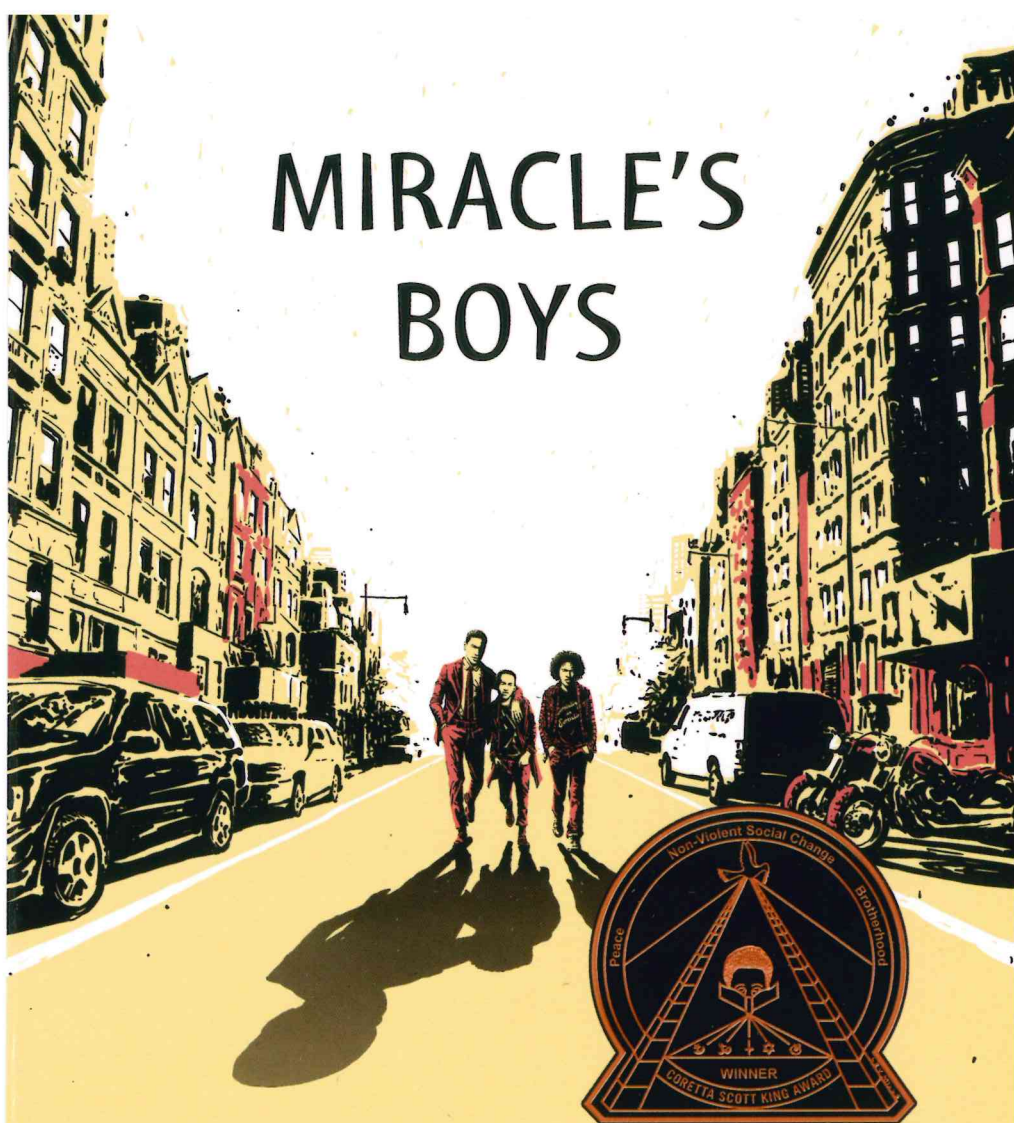


MIRACLE'S BOYS



National Book Award—winning author of *BROWN GIRL DREAMING*

JACQUELINE WOODSON





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CW

ONE

"BROTHERS IS THE BADDEST. THEN COMES DOMINICANS. Dominicans don't mess around. I'm cool with Dominicans though. They don't mess with me, I don't mess with them."

I lay back on my bed and listened to my brother Newcharlie talking. We had shared this room since the day I was born. And I swear since the day I was born, he'd been going on about who was the baddest. Used to be Puerto Ricans were the second baddest, but somewhere along the road their status dropped. Brothers were always at the top or the next ones down.

Newcharlie wasn't talking to me. Since he'd gotten home from Rahway Home for Boys a few months ago, he never talked to me. He was combing his hair and talking to Aaron. They'd known each other forever to say "W's up" and stuff, but they didn't start hanging till Newcharlie came home from Rahway. Seems once Newcharlie saw the inside of Rahway, most of the guys around here who cut school, hung out real late, and got into all kinds of stuff thought he was some kind of wonderful. Aaron acted like he wanted to kiss the heels of Newcharlie's shoes, hanging on to Newcharlie's words like they were something special. And Newcharlie was just as stupid over Aaron. Hanging out with him like Aaron was his brother. Like Aaron was me.

Newcharlie and Aaron were the same height and walked the same way, and now they had the same meanness. Aaron's meanness had always been around him. Even when we were small, we'd walk past him and he'd say something negative. Like when Mama used to make us go to church on Sundays. We'd be all dressed up walking to the bus stop, and Aaron'd say something like "Mama's church boys going to meet their maker." Or the time our big brother, Ty'ree, stopped him from snatching this little kid's Halloween

bag. Aaron didn't take the bag, but he kept glaring over his shoulder as me and Ty'ree and the kid walked away, saying, "That's all right, church boy. That's all right." Like he had something waiting for us later on. Newcharlie's meanness was as new as his name. He'd come back from Rahway with it, and the way he and Aaron hung so tight, you'd think he didn't remember those days when we crossed to the other side of the street when we saw Aaron and his boys hanging out.

I watched Newcharlie part his hair on the side and comb it one way, then shake his head, part it on the other, and pull the comb through it again. His hair's curly, like our mama's was—jet-black curls that girls go crazy for. He's three years older than me but only a little bit taller, and at the rate he was going school-wise, come this time next year, I'd be almost caught up with him. I'd just started seventh grade and Newcharlie was repeating ninth, but he didn't seem to care one way or the other.

The *old Charlie* would have cared about me catching up to him. He would have sat down at the dining-room table and crammed, because he would have been embarrassed about me being in almost the same grade as him. See, the old Charlie had feelings. If Charlie saw a stray cat or dog, he'd start crying. Not out-and-

out bawling, but he'd just see it and start tearing up. Sometimes, when we were out walking, he'd turn away real fast and I'd know it was because he saw the shadow of some stray animal and was wishing it wasn't out in the cold. Once he told me that some nights he lay in bed just praying for all the stray animals out there. *There's a lot of them, you know*, Charlie said. *And probably not a whole lot of people praying for them.* He told me about St. Francis of Assisi, how he was the guy who looked out for all the animals. He said him and St. Francis were the only two asking God to help those animals walking the cold streets not to freeze to death. I promised Charlie I'd pray too.

And sometimes, late at night, Charlie would just start talking, telling me stories about how things were before I was born—memories of him and our older brother, Ty'ree, and my mama and daddy together. Wasn't ever anything mean in it—like that he wished I hadn't been born or something—just stories, quiet stories that would make me smile and help me fall asleep.

Now I called him Newcharlie because Rahway hadn't sent the guy I was just talking about home. This guy standing at the mirror moving his hair around

his head was someone—something—different. Not the guy who used to laugh and tell jokes and put his arm around my shoulder. This guy never did any of those things. Ever.

Right after he came home from Rahway, I got up in the middle of the night to look at him. He'd been away for more than two years, and the guy sleeping across from me was a stranger. Some days he'd just sit on that bed with his hands hanging down between his knees. Just staring out the window and looking evil. But when he was asleep, his face spread out—all the frowns and scowls just kind of faded and he looked like Charlie again, ready to care about something, to be happy, or to cry about stray animals.

Newcharlie checked himself out for a moment without saying anything. He's light brown with thick black eyebrows and Mama's nose. He winked at himself, then caught me watching him in the mirror and gave me the finger. I looked away from him without giving him the finger back.

What changed you, Cha? I wanted to ask him.
What made you cold?

"Ya'll don't go to church no more?" Aaron nosed.

I swallowed and caught Newcharlie's eye. He looked back at me for a second, then frowned.

"Church is for little boys," he said. "Little mama's boys. I look like a little mama's boy to you?"

Aaron shrugged.

The last time any of us was in a church was for Mama's funeral. I didn't want to see the inside of one again. Least not for a long time. Least till the thought of even *passing* by one isn't enough to make me choke up and start bawling about Mama.

"Stupid little mama's boys like Lala," Newcharlie said.

"My name ain't Lala," I said.

In the summer I go down south to my great-aunt Cecile's house. If the watermelons are ripe, she'll buy one. When we get home, she always takes it out back and breaks it open against a rock, then scoops out the heart of it—the sweetest, reddest part—and hands it to me. I stared out the window. Somebody had done that to Charlie. Scooped out his heart and sent the empty bitter rind of him on home.

Aaron was sitting on the bed directly across from mine, Newcharlie's bed, and he was rolling one of his pants legs up real slowly. Sometimes when he looked at me, I felt the coldness, like somebody was dripping ice water down my back.

"Anyway, Puerto Ricans," Newcharlie said. "If they're in a gang, then you got a problem. But if they're on their own, then it's cool. Most of the ones in Rahway had gangs behind them."

"I don't know no Puerto Ricans that ain't in a gang, Cha," Aaron said.

"What're you talking 'bout?" I said. "We're half Puerto Rican and we ain't in no gang, and you're all Puerto Rican and you ain't either."

"How you know what I'm in with your little self?" Aaron said. "You don't know nothing about me, little boy."

Aaron looked me up and down like he was looking at something that didn't even have a right to be in the world. He was wearing a Yankees baseball cap with the front of it pulled down over his eyes so that he had to lift his whole face to look at me. I thought that was a stupid way to wear a hat but didn't say anything about it.

"I don't know what my size got to do with anything, but I know you ain't in no—"

"Mind your business, Lala." Newcharlie glared at me through the mirror. "Nobody in this room talking to you. You hear anybody call your name? When

somebody calls your name, then somebody's talking to you, and nobody in this room is *ever* gonna be calling your name."

"So just keep your stupid mouth closed," Aaron said, "and maybe you'll live."

"Lafayette," I said. "My name ain't no Lala. It's Lafayette."

I turned away from both of them and stared out the window. If you ever had a brother who didn't *like* you, then I don't have to explain it. Feels like being a stranger in your own house, like *everything* that used to mean something doesn't anymore. Even your own name. Newcharlie'd hated my guts since Mama died, and he wasn't shy about letting anybody listening know it. Most times when he and Aaron got to talking, I just stayed quiet. If I was real quiet, it was like I was invisible. And if I was invisible, Newcharlie couldn't hate me.

"What about white boys?" Aaron asked.

"White boys?! What you *think* about white boys?"

"Don't know, Cha. That's why I'm here asking you. You act like you know everything about Dominicans and Ricans and brothers, I figure—"

" 'Course I know about *white* boys," Newcharlie said. "They not even worth mentioning. It's like if you

have a totem pole of badness, right? You got the brothers at the top, then the Dominicans and the Puerto Ricans in gangs, then the Puerto Ricans not in gangs—and maybe some of those Chinese guys that’s in gangs—”

“They know karate and stuff, too,” Aaron said. “Like Jackie Chan. Jackie Chan can mess some brothers up, yo.”

“Yeah, like if they know karate, then they probably go before the Puerto Ricans in gangs—”

“Except if the gangbangers got guns.” Aaron looked over at me. “Blow somebody’s head off.”

I chewed on my bottom lip and didn’t say anything. Once, before he went to Rahway, Charlie took me to see a Jackie Chan movie. When we came out of the movies, I started kicking and chopping and stuff, telling Charlie I wished I was Chinese so then I could know karate. Charlie put his hand on my shoulder and turned me toward him.

“Not all Chinese people know karate,” he said. “That’s a stereotype.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about, but his hand was hard on my shoulder, so I stopped chopping.

“Like when people say all black people are lazy or something,” Charlie said.

I shrugged. A few months later I saw another movie. Only it wasn't Jackie Chan and it wasn't about karate. It was about this couple and they had this landlord who lived upstairs who was supposed to be Chinese or something. Only he wasn't really. He was some guy making believe. When people in the audience started laughing at the way the guy was talking, I felt weird, like it wasn't right.

"But if they know karate," Newcharlie was saying, "then they can kick a gun out of a gangbanger's hand, right?"

"Yeah," Aaron said. "You right. If they're fast enough. Don't a bullet travel at the speed of sound or something?"

"Depend on the gun, probably," Newcharlie said.

I wanted to remind Newcharlie about that day at the Jackie Chan flick, about his hand on my shoulder and what he'd said. And I wanted to tell Newcharlie that he had the totem pole idea all screwed up. If brothers were at the top, that meant they were the least bad. Anybody who knew even the tiniest bit about totem poles knew that the most important was at the bottom. But I bit my bottom lip and didn't say anything.

"Then after every every every body else," Newcharlie was saying, "*then* you got white boys."

"What about that guy David?" Aaron asked. "The one from Rahway?"

I looked at Newcharlie in time to see him glance at me in the mirror, then cut his eyes back at Aaron. He wasn't allowed to talk about Rahway in front of me. Ty'ree didn't allow it. But Ty'ree was at work, and Newcharlie took every chance he could get to do the opposite of what Ty'ree said. He turned toward Aaron and leaned back against our dresser. Then he dropped his voice real low.

"I saw him make a knife out a slipper spoon," he said. "His moms had sent him one 'cause he kept saying his shoes was getting too small, and since she couldn't afford to buy him a new pair of shoes, she sent him some Vaseline and one of those things make putting your shoes on easier—I know they got another name, but he called it a slipper spoon." Newcharlie eyed me, daring me to give the right name for it. I looked up at the ceiling and didn't say anything. I loved stories about Rahway.

"Every night I'd hear something scraping and scraping—real soft against the floor, like you had to

listen real hard to hear. Sounded like a shy cat against a screen door—just like a little whisper of a scrape, but I knew what it was, so it sounded real loud to me. Like a clock ticking away somebody's life."

"How he gonna sharpen it on the floor, yo?"

Newcharlie rolled his eyes. "Floors in Rahway ain't regular floors. Everything there's made out of cement—walls, ceilings, floors—like you living inside a big gray rock. Winter you feel like you'll freeze to death inside that rock. Summer you think you gonna fry."

He stared into the mirror. Only he wasn't looking at himself anymore. He was looking somewhere else. Someplace far away.

"Everywhere, everywhere cement," he said, his voice dropping lower. "And all of us always marching in a line—to the bathroom, to grub hall, to yard time. No talking, just marching, marching. Say one word and the C.O.'s calling your last name and taking something away from you—no TV, no yard time, no rec hall. . . ." He was still looking at that faroff place, but he was whispering now. "No you. No more."

I pressed my back into the wall, the white white walls Mama had painted to make our room bright, and tried to imagine my brother inside that stone place.

The place he'd gone back to after Mama's funeral. No Mama. No name.

"Who that guy kill, Cha?" Aaron said.

Newcharlie blinked and looked from me to Aaron like he wasn't sure who we were or why we were there.

"Who?"

"That guy David, yo. The one with the slipper spoon," Aaron said. "What's wrong with you, man? You're like 'beam me up' or something."

"It's not deep, A. I'm just trying . . . to remember . . . all of it. Few days later David showed me the slipper spoon, only it wasn't a slipper spoon no more. He moved it real light across his finger and one drop of blood came out. Reddest blood I'd ever seen in my life. I mean, he like barely touched his finger and that drop of blood was there. His finger was real pale, and that blood just stood out on it. All thick and red. I looked at that blood and knew the next person come in contact with that slipper spoon was never gonna hear the words 'happy birthday' again."

"Who he kill?" Aaron asked again.

"Yeah," Newcharlie said. "I'd have to put David higher on the totem pole than other white boys."

Aaron grinned. "You ain't gonna say 'cause of Lala?"

Newcharlie nodded.

"I know he didn't kill anybody," I said. "I know the C.O. found that *shoehorn* under David's pillow one day while ya'll were out in the yard and David got sent off to another place—worse than Rahway."

Newcharlie gave me a dirty look. "That's what you think, stupid. That's what Ty'ree says to tell you, but that ain't what happened. And since you think you know so much, I'm *really* not gonna say. I almost said, too. Then you had to go and open your fat mouth. That's what you get, you little . . ." I waited for him to say it, but he didn't and I felt my stomach relax.

He turned back to the mirror. Newcharlie was wearing a plaid long-sleeved shirt and baggy jeans. He unbuttoned the top button, then buttoned it again and checked himself out one more time.

"You ready?" Newcharlie asked.

Aaron nodded.

"Then let's step." He looked at me. "When Ty'ree gets home, you tell him we just left too, you hear me?"

I kept staring out the window.

"Your brother talking to you, man." Aaron said.

"Yeah—I hear you."

"Later, Milagros killer."

"Oh shoot." Aaron laughed. "That's cold, man."

"It's true," Charlie said.

I swallowed and looked down at my hands so Newcharlie wouldn't see my eyes tearing up. I could hear the door slamming in the living room and him and Aaron running down the stairs, taking them two at a time the way they always did. A few minutes later I heard Newcharlie calling out to somebody. It was gray out. I stared at the sky and tried not to let his words sink in. I stared until the window blurred.

"I didn't kill her," I whispered.

Then I lay back on my bed and prayed it would pour down rain.

Two

OUR DADDY HAD BEEN A HERO. WHEN MAMA was still pregnant with me, our daddy was sitting in Central Park reading the paper. It was wintertime, but he liked to go over to the park and sit. He liked the quiet and the cold together. He liked the sound his newspaper made when he turned the pages in the wind. Ty'ree says this woman had been jogging around the lake near where Daddy was. She was jogging with her dog when the dog decided to take off after a bird. The lake was frozen, so I guess the dog just figured it

could run straight across. But right in the middle the ice started cracking away, and the dog went under. Daddy looked up to see the screaming lady running after the dog—saw the dog way out, bobbing in and out of the water. Ty’ree says Daddy pulled the lady out first, then the dog. The dog and the lady lived, but my daddy died of hypothermia.

“He went out stupid,” Newcharlie always says now. “Saving a dog and a white woman is a stupid way to die. Only thing in the world you need to save is your own self.”

“You used to want to save stray animals,” I remind Newcharlie. “You used to pray to St. Francis.”

How do I do it, Cha? I’d asked that first night a long time ago, the night he told me about St. Francis.

Charlie sat up in his bed and put his hands together under his chin. *Like this. “Dear Lord and St. Francis of Assisi. Me and my brother know you both love animals as much as we do. We know how you saved that dog that was drowning in Central Park. You sent our daddy in there. We’re not mad about it or anything. Not anymore. We don’t have another daddy, but there’s a lot of other animals need saving. So please don’t let none get killed by starving or freezing to*

death in the cold. Don't let none get hit by cars or beat up by stupid kids. Just let them all have food and someplace warm. And if you could, could you please give dogs nine lives the same as cats?"

And turtles too, I added. Please.

Turtles too, Charlie said. Amen.

Amen, I whispered.

Charlie unclasped his hands and lay back on the bed. *Now watch, he said. When you dream, it's gonna be full of happy animals.*

He was right.

But that was a long long time ago. Back when we were a family. Back before Rahway and Mama dying. Back before . . . before Charlie became somebody else.

"I never cared about no dogs," Newcharlie says. But he doesn't look at me when he says it, because he knows I know he's lying.

All we got now is one other brother—Ty'ree. Ty'ree's just the opposite of Newcharlie. He'll tell you in a minute he's got a soft spot for me and don't care what people say about it. Newcharlie would never call me Lala in front of Ty'ree. He just knows better. People who knew Mama say if Ty'ree was a woman, he'd be her twin, even though two people made him, he's all Milagros' child. Milagros was my mama. Her name

means “miracle” in Spanish, and maybe it was a miracle that she had a demon-seed son like Newcharlie.

Mama was born in Bayamón—that’s in Puerto Rico—but her family came here when she was real little. I can only speak a little bit of Spanish, because Mama used to say it was better if we learned good English. But I’m taking Spanish now. Figure if I learn to speak Mama’s language, I’ll have a little bit more of her to hold on to.

My great-aunt Cecile’s all the time saying dead don’t have to mean dead and gone, and I like to believe that. I got two scratched-up pictures of Mama left. One of the pictures is of me and her outside on the stoop. Mama’s sitting and I’m standing bending over her to show her something I got in my hand. Mama’s wearing a light-blue dress and she has her hair out so that it’s all curly around her shoulders. In the picture she’s smiling at the thing I’m showing her like she’s real proud. I look real close at that picture all the time, but I still can’t remember what it was I was showing her. The other picture’s of me and Charlie and Mama. We’re all dressed up and smiling. Maybe it was Easter. Mama has her arms around me and Charlie’s shoulders. We both look a little bit like her in that picture, but I’m much darker—like Mama said my daddy was.

There used to be a lot of other pictures but they got burned. Newcharlie had a fit one Saturday and burned them all, but we're not allowed to talk about it.

Sometimes I wonder what happened to that lady and that dog my daddy saved. There's always stories about people getting saved and then giving the people who saved them money or people coming along years later and naming their kids after the people, but none of that ever happened to us. My daddy's name was Lafayette too, and I wonder if there's a little white kid somewhere named after him. Maybe the lady is still jogging around Central Park. Maybe she keeps her dog on a leash now though. And maybe once in a while she sees in her head my daddy running toward her on a half frozen lake. Or maybe she didn't have any kids and doesn't remember my daddy at all.

THREE

AFTER NEWCHARLIE AND AARON LEFT, I WENT into the living room and turned on the television. On Friday nights Ty'ree let me watch it as much as I wanted as long as I took one weekend day for homework. I usually chose Sunday—usually starting in the late late afternoon or the minute Ty'ree started getting after me—whichever came first.

I flipped through the channels for a while, then sat back against the couch and watched music videos. I couldn't really tell one from the other. Most of them

had some guy standing there rapping and a lot of pretty girls dancing around him. Or the guy was driving a fancy car with pretty girls in it. Once in a while the guy would be in a swimming pool with pretty girls. That was the one on now—a guy with a lot of rings on his fingers rapping to some pretty girls in bikinis.

Newcharlie liked listening to music and said he was gonna be a rapper. Aaron said he was gonna be one, too. Either that or a car salesman. I guess he figured he'd sell cars to rappers who would fill them with pretty girls. Thing about rapping though, Newcharlie said, is you gotta do it now. Most rappers weren't much older than him. Sometimes he and Aaron sat in our room all day long, making up rhymes and slapping each other five when something came off sounding right. But I hadn't seen them taking any real steps—like making some tapes and calling up a radio station to ask for a few minutes on the air.

I turned the volume down low. The apartment felt big and quiet with nobody in it. It's not that big—just four rooms: me and Newcharlie's room, then Ty'ree's room right next to us. His room used to be Mama's. Then there's a long hallway leading to one big room that's both the living room and the dining room. If

you go right, there's a dining-room table and chairs. If you go left, there's the couch and stuff. The door to come in and out is between the couch and dining-room table. You walk through the living-room side to get to the kitchen. You have to walk through the kitchen to get to the bathroom.

Newcharlie had put plants in all the windows—spider plants and ferns and some other ones I don't know the name of. He'd learned a lot about plants at Rahway. It was strange to see him messing around them on Saturday mornings, taking off the dead leaves and giving them water. Sometimes he put these little sticks of plant food in the dirt. Once I even caught him *talking* to them, telling this sickly-looking fern that it better toughen up if it wanted to make it in the world.

The sun had come out again, and I watched it bounce off the plants and sprinkle itself over the dining-room table. When I closed my eyes to just a sliver, I could see Mama sitting at that table, playing with her eyebrow the way she did when she was worrying, her hair coming loose from its braid. I watched my ghost mama for a while. She looked peaceful sitting there even if she was worrying.

"Hey, Mama," I whispered. "Can you make some chicken for dinner tonight?"

Mama looked over at me and smiled, a quiet, far-away smile. I blinked and she wasn't there anymore.

I got a thousand dollars in my pocket, the guy in the rap video was saying. I leaned back against the sofa and watched him do a sort of swim-dance around the girls.

After a while, I heard Ty'ree coming up the stairs. He always whistled the same song—a song our mama used to sing to us called “Me and Bobby McGee” about a woman hitchhiking with her boyfriend in Louisiana and how free she felt whenever she played her harmonica. When Ty'ree sang the words sometimes, it made me want to get a harmonica and get out onto the road. Maybe see a sunset. Once Ty'ree took me to Central Park and we watched the sun go down over the lake my daddy got hypothermia in. It was real pretty. Pretty and sad. Most times, though, it just sets and then it's night and what you notice is the day and the night—not the sunset in between. On the highway you probably get all four parts—the sunrise, the day, the sunset, and the night.

“Yo!” Ty'ree yelled.

“Yo back,” I said, holding up my hand without turning my head. I felt Ty'ree slap it and smiled.

“Where's your brother?”

I shrugged.

Ty'ree sat down on the couch beside me. He was tall and skinny-looking but not really. When he wasn't wearing a shirt, you could see all his muscles. But with his clothes on he looked skinny. He used to have locks, but he cut them off when he started working full-time, and now his hair is short and neat like an old man's even though he's only twenty-two. He leaned back against the couch and loosened his tie. I guess Ty'ree's like our daddy. He works and pays the rent and buys groceries and stuff. After Mama died, the people at the publishing house let him start working full-time. Now he's the mailroom manager there and says the work isn't so bad, but once in a while people blame you for stuff that isn't your fault. Ty'ree says it's not even worth getting mad about really. He says that's how it is in the whole world, people always looking for someone else to blame, so he might as well get used to it.

"Where's your brother, Laf?" he asked again.

"Just left."

Ty'ree looked at me, a slow smile coming to his face. He had the best smile in the world. Everybody said so. When he smiled, it made me think about when I used to go to church, how I'd sit there staring at this stained-glass window of Jesus with all the kids around

him. Jesus was smiling and the kids were smiling and everything seemed peaceful and right. That's what Ty'ree's smile was like. Peaceful and right. Once I heard Mrs. Williams who lives downstairs call him St. Ty'ree, and I heard Ty'ree laugh and say, *But I ain't dead yet, Mrs. W.*

"That what he said to tell me?" Ty'ree raised his eyebrows at me.

I shook my head and glued my eyes to the TV.

"Yeah, right!" Ty'ree rubbed my head and I smiled, taking a swing at his hand and missing.

"He really did just leave, T—like maybe a half hour ago."

"He say where he was going?"

"Nah."

Ty'ree frowned. "Boy better not be out there getting in any more trouble, that's for sure. And you better not be getting into any trouble either." He tapped the back of my neck.

If Newcharlie got into trouble again, they'd send him off to someplace worse than Rahway. The social worker said that she'd also have to send me either down south with Aunt Cecile or into foster care, 'cause if Newcharlie got into trouble again, it meant Ty'ree couldn't handle us.

"You hear me, Laf?"

"Do I *look* like I'm getting into trouble, man?!"

"Looks can be deceiving, li'l brother."

"Well, I'm not. I'm not Newcharlie and I'm not getting into trouble. Just sitting here watching some TV, that's all. A little TV never hurt nobody."

Ty'ree looked at me for a moment, then smiled again.

"Well it *didn't*. Not like watching a video's going to teach me how to hold up a candy store."

"Hey, we don't need to talk about that, all right?"

I nodded. Our house was full of stuff we didn't need to talk about.

"How come you ain't outside, Laf?"

"First you tell me don't be getting into trouble, then—"

"Little outside never hurt nobody," Ty'ree said, mimicking me.

I tried not to laugh but couldn't help it. Ty'ree could always make me laugh.

"PJ and Smitty visiting their cousin this weekend," I said.

"Out in Brooklyn?"

I nodded. Me and Smitty had been friends forever, been in the same class since third grade. Him and his

little brother, PJ, lived right down the block, and we all hung out once in a while. But sometimes Smitty'd get to asking questions about Mama dying—stuff I didn't care to talk about.

"Can you make chicken for dinner, Ty?"

He jutted his chin toward the kitchen. "I read your mind. Took it out the freezer before I went to work this morning."

"You gonna fry it?"

"Yeah."

We sat watching TV for a while. Ty'ree wasn't really watching though. He looked like he was thinking deep about things.

"You thinking about Mama?" I asked.

Ty'ree shrugged. "Not really. Kind of, I guess. Why do you ask?"

" 'Cause I'm always thinking about her."

"Me too."

Me and Ty'ree stared at the TV, feeling Mama somewhere nearby, and the house and my head chock-full with things we weren't allowed to talk about.

FOUR

NOBODY KNOWS WHERE CHARLIE GOT THE GUN he used to hold up Poncho's candy store three years ago. Not even Ty'ree. When the cops showed up at our house that night, Mama and Ty'ree were sitting at the dining-room table. Ty'ree had just cashed his check from the publishing company where he worked part-time, and Mama was filling out a money order for the rent. Ever since I can remember, Ty'ree had sat with Mama at the table, the dim light from the floor lamp in the corner turning them both a soft golden brown. While Mama filled out the money order and figured

out how to pay some of the other bills, Ty'ree made grocery lists and school supply lists and added and re-added the cost of everything. Some evenings he'd sit clipping coupons for the cereals we liked and the laundry detergent Mama used. He'd put these in an envelope on top of the refrigerator and take them down when he and Mama sat at the table, figuring and re-figuring.

That's what they were doing the night the cops knocked on our door looking for Charlie.

I was sitting in front of the television watching the news, because on weeknights Mama'd let us watch only one hour of regular television and then as much news as we wanted. I didn't really care for watching the news, but it was better than nothing.

Charlie had told Mama he was going to an after-school program to get help with his math homework. When he came in at seven that night, the news was going off and me, Mama, Ty'ree, and the cops were all waiting. Charlie had been too dumb to get rid of the gun. The cops found it and two hundred and fifty dollars in his pockets. Charlie was twelve and a half. Too young for real jail. So they sent him to Rahway Home for Boys.

It was one of the few times I'd ever seen Mama cry.

I turned and eyed Ty'ree now. He was leaning against the back of the couch with his eyes closed. I turned the TV down a bit more. I had been twelve for only three weeks but it felt like forever. Every day Ty'ree found a way to remind me not to end up like Newcharlie. But I wasn't Newcharlie. I was Lafayette. I had a bit more sense in my head.

I could hear kids running up and down outside in the street and some girls playing jump rope. I heard a fire truck go by and a little kid crying for his mama. We live on the sixth floor. If you hang out our window and look way over to the left, you can see Central Park, the very edge of it near the ice-skating rink. You can see the tops of the trees—they were turning all different colors now. And you can see lots of cars. If you look to your right, you can see the George Washington Bridge. Early in the morning you can hear the traffic coming over it. Right across the street is a bunch more buildings like ours—old gray-and-beige buildings with lots of floors and lots of apartments. Years and years and years ago the buildings used to be fancy, Ty'ree says. But not anymore. Now they're just buildings filled with people getting by. That's what me and Ty'ree and Newcharlie were—people getting by.

"Ty'ree," I whispered. "You asleep?"

Ty'ree shook his head.

I looked down at the remote control, then back up at the television.

"W's up?"

"Can you tell me something?"

"Maybe," Ty'ree said sleepily. "If I know it."

I tried not to think about Newcharlie's face when he said the words, when he called me Milagros killer.

"Can you tell me about when . . . when Mama died?"

Ty'ree frowned, then slowly opened his eyes. "It's Friday night, Lafayette. Go play some ball."

I shrugged. "Don't feel like it."

"It's gonna be winter soon—then it'll be too cold to be hanging."

"Said I don't *feel* like it."

"What do you want to know about it?" Ty'ree asked. He sounded tired. After a moment he put his hand on my knee. I wanted to put my hand over his but didn't.

"Just . . . like . . . like how come?"

"You know how come. She had diabetes. She went into a insulin shock."

"But . . . *why*?"

“ ‘Cause she had too much insulin in her. Her body just—just sort of shut down.”

I bit my bottom lip. “Then what happened?”

Ty’ree sighed and leaned back against the couch. “You found her the next morning,” he said. He sounded real patient, like he was talking to a very little kid. “She hadn’t got up to fix your breakfast. You were in the fourth grade. You always liked oatmeal in the morning. You tried to wake her up to fix you some.”

“Where were you, T?”

“I’d left for school already. I’d just graduated the day before, and I was going to pick up my diploma and say good-bye to people.”

“And Newcharlie was at Rahway, right?”

Ty’ree nodded. “He’d been there for two months when Mom died.”

Once Mama had said to me that time is like a movie—something you watch real close wanting to catch every line, every action, every moment. Then it passes and you feel like no time passed at all. She said that when her parents died, time didn’t stop the way people always say it does. She said it just became more *precise*—every minute, hour, day mattered that much

more. Charlie had been in Rahway for two months. There were four days between the time I found her and the day we buried her. The morning I found Mama, the clock beside her bed said 7:44. *Mama*, I'd whispered. *You're oversleeping*. And now years have gone by—like no time at all.

"You remember the last thing you said to Mama, T?"

Ty'ree smiled. "I told her to make sure that when she ironed my green shirt, she didn't put any starch in it. I didn't like starch in that shirt for some reason."

"You like starch in the other ones, though."

"Yeah, I do."

I twirled the remote around in my hands. "I think I told her she was oversleeping," I said. "But she didn't hear me. Her hair was hanging down over her face. I moved her hair away but I didn't call nobody. I should've called somebody."

"You did," Ty'ree said.

"But that was later on. It was too late then."

"It was too late when you found her, Laf."

I put the TV on mute and watched some people dance across the screen. They looked so happy dancing, like dancing was the best thing in the world.

"I was wearing my Brooklyn shirt," I whispered.

"And jeans. Mama was wearing her yellow pajamas, the ones with toasters on them. Remember those?"

Ty'ree nodded but didn't say anything.

"Me and Charlie had given her those pajamas for Christmas the year before. They'd been on sale, and me and Charlie couldn't believe we had enough money to buy Mama pajamas. With *toasters* on them. She always always always burned the toast."

"She thought we liked it that way." Ty'ree looked down at his hands and smiled.

"But how come?"

" 'Cause none of us ever had the heart to tell her we didn't."

I swallowed and stared at the TV. "Because we loved her too much to hurt her feelings."

We didn't say anything for a long time. It was starting to get dark out. When I looked over at Ty'ree, he was frowning down at the floor.

He bent over and picked up a straw wrapper. "I told Charlie to sweep. You see him sweeping?"

I shrugged. "He could have done it while I was at school or something."

"He *didn't* sweep," Ty'ree said, his voice getting loud. "Look at this floor! Look at it."

It looked fine to me. "I'll sweep it."

"No, I'll sweep it," he said, and got up and went into the kitchen. "I have to do everything in this house. Everything." I could hear him in there banging around. Then I heard him sniff and blow his nose. A few minutes later I could hear him making choking sounds. I went into my room then and closed the door, not wanting to hear Ty'ree crying, not wanting to hear anything. A long time ago he had given me his green shirt. I pulled it out of my drawer and spread it across my pillow, then put my face in it.

"Mama," I whispered, "wake up."

FIVE

AFTER MAMA DIED, MY GREAT-AUNT CECILE came up from South Carolina saying she was going to take me and Ty'ree back home to live with her. She's a small woman with white hair, tiny silver glasses, and hands that shake whenever she eats or drinks something. The two things I noticed right off were how she smelled like the candy part of candy apples and how perfect her teeth were. Ty'ree said it would be two thousand miracles rolled into one if they were real.

I had met Aunt Cecile only once, when I was real small and Mama had taken us all down south for our

daddy's uncle's funeral. Aunt Cecile was our daddy's aunt. I didn't remember much about that time, but Aunt Cecile remembered me.

"You were just an ant of a thing," she said, picking me up like I was still two instead of nine and squeezing me to her. "And look at you now, just as beautiful as I don't know what."

I'd never been called beautiful by anybody, and after Aunt Cecile said that, I went into the bathroom and checked myself in the mirror. Ty'ree always said I looked like our daddy. He was dark and curly-headed with brown eyes. My eyes are more black than brown, and my hair's more kinky than curly. Ty'ree makes me keep it cut short, sort of a fade. And when it's real short, you can see where it starts out as curls. I looked at myself in the mirror and tried to smile like Ty'ree, but one of my front teeth overlaps the other in a way that makes me look a little bit meaner than I actually am. Still, maybe Aunt Cecile was right. Maybe I was beautiful underneath it all.

ALL DAY LONG, PEOPLE HAD BEEN COMING IN and out of our apartment, bringing us food and juice and talking about how sorry they were and how big I

was getting. Someone even brought by a pound of bacon, two cans of Spam, a dozen eggs, and a loaf of Wonder bread in case we got up in the morning and didn't want to eat the other stuff. Ty'ree and Aunt Cecile took everything everybody brought us and thanked them. I sat in the living room mostly, staring at the television set and wishing everybody would just leave us alone. I wanted Mama to come home. Wanted to hear her coming up those stairs singing that "Me and Bobby McGee" song the way she always did.

Me and Ty'ree were both wearing black suits. Mine was too short at the wrists 'cause Mama had bought it the year before for me to wear on special occasions like school assembly and church. Since there hadn't been that many assemblies and I usually wore pants with a shirt and a tie to church, the suit had hung in my closet until Ty'ree pulled it out the day before Mama's funeral.

They had let Charlie come to the funeral and stay with us for a few hours afterward. When Aunt Cecile saw him with those two guards from Rahway, she crossed herself and pressed her handkerchief against her mouth. Charlie stood real stiff while she hugged him, his eyes sweeping over everybody, checking us all out. There wasn't any feeling in them. Just hard, flat

eyes that didn't belong to the Charlie they had taken away.

"Charlie," I whispered, trying to hold his hand, "Mama *died*."

Charlie snatched his hand away from mine and glared at me. "How come you ain't save her, huh?" he said. "If I was here, I would've saved her."

I stared at the guy standing in front of me. It wasn't Charlie. Charlie would never talk that way—never blame me for anything. This was somebody different. New. Newcharlie.

"I *tried*," I whispered, taking tiny breaths to keep from crying.

"I would've saved her." Newcharlie turned away from me, went over to the corner, and crouched down against the wall. He stayed that way, glaring at his hands.

The two guards watched him the whole time. By the time he had to go, I was relieved. *I didn't kill her*, I kept wanting to say to Newcharlie, but I couldn't. And on the way out of the house, when Newcharlie looked back at me and Ty'ree, then punched the wall, I felt like he was punching *me*. Ty'ree had his arm around me, and when Newcharlie punched the wall, he

pulled me closer. We stood there listening and could hear Newcharlie crying all the way down the stairs.

"Charlie," I whispered. Because he sounded like I remembered, like he did when that dog died. Hurt and small and lonely. "Charlie, don't cry. Please don't cry." His crying sounds kept coming though, but they got softer and softer, moving farther and farther away from us.

"Charlie," I whispered, burying my head into Ty'ree's arm. "Where'd you go, man? Where'd you go?"

SIX

THAT NIGHT, THE NIGHT OF THE DAY WE BURIED Mama, Aunt Cecile sat down in Mama's chair at the table and told me and Ty'ree about her plan to move us back home with her.

"We're already at home," I remember saying.

Aunt Cecile smiled her perfect-teeth smile and shook her head. "You're just two boys," she said. "And Charlie won't be home for at least another two years. When he gets out, he can come on down south too."

"You want to go live down south, Lafayette?" Ty'ree called to me.

I shook my head.

Ty'ree raised his hands and gave Aunt Cecile his St. Ty'ree smile. "Guess we'll be staying here then."

He and Aunt Cecile went back and forth for a long time, Aunt Cecile saying Ty'ree was too young to try to raise me and Ty'ree telling her of his plans to work full-time now that he'd graduated high school.

While they talked, I felt Mama sit down beside me and I laid my head against her shoulder. It was warm and soft and smelled like the honeysuckle oil she liked to put in her hair. But when I looked a few minutes later, it was just an orange pillow underneath my face, the pillow Mama had sewed back up after I had picked a hole in it.

After a while Aunt Cecile went into the kitchen and asked if me and Ty'ree wanted something to eat. We both said yes, and she fixed us each a big plate of food. I ate mine in front of the television halfway listening to Ty'ree and Aunt Cecile talk about how me and Ty'ree would and wouldn't get by living on our own.

Ty'ree had been accepted at MIT. I knew that was good, 'cause people made all kinds of fusses about the

school and about Ty'ree at his graduation. Every time we turned around, he was going up onstage to get another award. He was good in science and stuff. Sometimes he'd take me to the park with him, and I'd get to watch him and his friends launch rockets they'd built. For a long time he'd talked about wanting to work with NASA. After Mama died, he changed his mind about everything. Even stopped going to the park to launch rockets with his friends. Most of the guys he hung with went away to college. Ty'ree had gone to a special high school for smart kids. He was the only guy in our neighborhood to get in. Before Mama died, some guys used to make fun of him and call him Professor. But later on, once he started working full-time and taking care of me, people started showing him respect, saying, "W's up, Ty," when he came home in the evening. Slapping him five and asking after me and Newcharlie. Ty'ree said he didn't really care about not going to college, that keeping his little bit of family together was the most important thing. But once in a while he'd go over and visit some of his old homeboys who were home for Thanksgiving break or Christmas vacation. When he came home those nights, he didn't have much to say, just sat at the dining-room table slowly going through the pages of his high

school yearbook, looking lost. Looking like he'd left something big behind him.

AUNT CECILE STAYED WITH US FOR TWO WEEKS. By the time she left, all of Mama's stuff was gone and Mama's room had become Ty'ree's.

"At least you won't have to fuss about me sleeping on the couch during your Saturday-morning cartoons," Ty'ree had said when he caught me standing in Mama's room looking around for her things.

"I liked you better on the couch," I said. "I liked it better when Mama was sleeping in here. Where's her stuff?"

"Took it down to Goodwill this morning."

I opened the closet door. Ty'ree's basketball sneakers were on the floor where Mama's green sandals used to be. His shirts were hanging where Mama's dresses used to hang. Her black winter coat and yellow wool scarf were gone. I sniffed the closet. It still smelled like her.

"If I had a bad dream, Mama'd let me come sleep with her."

"You can come sleep with me now if you have a bad dream," Ty'ree said.

"It ain't the same, T."

"Do you remember the time she—"

I closed the closet door and looked at Ty'ree, waiting for him to finish. But he just shook his head. The *whole* room still smelled like Mama, like coffee and perfume and . . . It smelled like the way she laughed. Tinkly. It smelled like the memories of her—like how she used to try to hold my hand when we crossed the street. Even when I was nine, she was still trying to hold my hand. And I'd snatch it away from her and frown. Then she'd laugh and pull me to her. Sometimes I let her do that—walk across the street with her arm around my shoulder while men whistled at her and asked if I was her boyfriend. She was real pretty, my mama was. And some Friday nights she'd put on music and me and her would dance and dance. . . .

Me and Ty'ree hadn't cried yet. At the funeral we'd sat up front and let everyone give us hugs and pats on the backs and sorry looks without even flinching. But that day, after we'd put Aunt Cecile on a bus heading back down south, we stood in Mama's room that was now Ty'ree's watching the sun coming in through the window. Ty'ree had left up the flowered curtains Mama'd bought downtown, and for some reason this was sadder than anything to me. It seemed wrong—a

big, blue-plaid boy comforter on the bed and Mama's lady curtains at the window. I went over and rubbed the curtains against my face.

"This is all, huh, T?" I whispered. "This is all we got left of Mama."

Ty'ree shook his head. "Nah, Lafayette," he said. "That ain't all."

I didn't know what he meant but I couldn't ask. My throat was starting to fill up with all the days Mama had been dead and me not crying. All the tears were jamming themselves together and pushing their way out.

Ty'ree came over to me and looked at my face for a minute. Then, without saying anything else, he pulled me to him and we stood there crying until the sun was gone.

SEVEN

I HAD FALLEN ASLEEP ON TY'REE'S SHIRT AND woke to the smell of chicken frying and Ty'ree singing "Me and Bobby McGee" in the kitchen. I could hear him moving around, lifting the covers on pots and getting things out of the refrigerator. I rolled onto my back and thought about the dream I'd just had. Ty'ree and Aunt Cecile had agreed that I'd spend every summer down south with her, and when Newcharlie came home, he'd spend summers there too. The first summer I went, Aunt Cecile had pointed me down a path

that led to a stream chock-full of rainbow trout. I had been dreaming about that stream, about trout jumping up onto the fishing pole Aunt Cecile had given me. In the dream the fish wiggled and wiggled, their rainbow scales flickering in the sun. I pulled a fish off my line and let it dance its last dance against the bank, then put it in a pail half filled with water. I was carrying the fish back to Aunt Cecile, and she was going to fry it up. Then a shadow came over the path, and when I looked up, I saw Newcharlie standing there frowning down at me. He knocked the pail out of my hand and the fish lay on the ground between us, its eyes wide and glassy. When I opened my mouth to say something to him, no words came out, and me and Newcharlie just stood there. That's when I woke up.

It was dark out now, and a steady rain was pinging against the window. I wondered where Newcharlie was, wondered if he'd gotten home yet. I closed my eyes and tried to remember more stuff about what it was like before he went to Rahway. Sometimes me and him would sit out on the stoop waiting for Mama to come home and he'd tell me about girls who liked him and guys who thought they were bad. Sometimes me and him would get to laughing so hard about

something that we couldn't stop. I remember this one day we were laughing like that and Aaron came up to the stoop and asked what we were laughing at. Me and Charlie just looked at each other and busted out laughing even harder. I don't think we even answered Aaron. We probably didn't even have an answer. And sometimes Newcharlie walked down the block with his arm around my shoulder bragging to everybody about how smart I was.

Him and my big brother's gonna be rocket scientists, he'd say. Better watch out, or else I'll get them to send your butt to the moon!

"Mama," I whispered. "Make them send the old Charlie home."

Ty'ree stuck his head in the door. Bright light from the hall came in with him.

"Yo, yo, yo," he said. "Time to get up and eat, sleepyhead."

"What time's it?"

"Little bit after seven. You feel like going to the movies tonight after we eat?"

I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and nodded. "See what?"

Ty'ree shrugged. "I don't know. Figured we'd go downtown to the Quad and see what's playing."

"I don't want to see no art movie. You always want

to take me to see those boring old art movies. Half the time I don't even know what they're about."

Ty'ree shook his head and smiled. "You'll figure it out someday."

"I don't want to figure it out *someday*. I want to see a movie I can figure out while I'm *watching* it. Only reason you asking me is 'cause nobody else'll go with you."

"Only reason I'm taking you to the Quad is 'cause I'm not gonna spend eight fifty on some karate movie or action feature about some outer-space somebody wanting to blow up the Earth."

I grinned. "It could happen, you know. We don't really know about life on other planets."

"And we ain't gonna find out about it tonight. Come on and wash up. I got food almost on the table."

He disappeared out the door, and I got up and went to the bathroom.

Going to the art movies with Ty'ree wasn't really *that* bad. If we saw something that was way deep, he'd always figure out a way to break it down for me.

Ty'ree had fried chicken and made mashed potatoes and corn with red peppers in it. He'd fixed me and him a plate and put two slices of bread on mine because I eat bread with everything.

I sat down at the dining-room table. "We got any soda, T?"

"Ginger ale," Ty'ree called from the kitchen. "You want some?"

I frowned, not even knowing why I asked. It was the only kind of soda Ty'ree bought when he went shopping. If I had some extra money, I'd pick up a big bottle of orange or grape soda. I hadn't had extra money in a while.

"Nah. Just water, please."

Ty'ree came out with two big glasses of ice water and sat down across from me. We ate for a while without saying anything. Ty'ree'd learned to cook from Mama and from reading cookbooks. There were always two or three cookbooks in the bathroom, because he usually read them in there the way most people read the sports section or magazines.

"You say grace?" he asked me.

I closed my eyes. "Thank you, oh Lord and Ty'ree, for getting me something good to eat before I starved to death dreaming of fish. Amen."

When I opened my eyes, Ty'ree was smiling. I smiled back.

"You really dreamed about fish?"

I nodded.

"Aunt Cecile would tell us to play a number," Ty'ree said. "Fish is supposed to mean something. I remember her talking to somebody about it, saying she'd dreamed about fish one night and played whatever number it was and then two days later she hit for like three hundred dollars."

"What number was it?"

Ty'ree shrugged. "Even if I knew, we wouldn't play. Figure if Aunt Cecile hit for three hundred, she must have lost about six hundred—as much as she plays and as little as she hits." Ty'ree picked up his chicken wing, took a bite, and chewed slowly.

"In the dream Newcharlie came along and knocked the bucket of fish outa my hand," I said. "You figure they got a number for brothers knocking fish outa your hand?"

Ty'ree didn't say anything for a minute. He was holding the chicken wing in his hand and had a far-away look about him. I was sorry I had even mentioned it. It was only a stupid dream anyway.

"You know I don't like you calling him that, Laf."

"He calls me worse. And that's who he is anyway. That ain't the same brother left this house that night."

"None of us are."

"But we didn't get *evil*." I stirred my potatoes around on my plate, not wanting to look at him.

"You got quiet," Ty'ree said. "You don't hardly leave the house."

"I hang with Smitty and PJ sometimes and sit on the stoop—"

"You used to *play*, Laf."

"Well, I was a little kid then."

Ty'ree shook his head. "You used to laugh all the time and make jokes and play freeze tag and handball. You used to always have something new to tell me or show me. You used to go to Poncho's and come back with potato chips and soda and go across the street to talk to people."

"Poncho don't want us in there after Charlie robbed him."

Ty'ree looked at me. "You know that's not true."

I stared at my plate. After Newcharlie got home, we all went around the corner to Poncho's and Charlie apologized. Poncho said he didn't hold any bad feelings 'cause Charlie had done his time. *I loved your mother*, Poncho said. *You're welcome here. All of you.*

"I don't like candy and stuff anymore anyway," I said.

"Yes you do, Laf. Don't lie. And what about the other stuff? What about how you used to come home and talk about everything you did and saw—"

"I was just a little kid! Little kids do that stuff."

"Nah," Ty'ree said. "That's not why."

I didn't say anything. Ty'ree thought he knew it all, but he didn't. He didn't know *anything*.

"You changed too!"

"I know. I stuck my head into my job, raising you and Charlie. And Charlie, I don't know. He went somewhere inside himself. You see it. See the way he sits there staring off sometimes."

I nodded, remembering all the times I woke to find Newcharlie sitting on the edge of his bed, with his hands hanging down between his knees, just staring out the window. "What's he thinking about anyway? When he stares like that?"

Ty'ree shook his head. "Maybe Rahway. Maybe Mama. Maybe me and you."

"He's not thinking about me. At least nothing I'd want to get inside his head and hear."

"He say where he was going?" Ty'ree asked.

"Uh-uh."

"He didn't say what time he'd be back either, did he?"

"Nah."

"You rather I put you in my room and share your room with Charlie?"

I looked up at Ty'ree trying to see if he was mad or serious. His face was calm, like he just wanted everything to be over with already.

"Nah. It ain't so bad no more. He don't speak to me is all."

"How come you don't just ignore him? Make like he's not even there."

" 'Cause he wasn't here for years!" I hadn't meant to yell. " 'Cause," I said, almost whispering. " 'Cause I want Charlie back. I want my brother. I want him to see me. And I want him not to think I . . . I was the reason Mama died. I *wasn't* the reason."

Ty'ree frowned and stopped eating. "He still saying that? I told that boy I'd—"

"No," I lied. "He don't say it anymore. But I know he still thinks it."

"Look, Lafayette." Ty'ree rubbed his hand over his head and sighed. "You weren't the reason. Mama had—"

"I should have called somebody! I should have tried to get her breathing again. I just sat there calling to her. Just sat there waiting for her to wake up. And

Newcharlie knows it. He knows I got scared and froze up."

"She was gone before you got there, Lafayette. I don't know what's gonna make you hear that it wasn't your fault."

"Charlie would've known what to do. Like that time with that dog that got hit by the car. He found some cardboard and put the dog on it, real careful 'cause he said the dog might have some broken bones. Then he got me to help him lift the dog over to the sidewalk. He made me call the animal emergency people. I wanted to stay there, but he made me go, told me to run." I looked up at Ty'ree. "By the time I got back, Charlie was holding the dog's head on his lap. The animal emergency people said that was the right thing to do. And then that stupid dog had to go and die anyway."

Ty'ree nodded. Every day Charlie would call the ASPCA to see if that dog was still living. And every night he'd ask Mama if we could adopt it. Mama said no 'cause me and her had allergies, and even if we didn't, our building didn't allow pets. Then one day the ASPCA told Charlie that the dog hadn't made it. That's what the guy said, *The dog didn't make it*, like the dog was on its way someplace or meeting some-

body for lunch. "Didn't make it" is a stupid way to say something died. Charlie stayed in our room all afternoon. When he came out that night, Mama asked him how he was feeling.

Like nothing, Charlie said. I don't feel like nothing anymore.

Now Ty'ree looked at me, waiting for me to say something. I shrugged and stared down at my plate. Mama had been warm that morning. Warm like a person sleeping. Warm like that dog still was when we lifted it over to the curb. And when the stupid doctor told us Mama didn't make it, I felt like nothing, too. Like I could just dry up and disappear.

"I know I told you this a lot of times," Ty'ree said. "And I know other people have said it, too. But I'm gonna keep saying it, 'cause I know you need to keep hearing it. There wasn't anything you could have done, Lafayette."

"Miss Roberts from down the hall came first," I whispered. "I was screaming and she came and banged on the door. I was still screaming, but I got up to let her in."

Ty'ree didn't say anything, so I went on.

"She tried to blow in Mama's mouth. She told me

to call 911. I was crying. I couldn't go at first. I wanted to stay there with Mama."

"But then you went," Ty'ree said.

I looked up at him. "It took them a real long time to come."

"But you called them and they came, Laf. You called them and they came."

Me and Ty'ree sat there staring at our plates. I wasn't hungry anymore. I wanted to be out of the house suddenly, away from that day. I wanted to be in a dark theater somewhere, far away from our apartment. Far away from those men carrying Mama down the stairs while Miss Roberts held me and cried.

"Can we go to the movies now, T?"

Ty'ree nodded. "You want to see a blow-up-the-world movie?"

I shook my head. "Nah. Not really. I don't care if I have to think real hard. No subtitles though. Can stay home to *read*."

I looked up at Ty'ree and he smiled. I tried to smile back, but my lips felt quivery, so I got up and took our plates to the kitchen, wrapped foil around mine, and put it in the refrigerator for later. Ty'ree had pretty much finished his.

I sat on the couch and tried not to think of anything while Ty'ree got dressed. The rain was tapping hard against the window. Like somebody trying to get my attention. Like somebody trying to get inside.