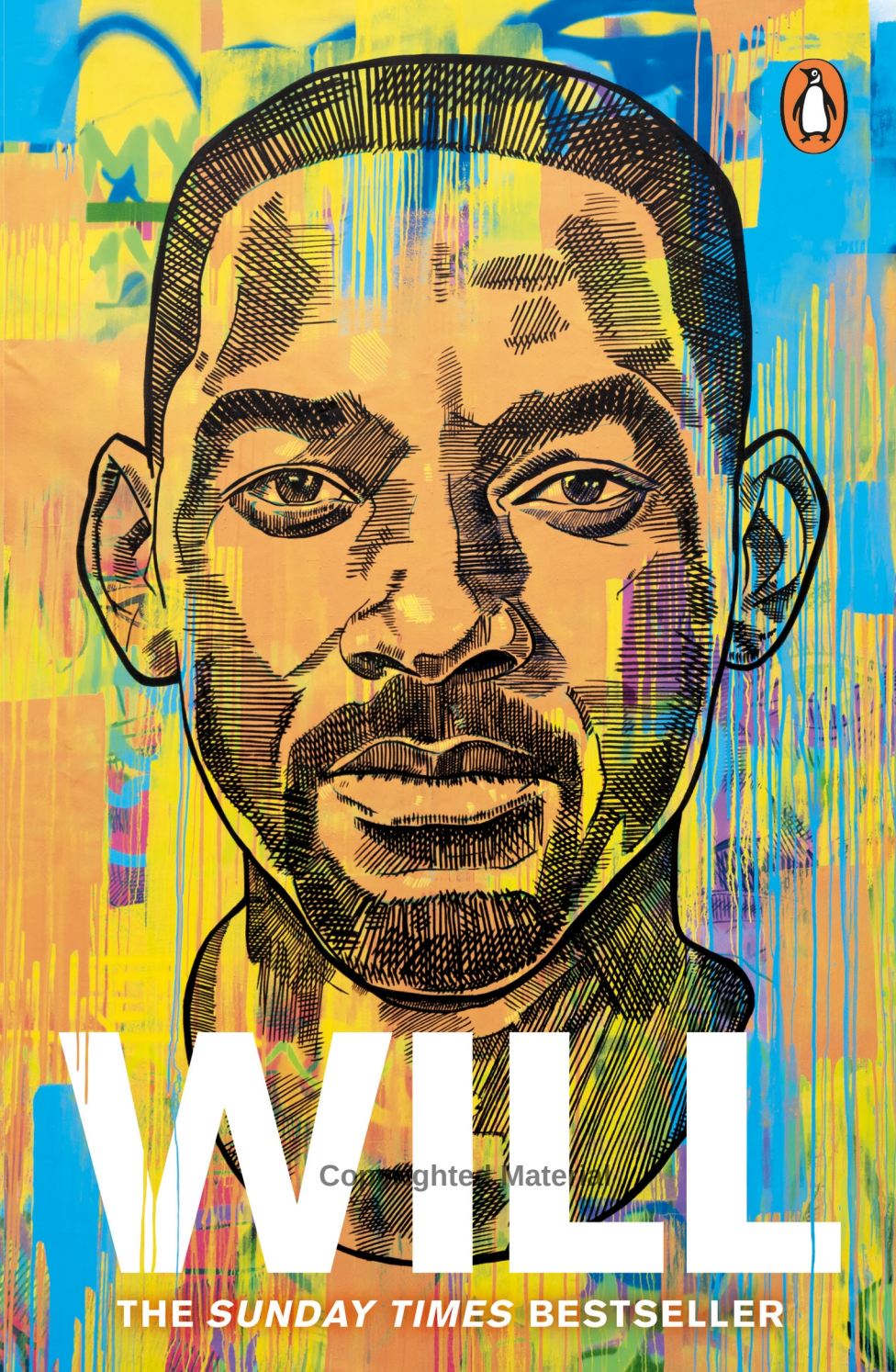


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WILL

WILL SMITH is an actor, producer, and musician, and an Academy Award, Grammy, and NAACP award winner, who has enjoyed a diverse career encompassing films, television shows, and multiplatinum albums. He holds many box office records, including the most consecutive $100 million-grossing movies (eight). He and his wife founded the Will & Jada Smith Family Foundation to accelerate the growth of initiatives that focus on deepening individual and collective empowerment in the areas of arts and education, social empowerment, health and wellness, and sustainability.

MARK MANSON is the number one *New York Times* bestselling author of *Everything Is F*cked: A Book About Hope* and *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck: A Counterintuitive Approach to Living a Good Life*. Manson's books have been translated into more than fifty languages and have sold over twelve million copies worldwide. Manson runs one of the largest personal-growth websites in the world, markmanson.net, with more than two million monthly readers and half a million subscribers.

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THE WALL

When I was eleven years old, my father decided he needed a new wall on the front of his shop. It would be a big wall: roughly twelve feet high by twenty feet long. The old wall was crumbling, and he was "sick-o'-lookin' at it." But rather than hire a contractor or construction company, he thought it would be a good project for my younger brother, Harry, and me.

Daddio did the demolition. I remember looking at that gaping hole in excruciating disbelief. I was utterly certain that there would never be a wall there ever again.

Every day for nearly a year, my brother and I would go to my father's shop after school to work on that wall. We did everything ourselves. We dug the footing, mixed the mortar, and carried the buckets. I still remember the formula: two parts cement, one part sand, one part lime. Harry was in charge of the hose. We'd mix the pile with shovels out on the sidewalk and then fill two-gallon buckets and lay our separate bricks. We did it without any rebar or wood forms, just one of those levels with the water bubble in the middle.

If you know *anything* about construction, you know this is a loony-ass way to do this. If we can keep it real, this is chain-gang kinda labor. Today we would just call Child Protective Services. This is a job so tedious and unnecessarily long that what ended up taking two kids most

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of a year would have only taken a team of grown men a couple of days, at most.

My brother and I worked weekends, holidays, vacations. We worked through the summer that year. It didn't matter. My father never took a day off, so neither could we. There were so many times I remember looking at that hole, totally discouraged. I couldn't see how this was ever going to end. The dimensions became unfathomably large in my mind. It seemed like we were building the Great Wall of West Philly—billions of red bricks stretching infinitely into some distant nowhere. I was certain that I would grow old and die still mixing concrete and carrying those buckets. I just knew it.

But Daddio wouldn't let us stop. Every day, we had to be there, mixing concrete, carrying buckets, laying bricks. It didn't matter if it was raining, if it was hot as hell, if I was mad, if I was sad, if I was sick, if I had a test the next day—there were no excuses. My brother and I tried to complain and protest, but it made no difference to Daddio; we were trapped. This wall was a constant; it was permanence. Seasons changed, friends came and went, teachers retired—but the wall remained. Always, the wall remained.

One day, Harry and I were in a particularly stank mood. We were dragging our feet and grumbling, "impossible this" and "ridiculous that."

"Why'd we have to build a wall for, anyway? This is impossible. It's never gonna get done."

Daddio overheard us, threw down his tools, and marched over to where we were yapping. He snatched a brick out of my hand and held it up in front of us.

"Stop thinking about the damn wall!" he said. "There *is* no wall. There are only *bricks*. Your job is to lay *this brick* perfectly. Then move on to the next brick. Then lay *that brick* perfectly. Then the next one. Don't be worrying about no wall. Your only concern is *one brick*."

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He walked back into the shop. Harry and I looked at each other, shook our heads—*This dude's a kook*—and went back to mixing.

Some of the most impactful lessons I've ever received, I've had to learn in spite of myself. I resisted them, I denied them, but ultimately the weight of their truth became unavoidable. My father's brick wall was one of those lessons.

The days dragged on, and as much as I hated to admit it, I started to see what he was talking about. When I focused on the *wall*, the job felt impossible. Never-ending. But when I focused on *one brick*, everything got easy—I *knew* I could lay one damn brick well. . . .

As the weeks passed, the bricks mounted, and the hole got just a little bit smaller. I started to see that the difference between a task that feels impossible and a task that feels doable is merely a matter of perspective. Are you paying attention to the wall? Or are you paying attention to the brick? Whether it was acing the tests to get accepted into college, hitting it big as one of the first global hip-hop artists, or constructing one of the most successful careers in Hollywood history, in all cases, what appeared to be impossibly large goals could be broken down into individually manageable tasks—insurmountable walls comprised of a series of conceivably layable bricks.

For my entire career, I have been absolutely relentless. I've been committed to a work ethic of uncompromising intensity. And the secret to my success is as boring as it is unsurprising: You show up and you lay another brick. Pissed off? Lay another brick. Bad opening weekend? Lay another brick. Album sales dropping? Get up and lay another brick. Marriage failing? Lay another brick.

Over the past thirty years, like all of us, I have dealt with failure, loss, humiliation, divorce, and death. I've had my life threatened, my money taken away, my privacy invaded, my family disintegrated—and every single day, still, I got up, mixed concrete, and laid another brick. No matter what you're going through, there is *always* another brick sitting right there in front of you, waiting to be laid. The only question is, are you going to get up and lay it?

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I've heard people say that a child's personality is influenced by the

meaning of their name. Well, my father gave me *my* name, he gave me *his* name, and he gave me my greatest advantage in life: my ability to weather adversity.

He gave me will.

It was a cold, overcast day, nearly a year after my brother and I had begun. By that time, the wall had become such a fixture in my life that thoughts of finishing it felt like delusions. Like, if we ever *did* finish, there would tragically be another hole, right behind it, that immediately needed to be filled. But on that frigid September morning, we mixed the final pile, filled the final bucket, and laid the final brick.

Daddio had been standing there watching the last few bricks being set into place. Cigarette in hand, he stood quietly admiring our work. Harry and I set and leveled the final brick, then silence. Harry kinda shrugged—*What now? Do we jump, do we cheer, do we celebrate?* We gingerly stepped back and stood on each side of Daddio.

The three of us surveyed our family's new wall.

Daddio plucked his cigarette to the ground, twisting his boot to put it out, exhaled the final drag of smoke, and, never taking his eyes off the wall, he said, "Now, don't y'all *ever* tell me there's something you *can't* do."

Then he walked into the shop and got back to work.

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ONE

FEAR



've always thought of myself as a coward. Most of my memories of my childhood involve me being afraid in some way—afraid of other kids, afraid of being hurt or embarrassed, afraid of being seen as weak.

But mostly, I was afraid of my father.

When I was nine years old, I watched my father punch my mother in the side of her head so hard that she collapsed. I saw her spit blood. That moment in that bedroom, probably more than any other moment in my life, has defined who I am today.

Within everything that I have done since then—the awards and accolades, the spotlights and the attention, the characters and the laughs—there has been a subtle string of apologies to my mother for my inaction that day. For failing her in that moment. For failing to stand up to my father.

For being a coward.

What you have come to understand as "Will Smith," the alien-annihilating MC, the bigger-than-life movie star, is largely a construction—a carefully crafted and honed character—designed to protect myself. To hide myself from the world. To hide the coward.

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My father was my hero.

His name was Willard Carroll Smith, but we all called him "Daddio."

Daddio was born and raised in the rough and rugged streets of North Philadelphia in the 1940s. Daddio's father, my grandfather, owned a small fish market. He had to work from 4:00 a.m. until late at night every day. My grandmother was a nurse and often worked the night shift at the hospital. As a result, Daddio spent much of his childhood alone and unsupervised. The North Philly streets had a way of hardening you. You either crystallized into a mean motherfucker, or the hood broke you. Daddio was smoking cigarettes by eleven and drinking by the age of fourteen. My father developed a defiant and aggressive attitude that would continue all his life.

When he was fourteen, my grandparents, fearing where his life was headed, scraped together what money they could and sent him to an agricultural boarding school in the Pennsylvania countryside where kids learned farming techniques and basic handyman work. It was a strict and traditional place, and by sending him there they hoped to introduce some much-needed structure and discipline into his life.

But nobody was going to tell my father what to do. Other than working on some of the tractor engines, he couldn't be bothered with what he described as "that hillbilly bullshit." He would skip classes; he smoked cigarettes and kept on drinking.

At age sixteen, Daddio was done with this school and ready to go home. He decided to get himself kicked out. He started disrupting classes, ignoring all the rules, and antagonizing anyone in a position of authority. But when the administrators tried to send him home, my grandparents refused to take him back. "We paid for the full year," they said. "You're getting paid to deal with him, so *deal* with him." Daddio was stuck.

But Daddio was a hustler—he was going to find his way out: On his seventeenth birthday, he snuck off campus, walked half a dozen miles to the nearest recruiting office, and enlisted in the United States Air Force. This was classic Daddio—he was so hell-bent on defying authority and rebelling against both his parents and the school that he jumped out of the frying pan of an agricultural boarding school and directly

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into the fire of the United States military. He ended up in the exact structure and discipline my grandparents had desperately hoped to instill in him.

But as it turned out, Daddio *loved* it. It was in the military that he discovered the transformative power of order and discipline, two values that he came to worship as the guardrails protecting him from the worst parts of himself. Wake up at 4:00 a.m., train all morning, work all day, study all night—he found his lane. He discovered that he could outlast anybody, and he began to take pride in that. It was another aspect of his defiant attitude. Nobody could force him to wake up with a bugle horn because he already *was* up.

With his passionate work ethic, boundless energy, and undeniable intelligence, he should have quickly risen through the ranks. But there were two issues.

First, he had a brutal temper, and superior officer or not, if you were wrong, he wasn't doing it. Second, his drinking. Let me tell you, my father was one of the smartest people I've ever known, but when he was angry, or drunk, he became an idiot. He would break his own rules, subvert his own objectives, destroy his own things.

After about two years in the military, this self-destructive streak peeked through the veil of order and ended his service career.

One night, he and the guys from his platoon were gambling. (Daddio was sweet with a pair of dice.) He took those dudes for almost a thousand dollars. Once he'd stashed the winnings in his footlocker, he headed out to get something to eat, but when he returned from the mess hall, the guys had stolen back the money. In his fury, Daddio drank himself into a frenzy, took out his service pistol, and lit up the barracks. Nobody got hurt, but it was enough for the air force to show him the door. He was fortunate that he wasn't court-martialed—instead, they just discharged him, put him on a bus, and invited him to never come back.

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This was a tension that ripped through my father's entire life—he demanded such rigid perfection from himself and the people around

him, yet after too many drinks, or if he snapped, he would burn everything to the ground.

Daddio moved back to Philly. Undaunted, he took a job in a steel mill while putting himself through night school. He studied engineering and showed a real aptitude for both electricity and the science of refrigeration. One day, after being passed over for a promotion at the steel mill for the third or fourth time because of his race, he simply walked out the door and never went back. He knew refrigeration, so he decided he'd start his own business.

Daddio was brilliant. Like many sons, I worshipped my father, but he also terrified me. He was one of the greatest blessings of my life, and also one of my greatest sources of pain.

My mom was born Carolyn Elaine Bright. She's a Pittsburgh girl, born and raised in Homewood, a predominantly Black neighborhood on the east side of the city.

My mother, a.k.a. "Mom-Mom," is eloquent and sophisticated. She has a petite frame, with long, elegant, piano player's fingers, perfectly sized to deliver a gorgeous rendition of "Für Elise." She had been a standout student at Westinghouse High School and was one of the first Black women to ever study at Carnegie Mellon University. Mom-Mom would often say that knowledge was the only thing that the world couldn't take away from you. And she only cared about three things: education, education, and education.

She loved business—banking, finance, sales, contracts. Mom-Mom always had her own money.

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Life moved quickly for my mother, as it often did in those days. She married her first husband at the age of twenty, had a daughter, and

was divorced less than three years later. By twenty-five, as a struggling single mom, she was probably one of the most educated African American women in all of Pittsburgh, yet she was still working jobs beneath the level of her true potential. Feeling trapped and craving bigger opportunities, she packed up the baby and moved to live with her mother—my grandmother Gigi—in Philadelphia.

My parents met in the summer of 1964. Mom-Mom was working as a notary in the Fidelity Bank in Philly. She was rolling out with some girlfriends to a party, and one of them told her she just *had* to meet this man. His name was Will Smith.

In many ways, Mom-Mom is the total opposite of my father. Whereas Daddio was the boisterous, charismatic center of attention, Mom-Mom is quiet and reserved; not because she's shy or intimidated, but because she "only speaks when it improves on silence." She loves words and always chooses them carefully—she speaks with an academic sophistication. Daddio, on the other hand, was loud, spewing the lingo of a 1950s North Philly hood rat. He loved the poetry of his profanity—I once heard him call a man a "dirty rat, cocksuckin', low-down, mangy pig fucker."

Mom-Mom doesn't use profanity.

It's important to note here, that back in the day, Daddio was the *man*. Six foot two, smart, good-looking, the proud owner of a fire-engine-red convertible Pontiac. He was funny; he could sing; he could play the guitar. He could *lock* people into him—he was always the dude standing in the middle of a party with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, a master storyteller who could keep a room buzzing.

When Mom-Mom first saw Daddio, he reminded her of a tall Marvin Gaye. He was savvy and knew his way around people. He could talk his way into a party, get free drinks and a table near the front. Daddio had a way of moving through the world like everything was under control, it was all going to be fine. This was comforting for my mom.

My mother's memory of their first days together is just a blurred montage of restaurants and clubs, strung together by a stream of jokes and laughter. Mom-Mom couldn't get over how funny he was, but most

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important to her, he was ambitious. He had his own business. He had employees. He wanted to work in white neighborhoods, with white people working for *him*.

Daddio was going places.

My father wasn't used to interacting with women of my mother's educational accomplishments—*Man, this bird's smart as a muthafucka*, he thought. Daddio was the *street* smarts to Mom-Mom's *book* smarts.

My parents had a lot in common, too. They both had a passion for music. They loved jazz, blues, and, later, funk and R&B. They lived through the glorious Motown days and spent much of it dancing together in musty basement parties and jazz clubs.

But there were strange commonalities, as well—the stuff that startles you and makes you think, *This must be God's plan.* Both of my parents had mothers who were nurses who worked night shifts (one was Helen; one was Ellen). Both of my parents had short-lived marriages in their early twenties, and they both had daughters. And in perhaps the strangest coincidence, they had both named their daughters Pam.

My parents got married in a small ceremony at Niagara Falls in 1966. Soon after, Daddio moved into my grandmother Gigi's house, on North Fifty-Fourth Street in West Philadelphia. It wasn't long before they combined their very different strengths and talents into an effective team. Mom-Mom ran Daddio's office: payroll, contracts, taxes, accounting, permits. And Daddio got to do what he did best: work hard and make money.

Both of my parents would later speak fondly of those early years. They were young, in love, ambitious, and they were movin' on up.

My full name is Willard Carroll Smith II—*not* Junior. Daddio would always correct people: "Hey! He ain't no mutherfuckin' Junior." He felt like calling me "Junior" diminished both of us.

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I was born on September 25, 1968. My mom says that from the mo-

ment I showed up, I was a talker. Always smiling, yapping, and babbling away, content to just be making noise.

Gigi worked the graveyard shift at Jefferson Hospital in Center City, Philadelphia, so she'd take care of me in the mornings while my parents were at work. Her house had a huge porch, which served as my front-row seat to the drama of North Fifty-Fourth Street, and a stage on which I could join in the theatrics. She'd prop me up on that porch and watch me jibber-jabber with anybody and everybody who walked by. Even at that age, I loved having an audience.

My twin brother and sister, Harry and Ellen, were born on May 5, 1971. And counting Mom-Mom's daughter Pam, just like that there would now be six of us under one roof.

Fortunately, the North Philly entrepreneur in Daddio was alive and well. He had gone from repairing refrigerators to installing and maintaining refrigerator and freezer cases in major supermarkets. Business was taking off—he was expanding beyond Philly into the surrounding suburbs. He started to build a fleet of trucks and hire a crew of refrigeration and electrical technicians. He also rented a small building to use as his base of operations.

Daddio was always hustling. I remember one particularly frigid winter, cash got tight, so he taught himself how to repair kerosene heaters. They were all the rage in Philly at the time. He put up a bunch of flyers, and people started bringing him their broken heaters. Daddio figured out that once he'd fixed a heater, he'd have to "test" it for a couple days, to make sure it was working. At any given time, he'd have ten or twelve kerosene heaters "being tested for the quality of his work." That many heaters will easily warm a West Philly row home, even in the coldest of winters. So Daddio canceled our gas service, kept his family warm and toasty for the winter*, and got paid for it*.

By the time that I was two years old, Daddio had established his business firmly enough to buy a house about a mile away from Gigi in a middle-class neighborhood of West Philly called Wynnefield.

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I grew up at 5943 Woodcrest Avenue on a tree-lined street of thirty

grayish-red brick row homes, all connected. The physical proximity of the houses cultivated a strong sense of community. (It also meant that if your neighbor had roaches, you had roaches, too.) Everybody knew everybody. For a young Black family in the 1970s, this was as American dream as you could get.

Across the street was Beeber Middle School and its majestic concrete playground. Basketball, baseball, girls jumpin' double Dutch. The ol' heads slap-boxing. And the second the summer hit, pop goes the water plug. Our neighborhood was thick with kids, and we were always outside playing. Living within one hundred yards of my house, there were almost forty kids my age. Stacey, David, Reecie, Cheri, Michael, Teddy, Shawn, Omarr, and on and on—and that's not even counting their siblings, or the kids on the next blocks. (Stacey Brooks is my oldest friend in the world. We met the day my family moved to Woodcrest. I was two, she was three. Our mothers pushed our strollers up to each other and introduced us. I was in love with her by the time I was seven. But she was in love with David Brandon. He was nine.)

Times were good, and people were clearly having sex . . . a lot.

My middle-class upbringing contributed to the constant criticism I took early in my rap career. I was not a gangster, and I wasn't selling drugs. I grew up on a nice street in a two-parent household. I went to a Catholic school with mostly white kids until I was fourteen. My mom was college educated. And for all of his faults, my father always put food on the table and would die before he abandoned his kids.

My story was very different from the ones being told by the young Black men who were launching the global phenomenon that would later become hip-hop. In their minds, I was somehow an illegitimate artist; they would call me "soft," "whack," "corny," a "bubblegum rapper," criticisms that violently infuriated me. Looking back, I realize I may have been projecting a little, but the reason I hated it so much was that they were unknowingly poking at the thing I most hated about myself, my sense that I was a coward.

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Daddio saw the world in terms of commanders and missions, a military mind-set that informed every aspect of his life. He would come to run our family as though we were a platoon on a battlefield and the Woodcrest house was our barracks. He didn't *ask* us to clean our rooms or to make our beds—he commanded, "Police your area."

In his world, there was no such thing as a "small thing." Doing your homework was a mission. Cleaning the bathroom was a mission. Getting groceries from the supermarket was a mission. And scrubbing a floor? It was never just about scrubbing a floor—it was about your ability to follow orders, to exhibit self-discipline, and to complete a task with the utmost perfection. "Ninety-nine percent is the same as zero" was one of his favorite sayings.

If a soldier failed his or her mission, it had to be repeated until perfected. And to disobey a command meant you faced a court-martial, and the punishment usually came in the form of a belt to your bare ass. (He'd say, "Take 'em off, I ain't gon' beat my clothes.")

In Daddio's mind, everything was life or death. He was preparing his children to thrive in a harsh world—a world that he saw as chaotic and brutal. The instilling of fear was—and still is to a large degree—a cultural parenting tactic in the Black community. Fear is embraced as a survival necessity. It is a widely held belief that in order to protect Black children, they must fear parental authority. The instilling of fear is viewed as an offering of love.

On May 13, 1985, Daddio came into our rooms calling for us to get on the floor. A couple of miles south of Woodcrest, the Philadelphia Police Department had just dropped a pair of one-pound bombs on a residential neighborhood. We could hear the faint *ka-ka-ka-kaaaaa-ka-ka-kaaaaaa* of automatic gunfire. Five children and six adults would die that day in what is now known as the MOVE bombing. Two entire city blocks—sixty-five homes—were burned to the ground.

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The news always seemed to reinforce Daddio's point of view. Daddio's

ideology was centered on training us mentally and physically to handle life's inevitable adversities, but what he unwittingly created was an environment of constant tension and anxiety.

I remember one Sunday afternoon, Daddio was taking a rare day off and sitting in the living room watching TV. He called me over: "'Ey, Will?"

Popping straight to attention, I said, "Yes, Daddy?"

"Run up to Mr. Bryant's and grab my Tareyton 100s."

"Yes, sir!"

He handed me five dollars, and I was off to the corner store. I was maybe ten years old at the time, but this was the 1970s, back when parents could send their kid to buy cigarettes.

I ran down the street directly to Mr. Bryant's without stopping. Totally out of breath, a perfect soldier.

"Hi, Mr. Bryant, my dad sent me to pick up his cigarettes."

"How you doin', Will?" Mr. Bryant said. "They didn't come in today—tell Daddio they should be here tomorrow. I'll hold a carton for him."

"OK, thank you, Mr. Bryant. I'll tell him."

Still a good soldier, I headed home. On my way back, I ran into David and Danny Brandon, who had just gotten this weird new thing called a Nerf football. It was a football, but it was soft.

Any soldier would have stopped.

This thing was *amazing*—I got lost in the ingenuity of this extraordinary object. *You could throw it in the winter, but it wouldn't hurt your fingers if you caught it! You could miss it, it could hit you in the face, and you'd be fine!* One minute turned into five, and then five became ten, ten became twenty . . . Suddenly, David and Danny freeze. Their eyes lock over my shoulder.

I turn, and my stomach drops. Daddio, bare-chested, striding up the middle of the street right at me.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOIN'?"

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David and Danny evaporated. I quickly try to explain.

"Daddy, Mr. Bryantsaidthecigarettesdidn'tcomeinand—"

"WHAT DID I TELL YOU TO DO?"

"I know, Daddy, but I—"

"WHO'S IN CHARGE?!"

"Whadda you mean—"

"WHO'S IN CHARGE?! YOU? OR ME?"

My heart pounding out of my chest, my voice quivers: "You are, Daddy—"

"BECAUSE IF TWO PEOPLE ARE IN CHARGE, *EVERYBODY DIES*! SO, IF YOU'RE IN CHARGE, LET ME KNOW BECAUSE I WILL DEFER TO YOUR LEADERSHIP!"

His nostrils flaring, the vein in his left temple pulsing madly, his eyes burning through my fragile, ten-year-old innocence.

"When I send you on a mission, there are two possibilities—one, you complete the mission. Or two, YOU. ARE. DEAD. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Daddy."

Daddio grabbed me by the back of the neck and dragged me home.

I didn't think I deserved a whuppin' for that. Most of the times I got hit during my childhood, I didn't think I'd earned it—it felt like an injustice. I wasn't the kind of kid you needed to spank. I already wanted to please you. David Brandon needed a beatin'. Matt Brown needed a beatin'. If I got in trouble, it was usually because I was distracted—I would forget something or my mind would drift. I think the corporal punishment of my childhood just convinced me I was bad.

The constant fear during my childhood honed my sensitivity to every detail in my environment. From a very young age, I developed a razor-sharp intuition, an ability to attune to every emotion around me. I learned to sense anger, predict joy, and understand sadness on far deeper levels than most other kids.

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Recognizing these emotions was crucial and critical for my personal

safety: a tone in Daddio's voice, a pointed question from my mother, a twitch of my sister's eye. I processed these things quickly and profoundly—a missed glance or misinterpreted word could quickly deteriorate into a belt on my ass or a fist in my mother's face.

Daddio had a black leather key pouch hooked on his utility belt that held about thirty keys, which for me served as an alarm system. The second he'd walk through the door you could hear his keys jingling as he placed them back into their case and reset them at his hip. I became so in tune that I could discern his mood from the rhythm and the intensity with which he handled his keys. My bedroom was at the top of the stairs, directly facing down to the front door. If he was in a good mood, they would jingle effortlessly, as though they were lighter than usual. If he was pissed, I could hear the jolt of pressure as he reattached them to his hip.

And if he was drunk, the keys didn't matter.

This emotional awareness has stayed with me throughout my life. Paradoxically it has served me well as an actor and performer. I could easily recognize, comprehend, and emulate complex emotions long before I knew that people would pay me for it.

My father was born on the heels of the Great Depression. He was a poor Black kid living on the streets of North Philly in the 1940s. He basically had a tenth-grade education. Yet, over the course of his life, he built a business with a dozen employees and seven trucks, selling thirty thousand pounds of ice per day to grocery stores and supermarkets in three states. He went weeks without taking a day off, decades without taking a vacation. My mother has memories of Daddio coming home in the middle of the night from the shop; dumping thousands of dollars in cash onto the bed, saying, "Count that"; and then immediately heading out into the night to get back to work.

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My father tormented me. And he was also one of the greatest men

I've ever known. My father was violent, but he was also at every game, play, and recital. He was an alcoholic, but he was sober at every premiere of every one of my movies. He listened to every record. He visited every studio. The same intense perfectionism that terrorized his family put food on the table every night of my life. So many of my friends grew up either not knowing their fathers or not having their fathers around. But Daddio had my back and never abandoned his post, not even once.

And while he never learned to overcome his own demons, he would cultivate in me the tools to confront my own.

As much as we all suffered under Daddio's militaristic views of love and family, nobody suffered more than my mother. If two people being in charge meant everybody dies, then that meant my mother could never be in charge.

The problem was that my mother wasn't the type of woman to be commanded. She was educated, proud, and stubborn, and as much as we begged her to please be quiet, she refused.

Once, when Daddio slapped her, she egged him on.

"Oh, you're such a man! You think that hitting a woman makes you a man, huh?"

He hit her again, knocking her to the ground.

She stood right back up, looked him in the eye, and calmly said, "Hit me all you want, but you can never hurt me."

I have never forgotten that. The idea that he could hit her body but somehow *she* was in control of what "hurt" her? I wanted to be strong like that.

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Everybody in my house could fight.

Except me.

My older sister Pam was strong like our mother. She was six years older than me, and she was kinda my childhood bodyguard. She would stand up to anybody at any time. There were multiple situations where somebody would take my money or I would get bullied or come home crying, and Pam would grab me by the hand, walk me straight outside, and scream, "WHO DID IT? Point to 'em, Will!" Then she'd proceed to casually whoop the whole ass of the unfortunate kid I pointed at. It was a sad day when she left for college.

Harry turned out to be strong, too. While I took extra special care to please my father every chance I got, Harry mimicked my mother's behavior. Starting at a young age, he preferred to just stand up and take the beatings. He once yelled at my father, "You can hit me, but you can't make me cry. [*Smack*.] I'm not crying! [*Smack*.] I'm not crying." Eventually, realizing he couldn't break him, Daddio laid off Harry altogether. All along, Harry's courage—the fact that my little brother was able to stand up to "the monster"—just reinforced my shame. In a family of fighters, I was the weak one. I was the coward.

In acting, understanding a character's fears is a critical part of understanding his or her psyche. The fears create desires and the desires precipitate actions. These repetitive actions and predictable responses are the building blocks of great cinematic characters.

It's pretty much the same in real life. Something bad happens to us, and we decide we're never going to let that happen again. But in order to prevent it, we have to *be* a certain way. We choose the behaviors that we believe will deliver safety, stability, and love. And we repeat them, over and over again. In the movies, we call it a character; in real life, we call it personality.

How we decide to respond to our fears, *that* is the person we become.

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I decided to be funny.

Each of my siblings remembers that night in that bedroom with our mother. Each of us was incredibly scared, but each of us responded differently, in ways that would go on to define who we were for much of our lives.

Harry, despite being only six years old, tried to intervene and protect our mother—he would do so many times over the coming years, sometimes successfully. But that night, Daddio just shoved him away.

My brother intuitively got my mother's lesson about pain: Harry had discovered that untouchable place within himself, that place where you could hit him as much as you wanted, but you could never hurt him. I remember him once yelling at my father, "You'll have to kill me to make me stop."

That same night, my sister Ellen responded by running to her bedroom, curling up on the bed, covering her ears, and crying. Later, she would recall Daddio walking by her room and, hearing her sobbing, coldly asking, "Now what da fuck *you* crying about?"

Ellen withdrew. Not only from Daddio but from the rest of the family. Years later, her withdrawal would result in outright rebellion. She'd stay out all night drinking and smoking and wouldn't even bother to call to say where she was.

If Harry was "fight," Ellen was "flight," and I became a pleaser. Throughout our childhood, my siblings and I judged one another harshly for our different reactions, and those judgments hardened into resentment. Ellen felt like Harry and I didn't support her; Harry felt that, as the older brother, I should have been stronger, I should have done something. And I felt like their responses only inflamed the situations and made it worse for all of us. I wanted everybody to just shut the fuck up and do it my way.

I wanted to please and placate him, because as long as Daddio was laughing and smiling, I believed, *we would be safe*. I was the entertainer in the family. I wanted to keep everything light and fun and joyful. And while this psychological response would later bear artistic

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and financial fruits, it also meant that my little nine-year-old brain processed Daddio's abusive episodes *as somehow being my fault.*

I *should* have been able to keep my father satisfied. I *should* have been able to protect my mother. I *should* have been able to make the family stable and happy. I *should* have been able to make everything all right.

And it's in this compulsive desire to constantly please others, to keep them laughing and smiling at all times, to redirect all the attention in the room away from the ugly and uncomfortable, toward the joyful and the beautiful—it's there that a true entertainer is born.

But that night, in that bedroom, with me standing there in the doorway, watching my father's fists collide with the woman I loved most in this world, watching as she collapsed on the ground, helpless, I just stood there. Frozen.

I had been scared my whole childhood, but this was the first time I had been aware of my own inaction. I was my mom's oldest son. I was less than ten yards away. I was the only chance she had for help.

Yet, I did nothing.

It was then that my young identity congealed in my mind. It became encased in a hard sediment, an unshakable feeling that no matter what I have done, and no matter how successful I have become, no matter how much money I've made or how many #1 hits I've had or how many box office records I've broken, there is that subtle and silent feeling always pulsating in the back of my mind: that I am a coward; that I have failed; that I am sorry, Mom-Mom, so sorry.

Do you know what happens when two people are in charge? When two people are in charge, everybody dies!

That night, in that bedroom, at only nine years old, watching the destruction of my family as my mother collapsed to the floor—in that moment, I decided. I made a silent promise. To my mother, to my family, to myself:

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One day, I would be in charge.

And this would never, *ever* happen again.

TWO

FANTASY



ow, I know y'all were thinkin' I was going to start this book off with, "Iiiiiin West Philadelphia, born and raised . . . ," not with stories of domestic abuse and violence.

I was tempted, I mean, how could I not be? I'm a make-believer. And not just any ol' make-believer, I'm a Legendary, Bad Boy, Man in Black kind of make-believer: I'm a *movie* star. My first impulse is always to clean up the truth in my mind. To make it better. To shine it up a little bit so it doesn't hurt as much. I redesign it and replace it with whatever suits me. Or really, whatever suits *you*: I'm a crowd-pleaser. It's my *actual* job. The "truth" is whatever I decide to make you believe, and I *will* make you believe it: That's what I do.

I'm a master storyteller. I thought about showing you the pretty me, a flawless diamond; a swaggy, unbreakable winner. A fantasy image of a successful human being. I'm *always* tempted to make-believe. I live in an ongoing war with reality.

Of course, there's the red-carpet-walking, fly-car-driving, tight-fade-wearing, box-office-record-breaking, hot-chick-marrying, *I Am Legend*–pull-up-doing, jiggy-ass "Will Smith" . . .

And then there's me. This book is about me.

Iiiiiin West Philadelphia, born and raised
On the playground is where I spent most of my days

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Chilling out, maxing, relaxing all cool
I got my ass beat and bullied every day after school . . .

That's how the song *should* have gone. OK . . . I can admit I was a weird kid. Kinda skinny, sorta goofy, with a bizarre taste in clothes. I was also the unfortunate owner of a prominent set of ears that made David Brandon once say that I looked like a trophy.

As I think back, I probably would have made fun of me, too. It didn't help that I liked math and science; they were my favorite subjects in school. I think I like math because it's exact; I like when things add up. Numbers don't play games or have moods or opinions.

And I talked a *lot*—probably too much. But, most important, I had a wild and vivid imagination, a fantasy life that was much broader and lasted way longer than most children. Whereas when most kids just played around with plastic army men, Nerf balls, and toy guns, I would construct elaborate fantasy scenarios and then get lost in them.

When I was about eight or nine, Mom-Mom sent me and Pam to Sayre Morris day camp in Southwest Philadelphia. It was the usual, bargain-basement thing: rec room, swimming pool, arts and crafts. I came home after the first day and ran into the kitchen, where my mom was sitting with our next-door neighbor, Miss Freda.

"Hey, baby, how was camp?" Mom-Mom asked.

"Aw, Mom, I *loved* it. They had this big jazz band with trumpets and violins and singers and drums, and they had one of those horn things that do like this." I mimicked the back-and-forth movement of a trombone.

"And then we had a dance battle, and like fifty people were doing choreographed moves together. . . ."

Miss Freda looked at my mom—*A full jazz band? Fifty choreographed dancers? At a children's summer camp?*

What Miss Freda didn't know was that she was caught in the cross fire of a playful game between my mother and me, one that still goes on even to this day. The rules are, I describe the most colorful, vivid, outlandish scene that I can come up with, which I then superimpose over

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the reality of my actual experience, and Mom-Mom's job is to determine how much of it is actually true, and in which case, does she need to do something?

My mom paused and came nose to nose with me. Her gaze served as a sort of old-school, mother-wit lie detector, looking for the slightest wobble in my commitment to my story. I didn't flinch.

She'd seen enough.

"Willard, stop playing. There was no jazz band at Sayre day camp."

"No, Mom, I'm telling you—it was *crazy*."

Miss Freda, confused, said, "But, Carolyn, he didn't even know the word for a trombone—he had to have seen it, right?"

"No. He does this mess all the time."

Just then, Pam walked into the kitchen, and my mother said, "Pam, was there a full jazz band, a dance contest, and a trombone at camp today?"

Pam rolled her eyes.

"What? No. It was a *jukebox*, Mom. Will stood there and listened to the jukebox all day—he didn't even get in the pool."

Mom-Mom looked to Miss Freda. "I *told* you."

I burst into laughter—Mom-Mom won this round, but at least I beat Miss Freda.

My imagination is my gift, and when it merges with my work ethic, I can make money rain from the heavens.

My imagination has always been the part of me that Mom-Mom loved the most. (Well, that and when I got good grades.) It's a weird mix of love that she has for me. She loves my silly side, but she needs me to be smart.

At some point in her life, she decided that she was only allowed to talk about important stuff: educational reform, generational wealth, the new misleading national health guidelines. She doesn't "entertain foolishness." Her and Daddio debated *everything*.

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"Integration is the worst thing that ever happened to Black folks," Daddio said emphatically.

"You don't believe that, Will—you're just sayin' it to pluck my nerves," Mom-Mom said dismissively.

"Listen to me, Car'lyn! Before integration, we had our own. Black businesses were thriving because niggas had to patronize niggas. The cleaners, the restaurant, the hardware store—everybody needed everybody. As soon as Black folks was allowed to eat at McDonald's, our entire economic infrastructure collapsed."

"So are you suggesting that you'd prefer to be raising these children in slavery, or in Jim Crow?" Mom-Mom said.

"I'm suggestin' that if there was a nigga water fountain, niggas would be gettin' hired to fix it."

Mom-Mom would never say it to Daddio, but she would repeat all the time, "Never argue with a fool, because from a distance, people can't tell who's who." So when she would stop arguing with you, you knew what she thought of your position.

When I say silly stuff, it makes the world *lighter* for her. But she needs me to say smart stuff, too. That makes her feel safe. She thinks that the only way I'll be able to survive is if I'm intelligent. She likes about a sixty-forty ratio of smart to silly. She's the best audience I've ever had. It's like there's some hidden part of her that even she's not aware of that's always egging me on.

Come on, Will, sillier, smarter, sillier, smarter . . .

I like to hit her with stuff that, on the surface, is super silly, and I hide the smart under it to see if she can find it. I like the look on her face when she thinks something is just stupid, and then the smart part sneaks up on her. (That's *my* favorite, too.)

Comedy is an extension of intelligence. It's hard to be really funny if you're not really smart. And laughter is Mom-Mom's medicine. In a way, I'm her little doctor, and the more she laughs, the more silly, smart, spectacular shit I make up.

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As a child, I would disappear into my imagination. I could daydream endlessly—there was nothing more entertaining to me than my fantasy worlds. There *was* a jazz band at camp; I *heard* the trumpets; I *saw* the trombone, the zoot suits, the big dance scene. The worlds that my mind created and inhabited were as real to me as "real life," sometimes even more so.

This constant stream of images and colors and ideas and silliness became my safe place. And then, to be able to share that space, to be able to transport someone, became the ultimate bliss. I love the ecstasy of a person's rapt attention, taking them on a roller-coaster ride of their emotions locked in harmony with my fantasy creation.

For me, the border between fantasy and reality has always been thin and transparent, and I've been able to step in and out of each effortlessly.

The problem is one man's fantasy is another man's lie. I developed a reputation in the neighborhood as a compulsive liar. My friends felt like they could never trust what I said.

This is a strange quirk about me and even continues to this day. It's a running joke among my friends and family that you have to dial back my stories two or three notches to know what *actually* happened. Sometimes I'll tell a story and then a friend will look at Jada and say, "OK, so what *really* happened?"

But as a child, what the other kids didn't understand was that I didn't lie about my perceptions, my perceptions lied *to me.* I would get lost; sometimes I would lose track of what was real and what I had made up. It became a defense mechanism—my mind wouldn't even contemplate what was true. I would think, *What do they need to hear to be OK?*

But Mom-Mom got me—she *delighted* in my peculiarities. She made space for me to be as silly and creative as I could be.

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For instance, for much of my childhood I had an imaginary friend

named Magicker. A lot of kids go through the imaginary-friend phase—usually between four and six years old. Those imaginary friends are amorphous identities that don't really have any shape or personality. The imaginary friend wants whatever the child wants, hates what the child hates, and so on. It's made up to affirm the child's thoughts and feelings.

But Magicker was different; even as I write this book, the memory of Magicker is as vivid and resonant as any of the actual experiences of my childhood. He was a full-blown *person*.

Magicker was a little white boy with red hair, fair skin, and freckles. He always wore a little powder-blue polyester suit, with a fire-engine-red bow tie. His pants rode just a little bit too high, exposing poorly chosen white socks.

Whereas most other children's imaginary friends served as projections and affirmations, Magicker had distinct preferences and opinions about what games we should play and where we should go and what we should do. Sometimes, he would disagree with me; other times, he'd make me go outside when I didn't want to. He had strong ideas about certain types of foods and the character of people in my life. Even as I'm sitting here recalling our relationship, I'm thinking, *Damn it, Magicker, this is* my *imagination!*

Magicker was such a significant presence in my childhood that my mom would sometimes set out a separate plate for him at the dinner table. And if she wasn't making any headway with *me*, she'd talk to Magicker instead.

"OK, Magicker, are you ready to go to bed?"

Fortunately, this was the one thing that Magicker and I always agreed on—we were never ready to go to bed.

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A side effect of being lost in a fantasy life was that I had a lot of eccentric ideas about what was fly, fashionable, or funny. For example, I'm

not sure how it developed, but I stumbled into an unfortunate but passionate cowboy-boot phase. Man, I *loved* cowboy boots; in fact, I refused to wear anything else on my feet. I'd wear them with sweatsuits; I'd wear them with jeans.

Hell, I even wore them with shorts.

Now, a Black kid in West Philly in cowboy boots might as well just put a bull's-eye on his back. Kids would make fun of me and tease me mercilessly, but I didn't understand *why*. "These boots are *dope*!" And the more they laughed, the deeper my commitment to cowboy boots grew.

I was always a bit of an oddball. Things that felt normal to me could seem strange to others, and things that other people celebrated sometimes didn't inspire me in the least.

Back in the day, Huffy mountain bikes were on fire; every kid wanted one. And one Christmas, all my friends on my block got together and we agreed to ask our parents for Huffy bikes that year. The plan was we would all ride our matching bikes to Merion Park, a small park just far enough outside our neighborhood to feel like we were on an adventure.

Well, Christmas came, and Santa made good on ten brand-new, matching Huffys. Noon rolled around, and everybody was out front.

Everybody, that is, except me.

See, I didn't ask for a Huffy. Huffys were for suckaz! And they were about to witness what a *real* bike looked like. Because while they had all asked for stock, standard, run-of-the-mill Huffy mountain bikes, I ain't no sheep. I had asked for . . . a bright red Raleigh Chopper. Choppers were those low-rider bikes with a big wheel in the back and a tiny one up front, with the handlebars that stuck way up in the air, with the three-speed gear shift and an L-bucket dragster saddle, a.k.a. the banana seat. They were like the Harley-Davidson of kid's bikes. You felt like you were on a *motor*cycle on that thing. It was the undisputed coolest bike on earth.

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I couldn't sleep the night before imagining my entrance. I had

worked out my big reveal: I would wait for everybody to line up out front, ready to go, but I would come out from the *back* driveway, maintaining the element of surprise. I even planned and practiced what I was gonna say when they saw me on my Chopper. "Whaddup, suckaz, what y'all waiting for? Let's go!" and then I'd just ride past them so they would have to catch up with me: Will Smith, the leader of the pack, the king of the neighborhood.

The moment arrived. I had been watching them from behind the curtains in my living room; I could tell they were all waiting and wondering, *Where's Will at?* And just then I rolled out from the driveway, handlebars scraping the heavens, peddling smoothly in my cowboy boots—that Raleigh Chopper first gear was *butter.*

I was *the man.*

I float on by, all eyes on me. I throw the nod, then hit them with the line: "Whaddup, suckaz, what y'all waitin' for? Let's go!"

It was quiet for a few seconds. I figured I had 'em shook.

Then I was nearly knocked off my Chopper by the roar of laughter that emerged behind me. Teddy Allison literally laid on the ground laughing.

Through his tears he managed to say, "What the *fuck* is that jawn?"

I hit the brakes and turned to scan the rest of the crowd to see if Teddy was just bussin', or if he was speaking for everybody.

"Nigga, are you in a biker gang?" said Danny Brandon. "You can't even see over them handlebars!"

Michael Barr said quietly, "This what happens when you go to white schools."

But it didn't matter what they thought, because to me, I was *hot.* That's one of the things about having an overactive imagination: I could make my mind believe *anything.* I was able to cultivate an almost delusional level of confidence.

And while this somewhat skewed perception of myself would often end in ridicule or getting my ass kicked when I was young, on many occasions throughout my life it served as a superpower. When you are

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unaware that you shouldn't be able to do something, then you just do it. When my parents told me I couldn't be a rapper because there were no careers in hip-hop, it didn't deter me, because I knew *parents just don't understand*. When television producers asked me if I could act, I said, "Of course," even though I had never acted a day in my life—I thought, *How hard can it be?* When movie studios said they couldn't cast me because African American leads don't sell to international audiences, I wasn't necessarily offended, I just couldn't understand how a motherfucker *that* wrong could have *this* job. It wasn't just the racism that bothered me, it was the *stupidity*. People would tell me how I was supposed to be, and it just didn't make any sense. I felt like their rules didn't apply to me.

Living in your own little world with your own rules can be an advantage sometimes, but you have to be careful. You can't get *too* detached from reality. Because there are consequences.

My consciousness was an infinite playground that I delighted in exploring.

But when I was a kid, the benefits of my fantastical delusions were still far off in the future, and the consequences were front and center. Tolerance and open-mindedness weren't the most common schoolyard virtues in West Philly. Kids could be cruel. And the more eccentric you are, the less mercy you will be shown.

The playground is a hunting ground where every little boy is testing the limits of his own budding masculinity, attempting to prove himself as stronger and dominant, constantly flexing and challenging other boys, measuring himself against them, and punishing those weaker than himself.

I was skinny and profoundly unathletic. My limbs and my torso had a sadly dysfunctional relationship. In addition, I had an overactive imagination and, from what the other kids could tell, I lied incessantly.

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All this meant that I was singled out by the other boys as an easy and justifiable target on which to prove their dominance. I got pushed around, picked last for games, hit, and spit on—you name it, I got it.

One day, when I was probably twelve or thirteen years old, a bunch of us were playing basketball in the schoolyard. I was fresh to death in my bright green shorts and my favorite cowboy boots. In my *mind*, I was Magic Johnson, but on the actual court I was more like a figure skater—cowboy boots don't necessarily provide the requisite grip or ankle support you might otherwise find in a standard basketball shoe.

Basically, I was stumbling all over the place.

At some point, the universal basketball bragging began, everybody trying to demonstrate how they could replicate the moves of their favorite players. One guy shouted out "KAREEM!" as he slung up a sky hook. Another screamed out "BIRD!," throwing up a three. But this was Philadelphia in the early eighties—how dare they disrespect these Philly streets? There's only one name to yell out on these courts: Dr. J, Julius Erving.

So, I said, "Watch out! Here comes the DOC! Move, y'all, I'm about to dunk!"

Matt Brown bust out laughing. "Nigga, you can't dunk."

Granted, I had never dunked before, but as soon as I said it, I believed it. As I made my way back to half court, I licked my fingers and wiped the bottom of my cowboy boots for traction. As I prepared to take a running start, I swear to the Almighty I had no doubt I was about to dunk this ball.

As I stretched my shoulder to prepare for full extension, the guys started throwing out bets.

"I bet you three dollars you can't do it, Will!"

"Bet!" I clapped back. "Get my money ready!"

"I'm in for five!" somebody said.

"I'll take all-a y'all's money! Bring it!"

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And I'm agreeing to all of them, because in my mind, this ball is already dunked. The guys all fan out. There's a moment of anticipation;

I steady myself, as the murmuring settles. And then, *boom!* I take off running down the court. I'm seeing the Julius Erving "Rock the Baby" cradle dunk in the 1983 finals sweep against the Lakers. Cowboy boots clomping, feet flailing, I hit my stride. About to take off, I'm up, I'm flying, the cameras are flashing, the crowd is going crazy.

And then . . . silence.

And somehow, I'm falling. Backward? Something has gone wrong.

SLAM!—reality hits with the force of paved asphalt.

I am not Julius Erving.

I am out. Cold.

The bigger the fantasy you live, the more painful the inevitable collision with reality. If you cultivate the fantasy that your marriage will be forever joyful and effortless, then reality is going to pay you back in equal proportion to your delusion. If you live the fantasy that making money will earn you love, then the universe will slap you awake, in the tune of a thousand angry voices.

And if you think you can dunk like Julius Erving in cowboy boots, then gravitational reality will invoke a painful and divinely perfect retribution.

Let's rewind and see what actually happened:

I had clomped my way from half court; all was still going well as I accelerated past the foul line. I took my last dribble; liftoff was smooth—not perfect—but I was airborne. As I ascended, I got just high enough to hit the rim with the ball, completely halting my forward momentum, thereby causing my legs to fly out from under me. (The slang terminology for this particular sporting mishap is "hanging yourself on the rim.") As I think back, the added weight of the cowboy boots may have exacerbated the torque.

I came down hard, directly on the back on my head and neck, knocking myself unconscious.

When I wake up, my friend Omarr is standing over me. I can see the strobing lights of an ambulance, there's blood in my hair, and I have no idea where my left cowboy boot is.

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I can hear Omarr's voice.

"He's awake! He's awake!"

Omarr is my oldest friend—well, except for Stacey Brooks. When he was little, he was so pigeon-toed that he'd be tripping himself and falling and scuffin' himself all the time when we were playing. His parents decided that he should have corrective surgery. When he was five, the doctors broke both of his legs and reset them. Omarr had leg braces all summer, but when it was time to go to school, all of a sudden, he was the fastest kid on the block *and* the best dancer. It made us all want the magical surgery!

As my vision slowly sharpens, Omarr's face slips into focus. I can see in his eyes that my fall must have been pretty bad. He isn't laughing; he's scared.

"Yo, man, you alright?"

I do a quick inventory—I can move my hands, my arms, my legs, my feet. Nothing broken. I muster an affirmative nod.

As they strap me to the stretcher and slide me into the ambulance, I catch a final glimpse of Omarr.

"Yo, O! It went in, right?"

Make-believe is a normal part of psychological development. But as we grow up, we start to let go of our fantasy life simply because we discover that living in the *real* world is more valuable to us than clinging to our fantasies. We have to learn how to deal with others, how to succeed at school and at work, how to survive in the material world. And it's hard to do that if you're unable to perceive reality accurately.

As such, we all have to learn to make a distinction between what is real and what is not. In fact, some people make the distinction so well that, as adults, they unfortunately lose the ability to embrace anything other than concrete, material reality.

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But, for some reason, I didn't go through this process. Or, perhaps, I

refused to go through this process. That's because my fantasy life is what protected me from the world. Offered the choice between the infinite playground of my imagination and a reality filled with constant threat, my mind chose fantasy.

We all delude ourselves a little bit around the things that scare us. We're afraid of not being accepted by people at work, or at school, or on Twitter, so we convince ourselves that they're stuck-up or ignorant or cruel. We concoct entire narratives about other people's lives when in fact we have no clue what they're thinking or feeling or struggling with. We invent these stories to protect ourselves. We imagine all sorts of things to be true about ourselves or the world, not because we've seen evidence for it, but because it's the only thing that keeps us from collapsing back into fear.

Sometimes we'd rather blindfold ourselves than take a cold, hard look at the world *exactly* as it is.

The problem is delusion works like poisoned honey—it tastes sweet in the beginning but ultimately ends in sickness and misery. The stories we tell ourselves, which are designed for our protection, are the same stories that create the walls that prevent the very connections we so desperately crave. I told myself that I had a friend named Magicker because it made me feel less alone. But that fantasy was also a part of why I was disconnected from the other kids in the neighborhood. Later in my life, I would invent the fantasy that becoming rich and famous would solve all of the other problems in my life. But the pursuit and maintenance of that fantasy only drove the people I loved further away from me.

As a child, I told myself that if I kept Daddio entertained and made him laugh then he wouldn't hurt my mother. But that fantasy only caused me to feel like a coward, an unworthy son, despite the fact that none of it was my fault.

My fantasy life, while in some ways protecting me, also caused me to feel more guilt and shame and more self-loathing. All fantasies eventually fail. No matter how hard you fight, the truth is undefeated; reality remains the undisputed champ.

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Daddio only took one summer vacation in my entire childhood. When your family sells ice, you are trapped at work from the first week of June, when you get out of school, to just after Labor Day, when you go back.

But in the summer of 1976, Daddio decided to take off two months, rent a camper, and drive the family cross-country. There was a family reunion from Gigi's side in Los Angeles. We took the northern route out to LA, and the southern route back to Philly.

I have seen every nook and cranny of the United States of America. We left Philly and headed west to Pittsburgh to see Mom-Mom's childhood home. Her father—we called him Pap Pap—still lived there. He seemed like a really old version of Daddio. Legend had it that Pap Pap would get so angry sometimes that his nose would bleed—and that could be just watching the Steelers.

Next stop, Cleveland, to see Aunt Tootie and Uncle Walt. Then Chicago to the Great Lakes, then on to Minneapolis and the Dakotas. We saw prairie dogs, but I don't know why they call them that. They look like tall hamsters that stand upright—think Timon from *The Lion King*. Harry got a handmade drum from a Sioux tribal leader in South Dakota. He banged that thing all the way through Mount Rushmore, the Devils Tower, and into Yellowstone National Park. We saw Old Faithful—I couldn't believe they could tell you down to the second exactly when it was going to erupt. The ranger would point and then *abracadabra!* Huge jets of boiling water shooting up out of the ground. The smell was nasty—Daddio said it was sulfur (I was glad to find that out because for a second, I thought it was Ellen).

Mom-Mom woke us up at sunrise on the top of a mountain in Wyoming. We were *above* the clouds. *This is what heaven must feel like.* But then we got stuck for an hour because a black bear walked out into the middle of the road and headed straight for our camper. It was a park rule that you had to turn off your vehicle if there was a bear within fifty feet of your vehicle. Daddio slammed the window closed with both

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