I remember the first time I saw Emmett Louis Till.

I came across his photo in a Jet magazine that marked the anniversary of his death. At the time, I was convinced he wasn’t real, or at least that he wasn’t a person. Mutilated beyond recognition, he looked more like a prop from a movie to me; a monster from some over-the-top horror flick.

But he was a person, a boy, and his story was a cautionary tale, even three decades after he died. “Know your worth,” my mom would say, “but also know that not everyone values you as much as I do.”

Still, Emmett wasn’t real to me.

In a way, he was a tale of yesteryear. There was no way I’d ever have to worry about anything like that happening to me or to someone I knew. Things had changed, even in Mississippi.

I grew up in a neighborhood that’s notorious for all the wrong reasons. While everything they showed on the news was true, there was so much more that you wouldn’t see unless you lived there. My neighbors were family. The neighborhood drug dealer was a superhero who gave kids money for snacks and beat up pedophiles who tried to snatch little girls off the street. The cops could be superheroes too, but I was taught at a young age to be “mindful” around them. We’d all heard stories, and they were realer than Emmett.

I remember the first time I saw the video of Oscar Grant. I was in college, which was in a nicer part of town than where I lived, but only ten minutes away from it, and it was very, very white. I did everything I could so no one would label me as the “black girl from the hood.” I could leave home blasting Tupac loudly, but by the time I arrived to pick up a friend, I was listening to the Jonas Brothers. I kept quiet whenever race came up, despite the glances I’d get because as the “token black girl,” I was expected to speak.

But Oscar did something to me. Suddenly, Emmett wasn’t history. Emmett was still reality.

The video was undeniable evidence that had never been provided for the stories I’d heard. Yet my classmates, who had never heard such tales, had their own opinions about it:

“He should’ve just done what they said.” “I heard he was an ex-con and a drug dealer.” “They were just doing their job.” And I hate to admit it, but I still remained silent.

I was hurt, no doubt. And angry. Frustrated. Straight-up pissed. I knew plenty of Oscars. I grew up with them and I was friends with them. This was like being told that they deserved to die.

As the unrest took place in Oakland, I wondered how my community would react if that happened to one of our Oscars . . . or if I became an Oscar.

From all of those questions and emotions, The Hate U Give was born.

I’ve always told stories. When I can’t find a way to say the words out loud, I create characters who do it for me. The Hate U Give started as a short story, and I thought I was done telling Starr and Khalil’s story because I foolishly hoped Oscar wouldn’t happen again.

But then there was Trayvon. Michael. Eric. Tamir.

And there was more anger, frustration, and hurt for me, my peers, and the kids in my neighborhood who saw themselves in those gentlemen. So I expressed those feelings the best way I knew how, through story, in hopes that I would give a voice to every kid who feels the same way I do and is not sure how to express it.

But my ultimate hope is that everyone who reads this book, no matter their experiences, walks away from it understanding those feelings and sharing them in some way.

And maybe then, Emmett Louis Till can truly become history.