

B
L
I
N
D
S
I
D
E
D

by the Walking Dead

"From surviving the streets
to slaying the geeks"

IronE Singleton

with Juliette Terzoeff

iron

Blindsided by the Walking Dead

“From surviving the streets to slaying the geeks”

IronE Singleton

With Juliette Terzieff

ISBN: 978-0-9890210-1-2

Blindsided by the Walking Dead

Myriad Press

All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2013 by IronE Singleton

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the author, except where permitted by law.

Cover photo of IronE Singleton by Derrick Blanks

Contents

The Prayer	1
Mirrors.....	5
Mess o’ Greens	14
Personal Playbook.....	21
The Fish Plate Hustle	28
Blacky Moves In	33
Middle Class Living.....	40
Stealing Coin	46
Street Corners	50
“Sprung”	54
That Package	58
Forty Kills.....	63
When the Streets Invade	69
Package Delivered	74
Beneath the Sheets	78
Shadows	82
Light.....	102
Hustle Man.....	109
Red and Black	115
Identity Swap.....	119
Reflections	124
The Vow	128
Acting Secrets.....	136
On My Way	140
Headshots	144
Bitter Pills.....	150

The Resurrected	159
Blindsided.....	165
Meeting the Dead.....	169
Dead to Rights.....	176
Undead in All of Us.....	182
Surviving the Dead	188
Saying Goodbye	191
Moving Forward	196
Acknowledgements.....	198

In loving memory of my mother Catherine Singleton
and all the others that left us too soon.
You will always be remembered...

Chapter 1

The Prayer

The creak of hinges tore my attention away from the day's homework. I turned to see Uncle Larry filling up the doorframe to our bedroom like a loaf of bread filling up a pan as it bakes. I noted right away he had one hand on the doorknob, the other on his hip, and a crease spreading across his wide brow. He was built like a mike—an inside linebacker in layman's terms. He'd even played a bit in his younger days. Right now he looked as if he were primed for a snap to unleash some serious hurt on the opposing team's quarterback.

“Sonny boy, you need to come wit'me for a few,” he said quietly and turned to walk down the narrow hallway toward his bedroom.

As I laid down my pencil, I wondered what infraction I might be called out for. Uncle Larry had a quiet way about him; he rarely raised his voice when speaking. When his voice dropped to a whisper it was almost as bad—and sometimes worse—than when he started screaming. Anytime we found ourselves leaning in to hear Uncle Larry speak, we knew something serious was about to go down.

I paused on my way out the door to shut off the light before following in his footsteps. We hadn't been living with Momzie and Grandpa Ray very long by then, and while I knew the rules of the apartment, sometimes I just forgot. How many rules could a nine-year-old be realistically expected to remember? Grandpa Ray's work was the kind that made a man feel ancient at only fifty years old. Manual labor at a tech steel manufacturing plant left him with little energy for more than sleeping when the workday was done. Larry became the enforcer. If I was already in trouble, I didn't want

to make it worse by adding to the power charges. The family was already struggling to pay all the bills. Every penny counted in those days. Every. Single. Penny.

Uncle Larry's room was on the second floor along with two other bedrooms and a bathroom. The biggest belonged to Grandma Ethelrine and Grandpa Ray. The apartment was their home, so it was only right they had the best room. Uncle Larry—who most people call Big Larry on account of his son, Larry Jr.—had the second bedroom to himself. My older brother Tracy, our momma Catherine, and I shared the third room. Cat wasn't around much. I missed her when she was gone, but it simplified the sleeping arrangements. Big Larry and Momzie—Miss Rine as the neighborhood knew her—took care of us. She nurtured, giving us hugs and emotional support; he taught. I wasn't quite sure what kind of lesson I was about to receive, though.

“Come sit next to me, Robby. Close that do' on yo way in.” Larry beckoned me into the room. I obeyed without question. Larry sat and removed his shoes and socks and placed them near his nightstand, even though it was hours before dinner time. It didn't make much sense to me. Why was Uncle Larry sitting there without footwear? What had I done now?

“Life ain't always pretty, sonny boy, but every day is a gift. I want you to remember that,” he said. I sat down next to him on the bed. “You weren't put here on this Earth to get what you want, any way ya wan' it, the quickest way you can. Ya hear me? You here, because God placed you on this Earth for a purpose. It is His will.” He paused and looked me in the eye. I knew he was gauging whether I understood we were having a real bona fide man-to-man conversation, though I was years away from the age when I needed to shave like a real man.

He held my gaze for several seconds and nodded.

“Okay now, take those off and place 'em next to mine,” he instructed, pointing to my shoes, “I got something I want to share wit' you.”

As I reached to remove my shoes, Uncle Larry began to lay it down—explaining a worldview I hadn't known existed. In a quiet tone, he spoke of self-respect and how it meant nothing if you disrespected others—respect wasn't just saying “yes, ma'am” and “no, sir” to your elders. No, that's window dressing for people to

hide behind. Even a hardened criminal guilty of heinous acts can have manners. Respect is honor and love. And love, Uncle Larry told me, is the lifeblood of this world, without which we are truly lost.

“We are all one family,” he explained. “You love your family, even on the bad days.” The greatest love any of us have, Uncle Larry continued to explain, is the love of our Maker. We have a responsibility to share what’s in our hearts with others ... not only the people we like or know, but everyone we encounter, no matter what challenges unfold on life’s path. “It’s got to be God first, family second, and everything else will fall in place. You hear me on this, if you hear nuthin’ else, hear me.”

I bent over to set my shoes next to Uncle Larry’s, smiling a little. His loafers had to be at least twice the size of my sneakers. I straightened just as Uncle Larry dropped beside the bed to kneel.

“Join me.” He reached out to touch my shoulder. “It’s time for you to learn how to honor our Maker.”

We knelt side by side on the floor, our hands folded before us, elbows resting on the side of Uncle Larry’s bed. I was growing at a pretty steady clip by then, but down on the floor like that I had to stretch my back as straight as I could to get my elbows up on the bed. “Repeat after me: Our Lord, who art in heaven”

I carefully enunciated every word, every line of the prayers he taught me. I did it to please Larry. He never steered me wrong. Big Larry was my mother’s brother—big, strong and knowledgeable. Grandpa Ray was officially the man of the house, but long hours of physical labor left him little time for us kids, so Larry stepped in. And if Uncle Larry said it was important, it was. More importantly I recognized this was the start of a conversation with someone who could help me understand my path in life. God had always been a part of the daily conversation in our home, but I had yet to develop a one-on-one relationship. I simply didn’t know how. I knew there was more to the world than the daily grind of the ‘hood. I loved my family, my home ... but it was a struggle to make sense of my life. I was too young to articulate my struggle to those around me. I thought about my brother, Tracy, and wondered whether Uncle Larry had the same conversation with him. Did Momma Cat know the prayer too? Did she say it every night as her brother said we should? I hoped she did ... for her

4 ~ Blindsided by the Walking Dead

sake.

Uncle Larry repeated the prayers until he was confident I'd remember, and taught me to end each prayer with an "Amen." He said the words were nothing if you didn't speak from within, and told me I should always sit on the bed after nightly prayers and rub my feet together to remove any dust or dirt before getting all the way under the covers. I watched and listened, and promised myself I'd remember. I was concentrating so hard on getting it all in my head, it was several seconds before I realized Larry was laying across the bed, his arms behind his head, just smiling at me. The lesson was over. I grabbed my shoes and crossed the small room.

"Remember what we jus' did," Uncle Larry said. "And mean it from your heart."

To this day, I speak every syllable of my prayers directly from my heart.

Chapter 2

Mirrors

Sirens rang out in the distance. The sound traveled easily through the apartment’s windows. Another crime in progress ... just another hour in the ‘hood. I wondered what new tragedy was unfolding on the streets of Perry Homes tonight. *Murder? Drug deal gone bad? Home invasion? Could be any one, or all of them.*

I sighed, dropping the washcloth I was using to wipe sticky goop from my face, and stared into the mirror. The only portion of the visage staring back at me I recognized was the eyes. My eyebrows and eyelids drooped into a frown. I strove for focus, to find some balance. My hands wouldn’t stop shaking. I looked like a “dandified coon” in reverse—a warped parody of a blackface performer dripping tiny drops of vanilla ice cream all over the sink.

I backed toward the toilet and bumped my knee on the bathtub. “Maybe if I just sit for a minute,” I said, realizing I sounded half-mad talking to myself.

A laugh erupted from the pit of my stomach and bubbled up my throat like bile. I sprang up from the toilet seat and headed back to the sink. My fingers gripped the sides of the basin so hard, I was sure my hands—or the sink itself—would shatter. I looked up in the mirror and came face-to-face with a mad man. *A madman*, I corrected myself. *Naw, man ... a maaaaad man.* The thought made me laugh even harder. Before I knew it, I was screaming.

Cat was up in our room humming to herself when I asked whether I could have some of the cake and ice cream in the fridge for dessert. When she responded, “Naw child, not tonight,” I knew she had a few drinks in her. She still had a smile that lit up a room,

the one that made her cheeks scrunch up and her eyes crinkle at the sides. The smile that often meant I was about to fall victim to a tickle attack. But there was also an edge to her tone. Her gaze hardened the longer I stood there.

Not to be thwarted in my quest for sugary goodness, I did what any other red-blooded almost ten-year-old kid would do—I went to ask someone else. As I padded across the hallway to Momzie and Grandpa Ray’s room, I could already taste the thick frosting on the chocolate cake. When they said yes, I wasted no time heading down to the kitchen to grab my hard-won dessert.

It took everything I had not to stand in the kitchen gobbling down the cake and ice cream right there next to the stove. I possessed a world-class sweet tooth. Every day I ate at least five dollars-worth of crap food—honey buns, chocolate, cookies—anything containing obscene amounts of sugar I could get my hands on. Eager as I was to enjoy my chocolate cake and vanilla ice cream, I wanted to savor it. I cradled the bowl in my arm and headed upstairs to our bedroom.

Cat’s eyes opened wide. She practically catapulted out of the bed as soon as she caught sight of me.

“You dumb red sum-a-bitch! Didn’t I tell you, you couldn’t have no damned cake and ice cream?” she screamed. Her cheeks flushed with anger. “How you gonna disrespect me like that? You didn’t hear me when I told ya or what?!”

“Bu—bu—but, I, uh, I ... ax. I did. Momma Rine said it was” My voice failed me. She took a step closer, her hands raised.

My eyes clearly saw what was happening, but my brain refused to process it quickly enough to mount an effective defense. Violence in Perry Homes was nothing new—not even to a boy yet to enter high school. Our neighborhood didn’t have the roughest reputation in Atlanta for nothing. All one had to do was step outside and wait a minute for someone to start a fight. My brother Tracy had come home bloody a few times. Heck, I’d even thrown some punches by his side. People fought over drugs, cars, girls, street cred, brand-name goods, you name it. Sometimes it seemed they fought just for something to do to take their minds off the grinding poverty and desperation plaguing them day after day after day. It was brutal—and it was normal. That was the harsh reality of the streets. That was life in Perry Homes.

But the life we lived outside wasn't the life we lived inside 579 Clarissa Drive. Tracy and I landed there off and on because Cat couldn't seem to raise us anywhere else. By the time I was seven my mother couldn't keep us anywhere at all, really. We moved around from place to place, with Cat uninterested, or unable to pay the bills, depending on her mood. Momzie and Grandpa Ray took us in permanently.

My grandparents' apartment was a place of hardship, hand-me-down clothes, and holes in the ceilings. Most of the clothes in the closet were only there because Momzie's employers gave her first dibs on their children's old stuff before throwing it out or donating it. Every single shirt I "owned" had someone else's name stitched into the back of it. Most of the underwear got quickly spoiled with skid marks. It didn't really matter much, most times the clothing stank from a lack of washing and stains became a secondary concern. Cat just wasn't real big on household chores.

Despite everything, Momzie made sure her home was filled with food and love. She could cook up a storm. It seemed like every time we walked past the kitchen, she was surrounded by pots and pans—elbows deep in a bowl of one of her favored meat and vegetable concoctions, adding spices that sent enticing aromas wafting through the living room and up the stairs. It was soul food at its finest. Dishes evolved from the hand-me-down scraps of food given to slaves by European slave traders and American slave owners until the ingredients became the backbone of black American cooking traditions. Chitterlings, collard greens, turnips, hog jowls, black-eyed peas, and squash stew—most dishes prepared with heaping lumps of lard because it was cheap and filling.

She may have been an average sized woman—about five foot four with a slender build—but my child's eyes saw Momzie as a giant, larger than life itself. She carried the weight of multiple generations on her sturdy shoulders, giving love to her children and their children in equal measure without reservation. She was never too busy to know instinctively when you needed a hug, a shoulder to lean on or a hand to cling to.

Momzie spent her days working as a housekeeper and child care provider for wealthier white and Jewish folk. Grandpa Ray worked at the tech steel manufacturing plant. Occasionally Momzie

found work for Cat, cooking or cleaning at other people's homes and things would be good for a spell. But Cat never stuck with it. After a while, she'd stop showing up for work without an explanation. Around the same time her temper would get short. She grabbed me and Tracy, called us hurtful names. Momzie and Big Larry referred to these as her "dark periods," but I didn't really understand what they meant. All I saw was Momma Cat having a hard time. Okay maybe she hit the bottle a bit on the weekends and acted a little crazy, but so did the other adults in the house. Anytime she did go too far, I would take care of her.

Even angels have moments of doubt. A little bit of love always made things better.

That's not to say it was always easy. One night when she woke me at three in the morning to keep her company, I sure wasn't thrilled about getting out of bed. It was a Sunday night and I had school the next day. But Momma Cat needed me. She was hungry. I half sleepwalked downstairs to get her something to eat.

I struggled to reach the pot of neck bones on the stove, and get a bowlful of them into the microwave without dumping everything on the floor. At eight-and-a-half I hadn't really hit a growth spurt significant enough to reach the microwave buttons without using a chair. And to be honest I may not have done my best in the kitchen that night. I knew the food wasn't properly heated even before the glass bowl sailed over my head a few minutes later and neck bones splattered the wall behind me. Tracy woke up at the sound of the crash just long enough to take a dazed look around before closing his eyes again.

"You 'spect me to eat that cold ass shit?" Cat howled. I cowered away and scrambled to retrieve the bowl. "You stupid red blockhead fucka, take yo' lil stankin' ass back down there and get me some mo' and you do it right! And brang me the hot sauce like I said."

I cried all the way down the stairs. Through my tears, I clambered onto the chair and got her another bowl of food, making sure it was steaming hot. My tears followed me all the way back up to the bedroom. Momma Cat was right. I needed to try harder, do better. To win respect, you gotta be respectful. A cold bowl of food for your momma doesn't exactly qualify even if it is the middle of the night. The next time Cat needed something, I

promised myself, I'd be perfect.

And now there we were a little over a year later, standing across from each other in our small bedroom with another bowl full of offensive food between us. Cat glared, her chest heaving. I stared back at her, afraid to blink, terrified to make even the slightest move.

Yeah, life in Perry Homes was tough and so was life inside 579 Clarissa. *But we were family.* The incessant violence ruling the street outside our door had no place inside the walls of our apartment.

I held my breath in an attempt to stop the stinging pressure of tears building behind my eyes. For a few seconds I thought it might actually work, until the first tear squeezed out of the corner of my right eye and slid down my cheek. *This is it.* I braced myself for the verbal lashing I knew was coming.

A gruesome smirk spread slowly across Cat's face, hardening her features right up to her bloodshot eyes—more a sneer than the smile she used to light up a room. When she spoke, she spat the words at me like boiling water jumping out of a teakettle—sizzling away in a rush of steam as each drop hit the stove.

“You want that ice cream more than you want to listen to yo’ momma ... you ... you ... red ... blockhead sum-a-bitch?” she demanded, each word like a hammer on my ears. “You keep on like that, you dumb muthafucka. You ain’t shit and you never gonna be nothin’ in this world. Go on then. Go ahead and eat yo’ damned cake and ice cream.”

“Naw, it’s okay,” I replied, blinking through tears fighting one another for space on my cheeks. “I—I don’t want it now.”

“Oh naw, you want it. Ya wanted it bad enough to sneak behind my back, you blockhead muthafucka, ya gonna eat it. You gonna eat every goddamned bit of it or I’m gonna shove it down your stankin’ ass fucking throat.”

Cat hit me hard in the chest, knocking me off balance, and snatched the bowl from my hands. Holding my dessert over her head out of my reach, she pulled me hard by the T-shirt. Her nails tore through the worn material and scraped my chest. My legs buckled, leaving me to scramble alongside her on my knees. She dragged me away from the door, away from any possible hope of escape. With a hard shove, I found myself lying flat on my back on the other side of our bedroom.

Cat knelt, wedging her knees against my shoulder joints, locking down my arms. “You gonna see now what happens when yo’ disrespect your momma, you dumb sum-a-bitch you.” She gripped the bowl overhead with both hands.

I tried to close my mouth before the bowl smashed into my face. As soon as the first crumbs of cake hit my nose, I couldn’t breathe. Thick frosting caught in my throat. All I smelled was chocolate. Cat ground the bowl as far into my face as physics would allow, twisting it left and right over my nose and mouth. She thumped the bottom of the bowl to make sure no cake or ice cream was left behind.

“How that taste, blockhead? You stupid muthafucka thought ya was gonna slide one past me. You keep on eating. There now, you eat it up,” she said, leaning down and whispering in my ear.

I twisted my head away. The pressure on my chest was debilitating. I could barely breathe. Every time I managed to force globs of ice cream and cake out of my nostrils and mouth, they fell back in before I could get a full breath. I bucked my hips and kicked my legs, but couldn’t get enough leverage to unseat her. After three unsuccessful attempts to free myself, I turned my attention back to breathing. A gooey clump of chocolate cake pieces mixed with a ball of ice cream slid toward the back of my throat. Cat’s hand slipped and she lost her grip on the bowl long enough for me to cough the melting mess in my mouth back into the bowl and gulp in a quick breath. She grabbed the bowl again and forced the goop back between my lips.

I screamed so loud inside my head I thought my brain would explode. *Cat...please!* I prayed she would hear me and stop. Somewhere out there on the streets people were swaying to DeBarge’s island rhythms or worrying their girl, like Eddie Murphy’s, was only interested in partying all the time. In our apartment, I was dying. *Dying!* The taste of salt filled my mouth alongside the creamy vanilla of melting ice cream. *Tears,* I realized. I sobbed and choked again on a piece of cake.

Cat started giggling. She sat back, putting her full weight on my chest. “You eat it up now. You get every. Last. Bite,” she told me and let go of the bowl.

The bowl slid off the right side of my face. I gasped for air. Melted ice cream was already beginning to dry on my skin, causing

the bowl to catch and slide bit by bit toward the side of my neck. The bowl clattered to the floor.

Cat got to her feet. “Look at this mess you made. You gonna clean dis shit up, too. You red bastard.”

I scrambled to my feet, blinking cake crumbs out of my eyes. Frosting and ice cream clung to my eyelashes, making them stick together. Cat stood, hands on hips, leering at me. I stood before her, my entire body shaking with the sobs I’d been unable to release with the bowl in my face, my fists balled up at my sides.

“Oh you a man now, aintcha? You gonna hit me, nigga?”

The desire to hit Cat consumed me. I shook with the desire to pay her back for the pain she’d put me through. *There*, I thought, eyeing the spot right next to her mouth on the left side where her skin puckered when she smiled. *Why shouldn’t I?* I immediately regretted the thought.

Because she’s your momma, and you have to respect your momma, an inner voice replied. It sounded a bit like Uncle Larry.

I paused, dimly aware of Cat clicking her tongue waiting for a response. I wanted to shout. *How could you do this, Cat?* Instead, I kept my silence. My shoulders slumped. I lowered my chin to my chest and closed my eyes.

“Naw. Uh-huh, I didn’t think so,” she said with a note of something like contempt in her voice. Cat turned her back on me, crawled into bed and went back to watching television like none of it ever happened.

* * * * *

I gulped in air and swallowed, wincing. My throat burned. I breathed through my mouth even though it felt like someone had rubbed sandpaper over the roof of my mouth and gums. Snot seeped out of my nose, spurred by my tears. It was hard to breathe and my screams were little more than whimpers, though they rang loud in my head. There wasn’t anyone in the world fool enough to call someone a man when they were standing with ice cream and cake crumbs all over their face, tears welling in their eyes while they made sounds like a dog that’s been kicked to the curb.

Ain’t no place safe now. You better know it and abide. I released my death grip on the sink and grabbed the washcloth. As I worked to

wipe the ice cream and cake goop off my face—pausing frequently to rinse out the sticky washcloth—I told myself how it was going to be now.

“Don’t nobody luv me, but that’s okay, ‘cause I’m gonna be somebody,” I assured the sad looking face in the mirror. With the right side of my face cleaned up, the left looked like it had a coating of partly dried wax on it. The strangeness of the image almost made me smile. “I ain’t got nobody. I ain’t got no daddy or nothin’. No need to worry now. They ‘on’t love me and that’s okay, I ‘on’t need nobody to be somebody.”

“I ‘on’t need nobody, cause I’m gonna be somebody.” I repeated the phrase a few times to make sure my brain got the message. All around the neighborhood there were people who relied on no one but themselves to survive. Individuals who commanded respect, not on the basis of family relationships, but because of the power they held. *God helps those who help themselves.* Wasn’t that what my elders said? Well then I was going to do just that.

To this day Big Larry jokes that when I was small I loved my momma so much, if she asked for a glass of water I’d fight anyone who tried to get it for her before I could. Most of the time the rest of the family would let me do it, rather than risk incurring the wrath of a precocious child.

Cat came and went whenever she pleased for as long back as I can remember. Sometimes we didn’t see her for days—or even weeks—at a time. It hurt me when she’d leave. I was a quiet child to begin with, but when she was gone I’d get so quiet I was practically a mute until Cat returned. Everything changed after the ice cream incident.

After that night, I would learn what it meant to stand on my own, practice to attain the strength of independence. When I felt overwhelmed, I’d withdraw to the bathroom. Surround myself with cracked porcelain, rusty taps and a yellowed shower curtain that looked like someone had pulled it out of a thrift store one-cent bin, and stare into that mirror. It was my private time to express myself freely—my frustrations, anger, hopes and dreams. My chance to

shed tears without family members asking, “Why you cryin’, fool?” When I’d scream, Momzie, Grandpa Ray and Tracy wondered whether I’d lost my mind. And, sometimes, for just a few moments, I had.

The face in the mirror always brought me back. There had to be a purpose for my being here, something I was put on this Earth to do. I would take my moments, vent my rage and doubts, and live to fight another day. It didn’t matter if nobody else saw the strength I saw in my face when I gazed into the looking glass. Someday they would know. And if they didn’t? Well that was okay, because I didn’t need anybody to be somebody. My independence was as clear to me as the gaze of the big brown eyes in the mirror.

Chapter 3

Mess o' Greens

I shut the apartment door behind me and waited for the inevitable request. There was always at least one member of our extended family at home during the afternoons. Tracy and I had school during the day, but once classes were finished, Tracy would plant himself in front of the television, or raid the refrigerator in preparation—if he wasn't at practice or out on the street messing around with his friends.

In between Grandpa Ray's shifts, I'd often come home to the soft thump, thump, thump of his plodding the short distance down the hall from his bedroom to the bathroom and back to lie down and rest. When I was greeted at the door by the smell of cologne—usually something woodsy or with hints of citrus—I knew Big Larry was around, but probably getting ready to go out.

I'd formed a habit of grabbing myself a sweet snack and some sort of drink—usually something just as sweet—to wash it down before settling in to do my homework. My routine was so well known within the family, many times the door had hardly clicked closed before someone would be yelling down the stairs for me to grab them something to drink, too. It always made me smile to be able to help.

With everyone coming and going with their own schedule it was rare to find all six of us home at the same time—except when Momzie was cooking a holiday meal. Momzie and Grandpa Ray worked during the weekdays; Cat, Big Larry, Tracy and I came and went pretty much as we pleased around our school schedule.

“Rob, that you?” Cat called.

“Yeah,” I replied and waited to see what she wanted. Sweet tea was my first guess.

“Put your schoolbooks down and come right in here.”

I took a few steps into the living room, and stopped. Momzie was sitting straight up in the recliner, her lips pursed, her hands folded neatly in her lap. She was dressed in her work clothes—a pair of black pants and a white blouse. Big Larry stood next to her, his elbow resting on the back of the chair. He met my eyes and nodded, but said nothing. Across from them two people sat on the couch with their backs to me.

As I rounded the side of the couch to get a better look, I found my brother sitting on the floor next to the glass coffee table. Tracy hugged his knees to his chest and stared down at the ground. He was pointing and flexing his feet, alternating left to right. Anyone who knew him well would immediately recognize it as a sign he was wound up or nervous about something.

A smile spread slowly across Cat's lips when she caught sight of me. Rays of sun coming through the window across from the couch where she sat played across her face, made her ebony skin glow. She'd applied a light touch of eye shadow that drew attention to her round brown eyes. The angles of her face stood out with her hair pulled back. She looked quite a bit like Momzie sitting across from her.

“Rob, yo’ daddy is here to see you,” Momma Rine said, breaking the silence.

I looked at the man next to Cat. He stood and held out his hand. He led me upstairs into the bathroom, leaving the quiet gathering behind us. I didn't want to be alone with a strange man. Who was he? Where did he come from? Was he really my father or pretending to be? He wasn't dressed fine enough to be from school or any sort of official agency. Neither Cat nor Momma Rine would send a representative of “the man” upstairs alone with me. That wasn't the kind of relationship any family in Perry Homes had with employees of government or agencies who worked with the poor.

“My name is James, and I'm yo’ daddy,” the man in the T-shirt and jeans told me. He walked into the bathroom and closed the toilet lid, indicating with a flip of his wrist for me to sit. As soon as he spoke, I was glad I was sitting. “I want you to repeat after me—James is my daddy.”

I did what I was told.

* * * * *

I looked away from Cat to Momzie and Big Larry. Momzie's eyebrows were raised so high I thought they'd jump back behind her hairline. She studied her daughter's face, the force of the unasked question in her eyes rolling off her like heat off a furnace.

"Ya all set?" Cat asked softly, as James and I sat back down on the couch. "Now you know yo' daddy." There was no apology for the deceit or sudden appearance of my real father. No meaningful explanation, either.

In the silence that followed I tried to make sense of what had happened. The grownups in the room—which apparently included Tracy even though he was only a couple years my senior—were obviously privy to the revelation long before I was. I felt every eye on me, but said nothing. *How can this be my father?* I didn't understand. *Robert Jr. is my father.* Or so I thought. He was the man I was named after. Granted, Robert Jr. wasn't much of a father. I had only a few vague recollections of him; snapshot memories of singing songs and fights with Cat. But I knew my aunt, Robert's sister Diane, pretty well. I had been to Diane's house; she bought me sweaters on Christmas and a set of cars for my birthday a few years before.

James, I would later learn, had been heavily into drugs and drinking, spent some time in jail on drug charges—a man unfit to be a father in my mother's estimations. They dated for some time. Cat was already pregnant with me when they broke up and she started seeing Robert. Robert seemed like a better man, so she opted him for use as her baby-daddy. He'd never really wanted to be a family man. It was abundantly clear by his departure and general absence from most of our lives.

I figured it wasn't much of a loss. Plenty of the boys I knew in Perry Homes were growing up without fathers, or fathers who were in and out of the picture at irregular intervals. Maybe James was planning for this to be a new start; he would be a real father to me in ways Robert never wanted to be. I considered it briefly, until I looked around the room, from Cat, to Larry and finally Momzie. Every single one of them looked at me as if they were about to cry.

Only Tracy seemed unperturbed by the news that I had a new father. He had unwrapped his arms from around his knees and was

playing with the shoelace on his left sneaker. Tracy's father wasn't around much either. Men come and go. That's how it was with Cat. Heck, that's the way it was with most folk we knew. I didn't understand what the big deal was. My dad, Robert or whoever, had never been a big part of my life. Uncle Larry was the closest I'd ever had to a father.

I could practically hear what Tracy was thinking, *Ain't nothin' gonna change.*

Momzie's children didn't have the same father either. Aunt Shirley and Aunt Pat had a different father than the remaining six children including Big Larry, Momma Cat, and my Aunt Brenda. Momzie worked two jobs for most of her life to take care of her brood. But they were still poor. Aunts Shirley and Pat's father made little effort to be a part of their lives. Grandpa Ray stuck around, but for a long time he wasn't the best help with the bills and child rearing. He would get paid on Thursdays and not come home until he was almost broke, usually on a Sunday. Momzie was forced to take shelter with her kin, living in the family's basement.

Eventually, around the time Momma Cat was nearing the end of her high school years, they got out of the basement and moved to Perry Homes. It wasn't much of a step up, for sure, but at least they had their own place. There were no picket fences, no station wagons. Heck, there wasn't even a yard or a driveway. But Momzie and her children stuck together, and did the best they could with what they had.

Would James break the absentee father pattern? Was I about to be blessed with something other than just a word—father—which meant little in the long run? *Daddy.* I tried it out in my head. It felt funny, but I figured it was okay, as it might not be something I ever called this man, James. I smiled a little and caught Momzie's eye. She tilted her head and smiled back, but her eyes were still watery.

James placed his hand on my arm. I turned and took my first good look at him. He had thick hair, cut short and neat. The round shape of James' face looked oddly familiar. He had a broad smile that took up much of what seemed like a welcoming face.

As I studied him, Momzie said, "Cat why don't you get som' to drank fo' everybody?"

James asked me about school and listened intently while I told

him about spelling and math and history. I assured him I did my homework every night, and Tracy told him how good I was with arithmetic. We talked about Big Larry trying to teach us boys basketball, and hanging out at the Perry Homes recreation center. James told me a bit about his family—his momma and sister, his cousins, and the extended family in Texas.

“I’d like you to meet them all sometime,” he said, and sipped the soda pop Cat brought out while we were talking.

He seemed easy enough to talk to, but how much was there to say to someone you don’t know at all? I mean really. James was my father. Daddy. A stranger. I fell silent and thought about the family I knew—or thought I did—and the new one being thrust at me all the sudden. Around me, the grownups kept on talking—conversing about work, life, paying the bills and other adult topics holding no interest for a kid who just started the fifth grade.

I’d only ever called Cat “momma” one time in my life. It was at one of the many parties she went to with friends—soirees she would occasionally take me along to. She’d been leaning against a dishwasher talking with a small group of people when I made my approach. “You don’t call me momma, ya call me Cat. Momma is what you call my mother,” she’d instructed in a sharp tone.

Since then, anytime the word “momma” crossed my lips it was directed at Grandma Ethelrine—a term of affection which evolved into “Momzie” as I grew older. Not calling James “daddy” wouldn’t amount to much of a change after living with Cat all my life.

I leaned around James and looked over at Tracy. My big brother gave me a wink. Besides Big Larry, Tracy was the only other male who truly took part in my life. He was outgoing and street smart in ways I would never be at age twelve. I was content to keep to myself most of the time, trying to figure out where I wanted to be and how to get there. Tracy was a creature who craved social interaction and wanted to thrive on the street. He had a thin build—not the most imposing figure for creating a reputation on the ‘hood’s rough streets. But he was intelligent, talked-fast, and used his God-given gifts to win people over with his quick wit and carefree smile. He was good at school. And whatever he said about my mathematical abilities, he could’ve just as easily said about himself. But whatever skill he displayed in his

academic pursuits, they were secondary to Tracy's drive for prowess on the basketball court. Sports were his only real focus in terms of schooling—not books. They had tangible value for him. He took what he learned in the school PE classes and put it to use in street pickup games, using the knowledge and skill he possessed to gain position. I didn't need a report card to tell me my brother was smart.

* * * * *

"Knew you was gonna be here," Tracy said from the doorway to Momzie's bedroom. I looked up from my spot on the floor and found him gazing down at me, as if asking permission to come in.

I shrugged, figuring he'd come in whether I wanted him to or not. The muffled sounds of raised voices came from downstairs. They'd been at it for over an hour—ever since James left—and the grownups could talk to one another all night as far as I was concerned. I shifted lower to the ground, wedging myself securely between Momzie and Grandpa Ray's bed and the dresser where the television sat. Another half-hour or so and it would be time for *Knight Rider*.

Michael Knight was a "kool kat." And KITT was the baddest piece of machinery ever made. Tracy and I talked about KITT—who would be a better driver, and what special modifications we'd want if the vehicle were ours. Tracy was two years older and insisted—out of the two of us—if KITT came our way, he would be the main driver. He said he'd steer the sleek beast up and down the streets of Perry Homes, show everybody how it really was. Nobody in the neighborhood would mess with him ever again if he drove KITT. And if anyone got any funny ideas? He'd fire off the flamethrower every once in a while.

Tracy also had other things on his mind.

"So what ya think?"

I was surprised by the question. We were close, Tracy and me, we stuck together and looked out for each other on the street. We shared so many of the same experiences with the 'hood, with our mom—similar fears, anger and doubts. We had cried, sweat and raged together when Cat left us alone in a car for a couple hours with the windows rolled up one hot summer day. Cat brought us

along when she and her male friend at the time headed to a run-down motel near old Fulton County Stadium to get high. She told us not to leave the car, and we didn't dare disobey no matter how scared we were. Tracy was about six years old; I was just four.

Heck, we even shared a bed—crammed on to a small contour sofa next to Momma Cat's bed in our crowded bedroom. Sometimes at night when I was having trouble falling asleep, I'd lie in the dark studying the hole in the ceiling above us. Visions of falling plaster or deformed creatures crawling out of the hole to scamper across the ceiling in search of victims would leave me shaky. But all I had to do was move a finger or a toe and I'd feel my brother lying next to me. In those moments having him close was a comfort.

Despite the physical proximity we had, and our automatic defense of each other against anyone looking to cause trouble, it was a rare occasion when we had any sort of deep, personal conversation. Sometimes when he would fall asleep before me, I'd risk a quick kiss on his cheek. I loved and admired my brother. Still, Tracy had his way to do things, and I had mine. There just wasn't a lot of tenderness in our lives. We were too poor to afford it.

For a moment I toyed with the idea of pretending not to know what he meant, but decided against it.

"He seemed a'right."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I said firmly.

"Yeah ... maybe he'll be good for some new clothes or somethin'."