

Chapter I

Saggin' & Baggin'

Black men born in the U.S. fortunate enough to live past the age of eighteen are systematically conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison. For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase in a sequence of humiliation.

-George Jackson

“*W*hat’s the deal, cornmeal?” Mark asked as he greeted his best friend, Jermaine at the gate in front of Jermaine’s parents’ front yard.

“Saggin’ & Baggin’, baby. You know how I do,” Jermaine said, giving Mark a pound.

“I know we gon’ miss the school bus if you don’t hurry your butt up,” Mark said.

Jermaine shook his head. “Bump that. I ain’t tryin’ to get detention for being late,” Jermaine said letting his pants fall to his ankles, so he could secure his backpack on his shoulders.

“You advertisin’, I’m buyin’.” The short, clean shaven man said as he walked up on the boys. The man dressed in beige Dickies and a matching shirt, nodded. “How much?”

Jermaine frowned. "Who is you?" he asked pulling his pants back up to his thighs.

The man held a finger in the air. "It's who *are* you, and Interested, is who I am," the man said as he grabbed his crotch and stared at the skinny sixteen year old.

Bobbing his head and shrugging his shoulders, Mark said, "No disrespect, but we don't know you, partna."

"Speak when you spoken to, boy," the big man said in a commanding deep voice as he pointed a dark ashy finger at Mark.

Mark sized the man up. *Five-eight, five-nine, a muscle head.* The man looked like he played on some NFL football team's frontline, and he was darker than the color black.

Mark was five-eight, and that was with his Timberland boots. Maybe a hundred thirty pounds and that's with a wet brick in each pocket. Jermaine was two inches taller at most, but skinny as a rail, something most people couldn't tell just by looking at him. That's because Jermaine wore three pairs of boxers, red, white, and blue, under the huge 42 inch waist jeans that were saggin' right above his knees.

"Cat gotcha tongue, youngin'?" the man asked, staring at Jermaine.

He was making Jermaine nervous. "Man, we gotta jet, before we miss the bus. Come on, Mark."

"Walk away from me and I'm gon' take what I want," the man said. "And I wish you would try to run in them jeans hangin' under your butt," the man said with slow calm. His face was a mask of intent sincerity.

"Man, what you want?" Jermaine said, shaking his head from side to side.

"I want what you offerin'."

For the fifth time in the last few minutes, Jermaine pulled up his pants. “Man, I don’t know what you thinkin’ but I ain’t no punk.”

“Really now?” the man asked.

“Man, I don’t want no trouble. I’m just tryin’ to get to school,” Jermaine said, looking around, hoping a neighbor would come outside.

Mark stood next to his friend shivering as the winter wind whipped through the April spring air. His huge T-shirt was waving like a flag.

“That makes both of us. Just got out the joint yesterday. Did a quarter for manslaughter. I stay down the street, out here getting’ my walk on, and I sees you and li’l homie hangin’ low, and when you let them jeans fall, I knew what it was.”

Jermaine waved an arm in the air, “Nah, partna’, you...you...you, got the wrong idea. I don’t swing like that.”

“I can’t tell.” The strange man licked his lips. The boys looked on as the man cracked his ashy knuckles and flexed his chest muscles. “First, you gon’, miss your bus. Second, try to run, I’m gon’ catch one of you and you don’t even wanna know what I’m gon’ do when I catch you. And third, you stand here and listen, while I put you down on some real boss game.”

The boys looked at each other. They didn’t know what to do or what to think, but they both knew that trying to run wasn’t the answer.

Oblivious to the wind, and the few cars that passed in front of Jermaine’s house, the strange man put a beige timberland-booted foot on the yellow fire hydrant he stood next to. “Back in ’84, 1984, I was around y’all age. It was a Friday night, everybody that was anybody hung out at Charle’s Disco on Simpson Road. It was a twenty-one and

older spot, but back then, it wasn't nothin' to go to Wong Li's Beauty supply, downtown at five points and get a fake picture I.D." He nodded. "Yeah youngin', on Friday's, Charles's Disco was ghetto fab, all the baddest young stunna's and wannabe strippers were on the scene half-butt naked, fishin' for a balla, and a new babydaddy. Me, hell, I was green as grass, but you couldn't tell me and the young stud I rolled with. My dude, Pork chop, was gettin' a little paper slingin' rock for some baby balla dude from the Westside. Matter of fact, Pork chops' boss, let him push his cherry-red I-Roc camaro Z-28 that night."

"Come on, Man. We gon' be mad late to school," Mark said, hoping the ex-con would let them go.

The man shot Mark a look that could freeze fire. "Interrupt me one more time," he threatened.

Mark pulled up his pants, and held them up with both hands in his pockets.

"Where was I?" The man looked off into space a moment before snapping a finger. "Oh yeah. So we bobbin' our heads, 'bout to bend the corner on Simpson Road, LL Cool J's first hit *I need a Beat*, blasted from the four 15 inch woofers takin' up the hatch and the back seat, when One-time came outta nowhere and pulled us over."

"Officer, what did I do?" Pork chop had asked, while letting the driver's side window down."

"License and insurance," the office had barked."

"You was born Black, my dude, that's what you did," I had muttered a little too loud."

"Officer needs assistance; I'm at Simpson and MLK. Officer needs assistance, over," the cop said as he took wide steps around the front of the car with his hand on his gun."

"Get out," the officer barked."

"I rolled the window down. 'Huh?' I asked."

“‘Get out of the vehicle. Now!’ the cop shouted, his hand on his gun.”

“I opened the door and began getting out when the cop, grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled me onto the ground, face first.”

“‘Jheri curl wearing jungle bunny,’ the cop quipped as he kicked me in the side. ‘Hands behind your back, smart guy.’ He bent my arms back and slapped handcuffs on my wrist as another squad car pulled up.”

“I wanted to scream from the pain in my side, but I was too angry.”

“‘What’s up, Rambo?’ I’d heard another cop, a brotha, ask.”

“*Thank God*, I remembered thinking. I just knew a brotha would set this Gestapo racist cop straight.”

“Both cops roughly pulled me up off the pavement. ‘Bruh, we wasn’t doing nothin’.’ I began addressing the black cop. ‘This dude pulls us over for no reason, and comes around the car and assaults me. And he called me a Jheri curl jungle bunny, before kicking me in the ribs.’”

“The black cop looked at the other cop and then back at me. ‘You do have a Jheri curl, and if he says you’re a jungle bunny,’ the cop shrugged, ‘then I guess you are.’”

“I turned and looked back inside the car. My dude, was sitting there, hands on the wheel looking straight ahead. I couldn’t believe what this sell-out in blue, had just said. His words hurt more than the kick in the side from the redneck cop.”

“‘Did you check for ID?’ the black cop had asked, while going through my pockets. ‘Jack Johnson, huh?’ the black cop read out loud as he looked at my fake ID, with the fake name and date of birth.”

“Bruh, did you just hear yourself? The cracka’ called me a jungle bunny,” I said.

“My name is Officer Jennings, clown,” the white cop said, before slapping me hard upside my head.”

“Without thinking I turned and spit in his face. Next thing I knew the black cop hit me in the back, and I was back on the ground near the curb, getting beat with a flashlight and a nightstick by both cops.”

He shook his head sadly. “A couple of hours later I was in the Fulton County jail, battered, bruised, and booked under a fake name. I was scared as you know what, but I was even more angry than I was scared. I was charged with assaulting an officer. Can you believe that, li’l homies?”

Jermaine shrugged his shoulders and Mark just shook his head.

The con continued. “Never having been locked up, I didn’t know what to expect. It was a small holding cell, with two other guys inside, a brotha somewhere between, I’d say 25 and 35, and a Hell’s Angel-looking, tatted up long-haired skinny white guy. The cell was a dull paint chipped gray. The rotten pissy smelling holding tank stank so bad I was almost scared to sit down. So, I went and stood in a corner. My back was to the concrete wall. One arm was folded across my stomach while my right hand was cuffed over my nose. I couldn’t call my mother. It was past three in the morning. I’d left my eleven-year-old brother home alone, and if I called her at work from jail, she’d know I left him home alone and she would’ve done much worse to me than the cops and the prison could ever do. I couldn’t think of anyone to call, when and if I did get a phone call.”

“What about your dad?” Mark asked, like he was suddenly interested in the story.

The con shook his head. “Never met the man.”

“What happened next?” Jermaine asked, still holding his pants up.

The con blinked back a tear. “This happened.” He pointed at Jermaine. “Same way I came at you young buck, was the exact same way the black dude in the cell came at me.”

“Back in the ‘80’s all the young studs wore skin tight jeans, belts, with big shiny silver or gold cowboy-looking buckles, and tight, shiny silk colorful dress shirts. Needless to say, when I was arrested I was clean as the board of health or so I thought. I was a 31 waist, wearing 28 inch Black Jordache jeans and a tight canary yellow button down silk dress shirt.”

“I was lost in thought, mindin’ my own. I didn’t even see the black dude until he was up in my face. He grabbed my butt with both hands and licked my ear.” With watery eyes, the con put his hands over his eyes, took a deep breath and continued, “The mother...” he took a breath, closed and opened his eyes. “The man stuck his tongue in my ear. I lost it. I was small, not too much bigger than you homies. Dude was maybe fifty pounds bigger than me. I screamed and just went haywire swinging and pushing the man back. He lost his balance and fell, banging his head on the cell’s metal toilet rim so hard he lost consciousness. Still, I continued beating the man. I stomped him in the head and face until the Hell’s Angel-looking guy, grabbed me from behind. I slung him off and started beating him unconscious, too. By the time the sheriff’s deputies got the cell open, one man was dead, and one was in critical condition.”

“My charge was upgraded to murder, and a week later, it became double murder, when the black guy died. My mother didn’t have any money for an attorney so I had a public *pretender*. I went to trial, and was sentenced to forty

years. I served 25. Why? Because I was trying to be like everybody else, stylin' and profilin', doing the In thing, wearing skintight, uncomfortable jeans, looking like a fool. And young buck, I done seen fads and styles come and go, but the dumbest one," he pointed to Jermaine's knock-off Red Monkey jeans, "is those saggin' pants. In the penitentiary, that was one surefire way to tell who's catching."

"Catching?" Mark asked.

"Yeah, who's takin' pipe. You know, who's advertising their same sex way of life. I just want you li'l homies to think about everything I said. I want you to think about what you wearing, and why you wearing it, and think about how you wearing it, because those are the first impressions anyone gets before you even open your mouths, and that first impression is everything. Before you know it you'll be responsible for yourselves. You'll be wanting jobs, and you'll be hard pressed to get a job looking like you can't even look presentable. It's so much more than that, but I just want you to think li'l homies, don't be me. While you two are walking to school holding your pants up, just think of as many positive things that can come out of you wearing saggin' and baggin' clothes, and then see how many negative things can come from you wearing saggin' and baggin' clothes. Just think, li'l homies. THINK..."

The con walked off, leaving Mark and Jermaine to ponder his words.

For more on sagging go to:

[associatedcontent.com/.../sagging_pants_hip_hop_trend_or_pri
son.html](http://associatedcontent.com/.../sagging_pants_hip_hop_trend_or_pri
son.html)

SELF-REFLECTION

1. Ask yourself: What do you think others see when they see young men wearing clothes three and four times too big, when they have their pants sagging to the knees?
2. Did you know that clothing fads such as wearing plain colored Dickies matching shirts and pants sets come from prison? Dickies are prison-issued clothes with a name tag on them. So, next time you put on a set of beige or green Dickie-like work clothes, think about the two million plus men that have no choice but to wear these same plain clothes every day for years as they serve time behind prison walls. Wearing the prison uniform is just another way of psychologically preparing you for the prison gates.
3. Go inside your urban Burger King and McDonald's restaurants anywhere in America and you can find young men and even young women wearing sagging pants, while flipping burgers, and mopping floors. I've yet to see a fortune 500 executive, a doctor or nurse, an attorney, or a political leader, wearing sagging pants. Do you have a McDonald's fry cook mentality?
4. Are you a follower or a leader? If you think you are a leader, then explain what makes you a leader.

5. If given the opportunity to meet President Obama, would you wear sagging clothes?

Chapter II

What Up, Dog?

*Children have never been very
good at listening to their elders,
but they have never failed to
imitate them.*

-James Baldwin

June 12, 1859 Norfolk Virginia

“**B**efore we get started, I need everybody to bow their heads,” Big Jim said as he looked out at the anxious crowd of men, women, and children. “Dear God, I wanna thank you for bringing us all together on this beautiful sunny day. I wanna thank you for your graciousness in allowing the good God fearin’ white men and women folk of Virginia,” he paused, extending an arm behind him

displaying a long line of shackled and chained tired and battered black men and women, “ta continue doing your work, civilizing the savage beasts that stand before you and behind me. Thank you for salvaging 150 of the 290 nigger cargo that we rescued from the savage jungles of the West African continent, Amen.” He banged the gavel down on the podium, atop the platform he stood on. “Let the 82nd Suffolk County State Fair and slave auction begin.”

Loud and enthusiastic applause rang out from the huge crowd of patrons. Little boys and girls sat on the shoulders of their fathers and older brothers so they could get a good view of the scene unfolding in front of them.

“First, we have this,” he pointed to the man that was separated from the others and was shuffled to the front of the stage, “healthy strapping boy. Just look at him. Big black broad shoulders, strong long legs, and big hands and feet. This here boy is a mule. I knows they brains is small, but this here boy got a big enough noggin’ to house a little more brain than the otha’ nigras. That oughta make him a tad bit easier to train.”

The crowd broke out in laughter.

“And he got some good vocal chords. Just listen. Bark,” Big Jim shouted at the naked chained and shackled black man to his right. “I said bark.” Big Jim hit the battered and chained man in the ear with the three pound wooden gavel. “Moo, meow, open that mouth boy,” Big Jim said, holding the gavel over his head, threatening to take another swing.

The shackled man didn’t utter a sound. He just held his head high, and looked out at the crowd as if he were royalty about to address his constituents.

“Two lashes,” Big Jim said to the whip bearer.

“One,” the crowd counted aloud with Big Jim as the whip bearer lashed the slave’s bare back.

Still the proud naked, chained man didn’t utter a word. He only made a grunting sound.

Nineteen minutes and twenty lashes later, the man barked, moaned, and meowed.

“Looka here, you see what a little discipline can do. In less than a half hour, I done taught the boy how to sound like three different animals. Now don’t worry ‘bout all the blood and the damage to his back. Animals have a natural way in healing up. These nigra animals is not quite near as smart as a housecat, but they is loyal as a hound dog as long as you feed and discipline them. Now let’s start the bidding.

Two hours later, Bartholomew Washington and his ten-year-old son, Bradley were loading up the beaten slave and a couple others he’d purchased at the state fair auction.

“Dad, why do we need more slaves?” young Bradley asked his father.

“Because son, we can clean em’ up, breed ‘em like we do our foxhounds, and...”

“Sell their pups off,” young Bradley said, interrupting his father.

“Well, yes son, but we can sell the big one’s we don’t need for more than we bought them for. They work the fields and the slophouses for a year, we make money all around the board. And we can get almost as much for their litter as we can our foxhound litter,” Bart said patting his red headed son on the back, before getting inside the horse carriage, with the three slaves strapped behind the buggy.

“Calm down, boy,” Bart said to one of the four healthy fox hounds that rode inside the large carriage. “They ain’t gon’ bite,” Bart said to the dog, barking at the slaves that walked behind the carriage.

June 12, 1959 Norfolk Virginia

“Looka here, looka here, looka here. Do you see what I see, Cat daddy?” Mario asked addressing his friend as they stood outside the 500 liquor store.

“See it, baby, my eyes is on the sparrow. That foxy momma got my name invisibly written all on her backside,” Boo-Boo said right before taking a swig from the brown paper bag.

“Let me hit that,” Mario said reaching out for the bottle. After taking a swig from the bottle, Mario walked over to the bus stop where the woman stood. “Say momma, what a fox like you doin’ out by yourself this time a’night.”

“Excuse me?” She turned.

“A fox like *yourself* need a cat like *myself* to protect you from all the hounds that surely be barkin’ up your tree.”

“What is your name?” the lady asked.

He took off his brown fedora. “They call me Dog, but you can call me anything and anytime.” He smiled.

The city bus’s lights could be seen in the distance.

“I didn’t ask what they called you. I asked what your name was,” she said.

“Ah, foxy momma, it don’t matter what my name is. It matter what I...”

“My name is Lenora. I am a woman not an animal, you remember that. Now if you see me again, you either address me as Lenora, Ms., or ma’am.”

The bus came to a stop.

“Foxy momma, let me give you a ride.” Mario said looking behind him in the direction of his ten-year-old half-running Buick. “My car is parked right over there.” By the time he turned his head back toward her, she was getting on the bus.

“Dragon mouth, B&%*ch, you gon’ play a player like that. You just gon’ ignore a top cat like myself?”

Lenora turned at the top of the buses stairs. “You still a slave, full of the virus. The worst part is you don’t even know it,” she said shaking her head before the double rear doors closed.

June 12, 2009 Norfolk, Virginia

“Who’s the baddest b&%ch you know, girl?” Lameeka asked Renee.

“Uh, that would be me,” Renee said, as the two teens walked through the hall, heading toward the high school cafeteria.

“Not!” Lameeka stuck out her left hand in a stop sign gesture. “No, I am that B&%ch, all young B&%ches should strive to be like. I’m 16, and I rocks Prada, and Versace on a regular. Dooney, and Louey call me on my cell to approve their new lines of purses and,” she pointed a gold glitter fingernail in the air, “let me emphasize the *and*,” she placed a hand on her hips. “Dudes be fightin’ to spend that paper on a B&%ch. In the words of the second baddest B&%ch in the land, Li’l Kim, *‘Queen b&%ch, supreme &%tch, kill a nigga for my nigga by any means b&%ch. murder scene b&%ch, clean b&%ch, disease free b&%ch.’* And girl, I be that b&%ch that Li’l Kim rappin’ about.”

“My Niggettes. What up Dogs?” Trey called out, while catching up to the girls.

“What it do, dog?” Lameeka responded, touching fists with Trey.

“It do what I make it do, Queen Bee,” Trey said, as they all walked into the lunch room.

“Nigga, you know you ain’t need to summarize my gangsta. Sound my name out. Queen B%#ch, not no Queen Bee,” Lameeka said.

“My bad, Queen B%#ch,” he said.” He turned. “Yo, big dog,” he called out to where the lunch line ended. “I’m gon’ catch up with you B%#ches later,” he said, about to run off.

“Hold on, little buddy,” Mr. Chambers, the head of security at MLK High said, putting a hand on Trey’s shoulder. “All three of y’all,” he addressed the girls and Trey, “come with me,” he commanded while, walking out of the cafeteria, the three students behind him, voicing their protests.

Mario Chambers had worked in the school system for forty-nine years. Thirty as a janitor, and for the last nineteen, he’d been a crossing and security guard.

Minutes later, the two young ladies, and Trey sat in front of Mr. Chambers, in his small office.

“What did we do?” Trey asked.

“What you all have is very contagious. The good new is, I have the cure.” Mr. Chambers stood up, his belly covered the black security belt around his waist. “I too, was afflicted with the same disease most of us, and you three have.”

“Man, I ain’t got no disease,” Renee blurted out.

“Me neither. Whachu talkin’ about?” Lameeka asked sucking her teeth.

“Oh, you got it.” He shook his head. “You all got it bad, and if you’re not cured, the chances of you having a good life are extremely slim.”

“Man, what are you talking about?” Trey asked.

Mario Chambers was one of the coolest old heads that worked at MLK High. He always kept it real, and shot

straight with everybody. He'd tell you what was on his mind whether you wanted to hear it or not.

"Back in slavery times, the slave master infected us with the virus. He beat our ancestors until they gave up their names and took on the one's he wanted us to have. Names that separated us from our families, tribes, culture, our history. And after a couple generations, we had all but forgotten who we were. We were beaten into accepting our condition."

"Come on man, how many times we done heard that same ol' song?" Trey asked.

"You may have heard the song, but you need to listen to the lyrics. Now the sooner you let me finish, the sooner you can get back to being ignorant," Mr. Chambers said. "As I was saying, before we were kidnapped from our homes and brought to these shores, we were proud people. We knew who we were, and where we were going."

Trey tapped Lameeka on the knee, before looking back up at Mr. Chambers. "If we knew where we were going, how did we end up as slaves in America?" Trey asked.

"Drugs and alcohol. That's how. The slave master could only master the slave by making someone a slave. What is a slave? A slave is anyone who mentally submits themselves to another. Give someone drugs and or alcohol and they become high. Not in control of themselves. Easily manipulated by others who *are* in control of *themselves*, therefore enslaving them. The number one drug of the slave master is deception. And after being deceived for generations, we have become the deceivers."

"I'm confused," Renee said.

"Yeah, me too," Trey said twisting his neck.

"Okay, call a man a dog for five six generations. I mean every day all day. If he's not strong in knowing who he

is, and his foundation, where he came from, then he'll eventually begin to question who and what he is subconsciously. He begins acting like a dog, sniffing behind everything with a skirt, having babies and leaving them to the mother and the state to raise, and a few generations later, no longer does the slave master need to call you a dog. You call yourself and others like you, who don't know who they are, dogs. Using the term endearingly mind you. And worst you act like animals. Many act like mad dogs or dogs in heat.

“When I was your ages, it was cat, cat daddy, cool cat, foxy momma. All animals. A generation later it's dog. My dog, big dog, and the B word. When I was young, call a woman a B and it's time to fight. But we call each other what we do, because we don't realize that we are sick. We don't realize that the Ignorant Virus has plagued a nation of black folks. You ever hear a white man saying what's up cracka', my honkie? You ever hear a white woman bragging on how she is the Queen B?”

Lameeka put a hand over her mouth. “You heard me, Mr. Chambers,” she said all bug eyed.

“Didn't need to. I hear enough, and I've heard enough. As easy as it is to say Dog, Cat, B, you can say King, What's up, Queen, because then you are talking about the essence of who you are and who you came from. Try it. Start calling your friends King and Queen, and we can start a happy, positive, feel good revolution.

SELF-REFLECTION

1. Why would you call yourself and your friends by animal names?
2. Why are blacks the only race that addresses each other using animal names?
3. What difference does it make how you address someone?
4. You whistle at dogs. You whistle at women. You call women names that are worse than what you call your household pet. Those same whistles and names someone has called your mother, grandmother, sister, aunt, girlfriend, wife. How does that make you feel?
5. What messages did you get from this story?

Chapter III

Blaze One

The tragedy in life doesn't lie in not reaching your goals. The tragedy lies in having no goals to reach.

-Benjamin E. Mays

“*Y*oung Dro’, wait up,” JT hollered out as he jumped off the porch and ran to catch up with his friend, Andro.

“Shawty?” JT said catching his breath. “What it do?”

“It do what I make it do,” Andro said giving the much older JT a pound. “On my way to school.”

“What ‘dat be ‘bout?” JT asked frowning up. “You been on some ole SpongeBob Square Pants lame kick these last couple weeks.”

“Nah, man, I’m still Dro’. I just gotta handle my business.”

“What bizness? Yo.” JT bobbed his head. “Peep game.” He pulled a clear, rolled up baggie out the pocket of his sagging Dickie work pants. “Smell this.” He put the baggie to Dro’s nose.

“Smell a’ight,” Andro said.

“A’ight.” He frowned up.” Cuz, this some Osama Bin Laden, certified Pakistani Indo. Man, this doe’ will make you strap a bomb on ya back, wit’ a happy face plastered across your mug.” JT playfully slapped Andro on his back. “Come on, Dro’, skip school, blow some trees wit’ your boy. And after we get right we can catch the Marta down to the welfare office and pick up a couple food stamp freaks.”

Andro stopped at the corner. He could see his high school where they stood. It was still about a four block walk.

“Look JT, I’m seventeen in the eleventh grade with tenth grade credits. I’m already a year and a half behind, my GPA is non-existent, and I’m always forgettin’ stuff. Simple stuff. I’m squarin’ up, dude. I gotta prepare for my future, ‘fore I won’t have one.”

“Squarin’ up! Future!” JT patted his chest, “Cuz, this me. Your boy.” He held up the bag of weed. “This is the future. Get high til’ we die. Smoke ‘til’ we choke. And sell what we can’t smoke.”

Andro knew JT wouldn’t understand. He’d avoided him for over a week now. He knew this day was coming, but he hadn’t prepared a script to convince JT that he was changing his life.

“Cuz, you know my moms be home all day sweatin’ me about a J.O.B. You got the crib to yourself until six.” JT crossed one arm over his stomach and rested one hand under his chin. “Tell you what, skip school today, let’s get blazed, and pick up a couple lonely welfare mommas down at social services, and at the end of the day if you still feel the same way, I’ll respect your groove, cool?”

Andro conceded, giving JT some dap. They turned and began walking back toward the house that Andro shared with his mom, and now his Uncle Keitz. Andro couldn’t tell

JT his real motivation for conceding to JT. So he decided to show him.

Fifteen minutes later, the two walked into the kitchen through the side door.

“You forgot something?” Keitz asked without turning around. His back was to JT and his nephew. Keitz wore some prison-issued beige shower shoes, a pair of white boxers and a matching wife beater T-shirt. “I would offer you and your company some breakfast, but this is all the eggs we got,” he said flipping his veggie omelet over in the skillet.

“Nah, I ain’t—”

“Haven’t,” Keitz corrected.

“Haven’t forgotten anything.”

Keitz moved the fork to the side and poured the omelet onto a paper plate, before turning around.

“Little, JT,” Keitz shouted, staring at JT. “Nah, that ain’t you. Can’t be. All grown up. Little pissy pants, JT Elliott.”

JT stood there wondering who this dude was. He thought about calling him out about the pissy pants comment but the thought quickly passed since this dude looked, and was built like the actor Ving Rhames.

“Me and your brother, Grip was tight. I still think about him.” Keitz shook his head.

“My bad, JT,” Andro said, looking at a confused looking JT. “This is my Uncle I-Keitz, but we call him Keitz.”

Keitz put his plate down on the counter and embraced JT. “You look good, little brotha’. How’s Ms. Ann?”

“She’s good. She don’t work no more, cause of her Sugar, and her High blood-pressure, but she ain’t let that slow her down.”

Keitz nodded. “Good for her. And you, JT, whachu doing for it?”

He shrugged, “Man you know, with the recession, it’s rough out here. Ain’t no jobs, and if you *do* find somebody that’s hiring, they sho’ nuff ain’t trying to hire a brother with a felony in his jacket.”

“Did you go to college? You gotta trade?” Keitz asked.

“Nah, not really. I just do a little this and that, you know,” JT said.

“A little this and that, huh?” Andro, why you say, you came back home?” Keitz asked.

“I didn’t say Unc. But JT is one of my road dogs—”

“I don’t see no animals in here, do either of you?” Keitz asked.

Both of them shook their heads, wondering why Keitz came out the blue with that question.

“Just wanted to make sure.” He nodded. “I see two men and if I had a mirror I’d see three. JT is a man, Andro, not a road dog. He doesn’t walk on all fours. I don’t wanna hear you call anyone a road dog again, nephew. Now finish telling me why you aren’t in school.”

“JT, got an ounce of Indo weed, and he convinced me to cut school.”

“I thought we—”

“Hold on, Unc.” Andro stuck out his arm before Keitz could go off. “JT is my friend. I’m not going back on anything I committed to, but I brought him here to talk with you.” Andro looked at JT. “Sorry, JT, but my Uncle is the reason I’m squaring up. You need to listen to him. Dude, I love you too much to not try and save you.”

“Save me? Save me from what?”

“From yourself,” Keitz said, before turning to his nephew. “I’m proud of you, nephew. Now you go on to school. I got this,” he said looking back at JT.

“All right, Unc.” JT glanced over at his friend. “You better appreciate this. I’m gon’ not only miss first period, but I’m getting detention because of you.”

JT stuck his arms out. “Hey, I don’t know what type of time you two is on, but I gotta date with some Philly blunts and some doe’. It was good meeting you, big homie, but I’m outta here like last year.” He turned to leave.

“Open that door if you wanna swallow every tooth you got in your mouth,” Keitz said, his voice filled with force. “Go on to school now, Andro, I said I got it from here.”

Andro couldn’t get out of the kitchen door fast enough.

“Hold on, pimpin.” JT waved an arm in front of Keitz. “You got the wrong one. I’m a grown man. You ain’t just gon’ talk to me any ol’ kinda way.”

Keitz took a couple steps forward. A paper plate with eggs and toast separated the two men. “You may be grown in age, but you have a child’s mentality, so I will speak to you and handle you like you act, and handle yourself.”

“Say what?”

“So, now you deaf, huh?”

“Nah, homie, I just wanted to make sure I heard you right.”

“Look, fool, you already gon’ make me call in. I only been on the job for a week, I might lose it, but it is what it is. I’ll get or I’ll make another job. I can’t get or make another you. Now, what you are going to do is, come into the dining room and sit your narrow behind down in one of my sister’s dining room chairs while I eat these cold eggs, and last, you

are going to take some of that wolf out your voice. I hope we understand each other.” He paused, staring at JT’s slim, but tall frame. “Cause if we don’t...”

JT knew better than to leave his burner at the crib. But he didn’t expect any drama on his block, especially this early in the morning. “Big homie, you don’t even know me for real, for real.” He shrugged while taking a seat at the dining room table. “Why you all up in mine?”

Keitz swallowed his food, and leaned toward JT. “Cause I can. And, because,” he stood up from the table and pointed to his mid section, where a big tattoo covered his whole stomach. “*At war for life*. I had this engraved on me while doing time in Jackson State Penitentiary. My war is against anything and anyone trying to take another young brother’s mind off the freedom prize, as mine and so many minds are taken every day, by our mis-educational, one-sided school system, our unjust judicial system, and our mis-guided bass-ackward traditional beliefs.”

JT took the baggie from his pocket and began pouring the contents onto the Cherrywood dining room table.

“What are you doing?” Keitz asked, finishing up the last of his omelet.

“I figure I’m gon’ be here for a while, might as well put one in the air.”

“Put it up or it’s going down the sink,” Keitz said with a calm seriousness. “Your brother was high. He thought he was smoking some killa weed, but in all actuality, it was laced with Angel Dust. Grip was older than me, but we were close. I knew him well. He didn’t touch sherm, acid, or anything stronger than weed. But that night, eighteen years ago, July 4th 1991, we were at a private party on the rooftop of some condo downtown, when Grip started flapping his arms like a bird. He kept saying he was black Superman.

Nobody paid him no mind, 'cause he was always clowning. Before we knew it, he jumped off the thirty-one story building. JT, he was high on," Keitz pointed to the plastic baggie, "weed laced with dust. He's dead. How old are you? Twenty-one, twenty-two?"

"Twenty-three," he muttered.

"Same age as Grip when he jumped to his death. You wanna be like Grip? You wanna die at twenty-three? The prime of your life. Or do you wanna be like me, thirty-six years old, living in your sister's basement, after serving half your life behind bars for armed bank robbery? I robbed First National after smoking some sherm, so I could cop some weed and some blow to put out on the streets." Keitz stood up. "Look at me, JT. Just take a look at me. Because I am you in thirteen years, if you don't wake your ignorant behind up."

"Man, I ain't you and I sho ain't my brother. I'm my own man."

Keitz shook his head. "No you're not. You're a ho', and your pimp is the dried leaves in that plastic bag." Keitz pointed to the plastic baggie. "You don't have a job, but you got two, three hundred dollars worth of dope spread out on my sister's dining room table. *A man?* That's what you think you are? Your momma's sick and living off of disability and social security, probably. And your grown behind, living at home, leaching off of her, and running around with a seventeen-year-old kid. Where is the manliness in that? Huh? Answer me, JT!"

JT knocked the dining room chair back, jumping out of his seat. "Ain't no jobs out here. I done tried. Ain't nobody trying to hire a black man with a rap sheet! I tried, man! I tried! I ain't got no skills. All I know is these streets. All I know is slinging dope, hustlin'."

Keitz shook his head. “Nah, you know so much more, but you don’t even know what you know, ‘cause you can’t think right high half the time. But, I will say this, knowing that you don’t know is the first step. So what you gon’ do about not knowing?”

JT had a look on his face like he really wanted to find a different way. “What can I do?”

“First, you can clear your head. Stop letting drugs cloud your thinking. And don’t give me that, smoking herb clears your head foolishness. That’s bull. It’s a depressant. That means it slows you down. The root of the word is depress, to hold back. You said yourself that we’re in a recession; the next worst thing is a *depression*. The media tells you we’re in a recession but we are really in a depression. And while the country is recessing and being depressed, you have to press on. It’s not like the military went door to door, took everyone’s money and credit cards and burnt them in a large oven. There is more money in circulation now than it was in the Clinton era when the economy was stable.”

He took a deep breath as he continued. “So I say this to say, that as long as grass grows you got a job. So don’t give me mess about nobody hiring. Hire yourself. You got enough money to buy that Indo, you have enough to go on line to Craigslist and buy a used lawnmower, a weed eater, and a rake. You can go door to door for now, and graciously ask your neighbors if you can cut their grass, clean their yards, and what not. You can buy a water hose, some supplies, and go door to door and ask your neighbors if you can wash their cars. You can buy a used pressure washer online and go to small business owners and ask them if you can pressure wash their parking lots. You say you know these streets, all you know is hustlin’. You will be on the streets

and you will be hustlin'. But you are only hustlin' backward if you keep spending your money getting high, escaping reality, escaping the real world, like your brother did. Like I did. Like over one-third of our young brothers are doing. So tell me, JT, whachu' gon' do?"

JT put his hands behind his head. "Man, I don't know."

Keitz slapped JT upside his bald head. "What the hell you mean you don't know."

"I don't know!" he shouted.

"You gon' know when you come home one day from doin' nothing and your momma's laid out on the living room floor, dead as a doorknob?" He popped him again. "You gon' know when your momma gets the call that her last and youngest child is found dead, or has been arrested again? You gon' know when your mother dies of a broken heart about her boys? You gon' know when your sons or daughters are found dead in a drug related homicide? You gon' know when your daughter is locked up for selling her body for drugs?" Keitz shouted as he continued slapping JT upside his head.

JT slid to the ground with his back to the dining room wall. "You right." He shook his head. "I can't keep letting my momma down. I don't know how you know, but I have two kids. Justin is two and Simone is four. They don't even live five miles from me and I might have seen them both a dozen times, and I ain't never done anything for them. Nothing. Exactly like my father ain't done nothing for me and Grip. I can't let them down. I don't want them to be like me," he cried.

"You can't let yourself down, JT." Keitz slid to the floor beside JT. "You have to man up." Keitz took JT in his arms and embraced him in a bear hug. "I know you don't

know how to be a man. I didn't know how until real men in prison who will never see the freeworld as we see it, taught me what it was to be a man. What it was to take responsibility for myself first and then others."

"Why? Why would you do this? Why would you help me?" JT sniffed, not at all worried about his tough image.

"Cause I love you, and I love what I know you can be. I'm doing this because I love me. I'm doing this because I love my father and he tells me that I am my brother's keeper. He tells me to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And as I honor my father, I honor His sons, and His daughters. I honor you, lil' brother and for the sake of your own brother, I hope that you'll honor yourself."

SELF-REFLECTION

1. Why do you think so many young adults smoke marijuana?
2. Do you smoke weed? Have you ever tried it? And how did it or does it make you feel?
3. Name five long term effects of smoking marijuana.
4. Why do you think people like to get high, or if you smoke, why do you get high?
5. Can you relate to anyone in the above story?

