

ESSAY

# SURVIVOR FILES

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*A Suite of Near Misses*

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## SURVIVAL FILE

It's your day so you sit at home waiting for your ex to arrive with your daughter. You call her from the time she was due until it's clear she won't show nor answer, at which point you ring your attorney—who also happens to be the homie—and curse a fusillade. *Chill, bro, chill*, he says. *We knew she'd fuck up and do something crazy 'cause that's what she does*. You trust your homeboylawyer, which is to say, you're given to accepting his counsel. This silly shit'll all be over in a day or two, you console yourself that night. That next morning, someone raps your

front door and rouses you out of bed. That someone is a woman who announces herself as a CPS (Child Protective Services) worker. The CPS woman informs you that someone filed a report that you abused your daughter. *What! Aw, hell nah, that's some bullshit!* you say. You check yourself the next instant, apologize for cursing, ask her to hold, and call your homeboylawyer. Your homeboylawyer advises you to let the woman look around the house, to make sure you allow her into your daughter's room. You follow his advice and after the CPS woman's inspection sit with her and

your fiancée in your sparse living room. The woman asks if there was a situation where you spanked your daughter. *Yeah, there was, you say. I told her to go to bed and she started cryin and kickin the walls. So I warned her once. Warned her twice. Warned her a third time. And after that there's consequences.* You tell the woman that you found one of your daughter's belts and, as she bicycle-kicked, slapped her on the leg with it a couple times and told her to go to sleep. You explain your daughter woke up the next morning chipper as ever and, per her routine, went skippety skip off to school with her cousin. *Well, the woman says, your story sounds consistent with what your daughter told us.*

The CPS woman discloses that your daughter said she was kicking while you spanked her and on accident kneed herself in the lip. *Oh, shit, you say. I didn't know nothin 'bout no busted lip. Why didn't her mama call me? She could've just called me.* The CPS woman affirms that your daughter told her that you didn't know about her lip being busted and that it doesn't appear to be any abuse, but adds she's mandated to keep the case open for thirty days. She assures you that when the thirty days expires, she'll close the case, and adds she won't need to meet with you again. You ask her if it's fine for your daughter to come home and she clarifies she doesn't regulate whether a child can return to a residence, that whether your daughter does or doesn't

is in the jurisdiction of the courts. *As a general rule, she says, we'd rather the child be returned to the accused parent, so we can observe the kid and the parent together and see how they interact.* You complain that you haven't seen your daughter in days and the CPS woman stresses she has no bearing on the absence. You call your homeboylawyer no sooner than the CPS woman steps a foot outside your crib. He insures you he's doing all he

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can to find your daughter, and you believe him, though that don't stop a week from passing, two weeks from passing, weeks and weeks without a word, without your ex answering a single one of your calls, and this calls for a smoke. So one

day you head down the street to buy some chronic and see your cousin—the cousin who dates your ex's sister—sitting in a car in front of the weed man's house. *What up, you say. What's up, fam, he says. You mount the steps and halfway up your cousin informs you the weed man's gone. Damn, fam, I need some chronic, you say. A nigga out here stressed.* Your cousin offers to sell you a sack, says he'll even smoke a blunt with you and drive you back to your crib and he don't need to offer it twice. In the midst of smoking, offhanded, your cousin asks if your ex is still in Baltimore. *Baltimore?! you say. She ain't in no Baltimore. She ain't supposed to be in no Baltimore.* You ask if he's sure she's there and he confirms. You explain to your cousin—what good is your explanation?—

that the courts said that since there's no custody resolution, neither you nor her mother can transport your daughter more than forty miles outside the city limits. Your cousin reports he heard of your ex's whereabouts from his girlfriend, proposes calling her on speaker as evidence. *Yeah, you say. Do that for me, fam.* He calls his girl and chitchats for a hot second, then says, *I thought you said your sister went to Baltimore. How's that when I just seen her at the bus stop.* She says, *You ain't seen my sister at no bus stop. My sister's in Maryland. I'm sure of that.* She says, *And that's fucked up what she did, taking that baby away from her daddy like that. I'd hate to be him.* The conversation ignites little flashes inside you and, on the brink of combusting, you hop out in the parking lot of your apartment and spark for your apartment dialing your homeboylawyer's line. He answers before you hit the front door. *Well, at least we have a target now,* he says, with calm you can't fathom. *At least we have somewhere to search.* You're due in court weeks from now and you half hope that your ex don't show so you can broadcast what she's done. Your court date arrives and you attend it with your homeboylawyer, your parents, and one of your sisters. Your ex don't show, but her mama and lawyer do. The lawyer requests to speak: *Your Honor, I'd like to resign,* she says. *I don't want to be a part of this case anymore.* Your homeboylawyer objects, argues your ex's lawyer is your lone point of contact with her, that

she should be ordered to stay on so you and he can serve her papers. The judge overrules the objection—which feels like the abuse of which you were once accused—and you mourn what might be an undefeatable defeat that you've just lost the one person you could hold accountable for your ex's actions. You reel to a place from which you might never return until—did he just say what you thought he said?!—the judge awards you full custody of your daughter, not a default, which could be protested, but a judgment—as in final, as in, you won. Once you were charged with domestic violence—in truth what

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Tell Daddy where you are,  
whatever city, and I'll be  
there tomorrow.

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might be a paternal inheritance—and now here you are being granted full custody of your little girl. Though your six-year-old could be anywhere in the world, for a moment your heart floats somewhere among the city's ever-gray clouds. Thereafter, calling all possible leads inaugurates your search in earnest and meanwhile your sleuthhound sister hunts online. Your ex changes her number, but begins calling you from blocked numbers with your daughter on the line. *Daddy, come get me,* your daughter pleads. *Tell me where you are,* you say. *I know you might get in trouble. But tell Daddy where you are, whatever city, and I'll be there tomorrow.* Months pass, holidays. Your daughter calls crying about a barren Christmas. You imagine how she must feel being shuffled from one house to the next, from a cousin to a friend. But then praise: your snoopificent



sister finds your daughter's school in Maryland. You contact the school and the judge who presided over your custody case and apply for the order that you can take to Maryland to prove your custody. Weeks later—of which each second is its own agony—you receive the paperwork you need. Your homeboylawyer advises you to send someone else to retrieve your daughter, says he don't want you to see your ex and rage. You hatch a plan to send your dad as an emissary to fetch your daughter from school, head straight to the airport, and fly back the same day. You coordinate the pickup with the school and spend a sleepless night listening to a riot in your chest. The school calls the next day to inform you that your daughter was unenrolled two weeks prior and you beat back the creeping dread that you may never see your daughter again. In time, your ex blockedcalls with your daughter on the line, and when you ask her where she is, she reveals that her mama has moved them to Phoenix. You ask to speak to your ex. *This ain't right*, you say, and implore her to let your daughter come home. Sometimes your ex calls and sobs that she and your daughter are near destitute and need help, and though it's tough to support someone stealing your child, you send funds in the hope they secure your daughter, that they place you one step closer to reuniting, and all the while you pray the life of living itinerate and hand-to-mouth will grind your ex into acquiescence. You ply your ex to let you buy your daughter a ticket, do it over and over and one time, to your shock, she agrees, with the stipulation that you wait a couple

of weeks. Those weeks pass and, to your vast gratitude, your ex calls and concedes to the ticket, so long as you foot her cab fare to and from the airport. You buy your daughter an unaccompanied minor ticket with the quickness and send your ex her ransom and buy the most expensive computer tablet you can and download it with games you hope give your six-year-old the ultimate delight. Your sleuthorific sister and you ride to the airport well ahead of your daughter's flight—you thinking about how it's been near a year since your daughter refused bedtime, bicycle-kicked, and busted her lip—and blow a little weed in the parking lot and dawdle into an airport bar and drink rounds too much for the occasion and amble to the gate to wait for your daughter's flight. At last, a passenger files off the plane—and another, another, another, another, another—at long last, a flight attendant escorts your daughter out of the Jetway. Your daughter spots her auntie first and bolts toward her, but stops short, and turns to you. *Daddy!* she says. *Daddy!* You swoop your precious six-year-old off her feet, squeeze her tight—maybe too tight—and lay infinite kisses on her. Years from now you'll recall this moment as one of the happiest of your life, but in the moment, worry over what time and distance may have birthed between you lives beneath your joy.

#### SURVIVAL FILE

You're out one night at the weekend hotspot off too many straight shots to count and therefore the kind of faded you think manifolds your funny when you hear

a guy you don't know say *Blood* to cap a sentence. *Damn, I didn't know niggas was still gangbangin'*, you say, and hunt the nearest faces for mirth. Don't nobody smile nor laugh, and in fact dude smacks you upside your dome as if your joke was a cue. In an instant, the two of you take to tussling inside the club—while neighborhood dudes whose account could damage your rep bear witness—and you best him before being wrenched apart and bounced outside. He paces one way. You pace the other. And in the distance between you lies the tacit truth that the animosity is in no way squashed. The next day, your friend is hosting your brother's moving-to-New-York barbecuefishfry and you show up hours prior, dump a shoe box carrying your Uzi and a 9mm on the living room table, and shout to the group of gathered men and God, *I heard niggas was looking for me. Well, let niggas know, I ain't hard to find. Somebody gone die!* In your midthirties, you'll bust one shot near, but just near, your father inside your crib, not to kill him, but to discourage him from discouraging you against prosecuting what might be your last ballistic beef, but on this day, you're in your late twenties, which in this case, is plenty old enough to die. You stomp out of the house and slam yourself into a car driven by your ride-to-beyond-good-sense girlfriend. Your brother calls and cautions you against doing something you'll regret and furthermore against returning to the barbecuefishfry. Hours after his call, you flout your disinvitation, which is to say you show up and stalk the yard with a waist-tucked

9mm bulging under your T-shirt, and a scowl that ain't got no place near anything festive. You see a dude who witnessed your scuffle the night before, a dude who's a friend of your new foe, and you flash your 9mm and threaten him into the basement. You lay your pistol in plain view and seethe, *Nigga, we can scrap right here, right now*, you say. *Nah, bro, I don't want no problems*, he says, and warns your newest archest foe heard word of your whereabouts and is on his way to the barbecuefishfry for action. By now, almost everyone wants you to leave, including the father of the friend who's hosting, and it's the father's wish you decide to heed. Oh—the timing, you stomp out of the yard, peer down the street, and in the distance, see your new arch foe among a circle of dudes. You pull the pistol from your waist and—men, women, and God's only begotten son be damned—march into the middle of street. Once, you told a grade-school teacher of your plan to become a hit man, and though you haven't considered that career choice in ages, today could be the day that delivers you to the threshold of that young hope. Before you shoot yourself into that fate, a girl you know from high school darts between you and your new foe. She calls your name, pleads, *Please, don't. Please!* She announces your fast foe is her brother and beseeches once more against gunplay and you pause, seeing an escape out of what a breath before felt foreordained. *Oh, that's your brother?* you say, and lower your pistol. The next week, you pull into the parking lot of the grocery store with your daughter in the passenger

seat and out of someplace unseen your foe pulls up beside you. Neither hand touches the wheel and you'd bet blood on why they aren't in view and what one holds. Decisions—of which the most fool would be to reach for what's under your seat. Your daughter is a fifth grader, which is to say in this instance, plenty old enough to die. You curl over her and brace, and when you don't hear a pistol bark, you raise your head, shake it, *no, no, no*, look your foe eye-to-assassin-black-eye, and mouth, *Man, I don't want no problems. It's squashed. It's squashed.* He idles for what could be the rest of your and your first born's life.

#### SURVIVAL FILE

This was the hipslickcool years you sold the cocaine and your older brother the heroin and both of you lived in his curious-colored house out in the suburbs. You could claim this was the consequence of somebody burgling TVs and guns out of that house, might contend it began days after the heist, when you drop by the pad of a dude who buys your coke and see your Trinitron TV in it. You ask him where he copped the TV and he reveals he bought it from a white boy who you also sell dope. Your friend admits that the white boy furthermore sold him a gun, which, as it turns out, was also stolen from your house. *Well, ain't this a bitch*, you say. You put out an APB for the white boy and obtain an address out

in Southeast. You recruit your acebooncoon and a younger brother and hop in your ride armed with pistols and a shotgun and wheel out to Southeast with half your hardening heart set on killing him. Soon your hodgepodge crew of hit men reach the address and, strapped, march onto the front porch. The house is lit and you can see people loafing inside it, see what looks

like a family, not a one of who resembles the white boy. It don't take long to glean you've been fed a bunk address, for your slapdash crew to scramble stealth off the porch and into your ride, for you to wheel back into Northeast, woofing the

whole way about what you'll do if/when you find the thieving-ass peckerwood. You cruise by a popular night spot and lo and behold spy the white boy's car parked near with him in it. You pull up on him, threaten him out of his car, and glare with your pistol drawn. You'll be thankful years later for the whisper in your spirit that won't let you kill him, but in the moment, you watch the white boy jerk as if to grab a gun and your acebooncoon ram him through the front window of a nearby building. The two of them wrestle inside as you wonder *what next, what next, what next*. No such ambivalence in your brother, though, who takes one long step closer and busts several shots through the window. By luck or grace or sinner's faith, the shots miss your acebooncoon but hit the white boy in the

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arm—or was it the leg? You'll be mighty, mighty thankful years later that the white boy didn't die and that nobody involved the police. Because you believe with all of your softened heart that killing a white boy would have been the end of your freedom, which is to say the end of any life you could stand . . . Or could it have been when you were living on the fumes of hipslickcool? That time, in the throes of your addiction, you schlepp into a dopehouse with ump-teen days' worth of dirty clothes stuffed in a duffel bag and spend days—or was it a decade?—puffing rocks with one of your old aceboons and reminiscing on the years when you wanted nothing more than to pull a Cadillac with automatic shut-off lights off the showroom floor, back when there was little more important than to lay claim to women galore, back when you dreamed of traveling to big places, owning

a big house on a hill. You shamble into the bathroom to piss and find a toilet bowl chocked with shit and toilet paper. You squeeze off your breath and close your eyes and piss and wash your hands and reach to dry them and see shit smeared all over the hand towel—and at the speed of a fresh high you feel every bit of what you've become. You slump out of the bathroom into the room where your old aceboon gropes his pipe. *That's it for me, man*, you say. *I ain't usin no more*. You grab your duffel and slog out the door, don't stop till you reach your sister's house, the same sister who at the time has miracled two years clean. She answers and gazes at you and steps aside. *Sis, I don't wanna do this no more*, you say. *I know you know how to do it. What should I do?* She raises a hand and whisks into another room and returns carrying towels. *Here*, she says. *The first thing you need to do is take a bath.* 🍷