

Ulysses Hill

The Choice of Paris

It does not take long for a child to realize they're poor. It takes no longer than the first time they are exposed to something else. They, of course, have some inkling before that, some innate sense that no human should live as they do. Even as a young child, you can see the signs of poverty written everywhere, even if you are too young to read them: the odd tension in your mother's face as yet another letter with the odd red marking appears or the noise that rings outside throughout the night. You can sense something is wrong, but it is not until you see the other side that you can finally put your finger on it. When you get to know someone, someone who has never returned home from school to find the power off, someone who has never worried about what they will eat tomorrow, someone who has never run from a gunshot, you truly understand. You understand you are poor. You understand you have less. You understand that not only is life unfair, but you have been dealt a particularly bad hand. And with this understanding comes jealousy, anger, and the most profound sense of despair. Each emotion, in its own way, threatening to destroy you.

“Envy blinds men and makes it impossible for them to think clearly.” -Malcolm X

The jealousy descends first. You begin to question your life. Why do we have no money? Why do they have money? How is this fair? The jealousy haunted me for a long time. What else is a man to do as while he lives in squalor, he is forced to look at those who live in luxury? Jealousy was only the beginning, though. The jealousy soon turned to downright envy. Most people never feel true envy. It's a mortal sin for a reason; it drives even the most upstanding man to depravity. Envy is what drives the drug dealer to sling, the gangbanger to kill, and the pimp to exploit. Envy, true envy at least, the type of envy that will lead a man to cheat, lie, and steal, stems not from the desire to have what others have but rather a desire to have anything at all, to have something, of substance, of worth. It is a desire for happiness and the realization that you will most likely never get it, at least not by conventional means. This envy does descend upon me, every so often. I have been able to resist it so far. I pray to never reach a state in which I allow envy's light to blind me, to kill my soul, to rob me of my morality. Hopelessness is hard to escape though, it by design proliferates every ghetto, slum, and housing project.

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves,” -Philippians 2:3

This envy, however, has another facet that makes it all the more enthralling; it is justifiable. This is what leads to anger, not jealousy, but rather the knowledge that your envy is completely justified. That realization that no one has any more right to food, power, or education than you, and yet they get them, and you don't. The fact that many of those who have achieved all three have only managed to do so through the exploitation of you and those like you whether indirectly or directly. The epiphany that this is not some odd fluke. This is not some horrendous mistake in the system that, when noticed by those in charge, will be immediately fixed. That the system is, in fact, working in the manner it was designed to, and almost no one, least of all those in power, have any desire to change it, and why would they? Why would they wish to change a system that, in one way or another, has benefited them, and in many respects, they can be considered to have won? To live in a country established on the backs of your ancestors in which you not only are devoid of any benefits from their suffering and contribution but also treated in many circumstances as a second-class citizen is inexorably infuriating. This anger chews at the soul of every poor black person in this country and is, in turn, used against us. The black man angry at the injustice that he is subjected to becomes the stereotypical angry black man; scorn that only serves to make the "angry black man" even angrier. Anger that can not be let go of because it is, in many aspects, the result of the oppressive force pushing it down onto him. Until these oppressive forces are relieved, the "angry black man" much to his own detriment and against his own will, shall remain angry.

"Black and white alike—ill in the same way, mortally ill. But before we die, how shall we live? I say with hope and dignity; and if premature death is the result, that death has a meaning reactionary suicide can never have."

-Huey Newton

For some, these two emotions are not enough to push through. To keep on fighting against all odds. For these unfortunate souls, there are generally only two ends. One, they grab the lifeline of religion that even the most devout atheist must acknowledge is one of the strongest sources of comfort that exists in our world, or two, they sink into their despair, and

they lean on whatever they can, alcohol, the void of sleep, or drugs, to somehow get through the day. Some people often falsely believe there is some sort of causation between the lack of education and religious fervency. I am here to tell you that this is not the case. What they are seeing is not causation but correlation. It is not the uneducated who are so often the most fervent religious practitioners but rather those who have nothing: not money or power: not anger or jealousy--not enough to sustain them anyway--and yes, not even education that needs faith the most. Without anger, jealousy, or faith, all that is left for those in poverty, for the black diaspora, is reactionary suicide, if not of the body, most definitely of the soul.

The Threat of The Black Boy

It was one of those hot summer nights. One of those nights that follows a day, so excruciatingly hot the seat buckle burns your hands as you step in a car. I had spent most of the day inside, of course, as a matter of self-preservation. I should have stayed inside, but my mom asked if I would like to accompany her on her UberEATS deliveries, and I had nothing else to do. So, I said yes.

The drive to Silver Lake barely registered to me. Silver lake is an upper-middle-class area right outside of L.A. My mom prefers going there to do orders because the tips are better and I don't mind it because the area is more interesting. People crowd the streets. Each restaurant is new, eclectic, bright, and colorful. The neighborhood vibrates with the energy of youth. It is the type of place that caters to and thus attracts young people. The first order went off without a hitch, as did the second and third. Then we got our fourth order.

I can't remember the name of the place. It was some upscale sandwich place that is ever so common in L.A. It was the type of place that smelled like dirt, root vegetables, and just a faint hint of must. The order was ready when we walked in, so I just grabbed it from the shelf set up in the corner for delivery corners and walked back outside to the parking lot. My mom

was waiting in the car, the engine humming as it sat there idling. The first sign of trouble was when the navigation app directed us to turn down a narrow street that was inclined. The street was narrow, with the column of cars parked on each side. We crawled up the narrow road for a minute or two until my mom's phone chimed, "Your destination is on your right." But there was nowhere to park. I was already unbuckling my seat belt by the time my mom was asking if I could get out and deliver the order so she doesn't have to park. "Already on it," I replied.

I began walking up the driveway when the door to the house opened. In the doorway stood a woman looking down at her phone. She looked up. I met her eyes, and in them flashed something primal. It took me a second to recognize. It was fear. My heart sank in my chest. "Uber Eats order?" I said, lifting the bag of food I was holding. "Yes," she said timidly. Her "yes" was excruciating to me. She somehow managed to fill that one word with every ounce of fear displayed on her face. I wanted to leave to end this interaction that was so obviously painful to both of us. I took a few slow steps forward. She shrank back into the door as if it were her only hope of survival. I considered just dropping the bag where I stood but thought better. When I reached about six feet from her, I stopped and gently set down the bag. "Enjoy your meal," I said.

When I entered the car, my mom asked, "What was that about?"

"She seemed to be scared of me,"

"Oh," she replied in a somber tone.

I am often met with fear. When I was younger, I would have spent the rest of that day trying to figure out what I had done to scare her. I would have forgotten the incident after that, but by then, by the age of seventeen, I already knew all I did, all I needed to do was exist. Knowing wasn't the solution, it ought to be though. It was a curse more than anything else, instead of spending a day thinking about the incident and forgetting it entirely. The memory

poked and prodded at that sensitive spot in my mind created by all those times people looked at me with fear. It lodged itself in that patch, one more stake in the collection running my mind through.

It does something to a person's psyche to be feared. To be feared is in many ways worse than being hated. To inspire fear in someone is to harm them. Something on one level or another one must feel guilty for or at least in some way regret. Regret, whatever it was, you did scare them, but what do you do if the only thing you did to inspire fear was to exist? Do you regret your existence? How do you fix existing? Can you? Should you? The two last questions seem ridiculous for any adult, a comical overreach for any rational person. However, for a child, to be feared is to lose one's sense of self. To see people recoil, to hear even teachers and educators, people whose job it is to nurture and protect you, fear you is soul-crushing. It leaves a mark, even into adulthood.

You are forced to question your right to exist when your mere existence harms others. You are forced to be more docile even as a child in some odd and rather infuriating attempt to somehow convince people that you are not a threat, but you must never let this moronic, infuriating, and - never forget - necessary charade lead to you showing anger even for a second because then you shall be a threatening and angry black man. A man whose existence, even if in the form of a child, cannot be allowed.

You might ask "Who fears a child?" No one? Everyone? Both. No one fears a child. Everyone fears a man. They fear what the child will become because one day, the little Black boy will no longer be so little, and at some point, after that, he will no longer be a boy. He will be a man. A Black man. They fear this day because it is upon this day, the day you are no longer a child, that people can no longer control you. An angry Black child is already a danger, but an uncontrollable angry Black man is a clear and present danger at all times.

The principal of the school I attended kindergarten once said to my mom, "He is hard enough to control now, what are we going to do when he gets bigger?" This shocked my mom,

a light-skinned Mexican woman. I think it was the first time she truly realized that I am Black. Not in a cultural or logical sense but rather in the sense that it will be the most important thing about me to many people, and whether consciously or subconsciously, they will quite often judge me solely based on that fact. I think it was hard for her, harder for her than even for me, to come to grips with the idea that while to her I am her baby, to the police I am a thug; to educators, I am a future threat; and to America, I am a subversion.

It was soon after this comment by my principal that I first saw the look. I say “the look” because it can be known by no other name. It is, in essence, the physical manifestation of the fear of any parent of a Black child. It is the look of fear in my mother's eyes when I attempt to do one of many things people so often do that could lead to me being killed. It is the look my mother gives every time I try to go for a walk at night. The look oh so many Black children have been forced to see, have been forced to endure. The look Baldwin attempted to describe. The look I shall attempt and fail to describe. I know I will fail but must attempt to anyway because it haunts me, and it haunts so many others, because even if I fail I must attempt to show America the pain that it has caused and still causes in the hope however idealistic and dimwitted that America will change.

The look is primal, resembling some distinct fear, anger, and sorrow. Fear that their child, their baby, could be taken from them without rhyme or reason no matter what they do. Anger at you, the child, the young man, for wanting to do something that you should know better than to do. Sorrow at being angry at you for wanting to do something everyone else gets to do. Sorrow that they can't just let you go walk at night because if you get stopped by the police no matter how cooperative you are, you could still lose your life. It is the look of a parent terrified, grieving, and upset at the mere idea of losing a child. Mixed with a hint of despair at knowing that they, your guardian, cannot guarantee your safety. It is the look that stripped me of my innocence by stripping me of my ignorance. From the moment I first saw that look, I realized my mother is not invincible. She is mortal like the rest of us, and there are problems even she can't solve.

To realize your parents can't truly protect you as a child, especially a young child's is a shock. The realization robs the little Black boy of the sense of safety which is so paramount to a happy childhood. With his sense of safety stripped away everywhere, he goes the Black boy must cope with fear. Fear forever chipping away at his mind. At one point, he must make a choice to live, truly live, going against the norms of America and risking his life, or merely survive and pray that America will decide that he is not too large of a subversion.