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A Nation of Millions: Thirty-Two Black Men

"The only thing that has ever interested me is a blank page."

—Jean-Michel Basquiat

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I came silently into the light and warmth of the church, a bit late, five minutes or more, having been told to arrive promptly by 11:00 AM at St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Church on Montague Street in downtown Brooklyn, a house of worship large enough to contain multitudes, or so I felt, the stillness inside the church that morning huge and warm. Light cast in from the great stained-glass windows brightening or shadowing those sitting in the pews and standing in the aisles. Trying to overcome my shyness in new situations and people, I made my way up the nave and scanned the small crowd, determined to spot a familiar face. That's when I saw Mitch, Mitchell Jackson, author of the novel *The Residue Years* (2013), back near the last pew, drinking coffee from a paper cup. I cut straight for him.

Mitch, aka Lil Homey, stylish as always—black rims on his face, black leather motorcycle jacket over a black sweater that served as backdrop, canvas, to a slim silver necklace with pendant, and slate-gray jeans—dressed with his usual "nigger elegance," to borrow a phrase from poet Larry Neal. No way to forget the audacious outfit he'd worn to an awards ceremony two years ago, the white designer shirt with a row of gold safety pins on either side of the collar, Mitch outdoing himself. His philosophy, Always put something that's you in the way you dress. Mitch saw me and we dapped and embraced. We sat together quietly and just lay back in the cut for a minute, taking in the scene.

We had all been called here, thirty-two black male writers, for a photo shoot that would echo and extend the famous 1958 photograph of jazz musicians in Harlem, A Great Day in Harlem. Six months earlier, I had accepted the invitation without hesitation given that the gathering would document a historic occasion. Later I discovered that several writers had declined the invitation for various reasons, while many deserving others never received an invite. If nothing else, I thought it was a great idea, a photograph that might get us to think some about generations of musicians and writers and the myriad ways that music has shaped and informed African American literature since the last century. It also helped that painter Kehinde Wiley was to direct the shoot. Things stalled, and by the time I received a follow up message about the shoot, Wiley was no longer involved, and the location had changed from Harlem to Brooklyn under the direction of Boots Riley.

Be that as it may, I'd be a liar if I said I didn't have any misgivings about some of the other writers on call. Didn't matter that they were all black men like me. In fact, that peculiar institution called race only made matters worse since there's room enough in the literary world for only one or two at a time, a reality that often pits us against each other in the scramble to seize the prize. This crabs-in-the-barrel competition brings out the worst in some of us. So heart-broken for recognition by the literary world, some will do anything, betray or belittle anyone to get a leg up.

Case in point, a young poet standing across the aisle, the center of attention for two fellow poets fawning about him. The poet has already made a name for himself, gained a reputation. I'd met him once before, a showboat and shit-talker. The three men moved closer together, their shoulders touching. Now I could see that they were taking swigs from a fifth of Hennessey. He loved to shock. Perhaps the libations and boasting were a way of not only

rebuffing us but also rejecting this church? Not that his flamboyance and theatrics were wholly out-of-pocket since this entire arrangement felt like a movie set. At one end of the church stood wardrobe racks just to the left of the chancel and at the other end a hair and makeup station in the narthex. There were tables with food and drinks here and there. Lots of props and people inside a structure that had "character," a place that had been designed with a less-is-more discretion to emphasize space, abundance, as in "Come in and stay for a while. All are welcome here." Nothing ornate, fancy, fussy.

When *T* magazine contacted me, I'd assumed we would gather in front of the same brownstone in Harlem where the fifty-eight jazz musicians had convened in 1958. I think back to the Great Day in Harlem photograph, think about generations, a young Sonny Rollins in dark shades standing in the second row and twelve boys seated on the curb in front of him with an aging Count Basie. Was that photo meant to say to the world, "The jazz musician has finally arrived?" If so, what will this photo say about us to the world? Why all this fanfare about thirty-two black male writers? Nothing surprising in the Brooklyn location since, in recent decades, Brooklyn has supplanted Manhattan as the preferred borough of residence for writers in New York. Brooklyn, our nation's new literary capital, is the new Harlem, as it were, for jazz musicians and writers alike.

Called to the narthex for hair and makeup, I discovered that the barber was a black man like myself, well-groomed and roughly my age, mid-fifties.

"What do you want today?"

"Whatever you think I need."

With brush, clippers, and comb, he gave me what I needed, while I did what writers do—that is, get nosey and ask questions to tease out his life into a narrative I might use someday. Then I closed my eyes and started to drift off as I always do under a barber's care, relishing in the comfort, letting my mind go, somehow chatting on, making conversation through my sleep haze.

When my cut was finished, I spotted the writer and horn-man James McBride in his signature porkpie hat that he wears to honor jazz musicians and went over and stood near him. He was carrying on an animated conversation with a small, slight bald man, dapper in British tweeds, a professorial brown as opposed to McBride's sober black—wardrobe was costuming all of us in black—and smartly purposeful.

"Hey, let me introduce you to George Wolfe." McBride gestured towards me. I shook hands with Wolfe. Mumbled something about how I admire his work and how I was honored to meet him. Trying to be casual, easy enough since I'm never nervous around celebrities, but McBride carried on with his introduction, saying glowing things about my most recent book *Song of the Shank* (2014), telling Wolfe how my character Blind Tom would be great for the stage.

Wolfe stood looking at me.

For my part, I was amazed at how much his interest in me made me feel. Thinking, I should tell him about my novel, tell him that it would indeed be great for the stage. I don't feel my fiction has received the attention it deserves. Writing is the one thing I've always been good at, the one thing I know I can get right if I put the time in, marinate, give my all. But something

inside prevents me from singing my own praise. In a panic about what to say, do, I asked McBride what he's working on.

"That's the difference between New York and LA," Wolfe said in a gentle voice. "In New York people ask you, 'What are you working on?' Nobody ever asks that in LA." Wolfe laughed easily.

Wolfe wondered if New York is still the city of possibility for young artists it was when he came decades ago to the cheap and affordable Manhattan of old. Feeling intimidated, I excused myself, promising to return. A missed opportunity? Perhaps.

I chanced upon the novelist Reginald McKnight in another wing of the church talking to a young dude I didn't recognize. I have always admired McKnight's work—and admired him, too, for his distinctive look, the dreads that encircle his head like a turban, his full plump face, and his unabashedly thick goatee sprinkled with gray.

McKnight acknowledged me.

"Are you in line for the bathroom?"

"Yeah," he said. "But you can go before me." He continued to look at me. "Man," he said, "my wife really loves you. She wants to leave me for you." A joke that was more than a joke.

I stiffened, wavered for a moment. What to say? How the world turns. Thirty years ago, when I was in grad school, McKnight was the most celebrated African-American fiction writer outside big name luminaries like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, a newcomer whose masterful short stories were often anthologized and taught.

His wife's "love" for me was another thing altogether.

"I'll marry her," I said, then rushed into the bathroom.

Once back in the nave, I noticed Daryl Pinckney sitting alone on a pew. From our many years teaching together in the New School's MFA program, I know Daryl to be clean-cut, soft-spoken, modest, and polite. I've only ever seen him in a suit. I took a seat in the pew in front of him. We got caught up then pondered over who was and wasn't there and why. I offered Hilton Als's name, both surprised and pleased to discover that Daryl and Hilton are friends, that they used to be running buddies back in the day, two intelligent black gay writers making the most of New York. Daryl told me about the Hilton the world doesn't know.

He recalled an incident where some homophobe confronted him and Hilton and started harassing them, berating them, threatening them. Hilton picked up a red chair and started swinging on the guy. Chased the guy beaten and bloody from the building. "Hilton was courageous."

I was still taking all this in, impressed, when wardrobe called me. The head designer busied two assistants with finding me a blazer, slacks, shirt, and shoes in my size. Once they had what they needed, I followed them into the dressing area, walked along the chancel up to the altar as though I was about to be baptized, only to turn left and take a seat inside the semi-transept. After a short process of trial and error, they outfitted me, the designer clothes and shoes echoing my body's disposition, making the man. I liked the way everything looked, fit, and I took a moment to admire my metamorphosis in the mirror, even felt obligated to act out some non-Jeff gestures and rehearse the new me, buying into the fiction.

But certain questions need asking. What does this kind of group portrait say about the place of the black (male) writer in America today? Why now? And what did the 1958 photograph say about the black (male) jazz musician then? We should remember that in 1959 Miles Davis was beaten bloody by a white cop outside the Manhattan club where his band was playing. Miles Davis who earlier that year had recorded the groundbreaking and widely celebrated *Kind of Blue*. Miles Davis in his fine Italian suit. Miles's suit and talent and fame didn't save him. Why? Because the black man was and is the most despised and vilified person in America, true for Miles Davis's time, true for ours, true perhaps forever. I know that this photo shoot, the image of me and other black men in designer suits and shoes is part of a well-intentioned campaign meant to show that Black Lives Matter, that it is meant to give visual proof to the claim that not all black men are thugs and criminals and rapists and losers, that many of us make important contributions to the arts, to our nation, and to the world. However, I also know that this photograph will change nothing, just as the work we do as writers and musicians won't save another black man from a cop's baton or gun. It won't save me or any other man here from a jail cell. As Malcolm X said, "America is our prison."

I would like to believe that we have arrived, that we are here in this church because the world is ready to receive what we offer, but I know that a day like this can bear no relation to the norm.

Back in my pew, I witnessed the first momentous occasion of the day, Ishmael Reed, our cantankerous prophet, emerging from the back wings of the church as if through a magic curtain. He looked amazing, sleek and stylish in a black suit, impeccably dressed and groomed, his gray afro haloed with every hair in place.

I called out to him.

He seemed pleased to see me. "Hey, do you have a copy of *King Comulus*? I have one for you."

He disappeared to retrieve the book, *King Comulus*, the final novel of William Demby, a great but largely forgotten writer, the latest title that Ish has published through his own company. For decades, Ish has given so much—and he's still giving at eighty years of age. All his days a fighter, this "wild donkey of a man" has lived up to his Biblical name: "his hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand will be against him" (Genesis 16:12). Ish refused to take things as they were and went to war against what he called the "gliberal" New York publishing establishment, creating space and opportunities for writers of color by saying what needed to be said and doing what needed to be done. Ish the novelist has given us books that are jazz on paper and hilarious hoodoo collage, while Ish the literary activist has been a gadfly, publisher, editor, anthologist, and builder of institutions. Ish was one of the first people to use the term "multicultural" and as much as anyone he has pushed and lived by the idea in both his writing and via organizations he founded like the Before Columbus Foundation, which presents the prestigious American Book Awards each year.

Here in this church everyone wanted to be in his presence. Writers introduced themselves to him or greeted him, and he greeted them in return, but Mitch was the first person to go for the photo opp. He handed me his phone and posed next to Ish, waiting for me to capture the shot. What the photo reveals: Ish as a naturally assertive presence, a man who sits easily in his skin, poker-faced and indifferent, holding his Styrofoam cup of coffee like a live grenade he might release at any moment.

As if on cue, Boots Riley materialized from the hidden room Ish had come from, Boots quite a sight in a seventies-style brown plaid pimp-leisure suit and shoes embossed with the title

of his film, *Sorry to Bother You*. Something tongue-in-cheek and whimsical in the way his sideburns ride his face like a bridle keeping him focused, his eyes on the prize.

Ish livened up a bit for a selfie with Boots, Mitch, and me.

We drifted in small groups towards hors d'oeuvres arranged neatly on tables, starting sentences, reaching our fingers into the food, stuffing our mouths, finishing sentences, debating the merits of *Black Panther*, Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Moonlight*, Cory Booker, *Luke Cage*, Trevor Noah, *Power*, Tupac, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Kehinde Wiley, *The Avengers*, Kendrick Lamar, *Random Acts of Flyness*, voices in the air, something brooding at a level deeper than language or thought. Long stretches of boredom too, waiting for hour after hour while members of our group got dressed and groomed and for Boots to get things right on the set that he'd had constructed around the corner at the Brooklyn Historical Society.

At one point, Ish, Mcknight, Nelson George, and Cornelius Eady sat together in a close circle discussing Richard Pryor. George said he'd interviewed Pryor near the end of the life, how sad the whole thing was, the interview going on for hours because Pryor struggled to get each word out. Somebody grunted picturing the scene, somebody else shook his head. Poor Richard.

I never met Pryor. The closest I came: getting snubbed by Paul Mooney in the McDonald's on 44th and Eighth Avenue one winter day circa 2003, a year or so before Mooney became a regular on the Dave Chappelle show. I entered the fast food joint and saw Mooney sitting at a table making business calls on a flip phone. I admired Mooney mostly because I knew he'd written material for Pryor.

"Hey, aren't you Paul Mooney?" I figured Mooney would be impressed that I recognized him. But he didn't look up at me.

“Yeah, I’m Paul Mooney.” He made his next call.

I thought about recounting the incident to the other writers.

“We made Richard get better,” Ish said. “We were a hard audience in Berkeley. He couldn’t bring that weak shit to us.”

“And you also knew him, too, didn’t you?” I asked.

Ish looked at me. “Yeah, I knew him.” Everything in those words. Everything that Ish says without having to speak it.

I can hear Pryor in my favorite line from an Ish novel: Jesus jumps down from the cross and says “Free at last!” And I can hear Ish in Pryor’s Mudbone routine. In both men the same comic genius rooted in the oral tradition of signifying, the dozens, and “lies.” All the street stuff I know from having grown up on the Southside of Chicago.

Moments or hours later, I’m sitting next to James McBride in another circle. He asks me about Charles Johnson, what is he like? I have much to say and try to say it, but then I see Jamal Brinkley sitting on my right and tell him I hope he wins the National Book Award, that I’ll keep my fingers crossed. Before I can stop myself, I grumble on and put my foot in my proverbial mouth, tell Jamal that he has no chance of winning because it’s all rigged against us.

I see McBride’s eyes lift under his porkpie hat. “It doesn’t matter if he gets that prize. It doesn’t matter if any of us get prizes. Why, because all of us are lucky. We’re here. We have the good fortune to simply be able to write. We’re the first generation who can say that.” He runs his hands over the ironed fabric of his pants. “Hey, you know what? I talk to Sonny Rollins every week.” Of the fifty-eight jazz musicians featured in Great Day in Harlem photo, all are deceased

except for Rollins and one other man. "Do you know what's important for him? The money is not important. The fame is not important. What's important is to keep this thing going. He says that his job is to leave something behind for the next guy. Your job is to create a space for somebody to come after you."

Before McBride gets his last word out, I know he's right. We all know.

After a long day inside the church, they marshal us into the Brooklyn Historical Society. It's now 5:00 in the evening, but we're still lively, full of energy. We walk single file, boisterous, laughing together, arms around each other. We come onto a tiered set with piles of books, Boots Riley's surreal conception of a library, and get placed in our respective positions. Give it up to Boots, who has transfixed us here, among the stacks of books and crates. His hands carve directions in the air.

Someone, "Should some of us kneel down?"

"Some people here can't kneel down because they won't be able to get back up," says the poet, whoozy on Hennessey. Later Mitch will text me, *"The loudest voice is the weakest in the room."*

Boots appears to be still in the process of setting up the shot when he announces that he's already got the photo he wants.

What? Six hours in the church but only fifteen minutes here. So it goes.

Boots asks, "Now what do you all want to do?"

Surprised, pleased, we look at Boots, look into the camera, accept his words as our due, all in a day's work.

Boots says, "Ish, throw up the finger."

Ish returns Boots's gaze, weighing the words, calculating—is he serious?—considering. He throws up the middle finger. And we all follow his lead, something satisfying and complete about this moment of Fuck you-togetherness. We nod our heads at one another in the way that black men do, have done for generations. Now we are free to call it a day.

Who am I to want more than this? Fuck you, America. And take a good look. We are still here. Still standing. Try as you might, you can't silence us. The changing same of our creativity is the one thing you can never kill. For that reason every day is a Great Day for us.

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