

RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW Story Cycle

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1. Playing Solitary

You know the first game I remember? If we woke up and Mom wasn't home from the club, I'd pour my baby brother and me a bowl of Frosted Flakes. Then we'd climb inside the closet, place the TV in the doorway, and sit there, hunched over our cereal, watching TV. Know what we called it?

"Playing. Solitary."

Man, the first time I went to prison I was only three months old. My mom took me to visit my father. Shoot, not just my father, everybody—grandmas, aunts, uncles—they all did time. Prison was a family reunion.

Even as a little kid, I knew the weak got robbed for their property. I remember waking up after a blackout to find our apartment full of looted merchandise, courtesy of the "five-finger discount." By six, I was stealing plums from the produce market. Man, what a treat for a kid whose family couldn't afford luxuries like fresh fruit.

First time my mom came to visit me in prison, she just stood, looking around, like "ain't nothing change." It was the same prison where she'd brought me to visit my father.

Yeah. "Ain't nothin' change." Trust me, I was a convict long before I ever did time.

2. Grandma Shot Bob

My very first memory ever is a gun. I was two years old and playing with my Starship Enterprise in my grandmother's kitchen. She and her boyfriend Bob were arguing. When I looked up to see what the commotion was about, he slapped her.

Grandma reached into her bathrobe pocket, but he grabbed her arm and they tussled. Suddenly there was a loud pop.

Bob howled, grabbed his foot, and starting cursing. "Goddammit, Rose, you fuckin' shot me."

I guess she couldn't get the gun out and just shot straight through the pocket.

My nine-year-old cousin came rushing in. Grandma gave her the nickel-plated .38 and told her to hide it in the basement of the building.

"And take the baby with you. Stay there till I come get you."

Talk about excited, not only had Grandma just shot Bob, we were going somewhere new: the basement!

I had no idea what was going on. Except Grandma was trying to not get in trouble. It was a lesson I never forgot: "Don't get caught!"

3. Nigger Lover

First time I ever saw a gun, my grandma was holding it. I heard a ruckus in the hallway and peeked out my door. Grandma was holding a tiny pistol. I was too little to understand she'd been drinking. All I knew was Grandma had a gun! The same Grandma who was the sweetest woman in the whole wide world. The same Grandma who, whenever Mama said, "*Absolutely not!*" always said, "*Of course you can, baby.*"

Grandma was cussing at Mama's bedroom door, saying, "I'm gonna shoot that goddamn nigger." I'd never heard her say such awful words.

Mama opened her door and said, "Give me the gun."

But Grandma kept waving the gun and cussing. So, Mama said, "If you're gonna shoot anybody in this house, you gonna have to shoot me first."

I was so terrified Grandma was gonna shoot Mama I didn't know what to do.

Finally, Grandma lowered the pistol. "Nigger-lover," she muttered.

I sat on my bed, tears spilling down my cheeks. I was part black. I didn't understand that Grandma was drunk and talking about my white mother and another man. I thought she was saying my mother was wrong for loving me.

For a long time, I sat on my bed and wondered why black people were called niggers and how come we weren't supposed to be loved.

4. Ajar

The day I learned about love, the sun was shining and everybody at our whole trailer park was outside. My mom was already over at my auntie's. They sold liquor on the side to help make ends meet. I knew my auntie's friend, Charles, would be there, too. I liked Charles. He'd lift me over his head and spin me around saying, "Little man be flyin'!"

But first things first. I was stopping by Ms. Rosie's trailer for my sugar fix. Ms. Rosie was about a hundred and forty years old and wore a Shirley Temple wig that was always just a little crooked.

All of a sudden, this loud POP ricocheted across the trailer park.

"It's a backfire," Miss Rosie explained. "Cars do it."

Then four more blasts. Pop, pop, pop, pop!

I took off running. All I could think about was my mother.

We were almost to my aunt's trailer when my uncle's blue Chevy flew by, kicking up gravel and nearly smashing a parked car. Our eyes met. I raised my hand to wave but he didn't even slow down.

Confused, I tore around the corner. The trailer door was ajar. I climbed the first step and heard the faint music inside. On the second step my tiny hand pushed the bottom of the door, opening it wider. I never made it inside.

Charles was lying on the floor, his shades twisted above his head, a pool of liquid gathering beneath him. My Auntie sprawled across Charles like a blanket. In the center of her forehead a round mark was oozing red. Inside the trailer, my mom started to scream and scream.

I just stood there in a stupor, saying over and over, “Get up, Auntie, please get up!”

I think a part of me is standing there still, on that third step. The part that was innocent and hadn't yet learned that love kills.

5. Downpour

I don't even know how to describe growing up in my house. It was a fucking horrific, crazy, sad experience. I remember this one cinderblock house, windows busted out and covered with plastic. If we wanted hot water, we had to heat it on the stove. And my dad, man, he beat up my mom all the time. I hated that shit.

This one night when my baby brother was about a month old, Dad knocked Mom around then told her to get the hell out of the house and take us kids with her. Thing is, it was one in the morning and we didn't have nowhere to go. Plus, it was raining, not a hard downpour but a steady drizzle. So, we huddled up under this huge oak tree. Mom held the baby and covered us best she could with her jacket.

Soon as it was light, Mom gave me the baby to hold, while she went to check if Dad had passed out yet. I tried to keep the baby warm, but by nighttime he was sick. He died in his crib not even a week later.

Nobody to this very day has ever mentioned anything about what happened. But I didn't forget. I used to put flowers by his little headstone. Soon as I was old enough, I got his initials tattooed on my arm. So, I always carry him with me in memory.

When you're a kid you don't got perspective. You just got bruises.

6. Shelf Life

I was four when my father started trying to kill me.

We never knew when it was going to happen. My mother would be working a night shift at the hospital, and my father might come home in that crazy mode. My siblings tried to protect me but there wasn't much they could do. He'd search the house until he found where I was stashed: in a toy box, tucked between bedding, under a pile of clothes on a shelf.

He would very gently pick me up and carry me to the bathroom, speaking softly of things I never understood. About my mother, I think. How maybe I wasn't his son. All the while the tub would be filling with hot water. Then he'd wrap my face and head in a towel and, in what seems now like an almost ministerial act, he'd dunk my head into the tub. He wouldn't be satisfied until I'd sucked in enough water to piss and soil myself and pass out.

I learned to survive. But what does that even mean? By the time I was six, I'd become – hell, I don't know what I'd become.

This is what I do know. It was a Sunday. Close to five pm, because my mother was getting ready for a night shift. I remember feeling like that night he could drown me for real.

So, I set our living room on fire.

I didn't run from the room. It was fully ablaze, but I wasn't scared. In that moment I was fine with whatever results I got.

I realize now my father wasn't trying to kill me. I was just a little child; if he'd wanted to kill me, he could have. It wasn't attempted murder. It was torture.

7. U Turn

I was a straight-A student and proud of it! It was pretty much the only thing I had to be proud of. My father was a single parent and schizophrenic. Our home had burned to the ground, destroying everything. So, we'd landed in the projects where even the playground was littered with crack pipes and bullet shells.

My teachers always said if you worked hard, you could be anything. I believed I had a chance to escape the black-hole of poverty. I would stand strong.

Then our fourth-grade class was assigned an essay project. I wrote diligently. The teacher told us to display our work on a tri-fold board. I told her my family couldn't afford one. My father called her, too. But she said it wouldn't be fair to the other students to make an exception. So, I failed. Which meant I got the first C on my report card.

I felt cheated. And deeply ashamed. That was the moment I realized hard work didn't matter. Poverty would win out in the end. That C was my U turn.

8. Badge of Honor

It was maybe the first lesson I learned. “Somebody put their hands on you, you hit their ass back

harder. If they bigger ‘n you, get a bottle or stick or somethin’.”

One night at supper, my stepfather told my mother the tea was too sweet. When she put the glass to her mouth, he smashed it against her face and started hitting her. I ran to a neighbor’s and called the cops. But, like always, my mom told them nothing was wrong. And I got my ass beat for trying to help.

Another night my mother’s voice woke me. I looked out the trailer window and saw him belt

her. They started fighting. Next thing I know, I’m out there in the middle of it, swinging and kicking.

I was only nine and less than half his size, so I know I didn’t hurt him. But I must’ve been annoying, cause—wham!—he punched me in the face, knocking me to the ground.

But my mom was so proud. She told everyone how her son was brave enough to fight a grow man.

So, I got the lesson. Don’t call the cops. Take care of it yourself.

Then one day I heard him say, “Bitch, get your ass up” and a scream. He’d thrown a pot of hot water on her. So, I chased him out the house with a butcher knife.

Last time I found my mother crumpled on the floor, I threw him against the wall. By then I was 14 and a football player. He was a 150 lb crackhead.

I didn't need a weapon. I punched him in the jaw. Pop! It broke. I looked him in the eye and said, "Don't you ever hurt my mother again."

He didn't. And I wore that respect like a badge of honor.

9. You Can Be Anything

My mother used to say, “You can be anything you want.” But when words don’t match up with reality, you finally stop believing.

During my sentencing, a social worker got on the stand with a stack of documents: school records, test scores, all sorts of things. He said that according to my standardized tests from fifth grade, I was literally in the top 1% of all students in the whole country. But somehow in 6th grade, my scores dropped into the bottom 67th percentile. He said this was alarming and absolutely unheard of. How come someone didn’t notice this? How come a guidance counselor didn’t intervene and find out why a child in the top 1% of the nation drops to the bottom 67% in a single year?!

I was dumbfounded. But suddenly a lot of things made sense. See, all the little kids from my housing project got bused to this pretty affluent elementary school. One of the best in the state.

But for middle school, all the kids from all the housing projects in town were funneled into one school that was 85% black and 100% poor. I don’t think we even had counselors.

I mean, I’d wanted to go to college. I wanted to make my Mom proud and give her all the things she never had.

“You can be anything you want when you grow up.” It’s crazy to look back now and wonder if it could have been true.

10. Point Blank

I was only eleven but already I knew stuff. Like, what you saw on TV wasn't real. I knew nobody in their right mind chased anyone with a gun. If somebody shot at you, you ran the other way! I knew that when a gun's drawn, ain't no witty dialogue happenin'!

It was a summer evening, but the power was out, so the neighborhood was dark. Me and my little brother were walking home from a friend's house when this boy a couple years older rolled up on his bike and said, "Y'all got any money?"

We shook our heads.

He propped the bike against his leg. Then he pulled out a gun.

It was the first time I'd ever had a gun aimed at me point blank. He didn't even have to ask; we just raised our hands.

He started patting our pockets. We were just two little boys in jeans, T-shirts, and dirty sneakers. It was pretty obvious we were poor. On our best day, we maybe had a dollar between us. I wondered if he'd shoot us for a dollar. I wondered if he'd shoot us for not having one.

I glanced at my arm. My mom had given me a watch for Christmas. A Timex. It meant a lot to me. But I didn't say a word when he took it.

The boy waved the gun and said, "Start walking. Slow. And don't turn around."

Even when we heard him pedal off we still didn't look.

After that I understood: my life could be taken from me for any reason, or for no reason at all. My life had no value. And the sooner I learned that, the better.

I never watched TV again. For us, the drama was live. And wasn't no way to change the channel.

11. Better Off Dead

Man, I was excited. I loved football and it was the Y's "Take a Poor Kid to a Game Day"!

Now, at the time, I'm only ten years old. Plus, I'm short. But my Moms didn't care; she bought all our clothes big, to make sure they got plenty of wear. My orange goose down coat was a perfect fit – for a grown man. It reached my shins. I looked like a walking a traffic cone.

So, we're strolling through the stadium when this woman starts hollering that a kid snatched her purse. Out of nowhere, five Security windbreakers appear. Then five cops.

The kid tried to run but the cops pushed him into the men's room. They slammed the rest of us to our knees, hands on our heads. Over in the restroom, we could hear the boy begging for mercy.

One cop kept patting me down and asking why I had on such a big coat. When I didn't answer, he put my hands behind my back and handcuffed me.

I thought "This is it." I figured I wouldn't live to tell about it.

He drug me into a dark labyrinth below the stadium and, believe it or not, there was a jail down there. What?!

The cop asked, "You ready to talk, tough guy?"

I was too scared to speak. So, first cage we came to, he pushed me inside and said, "One last chance, tough guy."

Even if I'd wanted to say something, I couldn't.

He slammed the door with a smirk. "Enjoy your stay."

It was crazy. I was inside a stadium with 65,000 fans who had no idea a 10-year-old child was trapped beneath them.

A few minutes later, I heard a cop say, “We had to transport the older kid to Metropolitan Hospital. Not sure he’s gonna make it.”

Another cop answered, “I think we oughta give this tough guy some of the same medicine.”

I was terrified. Nobody would know what happened to me.

Suddenly the door opened again, and a friend’s mom rushed in, asking a mile a minute “Are you all right? Did they hurt you?”

I couldn’t do anything but follow her through the hallways. We’d almost made it to the last door when the same cop called, “Hey, tough guy.”

I turned. He aimed his index fingers and thumbs like a gun. I knew what he meant. In his eyes, I was better off dead.

12. Shake It Off

Our stadium was a patch of grass at the end of the apartment complex. First base: half a milk carton. Second base: a discarded potato chip bag. Third base: a bald patch where grass wouldn't grow. Home plate: the other half of the milk carton!

We played four on four with a broken broom handle and an old tennis ball.

I was ten, and it was a perfect August afternoon except I was pitching, and we were losing. But I knew we'd make a comeback soon as we got up to bat.

I was about to fire in the next pitch when two figures emerged from the woods. Grownups. One guy was wearing a wool hat. In the summer? Slung over his shoulder was a shotgun.

When they finally passed, I got set to pitch, but everyone else took off running.

"Hey, where y'all goin'?" I called. "I want my ups!"

Then we heard the shot. I froze. The gunman was running back towards me but now the wool hat covered his face. It was a ski-mask. I sped around the corner and saw a guy standing by a boom-box. Except he wasn't standing; he was slinking to the ground in slow-motion.

Half his head was gone.

My mouth went dry. I couldn't move. It didn't seem real. How could someone only have half a head?

A single eyeball hung out of his skull like some weird fruit. A lady was crying and screaming "Oh God, his poor momma, his poor momma!" But I couldn't stop staring at that eyeball.

When the police came, they barely glanced at the body. An officer walked over to me and said, "You see anything?"

I couldn't speak. I guess I was in shock.

He smirked. “Man gets his head blown off in broad daylight, and no one sees anything, heh?”

Two attendants put on these thick, orange gloves and gathered the pieces of his brain into a baggie.

Our whole lives we’d played there on that patch of grass: tag, kickball, football.

We never played there again.

That was the end of my childhood. That was my rite of passage.

13. Suspension of Disbelief

Junior High. I was standing with a bunch of white guys. One had a ponytail. Another wore pigtails. But the principal grabbed me. “What have you done to your hair?”

“It’s cornrows,” I said.

“You look like a girl.”

A girl?! Man, I was the only dude in the eighth grade with a mustache.

Suspended.

Another time he came up and asked why I was wearing a blouse.

“It’s a Dashiki,” I explained.

“You look like a girl. Suspended.”

Okay, I admit suspension #3 was kind of my fault. I confessed to pulling the fire alarm. He was going to cancel field day if someone didn’t confess. So, I played the hero. My coach told him I was running track and couldn’t have done it. But our principal was perfectly happy to sacrifice a black kid.

My last suspension happened at the graduation dance. Not only was the DJ playing Old Black Joe, students were singing along! Man, that California school was lucky there were only seven of us black students.

When the DJ wasn’t looking I switched the track to Sly Stones’ “Don’t Call Me Nigger, Whitey.”

Suspended.

If the principal had been listening he’d’ve heard the next line “Don’t call me Whitey, Nigger.” But he wasn’t listening. Ever.