

COMPTON: MY LEGACY TO RISE ABOVE THE ODDS

*A Memoir of Survival, Truth, and
Transformation*

Opening Invocation

Ancestors, continue to align us. Ase!

Bobby Hemmitt: “Your true purpose in life is to get back to your God self. Anything else short of that is a waste of time.”

Publisher’s Note

Destiny’s Legacy Publishing was founded on the belief that stories—especially the ones we were never expected to tell—carry the power to heal, transform, and liberate. Through memoir, curriculum, and adaptation, we honor resilience, reclaim narrative, reimagine justice, and restore dignity.

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This work is inspired by lived experience and historical events. Some names, identifying details,

dialogue, locations, and incidents have been changed, combined, or fictionalized to protect privacy and support the narrative.

Audio Contents

This audiobook includes an opening invocation, publisher's note, copyright notice, foreword, about the author, introduction, fourteen chapters, an essay on tracking and gang behavior, and an appendix on street gangs in America.

Foreword

I extend my sincere thanks to Dr. William Burriss, who edited this manuscript and whose guidance helped validate my journey. You were my most admired English professor at Martin University. I also thank my former professor, Mr. J. L. Mize, whose lectures on “Emancipatory Narratives” expanded my consciousness and deepened my understanding of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. That work remains a stamp of my convictions. Finally, I thank Mr. Alex Alonso for allowing me to include his research at the end of this book.

“Love unexpressed is a crime against the heart.”

— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Le Petit Prince

About the Author

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Issa Abdul-Rahman is a memoirist, curriculum designer, and founder of Destiny's Legacy Publishing. With a gift for transforming lived experience into universal lessons, Issa crafts emotionally resonant narratives rooted in spiritual transformation, justice, and healing. His writing bridges personal testimony and institutional critique, elevating marginalized voices while challenging systemic norms.

Beyond his literary work, Issa leads programming for justice-impacted individuals through nonprofit initiatives focused on dignity, purpose, and opportunity. His curriculum-based workshops combine storytelling, emotional intelligence, spiritual grounding, and practical skill-building to support reentry, self-awareness, vocational readiness, and community restoration.

His mission is to use story as a blueprint for change: to educate, empower, inspire, and help people reclaim the legacy within themselves.

Introduction

This book is a work of fiction inspired by lived experience, historical memory, and true events. Some names, identifying details, locations, dialogue, and incidents have been changed, combined, or fictionalized to protect privacy and shape the narrative. It is not my intention to slander today's law enforcement officers. Many officers put their lives on the line every day to protect and serve their communities, and for that service I am grateful. At the same time, I make no apology for

remembering what I witnessed, what I survived, and what I consider historically significant.

The general misconception about Compton, California, is that its image is defined only by gang activity. That image says little about the many productive families, workers, thinkers, dreamers, and community members who have always lived there. Compton is a community with its own complex ideas, hopes, values, challenges, and possibilities. People continue to work every day to change the negative beliefs attached to it. I find it important to begin there.

“A smaller thematic universe demographically, implies the existence of persons who directly or indirectly, are served by a set of (limit situations) who are submerged and curbed by them.”

“...within any given location there are families and persons that share a different thematic universe that produce more favorable outcomes.” Paulo Freire

I discovered through my own experience that two education systems appeared to exist side by side: one that prepared students for success, and another that prepared students for failure. That system is known as “tracking.”

It was not until my adult years, while watching an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that brought national attention to *Waiting for “Superman”* and the issue of school tracking, that I finally heard the language for what I had lived. In that moment, I felt relief and validation. My experience had not been isolated. It had a name.

Later in adulthood, my desire to attend college brought me face to face with another consequence of that early tracking. Before I could move forward, I needed to obtain my GED. The college I hoped to attend offered a GED program, and I enrolled with determination. But

what shocked me most was not the coursework. It was the room itself. The room was filled with older adults—people like me, trying to recover a doorway that should never have been closed so early. In that moment, I understood that my story was not unusual. It was part of a larger pattern.

What I felt most was sadness. Not pity, but recognition. The room was full of adults carrying unfinished stories—people who had come back to reclaim something that should have been protected when they were children.

What the Research Shows

Research on academic tracking shows that sorting students into different academic paths does not simply organize instruction; it can shape opportunity. A 2023 meta-analysis found that tracking did not significantly improve overall achievement, but it did increase educational inequality. In other words, the system may not raise everyone up, but it can widen the distance between students.

Tracking often determines which students gain access to college-preparatory classes, advanced math and science, experienced teachers, and peer groups where college is treated as expected. Students placed in lower tracks may receive less rigorous coursework and fewer signals that higher education is within reach.

The effects can continue into adulthood. Studies of GED pathways show that adult education can reopen doors, but it often functions as a recovery system for people whose original educational path was interrupted. GED recipients may enter college later and often face

greater challenges with persistence than students who moved directly through traditional diploma pathways.

The research also supports what many students feel before they can name it: placement affects identity. Being placed in a lower track can communicate low expectations, limit confidence, and increase disengagement. When a child begins to believe the system has already decided who they are, the damage is not only academic; it is emotional and developmental.

Research on youth gangs and psychological trauma adds another layer to this picture. Studies of adolescent gang involvement show that many young people who enter gangs have already experienced chronic exposure to violence, instability, and adverse childhood experiences; gang involvement can then increase their exposure to further trauma. The National Gang Center also notes that school, family, peer, and community risk factors often overlap, meaning that academic disengagement, unsafe neighborhoods, and the need for belonging can reinforce one another. For students already pushed into lower expectations at school, these pressures can make disengagement feel less like a choice and more like a survival response.

The numbers help explain the scale of the problem. The 2023 tracking meta-analysis reviewed 53 studies, including 213 estimates of achievement and 230 estimates of inequality; it found no statistically significant gain in overall achievement, but it did find a significant increase in inequality. The CDC's 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 76.1% of U.S. high school students reported at least one adverse childhood experience, and 18.5% reported four or more. The National Gang Center reports that children exposed to

seven or more measured risk factors in one Seattle study were 13 times more likely to join a gang than children exposed to none or only one. These statistics show that school placement, trauma, and community risk do not operate separately; they often accumulate around the same young people.

This is why tracking matters. It is not just a classroom assignment. It can become a pathway—one that influences achievement, self-worth, graduation, college access, employment, and the need for adults to return later to reclaim opportunities that should have been protected earlier.

I became embroiled in the system when my quiet protest began with a simple refusal to pledge allegiance to the American flag. Not out of defiance, but out of confusion—and clarity.

I saw the Watts Riots of 1965.

I was seven years old when the riots occurred. Even as a child, I understood something was broken. The flag stood for liberty and justice, but what I saw on the streets of South Central told a different story.

I didn't have the language for systemic oppression, but I had eyes. I saw the smoke, the rage, the desperation. I saw neighbors treated like threats, not citizens. And so, when asked to pledge, I hesitated. My innocence became resistant. That moment marked the beginning of my awareness—not just of racial injustice, but of the quiet systems that shaped my own education, my own sense of worth.

That quiet protest—my refusal to pledge allegiance to the American flag—marked me. I didn't shout, didn't disrupt. I simply stood still, guided by a child's intuition shaped by the images of the Watts Riots. I had seen the

smoke, the sirens, the fury. I had seen a community cry out, only to be met with force. And so, when asked to honor a symbol that promised liberty and justice, I hesitated. That hesitation became a label.

From that moment on, I was no longer just a student—I was a “problem.” The system didn’t confront me directly. It rerouted me. I was quietly placed into the lower track; the one reserved for students deemed less promising. No explanation. No appeal. Just a shift in expectations, a change in tone, a different bell.

Teachers stopped asking what I thought and started telling me what I couldn’t do. I was branded—not by my ability, but by my awareness. My protest had revealed something they didn’t want to see: a child who could think critically, who could question authority, who could connect dots between history and the present. That kind of student didn’t fit the mold. And so, I was tracked—not by merit, but by fear. I was kept in the third grade for a second school year and watched my classmates advance ahead of me. The psychological toll on a child is immense: feelings of inferiority can take root, erode self-worth, and shape identity. Compounding this were teachers who set low expectations for certain students, reinforcing a cycle of diminished hope and limited opportunity.

As a child in a single-parent household without siblings, I often found myself on the outside looking in. My observations became my refuge—quiet, constant, and sharp. I watched my peers move in packs, bonded by shared routines, family structures, and unspoken codes of belonging. In their world, I was a shadow—present, but peripheral.

To survive, I became a chameleon. I learned to mimic the rhythms of those around me, adapting my speech, my posture, even my silence, just to feel included.

Belonging wasn't a given—it was a performance.

This instinct to adapt wasn't just emotional—it was strategic. In a system that tracked students by appearance, income, and perceived value, I understood early that visibility could be dangerous. My quiet protest against the flag, my questions about fairness, my refusal to conform—they all marked me. And once marked, the system responded.

But even in the shadows, I was watching. I was learning. And I was remembering.

As I entered adolescence, I found myself drifting toward mediocrity—not because I lacked ambition, but because it made it easier to bond with the less fortunate peers in my neighborhood. In a world where struggle was normalized, excellence felt like betrayal. I began to internalize a quiet form of self-sabotage, trading potential for acceptance. Paulo Freire calls this “fatalism”—a psychological surrender to the conditions imposed by oppression, where the future feels predetermined and freedom becomes abstract. I didn't have the language for it then, but I felt its grip. My dreams grew quieter. My sense of possibility dimmed. And yet, there was one voice that refused to let me go. My grandmother, with unwavering faith and fierce tenderness, kept planting seeds of spiritual power into my awareness. She reminded me that I was more than my surroundings, more than my setbacks, more than the labels assigned to me. Her prayers, her stories, her presence—they became

a counter-narrative to the fatalism I was beginning to accept.

My grandmother once quoted a simple yet profound phrase: “To thine own self be true.” At the time, I didn’t grasp its full weight. But in a season when I stood at the edge of self-destruction, that quote sparked something deep within me. It stirred my spirit, reminding me that truth isn’t something handed down—it’s something reclaimed.

That moment became a turning point. Her words weren’t just biblical wisdom—they were a lifeline. They called me back to myself, to the innocence I had buried beneath survival and adaptation. And now, as I share this small book, my hope is that young people who find these pages will feel that same call.

We must recapture our inner child—the part of us that still believes, still dreams, still questions. True transformation begins not with what others think of us, but with the stories we tell ourselves. The mindset is the soil. Consciousness is the seed. From there, we create our own truth. Our own reality.

One thing I never allowed myself to use as an excuse—neither in childhood nor adulthood—was the absence of my parents. I didn’t have them around to guide me growing up, but I refused to let that become a crutch. You can’t blame what’s beyond your control. Just think of the children across the world who’ve lost their parents to war, displacement, or tragedy. They must find a way forward.

Life brings challenges to everyone. No one is exempt. But self-pity is a trap—a quiet thief of potential. It’s no substitute for personal responsibility. We must learn to navigate around the barriers, not be defined by

them. And in doing so, we must remain humble. Humility keeps us grounded. It reminds us that strength isn't just about overcoming—it's about how we carry ourselves in the process.

*"Consciousness is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of transforming one's existence into a fuller humanity."*¹

"We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity"

Malcolm X

"We do not see the war being waged against us because we don't want to and because we are afraid. We are engaging in behavior specifically designed to block out any awareness of the war against our true reality." — Francis Cress Welsing

Chapter I: Church Boy

The fondest memories of my youth were during the years my grandmother and I attended a small Baptist church in San Pedro, near Long Beach, California. I was baptized there when I turned thirteen. My grandmother explained to me that my baptism was similar to a Jewish bar mitzvah, a custom marking a boy's transition into manhood. But what mattered most to me was not the customs of the church; it was the unconditional love of the church and family members that surrounded me. It was infectious.

Over the next several years, that small Baptist community became my private escape from the hood. Every Sunday morning, Ms. Hobbs would arrive without failure. We'd cram along with her and four kids, huddled in an old clunker, with an exhaust pipe that bellowed white smoke that left a trail behind. Yet, it was more than what we had. My grandmother was a godsend to Ms. Hobbs after someone had referred my grandmother to babysit her toddler, Adrian. The Hobbs lived not more than five minutes from us in Compton. Ms. Hobbs had four sisters, who were ushers, and a combination of nieces and nephews that formed the youth choir. They were a close-knit family.

Every Sunday, I looked forward to Ms. Hobbs' family ritual after worship service: joining one of her sisters and their children for Sunday dinner. Her sister's husband was one of the senior deacons. They were the Kings and the Princes, literally speaking. Mr. and Mrs. King both had children from previous marriages. There

were six kids at home—three girls and three boys—but you couldn't tell whose children were whose because they all shared a mutual love for both parents and called them Mommy and Daddy. They were like the Black version of the TV series *The Brady Bunch*.

In a matter of time, I found myself included in the Kings' family domain. Eventually, Sunday dinners turned into weekend stay overs. All of us boys were about a year or two apart: Keith and I were the same age, Andre a year younger, and Rodney was the oldest. They all made me feel at home. And the girls, they weren't going for my timid propensity for being treated extra special, yet they officially addressed me as their cousin.

As I returned home each weekend to Compton, it felt like migrating between two worlds. One was safe and secure, where a kid could be a kid. The other was filled with tension and scrutiny, where a boy was expected to be hard and tough. Compton was becoming the gang capital of Los Angeles County in the early 1970s. At home, I was the center of my grandmother's attention. Her fear of my peer associations made it difficult for her to cut me any slack. The negative influences surrounding us provoked her everyday anxiety that I might compromise my future and freedom. I was like a small fish being swallowed by a band of sharks—but still, they were my homeboys.

As I drifted between two worlds, Long Beach and Compton, I became a chameleon as a means for acceptance in the hood, to "be down" with the homies. Fortunately, I was able to forge a balance and resist several temptations that would lead to my complete ruin. "To be down" was measured by how far I would go, burglarize, carjack, smoke, or get high by the age of

fourteen. My homeboys and I discovered that we could go to the local neighborhood liquor store and buy cigarettes and alcohol on a whim. The only drawback was arguing about whose turn it was to “go cop.”

My journey of self-discovery was no less than hit or miss. Had it not been for my grandmother’s lectures, my tendency to jump on the bandwagon or cross boundaries might have resulted in extreme consequences. At any given time, somebody in the hood was either being released from Los Padrinos Juvenile Detention Center, known as LP, or from Chino, the Correctional Institution for Men.

I will admit that I committed some of the same offenses as the others, but somehow, I was able to avert the worst consequences of my clandestine behavior. It was hit or miss—a roll of the dice. To a larger degree, I have to say that my soul couldn’t stand the guilt of my offenses. When it came to being a criminal, I wasn’t feeling it. I couldn’t completely abdicate my core beliefs. In my heart, I was still a church boy.

In my second year of attending middle school at Benjamin O. Davis Jr., the Kings presented the idea for me to finish the year at Long Beach Middle School where their kids attended. At first, it was a tough sale for my grandmother, but she accepted the idea with optimism. The King family made accommodations, and I transferred without a hitch. The family was elated.

My new school was a stark contrast to what I was used to. It was heavily integrated with white students, who were the majority. Initially, it was a cultural shock. Right from the gate, the kids in my first period class assailed me with a barrage of questions related to my

background. The white kids wanted to hear the dirt and grime of my experiences in the hood. They had no idea how disturbing their probing was to me. Little did they realize that I didn't want to carry that persona or stereotype, nor was it a badge of honor I had wished to be known for. I was there to make a fresh start. I wanted to shed the griminess of my past and come anew. The students were briefed and informed ahead of my start date in class. My transition from Compton aroused startling images of the violence and mayhem they saw on the news periodically about gang activity in Compton.

By lunchtime, I was known to everyone as the "boy from Compton." My first day in the cafeteria generated an experience only rock stars could describe. While standing in one of two lunch lines, I was completely oblivious to the hype over my presence until a cheery-eyed white boy standing behind me caught my attention.

"Hey, they think you're fantastic."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Look behind you!" he said.

When I did so, at first glance, nothing appeared out of context, until I realized that there was an adjacent lunch line with three or four students. Then I discovered there were at least fifty pairs of gazing eyes behind me, and many more beyond the cafeteria entry door. Why weren't they filling the second line? The tables were divided into two sections of the cafeteria as well, with all the seats filling the tables where I sat first. Of course, the white boy got first dibs to sit next to me. He was more taken aback than I was. I simply thought they were tripping.

Here again, I was confronted with my good-boy-versus-bad-boy situation. Should I live up to the

stereotypical image of a thug—grab my crotch as I walked down the hallways, slap white boys at will, and take their money? I could play the role. Who was going to punk me? I was from Compton. They all wanted to get up close to this untamed savage.

My ego could have gotten the best of me. However, my decision crystallized on behalf of Andre, one of the King brothers. After the lunch break, I bumped into him in passing. He received the burden of recognition from his classmates when he bragged that we were cousins. That was enough to remove the temptation of making a foolish mistake and thug out. Andre's unblemished innocence gave me a sense of responsibility and accountability in my consciousness. I didn't realize until then how much he looked up to me. Therefore, I had to leave Compton in Compton. I had to stay on course and be me.

When the school day ended, I realized the full extent of my presence. The entire school was outside waiting to catch a glimpse of "the boy from Compton." Beyond the frenzy of starry-eyed enthusiasts, what caught my attention were the guys parked in front of the school, huddled in bad-boy formation on the sidewalk. It was an open confrontation, a standoff. I knew that look. It said, "This is my set." Andre assured me they were harmless and nothing to worry about as we began our walk off campus. But I discovered later that they were Long Beach Crips.

Suddenly, emotional displays of hand-to-hand combat ensued between two girls who had claimed their spoils of war. Unbeknownst to me, one of the girls shouted toward me, "Who do you want?"

It was like time had stood still. The crowd got quiet and tamed after the girls had nearly ripped their clothes off, exposing their undergarments and torn blouses. It was like waiting for the king to speak. I was more embarrassed that such a spectacle had occurred on my behalf, and yet all eyes were on me. Unexpectedly, I caught a glimpse of several potential honeys in the crowd. It dawned on me that for the first time ever, I could probably have any girl I wanted. Therefore, I wasn't ready to break any hearts just yet, and certainly not over those fools. I played it cool and walked on.

For several blocks beyond the school campus, at least a hundred kids followed our route home. The parade tapered off by each block, some turning back; they couldn't be late getting home. By the time we got to the house, somewhere between fifteen or twenty diehards were left outside, consumed with immeasurable adoration of where I lived. Andre was mystified. He said none of them, except for a few, lived nearby.

Aside from all the hype, the biggest challenge for me was to conform and measure up to the academic curriculum. Every class was structured and well disciplined. I struggled initially, yet there were several students willing to come to my aid after realizing my sincere efforts to keep up with the subjects. In our United States Government class, for example, students had a clear grasp of the four main bodies of government, including how the Constitution applied to each body of authority.

These concepts were completely foreign to me, as were the habits of studying, taking notes, and doing research. For me, it was an entirely new experience to

have students offer to help me after school with my homework. In Black schools, smart kids could be labeled as white or gay. They formed silos among themselves, or they dumbed themselves down to escape abuse from kids who lagged behind. Some students became class clowns, choosing popularity over intelligence.

“Peer pressure among black kids is more than likely the number one silent killer in the black community and then gangs.”

Jawanza Kunjufu, “To Be Popular or Smart: The Black Peer Group”

Ironically, the students that were reaching out to me happened to be white. My initial suspicion was that they wanted to use me for some kind of social studies experiment, to determine whether I could be transformed or domesticated. I was noticeably rough around the edges. And to some degree, I was suspicious and apprehensive as to why somebody white would want to help me. But I was desperate. I needed all the help I could get. Although, I could detect jealousy from my black counterparts. I wondered why they didn’t reach out, or if they could.

I continued to go home on the weekends. My grandmother didn’t want to give up complete guardianship. She kept a tight grip on who had the last say as the boss. I mentioned to a classmate that I went home periodically. I let my guard down, unaware that my classmate was an informant. I didn’t realize how much scrutiny I was under. The system didn’t want me slipping from its grip by leaving the Compton City School District.

Going home resulted in my eventual detriment. After three full months completely immersed and comfortable

within the structure of a new school and the Kings' home, school officials discovered that my arrangement was superficial. We were informed of my expulsion from the Long Beach School District. I literally died inside. The King family was devastated too. They had lost a family member. But I lost much more. I lost hope. I believed the white boy who had helped me with my homework sold me out after I mentioned that I sometimes went home to Compton on weekends.

My return to Benjamin O. Davis Jr. High was one of the biggest letdowns of my entire school experience. In contrast to the full learning environment I had been exposed to, I felt cheated. In fact, I believed students in my peer group were being cheated out of a real education. There was no real structure or classroom discipline. Sure, kids would get paddled for misbehaving, but there was a disconnection in the student-teacher relationships. Most of my teachers didn't show enthusiasm or set high expectations. It was a joke, coupled with constant disruptions from students who didn't want to learn. It appeared obvious that some teachers were there just to receive a paycheck.

I returned to the same old tired classes I had before, but with a new sense of responsibility for my own education. Fueled by anger, my tendency to release my rage against class clowns became a burden to no avail. It wasn't my job to correct anybody, nor should I have had to carry that burden. A few of my teachers, however, began to respond to my serious plea to give me mine, including my drafting instructor. I told him that the Long

Beach students were creating schematics and blueprints of real buildings, unlike the simple three-dimensional shapes or blocks he gave us to draw. After I told him, he quietly walked back to his desk and handed me a book with architectural drawings, along with blueprints of home foundations and floor plans. He said, "From now on, you work from this book until the school year ends." I was shocked, deeply gratified, and liberated. It was the first time a teacher had ever acknowledged my personal grievance and challenged my potential. More than that, he was probably breaking the rule. The following school year, I had the same drafting instructor, and he allowed me to advance in the course curriculum. Yet nothing else changed. It was back to the same old shit. Gradually, I didn't care anymore.

Chapter II: Day One — June 19, 1975

When word spread throughout my neighborhood that a few of my homeboys were responsible for killing a cop during a robbery attempt, I realized the days were numbered before that event would reach its climax and shit would get ugly. It was June 19, 1975, the night they pulled the robbery. That event opened the door of no return for me. A web of tales spun out of control, and I was trapped in a vicious cycle. Truth be told, my youth was robbed and my innocence scarred for life. My girl Kiki told me to stay off the block that evening, but my ego got in the way. I was too dumb to listen. The ego can be your friend or your worst enemy.

In South Central Los Angeles, as the streetlights began their synchronous dance—glowing dim amber at the edge of night—you would customarily hear a “rat-atat” sputter from an AK-47 or a distant “pop-pop” to christen the night. But this time, the shit was about to jump off on our block.

“Who’s this motherfucker creeping, Blood?” Smiley caught everyone’s attention. Huddled in a circle on the sidewalk, we focused on a car we suspected didn’t belong there. We couldn’t see the driver’s face as the car approached. It appeared to me that the driver was searching for an address, throttling and braking at short distances. Smiley put everybody in a state of paranoia. Discreetly, he was the first to break. Then everyone else began to scatter and run for cover as the unfamiliar car continued closer.

I slanted my body next to the side of a parked car and looked through the car windows to see the driver's face. To my surprise, it was Adam Hill. Daryl Hicks was among us too. He’d known Adam from years back like I had, but they never became friends. I called out to Adam to clear the air of confusion before someone trigger-happy mistook him for being a Crip.

Most of the guys were packing guns, as they were getting ready by complete nightfall to pull a robbery later that evening.

Adam immediately recognized me. He stopped his car dead center in the street, elated to discover my whereabouts.

After the years that had passed between us, he offered to kick it with me for a while. Smiley, Beau,

Daryl, Killer, and Mad-Dog came out from hiding, checking Adam and me from along the sidewalk. I realized Adam's suggestion was an open door, an excuse for me to leave the block. I didn't want to get caught up in what my homeboys were planning to do.

In hindsight, I didn't realize that leaving with Adam would become the door of no return for me. Before Adam appeared, the guys had questioned whether I was seriously down with connecting with the gang later that evening. Daryl Hicks had fronted me off because I had avoided other times when robberies were planned, "punking out" or not showing up. Just as before, I found a way to work myself out of the loop. I chose to leave with Adam, suspecting Daryl wouldn't miss the opportunity to inform the gang about Adam's father. Almost everyone in Compton had heard of "The Hammer." Adam's father had earned that name during the Watts riots of 1965. I was about seven years old that hot August, and my recollections of the riots were as vivid as if they had happened yesterday.

My grandmother and I lived right in the heart of South Central, near 136th Street and Mona Park. After the riots, an investigation was held to determine whether excessive force had been used against the citizens of Watts and South-Central Los Angeles. James Hill, Adam's father, was accused, along with several police officers, of being as brutal as some of the white cops during the riots. However, there was not enough documented evidence to charge him with excessive force. Nevertheless, Officer Hill was nicknamed "The Hammer." He maintained that reputation for years. He

eventually became the first Black captain of the SouthCentral Police Department.

If it were not for the Watts riots, I might never have met Adam. During that period, the actions of the police and National Guard—who seized the city and imposed a curfew on Compton, Watts, and South-Central Los Angeles—left more than a stench of mistrust, apathy, and discontent among the people for years. Even so, the summer following the riots, the South-Central Police Department created summer camps for the kids of South Central and the children of police officers to “help bridge the gap between the police and the community.” That’s how I met Adam.

We were among several hundred girls and boys who attended the summer camp that year. Adam and I bunked in the same cabin with two other kids who were white, but that didn’t make any difference to us. We were just kids and happy to be there, absorbed in the experience.

After my encounter with Adam the night I left the gang on Popular Street, I sought truth in my grandmother’s old saying: “When one door closes, another one opens.” At the time, I was looking for an opening and never suspected the closing. I believed Adam presented me with a window of opportunity and hope. We talked for hours that night. As young men, it was the first serious talk we had about ourselves. In a way, it was like meeting him for the first time.

With unexpected wit and wisdom, Adam led me to rediscover myself and my true potential. I also discovered many things about him, as well as about who the “real

Hammer” was—the man behind the badge. No one in a million years would have suspected how one man who could do everything so right could be so wrong. In a way, this story is about him as much as it is about me. Our lives were so close and yet a world away, locked and sealed in Pandora’s Box. But I’ll get to that later.

After we left the gang on Popular Street, Adam offered to treat me to a meal, and I was down with getting my grub on. As he steered his little red Volkswagen Beetle close to Zorbas’ hamburger stand on Compton Boulevard, I became leery. Zorbas bordered Crip and Blood territories, and the Crips claimed it as their spot. Adam appeared completely unaware of that fact, even after I told him. Truthfully, I was annoyed by it.

Adam said, “Listen, this is nothing more than a colony in which the white man has confined Negroes within a five-mile radius. It’s one thing to deal with conditions beyond our control, and it’s another when the oppressed inflict oppression on the oppressed. The idea is that you prepare for peace in a time of war and prepare for war in a time of peace. So whenever you’re confronted by your enemy, you must eliminate fear, or fear will become the enemy itself.”

He then put me on the spot by asking, “Should we be in fear of men who look like us, bro?”

“No,” I replied.

He asked again. “Should we be in fear of men, who look like us?”

“No,” I said.

Calmly, he affirmed he was not afraid, nor should I be for that matter. However, Adam didn’t have to follow the same rules on the streets. His world was completely

opposite of the daily challenges for survival within or beyond the five-mile radius where I lived. This was my world, and the only way that I could relate to it. Even so, I couldn't challenge the brother in his conviction because I also believed he was right.

Adam still didn't realize how close he had come to getting shot at on Popular Street just minutes earlier. He was fresh on the streets after being away for two years attending college in a military academy. During that period, Compton was recognized as having the highest crime rate in the nation for a city of its size. Gradually, the social dynamic in Los Angeles had transformed from the extreme of Black pride, created by the Sixties Black Power Movement, into the gang violence of the seventies—the Crips and Bloods. In a short time, our innocent optimism was snatched away, and gang violence permeated the fabric of the community. Things seemed to move against me after Adam's strong statement. I became suddenly paranoid when I spotted a car pulling into the parking lot at Zorbas with at least four people inside. Adam observed my fear as I anticipated their arrival, but he remained calm as I stood alongside him.

While ordering our food at the outside window counter, my mind replayed how recently damn near every passing night had claimed new victims who were caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, resulting in a violent death, and Compton Boulevard was no exception.

As the group approached, I took a steely glance at the muscular leader, who carried at least eighteen-inch biceps. His street name was Spooky, and his reputation was becoming legendary on the streets. He was notorious

for giving beatdowns to jokers for looking at him the wrong way. Spooky swayed his body from side to side to exaggerate his bulk and might. Adam murmured, "He looks like an ape from the jungle about to beat on his chest." I didn't think it was time to make jokes, but Adam carried on unfazed. Spooky quickly emerged as one of the leaders of the Eastside Crips, and one of the guys with him was my old homeboy Jesse Gomez, who was well aware that I was off my set.

Spooky's clean-shaved head was crowned with a navy-blue scarf that symbolized his alliance to his posse, who followed him in like manner. All of them maintained an obvious, piercing gaze meant to intimidate us as they approached. They were "Crip down" from head to toe, each wearing his gear as proudly as soldiers in a parade.

Jesse and I were tight back in the day. I recalled how, just a few years earlier, we had played on the same little league baseball team two years in a row; he was my rolling buddy. I used to look forward to Jesse's mom sending me an invite to some real Mexican food after our games. She treated me like family.

Subsequently, our friendship had faded during our freshman year when the school district implemented a plan that divided our neighborhood into subgroups; redistricting is what they called it. I lived just blocks from Compton High then, and I had never conceived the idea of attending high school anywhere else. Ironically, the year redistricting was implemented, which included my neighborhood north of Compton Boulevard, I received the disappointing news that I would be bused to

Dominguez High School way across town. That situation, among other things, is what sealed the fate of our neighborhood and others to become vowed enemies to the Crips.

To me, it is conceivable that redistricting was the catalyst that helped create gangs in Compton. Shortly afterward, boundaries were formed, and territories were established to mark enemy lines.

Prior to redistricting, all the teams in the league gathered at the Compton High track and field for practice after school each day. The games were played at Victory Park. Despite neighborhood affiliations, kids came from every corner of the district, but when the boundaries formed, we better not get caught anywhere near Compton High unless we were a so-called Crip, which included Victory Park, where the games were held.

I'm sure things would have played out differently if I hadn't stood alongside Adam that night at Zorbas. He remembered Spooky and Jesse from those days of little league as well. It was well-known during the little league years that Adam was the son of the "Hammer," but Adam was equally respected for holding his own.

While we made small talk about the good old days and Spooky's schoolboy reputation, Adam looked right through their bad-guy fronting and never flinched in response to the intimidating stares from Spooky or his boys. But I just couldn't believe Jesse. He was straightup gangbanging, staring me down as if I had no soul inside me and could shoot me with the blink of an eye if Spooky gave the word.

For nearly five years, beginning in 1965, there were almost no active black street gangs in

Los Angeles. Several reports that black gang activity was on the decline began to circulate (Klein 1971:22). According to Sergeant Warren Johnson, "During the mid and late 1960s, juvenile gang activity in the black neighborhoods was scarcely visible to the public at large and of a minimal concern to South Central residents" (Cohen 1972). It was the formation of these movements that offered black youth a vehicle of positive identification, as pride pervaded the black community (Los Angeles Times 3/19/72).

The Crips were successful in developing a style of dress and a recognizable appearance. In addition to their black leather jackets, they would often walk with canes and wear an earring in their left ear lobe. Some were also avid weightlifters. The Crips began to venture into their own criminal behavior, committing robberies and assaults. In 1971, several Crip members that were assaulting a group of elderly Japanese women were described by the victims as young cripples that carried canes. These young cripples were the Crips, but the local media picked up on this description and referred to this group as the Crips (Los Angeles Sentinel, 2/10/72). The print media first introduced the term Crip, and those that were involved in a life of crime were Crippin' by other Crips members who were still trying to be revolutionary with the same political thinking of the 1960s. According to _____ Danifu, an original Crips member, the Crips were the original name of the Cribs, but the term was substituted using the word Crips through a newspaper

article that highlighted specific individuals who were arrested for a murder. [8] Because some of the early Crips carried canes, the entire notion of Crip as an abbreviated pronunciation from crippled caught on. Jerry Cohen wrote that Crip members wore earrings in their left lobe, in addition to carrying canes, but the walking sticks were not the source of the gang's name that many believed (1972:C3). Danifu continued to add that Crippin' was a separate thing from being a Crib... Crippin' meant robbing and stealing, and then it developed into a way of life. [9]

As mentioned earlier, these youths tried to emulate the fashion of the Panthers by developing a style of dress that including black leather jackets. Those youths who had the Crippin' mentality became excessively concerned with imitating the Panther appearance. By 1972, most Crips were completely transformed into the Crippin' way of life, which often led into criminal activities. For example, the acquisition of leather jackets by unemployed black youths was accomplished by committing robbery and strong-arming vulnerable youths for their jackets. Jerry Cohen (1972) described the early Crips as: a group of juveniles that committed extortion of merchandise, mugging the elderly, and ripping off weaker youths, particularly for their leather jackets that have become a symbol of Crip identity. (p C3)

Chapter III: Touched by the Light

After we got our food, we sat in Adam's car. Adam began to analyze the whole situation. "Daniel," he said, "gangs are nothing more than a variation of man's

inhumanity against man, similar to ancient African tribalism.”

He began breaking down related historical events, reaching as far back as the formation of ghettos within Jewish settlements under the Roman Empire and the European invasion and colonization of Africa.

He was especially sensitive to the situation in South Africa and the territory of what was then called Rhodesia. Never had I heard such concepts and ideas articulated in such a way that made my experience relevant and perhaps disdainful. He told me about a man named Nelson Mandela, whose plight as political prisoner challenged apartheid. I had never heard of him until then, let alone apartheid.

Adam compared the struggles of oppressed Africans under apartheid in South Africa to the emerging political consciousness of young Black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement. Then he pointed to a young brother strolling down the street carrying an oversized boom box. “Do you see him walking happy and proud while toting that boom box?” Adam asked.

“He’s happy, and the white man is happy, because the white man looks at him and says, ‘That’s one Negro who won’t rebel against me.’”

While peeling away the veils of my ignorance, Adam provoked my curiosity and made me want to know more. His phrasing was remarkably simple and easy for me to understand. He marked each point with clear, memorable statements such as, “Ghettos don’t happen by accident; they’re created.” It was remarkable to hear someone his age shape complex ideas into words I could hold onto. All the while, he expressed genuine concern for the poor and

oppressed. I realized that he was quite different from his father. I didn't know how he had acquired such humility and compassion toward the less fortunate. This was an amazing trait, so unlike "The Hammer." As I listened, I saw myself as a nobody, but Adam took the time to show me how we "incorporate our own self-destruction," another phrase of his.

Suddenly, he reached into the rear seat and removed a copy of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written by Alex Haley, from his book bag. His presentation of the book felt like a king bestowing a precious gift upon an honorable recipient.

After he gave me a brief synopsis of the book, I gave my word that I would read it. He said we could discuss the book on the weekend and maybe drive up to the mountains to camp out. That was an appealing bargain to me.

The first and last time I had gone camping was ten years earlier, when I first met Adam. I remember feeling nervous about my promise to read. Back then, books felt like drudgery, tied to writing reports on subjects such as the American colonies or dead presidents.

Black people didn't seem to exist in American history or social studies. As a result, those subjects rarely captured my interest, nor was I inspired to read for myself. Yet I was a very good reader.

Teachers back in the day didn't spend much time on African American history. Malcolm X was perhaps too radical or less understood, compared to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. However, despite my dread, I valued Adam's friendship enough to not compromise it due to my own lack of desire for reading books.

We chilled in his ride until the late hours and talked about everything, it seemed. Later, when I settled in, I didn't hesitate to open the book. Every chapter pulled me deeper into Malcolm X's life and struggle. I read two-thirds of it before exhaustion overtook me, and I couldn't wait to finish it the next day.

It occurred to me that my encounter with Adam was the most enlightening experience I had ever had in one sitting with a homeboy. He expressed genuine concern about my future. It was different from my everyday routine of hanging out on Popular Street, shooting the shit, passing the Silver Satin, or toking on a couple of joints with the homies. None of the homies ever talked seriously about their future. We certainly never talked about where we wanted to be ten years down the road. We settled day to day, week to week. I was lost and without words when Adam asked where I wanted to be ten years into the future. The idea itself was new to me.

While hanging out with the fellows every day, everything revolved around "Blaze one," "How much you got on the drinks?" or "Where's the bitches?" If anything, we spent more time tearing each other down to the marrow with, "You can't do," "You can't be," or "You're dreaming." We never expected much from ourselves or one another. I guess that is what inspired me to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Adam explained how Malcolm X evolved from that same stagnant mentality, transforming himself into someone worthy, someone with purpose. Soon, that is what I wanted for myself.

After I completed the book the next morning, I was deeply touched by a sense of grief and loss over the death of Malcolm X. Nine years after his execution, at seventeen years old, I felt something for this man that I had never felt or understood in relation to my own father. I began to realize what I had missed by not having a father in my life. I had no reference, no legacy to claim.

I questioned Adam's point of view that night when I asked him, "Why will it mean so much to your father to pursue a military career and follow your family legacy?"

Adam replied, "My entire life from the cradle, and including my college career, was one huge orchestration of my father's conception."

Adam was an honor student who graduated from Compton High nearly two years ahead of his class as valedictorian and then went on to a military academy. But what got me was that, to him, it was nothing more than one huge burden on his shoulders. I thought to myself how gladly I would trade places with him. The idea of leaving Officer Training Academy to enter Meharry Medical College and become a doctor—with a forty-thousand-dollar scholarship to boot—was far beyond my comprehension. What an option. Still, I understood his dilemma about telling his father he didn't want to serve in the white man's army. My question to Adam was, "If your father's legacy is so important to him, then why didn't he name you James Hill IV?" With Adam's ability to make plausible arguments with great ingenuity, that was the only time that evening he was left without words. I felt stupid afterward for asking. Then I realized he was just venting. After all, it wasn't me who had to face "The Hammer."

Decades later, I remain deeply thankful for the knowledge Adam shared with me on the evening of June 19, 1975. It had a lasting impact on my life. That was the last inspiring moment we had together. Two days later, I watched him gasp for the last breath of his life as I held his body in a pool of blood. God have mercy on his soul. I miss you, Bro. But of course, I still have to give you the details of that story too.

Adam Hill 7-27-53 - 6-21-75

Chapter IV: Pieces of the Puzzle

Surprisingly, on that same evening of June 19, 1975, while talking about our roots, Adam and I discovered that we were born in the same hometown: Indianapolis, Indiana. It turned out that Adam's parents had moved to the West Coast several years before my grandmother and me. He told me about his family history, yet there were details of his family tree that he knew nothing about. Ironically, I would discover those details on the day his life ended. That was when Pandora's Box was opened.

My grandmother and I arrived in Los Angeles in the cold December of 1963. I remember the month because it

was the day before Christmas. It was a desperate move. The abuse my grandmother suffered from Papa Jim had become too much for her to bear, and she decided to make a change.

I vividly remember the late-night beatings that took place whenever he came home after drinking all night, usually on weekends. It was hard to believe how brutal he could be toward her, a petite and dainty woman with a voice that was often mistaken for a child's voice over the telephone. Still, she could be feisty and a force to be reckoned with when she wanted to be.

One early morning, as before, I began to emerge from my dreams into the reality of Papa Jim beating her again without mercy. I cried alone in my room in the dark as my grandmother wept and pleaded for him to stop. Eventually, her weeping ended in silence.

This time, before the sun came up, she packed our suitcases while Papa Jim passed out into a deep sleep. I don't know why she had to let him know we were leaving. Perhaps all she wanted from him was an "Okay, dog. Have a good life" response. But his "I don't give a shit" attitude was too harsh and offensive for her to take, and she snapped. Suddenly, the little lady who had pleaded in distress became as brave as David slaying Goliath.

While Papa Jim lay in bed, still numb from alcohol, my grandmother took both of his wrists and tied them to the bedpost with her nylon stockings. Before he realized what was happening, she began beating the living daylights out of him with his own wide leather belt. The snap of the belt across his naked body packed the punch

of a whip to a runaway slave. He cried and begged the way my grandmother had begged earlier.

“Ruth! What are you doing?” he screamed. He was fully awake then and damn near hog-tied. The big bear was reduced before my eyes to a funny, droll-looking fat man. Even so, I dared not laugh. As he struggled to free himself, he resorted to cursing her, trying to scare her into releasing him.

“Damn it, untie me!” he shouted and continued with similar threats. It was not in him to show a sign of remorse for the way he had treated her. Yet, everything he did increased her anger.

Her small arms must have grown tired from whacking and whirling. That was when she set the bed on fire. I thought she had gone crazy, but before the flames could do any real harm, she began throwing buckets of water on him and said, “Here, you son of a bitch,” as if to say, “This is what I could have done to you.”

When our taxi arrived, my grandmother grabbed our suitcases, and that was the last time I ever heard of Papa Jim. Papa Jim wasn’t my real grandfather. My grandfather Harold died before I was born. My grandmother used to tell me stories about how she and Harold had been childhood sweethearts. They had four daughters, including my mother, who died when I was born.

I have always called my grandmother “Mom.” She was my mom from my cradle to her grave. The memories of my father are vague; his visits with me before leaving Indianapolis were too few and far in between to attach any real significance to our relationship. Still, I believe that he helped finance our escape from Papa Jim.

Right after leaving Papa Jim still tied to the bed, we met my father, who was busy cutting hair that morning in a barbershop. With the taximeter running, we entered the shop. Without a word, my father handed my grandmother a roll of money. There was a short goodbye, and my father carried me back to the taxi.

We pulled away, headed straight to the Greyhound bus station to leave for Los Angeles. To this day, I have never heard from my father. His face has faded to a blur in my memory, like the face of my mother, whom I have never known.

Adam's family's move to Southern California was more illustrious than ours, especially in the way he remembered the complexity of his parents' reunion after World War II. He described his father, James Hill III, as a very proud man whose heritage included his great-grandfather James Hill I and his grandfather James Hill II, each of whom had served in the United States military, starting with the Spanish-American War. Adam's father, James Hill III, was among the African American men who served under the leadership of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis in the 99th Pursuit Squadron, part of what became known as the Tuskegee experiment. After the war, he completed his education and received his degree from Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

In 1955, he became one of the first Black police officers hired to serve in an all-white suburb in Indianapolis, Indiana. Five years later, he relocated his family to Southern California while pursuing a law degree at the University of Southern California. Shortly

before beginning his studies, he accepted an offer from the Los Angeles Police Department. By 1968, three years after the Watts riots, he was promoted to police captain in the South-Central District.

Adam passionately explained that his father did not escape resistance or racist condescension. On the surface, his accomplishments prevailed, but the scars he carried deep within created conflicts in his psyche. The pressure of proving himself as good as—or better than—his white counterparts was coupled with the challenge of disproving the fallacies of Negro inferiority and stereotypes. Somehow, though, those experiences made him oblivious to the cause of the weak and oppressed and to the very system he had strived to overcome. Adam didn't say it outright, but he came close to calling him an "Uncle Tom."

Adam was remarkably articulate about his father's experiences. The most interesting story was how the captain met Adam's mother, whom I came to know well in the years after my grandmother passed away. Mr. Hill met his wife while stationed in Paris, France, after the war in November 1944, when Benjamin O. Davis Sr. became Special Assistant to the Commanding General of the European Theater of Operations. On special duty as adviser on Negro problems, the assistant general was responsible not only to Black troops but also to a company of European troops and nurses. He worked to dispel myths white troops had spread, including claims that Negro soldiers had tails, emphasizing instead that they were proud, competent soldiers commissioned in

service to their country and fighting alongside Europeans in a common front. Mr. Hill was elated to begin a relationship with a beautiful young French woman in attendance. Born in France, she was aware of the propaganda and myths surrounding Negro troops because her mother was of African American descent. Beth, Adam's grandmother, had settled in France after leaving Chicago, Illinois, in her early twenties, like Paul Robeson and many aspiring performers and Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance. She eventually embraced the traditional role of a French wife and raised a daughter, Adam's mother.

I remember when I first laid eyes on her at Victory Park. It was my first year as a Little Leaguer and a couple of years after I became acquainted with Adam at summer camp. She was strikingly beautiful, almost mesmerizing, poised, and graceful. To me, she didn't fit the image of someone who would be married to "The Hammer." Mrs. Hill befriended the parents and volunteered her time at the park. Mr. Hill was noticeably the opposite: cold, dark in spirit, and completely unattached to people.

Yet you could immediately tell that they were a close-knit family, and they had made themselves part of the fabric of the community. Adam's parents were always at Victory Park when his team played. Occasionally, I would see my grandmother and Mrs. Hill chatting as if they were dear old friends, sitting beside each other at my games. I didn't find it peculiar then.

"Love is friendship that has caught fire. It is quiet understanding, mutual confidence, sharing, and forgiving. It is

loyalty through good and bad times. It settles for less than perfection and makes allowances for human weaknesses."

Chapter V: My Universe

Somehow, my grandmother survived her ordeal and made a way for both of us as we settled in Compton. With every hurdle she crossed, she often said to me, "We're pioneer stock." And we were. We started over in a little makeshift room with a cooking area, a sink, a tiny bathroom, twin beds, and only the bare necessities.

The place was a garage converted into an apartment in the 400 block of Arbutus Street near North Aranbe Avenue in Compton. It was a radical change from the life we had known in Indiana, where we had lived in a warm two-bedroom house. No matter how many rugs Mom layered across the floor or how carefully she sealed the cracks, the cold air still found its way in. During the winter months, it was never completely warm.

I stayed sick for weeks at a time. God only knows how she found that place, but as we settled in late that December night, it became clear that someone had been expecting us.

When we arrived, the people who lived in the front house greeted us with sacks of groceries. From then on, it appeared that we were completely on our own, with one exception: there was always one woman close to Mom

who called from time to time. She never visited us, but somehow, she remained present.

Evidently, Mom kept that woman updated about our needs and comforts. Over the years, I learned to hear the difference between those conversations and the calls from my aunts in Indiana. Whenever I asked who it was, Mom would simply say, “That was my guardian angel.”

Just days before Christmas, my grandmother found her first job at the Goodwill on Willowbrook. She even managed to bring home a few gifts and a small tabletop tree. We never missed a beat in that little makeshift garage. Mom made the best of what she had. We were never deprived of blessings because of Papa Jim. She had enough spirit and strength of character to make the sacrifices necessary to change our situation.

From her, I learned resilience—a trait I never imagined I would have to call upon so often. I also learned faith, strong will, determination, and the refusal to weaken under pressure. “Keep the faith and love the Lord. He will guard and guide you,” she always said.

Our lives began to improve in Compton when my grandmother became acquainted with a handsome gentleman who had speckles of gray in his thin-lined mustache, caramel complexion, and frosty silver sideburns that blended into his dark wavy hair, shiny and slick with pomade. I addressed him as Uncle Clifford.

Gradually, a serious relationship developed between Mom and Clifford, and she was optimistic that it would become more than platonic. I liked Clifford, perhaps as much as she did. Before long, he moved us out of that tiny garage apartment and into a nice two-bedroom apartment on the corner of Acacia Avenue and Magnolia.

The following school year, I began attending Rosecrans Elementary School. My Kindergarten teacher was a white-haired, pale lady named Ms. Vermase, who was warm-hearted, affectionate, and seemingly unbiased toward black children. I measured every teacher afterwards by her standards; most made the cut my first few years.

The relationship between Clifford and Mom probably lasted no more than six months. Still, in that short span, I became acquainted with a certain kind of manhood. Clifford taught me how to get a good spit-shine on my Sunday shoes, and he passed on an assortment of matching cuff links and neckties to wear with my dress shirts. He also taught me how to loop a real tie properly, unlike the clip-on ties Mom had bought for me.

He showed me how to brush and lay my hair into waves with pomade and a stocking cap before going to bed. One simple gift he gave me, which I have managed to keep throughout my life, was a wooden box that held my shoe waxes, brushes, and shining rags.

He also gave me my first Timex watch and taught me how to tell time. Before I was allowed to wear it, he tested me until I could read it correctly. He was a churchgoing brother with a job that allowed him the luxury of driving a brand-new Cadillac sedan on Sundays and a decent Chevy pickup during the week. From Monday through Saturday, he wore dark green khaki uniforms. On Sundays, he was sharp as a tack.

That two-bedroom apartment made room for his occasional overnight stays, which were unpredictable and brief, as he led Mom to believe he would leave his wife,

who was deathly sick. Before long, Mom began to draw the line, putting everything at risk: the nice ride to church every Sunday, extra food on the table, and the security of having a man around. She stood her ground with a non-compromising decision not to be trapped in self-deceit. She wanted “to be upright.” That was her credo. It was a hard lesson for me at six years old. I couldn’t imagine not having Clifford in our lives anymore. In my innocence, I began to think she was the “mean one,” even as the feuds between them became more frequent and intense.

Finally, the day came when she cut him off. Clifford tried to express concern that she was turning me into a mama’s boy, but that was not enough to make her bend or buckle. He became outspoken on the subject. Then the pen was lifted, and the ink dried. Years later, when I asked her what had happened with Clifford, she told me he drank too much and that she feared he would become another Papa Jim.

As my grandmother guided me in learning acceptable behavior, the world appeared vast and full of disorder during the early 1960s. The Vietnam War was the main event of the time.

On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy’s assassination shocked the world. It also triggered Mom’s decision to end my relationship with the brothers in the Nation of Islam, known to many as “the Black Muslims.” She had placed me under the tutelage of the Fruit of Islam to prove Clifford wrong about me becoming a mama’s boy. She strongly objected to that accusation.

My affiliation with the Nation of Islam ended as suddenly and firmly as my relationship with Clifford. Years later, after reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm*

X, I was able to connect the dots. At six years old, I was too young to understand.

Shortly after breaking ties with Clifford, we started to attend evening lectures at one of LA's Muslim temples. My grandmother eventually arranged for me to be assigned a brother mentor. My mentor's name was Brother James X. He was tall, slender, and dark-skinned, with pearly white teeth. He always spoke in an eloquent and gentlemanly manner.

Mom didn't necessarily subscribe to the beliefs of the Nation, but she was fascinated by the discipline and order among the believers. They exemplified brotherhood and seemed to express a high form of respect toward women.

I became accustomed to Brother James arriving on weekends with several brothers who treated me like the young charm of the group. I was always the youngster among the entourage, yet I consistently outsold them with *Muhammad Speaks* newspapers.

Though I could not articulate the message the way the brothers could, I attracted attention from the public with my polished image: suit pressed, tie clipped, hair parted sharply on the side, and shoes spit-shined just the way Uncle Clifford had taught me.

I became an attraction on LA's busiest street corners, offering a gracious smile and a simple, "Thank you, brother," or "Thank you, sister." The sisters couldn't pass me without a second glance and would buy a paper just on GP. It amazed the brothers. Every time we huddled together in that pretty black sedan and drove to our next destination, the brothers broke loose from the composure they maintained on the streets. In fits, they would shout,

“Did you see that? Did you see that?” I thought nothing could possibly pull me away from Brother James X and the brothers.

Then, in December 1963, Malcolm X gave a speech entitled “God’s Judgment of White America.” That speech later became known as “The Chickens Come Home to Roost Speech” because of an answer Malcolm X gave in response to a question afterwards to a reporter. The question concerned the late President John F. Kennedy.

It was Malcolm X’s answer that the president’s death was a case of the “chickens coming home to roost,” that the violence Kennedy had failed to stop in Birmingham had come back to haunt him. This statement resulted in Elijah Muhammad silencing him, and Malcolm X left the Nation shortly after.

As that statement hit the newsreels throughout the country, it produced a deep emotional difference in my grandmother’s heart. “How could he make that kind of remark?” She said repeatedly. John Kennedy was perceived by some as being a saint or savior for blacks in America. I believe in her mind he was.

Kennedy had made an impressive move when he sent twelve hundred federal marshals to escort James Meredith to register for class on the Oxford, Mississippi campus of Ole Miss. The local whites had rioted before the troops were sent to restore order. I will never forget that tragic day of Kennedy’s assassination. Mom wept and wailed as if she had lost a dear, personal friend. In expressing her affection for him, she frequently remarked, “He was a great man,” as she would eventually say about Malcolm X years later.

The week after Malcolm X's "Chickens Coming Home to Roost" remarks hit the news, the day arrived. Mom warned me that I could no longer accompany the brothers. It hadn't sunk in, and I still dressed and prepared myself before they arrived. I believed there might be hope, that Brother James could change her mind. He tried. When he finally realized he could not reverse her decision, I watched in silence, numb and subdued with grief. From the rear of the room, I saw water forming in his eyes as sunlight glared through the window. He stretched out his arms to give me one last brotherly handshake. As I approached, he knelt on one knee and placed his arms around me. I would never have believed that this tall, proud Black man—whom I had watched standing bold on street corners all over LA, immaculately dressed, my leader and mentor—could shed a tear for this poor, fatherless Black boy who was ready to be shaped into a man like him. When he walked out the door, I ran to my room and lay face down on my bed, nearly crying my heart out.

My grandmother followed behind, clenching her fists, throwing her arms down in fury, and shouting, "They teach too much hate." I would never see Brother James X again.

The following summer, we moved into a very small house on the border of Watts and Compton, at the corner of 136th and Mona Park Avenue. With that move, I came to experience another side of my grandmother. The area wasn't fully developed yet. There were a few paved sidewalks, but not many. It felt like living in the country.

A lot of folks raised farm animals as livestock, even horses for show or riding. After a while, it became second nature for me to hear roosters crowing in the neighborhood. Mom could wring the neck of a live chicken in a way that rivaled Annie Oakley. It was fun to go to the local farmers' market to purchase food for our own rabbits and egg-laying hens. Mom hired a neighbor to build our very own chicken coop. It was during that time when I got my first dog, a cocker spaniel named Skippy.

Gradually, my grandmother turned me into a real chore boy. I had to feed the dog, clean up after him, rake the yard, empty the trash, and walk to the market every day for small items—all before I reached my seventh birthday. And you can bet she never cut me any slack.

The most pleasurable moments we shared in that little house on Mona Park came in the evenings, when we lit a small grill in the front yard to roast wieners or melt marshmallows as the sun went down. Mom would say, “Danny Boy, we’re pioneer stock,” while we took in the country-fresh air and listened to the great hits of the time on the radio—Motown’s Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, Diana Ross and the Supremes, and my favorites, the Temptations, mixed with white artists like the Beatles, the Carpenters, the Mamas and the Papas, and Sonny and Cher, to name a few. Country living grew on me quickly.

During our first summer there, the Watts riots erupted. It was a turbulent time for Black people in South Central Los Angeles, and perhaps everywhere, as I eventually learned. Mom watched the nightly news without fail. Walter Cronkite was the man who

interpreted the world for us. The riots made a deep emotional impact on me as I witnessed graphic civil unrest and images from the Civil Rights Movement. I did not understand the brutality and mistreatment of people in Black communities who were protesting the wrongs of the system.

One evening as I watched the news along with Mom, Cronkite described a scene of policemen using batons, fire hoses, and dogs on the people on the sidewalks. He repeatedly used the phrase, "The Negroes." From the gist of the news reporting, the phrase carried a negative connotation, suggesting something evil or wicked. As far as I could see, these people who were being beaten and attacked unjustifiably by the police looked like me. It hurt my heart to think that society would think of my race or me as such evil creatures. For that reason, I asked my grandmother if I were a Negro. She glared at me in shock and answered, "You are an American," with strong conviction. However, I was not completely convinced.

The following day at school, I felt compelled to resist placing my hand over my heart while facing the American flag. I could not recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The phrase "one nation, under God" felt like a lie to me as smoke from fires in the streets not far away hazed the classroom. Armored tanks lined the railroad tracks on Alameda, a block from where I lived. Mom had not given me enough to remove the void. I might have been an American, but I felt like a different kind. I was still a Negro.

"Love is much like a wild rose, beautiful and calm, but willing to draw blood in defense."

Chapter VI: The Changing Times

Shortly after the Watts riots, “white flight” swept through the city like a fast Santa Ana wind, leaving downtown Compton damn near a ghost town as white residents and businesses moved away. Businesses relocated far beyond the borders of South Central, into places where Negroes were not yet even imagined as customers. Several Jewish retailers and merchants remained, keeping Compton Boulevard alive.

Still, you would never believe how beautiful the hood could be. After the riots, people in the community seemed humbled by a common thread of unity. It felt like a cleansing among us. Yet as a seven-year-old walking past the ruins of burned stores and buildings, I wondered, Where do we go from here? Who is going to fix it? The erosion of those buildings, along with the stale stench of fire, remained for nearly a decade after the riots of 1965.

Out of that period came a new language of cultural pride and social reform. Dr. Maulana Karenga, professor and chairman of Black Studies at California State University, Long Beach, created Kwanzaa in 1966 after searching for ways to bring African Americans together as a community. He founded US, a cultural organization, and drew from African “first fruit” harvest celebrations, including traditions associated with the Ashanti and Zulu, to form the basis of Kwanzaa. At the same time, young Black Nationalists drew inspiration from radical international voices such as Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, and Patrice Lumumba. Activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, including

Stokely Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver, adopted a tone of assertion through the slogan “Black Power.” The Congress of Racial Equality stood among the major civil rights organizations, alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Black intellectuals were reexamining the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, E. Franklin Frazier, Carter G. Woodson, Denmark Vesey, and others. Other groups explored Pan-Africanism. And if you wanted to get the pulse of Black America, *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines gave us weekly coverage of politics, social issues, and entertainment. They gave Black Americans a lens for self-examination.

Moving into the 1970s, the “hip” thing was catching on, and Afrocentric expressions began to enter the fabric of society. Gradually, I was coming to terms with my own Blackness. Perhaps what crystallized my acceptance of my place in society was James Brown’s record “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud.” For a Black kid during that time, it meant everything. The song was revolutionary.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had extended the call for social justice to the highest order. Black intellectuals from many venues were inspiring hope. They prodded the apathy and despair attached to our condition, and things were being shaken up while the Vietnam War moved toward its end.

In 1971, Muhammad Ali won the Supreme Court’s unanimous decision overturning his draft conviction. Hippies carried the “peace and love” slogan into mass

marches, and protest culture influenced the Civil Rights Movement. Leaders such as Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Thurgood Marshall, the first Black American to serve on the Supreme Court, represented achievement and possibility. A call for nationhood united many Black people, and we would no longer be called Negroes.

Before long, however, it seemed as if our Black leaders were falling like dominoes after the assassinations of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The Black Panther Party began to disintegrate under heavy scrutiny from the media and law enforcement.

Angela Davis, a radical Black activist and philosopher, was arrested as a suspected conspirator in the attempted courtroom escape of George Jackson from Marin County, California, on August 7, 1970. The guns used were registered in her name. Davis was eventually acquitted of all charges, but she had briefly appeared on the FBI's Most Wanted list while fleeing arrest.

Davis was often associated with the Black Panthers and with the Black Power politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s. She joined the Communist Party after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. She had been active with SNCC before working with the Black Panthers. She later achieved tenure at the University of California at Santa Cruz, even after former Governor Ronald Reagan had sworn she would never teach again in the University of California system.

In 1971, George Jackson, like Malcolm X before him, had educated himself behind prison bars to the point that his clear vision of historical and contemporary reality frightened the U.S. power structure. The prison system was determined to physically eliminate him, and they did. The media portrayed the Panther Party as a group of lawbreakers, fugitives, and convicts, which helped sever the loyalty and trust of many in the Black community from the party's legitimate causes.

As a result, other activist efforts among African Americans began to meet apathy and declining support. Compared with the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther Party was widely viewed by many young Black Americans as a future hope within the community. Young children, including me, were enamored with their revolutionary style and rhetoric. Children everywhere mimicked their salute and slogan: "Power to the people."

But those images in the media were soon replaced by Hollywood's "B" movie industry—films such as *Sheba, Baby*, *Super Fly*, and *The Mack*, to name a few. Somewhere along the way, too many of us began identifying less with revolutionaries and more with pimps.

*"Strange how laughter looks like crying with no sound,
and how raindrops taste like tears without pain."*

Chapter VII: The Gang-Banging Years

During my teen years, life in South Central became completely off balance as the Blood and Crip gangs emerged. In the beginning, I didn't take them seriously. I didn't believe the changes were real. For a solid year or so, I would creep past different posses in the so-called "enemy neighborhoods," blending in as if I were a part of their set without ever being confronted. If I rolled solo, it was all good.

I could chill out at Jesse's every now and then. Jesse wasn't down with gangbanging at first. He was too much into sports. He was naturally gifted, dominating every sport he played, including track. He had a promising future as an athlete, and he earned good grades without much effort. But over time, peer pressure and getting high with his homies on the block began to pull him in another direction.

My homeboy got pulled in, and we drifted in our own directions. Jesse's neighborhood boys formed alliances with emerging Crip gangs, while my neighborhood forged alliances with the Bloods, Pirus, Brims, Bounty Hunters, and the boys in Fruit Town.

Still, I continued taking chances to see my girl, "BKA" Diamond Red, who lived in the same neighborhood a couple of blocks away from Jesse. Red would stroll with me now and then so the Crips associated me with her people, who carried weight in the hood. The guys understood I'd come from across the way, beyond the Boulevard. Some still thought Jesse was my boy. I

gave the brothers their props and moved on the down low. If they hollered, “What’s up, cuz?” I would reply, “Ain’t nothin’, bro,” and keep strolling, staying neutral. There was no “cuz” or “blood” in my vocabulary.

Whenever the phrase was thrown at me, it was like being asked, “Who are you down with?” or “What set are you from?” In my heart, I wasn’t down with any of it. I just couldn’t let my own homies know that. You had to be down with your own set.

I just couldn’t embrace this thing in my heart, this mentality emerging like a fad of the moment. What was a Crip or a Blood? I wasn’t born into that, and neither was anyone else at that stage. I couldn’t believe such blind ignorance could become a way of life. My denial kept my heart from being filled with transparent hatred.

I began to see young men who devoted themselves to gangs as weak-minded and without a true cause or purpose. They were attaching purpose to fantasies that eventually became real, leading to death—and death becoming the means to no end. For me, it was all bullshit.

During that period, Daryl Hicks tried to play me as if I had some kind of secret pact with the Crips or was spying for them because I could bounce in and out of their neighborhood without harm. Daryl aroused my homeboys’ suspicions because of Red, eventually forcing me to reroute my way to and from my own neighborhood to avoid being punked. I didn’t think it was anybody’s business that I was kicking it with Red. Under the circumstances, though, I had to defend myself before Daryl’s views got out of hand among the homies. Daryl

opened the door by labeling Red a Crip girl and trying to front me off in front of the guys on the block. “So, you still kicking it with that Crip girl?” In a way, it was like being put on trial. Daryl was always the voice that could arouse a lynch mob; he always had something to say and liked playing the devil’s advocate.

My core belief was that the Crips were no different from us. Not long before the Crip and Blood gangs began, we all used to ball together on the same basketball courts—Lauder’s Park, Wilson Park, Gonzalez Park, and Victory Park, where Daryl played Little League baseball. It hadn’t been that long since we formed teams across neighborhoods before boundaries were created. Nobody cared what set you were from; Blood and Crip didn’t exist. Everyone knew the different schools we attended and the neighborhoods we lived in. It was all about who had game. That’s what bonded us.

Before blood was ever shed between us, and regardless of the pressure and danger I faced, I continued to do my own thing when it came to Red.

Red was my girl. Her mom’s crib was open to me; it became my private escape, a place where I could chill without pressure, away from the guys on the block. Red’s entire family gave me love, which was my reward for just being me. For a young guy fifteen or sixteen years old, it was the only good I could claim in those days. I walked in and out of danger to be there, and being there kept me out of trouble. I believe Red’s mom understood that, having sons herself. All I had to do was be righteous, treat her daughter well, and respect their home. Making it back home alive was the weight I carried each day from both sides, from the Crips and the Bloods. In some ways, I

feared my own homies would cause more harm to me than the Crips. They seemed to be blind followers of one another, taking that gangbanging shit too seriously—robbing, snatching cars, and getting stupid with it. There wasn't anybody among them, I believe, who had leadership qualities I wanted to follow. Hell, some of them couldn't even read. Daryl Hicks, whom I thought may have had the brightest intellect among us, was an "A" student, but he hid his talents to be a thug.

Sympathetically, I realized the burdens he carried were deeply rooted in him, dictating his rebellion against trying to fit in with smart kids. He suppressed his desire for acceptance from them out of fear of being ostracized. He came from a poor family and wore shoddy clothes and five-dollar sneakers purchased at the Boys Market grocery store. I knew the feeling. I wore the same supermarket clothes and sneakers too, unlike the hundred-dollar-and-up basketball shoes many kids wear today. Converse were a staple if your people had any money back then. A pair of Converse All Stars cost twenty dollars. But what shocked me was the day Daryl said I was more favorable in people's eyes because I was not as dark as him. That messed me up.

I began to look at Daryl in a different light after that stark revelation, which I believe accounted for his tough demeanor and bullying ways. I also began to realize that, in a sense, he was no different from me. We were adopting the same bad-ass-kid ways. We were all losing our innocence. There wasn't a sense of accountability anymore. There was no strong leadership among us. Out of twenty boys in a five-block radius, only three families had fathers at home, and two of those fathers were heavy alcoholics. There were no mentorships or programs to fill

the void unless you had athletic ability. Competition was reduced to how much grimy shit you could do and get away with. And if you got caught and did time, you earned a badge of honor. “You down?”

I estimate that more than two-thirds of the families in my neighborhood were single mothers raising kids on their own. Some boys began acting as if they wore the pants in the house. If you ask, “Where were the men?” perhaps they were dealing with their own struggles. Some had been pushed out of their role as heads of household by poverty, welfare rules, unemployment, and the larger forces that were reshaping Black working-class life. The meaning of labor is built on social relationships that shape the human desire to prosper. When those relationships are fragmented, the damage spreads through the whole community.

Times were hard for the typical African American or Latino family because of the wave of plant closings and job losses across Los Angeles County and the nation. From the late 1960s into the early 1970s, corporations moved large numbers of American jobs overseas. The effects were especially heavy in inner-city communities, where unemployment, poverty, and hopelessness began to deepen.

Automation and plant closures swept far beyond the traditional auto, steel, and rubber industries. They reached timber, canneries, meatpacking, electronics, airlines, cosmetics, department stores, and other lines of work. California was not spared. Families that had once counted on steady jobs found themselves caught in a changing economy with fewer doors open to them.

I recall a brief period when the Nation of Islam tried to recruit young brothers in the hood. But for the most part, the jokers on my block were not trying to hear it. In a manner of speaking, we were cooked—too far gone. Most of us had already dropped out of high school and had no real means to earn a living other than a minimum-wage job, selling drugs, or committing robberies. The last thing we wanted to do was sell bean pies. In our minds, that was as far as the Nation of Islam could take us. Young people emulate the images they believe are superior. At that stage in our social dynamic, carrying a handgun became a symbol of power. Most of the guys who carried guns were empty individuals: fatherless and poor, the type who embraced the juvenile justice system. Neighborhood acceptance became the common bond that filled the void—a twisted form of love turned inside out. We wanted to die for the hood instead of preserving life, the highest instinct of any human being.

“Hurt people hurt other people.”

While our Black leaders were being killed and jailed and we watched the Panther Party dismantled, we turned on ourselves. I could see the larger picture of how we were playing ourselves out of pocket. The guys circulating in and out of correctional institutions were feeding the hate machine. The jail system perpetuated more hostility between neighborhoods.

Alliances formed inside the jails reinforced boundaries and added to the violence on the streets. The police kept tabs on posses from each set too. It felt like a game to them, the way they would catch us on the streets,

scoop information on who was who, take names, and flash Polaroids on the spot.

The police were informed about who was going to be released, where they were coming from, and the personal skirmishes inside the joint between gangs. They fed the machine too, planting seeds of dissension between us. We were like pawns in the game, smoking each other at their will. Over time, things got serious between the Crips and Bloods, with bloodshed and funerals on each side. I attended three funerals in one day on the same cemetery lawn after one drive-by. That is what changed the course of my life.

The officer was shot during the robbery on June 19, 1975. Two days later, on June 21, 1975, Daryl, Beau, Smiley, Pitbull, and Killer each began the path that would earn them twenty-five years to life. But I got worse that day. I lost more than my youth to prison walls—I lost my heart, my soul, and everything I had ever loved. I died that day. And I'm telling you, there's nothing else in the world like dying before you actually die.

"You live and die and make a lot of mistakes in between."

Chapter VIII: Real Consciousness

Two days after I had spoken with Adam, that encounter had made such an impression on me that I became still. I was literally unable to move on impulse and go hang on the block the way I used to.

My plan was to lay low at the crib and chill, hoping Adam would come through on the idea of leaving the hood for a while and camping in the mountains over the weekend. I had kept my word and read the book as promised. Malcolm X's story made me see things in line with what Adam had been saying about lifting myself above obstacles.

My grandmother began to suspect that something was wrong because of my sudden devotion to my own peaceful space. At a snail's pace, I began reading Malcolm X's biography again, right after finishing it the day before. It felt strange to relax and listen to my inner voice with no music or television playing. Something deep and emotional began stirring inside me. My conscience began whispering thoughts and ideas I had never carefully considered before.

Thinking about my guy Jesse Gomez put me into an emotional head-spin as I realized how much we had become declared enemies. I remembered the day I first met him. I was on my way home from one of my frequent trips to the grocery store for my grandmother when Jesse came running into view, chased by an obvious bully. He looked tired of running. I don't know what internal force

made me act like some kind of guardian whenever I saw someone being abused, especially given my own frail size.

I couldn't hold back. Exhausted, Jesse stopped running and bent over to catch his breath several yards ahead of the bully. As the boy continued to advance, Jesse didn't move. He had no wind left.

"Leave him alone, punk-ass..." I shouted, dropping my grocery bag and crossing the street.

"You want some too?" the boy said.

"Let's drop his ass," I told Jesse.

Jesse and I stood toe-to-toe against the bully, jabbing, swinging, and missing. Suddenly, the bully became more aggressive, fending off both of us. He flipped me to the ground and did the same to Jesse. Then he gave up as the winner, leaving us bruised and battered. To make matters worse, he emptied my groceries onto the ground and ripped the bag to shreds. We were punked for real.

The first thing I wanted to know, especially after my groceries were spread all over the ground, was whether getting involved had been worth the trouble. Who was that kid, and what had Jesse done to piss him off? I learned the bully was Jesse's older brother, Hector. Jesse had told his mother that Hector was sneaking money from her purse again. That was the beginning of our friendship. It never mattered to me that Jesse was Mexican American. We bonded like brothers from then on. Eventually, Jesse acquired more Black friends once they discovered how cool he was hanging with me.

Jesse was more outgoing than his brother Hector, who was more of a recluse. The things that mattered most

to Hector were playing his guitar and smoking weed seven days a week. Hector never got mixed up in gangbanging. He would tell us, "I wish they would run up on me. I'll beat that ass." And no one ever messed with Hector. Everybody thought he was crazy.

Over the years, I learned to stay out of their sibling rivalries. On many occasions, their battles were tumultuous displays of hand-to-hand combat. Unlike Hector, who didn't go for being in a gang, Jesse got swallowed up in it. As far as my recollection, Jesse became the first Mexican American East side Crip in Compton and the first Mexican to die Crippin.' He was once the closest thing to a brother that I had known.

"Love is but the discovery of ourselves in others, and the delight in the recognition." — Alexander Smith

I kept thinking about everything that mattered after reading Malcolm's biography. My mind kept returning to Kiki. She was right about me tripping with the guys on the block. I needed to focus on my own priorities. Kiki and I had started dating during my freshman year at Dominguez High. Now she was six months pregnant, and I needed to get my shit together.

I decided to flip the script and put some long-term distance between the Popular Street gang and me. Ironically, that decision came shortly before I discovered that Daryl and the guys were being investigated for the robbery that left a police officer dead the night I left the block with Adam. They had gotten away, but the news had spread through the neighborhood.

Early that day, a homie from the block came by unexpectedly and told me the gang was paranoid because

detectives were snooping around, asking questions about Beau and the others. He said Daryl was putting my name out there as the snitch because I had taken off with Adam that night.

Daryl had made it known that “The Hammer” was Adam’s father, a captain in the Compton Police Department. I could see the conclusion they might draw, and I believed my homie could too. He didn’t want me to get caught slipping. He told me to watch my back if I went anywhere near the block. He knew they were off the hook, and this thing could spin out of control. They were still packing those hot guns, smoking, and getting loaded on Silver Satin in the “white house,” an abandoned house around the block on Popular Street.

After my homie left, my grandmother asked me again if everything was all right. I had to play it off. I couldn’t tell her what was going on without her going into a fit and dropping a dime on everybody. Looking back, that was where I made my mistake. I should have said fuck it and dropped a dime on them myself, but the word “snitch” had too much power in my head. I missed the chance to clean my slate with Mom and turn over a new leaf.

At the time, my lack of vision and immaturity would not allow me to confide in her. To do so felt like chumping out, like being weak, like being uncool. But I was playing myself by holding everything in and convincing myself that she didn’t understand the nature of the streets. Truthfully, I didn’t want to expose my own foolishness.

On rare occasions, Mom would hit me with a short verse from Scripture, simple and straight to the point. Today, unlike the days when I couldn’t decipher her

truthful metaphors, one verse still rings clearly in the tone of her voice: “To thine own self be true.” I wasn’t trying to hear that back then. Even so, it was planted in my conscience.

As I got older, Mom and I became distant. She criticized my behavior and my associations with the guys I chose to hang out with. She had not raised me to be like my homeboys. But she didn’t understand that, to a degree, I believed I had to be like them to survive in the hood or get punked. That was my logic.

She didn’t know about the time I was forced to play Russian roulette when the Piru boys from Lauder’s Park turned us into a Blood neighborhood, drawing guns on us like the wild, wild West. How could she defend or protect me from that?

Maybe if I had bonded with someone like Adam earlier in my youth, things might have turned out differently. But we can only play the cards we are handed in life.

Even though Mom was right about the guys on the block, I still sensed there was some good in each of them despite their wrongdoing. She was plugged into the grapevine and knew about some of the gang’s activities. Still, I convinced myself that I had to keep this one on the down low while feeling the pressure of Daryl fueling the fire that could ruin me by labeling me a snitch.

I couldn’t understand how Beau and the guys could be so oblivious to the fact that the same guns had been used in at least two other robberies I knew about, and that a couple of those guns had been stolen from a retired police officer who lived just blocks away from our own set.

Gradually, the pressure began to weigh on me. I couldn't decide whether to go around the block and clear myself or say fuck it and let the whole thing play itself out. Either way, there was no way to keep them from being suspicious. I decided to lie low one more day and get out of the hood for a while with Adam. I was certain he would keep his word. I just wanted a break from the city for a minute.

After checking my nerves a couple of times and making sure I was all right, Mom asked if I wanted to share a bowl of ice cream with her. She was in high spirits because it was her birthday, and she would never let me off the hook if I didn't come back with a birthday card. Of all the times she had relied on me to walk to the store, this was the one time I wasn't feeling it. But as much as I dreaded leaving the crib, I had to look out for Mom and do this thing.

I distinctly remember my walk to the store that day. I had an epiphany, a deep spiritual experience. For a moment, my mind and body seemed suspended, and I viewed my world as one solid entity. I felt partly disconnected from everything around me, consumed by sadness and by the presence of death, which I believed would be my own. I believe my spirit echoed the fears of my grandmother, who often prayed for my safe return home each day. My premonition was close, because within hours, the Angel of Death would come to collect the souls ordained by his Master.

Pushing myself forward while struggling against the fear of death that weighed on me like a ball and chain, I

felt my will to live and return home safely fill my spirit. For too long, I had taken my life for granted. But that was how I had learned to survive. Disconnected from my real mother and father, I often felt alone in the world and somehow incomplete. My life felt like a mesh of failures, and I believed I was destined to die before reaching my eighteenth birthday.

But that day I didn't want to die. I wanted to live, to see the child Kiki was carrying, and to give him a righteous legacy the way Malcolm X's father had tried to give him one. I realized I had something to live for. After reading Malcolm X's biography, I was struck by the reality that I had become a product of my environment, a social misfit trying to find his way.

My mind recaptured everything I had kept in denial, hidden in the inner recesses of my heart and dormant in the annals of my soul. I wanted a way out. I wanted to live, escape my own self-destruction, and reach beyond the limitations I had created for myself.

As I continued walking through the neighborhood, I saw a group of kids playing like gangbangers, holding their chests up, walking with that bad, bold stride, and saying, "What's up, Blood?" Their young mothers laughed as if it were cute, but the whole scene messed me up inside. I kept thinking that the very thing they were laughing at could one day get those children killed. Those young women were not looking that far into their kids' futures.

I went deeper into my thoughts and started thinking about how my dawg Jesse Gomez might put a bullet in me simply because I lived north of Compton Boulevard. We had been like brothers back in the day.

As I crossed the railroad tracks on Alameda, I looked at the rows of abandoned buildings and vacant lots left from the Watts riots ten years earlier. I asked myself, "Why in the hell are we killing each other over territory? What do we collectively own in South Central, not counting a few run-down tire repair shops or a mom-and-pop corner store here and there?"

It was just like Adam had said: "This is nothing more than a colony where Negroes are confined within a five-mile radius." Adam had sparked my intellect in a way no one else had, and I believed God had placed him in my path the night I saw him driving through the neighborhood.

Just as I crossed beyond the railroad tracks on Alameda, lo and behold, Beau spotted me from the passenger seat of Smiley's black '64 Chevy, Craigered down and hopping in the rear from the hydraulic suspension. I was clearly in their view. I saw Beau point in my direction as Smiley quickly veered toward the curb. I kept my stride on the sidewalk, but the front of the car missed me by only a few inches before coming to a complete stop.

"Hit me, motherfucker!" I shouted.

"What you gonna do?" Smiley snapped back.

"What's up, D-Boy?" Beau cut in.

"Man, that's a stupid-ass nigga," I said, still staring at Smiley.

"Calm down, Blood. Where you going?" Beau asked.

"I'm going to the store for my grandmother."

“Hop in. We’ll take you,” Beau said.

“That’s all right, man. I have to pick out a birthday card for Moms and grab a couple of things. I need to take my time. You know what I mean, bro?”

“All right,” Beau replied, disappointed. “Look, come to the white house when you get done, all right?”

“Yeah, all right,” I said.

“How long you gonna be, Blood? We got something for the head, and I’m gonna have something just for you, all right?” Beau said.

“Yeah, all right,” I repeated.

“Blood here, nigga!” Smiley hollered as he punched the gas and sped away.

My mind was made up. I had no intention of going anywhere near the block. I believed Beau would be patient, but I also knew I had nowhere to hide. Looking back, maybe that was another missed opportunity to explain that the suspicion against me was being created by Daryl, who hated me.

As I made my way home from the store, I boiled inside thinking about what Daryl was planting in the gang’s mind—this idea that I was a snitch. His dislike for me, and maybe for Adam too, had started long before that day.

Daryl’s hatred of Adam went back to the summer after the Watts riots, when we were kids at camp. Daryl and several boys from my neighborhood attended that year. We were grouped with kids from different schools and backgrounds, including the children of police officers from South Central.

Adam was outgoing and quickly emerged as a leader within our circle. He set the tone. We formed a pact of

friendship, talking and getting to know one another. Daryl quickly formed his own little pack among several boys who attended our elementary school. He wanted me to join, but I didn't get along with Daryl to begin with, and I didn't want to be a sidekick in his group. It took nearly a week of our two-week stay at Big Bear before Daryl accepted my rejection. That experience became the first in a series of clashes we would have over the years.

During the first several days at camp, it started with simple name-calling. I was a "punk" and a "white boy." Adam never intervened. He only watched how I handled the pressure. I couldn't give in to Daryl and his clique or buckle under their tactics. My cabin mates were my friends. It went against my gut to become a turncoat against them, even though I knew I might never see them again after camp. I also knew I would have to face Daryl and the boys at school when summer ended.

Near the end of the first week, Daryl and his crew seized the opportunity to confront me while I was walking along a trail with one of my cabin mates. My cabin buddy was clearly terrified of Daryl. Daryl punked him to provoke a conflict between us. Then Adam showed up out of nowhere. Standing directly in front of Daryl, I landed a solid blow to the side of his face. I sucker punched him. As we began to tussle, Adam quickly moved between us and threw Daryl to the ground. Daryl sulked in humiliation as his clique watched. He ran off shouting, "I'll get your ass in school, nigga, when your white-boy friends won't be around!" Without a doubt, Daryl resented my friendship with Adam then as much as he did during our Little League years. But I didn't know how to explain that to the gang without making them more suspicious of me.

"Words cannot express what the heart truly feels."

Chapter IX: Pandora's Box

When I finally returned from the store, Mom was in the kitchen whipping up her special hot vanilla glaze to spread over the cake she had baked from scratch. You would have thought it was my birthday the way she was throwing down on one of my favorite hook-ups. She told me to get out of the kitchen and lay her change on the lamp table beside her bed.

When I entered her bedroom, I laid the change down and sat on the edge of her bed, still numb from the pressure I was under. Then I got the idea to look through the shoebox of family photos she kept under the bed.

Mom never allowed me to look through those pictures on my own. She treated that box like a sacred shrine. But I thought maybe, if I sat there quietly for a moment, it wouldn't hurt anything to look at my mother's pictures. I had seen them before. Still, it didn't go over well when she discovered me meddling. She walked in and flipped out for what I thought was no reason.

"Daniel, what are you doing in my things?" she demanded.

I had placed the lid beside me before I even had a chance to sort through the photos.

"Mom, they're just pictures," I said calmly.

"I don't want you in my things!"

"Why can't I just look at my mother's pictures? Why don't you ever tell me anything about her?"

“Your mother was young and stupid! You’re just like her! Sometimes I wish you were never born!”

In anger, I tossed the box onto the floor. Without thinking, I dashed out of the house. My mind went blank. Her words cut through me like a double-edged sword. My grandmother had spoken out of fear—fear that I would discover what she had hidden in that box. Among the family pictures were photos of Adam, photos she had collected from Mrs. Hill throughout the years. Adam was my biological brother.

What happened next pulled me closer to the revelation.

After I left the house, my grandmother called Mrs. Hill, Adam’s mother and the only person who shared her secret. Mrs. Hill was the guardian angel who had called us periodically over the years but never visited. No wonder she and Mom always seemed to have so much to talk about during my Little League games.

“Hazel, dear Lord...” Ruth said.

“What’s wrong, Ruth?” Hazel asked.

“I said some terrible things to Daniel. He was looking in my shoebox—the one where I kept Adam’s pictures.”

“Oh my. Did he see them?”

“No, I don’t think he had the chance.”

“Ruth, I believe it’s time to tell them. They’re grown now.”

“But I swore I’d keep my promise.”

“For whose sake, Ruth—Jim’s?” Hazel paused. “Listen, I’m glad you called. Something terrible is about

to happen. Do you know where Daniel is?"

"I think I know where to look."

"Good. I need to find Adam too. I can't explain it all right now. Let me pick you up, and we'll search for the boys together. All right?"

"All right," Ruth said. Then, after a pause, she added, "Hazel, I just want to say thank you."

When I left the house, I walked directly to Kiki's. No sooner had I arrived than we began to argue. She didn't believe I had spent the last two days at home chilling out. Since I hadn't called her, she hadn't called me either—pride on both sides. As much as I wanted to make up with her and stay, I let my ego take over. I thought I would teach her a lesson for telling me what to do, so I walked out and moved toward my next big mistake. I headed straight for the hangout on Popular Street. I knew I would have to face the gang eventually.

When I reached the hangout, it went down about the way I expected. Beau and Smiley had not made it back yet, but everyone else was there. Daryl wasted no time stirring the pot.

"What's up, Blood?" Daryl asked.

"What's up?" I replied.

"Where you been, Blood?"

"I've been chilling."

"Who you been chilling with?"

"I ain't been chilling with nobody."

"Yeah, I know what's up."

"I know what's up too," I said.

“Hm. We’ll see,” Daryl said. “Beau’s been looking for you.”

“I already saw him.”

“When?”

“A little while ago. He told me he had something for me.”

All at once, the guys started laughing, but nobody gave me a clue about what was so funny. I kept my cool and stayed silent through Daryl’s interrogation. He was too cocky, and I was outnumbered. That was when I realized something had already been planned.

Meanwhile, Smiley and Beau were parked near Gina’s house, watching and waiting. Gina was Adam’s high school sweetheart, and Adam’s car was parked in front of her parents’ place.

When Adam and Gina stepped onto the porch, Smiley leaned forward. “There’s that motherfucker, Blood. Let’s hem him up.”

“Wait till he gets in the car,” Beau said. “We’ll jack his ass then.”

A few moments later, Adam got into his car and pulled away from the house. Smiley’s black Chevy followed close behind.

“Catch him at the stop sign and pull in front of him,” Beau said. Smiley accelerated, passed Adam, and maneuvered the Chevy in front of the red Beetle, blocking him in. Beau jumped out with a handgun pointed at Adam’s windshield.

As Beau approached, he raised the gun toward the open sunroof of Adam’s little Volkswagen.

“Open the door, Blood!”

Adam opened the door without resistance.

“Man, what’s going on?” Adam shouted.

Beau slid into the passenger seat and waved for Smiley to take the lead. “Follow the car, Blood,” he said.

“What’s up with you and Daniel?” Beau asked.

“Daniel and I are friends.”

“How are you and Daniel friends? I ain’t never seen you before.”

“I’ve known Daniel since we were kids. We played Little League baseball at Victory Park.”

“Why you start coming around now, all of a sudden?”

“I haven’t been around. I just returned from college a few days ago. I hadn’t seen Daniel in years. I ran into him on the street the other night by accident.”

“Ain’t your old man a cop?”

“Is that what this is about? Is Daniel in trouble because he knows me?” Adam looked directly into Beau’s eyes while keeping track of the car ahead.

“Look, bro, I don’t know what this is about. I haven’t talked with Daniel since the night before last, and we talked one-on-one. He’s concerned about his future. He has a lot of potential. He wants to do something with his life. He’s not a bad kid. I’m just reaching out to him.”

“Does he have a choice, bro?”

“Yeah,” Beau answered. “He can make his own choice.”

The two cars pulled up and parked along the driveway of the gang’s hangout.

As Adam and Beau entered through the side door, the gang waited in silence, already anticipating Beau's arrival.

"Aw, shit," Daryl said.

"Look what we got for D-Boy," Smiley said.

"I told you what was up, nigga!" Daryl shouted.

"Man, you niggas are trippin'," I told them.

"What's up with you and this cop snitch, Blood?" Beau asked me.

"Man, he's cool, Beau. He ain't no cop. I've known him since we were kids. Daryl knows him too."

I tried to throw a curve, but Daryl threw one right back.

"Fuck that shit. This is Blood here. This is family!"

Daryl rose into his usual position, playing the devil's advocate. Blood, family, and loyalty were the sacred codes of the hood—the rules we lived and died by.

But that idea had never been planted in my heart, and Daryl knew it. He was calling me out, forcing me to disavow my loyalty and friendship with Adam and prove my loyalty to the gang. That was the depth of Daryl's wrong against me, and he seemed amused by it. It was déjà vu, like summer camp all over again, when he had expected me to turn against my friends and join his clique. I'm sure Adam understood the seriousness of the moment. When I glanced at him, he dropped his head and covered his face with his hands in disbelief. Killer sat quietly in a dark corner of the room on a milk crate. Then he asked, "So why you ain't been coming around lately, Blood?"

I told them, "Kenny came by the crib and told me the block was hot, so I was just chillin', layin' low. Man, I'm

not stupid.” No one responded. Then Beau reached inside his jacket and pulled out a semi-automatic pistol.

“This is Blood, right?” Beau asked me.

“... Yeah,” I replied.

“This is family, right?” Beau placed the gun in my hand.

“Yeah,” I answered. My heartbeat intensified. The palm of my hand grew wet around the handle, and my arm began to shake. My mind dazed from the adrenaline rush. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Daryl reaching for his gun.

“Blast this motherfucker, Blood!” Beau shouted. “Blast him!”

“Beau, I know what it looks like, but I ain’t no snitch!”

“Punk-ass nigga!” Smiley said.

“I told you, Beau. He ain’t down!” Daryl screamed, waving his pistol in my direction.

Beau turned toward Adam. “He made his choice, Blood.”

“Wrong choice, fool,” Daryl answered.

“Hold up, Blood,” Beau said, signaling Daryl to stand down while keeping his pistol aimed in my direction.

“That’s not how it is, man,” Adam said.

“I know how it is,” Beau answered. He extended his arm with an open palm, gesturing for me to return the gun. “Yo, Blood. Forget it, all right.”

“You heard what he said!” Daryl added.

I didn’t know what to think in the heat of the situation.

“Put the gun down, Danny,” Adam shouted.

“Hey, Blood, it’s cool,” Beau insisted.

“Man, I’m telling you, I ain’t no snitch!”

“Blood, trust me,” Beau said.

I gave the pistol back to Beau.

“This shit is fucked up,” Beau said, casting a hard side glance at Daryl. He wiped the handle of the gun with the bottom of his shirt. Everyone in the room focused on Beau as his smirk faded. Daryl lowered his arm to his side, his eyes glazed, bloodshot, and watery. Beau was in charge now. Suddenly, he turned and stared directly at Smiley.

“You must think I’m stupid, don’t you?” Beau asked Smiley.

“Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“What about the guns you took from that cop’s crib?

I told you to get rid of ’em.”

“I did get rid of ’em.”

“Then how did the newspapers find out about ’em? They said the cop was shot with a stolen handgun owned by a retired police officer. Then you had me drag this cop’s son into this shit. Your gun is why 5-0 is creepin’.”

“Damn, Smiley. You fucked up, Blood!” Killer remarked.

Beau couldn’t read, but someone had tipped him off about the bullet casings found by the detectives.

The script was changing, but Smiley’s stupidity had already overshadowed the facts. Daryl had used Smiley to push his sordid tale that I was a snitch, and Beau and the gang had run with it. Something moved in my spirit, urging me to tell the truth as I understood it about Daryl.

I turned and looked Daryl dead in the eyes. Without a word, I could tell he was ready to shoot me point-blank

before I made a sound. He stood wide-legged with his pistol at his side and an ugly sneer on his face. At last, the moment had arrived for his evil to tip the scales against me.

Suddenly, Mrs. Hill spotted Adam's car on the block where my grandmother had believed she could find me. She pulled up hard in front of the house, jumped out, and slammed the car door loud enough to catch the attention of everyone inside.

She rushed toward the house, calling Adam's name. Daryl immediately peered through a hole in the boarded-up window. At that same moment, a caravan of cars rolled up behind Mrs. Hill and opened fire on the house.

Mrs. Hill dropped to the ground as bullets tore through the plywood and old lapboard siding. Daryl was struck in the face almost immediately. The room filled with sheetrock dust and splinters. Outside, my grandmother crouched beside the passenger side of Mrs. Hill's car. One of the boys shooting toward the house noticed her, and their eyes met. She recognized him and called out, "Jesse!"

Without meaning to, she revealed herself to another boy beside Jesse. He yelled, "She knows who you are!" Jesse froze. When the other boy raised his gun toward her, Jesse grabbed his wrist and forced the barrel away from her. As quickly as the cars had appeared, the caravan began to pull away, leaving Jesse and the other boy struggling beside Mrs. Hill's car.

The guys inside ran from the house, firing after the fleeing cars. In the chaos, their gunfire struck both Jesse and the other boy as they wrestled over the gun near the hood of Mrs. Hill's car, killing them both. Beau, Smiley,

Mad-Dog, and Killer fled without looking back at Daryl, who was left on the floor crying in pain and clutching his bloodied face. He had been blinded in one eye. I slowly pulled myself up from the floor.

I heard Mrs. Hill calling Adam's name again and again, her voice breaking in a frightened cry. I looked across the room and realized Adam was not answering. He was holding his throat, gasping for breath as blood spilled from his mouth. "Adam's been hit!" I shouted. I dropped to my knees and pressed both hands over the wound in Adam's chest to slow the bleeding. Outside, Mrs. Hill looked toward her car and saw one body slumped over the hood and another lying motionless on the ground.

The front and passenger-side windows of her car were shattered. "Oh my God... Ruth!" she cried. She ran to the car, looked inside, and saw that a bullet had struck the side of my grandmother's head. Ruth was not breathing. Her eyes were still open, fixed in terror. I heard Mrs. Hill scream, "Oh my God. No!"

"Mom!" Adam cried out in pain. I wondered why Mrs. Hill had not yet found the side door of the house. Crying in anguish but somehow staying composed, Mrs. Hill removed her sweater and covered my grandmother's upper body. Then she hurried into the shabby, cluttered house, past the empty wine bottles and the musty stench. When she entered the room, she saw Daryl curled on the floor, crying and holding his bloodied face. Then she looked across the room and saw me pressing both hands against Adam's chest.

"Dear Lord," she wailed.

“No! Stay here with your brother. I’ll handle it.” We both heard a helicopter approaching the area. She didn’t want me to expose myself to more danger or discover my grandmother’s body in the car. I kept pressing against Adam’s wound. I lifted his head slightly, and it seemed to ease his breathing.

“Thank you, bro,” he whispered.

“I swear, man, I didn’t know anything about what these guys were up to,” I told him.

“You did right, man. You did right,” he answered.

I was filled with remorse. I tried hard to keep my composure, but tears cascaded from my eyes and fell onto his face.

“Hey, watch it, man. You’re getting water in my eye,” he said, trying to laugh it off. Adam could be cynical in the most extreme situations. It was no laughing matter, but his humor kept me from falling apart.

Daryl continued lying in a fetal position, pounding the floor with his fists. Even in the heat of the moment, it took everything in me not to ask Adam what his mother had meant before she left. Her words rang in my head again: “Stay here with your brother.” Adam continued fighting for his life, but soon I would learn the truth behind those words.

When the police and rescue teams arrived, Mrs. Hill directed them into the house. She followed behind the paramedics and discovered that I had been handcuffed.

“He’s with me,” she told the officers.

“Until we complete our investigation, he’s a suspect,” one officer said. Then he turned to Mrs. Hill. “What is your name, ma’am?”

“I am Hazel Hill, wife of Captain Hill, who happens to be your boss. You may radio him and inform him that his son has been shot as well.”

A senior officer entered the room and immediately recognized her.

“Hazel, what are you doing here?” he asked. The officers and rescue team stood stunned.

“Harold, I will give the department a report after my son is treated. Until then, I don’t want to discuss the matter any further.”

“Sure, Hazel. It’s okay. Are you all right?” he asked sympathetically.

“What are you waiting for?” she snapped, pointing at the officer who had placed the handcuffs on me. He removed them.

Taking me by the arm, she kept me close to her side as we followed the men carrying Adam toward the rescue vehicle. Special crime units had converged on the scene. The bodies outside were still in place. Darkness had begun to settle as the sun dropped below the horizon. Helicopter lights swept across the perimeter of the house and washed over Mrs. Hill’s car. I tried to see the faces of the young men lying mangled and bloodied near it. I could tell at least one of them was a Crip by the colors he wore. At that moment, I did not realize one of those bodies was my boy, Jesse Gomez.

As I looked over the scene, my eyes locked on an officer in a suit aiming a camera through the passenger window of Mrs. Hill’s car. The flash went off,

illuminating the head of a woman inside who was obviously dead.

Mrs. Hill clutched my arm tightly, aware that I had seen the cameraman. "Come on, baby," she cried. In that instant, I understood the source of her anguish. Her face gave it away.

"Mom!"

"No, Daniel. Please!"

I broke from her and dashed toward the car, but officers blocked me and tackled me to the ground. I fought until my body gave out. They gave me oxygen and placed me into the ambulance beside Adam.

"A million words wouldn't bring you back. I know because I tried and neither could a million tears. I know because I cried."

~Antoine de Saint Exupery Le Petit Prince

Chapter X: The Truth Hurts

Mrs. Hill and I waited for the medical staff to give us word about Adam's condition. We did not yet know he had been pronounced dead on arrival. He had died in the ambulance. Sitting together in a private room, we seemed to have blocked out each other's existence, but my mind was scrambling, replaying the events of the day. One image kept returning to me: my grandmother's body in Mrs. Hill's car. It didn't make sense. Why was she there?

I recalled Mrs. Hill's statement to me in the house: "Stay with your brother." Then I wondered why the Crips had come after us in a surprise attack for no apparent reason. That was uncommon unless there had been a recent clash, and I didn't know of any. Finally, I broke the silence and asked her, "How is Adam my brother?"

"Dear Lord, please give me strength," she said, taking a deep breath. She exhaled slowly, then began telling me the story of my hidden past.

"Your mother, Betty, was dating your father, Harold Mayfield, during her senior year at Lockfield High School in Indianapolis, Indiana. It was 1952, and Harold, nearly eighteen years old, had decided to enlist in the U.S. Army. He received his orders for active duty and was sent to Germany. When he left the States, he did not know your mother was pregnant with Adam. Betty wanted to wait until Harold was settled overseas—or until he returned home—before telling him, but she never told him about Adam's birth at all."

"You're telling me my father didn't know my mother was pregnant with Adam? He never knew about him?"

"Your mother's reason for not telling your father at first was his uncertainty about joining the Army. His prospects for employment were limited, and Betty wanted Harold to take a chance to see what he could make of himself. She didn't want the pregnancy to become an excuse or a reason to hold him back."

"Why all the secrets? Why didn't Mom take Adam? What happened when my father came home?"

"Oh, Daniel. At the time, Betty lived with Raquel, the eldest of her three sisters. Ruth had been left alone with four girls after their father died. Unable to keep the

family home, the girls eventually went their separate ways. Ruth took a job as a live-in housekeeper in the northern suburbs. Diana and Elizabeth, your other two aunts, were young and had families of their own. Betty was pregnant with Adam, but the worst was yet to come.”

“Your mother experienced an emotional breakdown, or what the medical establishment defined as one. She began displaying troubling behavior, including hearing voices when no one was there. At first, the family wanted to believe her condition came from the stress of pregnancy and your father’s absence. They didn’t really have answers. Daniel, the family made an uninformed decision. They did not know what conventional medicine would later understand as a treatable chemical disorder. Back then, she was simply considered crazy. Raquel’s husband believed the children were becoming afraid of her, though she never harmed anyone. It was the uncertainty around her presence that kept the family in turmoil.”

“It was decided that she would be committed to a state institution for the mentally ill during the seventh month of her pregnancy. Adam was born on July 27, 1953, at that psychiatric institution. His birth certificate listed his father as unknown. Your father was never told of Adam’s birth, perhaps to avoid complicating matters. Harold wrote to your mother periodically. He loved her dearly, but without explanation, his correspondence was abruptly cut off. Adam’s birth and family history remained unknown to him, but not forgotten by your family—and certainly not by your grandmother, Ruth. Your grandmother initially took custody of you so that

you would not become a ward of the state or be placed in foster care.”

“How did you become Adam’s parent?”

“Ruth sought help from our pastor. He arranged a private meeting with Jim and me. Jim had one firm stipulation: because your blood relatives lived close to us, their identities had to remain anonymous. Our pastor, acting as mediator, consulted with your grandmother. Nearly at her wit’s end, she agreed.”

“After the adoption arrangements were made, the court documentation was approved, and we proudly received Adam as our son. By an act of fate, I met your grandmother at church one morning. Her anguish over losing Adam grieved her deeply. I approached her to console her spirit, and eventually I discovered that Ruth was Adam’s grandmother. I let her know her grandson would be loved. Ruth pleaded with me to have a special part in Adam’s life, so I kept a secret line of communication with her, knowing how firmly Jim would oppose it. Ruth confided in me about the abuse she suffered from her second husband, and I suggested that relocating to Los Angeles might be an option. Your grandmother received every school picture ever taken of Adam and was kept informed of every social event he participated in. She was always close to Adam in spirit.”

“So that’s why my grandmother never talked to me about any of it. I hated not knowing anything about my mother. Every time I asked, she shut down.”

“You see, your mother eventually recovered from her depression and moved on with her life. But she severed her relationship with the family and blamed Ruth for having Adam taken from her. Harold completed two

years of service and later reunited with Betty. She never told him about Adam's birth. On the day you were born, Ruth received a call from Harold at the hospital. He told her Betty was hemorrhaging badly and in extreme medical danger. That was the first time your grandmother learned Betty was pregnant again. A little later, Betty died, and you were born two months prematurely. Your father agreed to let Ruth care for you. You were a very sick child, and she used every home remedy she knew to keep you alive. She was born in 1911. Having borne four daughters, she had experience behind her. Because of all those long nights, the rubdowns with salves to break your fevers, and every prayer she knew how to say, you are alive today."

"As a body needs to be held, a bird needs to fly, and a heart needs to love."

Chapter XI: The Dark Side of Truth

After Mrs. Hill finished telling me the story of my hidden past, I discovered an even darker side to the tragedy. Sergeant Daniels entered with a nurse, who slowly opened the door to the room. Mrs. Hill stood and approached him before he could say too much in front of me, then led him into the hallway. I could faintly hear their conversation.

He began asking for information about my grandmother and how her nearest relatives could be contacted. Mrs. Hill kept her answer short and curt. "Her next of kin is here with me." She pleaded for more time before giving further details.

"Something is not right. Jim is acting strange," Sergeant Daniels said. There was a long pause before Mrs. Hill answered.

"Harold, she was a very close friend of mine. A lot has happened today, and I need time to put this ordeal together. I'll contact you soon. I promise."

"Okay. Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'll be fine."

Several minutes later, Captain Hill arrived.

"Jim, what the hell do you want?" Hazel asked.

"Hazel, I'm here to see my son."

"My God. Have you completely lost your mind? How could you? How could you do it? I begged you."

“Not now, Hazel. Please.”

“Damn you. You’ll be damned in hell with the blood on your hands, Jim!” Mr. Hill looked over at me, visibly shaken by what his wife had said.

“A report has to be made,” he told her.

“Then why don’t you make one?” she answered. I could see that her refusal troubled him. Suddenly, he lifted his arms high above his head and brought them down, striking the front of his thighs with his fists. Then he clenched his teeth and stormed out of the room.

I could tell that something was seriously wrong, and somehow it was connected to the drive-by. My suspicion was that the drive-by had been a setup by the police and that Mrs. Hill knew more than she was saying. I needed the truth. I was already in deep trouble with the gang still on the loose, and Daryl and Smiley had spread the word that I was a snitch. At first, Mrs. Hill would not give in. Then I told her my life was in jeopardy because of my relationship with Adam and because of the way she had tried to rescue us just before the drive-by shooters arrived. If I could put those pieces together, I could only imagine what the jokers on the street were saying.

Mrs. Hill understood the whole scenario. She realized the depth of my dilemma, but the magnitude of her own predicament was beyond belief. My suspicions were right. Earlier that day, she had overheard her husband conducting a private meeting with two uniformed police officers in his home office. It was rare for him to handle official business at home, and that made her curious. She listened long enough to understand the

plan: the officers would locate a rival gang leader and convince his posse to ride on our block. They would not risk their own safety trying to apprehend the gang suspected of killing Officer Jacobs. Instead, they intended to avoid a long, drawn-out legal case for their fallen comrade by having the gang neutralized. "I want the Crips to open fire on their hangout," her husband had told the officers, even without hard evidence proving the gang's involvement.

Captain Hill felt justified in delivering his own form of justice. There had been ten house break-ins within a five-block radius that month, and the gang had developed a pattern of robberies. In those break-ins, four residents, including a retired police officer, reported stolen firearms. Investigators traced shell casings from one shooting, and ballistics connected the retired officer's stolen handgun to the killing of Officer Jacobs. After the officers left, Mrs. Hill told me she was stunned. She was vehemently opposed to her husband's plan and begged him to call it off, but he refused to reconsider.

She had noticed the name tags on the officers' uniforms and called the station to ask about their assigned district. She discovered that they worked my neighborhood, close to where Adam's girlfriend lived. She tried to reach the senior lieutenant, believing he might be in the best position to stop her husband's vigilante plan, but he was unavailable because of a court hearing and never returned her call.

At that point, she did not know whom to call or whom she could trust. When my grandmother called to confide in her, Mrs. Hill decided her only option was to remove Adam and me from harm's way. Time was against

her because the officers were already moving with the setup. I asked if she thought the lieutenant was involved. “I don’t know,” she told me. Then she told me Jesse had been one of the boys in the drive-by and that he had been killed while trying to save my grandmother. “It stops here, Daniel. You hear me? It stops here,” Mrs. Hill said. “Ruth loved you boys dearly. I never meant to put her life in danger.” As her weeping intensified, I cried with her. Ain’t this a bitch, I thought.

“There are always two choices, two paths to take. One is easy, and its only reward is that it’s easy.”

Chapter XII: Losing My Sanity

That was one period in my life when, I must admit, I was on the verge of losing my sanity. I couldn’t remove the images in my head of the people I had loved and lost because of the captain and the devastation his hands had set in motion. I began thinking of a plan for revenge. The captain was at the top of my list, even before Beau and the others. I seized my first opportunity to break away from Mrs. Hill that night at the hospital. I took side streets, avoiding Crips, police vehicles that might be looking for me, and jokers in the hood connected to the gang. Mrs. Hill didn’t want me to go to jail. She felt responsible for my safety.

The only sure ally I believed I had was Kenny, the brother who had warned me that Daryl was calling me a snitch to the gang. I believed that if I could find him, he would let me hold a roscoe—a handgun—to defend myself. When I found Kenny, he tried to talk me out of

my mission. We chilled together for a minute, and he copped us a couple of short dogs to take the edge off. One led to another, but the alcohol only stirred my courage to keep going. Finally, Kenny gave in. He didn't want to leave me hanging. He knew there were enough jokers on the street who sided with Beau and the others, including their Blood posses across town. Kenny fronted me a .38 snub-nose revolver, and it was on.

Soon after I left Kenny's, I made my way across Alondra Boulevard toward the Hill home, remembering how Adam had invited me there years earlier after we played a game at Victory Park. My plan was to blast the captain before Mrs. Hill returned from the hospital. As I approached the block, patrol cars were already swarming around the house. I hid in a cornfield near the yard, shielded from the cars and streetlights. I watched the county sheriffs gather for about an hour before Mrs. Hill arrived. I couldn't believe my eyes when they placed the captain's body on a gurney and loaded him into a coroner's vehicle. He had shot and killed himself. As I watched, my stomach churned. I sobbed and vomited until my insides felt empty. My head spun uncontrollably. I nearly cried myself to sleep between the corn stalks, beneath the blanket of that June summer sky.

When I woke up the next morning, I staggered home at dawn, wanting to believe everything had been nothing more than a bad dream. But when I stepped inside, the house felt cold and empty without Mom's presence. What am I supposed to do? I asked myself. I walked into her bedroom, flipped on the light, and took in the details of

the room she had left behind. Then it dawned on me to search for the shoebox underneath the bed, but it was gone. I walked back through the living room and saw it carefully placed on the dining table. A handwritten note was taped to the lid with my name on it. I began to read the words Mom had written before leaving with Mrs. Hill.

“Dear Daniel,

I’m sorry for hurting your feelings. You have every right to know about your mother and father. I said those things to you because I was afraid to face the truth. I have always had your best interests at heart. I wanted your brother Adam to be raised in a good home, and I wanted you to have the chance to live, grow, and become the man God intended you to be. I carried this secret because I believed I was protecting both of you, but I know now that silence has its own kind of pain.

Your mother, Betty, suffered more than people understood, and I failed her in ways I have asked God to forgive. Losing Adam from the family grieved me every day, even though I knew Hazel loved him. I kept his pictures close because I never stopped loving him. I should have told you both the truth sooner. If I do not get the chance to say it face to face, know this: you were never a burden to me. You were my son in every way that mattered. I love you, Danny Boy. Please forgive me.

Mom went on to explain the circumstances of my mother’s dilemma. Her pain and anguish over my mother’s death, along with Adam’s separation from the family, grieved her until the very end. I could not understand why she believed she had to pay a debt that

was not owed. She was an innocent victim of circumstance. There was nothing for her to be ashamed of. I could not understand why Mom and Mrs. Hill had never come together to tell Adam and me the truth.

"The essential sadness is to go through life without love. But it would be almost as equally sad to leave this world without ever telling those you loved that you love them."

Chapter XIII: The Lord Taketh Over

It didn't take long before Beau and the others were caught. That was the first sign to me that, even after my grandmother's death, her prayers were still working on my behalf. Their capture put an end to the killing spree I had justified in my mind. The bullets that shattered the side of Mrs. Hill's car and killed my grandmother had been fired from the direction of the house, not from the drive-by shooters. At the time, it didn't matter to me who the actual shooter was. They were all guilty in my mind. I was ready to give my life to get even. Those first several days after the tragedy were the most critical to my outlook. I hurt so badly that I just wanted the pain to stop. Today, when I look at young people who give up too easily and lose hope for what life may still hold, I understand something about that despair. When it feels like there is nothing left to lose, it becomes easy to say, "fuck it." That was where my head was. But I did not give up or weaken in will. Perhaps a seed had already been planted in me to believe in the unseen God, the Most High.

After I began to set those emotions aside, along with my ego, the best description of my spiritual condition was that I felt condemned to a kind of purgatory. According to Webster's Dictionary and Christian theology, purgatory is a state or place in which souls expiate their sins through suffering, or a temporary state of punishment or remorse. My punishment, it seemed, was that I was still alive. I would rather have been dead. Instead, by the grace of God, I was still walking the earth, wanting to die while

God refused to let me go. I was filled with shame and disgrace. The one thing I realized I had to live for was my unborn child inside Kiki. The thought of leaving that kind of tragic legacy behind overshadowed the possibility of taking my own life. I couldn't do that to her. I couldn't go out that weak, not like that. I discovered truth in the saying, "If it doesn't kill you, it will only make you stronger." Still, the situation did not get easier for a while. I was left completely on my own to figure out the course I had to walk.

"Life can be a wonderful experience, but it's still hard."

— Issa A. Rahman

The word on the street was that I was a snitch working for the police. Everybody put their own spin on the facts, including my girl Kiki. The only person who shared my reality of the truth was Mrs. Hill. She made an arrangement with the District Attorney's office to keep me out of protective custody and out of LA County jail while the case moved toward trial. In fact, I did not have to appear as a witness at all.

Mrs. Hill used her leverage and connections to threaten a serious lawsuit against the police department. In exchange for keeping me out of the case, they concealed Mrs. Hill's report of the shooting, including information about her husband and the officers involved. The department wanted to avoid public humiliation and the public outcry that would have followed. If that background information had become public, it could have sparked another riot.

In the larger scheme of things, I was protected, but I still had to watch my back on the streets. Kiki and I split up under the weight of everything I was carrying. She could not handle my grief, and I did not want her to carry it on her shoulders anymore. Every day, I could see the anguish in her eyes, and I could not bear her unhappiness. When our son was born, she recognized the love I had for him. Still, I could feel the distance growing between us. I had to be the strong one. I had to walk away from the only thing in life I believed I had left to live for, and I soon discovered the love she secretly held for someone else. I was left with questions I needed to answer before I gave up on myself. Why was I alive? That question led to another: What does God want from me?

I believed in heaven and hell and had been taught the meaning of reciprocity: “We reap what we sow.” I felt as if I had nothing left to lose and no desire left for living. Then I turned to a gift Mrs. Hill had given me, one that had belonged to my brother Adam. It was sacred to him: his personal Holy Quran.

When I opened the book for the first time, I read a small verse that seemed to speak directly to me: “Seek the means to struggle in God’s way, and happily you will prosper.” Later, I had a long talk with Mrs. Hill, and I trusted her when she said, “That book may be your salvation.”

Mrs. Hill did not know much about Adam’s religion. He had converted to Islam, but she honored what the book meant to him. Then she read a passage from the Bible that I have since memorized. It was King David’s prayer in Psalm 51:10–12: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from

your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.”

Just as Adam had once given me a synopsis of Malcolm X’s biography, Mrs. Hill gave me a brief history of David’s prayer. The prophet Nathan came to David and exposed his wrong after David committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Bathsheba conceived, and David tried to cover his sin by bringing Uriah home from the army so people would believe the child was his. But Uriah refused to enjoy the comforts of home while his comrades were still at war. Even when David tried to get him drunk, Uriah still slept among the king’s servants instead of going home to his wife. Finally, David sent Uriah back to the front with orders that he be abandoned in battle. Uriah died, and David married Bathsheba. But Nathan confronted David, and David was forced to face the truth of what he had done.

The moral of the story, as tragic as it was, is that David—a powerful king—was humbled before God. He had to acknowledge his unworthiness, confess his iniquities, ask for mercy, and repent. Through that repentance, his spirit was restored. Mrs. Hill wanted me to understand that guilt did not have to be the end of me. If David could fall, confess, and still be used by God, then maybe I could survive the weight of my own shame. The house of David would continue through his descendants, and from that lineage came the prophecy of a Messiah. What mattered to me in that moment was simpler: God could still work through a broken man.

Mrs. Hill's words comforted my spirit. I am certain she had offered that same wisdom to my grandmother over the years, giving her strength and comfort when she needed it most. I finally understood why Mom had always called her a "guardian angel." No wonder Mom had found the courage to pick up and leave Indiana to start a new life. It was pure faith.

"Your heart is not living until it has experienced pain. The pain of love breaks open the heart, even if it is as hard as a rock."

Chapter XIV: Saying Goodbye

On the day we put my grandmother and Adam to rest, I stood beside their graves and thought about the memories I had shared with Adam as a child. I could see how deeply I had let my grandmother down. I had not yet measured up to the young man Adam had become. He was remarkable, filled with admirable qualities, and I was blessed to have known him. To this day, I carry his ideals of humanity with me. He left me a legacy to follow, and for that, I am forever thankful. I carry that legacy alongside Mom's spiritual guidance as I continue my earthly struggle.

Across the cemetery lawn, I could see Jesse Gomez's family gathered around his grave. I thought to myself, Why should I be denied the chance to see my friend put to rest? I gently lifted Kiki's arm from mine and began walking toward Jesse's people. The gangbangers

attending his funeral noticed me coming. They went into a frenzy, throwing Crip signs with their hands and shouting, “Crip here, nigga. You want some?” But I continued forward without hesitation. Like Adam had asked me, “Why should I be in fear of men who look like me?”

“Daniel, come here, baby, and say goodbye!” Jesse’s mother called.

“He was your friend!”

“You are my baby too. Come and say goodbye.”

She put her arms around me as we walked back to Jesse’s grave. “This is my baby,” she told them. The shouting quieted. We stood together at Jesse’s grave, and for the first time in years, I was free to show my love for a childhood friend. In my heart, Jesse had been like a brother too. I never wanted to disconnect from my dawg. See you again, my beloved, I prayed.

*“We all must learn to live with one another, or we will
live and die as fools.”*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Essay: Tracking, Gang Behavior, and the Psychology of Lost Belonging

Tracking is not merely an educational practice. In communities already carrying the weight of poverty, racial isolation, underemployment, and neighborhood violence, tracking can become one more mechanism that tells children who they are expected to become. When students are placed into lower academic groups, denied access to college-preparatory courses, or surrounded by low expectations, the consequences can reach far beyond the classroom.

For many young people, the damage begins internally. A child who repeatedly hears, directly or indirectly, that they are “basic,” “behind,” or “not college material” may begin to believe the label. That belief can weaken self-esteem, reduce motivation, and make school feel less like a place of possibility and more like a place of judgment. Once a young person disengages from school, other systems are waiting: the street, the peer group, policing, juvenile court, and eventually adult correctional institutions.

What the Data Shows

Research on tracking, school discipline, dropout patterns, and adult education points to a consistent theme: students placed in lower academic pathways often receive fewer opportunities, experience lower expectations, and face a greater risk of academic disengagement. In Los Angeles and similar urban districts, Black and Latino students have historically been overrepresented in lower

tracks and underrepresented in advanced, college-preparatory, and honors-level courses.

The pattern is not simply about grades. Course placement shapes access to teachers, peer groups, academic identity, and future expectations. Students who are not routed into college-preparatory pathways early may be more likely to fall behind, enter credit recovery, leave school before graduation, or later return through GED and adult education programs. Adult education can reopen doors, but too often it functions as a recovery system for people whose original educational path was interrupted.

The larger pipeline is clear: tracking can lead to lower expectations; lower expectations can lead to disengagement; disengagement can lead to dropout; dropout can increase exposure to policing, unemployment, and incarceration; and incarceration often returns the individual to education later through GED programs, reentry classes, or prison-based learning. This is not destiny, but it is a pattern too common to ignore.

The Psychology of Gang Behavior

Gang behavior is often misunderstood as simple criminality. But psychologically, gang affiliation often grows where self-esteem collapses, identity fractures, and aggression becomes a survival language. Many young people who are drawn into gangs are not born violent. They are often children and adolescents searching for belonging, protection, recognition, and power in environments where legitimate pathways feel blocked.

When a young person feels invisible, powerless, academically behind, socially rejected, or without

purpose, a gang can offer a ready-made identity. It says: "You are one of us. You matter here. You are protected here. You are respected here." That message can be intoxicating to a child who has never felt powerful in school, at home, or in the larger society.

Aggression in this context is often defensive before it becomes predatory. Psychologists describe this as reactive aggression: behavior rooted in fear, shame, trauma, hyper-vigilance, and the feeling of being cornered or disrespected. For many youth, what looks like hardness is really armor. It is a performance of strength built over insecurity and pain.

Identity, Masculinity, and Survival

For boys especially, low self-esteem combined with public humiliation can create a dangerous need to prove manhood. If school does not recognize a young man's intelligence, sports do not open a door, work is unavailable, and home life is unstable, the street may become the place where he learns a script for masculinity. In that script, fear must be hidden, vulnerability must be denied, and respect must be defended at all costs.

This is why gangs function as substitute families. They provide belonging where family systems have been weakened, identity where schools have failed to affirm, and status where poverty has stripped young people of ordinary forms of dignity. Low self-esteem becomes the soil. Aggression becomes the armor. The gang becomes the substitute family.

The Machine and the Lost Inheritance

During my transition from hopelessness, I was introduced to Black radical intellectual traditions that helped me name what I had lived. Teachers, elders, and thinkers such as Malcolm X, James Baldwin, George Jackson, Frantz Fanon, Kwame Ture, Amiri Baraka, and Dr. John Henrik Clarke helped many of us understand that oppression is not only physical. It is also educational, psychological, spiritual, and generational.

One phrase stayed with me for more than fifty years: “You are dealing with a cold, calculated machine whose motives and objectives are so criminal that it creates its own means of destruction within itself.” Whether quoted directly or passed down through the living language of the movement, that idea captured what I saw around me. A system that tracks children, destroys self-worth, fuels aggression, produces dropouts, feeds prisons, and destabilizes communities is a machine eating its own future.

To understand the present, we must also understand what was taken. Our ancestors carried communal identity, spiritual grounding, intergenerational knowledge, rites of passage, social belonging, economic roles, and mythic purpose. The machine replaced much of that inheritance with tracking, policing, economic extraction, social fragmentation, identity confusion, and generational amnesia. A people who once knew who they were became a people forced to search for who they are.

The Bigger Picture

The point is not to excuse harm. The point is to understand how harm is manufactured, repeated, and normalized. Paulo Freire says “when a person's humanity is threatened, it's an act of violence “. If we want to interrupt the cycle, we must protect children before they are labeled, tracked, discarded, or forced to find belonging in places that will consume them. We must build schools, families, faith communities, and cultural spaces that restore identity before the street offers a false one.

Tracking is not just an educational issue. It is a social issue, a psychological issue, a spiritual issue, and a justice issue. The future of a child should never be decided by a file, a test score, a teacher's bias, or a system's fear. Every child deserves a pathway that affirms possibility, restores dignity, and keeps open the door to becoming fully human.

Appendix: Street Gangs in America by Alex Alonso

The following appendix is included as historical context for readers and is credited to researcher Alex Alonso.

In Los Angeles and other urban areas in the United States, the formation of street gangs increased at a steady pace through 1996. The Bloods and the Crips, the most well-known gangs of Los Angeles, are predominantly African American [1], and their numbers have steadily increased since their beginnings in 1969. In addition, Los Angeles County has more than 600 active Hispanic gangs, along with a growing Asian gang population.

Surprisingly, little has been written about the historical significance of Black gangs in Los Angeles. Literature and firsthand interviews with Los Angeles residents point to three significant periods relevant to the development of contemporary Black gangs. The first period followed World War II and the significant migration from the South, when the first major Black clubs formed. After the Watts rebellion of 1965, the second period gave way to the civil rights era, when many former club members became politically active for the remainder of the 1960s. By the early 1970s, Black street gangs began to reemerge. By 1972, the Crips were firmly established, and the Bloods were beginning to organize. This period saw the rise of Los Angeles's newest gangs, which continued to grow during the 1970s and later appeared in several other cities throughout the United States by the 1990s. While Black gangs do not

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make up the largest or most active gang population in Los Angeles today, their influence on street-gang culture nationally has been profound. To better understand the rise of these groups, I went into the original neighborhoods to document the history that led to them. Los Angeles County includes 88 incorporated cities and dozens of unincorporated areas. During this research, I visited these places to identify active gangs in Los Angeles and determine their territories. Through several weeks of fieldwork and research conducted in 1996, I identified 274 Black gangs in 17 cities and four unincorporated areas in Los Angeles County.

Post–World War II to 1965

The first major period of Black gangs in Los Angeles began in the late 1940s and ended in 1965. There were Black gangs in Los Angeles before this period, but they were small in number, and little is known about their activity. Some Black groups that existed in Los Angeles in the late 1920s and 1930s were the Boozies, Goodlows, Blogettes, Kelleys, and the Driver Brothers. Most of these groups were family oriented and referred to themselves as clubs. [2] Max Bond (1936:270)

wrote briefly about a Black gang of 15-year-old youths from the Central Avenue area who mostly stole automobile accessories and bicycles. It was not until the late 1940s that the first major Black clubs surfaced on the East Side [3] of Los Angeles near Jefferson High School in Watts and in the Jefferson Park/West Adams area on the West Side, where significant Black populations lived. By 1960, several Black clubs operated on the West Side [4] of Los Angeles, an area

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that had previously restricted Black residents during the 1940s.

Several of the first Black clubs emerged in the late 1940s and early 1950s, initially as a defensive reaction against the white violence that had plagued the Black community for several years. In the surrounding communities of the original Black ghetto of Central Avenue and Watts, and in the cities of Huntington Park and South Gate, white Angelenos were developing resentment toward the growing Black population migrating from the South during World War II. During the 1940s, resentment from the white community grew as several Black residents challenged legal housing discrimination that prevented them from purchasing property outside the original Black settlement neighborhoods and integrating public schools. Areas outside the original Black settlements of Los Angeles were covered by legally enforced, racially restrictive covenants or deed restrictions. This practice, adopted by white homeowners, was established in 1922 and was designed to maintain social and racial homogeneity by denying nonwhite residents access to property ownership.

By the 1940s, such exclusive practices made much of Los Angeles off-limits to most minorities (Bond 1936, cited by Davis 1990:161, 273; Dymski and Veitch 1996:40). This process contributed to the increasing homogeneity of communities in Los Angeles, further exacerbating racial conflict between whites and Blacks, as the latter lived in mostly segregated communities. From 1940 to 1944, the Black population of Los Angeles increased by more than 100 percent, and ethnic and racial paranoia began to develop among white residents.

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Chronic overcrowding took a toll, and housing congestion became a serious problem, as Black residents were forced to live in substandard housing (Collins 1980:26).

From 1945 to 1948, Black residents continually challenged restrictive covenants in several court cases in an effort to move out of the dense, overcrowded Black community. These attempts resulted in violent clashes between whites and Blacks (Collins 1980:30). The Ku Klux Klan resurfaced during the 1940s, 20 years after its presence faded during the late 1920s (Adler 1977; Collins 1980), and white youths formed street clubs to battle the integration of communities and schools by Black residents.

In Huntington Park, Bell, and South Gate, towns that were predominantly white, teenagers formed some of the early street clubs during the 1940s. One of the most infamous clubs of that time was the Spook Hunters, a group of white teenagers that often-attacked Black youths. If Black youths were seen outside the Black settlement area—roughly bounded by Slauson Avenue to the south, Alameda Street to the east, and Main Street to the west—they were often attacked. The name of this club emphasized its racist attitude toward Blacks, as “spook” is a derogatory term used to identify Black people, while “hunters” highlighted its members’ desire to attack Blacks as a method of fighting integration and promoting residential segregation. Their animosity toward Blacks was publicly known: the backs of their club jackets displayed an animated Black face with exaggerated facial features and a noose around the neck. The Spook Hunters often crossed Alameda, traveling west to violently attack Black youths from the area. In

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Thrasher's study of Chicago gangs, he observed a similar white gang in Chicago during the 1920s, the Dirty Dozens, who often attacked Black youths with knives, blackjacks, and revolvers because of racial differences (Thrasher 1963:37). Raymond Wright, one of the founders of a Black club called the Businessmen, a large East Side club based at South Park between Slauson Avenue and Vermont Avenue, stated that "you couldn't pass Alameda, because those white boys in South Gate would set you on fire" [6]. Fear of attack among Black youths was, not surprisingly, common. In 1941, white students at Fremont High School threatened Black students by burning them in effigy and displaying posters saying, "We want no niggers at this school" (Bunch 1990:118). There were racial confrontations at Manual Arts High School on Vermont and 42nd Street and at Adams High School during the 1940s (Davis 1990:293). In 1943, conflicts between Blacks and whites in Inglewood, Gardena, and on the West Side involved similar acts, but the Spook Hunters were the most violent of all white clubs in Los Angeles.

Black youths in Aliso Village, a housing project in East Los Angeles, started a club called the Devil Hunters in response to the Spook Hunters and other white clubs that were engaging in violent confrontations with Blacks. The term "Devil" reflected how Black youths viewed racist whites and Ku Klux Klan members. The Devil Hunters and other Black residents fought back against white violence with their own form of violence. In 1944, nearly 100 frustrated Black youths, who had been denied jobs on the city's streetcar system, attacked a passing streetcar and assaulted several white passengers (Collins 1980:29). During the late 1940s and early 1950s, other

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neighborhood clubs emerged to fight the white establishment. Members of the Businessmen and other Black clubs had several encounters with the Spook Hunters and other white clubs of the time.

In Watts, several clubs were organized geographically around the housing projects in the area. The projects were built for war workers in the 1940s and were intended to be interracial. The first public housing project in Watts was Hacienda Village, a group of single-story units built in 1942. In May 1944, the 498-unit Imperial Courts project was built, and by September, the 700-unit Jordan Downs project was completed. In 1955, the largest of all the public housing projects was completed: Nickerson Gardens, with 1,000 units (Bullock 1969:14–16).

By the end of the 1950s, more than one-third of the population of Watts lived in public housing (Bullock 1969:16). Clubs such as the Huns and the Farmers were active in Watts housing projects. Several of these groups fought against established white clubs for years. As Black clubs began to develop strategies to combat white intimidation and violence, the effectiveness of white resistance to integration and residential desegregation began to decline.

Eventually, “white flight” occurred as white residents began moving into the growing suburban areas that flourished in the 1950s, leaving the inner-city areas of South Los Angeles behind. This left central Los Angeles as a primary Black enclave, with Blacks accounting for 71 percent of the inner-city population (Brunn et al. 1993:53). By 1960, the three separate communities of Watts, Central Avenue, and West Adams had amalgamated into one continuous Black settlement

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area, where low- and upper-class Black neighborhoods were joined into a single community.

During the 1960s, conflicts among Black clubs grew. As more white residents moved away and white clubs began to fade, Black clubs shifted from interracial violence to intraracial violence. The Gladiators, based on 54th Street and Vermont Avenue, were the largest Black club on the West Side, and rivalry between East Side and West Side clubs developed, along with fighting among clubs organized on the same side of town. The Businessmen, an East Side club, had rivalries with both the Slausons, also an East Side club, and the Gladiators, a West Side club. Even though more than 50 percent of the gangs active in Los Angeles were Hispanic, Black gangs represented a significant proportion of gang incidents that were rapidly increasing in number (Study of Delinquent Gangs 1962:1).

During this period, disputes among these clubs were handled through hand-to-hand combat and with weapons such as tire irons and knives, but murders were rare. In 1960, the six gang-related murders that occurred in Los Angeles were considered an extremely high number. At that point, Black-on-Black violence between clubs was becoming a serious concern in Los Angeles. On the surface, the rivalry between East Side and West Side clubs was associated with altercations on the football field, disputes over girlfriends, and disagreements at parties, but many clashes were rooted in socioeconomic differences. East Side youths resented upwardly mobile West Side youths because East Side residents were viewed as economically inferior to those living on the West Side. West Side youths, in turn, were considered less intimidating and less street savvy. In an effort to

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prove themselves equally tough, West Side youths engaged in several confrontations with East Side youths during the early 1960s.

Several clubs fought against one another during this period, but after the Watts Rebellion of 1965, and under the leadership of several socially conscious organizations, much of the rivalry was reduced. Young Black youths moved toward greater political awareness and concern for the social problems affecting their community. Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, a member of the Slaughtons, helped transform several Black youths of South Los Angeles into revolutionary soldiers against police brutality (Hilliard & Cole 1993:218), and several other organizations contributed to that change. The Watts Riots of 1965 were considered “the last great rumble,” as members of these groups dismissed old rivalries and supported one another against the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) (Baker 1988:28; Davis 1990:297). Paul Bullock wrote that the result of the riot activity in Watts was a movement to build organizations and institutions led by responsible Black community members (1969:69).

Social-Political Period, 1965–1970

In the aftermath of the rebellion, young people—namely former club members from the community—began to build political institutions to contest social injustices, especially police brutality, which had helped spark the 1965 Watts Riots. Following the Watts Riot and throughout the rest of the 1960s, Black groups organized and became more politically radical.

For nearly five years, beginning in 1965, there were almost no active Black street gangs in Los Angeles. Several reports began to circulate that Black gang

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activity was declining (Klein 1971:22). According to Sergeant Warren Johnson, “during the mid and late 1960s, juvenile gang activity in the Black neighborhoods was scarcely visible to the public at large and of minimal concern to South Central residents” (Cohen 1972). The formation of political and social movements offered Black youths a vehicle for positive identification, as pride pervaded the Black community (Los Angeles Times, 3/19/72).

After the rebellion in 1965, club members began organizing neighborhood political groups to monitor the LAPD and document its treatment of Black residents.

Ron Wilkins, an ex-member of the Slausons, created the Community Action Patrol (CAP) to monitor police abuses (Davis 1990:297). William Sampson, also an ex-member of the Slausons, along with Gerald Aubry, an ex-member of the Orientals, started the Sons of Watts, whose key function was to “police the police” (Obtola 1972:7).

The Black Panther Party (BPP) started a chapter in Los Angeles shortly after Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the party in Oakland, California, in 1966. The BPP in Los Angeles also helped organize Black Student Union chapters on several high school campuses in Los Angeles and supported the Black Congress, a meeting place for Black residents concerned with community issues, at Florence and Broadway in 1967. Ron “Maulana” Karenga organized a nationalist group called US Organization, and Tommy Jacquette organized Self Leadership for All Nationalities Today (SLANT) in October 1966 (Bullock 1969:67; Tyler 1982:222). After splitting away from US Organization, Hakim Jamal started the Malcolm X Foundation in 1968, and Robaire

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Nyjuka founded the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist group (MLM), which had an office on 78th Street and San Pedro (Tyler 1983:237). The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a national Black nationalist organization, visited Los Angeles and opened an office on Central Avenue in 1967. During that period, Ron Karenga also created Kwanzaa, a nonreligious holiday that celebrates African heritage. All these groups formed in the wake of the 1965 Rebellion to provide political support to the civil rights movement gaining strength within the Black community of Los Angeles. There were several nationalist groups in Los Angeles, but the Panthers and US Organization were considered to have the largest following and the greatest political influence in the Black community after the Watts Rebellion. The BPP heavily recruited members from the Slausons, an East Side club, while US Organization drew a large following from West Side clubs, including the Gladiators. Members of both political groups, however, came from a variety of clubs throughout Los Angeles. Carter was elected president of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party, whose stated purpose included monitoring the actions of the Los Angeles Police Department. Several members of the Black Panthers and US Organization [7], headed by Ron “Maulana” Karenga, had once been members of Black clubs in Los Angeles during the 1950s and early 1960s. Some experts have suggested that the rivalry between the BPP and US Organization was rooted in previous club rivalry, but Alonso argues that it was more closely associated with the opposing philosophies of the two groups.

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After several progressive groups formed in Los Angeles, local and federal law enforcement agencies began to target groups they viewed as threats to society and to the nation. The emerging Black consciousness of the 1960s, which fueled the political movement, was viewed as hostile. The efforts of political and militant groups to organize young Black residents against police brutality were repressed by the FBI, which viewed the Panthers and other groups as subversive threats to national security. Chief Thomas Reddin of the Los Angeles Police Department retained the military model and police tactics that his predecessor, Chief Parker, had employed for sixteen years. Reddin believed that the Black Panthers represented a major threat to the safety of his officers and to their authority on the streets (Scheisl 1990:168).

By 1967, the Panthers were one of the strongest Black political groups in the nation. In November 1968, J. Edgar Hoover dispatched a memorandum calling on field agents to “exploit all avenues of creating... dissension within the ranks of the BPP” (Churchill and Wall 1990:63). This was accomplished through counterintelligence tactics, known as COINTELPRO, designed to divide, conquer, weaken, and render an organization ineffective. COINTELPRO tactics used against the BPP had previously been used during the 1940s and 1950s against the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) in the United States (Churchill and Wall 1990:37). From 1968 to 1971, these tactics were used against the BPP to control and neutralize what federal authorities viewed as “a dangerous Black political group.” The most vicious and unrestrained application of COINTELPRO

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techniques during the late 1960s and early 1970s was reserved for the BPP (Churchill and Wall 1990:61; Horne 1995:13). After several confrontations over more than two years, disputes between the BPP and US Organization continued onto the campus of UCLA and resulted in the murders of BPP leaders. There are several versions of the events in oral histories from those who were present and those who knew the victims personally, but US Organization members were ultimately arrested for the murders. The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the end of significant forward progress by Black political groups in Los Angeles.

Gang Resurgence, 1970–1972

The attack on Black political leadership in Los Angeles, and the power vacuum that remained, created a large void for young Black youths in the late 1960s and coincided with the resurgence of Black gangs. A generation of Black teens in Los Angeles saw its role models and leadership decimated in the late 1960s.

Raymond Washington, a 15-year-old student at Fremont High School, started the first new street gang in 1969, shortly after much of the Panther power base was eliminated and as other social and political groups became ineffective in Los Angeles. Washington, who was too young to participate in the Panther movement during the 1960s, absorbed much of the Panther rhetoric of community control of neighborhoods (Baker 1988:28) and fashioned his quasi-political organization after the Panthers' militant style, sporting the popular black leather jackets of the time. Washington got together with a few other friends and started the first new Black gang

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in Los Angeles on 78th Street near Fremont High School, called the Baby Avenues.

In addition to emulating the Panther appearance, Washington also admired an older gang that remained active throughout the 1960s called the Avenues. He decided to name his quasi-political organization the Baby Avenues, to represent a new generation of Black youths. They were also known as the Avenue Crips, and after a short time they were referred to as Crips, which was a comment on their youthfulness. Their initial intent was to continue the revolutionary ideology of the 1960s and to act as community leaders and protectors of their local neighborhoods, but the revolutionary rhetoric did not endure. Because of immaturity and a lack of political leadership, Raymond Washington and his group were never able to develop an efficient political agenda for social change within the community.

The Crips were successful in developing a style of dress and a recognizable appearance. In addition to their black leather jackets, they would often walk with canes and wear an earring in their left earlobe. Some were also avid weightlifters. The Crips began to venture into criminal behavior, committing robberies and assaults. In 1971, several Crip members who were assaulting a group of elderly Japanese women were described by the victims as young cripples who carried canes. These young cripples were the Crips, but the local media picked up on this description and referred to the group as the Crips (Los Angeles Sentinel, 2/10/72). The print media first introduced the term Crip, and those involved in a life of crime were considered to be “Crippin’” by other Crip members who were still trying to be revolutionary, with the same political thinking of the 1960s. According to

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_____ Danifu, an original Crib member, the Crips may have been the original name, but the term was substituted through a newspaper article that highlighted specific individuals who were arrested for a murder. [8] Because some early Crips carried canes, the notion of Crip as an abbreviated pronunciation of crippled caught on. Jerry Cohen wrote that Crip members wore earrings in their left earlobes, in addition to carrying canes, but the walking sticks were not the source of the gang's name as many believed (1972:C3). Danifu added that "Crippin'" was separate from being a Crib: "Crippin' meant robbing and stealing, and then it developed into a way of life." [9]

As mentioned earlier, these youths tried to emulate the fashion of the Panthers by developing a style of dress that included black leather jackets. Those youths who had the "Crippin'" mentality became excessively concerned with imitating the Panther appearance. By 1972, most Crips had been completely transformed into the Crippin' way of life, which often led into criminal activities. For example, unemployed Black youths often acquired leather jackets by committing robbery and strong-arming vulnerable youths. Jerry Cohen (1972) described the early Crips as "a group of juveniles that committed extortion of merchandise, mugging the elderly, and ripping off weaker youths, particularly for their leather jackets," which had become a symbol of Crip identity (p. C3). Ironically, three days after this article was published, the desire for leather jackets led to perhaps the first Crip murder, when the sixteen-year-old son of an attorney was beaten to death over a leather coat. The victim, who was not a gang member, was a West Side resident who attended Los Angeles High School and

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played cornerback for the football team. According to the Los Angeles Police Department, the group that assaulted him fled the scene with five leather jackets and two wallets taken from the victim and his friends. A few days later, nine youths, including members of the infamous Crip gang, were arrested for the murder. The previous month, there was a similar incident in which twenty Black youths attacked and beat a 53-year-old white man to death on Figueroa and 109th Street in South Los Angeles. It was believed that the Crips were responsible for the killings, but no arrests were ever made (Los Angeles Sentinel, 2/10/72).

The sensational media coverage of the event at the Hollywood Palladium, plus continued assaults by the Crips, attracted other youths to join the Crips. Many youths joined, while others decided to form their own gangs. The increased attention the early Crips received from the police and from the community actually attracted more youths to these early gangs. The violence was said to have been committed to attract attention and gain notoriety (Rosenzweig 1972). In addition, several youths formed non-Crip gangs in response to continued Crip intimidation.

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1970–1980

Between 1973 and 1975, several non-Crip gangs formed a united federation as many Crip gangs began engaging in intraracial fighting with Black non-Crip gangs. Because of the numbers the Crips accumulated through heavy recruitment, they were able to intimidate and terrorize other non-Crip gangs, resulting in one of the first Crip-versus-Blood gang-related homicides. A member of the LA Brims, a West Side independent gang, was shot and killed by a Crip member after a confrontation (Jah & Keyah 1995:123). This incident started the rivalry between the Crips and the Brims. The Piru Street Boys, a non-Crip gang in Compton, had severed relations with the Compton Crips after a similar confrontation. A meeting was then called on Piru Street in Compton, where the Blood alliance was created.

By the mid-1970s, homicides in Los Angeles continued to rise. By 1978, there were more than 60 Black gangs in Los Angeles: 45 Crip gangs and 15 Blood gangs. By 1979, the 26-year-old founder of the Crips had been murdered, Crip infighting was well established, and gang crime had become more perilous. The county reported 30,000 active gang members in 1980 (Table 1.1), and gang murders reached a record high of 355 (Table 1.2). The Los Angeles District Attorney's Office and the Hardcore Gang Unit began to focus resources on prosecuting gang-related offenses during this period (Collier & Horowitz 1983:94). From 1978 to 1982, the number of Black gangs grew from 60 to 155, and by 1985 gang homicides were reaching epidemic proportions after a brief lull in activity during the 1984 Olympics. The epidemic of gang-related crime and homicides

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continued throughout the 1980s, peaking in 1992 with 803 gang-related homicides.

To summarize, the research on gang territories across four different years shows a growing trend in both the number of gang territories and the spatial extent of those territories. Gang territories expanded from the original regions of Los Angeles and Compton into communities on the periphery of the county. Black gangs developed first in the central area of Los Angeles during the early 1970s, then spread to adjacent suburban areas by the late 1970s and early 1980s. During the 1980s, Black gangs appeared in peripheral suburban areas of the county.

The increase in Black gang territories from Los Angeles into suburban areas of Los Angeles County coincided with the out-migration of Black residents from Los Angeles that increased in the late 1970s (Johnson and Roseman 1990:209). Migration patterns within Los Angeles County have influenced, to some degree, the spatial distribution and growth of gang territories. In nearly thirty years, gang territories spread to cover more than 60 square miles of the county. The number of Black gangs in Los Angeles increased dramatically from 18 gangs in 1972 to 60 gangs by 1978. This trend did not cease, and by the late 1990s, there were close to 300 Black gangs in Los Angeles County. The expansion of gang territories made it inevitable that gang conflict would spill into non-gang communities. Black gangs, along with Latino gangs, were no longer confined to the inner city of Los Angeles. By the 1990s, the changing geography of these gangs, once concentrated in the inner city during the 1970s, had become sharply juxtaposed with the affluent landscape of Los Angeles suburbia by

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the late 1980s and early 1990s. As the gang epidemic unfolded in Los Angeles, other urban and suburban areas in the United States began to see the formation of street gangs.

During the 1980s, a number of cities reported streetgang activity, with many reporting the presence of active Los Angeles-based Blood and Crip gangs. In 1988, police departments from across the country—from Shreveport, Louisiana, to Kansas City, Missouri, to Seattle, Washington—reported that California gang members were extending their operations (Skolnick et al. 1993). Some of this was due to the migration of gang members from Los Angeles, and some gang formation resulted from local youths emulating Los Angeles gang culture, partly through media and films.