



A college freshman experiences unfamiliar racism when he moves to a new area for school in this coming of age tale. He faces a life threatening test after a year of learning how to deal with his anger toward injustice.

Lesson Learned

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Scott Loken

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PROLOGUE

"All that I could think about was that this asshole killed him. I was staring at his body and I couldn't... I mean... I just froze. He stood there, smiling at me... basically begging for me to do something. He was provoking the shit out of me with that little fucked-up smirk! I wanted to kill him so bad, I was shaking... so I..." I could feel the tears threatening to swell up again, as I stuttered over the pain. I held my head in my hands trying to fight them back; I had cried too much lately. I looked up at the expression of concern on Tina's face, studying her for any glimpse of understanding. Looking at her struggling to control her own tears, I desired only for her to spare looking at me like I was a monster. "He was standing there laughing and the gun was right there!" I became consumed and upset just thinking about it again.

The whole situation had run through my mind thousands of times, wishing that I could take back what had happened. He deserved everything, but I was going to pay for what I did regardless. Wasn't I just a dumb college kid? It was their word towering over mine. My thoughts were obsessing on how hopeless my future was. At that moment I realized that any dreams that I had of a normal life were out of the question and I would be thankful if I was ever free from jail again.

Tina sat on the opposite end of the intercom, another visitor with tears streaming down her face. She didn't seem to know what to say. She was right there when it happened and I just wasn't sure how she now viewed me. To think she had been about to stay in that night because she had to study for a final exam. She could have (should have) missed seeing me do something like that. It was one of those moments that you do something so uncharacteristic of yourself, get so trapped in the fires of hate that you don't even recognize your own thought process; something else inside you takes over. The memory of it

doesn't even look like you, it's a picture of another person in your place.

She finally spoke up through hysterical sobs. "Didn't you listen to anything that Tamikah had said? She was like your friends back home saying that you had to pick your battles. Not only can you not win this, you're going down for it and nobody can help you!" She paused for a moment as if thinking about her tone, and feeling bad for it. We had been through a lot together and never got so upset that either of us yelled at the other. I looked into her watery eyes and saw the fatigue and empathy at seeing me in this situation, and hopelessness by not being able to do anything to help.

"I can't believe this is happening. It's like a nightmare or something... You fucking shot a cop!"

Her words cut into my heart. I could feel her pain, and understood that what I had done not only affected me. I had come so far in channeling my anger at racism in a positive direction. Now I was paying the price for losing my head at that single moment. One solitary mistake in a sea of all my progress. Yet it was as if my experiences all year had been leading up to this life-threatening test. In the end I failed peace and was now paying the price. I hadn't seen the signs telling me to be aware of my temper and the way I reacted to ignorance. One moment I'm a promising college student, ready to start a new future; the next - cop killer. An overwhelming feeling of pain and despondency swept over my body and my head plunged into my hands, where I could weep in private with my recollection.

"SEAN!"

When I heard Tina screaming for me, yanking me back to reality, I snapped out of the vision. Feeling sweat trickle from my forehead, I looked down to see the gun and then back at the cop. The red siren was reflecting in his eyes, making him a devil with a bloody grin. I looked over to see my friend's lifeless body

on the ground. I half expected him to get up and tell me to retaliate for what had been done to him. He would do the same for me. Temptation encouraged me to pick up the gun and shoot him.

Standing there numb, frozen with fear and anger, I contemplated the relief that taking up the weapon would bring me from my frustration and grief. What was I supposed to do? The sneering officer with the devilishly red orbs and a smoking gun in his hand, turned towards me smirking at the horror in my eyes. It turned into a smile that assured he was going to get away with what he had done. The torch of rage was a fiery inferno inside of me; putting light on more anger and hate than I'd ever known in my life. Instincts screamed that I had to do something. Glancing down again, I saw the gun on the ground and it brought a deep thirst in me. A blood thirst. Was that a whisper in my head advising me to kill him? So simple, pick it up and shoot him. My emotions took control of the wheel, driving me to make a move for the gun.

CHAPTER 1

ONE YEAR EARLIER

"Eh Sean, where you 'bout to go? Where'd you get in?" Drew had just gotten into Cal, or UC Berkeley as it is known to people who haven't grown up in the Bay Area. It was the last week of school for us at Berkeley High, quite possibly the most racially diverse school around.

"I think that I'm goin' to SB man, but I'm not sure." I wasn't all that thrilled about Santa Barbara University because I knew that I wouldn't be able to make the Volleyball team there, and at this point in my life I really thought that I could go somewhere with sports.

"Man, you'll be with your own kind," Drew said chuckling. "You know how many white people are down there? All those rich kids comin' up from LA, man." I looked up at him, smirking back at me, telling me he was only half kidding. "I dunno, you didn't hang out with any white people here."

"Yeah, and you know how I feel about racist mothafuckers. Right? Fuck man, I think I'm gonna have to check some people down there." I was laughing when I said this because I had no idea how bad it would really be when I got to the school. Drew and I always joked around about racial issues.

I remember when I first met him, we became friends instantly. We were always joking back and forth. He started to trust me because he could see that I wasn't like some other white people he had experienced. I listened to Hip Hop and was always trying to learn more about other cultures. The crew we hung out with was mostly Asians and African-Americans, so I was the white boy of the group. I didn't care though. I actually felt more comfortable in those surroundings. My friends always joked around about me not really being a white person on the insides,

and I guess that gave me an identity in this group. I don't think I would have had that feeling of significance in a group of white people.

School was ending and everyone was going their separate ways. We were all saying that we were going to try to keep in touch as much as possible. One of my best friends was an Indian girl named Teji. We had gone to the Prom together and the only reason we were not an item was because she was going to have an arranged marriage. Not exactly the greatest circumstances for a couple that want to keep it a secret from a set of parents that will not ever let her marry outside of her race. I accepted that though, because it's not like I wanted to get married now. I just thought about what if? Especially when I went off to college, because we kind of lost touch. I missed her sometimes and I found out later that she had gone through with the arranged marriage, but at least she fell in love with the guy first.

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My friend Steve was helping me pack. He was half Filipino and half African-American, and Drew introduced me to him during Junior year. He was kind of heavy set, a short guy, and always wore a Yankees hat backwards. The crew joked around with him, saying that he was trying to look the part of the gangster. We were going through my stuff, trying to find ways to make my move easier. It didn't help that my computer and stereo took up a lot of the car already, and I had barely started packing my clothes.

"I don't know 'bout Santa Barbara, man. You sure 'bout this?" he asked me tentatively.

"What do you mean?" I looked up from trying to stuff some extra clothes in my bag. "I know I'm probably not gonna make the Volleyball team but that's ok, if that's what you mean. The campus is pretty nice."

"I mean, you know how you get pissed more than us when we run into people that are racist as hell around here? That was always a trip to me. We would always joke 'bout how we wouldn't haveta do anything cuz we had a white boy with heart, that wouldn't put up wit any of that shit, you know?"

"Yeah I know, but it can't be that bad down there. How much different can it be from here, man? I mean, we've come a long way from the civil rights era. Plus I'm still gonna be in Cali, man. Don't trip, I'll be cool."

"Yeah, but you gotta be kiddin' me if you think that everywhere'll be the same as Berkeley. I don't know... all I'm sayin' is don't burn any bridges cuz you feel like you're gonna be stickin' up for us when we ain't even there. Don't take shit too personally; a lot of people are gonna be slippin' down there, you just have to pick your battles." Steve had grown up in LA for part of his life so he knew what he was talking about. But I just wasn't going to be able to understand until I was down there.

**

It was move-in day at the dorms. I had chosen a hall that I wanted to live in because it had an ethnic differences theme to it. The floor still had a lot of white people but at least it had a little bit of a mix of races. That was more than I could say for most of the other floors. I was surprised to find out that this school had such a lack of diversity, especially coming from a school that was as culturally mixed as my High School was. I was pretty nervous; any college kid moving out of the house they grew up in would be. I didn't know anyone and I had only talked to my roommate once on the phone. I was trying to make sure he wasn't gay by asking whether he had a girlfriend or not. He turned out to be pretty homophobic and he actually talked about how proud he was of being that way. For some reason, that didn't bother me though. I think it's just because I wouldn't have to worry about walking in on him getting with another guy.

I met a few other people on the floor. There was this one Vietnamese guy named Troung that was cool as hell to me, and we hit it off right away. The entire floor gathered in a lounge located in the middle of the hall, and we were all packed into the little area, listening to our Resident Assistant talk about the rules of the dorms and how they were all for our own safety, when he introduced himself to me.

"What's up, man? I'm Troung. Don't worry 'bout listening to the RA; he don't know what he's talkin' about. All you need to do is keep all the alcohol outta his sight, and you'll be cool. Take it from me; I've grown up around this school all my life and I've seen some bomb ass parties here." I could see optimism in his eyes as he whispered through his smile. "He's just gotta give you this whole speech because it's his job. You never know, he might drink with us. What's your name, man?" He extended his hand for me to shake.

"What's up? I'm Sean. Nice to meet you," I whispered back. We shook hands. "I don't know 'bout the drinking with us thing, but he seems pretty cool. He seems like kind of a stickler for the rules though."

Troung was about my height and build, 5'9" with short black hair. He was a really skinny guy, yet pretty muscular. He had taken a year off from school so he was already twenty years old, but this was his sophomore year.

After the RA was finished, Troung decided to take me over to this girl. I thought that she was incredibly beautiful, but I was just going to admire from a distance until Troung decided differently, and wanted to break me out of my shell. I was feeling pretty shy, because not only was this a new surrounding, but I never really had the guts to talk to any girl just at random like that.

"You think she's cute huh? Well, I met her earlier and she's pretty cool. Do you wanna meet her?" Troung asked.

"Hell yeah, I wanna meet her. For some reason I'm really attracted to Asian women. I don't know what it is. Maybe it's because I had a crew in High School that was mostly African-American and Asian." I was trying to play it off that I wasn't nervous but I wanted to just follow his lead, especially since I had no idea how to talk to her.

"Ah hah... ok, so you like the Asian sistas, huh? Well, that's real cool then. I sort of had that feeling about you when you walked in," he said laughing.

"What made you think that about me?" I asked as we started to get up with the meeting coming to a conclusion. The people crowding the room began to file out, while others stayed around chatting. The room felt warm from so many people fitting into the small space and I hoped I wasn't sweating. "I mean it's true, but I didn't think that I had a sign on my forehead saying that I love Asian women. Actually I like all women, but for some reason I'm less attracted to white girls than anything. I don't know; maybe it's cuz they don't seem to have as much culture."

"All right fool, do you wanna meet her or not?" He was laughing pretty hard by now.

"Oh yeah, my bad," I said as we started to walk over. He introduced me to Natalia even though he had just met her that day, too. He was one of those outgoing type of guys that you have always wanted to be like because women are drawn to his confidence. Throughout the year I would learn a lot from him on how to have that kind of confidence in myself. Natalia was Chinese, and so was her roommate Yen. The best thing about them was that they were from Oakland. At least I knew some people from the Bay Area here.

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Over the first couple of weeks at school, Natalia, Yen, Troung, and I had become pretty good friends. Troung had introduced us to his SB crew and we all started to go out a

lot. One night we decided to go hang out at one of the local 18-and-over clubs. It was actually Asian night at the club so I'd really wanted to go. I knew that I was never going to be able to talk to any of the ladies, because I didn't have enough guts. Plus a lot of the ladies I had met in my Asian American Studies classes seemed pretty full of themselves and only went out with Asian guys. That was nothing new though; it happened a lot in Berkeley too. I mostly just liked to go and admire the ladies I wouldn't be able to get.

The four of us were sitting in a booth watching the dance floor, when I spotted this beautiful girl. It seemed like she was eyeing me, so I had to point her out.

"Why don't you go talk to her, man? She's lookin' at you." Troung was seriously trying to get my confidence up. "I know her, she's cool. You don't have anything to worry about. She's not stuck up."

"What Asian girl don't you know around here?" I was laughing at how often he said that one line. "You not knowing some Asian girl around here, is like God not knowing anybody on this earth. It just doesn't work that way." He started cracking up, laughing at that. Natalia and Yen were sitting across from Troung and me, and gave me a nod of their heads as if to say, that's true, and started to laugh.

"See fool, you're funny as hell and she'll like that 'bout you. Hold on, I'm gonna go get her. Her name is Tina so try to remember that. I know how bad you are at remembering names after you hear it just one time. Hold on, aight fool?" He got up from our table and started walking off before I could say anything. It's not like I would have said anything anyways, because I really did want to meet this girl.

"Aight man, I'm trusting you on this one. Don't let this be another Sandy. You knew she was a lesbo when you introduced me to her." He started laughing as he walked away from me. I was getting nervous because I never liked meeting ladies in a

club atmosphere. It was too hard to talk to them since it was so noisy.

"Do you want us to leave so you can try to get your game on?" Natalia couldn't help but laugh, especially because I tried to ask her out, not knowing that she had a boyfriend back home in Oakland. Yet another thing that Troung neglected to let me in on.

"No... if you stay around then it'll look like I have a girlfriend, or at least that you two are cool with me, and that makes any ladies more attracted to me. Trust me, it'll be better if you stick around. Even though she might be intimidated, she'll still think that I've got a little bit of game." They both started laughing and I just sat on the other side of the booth trying not to look over in Troung's direction. He was talking to her by now, but then, to my surprise he started coming back without her.

"Uh oh, that's not a good sign, Sean. He's coming back without the lady." Yen was starting to get into the bag-on-Sean-session now. Her and Natalia were kind of inseparable, mostly because Yen was a pretty shy person without Natalia around. "What the fuck is that all about? I mean I don't like to meet women in a club but, shit... I still want to get something out of this night." I was kind of laughing it off too. "It would have been nice to at least talk to some girl that I didn't know before tonight."

Natalia and Yen were laughing pretty hard at me now. "Awww, poor Sean," they said at the same time, almost on cue. Troung walked back to the table with a big grin on his face.

"What the hell happened there? I thought you said that she was cool!" Even though nothing happened, I was still sort of relieved, but I didn't want him to think that I didn't want to talk to her at all.

"Don't trip, man, it's all good. She's cool, but she's almost as shy as you are. Plus she doesn't just wanna leave her friends. It's her friend's birthday so she doesn't wanna leave them. She did say that she'd noticed you in one of her classes, and thought that

you were kinda cute. She told me to give you her number so that you guys could talk. I told her your name so she said for you to call her tomorrow night. Am I the man or what?" Troung looked at me with a big grin on his face and gave a little chuckle as he sipped from his beer. Needless to say I was pretty impressed, but at the same time I didn't want to float his ego too much.

"You serious? She said all that? I'm not sure that I should believe you, fool. After that last time." I wouldn't put it past him to play this kind of a practical joke on me in order to get a good laugh.

"Oh come on, Sean, get over that. That lesbian girl still thought you were cute." Natalia had to cut in, laughing, "You should be happy that this girl's interested."

"I am, I just don't want to get on the phone tomorrow and have her be like, I thought I told Troung not to have you call me. Know what I mean?" I had a big smile on my face, pretty excited that she thought I was cute.

"Don't worry, I'm tellin' you the truth. She *wants* you to call her. Now let's go outside and have a cig; Louie and Chau are already out there." Troung started to get up and go to the front doors, so I followed, leaving Yen and Natalia.

"Go ahead, you smokers!" Yen said taking a sip of her Mai Tai.

I followed Troung outside. He always let me bum a smoke off of him because I barely smoked at all. The night was lit up by lights reflecting off the fog that had gathered. The streets were damp from the rainfall earlier in the day. My ears were ringing from the music blaring for the last hour or so in there. It was still early, for a Friday night, only about 11 pm. The cool air outside was welcome after being in the club for so long. It was getting pretty hot inside with all the people crowding the dance floor. The DJ was spinning good music, which was getting people excited while they danced. Every so often a classic song would

come on and so many would shout out their approval of the selection.

We met Louie and Chau outside. Chau was Vietnamese, a little shorter than I was, but really strong. He looked kind of like a body builder to me. He didn't like white people too much so he never really talked to me, but it's not like he was rude to me or anything. He just wanted to make sure that I wasn't like one of the racist white guys that he had come in contact with before. He almost had to go to jail once for getting into a fight with some guy who was expressing his racist feelings very explicitly to him. Troung said that I shouldn't take it personally because Chau doesn't like most people that he meets initially anyways. From all the things that were told to me he seemed like a guy with a "glass is half empty" type of mentality.

Louie was a lot like Troung the way he just accepted me right when we met. He didn't work out much so he was a pretty scrawny guy. He was really funny to me though, because he just sounded pretty funny with his accent. He and his brother were Filipino, and he always laughed at his own accent too. We joked around with him about his accent because he didn't really care. That was one thing that I made sure of though, because I didn't want to offend him at all. He respected that a lot about me, and even told me that it was cool if I made fun of his accent, because he said he thought it was funny too. It made him laugh sometimes to hear how he sounded to other people.

We were barely outside for two minutes smoking when a group of six white guys started walking past the club. I didn't acknowledge them until I heard one of them comment on the situation at hand in what sounded like a strong southern accent. I was in the middle of inhaling the smoke of my Newport cigarette and almost choked when I heard it.

"Hey look, it's chink night at this club right here. And what's this white guy doing around these illegal immigrants?"

"What?!" I was shocked and felt a spark ignite inside me which quickly flared to a lit torch of anger. I looked up and saw the six guys walking towards us. They were pretty big; I don't think any of them were under six feet tall. I started to get anxious and wished I hadn't heard what they said but I wanted to verify it. "What did you just say?!" I couldn't help but raise my voice.

"You heard me!" The one who said the initial comment was right up in my face now and his friends were moving to take on Troung, Louie, Chau and now Michael, Louie's twin brother. I was hit by a strong odor of liquor when he got close to me, and almost wanted to comment but he kept talking. "What? Do you think you're too good for white people, you white Uncle Tom?" Then he turned back to his friends laughing. "Keep your dogs away from these guys. I heard that they like to eat strays."

I looked at Troung and I could see the anger on his face. Louie, Chau, and Michael looked like they were getting themselves prepared to fight. I turned back to this guy and let my emotions take over, trying to find the best way to put my anger to words. I had no feelings about trying to get out of this situation in a peaceful manner. I was seduced by the idea that I wanted to hurt this guy in any way possible, and I felt determined to hit him mentally as well as physically. The words flowed from my belly, out of my mouth like a stream of lava that melted any peaceful thoughts that got in its way.

"And I bet you think that you're everything that is right with society, huh?" Stopping there just wasn't enough for me. The torch inside me was turning into a fiery rage, fast. I couldn't control this anger. "You're a fucked-up excuse for a human being, you fuckin' punk! Why don't you take your honkey friends and get goin' to the next KKK meeting, you fuckin' racist bitch!" My adrenaline started pumping and that rage transferred to my fist which felt an overwhelming desire to connect with his face. I reached back and threw a wild punch that nailed him in the side of the head, despite his efforts to dodge it.

I heard a bunch of people yelling, and I kept swinging when the guy I was fighting tackled me. I felt myself hit the ground and I swung him to my side so that we were facing each other, both of us holding the other and punching. He was bigger and stronger so I started to lose control. I had gotten a few hits in but he was able to get himself on top of me. I saw him gather himself as he held me down and began to raise his arm to throw his fist down on me. I saw a look in his eyes I had never noticed in anyone before. It was as if something was missing and there was a hollow spot where there should have been substance. It was an evil appearance, taken over by a hate-filled presence. Louie came over and kicked him off of me just when he was about to throw a hard shot to my face.

All hell broke loose. We were throwing wild punches, hoping to connect. Chau knew a little martial arts, and because of his strength was able to take on Louie's opponent while he got the guy off of me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Troung get lifted up into the air and then his whole body was slammed into a car; I could hear the thump of the connection to the vehicle's door. He was all right, and jumped back up quick, just in time for the guy to come at him again. One guy from their group just stood and watched, not getting into it. He was actually trying to break it up after a while, and so was Michael. Next thing I knew a few of the bouncers ran out to the fight and started throwing people everywhere, breaking it up. It took a little while but they got everyone separated and the whole group that started the confrontation took off running. They were screaming racial slurs at us as they ran down the street. The bouncers settled down once they realized the people remaining were all friends. We stood there in silence for a while, trying to absorb what had just happened. We were all looking at each other with puzzlement in our eyes. Nobody knew what to say, that was apparent in our blank stares, thinking about the fight, as if asking if that just

happened. It almost felt like what happened wasn't real, even though we had lived it, like we had just watched it on a TV screen.

Troung finally looked at me and broke the silence. "What the fuck was that? Who were those guys?"

"I have no fuckin' clue but I'll be damned if I was gonna let 'em get away with that shit!" I was tasting blood in my mouth and Louie saw me. I looked back at him and thought about him saving me from more of a beat down. "Hey Louie, thanks man, I needed that."

"Don't trip, man, I just can't believe you swung at that guy. He was fuckin' huge! I wasn't sure what the hell was gonna happen there." He looked at me smiling, but obviously shaken up. "But I know that if you hadn't done somethin', they were gonna start some shit anyways." He was kind of laughing about it, but you could tell that all of us were still feeling the adrenaline pumping through our veins.

"Damn fellas, we got us a white boy with heart here," Troung said, trying to laugh it off in his usual manner of dealing with the tense circumstances. We all started laughing, a nervous-but-relieved-that-the-situation-was-over type of laugh. Natalia and Yen came out of the club. Others had gathered at the door when they heard all the commotion outside.

"What happened, you guys?" Natalia was curious and worried. Yen was just speechless, as she usually is, with a shocked look on her face. "Are you guys all right? What's going... what happened?" Natalia was acting really confused but we felt that we just had to get out of there, so nobody responded.

Troung looked at me while he reached for Natalia to try to calm her down. "Come on, man, let's just bounce." Then he turned to Louie. "Hey Louie, you guys wanna come over to the dorms with us? We're 'bout to go right now."

"Yeah, all right. I'm gonna take Chau home and Michael's gonna follow us to his house first. I'll meet you there." Louie was

walking off with them. Troung acknowledged and we were on our way back to the car. I took one last look into the club and I saw that girl Tina looking out. She was one of the only ones still there, but we made eye contact and she smiled at me. Despite all that happened earlier, that put a nice smile on my face, and I walked off to catch up with Troung.

**

I was almost healed of all the wounds by the time school came around on Monday. I had my African-American Studies course focusing on the Civil Rights Movement. My teacher's name was Tamikah. She taught my discussion section for the course. The professor was a really old, kind of chubby African-American man that yelled at us the first day to get a point across. He seemed really intimidating, very passionate about what he taught, to say the least. But that's a different story. The class for this day was discussion.

Tamikah was a skinny, tall African-American woman. She had really short hair, glasses, and was incredibly intelligent. Sometimes I felt intimidated because she knew so much, but at the same time she was a great teacher, and challenged each of us.

I walked into class on Monday and she noticed the bruises on my face right away, I could tell by the look on her face, but she didn't say anything. She just started the discussion as usual and went into trying to help us narrow down what topics we could use to write our final paper. She was saying we really needed to get started early so that we would be able to put all the research together a lot better, joking with us about tendencies to procrastinate.

We went through the rest of class as usual, trying to make sense of what the professor was yelling about, and discussing the readings for the week. As class ended I caught eyes with Tamikah and I knew exactly what she was thinking. She really

understood how much I wanted to learn in this course through my enthusiasm in previous discussion classes we had. I waited for the rest of the class to leave and was ready for what she was going to ask. I almost lip sunk her words to me.

"Sean, what happened to you this weekend? I mean, you don't seem like the type to go out to party central and get yourself into trouble after having a few too many. Talk to me here; what's going on?" She was the most down-to-earth teacher that I had ever had in any schooling.

I met her eyes. "It's not what you think, trust me. I don't know if you would condone my actions but I'm sure that you'll understand what happened." I saw Tamikah start to get comfortable as if to say, ok let's hear it. I tried to explain.

As I went through the events that happened just a few nights ago, I could see her concern a few different times, mostly when I described what I was feeling at the time and how I still felt like I couldn't have gotten around the situation. I described how the guy that I fought with came straight up to my face and expressed his hate and bigotry with such ugliness. I told her I couldn't hold back anything, that my anger took control, and that the bouncers had to come out and break up the fight. As I talked I began feeling the frustration I had felt leading into the fight, and it started to make me upset again. Just telling how the guy came out and said racist things about my friends made me so full of hate that I couldn't help but raise my voice. Tamikah saw this and stopped me, calming me down. She put her hand on my arm to make sure that she had me calm and had my complete attention before she started.

"Sean, although this situation didn't turn more serious, that doesn't mean that the next time won't have a chance to turn that way." Tamikah's concern caught me off guard. "You have to understand that violence is how many people like yourself, who were standing up for what they believed in, have been sent to jail in the past. You have to be intelligent when you put someone like

that in check. Now I'm not saying that you have to let people just walk all over you, but I am saying that you have to be a little more intelligent in the future."

"But Tamikah, you don't understand. This guy had it in his mind that he wanted to fight. I'm not going to back down to that." I was trying not to get frustrated, but I felt like she wasn't listening to what happened.

She looked deep into my eyes, with an eyebrow raised, holding up her hand at me, to keep everything calm. "I do understand that, but also I want you to realize your actions, and how you didn't even try to keep the situation from escalating to violence. Now correct me if I'm wrong, but weren't you the one that swung first?" I hated to admit it but she was making sense, and I acknowledged that.

"Now I'm proud of you for sticking up for yourself and your friends, but remember to think next time and really try to channel your anger in a positive direction. Have you ever heard of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense?"

"Yeah, I've heard of them. Weren't they like, a really militant civil rights group?" I replied, trying to scrape together what I'd heard.

"Well, according to the predominantly white government and press, they were considered one of the most dangerous groups during the civil rights movement because of the tactics they used. However, what you probably don't know is the types of programs that they set up for their communities all over the nation, such as Breakfast Programs for children, free health care for people who couldn't afford any and other programs to help the community. In fact they got started in the Bay Area, which is why I bring them up to you now. You're from there, right?"

"Yeah." She knew just how to get my interest, and a smile started to creep up on my face.

"Well, that might be a subject that you would like to research for your final paper. You might learn a lot about the area you

grew up in and the way that it became the racially diverse and liberal area that you have been describing to us in class. Plus, it was a group that gave a lot of inspiration to 2Pac, who I believe is your favorite musical artist, right?" Tamikah seemed like she had known me for a while the way she knew how to talk to me.

"Yeah... alright, I'll check that out. That does sound pretty interesting." I stopped and looked up from getting my things together to leave. "Thanks a lot for the talk, Tamikah."

She just nodded her head to me and smiled, and after getting my stuff together I was on my way back to the dorms.

CHAPTER 2

A couple of weeks went by and I had been talking to Tina on the phone a lot. I was starting to really like this girl. I called her the day after the club, since she told Troung she wanted me to. I had to tell her the whole story about the fight that night. I just wanted her to know that I'm not the kind of person to really want to start fights, but if someone was intentionally trying to demean my friends and myself, then I wouldn't hesitate to put them in check. I wanted her to know that I stuck up for people, but there was one thing that I wanted her to understand over everything else when I was talking to her. The fact that I am usually not a violent person and could never, ever hit a girl.

We had gone out a few times and were quickly becoming a couple. Tina was the type of person to really make someone like me feel secure about myself. Of course she was attracted to me, but if I wasn't a person with a good personality then she would not have wanted to see me in a relationship way anymore. Basically she liked the person that I was and really encouraged me to follow anything I wanted to do. I really appreciated that about her, and she was especially interested in the way that I had started to get into my research on the Black Panther Party like Tamikah had suggested. She saw the passion I felt when I was researching things and how excited I got.

Tina would go to the library with me sometimes; she was the one that really showed me how to use the library sources. I really hated trying to do that alone, and I never liked asking for help in anything, unless it was someone that I knew. Tina often spotted things that I could use in my report, which really helped me a bunch of times.

"Hey Sean." She walked up to me when I was reading Huey Newton's autobiography in the library. Sometimes we would meet there to study a little bit and then hang out after studying. "What's that you're reading?"

"Remember when I was telling you about the two guys that started the Black Panther Party? They were the ones that sold those books at UC Berkeley to raise money to buy guns for protection while they observed the police, to make sure that they weren't violating the citizens' rights. Remember that?"

I showed her the book. She nodded her head.

"Well this is the autobiography of Huey P. Newton. He was one of those guys that started the Panthers. He is so intellectual, it's amazing. I mean, some of the things that he describes in here are so detailed. Did you know that he knew all the laws about possession of guns, observing police, and basic citizens' rights? Whenever they were in a confrontation with the police he would actually state a citizen's rights so he got the point across that the group knew the law. He never wanted to give the cops a reason to be able to throw the group in jail. If they ever did throw a member in jail, that person would be out the next day, because The Panthers were always within the law." I looked at Tina to make sure that she was following me and not getting bored with the conversation, but I saw that she was genuinely intrigued.

"That's so cool the way they did that. Just shows you education is a huge means to be able to fight for your rights." Tina started to pull out a flyer that she had found while walking over to the library from her class. "Have you seen this? I just saw it outside and thought of you."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a screening of a documentary that this guy, who used to be in the Black Panthers, made and he is going to be there when they show it. It tells about the group and how many of them have been set up and sent to jail, and are now considered political prisoners. I was thinking that you might enjoy it and want to use some of the information in this film for your paper. Pretty awesome, huh?" She started smiling at me as she saw my face light up. "Am I the bomb or what?"

"You *are* the bomb! When is this thing? This is perfect!" It seemed like everything was falling into place for me all at the right times, and I was getting so excited. "You wanna go with me to this? I know that you've been pretty interested in what I've been learning too."

"Are you kidding? Of course I want to go with you. You're not the only one that's been learning ever since you started researching for this paper."

I had told her everything I had been learning with so much enthusiasm that I was getting her excited about this whole subject. Every book that I started to read about the Party I couldn't put down. I thirsted to learn more and more about the group. What I read led to different books about the Panthers. It became a huge cycle of knowledge that I was gaining by reading so many different points of view. I read different autobiographies to get different perspectives, history texts on different actions taken by the Panthers, and books that had commentary on what the group was all about. I watched movies that reported on events going on at the same time that affected the Party in different ways. I even read perspectives that were denouncing the actions taken by the Panthers, in order to see the effect they had on people that were against what they stood for.

I read while I ate my meals, all of a sudden not caring if I didn't have someone to eat with. I read in classes even when it was a different course. I would think about things while taking a shower and be dripping wet looking up evidence to answer my questions. I read during breaks between classes, often showing up late from losing track of time. I found myself waking up with the book in my hand I had fallen asleep reading, all the lights in my room still on. Whenever I went to the library I looked up on computers what websites had information on the Panthers, and looked up speeches that had been made by the Party. I had never gotten so into the research going into a paper before in my

life. The fact was that I had never been so interested in a subject that I studied before; this was a first for me.

When I first started researching this subject I found a lot of information on the early years of the Party. The Panthers were formed in response to the numbers of African-American citizens that were falling victim to police brutality. It was an organization that really personified the teachings of Malcolm X, who's "By any means necessary" ideology they wanted to reflect. Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale were the two people who really started to organize the efforts to combat the racism and hate their community was experiencing, on account of the police department over-exerting their so-called authority.

I read on about the actions that the organization started to take. They saved up money to buy guns legally to use for self-defense, got a few people together while dressing in military attire and followed police cars around to observe that cops were respecting the rights of citizens in their community. The most intriguing thing about these actions was the fact that Newton had studied the laws regarding a citizen's right to observe the police while making these stops. He would explain each and every law that applied to the situation whenever a police officer tried to get them to disperse. He even knew that it was against the law to swear at an officer so the group coined the name "pig" in reference to cops whenever they would say something racist to them, such as calling one of them "boy."

Everything the Panther Party did amazed me. I was reading so much, with such enthusiasm, that I couldn't help but tell everyone around me about it. I would be just hanging out with friends and all of a sudden something would remind me of the Panthers, and I would go into a huge speech describing the did-you-knows about the organization. It wasn't exactly the best thing to do sometimes when everyone is trying to enjoy being drunk, but that's when I usually talked about it the most.

Lesson Learned

I started to learn more and more about the corruption in the FBI and the government's launching a Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), aimed at dismantling the Party as well as many other militant groups. Many leaders of different chapters of the Panthers were falling victim to this program by being set-up and jailed, even murdered, as was the case of Fred Hampton, a young leader of the Chicago chapter. This part of the story really started to get to me. The fact that the government and the FBI could take part in so much corruption and cover-up was ridiculous to me. It all stemmed from the hate and fury of one man, the leader of the FBI at that point, J. Edgar Hoover.

I didn't know much about J. Edgar Hoover until I saw the documentary. Tina and I went to see it on a Wednesday night. I didn't know if it would be very popular but a good amount of people actually showed up. The man who made the movie was half Japanese, and half African-American, but he wasn't quite what I was expecting. This was a very gentle and peaceful man who called everyone brother and sister, regardless of what color skin he saw. He would introduce himself by shaking your hand, the other hand cupping yours to show his love for all people. This made me feel welcome and ready to learn. I wanted to understand how a person who saw many of his colleagues fall victim to racism and brutality at the hands of the white man could have so much love in him. I wanted to understand his lack of animosity despite his knowledge of the facts that the past tries to hide. I needed to learn this mentality from him, and see what it was that Tamikah was talking about when she told me to channel my anger in a positive direction. I'm sure that this guy had a lot of anger for what history has shown but he obviously has channeled it in trying to educate others. I started to space out in the theater waiting for the movie to start. I wondered how I could absorb his ideals and take his point of view when dealing with people of ignorance. I wanted to know what I could do in order to channel my anger in a positive direction. He introduced the movie, and

before long the audience began to witness many facts on what I had come to find out more about; the corruption.

The movie was incredibly moving, telling the stories of Fred Hampton, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Geronimo Pratt, and many other people whom the FBI had set up. It told how the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. had been planned in files as early as three years before it actually happened. As I watched the movie I absorbed its message with shock and horror. I understood that this wasn't anything that was going to be taught in any regular U. S. History course. It hurt to see so much evidence to support the things that this documentary told about, and still know this fact about the American school system.

So much was told about the corruption that I just felt angry. The fact that a group in a position of power would do so many unspeakable things made me frustrated. The movie had told in detail the situation that jailed Mumia Abu-Jamal, where so many different pieces of evidence, that could have proved his innocence, were thrown out in court. It told about the murder of Fred Hampton, a leader of the Chicago chapter, who was killed by the Chicago police when they burst in and opened fire on Hampton's apartment not giving anyone a chance to surrender.

It was horrifying to think that the facts about these events were being kept from the public. I felt ashamed of my country. For the first time I understood why the civil rights movement had such a difficult time accomplishing anything. I gained an even greater respect for the leaders I was learning about. All the hate they must have faced and had to overcome. All the threats on their lives and their families' welfare they had to live through. The constant anxiety these leaders must have lived with shocked me. Their courage in the face of oppression was so apparent that I felt humbled, and wanted to become active in any way that I could. I had no idea how I could get involved but I wanted to find a way.

The documentary ended and the forum was open to questions. Many people seemed to be as blown away, and as breathless, as I was. I didn't even know how to react so I just listened to the praise that everyone was giving the producer. Many people found it shocking that he was able to find footage of J. Edgar Hoover declaring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. the most dangerous man in America. The filmmaker, David Shinsato, seemed to be willing to listen to everything that everyone said, and welcomed the chance to work with anyone who was interested in furthering the fight for equality.

After the documentary Tina and I walked back to her dorm. As we were walking, we started getting into a discussion about what we had just seen. This was not the greatest time to discuss any stereotypes that she felt, but it started to come out of her that way.

She turned to me with a concerned facial expression, and I could feel that she was about to tell me something which she wasn't sure how I would react to. "You know, everyone has fears of other races based on previous experiences. I mean, I know people that are not racist but are scared of others because of what they have been through in their lives," she said as we walked across the campus.

"What do you mean? People shouldn't be scared of a whole race based on one experience with a certain group," I replied. "That's where the ideas for stereotypes come from, uneducated assumptions of a whole race based on one person's actions."

Suddenly I saw the expression on her face turn from concern to anger as she started to get defensive. "Well, I can tell you that I'm scared of big Black men because of an experience I had." She caught me off guard with that statement and I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My respect for her dropped in a moment from a simple statement. I almost felt betrayed because of this new knowledge of one of her shortcomings. I was angered by that

statement because not only was it unexpected but it was so blunt. It was just blurted out with no facts behind it.

"What do you mean that you are scared of big Black men? What kind of a statement is that? You can't judge a whole race based on one guy that you experienced. He didn't represent the whole race by what he did to you." She could sense the frustration in my voice and started getting defensive immediately.

"Well, if you knew the thing that happened to me you wouldn't be reacting like this," she said raising her voice.

"Yeah... well... obviously I'm not gonna know that if you don't tell me. All that I've heard so far is a stupid generalization." I could feel the frustration and disappointment swelling up inside me. "You're gonna say something like that after the movie we just saw? How the hell do you expect me to react?"

She looked down at the ground and tried to make me comprehend her feelings. "Just understand that things happen to make us shape our opinions. Maybe one day you'll know exactly why I feel this way." Obviously she had no intention of telling me what happened right now and I didn't have the patience to talk about this anymore. I had held such a high opinion of her so far, and she had brought it all crashing down at the same time, in a moment of her trying to prove a point. At the same time I wanted to show her that I would support her with anything she wanted to tell me. This was the time that I had to show that I had an open mind to listen to her reasons and if the experience she had was so bad then I would support her in coming to terms with it.

"Yeah, maybe one day I'll know what happened. I just want you to know that I will be there and ready to listen whenever you are ready to tell me what happened... if you ever feel like you want to tell me." At the risk of sounding corny I still had to say one more thing to her to let her know my mentality. "I'm here for you."

"Thank you, Sean. That really does mean a lot to me," she said looking into my eyes. Her beautiful eyes stared back into mine. She had a way of making me feel at home and ready to fall for her at any minute. It was one of those moments where the bonding trust established between us got even stronger, and I wanted to ease any of her pains that she felt. I wanted all her pain to be transferred to me so that she would never have to feel it again. Even though my heart cried out to help her and find out what had happened to her, I knew that I had to be patient. Wait for a time when she was comfortable enough to talk things through, when she could really open up to me and have the trust between us grow even further.

We walked back to her place, tensions put to rest, and I kissed her goodbye. She held me close as our lips touched and I could feel her thoughts transferring into me. It was a sensual kiss that told me so much about her without saying anything. It told me that she didn't want to feel any type of animosity towards anyone, but her fears kept her feeling that way, and she wanted me to know that. It told me that she was appreciative that we could have the talk, and that I would understand when she wanted to talk about what happened to her. It told me that she wanted to be there for me as much as I was there for her, and that if there was anything that I wanted to tell her, she would be there for me. Nothing had to be said, it was just magic the way we had this new understanding.

I turned around and walked down the hallway of the dorms, every so often turning around to see her smiling back at me, watching as I walked around the corner to leave the building. I walked back through the cool night air and felt happy with us leaving on those terms and a newfound respect for each other. The bond between us that was present when we started the day had been shattered, and in its place was an even stronger bond that grew from new understandings. This was real.



A college freshman experiences unfamiliar racism when he moves to a new area for school in this coming of age tale. He faces a life threatening test after a year of learning how to deal with his anger toward injustice.

Lesson Learned

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