

Prologue

“Come on, August, grab your pullover.” I waited for my little boy at our front door.

“Where are we going, Mama?” August asked, dragging his black Gap sweatshirt behind him across the hardwood floors.

“To a rally at the park,” I answered, sliding the hoodie over his tall, slender body. Handsome and inquisitive at only five years old, August already had the makings of a scientist/cowboy/race car driver, and I was proud of how far he had come.

In a past life, before we became a family, August had lived in two foster homes. Meanwhile, I earned a license to foster/adopt from the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services. After months of certification and waiting, I became a mother to a six-month-old Black baby boy, and my life changed forever.

August’s addition to the neighborhood made us one of five Black

families who dwelled between La Cienega and San Vicente Boulevard. August and I loved our little slice of heaven—filled with Mexican Jews, nonpracticing Jews, old people, Koreans, young white families, and a formerly handsome playboy, who drove a red convertible and didn't date anyone older than twenty-five—just outside of the Beverly Hills hub. La Cienega Park, with its green play structures, sandbox, clean bathrooms, and recreation center, was a block away. Every day, elderly Jewish men sat at concrete benches, speaking Hebrew, feeding pigeons, and playing chess. Mothers nursed their babies or worked out with trainers, and little kids played king of the hill. On Wednesdays, the park was filled with divorced and coparenting dads and their children. The rumor was that Wednesday was designated court-ordered visitation day. Every now and then, a B-list celebrity from *The Fast and the Furious* would be on dad duty.

Before I adopted August, I landed in Beverly Hills in June 2006 on a fluke. I had lived in the San Fernando Valley for seven years when the condominium I was previously renting was sold. I was in denial about moving and waited until the last possible moment to find a place, when I stumbled upon a one-bedroom apartment on the eastern border of Beverly Hills. There were no fancy shops near me, and if I wanted to stargaze or stroll down Rodeo Drive, I'd have to drive west on Wilshire Boulevard for eight minutes. It wasn't the most upscale apartment building either, and even my grandmother made sure to emphasize to her sister and church members that we didn't *really* live in Beverly Hills, but it was home.

As we made our way down the dusty steps and onto the street, August asked, “What’s a rally?”

“It where lots of people who like the same things come together and talk or sing.” Earlier that morning, I had googled the Black Lives Matter website to see when they were coming to Los Angeles. As I scrolled down the page, I discovered a rally that night. I was frankly surprised a rally would be held in Beverly Hills. Of course, there was wealth in the area, but this was not a fundraiser. It was an event that was designed to bring white people, far removed from blight, gangs, and poverty, out into the street in support of Black lives. It was one thing to send money or sit at home and hand-wring. It was another to publicly cry foul at a system that routinely oppressed Black people. That’s what I had done by adopting August, and that was the reason I took him out that night.

“Like a party?” His eyes lit up.

My child was not even in kindergarten and already a party animal. “Um, not really.” It was already seven o’clock. Ordinarily, August would be getting into a warm, sudsy bath at this time of the evening. After he played with his boats and fish, he’d be ready for a cup of milk. Then August, who liked brushing his teeth, would delay bedtime by splashing water all over the sink. While I cleaned up, he would choose three or four books from his overflowing red-and-blue bookcase and wait for me in his twin bed. Tonight, I was disrupting his routine for one reason. I needed to connect with other mothers of Black boys.

“Why are we going?”

Good question. My heart echoed President Obama’s sentiment that Trayvon’s murder was a *national tragedy*. This was one of the few moments in history that the death of a Black boy was elevated to a national tragedy. I took a beat to consider how to broach the subject. If I gave my sensitive child too much information, he would feel bad without understanding why. If I gave too few details, he would miss the importance of the moment. I did not want to frighten him, but lying wasn’t the answer either.

“Why, Mama?” he asked again.

“Because a few weeks ago, a boy named Trayvon Martin was killed walking home, and we want to show our support.”

I spoke calmly, hoping to give August the impression that despite using the words *boy* and *killed*, my son was safe. I pretended we were just taking a casual stroll to the park, though the circumstances were far from normal. Except, I quickly realized, they were normal. *This* was my new normal. Most Blacks were taught that life was tenuous and this reality was just part of living in America. Before becoming a mother, I was detached from what that really meant. I lived in an affluent neighborhood and ran with a highly educated, well-traveled crowd. I thought my privilege shielded me from ugly truths about the actual worth of a Black life. Trayvon Martin’s murder opened my eyes to the new reality Black mothers faced every day. There was no guarantee that our boys would arrive home safely from school or back from the store after purchasing Skittles.

Trayvon's death grounded my parenting priorities. I went from trying to understand the difference between the Montessori and the Reggio Emilia approaches to education, to understanding that I was part of a club whose sole membership requirement was being the mother of a Black boy, and feeling the weight of that fear keenly for the first time. Suddenly, I was scared for August, who shared a birthday with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I wept inside because there would be times in August's life when trouble would find him, even if he was just out minding his own business, all because his racial classification was Black. Trayvon's death gave me another thing to worry about: life. How could I protect my son? How could I give him the best life, one where he enjoyed a childhood of trains and dinosaurs, not rallies for the gone-too-soon? In my new skin as mother of a Black boy, I had to think through how we would navigate a world set up to challenge his very existence. The task was daunting and made me feel powerless and small.

"Mama, I don't know Trayvon. He must be in Miss Isabella's class."

"No, he was a big boy," I said softly.

"What does *kill* mean?"

I had seen that one coming. "*Kill* means..." I faltered and tried again. "Um, killing is like when you step on ants and they die."

August frowned. "Did someone step on Trayvon? That's mean."

"I don't know all of the details, but—" I lied to stop the hole of fear that was swallowing me. "There are some mean people in the world, and a mean man killed Trayvon."

“Will that happen to me?”

I stopped walking and bent down, cupping August’s face in my hand, and looked into his beautiful brown eyes. “Oh no, angel, but you need to know that some people will think just because you’re a Black boy that you are not smart and funny. They will not care how much you love Elmo or how you got angry when you found out Pluto was a dwarf planet.”

“Why?” he asked sadly.

“I don’t know. Some people are stupid.”

“Ooh, you said a bad word.”

“Oops!” I covered my mouth and pretended to giggle.

“Can I get on the slide when we get to the park?” August was hopeful.

“Not tonight, son.”

I’m not sure if he understood that I had just done something terrible, had stolen some of his innocence. I had no choice. In ten years, August would be more than six feet tall, and people would assume he was older than he really was. He would not be given the “boys will be boys” benefit of the doubt for speeding or participating in immature class pranks. Trayvon’s murder unleashed a veil that separated August’s previous life as a precious, innocent babe to a child who would have to learn that his race and gender could get him killed.

Our busy street, a shortcut to the Beverly Center and West Hollywood, was quiet for once. The corner our apartment building sat on also held three office buildings, though the low brick building that used to house a colonic clinic was vacant. The rumor was that

nearby Cedars-Sinai Hospital had purchased the prime location and would begin demolition of the old building soon.

I had made this trek to the park hundreds of times. First, as a single woman, newly arrived in Beverly Hills, walking my dogs, then, as a single mother pushing August in his stroller. Later, August would push his own stroller, and I would watch him stumble and fall, learning to walk and trying to keep up with our dogs. The park was our haven where he spent time building sandcastles, making friends, and learning to ride his bike. But tonight, we had other business there.

With no cars in sight, August scampered ahead and waited for me at the streetlight. The light was red, so he pressed the button to illuminate the walk signal. The intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Gale Drive felt like a cold wind tunnel. Concerned about the cool night air, I gently turned him to face me.

“Angel, let’s pull your hood over your head.”

Suddenly, the reality of our situation hit me. We were Black people, dressed in dark colors, standing on a street corner in a wealthy neighborhood. I had a brief moment of panic and contemplated removing August’s hood and warming him through my embrace. I knew that a white boy wearing a hoodie wouldn’t warrant a second look from a passerby. August was young enough that he could get away with it, but if he were, say, thirteen, he would likely be perceived as threatening with his hood up. To the white world we lived in, a hoodie plus a Black male was synonymous with danger.

I grimaced at the irony that I could not even get to the park to

protest the death of a Black teenager without considering how August would be perceived. I decided to let it be and keep his hood up. We had not done anything wrong.

Trayvon's murder spoke to all aspects of my identity: Black woman, single Black mother, historian, sister, cousin, coworker, friend, lover. Much as I would have liked to, I could not ignore what was happening to Black boys all around me, or rationalize the violence away to convince myself that August would be spared. As an adjunct United States and African American history instructor at multiple Los Angeles community colleges, I was well versed in how this shit played out. So many Black men had been lynched and killed at the hands of white men in America. It was a record on repeat, a song I tired of, especially now that I had a son to raise.

My pedigree and privilege gave me access to a world away from police brutality, drugs, incarceration, and premature death. I had collected stamps on my passport from three continents, been to law school, explored slave castles in West Africa, walked in the footsteps of the Harlem Renaissance's elite on Martha's Vineyard, rafted down the Guadalupe River, and been to the flash point of the Civil War in South Carolina. I had danced atop tables at beach retreats in Mexico, sunned on whimsical weekend trips in Palm Springs, changed cars and jobs every other year, and maintained standing hair and massage appointments. I was a free, successful Black woman in the world, and still, none of that meant my child would surely be spared the fate of so many Black boys in our country. I wanted August to have the same

privileges I did, but a case of mistaken identity or racial profiling could wreck all of that. That's not what I had signed up for when I decided I wanted to become a mother.

I was already an outlier in the Black community for adopting a child I did not know and was not related to. I was an outlier in the white community for adopting a child domestically, and the butt of jokes by male coworkers who didn't believe I could raise a boy on my own. As a writer, I was fighting against white privilege's erasure of Black parenting perspectives and insistence that the word *mother* automatically meant *white*. The denial of voices of color meant our children's lives did not matter. Motherhood was supposed to be fun, filled with challenges to bring the best out of our kids and ourselves. For me, and for all Black mothers in America, it was alternatively fun and harrowing, as we broached conversations no parent should ever have to have with their young children.

As the death of Black boys became a way of life, my eyes opened to an important truth: Black mothers lived in a different America from white mothers. I saw the ease with which my white mom friend Liza babied her five-year-old son, Colton. While she closely monitored his emerging reading skills, she failed to educate him about the fact that America had a Black president. She had no idea that toy guns in the hands of Black boys could be misconstrued as a threat. Colton was free to roam about the country at will; August had to be vigilant about where he was at all times.

When we finally arrived at the park, most of the protestors were

gone. We missed it. I hadn't known what to expect but was willing to walk into a scene of grief, anger, shouting, and volatility. That was not the case. It was as if providence wanted me to keep August's innocence intact a little longer. I was disappointed but relieved and happy to have shown up, not just for August but for all mothers of Black boys.

August asked, "Where are the people?"

I looked at the throng of footprints in the sand and noticed a few stragglers, sitting quietly at the tables where the old Jews played chess. "They've gone home," I said, kissing his cold cheek. "Thanks for being such a trooper tonight."

"Now, can I get on the slide? Please."

"No, sir." I winked. "You need to get some rest so you'll be ready for school tomorrow."

I took my job as mother seriously, not only about teaching August how to tie his shoes or his ABCs, but about the institutional racism that was and would be a part of his life. No matter how fancy our zip code, he would need that information to stay alive. Woke to the broader meaning of Black motherhood, over the past few years I turned inward to examine my own life to determine why I decided to become a single mother via adoption—not an easy path for any woman, but especially a Black woman, to follow—especially when parenting in America is still filtered through a white lens.