Ghost Children

D. Winston Brown

The car gleamed under the Alabama sunlight. While the sun was still in its early-morning warming mode, I had risen from my bed, moved the hosepipe from the front yard to the driveway in the rear of the house and driven my car, a 1979 Datsun 200SX, to the middle of the driveway. I retrieved a plastic bucket, several brushes, a box of detergent and several rags needed to remove every particle of dust and dirt from the spoke hubcaps; from the now sparkling glass of each window; from each inch between hood and trunk; and from the silver grille, which sat like a snarl at the front between the bumper and the hood. By the time I left the house shortly before noon, the car gleamed; its candy-apple red paint glistened. I picked up Garrett, a friend with a penchant for Pink Floyd and bottled beer, and we drove to meet other friends, the whole time watching the daylight grow heavy and settle on the candy-apple red sparkle.

As each hour passed and we changed locations—a clean car on a Saturday required frequent changes of venue—I never parked in the shade and, as dusk approached, sought out spots under streetlights. The car gleamed throughout the day and into the night as we drank beer purchased from stores that let teenage drivers of gleaming cars buy beer. We drank more beer at each stop, in each new neighborhood: Forestdale, Bush Hills, Southside, The Brickyard. We restocked at the Icehouse in Ensley; we restocked at the package store on Goldwire. We cruised through more neighborhoods: Center Point, East Lake, Druid Hills, Fountain Heights. I drove the car slow; I played the music loud. Cameo was out then: the album with "Word Up" and "Candy." The crowd changed as the hours passed: two people riding, three people riding, but no more than three because it was

a small car and we all thought a lot of ourselves back then. We rode and drank and smoked, and long after the sun had tired of us, a guy named Spoon, a classmate, climbed into the backseat. Spoon sat in the middle of the backseat so he could stretch his long, skinny arm between the front seats. Garrett and I, in the front seats, watched as Spoon pointed out approaching landmarks where I needed to turn. We were going to Annetta Simon's house. Spoon's idea. He knew her, said we needed to meet her.

I remember that his elbow was huge compared to the rest of his arm, like a tennis ball skewered on a mop handle. I remember we rode slowly through the night as if on the prowl. I remember the heat remained just shy of 99 degrees that night, and I fell in love with how the chill of beer on the back of my throat felt like time stopping, for a moment, before a slow drag of warm air delivered a thaw. I remember we were at a red stoplight—it had been yellow when I stopped—and Spoon slid his thin arm forward again, low, barely above the gearshift, until I found myself transfixed by the gleam of a silver handgun, .38-caliber, which sat softly in the cushion of his palm.

I had seen guns before but never in my car.

This was not a year; this was a time. People were wearing Guess jeans with leather pocket-flaps or Levi's 501 Blues. Polo was destroying Izod, and hip-hop was just beginning to strip the veneer from the unconscious ease of life. And guns—guns were not yet a fashion statement. So when skinny Spoon, a kid I let cheat off me in algebra so he would share his weed before school, reached his arm forward with his hand cradling the silver weapon, I possessed no preconstructed, cool response; no learned reaction designed to maintain my coolness.

"Shit, Spoon. What the hell is that?"

"Watch the road," Garrett said. I'd begun to inch into the intersection.

"It's a gun," Spoon said.

"I know it's a gun," I said. "But what the fu—"

"Chill out," Spoon said. "I thought we could use it to scare—"

"Spoon," I said, "I ain't down for using no gun on a girl. If she don't want to—"

"Chill," Spoon said again. "I don't have to force any girls to do anything." He leaned his long head forward between the seats. "I

thought we could get, I mean, scare them niggers who came by the school last week."

The last week Spoon spoke of had consisted of a fight: Garrett and me versus three boys who'd come to our school as it was letting out. Garrett had walked out the door with his arm around the girlfriend of one of the boys. He had told her a joke that I'd told him, and they were laughing as they emerged from the school. I was maybe seven yards behind them when I saw the boys approach from the right. They were man-boys compared to us. Their blue jeans were creased and starched. Gold hung from their necks: herringbones wide as Band-Aids and rope chains weighed down by crosses the size of those pocket Bibles that evangelicals are fond of giving away. With each step, their faces curled into hardened scowls.

They shoved Garrett from behind. I dropped my books and ran toward them. From there, it progressed like most any fight, a slow-motion blur of fists and cuss words and falling and kicking. We, surprisingly, held our own. I hit someone on the jaw. Someone hit me in the gut. A girl yelled, then another. These things I remember as occurring all at once, like some theatrical production. It slammed to a halt, all of the jumbled confusion, when one of the boys pulled out a gun. It looked old and dull and more like a prop from a John Wayne movie than a weapon, but there was no denying it was a gun. He held his arm straight, the gun sideways, and he placed the barrel inches away from my head. What he said I don't remember. I fixated on the gold-nugget rings he wore on three of his fingers. I remember thinking as long as I could see the shine of those rings I was still alive. I heard someone cry, "No." I heard someone's sneakers squeak in the doorway behind me. Down the block, a car's engine revved. The moment flooded with isolated sounds: squeaks, gasps, jangled keys, running feet. I struggled to hear what I didn't want to hear—the crack of the gun when it fired.

It never came.

A gun to the head. A crowd of witnesses. A world slowed down to a single moment. What did I feel? I asked myself that for days, weeks, years. I tried sometimes to recreate the moment in my head, to force myself to trudge back mentally to that gun's barrel, but memory and desire are too strong to be kept separated; they blend

and produce mutated offspring. The facts always changed when I tried to remember. I questioned myself and then questioned my questions. Even when other students told me what they'd seen—that I'd stood motionless, didn't blink, didn't flinch or cower or try to move in the least—it felt unfamiliar, nothing like the perfectly still free-fall I felt whenever I tried to remember on my own.

There was one person, Jeremy McGetty, who witnessed that after-school brawl and described how I'd reacted in one word: reconciled. He told me this after lunch on the Wednesday following the fight, and on Thursday, I asked him to elaborate. I wanted to know what he thought I'd been reconciled with. Lanky and dark-skinned, Jeremy was quiet by choice and read all the time. "Reconciled with the possibility," he told me, "of both living and dying." Then, revising slightly, he repeated himself, "Reconciled with dying."

Reconciled became a refrain in my head. It didn't fit; I refused to allow it to fit. A decent student with a middle-class background, a product of an insulated private school, I was not supposed to be someone who reconciled his life with dying. I knew people who had, maybe, reconciled, at least with their situations. They didn't come to school often. Their subjects didn't agree with their verbs. They never spoke of a distant future. But even these boys, excepting a handful, couldn't hide the fact that they feared something. They were the children of bitter divorces. They had fathers conspicuous only by their absence. They never had curfews. My parent's marriage was successful. My father attended every event his sons were in. My mother was a schoolteacher, and three of my grandparents had been schoolteachers. My older brother and I were on our way to being third-generation college graduates. I knew my destiny because my family taught it to me, day after day, in both deed and word. So when I thought about being reconciled with something, death was not the normal and expected completion of that thought. With parental guidance. With the expectation of table manners. With Christmases where gifts crowded around the tree. But not with death. Yet, when I thought of it—of that description of my reaction—my blood surged: I felt pleased, thrilled even, that in that moment I had not retreated, not shrunk. I reconciled.

I can recall few details of the six days that passed between my conversation with Jeremy McGetty and seeing that gun in my car. I can

still clearly see the gun, not the hand holding it, just the gleaming gun, which glittered even more as light from the streetlamps we passed momentarily caught in its silver and crept slowly across its curves.

But this is not about guns. This is not a celebration of violence, nor is it a refutation of guns or violence. It is not that simple. Black boys, guns, anger. No matter the economic class of the boys, no matter the education, no matter the professional position—whether we move mops through hallways or carry briefcases through boardroom doorways—we seldom lose that head-nod to another brother or that anger, caged and carried in spines, which skirts just below the skin, racing or prodding alongside blood. But this is not about anger either—at least, not in the simple sense. There is no simple answer as to how a gun in my car became a primal summons.

To understand something, anything, about that moment requires another story, one in which I am only a witness.

I was 12. It was late, and I was asleep.

When my father woke me, my eyes would not, at first, release the darkness. Then I heard his voice. His voice didn't coax. He didn't tickle me or nudge me or call me one of his many nicknames. He used my name—Daryl—and repeated his request for me to wake up and dress only once. I recognized his tone as unrecognizable, unheard before, and the request was a commandment that allowed room only for obedience. No questions. No rubbing crust from the corners of my eyes. No slow, reluctant withdrawal from warm sheets.

For years after, when I talked about this night, I described my father's voice—depending on the audience—as alternately stark or angry or full of rage, sometimes loud, sometimes louder. It took nearly a decade for me to know that his voice was reconciled.

My father drove a long, brown Buick LaSabre with power seats and power windows. Alone on the backseat, I felt like the sole person on a church pew. We passed through empty streets with no regard for streetlights or stop signs. My mother sat in the front passenger seat without a single comment about our speed. Most intersections rose slightly like small mounds, and in that fast-moving, heavy car, it felt as if those mounds were waves, and with each rise and fall, I felt I left behind my stomach.

Something had happened to my brother. He was older, a junior in high school, and at a party, and something had happened to him. I

didn't worry about him, though. He was my brother—my older, bigger brother—and was indestructible, and so my parents' level of quiet concern didn't alarm me. Instead, I sat on the backseat with my mind excited by what I'd seen my father place next to him on the seat: his gun. My history with this gun: I'd seen my father fire it into the sky on the Fourth of July, and once, I'd snuck into my parents' bedroom, with my brother, and peered into my father's file cabinet at the gun. My brother, after taking a step or two backward, had clapped his hands, a loud smack I just knew was gunfire. I had dropped to the floor and held my breath until I heard his taunting laughter.

When we arrived at our destination, my father swept up the gun and rushed out of the car, leaving me to the care of my mother. People crowded the driveway. I saw my brother: He looked fine. He and a friend, I learned, had been attacked by a gang: BAQ. This gang was the terror of Birmingham then, and because my brother had taken them on and emerged with only bruises and scrapes—minus one Armitron calculator watch—he would become even more one-dimensional to me: indestructible, tough, cool.

My father had walked away as my mother and I walked toward the house. He and his gun had climbed back into the car and disappeared. While he was gone, and after I'd nosed my way into complete knowledge of what had happened to my brother, I began to create scenarios in my head: my father riding with his lights out; my father finding the BAQ members, draped by slinky women in short skirts and hanging out on car hoods, drinking beer; my father pulling out his gun, demanding the return of my brother's calculator watch (I loved that watch). I drifted toward the street and listened for gunfire, but the night offered only unbroken silence.

When my father returned and joined the others, he did it as if he'd only been to the store for a pack of cigarettes. He didn't tell where he'd been, and no one asked. I waited for him to say something. I inspected his clothes for some hint, but there was none. The mood evolved into jokes and laughter, into conversations about nothing, and the men drank beer. I felt cheated, my curiosity not satisfied. When we drove home, we did it slowly. We stopped at lights, and my mom sang along with the soul songs on the radio. I leaned forward to glimpse the gun, but the seat between my parents held nothing. Finally, I stretched out on the bed-sized backseat and fell asleep.

There is nothing original in that anecdote. A man, his son and the need to protect. But, at 12, I didn't understand that level of protection. I was gawky and entering that stage of life where loneliness becomes a badge. But I understood embarrassment. I understood pride. Protection was pushing someone when they pushed me. It was also associated with things: gold chains, a new pair of Nikes, clean cars with bumping stereos. These things, I somehow learned, deserved protection, deserved my blood if need be. We all knew this, and we all knew an infraction—like stepping on someone's new Air Jordans—meant a fight was inevitable. Years later, fists would turn to knives, and knives would turn to guns, but, when I was 12, a father, a gun and a gang-attacked brother were only exciting.

You never know exactly how one story will fit on top of another, how the brain will create its own truth to satisfy your deepest needs. Things may happen discretely, days apart, months apart, cities and decades and neighborhoods apart, but history collapses, then memory, and nothing ever remains discrete. Isolation is the lie we tell ourselves to comfort ourselves, but connections stretch the prisms we see through to allow more in, and more always changes things. A child changes a house; a war changes a teenage boy. Death leaves a void. Long before my father carried his gun as a weapon, history had constructed my prism, as it had for so many other young black boys. It was an unspoken history, so I didn't truly comprehend why I instinctively bristled at the word *nigger* or why the white guard at the jewelry store followed my father, my brother and me while we shopped for a Christmas gift for my mother, or what it meant when some white child, some innocent classmate at my 98 percent-white private school, said he couldn't come spend the night because his grandfather told him that he "didn't need to be going to no nigger's house in a nigger neighborhood." He said black, but I heard nigger even then, and I hit him. It's that anger—history's long and subtle voice—that, when misunderstood, becomes a simmering hostility. I saw it grow in friends; I saw it in the eyes of brothers I passed at parties and in the eyes of old men in haggard clothes that stood outside the Masonic Temple. I came to recognize the broken, to discern them by their walks, their limp handshakes, their newly purchased suits, and then I came both to despise and love them.

Years later, I would de-romanticize that night, unravel the cowboy dreams I'd dressed it in and begin the work of understanding what my father did, what my father had been willing to do. But first, I would have to encounter my car, Garrett, Spoon, me and the gun.

I didn't consciously think about my father and his gun when Spoon stretched his weapon forward like an offering. I merely accepted it. In my hand, the gun felt heavy, solid, and the metal felt as if it had recently been buried in cool dirt. It wasn't the first gun I'd held in my hand, but it felt heavier than I remembered. It contained no fun, no play, and we rode the next few blocks in silence. Not a reflective silence. Reflection would have demanded too much of me. I spent those few blocks divorcing myself from what I was about to do. There was justice to be exacted—and revenge. I thought of him only as The Boy. Where's The Boy now? How do we find The Boy? Is The Boy alone? The gun became a part of my hand. The metal settled into my palm with both a mechanical and a natural ease. I drove as if I'd always driven with a gun in one hand. Somewhere in the quiet of that car, we all gave our consent. Finally, I asked Spoon which way I needed to go. He told me to make a U-turn.

What I know now and couldn't have known then is that we—so many young, black boys—had moved beyond simply being frightened by the brutal world. Progress in this country since the first slaves, though slow and incremental and often delivered reluctantly, had nonetheless been steady. Each decade, each era, you could mark notables: Buffalo Soldiers, Marcus Garvey, A.C. Powell, Brown v. Board, Wright, Ellison, Martin, Malcolm, Civil Rights legislation (long past due). Then something died. Hard to pin exactly what and where, but the effect was crushing. Maybe, as James Baldwin writes in "The Fire Next Time," psychological death happened first when black soldiers returned from World War II in search of home but, instead, lost hope as America spurned them. If so, that same death knell finally tolled as the '60s expired, when we, the ghost children of Dynamite Hill and American capitalism, sensed a similar loss of hope. Faith and charity were scarce, too. We no longer asked, Why hast Thou forsaken me? We accepted our forsakenness, assumed it as a status quo that would never bend but might, one day, break. Not that we gave up on God; we just no longer waited on divine intervention.

If God had not rescued this country from its black heart, how could He help a black man put food on the table, buy a house, feel good about bringing a son into a country that had spent the better part of its youth denying those sons the right to be men? No one needed to tell us of this legacy; its impatient and simmering anger fell into our bones. Without a reason for patient faith, we fell into the acquisition of now—of seizing everything and every dream, now. For many boys, life and death fell, with the weight of a Bible, into the hand that wielded the gun. We were not adrift, not without direction, but we knew, without knowing, the invisible barrier often between possibility and us. It stretched before us like our own 33rd Parallel, our Mason-Dixon Line, our Edmund Pettus Bridge. This was an old war, and we didn't know how to fight it. So we fought and killed each other. We battled over gold chains and gym shoes, over ghetto blasters and Gazelles and four-finger gold rings. These things symbolized style, and style was manhood. We struggled to protect these trinkets, fought over them and all they represented.

What we have learned to fight for, to protect, is not an easy path to trace. What makes it real? The list is far too long: the atrocity of slavery; the 1921 race riots in Tulsa; the inherited memory of lynching; the murders of Medgar Evers and Emmett Till; burned-in mental images of water cannons blasting people down sidewalks, police dogs ripping the clothes of marchers, children locked into paddy wagons. Just pick one from this short list. For me, I came to understand why I took that gun from Spoon only after hearing for the first time a story that I'd heard at least 20 times before.

It takes place on Dynamite Hill. It involves a boy, maybe 10, maybe 11; a garage where three men, sometimes four, sit in a car without closing the garage door or turning on any lights; and a bedroom closet full of guns. It's important to know, first, that Dynamite Hill existed as a thriving neighborhood filled with blacks of all classes and professions. In the middle of it all was a lawyer who lived at the corner of Center Street and Tenth Court and who became a target for racists during the late '50s. Arthur Davis Shores was a small man physically, always impeccably dressed, dapper, but he fought with a savage intellect to make significant changes: He stood up to racism one court case at a time. In return, his house was dynamited—several times. That number would have probably been higher had it not

been for the men who decided to maintain a protective vigil, across the street in the dark garage, for their neighbor. They protected their neighborhood, as did other men in other unlit garages in nearby blocks (there were around 13 homes bombed in the neighborhood during this time), but this garage I know because it was in my grandparents' house and because my grandfather, a high school football coach, was one of the men waiting in it.

Every day, somewhere close to dusk, a car would back into my grandparents' garage. The door would remain open. Three, sometimes four, men would pile into the car as darkness came. My grandmother, also a schoolteacher, would cook for them—a meal or snacks to get them through the night. Danger was more than a possibility. Houses, including Mr. Shores' house, had already been bombed. The men never took the key out of the ignition. They had lookouts that walked the sidewalks. They communicated with walkie-talkies. My father, a boy of 10 or 11, also had a role. Every evening, as the men ate and then settled into their nightly duties, my father, just a boy then, was responsible for going into my grandparents' bedroom closet and retrieving the weapons. Not handguns: he nightly carried a collection of assorted rifles. The men didn't mean simply to deter—they meant to kill, if necessary.

I don't know everything they did during those nights. But I do know three things. One: My father, already proficient with guns, was a child nonetheless and still prone to concentration lapses. The story he tells involves him hurriedly swooping the rifles into his arms without first checking the safeties. One of the rifles fires. The blast is a wind's rush that travels past my father's face, inches (or less) from his cheek or from entering his chin and blowing away enough of his face to transform it beyond a mother's recognition. A hole opens in the ceiling, scarring the house my grandmother keeps immaculate. Two: The hole, for a long time, is not repaired. My grandmother hates guns and wants the hole to be a reminder. Three: Later that night, while my father is still in the garage receiving a lecture on handling guns, a call comes in over the walkie-talkie. A lookout sees someone walking near Mr. Shores' house, and he believes he saw the person toss something that was lit. The men rush from the garage. My father, a boy, follows. They surround the suspect. He's white, a teenager. Guns are drawn. Not shot, just drawn. The interrogation reveals the suspect lives

nearby, on the white side, blocks away, and he is out walking so that his mother won't catch him smoking a cigarette. He tells them he tossed the cigarette butt in the grass. The men, cautious, check out his story by calling his house. The white boy goes home; the black men resume their vigil. My father is now a witness.

After I was a little older, after the 21st time I heard this story, I saw it in a different light. I thought about my grandmother. My grandmother was a part of the missionary society at an African Methodist Episcopal church; she treated people, all people, as her Bible and her preacher instructed, yet she allowed her young son to be the gun transporter. A 10-year-old. I imagine her being torn, maybe expressing her worries, one night in bed, to my grandfather, who tells her what she knows already—something about the world and how their boy needs to learn to face that world as a man. That night, they decide on his manhood, and I imagine she tightens her lips in silent agreement.

My grandmother was a schoolteacher, and I'm sure she knew that her boy needed to seize his manhood, that the world would try to strip it from him as she'd seen it do to so many of her ex-students. Even she must have known that an element of necessary violence lurked in all manhood, at least for boys born black in America.

What she doesn't know is that time will transform that violence. My grandfather and his partners wielded violence to protect. I don't assume, in any way, that senseless killing didn't happen prior to my teenage years, but I do know that I lived through an evolution, one where guns became common, where boys wanting to be men no longer fought one another but shot to kill. And over what? Not for social change or to protect a neighbor. But over jewelry. Over cars. Over trendy gym shoes. Over blocks of faded, cracked pavement.

But I'd not yet arrived at these thoughts the night Spoon and Garrett watched me play with the silver gun while we sat at a red light. I felt I'd been given something I needed. We drove until we came to a stop next to a corner gas station. Across the street was a group of teenagers. They were laughing and joking. I saw no familiar faces for the first few moments. Then Spoon pointed to someone who'd drifted away from the crowd. I recognized him. My hand tightened around the gun. I wanted him to feel what I'd felt, and I wanted to feel the power he'd felt. No one told me to drive. I just

did, pulling the car to a stop in the westbound, inner lane. He was running before I fully extended my arm. I fired. He kept running toward the crowd. Maybe he was trying to reach the house behind the people. I fired again, followed him with the gun's barrel, sliding my arm along the door, and fired again. People ran, open-mouthed, and they looked like puppets, toys, not real. I kept The Boy in sight. I fired until the gun emptied, and then I heard the screams, noticed the fear of the people running.

I've never gotten over how good it felt, the physicality of that unchallenged power; it threw me into some sort of high. I remember driving away, all three of us whooping in the electric delight of conquest. I remember drinking a beer and feeling as if my blood still vibrated from firing the gun. I loved feeling like that, but then—as quick as a book slammed shut—I feared it. That fear crept through me. It crept through me when I watched the late, late news that night and when I read the newspaper the next morning. When I went to school Monday, I spent several classes glancing at the door, expecting to see policemen crash through.

Nothing happened. Life went on.

My friends, the ones who knew, just laughed. They treated me like a victorious general. They nosed around intently for facts, and they laughed when they learned I'd hit nothing. I became something different to them, and to myself. I fired no more guns during high school or after. I don't really know what happened to Spoon. He dropped out of high school, and I saw him a few times, hanging outside of parties or at George Ward Park on Sundays. Garrett became a drug addict whose ravaged body quit a few years shy of his 25th birthday. As for me, I heard the clap of that gun for years in my sleep, until it eventually faded.

Then, when I heard my father's story again, I thought of my twisted attempt at manhood, at pride. Somewhere along the way, my father succeeded in handing down to me a better ideal of manhood. I went on to college and a career, but I know so many others who didn't. I still see them occasionally, and I remember how we were all boys, at some point, who dreamed of manhood. Unfortunately, America has a long history of discouraging its darker-hued sons from becoming men, and from that discouragement has risen a legacy of anger. Anger at poll taxes. At separate but equal. At the murder of

Amadou Diallo. At the murder of James Byrd, Jr. At the language and practice of racism in all its old guises and modern disguises.

I don't know who said it first, but I remember my father telling me something he said his father told him: A man ain't nothin' but a man. As children do, I shrugged it off when young, but, as children do, I recalled it later and began the difficult work of understanding his stories and what they meant to me, for me. Sometimes, I suppose, what a society fractures in its sons is something only a father can heal. This is not to discount mothers, but it often takes a man to guide a boy into becoming a man.

These days, when I look at boys dressed in identical brand-name clothes; boys who speak perfect English in public spaces; or boys with their baseball caps tilted to the side, their jeans slung low, their teeth encased in platinum and diamonds, their heads covered in perfect cornrows or their biceps adorned with R.I.P. tattoos, I know all they want in life is to be men—and I know they are doubtful or scared they may not be given the chance. The truth about those dragons that lie in wait for them fuels a naked and aggressive and urgent ambition to compete in America's marketplace. This need manifests as an electric vitality that permeates American culture, giving it life and allowing its consumers to come close to the void—to play in the darkness—without risk. Meanwhile, the black boys who huddle like alchemists, creating and recreating opportunity where it doesn't exist, allow our real (and historical) anger to propel us at a furious pace toward dreams we refuse to defer. And though not possible, we do want to put down that anger gifted to us by a generation and a country that has yet to fulfill its obligation of showing us how to deal with, prosper, evolve and stand in the darker legacy of our manhood. Until this happens, as many ingredients shall fuel us—a deep and buried anger being one of them—as have contributed to the complex and tragic creation of these United States.

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