Chapter 1 South Side of Chicago, January 2000

I was driving south on the Dan Ryan Expressway at 4am, passing Comiskey Park on my right and the Robert Taylor Homes on my left, to my job teaching English at a Catholic high school in the far south suburbs of Chicago when the engine started making this weird knocking sound. It had been two weeks since I had last driven my car, and I immediately knew that the oil had probably all leaked out during Christmas break.

The car was a 15 year old black Volvo sedan with Ohio plates, my dad's old luxury car before he upgraded to a Mercedes. He had given it to me because I didn't have any money for a new car. He asked me to watch the oil because it already had 200,000 miles on it. For the most part, I did that, but I had forgotten to check it that early morning.

For the Christmas break, I went to New York to visit my family. I wanted to reset my life there and get healthy again. I needed to dry out a bit, but hanging out with my family and friends in Manhattan during the last days of the Millenium had the opposite effect. I was drinking and eating like it was the end of the world, and at the time, some of us really believed it was. I had come back to Chicago in worse shape than I was before to a job that was killing me physically and mentally. My girlfriend and I had broken up because I cheated on her and told her. I had gained 20 pounds that fall. I couldn't sleep, and I was too depressed to exercise. That morning, I figured I would get to school extra early to make copies and organize lesson plans for the new term, which was definitely still happening. Much to my disappointment, the world did not end.

I was going 65 when the car completely shut off. The engine died. No lights. No heat. No power steering or anti-lock brakes. I had enough momentum to drift to the right side of the Dan Ryan and get off at the next exit. For the life of me, I don't remember which street it was. It could have been anywhere between 47th and 87th street. I like to think I have a good memory for

these things, but I know that I don't. These days, the distinction between those streets seems so clear in my mind, but at the time, all numbered streets carried the same amalgamation of danger and discomfort. I didn't know anything about the south side of Chicago, other than the warnings white people would tell me at northside parties. I grew up in the suburbs of Cleveland, Chicago's smaller, less-successful younger brother with a chip on its shoulder. I was intimidated by the sprawling scope of the city and by the people who lived there. They knew it better than I did, so if they were telling me that I would get shot, mugged, carjacked, beat up, and raped if I went to the southside, I belived them.

The Dan Ryan itself is a monument to racial segregation on the south side. Other than the Great Wall of China, it's currently the largest public works project built to separate racial groups, the white neighborhood of Bridgeport from black Bronzeville. That morning in the darkness, I could see a few lit windows in the high rise project buildings, but most of them were vacant by that point, with even a few burned out or boarded up windows on the upper floors. I had stopped a few times along this stretch, when I was desperate for gas on my way home. But my pulse would always flutter as I stood there at the pump in my dress pants, shirt, tie and white skin.

As the car was slowing to a complete stop, I was able to turn right onto an empty street and pull to the side of the road, next to small mounds of hard snow speckled with dirt. I looked around and saw a few little brick houses on the block, but there were no businesses. No one was walking around at that hour, and only occasionally would another car drive by me, in one direction or the other.

I took inventory of my situation. I felt in my back left pocket to where my wallet might have been, but it wasn't there. On New Year's Eve, during the panicky Y2K celebration, I was drunk and left my wallet in a cab. For the flight home, I still got through airport security just fine

because it was pre-2001, and security didn't care if I had identification, as long as I had a plane ticket.

I also didn't own a cell phone, which was normal at that time. A few of my friends had them but not everyone. Plus, I was poor, living in a studio apartment on the northside, a few blocks away from my ex-girlfriend and making 25 grand a year. I had credit card debt and student loans.

I turned the ignition, but everything was dead. It was still warm inside the car, but without the heater blasting, I could already feel the cold seeping in.

Thankfully, I could see a payphone down the street. I checked the cupholders, but there was no change. I walked over anyway and tried to make a collect-call to my ex-girlfriend. For a second, I could overhear her answer the operator but not what she said. She didn't accept the charges though. She probably thought I was drunk and coming home from the bars, asking if I could come over. Who could blame her for hanging up?

I walked back to my car. A guy on foot passed by me, laughed, and said, "Man, you are in the wrong neighborhood." He could probably see the fear on my face.

On the other side of the highway, I spotted a gas station and walked over there. I talked to an Indian cashier behind a thick layer of bulletproof glass. He let me call a tow truck. I talked to the guy on the line and said I was going to leave my car and take a cab to school. I figured that someone at the school would have money to pay for the cab. The cashier then allowed me to call a cab company who estimated that it would be a $125 fare, with an out-of-the-city surcharge. I told them not to bother. I called my school too and left a message that I was sick and would not be there. The cashier let me call the tow truck dispatch back and asked that they could pick the car up as soon as possible. I wasn't sure if the cashier would have let me make all these calls if I

were black, but I was certain that if I were black and stranded in a white neighborhood, I would not have been given the same treatment.

With all those racist notions bouncing around my head, I walked back to my car, fearing for my life. I had a tie on. How could I explain to would-be muggers that I had no wallet or phone? I sat in my freezing cold car for a half hour before the first car stopped alongside me. A woman rolled down her window and asked if I was okay. The car had power windows, which were dead, so I had to open the door to respond. I said, "Yes, a tow truck was on its way." She offered the use of her cell phone, but I said I was fine.

The next person, probably commuting to work and in a big rush, stopped and asked me the same thing. He offered to call someone for me. "Thank you, but no," I said. "I'll be fine." Another half hour went by, and I could no longer feel my feet in my dress shoes.

Almost like a biblical tale, a third person stopped. She too offered her cell phone.

My worries had mostly dissipated, and I felt ashamed of myself. Every single one of these people had been black. I thought about Lincoln Park, where people don't even make eye contact when you walk down the street on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Here, people stopped on their way to work, in the cold weather, to help a stranger. I would have never done that in Lincoln Park, or any other place in the world.

While all of this was going on, there was this one other guy who had been circling the neighborhood. He was black and wearing one of those ushanka hats with the ear flaps and carrying a flathead garden shovel. He seemed to be looking for ice patches on the sidewalks, breaking them up and shoveling them off, but he was clearing all of the sidewalks on the whole block, even on the other side of the street, which I thought was odd. Everytime he passed my car, he stared at me. By that point, I had been waiting for over two hours, and it was light outside.

Finally, he approached my car, stood right in front of the driver's side door, and knocked on the window. Again, I had to open the door to talk to him.

"Hey, you look really cold," he said. "You wanna come inside for a cup of coffee?"

I laughed awkwardly and said, "Thank you, but I'm waiting for a tow truck and don't want to miss it."

"I think you could take the chance. My house is right on the corner," he pointed.

I said no and thanked him.

Another half hour went by, and my bladder was stinging with pain. I could see my own breath in the car. Then the man came out again.

"Just come inside," he said.

Summoning a bit of courage and desperation, I got out of my car and followed him inside his garden level apartment. I used his tiny bathroom and felt massive relief as I urinated. He poured a cup of coffee for me in a used Dunkin Donuts Styrofoam cup. I didn't care. I still had my coat on and my back still ached from the cold.

We talked. I told him that I was a teacher. He said he was shoveling the neighbor's sidewalks that morning. He told me his name, but I can't remember it anymore. Through the translucent curtain over the basement window, we could see the tow truck pull up to my car.

The driver of the tow truck got out just as I was walking back outside. He was a white man, and when he was about 10 feet away from me when he shouted, "How do you like this nigger neighborhood?" He said it loud enough for anyone to hear. I stopped and just stood there dumbfounded.

He said, “Normally, I would never come here, but I could hear over the phone that you were white.” I said nothing. He went on to say that the traffic had been bad on the north side, that he was sorry that it took so long but he thought that I’d left the car.

I went along with it. I said nothing back. I needed a tow, and I didn’t care who he was or what he said. I just watched him hook up the car. I sat inside the cab of the truck with him and watched him make an illegal u-turn, blocking four lanes of traffic in both directions. A driver drove around him as he slowly made this turn; she wasn’t close to hitting him, just going around the obstructing tow truck. He laid on his horn and yelled out the window, “You bitch! You nigger bitch!” He made the turn, and we were on our way to my northside service station. I continued to sit there on the passenger’s side in complicit silence.

When we got to the service garage, which was really that expensive Jaguar-Volvo dealership right off the Kennedy Expressway, I went into the office and explained my problem of not having any money. They said that they would pay the tow truck driver for me, but they couldn’t do it right away because the guy who cuts the checks for these things was not in yet. I said it would be great if they could make the tow truck driver wait as long as humanly possible. The man looked at me for a moment and nodded. “I’ll do my best.” I went to the fancy waiting room and poured myself a complimentary cup of coffee.

Chapter 2: Lunch in Hyde Park, Chicago, maybe 2014

My friend Malik was the person who asked me to write this story while we were at lunch one day. But I’m not writing it for him. I’m writing it for you, both of you. I’ve never told you any of this. Tess and Emily, you deserve to know the truth, or at least my side of the story. Many of the events of this story have already passed into family lore, through whispered rumors from

your aunts and uncles, when one of your parents leaves the room. I'm sure you have pieced some of these events together yourself, from passing comments from one of us. You know that we don't get along, which has been difficult for you, but we both love you so much. We did our best. Maybe this is TMI or maybe you've been dying to understand what happened. Maybe you're simply curious, or not in the least. The thing is that you don't have to read the story if you don't want to. Just put it down; that's your right! Maybe I need to write the story more than you need to hear it. But you don't know the whole story, with all the necessary background and runway, and why things turned out the way they did.

Let me start at the very beginning. Before human evolution and the dinosaurs and the single cell bacteria floating on the surface of a tide pool, earth was inhospitable to life, too hot and smokey. Then asteroids, or a comet, or a small planet, covered with ice, came and hit the earth so hard that a chunk of the planet fell off. That chunk turned into a hot floating mass within the orbit of earth. Through its own gravity, it formed into a ball, which turned into our moon. The ice from the comet or whatever melted and became the oceans. The earth cooled, and a few proteins synthesized, by whatever catalyst you believe in, the tip of God's finger or RNA chains combining under lightning or crystals or UV light. Anyway, life emerged from the cataclysm. For the purposes of this story, I don't really need to go back that far, but that's a fact that's helpful to remember.

I don't remember exactly what year Malik and I had lunch in Hyde Park, but it was definitely before the summer of 2016, the moment everything in our lives exploded. That day in the late summer of 2016 was my cataclysmic event, like a nova from a distant galaxy, where two binary stars suddenly brighten and then detonate. Only now, with much time and distance from the actual event, can we observe that event with any reliable scientific clarity.

Anyway, one year, I had lunch with my friend Malik. This was something we did every year. He would visit my summer class at the University of Chicago as a guest speaker, and then we would go out to lunch somewhere in Hyde Park. These lunches are mostly unremarkable: we order food, talk about teaching, wives, the kids, Bronzeville, and then we split the check. That year, we went to Medici on 57th Street and sat in the upstairs outdoor beer garden. We were at a little two-top against the wall, far away from the other diners. The sky above us was bright and blue, but it wasn't too hot. He ordered pizza, and I ordered a burger. He was wearing a yellow polo shirt with thin and thick blue horizontal stripes. I remember these little details because this was the time I told him the story of my car breaking down, which was why I moved to Bronzeville in the first place. Telling him this story is memorable because, as you know, Malik is my only black friend.

It's an odd thing to admit, that I only have one black friend. I could mean it as either a source of shame (I have *only* one) or as an assertion of a racist lack. White people frequently use this phrase to absolve themselves of having racist beliefs (or other iterations of prejudice). So I want to say, with all intentional and awkward self-consciousness, I do have other black friends. My Facebook profile shows black neighbors, black colleagues, black tennis partners, and most of my former students are black. When I say that Malik is my only black friend, I mean 'friend' in a real sense. With Malik, I can act stupid around him. I can admit things. I can make fun of him or ask him for advice, and he can do the same with me. Since I'm older and increasingly homebound because of my kids, my real friends have dwindled down to a few people, despite my claim to 700 friends on Facebook. Malik is on my short list.

We didn't grow up together; our friendship was only about ten years old when we were having lunch. We met in a professional capacity. He was giving a talk at Oakton Community

College, and I introduced myself afterward. It turned out that we had a mutual friend. Malik is a writer, a really good one and has written two award-winning novels. I consider him a mentor and a role model as well.

After we met, we started to see each other again at parties thrown by our mutual friend. Later, we were both invited to be part of a writers' group organized by said mutual friend. We exchanged drafts of our writing and got to know each other that way. I met Sophia, your mother, through this same writers' group, so it was a pretty big deal to me at the time.

It turned out that we had a few things in common. We both had strict fathers and serious Catholic mothers. We both teach. We were both married. We have young kids. We both live on the south side and love sports, especially basketball, though our allegiances are rival teams. However, in some ways, we're opposite. He was born and partly raised on the south side of Chicago, and then in his teen years, his family moved to the newly-integrated, working class south suburb of Chicago Heights. I grew up in a wealthy all-white suburb of Cleveland. He went to public schools; I went to private schools. He likes soccer; I like tennis. But the most obvious difference between us is that he's black, and I'm white.

Hyde Park, where we have lunch every summer, is pretty racially integrated, at least for Chicago. It's also economically diverse, though that barrier sometimes seems even more intractable for its residents. One of my friends at University of Chicago said Hyde Park is the one neighborhood where blacks and whites unite against the poor. And it's like that. There's the university and then there's the neighborhood surrounding the university. Hyde Park is a tale of two cities: the best of times, the worst of times. And it's also perfectly situated in between our neighborhoods, at least at the time, him in Woodlawn on 61st Street and me in Bronzeville on 35th Street, both predominantly black and predominantly poor neighborhoods.

When Malik and I talk, whether it's over lunch or drinks or dinner, we talk about everything except race. This is odd because the issue of race consumes his writing; his novels both grapple with black identity on the south side of Chicago. But this topic is not simply an academic pursuit to us. The majority of my students at my college are black, and many of them are graduates of Malik's high school alma mater Bloom Trail. He teaches at DePaul and the University of Chicago, my alma mater, and almost all of his students are white. I grew up in a white neighborhood and now live in a black one; he spent his high school years in a white neighborhood, but which is now mostly black.

I think we've always wanted to talk about race, but neither of us has ever brought it up. If we started talking about it, I'm afraid we wouldn't be able to stop. Or we'd get into an argument and never speak to each other again. Despite our daily preoccupation with the subject of race, I feel as though the conversation could be catastrophic because both of us are a tiny bit radical on the subject and, thanks to our upbringing, a tiny bit conservative. When Malik was growing up, his father made him wear a sport coat whenever he went into the Loop. Malik cannot abide the contemporary state of hip-hop and regards it as trash. As for me, I spend most of my days telling my students to take their headphones off while they are in class and that they need to read the assigned text. We are old fogeys.

The neighborhood is what we talk about when we want to talk about race. At this lunch, I told him a story of how I was pulled over in Bronzeville for driving with my lights off. The cop pulled next to me rolled down the window and asked me to turn my lights on. I did and drove away.

He told me the same story about him in Woodlawn. But in his version, the cop pulled him over and detained him for 45 minutes. He was driving a nice car, wearing nice clothing, and his

four-year-old son sat in the back of the car, absorbing every detail. We could trade stories like this for a long time. I get away with everything, and he gets punished.

Then he told me that they were moving out of Woodlawn to Oak Park, for a variety of practical reasons. Oak Park is where Hemingway was born. He famously said the town had wide boulevards and narrow minds. But it's not really like that anymore. Still, this was a surprise for me, and bad news for sure.

"You're moving to the suburbs?" I asked. "I guess that means 'goodbye for good' because this will be the last time I ever see you."

He laughed. "I'll still come to the city. We're right off the Green line." The Green Line runs by our place too. It's the oldest El in the city, but also the one with the reputation for being dangerous because it connects the west side to the south side. The administration at the University of Chicago even advises its students not to take it because of 'gang activity' nearby and instead, recommends that students take the Red line, which has far more crime than the Green line. But racism perpetuates this stigma about the Green line.

"Sophia and I are not driving to the suburbs to visit you. No way am I dealing with a commute on the weekend," I said, half serious. "Once you get comfortable with your big living room and big backyard, you'll never come into the city again."

He laughed and shook his head.

"Plus, you'll have to cut the grass on Saturdays, and on Sundays you'll have pool parties or barbecues, like a goddamn John Cheever story. You'll have a full driveway for basketball. You're never coming back here. You're not my first friend to move to the suburbs. I know how this goes," I joked.

He laughed again, and I'm proud to make him laugh. "How are things in Bronzeville?" he asked, trying to change the subject. His grandparents lived on the south side, not far from where our old house was. He's always interested in the gentrification going on. I have no delusion that I am the poster boy for that gentrification, although it didn't exactly work out the way I thought it would. After the housing crash of 2007, the house's price was underwater. But Malik was interested because we were still the only white family in our neighborhood, so the proposed gentrification didn't bridge the segregation gap on the south side.

"Good. Everything is good." I said. "Oh, Sophia had her bike stolen out of the garage."

"That's awful."

"Yeah, it was kinda my fault. I left the side door open."

"Still. Awful feeling," he said.

"But things are good. Sophia is doing well. The neighborhood is fine."

Then, for reasons I'm unsure of, I launched into this long story about how my car broke down years ago on the Dan Ryan. I had never told him the story. Malik sat back in his seat and listened to the whole thing.

Chapter 3: A Quick Summary of My Background and Life

Tess and Emily, I need to admit a few things before I can tell you the rest of the story. My upbringing was a lot different than yours. I always wanted to give you a better life than I had, and in some ways I did, but obviously, in other ways, I didn't.

I grew up rich. Big house in the suburbs. Lots of brothers and sisters, and we all had our own cars. My mom stayed home. I even learned to play tennis at a restricted country club. Your grandparents had a big house in the west suburbs of Cleveland. You remember it, right? I could

wander the neighborhood freely. We all went to private schools and colleges. We took vacations and had nice clothes.

Despite being only ten minutes away from downtown Cleveland, black people didn't live in our suburb. They knew better than to even drive through it because of the notorious police department. Other than watching the Cosby Show, Diff'rent Strokes, and Sanford and Son, I was unconscious of race. We never had any racial tensions in our neighborhood because there were no other races with which to have tension. I remember that there was one interracial couple who moved down the street from us. Everyone joked that they lived in a gray house. We stared at them sitting on their front porch as we rode our bikes by their house. They stayed there for maybe six months.

In America, this is really not that unusual. Blacks make up 13% of the U.S. population, and 60% of blacks live in only 10 states, most of them concentrated in cities. In my high school and college there were a few black students as well, but I almost never interacted with any of them.

Then I moved to Chicago, to Lincoln Park, and this was 1999, when all the 20-something white yuppies lived there. I followed my college girlfriend to the city and to that neighborhood. I got a job as a high school English teacher at a Catholic high school in Chicago Heights, so my commute was about an hour long. I had a good deal of black students—not the majority like my classes now—but more than I had ever been exposed to. I had a hard time navigating my cultural distance from these students, everything from the slang they used to the formulaic way they were taught to write. My difficulties could have been explained in different ways: I was a new teacher with zero teaching experience; I was living in a new city; I was teaching at a school that had a

good academic reputation, but not the same elite status as my own high school. Plus, at 23 years old, I was teaching kids who were 17 or 18. It was weird for all of us.

Before 2016, the year my life was hit by a comet, I used to describe 1999 as the worst year of my life. That year, I broke up with my girlfriend, got depressed, and then gained 20 pounds. Plus, my teaching was horrendous. I would stand in the shower each morning, letting the water warm me up in my cold studio apartment, saying to myself, "What am I going to teach today? What am I going to teach today?" I would have nightmares about my classes and found myself waking up in my bed shouting at my students. I would cry on my drive home. Sometimes I was so exhausted that I would have to pull over and take a nap in my car before I could complete my commute. I would pull into the parking lot of a McDonald's on the south side of Chicago and get a few minutes of fitful sleep, even though I was scared to be there.

My classroom experience vacillated between me being overly strict and overly lax. One time, when one of my black freshman students didn't have his textbook, I called him out in front of the class. He had to explain to everyone that his mom did not yet have the money to buy it, but at the beginning of the month, she would be able to. So he had to live with that humiliation for the rest of the year. Within two months, I had completely lost control of my classes; I spent most of the period trying to regain order, but even when I got control, I had nothing to teach. The students could see me sweating through my shirt.

On top of all this, I was paying $700/month to live in a studio apartment and another $125 for an uncovered parking spot in my building. My salary was 25 thousand to teach five classes, with an average of 28 students in each class. I was working full time and going into credit card debt just to live in Lincoln Park. Plus, since I had broken up with my girlfriend, I no

longer had any friends in the city. I suffered from urban isolation, and on weekends, I would go to Lincoln Park bars by myself desperate to meet anyone.

After that year of teaching high school, I moved to the south side and started grad school at the University of Chicago. I lived first in Hyde Park, then I moved to a black neighborhood called Oakland—one of those Chicago neighborhoods that north siders have never heard of—at 43rd and Lake Park Ave, right across the street from where Muddy Waters used to live. This place was nothing like Lincoln Park; when you walk down the street, everyone makes eye contact and says hello. One time, when I left the trunk of my car open, a woman rang the bell, and asked me if I wanted her to close it. Culturally, it was like living in a small town in middle America, without the white people.

I moved back to Hyde Park again, and then, some years later, I bought that house in Douglas, more commonly known as Bronzeville. Your mother Sophia and I had been dating for a year at that time and decided to move into the house together. We weren't yet engaged, but it was moving in that direction. We lived in a single-family home as part of the mixed income housing project after the last of Stateway Gardens homes were torn down. This development was, of course, an improvement of the poorly-designed and poorly-managed public housing, but about a year into our living there, the housing market crashed and construction stopped because of stagnant sales in the market rate housing. Although construction has started again, the Chicago Housing Authority has not nearly replaced the public housing that was lost, and most of those former residents have moved to the south and west suburbs, places like Chicago Heights, where I now teach and make my living.

But in those days, we were so happy.

Chapter 4: Lunch in Hyde Park, Chicago, maybe 2014

"You need to write this story," Malik said to me as he was signing his credit card receipt. He didn't say anything about my admission of racism. We didn't say anything else about race that day. Even today, when the topic comes up, we sidestep it and talk about it in a way that avoids controversy. The topic is difficult for us over food and drinks. In class, my students tell stories of police harassment and job discrimination. The parents in my neighborhood tell me about the worries they have for their children, the physical violence inflicted by police, poverty, and proximity. But for Malik and me, everything hits too close to home.

Tess and Emily, you too are white and privileged, though not as much as I am. I myself feel so distant from the heart of my own story. I'm the product of my expensive education, and I now make a good salary teaching underprivileged students, most of whom are products of underfunded public schools. I grew up wealthy, but I chose to live and teach in poor neighborhoods. It's awful to admit, but I sometimes feel like I'm in one of those shitty movies about the white savior teacher who teaches students of color in the inner city. In the movie version of my life, my white guilt drives me to become a teacher. With my exemplary teaching, I open their minds to poetry, and then they teach me a thing or two about life as well. The reality is that most of these teachers are either too burned-out or too scared of their students to do anything meaningful. Even with great teachers, schools can't change the way privilege is bestowed. We might make a difference for a few of them, but for the most part, we don't change anything.

The most complicated part of this story is about the black gentrification of Bronzeville, not the racial segregation. It's still predominantly black, so the tension exists between the wealthy black property owners and the black people living in Section 8 housing. In the park, class divisions run deeper than racial divides. I know many of my neighbors, but I socialize

mainly with the other black homeowners. They are the same way. I see the kids in CHA apartments frequently. They come by to say hi to my kids on the playground or talk to me while I'm working in my garden. My other neighbors, who are black and wealthy, typically don't speak to them and don't want anything to do with them.

Places like Chicago Heights, where I teach, have a lot of racial tensions precisely because they are integrated communities. Homogenous areas, like the one where I grew up, have few racial problems because the racial prejudice is invisible. When I talk to my black students about racism, oftentimes, they just want white people to admit that they are racist. White people fear that label and think they'll have to wear a white hood and a black 'R' on their clothing for the rest of their lives. My black students can admit when they have racist thoughts. They see it as an admission of their human nature.

When I look back at this story of my car breaking down, I remember how desperate I felt for help, how bad everything was. And then people came to help me, precisely the same people who I assumed would hurt me. They stopped whatever they were doing to help me. You don't expect this kind of help from strangers living in a major metropolitan area. Despite all the things that politicians and the talking heads on cable news say about the violence in Chicago, especially on the south side, I will say this: Tess and Emily, I hope nothing bad ever happens to you. I hope your car never breaks down. I hope you never get stranded, but if you do, I hope you're on the south side of Chicago.