

derer. But when I opened my mouth, he just shook his head and walked away.

We lived in a basement apartment in Brooklyn, which I doubt you remember, down the street from Uncle Ben and his wife, your aunt Janai. These were not great times. I remember borrowing two hundred dollars from Ben, and it feeling like a million. I remember your grandfather coming to New York, taking me out for Ethiopian, after which I walked him to the West Fourth Street subway station. We said our goodbyes and walked away. He called me back. He had forgotten something. He handed me a check for \$120. I tell you this because you must understand, no matter the point of our talk, that I didn't always have things, but I had people—I *always had people*. I had a mother and father who I would match against any other. I had a brother who looked out for me all through college. I had The Mecca that directed me. I had friends who would leap in front of a bus for me. You need to know that I was loved, that whatever my lack of religious feeling, I have always loved my people and that broad love is directly related to the specific love I feel for you. I remember sitting out on Ben's stoop on Friday nights, drinking Jack Daniel's, debating the mayor's race or the rush to war. My weeks felt aimless. I pitched to various magazines with no success. Your aunt Chana lent me another two hundred dollars; I burned it all on a scam bartending school. I de-

livered food for a small deli in Park Slope. In New York, everyone wanted to know your occupation. I told people that I was "trying to be a writer."

Some days I would take the train into Manhattan. There was so much money everywhere, money flowing out of bistros and cafés, money pushing the people, at incredible speeds, up the wide avenues, money drawing intergalactic traffic through Times Square, money in the limestones and brownstones, money out on West Broadway where white people spilled out of wine bars with sloshing glasses and without police. I would see these people at the club, drunken, laughing, challenging breakdancers to battles. They would be destroyed and humiliated in these battles. But afterward they would give dap, laugh, order more beers. They were utterly fearless. I did not understand it until I looked out on the street. That was where I saw white parents pushing double-wide strollers down gentrifying Harlem boulevards in T-shirts and jogging shorts. Or I saw them lost in conversation with each other, mother and father, while their sons commanded entire sidewalks with their tricycles. The galaxy belonged to them, and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to theirs.

And so when I remember pushing you in your stroller to other parts of the city, the West Village for instance, almost instinctively believing that you should see more, I remember feeling ill at ease, like I had borrowed someone else's heirloom, like I was traveling under an assumed

name. All this time you were growing into words and feelings; my beautiful brown boy, who would soon come into the knowledge, who would soon comprehend the edicts of his galaxy, and all the extinction-level events that regarded you with a singular and discriminating interest.

You would be a man one day, and I could not save you from the unbridgeable distance between you and your future peers and colleagues, who might try to convince you that everything I know, all the things I'm sharing with you here, are an illusion, or a fact of a distant past that need not be discussed. And I could not save you from the police, from their flashlights, their hands, their nightsticks, their guns. Prince Jones, murdered by the men who should have been his security guards, is always with me, and I knew that soon he would be with you.

In those days I would come out of the house, turn onto Flatbush Avenue, and my face would tighten like a Mexican wrestler's mask, my eyes would dart from corner to corner, my arms loose, limber, and ready. This need to be always on guard was an unmeasured expenditure of energy, the slow siphoning of the essence. It contributed to the fast breakdown of our bodies. So I feared not just the violence of this world but the rules designed to protect you from it, the rules that would have you contort your body to address the block, and contort again to be taken seriously by colleagues, and contort again so as not to give the police a reason. All my life I'd heard people tell their black boys and black girls to "be twice as good," which is to say "ac-

cept half as much." These words would be spoken with a veneer of religious nobility, as though they evidenced some unspoken quality, some undetected courage, when in fact all they evidenced was the gun to our head and the hand in our pocket. This is how we lose our softness. This is how they steal our right to smile. No one told those little white children, with their tricycles, to be twice as good. I imagined their parents telling them to take twice as much. It seemed to me that our own rules redoubled plunder. It struck me that perhaps the defining feature of being drafted into the black race was the inescapable robbery of time, because the moments we spent readying the mask, or readying ourselves to accept half as much, could not be recovered. The robbery of time is not measured in lifespans but in moments. It is the last bottle of wine that you have just uncorked but do not have time to drink. It is the kiss that you do not have time to share, before she walks out of your life. It is the raft of second chances for them, and twenty-three-hour days for us.

One afternoon your mother and I took you to visit a preschool. Our host took us down to a large gym filled with a bubbling ethnic stew of New York children. The children were running, jumping, and tumbling. You took one look at them, tore away from us, and ran right into the scrum. You have never been afraid of people, of rejection, and I have always admired you for this and always been

afraid for you because of this. I watched you leap and laugh with these children you barely knew, and the wall rose in me and I felt I should grab you by the arm, pull you back and say, "We don't know these folks! Be cool!" I did not do this. I was growing, and if I could not name my anguish precisely I still knew that there was nothing noble in it. But now I understand the gravity of what I was proposing—that a four-year-old child be watchful, prudent, and shrewd, that I curtail your happiness, that you submit to a loss of time. And now when I measure this fear against the boldness that the masters of the galaxy imparted to their own children, I am ashamed.

New York was another spectrum unto itself, and the great diversity I'd seen at Howard, solely among black people, now spread across a metropolis. Something different awaited around every corner. Here there were African drummers assembling in Union Square. Here there were dead office towers, brought to life at night by restaurants buried within that served small kegs of beer and Korean fried chicken. Here there were black girls with white boys, and black boys with Chinese-American girls, and Chinese-American girls with Dominican boys, and Dominican boys with Jamaican boys and every other imaginable combination. I would walk through the West Village, marveling at restaurants the size of living rooms, and I could see that the very smallness of these restaurants awarded the patrons

a kind of erudite cool, as though they were laughing at a joke, and it would take the rest of the world a decade to catch on. Summer was unreal—whole swaths of the city became fashion shows, and the avenues were nothing but runways for the youth. There was a heat unlike anything I'd ever felt, a heat from the great buildings, compounded by the millions of people jamming themselves into subway cars, into bars, into those same tiny eateries and cafés. I had never seen so much life. And I had never imagined that such life could exist in so much variety. It was everyone's particular Mecca, packed into one singular city.

But when I got off the train and came back to my hood, to my Flatbush Avenue, or my Harlem, the fear still held. It was the same boys, with the same bop, the same ice grill, and the same code I'd known all my life. If there was one difference in New York it was that we had more high-yellow cousins here in the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. But their rituals were so similar, the way they walked and gave dap, it was all familiar to me. And so I found myself, on any given day, traveling through several New Yorks at once—dynamic, brutal, moneyed, sometimes all of those at once.

Perhaps you remember that time we went to see *Howl's Moving Castle* on the Upper West Side. You were almost five years old. The theater was crowded, and when we came out we rode a set of escalators down to the ground floor. As we came off, you were moving at the dawdling speed of a small child. A white woman pushed you and

said, "Come on!" Many things now happened at once. There was the reaction of any parent when a stranger lays a hand on the body of his or her child. And there was my own insecurity in my ability to protect your black body. And more: There was my sense that this woman was pulling rank. I knew, for instance, that she would not have pushed a black child out on my part of Flatbush, because she would be afraid there and would sense, if not know, that there would be a penalty for such an action. But I was not out on my part of Flatbush. And I was not in West Baltimore. And I was far from The Mecca. I forgot all of that. I was only aware that someone had invoked their right over the body of my son. I turned and spoke to this woman, and my words were hot with all of the moment and all of my history. She shrunk back, shocked. A white man standing nearby spoke up in her defense. I experienced this as his attempt to rescue the damsel from the beast. He had made no such attempt on behalf of my son. And he was now supported by other white people in the assembling crowd. The man came closer. He grew louder. I pushed him away. He said, "I could have you arrested!" I did not care. I told him this, and the desire to do much more was hot in my throat. This desire was only controllable because I remembered someone standing off to the side there, bearing witness to more fury than he had ever seen from me—you.

I came home shook. It was a mix of shame for having gone back to the law of the streets mixed with rage—"I

could have you arrested!" Which is to say: "I could take your body."

I have told this story many times, not out of bravado, but out of a need for absolution. I have never been a violent person. Even when I was young and adopted the rules of the street, anyone who knew me knew it was a bad fit. I've never felt the pride that is supposed to come with righteous self-defense and justified violence. Whenever it was me on top of someone, whatever my rage in the moment, afterward I always felt sick at having been lowered to the crudest form of communication. Malcolm made sense to me not out of a love of violence but because nothing in my life prepared me to understand tear gas as deliverance, as those Black History Month martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement did. But more than any shame I feel about my own actual violence, my greatest regret was that in seeking to defend you I was, in fact, endangering you.

"I could have you arrested," he said. Which is to say, "One of your son's earliest memories will be watching the men who sodomized Abner Louima and choked Anthony Baez cuff, club, tase, and break you." I had forgotten the rules, an error as dangerous on the Upper West Side of Manhattan as on the Westside of Baltimore. One must be without error out here. Walk in single file. Work quietly. Pack an extra number 2 pencil. Make no mistakes.

But you are human and you will make mistakes. You will misjudge. You will yell. You will drink too much. You will hang out with people you shouldn't. Not all of

us can always be Jackie Robinson—not even Jackie Robinson was always Jackie Robinson. But the price of error is higher for you than it is for your countrymen, and so that America might justify itself, the story of a black body's destruction must always begin with his or her error, real or imagined—with Eric Garner's anger, with Trayvon Martin's mythical words ("You are gonna die tonight"), with Sean Bell's mistake of running with the wrong crowd, with me standing too close to the small-eyed boy pulling out.

A society, almost necessarily, begins every success story with the chapter that most advantages itself, and in America, these precipitating chapters are almost always rendered as the singular action of exceptional individuals. "It only takes one person to make a change," you are often told. This is also a myth. Perhaps one person can make a change, but not the kind of change that would raise your body to equality with your countrymen.

The fact of history is that black people have not—probably no people have ever—liberated themselves strictly through their own efforts. In every great change in the lives of African Americans we see the hand of events that were beyond our individual control, events that were not unalloyed goods. You cannot disconnect our emancipation in the Northern colonies from the blood spilled in the Revolutionary War, any more than you can disconnect our emancipation from slavery in the South from the charnel houses of the Civil War, any more than you can

disconnect our emancipation from Jim Crow from the genocides of the Second World War. History is not solely in our hands. And still you are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life. I am ashamed of how I acted that day, ashamed of endangering your body. But I am not ashamed because I am a bad father, a bad individual or ill mannered. I am ashamed that I made an error, knowing that our errors always cost us more.

This is the import of the history all around us, though very few people like to think about it. Had I informed this woman that when she pushed my son, she was acting according to a tradition that held black bodies as lesser, her response would likely have been, "I am not a racist." Or maybe not. But my experience in this world has been that the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration. And the word *racist*, to them, conjures, if not a tobacco-spitting oaf, then something just as fantastic—an orc, troll, or gorgon. "I'm not a racist," an entertainer once insisted after being filmed repeatedly yelling at a heckler: "He's a nigger! He's a nigger!" Considering segregationist senator Strom Thurmond, Richard Nixon concluded, "Strom is no racist." There are no racists in America, or at least none that the people who need to be white know personally. In the era of mass lynching, it was so difficult to find who, specifically, served as executioner that such deaths were often reported by the press as having happened "at the hands of

persons unknown." In 1957, the white residents of Levittown, Pennsylvania, argued for their right to keep their town segregated. "As moral, religious and law-abiding citizens," the group wrote, "we feel that we are unprejudiced and undiscriminating in our wish to keep our community a closed community." This was the attempt to commit a shameful act while escaping all sanction, and I raise it to show you that there was no golden era when evildoers did their business and loudly proclaimed it as such.

"We would prefer to say that such people cannot exist, that there aren't any," writes Solzhenitsyn. "To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he's doing is good, or else that it's a well-considered act in conformity with natural law." This is the foundation of the Dream—its adherents must not just believe in it but believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the Dream is the natural result of grit, honor, and good works. There is some passing acknowledgment of the bad old days, which, by the way, were not so bad as to have any ongoing effect on our present. The mettle that it takes to look away from the horror of our prison system, from police forces transformed into armies, from the long war against the black body, is not forged overnight. This is the practiced habit of jabbing out one's eyes and forgetting the work of one's hands. To acknowledge these horrors means turning away from the brightly rendered version of your country as it has always declared itself and turning toward something murkier and unknown. It is still too difficult for most

Americans to do this. But that is your work. It must be, if only to preserve the sanctity of your mind.

The entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are. I think of that summer that you may well remember when I loaded you and your cousin Christopher into the back seat of a rented car and pushed out to see what remained of Petersburg, Shirley Plantation, and the Wilderness. I was obsessed with the Civil War because six hundred thousand people had died in it. And yet it had been glossed over in my education, and in popular culture, representations of the war and its reasons seemed obscured. And yet I knew that in 1859 we were enslaved and in 1865 we were not, and what happened to us in those years struck me as having some amount of import. But whenever I visited any of the battlefields, I felt like I was greeted as if I were a nosy accountant conducting an audit and someone was trying to hide the books.

I don't know if you remember how the film we saw at the Petersburg Battlefield ended as though the fall of the Confederacy were the onset of a tragedy, not jubilee. I doubt you remember the man on our tour dressed in the gray wool of the Confederacy, or how every visitor seemed most interested in flanking maneuvers, hardtack, smooth-bore rifles, grapeshot, and ironclads, but virtually no one was interested in what all of this engineering, invention, and design had been marshaled to achieve. You were only



ten years old. But even then I knew that I must trouble you, and this meant taking you into rooms where people would insult your intelligence, where thieves would try to enlist you in your own robbery and disguise their burning and looting as Christian charity. But robbery is what this is, what it always was.

At the onset of the Civil War, our stolen bodies were worth four billion dollars, more than all of American industry, all of American railroads, workshops, and factories combined, and the prime product rendered by our stolen bodies—cotton—was America's primary export. The richest men in America lived in the Mississippi River Valley, and they made their riches off our stolen bodies. Our bodies were held in bondage by the early presidents. Our bodies were traded from the White House by James K. Polk. Our bodies built the Capitol and the National Mall. The first shot of the Civil War was fired in South Carolina, where our bodies constituted the majority of human bodies in the state. Here is the motive for the great war. It's not a secret. But we can do better and find the bandit confessing his crime. "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery," declared Mississippi as it left the Union, "the greatest material interest of the world."

Do you remember standing with me and your mother, during one of our visits to Gettysburg, outside the home of Abraham Brian? We were with a young man who'd educated himself on the history of black people in Gettysburg. He explained that Brian Farm was the far end of

the line that was charged by George Pickett on the final day of Gettysburg. He told us that Brian was a black man, that Gettysburg was home to a free black community, that Brian and his family fled their home for fear of losing their bodies to the advancing army of enslavement, led by the honored and holy Confederate general Robert E. Lee, whose army was then stealing black people from themselves and selling them south. George Pickett and his troops were repulsed by the Union Army. Standing there, a century and a half later, I thought of one of Faulkner's characters famously recalling how this failure tantalized the minds of all "Southern" boys—"It's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun..." All of Faulkner's Southern boys were white. But I, standing on the farm of a black man who fled with his family to stay free of the South, saw Pickett's soldiers charging through history, in wild pursuit of their strange birthright—the right to beat, rape, rob, and pillage the black body. That is all of what was "in the balance," the nostalgic moment's corrupt and unspeakable core.

But American reunion was built on a comfortable narrative that made enslavement into benevolence, white knights of body snatchers, and the mass slaughter of the war into a kind of sport in which one could conclude that both sides conducted their affairs with courage, honor, and élan. This lie of the Civil War is the lie of innocence, is the Dream. Historians conjured the Dream. Hollywood fortified the Dream. The Dream was gilded by novels and ad-

venture stories. John Carter flees the broken Confederacy for Mars. We are not supposed to ask what, precisely, he was running from. I, like every kid I knew, loved *The Dukes of Hazzard*. But I would have done well to think more about why two outlaws, driving a car named the General Lee, must necessarily be portrayed as "just some good ole boys, never meanin' no harm"—a mantra for the Dreamers if there ever was one. But what one "means" is neither important nor relevant. It is not necessary that you believe that the officer who choked Eric Garner set out that day to destroy a body. All you need to understand is that the officer carries with him the power of the American state and the weight of an American legacy, and they necessitate that of the bodies destroyed every year, some wild and disproportionate number of them will be black.

Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is *heritage*. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor—it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random mangleings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial. There is no uplifting way to say this. I have no praise anthems, nor old Negro spirituals. The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible—that is precisely why they are so precious. And the soul did not escape. The spirit did not steal away on gospel wings. The

soul was the body that fed the tobacco, and the spirit was the blood that watered the cotton, and these created the first fruits of the American garden. And the fruits were secured through the bashing of children with stovewood, through hot iron peeling skin away like husk from corn.

It had to be blood. It had to be nails driven through tongue and ears pruned away. "Some disobedience," wrote a Southern mistress. "Much idleness, sullenness, slovenliness. . . . Used the rod." It had to be the thrashing of kitchen hands for the crime of churning butter at a leisurely clip. It had to some woman "chear'd . . . with thirty lashes a Saturday last and as many more a Tuesday again." It could only be the employment of carriage whips, tongs, iron pokers, handsaws, stones, paperweights, or whatever might be handy to break the black body, the black family, the black community, the black nation. The bodies were pulverized into stock and marked with insurance. And the bodies were an aspiration, lucrative as Indian land, a veranda, a beautiful wife, or a summer home in the mountains. For the men who needed to believe themselves white, the bodies were the key to a social club, and the right to break the bodies was the mark of civilization. "The two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black," said the great South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun. "And all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals." And there it is—the right to break the black body as the meaning of their sacred equality. And that right has

always given them meaning, has always meant that there was someone down in the valley because a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below.*

You and I, my son, are that "below." That was true in 1776. It is true today. There is no them without you, and without the right to break you they must necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream. And then they would have to determine how to build their suburbs on something other than human bones, how to angle their jails toward something other than a human stockyard, how to erect a democracy independent of cannibalism. But because they believe themselves to be white, they would rather countenance a man choked to death on film under their laws. And they would rather subscribe to the myth of Trayvon Martin, slight teenager, hands full of candy and soft drinks, transforming into a murderous juggernaut. And they would rather see Prince Jones followed by a bad cop through three jurisdictions and shot down for acting like a human. And they would rather reach out, in all their sanity, and push my four-year-old son as though he were merely an obstacle in the path of their too-important day.

I was there, Samori. No. I was back in Baltimore surrounded by them boys. I was on my parents' living room floor, staring out at that distant world, impenetrable to me. I was in all the anger of my years. I was where Eric Garner

* Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*.

must have been in his last moments—"This stops today," he said and was killed. I felt the cosmic injustice, even though I did not fully understand it. I had not yet been to Gettysburg. I had not read Thavolia Glymph. All I had was the feeling, the weight. I did not yet know, and I do not fully know now. But part of what I know is that there is the burden of living among Dreamers, and there is the extra burden of your country telling you the Dream is just, noble, and real, and you are crazy for seeing the corruption and smelling the sulfur. For their innocence, they nullify your anger, your fear, until you are coming and going, and you find yourself inveighing against yourself—"Black people are the only people who . . ."—really inveighing against your own humanity and raging against the crime in your ghetto, because you are powerless before the great crime of history that brought the ghettos to be.

It is truly horrible to understand yourself as the essential below of your country. It breaks too much of what we would like to think about ourselves, our lives, the world we move through and the people who surround us. The struggle to understand is our only advantage over this madness. By the time I visited those battlefields, I knew that they had been retrofitted as the staging ground for a great deception, and this was my only security, because they could no longer insult me by lying to me. I knew—and the most important thing I knew was that, somewhere deep with them, they knew too. I like to think that knowing might have kept me from endangering you, that hav-

ing understood and acknowledged the anger, I could control it. I like to think that it could have allowed me to speak the needed words to the woman and then walk away. I like to think this, but I can't promise it. The struggle is really all I have for you because it is the only portion of this world under your control.

I am sorry that I cannot make it okay. I am sorry that I cannot save you—but not that sorry. Part of me thinks that your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life, just as for others, the quest to believe oneself white divides them from it. The fact is that despite their dreams, their lives are also not inviolable. When their own vulnerability becomes real—when the police decide that tactics intended for the ghetto should enjoy wider usage, when their armed society shoots down their children, when nature sends hurricanes against their cities—they are shocked in a way that those of us who were born and bred to understand cause and effect can never be. And I would not have you live like them. You have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels. And to varying degrees this is true of all life. The difference is that you do not have the privilege of living in ignorance of this essential fact.

I am speaking to you as I always have—as the sober and serious man I have always wanted you to be, who does not apologize for his human feelings, who does not make excuses for his height, his long arms, his beautiful smile. You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is

that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable. None of that can change the math anyway. I never wanted you to be twice as good as them, so much as I have always wanted you to attack every day of your brief bright life in struggle. The people who must believe they are white can never be your measuring stick. I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.

One day, I was in Chicago, reporting a story about the history of segregation in the urban North and how it was engineered by government policy. I was trailing some officers of the county sheriff as they made their rounds. That day I saw a black man losing his home. I followed the sheriff's officers inside the house, where a group of them were talking to the man's wife, who was also trying to tend to her two children. She had clearly not been warned that the sheriff would be coming, though something in her husband's demeanor told me he must have known. His wife's eyes registered, all at once, shock at the circumstance, anger at the officers, and anger at her husband. The officers stood in the man's living room, giving him orders as to what would now happen. Outside there were men who'd been hired to remove the family's possessions. The man was humiliated, and I imagined that he had probably for some time carried, in his head, alone, all that was

threatening his family but could not bring himself to admit it to himself or his wife. So he now changed all that energy into anger, directed at the officers. He cursed. He yelled. He pointed wildly. This particular sheriff's department was more progressive than most. They were concerned about mass incarceration. They would often bring a social worker to an eviction. But this had nothing to do with the underlying and relentless logic of the world this man inhabited, a logic built on laws built on history built on contempt for this man and his family and their fate.

The man ranted on. When the officers turned away, he ranted more to the group of black men assembled who'd been hired to sit his family out on the street. His manner was like all the powerless black people I'd ever known, exaggerating their bodies to conceal a fundamental plunder that they could not prevent.

I had spent the week exploring this city, walking through its vacant lots, watching the aimless boys, sitting in the pews of the striving churches, reeling before the street murals to the dead. And I would, from time to time, sit in the humble homes of black people in that city who were entering their tenth decade of life. These people were profound. Their homes were filled with the emblems of honorable life—citizenship awards, portraits of husbands and wives passed away, several generations of children in cap and gown. And they had drawn these accolades by cleaning big houses and living in one-room Alabama shacks before moving to the city. And they had done this