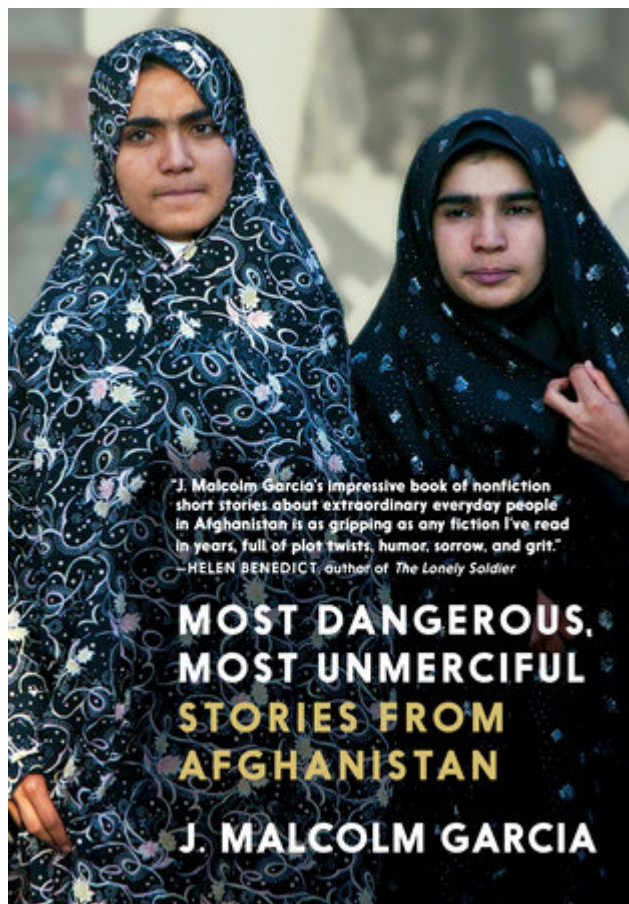


# New Nonfiction from Michael Gruber: Review of J. Malcolm Garcia's "Most Dangerous, Most Unmerciful: Stories from Afghanistan"



## Humanity in Afghanistan

For the average American G.I. who served in Afghanistan, the country was of a different world. Most understood Afghans had relatively little in common with us, its would-be Western custodians. For starters, its population spoke obscure Indo-Iranian languages like Pashto and Dari, which had no share with our West Germanic-based English. It was universally Muslim, which while monotheist, had a variety of practices we

found puzzling, or even less charitably, threatening, at least when viewed through the vaguely jingoistic shadow of 9/11. The day-to-day life of Afghans seemed to revolve around the dull monotony of subsistence agriculture, and moved at an unhurried, slow, perhaps even complacent, pace. Their households were multi-generational, with sometimes four or even five generations living under the "roof" of the same *qalat*. Whether in the bazaar or the fields, Afghans seemed to us frozen in amber, living a way of life that we ascribed to ancient times. Our assessment was that they were illiterate, poor, simple, and locked behind barriers of social custom and theology we could never hope to penetrate.

Much of this analysis is clearly retrograde and patronizing, but it was far more motivated by youthful hubris and ignorance than some sort of loitering colonial mindset. The average American G.I. in Afghanistan was not college educated. The extent of our education on Afghanistan had been delivered in a vulgar *milieu* of VH1, Comedy Central, cable news, and only the most remotely accurate Hollywood renditions. Most of us didn't even own passports. In fact, for many American service members, their deployment was their first time abroad. One's ability to empathize, or to even understand the Afghan way of life, was also limited by the task at-hand, which much of the time was unambiguously dangerous. Life experience and cross-cultural barriers only accentuated this divide. To put it bluntly, as has been true for the membership of all armies throughout history, we were really just kids, and therefore had an appropriately teenage level of understanding. It is hard to assign an "imperialist" mindset to what Robert Kotlowitz terms "adolescent fervor."

Much of what we learned of Afghanistan has therefore come *since* our deployments, as a way to help make sense of what we observed. J. Malcolm Garcia's *Most Dangerous, Most Unmerciful* is one such continuation of this project, describing the innards of a world many of us only observed from a distance,

despite being immersed in it. Garcia is a freelance journalist who appears to have a niche for war-torn or impoverished regions: his website reports he has also worked in Chad, Sierra Leone, and Haiti. The text in question is a collection of short stories that Garcia has compiled from his time in Afghanistan, all of them non-fiction.

As a writer, Garcia seems to be something of a Studs Terkel disciple, and the text is relentless in its centering of Afghans and capturing the *raison d'être* of social history: "history from below," as it's termed. In fact, we learn relatively little of Garcia himself, except for a tender chapter where he adopts and ships home an orphaned cat he names "Whistle." At least, I interpret this to be Garcia, although it may not be, as he refers to the anonymous protagonist only as "the reporter," and I can't tell if this is Garcia's effort at rhetorical humility or his description of a third party. Elsewhere, the text is mostly page after page of Afghans in their own voice, articulating their own feelings, history, and sentiment.

It seems notable that I cannot recall a similar literary project—one which centers the experience of the average civilian Afghan or Iraqi—sourced from any of our recent foreign entanglements. It is loosely represented in other journalistic media, like occasional pieces one may have encountered in *The New York Times* or *The Atlantic*, but these are news reports, not short stories collected into a single volume. Likewise, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is historical fiction, not documentary non-fiction. Garcia's project seems unique in this regard. To be sure, *Most Dangerous, Most Unmerciful's* genre—which I classify as oral war history—was pioneered some 40 years ago in Terkel's *The Good War*. But texts like these, especially when written by Americans, have primarily relayed the perspective of war veterans, not civilians in warzones. This underrepresentation of the noncombatant civilian is a tremendous disservice,

especially considering the horrific suffering they often endured. That Garcia's text makes this glaringly obvious is perhaps its most important contribution.

The stories shared by Garcia are wide-ranging. "Mother's House," the longest and most compelling in the book, tells of a recovery center in Kabul for narcotics addicts, likely the first of its kind, ran by a woman appropriately nicknamed "Mother." "Feral Children" gives voice to the destitute children of Kabul, who are subject to collecting cans or polishing shoes. Garcia makes observations of Afghan society throughout these stories, noting, for example, the marked contrast these youths have with their Westernized counterparts, whose libertine style of dress and flamboyant mannerisms are nearly indistinguishable from an American teenager in, say, Atlanta or Houston. And while Garcia seems to gravitate around Kabul, commentary like this—and his occasional bravery in venturing out to rural areas, such as when he is confronted by what appear to be Taliban supporters while at "a graveyard for Arab fighters" in "In Those Days"—speaks to the unfathomable chasm that existed in Afghanistan between Kabul, where the decided minority of families who benefitted from NATO occupation usually resided, and the destitute rural poor, who did not share in those benefits. Garcia attempts to give voice to both, showcasing the country's complexity and tremendous contradictions—ethnic, moral, economic, social, and otherwise—and how they defined both its people and the war writ-large.

In tandem with the text's keen insights is the steady drumbeat of this book, which is poverty and relentless suffering. To be sure, the stories are varied and unique, but my sense is they begin to blend. They are stories of human suffering which manifest into clambering, scrabbling, and scavenging; people using what meager resources they have just to survive, whether from the war, disease, or hunger. But the themes become so common and consistent that I felt myself having the reaction



ones does when they are exposed to homelessness or panhandling in a major city—"I'm not numb to your suffering, but this appears so ubiquitous that I don't know how to help you address it, or if I even should, or if I even can." I felt a sort of self-protective compassion fatigue while reading this text, or worse, that I had become a sadistic voyeur engaging in slum tourism. Perhaps this is Garcia's intention, or perhaps it speaks to sneaking deficits in my own character as I continue to process my—and our—involvement in that country and our two-decade-long war. Regardless, Garcia has produced here a fine addition to this continued exploration, and gives us an exposure to the humanity of Afghans that we would do well to absorb.

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## **New Fiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: "Viraj"**

Viraj sat in a room behind the motel reception counter, eating a bowl of bhaat with his fingers when the desk bell chimed. He set the bowl down and opened the door. A man in a heavy green coat stood at the counter. His pale blue jeans hung off his waist and he tugged them up. He had a wide, bearded face and smiled easily, but Viraj thought his eyes looked tired. A small, leashed brown dog stood beside him and sniffed the floor. The man whistled a high, sharp note, and the dog looked at him, ears perked, and sat.

"May I help you?" Viraj asked.

"Do you have a room for the night?"

"Yes," Viraj said.

"Do you allow pets?"

"Yes."

"OK."

"I'll need to see your ID and credit card," Viraj said.

The man reached into a pocket and withdrew a worn leather wallet held together by duct tape. Opening the wallet, he slid his driver's license and a Visa card under a plexiglass sneeze guard that Viraj installed at the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Is your dog a pet, or do you have him for emotional support?"

"What do you mean?"

"If it's for emotional support, I won't charge you a deposit."

"I was in Afghanistan," the man said.

"I see," Viraj said after a moment. "Army?"

"No, I was a contractor. But sometimes there wasn't a difference."

Something in the tone of the man's voice made Viraj uneasy, or perhaps he just felt bad for him. He didn't know.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He examined the driver's license. *Billington, John Donald. Colorado.* He entered the credit card number into a computer.

"Where are you from?" the man asked.

Viraj glanced at him but didn't answer. Was he one of those America First people? Around town he had begun seeing "American Owned" signs in the windows of other motels. Some guests had come into his motel only to leave when they saw him behind the counter. He didn't feel anger as much as contempt.

How ignorant some of these Americans are! he thought. He was just an infant when his father, frustrated with the low salary he earned as a history teacher in Hyderabad, India, brought Viraj and his mother here to McAllen, Texas, near the Mexican border. They moved in with his father's older brother, Madhav, who operated a Motel 6. With his contacts, he helped Viraj's father become a manager at the Grand Star, a motel just two blocks away. The family made a home of two rooms on the first floor where they still lived. Viraj's father always wore a dhoti and his mother wrapped herself in a sari, and they continued to speak Hindi to each other and to Viraj but he would answer them in English. After school, Viraj helped his mother clean rooms. He collected bedding and damp towels, and carried them to a laundry room, sometimes tripping on blankets trailing on the ground. His father worked the front desk. In those days, Viraj thought of the Grand Star as a warren of mysterious rooms within which anything was possible.

"Are you from India?" the man asked.

"Yes, I am," Viraj said.

He pushed the driver's license and credit card under the sneeze guard. The man put them in his wallet.

"How long have you lived here?"

"Since I was very small."

When he was a senior in high school, Viraj's father suffered a stroke. Viraj began filling in for him and managing the motel with his mother. As the months passed, the hopes for his father's full recovery faded. Now the family patriarch spent his days in a wheelchair staring out at the parking lot behind the motel, and Viraj's mother had to help him eat. He could speak only a few words. Viraj thought his parents would move back in with Uncle Madhav so he could continue with school. However, Madhav told him this was not possible. It is your job as a son to care for them, not mine, he said. Viraj considered

attending college at night but too many guests arrived in the evenings for him to take time off. He considered other options but the routine of managing the day-to-day operations of the motel soon became as much a part of his life as breathing. The plans he had made for school assumed the vagueness of dreams he had difficulty remembering. His mother told him that when he had a family he could fulfill his ambitions through his children, as she and his father had hoped to do with him.

After Viraj turned eighteen, Uncle Madhav introduced him to the daughter of an Indian friend. They married and Viraj brought his new wife whose name was Meera to the motel where they lived in a room next to his parents. She helped his mother clean after guests had checked out. Viraj and Meera tried to have children but she was unable to conceive. He told her it was God's will and she agreed but he knew she felt ashamed. She told him he was wasting his time with her. He took her to a doctor who prescribed antidepressants. She began spending more time away from the motel—where she didn't say, and Viraj didn't ask. Her unhappiness was another trial. He didn't know what to say without burdening himself further so he said nothing. When she didn't come back one night, he wondered if she was at peace and if so, how she had found it.

"I stopped in India on a layover and spent about twenty-four hours in New Delhi," the man said. "Not enough time at all to see it."

"In New Delhi, no, it would not be," Viraj said.

"Do you go back and visit?"

"No," Viraj said. "I am the manager here now and work all the time."

He printed a receipt for the room and asked the man to review and sign it and to write the make, model, and license plate number of his car in a box next to his signature. He looked out the glass front doors at the heavy, gray sky and saw his

mother pulling weeds from a pot that had once held geraniums. Uncle Madhay had scolded him for not replacing the dead flowers. Remove the pots, he told him, or plant something. What would your father think? Viraj agreed but did nothing. He doubted his father would care at this point so what did it matter? Viraj checked-in guests. Let his mother worry about the pots.

Across the street, cars pulled into the Waffle House. Next door, people streamed in and out of the Shell convenience store. A woman and a boy walked from sunlight into shade. On slow days like today, Viraj read books about ancient India that belonged to his father. His mother would check on him and he would feel her beside him peering over his shoulder as he read. He heard his father's labored breathing in the other room. I am fine, mother, he would tell her. After she left, he continued to read until his eyes grew tired. Putting the book down, he stared into space. Sometimes, he would go through his father's closet, change into a dhoti and then return to his chair. He imagined being a physician in the time of the Gupta dynasty, when advances in medicine helped create India's golden age. In another life, Viraj thought, he might have worked with the celebrated fifth-century physician and surgeon Sushruta. In another life he might have been him. Instead, he had this life.



“You’re in room 201, around to the back,” Viraj told the man.

The man nodded, leaned down and patted the dog’s head. Then he straightened up and waited while Viraj put a plastic card key in an envelope.

“Thank you,” he said.

He tugged on the leash and the dog stood.

“Did you know that from the Middle Ages to around 1750 some of eastern Afghanistan was recognized as being a part of India?” Viraj asked.

“No, I didn’t.”

“It was,” Viraj said. “There was an Afghan who died in 1576 on behalf of an Indian king fighting the Mughal Empire. His name was Hakim Khan Sur.”

"I didn't know that either," the man said.

He turned to leave. The dog walked beside him, its nails clicking on the white tile floor. Viraj watched them get into a dented Toyota hatchback checkered with mud, and drive toward the rear of the motel. He looked out the door for a long moment. Then he took a pen and wrote "Hakim Khan Sur" on a Post-it. He put the pen down and walked around to the man's room. The dog barked when he knocked, and the man opened the door without removing the chain lock. Viraj noticed a green duffle bag on the floor and a bottle of water and a vial of pills on the night table. The dog sat bolt upright beside the man and growled. Viraj stepped back. He offered the man the Post-it.

"I wrote down the name of the Afghan who died fighting the Mughals," he said. "Hakim Khan Sur."

The man looked at it and Viraj had the impression he didn't remember their conversation.

"Hakim Khan Sur," he repeated. "In case you want to Google him. You can tell me when you check out what you have learned."

"Thank you."

"I live here with my mother and father," Viraj said, "I like to read history books about India."

"I appreciate your trouble," the man said.

He folded the Post-it.

"Google him. You will see I come from a great country."

The man stared at Viraj.

"He was a very important person."

The man nodded. Viraj walked away. He had not gone far when

the man shouted, "I can't help you." Viraj paused but didn't reply or look back. He felt the man staring at him. He had been to Afghanistan. Viraj knew about Hakim Khan Sur. He thought that was interesting. He had assumed the guest would think so too, and would see they had something in common. Now, he felt foolish. He knew he would not see him in the morning.

Viraj returned to his station behind the counter. He wondered if he should read or just go to bed. He knew all there was to know about the golden age of ancient India. He often had dreams of that time as if he had lived in the fifth century, and he would remember them the next morning. He didn't know if that was a good thing. Maybe he read too much. Maybe this evening he would just sit with his mother and father and clear his mind, accept the silence as his own, captive to the slow pace of a quiet night.

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## **New Fiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: "Love Engagement"**

Noor and his wife Damsa moved to Paris when the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Twenty-two years later, after the collapse of the Taliban, they returned to Kabul and rented a house with a large backyard in District Ten on Taimani Street. Withered red, blue and white roses grew beside a bare concrete wall and geckos perched between the thorns, immobile, alert, leaping at the slightest disturbance into the branches of a poplar. Fallen leaves from the tree curled on the faded tiles of a cracked terrace. One afternoon, while he was watering the roses, Noor met his neighbor, Abdul Ahmadi, and invited him for tea.



Right off, Abdul noticed Damsa in the kitchen without a burqa. She looked him up and down without a hint of self-consciousness. Another woman stood beside her. She wore a burqa and turned away when Abdul glanced at her. Damsa carried tea and a plate of raisins and cashews on a tray and sat with Abdul and Noor and lit a cigarette. Abdul could not believe her behavior and turned to Noor. Noor shrugged.

It is no problem for a woman to smoke and sit with a man in Paris, he said.

Don't apologize for me, Damsa snapped.

I was not apologizing for you.

Yes, you were!

Turning to Abdul, she scolded, You are stuck in the old ways.

Abdul's face reddened with anger but he remained quiet. He closed his eyes as if the darkness would remove Damsa from his sight. When he opened them again, he ignored her and asked Noor about the other woman. Was she his second wife?

No, Damsa answered and laughed.

I spoke to Noor, Abdul said.

Yes, and now I am speaking to you, Damsa said. She is my friend from long ago. We were in school together.

We are not in France, Abdul said, trying to control his temper.

Yes, but you are in our home, Damsa replied.

Please, Noor said.

No, don't please me, she snapped.

When neither Noor or Abdul spoke, Damsa continued: The woman's

name was, Arezo. She was still not used to the idea that the Taliban were gone and she could now show her face to men. Slowly, slowly, Damsa said, she had been encouraging Arezo to relax and trust in the new Afghanistan.

Abdul understood her hesitation. He still had a long beard and wore a salwar kameez. His friends told him to shave but his mind did not switch off and on like a lightbulb. One day, the vice police were measuring his beard, the next day his friends were waiting for barbers to shave theirs off. It was all very sudden and as unbelievable as Damsa's behavior.

Excusing himself, Abdul returned home. He lived alone. During Talib time, when his father arranged for him to marry the daughter of a close friend, Abdul fled to Pakistan. The idea of marriage scared him, especially to a girl he did not even know. He had rarely spoken to any girl and never without an older person present. He had vague memories of playing tag with girl cousins in the back of his house when he was a boy but after he turned ten or eleven his father told him to play only with boys.

Abdul refused to come home until his father relented and promised not to force him into marriage but he did not speak to Abdul again. He moved around him like a detached shadow behaving as if he did not exist.

A tailor who owned a small shop in Shar-e-Naw hired Abdul as his assistant. When he died, Abdul took over. Then al-Qaeda attacked the United States and the Americans came. In the days and months that followed, Abdul would sit behind the counter of his shop beside a sewing machine and stare at the busy sidewalk traffic, incredulous. Young men strode by in blue jeans and button up shirts with bright flower patterns, much of their pale chests exposed. Girls wore jeans, too, and high-heeled shoes, and the wind from cars lifted their saris and they held the billowing cloth with both hands and laughed, their uncovered faces turned toward the clear sky, sunlight

playing across their flushed cheeks. Abdul struggled to absorb all the changes that had occurred in such a short time.

One day a year after they had met, Noor called Abdul and told him Damsa had died. She had awakened that morning, stepped into their garden, lit a cigarette and dropped dead of a heart attack. He found her slumped against a wall, a vine reaching above her head. Abdul hurried to his house. When Noor opened the door, Abdul embraced him.

Well, now I can watch American wrestling shows on TV without Damsa telling me it's entertainment for boys, not men, Noor said. I can play panjpar<sup>[1]</sup> with my friends and she won't tell me I'm wasting my time.

Two months later, Noor stopped by Abdul's shop with some news: his nephew, the son of his older sister, had become engaged. But it was not a typical engagement. He and the girl had decided to marry on their own. Their parents had not been involved.

My nephew calls it a love engagement, Noor said.

Their fathers do not object? Abdul asked.

No. Now that the Americans are here I think it is OK.

Noor left and a short time later Arezo walked into Abdul's shop and asked if he would mend a pair of sandals. She gave no indication that she recognized him. She still wore a burqa but she had pulled the hood from her face. Her hair fell to her shoulders. She would not look at Abdul directly but he noticed a smile play across her face when he spoke.



That night, as he got ready for bed, Abdul thought about Arezo. He wondered what it would be like walking beside her in public as young men and women now did. Just thinking about it kept him awake. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of them on a sidewalk together, their fingers almost touching. Then he leaned into her face and pressed his mouth against hers. As their lips touched he woke with a jolt.

Night after night Abdul had this dream. He always woke up after he kissed her. Eventually he would fall back to sleep and dream of Arezo again until the dawn call to prayer stirred him awake. Then one night the dreams stopped. He woke up feeling her absence, his head empty of even the slightest impression of her. The next morning, Noor called. His voice broke. He sounded very upset. He asked if he could come over. Yes, of course, Abdul said. When he let him in, he was shocked by his friend's sunken eyes, his unkempt hair and disheveled clothes. His lower lip was cut and swollen.

What's wrong? Abul asked.

Noor did not answer. Abdul made tea and they sat on the floor of his living room. After a long moment, Noor sighed and began talking. Two days ago, he spoke to his nephew. What is a love engagement? he had asked him. It is the most beautiful thing, his nephew replied. Why do you ask? Noor told him he had fallen in love with Arezo. Sometimes, accompanied by her father, she would stop by his house with food. Damsa would want to know you are taking care of yourself, she would tell him. Noor could not stop staring at her. He wanted to speak to

her father about marriage. No, no, his nephew said. That is the old way. You must ask her yourself.

With his help, Noor composed a letter. He told Arezo he did nothing but think of her all day. When he watered the roses, when he walked to the bazaar, when he had tea. *I want you to be my wife*, he wrote. His nephew shook his head.

Be humble. Ask her if she would accept you as her husband.

Noor did as he suggested and signed his name. His nephew delivered the letter. The next day, Noor woke up and found a note from Arezo's father outside his front door.

*Noor Mohammad, the letter began, Arezo loved your wife Damsa as a sister and continues to respect you as her husband. You are like a brother to her. She cannot feel anything more for you without betraying Damsa. In the future do not talk to Arezo again. I, as her father, Haji Aziz Sakhi, insist upon this.*

Noor walked to his sister's house and beat his nephew, slapping him in the face until the boy's father threw him out. Noor stormed off to Arezo's house and pounded on the door. No one answered. He paced on the sidewalk until nightfall. Then he went home but his frustration was so great he was unable to sleep. This morning, he returned before the sun had fully risen and stood impatiently across the street. As a dry, lazy heat began spreading across the city, he saw Arezo walk outside with an empty sack and turn toward the downtown bazaar. Noor followed her. When she went down an alley, he called her. She stopped and looked at him. The hood of her burqa was raised and he saw her face, the uncertain smile creasing her mouth. He grabbed her and kissed her. She stiffened in his arms, tried to shake loose from his grip and bit his mouth. He stumbled back and she ran, the burqa inflating like a balloon as if it might lift her into the sky.

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When he finished talking, Noor stared at his tea. After a moment, he looked up at Abdul, stood and let himself out without speaking.

Abdul followed him to the door. As he watched Noor enter his house, Abdul thought of Arezo. He hoped Noor had not scared her from his dreams. He would never hurt her.

<sup>[1]</sup> *A card game popular in Afghanistan*

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## **New Nonfiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: “Alabama Village”**

*(Editor’s Note: Some names have been changed for privacy.)*

The three white, rectangular buildings of Light of the Village ministry stand bright as a smile in the clammy humidity of a late Sunday afternoon in southern Alabama. A deep red cross rises above a stone walk where disturbed horseflies make a sharp buzzsaw of noise. On one of several bare trees, a cracked two-by-four scrawled with the message, *Holy Spirit I have You*, hangs unevenly. Arthur James Williams Sr., better known as Mr. Arthur, nailed up that sign and dozens more like it all around Alabama Village, an impoverished neighborhood in the town of Prichard.

I have just parked outside Light of the Village to meet its founders, John and Dolores Eads. They have been in Prichard since 2002 sharing their Christian faith. A friend told me

about them. Before I became a reporter, I had been a social worker. Since then, I've been covering families who fall well below the news radar, and if in the unlikely or unfortunate event become noteworthy, are generally viewed with disdain. The residents of the Village fall into that category. Decades ago, white flight and economic downturns turned Prichard, and Alabama Village in particular, into a brutal place. Today, the chance to be a victim of violent or property crime in any given year is 1-in-19, making this town of 22,000 just outside Mobile one of the most dangerous places to live in America.

Because of the violence, some people have compared the Village to Syria. When I lived in Illinois, people called Chicago "Chiraq" because of its astronomical homicide rate—as many as forty shootings some weekends. But that was Chicago. It was hard to believe that an obscure neighborhood in an equally obscure small town would in its own way be as bad, and yet that's what news reports implied. I'd worked in Syria as a reporter. That experience and my social services background made Prichard an irresistible draw as did John and Dolores. To work in the Village they had to be more than do-good, Jesus people who provide free after-school programs, meals, and other services, as well as Bible study. I called John. Totally cool, he said when I told him I wanted to spend two weeks in the Village. In late February 2021, I left my San Diego home for Alabama.

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As I drove into Prichard, I saw the collapsed roofs of abandoned homes punctured by trees that had muscled through them. Canted doors, buckled floors, charred outlets, fractured walls. The rotted remains of broken porches turned black by weather and rot. Chips of peeled paint dusted the ground and the scat of feral dogs.. Splintered steps sagged inward. Corroded stoves dust-covered and entwined in cobwebs. Pans and pots on stilled burners. The head of a doll rested against the leg of a broken chair beside a rusted, metal bed frame.

Streets that once knitted the community together had been submerged beneath weeds and heaps of abandoned couches, mattresses, toilets, boxes and stuffed garbage bags. The air smelled rancid. *Destination*, the brand of one forsaken tire. There was no sound.

Now, as I get out of my car, a man calls to me and I see John and Dolores and a handful of staff and volunteers across the street on the porch of a house newly rehabilitated by the ministry. John adjusts his cap against the sun. Casually and unhurried, he introduces me to everyone. Dolores has a dome of short, dark hair and wears wide glasses. Her voice exudes joy. Hey Malcolm! she shouts, as if I'm the highlight of her afternoon. Then I follow John back to the ministry. He unlocks the front door and we walk inside and pause beside a wall plastered with photographs of smiling children and teenagers. Some of them wear blue Light of the Village T-shirts. Other pictures show spent bullets, a splintered window, a shell casing.

One of the volunteers you just met, Jamez Montgomery, that's his uncle Mayo, John says, pointing to a photo of a grinning young man with dreadlocks. Mayo was shot. Jamez would be a great person for you to talk to you. That would be pretty cool. We got Jesse. You haven't met him. That's his mom, Cindy. She was killed. He'd love to talk to you. He's going to a community college.





Mayo. Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia

John points to the photo of the shell casing.

Keeping it real, he says. We never forget where we are.

We walk back outside, squint against the glare. John shouts to Dolores, I cruise and distribute fruit.

The staff and volunteers collect boxes of donated oranges and grapefruit and load a pickup. I hop in the back with John, Jamez and Dacino Dees. Dacino works for the ministry. He grew up in the Village and had no idea what to make of John and Dolores. He was about eight years old when he first saw them playing games with other children. Why're these white people out here messing with kids? he wondered. White people bought drugs in the Village and left. They didn't play with children. Then John walked over and talked to his stepdad and persuaded him to let Dacino join the other kids.

My birthday's tomorrow, Mr. John. Can I drive? Jamez asks.

You ain't driving.

I'll be fifteen.

Now you sure ain't driving.

Jamez laughs. He has been coming to the ministry since he was five. He has known John and Dolores for so long he calls them his godparents.

Let's roll! John shouts.

The pickup turns out of the ministry, jostling on the pitted road.

We got oranges and grapefruit, Bo. John shouts at a man peering at us from behind the screen door of a listing house.

I'll take a few.

Alright, Bo.

John calls almost everyone, Bo—men and women, boys and girls, sparing himself embarrassment when he forgets a name.

Thanks, Mr. John.

See you later, Bo!

We continue past a green house that opens as a juke joint at night. It stands in a block John calls the Donut Shop, an area used by drug dealers. Like a donut shop, 24/7, it never closes. Shirtless young men in blue jeans linger, watching us.

Bingo, what's up, man? Want some fruit? Just off the tree.

I see the leaves on it, Mr. John.

That means it's fresh. You doing good?

Yeah.

John doesn't judge the young men before him. Drug dealing does not define the entire person. However, he does not underestimate how quickly his interactions with them can go off the rails. Christians say, God will protect you. Yes, John agrees, and wisdom too. Wisdom has taught him to linger in the Donut Shop long enough to maintain neighborhood connections and no longer.

Keeping it real, he says.

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After we distribute the fruit, Jamez leaves for the apartment of his grandmother, Deborah Lacey. He expects her and one of his aunts to take him out for his birthday. When he was little, they would go to Chuck E Cheese. Now he prefers McDonald's. He especially likes Big Macs. However, he enjoys Chick-fil-A, too, and might go there.

Jamez and his grandmother used to live on Hale Drive in the Village, and he often heard gunshots. If the shots sounded close, he would run into the house. If not, he didn't worry about it. He has seen people firing guns on New Year's Eve but never at people.

Jamez has lost family. His grandmother's son, Uncle Mayo, was shot. His great-great grandmother, an aunt and a baby cousin have also died.. The baby drank lighter fluid. Jamez doesn't know how the aunt died. His great-great grandmother stopped breathing. She was old. Things are cool and then the next thing he knows someone's gone.

When Mayo died, his mother called him. Your uncle's been shot at your grandmother's house, she said. Jamez started running. When he reached Hale Drive he saw everyone crying and he began weeping. Blood pooled in the yard. The family had an open casket funeral. When Jamez touched the body it felt hard and not like Mayo. Everything about him was gone.

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Sixty-five-year-old Deborah Lacey left Alabama Village with her grandchildren after Mayo died. She hopes Jamez lives a better life. She tells him right from wrong. His older brother, Jeremiah lives in Atlanta with his daddy. He'll turn eighteen soon and graduate from high school. He calls her every day. His younger brother, Jerry, got caught with marijuana and a judge referred him to a drug program for six months. Deborah took the boys just after they were born. Their mother, her daughter, was off into other things. Not drugs just running wild. Still is.

Mayo, her baby son, was twenty-seven when he died. He had just come from his girlfriend's place and had pulled up to his house when someone shot him from a pickup with a 9 mm pistol. Deborah spent days afterward walking and weeping. You killed him! she screamed. She lost her mind for a minute and has still not recovered. A niece took her in. Mayo sold a little bit of weed but everybody did. Deborah doesn't understand anything anymore.

A small, eight-month-old dog the size of a Chihuahua with long, brown hair scrambles in circles on her lap. Deborah bought her for company and calls her Kizzy. The dog reminds her of Mayo. Hyped up just like him. When he was a boy, he participated in the ministry's after-school programs and summer camp, and he attended church on Sundays. In those days, Deborah worked at a Wendy's and cleaned offices. Then she got shot and had to quit. It was a big help to have Mayo at Light of the Village because she couldn't handle him all day while she recovered. It wasn't a bad wound. Bad enough, she supposes. Two people started shooting at each other just as she stepped off a bus. She hadn't walked but a minute when a bullet entered the calves of both legs. It didn't hurt, but it burned something awful. The bus driver called 911. Deborah was laid up for a good little while.

Alabama Village has been rough for so long it's hard for her to say when it started going downhill. She has seen just two

shootings—Mayo's and her own—and that was enough. It scares her. She stays out of their way. She was caught in that crossfire once and that was once too many.

Deborah can't hardly remember her younger days. She grew up in Prichard but not in the Village, and was into a little bit of everything. Whatever wasn't tied down she stole, money mostly. Never broke into houses. She robbed people on the street. No guns. She was afraid of guns. Instead she used a bat or a stick, whatever was available to intimidate people. She spent five years in the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women and learned to leave stuff alone that didn't belong to her and to live a better life if she didn't want to spend it in jail. She kept her head down and got into a work release program making baskets in a Birmingham factory. Then the prison placed her with a telemarketing company that sold light bulbs. That didn't work out. People would often cuss, become irrational, and worse, and company rules forbade her to respond in kind. But she broke those rules more than once and returned to making baskets.

Deborah tells her grandchildren how crazy she was at their age and where it led. She told Mayo the same thing. Sometimes he listened; sometimes he didn't.

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Dacino picks me up at my hotel the next morning. He spent the night at the house of one of his sisters in Gulf Village, a project adjacent to the ministry. They sat on the porch, heard gunshots, and hurried inside to a room away from the road.

Anybody can get shot, he tells me. When he was little, older people ran the streets. Now it's all younger people. Back in the day, they didn't shoot in broad daylight like they do now. He could play outside but was aware of his boundaries. No one told him. He just knew, like instinct passed down from one generation to the next. He'd sometimes walk around, feel

uneasy, and think, Yeah, I'm not going over there.

He was eight years old when he saw his first shooting. He and his brothers, Marco and Jamichael, and their stepdad saw a man chase and shoot another man in front of a Prichard convenience store. Smoke flashed out of the shotgun and Dacino's legs turned to noodles. He had gone to the store on his scooter and after what he had seen, he couldn't move. The ambulance took a while to arrive, and the the wounded man bled out in front of the store. The storeowner wouldn't let him inside. He didn't want blood on the floor. Dacino's stepdad said, Ya'll get over here, and they went to another store across the street.

That night, Dacino refused to go outside. He didn't want to walk into something that could get him killed. He knows homeboys who hang out and sell drugs but never joins them. He doesn't go around toting a gun. Everybody knows he won't pull a weapon and try to kill or rob someone. That's not him. He's Dacino from the ministry. They do their thing, and he does his.

When he leaves the Village, the absence of gunshots unnerves him. Man, he thinks, this is too quiet for me. When he enters a building, he makes a note of every exit in case someone starts shooting, but nothing happens. He lies awake at night thinking of things he's seen. In the Village, his mind is going, going, going. He doesn't have time to dwell on bad stuff.

His mother rarely let Dacino and his siblings outside when they were young. He played on the football team at his middle school just to get out of the house. Even when the season finished, he would tell his mother and stepdad, I'll be at football practice. His parents never came to the games, so how would they know?

He never met his biological father. One year, Dacino got a text from him on April 15: *Happy birthday*. Dacino was born on

March 15. He didn't reply. Dacino does remember his stepfather, though. He doesn't know how he and his mother met. Maybe he stole her heart because he sure knew how to steal everything else. One weekend, he walked into a store and left a few minutes later with a slab of ribs stuffed down his pants. No one noticed. He was that good.

When he didn't steal, he beat Dacino and his siblings until they gave him money they had earned cutting grass. I can make it work with this, he'd say, and leave the house to buy drugs. Sober, he didn't have a kind thing to say about anyone. High, he was nicer. After sixteen years, he left Dacino's family for his own in Michigan.

Dacino's mother never commented on his behavior. In fact, she rarely talked. She never whooped Dacino or got on him about not doing homework and skipping classes. He wishes she had because then he might have graduated from high school. Now, he's studying for his GED certificate and wants to earn a degree in physical therapy. About two years ago, he developed a staph infection and now he can't bend the fingers in his left hand. He would like to help others with similar problems. No one knows how he contracted the infection. His arm just started swelling one day. He went to three emergency rooms and each one dismissed the problem as tendonitis. This ain't no tendonitis, not with my arm this big, Dacino said. The doctors at a fourth ER agreed and rushed him into surgery. John and Dolores stayed with him the whole time. His mother never visited.

Sometimes children need their parents to give them a shove, Dacino thinks. Hearing his stepdad telling him he'd be nothing and his momma sitting there letting him be nothing made him think he was nothing. Dacino assumes she just didn't know how to raise kids because she lost her parents at a young age. She had her first child at fifteen. Eight followed. She moved in with her older sister and just winged it. Dacino always felt like a stranger in her house.



She's my mother, Dacino tells me, but that's it.



Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia



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When we reach the ministry, Dacino takes me inside and shows me a wall with forty-three photographs of people who have died in the Village since 2005. He points at the pictures, speaks in a matter-of-fact tone of voice:

He got killed on D Block.

He got killed in Gulf Village.

He got killed walking to a store.

He drowned.

He got killed by his cousin.

I notice a photo of Mayo. Dacino had been on D block near Hale Drive the day he died and heard the gunfire that killed him. I hope no one got shot, he thought, and then he heard screaming from Hale Drive. He walked toward the noise and saw a man futilely giving Mayo CPR. Everybody liked Mayo. No one in the neighborhood would have shot him. It was somebody from outside the Village, Dacino feels sure, somebody he had dealings with. The guy saw him and found his opportunity. Nobody was around but Miss Deborah. Had Mayo been with a friend they could have shot back and the guy wouldn't have made it out. That was a crazy day.

Another photo shows a baby boy who died of a gunshot wound in 2020. This morning I'm meeting his father, Corey Davis, better known as Big Man. He sits in the parking lot waiting for me in a red Dodge Charger R/T. I get in on the passenger side. Big Man slouches behind the wheel, barely glancing at me. Small diamonds are set in his teeth. He wears a red sweatsuit that he says cost \$1,500. He paid \$38,000 for the car. It took him a minute to get accustomed to the push button start. He owns five other cars including a Oldsmobile Delta 88 and a 1989 Chevy Caprice.

As I begin to ask my first question, Big Man raises a hand to let me know he will speak first. He never would have agreed to see me if Mr. John had not asked him, he says. He loves Mr. John and Miss Dolores. They help anyone. He has never seen two people give of themselves as they do. They pay bills, provide food, clothes, and talk about Jesus like he's this cool dude who lives down the block. They do more than they should, way more. Big Man will let no harm come to them.

Now he lets me talk. I ask him if he'll introduce me around in the Village. He shakes his head. No. If he took me to someone's house, they'd want to know why. They could make a bigger deal out of it than necessary and that could lead to a shooting. On the other hand, if I walk around by myself, people will want to sell me drugs. Why else would I be there? He suggests I stick close to the ministry.

Rain begins falling and he turns on the windshield wipers and the defrost, dialing down the heat when it gets too hot. He can't say how he earned his name. He weighed a few pounds more than he should have as a boy and he supposes his family decided to call him Big Man. No one uses his real name except girls. At twenty-five he has been with a few and has four children, including a baby whose photo I saw on the wall, Corey Jr.

The baby had been with his mother and her boyfriend the night he died. His mother called Big Man and told him to come to the hospital. He assumed his son had fallen, broken a bone or something. When he reached the emergency room, baby Corey's mother just looked at him. The look in her eyes told him it was worse than he thought, much worse. Something deep had happened, something bad deep. Then she told him: Baby Corey had shot himself in the head while she was in the shower and her boyfriend slept. Big Man went off, shouting and yelling and hitting walls. Two security officers held him. They told him Corey Jr. should be OK. Big Man thinks they just wanted to calm him, but they only added to his confusion. Even if Junior

is OK, he thought, he won't be the same person. He was shot in the head. Something's going to be missing. Something won't be right. Alive or dead, Big Man will have lost his son.

He called John and they met at the ministry, prayed, and talked. That was good as far as it went but Big Man needed something more. Counseling wasn't going to work. He stayed in his house for three months crying and smoking weed to ease his mind. Every time he thinks about his son he breaks down. The boyfriend is in jail for drugs. When he gets out there's no telling what Big Man will do. One thing's for sure: He'll want him to explain how a two-year-old lifted a pistol and shot himself.

Big Man has spent his entire life in the Village. His father was in and out of prison. He had two mothers, his real momma and an auntie who treated him as her own son. When he needed them, they took care of him. His father did his part when he was out. Big Man hears from him but doesn't need him now that he's grown.

He was about six or seven when John and Dolores established the ministry. His family was living just down the street. Big Man wondered what they wanted, these two white people. They helped him and other kids but once he was grown there wasn't much more they could do. No one, even John and Dolores, can tell an adult how to behave. They help families meet their needs but people will always have wants too, and when Big Man wanted something and Light of the Village didn't have it, he snatched it.

He counts on his fingers: at fourteen, he did a year in juvenile. Got out for three, four months and went back in for another year. Went back again when he was seventeen, got out at eighteen. Went in once more at twenty-three, got out at twenty-four. Most of it for selling drugs. But was never arrested for distribution, just possession.

John and Dolores would visit Big Man in prison and John would ask him what he planned to do to be a better person when he got out, and Big Man always answered, I'm going to change. But he never did. He meant what he said, but once he hit the streets his mind moved in an entirely different direction. What made sense in prison no longer applied.

He and another dude got into it about a girl one time. The girl told Big Man she was with him and then turned around and told the dude he was her man. The dude saw them together one day and thought Big Man was trying to backdoor him. He pulled out a gun and Big Man drew his. Look, I'm going to put my gun down, Big Man told him. I ain't trying to go there with you about no girl. I didn't know you were talking to her. The dude put up his gun. You right, he told Big Man.

Sometimes Big Man wonders what would have happened if he had started shooting. Where would he be now? Where would the dude be? Would they even be alive?

Big Man likes to wash cars and do construction projects with a friend he met in prison. He does other things to make money but that's not for me to know. He wants to buy an eighteen-wheeler and travel state to state delivering whatever. See a little of the country and get out of the Village but he can't conceive of living anywhere else. How do you leave everything you know? he wonders. If he could go back in time, he'd graduate from high school, enroll in college, and be a nerd. But it's too late for that. He doesn't think he'd fit in. He's smart but he doesn't believe he has the kind of intelligence necessary for school. If he flunked out, people would know and that would affect their opinion of him. He'd have to assert his pride and that would result in a shooting. He can avoid all that by not going. However if he could get an athletic scholarship, he'd sign up for college today. But he'd have to be good. He was once but not now, too fat. If a coach told him, You work out, you can play football, he would do that. Get your body back in shape and in six months we'll let you

play sports, he'd be on it. But that won't happen. No one will say that to him. He is who he is: Big Man. That's how people know him. They look up to him. He's respected. Who would he be outside the Village?

Big Man has dreams of homeboys dying, and then they die for real. Like a guy everyone called Dirty. Big Man dreamed about him getting shot and two months later someone killed him. He has dreams of getting shot himself. The bad stuff in his dreams comes true. He wishes he could leave the Village. He wishes he could stop dreaming.

Dolores is pleased I met Big Man. Just the other month he dropped by the ministry. She hadn't seen him for she doesn't know how long. John was out. Big Man offered to take them to lunch and he would pay for it. In all their years in the Village, no one had ever offered to treat them to a meal. Anywhere you want, Big Man said.

He was blown away that they had bought a house across the street. The house, Dolores explained, would be for kids who need a place to stay. Two or three—not many—and Dacino would live there to provide supervision. Big Man told her she needed to establish rules: Don't let them listen to rap music with bad words. No violent video games. No girls in the house. Bible study should be mandatory and held every day. Rules should be posted on the wall.

He asked Dolores if she could help him apply for a commercial driver's license. Yes, she said. Whatever you need to do, let's do it.

Big Man told her that at Christmas he bought bikes and passed them out to children. When he hears of someone in need, he helps with food and a hotel room. Big Man, Dolores thought, wanted her to know he was doing good things.

John pulled up and they joked about a time when they treated Big Man and some other kids to a buffet at a Golden Corral

restaurant in Mobile. Big Man was about ten. He took an entire chocolate cake and brought it back to the table. What are you doing? Dolores and John asked. They were so embarrassed. Big Man could have cared less. He sat down and started eating the cake. We can't take you anywhere! they said.

Big Man laughed at the memory, a soft kind of laugh, almost shy. Dolores still saw the boy in him.

You're always welcome here, she said.

As he left, she had no idea when or if she'd see him again. She knew the rumors about what fueled his lifestyle. His money didn't come from selling candy, and she worried where that could lead.



Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia

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In many ways, Dolores feels she has been training to do ministry work since she was a child. She and her family lived

across the street from their parish church in Las Cruces, New Mexico and she went to Mass with her family every Sunday and attended all the holy days of obligation. Before she met John, Dolores had considered becoming a nun.

She hates the idea that people think of the Village as a place to avoid. To her the families here mean more than the crime that makes the news. A person can know God and still grapple with temptation, she believes. She sees the person behind the gun. They are friendly and funny. They struggle, grieve, and yet survive. It amazes her how they persevere and look out for one another.

Her memories of each child that has passed through the ministry fulfill her. She has laughed with them, held them, taken them on field trips. The kids thought they were so tough in their little life jackets when she and John drove them to a waterpark one summer but when they saw the surging waves, the uncertainty of the water, they hesitated. Big tall boys wearing inner tubes laughing and screaming and dancing as the water lapped their feet. Kids being kids. Those memories remain among her most precious. She can see each child as they were. Like Big Man. Like Mayo. Just before he died, Mayo saw Dolores arranging a tent for a ministry event. Miss Dolores, do you need help? he asked. Yes, I do, she answered. They put up decorations and laughed, and as they laughed a boy came up and said another boy had brought a play gun onto the property, something John and Dolores did not allow. Mayo said, I'll talk to him. He took the boy with the gun aside and in a little while the boy approached Dolores and apologized. A few weeks later, Mayo died.

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In a hall outside the room where Dolores and I talk, twenty-eight-year-old Jesenda Brown mops the floor. She said good morning to Dolores earlier. It's the professional thing for her to do, she believes, greeting her employer. For three

weeks the ministry has been a mainstay of Jesenda's startup, Jesenda's Cleaning Service. She established a business page on Facebook to attract customers. People have called, not many, some. She has a few regulars now and intends to get on Angie's List to attract more. Then she thinks she will be super busy. She needs a car to get around and hopes to buy one in a couple of weeks. Her year-end goal: to earn \$2,400 a month. A cleaning business makes sense. She was always neat. Her life did not have much order as a child but she kept the spaces she occupied tidy. When she was on the run from foster care, she would clean the apartment of a boyfriend. Why not use that skill to earn a living? Her motto: maintain stability through responsibility. A bumper sticker slogan she repeats as if she had sat through a self-empowerment seminar but thought of it herself. She plans to buy a house in two years and get off Section 8 rental assistance. She doesn't want her three children to struggle as she does. If she provides them with stability, they can go to college and beyond. She considers her life a success because she has survived this long when many other people she knows have not. She can offer her four-year-old son and two daughters, seven and five, a future. All of them live with her; each has a different father. That doesn't bother her. People, she understands, may disapprove. They will say what they will and that's fine. She doesn't care what anyone thinks. It's her life, not theirs. Her son stays in day care when she works. Sometimes her seven-year-old cleans houses with her.

Jesenda works at the ministry twice a week; she has known John and Dolores since she was a child. In those days, everyone called her Nay-Nay after Sheneheh Jenkins, a character that comedian Martin Lawrence created and voiced on his 1990s sitcom, *Martin*. Her happiest childhood memories revolve around the ministry. Light of the Village gave her access to another world, like she wasn't in the Village anymore. Before the ministry's summer program and the field trips, Jesenda and her friends threw rocks at abandoned houses and busted out



streetlights late at night. Things, she knows now, they had no business doing.

She grew up in Prichard. Her mother died from a stroke when she was eight, and her father passed a few years later from a massive heart attack. They both had high blood pressure, drank, and used drugs. After her mother died, Jesenda lived with an aunt on Eight Mile, a stretch of road named for its distance from Mobile. Living with her aunt wasn't bad but it wasn't good either. Jesenda wanted her parents but they were gone and she didn't understand why. Her mother had problems but she was the best mom she could be. Her father may have been a crack addict but he took care of her. When her mother passed out, he made sure Jesenda was fed, bathed, and ready for school. He told her not to use drugs. He didn't follow his own advice, but he recognized his mistakes and she loved him for it.

One morning when she was in the seventh grade, Jesenda got into a fight with a boy on a school bus. He said something nasty about her hair and they had words and began hitting each other. Jesenda was a fighter. She even had a fight at Light of the Village years later when she struck her oldest child's father with a stick. To this day, John will ask, Hey Nay-Nay, you still got your stick? And she replies, I don't carry my stick no more, Mr. John, I carry my broom and mop. I'm doing my cleaning now. Oh yes, she reflects, she was a fighter. Even though she has changed, people remember how she was, and she was bad. She was horrible. She was a mean, little bitty something who didn't take nothing from nobody. She didn't care. Life was hard without her parents.

The bus fight landed Jesenda in the James T. Strickland Youth Center in Mobile. A court appointed social worker supervised her in foster care. Her foster parents were good people but they expected her to follow their rules. You have to be at home by seven, they'd tell her, but she'd come in at nine. You're not my momma. You can't tell me what to do, Jesenda

would snap.

Sometimes she would get a home pass to visit her aunt. When it was time to return to her foster parents, the social worker would come to the house, knock on the front door and Jesenda would dash out the back. The social worker would eventually catch up with her and lock her down in Strickland. Eventually she would be placed with another foster family. Jesenda went back and forth between Strickland and foster care until she turned eighteen and aged out.

She believes in herself and in the people of the Village. They aren't always killing each other. Still, Jesenda would not choose to live here. The Village is no place to hang out and chill. As rebellious as she was, Jesenda could not help but notice how her foster families lived a different life. They knew peace and calm. She doesn't want her children to grow up amid chaos and violence and experience the kinds of losses she has. Her brother James was shot at twenty-three. Mayo was the uncle of her oldest daughter. A bullet took her friend Demetrius Brown, but he had also killed somebody. You live by it; you die by it. Her nephew Xavier, better known as Buckshot, killed her cousin George, whom everyone called Boo Face. Jesenda doesn't know how or why that happened. Got into it with each other and let it go too far and forgot they were family. Jesenda received a phone call from her aunt. Hey, Buckshot killed Boo Face. She rushed to the hospital in disbelief. She still can't believe it. She has dreams of Mayo, Xavier, Boo-Face, and of her family, James and her mother and father, all of them together again. All she can do is cry and pray to God, because no one else can fix it.

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A lean young man with a self-deprecating smile stops at the ministry. As a child he fed his grandmother's goats and forever after became known as Billy Boy. His pregnant girlfriend sits in the car of a friend who will drive her to a

doctor for a checkup. If they have a girl, Billy Boy thinks he will name her Nola. He can imagine her bad little self getting on his nerves. So he thought, Nola, for no you don't.

Billy Boy sees Jesenda walk out of the ministry and calls her name.

Girl, I just came from D block and I just seen your name on the wall of this empty house. It said, Nay-Nay and Shana.

Where? Jesenda asks.

At the end of a house.

I don't know what house you talking about.

Dolores pulls up and parks.

You look happy, Billy Boy tells her.

Yes, I am.

OK, OK, he says. You're in the game.

I decided I'm not dealing with my hair anymore so I got it cut.

Good look, good look.

Thank you. So you're here because your girlfriend needs a ride?

Yes ma'am, but she found one.

Oh good. Who is your girlfriend? Do I know who she is?

You haven't met her yet. Nobody has.

OK.

Brianna's her name.

Pretty name. Is that her there?

Dolores turns and faces the car where Brianna sits and waves. Hey, Brianna.

Brianna looks up. Billy Boy gives a nervous laugh. He has three children, ages ten, four and two, in state custody. He needs to find a nice little apartment and a job to persuade the court to give them back to him. Their mother is in trouble over drugs and Billy Boy has been in and out of prison. It doesn't matter what kind of a job. Billy Boy's good at whatever. More of a handyman type of guy, for real. He enjoys lifting and moving stuff. An active job that would be good, something to tie him up all day. In 2019, Billy Boy had work with a company that installed tents and booths for fairs and concerts but then the tailgate of a truck fell on his right hand and Billy Boy lost the job. He received temporary disability, and hasn't worked since. He supposes he'll have to apply for a job somewhere outside of the Village. Ain't no jobs in Prichard.

He believes he could earn big money as a rapper. Cats around here know he has talent, but he doesn't trust studios. A producer might get his lyrics, give him a little money, and make a fortune. Billy Boy doesn't have time for those types of games. If produced right and orchestrated right, his raps would be a success. His words provide him with a chance to tell his story, and the streets can vouch for its authenticity.

Billy Boy will turn twenty-eight in a few days. A lot of years, man, a lot of years, for real. Maybe not for the pretty people but for him and his homeboys, yeah, a lot of years. By pretty people, Billy Boy means suburbanites who have no knowledge and in many cases no interest in dudes like him. He doubts any of them would be surprised to see their twenty-eighth birthday. They're much too judgmental, he thinks. Billy Boy believes they can learn from him. John and Dolores, they know. They came to Alabama Village because they understood not everybody has a lot of money. In the outside world, the

universe of pretty people, when someone falls, they panic. Unlike Billy Boy and everyone he knows, they ain't used to not having. People in the Village know struggle. They were raised on struggle and not having. If they fall they know how to pick themselves up and live by scraping bottom, because the bottom has been home for a long time. This right here, the cuts, teach survival. The people who are up now should come down to where Billy Boy lives and learn something about it. He can show them how they can make it without nothing and how they can be hungry and see another day and get on with little. Little is good. That's a good day to have little. If you got little then you got something, and something is better than nothing. One day, the pretty people may ask for his help. They might be so far down they'll need to sleep in an abandoned house with no roof. He can teach them how to persevere without power, without water, without plumbing, for real, or anything to piss and bathe in. It's no big deal. Make it through that and anything above it will feel better—feel like you're kicking back with the big dogs. He wishes the pretty people would open their hearts and try to understand him. He is so curious about them and what they do. Just their normal life, man, for real. Do they go fishing with their kids? Do they wake up every day with their entire family and not find that strange? What is it like to assume you'll wake up the next day, that you'll even have a next day? Billy Boy doesn't know anyone who has that kind of peace. A typical day for people Billy Boy knows would be: Get your guns, get your dope; not, OK honey, I'm home, what's for dinner? Just a day or two around people like that would be different. To be a child growing up with all the trimmings, Billy Boy would have loved that. Like a fantasy, man, that kind of love. Year after year he would have celebrated his birthday and received gifts and taken it all for granted. Be tripping just thinking about it, for real.

In jail, he would make his own birthday cake. He took a honey bun, two Reese's peanut butter cups, some M&M cookies, and put

it all in a bowl, mix in water, milk, heat it, and watch it rise. A cup of noodles on the side, and that was his birthday. Maybe he could work at a bakery. He wants a new pair of shoes, a nice pair. People crowd him. His kids, this new baby, his girlfriend. A new pair of kicks would lift his spirits. They'd help in a job interview too. People would look at his shoes and think he was sharp. Billy Boy turns to Brianna. She watches him. He prays really hard to be successful. He doesn't want to make any more mistakes.

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Dacino: Early for you, Billy Boy.

Billy Boy: What you talking about? Rained last night.

Dacino: I know.

Billy Boy: Warming up.

Dacino: Around five o'clock it'll get cold again.

Billy Boy: They say it's going to stay warm.

Dacino: You know how it is down here. Be warm, at five it be cold.

Billy Boy: I want to get me a bike, man. Spandex, little gym shorts. Skinny tight kind.

Dacino: I thought you wanted shoes.

Billy Boy: Doing it all, man.

Dacino: Where would you ride?

Billy Boy: No where. I'd have a picture of it on my phone. Just to show everybody I got one.

Dacino: Ride with it on top of a car.

Billy Boy: Just for show. Me and my bike are going out.

Dacino: Tell some dude, Let me see your bike, man.

Billy Boy: And never bring it back. I got you, man. Just for an hour.

Dacino: And don't bring it back.

Billy Boy: Come back all the wheels are gone.

Dacino (imitating Billy Boy): Man, it didn't have tires when you gave it to me.

Billy Boy laughs.

## **TWO**

On a Tuesday evening, John picks up children for the ministry's after-school program. They'll play games and have about a half hour of Bible study. He drives beneath I-65 into a neighborhood of small brick houses with peeling, white trim. Bare bulbs illuminate empty porches. He turns into a housing project, parks outside a home and beeps.

Here's Morgana, Cortney, and Shalanda, he shouts at two girls hurrying toward the van, shoulder packs bouncing off their backs. What's up, Bo?

What's up, Bo? they shout back to him.

What're you drinking, bo?

Orange juice.

A little OJ. What you up to, Shalanda?

Watching YouTube cartoons.

They clamber into the van. Shalanda finds a zip-close bag with half a sandwich.

There's food back here.

We'll throw it away, John says. I tried to clean it up for you

all. What kind of food?

It's a mushed something. It stinks.

We'll throw it away. Where's your grandmother?

She's not coming today. Not feeling well.

She OK?

OK.

Let's roll.

John starts driving

We have to pick up Jerome and a few others, what do you think?  
he asks.

Good.

OK. That's a good attitude.

Mr. John?

Yeah, Bo?

Rosa Parks didn't want to move on the bus, Shalanda says. We learned about her in class today. Was she and Martin Luther King friends?

No, Courtney answers.

Yes, Morgana says.

They were partners in the fight for civil rights, for sure,  
John says.

Rosa Parks was sitting down and a white person wanted her seat and Rosa Parks said, No, I'm not going to move out of my seat, Shalanda continues. You better go back there, white person, because I was here first and that is right because she was



there first.

That's true, John says.

And then white people got angry and she got arrested.

Hank Aaron, we read about him too, Courtney says.

He grew up in Mobile, John says. He's from Thomasville.

He played baseball.

He was good. He had made a lot of inroads. Progress, let's call it progress, John says.

Like Rosa Parks he had to take a stand to make things for the better. You guys learned a lot.

I learned about math and science, Morgana says.

Sounds like you guys did pretty good today.

I got all Bs, Shalanda says.

I got all As, Morgana says.

John stops at a squat house shadowed by trees.

Hey, Bo! John shouts to a boy running toward him.

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The late afternoon turns into evening and Baldwin Drive descends into shadow. John drops the children off at the ministry. Collapsing houses sculpt the gathering dark. If these disintegrating homes could talk, they would tell stories. The old people say voices cry out from graves lost to the woods. Jamel, he was a Lacey. He got shot. Boo-Face got shot. Boo-Face was a Davis. Bam-Bam got killed. Big Terry too. Red, she died. Last name, Robbin. Everyone called her Red although her hair wasn't red. She's gone all the same. Just got sick and died. Dectoria got shot in the head. Dorian's boy,

Sean, got killed. Someone shot him by a church down there on Telegraph Road. It's sad. The list goes on.

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John walks the perimeter of the ministry, hears the children laughing, keeps moving slowly, holding a walkie-talkie to communicate with staff inside. His gaze flits between buildings. His shoes scrape against stones. He never knows who might drop by or what their mood will be, agitated or friendly. Better to assess the situation outside away from the kids. He compares Light of the Village to a forward operating base. Over the years, he and Dolores have established codes: broken arrow means gunshots in the area, Mike Tyson means a fight. Hand signals too. Fingers shaped like a phone receiver means call 911. The codes resulted from an encounter one afternoon in June 2015 when a man convicted of murder and just released from prison drove to the ministry under the mistaken impression John and Dolores were holding his daughter.

The man's name was Franklyn. The girl had been adopted after her mother died of a drug overdose while Franklyn was in prison. No one told him. He rolled up to the ministry with his sister and a friend and her baby. They told him his daughter was at the ministry because her mother had used its services. John was inside with about one hundred children enrolled in summer camp; Dolores was outside. Franklyn got out of the car, walked toward her and put his finger to her head in the shape of a gun

Where's my motherfucking daughter? he shouted.

I don't know where she is. Dolores said, trying to stay calm, but her heart raced. She worried he might hit her. He continued shouting, shaking like he would burst through his skin. John heard the commotion and hurried outside. Franklyn spun around and faced him.

I want my child! he demanded.

John raised his hands for calm.

We don't know where she is, dude.

I want my child!

Man, you got to chill out.

John had a crazy kind of wish for Franklyn to clock him with a solid right hook and end this. Instead, Franklyn stormed back to his car and opened the back door. John followed. He saw Franklyn reach for a revolver. John had few options, none of them good: Fight, but with two women and a child in the car, that wouldn't end well; run, and risk Franklyn shooting at him and at the ministry and the children inside; or keep talking.

Dude, we don't have your daughter.

A woman named Tyra Quinie who had been studying for her GED certificate rushed outside and started shouting at Franklyn. He cussed her out and leaned into the car for the gun. John glanced at Dolores and their eyes locked and he gave her a well-this-is-it look. The thought comforted him. He stood in the presence of God, his wife, and the ministry—everything he had devoted his life to. Whatever happened, he belonged here.

We're going to get through this, Dolores told herself. It will be OK, but she knew it might not. It will be OK, she told herself again. She dialed 911. When she got off the phone, she shouted, The police are on the way!

Franklyn jumped in the car and slammed the door. He cussed out John and sped off just as the children wandered outside. Unaware of what had happened, they began playing. John watched them. He felt OK. He hadn't panicked, had stayed focused. A group of volunteers, however, left and didn't return.

Later that afternoon, a brother of Franklyn's called John and put him on the phone. He apologized. The two women, he said,

had told him John had his baby.

OK, John said, let me stop you right there. The police are looking for you. You're out on parole for murder. Chill out, go to the police, and we'll come by and see you.

Franklyn turned himself in. When John and Dolores arrived at the Prichard Police Department, a detective told them that if they pressed charges Franklyn would probably do fifteen years. He cried and apologized when they met with him. He had been played by people spreading rumors about his child, he said, and one of the women in the car egged him on. John and Dolores believed him. He had a manila folder with cards from his daughter. He had brought it with him because he assumed he was going back to prison.

No dude, it's all good, John said. If we can help you get a job, whatever, come by and we'll see what we can do.

John and Dolores have seen him twice since. They said hello and nothing more. John believes that if someone commits a crime they should be punished. Throw away the key, he gets that. At the same time, inmates need to be helped when they get released. Because they will get out. Franklyn had nothing. His daughter was gone and no one had told him. John and Dolores took the brunt of his anger, understood, and forgave him. Then the three of them moved on.

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Tyra Quinie thinks God told her to rush outside when Franklyn pulled up. She hadn't heard a thing, just looked up from her desk and decided to take a look. Because John and Dolores believed in her, she thought of them as her parents. Her father was mostly absent from her life and her mother was around but stayed to herself because she was deaf. Tyra relied on and trusted John and Dolores in a way she never did her parents. When she saw Franklyn yelling at John, she lost it. Franklyn called her all kinds of names but Tyra didn't

care. If you're going to hurt Mr. John, you're going to hurt me first, she had yelled.

Tyra had met John and Dolores years earlier when she worked at a Prichard gym, now closed. Many of the children she supervised participated in the ministry's programs. One day, Tyra dropped by looking for two sisters. Their mother had died of AIDS and Tyra had not seen them at the gym for a while, but she knew they ate breakfast at the ministry. One of them, Shadderias, later died from a drug overdose. Her picture hangs on the memorial wall.

The Lord spoke to Tyra as she parked outside the ministry that day. She knows how that sounds but she's not asking anyone to believe her. She believes it and that's what matters. Tyra, God told her, I want you to get your GED. She was about twenty-seven and could barely read. Dolores and John told her: You can get your GED. You can do this. Dolores was adamant: If you don't try, then you don't want it. All you got to do is try.

Dolores helped Tyra study. She took the GED test but failed by eighteen points. However, she aced the reading portion. Undeterred, she took it again and passed. Then the Lord told her, I want you to go to college. Tyra told John, I don't know what it is but the Lord says I should go to college. I guess you're going to college, John said, and she did. These days, she works at Amazon. She trains and supervises drivers.

Tyra does not live in Alabama Village anymore. When she was eighteen, her family moved here from the Orange Grove projects near downtown Mobile. Orange Grove was rough but not as rough as the Village. Life is real in the Village, no joke. When Tyra first came to the ministry, the memorial wall held only one photo. Now look at it. Forty-three. It's sad. More photos will go up, she has no doubt, but hers won't be one of them. She has all that she needs, not much but enough, and she doesn't mess around. Many families in the Village have much less and therefore they have nothing to lose. That's one

reason for the violence.

Tyra has seen plenty of people shot. She saw her best friend shoot another man in front of a convenience store. Nothing she could do but step back, run for cover, mourn the loss, and cry for the ones left behind. Don't be naive, John taught her, and have faith in God. Sunday is the most important day of the week for Tyra. She attends Bible study and renews her faith. Then she goes home and lives the best life she can. Many people in the Village have repented. They grew up and quit playing. No one knows what path someone will take. The boy with a gun might become the man kneeling in prayer. No one should give up on the Village. Look at her. She learned to read. Who would have thought?

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The death of a young man named Yellow was the first killing to insinuate itself in the lives of John and Dolores after they came to the Village. But they only sort of knew him. Certainly not well. The loss of another young man, Mook, left a deeper impression. They had watched him grow up. When they first came to the Village, they ran into him and some other kids. As they talked, it started raining and they all dashed under a porch, gray storm clouds scudding above them. Mook took pleasure showing them around. He was mild mannered but he was into drug dealing. Over the years, his temper began to tilt toward hot. He died after a former girlfriend told him she was with another man in the Roger Williams housing project in Mobile. Mook drove there and confronted him. They fought to a draw and Mook left. The man got a gun and called Mook, daring him to return. He did. The man had locked the door so Mook pulled the air conditioning unit out of a window and crawled inside. The man shot him.

The violence also can take bizarre, darkly humorous twists. Like George and the muffin. Sounds like a children's book doesn't it? John says. George was always out there a little

bit and he had made enemies. One afternoon a sedan drove through the ministry playground, and the two men inside started shooting at George. He ran behind a house holding onto a muffin. The shooters sped through in minutes, if that long. George peeked out from around the house and smiled, his gold teeth flashing. He had not dropped his muffin. It was a good muffin, he said. That stuck with people. George and the muffin assumed the status of folklore. A few years later, he moved to Florida. Not long after, his charred remains were found in a car.

Joseph Torres killed a man at fifteen. He had been involved with the ministry since he was a child. Like Mook, his moods ran hot and cold. If Joseph liked someone, he liked them 100 percent and would do anything for them. But if he disliked someone, he ignored them; they didn't exist. He knew how to take charge. If he saw kids fighting he'd stop it through his presence, by the way he carried himself, without speaking a word.

One night in 2008, days before Christmas, Joseph, his friend Johiterio, and a third young man whose name John does not remember, stopped at the ministry and said they wanted to be rappers. Joseph asked for money to buy shoes. John and Dolores didn't have as much cash as the boys needed and they got angry.

We're going to go make music, they said, and stalked off. They didn't hear from Joseph again until April 25, 2009, when he shot forty-two-year-old Benjamin Henry on D block. Benjamin didn't live in the Village but he knew people there. Joseph, Johiterio, and according to court documents, a third teenager, Antonio Hall, assumed Benjamin had money to buy drugs and decided to rob him as he sat in his car. Joseph approached the driver's side carrying a sawed-off shotgun. At some point he blew a hole in Benjamin's chest. He and the two other teenagers fled. Joseph would later claim the gun had misfired.

John heard about the killing from a couple in the Village who had volunteered at the ministry. Two of your boys killed a guy, they said, Joseph and Johiterio. *Two of your boys*, John repeated to himself. OK, whatever. Dolores was stunned. She would not have been surprised if Joseph had been stopped for selling weed, but murder? What happened? she asked herself. What went wrong? What had they missed?

Later in the day, Joseph called John.

Hey dude, John said, we need to talk.

Yeah, Joseph said.

They agreed to meet at the ministry that evening.

First off, how are you doing? John asked him.

I screwed up, Joseph replied.

Let's pray, John said.

He noticed Joseph wasn't scared. He had never been one to show fear. What remorse he felt he kept to himself. He seemed more upset that he had ruined his future.

What do you think God wants you to do? John asked him.

I think I need to turn myself in, Joseph said.

You know what that means?

I do.

You want to turn yourself in now?

Yes, they'll blame someone else and I did it.

John suggested they call his family. An aunt asked John to take Joseph to the police.

In 2009, a judge sentenced Joseph and Antonio to twenty-five years in prison. Joseph broke down and apologized to



Benjamin's family and his own; Johiterio, who had been on his cell phone when the shooting occurred, received three years. Police arrested him soon after his release for violating parole. His sentence that time: twenty-five years.

John keeps in touch with Joseph. They talk by phone on Sunday mornings.

What's going on? I hear him say in one call. You're still in Easterling Correctional Facility? You know it's been crazy down here. There's been shootings all over the place, you heard about that? Going back and forth right now. Hopefully things will tap down a little bit but yeah it's been kind of nuts. Going on for a little bit. How's COVID? Gone through the place or no? No, that's cool. Hope it all goes away so we can get back to normal. I'm glad you called. We have to work out a visit. We'll try to work that out. It's pretty up there. I know to you it looks the same but we like it. We can travel up there. OK I'll let you go. We love you, Bo. Holler at you.

John understands people may wonder how he can say, I love you, Bo, to a murderer? He saw the autopsy photos of Benjamin with a hole in his chest. He saw his mother leave the courtroom because she couldn't look at the pictures. Benjamin had a life. John makes no excuses for Joseph. Punish him, yes, he has no problem with that, but he sees no downside to showing him love. He doesn't know a perfect person, however that might be defined. It's not about second chances. It's about chance after chance after chance. Only death closes the door.

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Betty Catlin talks to her incarcerated son, Johiterio, every other day. She puts money on his books. One day at a time, prayer and faith, Betty tells me.

She was born in Mobile but her family moved to the Village in the early 1980s after her grandmother passed and the family took over her house. Her mother used drugs and spent much of her time on the street. Her father drank and lived with his

mother. In those days, Alabama Village had stores and houses on every block. She used to go to dances at the same gym where Tyra Quinie once worked. She remembers a 7-Eleven and a convenience store called Bert's. A hamburger stand took up a corner behind Two Dragons, another convenience store, and a laundromat. Betty moved around Prichard. She lived on Blount Drive, Colby Street, Fayette Street, and Dallas Street. At fifteen she had the first of five children. If she could go back in time, she would tell herself to wait. Just wait, girl, but she didn't. Only so much she can do now. Looking back don't change what's done. She talks to young people. Hey, come on here and let me holler at you. You ain't got no business hanging out like this. She pulls them aside and gives them something to think about. Other mothers look the other way: She ain't my child. I don't care about her. But not Betty. Somebody's got to care about them, otherwise they'll be pregnant and become mothers way too soon and then they'll see how hard life can be. It ain't about not having enough money. It's about wondering every day if your child will come home. Their fathers are out and up to no good. It's the mothers who get the calls. One night, Betty's phone rang and the girlfriend of her son Carlos told her he was dead. Betty's heart dropped so far down she couldn't feel it beating but the girlfriend had been mistaken. It was actually another young man who had died.

The sound of gunshots terrifies her. She was at her mother's house around the corner from where Mayo lived when he died. She looked out the front door and he was dead at his mother's house. He had a beautiful smile. He could be loud. Boy shut up with all that noise in there! Mayo would laugh. She couldn't help but think: That could be one of my sons.

Betty knows how people judge families in the Village based on no evidence at all. Like Miss Mandy. She's sick now but back in the day everyone called her the Candy Lady. Children would go around the corner to her house and come back with all kinds

of sweets. People joked she must be receiving kickbacks from dentists. There was also Miss Tooty. Her real name was Claudia. She also gave out candy.

Betty used to hover about the neighborhood behaving like everyone's mother. Even though she lives in Mobile now, kids still come around especially during the holidays. They know she can cook and love her greens, macaroni, ribs, dressing, beans, roasts. Whatever she makes, they'll eat.

Most Sundays, Betty makes breakfast at the ministry. Eggs, sausage, and grits. She also prepares meals for events. She's known John and Dolores a long time. She remembers when she first saw them. They parked their car, got out, and in minutes had all these kids, Big Man, and a bunch of others hanging around. If children liked them, they got to be all right, she remembers thinking. They stopped at her house and introduced themselves.

In August 2013, Betty studied at the ministry for her GED certificate. By that November she had passed the test. Now she hopes to save enough money to buy a house and leave it to her kids so they have something they can call their own. She works as a cashier at the Springhill Quick Stop in Mobile from noon to six. She earns minimum wage and puts aside what she can.

Betty likes her neighborhood in Crighton in the north part of Mobile. It's a little more restful than the Village. She still hears gunshots but less often. In the Village, it was every day. Or there would be fights. Everybody wanted to meet in a field and have at it. You all bring your problems over here and we get all the heat, she scolded them. Look at these older people on their porches trying to relax. They ain't paying no bills to look out over a field and watch you fools fight. Girls with their children in their boyfriends' cars watching them go at it like it was a basketball game. Scar their children for life. Betty shakes her head. It's no wonder children turn out as they do.

### THREE

Throughout his life, John has found guidance when he needed it most. He was born in Dallas and moved to El Paso at a young age. At fourteen, he enrolled in New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell and completed high school and two years of community college. He grew close to its chaplain, Vernon Edmondson. Kind and approachable, Edmondson always had a smile on his face. He encouraged his cadets to read the Bible as a book of stories and not as a weighty tome. Take it, go off by yourself, he told them. The book of John is a good place to start. He brought doughnuts to Bible study, a nice touch but for John and the other cadets, Edmondson's willingness to spend time with them meant much more. He walked the students through the Bible story by story.

The institute gave John structure. He lived in a spartan, three story barracks and learned to be responsible. He joined the boxing team, the only white kid on it. The coach was Black, his teammates Hispanic. He connected with people whose lives were very different from his.

John earned a commission in the US Army. After he completed his undergraduate degree, he earned a Masters in Business Administration and took a job in a jewelry store in Las Cruces, New Mexico where he met Dolores. They married in May 1994, a week after Dolores had graduated from college.

About a year into their marriage, they moved to San Antonio and John returned to school and earned a second master's degree, this one in healthcare administration. He and Dolores volunteered with Prison Fellowship, the world's largest Christian nonprofit organization for prisoners, former prisoners, and their families, and they also joined Angel Tree, a fellowship program that provides holiday gifts to children from their incarcerated parents. In addition, they helped with after-school and outreach programs, and facilitated Bible studies in housing projects for Victory

Gospel, a Pentecostal church that offered help to the very poor. The compassion of its pastor, Donny Banks, and his wife, Jackie, impressed them. They did not criticize homeless addicts for their drug use or require them to attend church. Instead they offered help without condition, and they were always cheerful.

In 1997, John accepted a job with the Mobile Infirmary Health System. He and Dolores remained involved with Prison Fellowship and Angel Tree. In December 2001, they began leading Bible studies in the Queens Court apartments, a housing project, after a six-year-old boy had been killed and a Prichard police officer wounded in an ambush authorities called retaliation for the shooting of three young men by undercover officers. When Queens Court closed in May 2002, John and Dolores began looking at other impoverished neighborhoods around Mobile where they could establish a ministry. By the time they drove through the Village, they had seen most of the city's housing projects but nothing had clicked. The Village did. The vacant houses and overgrown lots and dark streets spoke of a desperate need.

In the following days, weeks and months John and Dolores walked through the Village speaking to families. If we started a ministry here what would you want? they asked. Children told them they wanted a place to play and people to take them on field trips. The adults were more subdued.

Yeah, they said, that would be good for the kids.

Inspired by John 8:12, *Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life,* John and Dolores named their ministry Light of the Village. With help from a South Carolina ministry, they turned a crack house into a church, plugging gaping holes and shoring up the collapsed roof on the only building they could find that had a clean title. It's pretty messed up, one man told them. Another man

agreed. Yeah, but the rafters are OK. You won't be here more than a couple weeks anyway. But John and Dolores kept coming back from their home in Bay Minette, about forty miles away. Once a month became once a week. Once a week became every day. Every day became twenty years. John and Dolores stayed.

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John and Dolores attended a Baptist Church when they first moved to Alabama, although they didn't restrict themselves to a denomination. When they started Light of the Village, John wondered if he should study theology but his pastor dissuaded him. For what God has called on you to do, do you think the kids care about a degree? No, John agreed. That settled it. These days, John considers himself a layperson who practices his faith. If someone had to put a finger on it, he would say that he and Dolores are evangelicals. They take the Bible and go verse by verse, story by story, allowing it to speak for itself. They don't push it. They don't cram it. Anyone can come to the ministry. Faith or lack of it has no bearing. John and Dolores are not selling a product. John recalls a young man named TJ. He wasn't a product.

TJ rarely spoke. John heard him say six words if that. A little, shaggy black dog followed him around. TJ couldn't read so he asked Dolores to get him a recorded version of the Bible. He'd sit outside the ministry with his dog and listen to it.

John and Dolores may have been one of the last friendly faces TJ saw before he died in 2008. They had just given him a Christmas present, a pair of sneakers. Here's your gift, John said. Merry Christmas. We'll see you Sunday. TJ was shot in the head minutes afterward. John thinks someone playing with a gun probably killed him by accident. Everyone he knew liked TJ.

His death disturbed John. He thought he should have given TJ

more of his time. You're one of the last people he saw and all you could say was, Merry Christmas, see you Sunday? he reprimanded himself. Then he reminded himself that TJ had been at the ministry for years studying the Bible. In his own way, he had been talking to God up until he died. The realization didn't deaden the pain but it provided perspective and a dose of humility. This wasn't about what John should or should not have done. It wasn't about him at all. It was about TJ and his faith. He had not died alone. Still, John thought he should try to be a little less rushed with people. TJ's death was a reminder of the fragility of life in the Village.

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When John hears the *pop, pop, pop* of a gun, his mind flashes with questions: Where's this going? Is it someone just testing his weapon or something worse? After twenty years in the Village he has not grown used to the violence and doesn't want to, but he works with so many children who have. He recalls one April afternoon in 2014 when he picked up the Darrington brothers—Jesse, Jeremiah, and Jerel—in Gulf Village for an after-school program. Jeremiah got in the front seat. Every kid wants the front seat. Cindy, their mother, came outside, spoke to John, and left just as two men running between houses began shooting at each other. A driver behind John jumped out of his car and ran and John couldn't back out. He reached over to push Jeremiah's head down, but the boy was already on the floor as were Jesse and Jerel. John counted thirteen shots. Then the shooting stopped. Wind stirred, silence. Jeremiah sat up, broke out a juice box, and stuck a straw in it. OK, he said. We can go now.

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John arranges for me to meet with Jesse at the Whataburger in Saraland, not far from where he and his brothers live with their grandmother. I buy Cokes and we sit in a corner. Sunlight shines our table. Jessie watches me, fingering his

plastic cup. He is soft-spoken and serious. A smile flashes across his face when he recalls a good memory but I sense a wariness. He is waiting for us to get through the small talk for the painful questions he knows I'll ask about his mother. She was killed when he was seventeen.

Jesse grew up next door to the Village. He would walk through a hole in a fence to see his friends there. At five, he got involved with the ministry. His mother told him, There's a program where people will help you with homework and feed you. Young as he was, Jesse was skeptical. It was not that common to see white people in the Village or anywhere nearby, but John and Dolores held a six-week summer camp and it was fun, and it didn't take long for the color of their skin not to matter.

Every morning before school, Jesse's mother made him and his brothers read a chapter from the Bible. It could be any chapter. The point was to start their day with God's word and stay focused despite distractions. Jesse encountered many distractions. He never knew what he'd see when he left for school. Before he reached his teens, nine people had died in front of his house. Once, he hadn't even left for school when he saw a man on the ground bleeding from a gunshot wound. His mother and a neighbor tried to stanch the blood but he died. Jesse stayed in the moment. There's a dead man in the yard. I have to finish breakfast. I have to go to school. I have to catch the bus. He learned to smother his shock. The feelings would eat him up otherwise. So much dying. Even his brothers, they stopped feeling. They slept through shootings.

His mother understood the dangers and kept the boys in the house as much as she could. She told them to think about what they wanted to do when they were older. Avoid the lure of fast money, she warned them. Jesse promised her he'd enroll in college. He started thinking ahead to the next day, the next week, the next month. Even now as he talks to me he considers what he wants to do this afternoon. He doesn't know why he



thinks this way. To stay out of trouble, maybe. He has homeboys and cousins who try to lure him into the streets.

C'mon, get in the car, Jesse. Let's do this, let's do that.

Nah, man, I'm good.

Jesse's father did not involve himself with the family, and Jesse has seen him only a few times. He thinks his father's absence forced him to become a man and assume responsibilities sooner than he otherwise might have. Unlike many of his friends, Jesse has no children. His mother and grandmother warned him against having kids unless he was married and had a job to support a family. John and Dolores told him, Don't slip up.

He pauses, drinks his Coke and watches me. I've run out of small talk. I take a sip from my glass. Setting it down, I flip to a blank page on my notepad. Then I ask the question he has been waiting for: Tell me about your mother, I say, and what happened.

A day doesn't pass when Jesse doesn't think of her, he begins. He speaks of her to anyone who asks to keep her name alive and in his heart. Cindy Denise Darrington. Everyone called her Miss Cindy. She loved everybody. Didn't matter who you were. Anyone could walk into her house for a meal. She loved to cook. People would fight over her fried chicken. She helped people get off the street. Jesse can name a handful of people who lived with them until they got right. When he was young, his mother helped a homeless lady with a few dollars and encouraging words. The words impressed Jesse. Or maybe it was how she said them. Firm but loving. Don't give up. Hang in there. Something like that. His mother would ask John to help someone if she could not. Hey Mr. John, I got so and so in my house and they need this and that. What can you do for them? She knew she couldn't assist everyone so she turned to him. Some people took advantage of her, but Jesse's mother believed that no matter their sins everyone deserved love.

She died the night of December 1, 2017. That evening, he lay in his bed chilling. Jerel warmed food in a microwave. Jeremiah slept. No one outside, no backfiring car exhausts. A quiet night. Then Jesse heard a bang inside the house and his heart jumped. He leaped to his feet and ran toward the front door, and Jerel slammed into him running from the kitchen and knocked Jesse down. Jesse jumped up and Jerel fled into Jesse's room and dropped in a corner below a window, shouting, Momma just got killed, Momma just got killed. Jesse raced down the hall and saw a man she'd been seeing point a gun in his direction, and he fell. He thought he had been shot but he had only slipped and he leaped back up and ran to his room, closed the door, and pushed a dresser in front of it. Jerel sat crouching in a corner. Then Jesse remembered Jeremiah. He moved the dresser, opened the door, crept out, and peered into Jeremiah's room. He was asleep. Jesse tried to catch his breath, to slow the banging of his heart. He walked down the dim hall and stopped. He saw his mother on the floor, eyes open, blood pooling. The man was gone. He had no call to do this, Jesse told me. His mother never hurt anyone. She had fed this man, run errands for him, been intimate with him. Jesse learned later that the man had left the house and turned himself in to the police. People say he was on drugs. That doesn't mean anything to Jesse. High or sober, he should not have murdered his mother. Jesse's voice trails off. He turns back to his drink.

And now? I ask him.

Now? Jesse repeats. Now?

He and his brothers will continue living with their grandmother. They love her and help her clean the house and tend the yard. At night, they talk to one another to stay strong and keep it together so their feelings don't boil over and explode. That can happen. The murder of a mother can make her children lose their minds, mess with their brains in some type of way. When people get mad they don't think, they just

do. Everyone has the strength to hold on. It's up to them to maintain or lose control. He and his brothers hold on.

When Jesse graduated from high school, he enrolled at Coastal Community College just as he had promised his mother. He wants to transfer to Auburn University and major in engineering. He needs to earn money first. Auburn won't pay for itself.

Some of his classmates don't know about the Village, but it's never far from Jesse's thoughts. He has flashbacks of the night his mother died and tries to subdue the trauma so he doesn't go crazy. His brothers have bad dreams. Anyone who thinks about something real hard, of course they're going to dream about it. Everyone has nightmares.

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Morgan Carnley, a ministry staff member, takes a break outside. I join her. A few men stroll by and we listen to their low laughter, muted chatter. After they pass, I ask Morgan about Cindy. I was home in Mobile when I received a text from John that Cindy had been shot, she tells me. She remembers what she wore, a red flannel shirt and blue jeans, and her hair was up. I have to pray now, she thought, for Cindy and her children. They've been thrown into a whirlwind. All of them are doing as well as can be expected, she tells me. Jerel went through a rough patch where he rebelled a little.

It can be so challenging working with these kids, Morgan continues. At a recent Bible study with a group of teenagers, she said women should not have children outside of marriage. That hit a nerve. Not one child in the room had parents who had been wed. How does she express herself without sounding accusatory? How does she raise uncomfortable topics? She has worked with these kids for fourteen years. When she considers that they come from generations of single mothers and absent fathers, she feels overwhelmed.

Morgan grew up in Enterprise, Alabama, about 160 miles east of

Prichard. She majored in music at the University of Mobile. In the fall of 2007, during her freshman year, a college friend invited her to lead a music class at Light of the Village. Morgan had no idea Prichard existed. It's hard now to remember what subsequently drew her back. The kids, she thinks. How they thrived with just minimal attention. John and Dolores too. Their quiet yet determined belief in their mission. But it was difficult. She didn't understand street slang, had never experienced the kinds of losses the children had. She doesn't recall feeling shocked but she assumes she was.

Morgan hopes that the children will find an alternative to violence. Not getting shot. Not committing a crime. Making a choice to leave the street. Those feel like achievable goals. Then perhaps college, a job and a two-story home. For the next generation, or the generation after that.

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Dacino thinks Jesse has it pretty together. Sometimes he's weird, but who isn't? He stayed in school, that's good. Funny how he controls his anger. No one knows why Miss Cindy's killer did it. In the house, in front of the kids. That was shocking even for the Village. It just happened and he turned himself in. Miss Cindy was cool. Everybody knew and liked her and her boys. She was always at the ministry on Sundays. Dacino suggested to Jesse he see a counselor but he played it off like he was busy. Probably doesn't want to talk about it. He might be waiting on the right trigger and not even know it. Just happens and he goes nuts and shoots someone. That scares Dacino.

Dacino recently moved into the house across from the ministry. It has new hardwood floors, sliding doors, a living room with a fireplace. Huge kitchen and three bedrooms. A washer and dryer too. And new furniture. Dacino has never, and he means never, lived in a house so nice. He still can't get used to it. He won't sit in the living room because he doesn't want to break anything. He has such a large bed, he jokes, rolling to

the other side is like exercise.

Dacino had his own apartment and a job until the COVID-19 pandemic. He has worked since he was a kid. As a boy, he cut grass. When he reached his teens he cooked at Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen in Mobile. At seventeen, he moved to Spanish Fort for a job at a movie theater. On his first day, the boss lady asked him, Do you know what you're supposed to be doing?

This, Dacino said, indicating the broom in his hand. Cleaning. I read the job manual.

Nobody ever reads that, she said, and promoted him to cashier. Over time he became shift leader and then manager. He stayed on for six years until he accepted a job with the Wind Creek Casino in Atmore. Three years later, he became the manager of Premiere Cinema in Spanish Fort and worked with an older woman named Rosie. Then COVID struck and Dacino lost his job and apartment. He couch surfed between among three of his sisters, sometimes sharing a bed with one of his nephews, and volunteered at the church to fill his time. One day, Dolores asked him, Why don't you work for us? Come back tomorrow. Dacino assumed she was joking and didn't return.

I thought you were going to work for us, Dolores said when she saw him again.

You were for real? Dacino asked.

The next day, he showed up.

Dacino would never speak to John and Dolores when he first started coming to the ministry. He wasn't shy; he didn't trust them. They'd leave, he assumed. Every other church group had. Black, white, it didn't matter. They left. No way were these white people going to stay. Why're they doing this? he wondered. What do they want? How long is this going to last? Dolores approached him when it was just the two of them, and then he had to talk. Dang, this lady's going to want to talk to me, he thought. He never disrespected her but he did laugh

a lot in her classes, goofing with other boys. Dolores would pull him aside and look him dead in the eye, a smile on her face. She never got loud or mean. You know what you're doing, Dacino? Do you want to be disruptive? She wouldn't speak another word until he answered. She'd wait. And wait. And wait until he finally spoke. He knew he'd, better have the right answer or she would look so disappointed he would want to cry.

These days, alone in the house after work, Dacino sometimes wonders what kind of parent he would be. He had a son when he was twenty-two, Dacino Jr., but he died. Dacino was young and dumb, in the moment, and then just like that his girlfriend was pregnant. He vowed that unlike his father he would be there for his son.

A week before the baby was due, his girlfriend traveled to Jacksonville, Florida, to visit family. She called Dacino one afternoon and told him she had passed out and had been rushed to a hospital. The doctor told her the baby had a faint heartbeat. What do we need to do? Dacino asked. I need to stay in bed and chill, she told him. The next day, Dacino Jr. was stillborn. Dacino didn't know what that meant until he asked one of his sisters and she told him.

Dacino took the death hard. Angry at the world, he didn't want to talk to anyone, including his girlfriend. The baby was so small. Had he lived, Dacino probably wouldn't be working for the ministry because he'd require a bigger salary to support a family. His child would need attention, and he wouldn't have time for ministry kids. The money needed to study physical therapy would be spent on his family. Tragedy happens for a reason, he decided. It took him a long time to reach that conclusion and even longer to accept it.

Many of his homeboys have kids. They speak to their children but they don't take them out or live with their mothers. They'll say, These are my kids, and that's it. Dacino doesn't think having a child has anything to do with status. If they

can sleep with a girl they will, and if she gets pregnant, oh well. It's not about the number of kids who are born but the number of girls they sleep with. They live for the moment because life can be that short.

Dacino doesn't want children now. He sees his sisters with all their kids, how they can get stressed running them around, and he thinks, I don't need to take that on. He has his hands full at the ministry. Those kids, man, they can be so bad. He's OK giving them back to their mothers. But he would have loved his son. He carries a photo on his phone of Dacino Jr. swaddled in white cloth. The baby's mother got married. Dacino talks to her from time to time. He's happy for her.

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Evening. Wilson Avenue, Prichard. Dacino cruises, no destination in mind, just driving, thinking. The walls close in sometimes being alone in the house. Darkened storefronts stand in the shadowy glow of streetlights. Building a new Popeyes, Dacino notices. And a new car wash over there. Wasn't there the other day. Tony's Car Wash. Back in the day, Tony was always drunk. Morning and night he was full. In 2008, he told John and Dolores, I got to kick this life. The next day, they put him on a bus to San Antonio and Victory Gospel Church. He stayed ninety days and renewed his faith in God. Now, he has his own business. Twenty dollars a car, no charge for vacuuming.

There's Fry Daddy's, a restaurant. Order today, get your food tomorrow. That's how slow they are. Fry Daddy's and Fat Boy's restaurants nearby. They're not bad. Dacino turns onto U.S. Highway 45, a road that runs from Prichard into Saraland. There's another car wash. Next door, Dacino sees the store where he first saw a man shot to death. My Boy's Food Market it's called now. His stepdad made him ask people for money. No one will give a grown man money but they will help kids. Dacino hated it. He felt so embarrassed.



## FOUR

I move in with Dacino the second week of my trip to better experience the Village. As night approaches, a pale light illuminates the porch. I see the dim outline of one of Mr. Arthur's signs. Wandering around, I notice many more: *Praise God; Holy Spirit I have you; Let It Shine, Lord; Wow, God Is Intense*. Any number of his signs fill the road to Restoration Youth Academy, a closed juvenile bootcamp in the Village that shelters a homeless man, sixty-three-year-old Tommie Bonner. Since I once worked with the homeless, I decide to meet him. I take a road to the cracked drive of the academy. Shoulder-high grass and weeds shroud the buildings. I walk past a charred school bus covered with vines. Corroded ammo casings litter the pavement. The air left a bitter taste.

I shout, Tommie Bonner! several times before I hear a hoarse reply, Yo! A concrete walk leads through chest-high shrubs to a one-story building where I find him standing on a landing.

You made it, he says, as if he had been expecting me. Stroking his gray goatee, he runs his other hand through his thick hair. A worn black sweatshirt and two long sleeve knit shirts cover his narrow chest. He watches me wipe sweat from my forehead.

We'll get another frost in two, three days. It's coming, he says. Then you'll be wishing you was hot. Not summer yet.

He adjusts a clutter of pots that hold the rainwater he uses to wash dishes and points to a bare patch of ground he's cleared to plant onions and watermelon. He should have waited until June. It's just March now. Frost will kill them, he says.

Tommie discovered the bootcamp by chance. One night in 2018 he had stopped in a field to sleep. About two in the morning it started raining. Crawling out of his sleeping bag, Tommie got on his bicycle—something he found, doesn't know the year but

he knows it's old—and started riding in no particular direction seeking cover. Through the rain, he saw the square shaped buildings of the academy. He rode toward them and has been here ever since. Took him a minute to clean out the large room he now calls home. He moved mountains of debris, mostly broken ceiling tiles, and piled them in a hall where they remain today, a testimony to his labor. Then he swept and swept, dust pluming around him, until a blue carpet emerged. He hung plastic sheets where there had once been walls for insulation.

He has a sleeping bag and a mosquito net inside an oblong tent. Like crawling into a coffin, he jokes. He shows me a radio. As long as he has batteries it will provide him with company. He'd be talking to himself without it. A firepit lined with aluminum siding takes up one corner where he also keeps rodent traps. He gets rats, big ones, and hears them in the walls. One of them walked into a trap about three in the morning. Tommie didn't get up. Hours later, he kicked out of his sleeping bag and checked the trap but it was gone. Must've been a huge rat to run off with a trap.

I'd be back out in the field, I tell him.

Tommie laughs. You've never been in the rain with no place to stay.

Fishing calendars cover one wall. The owner of a hardware store in Chickasaw gave them to him. The calendars help conjure up good memories. Tommie loves to fish. He once caught a barracuda in the Gulf, not a great eating fish and the big ones have a lot of mercury. Same with tuna. The bigger they are the more mercury they carry. He has caught redfish, a good eating fish. Croaker, too, a better eating fish. He likes sheepshead almost as much. He snagged one the size of a plate years ago, a big son of a gun.

A grocery basket holds wood for cooking. Tommie won't burn

treated wood; the fumes knock him out. One window provides light and overlooks his vegetable garden. He used to see rabbits but hasn't seen one in five months. Coons, possums eat all the trash, he says, and scare away everything else including dogs. All the birds have left too. Won't be long before someone comes and hauls the burned bus for scrap and then it, too, will be gone.

A meth head named David used to live in one of the buildings behind Tommie. He's been gone now for a minute and Tommie doesn't miss him. He believed in Satan. He had written, *I love Satan* on the walls. All night long he was in and out, in and out. Weird, man. Satan didn't teach him to clean. He lived worse than a pig. It was a good day when David left and the devil with him.

Tommie shows me an office he uses as a prayer room. A crucifix and a picture of Jesus hang on the wall. Lying in his tent one night, Tommie heard the Holy Spirit tell him: Build you a room to pray, and he did. Every morning, before he does anything else, he stops in his prayer room and reads the twenty-third Psalm. *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want/He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters/He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake/Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me/Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over/Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

After his prayers, Tommie rides his bike to collect cans. He makes about thirty-seven cents a pound. In the evening, he smokes his room to discourage bugs. He sits in the warmth of the airy heat looking at gathering shadows before he douses the fire. He does not want the flames to attract the wrong people.

He has grown used to the sounds of gunshots at night and the noise no longer bothers him unless bullets strike close to his room. A bullet pierced six stucco pillars outside his door one time. Bam, bam, bam. Tommie dropped and rolled against a wall. Then the shooting stopped. A lot of people tote guns. He wonders how they afford them. Bullets ain't cheap. Big guns too: .357s, .44s, and others like machine guns.

Tommie was born in Choctaw County way up Highway 45 a good three hours from Prichard. He and his mother stayed with her father. They moved to Crichton, Alabama, in the early '70s. In his mother's final years, Tommie lived with her and worked as a maintenance man, painting and installing pipes. One evening, he returned home and his older sister asked, Where you been? I found momma on the floor. She's been like that all day. Tommie quit his job to care for her. When she died, he drifted from one temporary job to the next.

A white guy he knew from Daphne, Alabama, told him he needed someone to watch his own mother, eighty years old. Why don't you stay with her? he suggested, and Tommie agreed. She lived in a trailer and he moved into an RV nearby. She had rare plants, the names of which Tommie no longer remembers. At least she said they were rare, and she owned twenty-five little dogs, Chihuahua-like things. She wasn't the cleanest lady. In the evenings, they would drink a little wine and she'd smoke a cigarette surrounded by dogs and plants and talk him to death. Her son-in-law, however, didn't like the idea of a stranger staying with her and Tommie left. It only takes one person to ruin a good deal.

I ask him if he has noticed Mr. Arthur's signs. Ray Charles could see those signs, he tells me, they're everywhere. He thinks he may have met Mr. Arthur. A Black guy big on Jesus stopped him one day and gave him fifty dollars. Just up and gave him the money and kept going on about Jesus.

I'm blessed, thank the Lord, I'm blessed, he said.

Pray for me, Tommie asked him.

I will, brother, the man said. Pray for me too.

Tommie never saw him again. He stretched that fifty like a rubber band.

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Dolores tells me she worries about Tommie. She wonders what he does for food, how he keeps warm in the winter. He doesn't seem to want help. She enjoys talking to him. He's very sweet and polite and appears at peace. One time he had trouble with his bike and she and John replaced a tire. When he stops and checks in, she gives him food. Mostly she tries to be kind and offer him company.

She hopes Big Man will drop by again. Was he going to call them about going out or were she and John supposed to call him? She can't remember. Big Man was always a good kid but the streets exerted their pull. He wanted money for shoes, outfits. Every holiday he'd ask, Miss Dolores, can we get me an outfit, get me these shoes? He wanted to leave a store wearing new clothes. The Fourth of July was not about fireworks or cookouts but walking around in a fresh outfit. Big Man never outgrew that.

She remembers when he called John about his son, Corey Jr. She doesn't think he understood what happened. She doubts he asked himself how he might have contributed to the situation. Every young man she knows in the Village believes they love their kids. She doesn't blame them for not trying harder. They never had an example in their own lives. They don't know about birth control, something Dolores chides herself for not emphasizing more. She doesn't believe they have kids so they can be eligible for higher welfare benefits. They may do some things with the wrong motive but who hasn't? They live lives different from what most people know.

Now, Jesenda dotes on her children. Dolores remembers how she

used to be. Jesenda could fight and she would fight. Once that switch turned on, good luck turning it off. Nothing could stop her. She has come a long way. She exudes joy and Dolores is so proud of her. Jesenda is smart, always has been. People don't mess with her.

Cindy, Jesse Darrington's mother, could not have been more devoted to her children. She wanted her boys to receive an education, but she also allowed kids into her house who sold drugs and had dropped out of school. Her home became the center of all this junk. Jesse and his brothers had to navigate all that, the different guys she dated, and not good guys either. Jesse would say, I don't like them. Dolores never understood why she let just anybody in. She was so nice, too nice. She couldn't say no and do what was best for her. But she loved her children and they adored her. No one questions that.

Dacino has traveled far. He was always polite. Quiet, but polite. His stepfather, a wiry skinny man, didn't really like John or Dolores. She remembers when she first saw him with Dacino and his brothers. Dolores asked if she could get them water. Their stepdad said yes and then let them play with the other children. He could be nice in a condescending way. Dolores put up with him so Dacino and his siblings would come back. Dolores has no doubt Dacino will be a great physical therapist. He is compassionate, committed, and disciplined.

I ask her about Mr. Arthur. He was a gentle soul who professed a deep faith, she replies. He died in 2020 and she misses him. He loved God but he drank until he was intoxicated and then he beat himself up for displeasing God. He had a huge heart but he was torn. He told Dolores he wanted to do better but his alcoholism held him back. He was a big, balding man, about six feet one, but not heavy. What hair he had he tied into a braid. His expressive eyes danced with joy or drooped with sorrow depending upon his mood and the amount of alcohol he had consumed. He could fix things and helped out at the ministry. He dropped by and swept and mopped according to his

whims. He would arrive in a good mood or walk in weeping. Dolores would take him in a room, give him Kleenex, and they would talk and pray. He spread the Gospel with his signs. It's almost impossible to drive through the Village and not see one. Dolores wrote what he wanted to say and he'd copy it onto a board with markers she provided. It amazed her how many he put up. He used discarded boards he found in the woods. In the fall and winter the bare branches holding his signs declared his faith. *Oh, Lord, I'm Coming Home*. When he died in 2020, Dolores believed he did.



Photo by J. Malcolm Garcia

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Billy Boy stops at Mr. Arthur's house on Hale Drive and walks around the porch to a back door. The swollen wood sticks and he tugs on the knob with both hands until it opens. He knew Mr. Arthur well and likes to hang out with older cats like him, guys in juke joints. Chill, drink-a-shot-or-two type of guys. Mature kind of dudes. Billy Boy doesn't worry about them. They

won't go off into nonsense and shoot their friends. Billy Boy prefers them to younger cats. Mr. Arthur's house became one of Billy Boy's go-to places. If his family couldn't find him, they knew where to call.

Mr. Arthur and those older dudes were drinkers. Outside of the juke joints they put down the wine, man. Started early and didn't bother to eat. Billy Boy used to get on Mr. Arthur about that. Whatcha doing, Mr. Arthur? I know you ain't got no wine in your hands. Not at no eight o'clock in the morning. Mr. Arthur made Billy Boy mad, killing himself like that.

Sometimes Mr. Arthur burned trash in a barrel outside of his house. Billy Boy would warm his hands and then walk inside without knocking, just give a shout, Hey, Mr. Arthur! He used to watch him put up his signs. That was all he did. Hammer and nails. Real old school. Signs everywhere, man, like weeds. He put one on a tree in his front yard where a young woman died. *O, yes, Jesus loves Dectoria.* Billy Boy knew her. Some guys started shooting and she got caught in the crossfire and dropped as if a hand rose out of the earth and yanked her down. That was a very bad day, Billy Boy says. Three people were wounded and Dectoria died.

Billy Boy feels Mr Arthur's presence. One of his rooms has a desk and a lectern where he'd preach to whoever dropped by. A deer head stares out from its spot on a wall, cobwebs laced around the dusty glass eyes. In the dark kitchen, a rusted can of cranberry sauce stands alone on a warped shelf, the oven lost in a corner, the cabinet doors shut. Billy Boy walks down a hall, the sound of each step filling the house. Dark suits and a hanger full of colorful ties crowd a bedroom closet. A dresser stands beneath a mirror. Sheets and blankets cover a bed as if just made. The smell of mildew hangs heavy as fog. Only thing missing is Mr. Arthur. Billy Boy takes a couple of shirts and jackets. They'll go to waste if he doesn't. Mr. Arthur would want him to have them.



Sitting on Mr. Arthur's bed, Billy Boy looks out the bedroom window at the backyard, sloppy with water from a recent rain. He remembers how thunderstorms flooded streets when he was a boy. He'd drag an old mattress from a trash pile and do somersaults into the water and play for hours. The sight of garbage brings Billy Boy home, makes him feel like an eight-year-old again. Much of the trash, he thinks, doesn't come from the Village. Contractors who won't pay to use a landfill instead treat the Village like a dumpster. To Billy Boy it's beautiful. He can hear his scrawny boy's body splashing in the water, smell the stink of it and the odor of the funky mattress on his skin. He felt a kind of freedom. If he had an opportunity to go back in time and put it on camera and record it, he would. This is where he came up, amidst all this garbage, and felt joy.

A homeboy, Sean, died in the yard next to Mr. Arthur's house. He had wandered around to the back and saw some guys he did not like. They felt the same toward him and started shooting and Sean ran and fell beside a trash can. As he bled out, people say he called for his mother, and the guys who killed him are dead now, too, shot. What goes around comes around. Mr. John has a photo of Sean on the memorial wall. Another homeboy got killed on First Street not far from Hale Drive. He said something to a dude that the dude didn't like, *Bro what you say?* and the dude had a big ass gun and shot him. Billy Boy didn't see it but he heard the shot and was ready to throw down. If there's going to be a war me and my homeboy are going to win the war, he thought, but that's not how it went. Homey died; war over.

Billy Boy knew another homeboy who died in front of a convenience store, Two Dragons. He tried to shoot a dude but his gun jammed and the dude turned around and shot him. That was the first of many deaths Billy Boy witnessed. A bunch of dudes chased another friend and shot him when he tried to jump a gate. Not too long after that, Billy Boy got together with

two homeboys. They got carried away teasing each other; the joking started getting personal. Went from laughter to serious malice. Emotions got involved and then bullets flew and one of them died. After so many years of killing, Billy Boy has no expectations. He was exposed to death early before he knew what death was. Before he knew the word for it. He wonders when it will be his turn. He has been involved in a couple of shootings but no one died. So many of his homies have been killed that Billy Boy's like, I know I'm coming. Y'all make some room for me in heaven because I know y'all're all up there and there ain't no place else for me to go because I know I'm coming. He has reached a point in his life that he can't make friends because of the love, man, because he loves so hard. He's afraid he'll lose them. He tries to put restraints over his heart, hold back on the love and not feel. He keeps to himself. It's too late in the game to play.

Billy Boy thinks that if people fought like the old guys did back in the day, the shootings would cease. But if a dude doesn't know how to fight, what're they going to do? They got a reputation to uphold. Imagine a guy with diamonds in his mouth like Big Man all beat up from losing a fight. He wouldn't be able to ride around all falsey like that without people laughing at him. So now when he throws down he reaches for a gun. No one says, Hey, man, remember when we went to school together? Remember when we played basketball at Light of the Village? No one says any of that. They shoot.

Billy Boy leaves Mr. Arthur's house. Knee-high grass brushes against his pants as he walks through an empty lot, flies scattering. He considers himself a backstreet mover and prefers paths and alleys in and around the Village instead of streets. Safer. If he sees somebody he doesn't know, he worries, drops down to a crouch, watches. Don't too many people move off the main roads. If it's an older dude, cool, but a young cat will make him paranoid. Why's he out here? What's he up to? Billy Boy has learned to be alert. Anything

he sees that doesn't feel right or look right or feels out of place arouses his suspicions.

Billy Boy was born in Sacramento but moved with his mother and grandmother to the Village when he was five. His grandmother was from Mobile and he presumes she wanted to come home. His father stayed in California but called every so often. Hey, his father would say, I'm going to mail you fifty dollars tomorrow then Billy Boy wouldn't hear from him again until the next time he offered to send money. His mother used drugs and would leave him alone in the house. I'm going out to eat, she'd say, and he wouldn't see her for weeks. But he'd die for her. Even though she wasn't there for him, she's still his mother.

He relied on his grandmother, Miss Annie Marie. She was a sweet old lady and gave him what she had even if it wasn't much. By-the-book kind of lady. She made sure Billy Boy attended school and showed respect. Chores and keeping the house right. She was big on house cleaning. One time a lady made her so mad she tried to fight her from a wheelchair. Billy Boy laughs. Miss Annie could act crazy, man. Billy Boy called her momma. She died when he was ten and Billy Boy moved from one aunt to another. He dropped out of school at thirteen and began hanging out with older cats and learned to sell drugs. Use your instincts, they told him. Follow your gut. Hesitate, you die.

When Billy Boy turned fourteen, the police busted him with a gun a friend had given him, a .22, little thing. Watch your back, his friend had told him. Don't let nobody do nothing to you, you feel me? The police took him to Strickland. His mother and father didn't attend his hearing. A judge sentenced him to the Lee County Youth Development Center where he served thirty days. Since then Billy Boy has been in prison three times: in 2012 and 2014 for robbery and in 2016 for robbery and assault.

He did not steal because he needed money. Sometimes he would have a pocket full of cash and still rob someone. The thrill drove him—and his anger. Billy Boy has a temper. Today he keeps that side of himself chill. Someone would have to physically assault him for it to kick in, but his anger scares him because he gets hot pretty quick. He copes through prayer. All he does is pray. It's not on-top-of-a-roof praying, but it's prayer. He prays for his safety, his family's safety. He prays to God that he has the wisdom to identify danger. When he was in jail, he prayed with other guys. They had faith to a certain extent but too many of them lost it when they got out. The world of faith ain't the world of the 'hood. Billy Boy tattooed a cross between his eyes. Every time he looks in a mirror he sees it as a reflection of his love for God.

Billy Boy feels the weight of the spirits and ghosts of the dead, like Sean and another homey, Cyrus. Billy Boy and Cyrus were like brothers. They protected each other. Watch-my-back, watch-your-back kind of love. One time as he sat in a car with Cyrus, a dude pulled up next to them and gave them a troubling look. Damn, Billy Boy thought, there might be some shit, and cocked his .45, but nothing happened and Cyrus pulled off and cruised to a Burger King. At the drive-through, they asked for two Whoppers. Billy Boy reached into his pocket for change and nicked the trigger of his gun. Boom! The bullet went through the floorboard and into the right front tire.

We got to go, Billy Boy said.

Hell no, I want my food, Cyrus screamed at him.

Man, these people are going to call the police.

Not before I eat, Cyrus said.

They bought their food and limped off. The police never did catch them. Those kinds of stories, Billy Boy says, become legend in the Village.

He had a dream recently about playing basketball with Cyrus.

Then he dreamed about Sean. He asked him how death felt. Chill, Sean said. Billy Boy has been dreaming about dead people since he was little. He spoke to prison counselors about his dreams but they told him they couldn't provide the help he needed. After a while, Billy Boy embraced his dreams. They remain the one way he can still see dead friends, and they feel so authentic. In one dream he wanted to warn Cyrus he would get shot but he didn't want to upset him. So Billy Boy stayed quiet and then, as in the real world, Cyrus died.

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John and Dolores have known Billy Boy since he was a child. He always had a mind of his own and wanted to be seen as a hip, cool dude. However, people in the Village watch his actions more than they listen to his words. He doesn't command their respect. They see he doesn't work or take care of his kids. He has to change his life before he can be a role model.

That's the sad part, John tells me. Billy Boy knows what he should be doing. He talks about it but he doesn't follow through. John and Dolores have sent Billy Boy to several job programs but he always walks out. It's tragic, really. Billy Boy is bright and has insight. His observations about people can be spot-on. John recalls one afternoon when a preacher approached the basketball court behind the ministry. Guys from all over Prichard were playing. The preacher said, Stop. I want to share the word of God with you. Bow your heads. Who here wants to go to heaven? The players looked at John and he nodded, indicating they should do what he asked in the hope he'd leave. The preacher led them in a prayer of repentance. Billy Boy shuffled next to John. What do you think? John asked him. Is he leading them to Christ? He's not leading them very far, Billy Boy said.

When Billy Boy was eighteen, John spoke by phone to his father in Sacramento.

I'm ready to be a dad, his father said. Send me a picture of him.

John did.

Oh he looks great, his father said in another call. He gets that from me.

John and Dolores bought Billy Boy clothes, had a big send-off for him at the ministry and drove him to the Mobile Bus Station the next morning at eight o'clock. Fifteen minutes before departure, his father called.

I don't need him right now, he told John. Better stop him.

John told Billy Boy. Billy Boy shrugged. Disappointed, yes, but not surprised.

## **FIVE**

On a Thursday night, Billy Boy hangs around the ministry. He talks to Dacino and follows him to the house across the street, where John sits on a porch swing. Dacino tells him Billy Boy wants to buy shoes for his birthday.

How you going to buy shoes without any money? John asks him.

I don't know, man.

How much are the shoes?

Eighty dollars.

C'mon, Dacino you know you're flush, John says.

Who?

You.

Man, I don't have it. I'm going to stand by the dumpster and smoke a cigarette.

That's where your money's going.

John looks at Billy Boy.

What's going on, Mr. John? he asks.

I'm getting ready to go pick up kids for the after-school program. What have you been up to?

Walking around the Village. It's my birthday coming up. Kind of special to me.

Yeah, I know, but here you are.

I ain't in no trouble.

That's a plus.

I got nowhere to stay. I need a room.

You going to hang out while I figure out something for you, Billy Boy?

Yes sir.

I'm going to pick up the kids now.

Billy Boy walks behind John to a van and gets in with him. John backs onto Baldwin Drive. Billy Boy stares out a window. The night sky dances with stars.

Somebody got killed last weekend, he says.

Been a little shooting today, yeah, John says.

Got to be careful at nighttime. It's crazy. Do a lot of shooting from the bushes. After my birthday, I'm going to go out of town.

Where?

I don't know. Somewhere. Anywhere. Start over. Be something positive. I need work.

A birthday is a good time to get a new direction.

That's what Miss Dolores says. She gave me a good talk today. She'll tough-love you, man.

John picks up the children and drives back to the ministry. He gets out and the children follow. Billy Boy stays by the van. Minutes later John walks out and calls to Dacino.

I got a hundred bucks. That should handle the shoes. I'll tell him and then you want to run him up real quick to the store?

If it wasn't his birthday, I wouldn't do it.

Dacino looks at him. John shrugs. Does he just write Billy Boy off? Say, I don't want you around here anymore? John doesn't see how that would help. Enabling, the textbooks call it. It's easy to sit at home and recite academic rules of social work about what should and should not be done. In the field, that is much harder to do. John deals with people, not words on a page. They aren't canned goods with a shelf life. Billy Boy certainly isn't the only one. Many people see the ministry as an ATM. John tells them to text him. It's a lot easier than listening to their spiel: How are you, Mr. John. So glad you guys are here. John doesn't need the small talk, the false praise. Get to the point: What do you need? The manipulation is so obvious. He gives them what they want. It gets exhausting saying no all the time. At some point he'll cut off the spigot and Billy Boy will leave angry, hurt, and confused but not surprised, and that's sad too. It's just shoes. A fleeting moment of happiness. Why not? Enabling. That's a good term. John supposes it applies to him.

Go get you a birthday gift, he tells Billy Boy and hands him the money. Dacino will take you. Then we'll deal with finding you a place to stay.

Billy Boy looks at the ground and runs a foot over pebbles. He takes the money almost self-consciously, perhaps a little ashamed, without looking up.



Ya'll going to make me cry, he says softly.

I don't know about that.

Thank you, man.

Alright, Bo.

I love you, Mr. John.

We love you too, you know that.

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John walks through the Village early the next morning. He strolls behind the ministry and crosses a highway to the Donut Shop. On his way home last night, John noticed it was packed, the green juke joint filled with cars, the empty homes around it frantic with activity. Trap houses, people call them, places to stash drugs. No one steals because someone would rat them out and lethal repercussions would follow. Quiet now. John thinks he should call the Donut Shop something else. A donut shop never closes. Sure feels closed now.

What's up Bo? John shouts to a man peering out the door of a ruined home.

He doesn't answer. A dog barks.

John walks through the Donut Shop to other neighborhoods. The wind stirs, the air damp but warm, sunlight poking through clouds. A stop sign on a street named Madison Avenue carries graffiti: *PA for Life*. John thinks it means *Prichard, Alabama, for life*. Like a prison sentence. There had been houses all the way through here at one time. Nothing now except the rusted frames of stolen cars.

He walks to Big Man's house, a gray trailer home with a small front yard. He's up and busy, everyone coming around. Cars out front for only one reason. Got to get it. Early bird gets the

worm. Big Man holds a shoebox where he keeps his money, or so rumor has it. Rides around with it too. Doesn't leave it at his house, a precaution against burglars. He leans into the passenger window of a car. After a short moment, he jogs into his house.

What's up? John calls out to him. It's early, Bo, too early to be up.

Big Man glances at him without expression.



John, Dolores, and Big Man

Dude, I like those pants. I gotta say, you looking good, Bo.

A kid named Elijah lives with his grandmother around the corner; another boy, Daniel, nearby. He'd come to the ministry with Elijah. Elijah's aunt brought them but Elijah hasn't been around for a good while. Maybe because of COVID; John doesn't know. A dude named Diamond Dog lives not far from here. He

serves as the Village mechanic.

John keeps walking. He remembers the early years of the mission. He and Dolores were suspect then. Everyone was friendly but people did wonder about them. After twenty years, a few still do. Other people, too, wonder. Some of them think he and Dolores want to save souls and charge their egos. If anyone thinks they drive home at night feeling empowered, they don't know, they really just don't know. More often than not John feels deflated. It sucks, caring about people who self-destruct. Sucks big time. So many people have died.

It should be me up on the memorial wall next, he has said more than once in Bible study. At fifty-six he is much older than the young people staring back at him but he knows the chances of him dying before them remain slim. An argument over a girl, or someone feels insulted, a robbery gone bad, or something equally tragic and stupid will result in death. John feels immense joy and immense sorrow, most days not in equal measure. He and Dolores stay focused on the mission: Show love, hope, and faith. Let the Bible speak for itself, see who it touches. Listen, encourage. Be consistent and genuine. Tell the truth in a kind way. Don't condemn or judge. Help in whatever way possible. Come back. Be consistent. Be present.

John relies on scripture, 2 Timothy 4:5: *But you should keep a clear mind in every situation. Don't be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at telling others the Good News, and fully carry out the ministry God has given you.* He tells anyone who will listen, If you feel compassion for something, don't ignore it. Explore it. You don't have to go all Mother Teresa and run at full speed but you can investigate it. What do you feel compassion for? Search for it, embrace it. What moves you? The answer, he believes, is a gift from God.

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*Postscript*

On March 12, 2021, two days after I left the Village, I received a text from John: *Very sad news this morning. Apparently Big Man (Corey) was killed this morning.*

The shooting occurred in the Donut Shop about ten o'clock. He was shot in his red Dodge Charger R/T. Dacino called John. Dolores heard the ring and thought, Oh, crap. She saw by the expression on John's face that someone had been shot. He drove into the Village, Dolores stayed home. She usually doesn't go to murder scenes. At that point all she could have done had been done. Big Man was in God's hands now.

Everybody liked him, even the person who witnesses alleged shot him. This person some say hung out in the Donut Shop as much as Big Man. He stopped at the ministry every so often to wash his car and John would talk to him. He was wounded on Hale Drive one year and John visited him in the hospital. His vital signs were crashing more from panic than the seriousness of his wounds, and the doctors asked John to calm him. He was pleasant like Big Man. His kids participated in the after-school programs. No one knew the why of it. It may be that Big Man broke up a fight between him and another young man. It may be that Big Man said something that humiliated him. That's all it takes, injured pride.

The Donut Shop turned into a ghost town. John wondered who would fill the void.

In some ways, John told me, Big Man's death was a story that has been told many times, only every retelling is different because each person is different. He was more than a statistic, more than a number. When John thinks of Big Man, he sees the boy who snagged a cake from a restaurant buffet. He always had a young face, a kid's smile. John can still see his hurt when he talked to him about his son. Are you at the church? Yes, John said. I need to talk to you. Sure. Big Man had just come from the morgue and looked bewildered. How does a two-year-old shoot himself in the back of the head? he asked. He was upset, his pain palpable. The ministry was the

one place he could let down his front and be Corey instead of Big Man, a grieving father, exposed and vulnerable. Just the other day, John told me, when Dolores took some children home, DT, a young man who had been shot four weeks earlier, flagged her down. Leaning on his walker, he showed her his wounds like he was baring his soul.

I recalled my conversation with Big Man as we sat together in the same car he would die in. At one point, I asked him what people should know about him. He said he was a good person. Not a perfect person but a good one. Friendly, kind-hearted. But he would not let anyone disrespect him. He had a bad temper, he admitted, but believed he had it under control. I told him I thought it spoke well of him that he had sought out John after his son died instead of retaliating. It seemed at that moment, no matter how brief, he had sought an alternative to violence. Big Man stared out the windshield, his right hand resting on the wheel.

Maybe, he said.

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## **New Nonfiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: “The Forced Disappearance of Sombath Somphone”**

Ng Shui Meng speaks of her husband Sombath Somphone in the present tense, with a firm matter-of-fact tone about his disappearance, a way, I presume, for her to maintain control in a situation where she has none and knows nothing but heartbreak. Yet I hear the deep sentiment behind the words. To



her, Sombath is much more than the internationally acclaimed, award-winning development worker who vanished one night years ago. He is her partner, companion and mentor, a man with a quiet presence whom she relies on even in his absence. Although short and thin, he stood out in a crowd partly because of his shock of silver white hair. Most older Lao men dye their hair, she explains. Government officials all have black hair but Sombath has this head of white hair, and he always wears a cotton peasant jacket and yet there is something about him that makes everyone feel deferential toward him. That may have been a contributing factor to his disappearance, Shui Meng muses, this deference, the tranquil influence he has. He would never call himself an activist. He is not confrontational. Sombath believes in cooperation and works with Lao officials. In private he can be critical of the government but never in public. He's a pragmatist and strategic about what he does. Although he is not political, he inspires people. Perhaps that is what led to his undoing.



Sombath Somphone's wife, Ng Shui Meng. Photo: J. Malcolm



Garcia.

On December 15, 2012, Somphone was stopped at a police checkpoint in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, and was never seen or heard from again. Lao officials denied any involvement. Officials with human rights organizations believe Somphone was the victim of a forced disappearance by the government. Then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton demanded answers and the European Parliament expressed its concern but to no avail. The Lao government insisted it knew nothing. Almost nine years later, his fate and his whereabouts remain a mystery. His friends can only speculate on why he was taken.



The police checkpoint where Somphone was stopped. Photo: J. Malcolm Garcia.

“There’s an expression I first learned from Shui Meng,” one of Somphone’s colleagues told me. “You cut off the head of the chicken to scare the monkeys. It means you make an example of somebody. This is how the Lao government operates. They find an example and hit it hard to give it publicity and shut everybody up, and they did that with Sombath, and its consequences are still in effect.”

Laos is not alone in its use of forced disappearance. Phil Robertson, the deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia Division in Bangkok, Thailand, told me its use remains common throughout Southeast Asia. Thailand has abducted people over the years but less frequently than outright assaults and assassinations. Vietnam insists on taking people through a kangaroo court. The Philippines and Indonesia also use abductions to crack down on dissent. Some governments are quicker to use it than others. Laos is very quick. Robertson estimates about 22 Lao people have disappeared in recent years.

The night before he and I spoke, two Khmer-speaking men tried to drag prominent Cambodian dissident Chamroeun Suon into a van outside a 7-Eleven in Bangkok. “The boss needs to catch you, to arrest you, you have to come with us to the van,” one of the men told him. They tased Suon but he escaped, running back into the store. The attackers tased him so many times that their batteries ran out. Robertson presumed, with a hint of detached humor, that they had not used a very good taser. The two attackers may have operated without the authority of the Thai government, he said, but they certainly felt emboldened to try to grab him in a public place.





Sombath Somphone,  
who disappeared in  
2012. Photo:  
Wikipedia.

“There’s a lot of these cases in the region. A prominent Lao activist disappeared recently,” Robertson said, referring to the 2019 abduction of Od Sayavong in Thailand. He is affiliated with Free Lao, a group of Lao migrant workers and activists who advocate for human rights and democracy in Laos.

“We don’t know if there was Thai cooperation or not. The Thais have gone after their own dissidents in Laos so there very much could have a quid pro quo: You guys have targets, you go after them, and we’ll go after our guys.”

Robertson described the use of forced disappearance as one of the cruelest practices used against dissidents.

“Groups like Human Rights Watch, we raise the issue with governments but don’t get a reply,” he said. “When diplomats get involved they will get this sort of, ‘We’re investigating, yes. We’re concerned; we don’t know what happened. Isn’t it horrible?’ That sort of thing. ‘We don’t have any information. We heard he had a mistress and he ran off.’ Or they’ll say some other scurrilous excuse and accuse us of being naive to think something happened.”

Robertson did not know Somphone, but he has worked with Shui Meng, who continues to demand answers about her husband's disappearance. At first, she was confident he was alive and being held, but Robertson thinks her attitude over time has changed. For an advocate like Robertson, questions about what happened to Somphone become sensitive. He has his opinion but it's not for him to impose his thoughts on the family. That, he said, was Shui Meng's call.

The more I read and heard about Somphone the more disturbed I became. The idea that someone so accomplished could be abducted without consequences other than rote international condemnation struck me as terribly wrong. I know that sounds naive, but some things are just not complicated. You don't rip someone from their family for no reason other than a skewed notion of social control. To dismiss with a cavalier *Well, these things happen* didn't sit well with me. During my research into Somphone's disappearance, unidentified federal agents began arresting Black Lives Matter protesters at the urging of then-President Donald Trump. It seemed my own country was becoming less and less removed from totalitarian impulses. I became determined to write about Somphone, and to, in a small way, join the diminished but still vocal chorus of human rights advocates demanding answers, because one day, I thought, I might be insisting on similar answers for the disappeared here.

"I don't want fear to grip my life," Shui Meng told me before I flew to Laos. "If they want to target you, they can. That is the factor of uncertainty. Nothing is normal. Since Sombath disappeared, I don't know what normal is."

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Sombath Somphone was born in 1952 and grew up in Done Khio, rural southern Laos, the eldest of eight brothers and sisters. He was curious and innovative even as a child. Shui Meng

recalled one story when as a boy he decided it would be easier to raise frogs than catch them to sell in the market. At that time no one in his village bred frogs, but Somphone did and they multiplied. They also escaped because he did not have containers big enough to hold them. Still he tried. He was always experimenting.

At sixteen, Somphone enrolled at a French lycée in the town of Savannakhet, boarding with relatives in exchange for doing chores. An American teacher, Sylvester Morris, became his mentor and enrolled him in night classes at a local American school.

“He was in one of my English courses,” Morris recalled from his home outside Kansas City, Missouri. “He looked like he was 12. He was a very nice kid, very humble, respectful. He was not boisterous. The other kids looked up to him. He wanted to learn as much as possible.”

Morris helped recruit students for the American Field Service U.S. exchange program and in 1969 Somphone was accepted and spent a year with the family of Oscar and Phyllis Bardon in Wisconsin, where he attended Elkhart Lake-Glenbeulah High School.

“We called him Sam,” one of the Bardon children, David, told me. “He was so easy to talk to. He did his chores and fit right in. I can remember him laughing and always having a good time. We loved him to death. It was a sad day when we took him to the airport to return to Laos. We all cried. We had gotten very close.”

Somphone was impressed by the things many Americans take for granted, especially food. He saw stacks and stacks of packaged chicken and meat in supermarkets. He had never eaten steak before he went to Wisconsin, he told Shui Meng. Boys and girls played sports. Somphone’s only sport had been physical labor. Children yelled at their parents, shocking him. No Lao child

would shout at their mother and father. He wondered how to take the good aspects of American culture back to Laos, especially technology. He was in awe of technology.

In 1971, Somphone studied agriculture and economy at the University of Hawaii. After he graduated in 1974, he returned to Laos but then traveled back to Hawaii and earned a master's degree in agronomy. He also met Shui Meng there in 1978. A Singaporean, she was working toward her doctorate in sociology. They married in 1983. Shui Meng became a senior research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore and then worked for UNICEF in East Timor and China. In 1986, she joined Somphone in Laos.

Shui Meng recalled that he was always clear he wanted to return home. His intentions were modest: to be with his mother and father and siblings and use his skills and education in agriculture to improve the lives of farmers. He believed that the life of a Lao farmer is rich despite its typical poverty. Farmers have everything they need, he said: food, fish, water. They grow enough rice to sustain themselves for a year. He thought that there was much wealth in this kind of simplicity. A farmer lived with very little and was quite content to pick fruit, gather mushrooms, swim in the river. Many of them did not have running water or electricity yet they seemed happy. Somphone was always curious about nature and the relations between different plants. Shui Meng was a city girl. She couldn't recognize one mushroom from the next, one animal from another, but Somphone taught her to value the diversity of a forest and what it provided. He wanted to improve the lives of farmers without violating their attachment to the land.

"I adjusted," Shui Meng told me. "I was also curious about Laos. It was very different from anything I'd known. When I first came I saw that farmers had very little, but they had a contentment that I admired."

Throughout the 1980s, Somphone struggled to secure Lao government approval for projects promoting community-based sustainable agricultural development. He offered to work with the department of agriculture on the use of organic fertilizers. However, officials did not know what to make of his ideas and were suspicious: Why had he returned to Laos when so many others wanted to leave? Abandoned to his own devices, Somphone used his family's farm to implement his ideas. He experimented with azolla, a water fern that can be used as an organic fertilizer. He also encouraged the use of rice-based farming systems, in which rice is the major but not sole crop. Farmers diversified by planting vegetables, beans and fruits. They also began raising fish and fowl rather than catching them in the wild. In addition, Somphone introduced the use of fuel-saving stoves and rice mills, and large clay pots to collect rainwater for the dry seasons. He developed a recycling center in Vientiane.

In 1996, with the permission of the Lao Ministry of Education, Somphone founded the Participatory Development Training Center, better known as PADETC, to promote education, leadership skills and sustainable development buttressed by Buddhist principles. He trained young volunteers and local officials in community-based development, including sanitation, recycling and agricultural production. PADETC became perhaps the best-known civil society organization in Laos.

A woman who worked with Somphone at the center in the early 2000s, and who spoke to me on condition of anonymity, remembered him as zen-like. He was always smiling. The co-worker enjoyed watching Somphone and Shui Meng together. They teased each other. Shui Meng would tell funny stories about the two of them. They just looked happy together. She was the one who was more outgoing. He was calm, composed, thoughtful, and reflective, but he didn't drone on. He could make people laugh when he wanted.

Much of Somphone's work, the co-worker said, had to do with changing school curricula to better represent Lao culture. He was very focused on getting children involved with local customs. True happiness, he told them, was founded on one's culture and the environment in which they lived. Cooperation with the government and the education of young people, he believed, would bring progressive change to Laos.

Somphone retired from the center in June 2012 to spend more time with his family, meditating and writing. Six months later, he disappeared.

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Before I departed for Laos and between calls to Shui Meng, I spoke with a number of Somphone's associates. Like his PADETC colleague, most refused to let me use their names. No, don't print that, they would tell me. Even without my name, the Lao authorities will know you're quoting me. As one man told me, the mystery of a disappearance is what makes it so effective. "It's a strategy of repression through fear," he said. "As long as there is no information about Sombath it will have this chilling effect. No one will talk to you because no one wants to be next. If they can take him, they can take me."

Everyone I interviewed remembered how Somphone loved driving around in an old army jeep and how he enjoyed relaxing on a log, drinking beer and eating sticky rice and grilled fish. He cooked little pizzas in a toaster oven and told stories. He was very centered except when he played ping-pong. He was mad about ping-pong and would play for an hour or longer. He insisted it was good exercise.

His friends told me that Somphone often spoke about the use of communication technologies to empower communities. He believed in developing people and then letting them create their own organizations. He could be quite forthright about his opinions but he wasn't an alpha male, as one friend put it. He didn't

raise his voice to be heard. He spoke softly when he offered a different point of view yet he didn't mince his words. The considerate way he made his point impressed his colleagues. He was unassuming—his presence felt through his humility.

In the years before his disappearance, Somphone had been concerned about families losing their farms to government land seizures for industrial projects. After years of political and economic isolation, the Lao government began soliciting international investment in the 1990s. It agreed to hydropower dams along the Mekong River financed by the Thai government and to a high-speed railway connecting Vientiane and Kunming, the capital and transportation hub of China's southern Yunnan province. Somphone talked often about these developments to friends but he didn't make public statements. He never slammed the government. He wouldn't do that, was always careful, but he knew he was walking a fine line. But the line always shifted. Who knew where the line was? Who knew when it was crossed?

There was one friend of Somphone's whose recollections may offer a window into his disappearance. The friend had been involved with a weekly talk radio program. Listeners called and raised concerns about government corruption and other issues affecting their lives. In 2011, farmers spoke on the program. They opposed government confiscation of their land for commercial development. The show's producer opened the lines and callers made strong statements in support of the farmers. After the show aired, the deputy director of the state-run Lao National Radio called the producer and told him his show had been canceled effective immediately. Somphone unsuccessfully appealed to the government to restore the program.

Around this time, a sympathetic, low-level official warned Somphone's friend that he and Somphone, among others, were on a government blacklist. None of them thought they would be disappeared. Perhaps imprisoned for a short time but nothing

more. And given the official's minor status, the blacklist might be nothing more than a rumor. But the official insisted. Somphone, he said, was the first one on the list, but no one believed him.

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I flew to Vientiane in February 2020 expecting to enter the grim urban decay of a totalitarian state, something out of a dystopian movie. Instead, I found a city that despite its population of 683,000 people felt very much like a small town. Men and women paused at vendor stalls picking through fruit and the aroma of bread rose from French bakeries and Buddhist monks in orange robes strolled past parked tap-taps whose drivers slept sprawled across the front seat. Barefoot farmers watered crops near roads that meandered through parks where women sold flowers. Travel bureaus promoted tours to other cities.

"There are a lot of tourists," Somphone's PADETC colleague told me, "and you kind of forget the regime. The totalitarian aspect is not overt. It's smartly managed. You don't feel the regime."

The day after my arrival, I met with Shui Meng at Common Grounds, a coffee shop on a posh narrow street that included restaurants and stores filled with overpriced wood carvings and supposed antiques. After spending months talking to people who had asked me not to name them, I felt nervous, their paranoia becoming mine.

"Don't keep looking over your shoulder, otherwise you'll be more suspicious," Shui Meng scolded. "Nobody is listening to you. If they want to target you they can and you wouldn't know you are a target. Nobody tells you anything."

That did not make me feel better, but the stern look she gave me through her wide glasses kept me focused. Her dark hair, streaked with gray, came down almost to her shoulders and she



leaned back in her chair, legs crossed, as if nothing was amiss. She pointed across the street to TaiBaan, a shop she and Sombath founded a year before he disappeared. It sells handcrafts made by hundreds of Lao women across the country. The women receive all the profits from their work.

Shui Meng described Laos as living in a fishbowl. Everybody knows everybody and everybody sees everybody. It is not necessary to use the power of the state. It's just knowing you're being observed. Maybe you're not, but you think you might be.

"I really do believe that 95 percent of the time and 95 percent of the people are not being watched because the state does not have the resources," Shui Meng said. "It's that five percent chance that keeps everyone guessing."

We left Common Grounds and drove to the police checkpoint where Somphone was last seen. The crowded roads teemed with cars and tap-taps and a few wagons loaded with vegetables. Storefronts on both sides of the two-lane highway appeared to be doing a brisk business and I saw half a dozen signs offering dental services. Nothing remotely suggested a police state. In fact, I did not see any police officers.

"Because it can be so easily controlled, the oppression does not need to be very overt," Shui Meng explained. "You don't see police because you don't need to. Everyone monitors himself."

After about 15 minutes we reached the police station on Thadeua Road, in Vientiane's Sisattanak district not far from downtown. We stopped at the intersection and I snapped a photo. There was not much to shoot. The sidewalk had crumbled into a dirt path and ran past the station, which was little more than a hut. When the light changed, Shui Meng told me to put down my camera and we passed the station immersed in the flow of traffic. Shui Meng continued for about five minutes so

as not to draw attention before she turned around. We drove back the way we had come and again passed the station, which appeared vacant.

“Sombath’s disappearance is an invisible wound,” Shui Meng said as she took me to my hotel. “It’s not like a cut where I can stop the bleeding. There’s no recourse for justice. The police say they don’t know. The government says it doesn’t know. How do you make a case against a state system that has all the power to lie and there’s no independent press or judicial system? Where do you go? Nowhere.”

In 2012 Laos was chosen to host the Asia-Europe Meeting, an annual gathering of leaders to discuss the relationship between Asia and Europe. From October 16 to October 19, the ministry of foreign affairs asked Somphone to co-chair the ninth Asia-Europe People’s Forum, a parallel three-day convention of grassroots activists and nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, to discuss matters affecting their communities such as land and water rights, religious freedom and other issues. About 1,000 participants attended, the biggest civil society event ever held in Laos.



The cultural hall where the forum took place. Photo: J. Malcolm Garcia.

The popularity of the event scared more conservative elements of the government. Plainclothes security police took notes and photographs, intimidating many of the participants. A statement by Somphone, about promoting understanding, was translated into Lao and English, but not released. Somphone would never be critical. He was encouraging and inclusive but never confrontational. However, the Lao authorities thought differently. Despite his good relationships with various ministers, there were others within the government who always viewed him with suspicion because of his U.S. education and his close working relationships with international NGOs.

Tensions between the authorities and the forum's organizers soon emerged. The government had no experience dealing with such a sizable number of people descending on Laos from Europe and Asia, some of whom were activists within social movements. People were speaking openly about life in Laos. The ministry

of interior and the public security forces had planted minders everywhere. Anger over little things spilled over. The security people might say, You can't sit here. Why not? an organizer would demand. We can sit wherever we want. These small clashes became problematic because the authorities were not used to people arguing with them. As co-chair, Somphone had to sooth irate officials. What he may not have understood was what a facade the government had put up pretending the forum would be a safe place to speak freely.

Security people confronted one woman for raising concerns about land and housing rights in her village in southern Laos. The police intimidated her family. According to one source, the woman complained to Somphone, who became upset. He had given participants his word that they could say what they thought, based on the government's assurances to him if he agreed to be help chair the forum. He felt responsible, this source said. Somphone asked participants to compile a list of those who were being harassed. No one knows if the list was made. If it had been, knowing Somphone, the source said, he would have spoken to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Not in an in-your-face manner, but in his quiet way.

"Maybe this made him seem like a threat to the government," the source told me.

Another friend of Somphone's recalled that he was not looking forward to the forum. I'm ready to tend my garden and not deal with this, he said. He complained it was going to be a big headache. Somphone didn't anticipate how big a headache it could be until an NGO administrator, Anne-Sophie Gindroz, was thrown out of the country.

Gindroz had been the country director of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation in Laos, an international NGO that works on agricultural development and land issues, from 2009 until her expulsion. She and Somphone worked together to organize the forum. They were in constant negotiation with the government

about what they could and could not do. Still, she believed they had made progress. But she now believes the government took advantage of their trust and used the forum to observe the most outspoken participants, something neither she nor Somphone had expected.

In preparation for the forum, Somphone led a survey to measure happiness throughout Laos with the cooperation of local authorities. The findings of this consultation were incorporated into a video, "The Lao People's Vision," promoting an alternative development model based on consultation with rural communities. It was not a critical discussion about policy, but many issues came up, including the use of land and how development was conducted, as well as government corruption. People were very vocal. In a country where denunciation of the government is not tolerated, such an exchange of ideas would have been perceived as dangerous.

During the forum, the authorities would not allow "The Lao People's Vision" to be distributed. Some officials realized the potential consequences of people openly discussing their concerns. It was as if an alarm had gone off, Gindroz said, a wake-up for conservative elements of the government. They didn't want this in their country.

Gindroz described herself as very outspoken and along with Somphone had expressed concern for the harassment of forum participants with the Lao government even after the forum had concluded. On November 21, 2012, she submitted a letter to international NGOs and donors critical of the government's interference with the forum and the repercussions people had suffered. About two weeks later, on December 7, she was called into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a meeting she thought was about partnering her agency with local aid organizations. The meeting, she recalled, actually began with a discussion about her work, and at times she thought she had a good relationship with the ministry. But then an official said, You know, I've had a very bad night. I couldn't sleep. What

happened? Gindroz asked, and then the official handed her a letter notifying her that she had to leave Laos within 24 hours. Her husband and children, the woman said, could stay if they chose.

"Of course, I will go," Gindroz said, adding, "I think it's a pity. What you are doing now is proving what I was saying was right. You are putting restrictions on freedom of speech."

The official gave her a pained look.

"That was it," Gindroz told me. "I left. I was thrown out."

This was eight days before Somphone disappeared.

On Saturday, December 15, 2012, Somphone and Shui Meng left his office at 5:30 p.m. He got in his jeep and drove behind her. She last saw him as she passed the police station about a half hour later. When he did not come home for dinner, Shui Meng became concerned and called his phone but received no answer. Then she contacted friends to ask if they had seen him, but no one had. She drove on the road leading to their house to see if his jeep had broken down. She went to hospitals. Nothing. The local police said it was late and no one worked on Sundays. Come by on Monday.

Friends of Somphone called everyone they knew to ask if he had been seen. People were worried because he had worked closely with Gindroz and she had just been banished. Paranoia set in. Sombath, they took Sombath! Be careful, save yourself, his friends told one another. Many of them hunkered down in their homes. One man told me that he would tell his family and friends where he was going and when he would be back. He advised his wife: If I do not return, go to the nearest embassy and ask for asylum. Or cross the Mekong River and flee to Thailand.

Friends had to decide: Would they be afraid and not help Shui Meng or would they stand with her? For Lao people it was very

hard, and in the following days Shui Meng lost many friends who did not want to be seen with her.

On Monday, December 17, Shui Meng reported Somphone missing to the police. She had noticed security cameras around the police station where Somphone was last seen and put in a request to view the footage. To her surprise, the police agreed without hesitation and allowed her to copy it to her phone. The footage showed a jeep slowing to a stop at the police station shortly after six p.m. Somphone stepped out and appeared to speak with an officer. No other vehicles were stopped, and traffic on the road continued unhindered. A few minutes later, an unknown motorcyclist stopped, got in Somphone's jeep and drove away, leaving his motorcycle behind. A short time later, Somphone and at least two other men, in the presence of police officers, got in a truck and drove away.

Shui Meng was stunned. Surely, she thought, it had to be a mistake. Why would the police stop Sombath? She asked various government administrators but no one admitted knowledge of the event. Then she showed the security camera footage at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and officials there appeared shocked but claimed ignorance. Still, Shui Meng remained hopeful Somphone's detention was a mistake. They'll ask Sombath a few questions and then he'll be home with his quiet smile. I was held up, he'll tell her. They let me out. Don't worry.

On December 19, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced it had begun an investigation but about a week or two after Somphone's disappearance, Shui Meng noticed that government officials avoided her and replied with hostility to her questions. She soon became convinced that Somphone's arrest was more serious than she had realized.

About two weeks after Somphone disappeared, three members of the Asian Parliamentarians for Human Rights met with Lao officials about Somphone. Walden Bello, one of the

parliamentarians, told me the officials denied knowing what had happened and refused to even confirm he was missing. They insisted their investigation had revealed nothing.

Bello told me that he believes the Lao government made a cost-benefit analysis: Shall we silence this guy and risk reactions from the world or let him go and allow his voice to get louder and louder? In Bello's opinion they chose to silence him and take the heat. Bello feels sure the decision was made by senior government officials. He doubts too many people outside the ruling party knew about it.

Almost a month after he disappeared, Lao police issued a statement that the activity at the police station the night of his disappearance had been routine without any reported disturbances or detentions. Police insisted Somphone had not been taken. They suggested, without evidence, that he may have been involved in a personal dispute. No information, the police concluded, had been discovered to suggest what happened to him. The government-backed Vientiane Times English language newspaper published the police findings on February 4, 2013.

There is a risk of mythologizing Somphone given the circumstances of his disappearance, Somphone's PADETC colleague told me. He lived by principles we can all aspire to. She continues to work with farmers and thinks he would be happy about that. She feels confident that people involved in development work still remember him. When she is alone with a colleague she'll talk about him—his work and philosophy. Sometimes she meets with adults who had been involved with him as children, pleased they mention him. She has no doubt she is watched and trusts only a small group of people. Every time she attends church she prays for Somphone and for the truth to be told. She once thought he'd be found; he was just so kind, a gentle soul. Surely, he'd talk his way out. His decency would prevail. Despite everything in some ways she believes it has.



These days, Shui Meng sees herself as the voice of remembrance for Sombath. His memory persists, partially because the government's own security cameras filmed his abduction. The new technology can be a double-edged sword. The state surveils people, but people can also surveil it. The government certainly didn't expect that. The audacity of taking him without turning off the cameras angers her almost as much as his abduction. The arrogance.

She knows people believe Sombath is dead, but she has stopped being disturbed by what others think, their pity. She can't control the feelings of other people and won't lose energy over it. Sombath remains very present for her. Friends say, What a shame, a man like that who had so much to offer to have been disappeared. How can Shui Meng respond? She can't, other than to agree. Every minute of every day she worries about him.

"I miss Sombath," she told me on the last day of my trip. We were sitting in a back room at TaiBaan surrounded by colorful tapestries. Her voice quivered for the first time in our many conversations. Shui Meng still hopes Sombath will return to her but uncertainty has become her shadow, an unwanted escort. Sometimes she sees him in a dream. Come back, she tells him. I can't, he says. I'm leaving now. And she wakes up. Come back, she says again in the emptiness of their bedroom.

But by then he's gone.