

HALLSTREET MEDIA PRESENTS



# FATHERLESS SONS

A MEMOIR  
ON THE COMMON PLIGHT  
OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN BOYS

BY ROB HALL

The summer my father came home from prison was lazy and hot. Daily activities and free school lunch were over, and time moves more slowly when you're bored and hungry. Mom developed the theory that someone was breaking into the house and stealing food, but I never saw stealthy shadows slipping through the windows. We enrolled in a 4H Summer program and were forced to contend with the masses of other children from the neighborhood. Most of the children were there for the same reason, which was to get whatever food they were willing to give us. Times were a little tougher in our home, but generally tough on everybody.

When the ice cream truck rolled through the neighborhood, we learned pretty quickly not to ask. If anything, Ma was likely to make us come in the house and close the door. She would say something like it was too hot to be out in the sun, or that we had played outside long enough. But she probably just wanted to spare us from having to watch other children getting what we couldn't have.

To make matters worse, the ice cream truck would usually stop right in front of our building because it lie at the very heart of the crescent street. The bedlam created by raucous children vying for position in line happened essentially at our front door. While most children lit up at the song of the ice cream truck, I found it terribly taunting, a relentless reminder of things I didn't want to know, let alone remember. The muffled version of the song that I heard from inside the house blared in my mind nonetheless.

If it was early enough in the month and the ice cream truck came when she still had some change to spare, our mother would sometimes give me three dimes so I could get some push-ups. I remember excitedly clenching the trio of dimes in my fist as I dashed off around the crowd of children at the ice cream truck and across the street. To an outsider looking on, it might have looked like I'd completely missed the mark, but I was actually right on track as I scrambled to the back door of a neighbor's house.

Selling push-ups was a housing projects racket, the summertime side hustle of enterprising welfare moms. The product was assorted flavors of syrupy sweet Kool-Aid frozen in a white Styrofoam cup. Lots of people sold them, so competition was fierce in the marketplace. Sellers competed based on who had the best flavors, used the most sugar, and filled the cup to the top.

I banged on the screen door and placed my order once the inside door opened. Flavors were requested in terms of color and had nothing to do with any particular fruit. I ordered two reds and a green, paid the fee, and took off running again towards home. Part of me was running because I wanted to get home quickly to enjoy the treat; the other part of me was running because I didn't want to get caught alone carrying three fresh push-ups. In the heat of the day, it would be nothing to get beat up and get your push-ups taken.

Once I got home, my sisters would be waiting with expectant eyes and mom would be waiting with three teaspoons. The teaspoon was the weapon of choice for use in gouging sweet slush from the Styrofoam cones. We would all sit on our front stoop and hack away at the sweet frozen ice and, with help from the

warmth of the summer sun, transform it into a cool and colorful frosted pudding. When all was said and done, we were the messiest, stickiest, happiest group of tongue dyed rug rats that anyone had ever laid eyes on.

Some children were not so fortunate as to have their moms around to provide teaspoons and share those blissful moments. They were among those left to roam the neighborhood locked out of their homes while their mothers pursued various other pressing matters. I noticed that those children didn't use spoons to eat their push-ups. They simply hacked away at the ice with their teeth, spitting out bite size Styrofoam chips all over the street as they worked to expose the flavorful frozen rock.

Some children took on an air of superiority based on the idea that they got to have ice cream instead of push-ups. This was one of those times when I could care less. I didn't have ice cream, but I was more than glad just to have something, and to have that something be something good! I had experienced the alternative to having something, firsthand, and this beat that any day. Besides, my day for ice cream was coming sooner than I knew, and the hands that would bring it to me belonged to a heart that I was longing to know.

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Mom spotted him first through the front window of our apartment. She seemed suddenly overwhelmed with a fearful excitement, as if preparing to entertain a monstrous ghost she'd invited over for tea. She locked the doors and pulled the blinds shut, then she stood by the window and peeked through the side of the blind. I stood beside her and peeked through at a lower level of the window frame.

Her hurried movements had sparked my attention. "Oh Lord..." she announced solemnly, "... it's your father." I ran from the window, then to it, in a state of subdued hysteria. From the glum and darkened cavern of our living room, I peered into the light, squinting to get a better look at him walking across the street as his dark glistening figure emerged through dust particle infested sun rays. He seemed to move in slow motion...hulking, black, burly, intent.

He wasn't wearing a shirt, pectorals contracting without focused effort as he rounded the bend of the street. He pimped with a lean as he walked, as if the chip on his shoulder weighed him down on one side. He seemed to stalk his own purpose, taking each step as if with the next he'd lift the earth from its foundations and shake things up a bit. His face was clothed with a full beard and grim countenance.

Every movement exuded the air that he was not a man to be toyed with. His aura was powerful, "too powerful," I thought as I glanced at the bone bulging from my scrawny wrists. He was almost too powerful for me to believe that he was my father. Despite his muscular build and purposeful stride, he remained exceptionally nimble and light on his feet. He slipped out of my sight and through the front door of my grandmother's apartment like a ghost through a wall, and all was still again.

I stepped back from the window reeling from the unbelievable and unexpected sight I'd just witnessed. I'd seen my father, and he made me anxious.

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I suddenly realized that I had no idea how to contend with such an intense masculine energy. What to say? What to do? I hadn't a clue. What would he think of me? Would he love me enough to stay? Or would the ineptitudes that made me a laughing stock at school just drive him away? Would my own father accept me? I wanted him to. I wanted to please him. I wanted him to like me. I wanted him to love me. I wanted him to stay. I wanted to prove to him that I could be his son, and I set my heart on doing it.

Mom left the window engrossed in her own fervor. She paced slowly, and then briskly, and then slowly again. She grumbled and cursed under her breath, and talked to herself aloud...questions, answers, pontifications. In result, the intrapersonal discourse led to her double folding a brown extension cord, wrapping one end around her wrist and hand, so as to wield the cord as a weapon, locking me and my sisters in the apartment and heading across the street to my grandmother's place.

Not fifteen minutes later, she emerged significantly more disheveled than when she went in. Her eyes were wide, red and tearing as she came back in the house and locked the door behind her. She sat on the couch for a long while in silence before announcing that our father was coming to pick us up on the following day. More than twenty five years later, she told me her version of what happened that day in my grandmother's house.

According to her, because people had been breaking into our home and stealing our food, she needed to go to my grandmother's house to ask her if she could borrow twenty dollars to buy something to eat. According to her, when she asked for the money, "it didn't come out right." I imagine this means that she cursed grandma out while asking for the money and threatening to whip her with the extension cord, but I really don't know. According to her, my father had roared at her, ordering her to sit down, and shoved her down into a chair with such force that she was scared to death. This much I believe to be accurate...but she got the money.

The next day our father came to pick us up in a van. His demeanor was much nicer than I'd imagined it would be based on first sight. He was macho and cool, but kind and charismatic. I'd grown more comfortable with seeing him because I'd watched him on multiple occasions during the previous day as he walked back and forth between my grandmother's apartment and the parking lot behind our building. The buildings were situated such that I could watch him come out of my grandma's front door through our front window, and once he crossed the street and disappeared along the side of our building I could run through the house and to the back kitchen window in time to see him moving through the parking lot.

I'd studied his every move and twitch. The way he stood and leaned as he slid the key into the driver's side door of my grandmother's car; the way he swiftly slammed the trunk shut, more of his signature gait, I'd studied it all. Everything he did was smooth and easy, yet authoritative and decided. Class was in session, and I was taking notes.

But now we were with him, and the word that best describes the way I felt is...happy. I was just plain happy. Happier than I could ever remember being. So happy that nothing else seemed to matter. So happy I could cry. My father spoke to us as we motored down the street on the way to Friendly's restaurant for ice cream, but I was so happy I couldn't hear him. He said something about having a motorcycle and a bunch of other stuff, but I was so happy, I didn't care. All I knew was that I had my daddy. Not just a daddy, but my daddy.

Everybody has a daddy, but only the blessed few from my neighborhood ever got to possess him. I spent most of those few hours in a stupor because I thought I was in a wonderful dream and might wake up at any minute if I made a wrong move. Although he was talking much of the time, I was so out of it, so caught up in the euphoria that I can't really remember a word he said. What I do recall is that I had a ball.

My daddy had come and taken me to Friendly's for ice cream and then to a toy store where I'd picked out a kite. At that age, I had a complete fascination with anything that could fly, and a kite seemed to properly signify the free flowing emotion that I was feeling.

The kite had to be put together from a kit contained in a colorful plastic bag, and my father said that he couldn't do it that day, but he would come back soon and help me put it together, so we could fly it together. It was music to my ears.

When we pulled up in the parking lot behind our apartment, and our dad let us out, I ran to the back door, banged on it as hard as I could and fell joyfully into my mother's arms when she answered. The frame of the kite was just about as tall as me, so that I had to hold the bag in the air as I ran. This was the only way for me to keep from dragging it across the ground, or tripping over it and crushing it under my weight.

I streaked across that parking lot holding the bag in the air like an Olympic runner with a flaming torch. That kite was my trophy and my triumph. It meant that I had met my daddy and he liked me. If all the kids at school didn't like me, it didn't matter, 'cause my daddy liked me. He loved me; he cared for me. He had come back, and best of all, he was going to stay. The kite was proof that he was going to stay. He was going to come back and help me put it together, then he was going to show me how to fly it. I knew it because he told me so, and I had the kite right here in my hands to prove it. It was a real kite; he was my real dad; I was his real son. None of it was a dream or a fantasy.

I was delirious with joy, an inner city pauper who'd won the lottery, a western hillbilly who'd struck oil. Mere words could not express, and my young heart could not contain, the powerful emotions I felt. My mind could not reconcile the uncontrollable smile on my face with the tears swelling in my eyes.

I was so embarrassed that I rushed upstairs with my kite to the empty back bedroom. Never before had I known tears of joy, but on that day, staring alone out of a second floor window, I met them.

I stared into nothingness and relived the precious moments with my father in my heart, contemplating the wonderful days that were to come, sometimes

glancing toward the kite bag that I'd balanced gingerly against the wall in the corner of the empty room. My daddy was my prize and my pride, my cloud's silver lining, my dawn after the dark. No matter what I'd been through, no matter what pain I felt, my daddy made it all better. And, in my mind, he'd accomplished all of this in one day, with a few hours, an ice cream cone, and a kite. With baited breath, I waited for my father's return and dreamt of our future together.

I waited for days, but he did not come. I asked my mother but she had no answers. I asked my grandmother, but she just made excuses. I easily understood that the amorphous responses I was getting weren't answers at all. As days turned into weeks, and I gazed out the window toward the last place that I'd seen him, longing desire became listless dejection.

It couldn't all have just been a lie. The very contemplation of believing that was too much to bear. But no one was talking, and he wasn't showing, so I didn't know what to think. Why wasn't he coming back? What did I do wrong? I had tried my best to be a good son during those few hours. I was good. I didn't do anything bad. He had to be coming back. Something must've happened, but my Dad would take care of it, and he had to be coming back.

I *thought* that he had to be coming back, but I was full of uncertainties that I didn't have the strength to face. I preferred the comfort of denial, but in reality I was devastated. I turned my attention intently toward the kite, it was the embodiment of my hope that he would return, and it was the only part of his presence that I could still reach out and touch. I became fiercely protective of that kite; it belonged to me and my dad. I didn't want anyone else to touch it, not my mom, not my sisters, not anybody. As long as I held onto that kite, I couldn't lose the father I'd never had...again.

By then the bag was already open, the result of my restless inspection on a day when waiting didn't seem to be enough. I somehow deluded myself into believing that my dad wanted me to put the kite together in preparation for his return. The problem was that the assembly instructions were still kind of difficult for me. I studied the pictures and struggled to put it together for hours on end. My mom tried to offer her help, but I didn't want it. Again, this project was between me and my dad and no one else was allowed to participate...especially not a girl.

Eventually, I'm sure my mom did succeed in assisting me, but I resented her involvement so much that I was inclined to ungratefully snatch it from her hands as if she were getting in my way, and I could've done it better and faster without her.

Once the kite was assembled, there was nothing left to do but fly it. I sprang from the front door with the magnificent bird in hand, my mom and sisters not far behind me. We headed into the grassy play area next to our building and, with them as my audience, I performed my first feat of kite flying. Letting out just a few feet of string, I ran fast enough for it to take flight atop the stiff but temporary current of air I'd created. As soon as I stopped running, the kite

stopped flying and in a deflated flop, it fell to the ground. Fortunately, I didn't mind running.

My kite attracted a lot of attention. I don't think that many folks in the projects had ever seen one in real life. The more attention it drew, the higher I wanted it to fly. The higher I wanted it to fly, the more string I had to let out. The more string I had to let out, the faster and farther I had to run in order to keep it in the air. I was literally running out of real estate fast, and the little play area was not cutting it.

As days went by and I got better at flying, I started begging my mother to let me fly the kite in the barren fields of concrete, rocks, sand, gravel and broken glass by the railroad tracks behind our building. The area began just across the back street and extended right up to the railroad tracks, and there was no fence or partition to keep me from venturing into the path of a barreling train. Mom was dead set against the idea, but I badgered her into a reluctant yes. She could watch me from the play area or even our back door, and she did, like a hawk...for a while.

But as time went on and a sense of normalcy set in, she relented. At first she would stand on the grassy side of the back road shouting warnings across the street and setting limitations..."Watch where you're going!"... "Stay closer to the road!"..."That's too far!"..."Don't move!" she shouted as I all but skated through the rocks and gravel furiously tugging and letting my line.

With my eyes fixated skyward, I was liable to run or step into just about anything that happened to be in my path, often failing to notice the protruding projections of rusted nails and seas of glass shards that she so deftly guided me through. The one danger that I couldn't help but notice was the trains. The vibrations and quaking of the earth, the rumbling of the buildings around the tracks, and most tellingly, the unfettered, blaring and raspy screech of the whistle signaled the danger.

Subsidizing all of that was my mother's urgent command not to move. As if I would otherwise disregard all other sensory input and bolt for the tracks. But in time, she went from shouting by the curb to sitting in the kitchen, as she peered out the window to make sure I was still out there hours later.

The time I spent flying my kite by the railroad tracks became my bastion of solitude. It was my time to be alone with the memory of my father; my time to wish and pray for his return while gazing into a sky of endless possibilities. It was my time to hope in lengths of silence broken only by the sound of my own feet brushing through beaches of stone and the occasional snap of the kite as it caught in the gusts of Adirondack wind. I got better at flying that kite, but worse at allaying the pang in the pit of my stomach whenever I thought of my father.

Being abandoned again seemed to hurt more than if he'd never come home in the first place. I felt no insult, just added injury, alcohol and salt to an already wounded heart. It was worse than the embarrassment of school children jeering, it was worse than the pain of an empty stomach rumbling. Those were social and physical pains that could be alleviated at times, in the silence of an empty bedroom, or at our monthly Mother's Day dinner of fried chicken, sweet

corn and buttered rice. But the emotional pain of my father's abandonment seemed to never let up, a relentless reminder of my gross inferiority and ineptitude. His absence crushed me.

Nevertheless, I flew the kite for him. I flew that kite with all of my might. I pulled it along as I ran with all of my strength. I flew that kite until the edges were tattered and worn from countless crashes into the rocks and the tail was soiled from streaming through the clouds of dust that I kicked up. I flew that kite until I got good at it, all on my own, hoping for the sake of hope that one day my dad would pull up in that parking lot and see how his son had mastered the proverbial pastime of hanging a colorfully painted paper thin bird in the heavens. I thought surely he would be proud of me then.

But just as surely as all good things come to an end, the day eventually came when my flying companion lost all vertical lift and came careening toward the earth for the very last time. I had a moment of silence in the whistling wind as I stood by the railroad tracks holding in hand the remains of my felled fowl. She was dead. He was dead. I took a deep breath and tried to let it all go before starting the lonely trudge back home. Not far to walk, but I could drag it out if I walked slowly enough. I dug down deep... a reluctant smile found my face. "He would get me a new one", I thought. "That's exactly what's going to happen...my Dad is going to come back and buy me a new kite and then I'll show him what I can do!" Again I found a spring in my step, the trudge turned into a trot.

I had to get home quickly to announce the good news to my mama. "Mommy, I broke my kite but my daddy's gonna get me a new one when he comes back!" She offered a wry smile. "Oh baby, wouldn't that be nice," she said as I scurried to the playroom in search of something else to do. Everything else was dead, and I needed to keep some hope alive in order for my heart to survive. I think she understood it and let me ride. But it was a naïve boy's foolhardy hope, destined and doomed to die a slow and painful death.

Eleven long winters would pass and the death angel would descend upon my grandmother before the paths of my father and his namesake would cross again. The physical reality of the boy would be gone, and the hope of love from his father, that once burned as a raging fire within would become smoldering ashes and attenuated wisps of smoke precariously positioned to be whisked away by cold Adirondack winds...the same winds that once gave rise to the hopes and dreams of a fatherless child in the valiant stand of a fantastic kite.