

PLAYGROUND RULES

The block is empty. Dark windows of renovated rowhouses reflect the slender light from a waxing moon, which will eventually become bright and full as the lunar phase progresses, much like the Baltimore. Construction sites, beautified curbs, proliferating cafes, and changing complexions are turning tarnished pennies into shiny coins in parts of the city that had become dump sites for the poor, the homeless, the drug addicted and their suppliers. Seedy scenes from *The Wire*, filmed in Baltimore, are being replaced with alluringly manicured urban landscapes. A new Baltimore, after decades of neglect and suburban flight, is rising out of the ashes of a divisive inferno.

Figgy isn't happy with the transformation that feels more like erasure. He sits with his friends, Lake and Dee, on the red brick steps of one of the newly sold, but not yet occupied block of rowhouses, as they stare at the revitalized community park across the street. Together they mull over the changes to a place made for playing children, attentive parents, and the connecting of neighbors, in its inception, before it turned into a dark repository housing used condoms in the playhouse, dirty needles sticking up in the sandbox and splotches of blood on the pathways leading in and out of the park. Now, it had evolved into a place for children, dogs and distracted parents on cellphones or iPad. Just months ago, milk carton crates topped long poles at each end of the basketball court, mountains of trash skittered across mostly bare earth, and broken swing chains dangled with tilted splintered seats nearly touching the ground.

Figgy unrolls his dark brown hand revealing small stones in his palm. He lobs them at the playground rules sign at the entrance to the park. In small green print, park visitors are advised of new decrees they must abide like, "no rough playing or yelling permitted and no jumping off the sliding board". When Figgy first saw the sign, a few days ago, it was as if

someone had drawn a line in the sand. It was the moment when he decided to send a message to the new residents. The ones who walk their purebred protective pets to the dog park, adjacent to the playground, while looking at every passing brown teenage male, as if they are intruders.

“My big brother taught me how to play basketball on that court. Every night since I was seven years old, he’d bring me here and we’d play until he got locked up for shooting that stupid crackhead over money he owed him,” Figgy says with angry spit at the corners of his mouth.

“Yeah, my cousin, Abel, used to make money on the court, schooling everybody with his skills,” says Lake as he gets up to stretch the long legs supporting his six-five frame.

“I never got to play on it, but I wish I could have come out,” says Dee, staring wistfully at the park.

“It ain’t ours no more. They taking over everything. Changing the rules and kicking us out. We got to do something to show them it ain’t right,” says Figgy.

“It’s happening all over the city. Even the West Side. My cousin, Rolo, who lives over near Harlem Park, said first there was one white person and then they were getting notice to get out, cause their building had been sold. The whole city is a DIY project.” replies Dee.

“A what?” says Figgy and Lake, at the same time.

“Never mind. It’s this tv show my grandmother makes me watch with her,” says Dee, burrowing his chubby cheeks in his chunky hands.

“We got to do something to scare them away. Stop them from taking our neighborhoods,” says Figgy.

“Like what?” asks Dee.

The late August moonglow highlights the furrow of each of their brows, as they get up and walk to the curb. Inside collective silence, they try to find an answer inside their memories of what was and their concerns of what was to come.

Dee moves away from the others while cleaning his pea soup thick glasses. He walks back and collapses on the steps with the full weight of his short stocky frame and the overwhelming possibility that what Figgy wants might land them into deep trouble. He decides not to tell his friends that his grandmother has gotten notice to find a new place. He knows it will cause push Figgy to come up with a dangerously fiendish thing to do, like burn a building down, and as much as he loves Figgy, he doesn't want to go to jail. His thoughts fill with his Grandmother's admonishment, "I didn't raise you to end up in an early grave or a tiny cell. You hear me boy?"

From the moment, he came to live with his Grandmother, when he was five years old, after his mother overdosed on heroin, with the knowledge of who his father was locked inside her forever closed lips, she'd kept her hands on him like a vise. "Straight home from school." "No basketball or football." "Hit those books until you're smarter than Einstein", she'd say after lovingly setting a meal size snack on the kitchen table for him. Still, he hated all the times he'd had to lie his way out of the house to hang out with Figgy and Lake and hated, even more, when his Grandmother would look at them like thieves on the few occasions they'd come to the house looking for him.

Dee looks up as a stray cloud crossing the moon and knows that her strictness has paid off. He is to be valedictorian at graduation in June. Something he has yet to tell his best friends. The friends who'd saved him from being called "sissy boy" and "egg head" in grade school. The

friends who make him more than his Grandmother's DIY project, "the hope of a "dream deferred", as she always tells him. Dee looks over at his brothers and smiles.

Lake walks towards the shiny new black street lamp that emits soft yellow light, not like the ones on North Avenue that have bright searing white lights and police deterrent cameras. He begins to pace. He hates the quiet. He prefers the constant buzz of North Avenue. The confluence of people, some stumbling high, some boisterously laughing, and some just out to feel the concrete under their feet as they talk trash. Being amid the chaos made him feel a part of something colorful and real, like running a full court press to make a winning basket. It amazes him that he lives only a few blocks away from here with his aunt on a block not yet changed, where trees come up through the roof of two rowhouses and the rest are shuttered with cinder blocks. His aunt's house is the only one with people inside, instead of phantoms and a plethora of rats.

He looks back at Figgy and wishes he could tell him that he didn't care who came to live in this block or the next. He never felt like he belonged in Baltimore. His earliest memory, at four years old, was being dropped off at Aunt Telly's house because he was too much baggage for his mother and father to hold onto. He remembers his father's big hands folded around his small hands, as his aunt bent down to kiss him, seconds before his father released his hand and disappeared. It was years later when Lake found out his father had a new family in York, Pennsylvania and that his mother had left to live on a lake in North Dakota, where she believed her half white, half black child wouldn't fit in. The only things he had received from his parents before their departure was his name, because of his mother always dreaming near a lake, and his father's height.

It didn't matter now. He'd just got word that he was getting a basketball scholarship to Duke University. He still couldn't find the words to tell Dee or Figgy. Even though he knows they will be happy for him, he is not ready to deal with the knowledge they will soon be separated. They'd been his brothers since Mrs. Wilson's first-grade class, when Figgy was Fitzgerald Williams, Dee was DeJuan Jenkins and Lake was Lawrence Fulton. Through their friendship they had renamed themselves and the names stuck. They'd connected in a way that lessened their sadness at being abandoned. Lake doesn't know what he will do without them, but he can't deny the joy he feels in knowing that he will get out of this place, out of sharing his life with his aunt, her umpteenth boyfriend, and his five cousins. He can smell freedom and it smells like his girlfriend's perfume on a Saturday night in the back of his newest play uncle's car. Satisfyingly good.

Figgy bends down to grab another fistful of decorative pebbles from the planter in front of the house. He hurls them while trying to remember a time when he wasn't angry. He stays in a constant state of agitation, in his house, in school, in the neighborhood, and on the football field. The only time he feels his anger diminish is when he is with Lake and Dee, his boys. His mother had tried to make him write down all the times he had been in trouble over his 'mad at the world attitude' when he was ten years old. She constantly told him his short fuse was going to do him in and then she will have lost her son like he lost his father...to the streets. She was always screaming at him. "Why did you hit that girl?" "Why did you break that boy's arm?" "Why did you push the teacher?" Why? Why? Why? The only one, besides Lake and Dee who understood, had been his big brother, Louis. Louis told him, "When you grow up without money, a daddy, and you a black dude, angry is your friend. It keeps you sharp. It deadens the pain.

It makes you tough enough to go after what you want any way you can. The world ain't gonna give you shit. You gotta take it." Figgy lives by his brother's words.

After Louis went to jail, Figgy concentrated on football. It was the perfect place for his thick, tall body, and his anger. On the field, he could crush and maim without question or fault. His devastating tackles garnered him the nickname, "Ruthless" and the undying love of the crowd. He knew if he could only keep his grades up, maybe he could go to college, and if not, then straight to the NFL. It was the only dream he had and the only one that kept him from breaking someone's neck.

"What's up Lake? You're being real quiet?" asks Figgy.

"Nothing man, just remembering old times."

"Yeah," says Dee walking up behind Figgy.

"That's why we need to smash this park up. Make a statement. They just can't paint us over or wipe us out like we never existed, man", says Figgy.

"But they can Figgy. They keep trying and they always will. What the hell is destroying some swings or a sliding board gonna do?" says Lake.

"That's the white part of you talking. You better tap into your black part, the part that got you that basketball scholarship," says Figgy walking up to Lake's chest.

"How the hell..." stutters Lake as his greenish blue eyes turn steel gray and his pale cheeks blush crimson.

"Your baby cousin. This the hood. Nothing stays secret. Nothing, Dee, Mr. Valedictorian," says Figgy.

"I was gonna tell you guys tonight, I swear," says Dee.

“That’s cool. Looks like we are all getting out anyway. The hell with this park, this block and this city. When I leave, I ain’t never coming back,” says Lake.

Yeah? Where you going to North Dakota to be with your momma, who gave you up like you want to give up on teaching these white folks something? says Figgy.

“Man shut the hell up. Just shut the hell up.” says Lake as he and Figgy come chest to chest like spiral horned rams brushing the earth with their hooves indicating imminent battle.

“Hey! Wait. We are brothers. If we fight each other, we give them what they want,” declares Dee, trying to separate them.

A rustling sound stills them. Dee jumps as a rat the size of a well-fed cat saunters across the street away from them.

“I guess they’re gonna be transformed into butterflies or something,” says Dee, breaking the charged air like pouring hot water over a cat fight.

“Let the rats have this joint. We got better things to do. We are going all state this year in Football and Basketball at Mount Holly, then walking out the door with tassels in our hands,” says Dee moving back to the steps.

Figgy and Lake follow Dee. Their movements are halted by flashing car lights. Fear now charges the air as two police officers get out of a police car and walk towards them. Dee stands up as two cops near. Figgy puts his hand up to deflect the light. Lake takes his hands out of his pockets and lets them unsuspectingly hang by his side. Collectively, they brace for confrontation.

“What y’all doing here?” Asks the thinner of the two white officers.

“Nothing. Just taking a rest to talk on our way home,” says Dee.

“Well, your sittin’ on private property and there is no loitering around here.”

The next moments erupt in a flurry of confused and angry movements, when Figgy mumbles something under his breath, but loud enough for the heavier cop to hear him. He reaches for Figgy, spins him around and pins him onto the hood of the police car. Lake and Dee freeze in the quickness of the cop's actions.

“What the fuck you got me pinned down for? I didn't do anything. What am I walking and sitting while black? That's an offense?” Figgy says while struggling against the weight of the officer's meaty arm on his neck. The cop raises his other arm to gut punch Figgy, but the thin cop yells out.

“Wait, I know that boy and this tall one here. Let him go Pete. That's the player they call “Ruthless” on Mount Holly's Football Team. Man, this kid is a demon on the field. I know he's going all pro. And you're Lake, you play basketball, like Michael Jordan, boy”.

For the second time that night, suspended breaths release and tensions ebb as the darkened windows reflect the scene in front of the rowhouse that resembles old sepia photos from another time. Chains on the swing set in the playground rattle with the remembrance of crowded slave pens, swaying nooses and blood dripping batons, while the police car lights disappear one way and Figgy, Lake, and Dee walk down the quiet street the other way, with lowered heads and grinding teeth.