

T H E
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A T I
O N SHAI
LINNE

FINDING HOPE in THE FIGHT
for ETHNIC UNITY

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Roses Are Big

“I have some news for you, kids. We’re moving to the Northeast!”

My mother seemed genuinely excited about it. As she talked to us, my fourteen-year-old sister Shenita and nine-year-old me shared a knowing glance. Words weren’t necessary. We immediately knew that everything was about to change, and we weren’t happy about it. By “Northeast,” my mom meant Northeast Philadelphia, which was literally on the other side of town, as we lived in Southwest Philly. In Philly in the 80’s, the Northeast represented two things: The growing sprawl of suburbia fueled by the White people who had left the inner city a generation prior. And, for Black families like mine, it represented opportunity—the opportunity for better schools, better housing, better jobs. It also provided something of an escape for those who could see the writing on the wall as the early stages of the crack epidemic began to ravage our neighborhoods.

I definitely knew I was Black before we moved to Northeast Philly. But having brown skin didn't carry much significance in my preadolescent mind. It was just another fact of life, like wearing shell top Adidas, eating Apple Jacks cereal, or watching cartoons on Saturday afternoon. The kids in my neighborhood in Southwest Philly all had brown skin like mine. The magnet elementary school I attended (which was a thirty-minute train ride away) was extremely diverse. It was normal to see kids and teachers of many different shades, hair textures, eye colors, and accents. "Race" simply wasn't something we discussed. We were too busy learning the latest Michael Jackson song, practicing our "moonwalk," and looking for cardboard to breakdance on. But the Northeast was a different beast entirely.

When I walked into my 5th grade classroom for the first time that warm April afternoon, it was crystal clear that I was different. I could sense people staring at me. I could hear them chuckle. I was the only Black boy in the class, one of a small handful in the entire school. For the first time, being Black was no longer a simple fact of life like it was for Tootie in the 1980's sitcom. Instead, being Black was weaponized and used against me. Within weeks, as I was walking to the basketball court, I had my first experience (of many) of someone yelling "Nigger!" at me from a moving vehicle.

One of my earliest memories of my new school was walking into the lunchroom and seeing some kids huddled together and laughing. As I walked over to the group, a boy named Lance was reciting a poem:

"Roses are big, violets are . . ."

But as soon as Lance saw me, he stopped, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. The group dispersed and I didn't think much of it. Later that day in recess, Billy, who clearly had less shame than Lance, came up to me, and, with a big smile on his face, shared the rest of the poem with me:

*"Roses are big, violets are bigger
You have lips like an African nigger!"*

All the other kids who were there exploded into uncontrollable laughter. I didn't cry in the moment, but the sense of belittlement and humiliation I felt still puts a knot in my chest more than three decades later.

Thankfully, incidents such as these don't represent the totality of my experiences in the Northeast. I developed good friendships with White and Jewish kids, and many of those lasted throughout high school, college, and into adulthood. For every Lance or Billy, there were a dozen Justins and Jills, close friends who treated me with the utmost respect and welcomed me like I was a part of their own family. And yet, as I grew from a ten-year-old into a teenager, there was a consistent, steady stream of experiences that would remind me that my skin color was viewed by many as some kind of threat.

Disciplined by Hip-hop

I didn't grow up in a Christian home. My mother grew up going to church, but in her early adult years, she strayed from the God she had come to know in her youth. My sister Shenita and I were

born out of wedlock. My mother held it down as a provider and did her best to raise us as she dealt with all the challenges that came along with being a single mom. But she hadn't imparted the knowledge of God to me, and very soon, other influences began to shape my eager young mind.

I grew up on hip-hop music in the '80s and '90s. I was especially drawn to East Coast artists who specialized in deep lyricism with a positive message. Artists like Eric B. and Rakim, KRS-One, and Public Enemy were in constant rotation for me as a youth. What I didn't realize as I listened was that not only was I enjoying their music, but I was also being indoctrinated in their often anti-Christian views. Unbeknownst to me, a form of discipleship was taking place. Now, over thirty years later, I can still recall the lyrics that were shaping my young mind.

I remember learning from Public Enemy that Farrakhan was a prophet. I remember learning from KRS-One that Black people in America wouldn't be Christians if their slave masters weren't Christians.

Before there was such a thing as "woke," being aware of the injustices that many Black people face in America was known as being "conscious." And I loved "conscious" hip-hop. It was lyrically dense, rich with soulful samples, and filled with explicit messages that aimed to inform the listener about the social ills of the day. Chuck D, the front man for Public Enemy, one of the more popular conscious artists, famously referred to their music and that of their conscious cohorts as "Black people's CNN." This stood in stark contrast to the so-called gangsta rap of the late '80s and early '90s that was popularized by artists like N.W.A. and Ice T. While gangsta rap emphasized and often glorified the vices that plagued

the Black community (violence, drug-dealing, etc.), “conscious” hip-hop stressed a message of Black empowerment while speaking out against Black-on-Black crime. I connected deeply with this kind of hip-hop, which was neatly summed up in a phrase coined by KRS-One: “Edutainment.”

By the time I graduated high school, my mom had come back to the Lord and began talking to me about coming to church. But at that point, my worldview was solidified; I was decidedly anti-Christian. Hip-hop had successfully catechized me. Hip-hop taught me that Islam was a better (and cooler) choice than Christianity. Hip-hop taught me that Christianity was the White man’s religion. Hip-hop taught me that there were many roads to God. Hip-hop taught me that the Bible wasn’t reliable. My attitude toward my mom was basically, “If that Christian stuff works for you, cool. But don’t try to push it off on me.” This attitude remained with me, and my hostility toward Christianity only increased during college.

College Life: “Spiritual” and Still Black

The University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where I studied theater, had two departments: the visual arts (painting, illustration, animation, graphic design, etc.) and the performing arts (theater, dance, vocal performance, musicianship, etc.). Although I was a theater major, I tended to spend more time with friends in the visual arts department. I’ve always had a pretty low-key, laid-back personality, so it shouldn’t have been surprising that I found theater people a bit too dramatic for me. What I appreciated most about my visual artist friends was the kinds of in-depth conversations we would have. More often than not, our conversations

usually gravitated toward something dealing with the intersection of “race,” religion, and hip-hop. As I think about it now, these themes have formed a through line in my life, evident even in the fact that I’m writing this book.

By the time I got to college, I was pretty clear on where I stood on religion. First of all, I wasn’t religious; I was “spiritual,” thank you very much. And, I was agnostic. My favorite rapper, KRS-One, talked about metaphysics a lot. I didn’t really know what metaphysics was (still don’t), but it sounded like something deep to say when someone asked me what I believed. I had read *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield and of course that made me a guru on all things New Age. I also read the Tao Te Ching and went on a Buddhist meditation retreat in the mountains of Santa Fe, New Mexico, not to mention making it almost halfway through *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. So in my mind, I was also an expert on eastern philosophy. Finally, I was a vegetarian and had dreadlocks. Those two things *had* to increase my spiritual index. Basically, I had something of a salad bar theology. Pick and choose what works for me from all religions (except Christianity, of course) and throw it onto my spiritual plate.

In college, I was far removed from my “roses are big” days. The White college students I interacted with prided themselves on not having an iota of racism in their hearts. My Blackness wasn’t weaponized against me at school. If anything, it went more in the opposite direction, toward fetishization. Yet, even while at college, I was reminded that Lances and Billys don’t stay children. They grow up, often living lives with the “roses are big” mindsets fully intact and unchallenged by meaningful interactions with people of color.

One day, I was walking alone in broad daylight down a street in center city Philadelphia to visit some friends who lived in off-campus housing. I was coming from a rehearsal for a play I was working on. I had my headphones on. Since it was the mid-'90s, I must have been playing *The Score* by The Fugees, *Stakes Is High* by De La Soul, or *Illadelph Halflife* by The Roots. As I walked up the side street toward my friends' house, music blasting in my ears, I caught some movement just to the right. I looked over my shoulder and saw a police officer jogging up the street in my direction. My first thought was, "I wonder what happened up the block." Maybe I was lulled into some kind of detachment from reality by Lauryn Hill serenading my eardrums with "Killing Me Softly," but it never even occurred to me that he might be coming after me because, well, *I hadn't done anything*.

I was quickly snatched out of that fleeting moment of obliviousness. The officer grabbed me and yelled, "Up against the wall!" Within moments, what seemed like a fleet of police cars lined the tiny street my friends lived on. They were coming for *me*! Before I could even ask what was going on, my book bag was confiscated, and I was handcuffed and thrown into the back of a police cruiser. When I tried to ask questions, one of the officers said, "Shut up!" It would be many years later that I would educate myself about things like the Fourth Amendment and probable cause, but something tells me that having that information then would not have helped me.

It's funny what can go through your mind when your hands are cuffed behind your back in a cop car and you haven't been told why. I knew I hadn't done anything on *that* day. But that didn't make me completely innocent. I was in a party crowd and

smoked weed regularly. But how could they know that? Had they been following me? Did they tap my phone? Was this about me writing graffiti in high school? Was this about . . . wait a second . . . my backpack! I had a prop gun from another play I was working on in my backpack! What were they going to think?

My speculation was brought to a halt when another unmarked car slowly pulled up beside the police cruiser I sat in. This time, a young White couple got out and approached the window next to where I sat. Suddenly it became clear. They were there to identify me as a suspect in some crime! When they got to the window, Officer Shut up! said, “Hey! Look over here.” I turned my head to face the freshly traumatized couple. Surely, it was only a few seconds, but in those few moments, time stood still. How did I get here? Just moments earlier I had been reciting Shakespeare.

Now my fate was in the hands of two people who had just been victimized. All they had to say was, “Yes. That’s him,” and the entire course of my life might have changed in a moment. A felony charge. Expelled from school. Sitting in county jail until trial because my mom couldn’t afford bail. The gut-wrenching choice of pleading guilty to something I didn’t do to get less time or risking years in prison by taking it before a jury. A felony conviction following me like an obsessed stalker for the rest of my life, affecting future job, housing, income, and girlfriend prospects. All of these things were on the table, as far as I was concerned.

Also, given the shock of whatever just happened to them, would they be able to properly identify the person? Were they the type who think all Black people look alike? Was this robbery or assault (or whatever it was that caused ten police cars to pull up on me) the first time this couple had ever interacted with a young

Black male? I've never felt more vulnerable and helpless than in those few seconds. My emotions ran the gamut from fear to anger to sadness to disbelief to dread. I even felt empathy for the couple, as it was clear that someone had violated them. *But it wasn't me!*

Our eyes locked. They looked at each other. Then back at me. And back at each other. Finally, as my life was flashing before me for the eighth time, the man turned to the cop and said, "No, that's not him." And with that, they stepped away from the window. A few minutes later, the sergeant pulled me out of the back seat. After he uncuffed me, he looked me in the eye and said something to me that crystallized not only this entire event, but all the "racism" I had ever experienced up to that point.¹

After he uncuffed me, the sergeant looked me in the eye, and with a half smirk dismissively said, "See! That worked out well for you, didn't it?" No explanation as to why I was stopped, and certainly no apology. Just, "That worked out well for you." Well, no, sergeant, I thought. That actually did not work out well for me. I might, perhaps, think that it worked out well for me if I actually committed the crime and they failed to identify me. Or maybe if I was engaged in some other criminal activity at the time, I might think it worked out well for me. But as a person who had never been arrested before, let alone spent any time in jail; as a person who abhorred violence outside of Tarantino films; as a person who heeded my mom's advice when she repeatedly told me as a teenager, "Whatever you do, don't get caught up in the system, son. Once you get in, that stays with you forever and you never really get out"; as a person who was minding his own business and had just been scared to death by the police, no. I did not think it "worked out well" for me.

His question implied that my primary outlook as I walked away from this should be gratitude rather than what it actually was—trauma. His question did not (and I suppose, could not) take into account the person who was standing before him. Had he actually known me, I can't imagine him saying such a thing. All he knew was what I looked like and that I "fit the description" of so many others he had arrested previously.

After he said that, he handed me my backpack (prop gun and all . . . had they even checked the bag?), and I walked the final half block to my friends' house, where I had quite a story to tell them.

College Dropout

As I mentioned earlier, hip-hop disciplined me in many ways. One of the other lessons I learned was that regularly smoking marijuana (or "blunts") came along with the culture. That practice, combined with the free-spirited lifestyles of my new artistic college friends, meant that every day of college was a party. This caught up with me when, in my junior year, with three semesters left until graduation, I basically partied my way out of school. I dropped one too many classes (an 8:30 a.m. class, completely unreasonable for someone who partied until 4 a.m. every day), which put me under the required credits for financial aid. And, just like that, my college career was over.

After I dropped out, I started a theater company with some friends and alumni from UArts. We put on a few productions, and we were beginning to make a bit of a name for ourselves in the Philly theater scene. However, I felt like things were moving too slowly, and I wanted to get out of Philly. So I came up with a plan.

I would move to Spain to pursue acting (and Spanish women). After seeing the world a little bit, I would return to New York and launch my career as an independent film actor and director. My youthful arrogance had me convinced that all this was absolutely going to happen. It was just a matter of time. So I started taking conversational Spanish classes and preparing for the move.

I was good friends with a guy named Carlos. We ran together in the same crowd at college. Around the same time I dropped out, Carlos had abruptly moved to a small city in the deep South, of all places. When I told him about my plans, he suggested I move to live with him. I could stay at his place, rent free, and save up money for Spain. That made sense to me, so I packed my stuff and headed south. This was quite the culture shock for me coming from Philly. Everything felt so slow. There was really nothing to do but get drunk and high. So, I found the party crowd there and that's what I did. Little did I know that God was sending me to the deep South to have an encounter with Jesus.

The Light of Christ Is a Blazin' One

Life in the South became routine very quickly. I got temp jobs in order to save money. I would work second shift from 3 to 11, get off work and head to our apartment, where there was a party every night. Get drunk and high, stay up until 5 a.m. or so, sleep until 1 or 2 p.m., go back to work and do it all over again the next day.

In our circle of friends, there was a girl named Heather. Heather was friends with Carlos's girlfriend at the time. She was also an outspoken Christian. This was the first time that I ever had an evangelistic Christian among my peers. I had other friends who

got saved, but once that happened, they usually stopped hanging out with me. Most of the Christians I met were content to keep their beliefs to themselves. Not so with Heather. For her, it seemed like her Christianity was central to her identity. A few things struck me about Heather. She would always hang around us, but she wouldn't participate in our partying. She would come to the parties and rather than get drunk with us, she would drink a soda or a cup of water and just hang out. Heather was *joyful* and genuinely kind. Not kind in the sense that she wanted something from you and thought kindness was the way to get it. No, she was just a kind person, period.

She stood out in my crowd; we were usually sarcastic, cynical, and downright mean. To my shame, we did not treat her well. Everyone in my circle was in general agreement that Christianity was ridiculous, if not offensive. (What I later came to realize is that it wasn't "Christianity" I hated. It was Christ Himself.) A Christian in our circles was like a bloody fish in the midst of piranhas. We clowned her all the time, making fun of her, both behind her back and to her face. Heather's response to it was something I had never seen before. She returned all of our mockery and insults with nothing but kindness. I didn't understand it and it made me pause and ask myself, "What's up with this girl?"

One night we were at a party in Carlos's apartment. I was high on LSD. Before that night, if you would have asked me if I believed in good and evil, in my salad bar/pseudo-New Age worldview, I would have answered, "No. I don't believe there's such a thing as objective evil, or evil for its own sake. I believe that there are simply different levels of good." However, as I sat in Carlos's living room that night and looked around the room, I got the keen sense that I

was in the presence of the demonic. This sense cut through all of my philosophical presuppositions and arrested me on the spot. I was terrified. I went out on the balcony to clear my mind. As I was out there, I began to think about some of the things my mom had told me years before.

I realized two things that night: *Trying to run my own life wasn't working.* The best Shai could do on his own was drop out of college, get drunk and high every day, and end up down South on a balcony with something demonic in the living room. And, *I had rejected the Bible without ever reading it for myself.* I had so many arguments against Christianity. In fact, I liked debating with Christians to try to make them look foolish. But all the arguments I had against the Bible were things that had been told to me by others (mostly KRS-One). I was just repeating their arguments. I had never actually picked up a Bible and read it! The foolishness of that hit me like a Dr. Dre snare drum. How could I reject something without even looking into what it teaches?

Not long after that night, I walked into a Borders bookstore and grabbed a Bible for the first time. I found a chair, sat down, and began to read. I had no idea where to begin, so I just opened to the middle (I don't recommend studying the Bible this way! But God met me where I was). The first thing that I remember reading is Psalm 25:7, where David prays, "Do not remember the sins of my youth or my acts of rebellion" (CSB). This verse cut me to the heart. It became clear to me that I was rebellious and that I had rejected God my whole life. I snatched His blessings every day, and like the nine lepers in Luke 17, never once returned to give Him thanks. As I read, God was beginning to open up my eyes to who He is and who I am, in light of Him. Funny enough,

as I was reading the Bible at Borders, Heather and a friend walked up to me. Heather had a huge smile on her face. She didn't say much, but I could tell she was really excited. I didn't get it at the time, but I do now. She had obviously been praying for her "party crowd" friends, and here was the one who was perhaps the most hostile to Christianity, sitting there reading the Bible.

I let my mom know what was going on, and she sent me a care package, including a small booklet that contained the gospel of John. This seemed easy enough, so I began to read it. In fact, I spent all my free time reading through John. Back at Carlos's apartment, there would be parties going on in the living room, and I would be in my bedroom reading through John. As I read, I was confronted with the person of Jesus Christ and His claims about Himself. I was mesmerized. Truly, no one ever spoke like this man! I was also confronted with how ignorant I was about what the Bible teaches. I was floored when I learned that Jesus is God, the Word who became flesh.

Everything about Him demonstrated that He was the embodiment of divinity. His wisdom and understanding; His authority; His power over nature; His ability to know people's thoughts; His prophecies; His humility and compassion. When I read of His sacrificial death and victorious resurrection, it was like truth being injected into my lifeless veins. It was self-authenticating in a way that caused me to believe and accept it as infallibly true. As I finished the book of John, I knew without question that I owed all my allegiance to this precious Jesus and that it would be my highest honor to be His follower. It was right there, in my bedroom, as I read of the person and work of Christ, that I was born again from above and transferred from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of light. This was March of 1999.

Within a few weeks, I was back in Philadelphia, a completely different person. I had been miraculously transformed. When I left to live with Carlos, I was a Jesus-hating, New Age–embracing, weed-smoking hedonist. When I returned, I was on fire for the Lord Jesus Christ and ready to tell everyone about Him. What I didn't realize at the time was that God, in His mercy (and with His sense of humor), was about to use the very thing that disciplined me in my hatred for Him as the means through which I would help proclaim His supremacy: hip-hop.

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