

## Back To School (excerpt from "Caleb")

Back to school September. The fact that September was like a mini-Christmas was sort of a consolation for the death of summer. Labor Day was most bittersweet. Caleb found it hard to revel in the barbecue and punch ball. As fun as it could get, it signaled the end of something of lots really. His praying manthis Samantha was already moving slow, she was getting old. In a month she would be dead. She had not laid any eggs and so there would be know straw colored daughters to console him for the loss. Slow mornings that were brushed by the sun's kiss hours before the heat and weight of the day set in. He might fill a bowl of Alpha Bits and read about beetles in his World Book encyclopedia, then watch reruns of The Munsters. Gone. As was Lefty, the slew footed boy from down the block who stayed with his father every summer.

So when his mother convinced his father to stop by Aunt Dee Dees after back-to-school shopping, he was ready. They stopped at a department store . His father would have no part of most shopping especially for clothes. He knew that this one of those areas where Sienna found it impossible to compromise. And since he would not be involved in any activity where his own opinion did not count he could not see the point of going. He wanted to have more father and son time more rituals for Caleb and him but this would not be one of them. Caleb felt the tingling, the first stirrings of joy when he could see the back-to -school sale signs that covered the windows. The tannish pink little boy in the window was frozen in the midst of what might have become a smile or a word spoken. Caleb regarded him as what little boys what he was supposed to look like. He was a pretty little boy with stubbornly thin lips that were the pinkest pink he had ever seen. The kind of pink you might see only on Easter Sunday. And he held aloft the reddest ball he had ever seen. It was red like the planet Mercury in the solar system set in Mr. Irby's science lab red. At his feet was a set of neatly stacked books with no titles or pages. And he held the reddest red ball up with an arm cocked to throw. It made him happy to see this little boy which could be him. If things were different. If he were different. What a good little boy he was. He had his books with him so he did not play hookey like Derrick. And he had friends. Other good little boys to throw a ball to. But he did not forsake his education. It was so important to him that he managed to carefully lay his books down before he picked up the red red ball. His father must have told him. Perhaps he too had a father that told him a mind is a terrible thing to

waste. His father might have been one of beige colored men with beige hair and the next window over. These men who unlike his father were always happy whether they were in their white shirt and tie or running with both hands in their pockets. He must have liked his job 'cause he was always there but he never looked happy about going to work. These men looked like they were going to the park in their black, blue and grey suits. He wanted his daddy to be happy like these invincible men. He wanted to make Daddy happy. So that he could smile more when he was around. And now he knew. The answer was evident. It was in the sunshine that sprayed from all those bright beige faces. They told him their secret.

Everybody was having such a good time that last Saturday night before school. He figured it was one of the best times of the year for everybody. It was the beginning of the school year so nobody had gotten into any trouble yet. It was like the one good thing about going back was that you started fresh. Everybody got a new chance, a fresh start. So Aunt Dee Dee was not yet fussin about Arlette spending too much time with boys and not enough on books. Daddy wasn't fussing with him about spending too much time with books and not enough time "being a boy".

But for that night everything was just fine. All the grown ups were in the kitchen and the kids were in his cousin Arlette's room. All was as it should be. From there, Caleb could hear that Mommy was in a good mood. She loved bid whist. She kept talking about being trump tight. He liked the way she would snap her trump down whenever she had a good hand. Daddy would have his mouth stuck out til Uncle Carl said something low that he wasn't supposed to hear. Next thing Uncle Carl and Daddy both laughing and hitting at the edge of the table like they both lost their mind. But they were still losing."

We got lotsa back to school clothes from Mays Y'all wanna see? Derrick's question was really a demand as he didn't care whether anyone really wanted to see her show off his new clothes. He was intent on remaining the center of anyones attention. Envy he found particularly delicious. He could detect it no matter how thickly it may be coated with fluffy compliments. He had already heard his aunts sienna mention to aunt Bernie how she would have to wait til next week so he knew that caleb had not seen a stitch of new anything and school was less than a week away. Caleb would be wearing old

clothes the first day back because his mother waited till the last minute to catch the good sales. Derrick shared his grandmothers dependable disapproval of her youngest girl. He thought his aunt was too stupid and lazy to be a mother and only pretended to respect her in front of his grandmother. As often as his grandmother belittled his aunt, she was hers alone to pick at. She would never let any child openly disrespect any adult no matter how richly they deserved it, not even her Sienna. "Don't you mean May cees," caleb snapped. But by then Derrick had already scuttled off to his sister's room. Caleb liked showing up Derrick every now and then even though it often backfired. When it came to the dozens he was no match for derrick's wit or his meanness. Arlette whom he adored stepped into it. "No caleb, now see? He's talking about Mays, you know, the big store on Jamaica Ave." She was really trying to save him from an inevitable payback. Derrick would not let any insult go without a cost. Caleb didn't mind the correction coming from her. She was the oldest of the cousins and the cutest. The rest could be fickle and cruel forming alliances only if they paid off quickly and fully. Like the stray cat that ate the food Caleb left for it on the porch but clawed at him for opening the door before it finished the meal he gave it. "See," derrick sang as he laid before them the bounty of knit sweaters and handsome dress shirts folded and covered in neat plastic squares. Then there were Arlette's mini skirts, pastel knit tops and multi colored blouses that reminded caleb of the oak leaves in grandmas back yard. So many more colors and patterns in Arlette's pile than Derricks. A chorus of oohs and ahhs followed. Others chirped in each one topping the other with tall tales that reached far past their parents means. "I'm gonna get me 5 leather jackets one for each day." Lared beamed out. He slapped caleb five. Lared was calebs favorite of all the boys to wrestle with. Their joy whipped itself higher and louder. Boasts, lies and gossip were spat out fed upon, regurgitated and scavenged. These happy little birds made themselves dizzy. Occasionally one or two would plop on the bed, doubled over, holding their laughter cramped bellies, panting for breath. It was then that he said it out loud even though he was talking to himself. "Sometimes I wish I were a girl cause girls get to wear such nice things." It sounded funny to Caleb when it came out of his mouth, but since none of them said anything back, he figured perhaps he was not the only boy who felt that way. Perhaps they too envied the girls for their world of beauty and color, a world that boys were not allowed to enjoy. Caleb hid his joy in this world. By the edge of thirteen, he had known that this was forbidden to him although no one could tell him why. Not even his mother. His inquiries were met with one eyebrow raised or both wrinkled. They shook their heads and tsked tsked that no one told

him that not only was he to enjoy girlish things, he was not to ask why. “I know you ready for school Caleb, Arlette said with that smile of hers. “I think they must’ve dropped you on your head once too many.” Shut up. But no really there is nothing wrong with that I think its good that you like school. Just don’t tell anybody you’re related to me. No seriously, its great. Cause when you go off to college and get all those big degrees, you can come back and buy your big cousin a big house with a swimming pool and a ballroom floor.” He laughed at the thought of himself grown and fancied himself driving his mother to the mall in a sparkling new red corvette. She and daddy would be so proud of what a man he had become and they would tell grandma and everyone how grown he was. And Derrick would be his friend and want to ride in his corvette. And he would let him and forget about all the mean things derrick had done when they were still kids. “What you thinking about? You promise you’ll come back?” Yes, he said truthfully. Besides his mother, she was his favorite girl. He thought that she really should have been his girlfriend instead of his cousin anyway. She had more sense than any girl he knew and he liked the things that she liked unlike the boys who were after her all the time who only wanted to do the nasty with her. “I promise” he pledged. If she were his girlfriend he would marry her and kiss her every night when he came home from work and never make her do the nasty and they would go out dancing every night. Derrick walked up behind his sister smiling. He hung his head just over her shoulder and said “Uncle Corliss wants to see you in the living room. “Ooooh the warning cry sounded. A kid being called into the living room usually meant either high praise or severe reprimand. It was understood that swift punishment would be likely be executed at home following deliberation in the Saturday night high court he now faced. He told himself that Derrick was probably playing yet another trick on im. But it didn’t stop him from feeling like a con walking to the electric chair. As he took the long narrow hall leading toward the livng room, Stevie Wonder was singing, “I was born in Little Rock, had a childhood sweetheart.” They were at the card table so they must have been in the middle of a game. His skin was hot and itchy. His father called him to his side and placed his hand flatly along calebs shoulder. “Did you say that you wanted to be a girl?” His father measured each word, like the perfect discs of batter he lowered onto hot grease on Sunday mornings. If he explained himself that that’s not what he really meant. That he only wanted to wear all kinds of cool things then his father and he would laugh it off. And so would the others. Only tattletale Derrick would be mad that he didn’t get a beating. “Yeah, I did.” He heard a sigh but he kept looking straight into his fathers eyes. His fathers eyes were wide open and

trained on him. Caleb knew then that it would be alright. That his father was ready to understand what he had to say. He felt his head cooling and a peacefulness came over him. "See" he began, "Everybody was talking about all the clothes they got and I just said that girls get to wear neat things. That's all." His father shook his head and looked down at the floor between Caleb's feet. It was a sudden burst of light and heat that raised him. Only after his elbows hit the hardwood hallway floor did the left side of his face felt like it was missing. He thought it was a bomb. One of his aunts shrieked. His left eye was shut and stinging but through his right eye he could see has no longer in the living room. He looked for his father to see if he was okay. He recognized his fathers shoe inches away from his hand but before he could reach for him someone began beating his head so hard his body tossed from one side to the next. One blow after the other. He thought it was not going to stop. His mother screamed out daddy's name. Then the men came. They sounded like horses galloping and thunder. The sound of hard leather scraping against polished wood and shoulders and backs pounding against walls. The blows lessened except for an occasional scrape or pull at his shoulder." "C'mon man, let the boy go now. That's enough." Then it stopped as suddenly as it started. "Get up!" he heard him say. Daddy was out of breath and his voice cracked like he was about to cry." He was too scared to stand but he thought if he stayed Daddy would start in again. He looked back into his father's eyes out of his good eye. Daddy took a long breath. "Get out of my sight." He managed to stand up. As long as the walk toward the living room was, the walk back to the kitchen was much longer. The kids were all in Arlettes room talking about what they had just heard. He thought if he saw Derrick he would try to kill him, and if he did Derrick would surely beat him. He had had enough, so he stayed in the kitchen. He poured a glass of Kool Aid and put the cold sweating glass against his throbbing left cheek. He didn't hear her come up behind him but he smelled grandmas perfume before she spoke. "You alright?" She knelt down and hugged him. Even though the perfume peppered his nostrils he kept his face tucked into her bosom til she lifted it by the chin. "Your daddy should not have hit you. You know your father loves you. Right? Right? Well anyway he does love you. He just went overboard tonight. Sometimes Caleb, sometimes a father has to love his son with hardness. He can't be soft always like mothers, especially like your mother. If you never knew whether your father loves you. You should know that now. That he was willing to beat some sense into you in front of all of us. He just got carried away. You know why. Because he is a strong man who loves his little boy more than anything in the whole world. And he wants his boy, he needs his boy to grow up strong like him.

He knows that his son depends on him to show him how to do that. Mothers can't do that Caleb. That's why you got a daddy. "