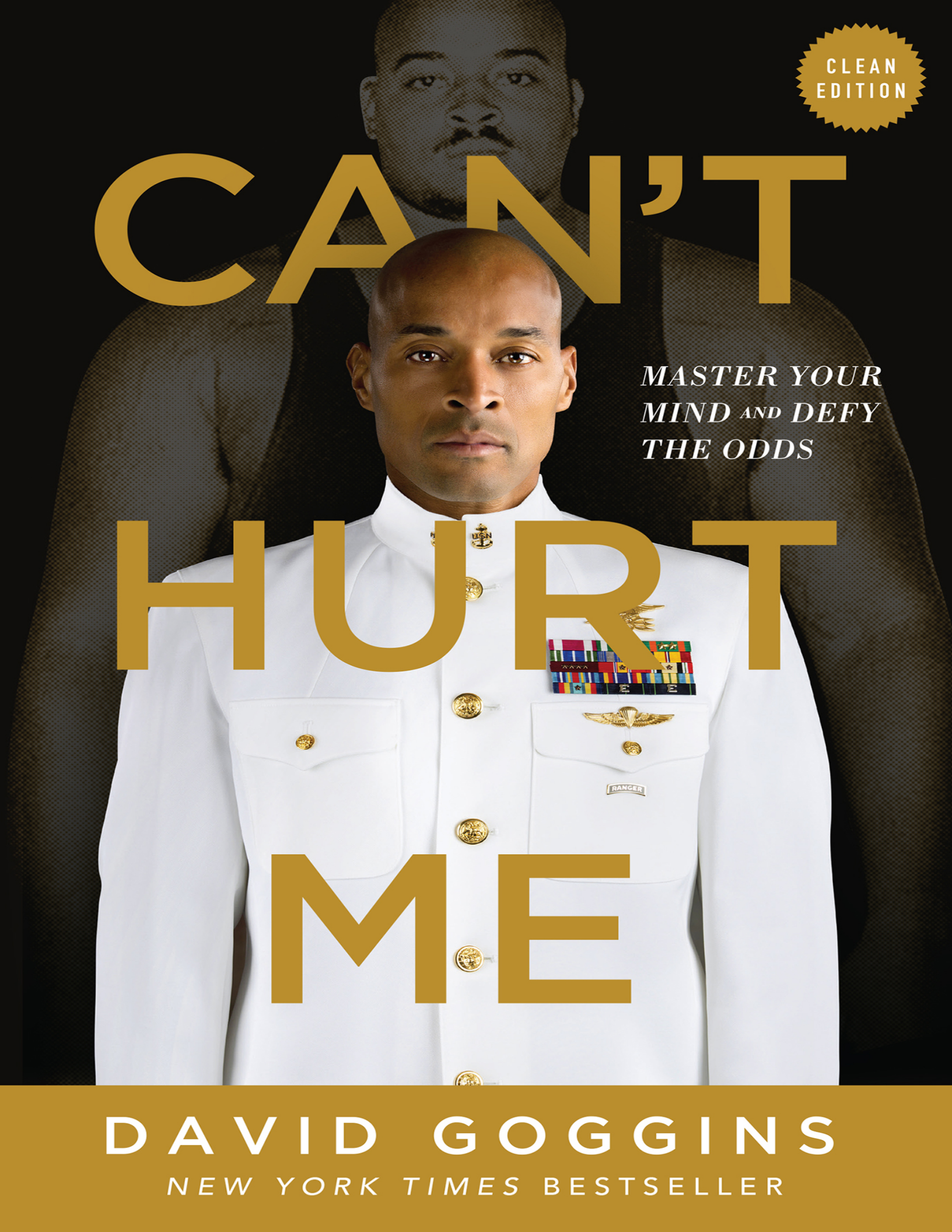
CLEAN EDITION
CAN'T HURT ME
MASTER YOUR MIND AND DEFY THE ODDS
DAVID GOGGINS
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

LIONCREST

PUBLISHING

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To the unrelenting voice in my head that will never allow me to stop.

CONTENTS

WARNING ORDER

TIME ZONE: 24/7

TASK ORGANIZATION: SOLO MISSION

1. **SITUATION:** You are in danger of living a life so comfortable and soft that you will die without ever realizing your true potential.

2. **MISSION:** To unshackle your mind. Ditch the victim's mentality forever. Own all aspects of your life completely. Build an unbreakable foundation.

3. **EXECUTION:**
   A. Read this cover to cover. Study the techniques within, accept all ten challenges. Repeat. Repetition will callous your mind.

   B. If you do your job to the best of your ability, this will hurt. This mission is not about making yourself feel better. This mission is about being better and having a greater impact on the world.

   C. Don't stop when you are tired. Stop when you are done.

4. **CLASSIFIED:** This is the origin story of a hero. The hero is you.

BY COMMAND OF: DAVID GOGGINS

SIGNED:

RANK AND SERVICE: CHIEF, U.S. NAVY SEALS, RETIRED

INTRODUCTION

DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU REALLY ARE AND WHAT YOU'RE CAPABLE OF?

I'm sure you think so, but just because you believe something doesn't make it true. Denial is the ultimate comfort zone.

Don't worry, you aren't alone. In every town, in every country, all over the world, millions roam the streets, dead-eyed as zombies, addicted to comfort, embracing a victim's mentality and unaware of their true potential. I know this because I meet and hear from them all the time, and because just like you, I used to be one of them.

I had a really good excuse too.

Life dealt me a bad hand. I was born broken, grew up with beat downs, was tormented in school, and called *nigger* more times than I could count.

We were once poor, surviving on welfare, living in government-subsidized housing, and my depression was smothering. I lived life at the bottom of the barrel, and my future forecast was bleak.

Very few people know how the bottom feels, but I do. It's like quicksand. It grabs you, sucks you under, and won't let go. When life is like that it's easy to drift and continue to make the same comfortable choices that are killing you, over and over again.

But the truth is we all make habitual, self-limiting choices. It's as natural as a sunset and as fundamental as gravity. It's how our brains are wired, which is why motivation is not enough.

Even the best pep talk or self-help hack is nothing but a temporary fix. It won't rewire your brain. It won't amplify your voice or uplift your life. Motivation changes exactly nobody. The bad hand that was my life was mine, and mine alone to fix.

So I sought out pain, fell in love with suffering, and eventually transformed myself from the weakest piece of garbage on the planet into the hardest man God ever created, or so I tell myself.

Odds are you have had a much better childhood than I did, and even now might have a decent life, but no matter who you are, who your parents are or were, where you live, what you do for a living, or how much money you have, you're probably living at about 40 percent of your true capability.

It's a shame.

We all have the potential to be so much more.

Years ago, I was invited to be on a panel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I'd never set foot in a university lecture hall as a student. I'd barely graduated high school, yet I was at one of the most prestigious institutions in the country to discuss mental toughness with a handful of others. At some point in the discussion an esteemed MIT professor said that we each have genetic limitations. Hard ceilings. That there are some things we just can't do no matter how mentally tough we are. When we hit our genetic ceiling, he said, mental toughness doesn't enter into the equation.

Everyone in that room seemed to accept his version of reality because this senior, tenured professor was known for researching mental toughness. It was his life's work. It was also a bunch of nonsense, and to me he was using science to let us all off the hook.

I'd been quiet until then because I was surrounded by all these smart people, feeling stupid, but someone in the audience noticed the look on my face and asked if I agreed. And if you ask me a direct question, I won't be shy.

"There's something to be said for living it instead of studying it," I said, then turned toward the professor. "What you said is true for most people, but not 100 percent. There will always be the 1 percent of us who are willing to put in the work to defy the odds."

I went on to explain what I knew from experience. That anybody can become a totally different person and achieve what so-called experts like him claim is impossible, but it takes a lot of heart, will, and an armored mind.

Heraclitus, a philosopher born in the Persian Empire back in the fifth century BC, had it right when he wrote about men on the battlefield. “Out of every one hundred men,” he wrote, “ten shouldn’t even be there, eighty are just targets, nine are the real fighters, and we are lucky to have them, for they make the battle. Ah, but the one, one is a warrior…”

From the time you take your first breath, you become eligible to die. You also become eligible to find your greatness and become the One Warrior. But it is up to you to equip yourself for the battle ahead. Only you can master your mind, which is what it takes to live a bold life filled with accomplishments most people consider beyond their capability.

I am not a genius like those professors at MIT, but I am that One Warrior. And the story you are about to read, the story of my life, will illuminate a proven path to self-mastery and empower you to face reality, hold yourself accountable, push past pain, learn to love what you fear, relish failure, live to your fullest potential, and find out who you really are.

Human beings change through study, habit, and stories. Through my story you will learn what the body and mind are capable of when they’re driven to maximum capacity, and how to get there. Because when you’re driven, whatever is in front of you, whether it’s racism, sexism, injuries, divorce, depression, obesity, tragedy, or poverty, becomes fuel for your metamorphosis.

The steps laid out here amount to the evolutionary algorithm, one that obliterates barriers, glimmers with glory, and delivers lasting peace.

I hope you’re ready. It’s time to go to war with yourself.

CHAPTER ONE

I SHOULD HAVE BEEN A STATISTIC

WE FOUND HELL IN A BEAUTIFUL NEIGHBORHOOD. IN 1981, WILLIAMSVILLE offered the tastiest real estate in Buffalo, New York. Leafy and friendly, its safe streets were dotted with dainty homes filled with model citizens. Doctors, attorneys, steel plant executives, dentists, and professional football players lived there with their adoring wives and their 2.2 kids. Cars were new, roads swept, possibilities endless. We're talking about a living, breathing American Dream. Hell was a corner lot on Paradise Road.

That's where we lived in a two-story, four-bedroom, white wooden home with four square pillars framing a front porch that led to the widest, greenest lawn in Williamsville. We had a vegetable garden out back and a two-car garage stocked with a 1962 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, a 1980 Mercedes 450 SLC, and, in the driveway, a sparkling new 1981 black Corvette. Everyone on Paradise Road lived near the top of the food chain, and based on appearances, most of our neighbors thought that we, the so-called happy, well-adjusted Goggins family, were the tip of that spear. But glossy surfaces reflect much more than they reveal.

They'd see us most weekday mornings, gathered in the driveway at 7 a.m. My dad, Trunnis Goggins, wasn't tall but he was handsome and built like a boxer. He wore tailored suits, his smile warm and open. He looked every bit the successful businessman on his way to work. My mother, Jackie, was seventeen years younger, slender and beautiful, and my brother and I were clean cut, well dressed in jeans and pastel Izod shirts, and strapped with backpacks just like the other kids. The white kids. In our version of affluent America, each driveway was a staging ground for nods and waves before

parents and children rode off to work and school. Neighbors saw what they wanted. Nobody probed too deep.

Good thing. The truth was, the Goggins family had just returned home from another all-nighter in the hood, and if Paradise Road was Hell, that meant I lived with the Devil himself. As soon as our neighbors shut the door or turned the corner, my father's smile morphed into a scowl. He barked orders and went inside to sleep another one off, but our work wasn't done. My brother, Trunnis Jr., and I had somewhere to be, and it was up to our sleepless mother to get us there.

I was in first grade in 1981, and I was in a school daze, for real. Not because the academics were hard—at least not yet—but because I couldn't stay awake. The teacher's sing-song voice was my lullaby, my crossed arms on my desk, a comfy pillow, and her sharp words—once she caught me dreaming—an unwelcome alarm clock that wouldn't stop blaring. Children that young are infinite sponges. They soak up language and ideas at warp speed to establish a fundamental foundation upon which most people build lifelong skills like reading and spelling and basic math, but because I worked nights, I couldn't concentrate on anything most mornings, except trying to stay awake.

Recess and PE were a whole different minefield. Out on the playground staying lucid was the easy part. The hard part was the hiding. Couldn't let my shirt slip. Couldn't wear shorts. Bruises were red flags I couldn't show because if I did, I knew I'd catch even more. Still, on that playground and in the classroom I knew I was safe, for a little while at least. It was the one place he couldn't reach me, at least not physically. My brother went through a similar dance in sixth grade, his first year in middle school. He had his own wounds to hide and sleep to harvest, because once that bell rang, real life began.

The ride from Williamsville to the Masten District in East Buffalo took about a half an hour, but it may as well have been a world away. Like much of East Buffalo, Masten was a mostly black working-class neighborhood in the inner city that was rough around the edges; though, in the early 1980s, it was not yet completely ghetto. Back then the Bethlehem Steel plant was still humming and Buffalo was the last great American steel town. Most

men in the city, black and white, worked solid union jobs and earned a living wage, which meant business in Masten was good. For my dad, it always had been.

By the time he was twenty years old he owned a Coca-Cola distribution concession and four delivery routes in the Buffalo area. That's good money for a kid, but he had bigger dreams and an eye on the future. His future had four wheels and a disco funk soundtrack. When a local bakery shut down, he leased the building and built one of Buffalo's first roller skating rinks.

Fast-forward ten years and Skateland had been relocated to a building on Ferry Street that stretched nearly a full block in the heart of the Masten District. He opened a bar above the rink, which he named the Vermillion Room. In the 1970s, that was the place to be in East Buffalo, and it's where he met my mother when she was just nineteen and he was thirty-six. It was her first time away from home. Jackie grew up in the Catholic Church. Trunnis was the son of a minister, and knew her language well enough to masquerade as a believer, which appealed to her. But let's keep it real. She was just as drunk on his charm.

Trunnis Jr. was born in 1971. I was born in 1975, and by the time I was six years old, the roller disco craze was at its absolute peak. Skateland rocked every night. We'd usually get there around 5 p.m., and while my brother worked the concession stand—popping corn, grilling hot dogs, loading the cooler, and making pizzas—I organized the skates by size and style. Each afternoon, I stood on a step stool to spray my stock with aerosol deodorizer and replace the rubber stoppers. That aerosol stink would cloud all around my head and live in my nostrils. My eyes looked permanently bloodshot. It was the only thing I could smell for hours. But those were the distractions I had to ignore to stay organized and on hustle. Because my dad, who worked the DJ booth, was always watching, and if any of those skates went missing, it meant my butt. Before the doors opened I'd polish the skate rink floor with a dust mop that was twice my size.

Skateland, age six

At around 6 p.m., my mother called us to dinner in the back office. That woman lived in a permanent state of denial, but her maternal instinct was real, and it made a big show of itself, grasping for any shred of normalcy. Every night in that office, she'd set out two electric burners on the floor, sit with her legs curled behind her, and prepare a full dinner—roast meat,

potatoes, green beans, and dinner rolls, while my dad did the books and made calls.

The food was good, but even at six and seven years old I knew our “family dinner” was a facsimile compared to what most families had. Plus, we ate fast. There was no time to enjoy it because at 7 p.m. when the doors opened, it was show time, and we all had to be in our places with our stations prepped. My dad was the sheriff, and once he stepped into the DJ booth he had us triangulated. He scanned that room like an all-seeing eye, and if you screwed up you’d hear about it. Unless you felt it first.

The room didn’t look like much under the harsh, overhead house lights, but once he dimmed them, the show lights bathed the rink in red and glanced off the spinning mirror ball, conjuring a skate disco fantasy. Weekend or weeknight, hundreds of skaters piled through that door. Most of the time they came in as a family, paying their $3 entrance fee and half-dollar skate fee before hitting the floor.

I rented out the skates and managed that entire station by myself. I carried that step stool around like a crutch. Without it, the customers couldn’t even see me. The bigger-sized skates were down below the counter, but the smaller sizes were stored so high I’d have to scale the shelves, which always made the customers laugh. Mom was the one and only cashier. She collected everyone’s cover charge, and to Trunnis, money was everything. He counted the people as they came in, calculating his take in real time so he had a rough idea of what to expect when he counted out the register after we closed up. And it had better all be there.

All the money was his. The rest of us never earned a cent for our sweat. In fact, my mother was never given any money of her own. She had no bank account or credit cards in her name. He controlled everything, and we all knew what would happen if her cash drawer ever came up short.

None of the customers who came through our doors knew any of this, of course. To them, Skateland was a family-owned-and-operated dream cloud. My dad spun the fading vinyl echoes of disco and funk and the early rumbles of hip hop. Bass bounced off the red walls, courtesy of Buffalo’s favorite son Rick James, George Clinton’s Funkadelic, and the first tracks

ever released by hip hop innovators Run DMC. Some of the kids were speed skating. I liked to go fast too, but we had our share of skate dancers, and that floor got funky.

For the first hour or two the parents stayed downstairs and skated, or watched their kids spin the oval, but they would eventually leak upstairs to make their own scene, and when enough of them made their move, Trunnis slipped out of the DJ booth so he could join them. My dad was considered the unofficial mayor of Masten, and he was a phony politician to the core. His customers were his marks, and what they didn't know was that no matter how many drinks he poured on the house and bro hugs he shared, he didn't care about any of them. They were all dollar signs to him. If he poured you a drink for free, it was because he knew you would buy two or three more.

While we had our share of all-night skates and twenty-four-hour skate marathons, the Skateland doors typically closed at 10 p.m. That's when my mother, brother, and I went to work, fishing bloody tampons out of poop-filled toilets, airing the lingering cannabis haze out of both bathrooms, scraping bacteria-loaded gum off the rink floor, cleaning the concession kitchen, and taking inventory. Just before midnight, we'd slog into the office, half-dead. Our mother would tuck my brother and me beneath a blanket on the office sofa, our heads opposite one another, as the ceiling shook with the sound of bass-heavy funk.

Mom was still on the clock.

As soon as she stepped inside the bar, Trunnis had her working the door or hustling downstairs like a booze mule to fetch cases of liquor from the basement. There was always some menial task to perform and she didn't stop moving, while my father kept watch from his corner of the bar where he could take in the whole scene. In those days, Rick James, a Buffalo native and one of my father's closest friends, stopped by whenever he was in town, parking his Excalibur on the sidewalk out front. His car was a billboard that let the hood know a Superfreak was in the house. He wasn't the only celebrity that came through. OJ Simpson was one of the NFL's biggest stars, and he and his Buffalo Bills teammates were regulars, as was

Teddy Pendergrass and Sister Sledge. If you don't know the names, look them up.

Maybe if I had been older, or my father had been a good man, I might have had some pride in being part of a cultural moment like that, but young kids aren't about that life. It's almost like, no matter who our parents are and what they do, we're all born with a moral compass that's properly tuned. When you're six, seven, or eight years old, you know what feels right and what feels way off. And when you are born into a cyclone of terror and pain, you know it doesn't have to be that way, and that truth nags at you like a splinter in your jacked up mind. You can choose to ignore it, but the dull throbbing is always there as the days and nights bleed together into one blurred memory.

Some moments do stick out though, and one I'm thinking of right now still haunts me. That was the night my mom stepped into the bar before she was expected and found my dad sweet talking a woman about ten years her junior. Trunnis saw her watching and shrugged while my mother eyeballed him and slugged two shots of Johnnie Walker Red to calm her nerves. He noticed her reaction and didn't like it one bit.

She knew how things were. That Trunnis ran prostitutes across the border to Fort Erie in Canada. A summer cottage belonging to the president of one of Buffalo's biggest banks doubled as his pop-up brothel. He introduced Buffalo bankers to his girls whenever he needed a longer line of credit, and those loans always came through. My mom knew the young woman she was watching was one of the girls in his stable. She'd seen her before. Once, she walked in on them on the Skateland office sofa, where she tucked her children in nearly every night. When she found them together, the woman smiled at her. Trunnis shrugged. No, my mom wasn't clueless, but seeing it with her own eyes always burned.

Around midnight, my mother drove with one of our security guards to make a bank deposit. He begged her to leave my father. He told her to leave that very night. Maybe he knew what was coming. She did too, but she couldn't run because she had no independent means whatsoever, and she wasn't going to leave us in his hands. Plus, she had no rights to community property because Trunnis had always refused to marry her, which was a

riddle she was only then starting to solve. My mother came from a solid, middle-class family, and had always been the virtuous type. He resented that, treated his prostitutes better than the mother of his sons, and as a result he had her trapped. She was 100 percent dependent, and if she wanted to leave, she'd have to walk with nothing at all.

My brother and I never slept well at Skateland. The ceiling shook too much because the office was directly below the dance floor. When my mother walked in that night I was already awake. She smiled, but I noticed the tears in her eyes and remember smelling the scotch on her breath when she scooped me up in her arms as tenderly as she could. My father trailed in after her, sloppy and annoyed. He pulled a pistol from beneath the cushion where I slept (yes, you read that right, there was a loaded gun under the cushion on which I slept at six years old!), flashed it at me, and smiled before concealing it beneath his pant leg in an ankle holster. In his other hand were two brown paper shopping bags filled with nearly $10,000 in cash. So far it was a typical night.

My parents didn't speak on the drive home, though the tension between them simmered. My mom pulled into the driveway on Paradise Road just before 6 a.m., a little early by our standards. Trunnis stumbled from the car, disabled the alarm, dropped the cash on the kitchen table, and went upstairs. We followed him, and she tucked us both into our beds, kissed me on the forehead, and turned out the light before slipping into the master suite where she found him waiting, stroking his leather belt. Trunnis didn't appreciate being glared at by my mom, especially in public.

"This belt came all the way from Texas just to whip you," he said, calmly. Then he started swinging it, buckle first. Sometimes my mother fought back, and she did that night. She threw a marble candlestick at his head. He ducked and it thudded the wall. She ran into the bathroom, locked the door, and cowered on the toilet. He kicked the door down and backhanded her hard. Her head slammed into the wall. She was barely conscious when he grabbed a fistful of her hair and dragged her down the hall.

By then my brother and I had heard the violence, and we watched him drag her all the way down the stairs to the first floor, then crouch over her with the belt in his hand. She was bleeding from the temple and the lip, and the

sight of her blood lit a fuse in me. In that moment my hatred overcame my fear. I ran downstairs and jumped on his back, slammed my tiny fists into his back, and scratched at his eyes. I'd caught him off guard and he fell to one knee. I wailed on him.

"Don't hit my mom!" I yelled. He tossed me to the ground, stalked toward me, belt in hand, then turned toward my mother.

"You're raising a gangster," he said, half-smiling.

I curled into a ball when he started swinging his belt at me. I could feel bruises rise on my back as my mom crawled toward the control pad near the front door. She pressed the panic button and the house exploded in alarm. He froze, looked toward the ceiling, mopped his brow with his sleeve, took a deep breath, looped and buckled his belt, and went upstairs to wash off all that evil and hate. Police were on their way, and he knew it.

My mother's relief was short-lived. When the cops arrived, Trunnis met them at the door. They looked over his shoulder toward my mom, who stood several paces behind him, her face swollen and caked with dried blood. But those were different days. There was no #metoo back then. That type of thing didn't exist, and they ignored her. Trunnis told them it was all a whole lot of nothing. Just some necessary domestic discipline.

"Look at this house. Does it look like I mistreat my wife?" He asked. "I give her mink coats, diamond rings, I bust my butt to give her everything she wants, and she throws a marble candlestick at my head. She's spoiled."

The police chuckled along with my father as he walked them to their car. They left without interviewing her. He didn't hit her again that morning. He didn't have to. The psychological damage was done. From that point on it was clear to us that as far as Trunnis and the law were concerned it was open season, and we were the hunted.

Over the next year, our schedule didn't change much and the beatings continued, while my mother tried to paper over the darkness with swatches of light. She knew I wanted to be a Scout, so she signed me up for a local troop. I still remember putting on that navy blue Cub Scout button down

one Saturday. I felt proud wearing a uniform and knowing at least for a few hours I could pretend that I was a normal kid. My mom smiled as we headed for the door. My pride, her smile, wasn't just because of the Cub Scouts. They rose up from a deeper place. We were taking action to find something positive for ourselves in a bleak situation. It was proof that we mattered, and that we weren't completely powerless.

That's when my father came home from the Vermillion Room.

"Where you two going?" He glared at me. I stared at the floor. My mother cleared her throat.

"I'm taking David to his first Cub Scout meeting," she said, softly.

"No Cub Scout meeting today!" I looked up, and he laughed as my eyes welled up with tears. "We're going to the track."

Within the hour we'd arrived at Batavia Downs, an old-school harness horse racetrack, the type where jockeys ride behind the horses in lightweight buggies. My dad grabbed a racing form as soon we stepped through the gate. For hours, the three of us watched him place bet after bet, chain smoke, drink scotch, and carry on like a madman as every pony he bet on finished out of the money. With my dad raging at the gambling gods and acting a fool, I tried to make myself as small as possible whenever people walked by, but I still stuck out. I was the only kid in the stands dressed like a Cub Scout. I was probably the only black Cub Scout they'd ever seen, and my uniform was a lie. I was a pretender.

Trunnis lost thousands of dollars that day, and he wouldn't shut up about it on the drive home, his raspy throat raw from nicotine. My brother and I were in the cramped back seat and whenever he spat out the window, his phlegm boomeranged into my face. Each drop of his nasty saliva on my skin burned like venom and intensified my hate. I'd long since learned that the best way to avoid a beat down was to make myself as invisible as possible, avert my eyes, float outside my body, and hope to go unnoticed. It was a practice we'd all honed over the years, but I was done with that. I would no longer hide from the Devil. That afternoon as he veered onto the highway and headed home, he continued to rave on, and I mad-dogged him

from the back seat. Have you ever heard the phrase, “Faith Over Fear”? For me it was Hate Over Fear.

He caught my eyes in the rearview mirror.

“You got something to say?!”

“We shouldn’t have gone to the track anyway,” I said.

My brother turned and stared at me like I’d lost my mind. My mother squirmed in her seat.

“Say that one more time.” His words came slow, dripping with dread. I didn’t say a word, so he started reaching behind the seat trying to smack me. But I was so small, it was easy to hide. The car veered left and right as he was half-turned in my direction, punching air. He’d barely touched me, which only stoked his fire. We drove in silence until he caught his breath. “When we get home, you’re gonna take your clothes off,” he said.

That’s what he’d say when he was ready to bestow a serious beat down, and there was no avoiding it. I did what I was told. I went into my bedroom and took off my clothes, walked down the hall to his room, closed the door behind me, turned the lights off, then laid across the corner of the bed with my legs dangling, my torso stretched out in front of me, and my butt exposed. That was the protocol, and he’d designed it for maximum psychological and physical pain.

The beatings were often brutal, but the anticipation was the worst part. I couldn’t see the door behind me, and he’d take his time, letting my dread build. When I heard him open the door, my panic spiked. Even then the room was so dark I couldn’t see much with my peripheral vision, and couldn’t prepare for the first smack until his belt hit my skin. It was never just two or three lickings either. There was no particular count, so we never knew when or if he was gonna stop.

This beating lasted minutes upon minutes. He started on my butt, but the sting was so bad I blocked it with my hands, so he moved down and started whipping my thighs. When I dropped my hands to my thighs he swung at

my lower back. He belted me dozens of times, and was breathless, coughing and slick with sweat by the time it was over. I was breathing heavy too, but I wasn't crying. His evil was too real and my hate gave me courage. I refused to give that evil man the satisfaction. I just stood up, looked the Devil in his eye, limped to my room, and stood in front of a mirror. I was covered in welts from my neck to the crease at the knees. I didn't go to school for several days.

When you're getting beat consistently, hope evaporates. You stifle your emotions, but your trauma off-gasses in unconscious ways. After countless beatings she endured and witnessed, this particular beat down left my mother in a constant fog, a shell of the woman I remembered from a few years before. She was distracted and vacant most of the time, except when he called her name. Then she'd hop to like she was his slave. I didn't know until years later that she was considering suicide.

My brother and I took our pain out on each other. We'd sit or stand across from one another and he would throw punches as hard as he could at me. It usually started out as a game, but he was four years older, much stronger, and he connected with all his power. Whenever I'd fall, I'd get up and he'd hit me again, as hard as he could, yelling like a martial arts warrior at the top of his lungs, his face twisted with rage.

"You're not hurting me! Is that all you have?" I'd shout back. I wanted him to know that I could take more pain than he could ever deliver, but when it was time to fall asleep and there were no more battles to fight, no place to hide, I wet the bed. Nearly every night.

My mother's every day was a lesson in survival. She was told she was worthless so often she started to believe it. Everything she did was an effort to appease him so he wouldn't beat her sons or whip her, but there were invisible trip wires in her world and sometimes she never knew when or how she set them off until after he slapped the daylights out of her. Other times she knew she teed herself up for a vicious beat down.

One day I came home early from school with a nasty earache and laid down on my mother's side of their bed, my left ear throbbing in excruciating pain. With each throb my hate spiked. I knew I wouldn't be going to the doctor

because my father didn’t approve of spending his money on doctors or dentists. We didn’t have health insurance, a pediatrician, or a dentist. If we got injured or sick, we were told to shake it off because he wasn’t down to pay for anything that didn’t directly benefit Trunnis Goggins. Our health didn’t meet that standard, and that ticked me off.

After about a half hour, my mother came upstairs to check on me and when I rolled onto my back she could see blood dribbling down the side of my neck and smeared all over the pillow.

“That’s it,” she said, “come with me.”

She got me out of bed, dressed me, and helped me to her car, but before she could start the engine, my dad chased us down.

“Where you think you’re going?!”

“The emergency room,” she said as she turned the ignition. He reached for the handle but she peeled out first, leaving him in her dust. Furious, he stomped inside, slammed the door, and called out to my brother.

“Son, get me a Johnnie Walker!” Trunnis Jr. brought over a bottle of Red Label and a glass from the wet bar. He poured and poured and watched my dad down shot after shot. Each one fueled an inferno. “You and David need to be strong,” he raved. “I’m not raising a bunch of homosexuals! And that’s what you’ll be if you go to the doctor every time you get a little boo boo, understand?” My brother nodded, petrified. “Your last name is Goggins, and we shake it off!”

According to the doctor we saw that night, my mother got me to the ER just in time. My ear infection was so bad that if we’d waited any longer, I would have lost my hearing in my left ear for life. She risked her butt to save mine and we both knew she’d pay for it. We drove home in eerie silence.

My dad was still stewing at the kitchen table by the time we turned onto Paradise Road, and my brother was still pouring him shots. Trunnis Jr. feared our father, but he also worshipped the man and was under his spell. As the first born son he was treated better. Trunnis would still lash out at

him, but in his warped mind, Trunnis Jr. was his prince. “When you grow up I’m gonna want to see you be the man of your house,” Trunnis told him. “And you’re gonna see me be a man tonight.”

Moments after we walked through the front door, Trunnis beat our mother senseless, but my brother couldn’t watch. Whenever the beatings exploded like a thunderstorm overhead, he’d wait them out in his room. He ignored the darkness because the truth was way too heavy for him to carry. I always paid close attention.

During the summers, there was no midweek respite from Trunnis, but my brother and I learned to hop on our bikes and stay far away for as long as we could. One day, I came home for lunch and entered the house through the garage like normal. My father usually slept deep into the afternoon, so I figured the coast was clear. I was wrong. My father was paranoid. He did enough shady deals to attract some enemies, and he’d set the alarm after we left the house.

When I opened the door, sirens screamed and my stomach dropped. I froze, backed up against the wall, and listened for footsteps. I heard the stairs creak and knew I was in deep trouble. He came downstairs in his brown terrycloth robe, pistol in hand, and crossed from the dining room into the living room, his gun out front. I could see the barrel come around the corner slowly.

As soon as he cleared the corner he could see me standing just twenty feet away, but he didn’t drop his weapon. He aimed it right between my eyes. I stared straight at him, blank as possible, my feet anchored to the floorboards. There was no one else in the house, and part of me expected him to pull the trigger, but by this time in my life I no longer cared if I lived or died. I was an exhausted eight-year-old kid, plain old tired of being terrified of my father, and I was sick of Skateland too. After a minute or two he lowered his weapon and went back upstairs.

By now it was becoming clear that someone was going to die on Paradise Road. My mother knew where Trunnis kept his .38. Some days she timed and followed him—envisioned how it would play out. They’d take separate cars to Skateland, she’d grab his gun from beneath the office sofa cushions

before he could get there, bring us home early, put us to bed, and wait for him by the front door with his gun in hand. When he pulled up, she'd step out the front door and murder him in his driveway—leave his body for the milkman to find. My uncles, her brothers, talked her out of it, but they agreed she needed to do something drastic or she'd be the one lying dead.

It was an old neighbor who showed her a way. Betty used to live across the street from us and after she moved they stayed in touch. Betty was twenty years older than my mom and had the wisdom to match. She encouraged my mother to plan her escape weeks in advance. The first step was getting a credit card in her name. That meant she had to re-earn Trunnis' trust because she needed him to cosign. Betty also reminded my mother to keep their friendship a secret.

For a few weeks Jackie played Trunnis, treated him like she did when she was a nineteen-year-old beauty with stars in her eyes. She made him believe she worshipped him again, and when she slipped a credit card application in front of him, he said he'd be happy to score her a little buying power. When the card arrived in the mail, my mother felt its hard plastic edges through the envelope as relief saturated her mind. She held it at arm's length and admired it. It glowed like a golden ticket.

A few days later she heard my father talking disrespectfully about her on the phone to one of his friends, while he was having breakfast with my brother and me at the kitchen table. That did it. She walked over to the table and said, "I'm leaving your father. You two can stay or you can come with me."

My dad was stunned silent and so was my brother, but I shot out of that chair like it was on fire, grabbed a few black garbage bags, and went upstairs to start packing. My brother eventually started gathering his things too. Before we left, the four of us had one last pow wow at that kitchen table. Trunnis glared at my mother, filled with shock and contempt.

"You have nothing and you are nothing without me," he said. "You're uneducated, you don't have any money or prospects. You'll be a prostitute inside a year." He paused then shifted his focus to my brother and me. "You two are gonna grow up to be a couple of gays. And don't think about

coming back, Jackie. I'll have another woman here to take your place five minutes after you leave."

She nodded and stood. She'd given him her youth, her very soul, and she was finally finished. She packed as little of her past as possible. She left the mink coats and the diamond rings. He could give them to his new girlfriend as far as she was concerned.

Trunnis watched us load up into my mom's Volvo (the one vehicle he owned that he wouldn't ride in), our bikes already strapped to the back. We drove off slowly and at first he didn't budge, but before she turned the corner I could see him move toward the garage. My mother floored it.

Give her credit, she'd planned for contingencies. She figured he'd tail her, so she didn't head west to the interstate that would take us to her parent's place in Indiana. Instead, she drove to Betty's house, down a dirt construction road that my dad didn't even know about. Betty had the garage door open when we arrived. We pulled in. Betty yanked the door down, and while my father shot out on the highway in his Corvette to chase after us, we waited right under his nose until just before nightfall. By then we knew he'd be at Skateland, opening up. He wasn't going to miss a chance to make some money. No matter what.

Everything went wrong about ninety miles outside of Buffalo when the old Volvo started burning oil. Huge plumes of inky exhaust choked from the tail pipe and my mother spun into panic mode. It was as if she'd been holding it all in, stuffing her fear down deep, hiding it beneath a mask of forced composure, until an obstacle emerged and she fell apart. Tears streaked her face.

"What do I do?" my mom asked, her eyes wide as saucers. My brother never wanted to leave, and he told her to turn around. I was riding shotgun. She looked over expectantly. "What do I do?"

"We gotta go, mom," I said. "Mom, we gotta go."

She pulled into a gas station in the middle of nowhere. Hysterical, she rushed to a pay phone and called Betty.

“I can’t do this, Betty,” she said. “The car broke down. I have to go back!”

“Where are you?” Betty asked, calmly.

“I don’t know,” my mom replied. “I have no idea where I am!”

Betty told her to find a gas station attendant—every station had those back then—and put him on the phone. He explained we were just outside of Erie, Pennsylvania, and after Betty gave him some instructions, he put my mother back on the line.

“Jackie, there’s a Volvo dealer in Erie. Find a hotel tonight and take the car there tomorrow morning. The attendant is going to put enough oil in the car to get you there.” My mother was listening but she didn’t respond. “Jackie? Are you hearing me? Do what I say and it will be okay.”

“Yeah. Okay,” she whispered, emotionally spent. “Hotel. Volvo dealer. Got it.”

I don’t know what Erie is like now, but back then there was only one decent hotel in town: a Holiday Inn, not far from the Volvo dealership. My brother and I followed my mom to the reception desk where we were hit with more bad news. They were fully booked. My mother’s shoulders slumped. My brother and I stood on either side of her, holding our clothes in black trash bags. We were the picture of desperation, and the night manager saw it.

“Look, I’ll set you up with some rollaway beds in the conference room,” he said. “There’s a bathroom down there, but you have to be out early because we have a conference starting at 9 a.m.”

Grateful, we bedded down in that conference room with its industrial carpet and fluorescent lights, our own personal purgatory. We were on the run and on the ropes, but my mother hadn’t folded. She laid back and stared at the ceiling tiles until we nodded off. Then she slipped into an adjacent coffee shop to keep an anxious eye on our bikes, and on the road, all night long.

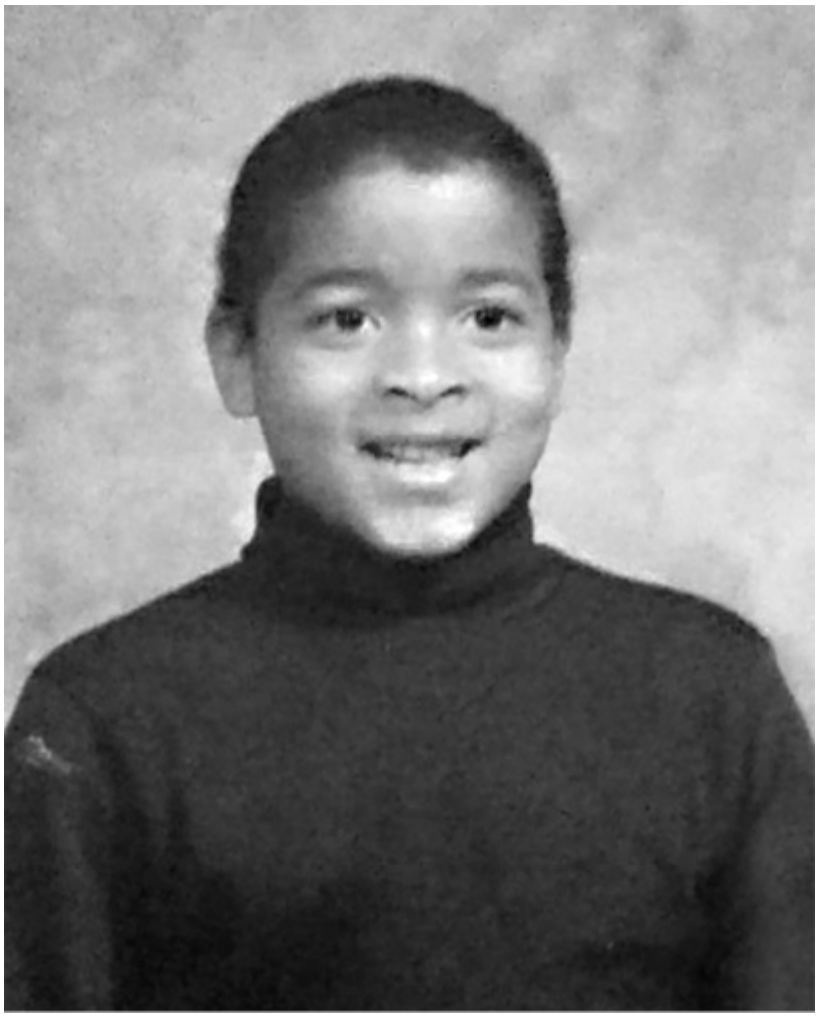
We were waiting outside that Volvo dealership when the garage opened up, which gave the mechanics just enough time to source the part we needed

and get us back on the road before their day was done. We left Erie at sunset and drove all night, arriving at my grandparents' house in Brazil, Indiana, eight hours later. My mom wept as she parked next to their old wooden house before dawn, and I understood why.

Our arrival felt significant, then and now. I was still only eight years old, but already in a second phase of life. I didn't know what awaited me—what awaited us—in that small, rural, Southern Indiana town, and I didn't much care. All I knew was that we'd escaped from Hell, and for the first time in my life, we were free from the Devil himself.

* * *

We stayed with my grandparents for the next six months, and I enrolled in second grade—for the second time—at a local Catholic school called Annunciation. I was the only eight-year-old in second grade, but none of the other kids knew I was repeating a year, and there was no doubt that I needed it. I could barely read, but I was lucky enough to have Sister Katherine as my teacher. Short and petite, Sister Katherine was sixty years old and had one gold front tooth. She was a nun but didn't wear the habit. She was also grumpy and took no crap, and I loved her attitude.



Second grade in Brazil

Annunciation was a small school. Sister Katherine taught all of first and second grade in a single classroom, and with only eighteen kids to teach, she wasn't willing to shirk her responsibility and blame my academic struggles, or anybody's bad behavior, on learning disabilities or emotional problems. She didn't know my backstory and didn't have to. All that mattered to her was that I turned up at her door with a kindergarten education, and it was her job to shape my mind. She had every excuse in the world to farm me out to some specialist or label me a problem, but that wasn't her style. She started teaching before labeling kids was a normal thing to do, and she embodied the no-excuses mentality that I needed if I was going to catch up.

Sister Katherine is the reason why I'll never trust a smile or judge a scowl. My dad smiled all the time and didn't care about me, but grouchy Sister Katherine cared about us, cared about me. She wanted us to be our very best. I know this because she proved it by spending extra time with me, as much time as it took, until I retained my lessons. Before the year was out, I could read at a second grade level. Trunnis Jr. hadn't adjusted nearly as well. Within a few months he was back in Buffalo, shadowing my father and working that Skateland detail like he'd never left.

By then, we'd moved into a place of our own: a 600-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment at Lamplight Manor, a public housing block, that cost us $7 a month. My father, who earned thousands every night, sporadically sent $25 every three or four weeks (if that) for child support, while my mother earned a few hundred dollars a month with her department store job. In her off hours she was taking courses at Indiana State University, which cost money too. The point is, we had gaps to fill, so my mother enrolled in welfare and received $123 a month and food stamps. They wrote her a check for the first month, but when they found out she owned a car they disqualified her, explaining that if she sold her car they'd be happy to help.

The problem is we lived in a rural town with a population of about 8,000 that didn't have a mass transit system. We needed that car so I could get to school, and so she could get to work and take night classes. She was determined to change her life circumstances and found a workaround through the Aid to Dependent Children program. She arranged for our check to go to my grandmother who signed it over to her, but that didn't make life easy. How far can $123 really go?

I vividly recall one night we were so broke we drove home on a gas tank that was near empty, to a bare refrigerator and a past due electric bill, with no money in the bank. Then I remembered that we had two mason jars filled with pennies and other loose change. I grabbed them off the shelf.

"Mom, let's count our change!"

She smiled. Growing up, her father had taught her to pick up the change she found on the street. He was molded by the Great Depression and knew what it was like to be down and out. "You never know when you might need it,"

he’d say. When we lived in Hell, carrying home thousands of dollars every night, the notion that we would ever run out of money sounded ludicrous, but my mother retained her childhood habit. Trunnis used to belittle her for it, but now it was time to see how far found money could take us.

We dumped that change out on the living room floor and counted out enough to cover the electric bill, fill the gas tank, and buy groceries. We even had enough to buy burgers at Hardee’s on the way home. These were dark times, but we were managing. Barely. My mother missed Trunnis Jr. terribly, but she was pleased that I was adjusting and making friends. I’d had a good year at school, and from our first night in Indiana I hadn’t wet the bed once. It seemed that I was healing, but my demons weren’t gone. They were dormant. And when they came back, they hit hard.

* * *

Third grade was a shock to my system. Not just because we had to learn cursive when I was still getting the hang of reading block letters, but because our teacher, Ms. D, was nothing like Sister Katherine. Our class was still small, we had about twenty kids total, split between third and fourth grade, but she didn’t handle it nearly as well and wasn’t interested in taking the extra time I required.

My trouble started with the standardized test we took during our first couple of weeks of class. Mine came back a mess. I was still way behind the other kids and I had trouble building on lessons from the previous days, let alone the previous academic year. Sister Katherine considered similar signs as cues to dedicate more time with her weakest student, and she challenged me daily. Ms. D looked for a way out. Within the first month of class, she told my mother that I belonged in a different school. One for “special students.”

Every kid knows what “special” means. It means you are about to be stigmatized for the rest of your life. It means that you are not normal. The threat alone was a trigger, and I developed a stutter almost overnight. My thought-to-speech flow was jammed up with stress and anxiety, and it was at its worst in school.

Imagine being the only black kid in class, in the entire school, and enduring the daily humiliation of also being the dumbest. I felt like everything I tried to do or say was wrong, and it got so bad that instead of responding and skipping like scratched vinyl whenever the teacher called my name, I often chose to keep quiet. It was all about limiting exposure to save face.

Ms. D didn't even attempt to empathize. She went straight to frustration and vented it by yelling at me, sometimes when she was leaning down, her hand on the back of my chair, her face just inches from my own. She had no idea the Pandora's box she was tearing open. Once, school was a safe harbor, the one place I knew I couldn't be hurt, but in Indiana it morphed into my torture chamber.

Ms. D wanted me out of her classroom, and the administration supported her until my mother fought for me. The principal agreed to keep me enrolled if my mother signed off on time with a speech therapist and put me into group therapy with a local shrink they recommended.

The psychologist's office was adjacent to a hospital, which was exactly where you'd want to put it if you were trying to make a little kid doubt himself. It was like a bad movie. The shrink set up seven chairs in a semicircle around him, but some of the kids wouldn't or couldn't sit still. One child wore a helmet and banged his head against the wall repeatedly. Another kid stood up while the doctor was mid-sentence, walked toward a far corner of the room, and peed in the trash can. The kid sitting next to me was the most normal person in the group, and he had set his own house on fire! I can remember staring up at the shrink on my first day, thinking, *There's no way I belong here*.

That experience kicked my social anxiety up several notches. My stutter was out of control. My hair started falling out, and white splotches bloomed on my dark skin. The doctor diagnosed me as an ADHD case and prescribed Ritalin, but my problems were more complex.

I was suffering from toxic stress.

The type of physical and emotional abuse I was exposed to has been proven to have a range of side effects on young children because in our early years

the brain grows and develops so rapidly. If, during those years, your father is an evil man determined to destroy everyone in his house, stress spikes, and when those spikes occur frequently enough, you can draw a line across the peaks. That's your new baseline. It puts kids in a permanent "fight or flight" mode. Fight or flight can be a great tool when you're in danger because it amps you up to battle through or sprint from trouble, but it's no way to live.

I'm not the type of guy to try to explain everything with science, but facts are facts. I've read that some pediatricians believe toxic stress does more damage to kids than polio or meningitis. I know firsthand that it leads to learning disabilities and social anxiety because according to doctors it limits language development and memory, which makes it difficult for even the most gifted student to recall what they have already learned. Looking at the long game, when kids like me grow up, they face an increased risk for clinical depression, heart disease, obesity, and cancer, not to mention smoking, alcoholism, and drug abuse. Those raised in abusive households have an increased probability of being arrested as a juvenile by 53 percent. Their odds of committing a violent crime as an adult are increased by 38 percent. I was the poster child of that generic term we've all heard before: "at-risk youth." My mother wasn't the one raising a thug. Look at the numbers and it's clear: if anyone put me on a destructive path it was Trunnis Goggins.

I didn't stay in group therapy for long, and I didn't take Ritalin either. My mom picked me up after my second session and I sat in the front seat of her car wearing a thousand-yard stare. "Mom, I'm not going back," I said. "These boys are crazy." She agreed.

But I was still a damaged kid, and while there are proven interventions on the best way to teach and manage kids who suffer from toxic stress, it's fair to say that Ms. D didn't get those memos. I can't blame her for her own ignorance. The science wasn't nearly as clear in the 1980s as it is now. All I know is, Sister Katherine toiled in the trenches with the same malformed kid that Ms. D dealt with, but she maintained high expectations and didn't let her frustration overwhelm her. She had the mindset of, *Look, everybody learns in a different way and we're gonna figure out how you learn*. She

deduced that I needed repetition. That I needed to solve the same problems over and over again in a different way to learn, and she knew that took time. Ms. D was all about productivity. She was saying, *Keep up or get out*. Meanwhile, I felt backed into a corner. I knew that if I didn't show some improvement I would eventually be shipped out to that *special* black hole for good, so I found a solution.

I started cheating.

Studying was hard, especially with my screwed-up brain, but I was a good cheat. I copied friends' homework and scanned my neighbors' work during tests. I even copied the answers on the standardized tests that didn't have any impact on my grades. It worked! My rising test scores placated Ms. D, and my mother stopped getting calls from school. I thought I'd solved a problem when really I was creating new ones by taking the path of least resistance. My coping mechanism confirmed that I would never learn squat at school, and that I would never catch up, which pushed me closer toward a flunked-out fate.

The saving grace of those early years in Brazil was that I was way too young to understand the kind of prejudice I would soon face in my new hick hometown. Whenever you're *the only* one of your kind, you're in danger of being pushed toward the margins, suspected and disregarded, bullied and mistreated by ignorant people. That's just the way life is, especially back then, and by the time that reality kicked me in the throat, my life had already become a jacked-up fortune cookie. Whenever I cracked it open, I got the same message.

You were born to fail!

CHALLENGE #1

My bad cards arrived early and stuck around a while, but everyone gets challenged in life at some point. What is your bad hand? What kind of crap are you dealing with? Are you getting beaten? Abused? Bullied? Do you ever feel insecure? Maybe your limiting factor is that you are growing up so supported and comfortable, you never push yourself?

What are the current factors limiting your growth and success? Is someone standing in your way at work or school? Are you underappreciated and overlooked for opportunities? What are the long odds you're up against right now? Are you standing in your own way?

Break out your journal—if you don't have one, buy one, or start one on your laptop, tablet, or in the notes app on your smart phone—and write them all out in minute detail. Don't be bland with this assignment. I showed you every piece of my dirty laundry. If you were hurt or are still in harm's way, tell the story in full. Give your pain shape. Absorb its power, because you are about to flip that pain on its head.

You will use your story, this list of excuses, these very good reasons why you shouldn't amount to anything, to fuel your ultimate success. Sounds fun right? Yeah, it won't be. But don't worry about that yet. We'll get there. For now, just take inventory.

Once you have your list, share it with whoever you want. For some, it may mean logging onto social media, posting a picture, and writing out a few lines about how your own past or present circumstances challenge you to the depth of your soul. If that's you, use the hashtags #badhand #canthurtme. Otherwise, acknowledge and accept it privately. Whatever works for you. I know it's hard, but this act alone will begin to empower you to overcome.

CHAPTER TWO

TRUTH HURTS

Wilmoth Irving was a new beginning. Up until he met my mother and asked for her phone number, all I'd known was misery and struggle. When the money was good, our lives were defined by trauma. Once we were free of my father, we were swept under by our own PTSD-level dysfunction and poverty. Then, when I was in fourth grade, she met Wilmoth, a successful carpenter and general contractor from Indianapolis. She was attracted to his easy smile and laid-back style. There was no violence in him. He gave us permission to exhale. With him around it felt like we had some support, like something good was finally happening to us.