

I

*if I be a master,
where is my fear*

- Malachi 1:6

We use to watch the big cars roll west on 47th Street, Lord's sun shinin off black paint-jobs, brighter than it shined against skin. We'd follow um for blocks – Southpark down to where the strip met Indiana Avenue at least. But they didn't never stop, not for us, not even for the red lights. Just rolled on through, afraid we'd jump on the fenders and take the joy-ride west, I suppose. Didn't want no ride though, least I didn't. Alls I wanted was for the rich men hidin behind them car windows to show they faces, to nod. Gimme my respect – that was all I wanted.

The ol souls walkin the strip, they was the ones who told us why the big cars never stopped. Said them limousines had somewhere to be, business to tend, folk to bury. So I'd ask the darkest, drunkest of all – ask if we knew them cars wasn't never gonna stop, how come we kept followin west on the strip?

Ol 47th Street Black'd laugh, like I was a stupid young un whose soul hadn't been lost long enough. When his chuckles was done, his voice'd creek from under his straw hat, like Grandma Rose's Devil'd possessed him, talkin bout, “if this's all the Lord's gave us to do with life, what's wrong in followin big cars, boy? We know ain't none of um gonna stop, we just hope to catch up one day.”

Then I'd laugh, cause that ol soul was the stupid one. Me, I didn't hope for no ride, just for that rich man to gimme my respect.

* * *

Mookie and me met way back, around `57. I remember comin out to the street—we lived in what they called West Kenwood back then, on 45th Street—and seein a little colored boy hittin balls up against folks' houses. I think he'd cracked one of Grandma's windows and I'd gone to check on things, to stop "all that heathen poundin," like how the ol lady called it. Minute I set eyes on Mookie out on the block though, I couldn't do nothin but watch them baseballs getting crushed. Cat swung with a lead pipe, all by himself in the middle of our street. Coulda stopped him if I'd wanted—Mookie wasn't nothin but a bit bigger than me back then—but that sweet swing and the float it brung had me locked in. Wasn't how the balls beat up the frame sidings or knocked over lawn decorations or shook up the fences. Mookie just made them fly so high – fifty, one-hundred feet in the air and on down 45th Street. He was only a boy, eight or nine years-ol himself, just a boy givin no thought to how far his balls popped or what they tore up, not studdin a thing but his swing.

"What you doin?" Took five minutes to get that outta my mouth.

"What?"

"Said what you doin? My grandma told me to look on the street and find out what the racket is."

"Ain't no racket. Playin ball."

"By yourself?"

"Naw."

"Who you playin with then? Don't see nobody else out here. Mus be playin by yourself, and you just don't wanna say it."

"Playin with the Lord."

“Huh?”

“Ain't nobody else out here to catch or pitch to me, so I'm playin with the Lord.”

Woulda got his tail whupped black to green if Grandma'd heard that kinda trash comin off his lips – so I knew from right from the jump, the boy didn't have no good home trainin. He tossed his second to last ball above his head and slammed it to 45th Place.

“Jesus bringin them balls back for you to keep playin?”

“Don't know. He ain't yet.” Mookie got to throwin his last ball in the air and lettin it bounce gainst the street. “You wanna pitch to me?”

Mookie rolled the last ball out where he wanted me to stand, and I followed into the street. After he'd whacked it away, I ran the neighborhood, collectin balls he'd already knocked about. We was best boys from then on.

Mookie first became the man in high school. Between 39th and 47th Streets at least, he was the man. Playin football—gave up swingin at balls for throwin um long and far—was what done it for him, tossin touchdown passes for Wendell Phillips High School, winnin games and standin as they hero and all. A dark-skinned, wavy-headed far—was what done it for him, tossin touchdown passes for Wendell Phillips High School, winnin games and standin as they hero and all. A dark-skinned, wavy-headed star, that was what Mookie those last two years of school. That was when the young gals really started throwin themselves at him, when he was tossin them touchdown passes. Hell, if anybody shoulda believed in a pot of gold promised a colored boy, then it was

Mookie; specially after seein his snapshot on the *Defender* sports page them times. I didn't play no football, framed too tiny. Wasn't nothin I coulda done out on the field that size. No hidin in Mookie's shadow out there – nigga was too busy gettin worshipped. So I sat in the stands, cheerin for him just like another one of them silly gals.

But that was over, Mookie bein a football star and all, by the end of junior year. Colleges didn't want Mookie as no quarterback, wasn't ready for a colored to be winnin games. Wanted him to be takin handoffs, tacklin, gettin tackled to the ground where he belonged. Proud young cat like Mookie didn't wanna hear that shit, so when he came to understand didn't nobody outside the Forties blocks want him for no touchdown-throwin hero, he stopped goin to school all together. Took to runnin the streets, stealin baseballs outta the Salvation Army store, shootin craps and smokin squares. No more Philips High touchdown-throwin for my man Mookie, just livin life as one of Grandma Rose's God-less street hoods instead.

That was what I saw him doin from the classroom window—shootin dice across the lot, down there free in the March sun—the day I decided to drop outta school and roll with Mookie for good. Ol Mr. Manley stood behind his desk up front, usin his wood stick to point at words that meant not a goddamn thing, scribbled one under the other on the blackboard. My blink slowed to the heavy fade that came on whenever Manley got to dronin his gray sermons and jabbin at the wall with his stick. I looked down on Pershing Road not cause I peeked Mookie's shadow out the corner of my eye or heard craps crackin off a wall then – just runnin from the man, like every other day. That was how come the muthafucka'd put me in the front of the classroom first off, so he could keep that ol stare fixed on me, make sure I wouldn't get away with sleepin through lessons.

His fault for sittin me close to the peep hole so freedom'd keep my eyelids open no matter his hum.

Down there, Mookie crouched to his knees at the middle of a circle of dropouts from the Low End, dark dice (couldn't tell for sure up high, but maybe they was red) leavin outta his hand smooth, rollin and bouncin against the concrete without losin they pop, then dancin that jumpin bean dance off to Phillips High's brick. Dice hopped high on that ground, too, like concrete was too hot for restin (but it was cold that day – saw ice clouds breathed from Mookie's mouth) and craps shot fast down the line, though he'd barely shook before lettin go; and when they landed against the school, brick chips bounced off the walls big as the craps that made um.

Those Low End cats stood tall over Mookie's squat, but they was still covered in the shadow brung by my man as they gawked his roll. Shock on they faces, cause lookin down to concrete they'd found a shootin star high above. I swore they cheered like the girls in the football stands, too. Couldn't do nothin to stop themselves, even as they dropped more dimes into Mookie's winnin pile.

Seein them free on Pershing Road, I had to go to the toilet. Mr. Manley took questions from the class behind me, usin the stick to point at brown hands raised here and there about the room, happy palms makin no more sense than the words scribbled in fronta me. Good, happy, goddamn palms. I didn't have a clue of the lesson's subject til I felt that pee throbbin in my crotch, pressin against my balls and thighs all of a sudden: "Heroes," the History teacher'd hummed. And the words on his blackboard came to eye as my right leg tapped a jig under the desktop: "Patrick Henry," the wall read, "George Washington," "Ben Franklin," "Daniel Boone," "Abraham Lincoln," "General John

Pershing” all under “American History’s Great Figures.”

“Who recalls the seven shared traits of these historic figures from our history?”

Manley said. “From yesterday’s reading. Somebody remember one? Ah, Deborah—”

The palm his wood stick fixed on dropped, and the big-teethed girl with the mini bee-hive sat up straight as a pole before answering. “Strength.”

“Good, Deborah – strength. Another from someone else . . .”

I raised my right hand. The words didn’t make no sense to me—heard talkin, couldn’t make no logic outta it—but squirts stung inside my skin, beggin to trickle into my drawers. Didn’t move from my seat though, no matter my knees shakin and palm wavin high. *Always raise your hand, wait to be excused from somebody else’s table, boy,* Grandma’d always said. I heard her under Manley’s hum, too, learnin that to me over and over til her lesson wasn’t no different than the classroom’s hero tales.

And the ol man saw me wavin, more frantic than happy like the rest – shit I was right in fronta the bastard. I caught them gray eyes rollin on me for less than a second before his stick pointed to the back of the room. “Someone else . . . Wilfred—”

“Patriotism,” the Puerto Rican boy said.

“Good,” said Manley, before pointing past me again. “Someone else with another—“

My left leg tapped, faster than the right, fought off a drip.

“Honesty.”

The bee-hive girl giggled.

“Morality.”

Mookie stood from the circle, and the Low End fools patted him on the back and

shoulders, gave him due dap for hustling they change before the next roller grabbed hot dice from the wall.

“Selflessness.”

Just one squirt into my draws, and I felt better – for a second, better. Legs went still, and as Mookie stepped outta the circle, I breathed. Could follow Grandma’s words and stay put in that place just then, and learn. Manley’s hum was soft, my body still and peaceful.

Then the rest of the hot juice bit my crotch for a turn to trickle themselves. Legs crunched together til I felt the wet cotton of that drip left in my drawers already. And that only turned the juice inside hotter, madder, screamin to be let free as the first, free all on the floor of Manley’s learnin room. Screamin for righteousness. I dropped my fist into my balls to keep the flow inside, and bit lips to forget that sting. Right leg couldn’t feel the left for the crunch and the beggin sting and the knuckles diggin at my sack. Whole while, the other hand waved, and Manley pointed every which way but up front.

“Courage.”

I remembered Reverend Goode durin one of his Sunday sermons at Grandma’s Ebenezer, talking about how the Cath’lics counted seven deadly sins a nigga could commit in life, crimes against God sure to get the soul damned to hell fire afterwards. Sounded same as them hero traits jiggin in ol Manley’s classroom. Remembered wantin to piss on myself in that Ebenezer pew, too.

Three cats left the circle down on Pershing, no more change, and Mookie’s shadow squatted against brick again. He rolled rocks without shakin, smooth and quick

as a blink. I waved my palm into one ear, then the other, as I heard a drip under my chair.

“Muthafucka, do you see me sittin here?” The classroom went quiet except for my echo and that second free drip under it. Stingin stopped for good – the flow inside’d won, my fight done, and heat let go all over and around me. My right hand splashed in the pants leg. “Goddamnit, been wavin at you ten minutes . . . you see me or what, goddamnit . . . fuck wrong with you?”

“Excuse me, Jacy,” that was how Manley’d say my name, “Jacy,” like one goofy, white word, instead of how my Grandmamma named me proper: “J—C” “Watch your filthy mouth, boy. Is there some problem?”

“Yeah, there’s a problem, muthafucka. Been wavin my hand at you all this time. Goddamn problem . . . like this,” I waved again, ear to ear, and the bee-hive girl giggled, followed by the rest – heard laughin from the cats in Mookie’s circle down below even, “wavin right in your face, stupid ass. What, am I invisible? Son-of-a-bitch.”

“You’ve got yourself a detention, Mr. Rose,” Manley dropped the pointer at the black board and sat behind his desk, scribblin on a yellow pad. “I saw your hand, boy. Your classmates answered the questions. Too late – you’ve earned yourself a detention now.”

A group mumble took over Manley’s hum. Fillin up the walls, that fool chitter-chatter and the drip from my seat, trappin me inside still. I heard, and I watched him write me off, like he couldn’t see wet drippin outta me.

“Muthafucka,” I jumped from my chair and kicked the desk outta my way, back to the mumblin bee-hive girls and brown boys. The puddle splashed and pee stank sharp

and hard in his classroom. I smelled it, at least. “Had to go to the bathroom, damnit. You ain’t see me?”

Manley looked up from my detention and pity took the place of his eyeballs’ roll as he saw my trousers hangin low from the crotch. Muthafucka wanted to apologize—I knew it—but he bit his top lip and grabbed the pointer. “Jacy, boy, if you had to go, you should’ve gone. Nobody was stopping you from getting up to the restroom. That’s what you should have done – you are smart enough to know better. Should have gone: sit back down now, Jacy.”

“Stupid muthafucka . . .” I ran the six strides to Manley, still heard the bee-hive gigglin and my drawers squishin together, long with the rest of um. Ran to the ol man though he screamed for me to stop; “sit your black ass down,” I swore I heard him say, so my legs swallowed that path fast as coulda been.

Heard Mookie down on Pershing, too. “Hot seven,” he said, and dice cracked against the wall.

“I’m wet.” Didn’t have a clue what I was runnin to him for til my arm crushed into Manley’s throat and screeched the ol man’s chair into the blackboard wall. Classroom was quiet then—no mumblin, no drips, no gigglin at a sorry, soggy bastard, no “oohs” or “aahs” from them scary niggas—just quiet and shocked same as the Low End dropouts watchin Mookie shoot on Pershing Road. I jammed Manley’s head into the blackboard til clouds of chalk rose up from his scalp, and “Lincoln” smeared into his gray. His eyes couldn’t roll no more, just spread wide and empty. He tried swingin that pointer at me, tried to put me back in my right place – but I snatched the stick outta his weak right hand and crashed wood sideways into the muthafucka’s nose. Splinters

popped all round, against my cheeks even, and blood ran from a rip opened at the bone that joined Manley's empty stare together, and then from his nostrils, bright red blood down pasty skin.

His hand rose to his face, wiped before the flow reached his lips. He looked at the pink palm. "Bastard . . ." he yelled, and the classroom was full of all kinds of dark "oohs" just then.

I ran again, squished though the door and down two flights of steps, droppin the pointer piece somewhere before makin it out to March sun. Nobody chased after me or paid me no mind as I went, and I heard no alarms soundin when I pushed on the emergency exit door. Ran out there to Mookie's crap shootin circle, passin wind and Low End hustlin dryin my trousers.

Be six years more years before I came across any more school learnin. Never could go back to Phillips High—didn't want to or nothin—but never had a choice about steppin foot back inside that joint. Manley was waitin there patient from what I heard, lookin to teach my ass a true lesson about his history.

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Bayo Ojikutu
6238 South Ellis Ave.
Unit #3
Chicago, IL, 60637

