

Catina Bacote

***My Brother Speaks:
“That’s The Way We’re Gonna Survive”***

Bernard slams his fist into his palm. Rubs his chest. Paces in half circles, crisscrossing my living room over and over. He rambles on about his trip to New York. “The train ride was cool. I was building with people the whole time. Breaking some history down to the young brothas.” I can imagine what history he’s talking about because he’s recommended books to me like, *The Falsification of Afrikan Consciousness* and the *World’s Great Men of Color*. His love of Black history found a firm footing when he started getting books from his fifth-grade teacher and reading them more than once. I love our history too, but I don’t preach it to anyone, especially people I don’t know. I doubt my brother has ever done that before tonight, either. Showing me exactly what he did on the train, Bernard opens his arms wide and fans them like he’s gathering people near him. “They started to crowd around. That’s what we need to do, talk to everybody. No one’s a stranger. That’s the way we’re gonna survive.”

It felt good to learn about people who looked like us.

I had been ranting like that for a few days. Did it several times—on streets, bus, downtown, etc.

I wonder who was on the train going from New Haven to New York City at ten o’clock at night and what they thought of my brother. He’s twenty-one years old but looks younger because the skin on his face is incredibly smooth, and he has only a few strands of fine hair on his chin. He dresses like a lot of people his age in sneakers, jeans, and a sweatshirt, but he’d started growing his locks when he was fifteen years old, and sometimes it sets him apart. His long thick hair reaches his back, and tonight, he wears it down and around his face.

I remember that. I never felt that before.

While pacing my living room, he moans and puts his hand on his chest. I ask him what's wrong. He says, "It hurts." He tells me there's a knot and asks me to feel it. I use the tips of my fingers to rub where he points, but I only feel his chest bone. I try to get him to sit down next to me on the couch, but he shakes his head "Nah, I'm straight."

But I know that's not true. He'd only taken the two-hour train ride to New York to visit me once before. A few years ago, our mother planned the trip, and they came up along with her boyfriend and Bernard's girlfriend, who was pregnant. We ate lunch at a Caribbean restaurant in the West Village and strolled around Central Park. I watched how Bernard took in everything around him with fascination, from the crowds on the subway to the young guys dancing in the park. Even though he reads about far-flung places like Ethiopia, Ghana, Mecca, and Egypt, he spends all his days in a city of twenty square miles. And when he's in New Haven, he's usually hanging around where we grew up, a housing project with little around it. When he called tonight and told me he was coming to see me, I wasn't sure what was going on, and now that he's here pacing and talking more than ever, I know something is wrong, but I don't know what.

He goes to the window, ducks down, and gazes out into the dark. A car rumbles by, and a horn blares further in the distance. Bernard stands only a few feet from where I'm sitting, but he feels further away than the traffic outside. Before I can say anything, he picks up his stride again. "You know what I wanna do? I wanna get the whole family together. Everybody. Mommy, Wayne, Uncle Wilson, Aunt Trish, Nicky, Dean...."

I try to sound calm by keeping my voice low. "For what?"
"I need to talk to everybody. Let them know what's on my mind. We need to work together as a family. I'm tired

Growing up, I saw Mommy struggling. She didn't talk about it, but I knew.

of being poor, endin' up with nothing. We need to pool all our resources, build something together, start a business. Everyone in the family has a role to play. They'll listen to me." Nodding with his whole body, he thinks about his plan. "Will you help me get everybody together?"

I scoot to the edge of my couch and lean forward to be a little closer to him. I tell him, "You aren't yourself."

He rubs his aching chest. "I'm not myself?" He stops moving long enough to look in my direction. "Catina, *you* don't see me?"

For a long time, I thought I knew my brother, as well as I knew myself. Even though I was only six years old when he was born, I watched him sleep and wake up and eat and play. When he was old enough to walk, he'd sneak out of our parent's room in the middle of the night and into mine. As we grew up, we planned our lives like they were on parallel tracks—a good college, a house with a yard, and a big ol' family. At twenty-seven years old, I didn't have the house or family yet, but it seemed possible. But I couldn't make out where Bernard's life was headed.

I have no idea what the streets are doing to him, but I have a feeling they're stripping away parts of him that he wants to hold onto. Like the part of him that worked hard during his Little League games, watched Pee Wee Herman on repeat, kissed our mother when he left for school, and before he went to bed. If it's not his innocence he's holding onto, maybe it's the part of him that couldn't put down *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* when he was twelve years old, and after reading it, stopped eating pork. Or maybe, it's the side of him that wants to look out for others, like the little kids in the projects who he shows how to hold a baseball bat correctly and dribble down court.

And if his big sister can't see him anymore, who can? Out in the wider world, he's only Black, male, young, and

<p>I definitely wasn't thinking about the future at that time. I was just doing it day by day.</p>
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poor. Highly visible and completely invisible. He's ignored one moment and watched closely the next. But of course, he's much more than what anyone can see, even me.

He's asking me if I recognize him, and I answer him honestly. "No."

You, my Big Sister, know me more than anyone.

"Then who am I? You tell me. Because I feel more like myself than I ever have. Everything is clearer, sharper than it's ever been. I can see and understand things I never knew existed." He speaks fast and moves from one corner of my small living room to the other. He rubs his chest with both hands, one on top of the other.

Everybody was smoking. Six or seven of us would pool our money and smoke 8-10 bags a night.

In one way or another, I keep asking Bernard what's going on with him. Finally, he admits he smoked illy. "I had a bad trip, and I lost it. It messed me up for a couple of days, but after that, I was just wide open. My mind expanded. I'm pumped. I don't even need to sleep." I knew illy was all over New Haven, and the folks who smoked it never knew and maybe didn't care if the mint leaves soaked in embalming fluid had PCP in it too. I try to get him to sit down. To have a glass of water. To tell me why he's come to New York in the middle of the night to see me. My worst fear is that he's come to say goodbye because he's heading toward a violent death, or a life of drugs, or prison. But instead of talking about tonight, he just wanders about the room, his hand pressed against his chest.

I don't know what would have happened to me if I didn't come up there. What made me come that night? I'll never know.

He returns to his grand plan and tells me his three-year-old son told him he's supposed to help people. "I want you to understand that I just have this energy, finally, to make things happen in my life. That's why I'm talking about this family meeting. I don't want to leave you and the family or my boyz behind. We need to do this. So much has happened these last few days."

Of course, I want to know what's happened, and I don't want to know. He crouches down on the floor to show me. He says he and his friend were in a car, and he points a finger at a spot behind him. "I saw these two young cats in a car watching us. They were gonna rob us, maybe shoot us. They started coming across the street, and I just laid low. When they were about to land on our side of the street, I just pulled off." His hand shoots into the air. "I caught them by surprise! It's these young cats tryin' to rob people all the time."

Everyone was trying to get me to calm down for days, but I just couldn't. I felt like I had a deadline to meet or something.

I wrap my arms around my body and close my eyes. "You're gonna get yourself killed." I hear him pacing in circles. He says, "Nah. I know what I'm doing."

He boasts that he's got the projects we grew up in, Eastern Circle, on lockdown. He calls himself the leader of the crew, the one the guys all look up to, the brain. He moans and rubs his chest. He asks, what's a body without a head. I listen to him go on about how he's the master of his domain, the savior of the streets. He tells me the guys depend on him. He makes things happen. And then he says something that finally makes sense. "I just wish Dwayne was here. He didn't deserve to go out like that."

Definitely doesn't sound like me.

We used to play basketball after school in the Betsy Ross auditorium. D was one of the best players. A slow, smooth game.

He was so funny. Everybody loved him, even the parents. He gave me my nickname, 5G's, saying I made five thousand a day.

It's been a year, and he hasn't said anything about Dwayne, so I want him to keep talking. Even though I know, I ask if he died in a car crash. Bernard tells me the carload of guys was being chased by the Hamden police, and they made it to New Haven, but the police kept on them. The car crashed head-first into the fire station on Grand Avenue. Everyone in the car, four guys,

Three guys were in the car. My boy Bone died too. The guy in the back seat got out before the car caught on fire and blew up.

It was the New Haven police the whole time.

died. Bernard could have easily been in that car. I knew it, and so did he. I imagine he's grieving for his friend and wondering why Dwayne died and he's still here. My brother tells me even though we all lived in the projects, they didn't get close until the fifth grade. He walks slower, rubs his chest, and says again, "He didn't deserve to go out like that."

Bernard stops pacing, and I make room for him on the couch. He lands next to me, and before I can say anything, his tears become the biggest thing between us. I kneel in front of him, hold his hands, and tell him I'm right here. He wipes his face on the inside of his sweatshirt, and it looks like his entire body loosens. I should be relieved as I land back on the couch, but I worry his agony won't always be something I can see or hear. Bernard tells me that the knot in his chest is gone, and I wonder for how long.

I left your house,
and the next day the
police rolled up in
the projects. We all
ran, but I fell and
got arrested. When
it was all over, I was
sentenced to five-
and-a-half years for
possession. The first
person I wrote a letter
to was you.