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AND THEN THERE WAS THREE,
THE HARD WAY

ROY LEE LEWIS, JR.

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Roy Lee Lewis, Jr. entitled "And then there was three, the hard way." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art, with a major in English.


Barry Kitterman, Major Professor

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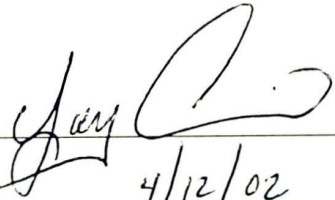

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Date

4/12/02

And then there was three, the hard way

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts Degree

Austin Peay State University

Roy Lee Lewis, Jr.

May 2002

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to

S'anna Babba

for reminding me of my writing passion.

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ABSTRACT

This work consists of a collection of short stories. Each story is capable of standing as a complete entity of its own; however, the presence of Twin and Junior, either as narrators or flat characters, is the most obvious vein of connection between them. The protagonists in each narrative share the common struggle of overcoming self-imposed delusion in order to reach disenchantment. Unfortunately, the characters insist on doing it the hard way.

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INTRODUCTION

“And then there was three, the hard way” is a collection of short stories that explores varying degrees of disillusionment. In each of the stories the main characters are young males under the age of twenty-one who have not realized that their worlds are subjectively perceived. Because they depend on others to define their beliefs and substantiate their existence, they maintain a perspective on life that is skewed. When the young are forced to accept their false senses of reality, they must find the strength and determination to take charge of their own lives.

Because the young males in these stories represent different age groups, their stories are unique. The young males are kind-hearted and good-natured but chose to be lead astray. When the time comes for them to make a critical decision for themselves, they place their strongest foot forward.

The Death of a Blind Boy

Mama was the main reason we left the Southside. When we lived on Orem and Murr Way, any time a passing vehicle's loud music knocked a picture off the wall, shook an ashtray from its place on the coffee table, or when screaming sirens interrupted rare moments of silence, or when the constant blare of hustle and bustle became too loud to ignore, she would start her campaign. I can still recall the last time she complained about those crows eating at her liver.

"I swear these South Park niggas just don't know how to act," she said looking up at no one in particular. Before the interruption, she was helping me with my third grade spelling words. "And they're going to have all of y'all following suit," she said, shaking her head at all of us for pumping our fists to the bumping bass of the car driving by.

"Nuh uh, not me Mama," I said.

"Me neither," Rucka said.

"Aunt Mary, you know we gone be ar'right," Benji said.

"The first to speak, the first to pronounce himself as a fool!" Now standing with one hand on her hip and the index finger of the other pointing at all of us in a sweeping motion, she said, "You Mamas' boys are too young to even know what all right really is. Benji, at just a year away from being a teenager, you think you're the Incredible Black Hulk, running up and down the block fighting and cussing folks like it going out of style." Benji was bigger than most kids his age. His blue-black skin complexion, man-sized hands, big face, and wide body frame made his look like an oversized teddy bear when he smiled. However, when he frowned, which was most of the time, he looked like a small grizzly. "Rucka, and his mixed up head, thinks pushin' and pedalin' is God's most glorious goal for man. Twin,

here. can't be trusted unless I'm standing over the top of him, making him do right. And that Junior, the silent one, he scares us all because he follows behind y'all like your shit don't stink. Life under the streetlights won't do any of you any good. Forgive them Lord," she said looking at the ceiling with both arms raised, "for they fear not where they live!" Mama returned her hard stare at Benji then said, "I can't wait to get your two cousins out of South Park!"

"Come on baby, don't start in on this again," Daddy said, just as weary of her sermons as we were. "We all agree that South Park ain't no Mayberry but this is our home."

"Well, it ain't a very good one," she replied rolling her eyes and smacking her lips.

"That's 'cause you want to lay it beside those white neighborhoods," he said without looking from behind his newspaper. "We were both raised out here and we turned out just fine."

"Oh yeah, well then what about your two brothers?" She pointed to the pictures of Uncle Tom and Uncle Shug sitting on top of a floor model RCA TV. "One locked up and the other gunned down in these streets you call home. That could just as easily be your two sons or your two nephews."

"You're right," he said putting down his paper while staring at the photos of his brothers on the television set. "But what's a nigga to do?" he asked, sitting up, and then scooting to the edge of the couch. "Being Black means you're born behind the eight ball. The luxuries are for white folks and surviving is for niggas. That's just the way it is. The system ain't..."

“Don’t even start with that *system* mess,” she said staring sternly into his eyes.

“Black folks don’t have to live like this. And I’m sick of hearing about *the way it is*. This isn’t the way it should be or has to be.”

“Okay Mary, you’re right again,” Daddy said, motioning for her to calm down. “But leaving the ghetto ain’t gone stop you from being Black.”

“Mannie, you know I’m not talking about being Black or white,” she said, dropping her shoulders. “I’m talking about living better. The longer we stay here, the more and more those kids are going to settle for seconds,” she said, while pointing but not looking at any of us.

“Okay baby,” he said folding his arms, “So where do you want to go and how do you plan to get there? We don’t have the money to just pick up and move. So now you tell me.” Unfolding his arms and extending them straight forward then leaning back against the couch, he asked, “How do we get to Mayberry, baby?”

As it turned out, Mama never did tell him. She just showed us all by working her cleaning job during the day and taking business courses from Houston Community College at night. Within two years time, Mama had gained an associate’s degree. The school’s Career Planning and Placement office landed her an executive assistant’s position downtown with the Enron Oil Company that paid her as much as Daddy’s job at the Shell Oil refinery.

It was during the spring break of our fifth grade year that we moved out east to a three-bedroom house located in a new subdivision ten miles outside of the city. Our new neighborhood, Pine Trails, was less than two years old and secluded in what then seemed to be an endless mile of undeveloped forestland. And it was appropriately named. Less than a minute after leaving the city limits, driving to the neighborhood felt like a safari through an

eternity of evergreens. Wallisville Road wound between sky-scratching pine trees like a path worn through the uninhabited wilderness. The cautious scamper of attentive squierrels and carefree armadillos that wandered along the road's shoulders were new and unseen creatures for Junior and I. We were used to the boldness of mangy, stray dogs and scrawny, alley cats. Purple Sage, the neighborhood's main street, was the only entrance into the hidden community and dead-ended after a straight country mile.

All of the brick houses on the main road and its side streets were homes with three bedrooms, two-car garages and driveways, with fireplaces and side or back patios. The spacious backyards were either naked or enclosed by wire or board fences. Community members created and cultivated assortments of blooming flowers, arrangements of evergreen plants, and well-trimmed bushes and trees with the ambition of having the "Yard of the Month" sign standing tall and proud on their front lawns.

Whites, Blacks, Mexicans, Indians, and Asians made up its diverse population. Either first-generation college graduates or employees at any of the industrial and processing plants on the east side headed most of the families. The kids that ran through its streets and played in its alleyways were as different as the colored candies in a pack of Skittles. It was common to see a kinky-haired kid, a slanted-eyed kid, a freckle-faced kid, and a copper-toned kid playing in a cul-de-sac trading Atari tapes, He-Man figurines, Garbage Pail Kid stickers and jelly bracelets. Dirt bike and big wheel races up and down the block resembled Olympic marathons. Nor was it out of the ordinary to find sunburned and brown-skinned potbellies trading tools or to see Spanish locks, Asian bobs, corn rows, and natural blondes exchanging beauty and baking secrets. Civic club gatherings mirrored NATO committee hearings, and PTA meetings were like reflections of UN peace talks.

Mama seemed to know exactly what she was talking about and constantly bragged about her omniscient vision and insightful decision. Personally, I didn't like Pine Trails at first and I fought like hell to reject it. I was uncomfortable in the new environment. Daddy was cool with it. Living in the suburbs didn't keep him from drinking and jiving with his old buddies in the ghetto. I think the main reason he liked Pine Trails was because it was only ten minutes away from work as opposed to the one-way, hour-long odyssey it took him from South Park. Junior took to it right away.

"Say, Junior, let's go down the street and play with Eugene and them?"

"Hmmm, let's go down to Royce's house instead, Twin."

"Royce's house? We done already played with that little white boy three time this week," I said.

"I know."

"So why should we go today?"

"Because I like Royce. He's cool."

"You do? Why come? He's white."

"So, that don't mean nothing. Royce is cool and he ain't always trying to run around cussing and fighting with everybody."

"What's wrong with cussing and fighting? You like to fight more than I do. Back in the South, behind Benji, you fought more than anybody else on the block. We get out here and you act like you're scared to fight."

"I ain't scared to fight. It's just different out here. It's better out here."

"Better? Please! What's so good about living around a bunch of whites, Mexicans, and foreigners that don't want us around no way?"

“It ain’t that they don’t want us around. You just don’t want to be around them. But you’ll get used to it after awhile.”

“*You’ll get used to it after awhile.* You sound like Mama. I ain’t getting used to nothing. Blacks need to stay by Blacks, whites by whites, and like by like.”

“Now you sound like Big Momma, Benji, and Rucka.”

“That’s cause they know what’s right. I believe granny when she say, ‘them other races ain’t to be trusted ‘cause they’ll pat you on the back with one hand and pick your pocket with the other,’ ” I said matter-of-factly.

“Well, Royce ain’t like that.”

“How do you know?”

“Cause I know. Royce is different.”

“Different like how? He’s still white. He ain’t come from slaves like us. He ain’t ghetto like us. He ain’t none of us.”

“Okay, so he ain’t black. He’s still the same age as us. He likes the same thing we like. He even writes stories and collects baseball cards just like you do. Besides, what’s he ever done to us?”

“Nothing. He’s just white,” I said.

“Black, white, or purple, if a person ain’t never done nothing to you then you shouldn’t have no problem with them.”

“Look, I don’t care about you and Royce. But it’s going to make me look weird too. They’re going to say us twins are Oreos. I ain’t no Oreo, Junior,” I said.

"If you're not, then you're not. But why do you care what other people gon' say anyway? Besides, Twin, this is Pine Trail not South Park. Nobody out here cares about black, white, or yellow."

"Yes, they do. They just don't act like it," I said. "And you're too blind to see it."

"Well blind or not, I'm going down to Royce's. You coming or not?"

"Yeah, I'm coming but only 'cause twins are best friends that stick together, no matter whatever. I'll be so glad when you wake up and see the light, though."

The longer we lived in Pine Trails, the closer Royce and Junior got. Royce spent the night at our house more than our cousins did, and vice versa. It even reached the point where we could walk into the Kennedy house without knocking, go into their refrigerator, pour a glass of milk, snatch a couple of snicker doodles from the cookie jar and plop down in front of the television without a word spoken or an eyebrow raised. I can honestly say, now, that the Kennedys did not have a problem with us. They treated us better than most of the Black folks we knew. But I was still convinced then that they were just closet Klan members. As it went, the only real hell we ever caught from associating with Royce came from Benji and Rucka when they came to visit.

One time, Royce came over to the house while Benji and Rucka were visiting and ended up being our personal doormat. Junior, Benji, Rucka, and I were watching "You Can't Do that on Television" when Royce came into our bedroom.

"Hey, Twins! Oh, uh, hi Rucka. Hi Benji. I, uh, I, I brought my new Frogger tape," said Royce. "You guys want to play?"

"We, uh, we, we don't want to play your new Frogger tape," said Benji holding his nose to achieve the best nasal voice he could project to mimic Royce. His white T-shirt

seemed to be catching hell as it stretched across his chest, arms, and fat stomach. It was obvious he was uncomfortable and irritated by the undersized shirt. Royce's entrance provided him with an outlet to relieve the pressure that had him bottle up. "We was just about to go outside and play football," he said with a devilish grin on his face replacing the hand that had pinched his nose.

"Yeah, you want to play football?" Rucka said, while lacing up his red and white Nike Cortez.

"Naw, let's stay in the house and play that Frogger tape," said Junior, hoping to avoid the inevitable. He took off the Houston Oilers Jersey and the "luv ya blue" wrist bands he had been wearing all day.

"Hold up, Junior! You was talking 'bout playing football after this TV show. Now all of the sudden dopey Opie comes through the door and you want to play Atari," said Benji, evil eying the number 32 jersey lying and sweatbands lying on the floor.

"Ha! Dopey Opie!" Rucka said, holding his stomach. "He called you dopey Opie!"

"Shut up, Rucka! He ain't dopey. You know his name is Royce, Benji. How would you feel if he always picked after you? Let's just play Atari. Me and you can play first," offered Junior.

"We ain't gone play no Atari. Just like he won't try after me, him or his brother. Ain't that right Luke Duke?" Benji asked Royce.

"He knows what's up? His brother can get some, too!" Rucka said. As Royce bowed his head, his face reddened. We could all see where it was going.

“Rucka you ain’t gon’ do nothing by yourself. Without us around you ain’t so bold. Just leave him alone. When we come out there, me and Twin don’t bother your friends,” said Junior.

“That’s cause our friends ain’t spoiled little white boys with Atari tapes afraid to play football,” replied Benji on his younger brother’s behalf.

“Yeah, Junior, our friends ain’t scary little white boys,” repeated Rucka.

“I’m not scary. We can play football,” said Royce sheepishly. Junior’s expression did an about face at Royce’s comment. His eyebrows, which slanted downward like they always did when he was ready to throw the first punch, jumped as high as they could go on his forehead; and his bottom lip, which was tucked tightly under the top one, popped out and dropped far south. It was more than obvious Royce’s reply was a punch he never saw coming. It surprised me, too.

“Cool. Then we gon’ play football.” He gave his T-shirt a quick tug. “And since you ain’t scary, you get to be all-time quarterback,” was Benji’s lightning fast counter blow.

“Okay, but I can’t throw that well,” said Royce.

“Come on Royce, all white boys can throw. That’s why y’all always pitch and play quarterback. You just need some practice,” said Benji.

“Yeah, you just need some practice, Nolan Montana,” Rucka said.

“Ha, Ha. Yeah, Joe Ryan!” I chimed in.

“Shut up Twin! You wouldn’t even be laughing if Benji and Rucka weren’t here,” said Junior.

“But we are. And today, we gone to play football with Casper the friendly Dope,” Benji said, this time rescuing me from Junior.

“Casper!” Rucka belted out with a hearty laugh.

“The friendly dope!” I laughed, with the assurance that Benji had my back.

“You don’t have to play if you don’t want to Royce. I don’t really want to play football anyway,” said Junior.

“Hold up swoll up! You was talking ‘bout it all this morning and right before this television show came on. You was cool wit’ it then. Royce said he’d play. So why you acting like a sissy?” I said, looking over at Benji for his approval.

“I ain’t a sissy, Twin! And I ain’t blind. I see what y’all are trying to do. And it ain’t cool. The three of y’all just want to”

“The three of us just want to play football,” Rucka said, cutting him off while also looking at Benji for approval.

“And Royce does too,” said Benji nodding his head at the two of us, smiling like Satan welcoming new members to hell.

So the five of us went out into the backyard and pretended to be the glory boys of Sunday. Royce was content with his role as our smash test dummy, so we got our rocks off. What’s so crazy is that Royce never really seemed to mind. He was just blind like that. He never cried about the hits: late, low, or dirty. No matter how long it took us to get tired or how much Junior tried convincing him to quit, Royce always got up for more. Junior was the only one who ever seemed to mind or hold a grudge. It was obvious that Royce simply enjoyed being around Junior, and it was just as apparent that Junior liked having him around too. I guess Royce was won over by the way Junior would stand against his own blood if it meant standing for what was right. Junior and Royce were totally and completely loyal to one another.

Regardless of the color line drawn around them, they always ignored the differences and remained close friends up until the eighth grade. As it turned out, all three of us played on the football team that year. Junior and I were the starting halfbacks and, as it turned out, Royce was the starting quarterback.

As twins, Junior and I fought with each other all the time. We also enjoyed pretending to be wrestlers. I was the Junkyard Dog and Junior would always be Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka. Sometime during the summer, we started including Royce in our wrestling matches. He was either “The Ravishing” Rick Flair or Ricky “The Dragon” Steamboat. Most of the time, we just had battle royals but every once in a while we would wrestle two against one for the sake of a good challenge. We held our matches anywhere and at anytime: at home in the alleyway, in our backyards, and even at school in the hallways and classrooms.

The day before our first home game, I had to run extra sprints for not memorizing all of my plays. So while Junior and Royce were waiting for me to come out of the locker room, they started wrestling with each other. Just as I walking out of the locker room, I saw that Royce was on top of Junior gripping him in a mean headlock. Of course, I didn’t think anything of it. I had seen it too many times before. At the same time I was coming out of the locker room, Jerome Turner, a black boy who was in his second year of the eighth grade, was coming out of detention. He saw Royce on top of Junior and bolted towards the two grapplers.

“Fuck you white boy,” he screamed, while raring his right arm back. Neither Royce nor Junior realized what was happening. The sucker punch landed flush against Royce’s ear. The clap that sounded from the contact barked like a shot from a starter pistol. Royce went

limp. A second punch was thrown but missed its mark because the first was enough. Royce went from holding Junior in a tight headlock to lying motionless on top of him. As I ran towards them, Junior was shrugging Royce off of him without realizing that Royce was knocked out. Jerome, who had already kicked Royce twice in the face, was about to deliver another when I tackled him.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, man?” I said.

“What the fuck is wrong with me? What the fuck is wrong with you? That cracker was jumping on your brother,” said Jerome, pushing me off him.

“No he wasn’t, we were just playing!” hollered Junior.

“Playing? It looked like you was getting your ass kicked to me,” Jerome said dusting himself off. “I was doing you a mother fucking favor.”

“Well, you fucked up!” I said. “That’s Royce. He lives on”

“He’s bleeding twin! Twin, he’s bleeding!”

I was so busy jaw jacking with Jerome, I had forgotten about Royce. When I looked down, an angry fear paralyzed me from head to toe. There Royce was, lying face down in a pool of his own blood. Junior was kneeling beside Royce, shaking him furiously.

“Wake up, Royce! Royce, get up,” he screamed as tears ran down his face. “Twin, he won’t get up! He won’t get up, Twin!”

Jerome took off like a bat out of hell while I stood over Royce and Junior. I began crying. The entire exchange was soul scorching. I had witnessed a white boy beaten to bloody unconsciousness. Sure, I had seen numerous civil rights films with Blacks being sprayed by water hoses, bitten by dogs, and beaten with billy clubs. But this was different, this was a live role reversal. This was Royce. Jerome was just as wrong as the white people

I saw on films and television. But I didn't judge him. I knew hate had done it to him. Hate that none of us possessed at birth. Hate taught and learned. The same that causes men to burn. The same hate that burned Jerome and Benji. The same hate that burned me until that moment. The Old Adam in me would have grabbed Junior by the collar and took off with Jerome.

"You stay with Royce." I said. "I'll go get some help." Then I ran back into the locker room to get Coach Lewis. Twin and I waited until the paramedics came. Junior was in too much shock to answer any questions, so I did all the talking. Before then, I would have kept quiet about the whole situation. But I did not feel like I was snitching this time. We would have both rode with Royce to the hospital if they had let us, but we weren't family. We wondered about his condition the rest of the evening.

"Hello? Yes it is ... oh, sweet Jesus! Thank you. Thank you very much." Mama gently placed the phone on the hook. She looked at me, then walked straight over to Junior. She grabbed him up with her right hand, sat in the same spot he had been occupying on the couch then pushed his head into her breast with her left hand. Without any words spoken, he began to cry. It started with a pout and then grew into a larger fit of wounded feelings. The louder he got, the harder Mama rocked him back and forth. The harder she rocked, the more my heart broke. The more my heart broke, the more I began to see.

Three days later, we saw Royce for the last time. His expression was peaceful. He seemed happy to be leaving. Junior couldn't stand looking at him; all he was able to do was bawl, loud and hard. As I looked Royce in the face, I got teary-eyed myself. I knew that I'd miss him too.

After the goodbye, it was over. Royce was gone for good; and Junior and I were left with memories of sleepovers, wrestling matches, Atari challenges, and that day, the day one blind boy began to see because another died.

A Bump on a Fool's Head

"But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool shall be in danger of hell fire. So what Jesus is doing here, church, is comparing and contrasting the Old and New Testaments. You see, because of the young man's foolish ways he was bumped on the head. You know, the elders used to say, 'A hard head makes a soft tale.' I'm using tale 'cause this ain't the appropriate place for the most common vernacular. But, but, they used to say, 'A hard head makes a soft tale.' Y'all don't hear me. Cause if y'all did, you'd say Amen. 'A hard head makes a soft tale.' I know some of y'all know that to be true. Brother Deacon, do you know what the old folks meant? Mother Beeby, can you testify to some of these babies in the church about what this means? Amen. But, but, before I go on, I want to jog your memory about something else the elders used to say. Now, for those of you who didn't say amen to those first words of wisdom, 'A hard head makes a soft tale', I won't hold it against you if you ain't never heard these. But for the folks who do, just say amen. Amen. Now, now, the old folks used to say, 'If you see a fool', how many of you know the rest? Amen, amen. The elders used to say, 'If you see a fool, then bump him on the head.' You see that's what Jesus is doing in Matthew 5 and 22, when he's comparing the Old and New Testaments. You see today a lot of us have to get bumped on the head for acting like fools. I don't hear any Amens, so I guess I'm standing here by myself. But that's all right, I'm gon' preach on anyway. I said, a lot of us have to get bumped on the head 'cause we're acting like fools. Take for example, the boy who"

Yes indeed! No one could appreciate this sermon more than Twin. Reverend Wiggins would probably get tired of all the ‘amens’ and ‘hallelujahs’ he’d receive if Twin was in church today. If there were ever a person that took too many unnecessary lumps it would have to be my twin brother. He always, as a matter of fact, seemed to insist on learning his lessons the hard way. I can still remember, like it happened yesterday. He took a hard one for what he called ‘playing the fool.’ Preach on preacher.

“Say Twin, what happened to you after school today?”

“Can’t you see what happened?” he said, crooning his neck forward.

“I can see your face is all fucked up, like you took a serious loss. But I’m asking what happened for real! Not that lie you told mama ‘bout falling off Bootay’s moped, ‘cause I know. That nigga don’t own a bicycle, let alone a moped.”

“Be easy Junior,” he said, waving his hand in a slow downward motion. “I told mama I fell off a moped ‘cause that’s all she needs to know.” After looking suspiciously at both kitchen entrances, he said, “Let’s go out in the back, so I can tell you what went down.”

“Cool, that’s all I wanted to know in the first place,” I said, following him through the garage door.

“That’s all I wanted to know in the first place,” mimicked Twin, reaching into his brown, short-sleeved Dickie button down shirt pocket for his cigarettes. “You definitely got mama’s nose,” he said, fumbling for the lighter in his matching Dickie work pants pocket.

“And you’re definitely going to have daddy’s lungs,” I said. “You could have told me what happened in the kitchen. You just wanted to come out here so you could smoke your Newports.”

"You got me." He lit a Newport cigarette and took a long, deep drag. "I can't sneak nothing past you, Sherlock Homeboy," he said, after releasing the smoke from his lungs.

"You dumb nicotine fiend, you'll be lucky to get past fifty-five 'cause them cigarettes are going to cut your ride short."

"Them cigarettes are going to cut your ride short," he said, mimicking me again. He took a quick drag. "You sound like mama after daddy right now, Junior," he said exhaling smoke and words at the same time.

"Well if I sound like mama after daddy, that's cause neither one of y'all need to be sucking early death through a cancer straw!"

"Watch out, Mr. Athletic America. Cancer won't be the death of me. Can't you see? I'm gone live and die the life of a G," he said, looking up to the sky.

"So is that what happened today?" I said laughing. "You got jumped into a gang?"

"Ha ha he he ho ho! Blow it out your ass hole, Junior. I didn't get 'jumped into a gang.' You know better than to come at me sideways like that anyway," he said, poking at his ribs. "You know I'm too gifted to bang and too talented not to do my own thang."

"I hear you, but none of that explains your broken nose and swollen jaw," I said, pointing twice at his face. "Twin, what the hell happened, bra?"

"Man," he said in a long exaggerated tone. "I got caught slippin' on the senior hall after school today."

"For fucking with Rachel, huh?"

"I was hollering at her, but..." He paused to hit his cigarette. I jumped in before he could release the cloud or complete his sentence.

“Uh huh! That’s why you got drug, huh? I told you. I told you so. I told your black ignorant ass so! I told you the boy loves that broad’s period panties. But naw,” I said, shaking my head in disgust. “You insist on being Billy Dee Williams Junior. You already know Pine Trails and Summit Point mixes like sugar and shit. But you just have to be the Romeo scheming on another motherfucker’s Juliet. I told you that Mr. Clean Up man game would get your ass kicked. How come you have to pick every piece of fruit from the tree?”

“Slow up, Reverend Deacon Doctor Doug,” he said, flicking his cigarette butt into the yard. “This ain’t ‘bout all that. These scars are the stripes from a completely different level of the game,” he said, staring through me as if he were alone and simply thinking out loud. “I didn’t realize how foul I was playing ‘cause I didn’t respect the rules.”

“Okay Twin, I know you’re supposed to be the one with all the ‘street’ knowledge, but right now you sound like confusion.”

“You mean, Confucius,” he said, coming back into the shared world of our backyard.

“Naw, I mean confusion. ‘Cause that’s all I’m getting from your pathetic ‘player made’ proverbs and psalms.” I laughed. I began marching in place like a silly leprechaun. “So here’s one for you,” I said, “Riddle me this; riddle me that. What the hell happened to your face, Mr. Cool Kat?”

“Very funny, Mr. Slow Torre,” he said, smiling but not smiling. “I’ll put ya’ down, if you quit interrupting me with your raggedy ass jokes.”

“Raggedy? The only thing raggedy right about now is your face, elephant boy,” I laughed.

“Whatever,” he said, lighting another cigarette. “It started yesterday while me and Bootay was waiting on you to get out of football practice,” he said, exhaling. “We...”

“Yeah, I did notice the two of y’all acting different on the way home. I kinda thought y’all had been into something, but I was tired and forgot to ask.”

“Well anyway,” he said, before taking another pull. “It started when about half the football team, or what looked like half, came off the field earlier than y’all normally do. Me and Bootay...” He paused to exhale and I jumped right in again.

“Yeah, the offense did get to leave practice early yesterday.”

“What for?”

“They scored in the first five possessions of scrimmage practice. They went in early and we ran sprints for the rest of the time. Both sets of coaches, offense and defense, watched and talked shit about how sorry we were. But that ain’t nothing, though. Finish what you was saying.”

“Okay. Me and Bootay went in behind ‘em and talked up a crap game. We got...”

“Who was shooting?”

“Junior, what’s up with your patience today? I told you I’d tell you everything that went down. Just hold the phone ‘till after I drop the 411?”

“I’m just anxious to know what’s up? I want to know who jumped on my brother. Football team or not, if it’s time to throw them thangs, then I’m ready.”

“I don’t think you’ll feel that way after I finish dropping you off,” he said, flicking another cigarette butt into the yard. “Anyway, it was me, Bootay, and four of the football players: DeAndre Hardaman, Rasheed Brooks, sorry ass Craig, and the quarterback.”

“You mean Scott, Scott Gravitt?”

“Junior, I did say *the* quarterback. He asked me if I was your brother. He was like, ‘*I don’t mean to sound prejudiced or anything but, but, you two look just alike.*’ I didn’t say shit but I was thinking to myself, fool, don’t you know an identical twin when you see one?”

“You know how some of them try to say all niggas look alike,” I said laughing.

“Yeah, but I think he was just trying to be cool. Which was fine by me. I was trying to get up on some of his paper.”

“Can he shoot?”

“I couldn’t tell. If he can, he didn’t stand a chance anyway. Me and Bootay ran it over on all four of them so smooth, Junior. I’m saying,” he said, hammering his right fist into the palm of the opposite hand. “We should have been locked up for committing fraud. Me and Bootay hustled them boys out of a good piece of change. A hundred from the quarterback, fifteen from sorry ass Craig, eighty from Rasheed and \$127 from DeAndre.”

“Damn! That’s \$300.”

“On the cool, it was 322, \$161 apiece.”

“Y’all two had to be doing some shady shit, if you’re calling out their pockets like that. Rasheed and DeAndre are hustlers. Well, Rasheed is and DeAndre’s brother is a timer. How come they didn’t peep what was going on?”

“Who’s DeAndre’s big brother?”

“Chico, Chico Hardaman.”

“No shit?” And then it hit him. “That’s right. That’s right and I knew that already. I just forgot because I never see them together. Shit, they’re two entirely different types of a niggas, a timer,” he said, pointing to the left and then to the right, “and a dumb jock. So that’s where all that money came from. After I gave the white boy change for his two fifties,

DeAndre changed out one of Bootay's hundreds. Trying to show out and shit. I thought he was funny bunny. He talked a good game but the bitch started crying after he lost his money."

"Is that why your face looks the way it does now?"

"That had something to do with it, but like I said, we ran it over on 'em smooth. I'm saying, trump tight. Junior, I mean TRUMP TIGHT," he said, hammering his fist into his palm twice, stressing both words. "Rasheed didn't catch on. He just stopped shooting when he got eighty in the hole. He had more to spend," Junior said, pointing with his thumb to his immediate left. "But he realized luck wasn't on his side. Sorry ass Craig," he said, pointing off center left, "proved his name and the white boy," he said pointing to his immediate right, "just got caught up. Me and Bootay ran it like a baby Vegas. They never even realized three dice were hitting the floor," Junior said, holding up three fingers. He knew all kinds of tricks and hustles when it came to shooting craps, playing cards, or laying dominoes. Junior could cuff and set a pair of loaded dice in front of the most seasoned gamblers without getting caught.

"So how did Bootay catch on?" I asked.

"I put him down about a month ago, and we been licking ever since. Anyway, every time I shot the dice," he said, falling back into the moment. "he bought 'em right after. So both of us was holding and setting. We started off shooting ones but by the third point, I had them shooting and side betting fives." His hands were moving anxiously, changing directions with every other word he spoke. "I sucked up forty dollars fast, tricked the dice, and put my stack up. Bootay," he said, pointing directly in front of him for as long as it took to identify his partner, "hopped on 'em with me fading and sucked up some more paper. I

fed him twenty,” he said, motioning like he was passing out money as fast as he could, “and bet with the other twenty. I never pinched off my own stack after that. Before DeAndre got to shoot,” he said, pointing to the position in between Bootay and the white boy, “sorry ass Craig ran out of money. He didn’t really want to shoot anyway.” The more he talked the faster his hands moved. The more his hands moved, the faster he talked. “He was just trying to make some change off the side bets with his lunch money. He probably would have if me and Bootay didn’t have our shit together. We got it so crunk,” he said, laughing, “that I’d bet five against Bootay, win, and he’d pass a me a ten. He’d bet ten against me, lose and pass me a five.” I was confused but not surprised.

“How’d the hell you two shade tree motherfuckers pull that off?” I asked, scratching my head.

“I done already told you. We had it trump tight. Whether I was shooting or fading, I side bet with everybody going north and south, shit talking loud and fast the whole time. But I never once rode with Bootay,” he said, raising his index finger as if that were the one cardinal sin he wouldn’t dare commit. “Money stayed on the ground, so everybody had to watch their own change. I kept the dice hot, catching every other roll or two. If I wasn’t catching or popping off at the mouth then Bootay was. And you know that Creole talking nigga had ‘em going with that funny ass swamp water rap of his.”

“So on the cool, y’all played break-even with each other while cheating everybody else.”

“Man, what?” He lit up another cigarette. “Me and Bootay had it click tight, like he was my twin.” He took another drag. “You know we had to count the money out in front of

them. I licked for 140 and Bootay counted out the rest. We put in their face. And that's when the shit started stanking."

"Is that when DeAndre started tripping over getting hustled?"

"You feel me?" He hit the cigarette, inhaling and exhaling in a normal breath. "He started talking about *'something ain't right. How come you two ended up with all the money?'* Bootay stepped right in his face and was like, *'Cus lady luck luvs eechee 'n 'ery playuh from 'ot de Pine Trails. She gon' lay dine wit' de real, not no part time husla. Speshlee no, cry baby chile fo 'tball playuh!'*"

"I know DeAndre didn't like that," I said.

"Hell naw, he didn't! He stuck his finger in Bootay's chest and was like, *'Fuck you Bootay. Fuck Lady Luck and Pine Trails. You niggas are known cutthroats, especially you, Twin. Y'all are suppose to be boys but y'all ain't bet together once. Something is shady 'bout that.'* The white boy was between me and DeAndre so I stepped around him and was like, *'I don't know what you're talking 'bout, nigga. Money is money, whether its from a friend or foe, nigga.'* I started bootin' up. The nigga was serious for real. He started talking about taking his money back and shit. I looked over at Bootay and he was ready to dance too. You know what I'm saying, DeAndre would have got drove, thinking size would handle us. He nuttin' up too. He wasn't trying to go solo so he tried to pump Rasheed, Craig, and the white boy up to help him. Talking 'bout, *'They ain't just cheat me. They cheated the three of y'all too. I know y'all ain't gone just stand their like some ho's and let them take your money like that. Shit, two can't take four.'*"

"That sounds just like that big ole bitch. Always trying to hype somebody up to rat pack. But I know Rasheed didn't get sucked in. That's my boy. He knows you're my

brother. Plus, he's too cool to plex over money like that. Sorry ass Craig ain't and can't do shit. And I know, Scott didn't want to do nothing," I said, angered by what my brother had just told me.

"Right," he said, then pulling from his cigarette. "So when that bird wouldn't fly, your boy recruited some bystanders. Actually, about four of them were Summit Point niggas. The rest were just followers. You know how y'all football players try to cut for each other."

"Yeah, so how many of them was it?"

"Too many, Junior," he said, flicking the half smoked cigarette in the yard. Stepping back and looking around as if were presently circled by the mob, he said, "And I wasn't about to be the cheese for the rat pack. Bootay wasn't going either. Me and my boy was standing shoulder to shoulder. So you know what happened next," he said, nodding at the inevitability of their next move.

As much as Twin liked to fight, he hated to lose just as much. He was the type of person that if he lost a fight one-on-one, he would fight the joker who beat him everyday until he won. He wasn't the person you'd run to get if you wanted someone beat up, but he was the one you'd get if you wanted someone you could count on to fight. He was always prepared to help even the odds, and he was even more prepared to even the odds if no extra bodies could be found. Besides, I knew my twin brother and the circle of thugs he surrounded himself with.

"I already know!" I said. "You pulled out your quarter piece and Bootay whipped out the butterflies. I know them boys backed down at that!"

“Baby boy! You would have thought it was a bank robbery up in that bitch.” He had fallen back into the moment, but this time he wasn’t talking fast and his hands weren’t moving wildly. This time his voice was hushed and his hand gestures were slow and extremely exaggerated. “Nigga, them boys got real civilized when the peacemakers came out. I’m saying, it was like the night before Christmas. And all through the house, not a creature was stirring.” Then he came to his old loud and obnoxious self, “And DeAndre was the first to shut his motherfucking mouth!”

“Ewwweee!” I said shaking my head while holding my fist to my mouth, “I know Bootay played the fool in that bitch.”

“Man,” he said in his normal, long drawn out way of saying it. “The hostages were quiet but Bootay was excited and stomping around like a Ragin’ Cajun Corleone! Talkin’ ‘bout, *‘Boot up, bra!’* Walking up in folk’s faces doing this, and doing that. Hollerin’ ‘bout, *‘Man o’ mouse, nig’a. Ain’t no air in ya’ ches’ now, nig’a! Ain’t no cheese fo’ da’ rats today, nig’a.’*” Tickled more by Twin’s reenactment than by the actual image, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I can see his braided up, Louisiana loud talking, wannabe gangster ass twirling his knives. As good as he can flip and flick them damn thangs around, I know them boys was scared. Especially with you pistol playing,” I said, pointing at Junior.

“Huh, if you only knew. This one fool stepped out of the crowd and was like, *‘It’s cool. Ain’t nobody gon’ jump on y’all. Just get outta here with that shit.’* Junior, what did he say that for? I was on such a rush that I walked straight over to him and laid the pistol in the center of his chest, like this.” Using me as the demonstration dummy, he placed his finger gun on my chest with the barrel aimed up at my chin. “Then I told him to be the fuck quiet.”

“Damn Twin,” I yelled, pushing his hand away from my chest. Even though I was just a stand in, I felt violated. “You didn’t have to do all that. I can understand you didn’t want to get mobbed but that sounds too extra, bra.”

“I know, Junior. I know,” he said, dropping his head out of shameful guilt. “As soon as I took the pistol off his chest, the air got sour and you could hear it hit the floor.”

“Dude pissed on hisself?” I asked in disbelief. “Aw man! You did the fool, Twin.”

“I know. He didn’t let them fall but I could tell he wanted to cry. I could see the tears building up in his eyes.” His tone turned from serious to apologetic. “I was just so high off the rush and hyped up with Bootay that I didn’t even care at first. I was just going off of raw hate. I hated DeAndre for wanting to mob. I hated them boys for being his followers. I hated dude for pissing on hisself. I hated myself for being in the situation. I even hated Bootay for coming up with the idea to hustle them boys in the first place. On the cool, I was pissed off most from the way he seemed to be loving the danger of it all.”

“Lord, have mercy on you two fools. Y’all must have thought y’all was Corleones for real yesterday. I bet you and Bootay felt like y’all made off like straight mobsters, huh?” Twin started pulling another cigarette from the pack but pushed it back in then placed the pack in his pocket.

“Yeah, but I paid for it today, though,” Twin said, looking up at the clouds.

“Yeah, I see that ‘cause that’s definitely what your face is sayin’. And I won’t lie, you probably deserved every bit of it, but fuck it. Whoever it was, they’re going to learn not to fuck with the twins. Your broken nose is my broken nose. And the same goes for that swollen jaw. We can roll through Summit Point right now! Fuck DeAndre, fuck his brother, fuck Summit Point, and fuck them football flunkies. I’m forever gone stand with you, right

or wrong. I put that on my balls and my word. Hell, we can get Malika and Trameka on your girl Rachel for being the good one gone bad. They don't like the broad anyway. Yeah, it's on and popping again."

"Slow down, Calvary cowboy," he said, waving me off. "You can leave Rachel and DeAndre out of this. On the cool, there ain't gone be no revenge attack."

"What? You said you were over on the senior hall fucking with the bitch. She lives in Summit Point with DeAndre and the rest of 'em. She might like you, but she loves and lives with them. I thought you were a player? I know you ain't trying to save that tack head. Twin, what's the damn deal?"

"Junior, I was on the senior hall. And I was rapping to Rachel. And on the cool, if I hadn't been hollering at her at the time, I probably wouldn't have got caught out there like I did. But I'm kinda glad about that. It could have been worse had I been spotted anywhere else."

"I'm lost now, Twin. I can't really tell where you're coming from, but I'm with you. I'm not understanding why you look like shit today, and why you're so quick to let it go."

"Let's just say, today's after school lesson taught me some things about life that can't be learned through teacher or textbook."

"Okay grasshopper, you're sounding like Confusion again," I said. "I can see why you got jumped and I know why it happened. But there are still dots to connect. So go ahead and draw the lines, Twin."

"The only thing keeping me from filling in the blanks is you. Every time I get going, you get to quizzing and questioning like I'm Jim Blaine going off about his grandfather's old ram."

"Jim who? Is that one of Daddy's homeboys? I asked, lost and confused.

"Never mind," Twin said. "Just let me lace you."

"Well, go ahead and lace me then."

"Alright. It's like this. It happened today about 3:45." I guess Twin's emotions had come down because he was able to light another cigarette.

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "Did you say 3:45?"

"Yeah man," he said with obvious frustration. "Three. Four. Tee. Five."

"Practice started today at 3:30. DeAndre was at practice today, so he couldn't have been one of the ones."

"I never said he was Junior. It was..." I jumped right back in.

"So that mother fucker had someone else jump you? Hell, naw," I said, throwing my fist in a downward motion. I began pacing back and forth, no more than three steps per direction. "I thought that nigga had a funny smile on his face at practice today after he asked me where you were. We'll get his bitch ass." Twin grabbed my right shoulder and turned me toward him so that we were standing face-to-face.

"We don't have beef with him, Junior," he said calmly. "He wasn't even in this. This was...." I broke free and started pacing again.

"Yeah right, he probably had them Summit Point niggas rat pack you. None of them sorry ass ho's can fight anyway. That's why they always have to jump folks."

"It wasn't the niggas from Summit Point, Junior."

"Then who the hell was it?"

"Your boy Derrick," he said.

"Derrick? Derrick who? Smith or Williams?"

"I don't know the nigga's last name, Junior," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I just heard Rachel scream his name."

"You know him when you see him then, huh?"

"I sure do and I'll never forget his face. Just like I'm sure, he'll never forget mine," he said, laughing to himself. "I can't spit this to everyone because they probably wouldn't feel it coming from me anyway." He tapped me in the center of my chest then gave a quick glance to the sky. "But the LORD taught me about vengeance and humility today."

"What? Twin, I don't really know what you're talking about, but we'll get revenge tomorrow and the motherfucker will definitely be humiliated."

"No we won't," Junior said, shaking his head slowly. "It ain't necessary. I told you, I'm cool with just letting this one go. I'm just gon' let these bruises heal and remember how I feel. I had this one coming. It could have been a lot worse than a smashed nose and a puffy jaw. I could have been killed."

"Had it coming? So you just gon' lick your wounds and turn the other cheek." I was infuriated and couldn't believe what I was hearing. Not coming from Twin. "We didn't let dude who killed Royce fly free. So why should we let this Derrick motherfucker hit the wind? This ain't like you, Twin."

"Maybe not in the past, but it is now," he said.

"Naw, Twin. That's gon' make both of us look bad. You getting jumped on and us not doing shit," I pleaded.

"I don't really care how we gon' look or what people gon' think." Twin looked me directly in my eyes and said, "I had it coming, Junior."

"I heard you say that already. I'm just not sure about letting you get jumped on and then turning my head 'cause you felt like you had it coming. One on one, maybe, but not a rat packing."

"Well then, let me be honest about it. I really didn't get jumped on. I just got my ass kicked."

"You mean one motherfucker brought it to you like that? You must not of got a chance to boot up in that bitch."

"I did boot up at first, but then I went soft when I saw who it was. I didn't even really fight back."

"What? You didn't fight back? Were you scared of the nigga or something?"

"Naw, I wasn't scared of him. It's like I already told you. I just couldn't go when I turned and saw who it was."

"So you just took the loss?"

"That's right," he said, kicking at something on the ground that wasn't actually there.

"And on the cool, I think it was the best thing for me."

"What? Hold up. Hold the fuck up, Twin! You mean to tell me you didn't get jumped on..."

"Uh huh."

"...you didn't fight back."

"Uh huh."

"...and you think it was the best thing for you? Is this what you're telling me, Twin?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm telling you."

“Well, you gon’ have to tell me a lot more,” I said, grabbing him by both shoulders, forcing him to look me in the face, “‘cause I ain’t understanding this big six on double blank you’re talking right now. Yesterday, you thought you were the hardest pit in the litter. Today you sound like a pup on the porch, like a pastor of the New Testament, turning cheeks and shit. If you’re scared, say you’re scared. If you’re going through it then just holler at me. But if you’re just suffering from after shock then you need to go ahead and shake that shit off. ‘Cause I can’t tell if you talking conscious or concussion.”

At this point, I was ready to go in the house. Twin wasn’t making much sense to me. The sun had set and the stars were out. I was waiting on Momma to stick her head out of the back door to see what we were talking about for so long. The moment she asked, I was prepared to cut our conversation short and walk right inside the house behind her. However, she never rescued me.

“I know it might sound like I’m coming from the left, but I’m really seeing what’s right. It’s like Big Momma always says, *‘when you change, those who know you best are the last to see it.’* So, I don’t really expect you to peep it right now.”

“Wait a minute? You’re the first to run and the last to listen when Big Momma gets to going. Now you’re quoting her? ‘Like Big Momma always says,’ this coming from the same nigga bold enough to tell her that old school rules don’t apply to new school fools. Either that nigga did more damage than you thought or you really are going through it.”

“I’m serious about what I’m spitting Junior. It’s like this. When I was hollering at Rachel and I heard, *‘What’s up now nigga?’* I went straight into combat mode.” It was happening again. He was falling back in to the confrontation that happened earlier. He was talking to me but if I walked into the house he would have continued talking. “I was booted

up before I even made the 180. But then I looked into his eyes and saw the same hate I used the day before. It was the exact same, just recycled and thrown back at me. For a split second, I was terrified.” His voice didn’t tremble, nor did it reflect the emotions he was enduring but a single tear rolled down his cheek. “But not because of the nigga. I was more scared of what was about to happen. It was like my soul went ice cold. Then just as fast, I saw his fist coming dead at my face. I was so relieved ‘cause I just didn’t know what to expect at first. It could have been a lock, a knife, or even the steel.”

A second tear traveled down the same path as the first as he stood with his hands clasped in front of him rocking back and forth. I looked around to see if any neighbors were outside witnessing my brother’s confessional. Even if there were, it wouldn’t have mattered to him. He was in a different world. However, I stood in the backyard embarrassed for him.

“But because it was just his fist, I stood in and took it flush. I knew my nose was broke. I felt it give as the pain erupted, like he pushed a migraine button. The headache came immediately. My eyes flooded and the blood covered my lips and coated the back of my throat. He gave me his best one. I was so punch drunk that I just dropped to my knees. I don’t know what happened to my jaw. I don’t know if he hit me, kicked me, or if I just fell into the lockers side face first. I was just so gone by the first lick. When I fell to my knees, I know he was still bombing on me but I didn’t feel any of it. I saw a lot of shit going on around me, but I couldn’t tell exactly what it was. I heard Rachel scream his name but I can’t tell you why or what was going on. I felt my body being thumped and changing directions, but like I said, I don’t know if it was me getting hit or kicked, falling into the

lockers, or hitting the ground. Through the whole thing I was dazed and amazed,” he said, looking at me as if he was trying to wake up.

“Amazed,” I asked. I thought my question would help bring him into complete consciousness, but it only sent him back into orbit.

“Yeah, my mind was racing like a runaway slave against the first light of dawn. But my body, my body and everything else felt like a Twilight Zone of slow motion. And you know what’s so crazy?” The question was more for him than it was for me. I didn’t have an answer, but if I did there was no chance to give it. “I wanted to black out, but I couldn’t.” He was rocking again, but the two tears were replaced by a peculiar smile. “I mean, my body was through, but my head kept on going, just turning everything over. I thought about the distant and the not so distant past. I thought about yesterday. I thought about the moment. I thought about how I felt the second before and how I’d feel when it was over. It was like the wildest roller coaster I ever rode. But for real, I was seeing everything from all the angles. I saw his eyes, his pain. I saw everybody else’s eyes and was ashamed. I even saw myself and knew I had no one but me to blame. I was watching the whole thing like a game you could have been playing in.”

His profession was too much, especially coming from him. I don’t know if it was the shining stars. I don’t know if it was the full moon shining directly above him. I don’t know if it was the cool breeze that reminded me September’s nights are closer to winter even though her days are closer to summer. Whatever it was, I was at a loss for the appropriate reaction. So I responded the way I normally would.

“I don’t know about a game you see me playing in,” I said. “‘cause when you’re watching me, I’m laying hat or bringing the wood. Not getting rolled over.”

"It's not the loss or the lumps and bumps I'm talking about, Junior," he said, failing to acknowledge the humor of my comment. "It was more of the direction I was heading as opposed to where I should be going."

"So are you trying to tell me you're going straight? No more girls, guns, gambling, or getting fucked up?"

"Say Junior, I'm not telling you that I'm going square 'cause I'm not. I'm going to be a player for life. I just...."

"Hold up, Screw! You almost had me going for a minute, fool," I said, laughing. "With all that, 'I saw this, I see that', and 'an ass whipping is the best thing for me' bullshit. Five minutes and twenty-three seconds ain't long enough for you to fool me, Twin. I knew...."

"Naw, Junior," he said, grabbing me by the wrist. "I wasn't trying to fool you. On the cool, that's exactly the thing I'm changing. I'm through wasting my time and energy trying to get over folks. I'm through with that foolishness."

"Whatever, Twin. You're just trying to drop the temperature on that "ice water conversation" you think you have."

"No, I'm not, Junior," he said, looking like a choir boy falsely accused of stealing. "This ain't a game. It's real. What are three of the worst things Big Momma says a person can do in life?"

"Um," I said, scratching my head pretending to take him serious. "Let's see. Murder, betrayal, and blasphemy."

"True, she's said all that, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about as far as fools are concerned?"

“Oh, she always says, ‘*see a fool, bump him on the head*,’” I answered while pointing at his.

“I did get my head bumped today, but that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“How about, ‘*the LORD takes care of babies and fools*’.” And again, I pointed at him.

“That applies too but that ain’t what I’m talking about either.”

“Well, I know she always call you a fool ‘cause ‘*you won’t sit down long enough to listen to the difference between liberty and hard labor*’.”

“And she’s been right about that too,” he said, “but none of that’s what haunted me today.”

“So Twin, what did she say that’s got you testifying scared today?”

“This ain’t scared talking. This is truth singing and ringing loud and clear.” He pointed a balled up hand at me. Unfolding three fingers one-by-one for each point, he said, “The worst things a person can do is, one, try to fool others, two, play the fool, and, three, fall in love with a fool.”

“She does say that all the time, but what’s that got to do with you?” Looking at my brother as if he were a mischievous grade-schooler, I continued, “the only fool you’re in love with is yourself.”

“I know you think your stand up is funny but you’re right.”

“Man! If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that ass whipping has got you going from Saul to Paul.”

“It wasn’t just the ass whipping. It was more of what I was forced to see.”

“So, then what did you see standing on your mountaintop, Dr. Moses Luther King?”

“You got plenty of jokes, but this is serious. I really did see myself caught up in all the foolishness that I’ve been refusing to acknowledge. It’s time I accept myself and my actions for what they really are.”

“So what are they?”

“The ways of a stone cold fool.”

“Hallelujah! Hallelujah! GOD is good,” I screamed and shouted pretending to be one of the church mothers when they catch the Holy Spirit. “Praise HIM! Momma and Big Momma will finally get to rejoice at the prodigal son coming home!” I began clapping and flapping my arms like a bird. “There is a GOD! Amen! Glory be the name!”

“Be easy Junior.” His stare stopped my shenanigan. “I’m as serious as AIDS about this. I really am going to start doing better than I have been.”

“I’m sorry Twin,” I said. “This is just hard to listen to coming from you. It’s not that I don’t agree with what you’re saying. For real, I hope you do get back on track. But man, I’d be a lying fool, if I said I thought you was for real. Every time you get in serious trouble or get scared, you start that ‘I’m going to do better shit.’ I love you like no other, Twin, but you just gon’ have to show me. On the cool, that’s how everybody is when they hear you pop gumming. What’s so different about this time? And if you do plan on doing right, then why did you lie to mama?”

“Look Junior, I ain’t pop gumming. I lied to mama ‘cause I knew she wouldn’t listen past the dice or the fight. I’ve told her so many lies that she barely believes me when I tell the truth. So I ain’t tripping off having to show her too. But for real, Junior, I really am seeing all my short falls for what they are. I walk out of this house everyday trying to fool the world, but I’m only fooling myself. You’d think we lived on section 8 or in the projects

the way I carry on. Mobbing and robbing with fools that really don't have the luxuries and blessings we, or maybe just me, take for granted. Stealing when the old man will buy me anything I ask for. Shooting dice with my allowance, pretending I hustled for the knot. Shit man, the only reason I need this pistol," he took the twenty-five from the small of his back and looked it over, "is 'cause I choose to walk through hell with gasoline underwear on. If I wasn't always trying to be down or prove how real I am, I wouldn't need the chrome," he said, handing the pistol to me.

"That's right," I said, placing it in the small of my back. "If you live by the steel, then you gon' feel the burning chill of the steel."

"I know, Junior. I must have pulled that pistol about a dozen times, only squeezing the trigger once for what it was intended for. Playing the fool and taking penitentiary chances. I don't want fed or dead consequences, law of the land or law of the LORD."

"I know," I said, grabbing his arm pulling him close to me. I put my arm around his shoulder. "We both know, you know right from wrong. The examples have been set before us. The choice is yours. You could follow Benji to the joint. You could follow Uncle Tom to the gangsters' graveyard. Or you could be a family man like Big Chief, Daddy, and Uncle Ben. The rap sheet you've started may make it hard for you to recover, but you, and I'm seriously stressing *you*, because you can, still, stack your resume with enough glitter to blind anyone looking for the garbage."

Before Twin became the problem child, he was the smart twin. He made the honor roll every year from kindergarten to the ninth grade. In the fourth grade, he was one of only five kids selected to participate in a talented and gifted program that sent them to a different school two days out of the week. Twin was also the junior superintendent of Sunday school

and the captain of the drill team at our church. Witnessing the senseless murder of his best friend, Royce, in the eighth grade was the biggest influence in his change.

"You know, Junior," he said, stepping out of the embrace. "I'm really tired of playing the fool. There used to be a time when teachers ignored me for trying to answer every question. Now, I act dumb when they call on me, knowing I know the right answer. I run with niggas that don't even know their daddies. They ain't got mommas lucky enough to be housewives. On the cool," he said, pointing at me, "we may not get everything we want, but we ain't in need of nothing. But if you looked at me," pointing to himself, he continued, "you'd swear Momma was working three jobs and Daddy was a rolling stone. Like, you're the only one with a chance to better yourself. Like, I'm stuck in the game trying to help Momma make ends meet. Junior, I've been hustling in the wrong game for all the wrong reasons. No need, jus' 'cause I wanted too. Bootay talks about quitting as soon as a better way comes but me," he paused, dropped his head, and then looked back up at me. "Man, I ain't nothing like Bootay, but the only one who needs convincing is me."

"I can tell you're finally listening to Momma and them, Twin, because I can see you hearing yourself. Instead of looking out the window, you're looking in the mirror."

"You're right, Junior," he said, punching me lightly on the shoulder. "I've been too busy ignoring my past, pissing on my potential. I don't know if you realize it or not, but after we took it back for Royce, I never put that pistol down. I started falling in love with all the hurtful shit I've been so quick to hug these last few years. All the shit I've been warned of. It's like you just said, the examples have always been in front of me. At first, I was scared but then it turned into a false sense of security. Big Mama says, 'the high road is a lonely road.' I've been looking for company at the bottom of the hill. And I really did fall in love

with the company. But what's so crazy is that it wasn't love I received. It's been more hate than anything else. A hate that has been eating at me slowly, trying to kill me softly and quietly. Junior, I've been such a fool. Running from the church house, skipping school, and smoking and drinking just to look cool. And now I'm halfway hooked on the shit. I've been doing too much dumb shit. And where has it got me? Six months in boot camp, a year of probation, and a late start in the tenth grade. But that wasn't enough. Today, I'm barely in the eleventh grade. I'm standing here," he said, pointing to the ground with both hands, "thankful for a broken nose and swollen jaw. I look at myself and these bruises and know it should have been worse. Crooked craps and pulling a pistol without using it. Junior, those are the ways of a straight up fool. I just don't want this shit no more. I don't want it no more. It's too much for me. It's too much for me, Junior. The foolishness is over. You hear me, Junior? It's over!"

"I hope so, Twin. I swear I do, but ..."

"It is, Junior! On the strength," he said, stepping back into my personal space.

"Tomorrow, I'll tell Derrick he don't have to worry about the come around 'cause I'm letting it ride out. I'll tell him after y'all get out of football practice, that way ..."

"Why do you want to wait 'til after football practice? Why not just tell him before first bell?"

"Because I won't be at school tomorrow. I got...."

"Now hold up Twin, I said, pushing him from me before he could finish his sentence.

"After everything you just said to me, you're going to turn around and tell me you're skippin' school tomorrow? Bra, what the fuck are you trying to pull?"

"I ain't trying to pull nothing, Junior." My response caught him off guard. The hurt was evident in his eyes and voice as he explained. "I'm not skipping school. I got detention. Principal Perry saw me bloodied up after the fight was done and over. He questioned me 'bout what happened, but I didn't tell him nothing. So, he gave me In-school suspension for the rest of the week. It's cool though. At least, I won't have to face all those staring eyes at the schoolhouse until Monday."

"I guess. But what makes you think that you'll be able to find this Derrick dude after football practice on a Friday?"

"Because he on the football team."

"Derrick? On the football team? The only Derrick on the football team is a third string running back named Derrick McKelphin."

"Okay then, that's the Derrick dude," he said, nodding his head and pointing to the imaginary "dude" standing to my right.

"You mean, Derrick McKelphin did this to you? He's the one who's got you looking like who did it and what for? Derrick McKelphin's got you running to alter call. Say, I'm back on confusion again, Twin. That slap ain't got heart enough to run up the middle, let alone the heart to bring it like" This time he cut me off.

"Junior, he may not have heart but his pride was definitely damaged. And that's what..."

"Hold up, Screw! Not him, he couldn't have done it."

"Well, he did."

"So, then why did he roll on you?" At that moment, I was shocked more by who the perpetrator actually was and forgot completely about what he had done. Never in a million

years would I have ever suspected Derrick McKelphin. He had proven himself to be too much of a punk. The prior football season, we lost the city championship game by four touchdowns and a field goal. When we were supposed to shake the other team's hands and tell them "good game," a fight broke out. We won battle. However, when the melee cleared and all of our players were corralled and accounted for, Derrick was the only one who couldn't be found. Come to find out, when the fight broke out, the coward ran straight into the locker room without so much as taking his helmet off his head. Junior tried to explain, but I cut him off.

"Because he was"

"He ain't cool with DeAndre?"

"I know. It's just that he was"

"He ain't from Summit Point, either."

"I don't know where the nigga stays. All I know is that he"

"He couldn't have been one of the mice following behind DeAndre on that rat pack shit."

"Junior! If you shut up, I'll tell you who he was! He don't stay in Summit Point and he ain't one of the ones who wanted to jump me and Bootay."

"Then, who the hell is he, Twin?"

"He was the dude that pissed on hisself, yesterday."

I just stood there looking at Twin. He just stood there looking at me. To this day, I don't know how long Momma had been standing in the garage door, but, before I could respond to what Twin had just revealed, she called us in.

“It’s 9:30, y’all!” She stood there smiling, looking at us as if something we had done made her the proudest mother in the world. “Come on in!”

“As the choir sings ‘Amazing grace’, the doors of the church are open. Come on in! You don’t have to rub that bump any longer. You don’t have to play the fool no mo’. You don’t have to fool yourself anotha’ day. The doors are open. Won’t you come?”

Why the Bride Carries Flowers

Love makes young males do the damndest things. Cupid can make them so stupid that they allow their women to cheat on them. Some tattoo their lovers' names on their chest, shoulders, and arms. A few even run in front of moving cars. Often, lust and infatuation push them to engage in sins much worse. Some boys spend their entire paycheck trying to win the girl. Some have been known to fight every possible competitor to prove their valor to a certain special lady. And then, there are those who wind up getting the girl pregnant and placing themselves in a cage with a soul mate that turns out to be an unworthy cellmate. Lawrence Sylvester destined himself to find out the hard way. Love at first glance is better suited for a night of romance, and only stands a ghost of a chance as the foundation of lasting marital circumstance.

The banquet hall of the Marriott looked like a church sanctuary. Mrs. Sylvester didn't like the idea of her oldest son being married anywhere other than Gethsemane Missionary Baptist Chapel, so ten rows and two columns of pews were brought to replace the individual chairs. The mother of the church, Momma Kelley, wasn't allowed to play for the ceremony because Maggie and her mother, Jackie, had to have some say in the wedding plans. Instead of an organ or piano, one of Maggie's uncles, the one who called himself Fingers, dj'ed the wedding. It wasn't a conventional wedding so Mr. Sylvester didn't concern himself with paying for tradition.

The flower girl strolled up the aisle as the deejay played Bessie Smith's "Go to Sleep Little Baby." Everyone commented on how cute the four-year-old looked in her yellow pastel dress. She so enjoyed the attention and the freedom of throwing flower petals on the floor. She didn't notice that her hair bow fell, marking the exact spot where the bride and

groom would stand and commit themselves to each other, before their parents and the rest of the world. Everyone noticed the fallen bow, except for Reverend Louis Lee Roy, but it fell too far out in the open for any of the wedding congregation to retrieve it. The groom, bridesmaids, and groomsmen all noticed the yellow bow on the floor but stepped over it, pretending not to see it. They assumed that someone coming up behind them would pick it up, but it never happened.

When the wedding party was in place, Maggie's uncle put the Stevie Wonder record on his left turntable and "Ribbon in the Sky" bellowed through the banquet hall speakers. Maggie Ary and her soon to be father-in-law, councilman Adolphus Ray Sylvester, made their way up the aisle. Maggie looked at everyone she could without turning her head. She couldn't believe it had worked. The councilman looked so proud and dignified that he made those who didn't know better think Maggie was his real daughter. He couldn't deny that she was indeed a beautiful looking girl. He wondered whether or not she was capable of being a worthy addition to his family.

The Reverend Roy admired the young bride's beauty, too. He couldn't believe she was getting married so young. As far as his knowledge and experience had schooled him, he didn't see a girl as attractive as Maggie capable of settling down so early without some ulterior motive. He didn't waste any time trying to figure it out though. He was more concerned with getting through the ceremony for the reception. The Reverend was a 62-year-old widower who enjoyed hugging and kissing on the women of his congregation, or any other available female for that matter. The prospects in the wedding congregation were extremely attractive and more than his inebriated eyes could handle. As he looked over the bridesmaids and the women in the audience, he got overly anxious. The record was still

playing and Maggie and the councilman were a step and half away from coming to a complete stop when the reverend spoke.

Who gives this woman to be married to this man?

Lawrence thought about the irony of the question. Maggie's father was nowhere in attendance and refused to contribute to the wedding. It was only fitting for his father to give her away. After all, councilman Sylvester was responsible for the wedding's orchestration. Lawrence thought about the morning when his father first called him.

"Hello," Lawrence answered.

"Hey, Lawrence. This is your father."

He didn't expect his father to call so soon. He had only told his mother about Maggie's pregnancy that morning.

"Well, I guess you've gone and done it, huh?"

"Done what?"

"I let's cut straight to it, buddy. Your mother gave me the scoop right before lunch. So how far along is she?"

"Three weeks."

"Are you positive?"

"That's what the doctor said three days ago."

"So what do you plan on doing about it?"

"I don't really know."

"What do you mean you don't know? Will she get an abortion or does she want to keep it?"

"She wants to keep it."

“How do you know for sure?”

Lawrence wanted to tell him how much Maggie and her family spoke of having kids and what it meant to them. Jackie had Maggie when she was fifteen. Jackie was born when her mother was fourteen. Maggie’s aunt had her first child at the age of sixteen, and her father’s side of the family was no different. Her father was sixteen when Maggie was born, and his four siblings were all parents before the age of seventeen. Lawrence wanted to tell his father how often Mrs. Ary talked about him being the father of her first grandchild, but Lawrence knew his father wouldn’t understand. He didn’t either at first, but they worked on him. He had fun just entertaining the notion. After all, he did fall in love with Maggie from the moment he saw her. If he could be her husband, then she would have to mother his children. Because of Councilman Sylvester’s status, everyone thought of Lawrence as coming from a “good” family. Too often Lawrence had been warned he would be targeted because he was the son of Adolphus Ray Sylvester. It didn’t help that the mayor pro tem never really liked Maggie or Jackie. Councilman Sylvester accused them of trying to “marry up” the first time they visited his house. So, Lawrence answered with the best response he could come up with.

“She doesn’t believe in abortion.”

“Of course not,” he laughed, “not when it’s the son of Adolphus Ray Sylvester. Damn it, Lawrence! I warned you about mixing cheap bourbon with rich blood. Thanks to you, she’s landed one of the biggest fish in the pond. I bet her mother is proud as a dropout with a GED. I can’t believe you’ve done this to me.”

“To you?”

“Yes, to me? Who do you think is going to have to fix all this? Damn, son. Why did you have to go and get the girl knocked up now? You really picked a fine time to forget to use a condom.”

The councilman’s selfishness made his son relish the fact that he and Maggie never used condoms. He knew this was foolish but hearing his father bellyache made him overlook the folly.

“Well, I guess I’ll be the first to tell you congratulations,” the councilman said.

“Congratulations? You mean you’re not mad that I’m having a baby?”

“Having a baby?” Councilman Sylvester laughed into the phone louder than before. “I’m not talking about the baby. I’m talking about your wedding engagement.”

“But I haven’t proposed.”

“Not yet, but you will. As a matter of fact, you won’t really have to. I’ll call Jackie after dinner tonight and work out the details. I’m sure she’ll have no objections. I’ll call you back in the morning to brief you on what we come up with. In the meantime, you just do your homework or whatever it is I’m paying for you to do up at that college. I guess this will be a freshman year you never forget,” the councilman said, laughing.

“Hold up, Daddy. I don’t want to get married. I’m not ready for all that!”

“Oh, really,” he laughed. “Now’s a brilliant time to admit your lack of maturity. But that’s all too late now. I told you, schoolboy. If you screw around with those schoolgirls during the wrong period, you’ll get caught red-handed.”

“This isn’t fair. I don’t want to be married yet. And you can’t force me to.”

"Fair," he said. "You're one to talk about fair. I tell you what's not fair. Out of all the times you could knock a girl up, you do it over your Christmas Break. If my math's correct, that's when the two of you decided to play house, right?"

"Yeah."

"Why couldn't you just wait until the summer? I can see the headlines now. Lawrence, I've worked too hard for too long to have you and your little prick ruin this for me."

"Daddy, I wasn't trying to mess up your"

"Oh, no you haven't messed up anything yet. As a matter of fact, that's why you have to marry this girl."

"But I haven't finished college. I haven't..."

"Look, son. Don't worry about all that. I said I'd take care of everything. You'll come home for spring break and get married. Reverend Roy can perform the ceremony. It'll be a small wedding with only immediate family and close friends invited."

"It sounds like you already got it worked out."

"Don't interrupt me while I'm thinking out loud, boy. Yeah, you'll get married over your spring break. I'll even spring for a honeymoon, if you want one. Afterwards, you can go back to Grambling, and she'll finish up at LBJ. Let's see, she's three weeks now. That means the baby will be born by late September or early October. Every thing'll be over by then. Yeah, that way we can satisfy ourselves with putting forth our best effort. And if the marriage turns out to be more than you can handle, then at least you know we tried to do the right thing. Come to think of it, I wouldn't mind having a grandchild right now."

Lawrence hadn't given the situation this much thought. Any time he slept with Maggie, he only thought about the way her beautiful, peanut-butter-colored breasts swayed in unison to the rhythm of their movements. He was obsessed with the feel of her soft skin against his. His sole ambition was getting her to sing that moan of pleasure that only released itself when her back was arched and her desire was satisfied. He had only known Maggie was pregnant for a few days and was too terrified to think past the next day, let alone nine months. But to set her up like his father was proposing seemed too conniving. Lawrence thought it was cruel. He loved Maggie, or so he thought. He wanted her to be his wife but not like this, not under these circumstances and conditions. He was confused but still loyal to his lady.

It's funny how the pressures of society can bend a man's will. Nobody ever thinks that their dreams won't come true until the brick wall of reality roadblocks their path. Trying to break it down is fatal and the decision to take a detour or turn around is sometimes just as tragic. Only in the most extreme instances is marriage perceived as a barricade, but for Lawrence the decision was whether to see it as a gain or a wall of shame.

"I don't know, Daddy. This doesn't sound right to me. I can't do that to Maggie."

"To Maggie? Lawrence, stop thinking with your small head. She's doing more to you than you know. You think this is all an accident. I don't know how young Jackie is, but I'll bet she had Maggie when she was just a baby herself. I'm not the best judge of character, but observing what I've seen of her, I'm not sure I buy the explanation of why they're living in Austin Rouge now. It's not your fault, son. You've lived a sheltered life, so I can't honestly expect you to understand the gravity of this predicament. Women attempt to trap men with babies every day."

Lawrence was even more confused. He knew that there was some truth in his father's words, but he couldn't repress his feelings for Maggie. The deck was stacked against her. He had been with her family on several occasions and was always shocked by their ideas and beliefs. He often heard Mrs. Ary tell Maggie that men were simply pawns waiting to be instructed on when and where they were supposed to move, and that they were dumb and couldn't see past an erection. When he compared his mother to Jackie, it was obvious why one was married and the other wasn't. Maggie's mother hated cleaning house and cooking meals. Mrs. Sylvester, on the other hand, enjoyed her nights out on the town, but she preferred private meals at home, her family eating what she prepared for them. Lawrence was scared that Maggie would turn out like her mother, but he harbored the hope that he could help her to become more like his mother.

"Daddy, I can't agree with this. It's just doesn't feel right to me," he said.

"Damn how it feels, son. That's why we're in this situation now. I'm not about to let you drag this family through the mud because you're whipped. No, you're going to follow the program or else."

"Or else what?" Lawrence challenged.

"Or else I'll let you handle this on your own. I mean completely on your own."

"Fine. I can do that. I'll get a job, finish college, and take care of my own family."

"Lawrence, don't tempt me. You're nothing more than an eighteen-year-old, snotty-nosed spoiled brat. You've never worked a hard day's labor in your life. You're too used to me giving you everything. Do you really think *you* could work your way through college, provide yourself with food, shelter, transportation, and support a child without any help from me? Get real."

Lawrence wanted to hang up the phone, but instead he looked over at the mini-fridge next to his desk. It was full of food and beverages he had purchased the day before with the money his father sent him for his weekly allowance.

"You don't have anything I haven't given you. If you think you're cutting me off, you're not. You'll be pissing on your own shoes. Look Lawrence, you are a Sylvester, but we both know *you* can't make anything from nothing. Remember the time you tried selling model airplanes for your school fundraiser? Who bought one hundred airplane abstracts covered in glue? What about the time you ran away and lived in the pool house for a week? Or how about that time you burned up your mother's stove trying to fix her breakfast in bed? Wasn't that last Mother's Day?"

Lawrence glanced at the calendar hanging next to his closet. He looked for the second Sunday of May, but all he saw was the first week of February.

"Come on Lawrence, you and I both know you're better off being groomed and pruned rather than trying to plant your own seeds and growing them in a field other than the one I've already provided for you. You don't have to hoe such a hard row, son. Besides, that's what fathers are for. This really is for the best. So what's it going to be, junior, my way or the highway?"

Lawrence was cornered and couldn't fight back. Despite the freedom he thought he had from being away at college, he realized he was still dependent. He didn't want to give up his college life. Up until the news of Maggie's pregnancy, he had been having a ball, living worry free. He had been meeting all kinds of new people, girls included. He always thought he loved Maggie but was highly receptive to the college girls he met. Being married

with a child would be the end of a life that had just started. He knew he couldn't give up college. He realized, or assumed, his father was right, as he had always been.

"I think you're right, Daddy. I'm not ready for all that responsibility. Plus, it's like you said. My college years will be the best of my life. I don't really want to be married right now, but if you think so, I guess I'll get married. Do you really think this is what I should do?"

"I do," answered the councilman. The question came so fast; he forgot that he intended to pick up the yellow bow. Instead, he kissed Maggie on the cheek, took two steps back, winked at the groom, then turned right to take his seat next to his wife on the first row.

Was he winking at me, Reverend Roy thought to himself. The reverend quickly convinced himself that he wasn't the intended audience. He cleared his throat, and then proceeded with the ceremony.

Dearly beloved: We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony. It signifies to us the mystery of the union between husband and wife in heart, body, and mind. It is intended, when it is God's will, for the procreation of children. Therefore marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted.

Lawrence looked at Chris, Maury, Darius, Junior, and Twin, one-by-one. All of the groomsmen, except for Maury, Maggie's twin brother, responded to his glance with a subtle nod. What Lawrence couldn't see was that his father's eyes were one person behind his, making sure the groomsmen were checked and compliant to *his* intentions. One-by-one, as they noticed the councilman's stern look, they all stood up a little taller, straightening up as if to show that they were on their best behaviors.

Into this holy union Lawrence Sylvester and Maggie Ary now come to be joined. If any of you can show just cause why they should not be married, speak now; or else forever hold your peace.

"Say, man," said Chris, the shortest of the groomsmen. "This isn't right at all, and everyone here knows it." Everyone in the motel room nodded. "When Reverend Roy asks if anyone objects to the marriage, I'll get out of line and tap him on the shoulder. I'll say Reverend Roy, 'I do,' because I know you don't want to be married, Lawrence."

"I'll say something too," added Junior.

"Yeah man, we ought to all just come out of line and raise our hands," said Darius, "or just lift you off your feet and run out of there with you on our shoulders."

"I just can't believe you're marrying her," said Twin. "I told you what kind of girl she was."

"Yeah, tender heart, you just had to make her your girlfriend. You're probably the first boyfriend she ever had," said Darius.

Lawrence never told them how they came to be girlfriend and boyfriend. They never knew about his first performance as a minuteman.

"Shut up, Darius," said Junior. "If he didn't put the handcuffs on her first, everyone at this bachelor party knows you had a shiny set ready for her wrists." He reached into the igloo and pulled out a Miller Lite. "You might have got it without giving her the title, but you were in love licking the pearl tongue too."

"Look, Lawrence," said Twin, "We all know it's not really up to you."

"Election year or not," said Chris, "he doesn't have the right to dictate your life. You shouldn't have to marry Maggie for the sake of a mayor's race. We should just go down to

the television station and tell them the real reason you're getting married. I say if he's wrecking your life then we should sabotage his campaign."

"That wouldn't do any good, no how. Maggie would still have the baby. Like Johnny Taylor says, 'It's cheaper to keep her.' Jackie would have her file for child support and Lawrence would be in worse shape. The baby would be an Ary and the custody arrangements could get ugly," said Twin

"At least he wouldn't have to marry the broad," said Chris.

"Hold up Chris," Lawrence said. "As far as I can recall, you're the last person to talk bad about Maggie."

"Calm down, Lawrence," said Twin. "Nobody's faulting Maggie for what she is. It's just hard for us to handle. I mean, she's walking around town as happy as Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, like she's Princess Di about to bag Charles."

"Really," said Junior. "It doesn't even bother her that she's been with most of the groomsmen."

"I know, huh," Lawrence said. "Daddy says it's her bloodline."

"Whatever it is, it just ain't right," said Junior.

"For real," said Twin. "From the jump, I told all of y'all about her. But I'm just concerned with how well you'll handle this. After tomorrow, will you and I still be able to be cool? Shit, man, you're like my brother. I don't give a damn about her. I mean, you don't have to worry about me trying to creep through your backdoor 'cause I'd rather have your friendship. Are we still going to be cool, Lawrence?"

"I don't really know," Lawrence said. He wanted to tell them that it wasn't as bad as it appeared, but his father told him to keep everything a secret. If they knew the plan, they

probably wouldn't come down as hard on him as they were. The truth wasn't anything he was proud of anyway. If he decided to stay married, then he would. Besides, he thought the marriage could be significant enough to change Maggie's life. Becoming a Sylvester might break the cycle her family had perpetuated

"Lawrence, you already know about *our* past," Chris said. "I'm not saying I want to marry her, but she is special to me too."

"Look, Lawrence, I won't lie to you," said Darius. "I know that most people don't think too highly of Maggie, but I'd put her on the same pedestal, without anyone forcing me to do it. To tell you the truth, I'm jealous of you. I begged her to be my girlfriend all the time. So, when she told you 'yes,' I was pissed off because I knew what *we* had was over."

"I know I don't know Maggie like the rest of you do. But if it's all the same," said Junior, "she *is* a beautiful girl."

"Okay fellows, y'all remind me of the first time y'all saw her. Let's not fall in love with her again," said Twin. "She is marrying Lawrence tomorrow. This isn't what a groom wants to hear from his groomsmen."

"You're right," Lawrence said. "But it's not your fault. When Reverend Roy asks if we should be married, I want all of you to raise your hands and then walk out of there. I'll be right behind you guys."

"Yeah," all of them said together, raising their beer bottles in toast.

"And if y'all don't move, I'll deal on my own. First I tell Reverend Roy thanks but no thanks. Then I'll walk over to my Daddy, tell him can't, no, he won't run me or mine. And then I'll walk out and meet y'all at Popeye's chicken."

I require and charge you both here in the presence of God, that if either of you know any reason why you may not be united in accordance with God's Word, you do now confess it.

Lawrence looked over his shoulder at his father. The councilman looked back at him and smiled. People in the congregation noticed the exchange but mistook it for one in which a son needed some encouragement. Lawrence looked at the reverend and swallowed. He wanted to confess it all, but he couldn't. Better yet, he knew he wouldn't. When he looked at the groomsmen, they were standing like soldiers at attention. They ignored him, pretending to be occupied with something else.

Normally, a wedding is more than just a promise that a man and woman make to each other. A wedding is also a commitment made to friends, relatives, and society. The two most important parts of a wedding are the vows and the pronouncement of marriage. While the question of intent is never mandatory, it is rarely omitted. It answers the question: "What promise will the two of you make to your relatives and community?" In the case of Lawrence and Maggie, it was the cornerstone of their marriage.

Lawrence Sylvester, will you have this woman to be your wife; to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and health; and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?

"What a minute!" As he reached for the phone, he fumbled. "I can't hear you." He paused the video game he was playing and then spoke into the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hey, Lawrence." Maggie's sweet, high-pitched voice caught him off guard. He threw the controller to the side of his bed. Sitting up in the middle of his bed in order to give her his full, undivided attention, he tried not to let his anxiety scream through the phone.

"Oh, hey Maggie."

"Lawrence," she whined seductively, "How did you know it was me?" The question was artificial. She knew Lawrence knew her voice when he heard it, and he knew she knew. Frustrated by her manipulative tactic, he answered anyway.

"I don't know. I just knew. What's up?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking about you. What are you doing?"

"Nothing. What are you doing?"

"I already told you," she laughed. "Lawrence, you're so silly."

"I guess I'm just a comedian," he said, trying to be funny on purpose this time. She laughed but it was forced, so he knew the attempt failed. Scared of the silence that might follow, Lawrence resorted to what he knew would work. "You were looking good at school today, Maggie."

"Then how come you didn't tell me earlier?"

"Because I, well I, I don't know." His mind and lips were betraying him like they always did when he spoke to her. He wanted to say that he didn't tell her because he had told her every day since they first met.

"Lawrence," she whined again. This time her voice wasn't so seductive. It was more like one heard from a teenage girl asking her father for a prom dress or new car. "What do you mean you don't know? I couldn't have been looking too good. I wasn't looking good enough for you to say so."

"But you did look good today. You look good every day," Lawrence said.

"I like you Lawrence," she giggled, realizing she had him cornered. "I *really* like you."

"You do? I mean, yeah. You do."

"Aren't you going to ask me why?"

"Okay. Why?"

"Because you're not like the others. You're the only one who brings me gifts and says nice things to me. Most guys see me and want to have sex, but you're different. You were willing to wait. You never pressured me like everyone else has. Even though you couldn't handle it, it was special for me. Maybe I can make it up to you.

Lawrence couldn't believe what he was hearing. Was she confusing him with one of her other suitors? Was she just setting him up for the take, like time and time before? Even if she was, he didn't care. Lawrence loved her and she, sooner than he ever thought, was going to be his wife. "Yeah, I'd really like that," he said.

"Good, because I want you to be my boyfriend." From his silence, she could tell she had him off guard. She pretended to sound as if she was on the verge of crying.

"Lawrence, I'm tired of my reputation. I know what people say about me. And I know you do too, but you still drop everything to make me feel special."

His heartstrings were being strummed. He wanted to take her pain away.

"That's because you deserve to feel special, Maggie."

"See," she said, sniffing, pretending to get herself together. "That's exactly what I'm talking about, Lawrence. I believe you when you say you love me. I know this is backwards. And I know people will call you crazy if you say you will. But, I want to be saved. Lawrence will you rescue me? Will you be my boyfriend?"

"I will," he answered.

Will all of you witnessing these promises do all in your power to uphold these two persons in their marriage?

"We will," the congregation said in unison. The future mayor looked over to his left at his daughter-in-law's mother. They locked eyes and traded smiles. The first was relieved that the wedding was going so well and the media hadn't discovered his son's black eye. The second was glad that her daughter was marrying up. Four of the groomsmen moved in protest, but the movement was no more exaggerated than a shift in their stances. It was one of the best displays of silent protest that ever went unnoticed.

Lawrence, take Muriel by her right hand.

Reverend Roy noticed that the groom was starting to perspire. Was he hot too, he thought to himself. He could feel his own sweat gathering around his collar and his shirt sticking to the small of his back. Reverend Roy took his handkerchief from his pants pocket and wiped the beads from his forehead.

In the Name of God, Do you Lawrence Sylvester take Maggie Ary to be your wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?

When Lawrence first saw Maggie, it was love at first sight. At least, he loved what he first saw. Her peanut butter complexion, long wavy black hair, high cheekbones, and button nose replaced every cover girl image he ever dreamt of. For a high school girl, Maggie was a brick house. Her 38-24-46 frame put the other girls at Lyndon B. Johnson High to shame and made all the boys have shameful thoughts. It didn't help that she was bowlegged. Chris, Darius, the Twins, and Lawrence were on their way to lunch when they spotted the young, southern-fried Foxy Brown.

"Hot Damn," yelled Darius.

“Fwwe,” said Junior. Of Lawrence’s two friends, the twins, Junior was the first-born. Already having a girlfriend, he didn’t see anything wrong with commenting on the menu.

Maggie heard Darius’s comment and looked to see who was acknowledging her. She gave an innocent looking smile to her five admirers.

“Okay, Miss Pretty. Some of these boys can’t handle a smile as beautiful as yours. So you be careful. You don’t want to give ‘em reason to say they were provoked,” said Twin, the second Siamese.

“Twin, you’re so silly,” Maggie said. She bowed her head pretending to blush. She was about to stand and chat with the boys until the jealous and always cock-blocking Stephanie Mitchell grabbed her by the wrist and pulled at her so that she couldn’t stop. Lawrence hated seeing her leave but loved the manner in which she walked away. Her hips hypnotized him as they twisted with the precision of a pendulum, causing her rear-end to effortlessly sway from side to side like the swinging arm of a chime clock.

“See y’all later,” she said, looking over her shoulder to see how effective her gender blessing was. Lawrence and Chris were caught with their mouths open. Darius licked his lips. Junior shook his head, and Twin locked eyes with her and simply pointed at what had them all mesmerized. She smiled again, but this time it wasn’t so innocent.

“Twin, who is that?” asked Chris.

“Maggie. Maggie Ary. She just transferred from Sibley.”

“Sibley? Where’s that?” Darius asked.

“Way out in West Texiana. Somewhere between Midland and Lake Charles,” replied Twin.

“What grade is she in?” asked Junior.

"She's a sophomore. She played on the varsity basketball team at her old school. She's going to wait until next year to try out for the team here, but she's going out for the track team in the spring. Her daddy left them about a month ago, so her momma packed up, moved them to Austin Rouge. She's got a twin brother too. I think she said his name was Marlon, Marvin, or something like that. They live next door to Barry Kay."

"Man, how long has she been at LBJ?" Lawrence asked.

"She checked in yesterday."

"Damn Twin, how do you know all this already?" Chris asked.

"Come on, you slap. Didn't you hear him say they lived next door to B.K? Knowing those two cock hounds, they've probably challenged each other to see who can knock her down first," Junior said in defense of his brother.

"Actually, I got all this from the horse's mouth. I was in the office waiting to see Principal Perry when she and her brother checked in. Her mother is fine, too."

"So does she have a boy friend?" Lawrence asked.

"Not yet," Twin replied. "I might play the role for a week or so 'cause she's definitely on my hit list. You know what I'm saying. I gotta know if that big booty, bowlegged broad can go. She walks like she's sitting on a gold mine, but it might not be worth more than a brand new dime."

"Dime or not, I think I love her," Lawrence said.

"Back, back Lawrence," said Twin. "That broad is definitely too boy-crazy. She's a small-town, country girl. There ain't nothing to do in Sibley but watch tumbleweeds roll or park on the levee. She's *not* a good girl. You saw for yourself how eager she was to stop and talk. You can tell by that walk. She knew we were looking."

"I don't care how she walks or talks," Lawrence said. "That's gon' be my wife!"

"Whatever," said Junior. "You know I'm not too quick to side with Twin when it comes to ideas and opinions concerning the opposite sex, but he may be right on this one."

"Yeah, Lawrence," Darius chimed in. "A girl like that could never be your wife. Especially, since I'm gonna make her wanna marry me."

"A girl like that isn't worth the trouble. When they look that good, you'll have to fight every time you take her somewhere," said Chris. "I'll say this, though. I wouldn't mind letting her take my virginity."

"Now that sounds like a smart plan," said Twin. "Besides, she doesn't look like the type that's raised up to be anybody's wife, or girlfriend, for that matter. I told you I saw her momma. She looks hella young, more like an older sister."

"I don't want the momma no way," said Lawrence. "I want Maggie."

"Boy, you're crazy. You can't turn a hooker into housewife. And listen to the game I'm giving you. She's too sexy to be the soul mate of a sucker like you. You might want to cut her, but you don't seriously want to be her husband."

"I do," Lawrence answered, releasing her hand. Reverend Roy nodded at him, then proceeded to instruct the bride.

Maggie, take Lawrence by his right hand. In the Name of God, Do you Maggie Ary take Lawrence Sylvester to be your husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?

Maggie had to keep herself from answering before the Reverend could finish asking the question. Her mother was right. And to top it off, she was going to Jamaica for her honeymoon. She had never left Texiana before. She thought about Andrea Campbell and how envious she would be. It could have just as easily been Andrea standing in her place.

“Andrea Campbell told me that, yesterday, you asked her to the junior prom,” Maggie said, standing naked in front of the mirror that hung on the outside of her bedroom closet door. “How come you didn’t ask me?” Sylvester, also in the nude, sat on the edge of her bed in awe of her beautiful body. Her legs were thick but well defined. Her breasts were round and plump like ripe cantaloupes. “Look at me when I talking to you, Lawrence. See,” she pouted, “that’s what I’m talking about. You say you want to be my boyfriend, but you’re just like the rest of them. You don’t care how I feel. You don’t care about what I have to say. You just want me,” she said, teasing him, “for my body.” With her lips puckered and eyes half closed, she gently squeezed both of her breasts, with her thumbs and index fingers fondling her nipples. Slowly, she slid them past her waist. With the middle finger of her right hand, she stroked her vulva. “Lawrence,” she whined, “how can I trust you if you’re so easily distracted by my body. When I get old and gray, you won’t want me any more. Then what will I do?”

Her enticing lips called his manhood into full attention. He had heard so many stories about how good it was. About how slippery and wet it got when Maggie knew her victims had surrendered to her sexual prowess. And about how well she could massage a man by flexing her pelvic muscles. Lawrence knew she was dangerous, but he didn’t care because his infatuation had him loving her. Forcing himself to look away from his greatest temptation, he looked directly in her eyes.

“You can trust me, Maggie. I’ll always want you. You know that. I’m not like the other guys. You know that too, Maggie. Don’t you? I won’t go to the junior prom with Andrea if you don’t want me to. I only asked her because I didn’t think you’d go with me. Is that why you don’t want me to go with her? Do you want to go with me, Maggie?”

"That's more like it. You said you want me to be your wife, so how do you expect me to feel if you're running wild and going to dances with girls like Andrea Campbell."

"So you're going to the dance with me? Are you Maggie? Are you going to the dance with me?"

"I'm sorry, baby, but Reginald Green already asked me. And he's already bought my dress and the corsage to go with it. I want to go with you, but I can't just cancel on him out of the blue. It wouldn't be right now, would it?"

"No, I guess not."

"But I'll tell you what. Why don't you trade places with me and kiss me on my lips. You know how good your kisses make me feel. Lawrence, I know you want to make me feel good," she said, observing his stiffness. "Don't you?"

"Yes," he said, like a timid little schoolboy.

"Well then, trade places with me and make me feel like your future wife." So they traded places with him assuming everything would follow the usual routine. Every day after school for the past two months, Maggie invited Lawrence to her house. They would both get naked and she teased him until she grew tired of the charade. The game always ended with her lying on her bed while he went down on her. He had gotten so good he was able to make her reach an orgasm every time. Once she came, he started reaching for his underwear. However, she surprised him this time. She grabbed Lawrence by his ears then pulled him on top of her. He didn't believe what was happening. His breathing grew heavy and his heart began racing so fast that he thought it would explode. Lawrence became so anxious that he came before he got all the way in.

"That's it," Maggie said, stressing both words. "Get up and go home right now!"

"I'm sorry, Maggie. I, I don't know what happened."

"I know what just happened. Nothing. After all this time, I thought you were ready to be my man, but you're not. I might not ever give you this chance again."

"You don't really mean that do you, Maggie?"

"I do," she answered, smiling. She let Lawrence's hand go. Reverend Roy nodded at her, then motioned for the maid of honor and the best man to bring the rings.

Bless, O Lord, this ring, to be a sign of the vows by which this man and this woman have bound themselves to each other; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In earlier times, some people thought there was a vein in the left hand's third finger that ran straight to the heart. Placing a wedding ring on that finger signified the ultimate union of genuine love and dedication between a man and woman. However, Lawrence was ignorant to all of this and placed Maggie's ring on her pinky finger. No one, including the reverend, but Maggie noticed the error.

For centuries, flowers represented all kinds of sentiments and values. Roses were for love, lilies for virtue, and so on. Greek brides carried ivy as a symbol of eternal love. Orange blossoms, perhaps the world's most renowned wedding flower, were chosen by the Spanish to signify happiness and fulfillment because the orange tree flowers and bears fruit at the same time. Initially, Maggie's yellow and green bouquet was intended to match the color scheme of her wedding. She and Jackie agreed the arrangement would bring beauty and elegance to her special day. However, it came in handy, serving a better purpose. Her bouquet was the perfect sized shield to conceal the movement of her hands as she slid the ring off of her pinky and placed it on the correct finger.

Now that Maggie and Lawrence have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands and the giving and receiving of a ring.

in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, I now pronounce them as husband and wife.

Maggie kissed her husband. The councilman sighed in relief. Mrs. Ary smiled at a job well done, and Lawrence fought back his tears.

Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder.

As the wedding party filed out of the banquet hall, Reverend Roy noticed the yellow bow on the floor for the first time. He thought about stepping over it but decided that it wouldn't be right to just leave it there, so he picked it up. He took a second to look it over then placed it in the left pocket of his jacket. He smiled because he noticed that no one was paying him any attention. He reached in his jacket's left inside pocket. He pulled his silver whiskey flask from it, unscrewed the top with Bible in hand, took a swig, screwed the cap back on and then proceeded to the dining hall for the reception festivities.

VITA

Roy Lee Lewis, Jr. was born in Natchez, Mississippi on March 25, 1975, and grew up in Houston, Texas. He attended elementary schools in the Galena Park Independent School District and graduated from North Shore High School in May of 1993. The following August he entered Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee and in May, 1997 received the degree of Bachelor of Science in Business Administration. The same month he began working as an accountant for Pennzoil Company in Houston, Texas. He entered Austin Peay State University in 1999 to obtain a Master's degree in Creative Writing.