



This is a coming of age story of Ezell Blair who, along with his friends, reignites a campaign for equal rights. The book shows a timeline starting from the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and all the battles that ensued before it ended.

Four The Culture

By Dadriene Davis

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FOUR THE CULTURE

A Movement Awakened

THEY
KEEP
COMING
BACK

Dadriene Davis

A man is shown from the back, standing on a glowing yellow circular platform. He is wearing a yellow short-sleeved shirt with vertical stripes, dark trousers, and a dark hat. He is holding a light-colored jacket over his left shoulder and a black suitcase in his right hand. The background is a deep blue space filled with stars and a bright comet streak.

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Chapter Four: The Rare Star in the Cosmos

Ezell was in a frenzy. He stood in the arts department along with his bandmates. They were all watching his tantrum with disdain. However, they were not surprised at the situation by any measure.

“What do you mean he didn’t pay the money?!” Ezell exclaimed. “I thought this was taken care of last week!”

The lady at the desk scanned her finger down a piece of paper. “I’m sorry, Mr. Blair, but we did not receive a payment from your father at any time.”

This was news to Ezell. Willie, Thurman, and John watched him panic with nonchalant expressions on their faces. This is what they had warned him about, and now the conflict was unfolding before them. Ezell pleaded to have the deadline extended, but it was too late. “You should enter the competition next year,” the woman suggested.

Ezell shook his head. “I’m not gonna be here next year,” he said. There was a cry of defeat in his voice. Who would have thought that, after nearly half a year of rehearsing, everything would crumble to pieces before him? His bandmates did.

“I told you your dad wasn’t gonna keep his word,” Thurman said. “You know he doesn’t want you doing anything but following behind him.”

The three of them had circled around Ezell. “There goes our chances at winning!” John said, ripping a flier about

the competition. It was a bit dramatic, but Ezell understood their anger.

“Guys, I’m sorry, he was supposed to have paid the money weeks ago,” he cried. “Had I known he wasn’t gonna keep his word, I would have gotten a summer job and paid my own way!” This did not have the effect he thought it would. Ezell had hoped they would understand his situation. They did not have to trust his father, but they did so with Ezell’s reassurance that the man would keep his word.

Willie had been silent this whole time. He turned to Ezell with the coldest stare he had likely ever given anyone. “It’s our fault too,” he said. “We knew your dad wouldn’t keep his word, so we should have replaced you.”

The words from the gang members a few weeks prior was light compared to what Ezell heard at that moment. *Replaced?* He had been exiled from a hobby he loved dearly. It was not like he could never pursue music as a soloist, but there was a sense of unity and brotherhood formed through the group. He wanted to explain himself, but there was nothing he could say to stop them from heading out the door.

Ezell walked into the hallway. *Is this really it?* Life had come at him fast. In those moments, he could feel a change in himself. He could not explain it, but it was as if something in his life had broken. It may have been his anger. There was no way his father could have done this to him. Ezell felt that perhaps all situations did not require a positive attitude, and this was one of those situations.

*

Corine was cleaning up the kitchen while her children did their homework at the table. Supper was over, and Ezell Sr. would be coming in a little later than usual. He was part of the NAACP, and they had a board meeting that night. Ezell was far more quiet than usual, and everyone in the house knew why. There was a sense of lifelessness in his eyes that his family hardly ever saw. He flipped through the pages of the geography textbook without an ounce of concentration.

The phone rang, slowly pulling Ezell back to reality. “I’ll get it,” he said. He finally had an excuse to leave the table. The call was for him anyway. “Frank?” This brightened his mood a bit. It had been over six months since Franklin moved back to D.C. The two of them did not talk often, but when they did, there was one question Ezell expected to be asked—*where will you go to school?*

His father had made it home, happily greeted by Sheila and Jean. Corine had placed a bucket under a leak coming from the ceiling. Ezell Sr. came to her side. “Why didn’t you ask Junior to patch up that hole?”

The woman shrugged. “Does he know how to?”

Ezell Sr. was almost offended by the question. Of course he had shown Ezell how to patch up a hole in the ceiling. Any father would. “Where is he?” he asked in a stern tone.

Corine felt the tension rising even with just her husband in the room. When Ezell walked in a few moments later, she felt even more of a burden on her as

father and son glared at each other. For the first time in a long time, Ezell was not smiling. He was not pretending to be okay. He was enraged.

“Come on, let’s go get ready for bed,” Jean said, escorting Sheila out of the room, swiftly. It was rare for a situation to escalate this far between the two men of the house, and they would not be present for it.

“Junior, what’s been going on with you?” Ezell Sr. asked. “You’ve been catching the bus home all week. Is something wrong?”

Ezell grabbed the textbook from the table. *What a stupid question.* He would never say those exact words to his father, but his actions would. “Yes, something’s wrong,” he replied. “I think I’m gonna fail geography.” The evil smirk afterward did it. Ezell knew where his father stood on education, and though he was passing all his classes, he had to test the waters. *What if I didn’t care about failing your class?*

“What did you say?” his father demanded as Ezell headed down the hall. “I don’t show favoritism. If you fail, then you fail.”

Ezell shrugged. “Well, at least you can be honest about one thing.”

Ezell Sr. brushed past Corine, who had been trying to de-escalate the conflict. “Everyone, just calm down!” she begged. “We can talk about this tomorrow.”

Her husband had already stepped in front of Ezell. “So, you’re an adult now?” he said. “You think you’re gonna live

in my house and complain about a damn singing competition when you're holding a B average in school?!"

Ezell stepped in closer. "So what? We practiced for months, and you took away our chances of winning—"

The man showed no remorse, interrupting his son. "I don't care!" he yelled. "I worked my ass off to keep a roof over your head. While I was off in the war you sat around here playing with dolls, and now you talkin' bout singing?!"

Ezell knew where his father was going, and he was ready to go there with him. "Well, at least I'm passionate about something!" he retorted. "Cause obviously when you have no purpose in life it turns you into a bitter, narcissistic man. I don't want to be an engineer, and I'm not going to A&T!"

Ezell Sr.'s anger had peaked. "I didn't ask you what you wanted. I'm trying to turn you into a man!" he shouted.

"No, you're trying to turn me into you!" Ezell had forgotten how heavy his father's hands were until one of them struck him across the face. He also never knew how much anger was locked inside of himself. Harbored emotions that would only surface in a heated moment like this one. They both were breathing heavily as if they had emerged from deep waters. The climax had come and gone.

"If you had any idea of the world you were born into, you'd know just how well off you are here," Ezell Sr. said. "There are people who could only imagine what it's like to have the family you have and the opportunities we lined

up for you. I think it's time for you to go to bed and think about it."

Ezell went back to his room quietly. He had so much to say, but there was no point. His father never listened, and his mother just wanted to keep peace in the house. Ezell tossed his records on the floor. He had no peace if he was not allowed to be himself. Then came the big question everyone would ask themselves at some point during their life.

Who am I?

The sky seemed especially vast tonight, or maybe Ezell was imagining things, since apparently, he was delusional. He sat on the steps of the porch, looking up at the stars and contemplating life. He did not know where to go from here. He was a senior in high school still trying to discover his identity. At this point in time, he was just existing. The screen door opened, but he did not bother to turn around, since he knew who it was.

Ezell could sense his grandmother's presence anywhere. "You all right, Junior?" she asked. "I know a metamorphosis when I see one."

Her grandson took a deep breath. "Grandma, it seems like my life is just one big crisis," Ezell replied. "I feel like I'm stuck. What am I supposed to do?"

There was a flash from above them. Ezell looked up to see a streak of white light passing through the sky. "Remember when I told you that when you see a shooting star, something big is about to happen?" Adelia said.

“The only big thing I’ll ever accomplish is graduation,” Ezell said. “I don’t think I can do anything else.”

Adelia had sat down beside him. “Well, if that’s what you believe about yourself, then so be it I guess.”

Ezell sighed. “Everyone thinks I’m too weak to do anything, and they’re probably right.”

Adelia pointed at the sky. “You see how those stars crossed the horizon? No specific route, no direction, nobody forced them to move,” she said. “They just found their way through the universe, adored by everyone who saw them pass by.”

Ezell watched as a few more shooting stars ran across the sky. It was a breathtaking sight. “I don’t know your destiny and nor does your father, mother, or anyone else,” she continued, “and even if you don’t know what your purpose is, just go wherever life takes you for now. If your intentions are pure, you’ll find yourself where you’re meant to be.”

Ezell could always count on his grandmother, who was also his best friend, to give him advice to live by. Most times he could not make out what her analogies meant, but this one resonated with him on a spiritual level. He was still unsure of the decision he would need to make in terms of his future; would he go out of state for college or stay in Greensboro, close to his family? He had the rest of the school year to figure it out.

Chapter Eleven: At the Breaking Point

The holiday season was finally here. Students packed up their belongings and headed back home for three weeks of no schoolwork and, most importantly, no stress. Joseph boarded a bus to New York. For the most part, he and Ezell got along famously, and he had even taken a liking to Franklin and David. The four guys started out attending school events together, and over time they would all end up in either Ezell and Joseph's dorm or Franklin's to discuss politics. Joseph liked the idea of doing a sit-in, but no matter how many conversations they had about it, everyone would eventually get caught up in their everyday routines and the idea would be shelved.

Ezell's and David's home was right around the corner. It was now just the two of them again, walking around Greensboro so David could buy gifts. His wife would be having a boy within those next few months, and David was fixated on being a provider for his family. Ezell just knew the boy would be a junior. Sharing a name with a parent was a lot of pressure, because there was typically this undying need to live up to it. Ezell Sr. never let his son forget not to tarnish the *Blair* name that he'd made formidable in Greensboro. Ezell had done nothing to live up to his father's local legacy as an educator, army veteran, and NAACP chairman, and though he was known as the high jump champ, David carried an emptiness about

himself. There was more he wanted to accomplish in life as well.

Typical young-adult issues.

“E.Z., have you been doing alright?” David asked.

“I’m fine,” Ezell replied.

David was quiet for a moment, as if he was too guilty to say what he wanted. “E.Z, we haven’t talked about what happened with your old roommate,” he said. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help.”

Ezell sighed. “It’s alright, David. As you can see, I’m still alive.” This was normal behavior for David Richmond, who felt it was his life’s mission to come to everyone’s aid. Once he had formed a bond with someone, he could not stomach the thought of not being there in their time of need. Ezell did not need to be pitied, or at least he did not want to be.

“E.Z., that could have gone another way,” David said. “I know you were defenseless, so I should have been there—”

“David, it’s fine,” Ezell said, “I don’t need you to fight my battles, alright?!”

David nodded, realizing he might have been a bit overbearing, and Ezell knew he had probably gotten more offended than he should have. But they were willing to look past each other’s subtle differences, as real friends did.

“I’m sorry, it’s just been a long semester,” Ezell said.

“Go get you some rest, brother,” David replied, “I’ll see you later on this week.”

Ezell and David did their signature fist bump before parting ways. Ezell looked across the street at the Woolworth's store. There were people visible through the glass door such as the Caucasian customers seated at the stools around the counter while the African Americans waited several feet away. The rule was that coloreds were allowed to order food from the counter but would have to leave once it was ready. Dining at the lunch counter was against the rules for minorities in Greensboro as it was for most other cities in the South. "With all deliberate speed."

Yeah, right.

*

Ralph Johns had come to spend Christmas with the Blair family. He was always welcome in their home. Of course, it would not be a normal fellowship dinner with Ralph if politics weren't a topic of conversation. Corine would excuse herself to the kitchen to avoid the debates the men would get into at the table about what would be the next steps to integration. Ezell was less intrigued by this subject. Christmas was supposed to be about family, so there was no need to spend time discussing an issue that could tear loved ones apart. He could not deny, however, that when he was alone, the urge to act against segregation weighed on him like an anchor, pulling him down into the depths of his deepest desires—change being one of them.

Ezell felt himself transforming into someone different and wanted the world to experience the same transformation, but if things did not go well, he would

have risked everything for nothing. And who was he to speak out against laws that had been in place for centuries? No one. Yet, he thought of the story of Esther. She came from nothing, was later favored by a king, and managed to save her people from annihilation. For years, Ezell thought he was cursed to live during these times. In a world where the color of your skin would not allow you to be treated as a citizen in society, let alone a human.

But then he thought that maybe, just maybe, he had been born for a time like this.

*

Joseph McNeil typically forgot the rules of the South once he crossed into Northern territory, or maybe he never took Southern laws seriously since he was so used to his life in New York. Either way, he was in for a rude awakening on his way back to North Carolina. While at the train station in Virginia, Joseph waited in line to buy something to eat, since he still had hours left to go on his journey back to campus. He might have been too hungry to notice customers, both white and black, staring at him in confusion. Joseph was waiting in the “whites only” line.

He approached the stand, prepared to order. The salesman hardly acknowledged Joseph’s presence. He was completely discombobulated. “Alright, I’ll take a hamburger, ketchup, mustard, and maybe just a few onions. I don’t wanna get congested on the way home, y’know,” Joseph’s words went in one of the man’s ears and out the other. The African American customers watching

wanted to intervene. Joseph was clearly green, meaning he had little prior knowledge of what situations like this could escalate to. They thought the young man had a death wish.

“Boy, have you lost your mind, or can you not read?” the white salesman said.

Joseph was confused. “What do you mean?” he asked. He still hadn’t noticed the crowd of people zoned in on the two of them.

“We don’t serve coloreds here,” the man replied. Then he pointed to a line of about twenty people on the other side of the station. “That’s where you get your food from. With the rest of *them*.”

Joseph was baffled, staring at the “coloreds” sign above the crowded booth. There was no way he could wait in that line without missing the bus. “Sir, my bus is gonna be here soon, if I don’t—”

“That ain’t my problem, boy,” the man snarled. “I know you just got off that bus from New York, but we do things a lil’ differently down here. We don’t serve your kind, so go on over yonder before I have security carry you out. You’re holding up my line.”

Joseph glanced around the station. Some people looked away, probably to make the moment less embarrassing for him. It was, in fact, the most humiliating experience for Joseph, and as if the food stand conflict was not bad enough, shortly after he was forced to give up his seat to a white passenger on the bus headed for North Carolina. He would not have wished these incidents on his

worst enemies—to be dehumanized, devalued, and treated as an outcast. That was a feeling he would never forget.

Joseph was not only naturally driven, but he was also impulsive. Once he was angry, his mind locked on to whatever or *whoever* offended him, and he would have his revenge. Even if it had to be done in a nonviolent way, people needed to know that Joseph McNeil would not be disrespected without consequences. He stood silently at the crowded end of the bus, plotting in his mind for hours before they finally saw the sign welcoming them back to North Carolina.

This ends here.

*

The night everyone returned from winter break was an eventful one, as Ezell, Franklin, and David struggled to calm Joseph. The racist encounters replayed in his head so much that Ezell did not have peace of mind for weeks, and every day he watched as Joseph devised a master plan to cause an uprising in Greensboro. It was amazing how much you could learn from someone when they were in a vulnerable state. Joseph was from a poor family, dirt poor. The other three men could not relate to sleeping on the bare ground in a basement at any point in their lives, but Joseph had been at his lowest point several times, so there was no way out but *up* this time around.

Ezell did not know much about astrology. He knew he was a Libra and that apparently Librans could fall in love with many people at once. *Very inaccurate.* There was a

stereotype that Arians were hot-tempered and would not let a situation go until their payback was executed exactly how they wanted it done. Joseph McNeil was very much an Arian then, as he was adamant that the South would not view him as a pushover. He was smart, however, and knew he could not strike in a harsh or aggressive manner, since that was against the concept of *peaceful resistance* Gandhi believed in.

“Are we doing this or not?” Joseph demanded. “How long do you all intend to wait?”

Franklin, David, and Ezell glanced at each other. “Well, it is after Christmas,” Franklin said, “so I guess we can get together with the students at Bennett.”

David disagreed. “Frank, that’s gonna take too long to pull together.”

“So, what do you suggest we do?” Franklin asked.

The question was followed by a lethal silence. Everyone knew the answer. If they wanted to do a sit-in it would likely only be the four of them, and this very thought shook Ezell up in a negative way. He and his friends were sentencing themselves to death, all because Joseph wanted a hamburger. At least that’s what he wanted to pretend it was about, but the truth was that denying minority citizens basic human rights should have never been legal in the first place. That problem went back to the day people of color were stolen from their homelands; they were never meant to be treated as humans in America from the beginning.

Four The Culture

Equality was long overdue in the South, and someone had to do something about it.



This is a coming of age story of Ezell Blair who, along with his friends, reignites a campaign for equal rights. The book shows a timeline starting from the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and all the battles that ensued before it ended.

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