

***Adventures with Hood Shortiez***

*Portal to an Unknown World*

By Creola Thomas

Adventures with Hood Shortiez: Portal to an Unknown World

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## The MOST Disastrous, Outrageous, Downright Ridiculous Day of My Life

My name is Salle with an E, not a Y. See, the reason this is important is that I was named after my Big Mama, and she was a boss in a small town. My mother called her a big fish in a small pond, but she held down the business, whatever her business was. Most people say we are a lot alike because I can be bossy. I wouldn't say that I'm bossy, but *somebody's* gotta take charge, and it might as well be me.

Seems like every time I lay low, something *horrible* happens. The horrible set of mishaps I'm about to describe landed me and my crew in a strange place, which even now is hard to explain. Before I tell you about that place, let me just tell you that there are hidden portals in the hood, worlds with talking creatures with motives and purposes yet to unfold. A world undefined by anything you have ever seen or heard before. This place doesn't only live in the imaginations of the youth or the elderly or the insane—it's more than just imagination.

I am warning you early to brace yourself, hold on tight for dear life, as if you were at the top of a hundred-foot drop on an amusement park ride, excitedly waiting and dreadfully anticipating the story I will tell you soon. This whole tale of twisted events will leave you twiddling your thumbs, lost in thought, half wanting to believe they're true. But they were experienced by four other people, and therefore, there must be some truth to them, right? A real-life mystery.

My mother says that there's no such thing as mysteries, that everything has a logical explanation. She says that if you ever think you've found a mystery, you're just not the right person to solve it. The answer is out there, just waiting on the right person.

I may have to disagree with my mother on this. Of course, I am only thirteen, but as sure as I am the only girl in my family, I experienced a mystery, and if I have to wait for the rest of my life, I hope to meet the right person who will unravel this one.

It all started two weeks before seventh grade was to end. We were in the science lab getting our final projects together. Well, some of us were working hard on our projects, like Marion, Sharie, and me. Ryan, however, was dancing with the skeleton, and Stinky—who really shouldn't have been there because he is three years younger and a whole lot dumber—was mixing all sorts of liquids together, all sorts of science stuff. Sharie and I hoped he would

stop, but he didn't. He really didn't feel like he had to listen to us. We were just a couple of shortiez from the streets, like him, trying to make it to middle school next year.

Ryan couldn't resist all the fun Stinky was having, so he decided to join him. The two of them were making some sort of magic potion that would surely bring about world peace one day. We didn't pay it much mind because we were deep in our own work, but then the smell of burned rubber began to fill the air. After that came a foul odor. We went over to see what kind of concoction those clowns were making, and suddenly, *everything* went *kaboom!* They had mixed popping powder with baking soda and vinegar in one of the large silver pots on the science table. The next thing I know, popping gunfire sounds were coming from everywhere!

Then suds-like bubbles began to fill the air, and when they burst, they actually stained the walls, desks, and cabinets. The boys must have added something foamy white to the potion because white smoky clouds merged with giant smelly puffs, and together, those took to the air, covering everything in white wherever they landed. Marion tried to turn off the heating stove, but the smelly bubbles popping all over the place were also gummy and sticky, and as he was on his way to simply calm down the situation, he slipped, fell on top of the skeleton, and bones flew all over the place.

In his struggle to get back up, he knocked down the bookcase and the big blue globe went spinning into the classroom window. The mysterious exploding sandwich bags tumbled off the top bookcase. Our science teacher, Mr. Scott, had said that if those ever dropped it would sound like an atomic bomb, and boy, he didn't lie. Those little exploding plastic bags not only let out a loud banging sound but also had a unique smell, like roach spray or Mr. Lewis's stinky cologne.

Well, what's a girl to do? This was a man-made disaster, and the two boys who created it were huddled under a table covered in something that could have at some point been baking soda. I slipped trying to get to the intercom and slid all the way across the room, knocking down books, a desk, measuring glasses full of thermometers, plastic bottles, Petri dishes, and magnifiers, before finally reaching the garbage can. Heck, even my head took the initiative to mop up some of the suds and was completely white on top. You would think I had prematurely gone gray.

In the midst of all this, my mind was in panic mode as it lingered on my mom's reaction—I imagined the hundred and one different ways she was going to kill me for messing up the French braids she had just paid a neighbor to do for me. Sharie managed to ring for help, but not before she slid into the window shades, pulling them down and covering herself in curtains, spiders, and a whole lot of hidden dust. The smelly floating fart bubbles greeted

all of us several times with a gentle kiss, leaving our faces, backs, and necks covered in tar glue and smelling like rotten eggs.

On top of all that, when help arrived, Ryan and Stinky—the originators of this whole mess—weren’t the only ones in trouble. We *all* got marched down the hall to meet our doom. In one single-file line, heads bowed, the kids most of the community affectionately referred to as simply “dem shortiez” were definitely taking the walk of shame. Disgruntled and disheveled, we walked the long hall. Every now and again, Sharie, Marion, and I gave Ryan and Stinky the evil eye—making sure they were well aware this was all their fault and that we were expecting them to clear the rest of us of any wrong.

Now, this is not the first time we’ve taken the long walk to Principal Morten’s office, but we had hoped that maybe, just maybe, by this time we had seen our last detention . . . until eighth grade, of course. This was quickly becoming *the most disastrous, outrageous, downright ridiculous day of my life.*

The Verdict is in—Let's Hang 'Em!

I Mean, Book 'Em!

Principal Morten of St. Joseph's Catholic School was a jolly middle-aged dude who had eaten a few more doughnuts than salads. He had obviously done more socializing than exercising, but he listened twice as much as he spoke, and for that, we pitied and adored him. Principal Morten was known for his uncompromising compassion. Even in his anger, he exhibited kindness. He was like a judge who never found anyone totally guilty.

One of the security guards, acting as if he was the Secret Service or something, showed him a few visuals of the room we had just destroyed. Even if he hadn't seen the room, we were living proof of the destruction.

Stinky, covered in his own funk, was especially blasted by his own self-made fart bombs. He looked as if he'd been hit several times, and when they landed on him, they changed color, making him look like the rainbow stink boy. He also had black mud stripes all over his face and hands. Ryan, the once-white kid with fiery red hair, was now covered in a mix of dark-colored mud and white chalky powder. His hair was no longer red, but rather a musty yellow. Marion had rips in his shirt from one of the skeleton bones, and he had mud stains all over his face and clothes.

Sharie, who had to brush a few baby spiders out of her hair, sat traumatized and silent. She twitched every free second or so. I knew she was throwing up hiccups when she started jerking her head back. *Poor Sharie*, I thought. I decided not to tell her a dead spider was trapped between her hair and barrette because I knew, from the moment she arrived in the office, that she was on the verge of having a panic attack.

Lastly, there was me, Miss Gray Hair—smelly, muddy, and missing a sock and shoe from trying to recuse myself from the disastrous event that had just invaded my life. I heard the sirens from the fire trucks which slowly accompanied the truth of another reality—that the smoking blue-and-red stuff that sparked like electricity was actually fire, and we had, of course, burned down part of the newly decorated science lab. Yeah, that's going to *really* help our stellar reputation with the community.

Principal Morten mulled over the pictures, every now and again giving us a sneak peek of his disappointment by looking up, eyeing us closely, and shaking his head. From time to time, he would grunt words no one understood. He was restraining himself. I've got to tell you, this was not regular old Principal Morten. He is usually more preachy in these matters,

but he was quiet—a little too quiet—and I got the feeling that it wasn't because he was praying. Ryan, being braver than he had to be, finally spoke the words we were all longing to hear him say:

“Father . . .”

He was going in for the appeal . . . and he was going to cry. Yes! Score! If you cried, Principal Morten would give you a break. Also, when you addressed him as “Father,” instead of “Principal,” it meant you wanted compassion, and with all the damage done to that room, we needed more than compassion—we needed a Jesus-walking-on-water miracle. Even though it appeared that Principal Morten was not quite ready to hear from any of us, Ryan took his silence as permission to speak.

With trembling lips and a teardrop hiding in the corner of his large green eyes, waiting to fall on cue, Ryan continued. “Father . . . Father, I know things look really bad in there, but it really wasn't supposed to turn out that way.”

*Oh, no*, I thought, *what is he doing?* I wanted to hear begging and pleading. I wanted to see tears, lots of tears. We all knew the lingo. The routine was not new to us, especially not new to Ryan. We were all sort of known for making mishaps every now and again. I paid closer attention as he began speaking again, and this time, I hoped to see some showmanship.

“First of all, it wasn't everyone who created this mess. You see, Stinky and me, sir, we were trying to be inventors, like Carver, so we had to be daring. But we are so sorry! Please, please don't kick us out.”

The tears began to flow like a faucet and I could hear an angelic choir singing. If I didn't know Ryan, I would have believed him. We were sure to get a pass this time, maybe even a hero's reward. I mean, not to brag or anything, but a few of us did try to salvage the situation.

Principal Morten turned his attention totally away from us, walked to the cabinet, and got out a large black container labeled “Drake Shortiez.” Yeah, that was us alright. The container was big and packed with pink slips. What was he doing, saving our detention slips as souvenirs? Principal Morten picked out one of the slips and turned to face Ryan.

“What happened with the car, Ryan?”

“The car, sir?” Ryan repeated as if he didn't understand the word *car*. “Well, I will tell you what happened with the car. It was a rainy Chicago day, and we shortiez were walking home from school, like most days, but on this day, we didn't have umbrellas, so our sweater and jackets were our covering, and everything from the top to the bottom was wet . . .”

As Ryan spoke, my mind drifted back to that soggy fall day. I could feel the rain soaking through my clothes all over again, and I could hear Stinky saying, “Let's wait in that car until the rain slows down—my bones hurt.”

We had come across a block car in the rain: one of those busted-down cars in the hood that just sit there waiting to get towed. Sometimes they attract suspicious activity, but today was a whole other story.

“Yeah, I bet your bones hurt!” I teased Stinky. After a little convincing, we all packed in the car, glad to get out of the rain.

Out of nowhere, Ryan starts boasting, “I can drive this car.”

“No you can’t,” Stinky challenged.

“Yes, I can too. I can make it start.”

Marion tried to intervene, but before anyone could say anything, Ryan popped that hood and started moving some things about. He took out the ignition key, arranged the cords, and low and behold, like a common car thief he made the ignition activate. With us all in shock, he announces confidently, “I can drive this piece of crap too—move over.” Well, after seeing him in action under the hood, who would doubt that he could? Marion moved out of the driver’s seat and jumped in the back. And with no sense at all, Ryan zoomed out into the street.

I could have died that day. I saw my life float by like the glass bottles floating around us down the street. Ryan drove that car alright—right into the back of a funeral home, which let in the rising floodwater and let out several empty caskets, which drifted down the streets like decorated floats in a parade. The darn car stopped, and then caught fire. What more could a group of kids do but try and float on the caskets, as the water was all of twelve feet, and we could have drowned?

Okay, it was more like two feet, but we had to get home somehow, or people would have known we burned up the block car, and for the record, block cars are supposed to be undrivable. Ryan knew that admitting to the car situation could land him in a lot of hot water, but it just so happened all the caskets were recovered, and no harm was done. The block car still sits there. The rain put out the fire, and someone simply pushed it back into place.

Ryan’s stammering brought my mind back to Principal Morten’s office. Ryan couldn’t think of anything quick to say, so he said what we all probably would have said: “Sir, I don’t know much about cars. That wasn’t me!”



At this point, Principal Morten took out a picture someone had given him of Ryan—eyes the size of bow dollars, mouth opened wide driving—yes—a car. We all got to view what appeared to be exhibit one. We got up quietly from our seats and looked at the picture, which was undeniably Ryan—and of course, us—and with the precision of choreographed dancers, we all took two steps back to our chairs and hoped that the conversation about the car would end. Principal Morten shook his head but said no more about the car.

I saw it: it didn't linger long, but I'd say anger—not disappointment, but anger—flashed through Principal Morten's eyes as he removed another pink slip from the box.

"Tell me about the corner store situation."

Marion stood up and announced, "We are not guilty! Kids go in that store and steal all the time and get chased out. Everybody thinks we are so bad, but what about *love*?"

Principal Morten eyed him carefully, as this was a new thing Marion was doing (it was a new *something* alright). I didn't know where he was going with this.

"Yes, Father Morten, these little shortiez just need *love*, that's all," Principal Morten slapped down a photo of Stinky putting bags of chips in his backpack, front pants pockets, and back pockets. Again, we all got up and looked at the pictures and quickly sat back down. All I was thinking was, *please don't let Stinky open his mouth*. Maybe we're a little on the bad side, but if we just keep quiet, Principal Morten would simply give us a paper to write over the summer and we'd be all good. But nooooo! Stinky had to open his BIG, FAT mouth.

"Well, actually, sir, I wasn't stealing anything. I didn't know he didn't have a layaway plan."

"Layaway plan?" asked Principal Morten.

"Yeah, I wasn't stealing the stuff, I was just putting it on layaway. I had every intention of paying him later. If he wouldn't have grabbed me by the collar, taken the chips and all from me, and forced me to run for my very life, I would have told him, 'Look dude, I'll pay you later.'"

"Pay him later?" Principal Morten repeated because he, like the rest of us, couldn't believe what Stinky was claiming. But the more we thought about it, the more we were like, *I wonder if that store did have a layaway plan?*

"I am disappointed and saddened by this series of events. Really, really sad." He stopped—and our hearts stopped, too. He spoke again, and we were resuscitated. "In this box, these are your combined detentions."

"Clearly, we are just not doing enough," said Ryan, hoping to bring clarification to his statements, but Principal Morten wasn't having it.

“It’s not that you are not doing enough, so stop it, Ryan,” he said sternly. “It’s my turn to speak. We are not doing enough and you are not doing enough. It’s a two-way street. You’ve got to want to do good.”

“We do, Father,” I said, hoping that my voice sounded remorseful enough.

“No, clearly you do not!” declared Principal Morten.

Marion, who can be the most rational one of us all, stood up to again defend us (I hoped). One thing for sure is that he knows how to get a situation calmed down with words no one really understands. It has been said that Marion can convince anyone of anything if he believes it himself.

Marion spoke softly, pleading with Principal Morten, “Give us one more chance to prove that we do know how to do good; if we fail, we will spend the whole summer in detention.”

“OK,” I said, “push pause and reverse, please. Allow me to rewind that last statement. Marion, who is a blockhead, spoke nonsense!” However, Father was seriously taking his plea into consideration.

Finally, Father spoke, “OK, but I am going to give you several chances, because of course, you have done several misdeeds. You are assigned the ‘Do Good Challenge.’ Within the next two days, you must do at least ten good things collectively, as a group, and have an adult sign off on the deeds. I will be calling each of them to verify the work you did. If you complete the task, no summer detention and you get to stay in this school.” In my mind, all I was hearing him say was *leave the school—he was kicking us out to public school!*

All of a sudden, the image of public school came flying at me as if to slap me back to reality. I saw students throwing books out the window, teachers taking smoke breaks right in the middle of teaching, and kids playing “Punch me out” during the reading block. The image of one of those oversized kids knocking out boys didn’t want to leave me—until it was replaced with the image of an oversized girl knocking *me* out. Now, I am a big fish in this small pond, and trust me, I can stand my ground with anyone in a fight, but I just didn’t think I could beat up the six-foot-tall Amazon girl who was playing knock-me-out on my face. And poor Sharie, she wouldn’t even have a chance. No public school for us, we were just not yet ready for that.

As I tried not to think of Amazon girl, Principal Morten continued: “If you do not complete this task, each of you will spend every single day of your summer cleaning up this place—for free—after which you will spend the remainder of your time in a detention room looking at dull white walls. After that, I will be asking your parents to transfer you all back to public school. If your behavior is only getting worse, maybe a private school is not the right setting

for you guys. I will be pulling your scholarships as well, but that goes without saying. So, do we have a deal? And before you answer that, remember I am not offering anything else . . . Deal?”

“Man, that sucks! We can’t do that!” shouted Stinky.

We all looked at him to say shut up, and with eyes that would kill, but unfortunately, that didn’t stop him.

“I’m not going to shut up, you know we can’t do good!” Stinky added, as if his first comments weren’t bad enough.

Principal Morten lowered his glass and stood bravely, with the feeling of victory swallowing up his soul—you could just see it—as he announced, “Hence the challenge. You guys are going to work together, this time for the good of man. And maybe you will learn that getting everything you want and doing what you want to do is not always a good thing. Just because you can do it does not mean you should. I know it took me a while to get that message, kids, but if we all lived in a place where everyone just did what they wanted to do all the time, most people would fight to get out of that place.”

“I wouldn’t!” I announced. I *wouldn’t* fight to get out of it. No adults telling us what to do, it would be perfect! I looked down, as I knew this was a setup plan for failure. So I said a little more forcefully, “It can’t be done with this crew.” Then I thought about it. Maybe I should just agree. So I added, “We can do good, I mean, I am sure Sharie and I can do good, but the rest of them—they my homies, don’t get me wrong, but ain’t no good in them, except maybe Marion.” Somebody had to say it. *Why y’all looking at me?* I wanted to say, but instead I stood my ground and gave back the dirty looks tossed my way.

“Please, Principal Morten, can we split up? That way we can accomplish more. Let’s say me and Sharie and then the boys—yeah, the boys against the girls!” Sharie gave me a sinister nod of agreement, as though she knew the challenge would be like taking candy from a baby.

But good ol’ can’t-wait-to-have-a-cheeseburger Morten shot that idea right down. “No, you have to do it together, and that is that!”

Sharie, who is deaf, signed to me that she didn’t want to take the deal, but I explained to her and the rest of them that this may be the only way out of our predicament. So we laid our hands one on top of the other and made a pact with each other. Then we turned to our beloved principal and sealed the contract with him.

Principal Morten was a man of the law, and he took his contracts very seriously. Legend has it that one of his students signed his mother away on a contract with Mr. Morten and that

woman works in the school to this very day. Well, obviously the kid lost the bet, but the point is, never sign a contract with Principal Morten. It's long been rumored that you just can't win with him. The very nature of the contract is that you lose.

Come to think of it, this would be just what the good Principal Morten wants: if we lose, we have to clean up his whole school over the summer, and we get kicked out of his school for fall, and all is well in Morten's world. But what choice did a group of shortiez have? We had two days to do ten good things. We could do it; I knew we could. I felt a *Rocky* motivation infuse my soul, and for the first time, I knew that it was truly possible.

However, we weren't off the hook that easy. We still had to clean up the lab the next day, despite the fact that we accepted the challenge, and our parents would have to know what we did and all about the contract. But things could have been a whole lot worse. My mother and father could have been called up to the school.

Now, my father is a Reverend, but he considers Father Morten to be holier than him *and* my grandfather; it has something to do with Father Morten not taking on a wife in all these years, you know, *grown-up* stuff. So for some strange reason, in the presence of Father Morten, my father can barely talk. He just cries like he lost his best friend, and anything the good priest says is right, and they are all wrong. I don't get it myself, so I can't expect you to understand; just know that watching a grown man trying to explain himself while crying at the same time ain't a pretty sight.

Anywho, we still had to get our parents to sign the contract, which I am sure Principal Morten already knew was coming because I am sure this contract wasn't our idea at all but rather the exact road he wanted to take in order to kick us out of school. "That Principal Morten—" I thought as I looked at his irritating, sideways, oddball presence.

However, that was okay, because this rag-tag crew came from strength. So with confidence, I thought, *Can we do it? Yes, we can! Well, I think we can . . . or at best, I hope we can . . . come to think of it . . . maybe not. Sheesh!*

### 3

#### The Rag-Tag Crew: Salle May Thornton's Family

When people think of us shortiez, they think we were joined at the hip, but actually, that is not exactly true. I am from the Thornton clan, the family of the three P's: my grandfather's name is Percy Thornton, my father's name is Percy Thornton (we call him PT), and my brother's name is Percy Thornton (we call him JR).

My mother, Anna Thornton, is a hat-wearing, heel-clacking first lady of the church. What is a first lady? Glad you asked. The first lady is simply the pastor's wife. My mother is all of five foot two, but she's a powerhouse of a woman with the likable factor working in her favor: she makes everyone feel like having cookies and milk and just chilling out. Well, that is, until you make her mad, which is a side you usually don't see. She isn't angry a lot, but when she is, run for cover—or as my father would put it, hide in the closets.

In the community, they call my mother the "Proverb Lady," I guess because she technically works three jobs. She's a mother, of course, but she also works for the local community public school, which is why we attend private school, and she sells Avon, with the hope of driving a pink Cadillac one day. My dad wants her to give up that Avon job. He says she's her best customer, and honestly, I think he hates the thought of maybe one day having to ride in that pink Cadillac.

I want her to keep the Avon job. Some of my nice earrings, bracelets, and flower-smelling perfumes come from that gig, and it somewhat makes me special in my school when I dress up and I have matching earrings, bracelet, and necklace. I am a walking billboard for Avon products, which actually makes me rather special because my perfumes and cheap jewelry did not come from the corner store.

If my mother is the first lady, my father's got to be a pastor, and he is—Pastor Percy Thornton. He preaches almost every Sunday, and when he is not trying to get people to preach to, he likes to believe he can play golf. On any given Saturday morning, my dad, Uncle Bruce, and a few of the community old-timers like to go out on the green. Well, it's not a real golf course; it's the green lawn behind the park district. I hear if you watch out for the dog poop, you may have the opportunity to hit a hole in one.

Another member of the Thornton Clan is my brother, Percy Jr. What can I say about Percy? Well, for starters, call him JR. He is two years older than me and a lot dumber. To put it nicely, he is a rather stupid boy, and he knows it (really, he does). But everyone—and I do mean everyone—thinks he is the future of this family. He manages to never get in trouble and he is always so proper with his uniforms, low haircut, and friendly greetings. My brother speaks to everyone; even if he doesn't know you, he is going to say, "Good morning." What kind of person makes sure he says good morning to everyone he meets, friend or foe? You should be hanged for such atrocities.

You should hear Ms. Nelson brag on how he is so presidential. "What a nice young boy that Percy Jr. is!" It's not just her. The whole Drake Street thinks he is something special. I would be rich if I got paid every time I hear my brother is headed for greatness. Stupidity, I tell you—no, insanity—and you want to know why I feel this way? I know what eyes whose vision is only made clearer with glasses do not see; I know what great things he is headed for, he told me his dream.

Now, you see, I am mostly considered a misfit, a waste of brain energy, one of "dem shortiez" from the hood. But in reality, my brother, the proper-sounding "I have a dream" speaker and communicator, is a plum idiot; my brother's dream is this—but I'm warning you, before you read any further, his dream is going to turn your stomach, make your head spin, knees shake, and if you are standing you may faint so have a seat—Mr. Greatness's dream is . . . Are you ready? Are you sure? Well, here it is . . . my brother wants to open a booger factory.

You heard me right, he wants to clone boogers. He likes the taste of his boogers. He eats them behind my parents' back. He thinks his boogers taste good and would taste even

better if they were on toast. Oh, not to mention the snot—he feels the snot is like ketchup on fries—the more slimy white stuff covering the boogers, the better.

Now, how will he accomplish this dream? Here's his plan: my brother wants to clone the first booger ever. He figured if sheep can be cloned, so can boogers. How will this grand operation work? Actually, the plan may be workable. You will mail in your boogers and he will clone and pickle them in man-made snot and mail them back to you, like a jar of pickles. You can also have dry boogers mixed with raisins. He told me this vision with a loving twinkle in his eyes and a prideful smile on his face, as if he had just unlocked the secrets to saving the planet.

Even I had to admit he had a workable plan for promoting this ridiculous idea. He was aware enough to know that you gotta somehow eliminate the taboos of eating boogers before this plan can work, much like how people eliminate the grossness around eating roaches. He even took time to look up where roaches are eaten, like in China, where there are many farms that actually sell edible roaches. OK, his level of stupidity runs deep as you can see, but he is thinking, and this I have to give him credit for because, sure enough, he is a total idiot. It would have been nice if he just paid a little attention in third-grade science, because if he had, he would know that a roach is an insect and insects can sometimes be consumed because they are rich in protein and low in carbohydrates.

And how will he get the word out concerning his plan to clone boogers? I've got to give him credit for at least trying to think. Now, to get the word out, his plan is to hire a rich rapper or actress and pay him or her millions of dollars to eat boogers and to put eating boogers in a rap or pop song. This is all it will take for people to run out and clone their boogers.

Now, I know this may seem rude to not pay attention when someone is speaking, like when my brother releases this concept into the atmosphere on lazy Saturday mornings when no one is awake and the Saturday morning cartoons are running reruns. So, I may have helped him just a little to come up with ways in which he can expand this brilliant idea and grow the enterprise. I may have given him the idea of boogers on a bun, or boogers in the bag, boogers n' chips, boogers with cheese, and yelled, "This is my favorite boogers sour cream dip!"

So, in other words, good people of the world, you will one day pay JR to eat your boogers. That will be his contribution to the world. I know what you are thinking—I'm the misfit, the original creator of chaos (as I am lovingly known in the community)—but it goes to show that looks can not only be deceiving, but they can be downright criminal. I am waiting for the day when he asks my parents to put up their soon-to-be-paid-off building and invest in

his booger enterprise. I will be there to witness it with my own eyes. Nope, I won't be in jail as some have speculated; I will be sitting right in Grandpa's chair.

Some of you may be thinking, why won't I tell him that those little green things are trapping viruses or bacteria before those pathogens enter your system? Why don't I tell him that these boogers are simply waste, something to be blown out and tossed in the trash can, and that cloning boogers would be very similar to cloning poop? Well, I never want to be a dream killer, and maybe if he stopped stealing my stuff and giving it to his wannabe girlfriends, I would have helped a brother out, but he won't stop, and he don't care, and even if he is caught, he always comes out looking like the good guy; so let's just see how well this plan works out for him.

Moving on to another valued member of the Thornton clan: Uncle Bruce. He was very athletic in his younger days—I hear he was really good at basketball. Now he plays back-of-the-yard golf with my dad. He also fixes cars. He owns his own garage on the avenue. He lives on the third floor with his girlfriend, Pat, and Ryan (more about that story later). My grandpa lives in the garden apartment on paper, but most days he's here with us, eating my mother's food and falling asleep in front of the floor model television; he only really stays in his apartment when my TT comes over. My TT is my grandfather's late-life child by a lady with long red hair and longer fingernails. He got someone pregnant when "the boss" died.

Who was the boss? I saved the best, or shall I say, the baddest, for last. The originator of bad, the hood legend, the one and only Big Salle, my grandmother. She actually started the movement that landed us at 914 N. Drake Street some twenty years ago.

When we moved to this block, every house had grass and the sun greeted the people every morning with smiles. Even when it rained, the sun was out relentlessly, giving hope. The moon hung low enough to give the night light, so bright you would think you were on a movie set; the stars twinkled just before they were to dissolve into the light of the day as daybreak sent its love with peaks of sunlight. People wore straw hats and Kane skirts on those rare summer nights. The fog would move at knee level, and us kids could reach and touch it. It had a misty, gritty feel to it, like pushing backward against the heavy wind. The winter was really winter, with snow kissing and melting on your face, not so cold that you couldn't come out and enjoy a sled ride or a friendly snowball fight; the snow melted under hot ice, leaving a safe passage for people to walk, run, and enjoy the beautiful scenery of snow covering all the ugliness of ordinary life.

People didn't even lock their doors until we moved on Drake Street. I hear Big Mama said we integrated the hate. I am still not sure what that means, but when we came, there were others behind us, on other blocks and across the street. It's like our house put out a visual



sign that read, “It’s OK for black folk to live here now, and all the other people of the world, it’s OK for you to move out.” And that’s exactly what they did; they moved east, taking the sun, policemen, stores, factories, and pockets with dollar bills with them, but not before they made Big Salle a legend.

My grandmother, my namesake, is a hero or a villain depending on who’s telling the story, and believe me, stories were told and told and told. So, here’s how the story goes: We migrated from the Near North Side of Chicago from a place called Cabrini. The very fact that she was born in the low-cost housing should have given the friendly new neighbors a warning that maybe this family was not to be messed with. Besides, they say my grandma was something special—she came to the world with a bullet in her mouth. They said she didn’t even cry as a baby. She couldn’t cry. The doctors had to surgically remove the bullet.

She was a big baby, I’m told, and passed the crawling stages. She was born and just started walking. She was always big and she was always bad. No guy in her neighborhood would dare ask her for anything, rather less a date. Well, my grandpa asked her if she wanted a beer, and she fell madly in love with Percy Thornton because he was unafraid to talk to her. They were in love as best as anyone could be in love with Big Salle. They had two baby boys and life was groovy until Grandpa got the draft card and shipped off to war.

Well, Big Salle wasn’t going to slack on her part. While her man was away, she held down the folk. Big Salle started saving and stealing, doing whatever it took to take care of her family—wasn’t much a woman could do, but what it was she could do, she did. She ran numbers and guns, and if you didn’t pay up, you got crushed. Grandpa was gone for three years, and when he came back, not only was Big Salle almost the richest woman in the hood, but she was the maddest woman or man in the hood.

War has its way on the minds of sanity. I’m told you come back with the ghosts of the soldiers you left overseas. This helped us to understand why Grandpa came back different. He was having night shakes and morning quakes. He took long showers and his eyes never met yours in conversation—he always talked head bowed. Most days, I’m told, he just stayed in his room and itched all the time. Big Salle knew she needed to move her family to a more peaceful part of town, so she used Grandpa’s GI Bill and all her cash and bought the house on Drake Street. She also didn’t want Grandpa going to the nuthouse because whispers were being heard and people were calling him looney, the same people he accused of being spies.

Anywho, before Big Salle would let them try and claim him insane, she moved on Drake with new faces and basic unknowns and safe from army reporting. These were new lands, and although her fame was spoken of often on the North Side, Drake Street had to learn for

themselves. She had to break a few jaws and crush a few bones just to live on the street. My grandma stood every bit of six feet with long black hair and broad shoulders, and when she walked down the street, concrete grounds cracked. That's why today we have horizontal lines in sidewalk concrete grounds.

People moved to the other side of the street so as to not walk past my grandmother—you better not look her in the eyes, you might catch on fire. They say my grandmother was so strong, she fought off three white-hooded gang bangers by herself by throwing one of them under a speeding car. She was so strong, she bent a .45 pistol in half. They even said she shot a guy in the eye.

Now, why would she do all this? Glad you asked. See, we were the first African American family to like integrated Drake Street, so a few nice fellows—friendly dudes in Casper the Friendly Ghost Halloween costumes—well, these nice men liked to start friendly barn fires for new African people in the shape of a cross because they knew my mama loved the Lord. I guess my grandma was just having a bad day, she went outside with a bat and the strength of twenty men and cut that celebration short. You can imagine a few people were hurt.

Well, that was my grandmother—the knife-toting gunslinger and “shut yo mouth” bad mother. I bet you are wondering, how did this hood legend die? Well, she shot herself in the foot, bullet went clear through her foot, and she fell asleep on the porch and died with the gun in her hand. She sat on the porch for two days, and no one wanted to wake her up just in case that puddle of blood surrounding her wasn't from her foot. After about two days, the smell was fumigating the area, and someone had to do it. They had to put my grandmother to rest properly.

Our neighbor, Ms. Nelson—yes, the community gossiper—called the cops and my grandma's body was eventually moved to the morgue. This is how Ms. Nelson became somewhat famous herself. She was credited with helping Big Salle receive a proper grave.

After Big Salle's death, my grandpa had to pull it together. He actually went to the doctor and got medication for his strange condition because he didn't have Grandma to scare it out of him. He also put his boys in church. Every Sunday, he would drop them off with one dollar for the offering. He couldn't attend church himself, you know, with his condition and all he couldn't sit for that long, but he wanted his boys in church because he knew that was what his late wife Big Salle would have wanted. He really loved Big Salle.

Okay, he did mess up, my grandpa, and got that baby who is now my TT, which is short for auntie. Oh, by the way, he actually was kind of famous because he was on television denying the baby until the test results came back, and they tell me his pissed his pants right in court. It was a hard laugh for years around here. They say all he could do was look

and stare, couldn't even answer any more of the judge's questions. He just stood there, buck eyes, mouth open, peeing his pants. I would have loved to see this myself, but Grandpa had lawyers have it removed from the world—the tape and the television show just disappeared, gone for life.

OK, St. Joseph, how did I get there? The school is how we all met. I had two really good things going for me and one maybe not-so-much-of-a-good thing. The not-so-good thing was I was much too much like my grandmother (absent of the strength and size), so my parents didn't want me to go to public school. They feared for my life. Somebody was surely going to shut me up one day, and my brother would not be any help.

The two good things are that I was smart—I mean really smart, some would even say a genius—and I could also play the violin. I just picked it up and started playing like a pro. In fact, the Chicago symphony wanted me to be a guest violist, but my mother said no, because she didn't want people throwing tomatoes at me on the stage, even though she knows the only person who would probably throw the tomatoes would be Granddad. Well, he said he would, and we all believed him.

Now, the only school in my area with a good music program, small classroom sizes, and stable teachers was the Catholic school, St. Joseph's. My mother applied for a scholarship for my brother and me, and it was granted. My dumb brother and I were the first students of color to attend this Catholic grade school from Drake Street, but more would follow. In fact, it was this school that would eventually connect this rag-tag crew, lovely referred to as “dem shortiez.”

## The Rag-Tag Crew: Who Is Ryan?

It was a summer day, but not just any summer day—the kind of day where heat is too hot to move, so when it lands on you, it penetrates your skin and you feel like you are literally being cooked to order on the spot. I will, on my honor, tell Ryan O’Conner’s migration to Drake Street just as he tells it. Why? Because he’s my cousin, and I love to hear him tell this story. I think he may even believe it.

Anywho, I think it’s only fair to let the kid speak his truth. So, here’s how the story goes: It was a summer day, the kind of day . . . okay, I said that part. Moving on. It was such a day as this that Ryan and Pat’s (his mother’s) tires literally melted to the iron rod, blowing Pat’s tires off the rims. They had been driving for almost fifty hours fleeing the Italian Mob, who would be most likely looking for Ryan’s father, Connor O’Conner, who was a high-ranking member of the Irish Mob.

The Irish Mob was in too deep with the Italian Mob, who wanted them to close down the liquor stores in the community which they shared. But Ryan’s father, all of six-foot-five, two hundred and ninety pounds, with a punch more powerful than Rocky’s, told them freaking Italians that they would have their drinks all day every day if they so choose. In fact, Connor was so indignant at the request he *dared* the Italians to try and take away their drinks.

The Irish never tried to take spaghetti away from the Italians, by the way. Spaghetti is just as bad because it’s high in carbs and when consumed in a large amount it will kill you (Ryan’s story).

Anyway, the Italians had no right to even suggest something the Irish loved so much had to go. So, Connor O’Conner declared war and sent out the statement: “We will drink on the porches, in the parks, and in the restaurants” (Italian restaurants, no doubt), and begged them clowns to ride down on his Irishmen. Ryan’s father’s group was the Green Pride, and the Italian crew was the Meatball Thunder. Well, anyway, the Meatball Thunders told that Green Pride group that they would have their rumble, and the last man standing would be the best (and possibly the only) man standing.

Now, at this point in the story, I told Ryan it would be so cool if the two groups broke off into a song and dance, but he reminded me that he was, in fact, authoring this story, and he was telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and everyone knows Irish don't dance. Now, I tried to remind him about the Irish stepdance, like the Riverdance, but you know what he said—his story, so let him tell it.

Well, anyway, the Green Pride was out for blood. The nerves of the Meatball Thunders to try and tell them they couldn't have their drinks! Getting drunk was a rite of passage and something the Green Pride had no problem with. (Remember, his story, I'm just telling you how it was told to me.)

So the night before all this was to go down, the menfolk made the womenfolk leave, never to return. "Never to return?" I questioned, and he reiterated, "Never to return." They gave each of them the wheels they needed to drive away with and a long, passionate kiss. They also gave them divorce papers and the right to change their names. Pat swore to Ryan's dad with tears in her eyes that she would never love another, never in her life.

This was really hard for Ryan to tell, because with his father losing his mother, he witnessed an Irishman cry. His father wept so loud and long the ground shook and the moon turned bright orange. When his dad stood back up after crying so long and hard, his eyes were bloodshot red, and his hair turned silver. He had been transformed into an Irish god, and everyone knew this. He was ready to let his family go and fight for the honor of his community. It was the way that his father and mother loved that made his dad a hero in Ryan's eyes, not the fact that he was fighting for a community so that that community could stay drunk.

The duel was to take place that Friday night, and the women, children, and old people had to leave. In Pat's flight to get away, she knew she need to drive 120 on the expressway in the dead of the heat. Although she felt one of the wheels on the car was shaking, she had to get away; if the Italians ever found her, they would kill her and the son of god Connor O'Conner. If god Connor won the duel, a mark would be on his family because someone would take revenge, and if he lost the fight, the Italians would look high and low to get rid of this whole family, because if a son of a god grows up, he has to kill all of the Italians connected with that duel. It has to be done, that's just the way it is.

So, Pat leaving her husband and uprooting the family was the only respectable thing to do. Being in this position is very perplexing and complicated, especially if you have children. Pat knew she could not migrate to an area where she would fit in because they would know. I mean, the word travels like that—the son of a god is hard to hide. She knew she had to go and live amongst another race of people, so she asked Mother Mary for a sign, and right

when she exited the expressway, her wheels melted off the rims right in front of a junky-looking garage, which just happens to fix cars. It's hard to believe that Mother Mary would send her there, but it was cheap, and Mother Mary slept in a barn to save money, so saving money is very important to Mother Mary.

Now, please understand I had to correct him on this; I wouldn't be a good Baptist if I didn't. I had to let the kids know that Joseph and Mary had to sleep in the barn because there was no room at the inn. We sing songs about this, we've done plays concerning this night, and not to mention, all of the nativity depicts this very scene. I just couldn't let him mess this part up. He silently agreed and proceeded to continue his story by saying that, when her wheels came off the rims, they stopped at what seemed to be a pitstop—a run-down raggedy-shabbily of a building, which was the mechanic's shop owned by big and very scary Bruce.

Now, remember, this was a hot day and an even hotter night. Ryan's mother was so distracted and tired, all she wanted was one drink of water. The lonely and sad mechanic's shop owner told her, "I will give you that drink if you will give me your heart." Now, according to Ryan, she accepted that offer, because if she didn't have water right that very minute, her son would probably have died. Afraid for her life and the life of her young son of Connor O' Conner—the god son—Pat gave her heart to the mechanic who gave her water. That very night, they sealed their love in the back seat of her car while Ryan ate a burger and fries.

Well, that's Ryan's story. Oh, and the reason he was at the Catholic school first is because he was at a Catholic school on the south side of Chicago, so all they had to do was transfer his records. If you attended one Catholic school you attended them all. I've come to learn there is no telling what Ryan won't say. He once told me his grandmother was secretly a nun, who secretly married a priest, and they raised together three whole kids in the convent. I know you are wondering: how did she deliver the babies? God did it, according to Ryan. At night with no help, the babies just popped out. It was a water-to-wine miracle.

See what I have to put up with? And no matter how we argue that this couldn't possibly be true, Ryan never changes his story because that is the kind of person Ryan is. Other than creating all these unbelievable hyperboles, if he had two cents, he would gladly give you one, and if you go down, he's got your back, and if he had to create a bigger lie to get out of a lie, if he likes you, he will do it. If Ryan liked you, you didn't have to earn it, and if he didn't like you, you didn't have to earn that either. Basically, it depends largely on what he ate the night before and how much it matters to you whether he likes you or not. To me, it mattered none, not even a little bit, so he liked me right from the start.

Now, my Uncle Bruce tells it a different way, so I guess it's fair to share his side of the story. He met Pat at his shop as she drove her beaten-up Ford to his mechanic's shop on two flat tires. He sort of felt sorry for her, a young lady trapped in the hood with two flat tires and very little money. He fixed her car and offered her leftover burgers. She refused his help and paid for the food. She also told him he was running his business all wrong and helped him sort of reorganize the place. She was a quiet thunderbolt with a heart of gold.

When he fixed her car, the two of them talked all night about so many things. She had left an abusive relationship, and he had just ended a relationship because his ex-girlfriend cheated on him. She offered to work for him on commission, and he accepted, and they simply liked each other. The race didn't even matter, especially when they each had someone they could simply laugh with. It took a while, and they didn't hook up overnight, but they grew to love each other and now they live above us in the three-bedroom apartment, and Pat is still the part-time secretary at the mechanic's shop. She works mornings for our school, St. Joseph's, and part-time in the mechanic's shop.

I liked Pat right off. She was so easy to convince and didn't always assume we shortieez were lying. She also just bonded with my mother; they are like sisters, getting up at 5 a.m. and going to the thrift stores, grocery stores, working out together, or staying up late at night cooking Thanksgiving dinner and listening to music, and don't even mention Christmas Eve—those two will be wrapping presents and wearing the same PJs, just like sisters.

When I first met Ryan, I didn't like or dislike him, he was just a weird kid with red hair. As I got to know Ryan, I realized he may feel left out (my mother could have dropped that in my ear). My mother thought he was a kid trying desperately to hold on to the little of his life he still had from before my uncle stole his mother's heart. Ryan would twirl his toy airplanes (homemade from hangers) and stare out the windows; you could tell he would rather be someplace else. Pat went out and bought him all the latest clothes, but nothing really moved him. Oddly, the only person he spoke to was crazy Grandpa. Ryan was like this superhero, afraid to fly.

At school, before Marion and Stinky came, he was just a punching bag for some of the kids. He wasn't ever afraid to stick up for himself, but he just never had anyone to pick him up when he fell down, and in the hood, someone will try you. One day, I decided I would be that person who picked him up (also, my mom told me it was the right thing to do). We really bonded when I overheard a conversation Ryan was having with Grandpa. I wanted to know all about this conversation, so I asked him, "Why do you talk to Grandpa, only?"

Ryan looked back at me, and it was at this point I realized he had nice green eyes. “Well,” he said, melancholy, “he always wants me to get bananas for him, knowing it’s going to make him fark.”

“I know, right!” I enthusiastically agreed.

“So I just talk and lie to him all the time. He farkes and I lie.”

“Makes sense,” I said.

Then Ryan let me in on one of his secrets. “I told him one day that I found a bag of money and I hid it in a blue garbage can somewhere on Iowa Street, the recyclable cans.”

“We don’t have blue garbage cans in the hood, Ryan.”

“I know.” Ryan smiled.

I thought Grandpa was upset because he couldn’t find the money. Turns out, he was upset because he didn’t see one damn blue garbage can.

I laughed. Not only because Ryan had figured out Granddad, which can be a challenge within itself, but because we were alike in so many ways; we had both inherited a family that we didn’t understand, and we both were slowly coming to terms with the fact that maybe we won’t ever understand, and maybe they are weird, crooky, odd-talking, farking, jerk-faced, and jewelry-thieving, but they are family nonetheless. As for Ryan, he didn’t just become my friend that day; he became family.



### The Rag-Tag Crew: Who is Sharie?

Sister Mergie was the color of a copper penny; she wore a veil attached to a white coif. She was thin, but not too thin; her hair was long, but very kinky, and it hung stubbornly down her back almost to her buttocks, which made her look kind of funny because she was short, around five foot one. We all wondered, if her hair grew any longer, would she trip over it? Or grow so long that she would have to live in a tree and invite company to come up by climbing her incredibly long, coarse rope-hair? Oh, wait a minute, I think that story has already been written.

Anyway, Sister Mergie, who comes to us by way of Trinidad and Tobago, was a new addition to our school, and need I say, a welcome addition. She speaks English with a funny accent and a language known as Creole. Sister Mergie had invaded our space, and with her, close to her hip, were all her reasons for coming to this small Catholic school in a working poor African-American community, and she wasn't about to lose sight of her true calling.

I knew when I first laid eyes on her that she was the kind of person who held her reasons close. They were her prime motivation, similar to my father's Thanksgiving Day food list. Everything on that list he was going to make sure we had that year, even if he had to drive miles, fight in long superstore mall lines, or preach it out of you—needless to say, he was getting his divine meal, just like Sister Mergie was getting a group of kids who could barely speak English to speak sign language.

This nun did not talk much, and when she did talk, it sounded like she was talking through a baritone trumpet. Her speech was slow and exact, but the only really clear word we all understood was “no.” I later learned that she was deaf or hard of hearing, but as she had hearing early on in life, she could understand sound, and she was an excellent lip and face reader.

Deaf people like to be referred to as hard of hearing. I didn't know that some deaf people hear inner ear sounds and they can actually feel vibrations. Sister Mergie explained that she hears with her heart and speaks with her hands; she was part of a pilot program with

the goal of fostering the hard-of-hearing community in their own communities so that they will understand the cultural context of their same-age peers.

I know all this sounds complicated, and she didn't dumb it down for us. Some of us had to catch up. What I gather that she meant was that since hard-of-hearing kids have to be around the people in their community, they might as well learn how to communicate with the people in their community. Her goal was to work with the American Society for Deaf Children and create programs that bridged the two cultures.

Now, believe it or not, within four months, Sister Mergie had a group of misfits singing and signing Christian songs. A whole group of around one hundred hard-of-hearing kids came to see this, and in the crowd was Ms. Nelson and her princess-of-a-grandchild, Sharie.

It wasn't until that day that I came to understand why no one ever talked to Sharie. She was a Drake girl like me, same age, and we never ever spoke. When we had block parties, she would sit on the porch, dressed the best, and you knew you had better not approach her. Her hair was always in place, lips always glossy, nails always white; when she walked past you, if you were clear-headed, you just might bow, as if the princess was coming, but at the very least you'd get out of her way.

Ryan thought she was a life-sized doll, but I knew she was real, just a little different, and that day I found out why. Sharie was deaf. I was hear-hustling when I heard the conversation Ms. Nosy Nelson (as she is known in the community) was having with my mother. Apparently, public school wasn't working out for little Ms. Princess. The kids were picking on her and touching her hair. My mother introduced Ms. Nosy Nelson to Sister Mergie, and the rest is History. The next quarter, we had three new hard-of-hearing students, and the only one who lived on Drake Street was Sharie.

I remember when I was introduced to Ms. Sharie. She was polite—I thought a little too polite. She actually reached out and shook my hand. My mother looked down at Sharie with almost-tears in her eyes and said, "Poor girl, kids were actually hitting this poor little deaf child. Well, I tell you what, sweetheart. Had I seen it, I would have fought those girls myself!"

Then my mother turned her attention to Ms. Nelson, who was getting some weird sort of satisfaction from my mother's comforting words. But I caught it, even if my mother did not. I caught it. Maybe it was the gentle flicker of her long lashes or the way she threw her head back and smiled. Ms. Nelson wanted a full fill-up of sympathy, bowing her head in shame and holding back tears, but Sharie did not. In fact, it didn't appear that she wanted any at all. So I signed to Sharie, "I have a feeling the other kids needed to be protected from you."

"Damn straight," she signed back.

This is the day she became my bestie, my ride-or-die chick, my lunch meal ticket or late-night snacks or the clean house I could always go to when I wanted to get away from my lunatic brother. I liked her straightaway. We had a secret language code the rest of the world couldn't understand, and that bonded us.

Sharie is the kind of person who gives you information on a need-to-know basis. One day, we were walking home and we saw a little girl holding her father's hand, and that's when Sharie told me she had a little sister on her father's side, and her name was Hailey. I asked if she was hard of hearing, and she said no, and that was it. I met Sharie's mother around twice. She would come over and Sharie told me that they would have to lock all her stuff up until she left. She said her necklace was missing, but she wasn't sure her mother took it. She could have lost it.

She loved her mother, but her mother was sick and that's all she ever said about her. I did ask her one day about her father, and she didn't say anything, but about three weeks later, I was having dinner at her house and she signed, very casually, as if I had just asked her the question about her father that day, "My father is an ignorant dick."

I laughed because she had signed a bad word right at the dinner table, right in front of her grandmother.

Then she signed, "Look at all those clothes over there. They are probably all going to be too big."

"Just give him your size," I said.

"I do, all the time, but he doesn't know how to listen. All that stuff is probably stolen anyway."

"Why're you wilding out on your father like that?" I said.

"Know what he said to me?"

"What?" I asked curiously.

"He said to me that I'm going to have to stop using my hands and use the little words, just talk real slow."

I laughed, and Sharie couldn't help herself, she laughed, too.

"What did you say back to him?" I asked.

"Nothing. I wanted to show him exactly what he was going to get with my words, the dumbass."

We both laughed again, and this time, Ms. Nelson looked up from her plate of food. I had to tell her that we were excited about the food, as I didn't want her to think we were talking about her. So, Sharie and I did the table bet again over who can finish their greens the fastest, and this time she won.

There are lots of things I can say about my bestie: She likes to dance, and she dresses nicely. She's down for Drake Street and is never afraid to tell the truth, except when she wants to tell an untruth. We both have huge crushes on Mario Van Peebles and Michael Jackson. I think I can sing like Michael Jackson and Sharie thinks she can dance like him. I also liked Bruce Springsteen, but that's a secret I will take with me to my cold box of stone twelve feet under. The only person who knows this is Sharie, and she won't tell because she is really good at keeping secrets.

One thing you'd better know: Sharie does not like to be called "disabled." As she will tell you, she's able to do exactly what she wants to do, and she also doesn't like pity. I myself like pity, especially when I know I don't need it. All in all, we are not joined at the hip as most people would like to think, but we are certainly two peas in the same pot.

### Rag-Tag Crew: Who Are Marion and Stinky?

There are days when everything is low in the hood. You don't hear the loud noises bumping from the trunks of cars, or speakers blaring, or dogs barking through black gates. You don't see many people walking down the street—a few here and there, but not many. People sit on porches or red crates with lazy glares as if they just missed something and forgot what it is they missed. The hood aroma is turned down, so you don't smell the scent of soul food taunting and teasing your taste buds—a smell strong enough to invite your memory back to fatback in greens, fried chicken, honey-baked hams, yams covered in brown sugar, three-layer baked mac and cheese, cornbread, or butter-and-honey-covered biscuits.

You don't get any of that goodness on turned-down days; smells, music, voices, and even moving feet sound like they're turned on low. Life sort of creeps on by, for life has lived in the reality of movement, anxiety, and worry for most of the week, but on turned-down days, life sort of gives the people a vacation from giving and taking, thinking and wanting, and for maybe just moments, people just exist without any care of knowing.

If you are lucky, you realize that days like these are a blessing from God; if you are foolish, you long for these days to end so that you can get back to the busyness of event planning.

I never wanted these days to end, for these days may be the few times in my hood I can hear thoughts—including my own. These low days usually come to us on Saturday mornings, and they rarely last past noon.

On this particular Saturday, Sharie and I were sitting on our porch. No need to do much on low days. Ryan was in the house doing homework which he would, of course, forget to bring back to school on Mondays. I felt like walking because I knew Sharie had money (and, of course, I didn't), and I also knew she would buy me a little treat, a Push-Up ice cream bar or something sweet.

So, in the laziness of the day I asked her, "Hey, you wanna walk to the store?"

Sharie looked in her purse, pulled up ten dollars, and signed, "Sure, why not."

So, we did, and the day was going all so well when this strange image presented itself to us.

When we got to the corner, about to go into the store, we saw it. We just stopped and looked. It was hard to believe what we were seeing, but we were both seeing it. Could it be a turned-down day trick of our imaginations? We walked closer just to check it out, and there it was: Ms. Nelson, Sharie's very own grandmother, was talking to Rosetta.

This was a really big deal, like Channel 7 News big. You see, no one talked to the New York immigrant, Rosetta, except maybe my mother. Even if you talked to her, you probably wouldn't understand much. Her mouth moved and words came out very strangely. In that dialect of hers, her consonants were all oversimplified and her vowels were extended. But there were other reasons we didn't talk to this New York princess. The truth of the matter is, she was the envy of the hood, but people wouldn't let her know this, so people just simply avoided her—for her sake, of course. They didn't want pride to give her a big head.

In the eyes of the young girls that shyly looked up to this strange New York plant, she was the Sugar, Honey, Iced Tea, an oversized bag of chips with dip, and bad "A" hair whip on the side. She was the hood's Kim Kardashian. She had body piercings and a small diamond nose ring, and this was unheard of until she came to the hood. People wouldn't dare tell this plant she inspired them with her piercings, but if you just look around, everybody but church women has got 'em now. Her nails were long and glossy, with acrylic tips. Now, almost everyone's got long nails that they can do very little with, but those nails look like Hollywood and they make the common girls feel sophisticated, so thanks again, New York.

Rosetta's skin glowed chestnut brown, and her lips were so glossy that it always looked like she'd just completed a bucket of chicken by herself. If you ever caught her smiling, you witnessed how perfectly straight and white her teeth were, complemented by deep dimples that sort of relaxed her face. But what really made her both an admirable and contemptible member of our hood is what we watched when she walked past or stood still.

She was all of five foot four, and if she had a waistline, you didn't see it. Could be you didn't see it because you were distracted by the breasts that protruded from the front and the huge butt that hung from the back. Her butt looked like someone had blown up two large balloons, filled them with water, then placed them perfectly below her lower back.

She walked much differently from the women in my hood, which made her stand out even more. She walked like she was sweeping the floor with her hips, slowly, from side to side. Most women in my hood just walked to get from place to place, but when she walked, her presence drew your attention, and you knew you were watching a person who knew where her steps were taking her. You can imagine the thoughts people had when they saw her coming, sweeping the earth from side to side. So, what is it that people did when she walked near? Well, what do people do when you sweep? That's right, they move out of the way.

How did New York get to Chicago, you ask? It was said that Sam moved her here because he was changing the base of his operation to Chicago. Who's Sam? He was a hood pharmacist, gang banger, and leader of all things tough and bad. He was a mysterious man

himself, that Sam. People said nothing to him and nothing about him because they didn't want to wake up dead the next morning. If Sam didn't shoot you, Rosetta just might.

Two boys moved with Rosetta from New York. The oldest one was quieter but loved sports. You mostly saw him with a football or basketball. The youngest one was loud and boastful, and most people called him "Stinky" because he smelled like pee. He was bold and he knew everybody. I never told him my name, but he knew it. He was a little more familiar with Ryan, always asking him, "Who moved you on my block?" as if white people couldn't live on Drake.

Needless to say, I didn't like the kid much, but he was a Drake boy. His mother, Ms. Rosetta, was tough in a nice way. One day, Stinky threw his ball into the yard of a neighbor who had dogs in the backyard. Rosetta was trying to get the neighbor's attention because Stinky was crying—he wanted his ball. The neighbor wouldn't come to the window or door, and that Miss New York started threatening to shoot the dogs. She used so many vulgarities . . . it was bad. Really bad. In fact, that's how my mother and Ms. New York sort of became friends.

My mother stopped her from shooting the dogs. She called the neighbor on the phone, and they came right out and gave Stinky his ball back. Think Ms. New York was grateful? Well, think again. She told that neighbor that next time, she was going to shoot the dogs. She was glad my mother helped, though. The next day, she gave my mother really hot sausages in brown rice with carrots and lots of other indescribable food products. It was a colorful mess.

You see, Ms. New York was always making treats, dishes with food products that should never be paired together, like baked potatoes and beets, or steak with caramel sauce. That steak was very sweet, but not half bad. Sometimes she gets it right, but most times it's just bad. That time, my mother thanked her and threw it out. But anyway, that's why she talks to my mother.

The day after the whole thing with the dogs, Sam told that neighbor to move those dogs to the garage and said they could only be brought out when the kids were at school, and, of course, the neighbor complied. They didn't want to wake up dead the next morning.

Stinky's father was the hood's international hoodlum. There are stories written about this man in invisible ink. My brother and I were forbidden to say anything to him; when he walked past us, we were all told to look down, no eye contact. He was just the type of man you didn't want to tangle with, my father said.

Strangely enough, it didn't seem to bother him that no one talked much to him except his crew. I guess he had lots of friends because he always had gangs of boys with him, and I

guess they reported everything back to him because he knew everyone's name and the family they belonged to, come to think of it. That could be how Stinky got all that information. On those rare occasions when he saw us kids doing something we weren't supposed to do, he told us to go home before he told our parents.

He caught me saying an unsavory word one day—not that I'm proud of this, but it happened. He told me he didn't think church girls talked like that. I was embarrassed and honored at the same time. He knew exactly who I was. Now I guess he won't know much of anything because he is in jail. There was this shootout that left one man dead on the avenue. According to the hood, even though Sam wasn't there doing the murder, he certainly went to jail for it. So, while he is fighting this case, he has Ms. New York running the hood.

So, when I say we saw her talking to Ms. Nelson, we were, of course, taken aback. I've never seen Rosetta with a gun, but they say she always carries one. I don't know if this is true, but what I do know is that Rosetta and Sam have the best-looking two flat on our block, and the only two flat with only one family living in it, a gold fence protecting it, cameras all around it, and floodlights that would light up an outdoor movie set. It has also been said that a tunnel under their apartment leads all the way back to New York.

Again, you can imagine our surprise when we saw this little New York talking to the gossip of the community. We got a little closer—so close that Ms. Nelson had to acknowledge us. We spoke and she smiled. She was telling Ms. Nelson about the school wanting to put Stinky in a kind of special class, and Ms. Nelson was telling her about our school. She was going on and on about how glad she was that she got Sharie out of that public school. I wondered how much Ms. New York was actually listening. She told her about the small classroom sizes, hard-of-hearing programs, hot lunches, and teachers. She just went on and on and on.

The next week, there were two new boys in our school. At first, we still didn't know them, we still didn't have much to say to them, but we all walked the same way home.

As life would have it, a week or so later, there was this really big kid picking on Stinky, calling him these really bad names. What did he call him? Oh yeah, it was "stink-bum." Stinky was a short kid, but he was a fearless kid. He told the boy to say it again, and, of course, the big kid said it again, but this time, Stinky hit that big kid.

Sharie told me the little kid actually stood up for her one day in public school. I guess it was because they lived on the same block. Well, anyway, this big kid was picking Stinky up off his feet, getting ready to drop him to the concrete, when out of the blue, Ryan gave this kid a gut punch, landing him and Stinky on the ground. Now, this is how Sharie and I got into



the mix, because this kid was slowly standing up, and truthfully we didn't think Ryan had a chance. As luck would have it, when he finally made it to his feet, he had Marion to deal with, and although Marion was only in the sixth grade, this kid had nothing on him. Come to think of it, this was how Marion got the name "Hands."

While Sharie and I were running to give Ryan and Stinky help, we didn't have much to do because Marion gave that big kid so many blows you would have thought he was the Rock 'Em Sock 'Em robot toy. Needless to say, we all ended up in detention the next day, and after detention we all walked home. Ryan invited Marion and Stinky to our clubhouse, and we all sort of became friends.

Well, I am not a big fan of Stinky. He talks too much, and out of the blue the kid will drop the F-bomb. He even did it in chapel. He was the candle boy, and he almost dropped the long candlestick, and out of his mouth came so many F-words you would have thought he was getting paid to drop the F-bomb. We all laughed, and throughout chapel we all passed the F-word around like a collection plate. Marion said we were F-ing going to go to hell for that.

Well, we didn't go to hell, but we did earn a trip to the principal's office. We all ended up in detention for that, too. As for Stinky, he was ushered to the back room and prayed for, or given ice cream, or offered a towel to wash up with, or something like that. Whatever he got, it was not a punishment.

Well, I guess that's how the rag-tag group got together. Like I said, we are not joined at the hip, just connected because we all live on Drake Street, and we all just happen to be some really cool kids who've got each other's backs—that you'd best believe!

## The Long Walk Home

I was on my way home, and due to recent events, I would rather be going anywhere but home. To escape the fate that awaited me, my mind began to wander, and the only thing I could think about was this: Why is hair such a big deal anyway? Why must I even have to explain to my mother that she will have to take down this fresh hairdo, and wash it, and have it re-braided? Why couldn't I just wear the messed-up braids? Well, I'll tell you why—because I got sand in it.

Okay, you don't get it, but let's just put it this way: sand and African-American hair is disastrous. That's why you don't see black people at the beach, the sand takes out our hair. If someone got sand in their hair, it was a national crisis in the hood. You had to quickly comb out the hair, wash it twice, and, of course, wear that ridiculous conditioning cap much longer than usual lest you deal with being bald-headed. That's what happened to Mrs. Smith's hair. She ain't got no hair around her edges because she didn't wash out the sand soon enough.

The only thing that would distract my mother from the sand in my hair would be a Daddy good day. I found myself wishing and praying that Daddy would do good today. If Dad would have a reason to surprise my mother with something special, sand in my hair wouldn't be a problem. It would be like the time when Daddy brought home candy just because. My mother smiled almost the whole day. I had lost my key to the house, but it didn't matter. She just gave me the spare key and told me to be careful.

Yeah, that happened. I tell you, she didn't even lecture me about being more responsible. Boy, I hoped this was one of those days. If it was, maybe I wouldn't get in trouble for getting a last-chance write-up. There was something in the pit of my gut that told me I was going to meet "*Papa can't save you now*" Mama.

My punishment? I would be locked in my room for around ten years, and my only visitor would be my grandad, who would come not to comfort me, but to confuse me or make matters worse. He's a funny fart, that man is, and he gives terrible advice.

Then again, she might let me out around my eighteenth birthday. By that time, she would have hoped I'd met and married common sense, so I wouldn't get in trouble all the time and wouldn't let anyone put sand in my hair. I really didn't know which one was worse, the sand in my hair or the write-up. All I knew was that they were both bad.

We walked and Stinky talked. He was still trying to figure out who could have taken that picture. Then he stopped, and we stopped, as he announced, “I got it! I know who took that picture!”

“Who?” I asked. Not that I really wanted to know—in fact, I already knew, and, really, I think we all knew other than Stinky—but he had been really deep in thought over this.

Then he announced with confidence, “Well, I think it was Sharie’s grandma!”

Sharie snapped back, “Well, I think it was yo mama!”

“No, hear me out, Sharie. Who likes to take pictures?” Stinky asked

“Yo mama!” Sharie declared.

“Who cares who took the picture?” I interjected.

Really, I just wanted Stinky to get off Sharie, because he was right. Ms. Nelson most certainly did that. But Sharie should not be held accountable for the actions of Ms. Nosey Nelson (as she’s affectionately known in the hood).

“She ain’t gonna keep talking about my mama,” said an agitated Stinky.

Stinky was mad, but he gives Sharie grace he wouldn’t give to the rest of us. Had we said that about him, we would have gotten the F-word up, down, and sideways. But honestly, Sharie is a little nicer to Stinky, so he likes her a little more and takes a little back talk from her. Had that been me, though . . .

We all walked on silently, not daring to say we all sort of thought it could have been Sharie’s grandmother. She’s always keeping an eye out on us. I guess she must think we’re a bad influence on Sharie, but the truth of the matter is, her granddaughter, even though she’s mute, is just another shortie from the hood; she’s no different from the rest of us.

When we walked the long way home, we really walked *the long way* home. I only hoped my dear mother was cooking so she would be too tired to fuss and that we would be right on time for dinner. I figured if we were on time, we just might be allowed to eat first, and sometimes food energizes your thoughts. We could possibly even come up with a totally new refreshing twist to our story, one that would make all of us look like heroes.

Besides, I’d gotten most of the white stuff out of my hair. It was still frizzy-looking, but at least I didn’t look like a gray-headed old lady.

“There go those shadows again,” Ryan said very nonchalantly.

The shadows are our lookalikes—strange, but lots of strange things happen in my hood. Mr. Reynolds takes out his teeth, both top and bottom, right out of his mouth, and those teeth outside his mouth talk to you like a puppet or something. You don't see his mouth moving. He just folds his bottom and top lips together and those teeth just keep talking. He always says you can't tell him to shut up if he is not moving his mouth. Lots of people find it funny, but as for me, I just find it strange.

The unusual is common around here, and besides, maybe there aren't any shadow people following us. Lots of the time, we eat greasy food. My grandpa always says that if you eat greasy foods, your imagination can run away from you. I have always taken "your imagination running away" to simply mean you will start seeing illusions. That could be what was happening with us. Our imaginations were simply running away from us and we were delusional. So, in our state of sheer confusion, we all saw shadow people that looked like us. Yeah, that was it.

Then again, as I thought more about it, I considered what may be a more logical choice: it could very well be the trees reflecting on the ground that look just like the five of us. Whatever it is, it has been happening for about two weeks or so. It's like we are being followed by *us*. Strange and weird, but that's why I don't think about it much.

One day, these shadow people were on the side of the bus, waving goodbye to us. Stinky waved back. We mostly see them when we are together, but I saw them on the back of the church building; they looked to be smiling. That particular time, Shadow Marion had his hair in braids, and when I saw him later that day