even as pitiful as I was, I knew I had a window of opportunity to get beyond the idle chatter to the “Do you want to hang with me?” question. But I just didn’t and couldn’t ask. Not on that commute home, and not on any coincidental bus trips after that. In all, I probably had about a dozen opportunities to ask Phyllis if she liked me or if she wanted to go out with me throughout July.

A standard non-conversation conversation went like

“Hey, Phyllis.”

“Hi. How are you?,” she’d asked.

“All right,” I’d say.

“How was work?”

“Okay. How was your day?,” I’d ask in response.

“Fine,” Phyllis would say.

Then, there would be the occasional “Did you see...?” some movie, or a “Did you buy...?” the latest album or tape. Otherwise, it was like two ex-spouses attempting small talk before switching the conversation to concerns about their kids.

These bump-ins weren’t deliberate and not even “by accident-on purpose.” When I did see her, I didn’t get the sense of euphoria that I had when I saw her in high school. My heart didn’t go pitter-patter, and my throat and mouth didn’t turn dry. At times, I felt a sense of dread when I’d come out of the Galleria with my comfort food in hand and Walkman on, only to have to talk to Phyllis without the cover of school as a pretext. My thinking was, “If it happens, it happens. I’m not going to force it.” I’d grown comfortable in my discomfortability with the situation. Although I knew that there was a chance every time I went to or came home from work that I’d run into her, I wasn’t looking forward to it.

I preferred to think of Phyllis from afar. On meandering walks that often took me through Phyllis’ neck of the woods. Or when I listened to certain songs, particularly love duets and Whitney Houston. I never once dared to walk over to her house, and I refused to call even though I knew her family’s number was in the phone book. I couldn’t even quench my libido’s growing thirst by thinking of her and how she looked. In the back of my mind I began to realize that my attraction to Phyllis didn’t have much to do with

Phyllis. Yet when I did bump into her, I tried through our short conversations to see if there was any “there” there.

It all came to a head on the most innocent of late-July days. I decided to stop at the Galleria on my way home from work again, this time because I needed a new pair of AA batteries for my Walkman. I went to Sam Goody’s and contemplated buying Michael Jackson’s “I Just Can’t Stop Loving You” cassingle and The System’s “Don’t Disturb This Groove” before I bought the batteries. Then I went downstairs to the bus stop to wait for the 40 bus, standing with my back to a yellow-brown brick pillar and facing the street. I had my headphones over my ears and was ready to play some tunes as I pulled out the old batteries and ripped the new ones out of their Energizer packaging.

It was at that moment I heard a familiar voice talking and cackling. I turned and it was Phyllis talking with her sister Claudia. I thought about walking over, but for once I correctly listened to my instincts and turned with my back on the pillar again. Then I heard the words that would leave me in a tailspin for months to come. “There’s somethin’ wrong with that boy,” Phyllis said. “He just sits there and never says anything to me . . . he doesn’t know what to do with what he’s got.” At that point I was sure she was talking about me. “How long does he expect me to wait?,” she said with more disdain than I’d ever heard from any of my classmates, including Wendy. Phyllis and her sister were both laughing at that point. They mixed in words like “weird” and “limp” along the way to eventual hilarity. As painful as it was, I continued to listen until the bus came, almost ten minutes of nonstop character assassination. I was their punching bag because I was “too stupid” to know how to ask Phyllis out. When the bus came, I got on, sat in the back, and turned on my Walkman. They saw me and said “Hi,” and I refused to respond in kind. It was a long trip back to Mount Vernon.

“God, you are so pathetic!,” I said to myself as I walked home. I felt like crying and like punching a hole in a wall at the same time. Besides being in public, the only thing that kept me from crying that night were two thoughts. One was that I never really understood why I was attracted to Phyllis in the first place. Two was that I realized that in order for her to have been talking about me that way, she must’ve been attracted to me at some point. But her attraction had turned into utter contempt, the kind most folks have for pedophiles.

I was hurt, so much so that I actually did something I didn’t think I was capable of before. I actually told someone about it. As my Phyllis infatuation began its descent into

obsession, I became friends with another Operation Opportunity intern. Erika was going into her senior year at MVHS. She was an inch shorter than Phyllis, which was probably the first thing I noticed about her. She was pretty and thought of herself as a pretty nerd. At least she wore slacks and jeans. That much about her I appreciated.

Erika was going through a hard time herself. Her parents were in the middle of a nasty divorce, which included custody arrangements. Since she was seventeen, she could make up her own mind about which parent to live with. Except that she couldn't. It was between White Plains with her mother and younger brother and Fleetwood with her dad. "And the commute to school would be horrible," Erika said more than once about living in White Plains.

She'd also just broken up with her White boyfriend. The relationship was decidedly about race, according to Erika. He apparently digged her because of her race. Besides, "his parents never liked me with him," Erika said to me once. After the Phyllis and Claudia episode at the Galleria, I spent more time listening to and talking with Erika, eventually chiming in with my miniscule pearls of wisdom about family dysfunction.

When I finally told her about Phyllis, my feelings for her and the overheard conversation, Erika got this angry smirk on her face. "You don't need her . . . she's triflin'," Erika said. It was the first time I ever heard that term. "Triflin'!," I thought. It hit me that Erika was absolutely right, that Phyllis was superficial in her outlook and triflin' in her interactions regarding me. It didn't ease my pain, but it did make it easier to express my anger.

Me and Erika spent quite a bit of time talking over lunch at work, talking after work and hanging out in White Plains and in Fleetwood. I got to meet her mother and her younger brother, and I met her father once. I learned quite a bit about her eventual Class of '88, where a fight similar to the one between Laurell and Sam was unfolding. This time it was a White male and a Black female battling for the valedictorian prize. Erika thought that this fight had something to do with race, giving me more insight into what happened between Sam and Laurell and how we as their classmates unconsciously took sides. Erika wasn't a fan of either person, but especially the White guy and his best friend. They were all pretentious in their own ways. As for college, Erika had planned to apply to Wesleyan and a few other small liberal arts colleges and Ivy Leagues. No safety schools for her!

We spent quite a bit of time talking about relationships. And she spent a portion of that schoolin' me on finding a balance between being nice and being assertive when it came to women. "We like guys who are aggressive, but not too aggressive," she'd say. If Erika started a sentence with, "You're a nice guy Donald, but . . .," I knew where she was headed. Apparently being nice and smart weren't enough. I needed to be confident in and comfortable with myself, relaxed in my own skin. I had to assert myself, to let a woman know how I felt about her. I couldn't be "too revealing," though. That would be "scary." I learned more from Erika about women in six weeks than I learned from all of my female classmates and Mom in eleven years. Combined! Erika had picked up my spirits at a time when I needed it the most. I just hoped that I'd done the same for her.

The last week and a half before college was spent gathering up supplies and information as if I were headed to a remote island in the South Pacific. I took half of what was left of my Afro-Caribbean Society scholarship and bought an electronic typewriter for writing papers. I'd spent \$150 of it during the summer helping out at home and covering my commuting and lunch costs before I'd gotten my first paycheck from General Foods. After buying the typewriter on The Avenue, I had about \$150 left over for Pitt. Jimme gave me a couple hundred more.

While I packed and gathered up my clothes, I also made some rounds. I went over to Laurell's a couple of days before she and her family left for Arlington, Virginia, and Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. Laurell's aunt would take her mother and sister Naomi in. We talked for a few hours while recording each other's tapes. I got U2's *Joshua Tree* and Billy Joel's *Greatest Hits, Volumes I and II* out of the deal. She got quite a few off of me, who I don't remember. While waiting for the tape recordings, we talked about our escape from Mount Vernon, about the stress of the last couple of years, what lay ahead for us at our respective universities. I told her about Phyllis, not in the painstaking detail I'd given Erika, but enough for her to know that I liked her and was hurt by her. We exchanged addresses and promised to keep in touch. As much as I had to deal with, at least I didn't have to make arrangements to take care of Mom and my only sister. Good thing Laurell had sophomore standing!

I bumped into Allison a couple of weeks before her Vanderbilt adventures. We talked about her Ciba-Geigy internship, her preparations for her freshman year and her dread of being in the middle of the South. "It won't be that bad," I said with a smile and a wink.

Despite it all, Allison was ready to go. Quietly, Allison had earned a few college credits, between AP exam scores and her courses at Pace University. Her goal of becoming a doctor seemed single-minded, at least to me. Whatever trepidation she had about leaving her family and life in Mount Vernon was more than outweighed by her calling. We also exchanged numbers and addresses. Of course, I told her about Phyllis as well.

In the last three weeks, I managed to get contact information for Wendy, Denise, and Erika, and already had enough information to contact a host of others if I so chose. But at that point, I knew with whom I wanted to stay in touch. One of the last things I did was to go on one long walk around Mount Vernon about five days before the end. I went through every neighborhood I grew up in, from 425 South Sixth to Adams Street, from 616 to Wilson Woods, Pelham, and Memorial Field, and from MVHS to Fleetwood. I walked defiantly past Phyllis' home on North Columbus, listening and singing to Whitesnake's "Here I Go Again" all the while. I was sending a message to myself, that regardless of what others thought of me, I had the right to be liked just as I was and to be met there as well.

But that wasn't the end of the lesson, not by a long shot. A month earlier at 616, while standing at the building's front steps and doing one of a thousand things in getting ready for Pitt, an older neighbor named Melissa started talking to me, saying that she could school me sexually in ways that no woman my age could. I knew she graduated from MVHS in '79, as big a party her mother through for her that year. Melissa's mother always greeted me, but her drug-dealing brother Terry did nothing except make fun of me. He'd typically say, "Do you think them White folks gonna 'cept you jus' 'cus you sound like 'em?" Melissa rarely said anything to me, going from boyfriend to boyfriend over the years. She complained about her last one. "I met him at the laundromat. Can you believe that?" she said. I ignored her, hoping the 7 bus to Yonkers was ahead of schedule.

"Do you want to spend time with an older woman?" Melissa suddenly asked.

"I already have a girlfriend," I lied.

"I betcha she won't do what I can do for ya."

"Well, that does sound tempting, but . . ."

"You're afraid, I understand. I'll be here if you need anything," Melissa finished.

I thought the woman was high on her brother's drugs or something. It was a pretty creepy conversation given the nine-year age gap and her drug-dealing brother Terry. Sex with her could've been deadly on several levels.

21. Pitt

It was the last Wednesday in August when I took my suitcases, Army bag, and two boxes by cab from 616 to 241st. But not before a long and tearful good-bye with Mom, Eri, Sarai, and Maurice. Yiscoc didn't wake up to say good-bye until I was practically out the door. My stepfather insisted on giving me an extra fifty dollars for my college journey. I thought for a second about turning it down, and decided against it. "This was the least he owed me," I thought. I felt bad about leaving, especially for Eri, who was just a little more than three years old. Darren and I took my stuff downstairs to the Reliable Taxi cab at five in the morning, got to the Subway stop and met Jimme there. We quietly rode the train to Penn Station on West 34th, where I'd catch the 7:50 am Amtrak for Pittsburgh. Once it was time, Darren and Jimme helped with getting all of my stuff on the train, most of which I half-realized I probably wouldn't need. We hugged, and Jimme actually teared up in his one remaining eye. This was the second time in a row I'd seen him sober, and he seemed happy for me.

The train ride to Pittsburgh was much longer than I expected. My assumption was that since Philly and Pittsburgh were in the same state that the ride wouldn't last more than a couple of hours. What I didn't know was that once we pulled into the City of Brotherly Love that the engineers would have to uncouple the electric engine and connect a diesel one. What I didn't know was that the trip across the state of Pennsylvania was a long and windy one, with hills and mountains, small towns and tunnels. What I didn't know was that there would be a boring recording describing the construction of track through the Allegheny Mountains which led to the creation of Horseshoe Lake. I took two naps, listened to five tapes, and with all of that, still had an hour and a half to spare. I ended up talking with a young Catholic priest about the nuances of Christian faith and how Christians often misapply their faith in secular situations.

We pulled in about thirty minutes late, just before 5 pm. I immediately found a phone book and called for a Yellow Cab. I waited, and waited, and waited, all while about six cabs came and picked up other passengers from my train. I looked at the downtown skyline and thought, "It doesn't look like a hick town so far." Yet the cab drivers sure acted like it was. They refused to make eye contact with me, much less pick me up. After an hour, I called Yellow Cab again, this time threatening them with a lawsuit. "If I don't see a

cab real soon, I'm contacting the NAACP and filing a discrimination lawsuit!" I yelled to the dispatcher over the phone. Within three minutes I got my taxi. I was already beginning to think that Pittsburgh wasn't my best choice for pursuing higher education.

My first drive through the heart of Pittsburgh reminded me of what people had been saying for years about New York and how great it was. Once we passed through downtown, which took less time than driving through Mount Vernon, we went through these working-class neighborhoods and Black communities that looked at least like they belonged in South Side Mount Vernon. *Hill Street Blues* hadn't done the po-dunk town justice. Then we reached the Oakland section of the 'Burgh. School buildings, college dorms that looked like silos, shops and restaurants abounded. Just before we turned left off of Forbes Avenue, I saw it, the Cathedral of Learning, for the first time. I was starting to feel better about my decision.

The driver turned left again, off Atwood and onto Fifth Avenue, then a right onto Lothrop, where, of course, Lothrop Hall was. It was an eleven-story dirty uranium-brown building, where years of coke soot had built up. There were few students or staff around. I went through security, using my high school ID for the last time, and the guard gave me a temporary dorm pass that I could use until I got my Pitt ID. My dorm room was on the third floor. It overlooked a drab and empty yet clean courtyard. I was lucky, since there was a good chance I might've ended up with a roommate. The dorm rooms at Lothrop went to one student apiece. I was so exhausted from all of the emotions and stresses of the day. I grabbed a pack of Lorna Doone's and a can of Veryfine Apple Cranberry juice from the vending machines in the lobby, called Mom to tell her I was fine, somehow found the Mets game on my portable radio, and fell asleep in my twin bed.

That first week and a half was a haze of placement exams, freshman orientation, class registration, paying tuition and room and board, looking for work, and meeting all kinds of new folks. Nothing in my six years of Humanities had prepared me for the dizzying array of social, academic, and financial activities in which I found myself engaged. But five years of 616 and tracking down Jimme did help with making sense of so much in so little time. I passed all of my placement exams, and only needed to take General Writing to fulfill a Pitt requirement. I tested out of the language requirement through the Italian placement exam. Life is so strange and ironic sometimes. I take AP English and place into a

required writing course, and I fail the Italian Regents two years before, and after not having even looked at the language in two years, I test out of the language requirement?

In the meantime, I learned nothing from my freshman orientation, except that Pitt had lots of students, and that it was a lousy idea to play three hours of volleyball on an empty stomach. I nearly blacked out on the steps of David Lawrence Hall, and went across the street to the 7-Eleven for a Mountain Dew Big Gulp to wake me up. I also had a college advisor who was much more stressed out than I was. It seemed that he was having a hard time with his history dissertation committee, which stood between him and his PhD. He represented an office that my soon-to-be teaching assistant Paul Riggs regularly joked was a “graveyard for dashed dissertation hopes.”

Because I’d gotten to campus so late, I ended up registering for only four classes, and not all my first choice: Pascal, East Asian History, Honors Calculus I, and Astronomy “for dummies.” My stressed-out advisor figured that I “should take it easy” my first semester, so my thirteen credits represented the most he thought I “could handle.” My financial aid covered all of my tuition and most of my room and board, but left me over a thousand short for the winter term. So right after Labor Day Weekend, I went through all the work-study jobs listed on campus, and settled on one, with Pitt’s CIS Office. I would be someone who babysat computer labs on campus for \$4.10 an hour.

Figuring out who all the players — and playas, male and female — were on campus took up nearly the first half of the semester, with me studying, working and worrying along the way. I met two groups of students within my first week at Pitt. First, members of Pitt’s men’s basketball team arrived on campus. Most of the team stayed on my floor, with three of them within five doors of me. Fellow freshmen Brian Shorter and Darrell Porter, as well as upperclassman Rod Pipkin were just down the hall from me. Two other freshmen, Sean Miller and Jason Matthews, lived on the other side of the floor. The only guy not from Western Pennsylvania out of the five was Matthews, who came in all the way from southern California. Indirectly through him, I learned about the exaggerations that come with big-time athletics. The Pitt program guide listed him at six-three. I was six-one and a half when I met him, and I had at least a one-and-a-half inch height advantage.

Over the course of a week I met them all, explaining to each of them how I wasn’t a member of the basketball team, got challenged to some shoot-arounds and one-on-ones at the student gym, and even got to see one of their practices. Paul Evans, their head coach,

was, sorry to say, an asshole. Even with the passing thought that I could compete with these guys, there was no way I could take him constantly screaming obscenities at me in his dogged attempt to maximize my athletic talent. I wasn't a racehorse, and neither were they.

The other group, the one I'd spent much more time with my first semester, was an eclectic group of freshman geeks and wannabe cool guys on my floor, sprinkled in between the basketball players. First there was Samir, a second-generation Pakistani American whose parents moved to suburban Pittsburgh at least a decade earlier — as part of the South Asian brain-drain — and whose father was an engineer. He would've definitely fit in with my Humanities classmates, as he was a social nerd. He was a pre-med major through and through, and never questioned that his calling was to become a doctor. Then there was Charles, whom all of us called Chuck. He was from Steubenville, Ohio, a small town just across the Pennsylvania-West Virginia-Ohio borders. It was the “birthplace of Dean Martin,” which was the first thing Chuck ever said to us with a smile. We were about the same height, but unlike me, he really looked like a geek. His brown hair was cut and combed like a nine-year-old's, all straight up and down. He wore the thickest glasses with frames that were just as awful. Chuck was Clark Kent, except he lacked superpowers. With all that going for him, I liked him immediately.

Other newbies that arrived included Ollie, Todd, Aaron, and Mike. Mike was a transfer student from Allentown, Pennsylvania, whose older brother flew Harrier jets for the Navy. He was like having an unadulterated twenty-one-year-old version of Alex on our floor. He constantly joked and got us to loosen up. Mike constantly went out for parties, beer, and whatever else he could get into. Ollie was an introvert, at least on our floor, who was into Elvis Costello and R.E.M. Todd was a wannabe musician who loved punk rock, particularly Hüsker Dü, and was a bigger Elvis Costello fan than Ollie. Aaron and his soon-to-be-friend next door were heavy metal freaks, with Anthrax, Black Sabbath, Def Leppard, Dokken, Guns 'n Roses, Metallica, Mötley Crüe, Poison, Quiet Riot, Ratt, Twisted Sister, Whitesnake and so many others on their playlists. Bon Jovi and Van Halen didn't make the cut - they were “too soft” according to these guys. Since I liked a little bit of everything, I could listen for a while before retreating to my room and putting on some Anita Baker, or as the weeks went by, Kenny G. I spent a lot of time with these guys, likely too much time.

The first weeks of the semester weren't wonderful, as we were all figuring out the world that was Pitt and - in my case, at least - the city of Pittsburgh at the same time. But there was a sense of balance. I received mail from Laurell, Allison, Denise and Suzanne that semester, and spoke over the phone with Erika a few times. I went up to the TV rooms on the fourth and tenth floors and bumped into dorm mates who weren't on the third floor, an occasional welcomed change. I found time to study and enjoyed three of my four classes, especially East Asian History. Honors Calc was the exception. We had a Japanese professor whose English skills weren't very good, and whose teaching skills were worse. We were doing more advanced forms of derivatives, limits and functions than I'd done last year. The good news was that I wasn't the only one who'd taken AP Calculus last year and felt lost. I was in class with Carl and Carlos, the twin towers of academic Pitt-dom. They were both Black, very smart, very nerdy, both very nearly my height and just as skinny. Carl and Carlos grew up in Penn Hills with a younger sister they swore was smarter than they were and parents who worked really hard to take care of their needs, including their education. Still, they both were in Army ROTC, spending weekends and summers being trained by the military while having their bachelor's degrees paid for in full. I liked those guys from the moment I saw them in class.

It was the first time in six years I felt at home talking with other Black males. Carl and Carlos were the first two Black males I knew whose musical tastes were as eclectic as mine. They loved Chicago (at least Chicago before Peter Cetera left the band), liked Kenny G, listened to Geto Boys, Whitney Houston and Anita Baker, and got my whole Mr. Mister thing, which was quickly evolving into U2 for me. They had been taught to play the piano, saxophone and other instruments growing up, and both of them knew jazz inside and out. Carl especially thought that Chuck Mangione had killed jazz in the '70s, but loved Herb Alpert, John Coltrane and Dizzy Gillespie. They weren't into sports all that much, but I could already see how ROTC was getting them into shape. Carl and Carlos would be the most level-headed people I'd meet and get to know that semester.

Astronomy was so easy that I didn't give it any thought, and Pascal was more tedious than hard. I didn't get it, though. I was constantly irritable when working on a programming project, and merely relieved when I debugged it and handed it in for grading. East Asian History with Ann Jannetta was a good course, not great, but I didn't get into to it as much as I would've liked. There were too many other things to do that

semester. I started working for CIS that September, putting in anywhere between eight and fifteen hours a week at the computer labs in the bowels of the Cathedral of Learning. My people skills weren't the greatest, but I knew people would cut me slack because I was the all-knowing computer geek.

About two weeks into my first semester, I went to my Pascal class in the steep hills overlooking the rest of Pitt. I could barely stay awake, the instructor for the class was so boring, and I actually already knew the material from my class at MVHS. I left early, went back to Lothrop, took an hour-long nap, and went downstairs for lunch. I was still in a groggy haze when a nice-looking Latina motioned over to me. I went over to talk to her. My frontal lobe was obviously still in dream land.

"What's up?," I asked.

"What you doing at eight tonight?"

"I don't know, I have to check my calendar," I said with sarcasm.

"Do you want a blowjob? Invite me up to see you tonight. I'm sure that after a long day in the gym you could use one."

"Sure, why not? See you tonight, then."

I was in complete and total shock after that. I didn't expect her to actually show up to my dorm room, and I figured that once she figured out I wasn't a basketball player, she'd move on to someone else. And I was right. Within three days, I saw her coming out of a Pitt basketball player's room, looking somewhat whipped. It was after midnight.

It was my first taste of why it was difficult for athletes to keep their dicks in their pants. It was also my first taste of post-Phyllis stress disorder. Despite all of my distractions and my early academic successes of the semester, my thoughts went back to her, at least my image of her before she shattered it at the end of July. In a way she was right, in that I didn't know what to do with what I had. It would've been hard to know, seeing that I didn't even know how to have a conversation with a woman that went from "Hi" to flattery and confidence, to going out and hanging out and kissing and getting in bed with one.

The other, much more important event that led to the climax of my inner turmoil started with my failed pursuit of a six-foot freshman who'd played volleyball in high school. Despite my attempts at conversation and occasional phone calls, she wasn't for a moment interested in me. She had a boyfriend back home. I understood. My third-floor

dorm mates had pushed me to pursue her. I decided that I needed to take a step back and look at why no woman my age showed serious interest in me. I took some of Erika's advice about being assertive, about being myself. I decided to write Phyllis at Rutgers.

This wasn't an easy task. With email use still uncommon, I had to go to Pitt's Hillman Library and look through phone book directories before I found the number to Phyllis' freshman dorm. I got the address, bought her a card for her eighteenth birthday, and sat down and wrote her. About how I liked her and wanted to know if she "ever liked me." I needed to know if she and her sister really were talking about me at the bus stop that day, "one way or the other." I wanted to know what she thought I needed in order to impress someone like her in the future. Then I added "Happy 18th Birthday!" I sent the card off on the second week in October, just a few days before her birthday.

On the second of November, I got her response. It was in purple ink, with heart-shapes and circles for dots over "i"'s. Reading her letter was like reading the liner notes off of a Prince album. Like the song "I Would Die 4 U," Phyllis had decided to limit her English skills to the '80s equivalent of sign language on paper, a real "revolution" on both their parts. I remember she started, "Thank U 4 your card 2day," an insult to my intelligence. She would've been better off with, "Yo nigga, 's up wit' ya sweatin' me?" She wrote indirectly that she did like me at one point in time, but added "but we're in college now . . . around lots of nu people" She admitted that I was her and Claudia's topic of conversation that day, but "I needed 2 get over that." She hinted that I shouldn't write her again, and that was it. No apologies, no attempt to understand how I felt.

My emotional hurt was on a scale that only compared with how I felt after seeing Mom abused by my stepfather. It might've not been literally as bad as that, but it was close enough so that I was barely functioning like I should've. My anger was really, really deep, like you could dig it up with a steam shovel, one of those industrial-sized ones used in open-pit mines. And I directed all of my anger and loathing within. I couldn't eat, not that day, not that whole week. I was in such deep despair one night that I thought I might need to see a psychiatrist. "All my years at 616 have caught up with me," I thought.

My downward spiral was made worse a week earlier with a burglary on a Monday night at the end of October. While I took a bathroom break at the computer lab, someone stole my Calculus textbook. I felt violated, especially since it happened at work. It made me more distrustful of the people I worked with and of Pitt students in general. And after

Phyllis' wonderful response, I all but stopped going to class. I missed most of my classes the month of November, only showing up for exams or if my mood had let up long enough to allow me to function like normal. The weekend before Thanksgiving, I allowed my dorm mates to cheer me up by getting a couple of cases of Busch Beer. These were the Pounder type, sixteen-ounce cans. After getting Mike to get us the cases, we went back to Aaron's room and started drinking. I downed four cans in fifteen minutes, and was drunk within a half hour. I started throwing around the word "bitch." Anytime anyone mentioned Phyllis' name - or any woman's name for that matter - one of us said the B-word and we'd guzzle down some beer. I was drunk, but not so drunk I didn't know what was going on around me. That night, my geeky acquaintances started calling me "Don" and "Don Ho," since I was the life of that illegal party. I would've been better off smoking some cheap herb with Todd and Ollie.

I recovered from my bender in time to go home for Thanksgiving, but I was in a fog for the rest of the semester. I still managed a few firsts. That trip back home was my first on an airplane. I took a Continental flight from the old and decrepit blue hangar that was Pittsburgh Airport into Newark, with Craig "Ironhead" Hayward on the flight sitting in first-class. He was a senior and the starting running back for the Pitt Panthers. Besides being a great player, he was a bit of a party animal and had gotten into fights with Pitt Police. I remember the student newspaper having him in their police blotter, allegedly body-slammng a cop who was arresting him for a being a disorderly drunk. Yet in his sober, not-with-his-peeps state, he was a normal guy who knew how to be polite, even on this flight.

I also missed my first flight on the return trip, and ended up waiting six hours at Newark for another seat. This turned into my first time in first-class, and it was wonderful. I also went to my first college basketball game at the old Fitzgerald Fieldhouse. With Charles Smith, Jerome Lane and Demetrius Gore, they were a really good team with a really unimaginative coach.

What I couldn't do was pull myself together enough to finish the semester strong. I got caught up in porn, *Players* and *Hustler* mostly. I'd go out after eating dinner at Burger King or McDonald or one of five other places I went into Oakland, usually Miller's News Stand on Forbes or the mini-mart across the street from Lothrop Hall on Fifth. This deliberate attempt at self-destruction likely shorted out my imagination. I finished the

semester with no confidence in my performance, only looking forward to returning to the only home I knew.

Pitt was the only school I knew whose holiday break was so short. My last final, Pascal, was on Saturday, six days before Christmas. I left for the airport that afternoon. The semester started on the fifth of January. Seventeen days to recover from a rough end to the year. I went home as depressed as ever, like there was a dark storm cloud hanging over my head, drowning me in rain and shooting lightning bolts at my ass. I visited Suzanne's during the break, spending a couple of hours talking about our respective schools and semesters. It was her Plebe year, where her commanding officers and upperclassmen and women cadets hazed them, in a sense, to see if she and other classmates could get through the first year. I gave Suzanne all of the highlights of my first semester, leaving out the gory details of the previous six weeks. Her father stopped by in between his different work projects, sizing me up quickly enough, so quickly that I didn't think Suzanne noticed. It seemed to me that a White father with an eighteen-year-old daughter in pajamas with her boobs practically popping out of her top should've been somewhat concerned about the presence of an eighteen-year-old Black boy in his living room and kitchen. Especially with no one at home. Suzanne invited me to come over before I left for Pittsburgh after the holidays. I didn't say "No," but I knew I wouldn't be coming back over during the break.

I spent some time with Erika as well. It was on a visit to MVHS and Meltzer's classroom, just before the school closed for the holidays. Watching Meltzer's class in action reminded me of how difficult it was to learn when classmates preferred to tear each other down rather than encourage each other. Meltzer asked me to speak for a few minutes about my first semester at Pitt. I don't exactly remember what I said, something about the importance of time management and the different things that a student needed to juggle without the help of parents or teachers. I didn't want to add the need to be mature enough to balance and channel emotions. That would've been too complicated a speech for kids who had no idea what they were getting themselves into yet. These were high school juniors and seniors, after all!

After I talked with Meltzer a bit, I walked Erika to the bus stop in North Side Mount Vernon's stark snowiness so she could catch the 40 back to White Plains. As it turned out, she was living with her mother and brother and visiting her dad on occasion. She was showing the strain of a senior caught between the pressures of applying for college

and the need for a break. She wanted to go to a holiday party with me, and as usual, I declined. After the semester I had, I didn't have the stomach for anything that might've involved alcohol or MVHS. Erika looked disappointed in me. I think she knew that I was still struggling over the whole Phyllis thing.

The day I was scheduled to go back to Pittsburgh was also the day I finally received my grades. I earned an easy A in Astronomy, a B- in Pascal, and a C in Honors Calc. All three of those grades I expected. The C in East Asian History was completely unexpected. My grade point average for the semester gave me a 2.63 to start my postsecondary career. That might've been good enough for most folks. But of course not for me. My Challenge Scholarship absolutely depended on me maintaining a minimum 3.0 average at the end of every school year in order for me to stay eligible. That was my wake up call to what I'd allowed Phyllis, and my thoughts of her and me — and of her *with* me — to do to me. I didn't even give Mom the chance to see my grades. I said my good-byes, which were easier to do the third time around, took the cab to 241st, the Subway to midtown, and the Carey Bus to Newark.

The days after I got back to my dorm I spent assessing my situation and what to do about it. The first decision I made was to consolidate the funds I managed to secure at the end of December. I had General Foods cover my remaining room and board payments for the school year, increased my Stafford Loan amount for the semester, and marched down to Thackeray Hall. I waited all day to take care of my bills, get my few hundred dollars of leftover cash from all of my aid — all of which I needed for books — and registered for classes. The last part took the most time, and was the hardest to do. The low the second morning of the semester was two below zero, and the high that day was eight above. Fahrenheit, not Celsius. I stood in line outside for over an hour in that weather surrounded by two feet of snow with the occasional winds and blowing snow before getting inside at nine that morning. Despite my advisor, I decided to take a full load of classes, balancing two math courses with two history ones, with “rocks for jocks” Geology being the fifth one. The others were Western Civ II, Roman History, Calculus II (the regular one, not Honors), and Logic. I needed the last one in order to fulfill my math requirements as a Computer Science major. After six hours of cold, wet floors, and administrative folk working with '70s-style IBM punch cards, my school bill was all but fully paid, and I was registered with all of the courses I wanted to take.

The next thing I did was to put everyone in my life in two categories. All guys were “assholes” and all women were “bitches” until they proved otherwise. I didn’t call anyone that, anyone except for Phyllis, of course. It was my way to channel my anger so that I could laugh at myself and concentrate on the task at hand. All I needed to do now was to figure out how to co-exist with my immediate dorm mates, as they had aggravated my situation with their morbid, drinking ways.

The opportunity I needed happened that Sunday evening. As usual, I left my door open and walked down the hall to the bathroom, did my thing, and went back to the room to call Mom. When I called, Mom kept saying “Hello . . . Hello . . . Who’s there?” She apparently couldn’t hear me. After my third attempt, I checked my phone to see what was wrong. The bastards had unscrewed the phone and taken the transmitter piece out, which was why Mom couldn’t hear me! I couldn’t even make a call to report what they did! I set out for Aaron and his friend’s rooms. When they saw me, Aaron ran and immediately closed his door. His friend tried to break my hand as I kept slamming my body into his door and put my foot between the door and the door jam. I thought about telling our RA, but he was too busy screwing his girlfriend to notice that he had no control over our floor.

The next day, stupid asses one and two were next door in Chuck’s room, bouncing balls off my wall and laughing like there was something funny about it. My anger turned into a rage I hadn’t felt since my fight with JD six years before. So I took matters in my own hands. I grabbed my dust mop and unscrewed the handle, walked over to Chuck’s room, and proceeded to smash drunk Aaron and his stupid ass friend on top of their heads.

“I don’t hear anyone laughing now!” I yelled. “If I don’t get my phone piece back by this time tomorrow, there’s going to be a fight, and I don’t intend to lose! We can *all* get kicked out of school!”

I’d never seen three White guys and Samir so scared. I knew I had crossed a line, but so had they. To make sure they knew that I meant business, I smashed my dust mop handle against Chuck’s wall as hard as I could.

“That’s what’s gonna happen to your heads if I don’t get my phone piece back!” I yelled, making sure I looked as thuggish as I could.

They sent Samir as an emissary with the transmitter by the end of the day. I didn’t allow myself to feel bad about going psycho or, from their perspective, “Black” on my

dorm mates. With Chuck and Samir as exceptions, I saw everyone on my floor as the enemy for a while. And for the next couple of weeks, whenever I left the room at night for the bathroom or for something else on my floor, I took the dust mop handle with me. I wasn't crazy. I was as sane as I'd been in a long, long time.

The result of my decision to excommunicate almost all of my first-semester friends was that I could start with a clean slate, at least in my own mind. This was especially true on a campus with nearly thirty thousand students. For the first time, I revised my definition of *friend*, narrowing it to the point where I realized that only Erika, Laurell, Suzanne, and Allison fit the definition. Wendy didn't, Denise didn't, and neither did Chuck and Samir. I wanted to make new friends, real friends, the kind you could feel comfortable sharing yourself with. The kind that actually wanted to know why I was the way I was, the ones that could show me a better way to be me. I knew I wanted and needed more Black friends, but not to the total exclusion of folks of other backgrounds. Most importantly, I wanted friends who weren't my age. Because it seemed to me that kids my age didn't know crap about crap. They were too sure about their lives and themselves to reflect on their behavior and emotions. At the least, I could learn more from a man or woman about being a good student, friend, or even lover than I could from another eighteen or nineteen-year-old, still trying to figure out the world.

That's what I did. I made a point of relating to folks older than me that semester, some of whom were substantially older than me. In my Western Civ class, there were two people who would remain friends of mine long after the Winter Term. First there was Regis. He was a working-class Western Pennsylvanian through and through, with that guttural Pittsburgh-ese accent. Regis said "jag-off" for "jack-off," "ruff" for "roof," "yinz" for "you all" or "y'all," "dahntahn" for "downtown," and so on. He'd been unemployed for nearly a year, laid-off by Westinghouse, where for the previous five years he guarded a boiler room in one of their plants. He was about five-six, constantly scruffy and disheveled, and sometimes looked like he was a step or two away from insanity. But Regis was a quick study, absolutely enjoyed going to college, and was a rarity even for a twenty-eight-year-old. He was a deeply critical thinker. As a result, we hit it off right away in our discussion sections on Friday mornings. We'd often gang up on the rest of the class in the discussion of all things Western European-related, from the French Revolution to European

imperialism in the nineteenth century. It was wonderful not being the only oddball in class for a change.

It helped that we had a good professor in Sy Drescher. He lectured, but managed to do it as someone who was excited to be teaching and not like some excruciating task, like cleaning out a sewer or rendering cattle. His teaching assistant for our discussion session was Paul Riggs, a second-year grad student who had Drescher as his advisor. Paul was a nice looking White guy for a nerd, already in his mid-twenties with his blonde-brown hair and around six-feet, he was a rarity on campus. So was his class. He found a way to do more than ask us a bunch of questions that were meant to quiz us on the textbook. In a much more straightforward manner than Meltzer, Paul was able to get us to think about critical periods in Western European history as if we were there. We debated the significance of things like a richer diet and its impact on population growth and the expansion of European imperialism, the connections between Charles Darwin, evolution, and the advent of scientific racism at the end of the nineteenth century, and so many other things that allowed us to connect the dots. Paul was also the first teacher I had at Pitt who assumed that I could do the work without acting as if I shouldn't have been in their classroom.

It helped that he occasionally indulged me. When our weekly discussion turned to the killing fields that had been northern France and Belgium for the bulk of the four years of World War I, I allowed my imagination to get the better of me. I made a comment that connected the tragedy of deadly trench warfare to a song by Sting called "Children's Crusade." I started quoting lyrics, like "virgins with rifles, a game of charade," "the flower of England, faced down in the mud, and stained in the blood of a whole generation," and "corpulent generals safe behind lines." I related it all to the documents book and Drescher's lectures on the war that wiped out a generation of young men in Western Europe. It took me two minutes to draw all of the different connections. Paul, shaking his head at the end, got this incredulous smile on his face. All he said was, "um, you know Sting's overrated?"

In Geology, I had a professor who sounded like Abe Vigoda from *Barney Miller* and looked like he'd been digging up shale every time he lectured in class. The class was pretty easy, all multiple choice. The main issue of significance wasn't the class, though. It was Monique. I had met her at the Cathedral lab the previous semester. She always came to the lab with her boyfriend Eric, and always somehow found something she needed help with.

She made almost every girl I went to high school with, well, look like they were *girls* by comparison. She was a chocolate-brown something, all right, about five-six and proportionate from head to toe, butt included. We were in this class together, which apparently gave her a ready-made excuse for toying with me off and on that semester. As sexy and attractive as she was, I was ill-equipped for any drama between her and her boyfriend Eric. Monique was twenty-four, Eric twenty-two and six-two at that. He looked like he worked out, or had at least filled out, in ways that I knew I hadn't yet. So at first I kept my distance, not wanting any part of what was going on in Monique's head.

I bumped into her one day while getting lunch at the Cathedral of Learning, in the Roy Rogers restaurant on the ground floor. She asked me to sit down and eat with her, and for once, I didn't refuse. We started talking, or rather, Monique started talking about Eric and how she felt about their relationship, particularly their sex life. I really didn't want to know anything about it, but my ears perked up when she said, "You'd think that as tall as he is he would be bigger down there." That was *definitely* too much information.

"You know what they say about men with big feet?," Monique asked next.

I really didn't know. I guessed that I was about to talk my way into a punchline.

"What, Monique?"

"Big feet equals a big you-know-what," she answered while pointing to my size thirteens and then looking at my face.

"You're blushing," Monique said with a coy smile.

Of course I was blushing. It wasn't every day that someone six years older than me hinted that they might want to have sex with me, boyfriend or no boyfriend.

At one point we became study mates. I was pretty much acing Geology without much studying. She was struggling, but not enough that she *needed* to study with me. Monique at one point asked to come to my dorm room to study. Despite all of my qualms, I said "Yes, of course you can come up." Monique didn't show, and despite some additional attempts on her part to find a good meeting spot, I found my resolve.

For what it was worth, a gorgeous Black woman in her mid-twenties flirting with and insinuating that she wanted to have sex with me did give me a confidence boost that slowly wore away the anger I started the year with. What also helped was a battery of new music that helped focus my anger and reinvigorate my imagination. Richard Marx's "Should've Known Better" and Paul Carrack's "Don't Shed a Tear" were two songs that

were close enough in lyrics, meaning and emotion to my situation with Phyllis that I smiled a silly smile every time I heard or played them both. I eventually added Michael Bolton, Brenda Russell, Sting's latest album *Nothing Like The Sun*, and Michael Jackson's *Bad* to my collection. But for the first time in two years, I started paying attention to rap again. Rob Base, Salt 'n Pepa, Big Daddy Kane, and Public Enemy all began to seep into my consciousness that winter and spring. Geto Boys' "Mind Playin' Tricks on Me" would've been nice to hear six or eight months before, when I was waist deep in obsession over Ms. Triffin' Ass!

Most of this music spoke to my anger, not just at Phyllis and not just with myself. I was pissed off with my world in so many ways. Including the curse of having a conscious. While the red-shirted Brian Shorter could have a night where three girls would come to his room in a six-hour span (I had diarrhea that night, so I wasn't trying to count), I'd get bunged up over one older woman. I blamed God and Mom for making me this way, and my stepfather and Jimme for taking no interest in doing the right things to make me the kind of man I wanted to be.

Students somewhat younger than Regis, Paul and Monique rounded out my list of new friends and acquaintances. There was Theresa, a nice thick Black woman who all but told me that I couldn't get with her because I was just too skinny. I met Tracey one day doing laundry, and I had to work hard to convince her that I wasn't an RA or a grad student. I had to choose between her and Spike Lee's *School Daze* one evening during Spring Break. I tried to do too much that day. There were a host of other nursing students I met, some very attractive, some really, really sharp students. It was this semester I learned that Lothrop Hall and Pitt's Nursing School were connected through a bridge on the fifth floor of our dorm, which explained the high number of nursing students in the building. Melissa was the nursing student I got to know best that semester. She had a boyfriend that she cared about, so I didn't have anything to worry about there. Melissa was an obvious Christian, something I hadn't seen too much of back home. She was part of Pitt's Ambassadors for Christ club. Through my conversations with her, I met several other members of this campus group, including a man who graduated from Mount St. Michael's in '85. He'd grown up in Mount Vernon, and though he'd been at Pitt for three years, he was on the verge of academic probation. I never got to know him well enough to get his name.

Through Melissa, I also met Mario, Leandrew, otherwise known as Lee, and Marc. My relations with the first two were all right but fleeting. Leandrew, or Lee as he liked to be called, loved movies, and was a huge Star Trek fan. He'd spend most of his free time in the fourth or the tenth floor lounges watching old episodes of *Star Trek* or the new series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* on WPGH-TV Channel 5. He was an Information Science major, which meant I'd see him in the computer labs where I worked. Though a geek, and quieter than me at that, he was a good person to know.

But it was me and Marc who became fast friends. It was the strangest thing to see on campus, as Marc was barely five-one, and I was slowly growing toward six-two when we first met. Marc tried to make up for that by power lifting and using GNC products to build muscle mass. He was the first body builder I'd ever met. We soon got into debates about the meaning of grace, about how to understanding living by faith and what it meant to be truly celibate. Though he was a leader of Ambassadors for Christ, Marc never tried to convince me to join.

We also talked a lot about race and racial politics, including Jesse Jackson's second attempt to run for the White House. It was during these conversations that Marc's Philly accent was the strongest. "He ain't neva gonna win," he said on numerous occasions when I'd say "Jesse's got a chance if he can take a big state." It took me a few years to distill "joint" from what sounded like "jawn" or "jawns" coming out his mouth. Marc was an interesting character, I thought, pretty bright, but he was missing something. What that something was I couldn't have known, my learning curve as sharp as it was. None of that mattered, though. As far as I was concerned, Marc was a cool guy to be around.

Marc was in his second year at Pitt, and his presence and that of other Black and Hispanic students highlighted an interesting divide. A majority of the University of Pittsburgh's Black and Brown students, especially the males, came from the Philly area, followed distantly by folks from the Baltimore-Washington, DC area. Black and Hispanic students from the New York area were so few that we almost knew each other by name. The second largest contingent of Black students at Pitt were actually from Pittsburgh. Philly Blacks and 'Burgh Blacks had different attitudes about our world, emphasizing the word "attitude" for Philly Blacks and the lack thereof from Pittsburgh Blacks on the campus.

So it was hardly a surprise that I could relate to Marc and Black males from Philly, Black women from Pittsburgh, and deep-thinking Whites on campus. All of these different folks brought a richness and tension to my life that approximated what I'd known in Humanities. Only smarter, wiser, more mature, and less soul-destroying.

The semester turnaround I had was almost anticlimactic. Every class was going better than expected, especially Calc II. I guess I should've expected it, though, considering how integrals and volumes and other, more complicated uses of Calculus were where I excelled in AP Calc the year before. Roman History was a multiple-choice turkey shoot, with the exception of one four-page paper, which I aced. I wrote more letters to Laurell, Allison, Suzanne, Erika, Denise and Wendy that semester, something that actually helped my writing. Only in Logic did I not do as well as I hoped. I *earned* my C in that course. Otherwise, I got A's in Western Civ II and Roman History, an easy A- in Geology, and a B in Calc II, giving me a 3.33 that semester and earning my first Dean's List. Because I had more credits the second semester than I'd taken in the first, my overall GPA went from a 2.63 to a 3.02, preserving my Challenge Scholarship for next year.

I guess I should've at least been relieved. After all, I'd beaten back some serious demons and overcame my own spiral into insanity to restore order to my universe. My heart and mind were mending. I wasn't completely healed, but I didn't think I needed to seek professional help anymore, either. Yet I wasn't happy. I was still pissed off with myself and with triflin' Phyllis, because I came so close to giving up all I'd worked for because of her and the image I had of her.

Most of all, I was pissed with Mom and Jimme. After the first semester, in which I amassed nearly five hundred dollars' worth of help from the two of them, they hardly sent me a dime, costing me the opportunity to reserve a dorm room for Fall '88. The money I made from CIS was just enough to cover my books and some of my room and board costs. I owed the university over eight hundred dollars at the end of the year. Jimme swore he sent me the money via Western Union, but he hadn't. I left Pittsburgh for home on the last day of April without a place to stay in the fall. Somehow I assumed that I'd find my own place by the time I came back in August.

22. The Long, Hot Summer

I got back to 616 with no problems, flying into LaGuardia for the first time, then the Carey bus to Midtown, and then the Metro-North into Pelham and home. I wish that I'd done this on all my other trips home. It was already a warm spring, a sign that a hot summer was on its way. I always loved spring. By my last day at Pitt, flowers were planted and blooming all around the campus, the grass was lush and green, and the trees were full of leaves. It was too bad I couldn't experience it in Pittsburgh, as stark and drab as the town had been all school year.

Once I got home, I knew I had my work cut out for me. The place was a mess with dirty clothes and dishes everywhere. My stepfather Maurice was home, but he was asleep as usual. The fat fart hadn't worked since the holidays. He didn't even have a car anymore. Maurice had neglected his used Cadillac's motor oil and radiator for a year and half. So much so that one day after visiting his family in Trenton, the Coupe DeVille's engine gave up the ghost on the New Jersey Turnpike, where he was doing ninety-five. He was home-bound in more ways than one.

My younger siblings weren't babies anymore, and it showed all over the house. Dirty hand-prints of grape jelly, peanut butter, egg, butter and poop could be found from the front door jam to the toilet seat thirty feet away. My brothers Maurice and Yiscoc didn't even know how to make up their beds or pick up a piece of paper, much less clean up the house. Sarai pretty much just acted like she was a princess in all this. For once she was completely healthy.

But Eri was the real culprit for much of the mess. At nearly four years old, he was already an angry little boy. It manifested in different ways. He'd pick fights with Maurice, Yiscoc and Sarai. With Maurice and Yiscoc, stuff would get knocked down over all over the house. Eri would walk all over the house with food and leave his hands unwashed in the process. Then he'd touch everything with those hands. The most disgusting thing was his refusal to poop in the toilet. Eri would poop everywhere. In his underwear, on the floor by the toilet, in the bathtub, in his bedroom — my former bedroom. Mom would just yell, "What's wrong wit'chu, Judah baby!," a negative slap at my stepfather and Eri. I knew that this didn't help matters. Nor did Eri's father, who lay on the living room floor in his

elephant-gray underwear watching TV, destroying our earth-colored carpet in the process. It was gray from years of obesity-laden dead skin cells.

And Darren was finishing up at Clear View, where they attempted to undo more than a decade of psychological damage by having my older brother take the New York State Regents Competency Test. If he passed, he'd get a bonafide high school diploma, from MVHS no less. When I came home, Darren was jumping up and down in the bedroom while Eri and my other siblings looked like they'd been abandoned at least a couple of days before. After spending the better part of a year away, I came home and found myself unable to pick up where I left off.

It wasn't just what I saw. The smell of our place at 616 was overwhelming. There was the tell-tale scent of overused cooking grease for frying porgies, whiting, and chicken, mixed with the odor of stale cigarette smoke from Mom's Belairs' and Maurice's Benson & Hedges'. All of that combined with the body odor and sweat of seven other people, combined with garbage and crap. Not to mention the release of farts and the drawing in of exhaust fumes from the outside world by fans running on high in the living room because we didn't have air conditioning. There wasn't enough Lysol in the world to cover up the smell of poverty at home. I experienced some form of culture shock, a nagging sense of agitation and disgust that reached right down to my bowels. It took me two days to adjust well enough to be able to sit on the toilet. I felt cut off from the world again, and I was far from happy about it.

I waited two weeks before I started looking for work. There was just too much cleaning to do, too many clothes to wash, too many old responsibilities to pick up again. The one thing I did do right away was to get my learner's permit so that I could learn how to drive. It seemed to me that I couldn't hope to travel or get a good job without having a driver's license. At the end of my second week back, I grabbed a manual at the White Plains DMV, leafed through it, and took the exam. I passed with a 70, making the cut by two questions. I scheduled and took my first driving lesson two days later. I was quickly on my way to becoming a licensed driver.

But if I hoped to follow up on that quick success with a job that could cover the cost of more driving lessons, I was sorely mistaken. It was already too late by the time I began to look. Summer jobs were sparse and I was now in competition with college

students in the area. I could've had a two or three-week head start on things if I'd started looking right away. Mom didn't let me here the end of it.

"I told you to look, but you didn't listen," she said to me over and over again.

"How could I've known that there wouldn't be any jobs out there this year?," I said in my defense once.

"You could've had a good job, but you sat on your ass and did nothing," Mom shot back with disappointment, as if I didn't need a break before looking for work.

By the beginning of June, I was also in competition with high school students for jobs. The summer of '88 just happened to be one of the worst summers on record for finding a job, at least if you were between sixteen and twenty-four. In some areas like New York, the summer unemployment rate for young adults was over seventy percent, and it was worse for Black males. So I wasn't alone, at least according to Tom Brokaw and *NBC Nightly News*.

I certainly didn't feel any better, though. I went to the New York State Employment Office on Gramatan, and they offered me jobs mowing grass and fixing air conditioners. The first one required a car and barely paid four an hour. The other paid \$4.50 an hour but I needed to have experience fixing air conditioners. Oh well! I looked through the papers, and called for a law office job doing research. The job required a history background and offered a \$10 an hour salary, but it required me to have my B.A. in hand. "Just because I don't have degree yet doesn't mean I can't do the work," I practically begged. The woman on the other end of the phone responded, "Trust me, I'm doing you a favor. You'll thank me later."

I was desperate for work by the second half of June, so desperate that I literally walked Manhattan for a job one day. I looked at a job ad in the *Daily News*, one that required applicants to go to an address on Broadway in Manhattan. The job allegedly paid \$400 a week. I had just enough money left from my CIS job at Pitt to catch the Subway there and back. I walked from 616 to 241st, and took the 2 like I used to. Stupid me got off the train at 42nd Street and Times Square, having forgotten that New York's numbered addresses didn't take jumps from block to block like in Pittsburgh. If a building's address on one block was 1000 Broadway, the building's address on the next block would likely be 996 Broadway. My address was around the 200 mark of Broadway. I proceeded to walk in my only good suit from Times Square to Broadway and from there in Midtown all the way

to Chinatown, a walk of nearly three miles. It was pouring rain on that hot and humid day, somewhere in the upper eighties. After almost an hour of walking, I found the place. It was a sweatshop, with lots of Chinese immigrant women sewing cloth for dear life. Apparently the job involved supervising these poor women. It would've been more like serving as an overseer. I had to turn around and walk until I found the nearest Subway stop, wind my way back to 241st, and then walk home from there. Five hours, five lost pounds and two ruined shoes later, I was beyond worn and forlorn. I gave up hope that day of finding any summer work.

After being depressed for a couple of weeks, I went out after July 4th to look for work at Mickey D's. Neither McDonald's I went to — the one on Sanford Blvd. in Mount Vernon and the one near downtown New Rochelle — had an opening. A McDonald's with no need for an extra hand? "You *gotta* be kiddin'!", I said to the manager in New Rochelle.

My last attempt at finding work was to take the U.S. Postal Service's postal carrier exam out at their sorting facilities in North White Plains. It was an embarrassing experience, taking a civil service exam with folks who obviously weren't in school. I didn't even know that there were study guides for these exams, for knowing the difference between McClellan and Mclellan, zip codes 10552 and 15252, and AK and AL as states. I spent two hours sweating in a warehouse-like room, breezing through questions and hoping that I would get a call. That was the twenty-fifth of July, the last Monday of the month. About ten days later, a letter came from the Postal Service telling me that I passed the exam with an 86. Preference would be given to veterans and other applicants with special circumstances, then the highest scores after that would get a call, depending on job vacancies. I wouldn't hear from them again until Christmas '92.

My unemployment meant that I was off from school for an amazing four months, 120 days' worth of torture and stress. Especially with my stepfather around. His laziness, his grease and stench and halitosis, his inability to do anything right and his expecting my absolute obedience was a continual indignity that I couldn't live with after spending most of the previous thirty-six weeks away. We actually got into arguments about *his* kids. I didn't see why I had to take care of them while he'd lie around watching TV all day. "Because *I'm* the man of the house," he'd say. "Well, you're the fattest man, anyway," I'd try to say under my breath. Sometimes I just didn't care if he heard me.

Maurice and Mom would have arguments about once every ten days, with me usually caught in the middle, if only because Mom would talk to me about him afterwards. I also was prepared to call the police if anything got out of hand. And I was sure that Maurice knew I would, so he walked a tightrope between verbal and physical abuse.

The final phase of their already dead marriage began on Mother's Day. Maurice went to a flea market outside of Yonkers Raceway and came home with a gift for Mom. It was a used Crock-Pot popcorn popper, the type you heat up over a stove. He gave it to her with all three of us in the kitchen.

"Happy Mother's Day! I got it at the flea market for three dollars!" Maurice exclaimed, thinking that he'd done something good for a change.

The dirty cream-colored pot had dents and scratches all over it. After he left the kitchen, I finally picked my jaw up off the floor.

"You know I outta take this pot and hit him upside the head with it," Mom said. "He's either the dumbest man on the planet or the meanest," I thought. I laughed while shaking my head.

Then Maurice got the brilliant get-rich-quick idea of starting a limo business. The Milton's on the second floor of our building at 616 had been working a limo business for about eight years. It had put the mother Helene through school, helped pay for their two kids' parochial school educations, and it was growing. Ralph was no longer doing much of the direct driving work. He owned three limos, did business all over the New York area, from the major airports to corporate offices like IBM's international headquarters in Armonk, General Foods and so many others. All during June and July, Maurice attempted to work Mom into this scheme by getting her to sign over the old Sun-Lion Corporation license, the one Mom paid for to help Maurice realize his telecommunications scheme six years earlier. Mom refused, driving Maurice batty. "I ain't givin' you nothin' until you get the money together," she said.

My stupid stepfather went to a bank next. I was sure that they laughed him out the door with a story to tell each other for the rest of the decade. Maurice had Ralph and his brother Matthew over one evening to discuss the financing that would be needed to start the business. The moment I heard Ralph say, "A good limo costs around \$25,000," I went into the kids' bedroom and snickered hysterically for about five minutes. Maurice

practically begged Ralph to lend him the money, but he refused, saying that “you gotta get me some collateral before I do that. I gotta know you’re serious.”

So my stepfather went to Jeanette Martin, a long time acquaintance on Mount Vernon’s South Side who owned two homes and had a few businesses of her own going, including a child care operation. Martin helped defray some of the costs of Mom and Maurice’s wedding reception, as it was held at her house back in ’78. She was a nice woman, a combination of Tina Turner and Chaka Khan in terms of how she looked and sounded. Martin tended to look out for pitiful people like my stepfather.

Maurice’s timing couldn’t have been worse. Mrs. Martin had been in the fight of her life, having been arrested and put on trial along with her husband on child molestation charges in ’86. Eighteen kids had said that they’d been touched, assaulted and sodomized by the couple in a wild pedophilic orgy, even though they weren’t the day-to-day daycare providers. The story was all over the news off and on between the fall of ’85 and the summer of ’88, coming up again once the Tawana Brawley story and Jesse Jackson’s “Run Jesse Run” campaign had dropped below the fold and off the airwaves. It was part of a rash of incidents in which spiteful parents, overeducated psychologists and coached children brought accusations against child care providers with little to no evidence other than the children’s statements. One daycare provider was convicted, and Martin was all but acquitted, except for two misdemeanor counts of child endangerment. Martin’s husband was acquitted on all counts.

Mrs. Martin ended up serving a year in jail, getting out in early ’88. Her once abundant savings were almost completely gone, and so was her health. She lent Maurice \$1,000 to help him start the business, likely knowing that she’d been better off using it to throw herself a party. Martin died less than a year later, and Maurice gave up on using the money to start the business long before that.

My contempt for him was so strong that it could’ve overpowered the odor of a hundred skunks, which in Maurice’s case was a close enough metaphor. I saw the man as a walking cesspool of evil and spiritual corruption. I blamed him for everything evil that had happened to me over the past decade. I wanted him to pay, but Mom kept saying, “You can’t walk around with so much hate in your heart.” She was right. “I’m supposed to be a Christian,” I thought. That thought was quickly replaced by the reality that good can’t abide evil, and I couldn’t take much more than I already had.

One triple-H evening in late-June I was about to give Eri, Sarai and Yiscoc a bath. I filled up the tub and had started to get a wash cloth and soap together for bathing them. They always had fun in the tub, one of those rare occasions when life seemed normal. Maurice passed by me as I went into the bathroom. I must've given away my look of disgust and scorn, because the next thing I knew, he pushed me from behind and almost knocked me into the tub. "You're gonna respect me nigga, once and for all!" he yelled as he tried to throw a punch. I caught him off balance with my right arm as I pushed off the tub wall with the left so as to not land on my siblings. Luckily for them, their father landed in the front of the tub, where no one was sitting. Then they held Maurice back just long enough for me to leave the house again. He wouldn't have been able to chase me, anyway. He only had on his funky underwear.

I walked for a while, west up East Lincoln until I reached Lincoln Elementary, bumping into Danny in the process. No conversation, thank God, just a honk from him in his souped up Camaro as he tore down North Fulton. I stayed on the playground for about an hour, then went back home. I knew that I had a decision to make. If he laid a hand on me, I'd go to the police. If he didn't, I'd act like everything was normal and go to bed.

When I got home, Maurice and Mom were up waiting for me in the living room. He didn't touch me. He didn't say anything for a moment.

All I kept muttering to myself was, "I'm a pussy," because I still could've gone to the cops for his attempted assault.

After a couple of minutes, he said, "Get this through your head, boy. Me and your mother are happy together, and we're gonna be together long after you leave here and go out in the world. The world's a dangerous place, and we're just gettin' you ready for it."

"Huh? What?" I knew not to laugh right then, but I was laughing at him on the inside. I knew right then that him and Mom would be over sooner rather than later.

It *had* to be coming to a close. Mom had broken out of her welfare rut soon after I started at Pitt, enrolling at the proprietary Westchester Business Institute in White Plains to pursue an associate's degree in Accounting. They offered quarter-system (ten-week long) semesters in which part-time students took two or three classes, Friday nights and Saturdays. Even my brother Darren could watch our four younger siblings for four hours on Fridays and six on Saturdays. Mom was already in the middle of her third quarter when I came home for the summer. I knew that she'd never admit it, that my decision to go to

Pitt pushed her to go back to school herself. I was happy for her and I wanted her to succeed.

I also hoped that I could convince Darren to go to college as well. Not so fast! Darren might've passed the RCT with flying colors, but it only tested students on material they should've learned in eighth grade. I could've aced the exam myself by the time I finished sixth grade. Darren had a lot of work to do academically and psychologically if he really wanted to go to college.

Most of my thoughts regarding Darren were about his high school graduation with MVHS' Class of '88 at Memorial Field. He was graduating at twenty-one, not so bad except for the fact that he didn't know a single person in the class and had never set foot in MVHS. Not only that. Darren was graduating with Erika, who had invited me to the ceremony as well. She was on her way to Wesleyan University in the fall. Not only that. Darren's Clear View friends were also there. This wasn't a good combination of folks, given the level of intolerance Mount Vernonites had toward anyone who wasn't "normal." Sure I was embarrassed, but I was much more embarrassed for them than for myself. I knew Erika well enough to know that she would've been fine around Darren and his friends. But I also knew that rank-and-file graduates and their parents weren't. My Uncle Sam showed up, which was really nice. Jimme didn't, for whatever reason, probably both bad and good considering how drunk he was at my graduation the year before. I didn't see much of Darren in July and August. He was doing summer camp and working at Clear View those months.

My youngest siblings were just starting to hit elementary school age, with Sarai and Eri now five and four years old. Maurice and Yiscoc were already there at soon-to-be nine and seven years old respectively. With no job and no money to do anything after the middle of June, I dedicated myself to their care and nurturing. It was the first time I clearly saw the differences in all their personalities. Maurice was shy and smart and easily excitable about how things worked. Yiscoc seemed to long for folks in his life that he could be cool around. He was in love with the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoon series, which had started at the end of last year, and he constantly imitated their karate moves. Of course, Yiscoc's overweight father sometimes tried to help with some of that. Sarai was a lonely princess of a girl, and constantly wanted me to baby her. She was already talking bad about her brothers but cried whenever they made fun of her. And Eri, well, he was a handful, an

irritant that just loved to stir things up. It was almost as if he wished he hadn't been born, the way he acted sometimes.

About a week after his fourth birthday, I came home from looking for work to find that only Darren and my younger siblings were there. Eri had been by the living room windows and radiator, which wasn't on of course, as it was the beginning of June. When he saw me, he ran right to the bedroom. Because it was such a hot day, I immediately picked up the fragrant smell of poop but wasn't sure where it was coming from. Then I saw it! This big brown turd on the side of the radiator. I had to get a towel, because we didn't have cleaning gloves or paper towels (too expensive), pick it up, and dump it into the toilet to flush it down.

"That's it!" I yelled as I grabbed Eri. I wiped his butt, pulled up his underwear and spanked him.

"If you're smart enough to take a dump by the radiator and run into the room when you see me, then you're smart enough to sit on the toilet!" I yelled while smacking his butt with my hand.

Eri cried, but that wasn't the end of it. When Mom came home after shopping for porgies and whiting, I told her, and she spanked Eri as well. When my stepfather came home, she told him and he, of course, whupped him. It was the last time Eri pooped anywhere other than the toilet.

Most of my other dealings with my siblings were mundane by comparison. I made them breakfast and lunch most days, and dinner on Fridays. I took them to Wilson Woods and Holmes School to play Nerf football, on walks into Pelham and within a mile-and-a-half radius of 616. We played some basketball around Traphagan Elementary, where there was a court, and in the park in Chester Heights, where I destroyed Darren's NBA dreams three years before. I gave them baths, read a few books to them, and we played some indoor games together.

By far my favorite times with them that summer were nap time and music time, which sometimes were one and the same. They were the rowdiest kids I'd ever seen, and despite the lack of discipline they generally displayed, they listened to me when I told them all it was time to take a nap. Right around one-thirty or two o'clock in the afternoon, I'd get them all to lie down in their beds in my former bedroom and on the worn-out blue couches in the living room. Then I'd put on something smooth and

mellow, which at first was Anita Baker or Whitney Houston. I very quickly learned that wasn't potent enough, so I switched to Kenny G's *Duotones*, including "Songbird" and "Don't Make Me Wait For Love." They were all asleep by the time side A was done. As much as I liked Kenny G back then, I'd fall asleep, too. It was the most peaceful two hours of my day.

In the evenings, especially in the last month and a half before I left for year two at Pitt, we would play sing-along together. I'd bought Michael Jackson's *Bad* again before my money from my last CIS paycheck ran out, along with cassingles with Brenda Russell's "Piano In The Dark," Johnny Hates Jazz's "Shattered Dreams," and Whitesnake's "Here I Go Again." I also played Michael Bolton's *The Hunger*, The Police, Genesis, Sting, and Richard Marx. When I didn't own it, I switched to radio to play songs like New Edition's "Can You Stand The Rain?," Breathe's "Hands to Heaven," George Michael's "Father Figure," and Terence Trent D'Arby's "Sign Your Name." But our stand-by, absolutely must-play-over-and-over-again song was Michael's "Man In The Mirror." They wanted to hear that all the time. I ended up scraping some money together and bought the cassingle, which also included the song's instrumental version. The video was cool despite the way Michael looked, and it was the summer of presidential politics, Lakers versus Pistons in the NBA Finals, and the Summer Olympics in Seoul. It was a song that fit its times, had a message, albeit a somewhat convoluted one. And for better or worse, you could tell that Michael Jackson really loved this song himself. I knew that was why my younger siblings enjoyed it so much.

Despite their fun, I needed to get out of the house from time to time. It was the hottest and driest summer on record, so dry that the New York City area was under a state of emergency order. People were forbidden from washing their cars or watering their lawns, which would've left me out of a job mowing lawns anyway, as brown and dead so many were by mid-July. Day after day with my siblings, at 616 or outside, with highs of ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one-hundred-and-one, and without air conditioning was taking its toll. Just going to C-Town to food shop was a welcome relief from the heat.

So I did venture out from sometimes, making my way to Mount Vernon Public Library or Hartley Park a few times. I bumped into Wendy several times at both places. She was still working at the library's periodicals desk. I think I joked with her once about

checking out *Playboy*. We'd talk about how the school year went, or how the summer was going, or how JD was doing. According to Wendy, he was in Egypt that summer, touring the Great Pyramids like the good jet-setter he was. If I'd been at all interested, it might've been a good summer to really have hung out and gotten to know her better. But with no money, the shame and embarrassment of 616, and my mind still in recovery from a rough year of rejection and strife, I didn't want to put myself in another situation where a former classmate could hurt me. I was content talking with Wendy and watching a public concert with her at the park.

For similar reasons, I rebuffed Erika's attempts to hang out that summer. I'd sometimes meet her some place and we'd walk and talk, but that was it. Even though I learned the lesson that not everyone female was as triffin' or insensitive as Phyllis, I assumed that the lesson only applied to folks outside of the New York area. Since there were at least three or four million residents with a social rudeness disorder, I didn't want to give my heart-felt trust to anyone unless it was absolutely necessary. I couldn't take the chance of going down the path of obsession and self-destruction, because if something like Phyllis happened again, I didn't know if I would ever recover.

Over those long days and evenings at home, I also bumped into Suzanne a couple of times at her house, Allison once or twice, and even had a couple of Phyllis-in-car sightings. For the first time, I actually felt nothing at all - good or bad - about her. I also bumped into Lisa at the old mall in New Rochelle. Lisa was one of the most popular students in our class, a café au lait Black woman. It seemed that many of the popular folks from MVHS were between redbone and golden-brown in complexion. She found her way in Cameo's "Word Up" video, did some bit roles on ABC's *All My Children*, and had done some modeling. Still, Lisa didn't seem particularly happy. We talked — no — *she* talked to me for a few minutes about her acting and modeling prospects and I just listened. I didn't fully trust my instincts, but I kind of thought that most of what she had said was a bunch of half-baked hoping and wishing instead of actual work.

On one Saturday summer evening in August, I thought of Phyllis again as I walked passed MVHS, listening to WPLJ play Breathe's "Hands to Heaven" and New Edition's "Can You Stand The Rain?" back to back. It had been more than a year since that day at the Galleria in White Plains, when Phyllis and Claudia castrated me. I saw so many silent-treatment ex-classmates like Gordon, Tomika, Jamie and others with boyfriends and

girlfriends in cars that I couldn't take it anymore. I started tearing up out of anger and despair, thinking "Why do I have to always be the one who loses out?!" I was so overwhelmed that I didn't talk to Mom or anyone else after I came home. I didn't even eat. In one of those rare moments of semi-motherly tenderness, Mom asked me what was wrong.

"Why do we have to be the ones without a house or a car? Why do I have to do without all the time? Where's my girlfriend?," I asked and said without much thought about what my questions implied.

"You can't go on out there hatin' the world or being jealous 'cuz of what others got. If you keep workin' at it, you'll have yours," Mom said.

Besides the fact that she was right for once, I couldn't believe that she was still capable of saying anything that was nurturing or encouraging.

"Thanks Mom," I said.

Of course, she didn't let it go with that. "You're the type of guy girls marry. Or you could also be a rapist."

I did figure something very basic and human out about myself and the two crushes of my life after that evening. If Wendy was the yin, the Force in my life that was always good for me, Phyllis represented the yang, the Dark Side of the Force. I'd become attracted to Phyllis the same way an abused puppy becomes loving of someone who at least feels sorry for it. In those first years of Humanities, Phyllis was nice to me because it was the Christian thing to do, given my Hebrew-Israelite ways. When my kufi came off and my body grew in length, Phyllis was attracted to me because she sensed my hunger for acceptance from others, including hers. By the time I picked up on her infatuation, her's was already starting to wane.

I understood through my conversation with Mom that my attraction to Phyllis paralleled my love for Mom, my wanting her approval as a man, as a Black man especially. I wasn't cool enough, wasn't confident enough, wasn't aggressive enough to fulfill Phyllis' image of me. It wasn't as if she hadn't given me opportunities to fulfill her ideal. Invitations to basketball games and after school parties were met with my excuses. They were good excuses, even excellent ones, but not-good-enough for folks who never actually knew the real me and my real life. My reason for turning Phyllis down was because I knew that the Phyllis that had been so nice to me when we were younger wasn't the Phyllis I saw as a

high school junior or senior. I couldn't possibly fulfill her image of me anymore than she could fulfill my image of her. Once the summer before college rolled around, she had already accepted that something was wrong with me. I hadn't accepted that something may well have been wrong with her. It wasn't until the letter that I fully understood what it was that both attracted me to Phyllis and what made me cringe at the same time. It just took me until August to process it fully. The strong need to have cool folks in your life, a need for acceptance, a need to be popular, is a sign of insecurity, of narcissism, a word I'd only recently learned.

Still, I knew that none of that really mattered to anyone but me. As a man, even a man as young as me, I understood that most women expected us to make the first move in dating or in having a relationship. When we don't step up, it creates too much doubt and discomfort for women, at least in my limited experience with them. So it's easier for them to blame us, to say we're weird, we're asexual, we're "gay" than to think that maybe, just maybe, we're terrified. Terrified of our own emotions, about how to reconcile how we feel with our rational minds and our spiritual beliefs, about how to feel adequate to the task of even starting a relationship or just asking someone out. That was how I felt, and in understanding that, I was finally able to say good-bye to Phyllis, still disappointed, but no longer angry enough to make a voodoo doll out of her.

23. Break Point

About two weeks before I needed to go back to Pittsburgh for my sophomore year, I went to search for Jimme. I was still steamed with him for not getting me the money I needed to secure a dorm room for the upcoming school year. I hardly swung by to see him that summer, too busy taking care of my siblings and recovering from my second roughest year in the decade. So on the next to last Friday before I needed to get back, I bummed ten dollars from Mom and took the Metro-North down from Pelham to the city. I got off, took the shuttle over to Times Square and the 2 to 72nd before walking over the Levi brothers' office on West 64th. Jimme wasn't there, but Glen was. "He's over at my brother's on East 59th," he said. I'd forgotten that Bruce Levi had his own cleaners and business on the East Side.

I walked the dozen or so blocks there. And there Jimme was. I caught him just as he was getting paid for the week. "Bo' wha'cha doin' up here?," he said with complete disbelief. We talked for just a few minutes, with me mentioning more than once how I needed money to secure some sort of apartment at school. "Donal', I done messed up too much money," Jimme said. Apparently my father had spent most of the summer going through one of his drinking binges. The Levi's had bailed him out several times, as his landlord Mrs. Smalls had toyed with the idea of evicting him. Jimme gave me \$100 on the spot, and promised to get me more money before I left. When I went to see him at work the following week, he'd given me \$300 more. Indirectly, Glen and Bruce Levi were helping me through college, but I didn't feel particularly thankful toward them at that moment, the wannabe Jewish gangsters they were. Still, I didn't forget my manners. I actually did say, "Thank you so much!" like I meant it.

In rapid succession, I packed up my stuff in the five-suitcase set Mom had bought me the year before. Two suitcases, two duffel bags, and a garment bag, all of which she'd ordered from a catalog for a measly eighty bucks. I went down to a travel agency that was down the street from the Pelham Metro-North station and C-Town and found a cheap one-way ticket on USAir for \$35. I couldn't buy a good steak dinner in midtown Manhattan for \$35! I got myself mentally ready for finding an apartment, ideally a one-bedroom.

By that last Sunday in August, everything was ready, and I had everything I needed. I played songs with my siblings for almost two hours before I left. I gave them my Michael Jackson tapes and my radio cassette player, taking my beat-up Walkman with me. We all hugged and cried, much more so than we had the year before. Part of me really didn't want to leave, and part of me knew that I wouldn't be whole again if I didn't. Mom gave me a hug and fifty dollars as I walked out the door. Darren and Maurice walked with me to the Metro-North station, helping me with my bags.

I soon figured out why my flight was so cheap. I was catching the last flight out of LaGuardia, at a quarter to eleven, on a turbo-prop no less. I wouldn't arrive at Pittsburgh Airport until well after midnight. From about three o'clock to 6:30 am, I slept outside the baggage claim area with everything I owned. The long, dry summer heat wave had started to snap, so that it was just comfortable enough to sleep some. Some, but not enough. Then I caught a cab over to Oakland and the University of Pittsburgh.

My first stop was William Pitt Union, where the Off-Campus Housing Office was located. Students and their parents were all over campus, bringing in all their wares. I was immediately struck by how simple and easy their process of starting the year was. I tried very hard not to be resentful. For once, I succeeded, if only because I realized that resentment was a luxury I could no longer afford.

At that moment, I realized that the \$390 I had left over from my trip would only be enough for a place that cost around \$200 a month, and there weren't too many of those near campus. I wrote down a list of apartments that seemed to fit my budget, and made a few calls. There was a place somewhere in Squirrel Hill that was going for \$205 a month. I made a 9 am appointment for Tuesday to take a look at the place.

In the meantime, my hands and arms were tired from walking around with my five-piece luggage set all morning and into the early afternoon. I went back to my old sleeping grounds at Lothrop to see if I could find a familiar face to leave my bags with for a while. The only person I found was Todd, who just told me

“No. Don't you have someone else to ask?,” he said.

“No I don't, but I'll keep lookin',” I lied.

I went back to the student union, looked up a few extra possibilities, gave Mom a quick call to let her know I was all right, and tried to find a place to hold up.

I checked in at the Howard Johnson's on Bates and Boulevard of the Allies, a main drag on the edge of Oakland and just three blocks from the west-central entrance to Schenley Park. It was after six that evening. I got a room for \$69. Compared to sleeping out at the airport and walking around campus all day with suitcases, the lumpy and overly springy bed was wonderful.

Even with a full night's sleep, I woke up the next morning sore and worried. I spent an hour thinking and staring out the window facing both Blvd of the Allies and Bates, watching cars go by and students on their way to campus, all seemingly happier than me. I had a bit more than \$300 left, putting me in even more of a bind than I was in to start the trip. I couldn't afford to check into the hotel for another night, and I didn't have the time to sort through my Pitt bill and financial aid all day at Thackeray while trying to find an apartment. So I went out with my luggage in tow, and walked all the way from Howard Johnson's and through the park to Squirrel Hill, eventually ending up at the apartment building on Beacon and Wightman. As soon as I met the manager, his face changed from friendly to threatened. He looked like he'd never seen a Black man before. "Um, the apartment I had is gone. I just gave it to someone else," he said. I looked at him lying through his teeth and just walked away. It was just after 9 am, but I was too tired to argue. Besides race, the only reason I could think of for my rejection was that I had everything I owned with me when I went to meet with him.

As I walked back toward campus in the August heat, I got this unbelievable cramp in both my hands. I had developed some small calluses in them from spending the better part of two days walking around with my luggage. My legs ached, and I had lost a few pounds since Sunday. I sat down at a bus stop for a while, then I walked a few blocks, stopped, and walked some more. It took me over an hour to reach the park from where I was in Squirrel Hill, a seven or eight-minute walk under normal circumstances. I got to a point along the side of the road where I was pushing the luggage ahead of me a few feet at a time with my legs. At that point, I'd given up.

Thinking of what to do, I looked at the foliage around me. I was in a part of Schenley Park thick with trees, bushes, dark grass and thick bush leaves. So thick that I could stick all of my luggage in a thicket and it would stay concealed for a few days at least. I had in my head the knowledge that several gays had been killed in the park that summer, hidden in its nooks and crannies for days and weeks before police had found their

decomposing bodies. If a rotting corpse could stay hidden for weeks, so could my suitcases. Either way, it made more sense for me to hide the luggage than it did to struggle with it all the way back to Pitt, get on a bus and take it to the Greyhound bus station downtown. I made sure that no one was looking and hid all of my worldly possessions, taking my book bag with a change of clothes, my Walkman and a few of my tunes with me.

Tuesday and Wednesday were the worst two days of my life since the summer of abuse. Even with the luggage well hidden, I worried that fire ants would get a hold of my clothes or that a homeless guy would steal my stuff. But I had no choice. I saw no one from the second half of my freshman year on campus, so I didn't ask for any other help. I kept looking and calling places for apartment availability. Whether efficiencies or studios or one-bedrooms, the response was always, "the place is taken." I spent part of the evening at William Pitt Union, watching the news and the Pirates game, thinking all the while about where I'd sleep that night. The student union was out. Pitt Police were always prowling around and looking into the TV room. Hillman Library was still on a summer schedule, and wouldn't open for its normal hours until after Labor Day. The other buildings were classrooms and faculty offices, better places to hide. My runaway experience in '85 gave me that idea.

I went over to Forbes Quadrangle (formerly Forbes Field, where the Pirates used to play) and hung out at The Second Plate deli on its benches for a while, pretending to study until well after midnight. Then I looked around for a good place to sleep. Unfortunately, maintenance and security guards locked up all of the classrooms and faculty lounges at night. I settled on the stairwell in the farthest corner of the building away from its two main entrances. I walked up to the fifth floor ledge, laid down on the hard concrete on top of my clothes, and fell asleep. This wasn't a good sleep, maybe four or five hours. The fluorescent lights were always on, the guard or students would use the stairs, and the ledge was the hardest thing that I'd ever slept on. I woke up on Wednesday and Thursday morning stiffer than I'd been the day before.

Despite my new experience as the homeless student, I went to my first day of classes. It was actually one class I attended, General Writing, which was in the Cathedral of Learning. I stayed awake long enough to pick up the syllabus and realize that our teacher for the semester was a grad student. Other than that I spent the day breaking down my pride and looking at places where people shared kitchens and bathrooms, something I

wouldn't have considered seventy-two hours before. These places were between \$100 and \$220 a month. I saw a room that was going for \$140, but I decided not to give them a call, continuing to look for something that seemed better.

Before I went to sleep Wednesday night, I got real with myself and real humble with God and started praying. I said, "God, I don't pray nearly as much as I used to, but I could really use your help. I am your child because of Jesus, and I need you to help me find a place to stay. If you don't help me find somewhere to live, I'll have to go home and go to school from home." I knew full well — and God knew, too — what would happen if I went back home. Nothing. Nothing good, anyway. I was three or four days away from buying a plane ticket back to New York and withdrawing from the university. Thoughts of going to Fordham University or Hunter College crept into my head. They were good schools for someone like me. Living at home, though, wasn't.

Day four of homelessness started with me washing up in the men's restroom on the ground floor of Forbes Quad, taking a walk to check on my bags, which were fine because of their pristine location, and came back to campus to do another day of torturous, Sisyphean searching for some place to live. As God and luck would have it, I bumped into Lee. I hadn't seen him since two weeks before the winter semester ended. We talked at length about his favorite show, *Star Trek TNG*, one that we watched together in the tenth floor lounge of Lothrop Hall a few times the second half of our freshman year. We also asked about each other's families and our summers, and then he asked me where I was staying.

"I'm looking for a place," I said.

"You don't have a place yet? Where have you been staying?," Lee asked.

"At Howard Johnson's," I semi-lied. I'm sure Lee knew that I wasn't telling the whole truth either.

He told me that he lived just around the corner from the hotel, right off Bates. The address was 25 Welsford Avenue. Lee's landlord was a Korean guy named Fu. I thanked Lee, went back to the student union to search through the vacancies, and came across Fu's name with the \$140 listing I'd seen the day before. After taking a moment to thank God, I called Fu up. The room was still available.

I went over that evening. It was about a hundred and fifty square feet in all, about the size of a small office or large cubicle. I shared half a radiator with a guy next door. The

wall in between us violated at least two fire codes. It was two layers of cardboard and one layer of sheet rock, with a crude opening for the radiator that the two rooms shared. But the room had a bed, a door with a lock, and the house, a kitchen, fridge, microwave and bathrooms on the first and second floors.

“I’ll take it.”

“Good. You move in tomorrow night. I have some paperwork for you,” Fu said.

As much as I wanted to collapse right then and there, I knew it was already too late in the day to march back to the park for my stuff. I spent my last night in Forbes Quad’s stairwell and last morning washing up in the men’s restroom on the ground floor. I went to all of my classes that day, Biology, Psychology, and General Writing, bumped in Regis and talked to him for well over an hour, got my bags and called Fu. I paid him \$280 dollars for a month’s deposit and a month’s rent. After he gave me my keys, I went into my second-floor sleeping room. It wasn’t much, but it was home. I fell asleep listening to frat boys and sorority girls act fools outside my window. Compared to Maurice, Yiscoc, Sarai and Eri, not to mention Mom and stepfather, they might as well have been crickets for all I cared. I slept away most of my Labor Day Weekend, except for spending some of my remaining money to take in a Pirates-Mets game at Three Rivers. My Mets won 7-5, on the power of two Darryl Strawberry home runs.

Five days of homelessness taught me more about myself and my family than I had learned in the years since my summer of abuse. I already knew that my situation at Pitt was precarious. Because of my limited resources, any dumb decision I made with my money could result in eviction or another episode of living “on the streets.” I knew that I couldn’t rely on Jimme or 616 to bail me out in the long run, that I was out here, all alone.

Or was I? After what I’d just been through, I learned something new and foreign. That everyone needs folks in their lives — friends, family, mentors and authority figures — if for no other reason than the need to ask for help. I’d come to know at least a dozen people that I could’ve called on during my five-day ordeal, but I never looked through a phone book or gave them a call. Heck, I didn’t even try to keep in touch by getting their addresses and numbers at the end of April. Not to mention contacting Jack Daniel, an Associate Provost at Pitt and the author of the Challenge Scholarship, the one that paid for half of my tuition. If anyone had any incentive to make sure I had a place to lay my head, it would’ve been him. All of these thoughts had been in my head during the week. I didn’t

trust them or the instincts or wisdom from which they originated. “I’m so stupid God,” I said to myself, “I’m so incredibly stupid.”

Mom’s constant mantra in my head, of not depending on others for help, was a lie, at least for me. I couldn’t will myself through school. Especially when it came to money. I needed all the help I could get. Besides, my family had now been on welfare for five and a half years. If that wasn’t one of my Mom’s examples of so-called handouts, I didn’t know what was.

My approach to college changed with this revelation. I decided that I needed a network of friends, acquaintances and authority figures in my life. I knew that all the things I shied away from talking about were now things I needed to discuss. But I also knew that I had to draw out my better, more sociable self in order to welcome others in my life with open arms. That meant taking some risks, which meant that I could get hurt emotionally or psychologically by them. I made a pact to myself, a pact to keep my emotions in check, to not allow myself to get too high or too low about any particular set of circumstances or events. Regarding female prospects, I added an addendum to my pact called the Phyllis Rule. The Rule was that if any person I ever went out with showed through act or deed that they were triffin’, superficial, or expected men to fulfill a traditional role, I’d have the option to back out of the date or relationship.

My new perspective on life at Pitt and in general was tested almost immediately. Right after Labor Day, I sorted out all of my financial aid issues, completely paying off my room and board bill from last year. I found myself with only \$450 left for the semester, even with student loans, Challenge Scholarship, and Pell Grant in hand. Once I accounted for books, food, linens, a new Walkman and other basic needs, I only had \$205 left over. That was by the third week in September.

Even working at CIS didn’t help. Because of my five days in search for a living space, I didn’t get on the computing lab work schedule for September. Pitt paid all of its employees — work-study and otherwise — once a month and in arrears. My first full paycheck wouldn’t be until the end of November. I felt screwed. I survived homelessness only to face a major financial crisis, one that left little margin for error. I could’ve saved the \$45 dollars I spent on the new Walkman for some food.

I paid my \$140 in rent on time at the beginning of October, and stretched the remaining \$70 as much as I could. I made Mom’s favorite cheap meal for one week, five-

dollar spaghetti and meat sauce with broccoli. With seasoning and Kool-Aid at home, who needed anything else? With all my efforts, the spaghetti and not-so-meaty meat sauce lasted most of the week. Week two was pork neck bones and rice with spinach, the first time I'd eaten a significant amount of pig since the pre-Hebrew-Israelite days. Week three was a vat of tuna fish salad, which was mixed with just a tiny bit of scraped-from-the-bottom Miracle Whip with salt and pepper. By the end of that week, I couldn't eat canned tuna from a can anymore. Just looking at or smelling a can of tuna now made me want to vomit. I haven't eaten a tuna fish sandwich since.

The end of October rolled around with few food prospects and another drop in my weight. I was sick of Kool-Aid. Pittsburgh's water made water from New York seem like it came from mountain springs, which of course, it practically did. The water was so polluted it gave the grape Kool-Aid I made a funny aftertaste, making me stick with lemonade and fruit punch as options. Much more important was the rent. I called Mom up and asked her to wire me money for rent, hoping that she had it. Surprisingly, she did. She sent me exactly \$140, which I immediately gave to Fu, on time.

My money was so short that I finally swallowed my pride and asked for help. I first asked Regis, after he noticed that we weren't even hanging out at the Roy Rogers in the Cathedral of Learning anymore.

"To be honest, I've only had \$205 to my name since September," I said.

"How've you been making it?," Regis asked.

"Spaghetti one week, pork neck bones and rice the next, tuna fish after that. I'm now down to peanut butter sandwiches," I said.

"I don't have much, but I can at least bring you some bread and a potato. We don't want you out here starvin'," Regis responded, patting me on my right shoulder afterward.

Later that week, Regis actually gave me some bread and a small sack of potatoes. I bummed a few dollars off of Marc, enough to add a hamburger and some chips to my diet of peanut butter crackers and peanut butter sandwiches. Others got into the act, including Lee, who shared some of his dinner with me a couple of times back at Welsford.

I also started donating plasma through Sera-Tec's South Oakland lab twice a week to supplement my lack of income. It required me to lie next to winos, homeless men, and college students apparently doing this for similar reasons or because it was part of their hazing as frat pledges. I made \$75 from six sessions of donating enough plasma to save

many lives. The IVs the technicians used and reused were ones they also stuck in the same place in my right arm. So much so that the insertion point formed a scar and made me look like I was a heroin addict. Sera-Tec was a temporary fix all right, one that only provided enough money for more bread, peanut butter and Kool-Aid.

Despite these acts of generosity and my acts of desperation, I knew that I'd probably starve before the semester was over. I had less than ten dollars to work with after the first week in November. I went to Thackeray Hall to register for classes for next semester. While there, it occurred to me to go upstairs to see one of the financial aid counselors, an older Black woman named Beverly who'd been really nice to me while working through my bill issues earlier in the semester. I told her in detail what was going on. "You need to talk to Ron," she said, referring to Ron Slater, the university ombudsman, the person who normally resided over tuition payment issues. So there I was the next day, explaining to the ombudsman my situation.

"We'll take care of this, we'll find you some extra money. Just hang in there for a few days," he said.

Slater actually offered me money right out of his wallet.

"No thanks, I'll be all right," I said, my voice starting to crack because I was so grateful that anyone cared enough to help me through my dire straits. I somehow found a way not to cry right there on the spot.

The week before Thanksgiving, I went to check in with Beverly. "I've got good news for you, but you'll have to wait a few days." Through the ombudsman, the university had recalculated my financial aid package, increasing my Pell to the maximum amount allowed, and added the federal SEOG grant (Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants) to my aid menu. Both gave me an extra \$800 to work with. After that weekend, one where Regis' potatoes became a part of my diet, I bummed five dollars off of one of my classmates from General Writing. The next day I got my check from the ombudsman. "I'm so glad to have been of help. It's part of my job. I just wish you'd come to me earlier," Slater said. Hearing that did make me tear up. I was in the spirit of the season already. It was two days before Thanksgiving. I spent that holiday at Melissa's house with her and her father, an ailing contractor in his early-sixties.

Even with all my money problems, I found time to reconnect with folks from my first year at Pitt and was able to build on those contacts. I spent a lot of time in the first

weeks of the semester with Marc, who introduced me one day to Rob and Rob's ex-girlfriend Keri. It was a day of quick recovery from a cold, no doubt one I picked up from stress and the draftiness of my room. I was in a NyQuil-induced haze when I bumped into them at the old student athletic center at the top of Oakland. Housing projects and the historically Black Hill District were just a few hundred yards away. We talked for nearly three hours, about the summer, about our classes, about God and about dating. It was fun talking with my peeps, something I hadn't experienced in a while. I learned that Marc and Rob were jazz aficionados, sparking a debate over the renewed interest in jazz fusion through Kenny G. They both thought Kenny G was okay at best, but the fact that jazz had been hijacked as high-brow by Whites wasn't cool with them. I also learned more about Marc's celibacy, causing Rob to get this wry smile on his face. Obviously, he didn't believe in saving himself for marriage. Keri, for her part, kept pretty quiet during most of the conversation.

Regis was in my circle throughout the semester, which was why he was able to provide me some much needed starch during my semester-long time in need. We talked, mostly about his Heidegger course, a scary existential philosophy course for anyone to take. I heard so much from Regis about Heidegger's *Being and Time* that I felt like I was in the course. Whenever the subject came up, he was always like, "So you got a hot date tonight, right?" No excuse was good enough for him, whether it was lack of money or lack of confidence.

What I did do to welcome others in my life was to say "Hi" to everyone, whether they responded or not, whether they were Black, White or Latino, whether I wanted to date them or not. The result was I began to notice that I greeted the same people regularly. That made me bold enough to ask their names and engage them in a conversation, especially around Thanksgiving time. I ended up introducing myself to folks who became my circle of friends and acquaintances for the rest of undergrad. I met Michele after a semester of "Hi"s at William Pitt Union. She was a cute and petite woman, just over five feet tall, and was one of the lightest-skinned Blacks I'd ever met. More importantly, I could tell after a minute of conversation how smart she was.

One day just before Thanksgiving, I stopped the quiet greetings with Michele.

"Hi. You know, we keep saying 'Hi' to each other. We see each other on campus every day, and we should know each other's names," I said.

Michele laughed, stuck out her hand, and said, “Hi. I’m Michele. Now you know.”

I told her my name.

“I’ve gotta go to class. It was nice meeting you, Donald,” Michele said, all smiles.

“Nice meeting you, too. Now I know what to call you the next time I see you!” I yelled as she crossed the street to go to David Lawrence Hall.

I met Kenny through constantly running across campus. And I met Elaine, another person I’d seen all over campus, right after Thanksgiving, in the Afro-American Studies section of Hillman Library. For the first time, I was making the first move to start a friendship.

The semester went well despite the financial strife. It turned on another nail in my upbringing’s coffin. In addition to Biology, Psych 101, and General Writing, I was taking History of Art and Assembly Language, the last as part of my Computer Science major. Playing around with codes that related to “011000100101010000010” all the time drove me out of my mind with frustration. It was after our first major programming assignment that I recognized the problem. “I’m going to school for Mom and not for me,” I said to myself one late evening after running the debugger software at my CIS job. I had a major decision to make.

On the eighteenth of October, I went to the College of Arts and Sciences office on the eighth floor of Cathedral and changed my major to History. I then walked to Thackeray and withdrew from my Assembly Language course. Boy, did that feel good!

Then I called Mom from William Pitt Union to tell her my good news. She was completely quiet for a good ten seconds.

“What are you gonna do with a degree in history?,” she asked with shock in her voice.

“I don’t know yet, Mom, I don’t know. But I do know that I’ll graduate if I major in something I love.”

“All right, are you sure?,” Mom asked more directly. She already knew I was.

I ended the semester on a tear, especially with more than Kool-Aid to drink and peanut butter to eat. I earned two A’s, one in History of Art and one in General Writing, plus a B+ in Psychology and a B- in Biology, a 3.56 semester and my second on the Dean’s

List. Much more important than that, I found myself with a group of people who I could see for who they were, folks I could really hope would stay in my life beyond school.

Unfortunately, the last two years left me with a distasteful habit. Once I was flush with funds, I found myself buying porn magazines again to relieve my months of stress and unfulfilled lust. I was making up for lost time, becoming reacquainted with *Players*, *Hustler*, and *Penthouse*. The night of my scheduled return to 616, the sixteenth of December, I went to Fifth Avenue and bought up all of the magazines with long-legged Black women I could find. There weren't that many. I took them back to Welsford, where I jacked-off throughout the night.

There was something different about this, though. I couldn't go to sleep, even though I was absolutely exhausted. I wasn't supposed to catch a bus until eight o'clock that morning, but I gave up getting sleep at five-thirty. I went out in a snowstorm to catch a PAT-Transit bus downtown, and walked over from Grant to the Greyhound Bus terminal. I didn't think we were going anywhere the way the snow was coming down, but we left on time for New York City. Good thing for us that the bus was a non-stopper between Pittsburgh and Philly.

On the bus and across from me was a young Black woman with a Brooklyn accent. She was as pretty as anyone I'd seen in the previous seven years. But I was so tired that I kept to myself. Despite our driver's attempts to kill us all by going at near ninety an hour on the part of the Pennsylvania Turnpike that crossed the Allegheny Mountains, I slept for a couple of hours, playing Phil Collins, Peter Cetera, Brenda Russell and Kenny G throughout. Once I woke up, I looked over at her and struck up a conversation. We talked from central Pennsylvania to Philly and from there to New York. She was a second-year medical student at Wayne State University in Detroit, and was in between boyfriends. We talked about our families and our growing up in and around the big city. She was the first person to tell me that "anything above 125th Street is upstate, don't'cha know?," referencing Mount Vernon. It was a long and wonderful conversation, and if I hadn't been embarrassed by 616, I would've asked her out. She didn't give me the chance to think about it. She gave me her number and said, "You don't have to call, but I really would like it if you did."

I didn't call, thinking, "How could this work?" Even just hanging out would've been a logistical nightmare. Forget about the distance between Detroit and Pittsburgh. I

knew I was over-thinking again, but at least I was thinking about something that *actually* happened for a change. I was game to a date, but it just wasn't going to work. So I sighed and put her number in my wallet, blown away that another attractive woman would be interested in *me*.

Laurell came up from Virginia and Johns Hopkins to visit her father in Mount Vernon. She got together with Nicole, a friend of hers from MVHS who graduated a year after us. She wrote a letter to me before the holidays announcing her visit and wanting to get together, but I didn't believe her. I didn't say so, mind you, I just didn't respond. So *Laurell* got bold. She came over the second-to-last day of '88 and rang the downstairs security bell to get in the building. I was washing dishes from a breakfast of grits and eggs, the house a pitiful mess as usual. Before I could get to it, one of my younger siblings had buzzed them in. I was in no way ready to go out, and the house was too disgusting for anyone to visit, especially anyone I knew. I was wearing a blue-and-white checkered ex-dress shirt, my green-blue Bugle Boy jeans, and a pair of new Nike's I'd bought post-Thanksgiving. Mom was in a panic. "Donald, get downstairs before they get up here. They can't see the house like this!" she said nervously.

As soon as I got out the door, Laurell and Nicole were coming onto the third floor from the stairs next to our apartment door. I said my "Hi" and gently coaxed them back downstairs to Laurell's old Chevy Chevette. She gave me a "What gives?" look. I said, "Things are unsettled right now," my code to say that the apartment was a mess, but I knew that Laurell didn't buy that for an explanation.

It didn't seem to matter. We talked all the way over to JD's house about school, school and more school, picking up our former eighth-grade math teacher Longerano in the process. Laurell and Jeanne had become friends between eighth grade and her second year at Johns Hopkins, something I found odd and fascinating. It was a cold yet clear day, with snow all over the place from recent storms. We went to JD's house, where Joshua was already waiting. The house was in Fleetwood, and it wasn't a house to me. It was a palatial mansion compared to most of the houses I'd seen. The hardwood floors looked like they'd been put in yesterday, lacquered the night before and sterilized that morning. The place was laid out, the type of house you'd see in *Better Homes & Gardens* or on a slightly less affluent *Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous* with Robin Leach. I tried as best I could to hide my awestruck feeling at that moment. I wasn't jealous. It just finally hit me why there was so

much social distance between me and my classmates. I met JD's aunt for the first and last time.

Once JD made his grand entrance in the living room, we schlepped to the nearest pizza joint on West Grand in Fleetwood. The pizza was good, but the conversation was better. There was a lot of "everything's goin' well" type of discussion going. Yet I got the sense that things weren't all that great. Then JD admitted that he was a semester away from academic probation at Berkeley. His engineering classes were kicking his butt. From the looks of things, he was doing much better athletically than anywhere else, having bulked up to 190 with twenty extra pounds of muscle. Josh then admitted that his academic and social life wasn't exactly going as planned. "I don't know which one is worse," he told us. He'd grown four or five inches since MVHS, good enough to put him around five-five or five-six. Laurell, of course, had a killer GPA at Johns Hopkins, an Asian boyfriend named Eugene, and just loved things there. What she didn't mention, between home and school, was that she was on the verge of burnout, 3.6 average or not. The two of us exchanged letters about once every four to six weeks, so I knew more of the truth. But it took work to get JD and Josh to be honest. I decide not to embarrass Laurell with questions I already knew the answers to. As for me, I talked a bit about some of my new friends and a couple of my class. Nothing, though, about the drama of the previous year.

We hung out for about an hour and a half, gave each other our well wishes, and went our separate ways. Laurell dropped me off and gave me a big hug, all the while still curious about why I intercepted her before she reached the front door to the apartment. "Because the apartment's a mess," I said. She didn't see that as a good enough excuse, as many times as I'd been to her place on Rich while we were in Humanities. But it was the only explanation I had. What else could I have said? That my younger siblings looked unkempt, that my obese stepfather walked around in dingy underwear, that Mom was embarrassed, even more than I was? I guess. It hit me for the first time why I liked the folks I'd met at Pitt so much more than my former classmates. I didn't have to pretend that my life was going great in front of them, that I knew everything or had my career all figured out. I didn't even have to feel embarrassed about how little furniture there was in the house or feel interrogated like I felt with Laurell at that moment.

But Laurell did do something that my Pitt folks would've done. She stopped herself from escalating the conversation about 616. She just gave me a dear friend hug. "Have a

Happy New Year,” she said. “Happy Birthday, Laurell,” I said. “Maybe there’s hope for *some* of my classmates, at least,” I thought. The last few months had proven that there was plenty of reason to hold out hope for myself as well. I learned all the things I needed to know to live my life for me again.

24. Brand New Day

Changes in my life had now become inevitable, especially after overcoming homelessness and malnutrition. As Bobby once said to me, “When you least expect it, expect it.” Because of the Twenty-Second Amendment’s FDR Rule, there was at least one expected change as ’89 began. On the twentieth of January, Reagan finally left office. And even though I was no fan of Bush — or Dukakis for that matter (I wrote Jesse Jackson in on my absentee ballot) — I was happy that Reagan’s reign was over. There were plenty of other changes that I hoped would occur in ’89, more at the level of my classes, my new major, my circle of friends and acquaintances, and with my family.

The first change was immediate. I decided that after more than two years of struggle that my porn pleasures were too dangerous for me to continue to indulge in. It wasn’t a spiritual or Christian decision exactly. I felt that these images got in the way of how I dealt with women in general. They also messed with my ability to imagine, to experience the world and connect it to my imagination. Plus, I needed to sleep more, and porn magazines didn’t get the job done. So the day after my return from the holiday break, I threw out all of my magazines. “If I’m going to jackoff, it needs to be to women I’ve actually seen or met in the real world,” I thought with a bit of trepidation. Though horny, I was relieved not to have the pressure that I felt with *Playboys*, *Hustler* and *Penthouse* lying around.

To avoid the financial challenges of the previous year, I soon signed up for the new schedule at CIS, putting myself down for twenty hours a week. I had two eight-hour shifts at the Cathedral labs, including a 4 pm to midnight shift on Mondays. This would turn into a problem as the semester progressed. I had an 8 am macroeconomics discussion section on Tuesdays. I didn’t know how much of a problem it would be. I just knew I needed the money.

CIS itself was going through some growing pains. In the sixteen months since my freshman orientation, the system had expanded from two labs in Cathedral and one at Forbes Quad to include a new and expanded lab at David Lawrence Hall and a brand-new one at Hillman Library. My four-hour weekday shift was at the library lab. More labs, more computers and the new high-speed and high-capacity laser printers all meant new employees and new co-workers.

It also meant a new boss. My even-tempered boss Mark moved into an administrator level position with CIS and the university. Cindy came on board and changed the way we worked with each other immediately. Our staff of geekish White boys and older, worldlier White guys expanded a bit as more women came to work for the labs. I felt uneasy about this because with all this change, I was maybe one of three Blacks working for CIS in early '89.

Some of my co-workers welcomed the changes. Bill was a twenty-six year-old White male who had just finished his B.S. in Computer Science and was looking for a systems analyst job when Cindy came on board. He was one of the few folks in CIS who didn't behave like a complete geek. He had communication skills on par with a good salesman, which likely explained why there were women constantly asking him questions during his shifts. Patrick was around Bill's age and engaged, but that didn't seem to matter too much from what I saw from time to time. Jeff and Paul were my favorite folks to work with, not too macho and not too nerdy, just about right for CIS work. Aside from them, our group of geeks seemed content with the labs and their know-it-all roles in them. Most CIS staff weren't that bad, but a few came close. We all had funny stories about students folding up the old five-and-a-quarter inch floppy disks and not knowing why they didn't work. Or about people jamming their disk in the gap between the two drives and wondering why their computer shut down.

Then there was Pamela. She was a twenty-six-year-old peroxide-blonde party girl who'd come back to school and ended up an Information Systems major. Sometimes I ended up paired with her on my Monday evening shifts, which ran from 4 pm to midnight. I liked talking to her during those shifts to pass the time when I couldn't concentrate on evolutionary theory in second-semester Bio or didn't feel like reading more existential philosophy. But I wasn't interested in her. Despite the fact that she was the first White woman I'd met in Pittsburgh that had anything other than a completely flat butt and that she occasionally said something interesting, Pamela was out-of-sight and mind when my shift was over.

Three weeks into the semester, Bill threw a party at his apartment on North Craig in North Oakland. He had taken a job to work for AT&T somewhere in Virginia, a job that would start at the beginning of March. He wanted to celebrate, so he invited all of us over. I liked Bill, so I went.

I got there and it was as insane a scene as I'd seen in the dorms my freshman year or with my father at the bars in the city. Bill's place was barely lit. Booze and boozers were everywhere, and almost everyone was in some phase of inebriation. I got in, and Pamela started talking to me all crazy, as if we'd been in conversation about our sexual preferences in the past. I pulled away from her, had conversations with Mark, Bill, Patrick and a few others, had a customary drink — my first beer since just before Thanksgiving '87 — and left.

At least I was trying to. As I began putting on my coat and scarf, Pamela came out and put her arms around my neck and her left leg in between mine, pushing me up against the foyer wall in the process.

"You can't leave *now*," she said, her eyes glazed and bloodshot.

I didn't say anything. I just tried to get her arms from around me.

"I know you're attracted to me . . . that you like *this* White girl," Pamela said as she tried to kiss me.

"You're drunk!" I said in response as I finally managed to unhook her from my neck and body.

"I might be drunk, but you can still get laid," she said as I shook my head and left.

I assumed that Pamela had too much to drink and that what happened at the party was the end of it, but it wasn't. All through February and early March she worked hard to bait me into conversations that were all about sexual innuendo. During one Saturday project when we were installing new PCs and new software, Pamela called me a "useless prick." I responded, "Just because you have a nice butt doesn't mean I'm supposed to be attracted to you!" I pretty much tried to avoid her after that.

Since I needed the hours, I occasionally took on other folks' shifts. But when Bill left, most of his hours fell on my plate. From the third week in February through the beginning of April, I averaged thirty-six hours a week at CIS, between the Cathedral labs, Forbes Quad and Hillman. So there was only so much avoiding of Pamela I could do.

The annoyances of working full-time for nearly half a semester with a party girl who couldn't seem to leave me alone didn't distract me from the task at hand. I registered for classes as a History major back in the fall with the undergrad history advisor Bob Doherty. He was cool as most professors went, a no-nonsense, tell-it-like-it-is kind of guy. I decided for my first semester in my major that I just had to take the writing seminar for

History majors. Doherty said, “You know, you’re not supposed to take this class until your junior or senior year.” I knew this, but I pushed for the class, using my grade in Western Civ II and my AP American History score as evidence of my ability. Doherty then agreed, but only if I didn’t take any other history courses that semester. I also registered for second-semester Biology, macroeconomics, Intro to Shakespeare, and existential philosophy, which would fulfill one of my undergraduate writing requirements. In all, I had registered for a sixteen-credit semester.

It would’ve been a tough semester even if I hadn’t worked, but with the CIS schedule the way it was, I was in for an interesting ride. For Macro, the chair of the Economics department was our professor. The class was at nine o’clock in the morning on Tuesdays and Thursdays, along with the 8 am discussion section every Tuesday. It was almost as if he wanted folks to fail. With my Monday night work schedule, I rarely made it to class on Tuesdays, and I only made it to one discussion section all semester long. To make up for that, I never missed the class on Thursdays, and often participated in the lecture discussion, asking questions and making comments on the contradiction of “zero unemployment” as four-percent unemployment, according to Keynesian economics. It would’ve been better if Zini or Demontravel had taught the course.

Shakespeare was later in the day on Tuesdays and Thursdays, taught by Wion, who looked like the actor Robert Foxworth from the CBS show *Falcon Crest*, only not quite as handsome. He delivered lines from *Taming of The Shrew* and *Othello* like he’d been a wannabe actor in a previous career but realized teaching was more of his shtick. Wion often used Freudian pop psychology to explain the motives of characters in Shakespeare’s plays, and as he did, all of our eyes glazed over. This analysis for us was so ’70s, especially for the second-wave feminists in the class.

My Bio and Philosophy classes seemed to fit under the theme of “questioning God,” as there were students in both who had an ax to grind against “dumb Christians” like me. Bio in some ways was easier, at least because we had a professor who understood why some of us who were Christian might find evolution difficult to swallow. After several yelps from students during one of his lectures on evolution, mutation and reproduction, he said, “just because there’s evolution doesn’t mean that God doesn’t exist. Who’s to say that evolution isn’t a higher being’s method for the creation of life?” Our professor was willing to concede that while evolution was a scientific fact, that the mechanisms that made

evolution possible might not have occurred purely and merely by chance, given their scale and complexity. I appreciated that answer very much. It helped me reconcile my anxiety over evolution versus creation, an anxiety that I hadn't been able to resolve since Graviano's Bio class in ninth grade.

In existentialism class, especially the discussion section, no reconciliation was possible. On the one hand we had a great professor, a young and energetic recent PhD teaching in his second semester at Pitt. He made Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Camus come alive as he became excited talking about the *Übermensch* (German for Superman) and Abraham's "theological suspension of the ethical." This guy would end up with a job at Georgetown by the end of the semester. One of his teaching assistants, my discussion section instructor, was an Australian man in his late-twenties, with curly hair like the lead singer from Simply Red, except my instructor's hair was a dirty blonde. He spent discussion after discussion railing on Christians as "people who refuse to believe that God doesn't exist." One of our discussions was so anti-everything other than atheism that I found it just as bigoted as anything I'd heard from Hebrew-Israelites or out of a televangelist's mouth, and said as much. I was ignored.

No class that semester drove me nuts like my writing seminar with Neal Galpern, though. We met on Monday and Wednesday afternoons for about an hour and a half, and it was the most boring hour and a half on my schedule. Galpern was an aging hippie complete with comb-over who graduated with doctorate in hand from Berkeley in '75. He sometimes acted like he was still dropping acid. His stuttering starts and stops and numerous "Um"s could stop his lectures and our discussions cold, leaving most of us wondering where he was headed next. He wanted each of us to write a research-based paper of no less than twenty pages on any comparative topic in history that we could come up with, as vague as the man himself.

Nothing was worse than the five classes we had over three weeks, all wrapped around Spring Break week. Galpern began this long and meandering soliloquy about his comparisons of medieval Spanish culture and the Moors, who ruled most of the Iberian Peninsula between the early eighth and mid-thirteenth centuries before being completely kicked out in 1492. There were fourteen students enrolled in this class. Yet over five horribly boring lectures, our attendance dropped from twelve to ten, then ten to six, then from six to four, and finally to two students by the lecture after the break. The class didn't

reach full attendance again until the middle of April, a week before the end of the semester.

I couldn't stand Galpern and his constant skipping over my hand in class and his snarky comments to all of us as if we were all dense and he was clearer than Antarctic ice melt. I didn't challenge Galpern in class, at least not directly. I challenged him with my project. I decided to do a paper that compared the main features of the Civil Rights Movement in the US to the Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa. Admittedly it was too big a project, but it was Galpern's job to help me narrow the topic into a doable chunk. Instead, all the advice he gave me consisted of "You need to find another topic, um . . . because, um . . . I'm afraid . . . I don't, um . . . know much . . . about this." I refused to budge. I wasn't about to do a stupid paper on medieval Europe just because that happened to be his area of alleged expertise. After a meeting where Galpern finally gave in to me, I went across the hall to our classroom on the third floor of Forbes Quad and imitated my professor's halting style of conversation. Galpern walked in, and I just kept going until I finished my, um, sentence. Yeah, it would be safe to say that he didn't like me too much either!

With work and classes taking up so much of my time and energy, it was difficult to find a social life that would bring some balance. I still tried, though, and at times succeeded. It took one Friday at the end of January to solidify one group of folks whom I'd count in my circle. After a long week, I wasn't feeling particularly hot, so I went home after my Bio class and took a long nap. When I woke up, it was already after seven. I quickly washed up and decided to spend the evening at the student union watching TV since I didn't have any plans.

I went to the TV room and started watching what seemed like the three-thousandth episode of *Dallas* on CBS. I hadn't seen much of the show since Victoria Principal's character had awoken from a year-long dream about losing her husband, played by Patrick Duffy. Almost two years had passed between episodes for me, yet it only took one twelve-minute segment for me to figure out the new story line.

I turned to Kenny and his tall friend, both of whom were sitting behind me in the next row, and said, "This story's ridiculous." Nothing particularly profound.

Except that opened the door for Kenny to fire off some jokes. "You know, Sue Ellen's 'nothing but a drunken slut,'" a joke and a quote of a classic line from the show. We

all laughed. That opened the door for me to put my sense of New York irony and sarcasm to work.

“Yeah, *everyone* in Dallas lives like the Ewings,” I said.

Before long we were having a good time making fun of the show. I kept comparing the character Cliff Barnes to President George H. W. Bush, both smart but swayed by their rage and jealousy, while they kept laughing at all the ridiculous story lines.

I soon learned that Kenny and his friend were from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania’s state capital, which I’d gone through only by Amtrak. “I’m sorry,” I said in hearing the news. Kenny thought that was funny also. Still, it wasn’t Mount Vernon. “That would be worse,” I thought.

Over the next few minutes, Michele, whom I’d met the previous semester, had come into the room said “Hey,” and joined in on our hilarity of the show. Two others came in over the next twenty minutes. First there was Bryan, a short White dude with John Lennon-type rose-colored glasses whose hairline was already receding and thinning. He dressed like a young professor would, with a brown tweed sport coat and big green and blue-striped scarf that hanged down to his knees, along with khaki slacks. Bryan chimed in immediately, aware that we weren’t really watching the show.

And then came Terri, also short and different. At five-two, she had short dark-brown hair and also wore glasses, though not as cool as Bryan’s. There was something about Terri that I knew was different, that she wasn’t just “Black,” whatever that meant. She was one of the first biracial women I’d come to know. It seemed like those were the first words out of her mouth. Maybe not. But Terri did tell us she was “half-Black and half-White” before the night was over. Terri and Bryan obviously knew each other, as they came in together already in the midst of another conversation. She immediately jumped into our growing conversation once they sat down and criticized *Dallas* as one of many examples of lily-Whiteness on TV. That launched a whole new discussion, with everything from *The Cosby Show* to 227.

After about an hour of debates, jokes and wonderful conversation, we all went out into Oakland. We started at The O, the nickname for Original’s. It had already been a mainstay for students and steelworkers in need of cheap food and beer since ’60. The Pitt football team often drank and caroused there, often getting into fights with Pitt Police. This Friday it was overcrowded and dirty, and we wanted to talk. Terri had become the leader of

our pack, and took us over to Hemingway's as an alternative. The bar and restaurant was The O's opposite, very quiet, very reserved, with a very much older and whiter crowd. It was also the first time I'd been carded, so I couldn't have a drink even if I wanted to.

The six of us talked until well after midnight, with me being the first to leave. We exchanged email addresses and phone numbers in the process. I was amped after having met so many folks so quickly and with so little effort.

Bryan, Kenny, Terri and Michele became a big part my existing and diverse group of acquaintances and friends. I continued talking to and hanging out with Elaine, who worked at Hillman Library. I eventually met her older sister Donna, who apparently had gotten Elaine her library job. Elaine also introduced me to her goofy cousin Kendall, goofy yet cool at the same time somehow. He wore DJ Jazzy Jeff glass, thick-rimmed and tinted and had well-developed pecs for a nineteen-year-old, at least compared to me.

I learned that Elaine was one of six kids, grew up in Homestead, one of Pittsburgh's great steel-mill suburbs before USX (formerly US Steel) closed its plants in the mid-'80s. Her father was in charge of Pitt Police at the Greensburg campus and her oldest sister Allison was at Georgetown Law. That after a successful collegiate basketball career with the Lady Hoyas as an undergrad. Elaine had already been at Pitt for three years, summers included, figuring out what she really wanted to do with her life. With family as accomplished as her father and oldest sister, and with Donna finishing up a speech pathology degree, I could understand why.

It was another link on the chain of discovery for me, discovering how to be a friend and how to maintain friendships. It was digging beyond the initial "Hi"s and small-talk conversations to real issues, hopes and dreams, jealousies and minor flaws of others that made me cherish these new people in my life. Of course, I still talked and occasionally went to lunch or a movie with Lee or Regis, Carl or Carlos, Marc, Monique and numerous others I'd come to know during my first three semesters at Pitt. I finally felt comfortable at the University of Pittsburgh, and for the first time in years, more comfortable with my awkward and goofy self.

I looked at myself in the mirror one Saturday morning in February, probably between hanging out with folks and another CIS shift. I stared hard at my face and body and said, "You know, you're not so bad looking after all. You're no Denzel, but you're okay." After years of hearing people like Patrick and Clyde and Gordon and Jamie calling me

“ugly,” “ugly ass” and “you’re so ugly it hurts to look at you,” I needed to affirm myself. Then I reminded myself of something Mom or Jimme should’ve said to me five years earlier. “You’re not five-foot-four anymore. You’re not twelve anymore. You’re nineteen and six-foot-two. Everyone else acts like you are who you are now, so you should too,” I said before laughing out loud. I knew I was already acting my age and my height. Finally. It was just a reminder that my life would continue to change only as much as I allowed myself to evolve as a person.

And I had changed, at least enough to ask for help beyond the need to eat. I knew that I needed to do more with my money than put it in my socks and shoes at Welsford. So I opened my second bank account at Pittsburgh National, a year and a half after I’d opened and closed my account for my \$500 scholarship at Marine Midland in Pelham. I had my own telephone installed, having regular access to one for the first time in nearly a year. Since my homelessness week, I felt like I needed to make adult decisions for me, not for Mom or family, if I’d ever be in a position to help them in the future.

I even got Bill to give me a driving lesson in Highland Park Zoo’s parking lots before he left for Virginia in March. I’d gone in October to the Pittsburgh DMV center off Washington Boulevard, near the bridge across the Allegheny River into the northern suburbs. I ended up walking from Welsford through Oakland to Forbes, then Fifth Avenue, stayed on Fifth through Shadyside and Point Breeze and Homewood-Brushton until it turned into Washington, then kept going until I reached the center. It took me an hour to get there and another to get back. In between I scored a 95 on the Learner’s Permit exam, making me eligible to get a driver’s license in two states.

Three months later I was behind the wheel of Bill’s car, his “babemobile,” his white ’88 Ford Thunderbird. It was an easy lesson until I screwed up. I was going too fast on a left-turn and cut the car too close to an embankment. We ended up going down a short grassy hill that cut off one side of the large parking lot from the other. Bill was terrified and a scary shade of purple for his car. I’d no sooner parked it than he jumped out to make sure there wasn’t any damage. I knew that this lesson was over.

Once my schedule at CIS went to near full-time by the end of February, I had precious little time for my friends and acquaintances, for hanging out or going to movies. I had to cram in my studies in between way too many shifts. Conditions at work made me

feel that I was being harassed. Yet I couldn't turn to my boss. Cindy and Pamela had apparently been friends since high school.

I did the only thing I could think of. After the first week of April, I went to Cindy to cut my hours, at least temporarily. "I need someone to take my Saturday shift," I said. Her response was, "You have a serious attitude problem." Even I knew that this was code for not knowing my place. With that statement, Cindy not only allowed me out of my Saturday shift, she reduced my hours to two shifts, twelve hours a week. All because I needed to work fewer hours? Yeah, right! This was all about Pamela and my rejection of her advances. I knew the deal as a Black male with a White female as my boss, one who happened to be friends with Pamela, a constant nuisance and another White female. I'd lose any direct accusation, and lose my job with it.

It was the beginning of the end at CIS, and I knew it. Between changing my major, the changing staff and my becoming ever more opinionated about what was going on, I didn't fit in there anymore. I caught wind of Cindy's plans to put me on probation or, if that didn't work, to possibly have me terminated while in the midst of finals week.

I went into pre-emptive strike mode. The next-to-last day of the semester, I went into the Cathedral lab and wrote a long email to the CIS list-serve. I wanted every employee and every person from the head of CIS down to my co-workers to know what I'd been through. I detailed every instance of Pamela's harassment in and out of the labs. I talked at length about the lack of a Black presence in jobs at CIS. I accused the CIS hierarchy of practicing nepotism. I started the email subject line with "Why I'm Quitting CIS," just in case anyone got the idea that I was planning to stay. When I left, I was ready - really ready - to never come back there as a worker. That was the most stressful part of my last three weeks of the semester. I'd never quit a job before. I saw CIS as another decision I'd first made when I was still thinking of myself as an adult with family responsibilities. The person I'd become in the past two years was no longer interested in working with other nerds in computer labs.

My toughest class to finish up that semester was Galpern's. After my stand against his rejection of my paper topic, I had no choice but to turn in a really good paper, one that didn't go all over the place on the comparisons and contrasts of the Civil Rights and Anti-Apartheid Movements. I narrowed it to the student portions of both movements, where I could do a direct comparison between African American and Black South African college

students and how both supported each other's movements in the '60s and in the '80s. Still a complex topic to spend only twenty pages on. I ended up with twenty-five.

The day before the paper was due, the next to last Sunday in April, a classmate walked by me into the computer lab at Hillman, saw me and stopped. After our exchange of greetings, he asked me where I was with my paper. "I'm putting the finishing touches on it right now," I said. "I haven't even started writing yet," he said in response, looking worried after my proclamation. Not only that, he hadn't finished his research on some obscure medieval topic. His misery made me feel a bit better about where I was.

That was the beginning of a busy week. Despite that, I had the chance to appreciate how significant having time to do more than work felt like. I played my latest tunes so that I could be more reflective and deliberate, including new stuff from Anita Baker, Peter Cetera and Mike + The Mechanics' "Living Years." With so much free time, studying for my Shakespeare, Bio and Macro exams was that much easier. My final paper for Philosophy was comparatively easier than protecting my grade in Galpern's class. When I wasn't doing that, I made a point of seeking out my friends and acquaintances and saying "Have a wonderful summer" to all, including Regis. We promised that we'd write each other over the long summer. I wasn't going to make the same mistake I did last April. I even remembered that Wendy's birthday was near the end of the month, and "sent" her a card for her twentieth birthday. Sort of. Someone I knew found my card on the ground floor of Cathedral, bought a stamp, and put it in the mail. In my rush to finish out the semester, I'd forgotten to mail it.

Even before I started packing for the summer, I knew how well I did that semester. I came within a good sniff of making another Dean's List, finishing just short of a B+ average with a 3.19. I earned A-'s in Philosophy and in Galpern's class. Only one other person earned an A in the class, and she was on her way to Columbia to pursue her master's in history. Several other students either failed or earned D-'s. I had a B+ in Shakespeare, a B in Bio and a C+ in Macro. I counted my blessings. Working fewer hours the last three weeks of the semester made a difference. I felt somewhat vindicated, although I'd discovered a new problem. How to balance work, school, and friends without losing focus on any area of my college life. I needed a new plan, one that made the last two weeks of the semester the same as the first two weeks.

25. The Miracle of Divorce

I still believed in miracles. I made no distinctions between them. Small and big, everyday and undoubtedly divine, I knew that all miracles were the product of my efforts, those of others working on my behalf, and the intangible, the impossible-to-explain without God. These were the thoughts I took with me back to Mount Vernon and 616 for the summer of '89. I flew into JFK and took the Train-to-the-Plane bus and Subway into Manhattan, then the Metro-North home. I came in knowing that I'd need to find a job before May was out, otherwise it would be another long summer. But I also knew I needed to rest. With all of the money I'd made through the extra hours at CIS, I still had one paycheck due to me plus several hundred in the bank and \$400 on me. I wasn't taking any chances. I gave myself the first two weeks off and decided that I would start looking at the New York State employment office after that.

In the meantime, I came home to a pigsty. It was the filthiest I'd ever seen 616. The entire hallway and foyer had bags full of dirty clothes piled up to wash. Some of the bags had overflowed. There were an endless amount of dust bunnies along the washboards of the hallway walls, as if they were in bomber formation. Trash and food were all over the kitchen, and the once-brown carpet in the living room was literally black and gray from Eri's spills and my stepfather's feet and oily body. I had steeled myself for the disconnect between my life at Pitt versus 616, but almost nothing could've prepared me for this. Boxes of my stuff from Welsford were coming in at the beginning of the week, so I knew it would be impossible to walk into the house if they were stacked in the foyer too.

So I did what I always had done, only with some righteous indignation. I said to Darren, "What have you been doin' the past four months, jumping and down on the floor?" I only grunted at Maurice when I saw his fat ass for the first time since the holidays. "How did things get to be like this?," I asked Mom after giving her a hug. "I gave up," she said, as she stared at the lump lying in the middle of the living floor carpet, a beached whale brought in by life-tide's ebb. I sorted two or three bags of clothes, made Darren get our siblings dressed, and went down to Pelham to wash clothes.

Over the next two weeks, that was mostly what I did it seemed, wash pile after pile of dirty clothes. I figured that there were about six weeks of clothes sitting in the hallway and foyer the day I came home. I also cleaned up as much as I could, got my siblings out of

the apartment after school and on weekends, helped them with homework, and just tried to be as useful as possible.

It was always hard making the transition from being a student with classes, friends, parties, movies and other going-out opportunities to being back. First, the city itself was bewildering, especially after four months of po-dunk Pittsburgh. Walking through Grand Central, a station falling apart, dingy and so smelly that I called it and the city the “Third Armpit of Hell.” Too much hustle and bustle, too much pushing and shoving, too much sound and fury signifying everything.

Then there was the transition to Mount Vernon, my vision of Springsteen’s “dead man’s town,” with nothing going on, even with the rent. After that, was 616, and slowly getting back into the routine of second-child-as-eldest-son, not to mention caregiver, provider, and leader of the resistance to Maurice’s tyranny. It took me three days just to adjust to sharing a bathroom with my family again, which led to constipation and a sense of uneasiness.

I didn’t have much help. Mom was taking three courses at Westchester Business Institute that quarter. Darren had taken a job as a courier down in the city with a company that had a weird name, something with Blake in it. He was a foot courier. Darren had neither a license nor a bike. On weekends Darren would just lie around on his bed, or worse, he’d spontaneously jump up and down in his room with a big grin on his face, about what I didn’t know. My stepfather Maurice had gotten a job with the Mount Vernon Sanitation Department in February. He was a garbage man, an irony too delicious for Mom to leave alone. “Of all the job’s out there, ‘garbage’ goes and becomes a garbage man,” she laughed sarcastically on a couple dozen occasions. Their fights were every day now, with constant and open name-calling to boot. It was the worst I’d seen it since before Mom had been beaten up by Maurice seven years before.

So it was that on the tenth of May, with everything going on between Mom and my stepfather, Darren in his own world and my own hands full with my younger siblings that no one noticed that my brother Maurice hadn’t made it home from school. He was almost ten, but he still didn’t have friends he hung out with. I started worrying about an hour after he should’ve been home. I asked Yiscoc, Sarai and Eri if they’d seen him at Holmes during the day. Of course none of them knew anything, a sign that Mom and their father’s willful ignorance of the world around them had penetrated all of their heads.

By 7 pm, I was really worried, to the point where I told my stepfather that I thought his son was missing. “What’cha want me to do about it, look for him?,” he laughed. I was so horrified that I immediately called the cops to report my brother missing.

Just before Mom came home from class, the police called back to report that Maurice had been found, safe and somewhat sound. He was in Fort Lee, New Jersey, dehydrated and with soiled clothes from the long and unending walk. I went downstairs to wait for Mom, bumping into Helene along the way. She had this “What’s wrong?” look on her face, so I told her what was going on. Mom had made it to the front steps of 616 by then. Within a few minutes, Helene was giving us a ride in one of the Milton limos to pick up Maurice from the police station in Fort Lee. “He must’ve have walked twenty or twenty-five miles,” I said as we merged on the Bronx River Parkway.

It turned out it was only somewhere between fifteen and twenty miles. My younger brother somehow figured his way through the Bronx and into Manhattan. He took Route 9 and Broadway through the Bronx, crossed the Broadway Bridge into Manhattan, and followed the signs to the George Washington Bridge. From there Maurice found his way onto the pedestrian path on the upper deck of the mile-long bridge across the Hudson and meandered his way to nearby Fort Lee before the police picked him up. When we finally arrived and saw him, I was really happy that he wasn’t hurt. I wasn’t angry at him. I just wanted to know why. Mom hardly said anything herself. When I asked Maurice, “What were you thinking?,” he yelled, “I don’t want to go home!” That was all he said the whole ride back in Helene’s car. When we got back, we both thanked Helene, and Mom attempted to give her money for the ride, which she didn’t accept.

But it was more than enough, at least for Mom. She laid into my stepfather after we cleaned my brother up, fed him, and sent him to bed. For big Maurice’s part, he just left the house, presumably to carouse with another one of his victims.

Mom had shown *some* signs of spiritual growth since I’d last been home. She was singing more hymnals and other gospel music. She was watching televangelists like Oral and Richard Roberts, Frederick K.C. Price and Kenneth Copeland and shows like the *700 Club* every day when she wasn’t studying for school. And she was praying more openly than ever before. I guess Mom figured that the best way to get rid of her husband was to spend more time with the Almighty than hating my stepfather. This started soon after the Fort Lee incident.

For my part, my one and only stop that week was at the state employment office. There, I found only one job that seemed to fit, as a telemarketer with Storm Market Research in Pelham. The job itself wasn't in Pelham, it was in Mount Vernon, on Park and East Prospect above Prisco's TV Store and the downtown C-Town. I started the week after we tracked down Maurice in New Jersey.

The job paid \$5.50 an hour, more than my CIS job by a sizable margin, and without the stress. There were five or six of us all making calls to professional offices and doing surveys, not the random, let's-call-everyone-in-the-phone-book marketing that I thought it would be. All but one of my co-workers treated the job like it was something they could take or leave. We were supposed to show up by nine, but folks would pull in around nine-thirty or ten, and then chat away for an hour or ninety minutes at a time.

This job lasted only a week, but because I'd actually been doing my job, Storm invited me to continue on with them on a longer term project at their office in Pelham. For once my hard work had paid off. At Storm's headquarters, I had my own office to do my work, which was to call up government procurement officers and ask them questions about some Japanese customized software. It was a cake job that kept me employed another three weeks. My last full day there was the ninth of June. After I got home from work, I checked the mail and found another check from my CIS job in the mail, one for \$365. I'd already received my final check from the good IT folks at Pitt a month earlier, on the twelfth of May. So I knew something was up. When I told Mom, she said, "Can't you see this is a miracle? Just give praise to God and keep goin'."

The following Tuesday I picked up my last check from Storm, and, unemployed once again, I bumped into Helene on my way up the front walk at 616. "If you're lookin' for work, the county's hirin'. Jobs are fillin' up, so you should hurry up there. I've been tryin' to get Tre's" — her son's — "lazy butt up there this week," she said. I went upstairs, told Mom that I'd be out to apply for jobs in Westchester County, rushed out and made it to White Plains around 4:30. I filled out my application with ten minutes to spare before closing. The deadline for summer jobs was that Friday.

Two nights later, the strangest and final pages of Mom and my stepfather's marriage unfolded. It was the fifteen of June, near midnight, and they were arguing like they could kill each other with steak knives in the living room. Mom was "sick an' tired" of my

father's constant abuse, not physical mind you, but just as disabling. One of the things Mom had vowed to do during May and June was to quit smoking. It wasn't exactly the first time she had tried. Only this time she'd been successful, so much so that Maurice had taken to blowing his Benson & Hedges smoke into her face when she sat in the living room watching TV and jonesin' for some nicotine. It was that, Maurice's garbage job and his unwillingness to pay any bills or put any food in the house, his obvious signs of cheating, and his eternal threats of physical violence to her and my siblings she went after him about. Maurice just complained that she didn't "love" him anymore. When Mom said, "I stopped lovin' your heathen ass a long time ago!" I snickered and fell asleep.

I was somewhere in dreamland when I heard this loud crack hit against the other side of the wall of our room. "Oh my God!" I yelled and jumped out of bed. I ran into the living room to see Mom's heavy crystal ashtray on the floor, five feet to her right, and my stepfather on the other side of the living room, with a combination of rage and bafflement on his face. The wall itself had multiple fractures and a dent about a foot and a half in diameter.

"Are you okay?," I asked Mom.

"Yeah, Donald, I'm fine. This between me and him," she sighed.

I didn't move, figuring I either needed to take on Maurice myself or run to the back and actually call the police.

"Get the fuck outta here!," Maurice yelled, seemingly ready to get up and attack me.

"Go on Donald. I'll take care of this," Mom said with a strange combination of calmness and confidence. I'd never heard Mom sound so sure about anything. Despite thoughts of Memorial Day '82 going through my head — not mention my better judgment — I slowly backed out of the living room and into the hallway. All the while Maurice started to rise up off of the sofa to threaten and possibly attack me.

I went into the back and got into bed, thinking about what I knew I needed to do if he actually attacked Mom again. I waited for what I thought would be the grand finale. Nothing. Nothing else happened. It was like they were both in shock. My stepfather left the living room, rumbled through the hallway and punched open the door to our room before slamming the door to the master bedroom. Darren jumped out of bed and yelled

this piercing yelp, like he was being tortured. I was mad at him too at that moment. I closed the door and went to sleep.

By the time I got up the next morning, my stepfather was packing up his clothes in one of Mom's suitcases. He soon left, as if *he* were scared. When I asked what had happened the night before, Mom said, "A miracle." In the heat of their argument, Maurice had picked up the crystal ashtray and thrown it at Mom. She said that it bounced off her right cheek and jaw, plowed into the wall three feet to where she'd been sitting, and then hit the floor to her right. If it had hit her as she said, Mom should've been unconscious with multiple facial fractures. But other than a minor scrape on her cheek and a headache, she was fine. The wall behind her wasn't. My choices were to somehow believe that my stepfather missed her at point-blank range and took out part of the wall. Or to believe that a major miracle had occurred, leaving Mom with almost no physical damage.

Considering how Maurice left, it was much easier to believe that a miracle had occurred. What else would explain the silence, the sudden turn away from Mom and to the master bedroom, the sense of fear that my stepfather had the next day? The only other explanation would've been that he was afraid that we'd call the police. I was still willing to, but it wouldn't have done me any good if Mom didn't press charges. All I knew was that for the second time in nine years, Maurice had packed his things and left without any indication of where he was going.

That afternoon, I got a call from Westchester County Department of Community Mental Health Programs in White Plains. A man named Bob Beane had seen my resume and application and wanted me to come up to his office the following Tuesday for an interview. After not being able to get a job at Mickey D's in '88, I was finally getting a call! I quickly agreed, not hiding my excitement about finding a summer job in the process. I'd only been without a job for three days.

The next few days were a whirlwind with my soon-to-be ex-stepfather gone without a trace. I spent the weekend with my siblings, and then the following week thinking of the immediate future, including what would happen once I went back to school. I wasn't going to be able to serve as the family babysitter forever. That Tuesday, I interviewed with Beane, the director of the county's Department of Community Mental Health. He was an older and dapper Black man in his early-fifties. He had that "good hair" that Mom and other older Blacks talked about, with a tiny mustache and smooth dark

brown skin. Beane was another hipster, always dressed to impress. We talked mostly about my undergrad and what I wanted to do with my bachelor's degree in history. Then Beane told me about the job. "The Mount Vernon clinic's been having some billing issues, and I need a smart person to straighten it out. Do you think you're the man for the task?" I was happy to accept the offer, a deal that I couldn't have sniffed the year before.

The Thursday night before my first day at the Mount Vernon Clinic, I was on my way to bed when I heard Darren jumping up and down in the bathroom. I came down the hallway and burst into the bathroom, hoping to shock him out of his awful habit, one that he picked up from Clear View. There he was in all his nakedness, his penis as hard and straight as I'd seen! I barely had time to process it, as Sarai had come out of Mom's bedroom to go to the bathroom and had also seen the monstrosity in front of us. I covered Sarai's eyes and closed the bathroom door. "Get dressed *now*, Darren!," I yelled. Mom came out of her room, wondering what was happening. Sarai explained it almost as well as I did. "That boy's gotta go," Mom said. I agreed. After she and Sarai went to bed, I talked to Darren about his latest incident.

"What are you doing? You know there are kids here. Mom's right. You're twenty-one years old, you have a job. You need to move out," I said.

Darren sat on his bed, finally embarrassed.

"I don't want to move," he said.

"Well, you're going to have to," I responded.

Darren wouldn't be the only one moving out. The next day, Maurice came back to 616, not to live, but to pack up. Luckily there wasn't much food in the house this time around. As it was, he took sheets, pillowcases, towels, wash cloths, his clothes and papers, and the only TV in the house, packed it up in a car driven by some guy I hadn't seen before, and left. Maurice didn't say a word to any of us, and he moved his stuff while Mom was at school. I looked at the clock. It said 3:30 pm. It took nearly seven years and one month, but the miracle had finally come, and the torture was finally over.

Maurice's consistency of running like a dog with his tail caught between his legs pissed me off, but not as much as Darren embracing himself as mentally retarded. I hoped that moving out would help him grow up the same way it helped me. After Mom returned from school, I decided that me and Darren should visit Jimme so that he could help Darren find a new place.

As we'd done so many times before, we walked in the summer's evening heat through Mount Vernon, turning off East Lincoln onto Park Avenue. A couple of blocks later we bumped into Wendy, who was really happy to see me. She had her arms stretched out to give me a hug, and I just waved her off. I wasn't exactly in an affectionate mood at that moment. I had bumped into her the month before, and would see her at least one more time before the summer was out. I let her know what was going on with me and my family, perhaps for the first time. She looked like she didn't know how to react, I guess because she'd never seen me that pissed before. After a few minutes of airing out my family's laundry, I felt better — even if she didn't — and we moved on to what she was up to. Then we said our “See ya later's” and went our separate ways. I could've kicked myself at that point for not being more affectionate, but I knew I had something more important to do.

Ten minutes later we bumped into Sam off The Avenue and West First. This surprise meeting trumped my Wendy conversation. When I saw into Sam en route to Jimme's with Darren, he'd just gotten off work at his summer law firm job in the city, his third summer working there. He was wearing a hideous green-and-white-checkered dress shirt with dark green suspenders and even darker green slacks. Why hideous? Because on a hot and hazy day in late-June '89, a day in which batting an eyelash would generate some sweat, Sam was dressed like it was the middle of March. The color scheme didn't blend at all with his dark chocolate skin, and his face was both greasy and sweaty from a long, hard day.

But the biggest shock was Sam's hair. It was conked — or fried as some folks say — ala Miles Davis or Malcolm Little before he became Malcolm X. This was the first thing I noticed, even before the Green Giant get-up. Since I was already in a pissy mood, one only mildly moderated by my Wendy sighting and conversation, I didn't outwardly react to it. At least I thought I didn't.

I realized as I stood there with Darren talking to Sam what had bothered me most about him during all of our years together in Humanities. I had called him an “Oreo Cookie ” — Black on the outside, White in the middle — in my head and under my breath on a few occasions during our Humanities years. This sighting and conversation let me know that I was wrong. Sam didn't have *any* identity at all. He made himself into whomever others wanted him to be. To his family, he was the mild-mannered and religiously faithful kid who just happened to be a genius. Or “Righteous Sam,” as Bobby

used to call him. To our teachers, Sam was super-intelligent, an overstretched overachiever whom teachers gave the benefit of the doubt if his assignment was late and he needed an extra day. To many of us, he was a talented competitor who was far more worthy of our school's number one status, the polar opposite of Laurell. I'm sure to a fair number of his Harvard classmates Sam was a marvel, either not "Black" enough or too much of a "credit to his race."

The Sam I saw that day wasn't the confident, take-on-the-world-with-a-smile-on-his-face person I'd seen in action for six years in Humanities. He was confident enough to attempt to act that way toward me, though. Sam told me that life at Harvard was good, that he was succeeding academically and that he'd found a way to fit in with his mostly White, six-figure and two-comma classmates. He also still intended to go to law school. And though his job at the law firm was difficult, he said that he enjoyed that also. Sam must've thought that he was talking to the uncultured twelve-year-old I once had been. His utter lack of details about classes, people, majors or professors let me know right away that his life at America's preeminent university was somewhere between rocky and a living hell.

My conversation with Sam was a major revelation. It explained why it took until I was a sophomore in college to find my footing. We *all* had significant identity issues, exaggerated by our competitive conditioning as Humanities students. These weren't typical teenage struggles over being cool or not. Especially when being cool meant being "Black" or "Italian" or "anti-intellectual," not just "cool" in general. Our grades and ranks — or shunning them as the case might've been — were as much a part of our individual identities as being affluent or Jewish or Black. Sam may well have been an extreme example of this, but he was hardly alone. I realized that the battle I'd been waging for so long came out of my own identity crisis, one that started as a spiritual disconnect between being a Hebrew-Israelite and watching my stepfather break every rule in the Talmud. The battle didn't even begin to subside until I decided to embrace myself for who I was, good, bad and ugly.

One person who never seemed to struggle with her identity was Allison, my former classmate who'd only sent me two letters in two years. She somehow came out of Humanities mostly unscathed. I bumped into her on my way to lunch from my new job with the county, three weeks after my Wendy and Sam conversations. It was a beautiful and warm July afternoon as I walked across the bridge that connected Park Avenue to West

First and South Side Mount Vernon, an old truss bridge where I could see the Mount Vernon East Metro-North station to my right. As I reached the northern end of the bridge, there was Allison. She was in a tight red t-shirt and jeans, breasts surprisingly prominent, smiling from ear to ear. I didn't refuse this hug. We barely said "Hi" before Allison blurted

"I can't talk long. I'm getting married!"

"You are? That's great! Congratulations! When?" I said and asked all at once. I was in pleasant shock.

"We haven't set a date yet, but I'm leaving to be with him today," she said.

With that, I put my arms out to give Allison a big, heartfelt hug and wished her well. "There goes a great girl," I thought.

As I continued to the deli around the corner on East Prospect, my Allison sighting made me think about my future. With Maurice gone for good, Darren about to move out, and my life now centered in the 'Burgh, my future seemed bright because I finally seemed to have some control over it. I knew who I was and who I wanted to become, and at least wanted to take the journey to find out. Not only was Maurice no longer standing in the way of that. Not only didn't my world revolve around Mom and my younger siblings as much anymore. I had removed myself as the greatest obstacle of all. That thought made me smile, for myself and for Allison.

26. My True Self

I found myself at a party one cold and starry evening, standing in an equally cold kitchen. It was really bright in the kitchen, almost to the point of overpowering my eyesight. The walls and cabinets were all-white, the counters made of Formica, and the floor light blue-and-white tiled. This was in stark relief from the adjacent living room. It was in a red-brown, '70s dimmed-light den mode, with beads hanging over the doorway leading out of the kitchen to it. It was a party, the kind of party I never had the chance to go to in high school. But everyone was there. Even people I hadn't seen since my Davis days.

Laurell, JD, Wendy, Sam, Denise, Nellie, Bobby, Brandie, Jennifer L., Cynthia, Alex, the Anthony's, and so many others. Laurell and Nellie were peeling potatoes and throwing them into big pots of boiling water. They started slicing and dicing them, laughing as they were throwing the pieces into the bubbling clean and clear liquid. Except these weren't potatoes. These were turds, each shaped like a large Russet, being peeled and chopped, looking white but quickly turning crappy- brown upon contact with the air. Laurell and Nellie shared the boiled and mashed turds with my former classmates, who were smiling in glee and eating them up with delight. I then looked at this six-foot, trapezoidal pyramid of a rack in the middle of the super-bright kitchen. It was full of turds, stacked on each one of its seven levels. It was enough to feed the guests several times over.

When I sat up from this dream in my Fu room on Welsford in Pittsburgh and found myself in the present, February '90, I gave Mom a call. I told her about the dream in all of its strange details. I asked her what she thought of it. "Your friends are full of shit," she said. After laughing so loud that I nearly rolled out of bed, I said, "That can't be. It's got to be more complicated than that." Yet I knew that Mom was absolutely right. Most of the people I knew during my years in Humanities, classmates, teachers, administrators, family members and neighbors were full of crap when it came to me. I even included myself in that category. I might've made sure of or accidentally given myself a couple of enemas between 7S and the University of Pittsburgh. But it would've been hard to stay clean around all the filth on which we dined growing up. Now that I was a junior at Pitt and planning for grad school and my longer-term future, my interactions with my past had

become part of my dream world. It was an occasional reminder that I wasn't really myself in the relatively recent past.

What Mom said was ironic, too. For better and mostly for worse, Mom, father and ex-stepfather had crapped up our lives with their baggage. The turds from their lives were the reason why my dreams had grown to be so vivid, so complicated by the time I reached adulthood. Those dreams made me smile a Cheshire cat's smile, laugh like a hyena at feeding time, or cry as if someone had passed away. Mostly, my dreams and nightmares brought me to anger, as if someone were trying to steal my life from me, which as it turned out, was how I felt most of the time when I was awake. And that also made me resolute whenever I left my dreams for the conscious world.

The summer and fall after Mom and Maurice broke up for good left me in completely uncharted territory. For the first time ever, Mom didn't have a man in her life. And with Darren moved out that summer, I was the undisputed "man of the house." Except that I'd been playing this role for almost seven years. I tried to be there for her and my younger siblings as much as possible. I bought a new TV for the family, took my siblings to movies, including *Dead Poets Society* (talk about a major mistake), taught Maurice how to tie his shoes, and generally tried to make up for the loss of their dad.

Then I had to leave for Pitt. Mom decided to stop going to her classes at Westchester Business Institute two weekends before the end of her summer semester. I offered to miss my first week of classes so that she could at least finish the classes she'd been enrolled in that summer. "You go Donald. I'll be all right," Mom said. She just didn't see a way to take care of the kids and take her classes at the same time. I left, saddened by what I thought was an unnecessary sacrificial act on her part.

I went into my third year at Pitt with the singular goal of finding balance in my life. I wanted to take my academic life and my social life to a new level, and at the same time take a job that didn't require me to play the role of computer geek anymore. My work with the Mount Vernon Clinic and Westchester County Department of Community Mental Health helped me find a work-study job with Pitt's Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic. I did database work as part of a project to revise the Diagnostic Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, known as DSM-III-R and its World Health Organization equivalent, the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, or ICD. I worked ultimately for an internationally-renowned psychiatric

epidemiologist in Professor Juan Mezzich. Despite the importance of the work, I learned my lesson from the previous semester of near full-time status. I was happy to only work twelve to fifteen hours a week doing what was my mindless chore of entering data.

I reasoned that I needed to have balance to my semesters so that I wouldn't spend the last two or three weeks of them playing catch up. Starting with the fall of '89, I took all of my syllabi from all of my classes, grabbed a calendar, and crafted a table where I knew exactly what to read, when to study, and when to begin my research and writing projects for each class I had in a semester. That way, I could know when to slack off or party, when to buckle down and study, and when to just shift into academic cruise control. And with the help of Marc and Regis, Michele and Terri, Elaine and Bryan, Kenny, Paul Riggs and so many others, I learned how to just chill and have a good time when I wasn't gunning for a 4.0 or entering endless amounts of data at work.

I wish I could say it worked like a charm, that first semester of holistic balance, and it did in a way. Except I had taken third-semester Calculus to earn a minor in Math at a time when I didn't need it, certainly not to graduate. I escaped with a D+, dragging my GPA for that semester down to a 2.98. It was another lesson in humility, that no matter how intelligent I thought I was, a year and half of not studying Calculus would make a difference in my grades. Laurell did send me her homework assignments and notes, but to no avail. It didn't help that I had a minor crush on Michele for the last week and a half of the semester and would've preferred that my and Terri's attempt to play matchmakers for Michele and Marc hadn't worked so well. It was part of learning how to channel my energies into my academic work, to understand that not everything I did would yield success just because I was doing it.

By the time I'd awakened from the turd dream at the beginning of '90, I was well on my way to my first 4.0 semester. But that was only a part of the story. With the start of the new decade came my taking another long look at myself, at who I'd been for most of the '80s and who I expected to be in the '90s. It was time to put everything between Starling Churn and Phyllis completely aside. While I remained in contact with Wendy, Denise, Suzanne and Laurell, for the most part *I* was initiating the contact. I came up with a simple and effective rule. If they truly wanted to become or remain friends with me, that had to write or contact me as much as I contacted them, which by this time was twice a semester. Wendy and Denise fell off of my contact list soon thereafter. My last exchange

with Suzanne was in the fall semester of '90, a couple of months before Operation Desert Shield turned into Desert Storm. Laurell kept writing, a letter about every couple of months, and often more than that, whether I was at Pitt during the school year or in Mount Vernon working during the summer. After nearly a decade, I had one person from six years of Humanities I could truly call friend. It was completely unexpected!

For nearly fifteen years after finishing high school, my overcoming my obsession with Phyllis, and my bout with homelessness, I'd kept the secrets of my family life and my most embarrassing and painful Humanities moments under lock and key in my mind. I'd built a mental firewall, where I'd given only a select few folks the 128-bit encryption code necessary for opening it up. A handful of friends, Harold Meltzer, a couple of girlfriends, and my wife Angelia. That was it.

At least until my family intervention in January '02. I'd secretly come up to New York and Mount Vernon that week because my youngest brother Eri had knocked up his girlfriend. At seventeen, he'd spent three years in seventh and eight grade, and two and a half years in ninth. Between that, Maurice having dropped out of Westchester Community College, Yiscoc having failed the GED exam three times and Mom's constant complaints about "the kids," I felt I had no choice but to intervene. I drew up and made copies of a table identifying all of the major bad or non-decisions Mom, Jimme and my idiot ex-stepfather had made on our behalf between '67 and '98 to give to everyone, including Darren and my Uncle Sam. I made them promise to show up.

After an hour, Eri was upset, Maurice was crying, Darren was in some sort of delirious heaven - as morbid as he was - and Sarai was pouting, arms crossed while sitting on the bowing, cheap beige couch in front of me. Only my mother hadn't said a word. She sat and stood in a state of shock, eyes teared and mixed with daggers of rage, face drawn, as if I'd slapped her in both cheeks. She hadn't made a single sound. As I went on about how "fucked up our family has been," I realized that as important a voice in the room as my mother was, it was more important to reach my brothers and sister than it was to reach her. So I left, shaking my head, promising not to show my head at 616 anytime soon, hoping that we "would get our acts together," but realizing I couldn't invest my emotions "in making all of our lives better anymore."

The aftermath of that emotionally-charred January evening re-opened all of my old scars and wounds from the '80s. Abuse, betrayal, loneliness, poverty, rejection, religion, unrequited love. It all came flooding back into my consciousness. I realized that I'd left a host of issues unresolved. Issues that I thought that I'd gotten over once I became Dr. Collins, a married man with a great woman, a good job and what I saw as a whirlwind life. The book that I'd been putting off for most of my life, the story that was my surviving 616, the Humanities Program, Mount Vernon public schools and Mount Vernon, New York itself, I was now compelled to tell.

As I began to work on *Boy @ The Window*, I realized that my story would be far from complete without the words and thoughts of my former classmates, teachers, and family members. Thoughts about themselves. Thoughts about Humanities. Thoughts about me. Thoughts about our world and our times.

One of my first moves was to reach out to my one-time best friend, the Reverend's son Starling Churn. I decided to contact Starling in May '03. It'd been nineteen years since I'd seen or heard from him. I ran a Google search and, lo and behold, I found Starling with one try. Starling Churn's a rare name, of course.

When Starling finally responded with a phone call at the beginning of July, it was a pre-Noah high that I'd been riding — my wife was due to give birth to my son at any time. Two weeks later we were on the phone at the end of my workday, talking for the first time in nearly two decades. I had many questions. Like why was he back in Mount Vernon, what had gotten him into teaching, and why hadn't he changed his name?

We talked for nearly ninety minutes. It was a really good conversation at first. I learned about Starling's spiritual journey from traditional Baptist to non-denominational, spirit-filled Christian. He learned about my conversion to Christianity as well, having assumed I was still a Hebrew-Israelite. I heard a relieved sigh coming out of my receiver, like I was a prodigal son who somehow found my way home. Both of our conversions occurred in '84, in his case, right after moving to Wilmington, North Carolina.

But when it came time to talk about our friendship's end, Starling had let me down. I was disappointed that he didn't feel comfortable enough to discuss what actually happened. According to Starling, I was "caught up" in a "cult." He spoke of his shock in seeing "that hat" on my head when I came to school with my kufi for the first time. I'd "made my decision" regarding my spiritual future, Starling said.

As he described my “decision” to become a Hebrew-Israelite, I said, “I don’t know what you mean by ‘decision,’ I mean, come on, we were eleven!” I don’t think he heard me, because he then spoke of the relief that he had sighed of earlier over my becoming Christian. It was as if I was now worthy of his conversation because of my allegiance to the cross. Starling’s statement made sense, if only in an inflated-preteen-image way.

Starling also said that he “didn’t really consider our friendship to have ended, but rather time and distances and our running in different circles precipitated some separation.” Really? Our friendship’s end wasn’t exactly gradual. Didn’t we fight over my conversion? I don’t remember Starling and me having reconciled in any way prior to the end of ninth grade, right before he left with his family for North Carolina.

We continued to talk, to discuss his life as school teacher and ordained preacher. His monologue about the “need to help others,” to help “Black boys stay in school” and “find their way to God” stood out the most for me. It all sounded good. Given our history, it also sounded all too familiar and disturbing.

I may have reached out to Starling early on, but my first push into the rough terrain of *Boy @ The Window* started with my sweet and wonderful teacher and mentor, Harold Meltzer. Always easy to talk to, ever knowledgeable about all things Mount Vernon public schools and Humanities. My first interview with him was in August ’02, but the first time we discussed the possibility of me doing *Boy @ The Window* went back to February ’95. He wasn’t too far removed from his retirement back then. I was working on my doctoral thesis, living in DC for a couple of months while hitting the archives and libraries up for dusty information. In need of a writing break, I gave him a call on one cold and boring Saturday afternoon.

Meltzer answered with his usual “H. MMMMMMMM. here?,” the M’s strung together like a long string of pearls bouncing slightly as you’d lay them gently on a table. When I said who it was, he said, “DONNIE!! Why, it’s so good of you to call!” in his halting suburban New York accent. Little did I know that this was the start of a three-hour-long conversation. We touched every subject we had in common. From every AP American History classmate to the bittersweet incidents that pushed Meltzer into retirement.

We spent a lot of time talking about Sam. To me, Sam was always an enigma. I genuinely felt both in awe of and disheartened by his presence in my life during the Humanities years. I thought it was amazing that he was able to do as much as he did. The high school band. The mock trial team. The school newspaper. Our yearbook. An appearance on Phil Donahue! At least he wasn't a star basketball player, too, especially in Mount Vernon!

Yet I felt the side effects of Sam's success. Teachers telling me that I should be more like Sam, as if I was Sam's younger, underachieving brother. I saw how Sam occasionally cashed in on his built-up academic capital to give himself more time to work on assignments no one else got a second of overtime to do. I don't think I ever wanted to be Sam or become close friends with him, though. Something about his need to be well-liked by our peers and teachers bothered me. His rare attempts to make conversations with me were mostly of the shaking-his-head-in-confusion ones. He didn't get my attraction to the pop/rock band Mr. Mister, an '80s prelude to Creed, I guess. "They can't sing," Sam said to me in Warns' English class once as a reference to Mr. Mister's #1 hit "Broken Wings." The incident on the school bus on our Albany/FDR trip was another example.

When I interviewed Sam in Sacramento in March '06, he asked, "What do you think I thought of you?"

"For the most part, as far as you were concerned, I didn't exist . . . I mean, I was there, of course, but I wasn't in any of your circles, so I didn't really exist for you as a real person," I said in response.

Meltzer never made me feel like that, nor did he ever engage in comparing me to Sam. But he obviously was concerned about him, and had been so even when we were in eleventh grade. As for me, he said, for probably the one-hundredth time, "I never worried about you, Donnie."

At the time of my '95 conversation with Meltzer, I'd recently published an op-ed in my hometown and county newspapers, "Solving African American Identity Crisis." Somehow our discussion of that piece led to a discussion of Sam. Meltzer told me that Sam "had a really hard time at Harvard" and that he'd "graduated with Gentleman's Ceeeeeeee's," the C's rolling off his tongue in the process. When Meltzer asked if I knew what Sam's problem, I brought up the whole June '89 conversation, the one that showed his obvious confusion about himself, between his conked hair and Jolly Green Giant

business suit. After an unusually long pause on the phone — it was long even by Meltzer's own standards — he said, "You're exactly right." We spent the rest of our Sam discussion talking about him in high school and his need to be liked as a significant part of his identity issue.

When I officially interviewed him for the first time seven years later, Meltzer put up a good front for me over the telephone. But I could tell that he wasn't doing well. I could hear the strain of bitterness in his voice. It was something only someone like me would've picked up on, knowing Meltzer like I did. In the past when I talked to him I could count on his laughter, this sarcastic, ironic laughter in his voice. That laughter was gone, replaced by an unsugared and unprocessed cocoa version of the original. This was my first sign that I needed to interview Meltzer sooner rather than later.

After telling me how "delighted" he was "to do the interview," we began to discuss his becoming a teacher and what he'd learned about his students as a teacher. We spent a lot of time in conversation about his first teaching assignment, a group of sixth graders at "The Millie S. Graham Elementary School," as Meltzer put it. It was a midyear assignment from the Board of Education in January '59, several months after Meltzer had finished up at Hunter College. The man who'd known that he wanted to be a teacher since seventh grade was in a classroom with students who were performing poorly. So Meltzer offered them a challenge. Apparently the highest performing class in the school at the end of each marking period would receive an award. The award included a lunch of "hamburgers, hot dogs and fries in the gymnasium of *the* Graham School." Knowing that the lunch was the prize in which his students had the most interest, Meltzer was able to help this group of students earn their quarterly award.

When Meltzer began to tell me about the food and ceremony, he paused and began to sniffle over the telephone. "Are you okay? What's wrong?," I said.

"I can't go on. . . . I can't talk about it anymore."

"What's the matter? Was it something I said?"

"No, no, I can't talk about this anymore."

With that, I said "I'll talk to you later, then," and hung up the telephone. Meltzer had said to me on numerous of occasions that hunger was the most serious problem he'd ever faced as a teacher. Now I knew it was hunger on several levels, and not just in '59 either.

My second interview with Meltzer occurred on a typically windy fall day in November '02. I came up to New Rochelle by Metro-North's New Haven Line. This particular line passes through Mount Vernon and Pelham, two places where I could've stepped off to visit my family, but after my intervention, I couldn't bare the thought of visiting Mom. She'd only spoken to me twice since January, once to read me the riot act for embarrassing her in front of the rest of the family. My response was to send a letter to Mom asking her to seek counseling because I believed that she was in deep clinical depression.

That was in July. It'd been a long and difficult road to reach this point in the year, where my relationship with Mom was strained and not just strange. This wasn't important now, though. I knew that my favorite mentor wasn't in the greatest of shape based on his recent letters and my first attempt to interview him that August.

I got off the train, and managed my way through New Rochelle's semi-sleepy downtown area to 54 Church Street, Meltzer's apartment building. He'd grown up here in this once Jewish-Italian enclave. Now his neighbors were mostly working-class Afro-Caribbeans, Blacks and Latinos. As I approached the building, I thought back to April '99, when I first visited Meltzer after the doctorate. He wasn't in good physical shape then, either, but at least he was in good spirits.

I rang Meltzer's doorbell four times before he answered. His voice now labored to say the words "H.M. here?" It was a third-floor walk-up for me, but it left me in less distress than the heavy-breathing Meltzer was in just walking from his telephone in his dining room area to his front door, about thirty feet in all. I was in some shock when he answered the door. Meltzer had gained about fifty pounds in the three-and-a-half years since my '99 visit. His broken and in-constant-traction-back, not to mention his surgically-repaired knees, had left Meltzer barely able to walk *with* the assistance of a cane or his walker. He always had a bow in his upper back. With the extra weight, my former teacher now looked about fifteen years older than his actual age. He was shirtless, but did wear some gray sweats to cover his bottom.

His apartment, though messier than when I visited him last, still felt like a teacher or artist's flat. Having seen *Finding Forrester* the year before, his apartment reminded me very much of the hermetic character Sean Connery had played in the film. It was old and musty, a place just big enough to get lost in but not big enough to feel luxurious. It was

filled with books and magazines and newspapers. Not to mention blue books, essays, and other evidence of Meltzer's long career in Mount Vernon's public schools. Meltzer had the radio set to WQXR-FM, a New York-area classical station. The music was bittersweet, as was Meltzer's mood. He was definitely happy to see me, but probably would've preferred being in better physical shape.

I discovered once I sat at his dining room table that he was also a diabetic and had heart disease. In our first hour together, he'd taken both his insulin and heart medication. Meltzer kept talking to me about his neighbors and this male friend of his, a neighbor who'd help him get out of the house and would sometimes drive him to his rehab appointments at Westchester County Medical Center in Valhalla or at Mount Vernon Hospital. Then he mentioned the possibility of getting several of his vertebra fused in a risky operation. If successful, though, it would relieve much of his discomfort, enable him to walk with less help, and possibly lose some of his weight. I just hoped that he'd make it through the interview.

"So, you wanted to know what these characteristics were . . . what kind of student you were based on what I perceived. Well that's the easiest thing in the world!," he began after I'd gone to the store to buy him lunch. To me at least, Meltzer's voice had immediately changed from this worn and forlorn tone to his more cheerful and hopeful one. He must've transported himself back to '85.

"I had a few students, not many, just a few, you were one of the few, you would sit on the edge of your seat because you were so skinny . . . and you eyelids never blinked . . . because when you were fascinated, you know, everything fascinated you, you watched the chalkboard like a hawk. . . ." he continued. I found myself in '85 again, reliving the memories of Meltzer and his classroom, the rhythm of his voice, the stunned silence of my classmates, the rustle of leaves from the high school courtyard tree closest to Meltzer's window, the occasional chalk-trauma. ". . . even though you never moved a muscle in your face, your eyes used to flash . . . I could see that. . . no one else could see but I could see . . ."

Meltzer meandered into a discussion of my academic progress in his class. "And many times when you read the question over and tore open the blue book . . . and in the end there were maybe three or four lines written. They were gems of writing, absolute

gems, but you needed to have more, you see, because they” — the College Board — “wanted more,” Meltzer said.

And because of Meltzer, I did give them — and him — more. So much more that I earned the big “5” on the AP American History exam. I guess that was why he never worried about me.

We spent the last couple of hours discussing the book idea that would become *Boy @ The Window*. Meltzer thought that it should be a fiction novel, based on the real flesh and blood folks in my life, but with different names of course to protect me from any potential lawsuits. He did make me rethink the project from a simple research study of my high school years into narrative nonfiction or a memoir. Then we said our good-byes.

“It was so good to see you, Donnie,” Meltzer said.

“Me too.”

“Come back over soon. We should talk again,” as Meltzer found a positive note.

“Don’t worry. I will.”

Who were we kidding? We both knew that his days were numbered, and that this second interview was likely the last time we’d talked. I was honored to be able to spend the day with him, to gain some additional insight about my long-time mentor and friend. Not to mention Mount Vernon and MVHS. Those eight hours together in conversation were as precious as any moments I’ve experienced as a student and a teacher. And in making sure that Meltzer knew how much I appreciated him, I kissed his forehead and gave him a big hug as I left his place for the final time. He died on January 2 of ’03.

Wendy once said, “He really taught me how to write. . . . I know I relied on his methods heavily when I was at NYU writing all of those essays.” I just wished that she and so many of his other students had told Meltzer the same thing in his final days.

This was all part of my need to re-integrate my past with the person I’d become in the years since leaving for Pitt so many years before, all with these twists and turns as I progressed with writing and interviews. I found myself late one night in March ’06 in Wendy’s presence, but not the Wendy of my youth. It was Wendy in her mid-30s. She kept saying “I’m here,” as if I knew where “here” was. She was as beautiful and alluring as ever. Her laughing smile, her thoughtful face, her eccentric eyebrows took me back to ’82. This despite her seeing me as a preposterously pretentious preteen. It was as if she was saying,

“Don’t worry, I’m around, you’ll find me.” I think that I was smiling back at her. Only to remember that I was a thirty-six-year-old married man with a two-and-a-half-year-old son. I bolted up in bed and looked at my wife and the clock. It was 5:30 in the morning!

My Wendy crush was one that was really my “first love. It doesn’t matter if she didn’t reciprocate,” my wife said. That was her response after I sat down and explained in detail how I felt about Wendy for three months of my life. It never occurred to me that I was *in love* with Wendy until I talked with my wife about it. I think I was in denial, or had forgotten the totality of my tweener feelings for her and how they affected me whenever I was within a hundred yards of her.

I don’t know, but I guess it’s safe to say that I fell in love with Wendy, if only in an Aang and Katara or Ron Stoppable and Kim Possible sort of way. Even these pop culture references to the animated series’ *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *Kim Possible* don’t completely capture the complexity of how I saw Wendy in reality or in my dreams. For most of my life, my crush and love for Wendy was the standard by which I unconsciously measured other women. A standard that was unattainable even and especially for Wendy.

My dream of Wendy didn’t die with the summer of ’82, with me serving as my ex-stepfather’s whipping boy or with my vow to get into college and to get out of Mount Vernon. My search for my vision of Wendy had barely begun. Only to end more than two decades later with the realization that most of women I’d dated or wanted to date, including my wife, had a bit of that vision in them. It was this revelation, this constant and unconscious search for her in my dreams, which led to my first Wendy search in May ’05. Google gave me links and leads for everyone who shared Wendy’s maiden name during my fourteen-month search for her, about 91,000 in all. Unlike so many of my former classmates, none of my searches linked her with NYU, the university she attended after high school. I concluded that she either hadn’t finished college or had become a non-traditional graduate, taking upwards of a decade to complete her degree.

Then I met up with Sam during Sacramento business trip in March ’06. He was another classmate I hadn’t seen in seventeen years. After our conversation about his glory days —and my inglorious ones - I asked him about Wendy as an afterthought. Sam told me that he’d seen her a couple of years before with her two-year-old daughter in tow. Although he didn’t have her address or other information, he did tell me that Wendy lived somewhere in the South. I had a few Southern addresses from my search, but I hadn’t used

them up to that point because the Wendy I *thought* I knew was a city girl, not the kind of person who could live in the South and come to know its pleasantries. Sam warned me that Wendy “has some interpersonal issues,” as if she were somehow off her meds when she visited him in '04. I didn't know what “interpersonal issues” met, and I didn't really care. It was something I kept in mind, though, as I continued to look.

I still had two addresses left to try, both in the South. Both letters came back, which left me discouraged. Then I had another idea. Assuming that I might've written the address or addresses incorrectly, I did a Mapquest search to see if the addresses would come up. One address was correct, the other one wasn't. It was then that I decided to try again, sending only one letter out, this one to the previously incorrect address. This was my last bullet. She'd either be at this address or be completely gone.

Ten days later I received a “You Found Me” email from Wendy. It was a twelve-line run-on sentence of everything that had happened with her since '89. Her start and stop and start again at NYU. Her career trajectory from documentary films and music video promotion and production to becoming a stay-at-home mom and going to nursing school. Her moves from New York to L.A. to Phoenix to the Carolinas. Her road to marriage, the birth of her only child, now a four-year-old girl. And her mother's death. It now looked like I wasn't the only one whose life had taken them full circle.

I had so much to write Wendy about. I really wanted to tell her about that crush of so long ago. But with all that history, I also didn't want to scare her off. I stuck to a discussion of my life since finishing my doctorate, including my marriage of six years and my soon-to-be three-year-old son Noah. I spent time in my next set of emails describing my vision for this book and discussing why I wanted to interview her without mentioning the crush. After several weeks of email correspondence, I finally felt comfortable enough to ask to do an in-person interview. We tried for late-August, which didn't work out because of her husband's schedule and her gearing up for a semester of nursing school and clinicals. After three more weeks of email negotiations, we had settled on some mid-October dates for my visit.

What I walked into on that rainy October '06 day mirrored my own Silver Spring, Maryland residence. It was a modern-day carpeted flat in an apartment-home townhouse, appearing as lived-in by the scattered toys in the living room and foyer. Wendy was making stew peas, a Jamaican dish of rice and peas (kidney beans), beef chunks, dumplings, and a

host of other ingredients. If I'd been in another frame of mind, a look of shock would've come over me. Wendy cooking? Put that above the fold of the *New York Times*! Yet since I was willing to expect anything from the new Wendy, I wasn't all that surprised. Her husband greeted me warmly, which *was* a bit of a surprise. I've been around enough couples to get a sense of how these kinds of interactions are supposed to work, regardless of sexual orientation. It's where the husband or the "man of the house" sizes me up, regardless of my intentions. Wendy walked out of the kitchen and gave me a hug, the kind friends give each other after seventeen years apart.

Then I met her daughter, this chip off the not-so-old block, a great combination of Wendy's and her husband's facial features. She was an adorable four-year-old wanting to learn about the world around her. We shook hands and made animal noises for about two minutes. I felt at home. It was as if I walked into my apartment and had to chance to see myself, my wife, and my kid in action, with sarcastic banter and silly noises included.

There was so much to discuss and so little time. So I started where the twelve-year-old in me would've if he had a voice. I asked about her mother, her family, her growing-up years in New York, her time in school and in Humanities. What came out was so different from what I expected because it was so similar to my experience and because our similar experiences occurred during the same time frame.

"My mom was never very affectionate . . . she wasn't an 'I love you' person . . . She wasn't a hugging person or anything like that, though I'm sure she was when I was little," Wendy said at one point during our discussion of her family situation in the early 80s. Every word resonated with me, to the point that I had to refocus myself as an interviewer to continue the conversation.

After over an hour of discussion, I assumed that Wendy's mother wasn't exactly the most emotionally intimate person in the world. The words that followed, though, were a clear path from her mother to my own. Wendy said, ". . . which is why I think that, because of her past and everything else that she just turned off emotionally at a certain age where her children were concerned because she was like, 'Well, I don't know how this person's going to turn out right now'." I nodded my head in my role as the semi-objective interviewer. Yet I couldn't help but feel that she had just described Mom and her past.

Wendy's mother came to the US and New York City for good somewhere between the end of '68 and the spring of '69, pregnant and just about ready to give birth to her

baby daughter. Already in the downswing phase of a third relationship, Wendy's mother moved to New York from Jamaica for the same reason that Mom and father moved to the great metropolis. To seek a better life, to fulfill dreams yet unknown, to overcome their own sense of inadequacy. But by the time of Wendy's birth, her mother already had four other children, three girls and a boy, all between ten and twenty years old. Mom's second pregnancy, me, occurred around the same time as Wendy's birth.

After drifting a bit after her high school graduation, one of Mom's cousins came for a visit to Arkansas in the summer of '66 and told her that there was good-paying work in New York City. Her cousin lived in the Bronx, a hotbed of Black migration and West Indian immigration in those years. Without much thought, Mom took a four-day bus trip from Texarkana to New York to what she hoped would be a new life. Given the alternative of tenant farming and generational poverty, New York must've seemed like going to heaven.

Sixteen years, a dead-end job and two abusive husbands later, Mom must've been thinking that Mount Vernon was a hellish pit that got hotter every time she tried to make her and our lives better. With a fourteen-year-old kid in a school for the retarded, a twelve-year-old getting beat up by the second husband, a three-year-old who all but refused to speak because of his abuse, a one-year-old and another one on its way, it was little wonder that she showed about as much affection as an NYPD police officer. The "I love you, Donald" faucet, which was an occasional drip prior to the summer of '82, was pretty much turned off after that.

Wendy's description of her life with her mother matched mine almost word for word except for the absence of physical abuse and the fact that her eventual stepfather was White. We were at the opposite ends of the too-many-siblings-too-far-apart-in-age cycle. Neither of our mothers had enough left in the emotional tank to fulfill their potential promise as our primary caretakers. For Wendy's mother, it was the end of a cycle in which her children grew further and farther apart from her and from each other. "My mom was always wanting everybody to come together, but I don't think she had the best way of letting that be known . . . one of those people that's like 'You should read my mind and know what I want you to do' . . . it's never worked for me," Wendy said.

By the time I'd met Wendy in seventh grade, her mother was already involved with her eventual stepfather, something that apparently didn't sit well with her. "And where I

had most of her attention before, of course she was splitting her attention with my stepfather but . . . academically still it got less and less and less and less as far as being able to come to her,” she said.

Mom had stopped listening to my daily school reports long before seventh grade. Mom still remembered the day that I told her not to help me with my spelling test homework from third grade. That day I said, “I don’t need your help, Mom. I can do it by myself.” She never again offered to help with my homework.

The parallels between our lives and our education — formal and informal — meant that we both faced the prospect of having to go it alone if we were to finish high school and attend and complete college. Neither of us had the parental nor financial support that our more affluent classmates took for granted. The difference was Wendy embraced her peers as friends and their expectations as acceptable much earlier than me, if only because she had been with them in the elementary school version of Humanities from fourth grade on. Having rarely been exposed to affluent Whites and middle class Blacks before seventh grade, I had a sharp learning curve. But because I’d embraced my vision of Wendy as someone who could save me in some way, I adjusted to this otherwise inhospitable world of high expectations and constant chaos.

My interview of “Ballerina Wendy” served as my first confirmation after nearly a quarter-century that mine wasn’t the only preteen life in Humanities that was lived in familial conflict and confusion. Maybe this is what I unconsciously saw in Wendy when I met her for the first time so many years ago. Maybe what I mistook for her fierce nature was instead a really ticked teenager who didn’t care to be around a childish and arrogant twelve-year-old, another person in search of an identity. What I thought was quirkiness was really a tomboyish nerd who was in her first throes of reconciling the conflicting messages she’d received from her mother. Messages about how she should live her life as a Jamaican in a world dominated by Whites and populated by Blacks.

I’m sure that all this is true. I’m sure that the Wendy that I felt so much in love with so long ago was as much a ghost in my mind as she was the most alluring and attractive five-foot-four female I’d meet prior to college. It still doesn’t change the fact that I must’ve seen something in her that pulled me in like a fish on a hook, an irresistible force only something supernatural could fend off. I saw enough fierceness, quirkiness, athletic grace, tomboyishness and freedom of action and association in her to want to be with her.

Whatever that meant for a twelve-year-old on the edge of puberty. All I know is that I was happy to have reconnected with Wendy and really gotten to opportunity to know her for the first time, to have met her husband and daughter, to have actually connected on a deeper level. But like the CBS show *Cold Case*, I got a glimpse at the twelve-year-old that was once me. He gave me a thumbs-up.

Epilogue

It's been a lifetime since I'd finally come into my own as a human being. I didn't have the benefit of my parents or an older brother or friends as potential guides for me to figure myself out. My classmates, as it turned out, were just as screwed up as I was. Granted, I was much more obvious about my identity crisis. And I needed to do what I did, as clumsily and blindly as I went about doing it, too. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have survived my stepfather's abuse, the muggings, the insanity of my alcoholic father or welfare poverty and four younger siblings. Not to mention the constant slights and insults, the so-called tough love of my so-called teachers, the undercurrent of racial strife and socioeconomic snobbery that was all a part of my hometown.

None of this is an endorsement of the conservative movement's obsession with "hard work" as the key for individual success in American society. If anything, my story is one that shows that no matter how hard any of us work, helping hands are a necessity. No one truly pulls themselves up by their own bootstraps or is a "self-made man" or woman. We all need a "handout" in order to climb out of poverty or some other set of circumstances that could otherwise cripple us. Hard work is a necessary part of social mobility. But it means nothing without a social safety net and a socially-responsive community.

It took nearly a decade to see myself as a man, a Black man, a person with emotions and intelligence that was only limited by my ability to see myself with my own eyes, instead of Mom's or my classmate's eyes. It took nearly six years for me to see myself as a Christian and a human being at the same time, fallible, humble, arrogant, but with choices and consequences to be and do all that The One had created me for. It wasn't until my junior year at Pitt that I realized what God's grace really meant for me. That grace, or some divine favor in my life, only worked when I asked for it and worked to make sure I'd done everything I could do to activate it. The Bible says that God's grace "is sufficient" and gives me "sufficiency in all things." But in order to have the favor to overcome and succeed in every situation, I also learned that the journey is as important as the destination, as Buddhists and Tao-influenced hippies say, and staying on the journey without losing sight of the destination is critical.

Because of my upbringing and Mom serving as the object of my “damsel in distress syndrome” until my mid-twenties, I kept the women I slept with separate from the women I wanted to become involved with. It took several short relationships to realize that this false wall wasn’t going to work, that sexual enjoyment and romance were meant to go hand-in-hand. And that I was worthy of romantic love, even from women more attractive than anyone I’d seen growing up.

Most of all, I learned that it was all right — or a’ight — to be me. Imperfect, emotionless, emotional, envious, petty, faithful, dreaming and visionary — all of those things can and do describe me, then and now. Just because I didn’t code switch from graduate-level English to hip-hop Ebonics easily didn’t mean that I didn’t understand what my friends and acquaintances were saying. Plus, as an eventual grad student and professor who’d eventually spend thousands of hours in the academic equivalent of the “above the rim” game as an intellectual, thinking in high-brow English was required. Being Black was much, much more than about how quickly I said “Word up” or “It’s all good” or if I preferred Tupac over Notorious BIG.

I certainly love Mom and acknowledge that without her hard work and persistence — at least through my thirteenth birthday — that I wouldn’t be here to write. But there are many things about her I didn’t like even when I was in the midst of constant abuse from my stepfather. The nurturing, affectionate mother that so many children take for granted as their first source of emotional strength was almost never there for me. Mom often said, “I like children when they’re from babies and two . . . it’s all downhill from there” while I was growing up, a sign that becoming the eventual mother of six children was perhaps not the best life choice. It’s only been in the past few of years that I’ve realized how much not receiving this kind of affection has affected my relationships with women and friendships with men. Emotional intimacy and the level necessary that each of us needs to function successfully in life can be the difference between experiencing happiness in almost any situation and living a miserably slow death.

Humanities was a bittersweet success story. It was one in which it generally did its job. The vast majority of its students applied to, were accepted by, and enrolled in college, all at rates higher than the national average and on par with the rates of high-achieving, high income students today. Aside from myself, Denise earned a doctorate in psychology, Laurell one in mathematics education, and Allison and Dahlia both have their MD’s. At

least eighteen of the top twenty students in our class earned a bachelors degree within six years of finishing high school. Bottom line, the program did leave us better prepared for college than we would've been without it.

Yet even without Humanities, folks like JD, Denise and Suzanne would've made it to a postsecondary institution, their tickets punched by their parents and families as part of their birthright. Laurell and Sam likely would've ended up at Johns Hopkins and Harvard anyway, and Dara, Dahlia and Allison would've crossed Hades to get into college. The more affluent Whites who left MVHS or Mount Vernon, like Nellie, Jennifer Y., Mary, Danny P., Craig and others, worried about getting into college about as much as I worried about being short. For folks like Wendy, Alex, Bobby, myself and so many others — Humanities did make a difference, even as it created significant growing pains in the process.

But that's just it. The dark side of Humanities was that it left many of us in search of answers and unhappy with many of the ones we found. We had no choice but to be shocked by the number of Whites or Blacks or affluent kids or po' White trash or kids with abilities at least as obvious as ours when we started college. Or by our professors' low or high expectations of us. Or by how normal everyone else at our universities were compared to us. It's been more than twenty years since we tossed our caps into the air, and yet I know there are more than a few former classmates still in search of their identity and of their place in this world.

I can say without a doubt that Humanities did make a difference in my life. I wouldn't be the person I am today without those six bittersweet and indifferent years. It makes any setback I might suffer today seem small and laughable by comparison. There are things I wish would've happened, things that would've made it easier to enjoy life and savor glorious moments even now. I wish Humanities had been as serious about developing me as a writer as it was about accelerated math and science classes. I regret not asking Phyllis out for a date. I lament not revealing more about the tragedies of my family life or my keen sense of humor to the few classmates and teachers I had some bond with, however weak. I wish I had trusted my instincts and never worn that kufi to Holmes or Davis. I know I should've stayed with football or tried out for basketball. And I wish I had the opportunity as a twelve-year-old to kiss Wendy one time. Admittedly, there's a part of me that wishes I could kiss her now.

But as I reveal my deepest regrets, I also know that my imperfections weren't the only ones I struggled with more a quarter-century ago. I knew that my family's poverty did play a role in how I saw so many things in my education. In everything from the 45 on my Italian Regents because of malnourishment to my week-long homelessness my sophomore year at Pitt. Unfortunately, it was the collective assumption of Humanities' educational leadership that a rigorous education would cancel out our families' economic deficiencies and would make our diverse backgrounds inconsequential.

Tied to this assumption was that Humanities would somehow make us better, well-rounded *people*, not just superior students. Boy were they wrong! Humanities created an identity crisis for all of us, one in which we constantly processed the garbage of "la crème de la crème" year after year. Star athletes and super-popular students do experience this lack of proportion between the awe that others express in their abilities and potential and the imperfect humanity they feel within themselves. In our case, grades and the affirmation that came with them *were* our identity. That led to friendships and cliques, relationships and other tensions that wouldn't have existed otherwise, continuing in some cases well after high school.

I think that there was a bigger fear among us, one bigger even than race or religion or gender. It was even bigger than trying to be cool or not being able to fit in somewhere. It was the fear of competition, of giving anyone in Humanities an added advantage by coming to their defense. When combined with the unacknowledged diversity of Humanities, it led to a cliquishness that would define most of our in-school friendships and relationships until college. If you were weak enough to knuckle under because Alex called you a "monkey" or a "brainiac" for a month, then you didn't deserve to be in Humanities. A program where the ultimate show of strength was your grades. Not to mention your ability to negotiate the in-crowd, the folks from Grimes and Pennington who'd been taking courses together since at least second or fourth grade. If you failed in one, you had a chance to redeem yourself with the other. If you failed at both, you likely either dropped out of Humanities or faded into the background.

"We were all thrown together," Laurell said to me more than once about our Humanities years. It was as if she were saying that none of us should've been in the same classroom in the first place. But all kids are "thrown together" in any educational situation, public, private or parochial. Yet Laurell in her own way was and is correct. Given the times,

it would've been difficult for most of those in authority to conceive of a holistic humanities curriculum built as much around tapping into our unique identities as it was around our academic abilities and potentials. Difficult, but hardly impossible.

So many of the people I've interviewed saw me as serious, too serious really for my own good. I was too much of a loner to have friends, too weird to be authentically Black, too shy to get a girl to like me. I still see some of those traits in me today. Yet I also see the confusion, the despair, the all-out attempts at youthful greatness that so many I went to school with were anxious to have as their own. It wasn't just me who needed to slow down. All of us were too mean, too needlessly apathetic, too impatient with our sense of inferiority or superiority as products of Mount Vernon to be friends with each other. I only wish that the people I've interviewed for this book had met the people I've come to know and love since my freshman year at Pitt. Maybe then it would sink in that all of us need to be saved sometimes, especially from ourselves and from those who believe we only need to rely on ourselves in order to succeed in life.

Acknowledgments

I've done so much soul-searching and contemplation from traversing my past. It's been bitter work, but also sweet and somewhat satisfying. I've learned more about myself and my former classmates than I would've expected. My mental firewall, now permanently disabled, has left me a more whole and humble person than I was when I started this project in '02.

Many of these stories, especially of my family life, come from my scraps of journals that I kept at twelve, fifteen and nineteen. Their rawness has been mixed with my more mature recollection of incidences and stories from my teenage years, stories from family members, my former classmates and teachers, and newspaper accounts and other pieces of official evidence confirming what I already knew. For most of my former classmates, their names or descriptions have been altered in some way, and conversations or some of their stories or backgrounds changed slightly to protect their privacy. I have with permission used the first and last names of only one former classmate. Unless specifically requested to do otherwise, I have used the actual names of former teachers, administrators and other authority figures throughout the book.

By necessity, some of the conversations and vignettes in this book are only approximations of the actual conversations that occurred. I didn't always have a pen and piece of paper handy, but my long-term memory has usually been a good source of recollection. I've tried to do everyone in the book justice, to neither portray folks as villains or heroes, to show all of the characters in this book as completely human as I was back then. With all of the promise and perils, emotions and passions, flaws and arrogance, rage and forgiveness any of us could ever expect to display.

I thank the following people who are the characters that make up *Boy @The Window*. To Andrew, the Anthony's, Joe, Danny, Josh, Gordon, Clyde & Patrick, and other guys who may have ridiculed me at one time or another, you have my thanks. For without that, I would've never known how different a person I was and am. I needed that negative reinforcement to push me, to make me strive for answers that I would've never found just attempting to fit in with all of you.

There are so many others to thank for all of the little things. A kind "Hi." or a nice, welcoming smile. A comforting conversation or at least a flash of interest in me. Or the

ability to make me laugh or feel something other than anger, rage, or sadness in those depressing years. Many thanks to folks like Allison, Kim, Vanessa H., Vanessa C., Vanessa R., Gina, Tomika, Lisa, Denise, Dara, Craig, Richard, Rosa, Marianne, Marni, Jennifer L., Jennifer Y., Debra, Akbar, André, and so many other who made my six Humanities years not seem as long as they actually were.

I save my most heartfelt thanks for those I actually did interview as part of *Boy @ The Window*, for confirming my assumptions, my greatest hopes and fears. For surprising me with your words, your deeds, the changes in your lives in the years after graduating high school. Alex, I'm so glad that I decided to push forward and interview you despite myself. Yours wasn't the toughest interview, but it was one I was sure I didn't want to do. Starling, thanks for talking with me and expressing yourself, even if yours wasn't close to the whole truth. Bobby, you haven't changed a bit, for better or worse. I hope that you allow room for change in your life as we enter our forties. Suzanne, I'm so happy that in all of your struggles to define yourself that you've found a path that works for you. Sam, I really hope that you find yourself no longer willing to morph yourself for the benefit of others one day in the near future. Life truly begins when you live it for who you are and not for what others want you to be. Kim, thanks for plying me with about a half-gallon of water on our interview evening. And for serving as a critical connection with so many people from so long ago. JD, thanks for giving me more information than you really wanted to. Dara, thanks for being yourself, as acerbic and defiant as you were. I hope that life continues to treat you gently. Thanks also to Niocy and Danny P. for granting interviews for this project.

As for Wendy, what can I say that hasn't already been said? I might not be in love with you anymore. Thanks for the interview and for full access to your home and family. I learned more than I could imagine from spending time with you and yours.

To teachers Mr. Louis Cuglietto, Mrs. Della Bryant, Mrs. Mignone, Ms. Rosemary Martino, Mrs. Warns, Dr. Joyce Harrington, Mrs. Ellen Lewis, and even my first, third and fifth grade teachers Ms. Griffin, Mrs. Shannon and the late Mrs. O'Daniel, thanks for your tutelage. Thanks for granting interviews, for answering questions, for remembering me. Thanks also for your honesty, even when you didn't mean to be.

To my University of Pittsburgh compadres and professors, many, many thanks for helping me get my head and heart together in the years after Mount Vernon. Paul Riggs,

perhaps the second-best teacher I've ever had, you have my thanks with all my heart. I wouldn't have gained the courage to become the professor I am today without your presence in my life. To Regis, Samir, Lee, Melissa, Marc, Michele, Terri, Kenny, Bryan, Elaine, Carlos and Carl, Monique, and so many others, thanks for getting my head out of books and out of my butt in my first two years at Pitt. Finding time to have fun, to have any kind of social life, made Pitt a great experience, even if I could've blown up the rest of the city. To Sy Drescher and Ann Jannetta, thanks for reinvigorating me as a student of history. And to Dr. Jack Daniel, for creating an academic scholarship that was my ticket out of Mount Vernon, New York.

To Harold Meltzer, the late Brandie Weston, and my late sister Sarai, you have my thanks, my love, and my tears. I saw Meltzer's last days up close, and Brandie's and Sarai's from afar. I still think about all of you ever so often. About your witticisms and creative flights of fancy. About your eccentricities. But most of all, I think about your courage under fire. To Brandie, wherever you are now, I'm so sorry that your final years here on Earth before August '07 were spent in mental illness and homelessness in Southern California. As for Sarai, after two months of almost continual time in Mount Vernon Hospital, my only sister, passed away on July 11, 2010. Too much pain, too many blood transfusions. To Sarai, your life serves as a reminder to make the most of the time I have left. I just hope that all of your after-lives are much better than anything this world offered each of you while you lived.

I thank the people nearest - and some of them, dearest - to me for their support or at least lending me their ears over the last seven years. My friends Carlton McLellan and Andrew Hartman, who both earned doctorates as *Boy @ The Window* unfolded. Thanks, and more thanks, for taking time out to read this manuscript in its earlier forms. Thanks to Suzanne, Marni, Elaine Westbrooks, Dora, Rivera, Evita Smedley and Jessica Muse for reading later drafts. Thanks also to Brian Richmond, Natalia López, Camille Rodriguez, Sandy Weinbaum, Francine Joselowsky and others from my AED days who at least put up with my varying moods and thoughts about *Boy @ The Window* as it evolved from idea into book.

Thanks without a doubt go to my God, my creator, the one who despite myself set me on the path to find myself nearly thirty years ago. I wouldn't be here without all of the steps and miracles that made this journey easier.

Thanks to my family, of course, for their struggles with and support of my work. To my father Jimme, thanks for returning to my life whole just as I turned thirty. I'm so happy that people can and do turn themselves around, that there really is a place for hope in this life. To Mom and my now deceased ex-stepfather, while I know you would never, ever, support *Boy @ The Window*, I know that there are so many others who need to read and hear this story. To my Uncle Sam Gill, Jr., thanks for your candidness. To my siblings Darren, Maurice, Yiscoc and Eri, please keep pushing on. It does get better once you start making your own decisions about your future.

To my wife Angelia and son Noah, thanks. For your love, for your ears, for pulling me away from the computer, for putting up with my mood swings. Books like this can bring back feelings and memories for which a writer can't fully prepare, so thanks for at least staying away. I hope you both know that I'll always love you.

Theme Music

Boy @ The Window Mix [274 songs]				
Name	Artist	Album	Genre	Year
Love Me Do	The Beatles	Please Please Me	Classic Rock	1963
You've Lost That Loving Feeling	Righteous Brothers		Rock/Pop	1965
Purple Haze	Jimi Hendrix	The Ultimate Experience	Rock	1967
I Was Made to Love Her	Stevie Wonder	Stevie Wonder: Greatest Hits	R&B/Soul	1967
All Along The Watchtower	Jimi Hendrix	The Ultimate Experience	Rock	1968
With a Little Help from My Friends	Joe Cocker	Joe Cocker's Greatest Hits	Rock	1968
I Heard It Through the Grapevine	Marvin Gaye	I Heard It Through The Grapevine	R&B/Soul	1968
Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay	Otis Redding	The Dock of the Bay	R&B/Soul	1968
Hey Jude	The Beatles	1967-1970	Classic Rock	1970
What's Goin' On	Marvin Gaye	What's Goin' On	Soul	1971
Saturday In the Park	Chicago	Chicago V	Rock/Pop	1972
Philadelphia Freedom	Elton John	Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy	Rock/Pop	1975
As	Stevie Wonder	Songs in the Key of Life	R&B/Soul	1976
Stayin' Alive	Bee Gees	Bee Gees Greatest [Disc 1]	Pop	1977
How Deep Is Your Love	Bee Gees	Bee Gees Greatest [Disc 1]	Pop	1977
Lovely Day	Bill Withers	Menagerie	R&B	1977
Come Sail Away	Styx	The Grand Illusion	Rock/Pop	1977
Easy	The Commodores	Commodores	R&B/Pop	1977
Too Much Heaven	Bee Gees	Bee Gees Greatest [Disc 1]	Pop	1978
What A Fool Believes	The Doobie Brothers	Minute by Minute	R&B/Pop	1978
Roxanne	The Police	Outlandos d'Amour	Rock/Pop	1978
Ride Like The Wind	Christopher Cross	Christopher Cross	Pop	1979
Sailing	Christopher Cross	Christopher Cross	Pop	1979
Cars	Gary Numan	The Pleasure Principle	Pop	1979
Rise	Herb Alpert	Rise	Jazz	1979
This Is It	Kenny Loggins	Keep The Fire	Rock/Pop	1979
Rock With You	Michael Jackson	HIStory: Greatest Hits, Vol. 1 [Disc 1]	Pop	1979
Babe	Styx	Classics Volume 15	Rock	1979
Still	The Commodores	The Commodores: Anthology	R&B/Soul	1979
Guilty	Barbra Streisand (& The Bee Gees)	Guilty	Pop	1980
Woman In Love	Barbra Streisand (& The Bee Gees)	Guilty	Ballad	1980
New York, New York (Theme From)	Frank Sinatra	Trilogy: Past Present Future	50s Big Band	1980
Searching	Luther Vandross	The Best Of Love (Disc 1)	R&B	1980
Never Too Much	Luther Vandross	The Best Of Love (Disc 1)	R&B	1980
A House Is Not A Home	Luther Vandross	The Best Of Love (Disc 1)	R&B	1980
Love On the Rocks	Neil Diamond	The Jazz Singer	Soundtrack	1980

Another One Bites The Dust	Queen	The Game	Pop	1980
Keep On Loving You	REO Speedwagon	Hi Infidelity	Rock/Pop	1980
Whip It	Devo	Freedom of Choice	Alternative/Punk	1981
Juke Box Hero	Foreigner	The Very Best... And Beyond	Pop	1981
Just the Two of Us	Grover Washington Jr. & Bill Withers	Winelight	Jazz	1981
Don't Stop Believin'	Journey	Journey's Greatest Hits	Rock	1981
In The Air Tonight	Phil Collins	Face Value	Rock/Pop	1981
Spirits In The Material World	The Police	Ghost In The Machine	Rock	1981
Hard to Say I'm Sorry	Chicago	Chicago 16	Rock/Pop	1982
Do You Really Want To Hurt Me	Culture Club	Kissing to Be Clever	Pop/Punk	1982
Dirty Laundry	Don Henley	I Can't Stand Still	Rock/Pop	1982
Love Come Down	Evelyn Champagne King	Get Loose	R&B	1982
Waiting For A Girl Like You	Foreigner	Records	Rock/Pop	1982
Don't You Want Me	Human League	Dare	Pop	1982
Jack And Diane	John Mellencamp	Words & Music: Greatest Hits [Disc 2]	Rock	1982
You Are	Lionel Richie	Lionel Richie	R&B/Pop	1982
I Keep Forgettin'	Michael McDonald	If That's What It Takes	R&B/Pop	1982
Baby Come To Me	Patti Austin & James Ingram	Every Home Should Have One	R&B	1982
Tainted Love	Soft Cell		Punk/New Wave	1982
That Girl	Stevie Wonder	Original Musiquarium I	R&B/Pop	1982
Lady (You Bring Me Up)	The Commodores	In The Pocket	R&B/Pop	1982
Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic	The Police	Ghost In The Machine	Rock	1982
Invisible Sun	The Police	Ghost In The Machine	Rock	1982
Good for You	Toto	Toto IV	Rock	1982
White Wedding	Billy Idol	Greatest Hits	Rock	1983
Rebel Yell	Billy Idol	Greatest Hits	Rock	1983
Ain't Nobody	Chaka Khan	Epiphany: The Best Of	R&B/Soul	1983
Miss Me Blind	Culture Club	Colour By Numbers	Rock	1983
Let's Dance	David Bowie	Let's Dance	Rock/Pop	1983
I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues	Elton John	Elton John: The Greatest Hits 1970-2002	Rock	1983
Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)	Eurythmics	Greatest Hits	Rock	1983
Maneater	Hall & Oates	The Very Best of Darryl Hall & John Oates	Rock	1983
Flashdance (What a Feeling)	Irene Cara	Flashdance	Soundtrack	1983
All Night Long	Lionel Richie	Can't Slow Down	R&B/Pop	1983
Give Me The Reason	Luther Vandross	The Best Of Luther Vandross (Disc 2)	R&B	1983
Billie Jean	Michael Jackson	HIStory: Greatest Hits, Vol. 1 [Disc 1]	Pop	1983
Thriller	Michael Jackson	HIStory: Greatest Hits, Vol. 1 [Disc 1]	Pop	1983
Maniac	Michael Sembello	Flashdance	Soundtrack	1983
Love Is A Battlefield	Pat Benatar	Live From Earth	Rock	1983

You Can't Hurry Love	Phil Collins	Hello, I Must Be Going!	Rock	1983
True	Spandau Ballet	The Ultimate Eighties	Blues	1983
King of Pain	The Police	Synchronicity	Rock/Pop	1983
Every Breath You Take	The Police	Synchronicity (Remastered)	Rock	1983
Africa	Toto	Toto IV	Rock/Pop	1983
Sunday Bloody Sunday	U2	War	Rock	1983
New Year's Day	U2	War	Rock	1983
Owner of a Lonely Heart	Yes	90125	Rock/Pop	1983
Cruel Summer	Bananarama		Pop	1984
Do They Know It's Christmas?	Band Aid (Bono & Boy George)	DTKIC (Single)	Rock	1984
Eyes Without A Face	Billy Idol	Greatest Hits	Rock	1984
Longest Time	Billy Joel	An Innocent Man	Rock/Pop	1984
Caribbean Queen	Billy Ocean	Suddenly	R&B/Pop	1984
Born In The USA	Bruce Springsteen	Born in the U.S.A.	Rock	1984
Through the Fire	Chaka Khan	I Feel For You	R&B/Pop	1984
Hard Habit To Break	Chicago	Chicago 17	Rock/Pop	1984
Time After Time	Cyndi Lauper	She's So Unusual	Rock/Pop	1984
I Can Dream About You	Dan Hartman	Streets of Fire	Soundtrack	1984
Boys of Summer	Don Henley	Building the Perfect Beast	Rock/Pop	1984
Here Comes The Rain Again	Eurythmics	Greatest Hits	Rock	1984
Relax	Frankie Goes to Hollywood	Welcome To The Pleasuredome	Electronica/Pop	1984
Out Of Touch	Hall & Oates	Big Bam Boom	Rock/Pop	1984
On The Dark Side	John Cafferty & The Beaver Brown Band	Eddie & The Cruisers	Soundtrack	1984
Missing You	John Waite	No Brakes	Rock/Pop	1984
Hello	Lionel Richie	Can't Slow Down	R&B/Pop	1984
Can You Feel the Beat	Lisa Lisa & Cult Jam & Full Force	Lisa Lisa & Cult Jam: Super Hits	R&B/Soul	1984
Human Nature	Michael Jackson	Thriller	Pop	1984
Always Something There to Remind Me	Naked Eyes	Fuel for the Fire	Pop	1984
Sister Christian	Night Ranger	Greatest Hits	Rock	1984
We Belong	Pat Benatar	Best Shots	Rock/Pop	1984
When Doves Cry	Prince	Purple Rain	R&B/Pop	1984
I'll Be Good	Rene & Angela	Street Called Desire	R&B	1984
The Warrior	Scandal	The Warrior	Rock	1984
Oh Sherrie	Steve Perry	Steve Perry: Greatest Hits	Rock	1984
Drive	The Cars	Heartbeat City	Rock/Pop	1984
Wrapped Around Your Finger	The Police	Greatest Hits	Rock	1984
Jump	Van Halen	1984	Rock	1984
How to Be a Millionaire	ABC	Look of Love - The Very Best of ABC	Pop	1985
Take On Me	a-ha	Hunting High and Low	Pop	1985
The Night Is Still Young	Billy Joel	Greatest Hits II	Blues/Rock	1985
Summer of '69	Bryan Adams	Reckless	Rock	1985
Sunset Grill	Don Henley	Henley's Greatest Hits	Rock	1985

I Want To Know What Love Is	Foreigner	Agent Provocateur	Rock/Pop	1985
Have You Ever Loved Somebody	Freddie Jackson	Body & Soul Smooth Jams (Disc 1)	R&B	1985
Method of Modern Love	Hall & Oates	Big Bam Boom	Rock/Pop	1985
What About Love	Heart	Heart: Greatest Hits 1985-1995	Rock	1985
Things Can Only Get Better	Howard Jones	Dream Into Action	Rock/Pop	1985
Lonely Ol' Night	John Mellencamp	Words & Music: Greatest Hits [Disc 1]	Rock	1985
I Wonder If I Take You Home	Lisa Lisa & Cult Jam	Lisa Lisa & Cult Jam With Full Force	R&B/Soul	1985
Hangin' On A String	Loose Ends	A Little Spice	Soul	1985
Broken Wings	Mr. Mister	Welcome To The Real World	Rock	1985
One More Night	Phil Collins	No Jacket Required	Pop	1985
Don't Lose My Number	Phil Collins	No Jacket Required	Pop	1985
Inside Out	Phil Collins	No Jacket Required	Pop	1985
Easy Lover	Philip Bailey & Phil Collins	Chinese Wall	Rock/Pop	1985
Smooth Operator	Sade	The Best Of Sade	R&B	1985
The Sweetest Taboo	Sade	The Best Of Sade	R&B	1985
Don't You (Forget About Me)	Simple Minds	The Breakfast Club	Soundtrack	1985
If You Love Somebody Set Them Free	Sting	The Dream Of The Blue Turtles	Rock	1985
Love Is The Seventh Wave	Sting	The Dream Of The Blue Turtles	Rock	1985
Children's Crusade	Sting	The Dream Of The Blue Turtles	Rock	1985
Shadows In The Rain	Sting	The Dream Of The Blue Turtles	Rock	1985
Fortress Around Your Heart	Sting	The Dream Of The Blue Turtles	Rock	1985
Shout	Tears For Fears	Songs From The Big Chair	Rock	1985
Everybody Wants To Rule The World	Tears For Fears	Songs From The Big Chair	Rock	1985
Head Over Heels	Tears For Fears	Songs From The Big Chair	Rock	1985
How Soon is Now?	The Smiths	Hatful of Hollow	Rock	1985
Voices Carry	Til Tuesday	Voices Carry	Pop	1985
Pride (In the Name of Love)	U2	The Unforgettable Fire	Rock	1985
Freedom	Wham!	Make It Big	Rock	1985
Saving All My Love For You	Whitney Houston	Whitney Houston	R&B/Pop	1985
You Give Good Love	Whitney Houston	Whitney Houston	R&B/Pop	1985
The Sun Always Shines on TV	a-ha	Hunting High and Low	Pop	1986
Sweet Love	Anita Baker	Rapture	R&B	1986
The Way It Is	Bruce Hornsby & The Range	The Way It Is	Blues/Bluegrass	1986
Friends and Lovers	Carl Anderson & Gloria Loring	Carl Anderson	Adult Contemporary	1986
Rock Me Amadeus	Falco	Falco 3	Pop	1986
These Dreams	Heart	Heart: Greatest Hits 1985-1995	Rock	1986

Human	Human League	Crash	Pop	1986
Caravan Of Love	Isley Brothers (Isley-Jasper-Isley)	Caravan of Love	R&B/Pop	1986
R.O.C.K. In The U.S.A.	John Mellencamp	Words & Music: Greatest Hits [Disc 1]	Rock	1986
Girl Can't Help It	Journey	Journey's Greatest Hits	Rock	1986
Be Good To Yourself	Journey	Raised On Radio	Rock	1986
Sweet Freedom	Michael McDonald	Running Scared	Soundtrack/Pop	1986
Silent Running	Mike + The Mechanics	Mike + The Mechanics	Pop	1986
Kyrie	Mr. Mister	The Best of Mr. Mister	Rock	1986
West End Girls	Pet Shop Boys	Please	Pop	1986
Sledgehammer	Peter Gabriel	Shaking The Tree: 16 Golden Greats	Rock	1986
Red Rain	Peter Gabriel	Shaking The Tree: 16 Golden Greats	Rock	1986
In Your Eyes	Peter Gabriel	So	Pop	1986
Take Me Home	Phil Collins	No Jacket Required	Pop	1986
My Adidas	Run-D.M.C.	Raising Hell	Rap/Hip-Hop	1986
Walk This Way	Run-D.M.C. (w/ Aerosmith)	Raising Hell	Rap/Hip-Hop	1986
Never As Good As The First Time	Sade	The Best Of Sade	R&B	1986
Alive And Kicking	Simple Minds	Once Upon a Time	Rock/Pop	1986
Sanctify Yourself	Simple Minds	Once Upon a Time	Rock/Pop	1986
Money's Too Tight	Simply Red	Picture Book	Rock	1986
Holding Back The Years	Simply Red	Picture Book	Rock	1986
Higher Love	Steve Winwood	Back in the High Life	Rock	1986
I'll Be Over You	Toto	Past To Present 1977-1990	Rock	1986
Sunshine	Alexander O'Neal	Hearsay	R&B	1987
No One In The World	Anita Baker	Rapture	R&B	1987
(I've Had) The Time of My Life	Bill Medley & Jennifer Warnes	Dirty Dancing	Soundtrack	1987
Wanted Dead Or Alive	Bon Jovi	Slippery When Wet	Rock	1987
Mandolin Rain	Bruce Hornsby & The Range	The Way It Is	Blues/Bluegrass	1987
Tunnel Of Love	Bruce Springsteen	Tunnel of Love	Rock/Pop	1987
The Lady in Red	Chris de Burgh	Into The Light	Pop	1987
Don't Dream It's Over	Crowded House	Crowded House	Rock	1987
True Colors	Cyndi Lauper	True Colors	Pop/Punk	1987
Can't We Try	Dan Hill and Vonda Shepard	Dan Hill	Adult Contemporary	1987
Big Love	Fleetwood Mac	Tango in the Night	Rock/Pop	1987
Tango In The Night	Fleetwood Mac	Tango in the Night	Rock/Pop	1987
Tonight, Tonight, Tonight	Genesis	Invisible Touch	Rock/Pop	1987
Land of Confusion	Genesis	Invisible Touch	Rock/Pop	1987
In Too Deep	Genesis	Invisible Touch	Rock/Pop	1987
Got My Mind Set On You	George Harrison	Cloud 9	Rock/Pop	1987
Hard Day (Shep Pettibone Remix)	George Michael	Faith	Pop	1987
My Mind Playin' Tricks On Me	Geto Boys	Uncut Dope	Hip-Hop/Rap	1987
Touch of Grey	Grateful Dead	In The Dark	Rock/Pop	1987

Alone	Heart	Bad Animals	Rock	1987
The Pleasure Principle	Janet Jackson	Control	80s Pop	1987
Paper In Fire	John Mellencamp	Chronicles	Rock	1987
Songbird	Kenny G	Duotones	Jazz	1987
Don't Make Me Wait For Love	Kenny G	Duotones	Jazz	1987
Love Will Conquer All	Lionel Richie	Dancing on the Ceiling	R&B/Pop	1987
Midnight Blue	Lou Gramm	Ready or Not	Rock	1987
Stop To Love	Luther Vandross	The Best Of Luther Vandross (Disc 2)	R&B	1987
That's What Love Is All About	Michael Bolton	The Hunger	Pop	1987
Ain't Nobody Like You	Miki Howard	Femme Fatale	R&B	1987
Stand and Deliver	Mr. Mister	Go On...	Rock	1987
U Got The Look	Prince	Sign O' The Times (Disc 2)	Rock	1987
The One I Love	R.E.M.	Document	Rock	1987
Don't Mean Nothing	Richard Marx	Richard Marx	Rock	1987
Lonely Heart	Richard Marx	Richard Marx	Rock	1987
Heaven Only Knows	Richard Marx	Richard Marx	Rock	1987
Push It	Salt-N-Pepa	Hot, Cool & Vicious	Rap/Hip-Hop	1987
Back in the High Life Again	Steve Winwood	Back in the High Life	Rock	1987
Be Still My Beating Heart	Sting	Fields Of Gold: The Best of Sting 1984-1994	Rock	1987
They Dance Alone	Sting	Fields Of Gold: The Best of Sting 1984-1994	Rock	1987
If You All Get To Heaven	Terence Trent D'Arby	Introducing The Hard Line	Pop	1987
Rain	Terence Trent D'Arby	Introducing The Hard Line	Pop	1987
Where The Streets Have No Name	U2	Joshua Tree	Rock	1987
I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For	U2	Joshua Tree	Rock	1987
With Or Without You	U2	Joshua Tree	Rock	1987
Bullet The Blue Sky	U2	Joshua Tree	Rock	1987
Running To Stand Still	U2	Joshua Tree	Rock	1987
Here I Go Again	Whitesnake	Whitesnake	Rock	1987
So Emotional	Whitney Houston	Whitney	R&B/Pop	1987
Waiting for a Star to Fall	Boy Meets Girl	Reel Life	Pop	1988
Hands to Heaven	Breathe	All That Jazz	Pop	1988
Piano In The Dark	Brenda Russell	Get Here	R&B/Soul	1988
Father Figure	George Michael	Faith	Pop	1988
One More Try	George Michael	Faith	Pop	1988
What's On Your Mind (Pure Energy)	Information Society	Information Society	Pop/Funk	1988
Shattered Dreams	Johnny Hates Jazz	Turn Back The Clock	Pop	1988
Against Doctor's Orders	Kenny G	Silhouette	Jazz	1988
Mr. Bachelor/Tomorrow	Loose Ends	The Real Chuckeeboo	R&B	1988
Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay	Michael Bolton	The Hunger	Pop	1988
Man in the Mirror	Michael Jackson	Bad	Pop	1988
Smooth Criminal	Michael Jackson	Bad	Pop	1988
Can You Stand the Rain	New Edition	Heart Break	R&B/Soul	1988

Don't Shed a Tear	Paul Carrack	One Good Reason	Rock/Pop	1988
What Have I Done To Deserve This	Pet Shop Boys	Actually	Pop	1988
One Good Woman	Peter Cetera	One More Story	Rock/Pop	1988
One More Story	Peter Cetera	One More Story	Rock/Pop	1988
Two Hearts	Phil Collins	Phil Collins: Hits	Rock	1988
Should've Known Better	Richard Marx	Richard Marx	Rock	1988
Endless Summer Nights	Richard Marx	Richard Marx	Rock	1988
Hold On To The Nights	Richard Marx	Richard Marx	Rock	1988
Forever Young	Rod Stewart	Out of Order	Rock	1988
My Heart Can't Tell You No	Rod Stewart	Out of Order	Rock	1988
Don't You Know What the Night Can Do	Steve Winwood	Roll With It	Rock	1988
Wishing Well	Terence Trent D'Arby	Introducing The Hard Line	Pop	1988
Sign Your Name	Terence Trent D'Arby	Introducing The Hard Line	Pop	1988
The Robbery	The London Film Orchestra	Buster	Soundtrack	1988
Fast Car	Tracy Chapman	Tracy Chapman	Alternative	1988
Just Because	Anita Baker	Giving You The Best That I've Got	R&B/Soul	1989
When I See You Smile	Bad English (J. Waite)	Bad English	Rock/Pop	1989
She Drives Me Crazy	Fine Young Cannibals	The Raw & The Cooked	Rock/Pop	1989
Good Thing	Fine Young Cannibals	The Raw & The Cooked	Rock/Pop	1989
Like a Prayer	Madonna	Like a Prayer	Pop	1989
Living Years	Mike + The Mechanics	The Living Years	Adult Contemporary	1989
Another Day In Paradise	Phil Collins	...But Seriously	Rock	1989
Welcome to the Terrordome	Public Enemy	Fear of a Black Planet	Rap & Hip-Hop	1989
Fight the Power	Public Enemy	Fear of a Black Planet	Rap	1989
Angelia	Richard Marx	Repeat Offender	Rock/Pop	1989
Right Here Waiting for You	Richard Marx	Repeat Offender	Rock/Pop	1989
Keep on Movin'	Soul II Soul	Volume I - Keep On Movin'	R&B/Soul	1989
Back To Life	Soul II Soul	Volume I - Keep On Movin'	R&B/Soul	1989
Optimistic	Sounds of Blackness	The Very Best of Sounds of Blackness	Christian & Gospel	1989
All Around the World	Lisa Stansfield	Affection	R&B/Soul	1990
You Can't Deny It	Lisa Stansfield	Affection	R&B/Soul	1990
I Wish It Would Rain Down	Phil Collins	...But Seriously	Rock	1990
I'll Be Good To You	Ray Charles, Chaka Khan	Back On The Block	Jazz	1990
It Must Have Been Love	Roxette	Pretty Woman	Soundtrack/Pop	1990
The Power	Snap!	World Power	Hip-Hop/Rap	1990
Boy At The Window	Groove Theory	Groove Theory	R&B	1995
Beautiful Day	U2	All That You Can't Leave Behind	Rock	2000
Comin' From Where I'm From	Anthony Hamilton	Comin' From Where I'm From	R&B/Soul	2003