

ECHO BROWN

BLACK
GIRL
UNLIMITED

The Remarkable Story of a Teenage Wizard

Christy Ottaviano Books

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY | NEW YORK

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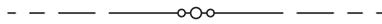
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For Day Day

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I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain



—MAYA ANGELOU
(*“Still I Rise”*)

LESSON 1

Building the Perfect Shell

My mother is a wizard. Wizards can freeze time and sit on ceilings. My mother isn't doing either of those things right now, however, because she's passed out on the bathroom floor, where she's been all day. I can see her bare brown ass; it's protruding awkwardly in the air since her pants are down, ruffled around her ankles. I'm embarrassed for her. I want simultaneously to cover her and to cuddle up next to her. I have tried to wake her up. She is needed in this moment. The smoke is pouring into the apartment through the windows and looks like thunderclouds, dark and puffy. Both my brothers are in their cribs in the next room crying. Screaming. Coughing. I keep hoping my mother will pop up off the floor somehow, perform one of her miracles, and save us all from the smoke. I have tried, but I am only six and I don't know if I'm a wizard like my mother. In fact, the only special power I seem to have is rising from the dead.

I rise from the dead every morning, excited to go to school. School is no ordinary place; it is an extraordinary place for extraordinary little boys and girls. At least that's what my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Jackson-Randolph, tells us. We begin every morning by twirling on the magic carpet. It's old and falling apart like the rest of our school, but Mrs. Jackson-Randolph says we shouldn't focus on the negatives; we should search for the positives in every situation so we don't become bitter or discouraged. When the ceiling tiles leak during a big storm, or our toys fall apart, or a mouse darts across the classroom, Mrs. Jackson-Randolph shouts, "But look at how much of the ceiling isn't leaking! Look how many toys we still have! We are blessed and bountiful!" We shriek with glee. We clap. She is right, we still have so much. I know that even more is on the way thanks to the wishes we make while twirling on the magic carpet.

Every morning, we twirl and twirl around one another until Mrs. Jackson-Randolph tells us to "Freeze!" Then we all freeze in whatever position we find ourselves. "Now make a wish," Mrs. Jackson-Randolph says. "Think about someone you really, really love and make a wish for them. We shouldn't only wish for things for ourselves. We also have to think about others." I'm happy to wish for someone else this time since I have already wished everything for myself: a pink motorized Barbie truck that I can drive down the sidewalk like I see the girls do in the commercials on TV; an Easy-Bake Oven so I can make cakes like my mother does; more red bows and ponytail holders so I can make my hair look better (it never

looks right); and lots of crayons, markers, and colored pencils so I can color all the coloring books in the world.

I make other wishes also, secret wishes, but don't tell anyone about those. Like wishing I was just a little more light-skinned like my best friend, Jessie Stewart. Jessie and I hold hands, walk to school together, and sit next to each other in class. I only just met Jessie at the beginning of the school year, but we have already become like brother and sister. When Mrs. Jackson-Randolph isn't looking, we pass candy and make funny faces at each other. Sometimes we even cover our ears and scream at the top of our lungs to see if our voices can reach all the way to outer space where the aliens live. Maybe they will hear us and come twirl with us on the magic carpet. We wonder what wishes the aliens would make. Mrs. Jackson-Randolph does not like when we scream and wrinkles her face while telling us to use our inside voices. We nod yes, but start screaming again as soon as she turns around. Screaming, like yawning and sneezing, is contagious. Soon, almost everyone in the class starts screaming, including my two other friends, Tiffany and Davante. None of us can out-scream Tiffany. Her high-pitched shrills cause Mrs. Jackson-Randolph to cover her own ears and shout, "Enough!" We all stop midscream, mouths wide open, and stare awkwardly around the room at one another until she tells us to close our little pie holes.

"But I don't like pie, so mine gotta be anotha kinda hole, don't it?" says Davante, who always has something smart to say. Mrs. Jackson-Randolph slowly turns around and stares

intensely at Davante, until he lowers his eyes in shame. No one says another word.

Davante's parents are Black Panthers. I don't know exactly what that means, but they have large Afros and are always dressed in black, including black sunglasses, which they keep on all the time, even inside the school when they pick up Davante. I wonder if they always wear sunglasses because they secretly don't have eyes. People without eyes would be scary, so I hope they never take off the sunglasses if they really don't have eyes. The sunglasses inside are not the only strange thing about Davante's parents. They also raise their fists all the time, like they're going to punch someone, but I never see them hit anyone. Davante raises his fist like his parents, but only sometimes, like on picture day.

I wish Jessie, Mrs. Jackson-Randolph, Davante's Black Panther parents, or any of my friends were here right now to help stop the smoke and save us. I stare at my brothers in their cribs. I put my hands through the bars and pat their foreheads to try to get them to stop crying, but tears are pouring out of their eyes and their little arms and legs are shaking. They know something is wrong, too. I am shaking like my brothers. There is a pinching in my throat, like someone is squeezing it closed so no air can get in. I have only felt like this one other time, when Tiffany and I almost drowned at the beach.

Mrs. Jackson-Randolph takes us on a class field trip to see the gray lighthouse at Lake Erie. "Each of us is a lighthouse,"

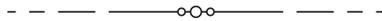
Mrs. Jackson-Randolph says, “shining our light and purpose out into the world. Your purpose can be as big and vast as the water in front of you. It’s never too early to start thinking about what you want to do in this world, deep down in your heart. Whatever it is, make sure it helps other people in some way. We have to take care of each other.” When Mrs. Jackson-Randolph says this, Tiffany grins and gives me a big hug. I squeeze her back tightly until she starts squirming. If I had a sister, I imagine she would probably look like Tiffany. I stare at the lighthouse across the water, close my eyes, and scrunch my face up trying to look inside my brain to see what my purpose is, but I can’t think of anything. My mother is always saying, “This ain’t no place for a girl chile. Lawd, I prays fo da day when someone heps da lil girl chiles of dis worl’, ’specially da black ones.” I don’t know why the “lil girl chiles” need so much help, but maybe that can be my purpose, to help the other “lil girl chiles.” I’m not sure yet. I will have to scrunch my face up and look inside my brain again to see if there are any answers in there.

When Mrs. Jackson-Randolph isn’t looking, a few of us run excitedly toward the water, trying to get to the lighthouse and see for ourselves what’s inside. We sprint ahead until Mrs. Jackson-Randolph yells at the top of her lungs, “Stop!” Everyone freezes except me and Tiffany. We can’t stop. The water calls us forward as we try to outrun each other, splashing and splashing. I look over and see that Tiffany, my almost-sister, is laughing and smiling just like me, until the water begins to swallow us, pulling us way down. Tiffany’s

smile disappears, and she starts frantically flapping her arms, screaming, "Help! Help!" Suddenly, the sun moves from behind a cloud and shines brightly in our direction. I can see Tiffany's illuminated wet face bobbing up and down in the water. She stops screaming and struggling and stares right up into the sunlight. It's so bright I can't look at it, but Tiffany's eyes are focused upward and she doesn't look afraid anymore.

But I am. I try to scream for help for both of us, but I can't because I'm choking. My chest is full of water and my throat is pinched closed. I can barely breathe, even after Mrs. Jackson-Randolph pulls us to shore.

I can barely breathe right now because of the fear and the smoke, which is swallowing me and my brothers, just like the water at the beach. Now I know that it's not only the water that can take your breath. I wonder what happens when you stop breathing.



On picture day, we all buzz around school like honeybees returning to the hive. We are ecstatic to be dressed up and leaving class one hour early. When the time finally arrives, we bolt down the hallway to the cafeteria, where bleachers, cameras, and special lights have been set up. Everyone looks pretty on picture day, especially Jessie. All the girls circle around him, trying to touch his soft hair. Tiffany grabs Jessie's hand

and pulls him away from the girls, saying he's her "baby." She says it like a mother would say about their child, but we all know she means boyfriend. I want Jessie to be my boyfriend, like all the other girls in the class do, but Tiffany is bigger and stronger than all of us so I guess she can have him.

My mother calls Jessie "the little high-yellow boy that lives 'round the corna on Foster Street." Jessie is the only high-yellow kid in the class. The rest of us range in color from caramel to dark brown, like wet dirt. Everyone says Jessie has "that good hair" because he's mixed with black and white. His hair is curly and falls in thick black ringlets down the sides of his face. He looks like he could be Middle Eastern or Latino. I ask my mother repeatedly if I can get a relaxer so my hair can look like Jessie's. Tiffany already has a relaxer, and now her hair is silky smooth and not knotted and nappy like mine. My mother thinks I'm too young to get a relaxer and tells me to stop asking her about it. Even though she says no, I still wish for a relaxer every morning on the magic carpet.

When it's time to take the class picture, we all stand, wobbling and smiling on the bleachers. Jessie stands next to me and grabs my hand, like he always does. Tiffany tries to kiss Jessie on the cheek, like she always does, but he turns his face in disgust. Davante raises his fist like his parents, which blocks the faces of two people standing behind him. Mrs. Jackson-Randolph shakes her head when she looks at the photo on the cameraman's camera and says we will have to take another one. This time we must stand still, look directly ahead, and smile proudly. We nod yes, but when the photographer says "One,

two, three . . . cheese!” we sprint around the bleachers, make funny faces, and hug and hit each other. After eight pictures, Mrs. Jackson-Randolph finally gets one she’s satisfied with. Frazzled and exhausted, she walks us outside to where our parents are waiting. The end of the school day is a relief for all of us. We scatter, like marbles in a pinball machine, into the arms of our parents. My mother doesn’t gallop, like most of the men in my neighborhood, but instead streaks forward with the fury of a thousand panthers, grabs my and Jessie’s hands, and drags us along the concrete sidewalk all the way home.

As soon as we get home, it’s reading time, which is a very special time. My mother opens the pink box sitting on the dresser with the black spinning ballerina inside who twirls to the song “What a Wonderful World” and has a bright white light in the middle of her stomach, which my mother says symbolizes the light we all have inside. I don’t see any lights inside myself or anyone else, so I don’t know what she’s talking about. My mother says she will let me have the pink ballerina box when I’m old enough not to break it. Once everything is quiet and cozy, my mother gathers Jessie and me in the big armchair and reads several of the books piled by the chair. Books like *Green Eggs and Ham*, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, and *The Cat in the Hat*. Reading time is my favorite. I can’t read yet, but I love listening to the adventures of all the characters in the stories. Plus, reading time is really the only time my mother softens. Her voice and eyes grow warm, and

she kisses us on the forehead after each story. I secretly wish reading time would never end.

Staring down at my mother unconscious on the floor, I think about who will bring me home after school and read to me if she doesn't get up. My stepfather is never around, and Jessie's parents are very mean. What if no one takes me to school again? I will miss all my friends and Mrs. Jackson-Randolph. I look intently at my mother and begin to worry that she is dead.



I have seen only one other dead person in my life, at Mr. Casey's funeral last year. I ask my mother why he isn't moving. Why he won't get up out of the box in front of the church. My mother calls the box a "casket" and says he won't get up because "he's dead and gone to the in-between wit' da rest of da ancestors. He ain't neva comin' back ta dis worle."

I tell my mother I die every night also, but I've never seen Mr. Casey in my dreams.

"Sleepin' ain't da same thang as dyin', chile. You don't neva wake up when you dead and gone."

I feel sad that Mr. Casey will never wake up again. He used to give me and my brothers candy every time he saw us and say, "Children are the bravest of all, so they deserve special,

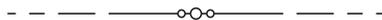
sweet treats,” and pat us on the head. And now he’s gone to the in-between, which is a place I have never been, but my mother says we will all go there one day. I hope not anytime soon. I’m still getting used to this world.

I want to ask her what the in-between is, but the pastor starts preaching all about Mr. Casey’s life and accomplishments. Mr. Casey’s family starts whooping and hollering all around the church. It sounds like the feral cats that roam the streets by our apartment when they are in heat. One of Mr. Casey’s relatives runs up to his coffin and throws her whole body over the casket while yelling in a shrill, high-pitched voice, “Why? Why? Why ya hafta take ’im so soon?”

My mother shakes her head and says, “So soon? Lawd, dat man was ninety-three years old. I don’t know why people’s got to be so dramatic and act a damn fool. Jus’ be wantin’ attention.”

I watch the ushers work to pull away three people who have made their way to the front of the church. They continue their feral-cat screaming and claw feverishly at Mr. Casey’s casket. I wonder if all funerals are this chaotic.

Right now, my mother looks like Mr. Casey did in his casket that day. I tell her that she can’t go to the in-between yet. She is still needed here. I tell her I wished for her at school today on the magic carpet. I wished that she would take down her shell more often and show us the warm parts underneath.



My mother has had her shell since she was a little girl like me. She spent years “gettin’ it jus’ right and makin’ doubly sho it was strong enough,” which is why she never likes to take it down. I am shocked when I find out my mother wasn’t born with her shell—that she had to learn how to build it. Being a wizard is not what you think. In fact, it requires serious training. The first lesson is how to build a shell. My mother is a master at this. She flips a switch and—*bam!*—she’s gone. A million miles away. And what’s left is a hard shell. She started developing this shell when she was a young girl, after her uncle started doing bad things to her in the bathroom in the middle of the night. I ask her what things he did, but she tells me not to worry about it because those things will never happen to me. I’m glad. I don’t want bad things to happen to me, either.

The bad things happened from the time she was my age until she was ten. Every time he came to her room late at night, she would hide under the covers. She would pull them up over her head and wish she was invisible. (Unfortunately, wizards don’t have the power of invisibility.) Her uncle would come and carry her to the bathroom and do the bad things. She would leave her body and sit on the ceiling until he finished. Leaving her body wasn’t enough, however. At the end, she always had to come back down because “you cain’t stay on the ceiling foreva,” she said. She would cry alone in her bed after it was all over, her small body sulking and shaking in the dark.

So she learned how to build a shell around herself. When

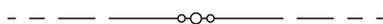
she put the shell up, she didn't feel anything, and that's what she needed to protect her warm parts inside. She knew that the shell would have to be hard enough to keep out the rest of the bad things coming her way. She didn't make just any shell. She made a double-layered shell that was impenetrable. Airtight.

The shell couldn't stop the sinking, however. My mother said she sank all the way down to the bottom of herself, after what her uncle did to her. "So fuh down, my mama had to come get me and brang me back, but I don't wanna talk 'bout huh, my mama. You heah? I ain't neva got ova what happn'd . . . Don't ask me no mo questions 'bout huh. You heah? Chi'run is too damn nosy. Got a question fo ev'rythang. I sweah ta God." Every time we ask my mother about her mother, her shell flies up and she gets so mad. I wish I could have met my grandmother so I could ask her myself what happened, but she, like Mr. Casey, is no longer in this world.

Besides reading time, my mother rarely takes down her shell. I want her to take it down more often because I need the warm parts underneath that she keeps hidden. I have been trying to build my own shell, to protect my warm parts also, but it's hard. I just want to twirl on the magic carpet with all the people in the world, but I know that's not possible. Some people are dangerous.

I wish I had a shell right now to protect me from all this smoke. It keeps pouring in and is getting thicker. I know if my mother doesn't get up soon, it will fill the entire apartment.

I waddle back to the living room, where my brothers are still crying. I have an overwhelming urge to save them. I can't figure out what to do. I look around the room for help. The lights are off. The TV is on. The glare disturbs me. The people on the TV are not helping. Neither is the sad-looking man with brown hair and blue eyes hanging in a picture frame on the wall. I reach toward him and the people on the TV, trying to grab them and show them we need help, but my arms are too short. I'm wearing a long T-shirt and my hair is in braids like Ms. Celie's from *The Color Purple*. I'm trying not to cry, but the tears fall from my eyes and I start to panic. I wonder where my stepfather is. Maybe he can come and save us from the smoke. I listen for his keys jingling at the door. I pray for the sound but hear only the TV.



The men can build shells, too, but they are not wizards. I never see them make miracles. I only see them make chaos. My father is not my biological father—he's my stepfather, but my brothers' biological father. I still call him father and not stepfather because he's raising me. My mother said my real father is a "lyin'-ass, conniving-ass, no-good-ass mothafucka wit' thirteen kids"—all girls—"by different womens, and he don't take care a' none of 'em." My mother tells me to forget about him, but I still wonder where he is and what he looks like and if he drinks like my stepfather, who is drunk all the time. My brothers and I love it when my stepfather gets

drunk. He comes to life, gleefully bouncing us on his knees and telling us stories about what a great man he is. He tells us he's a member of the T-Man Trivilization. We don't know what it means because they never teach us about the T-Man Trivilization in school. We later learn that *trivilization* is not a real word and that he actually means *civilization*. He's been out of the South for almost twenty years, but his Alabama accent is so thick, he sounds like he has a mouthful of cotton when he talks. He stretches out his words and talks slow, like molasses running down a maple tree, except when he cusses, which is the only time he ever talks fast. He loves to cuss and often forms entire sentences with just cuss words. I once heard him say "Goddammit, hell naw, shit, hell naw, shit, goddammit, hell naw!"

My brothers and I enjoy my father's drunken antics, but we know they won't last long. Eventually, after the glow of the alcohol has worn off, there will be a fight. There is always a fight. My father will begin making his fast cuss-word sentences, directing them at my mother, shooting them into her like bullets. My mother will raise her shell, and the chaos will begin. She will spin around the apartment like a tornado, destroying everything in her path. I don't understand how she can make so many miracles and yet cause so much chaos. How she can be so dazzling and destructive at the same time.

LESSON 2

Making Something Out of Nothing

I am always astonished by my mother's spectacular miracles. Even though she can't do it right now because she's lying facedown on the bathroom floor, I see her make miracles all the time. Like making something out of nothing, which is the second lesson of wizard training. I don't understand how she does it, how she is able to make things appear out of thin air. My mother is truly gifted at this.

One day, when we are much older, my brothers and I sit at the kitchen table, starving. We have each already eaten a bowl of dry cornflakes (we refuse to add water and there is no milk). We have also eaten Miracle Whip and cheese sandwiches on white bread, but we are still hungry. We don't dare say we are hungry. By now, we also have shells and hide behind them like we have been taught. We sit quietly at the table poking and prodding one another. We are never quiet unless we are hungry or at one of my mother's Saturday-night grown folks' spades parties. We don't make a peep as we glance out of the corner of our eyes at our mother, waiting

for the miracle. She stands, hunched over the sink, smoking a cigarette, pretending like she doesn't see, but we know she does. We can feel the electricity of the approaching miracle coursing through her body. And then, from her hunched position, she rises and calls out my name, "Ecka, watch yo brothas, I'ma be right back. Don't let nobody in, you heah?" I nod faithfully. We quietly watch her leave.

As soon as she's gone, we run to Ms. Patty's apartment in the front of the building. Ms. Patty is sixty-eight years old, lives alone, has lived in the apartment building since before we were born, and has a lot of health problems. Her voice is very hollow and scratchy because she had throat cancer many years ago and they had to remove one of her vocal cords. She sounds like Marge Simpson's sister from *The Simpsons*. Her back is also hunched over because she has sciatica. She's always drinking from a plastic purple Kool-Aid cup. No matter what time of day you knock on her door, she has that purple cup in her hand. Ms. Patty feeds us constantly. She tells us she knows our mother "been goin' thru some thangs," so she has to make sure we don't start looking like "dem little po', big-belly babies in Africa we always see on the late-night TV commercials." She makes us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or gives us big hulking slices of lemon pound cake that she makes from scratch.

Our apartment is behind Ms. Patty's in the back of the building on the top floor and doesn't face the street, so we can't see what happens on the sidewalks, which is why we

always run to her apartment when one of our parents leaves, to see in which direction they go.

“Ms. Patty! Ms. Patty!” we yell while banging on her door. “Let us come sit on da porch wit’ you!”

Ms. Patty pulls open the door and says, “Lawd, if y’all ain’t the loudest chi’runs in dis buildin’! Go on, but don’t touch nothin’. Nothin’! You hear me?!”

We nod our heads yes and then run through her apartment touching everything we can on the way to the porch while giggling uproariously.

Ms. Patty hit the lottery many years ago, but no one knows how much she won for. She has the nicest apartment in the building, and it’s full of strange fancy items like painted glass vases; a cabinet with white porcelain dishes on display; the biggest TV we’ve ever seen in our lives; and, taking up an entire wall, framed paintings of black people picking cotton and getting whipped in various positions. My brothers and I wonder why anyone would want pictures like that all around their apartment. Ms. Patty says it’s to honor the struggles of the ancestors so that she never forgets where she came from.

“But you don’t come from no cotton field, Ms. Patty. You come from Philadelphia,” Rone says when she tells us about the paintings.

“Aww hush, boy! I swear y’all have da fas’est and freshest lil mouths, jus’ like dem damn Bébé’s kids!”

She’s right. At this age, we are like Bébé’s kids—the characters in a popular animated movie that run around making a

ruckus. Nobody can stop Bébé's kids from wreaking havoc and destruction wherever they go. Bébé's kids would have broken all the nice things in Ms. Patty's apartment, but we don't break anything on our sprint to the porch. We just run our hands over as many surfaces as possible, including her glass vases and the china cabinet. Later Ms. Patty will tell our mother, "Dey cain't neva come back to my apartment 'cause dey leave greasy handprints all ova my shit." But she always lets us back in.

When we finally arrive on the porch, we see our mother drive off in a red Buick with a man we don't know. A few minutes later, Ms. Patty emerges with her purple cup and tells us to "sit down somewhere until ya mama get back." I wonder if she knows my mother is a wizard and that she is going to perform one of her miracles. I search Ms. Patty's eyes for a glimmer of knowing, but I don't see any flashes of insight. My brothers and I sit on plastic chairs on the left side of the porch and stare up and down the street. This porch is the epicenter of social life for the apartment building in the summer. My parents, Ms. Patty, and their friends sit there for hours on warm summer days, talking about everything: politics, the old days, the future, and the people on the sidewalk. Ms. Patty is notorious for making comments about people passing by, whether she knows them or not. My mother says, "Ms. Patty talks about er'body. She jus' cain't hep huhself. She got ta be observin' and commentin' on ev'rythang."

Shortly after Ms. Patty joins us on the porch, she begins her observations: "Ooooh, look at huh. Got all dem damn kids dat she cain't take care of. Ooooh, what's happenin' to da

young folks today, Lawd? Wearin' all dese tight dresses and thangs." Ms. Patty suddenly turns to us and tells us, "Cova up y'all's eyes," so we won't see what Danielle, the woman across the street, is wearing. We've already seen, but we still cover our eyes. We peek through our fingers and watch Danielle, who lives down the street and has five kids, saunter up the sidewalk. All the men parked in vans on the side of the street yell out to her, "You lookin' mighty fine today, Ms. Danielle. When you gon' let one a' us have a piece of dat?"

After Ms. Patty has done all her secret observing, she yells down in a syrupy-sweet but fake voice, "All right, Ms. Danielle, how you doin' today? I like dat outfit. You lookin' mighty good, gurl! And how dem kids?"

Danielle hollers back, "Er'body doin' good, by da grace of God."

Ms. Patty responds, "I know that's right. All we got is grace. Well, I'm glad you doin' good. Have a blessed day, now."

As Danielle walks away, we uncover our eyes and Ms. Patty continues her commenting.

"Ooooh, dat girl jus' ain't done nothin' wit' her life 'cept single-handedly repopulate da whole damn earf. Ooooh, Lawd keep her high in yo favor, 'cause she shole gon' need as much grace as you can give. If dat ain't da truf, I don't know what is." Ms. Patty takes a sip out of her purple cup while chuckling to herself.

My brothers, Jerone and Teandre—Rone and Dre, and I sit for the next hour on Ms. Patty's porch while she drinks and talks about everybody who walks by. She must be taking the

smallest sips known to man because she never seems to run out of liquid. When we finally see the red Buick back on the street and turning into the driveway, we run down the hall to our apartment and sit quietly at the table, putting our shells back up.

Our mother bursts through the door with McDonald's, our favorite, and two bags of groceries. We are astonished. *How did she do it?* With no money. With no job. She has turned air into food. Amazed, we sit at the kitchen table feasting upon her miracle. We gobble the cheeseburgers and fries, and gulp down the sodas. She stands, leaning against the sink, smoking a cigarette, watching us. Her eyes are dead. Her clothes and hair are disheveled. She doesn't say anything. She is cold and detached. Behind her shell again. I ask, "Momma, do you want some?" Suddenly, the shell breaks and tears begin pouring out of her eyes. We stop eating. We are shocked. We are disturbed. We don't understand. Why is she crying after she has produced such a marvelous miracle? "No, baby," she says. "I'm awright."

She's not "awright" now, though. She's lying on the bathroom floor, not moving. And the house is burning. I don't know that the house is burning. I am only six and don't know what smoke means, but I know something is wrong. I see several birds chirping frantically outside the open window. As soon as I notice them, everything starts to move in slow motion. The people on the TV talk much slower. The black clouds of smoke roll in slower and slower. The birds seem to

know something is wrong. They fly in circles right outside the window. I want to tell them to fly far, far away before the smoke swallows them, too, but before I can, I hear muffled voices shouting, “Is there anyone inside? Is there anyone up there?” I hear sirens blaring, right outside the apartment. I don’t have many words yet. So I start crying. I stand in the middle of the room and cry as loud as I can. I try to push all the energy of my body into my voice. I amplify myself, attempt to become just sound. A sound so big it can reach the voices outside.

It works! I hear someone coming up the stairs. I hear Ms. Patty’s voice. I hear my father’s voice. I hear other voices. I hear pounding. I hear keys jingling at the door. Suddenly, my father bursts into the apartment and in one fell swoop grabs us all—my mother, Rone, Dre, and me—in his big, drunken arms. He is not cussing now. He is quiet and focused. More quiet and focused than he’s ever been in his entire life. He transforms himself into a nest and carries us all away from the smoke. It is the only miracle I have ever seen him make. Our tiny hands grip the back of his neck as he gallops forward, unstoppable, until he emerges outside into the crisp, stinging air. I rest my head on his shoulder and watch as the birds fly away north into the night sky.



When I am older, I ask my mother what she was dreaming about when she was lying on the floor while our apartment

building was on fire. She said she wasn't dreaming, she was praying. She was in a crack cocaine-induced coma that almost took her life. She could hear me nearby and wanted desperately to help, but she couldn't activate her body. Instead she lay there and prayed the whole time. She said she had no choice but to surrender to the beyond. It was out of her hands. So when she was lying there, in a puddle of her own vomit, with pants down and her body paralyzed, she prayed, "Dear God, please let my chi'run be diff'rnt. Please, God. This ain't no kind of life. It might be too late fo me, but it ain't too late fo dem. Make a way, God. Make a way out of no way."

She spiraled those prayers so far and deep into the universe, she felt like she left her body altogether and traveled to the in-between: the quantum field of infinite possibility where miracles originate, where the ancestors live, and which exists between this world and the beyond. In that place, outside the limitations of time and space, she begged for mercy, for another way, and the whole quantum field vibrated from the impact of her desire. In fact, the universe began to reimagine the trajectory of what was possible. Unforeseen realities for me and my brothers began to take shape. My mother is no ordinary wizard. She is a quantum wizard with the power to disrupt the future by spiraling her prayers far beyond the man-made barriers of this world.

LESSON 3

Reaching the In-Between

I wonder if I came from the in-between, if that's where I was before I was born. My mother said that's where she went on the night of the fire and that's where all the dead people are. I wonder if that's where all the born people are as well, before they are born. Nobody will answer my questions about the in-between—where it is, who lives there, how to get there—so I make up my own stories. It's at the top of the sky, way above, where the blue part ends. And aliens, not ancestors, live there. I stare up at the sky with my notebook, trying to see where it is. I squint my eyes, which causes the sides of my mouth to pull up, like I'm smiling, but I'm not. I bend my head all the way back until it feels like it's going to fall off. I still don't see anything but clouds and sun rays. *God has hidden it well*, I think.

I ask my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Samuels, if she has ever seen the in-between at the top of the sky where the aliens live and where we spiral our prayers. She cranes her head confusedly to the side and says there's no such thing as the

in-between. “There’s nothing but empty space, other planets, and the sun above the sky.”

I stare at her doubtfully. “But my mother went there,” I say definitively. “So it has to be hidden somewhere we can’t see.”

“Sweetie, I don’t know what you’re asking me. No one knows what’s above all of that, but I very much like your curiosity.”

On the first day of school, Mrs. Samuels gives us all notebooks and tells us we have to be scientists in our own lives, curious about our surroundings. Like scientists, we should write down our observations about the world around us. She doesn’t need to tell me that, however, because I’m already very curious about everything. In addition to my curiosities about the in-between, I am also curious about my parents and the other adults in my neighborhood. I observe them carefully and take notes about my findings in the small notebook. I figure out that the adults are very strange, and not like us children. For example, they seem to be angry all the time, even at little things like when we forget to close the screen door, or when we come running up the stairs in excitement. And when there is food in the house, my mother gets very angry when we don’t eat every single bite on our plates. Sometimes, I get so stuffed, I feel like my belly will explode. I feel like the white Pillsbury Doughboy who’s always on TV. I don’t want to eat another bite, but there is still so much food on my plate. I try to sneak the plate past my mother, who is talking on the phone, but she sees me and tells me to

“sit right on down and scrape dat plate. You thank food grows on trees?! Well, some of it do . . . But dat ain’t da point. Ain’t gon’ be nothin’ wasted in dis house!” I sit for another hour taking small bites until all my food is finally gone.

I tell my brothers we have to observe our parents like they are specimens in the laboratory to figure out why they are so strange. My brothers hate school, but they love observing. The only time I ever see them focus all the attention in their brains is when we are secretly observing the adults. I have tried to convince them of how important school is, even setting up a pretend school on the weekends to teach them everything Mrs. Samuels has taught me, but they wiggle and squirm and eventually run around the living room screaming, “Nooooo!” They sit as quiet and still as rocks when we are observing, however, like they are about to learn the most important lesson in the world.

Our favorite place to secretly observe adults is at the Saturday-night spades game. My parents dress up and invite all their rowdy friends over. Spades is a popular card game for black people in America that involves lots of trash-talking, like “Who taught you how to play spades, nigga, Stevie Wonder?” At first, my brothers and I think the adults will begin fighting when they start their trash-talking, but two minutes later they are laughing and joking, slapping the table in glee, and patting one another on the shoulder. The trash-talking seems to be how they bond and build community during the game. My brothers and I practice trash-talking after the party by

hurling insults we hear during the game at each other. We know we are not supposed to say cuss words, so we cover our mouths and giggle while mocking the strange adults.

The process of setting up the game is the same every time. First, my father assembles two white plastic foldout tables, one in the middle of the room and one by the window. Next, my mother sets out an assortment of snacks and drinks: potato chips, fried pig skins, peanuts, cans of Pepsi, and fresh Kool-Aid. Their friends bring bottles of Colt 45, packs of cigarettes, and small plastic bags filled with white rocks. Later, they will all be crawling around on the floor searching for any white rocks that might have fallen. I don't understand why anyone would crawl around on the floor picking up rocks, so I write it down in my notebook as part of their strange behavior. After everything has been set up, my mother puts a record on. She always plays old-people songs by Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, Al Green, Sam Cooke, Otis Redding, and the Temptations. She rotates the records throughout the night until all her favorite hits have been played.

My brothers and I wish she would play newer music like Tupac or Immature or Mariah Carey instead. We don't understand the significance of the music my parents play at the Saturday-night parties. To us, the singers sound ancient and out of touch. We don't know that the music is pregnant with the pain and suffering of our parents' generation. That it's a soundtrack to their lives. When Sam Cooke cries, "A change is gonna come," or when Marvin Gaye asks, "What's going

on?” my parents and their friends lament their own conditions. They complain about how “the government don’t give a fuck ’bout da niggas.” How it’s all designed for them to fail and how things “gotta get betta in da future. The Lawd’a see to it.” I write it all down in my notebook, including how sad they get when their old-people music plays.

They don’t just tell sad stories and complain about the government, however. They also recount raucous tales from when they were young. The first boy or girl they liked. Their proms and school dances and how they was “the sharpest looking one at da whole dance.” They remember all the things their parents told them about how to live in the world. “Man, my momma use’ta say don’t neva give up, no matta how hard life get. She use’ta say if there’s a will, there’s a way. I shole do miss my momma, man.” Everyone sits in silence for a moment to honor all those that “done gone on home to da glory.” They smoke cigars and cigarettes and talk about the good ol’ days in the “hot-ass, cotton-picking South,” which is what my father calls it and is where most of them are from. They had no idea how hard their lives would be in the North, about all the obstacles to come. So they left the South in droves, headed north, unstoppably north, before landing in Ohio, the Buckeye State, nestled on the shores of the great Lake Erie.

My father calls it the Shotgun State and says, “Ain’t nothin’ but hillbillies and honkies wit’ big-ole shotguns soon as you step foot anywhere outside a’ Cleveland into one a’ dem yella co’nfields. Have you hopin’ and prayin’ one of ’em don’t

decide to send yo black ass on home to da good Lawd way befo' yo time. Show up at da pearly gates a' heav'n, and da good Lawd'll tell ya you ain't 'spected fo anotha thirty yeahs. 'Not accordin' to dem white folks,' you tell 'im wit' sorrow in yo eyes and pity in yo soul. And dat's when you really realize dat da only thang standin' between you and da good Lawd is a praya and da mercy of da white man. But I guess it's always been dat way, ain't it?" Everyone at the table nods in prodigious agreement.

I notice that they talk a lot about God and prayer during their spades games; it's almost like a second church. Everyone seems to believe in "da good Lawd," except my mother, who always tells them to "stop talkin' all dat religion talk, 'cause God ain't comin' to save none of you niggas." But they don't listen to her.

Ms. Patty, who has a different wig for every occasion, wears her Tina Turner wig to the spades games, and says she stays in prayer "fo ev'rythang and er'body," even though she talks about "er'body and dey mama."

"I still pray fo 'em afta I talk about 'em," Ms. Patty says while cackling to herself. Ms. Patty says she's received everything she ever wanted thanks to the power of prayer.

"Well, Ms. Patty, you must be doin' somethin' right. How many times you done hit the lottery?" Quincy, one of my father's friends, asks.

"Don't worry about my money, nigga. Worry 'bout da power of yo own prayers," Ms. Patty shouts playfully, drinking from her purple cup while everyone laughs in the background.

Despite their prayers and all their talk about God, it does not stop them from sinning, which is something else I write down in my notebook—how often they say one thing but do another. Pastor Aily, whom we only see in church on Sunday mornings, says you are not supposed to curse, hit each other, drink, do drugs, or go to bars, “which are the devil’s playgrounds,” but my parents and their friends do all those things.

Pastor Aily says, “Da only reason God don’t strike us all down fo our sins is ‘cause he’s good and merciful. Anybody can repent and beg for forgiveness for their sins.”

I want to believe Pastor Aily, but my mother says, “Ain’t no mercy here.” After what happened to her mother, which she still refuses to tell us about, she stopped believing in anything. I am only a kid, but I know you have to believe in something to make sure you have a story in your head that explains the world. There seem to be many things to believe in, and I believe them all: God, the in-between, heaven, hell, and the devil. So I have many stories in my head to explain the world. I haven’t conducted enough observations yet to prove any of them wrong. I figure I better just believe in them all in case they are all true.

After the adults finish talking about God and the good ol’ days at their spades game, someone turns the music up and they start dancing and swaying and singing and clapping to the beat. It is the happiest we ever see them. My brothers and I watch from our secret hiding place on the side of the couch. We tuck our heads beneath a blanket and peek in amusement as the adults begin their wild spinning around

the room. They remind me of kindergarten when me and my friends used to twirl on the magic carpet, but the adults don't just spin, they also dance very close together, which we were never allowed to do on the magic carpet. Soon, my father, in his purple velvet suit and matching fedora with a green feather on the side, and my mother, with her purple silk dress that has a slit all the way up her leg, will be dancing in the middle of the living room while their slow old-people music plays in the background. I don't know why, but I feel funny inside watching them dance like this. So funny, I cover Dre's and Rone's eyes so they don't see. My mother melts her whole body into my father, as if he is a big tall tree that will shelter and protect her forever. It's strange to see them like this, especially since they are usually in chaos, but I prefer this over their chaos.

Others slow-dance also or sit smoking cigars and cigarettes, watching the slow dancers while blowing large plumes of thick smoke up toward the ceiling. I watch it rise, remembering the smoke from the night of the fire three years ago. I look toward the window and watch as a bird, just like on the night of the fire, lands on the windowsill, crouches under the cracked window, and attempts to come inside. I wonder if he is trying to grab some of the potato chips that lie scattered on the table near the window. Someone sees him and swats at him with a broom before he has any chance to peck at the chips. I watch as he flies off into the night sky, wondering where he is headed.

Soon after the bird leaves, the procession in and out of the bathroom, where the adults kneel and pray to their white rocks, starts. The next morning, on Sunday, they will kneel in church and pray to their white God. I begin to wonder if white is the color of things to be worshipped in this world, if it is the only color to be worshipped in this world.



Sunday mornings are my favorite part of the week because my mother cooks her famous before-church breakfast of eggs, grits, biscuits, sausage, pancakes, and bacon. Everyone trickles in slowly to indulge in this before-church feast. First, Ms. Patty will come stumbling in with her purple cup and her church wig. This wig is short, black, and styled in a pixie cut. It is very different from her Tina Turner–styled wig. She says she “don’t wanna look like no Jezebel in da house of da Lawd.” Sometimes Jessie, Davante, or Tiffany come for breakfast with their parents and siblings. If they come, we chase one another all around the apartment playing hide-and-seek or tag. We play until one of our parents tells us to quit making all that noise.

Next, Ms. Jannie, a close family friend who is like our grandmother, will come busting through the door with her three grown, lazy adult kids and two of her grandchildren, all of whom live with Ms. Jannie in her three-bedroom house down the street. If it’s winter, like it is now, Ms. Jannie will

wear her big brown fur coat made of coyote that she says her “daddy hunted and killed his self when we was down in Alabamy.” Then she will take up all the space and oxygen in the room to tell us all about Jesus and how he saved her and how she “don’t pa’ticipate in Saturday-night parties no mo, ’cause I done let all dat sinning go.” She continues, “Yes, Lawd. I done seen da light, and da light is da man upstairs, Mr. Jesus Christ! You betta get right if you ain’t, ’cause da rapture is a-comin’! You heah me?! Dis worl’ gon’ end befo’ not too long.” My mother will tell Ms. Jannie to save the preaching for church and just enjoy the food. I look up at the picture of Mr. Jesus Christ, who hangs over the stove now and not in the living room anymore. He always looks sad, with his hands resting in prayer in front of his chest and his eyes rolled up toward the heavens. I sometimes talk to him when I’m alone in the kitchen. I ask him what he thinks about our unruly family and what he thinks about people constantly praising him or constantly calling out his full name. Does it make him feel good even though he’s no longer here? I wish more people would call me by my full name, Echo Unique Ladadrian Brown, instead of calling me “chile,” “girl,” or “Bébé’s kid.”

As the Sunday-morning breakfast rolls on, usually my father, who is always the last one up, will come shuffling into the kitchen still wearing one of his colorful velvet suits from the night before and say, “A’ight, Ms. Jannie, you got it,” in recognition of Ms. Jannie’s standing in the community. “How you feelin’ dis mornin’?” he’ll ask. Ms. Jannie responds that she’s feeling better than how he looks. “Lookin’ like you done

been run ova by a truck dis mornin', Ed." She will ask him when he will be ready to give up sinning and get right with Jesus Christ. My father will smile to himself, give her a hug, and change the subject by commenting on the excellence of the food. "Dis bre'fast shole do look good dis mornin', Aprah. Thank you, darlin'." My mother's name is April, but everyone calls her Aprah. My father will then give my mother a kiss on the cheek, shifting the focus entirely away from his sinning. None of that happens this morning, however, because my father is not home. He left at eight, and none of us know where he went.

After my mother finishes cooking breakfast, Ms. Jannie, the most righteous among us, will lead us in prayer before we can eat. I hate when she starts her praying, because we never know how long it will last and I can smell the bacon the entire time. I peek out from underneath my eyelids to see if it looks like she's almost done, but she just keeps going and going and going, like the Energizer Bunny. She never runs out of words for her Lord. I mark that down in my observation notebook—how the adults always seem to have endless words in every situation, even when more words are not needed. Ms. Jannie continues with her never-ending prayer for what feels like forever. When I hear the word "finally," I know she's almost done. "And finally, Lawd, watch ova us. Clean us, Lawd. So many of us done gone astray. Bring us back in yo favor and grace. Bring us back. Tho we know da end of times may be upon us, restore all those who suffer ta health and good fortune. In yo name I pray, amen."

We all rise as if on cue and eat our breakfast, which has almost gone cold. After we finish breakfast, we prepare to leave for church. Right as we are about to walk out the door, my father comes stumbling in drunk and shooting his cuss-word sentences everywhere.

“Goddammit, hell naw! Ain’t nobody goin’ no goddamn, motherfuckin’ goddamn where! I got somethin’ ta say.” My mother immediately bristles and puts up her shell, but not her normal shell. Her combat shell, which means she is preparing to fight. My brothers and I are surprised since she never puts up her combat shell in front of righteous people like Ms. Jannie, but my mother has been on edge all morning. She has been nervous, agitated, and jittery. I wonder if it’s because of what happened last night. I wonder if she has not fully returned to her normal self or if she is still stuck in the other realm,

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where the procession in and out of the bathroom has finally concluded. Eventually, my mother gets up again and starts dancing in the middle of the room, alone this time. Someone puts on Marvin, her favorite, and dims the lights. She starts off slowly, winding and twisting her hips, pulling at the edges of her purple dress until it rides up her thighs and threatens to reveal the very round behind it is struggling to cover.

Everyone in the room is mostly quiet now. The bottles of Colt 45 are empty. The cards lie strewn about the table, some wrinkled, some folded. Two people are passed out on

chile, 'cause I know'd. I know'd she was gon' be one, too, but it don't do none a' us no good to be what we is. I don't want dat fo huh, Mama! I don't want it!" my mother cries out in distress. I look to see whom she is talking to, but everyone in the room is frozen except her and me.

Suddenly, she looks over toward me as if she is looking directly at me, but it's almost as though she is looking past me, way past me. I am still covered by the blanket, but I feel like she can see me. Her head starts to roll slowly up toward the ceiling. I follow her gaze and am shocked that the ceiling seems to have dissolved. I stare in disbelief at the dark space above. I've never seen anything like it. There are dazzling, shimmering specks of light that rain down periodically, stopping just at the top of the room, and there are puffy colorful clouds that float slowly across the space. I also hear some kind of noise that sounds like a thousand people humming quietly in the background.

I stare up, way up, the way I do when I'm conducting my observations outside, but I don't understand what I'm looking at. I'm completely hypnotized by the colors and the light. I try to turn my head and look back over at my mother, but I can't move my head or close my eyes. I see the specks of light start to wrap around one another, spiraling and spiraling until they form a light beam that streaks across the dark space and then down directly into my forehead. I feel a small jolt, as if something has been downloaded into my brain. There are no thoughts in my head. I am blank, like an empty piece of paper. Until a single thought comes: *Mrs. Samuels was wrong.*

Suddenly, a flood of other thoughts pours into my brain and my whole head is full of words, too many words, like Ms. Jannie's never-ending prayers. Words that I don't completely understand wash over me: *Your mother is a wizard. So are you. She can open a portal to the in-between, like the one you saw just now, when she's high on the white rocks. She does it to try to contact her mother. She doesn't want to be a wizard, because of what happened, what she did to her mother. You'll come to know what happened when the time is right. For now, don't worry. She will be a very difficult mother, but she loves you and your brothers more than life itself. You and they are her single purpose here. You cannot make miracles yet. Not until you realize the unbreakable. Don't worry, for now you'll forget all of this. Just keep watch for the birds: they are messengers. Keep watch.*

The third lesson of wizard training is that the in-between cannot be found or discovered. Instead, it reveals itself to unsuspecting wizards. It cannot be hoped, prayed, or called for the first time. You can only wait for the portal to finally open. Then, after first contact, you can grow to reach it at will. A wizard's path through life is greatly impacted by their relationship with the in-between, whether they choose to run from its immense power or whether they learn to cultivate it to better navigate the future. Each choice has consequences that ripple, ultimately determining if they will become a broken wizard or an enlightened one.

The spiral of light retracts, and when I open my eyes I see that the ceiling has returned but everyone else is still frozen.

I look back over at my mother in confusion, but she is still looking past me. I try to remember all the words that were just in my head, but they're falling out. I open my notebook to write down some of them before they're all gone. All I can remember is *birds*. I write it down and notice that my brothers, my father, and my parents' friends start slowly moving again, but my mother still looks suspended in the other realm. Her eyes are dull and glazed over, but the rest of her is glowing. All the light in the room bends toward her. She looks ethereal, like she is possessed

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with fury and rage. The knife presses so deeply into my father's throat, I'm afraid she will pierce his windpipe. Suddenly, she drops the knife, which hits the floor with a disturbing *thunk*. We all watch as she whispers in my father's ear loud enough for everyone to hear, "If you eva go near dat bitch again, I'a kill you. I'a kill you dead, nigga. Afta ev'rythang I done fo you and dis family." She then looks sharply at Ms. Jannie and Ms. Patty and tells them to "stop all dat cryin' and prayin'. Wasn't y'all's prayin' or y'all's white Jesus dat saved dat nigga's life. It was dem kids and only dem kids. Now, let's get ta goin' befo' we miss da mornin' service."