

HOLLYWOOD  
PARK



A MEMOIR

MIKEL  
JOLLETT

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*For Poppy and Lou*

ESCAPE

*Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my memory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think if, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.*

—TONI MORRISON, *BELOVED*

CHAPTER 1

# ANCIENT CITIES TO THE EAST

We were never young. We were just too afraid of ourselves. No one told us who we were or what we were or where all our parents went. They would arrive like ghosts, visiting us for a morning, an afternoon. They would sit with us or walk around the grounds, to laugh or cry or toss us in the air while we screamed. Then they'd disappear again, for weeks, for months, for years, leaving us alone with our memories and dreams, our questions and confusion, the wide-open places where we were free to run like wild horses in the night.

It happened all at once, my brother and I sitting naked in the bath, playing with our toy boats, listening to the music and the sound of muffled voices from the next room. We are swaddled in red and green wool blankets and readied for sleep: story time, pajamas, the rubbing of tired eyes. Goodnight canyon. Goodnight mountain. Goodnight building. Goodnight stars. Crayons are put away, cubbies cleaned, teeth brushed. I drift to sleep and am rattled awake, surprised to see my mother's face with her shaved head, her hazel-green eyes, her round Dutch cheeks and crooked yellow coffee-stained teeth, "Hi, Goo. Wake up. We have to leave. It's not safe here."

I've been told this woman's name is "Mom." That's what I'm told to call her. I know the word is supposed to have some kind of special meaning. She comes to visit me. She's sadder than the others. She wears overalls and squeezes me, talks about how she misses me, her eyes forever darting around the room like a nervous bird. My eyes are filled with sleep, my head heavy. "But I'm tired."

Bonnie and Clubby are the other women. They're with me every day. They're funny. They talk in strange voices and always have a game to play or a slice of apple or crackers and juice. They call me "Son." Pronounced "Suuuuun" in a low baritone on account of my deep voice, round belly and overbite that makes my top lip stick out in a funny way. They always say they could just "eat my face." They're big and soft, like warm pillows I can fall into. Clubby talks in a strange way that doesn't use any *r*'s. "Well, waddya think, kid? You gonna get in yo jammies o' wut?" She says it's because she's from a place called New Yoke. Which is far away from California.

The woman I'm told to call "Mom" cries when she comes to visit. She reads me a book or we walk around the compound, the big golden field or I sit in her lap as she sings songs with words I don't understand "Fair-a, jhock-a, fair-a jhock-a, door may voo, door may voo." She combs my hair, tells me she misses me. "Don't be sad, Mom," I tell her. I tell her that most of all. "Don't be so sad all the time." She stares at me when I eat like she's trying to memorize something, like she's about to say something but decides not to.

"I love you, Goo. My little boy." Tears in her eyes fall on the bib of her clean blue overalls. Everyone wears overalls here. I have three pairs. Then she disappears again and I find Clubby and Bonnie and we laugh and build things out of Popsicle sticks or play hide-and-seek with the other kids until bath time, then song time, singing:

*There's a land that I see where the children are free . . .*

Then bedtime when there are stories of dragons and castles and baby birds and moons that talk to children and children who talk to cats and blue butterflies that talk to lions. Then they say goodnight to me, to Cassidy, to Guy, to Dmitri—my best buddy—then Noah.

When I wake up, when all the other kids are still sleeping, Mom shakes me and says, "We have to go, we have to go now. You have to be quiet, honey."

I tell her I need some water. She has a look I've never seen as I feel my chest sink into itself like there's something sharp and hot at the bottom of my throat. "What about Clubby and Bonnie?"

“Shhh . . . We can write to them, I promise.” She picks me up. The other kids are fast asleep. There’s a soft yellow light coming from the doorway of the bathroom with the low toilet next to the craft tables. Debbie, who watches over us at night, stands next to the woman I am told to call Mom. She looks scared. My brother Tony is in the doorway, already dressed, his arms crossed. His head is shaved just like mine.

“Where are we going, Mom?” My throat is dry and I feel a blankness spreading from my stomach, up over my chest, going out over my arms and legs to my fingers and toes.

“To the car, to go see Grandma and Grandpa.”

A car? I don’t understand. I’ve seen cars driving in and out of the long driveway at the front of the building but I’ve never been in one. They look so big and fast. I wonder if it will feel like flying. When Dad comes to visit, he rides a loud, two-wheel car called a moto-cycle. He leans back on the seat with his hands on the handlebars which makes it look exactly like he’s floating on air.

The world is as big as the playground, the field, the forest on the far side of the road and this room where I sleep with Dmitri and Cassidy after song time, as big as Clubby and Bonnie with their funny voices and tomato soup and toast.

The woman I’m told to call Mom is looking for my shoes. Debbie goes to the cubby closet and opens the door to the cubby where I keep my overalls, underwear, socks and the baseball Dad gave me signed by Steve Garvey, who is a professional baseball player. Dad likes baseball, I think. I have a bag where I keep my toothbrush and a yellow plastic comb that’s too big for my shaved head. I have marbles and chalk and the pictures I drew with Bonnie on construction paper. I don’t have any toys. None that are mine anyway. All the kids have to share our toys and no one can even keep a bike if someone brings you one.

Debbie puts my things in a paper bag and hands them to Mom. We start for the door. “Wait, Mom. No one will know where I am when they wake up.”

“It’s okay sweetie.”

“Shut up dummy!” Tony says.

“Shhhhhh!!” Mom pulls him to her hip.

“But why do we have to leeeeeeave?”



She lets out a deep breath, puts me on the ground, gathers us like a mother hen.

She squints, holding her eyes closed tight, her hands over her forehead, then opens them and looks at me, grabbing my hands in hers. She reaches for Tony but he turns away. “Listen, I know you don’t understand, but we have to leave right now and we can’t let anyone find out, okay? So I need you guys to be quiet. We’re going on an adventure.”

Her eyes move wildly from me to my brother, back to me. “You can sleep in the car. And when you wake up, you’ll be at Grandma and Grandpa’s house and we’ll all have Dutch rolls and cheese.”

There’s no reasoning with her. I try to imagine what the house looks like. I’ve never left the School, which is what everyone calls this place. I wonder if it’s got a big door. Mom once told me they had lots of music boxes, that Grandma was crazy for small boxes that play music when you open them.

I look at Tony’s face for clues but he’s got his chin pressed against the door frame, holding the paper bag with his stuff in it. My head feels woozy as my eyes fall on the buttons of Debbie’s blue overalls. She’s nice but she’s new. I miss Clubby because she used to be with us at night and would hold me when I had a bad dream and call me Suuuuuun. She would tell me we were safe here, all of us here in Synanon, living together, a great big family, a tribe of humans who love each other and love the world and love the little babies most of all.

Debbie whispers something to Mom. Tony is mad. I’m told he’s my brother. I see him on the playground but he never plays with the other kids. He sits by himself. I sit by him sometimes but I don’t think he likes me because he pushes me and tells me to leave him alone. He’s three years older and twice my size. People say we look like each other but I don’t see it.

Mom picks us up. She seems so much like a giant bird. Like she swooped down from the sky and got us. I want to tell her not to worry, that I can fly too. I’m strong enough and sometimes when I’m dreaming, my ears get big—big enough to be like wings—and I can fly anywhere I want. I just flap them and soar way up into the sky. I tell myself, *Remember, you have to remember this when you wake up. You can fly.* And I’m remembering now because I just woke up. I want to tell her but there’s

no time. She beats her wings and we take flight over the school, the playground, the yard, the field, the buildings, the entire Synanon compound where we played games and ate and sang and slept. Where we heard the adults screaming through the speakers of the Wire, the in-house radio, with its crackle and hiss letting us hear the sounds of people laughing, people crying, people yelling, people dancing, a jazz band playing music. The Punk Squad, the mean teenagers with their cursing and cuffed jeans getting punched in the face if they ever talk back. Every week one of them runs away and everybody gets so mad. The sound of Chuck, the Old Man, the leader, talking about things we don't understand. He says he loves us but he's always so angry. And the bird, we are told to call her "Mom," flapping furiously, eyes locked on some faraway point as she clutches her chicks and we fly up over Tomales Bay with its streams draining into the Pacific Ocean, the giant redwoods on the hillside, the big waves crashing against the rocks on the coast, slowly breaking them into tiny pieces, fracturing them, pulling them apart—until they're soft to the touch, portable and broken, easy to walk on, to place into a small plastic bag for a tourist visiting with sunburned ankles from some ancient city to the east.

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