

**Esau McCaulley**

Bestselling author of *Reading While Black*

**HOW FAR**



**TO THE**

**PROMISED**

**LAND**

**One Black Family's Story of Hope and  
Survival in the American South**





# HOW FAR TO THE PROMISED LAND



HOW FAR  
— TO THE —  
PROMISED LAND

*One Black Family's Story of Hope  
and Survival in the American South*

ESAU MCCAULLEY



CONVERGENT  
NEW YORK

Copyright © 2023 by Esau McCaulley

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Convergent Books,  
an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random  
House LLC, New York.

CONVERGENT BOOKS is a registered trademark and the Convergent  
colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McCaulley, Esau, author.

Title: How far to the promised land / by Esau McCaulley.

Description: First edition. | New York: Convergent Books, [2023]

Identifiers: LCCN 2023011990 (print) | LCCN 2023011991 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780593241080 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593241097 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: McCaulley, Esau—Childhood and youth. |

McCaulley, Esau, Sr., 1960–2017—Family. | McCaulley family. |

African American families—Alabama—Social conditions. |

African Americans—Alabama—Huntsville—Social conditions. |

Poor Black people—Alabama—Biography. |

Huntsville (Ala.)—Biography.

Classification: LCC E185.93.A3 M33 2023 (print) |

LCC E185.93.A3 (ebook) |

DDC 305.5/6908996073092 [B]—dc23/eng/20230512

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023011990>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023011991>

PRINTED IN CANADA ON ACID-FREE PAPER

[convergentbooks.com](http://convergentbooks.com)

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

*This book is dedicated to my mother, Laurie McCaulley.  
Whatever else I am, I will always remain your son.*



He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”

—LUKE 18:9–13



---

---

## *Contents*

INTRODUCTION: **Black Narratives and  
American Dreams** XIII

PART I: *Absence and Presence*

CHAPTER 1: **The Making of a Villain** 5  
CHAPTER 2: **Single Moms Aren't Allowed to Die** 20  
CHAPTER 3: **Three Inches to the Right** 36  
CHAPTER 4: **The Game Is Undeclared** 52  
CHAPTER 5: **Survival Is Complicated** 71

PART II: *The Vine and Fig Tree*

CHAPTER 6: **Sophia's Gift** 85  
CHAPTER 7: **Running from the South** 98  
CHAPTER 8: **There Is Power in the Blood** 115

PART III: *Ordinary Glory*

CHAPTER 9: **If You Scared Go to Church** 127  
CHAPTER 10: **Fools Fall in Love** 151  
CHAPTER 11: **Black Holidays** 174  
CHAPTER 12: **Fathers and Sons Revisited** 188  
CONCLUSION: **A Funeral** 201

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 209



---

---

INTRODUCTION

*Black Narratives and American Dreams*

In March 2019, I agreed, after much hesitation, to join a panel at the University of North Carolina. Having committed to a speaking engagement in Tennessee the following evening, I'd initially demurred. But in a last-ditch effort to convince me to come, the organizer informed me that the Grammy Award-winning recording artist Lecrae would be the other speaker and panelist. Providence was with him, because the date coincided with the birthday of my oldest son, Luke, and Lecrae happened to be one of Luke's favorite hip-hop artists. How could I resist?

Luke beamed when I told him the plan. He picked out his favorite New England Patriots hoodie for the journey and told all his friends at school, treating two days of one-on-one time with his father as the rarity that it was. Seeing him prepare brought to mind an ill-fated road trip with my father

that happened when I was around the same age. But I forced that memory to the back of my mind and focused on the present, allowing my son's excitement to overcome the beginnings of melancholy. I noted that he'd remembered to pack his asthma medicine, changes of clothing, and even a pack of gum, to keep his ears from popping on the flight.

The next day, a friendly volunteer met us at the airport and drove us to campus for a tour. Having left behind the forty-degree chill typical of early spring in Rochester, we enjoyed a warm and breezy walk among the sights and sounds of Chapel Hill. Our student host chatted with Luke, seeming more interested in this youth with a mini Afro and articulately stated preadolescent opinions than the scholar come to town.

Still, despite the pleasant welcome, a campus visit to discuss anti-Black racism carries the tension inherent in any discussion of race. I'd been invited to show that Christianity can be a friend, rather than a foe, of social justice by addressing how faith helps us resolve what W.E.B. Du Bois famously called "the problem of the color line"—this to a college still reeling from a series of protests in 2018 that climaxed with the tearing down of a Confederate statue on university grounds. Speaking at these events, I sometimes feel like a doctor telling a patient that their illness is more serious than first thought. Recovery will not simply involve taking medication; it must include surgery and a change in lifestyle. The truth stings, making hostility toward the bearer of such bad news inevitable.

As I took to the stage alongside our host and Lecrae, I looked out at the audience—a gathering of earnest-looking

white students with a sprinkling of chocolate bodies. I saw in their posture and stares a familiar mixture of skepticism and hope. I knew what the Black students were thinking: *What will he say? Is he here to speak about Black people or to us? Will he tell the truth or curry favor to keep his role as appointed representative of the race?* I sat in similar auditoriums as an undergrad, my head stuffed with the writings of James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Martin Luther King, Jr., and a multitude of Bible verses. Part of me longed for those days, when it was easy to imagine that my words and writings would one day prove the truth of anti-Black racism and move people to resist its effects on society. But I was no longer in the audience, nor had I been for quite some time. I felt less sure of myself. Racism persists for a reason, and experience had taught me that change is not the work of one speech or book.

Nonetheless, I did what was asked of me. I tried to bring the teachings of Christianity and my knowledge of Black history, literature, and the African American church to bear on the evening's topic. As the night wore on, my words seemed to have some effect. Audience members who'd started the evening pinned to the backs of their seats now leaned forward. The crowd began to respond with applause. My energy was good, no doubt spurred on by the opportunity to make Luke proud. I could see him sitting with a group of college students in the front row, the youngest face among a sea of emerging adults.

The Q&As that follow such talks are always tricky. You never know what questions or paradoxes audience members might have for you. To keep the conversation on track, the

questions had been screened beforehand. I knew the drill, but toward the end of our time together, it was the host who asked something that stumped me: “To help our audience, please tell us about one of the most racist things you have experienced.”

The request was framed as a way of drawing the audience in. Maybe the questioner thought a dose of pathos was needed to drive home the point that racism is wicked. Still, as a Black man speaking to a mostly white audience, I winced. I answered before my fellow panelist had a chance to respond: “Can we pass on that one? We’ll pass.”

Until recently, I would have dutifully complied. On stages and in print, I would cut myself open and bleed in hopes that my pain and suffering would help bring justice to my people. It was how I’d been taught to speak. I recall meeting with my guidance counselor near the end of high school and asking, “How do I fill out these college applications? What should I put in my scholarship essay?” What I meant was *How do I please these white people who have my future in their hands when they’ve never been in my neighborhood, never stepped into my school, never traveled the streets of Huntsville, Alabama, in this dark flesh that is often viewed with suspicion?* My counselor, long experienced in such matters, told me to write about all the obstacles I’d faced. “Tell them your story and the things you overcame. Make them feel the difference that letting you into the school will make in your life.” Colleges, she explained, wanted to know they had the opportunity to pluck a branch from the burning fires of poverty before it was consumed.

So I learned to tell the story America requires from its

Black survivors. I wrote about overcoming an absent, drug-addicted father, anti-Black racism, and childhood poverty to earn a high school diploma and a shot at higher education. In that version of events, my father and the people I encountered along the way became cautionary tales, the tragic backdrop to my feats of grit and determination. It worked. Despite having adequate but not exceptional grades, I was accepted at a nationally ranked college with generous financial aid; from there I went on to seminary, graduate school, and a career as a university professor and columnist.

The moderator's request carried a predetermined plot. By revealing a horrific experience I had survived, by relating how I had become a more determined person for it, I would be rewarded with the audience's sympathy, just as I had won over the sympathy of the college admissions committees decades earlier.

But that night, onstage, I realized that something had shifted. I did not want to speak about overcoming racism and poverty as a hero. Nobody escapes poverty; we are marked by it. The friends, relationships, and traumas we experienced linger. We carry them wherever we go.

And the spotlight in these narratives is too narrow. A good narrative—a Black one, at least—is not owned by any individual; it is, instead, the story of a people. The focus on a singular person obscures the truth that the gifted are not the only ones who succeed, the weak are not the only ones who perish, and the America we laud for producing victors still creates too many victims to be at ease with the way things are. Instead of hearing about the worst hardship I had experienced, what the audience needed was for me to talk

about the community and the family that shaped me—the people normally written out of such stories—and how the struggle in each life to find meaning and purpose, regardless of its outcome, has a chance to teach us what it means to be human.

In the end, my declining to answer is what this book is about. What I owed the audience, yes, but my people first and foremost. A story not about *me* but about *us*.

My desire to tell my story in a different and truer way had begun two years earlier. On the night of August 26, 2017, my father, Esau McCaulley, Sr., died unexpectedly. I was thirty-seven years old and married to a woman I had met in college. Mandy and I had four kids—two boys and two girls—ranging in age from nine to one. We lived in a four-bedroom house in Rochester, New York, that could fit the four houses of my childhood inside it.

In our Rochester neighborhood, there were no sirens or shouts from feuding couples next door. There was no momentary pause while the neighbors held their breath, deciding whether the loud noise they'd just heard came from a gunshot or a car backfiring. It seemed fitting that the neighborhood was known as Park Ave, bringing to mind one of the highest-valued properties on the Monopoly board. Its tree-lined blocks were filled with old Victorians, Craftsman homes, and colonials of every color, many with sweeping porches that made it easy to greet neighbors as they walked their dogs on the well-manicured sidewalks. Our house was precious to me, a red-and-green Victorian built in 1888. Mov-

ing into that home felt like an arrival of sorts, the last step on my journey to the promised land.

That night, the phone woke me from a deep sleep, its ring reminding me of the ten years I had worked as a pastor. Almost every evening back then, my phone would buzz with news of an illness or a family turmoil, and I would rush out to visit the hospital or counsel a married couple in crisis. As a clergyperson, my goal was to be available to my parishioners, never to let down someone in need. But since I'd slipped into my new role as a professor, my phone no longer rang past midnight. I knew the news was bad even before I answered.

It was my older sister, Latasha. I could tell from the sound of her voice that she'd been weeping, but as a pediatrician who oversaw an intensive care unit, she was used to delivering difficult news to grieving family members. She cleared her throat. "Dad died in California. His truck veered off an overpass and fell onto the highway below. No other cars were involved. We do not know what caused him to do that yet."

With the news now delivered, Latasha became my sister again, and she wept. But the truth of her words had not yet reached me. I did not cry. I felt empty, like when you finish a meal still hungry.

A decade prior, I might have said something callous or trite. The man who had caused us so much pain was dead. Now I did not know what to say. "Thank you for telling me," I said, withdrawing into formality.

Mandy had woken up and sat beside me, her concern showing in the delicate set of wrinkles that framed her eyes.

I thought about how much I loved those little lines, earned from a lifetime of fretting over the coughs and sniffles of young patients and the bumps and bruises our children managed to collect. “Are you okay?” she asked once I’d hung up.

I told her I didn’t know, and I dialed my mother. She was crying, too. Next came my younger sister, Marketha, and my brother, Brandon. Eventually all five of us found ourselves on a group call, sharing light stories about my father and avoiding the heavy ones as best we could.

Once that call had ended, I lay back down in bed, but sleep eluded me. I was anticipating the conversation that would come the next day. My family would need to plan a funeral, and a funeral required a eulogy. I ran through two options: The Reverend Theodore Bone was my mother’s father. He was the natural choice, as the family patriarch and a respected clergyperson in the part of Alabama where I’d grown up. But after opposing my parents’ relationship from the beginning, he’d never gotten to know my father very well—and what little he knew, he didn’t like. There was also the pastor of my childhood church, the Reverend Oscar Montgomery, but my father had not attended church with us.

That night, lying in the dark, I understood as certainly as I knew that the sun would rise that my father’s eulogy would need to be delivered by me. Like the Reverends Bone and Montgomery, I was a clergyperson, but unlike them, I shared a name with my father and, at times, had shared a home—although much of that period had been fraught and worrisome. Still, I did not know the details of his life well. Our in-depth conversations had been few and far between, cur-

tailed by what little a young child and a father on drugs have to say to each other.

The next afternoon, I called my mother again. Southern standards of decorum required us to pretend that something other than death was on our minds. “How are the kids?” she asked. “Are you enjoying life as a professor?” When I got around to asking about the funeral, she told me it might need to be delayed by a few weeks because a spate of murders in Bakersfield over the weekend left ten bodies to be autopsied ahead of my father’s.

Steeling myself, I told my mother what I’d been thinking: “I believe that I should do the eulogy.”

“We agree,” she said, not hesitating for a second. “Your sister Marketha called me earlier and said, ‘I don’t want nobody speaking about our daddy except my big brother. He is the only one that will tell the truth.’”

Then my mother paused, thinking it over one last time. “Are you sure you can do it?”

I replied, “I’m not sure I have a choice.”

I knew this work. As a clergyperson, I had delivered eulogies before. I understood that the pastor’s job is to find meaning in unfinished lives. Because few people have the opportunity to set their affairs in order and make amends for all the things gone wrong, it becomes the job of the clergy to provide closure for grieving friends and relatives. Anyone close to the deceased can tell a fond story about them, but clergy are tasked with something deeper: connecting the life of the deceased to the wider purposes of God.

Even before I began, part of me understood that asking

the question of who my father was would involve coming to accept the role he'd played—good and bad—in making me who I am. His story and mine are not so easily separated. It had taken me most of my life to begin the process of forgiving him. I had set off down that path, but I had not yet learned to regard him with much tenderness. To eulogize him, I would need to see him clearly, as someone whose story deserved to be treated with care.

My father's death ushered in a season of truth telling. I would begin to let my children in on the story of their grandfather and their ancestors before him—stories I have collected here. I would tell them about my own childhood, about growing up poor, about meeting their mother, and the struggles we had in making a life together. In telling those family stories, I would begin to teach them about America, its past misdeeds and triumphs. I would make more of myself known to them.

In the end, I would tell my kids that we, the McCaulleys, are a people born of trauma and miracle. By that, I mean we have experienced the traumas American society has inflicted upon Black people for centuries *and* the harm we've done to ourselves. We come from a long line of wanderers, looking this way and that, trying to find the promised land in a country that has never loved Black people well. Nonetheless, when tragedy—fire, disease, sickness, and physical violence—has threatened to undo us entirely, God has intervened and performed miracles. By miracle, I do not mean a simple rescue, an escape from danger. Instead, like the ancient Israelites finding their way in the desert, we have received just enough manna in the wilderness to make it to another day.

# HOW FAR TO THE PROMISED LAND



*Part I*

---

---

ABSENCE AND PRESENCE



## *The Making of a Villain*

My father and mother met in the winter of 1976. I've seen photos, stored in a box in the utility closet next to the washing machine and a mop better suited for spreading water around than clearing grime off floors. In these photos, my parents' clothes are more a battle for supremacy between pastels than anything resembling coherent outfits. There they are, looking as young and untroubled as any two high school students on a Friday night date. Not yet parents, not weighed down with the responsibility of caring for four children, both are smiling, my father standing behind my mother, who sits on a stool with her head nestled into his chest.

They met not long after the Jim Crow laws were replaced by practices more subtle and harder to combat. Segregation was technically outlawed, but custom divided my mother's hometown of Huntsville into sections. "Things were pretty

separated in Huntsville,” my mom recalls. “I cannot remember one time when we partied together. We had Black house parties and white ones, even among students in integrated schools.”

The Parkway Place mall demarcated the white part of town. Located at the intersection of Drake Avenue and Memorial Parkway, it was close enough to the Black section of Huntsville for my mom to feel comfortable visiting. Another mall, called Heart of Huntsville, located deeper into the white area, seemed off-limits. My mother remembers security following her from the time she walked in until she exited: “One security guard for every Black person they saw.”

My parents were introduced by my father’s cousin Larry, whose easy smile and welcoming personality marked him as a charmer. Larry and my mom attended school at J. O. Johnson High, where he was two years ahead of her. Intrigued by the sly older boy, my mother dated him, but after the second outing, she opted to let him down easy by introducing him to her friend Wanda. Larry, in turn, suggested that my mother meet his cousin Esau, who went to school out in the country, at Gurley High.

On that first date, my mother is instantly drawn to my father’s tenderness. She will come to know him as outgoing and funny, but tonight he acts shy and polite. It’s the 1970s, and, playing to the stereotype of the decade as I imagine it, they spend the evening parked at a drive-in movie. In the front seat, Larry and Wanda are hitting it off. Encouraged by his prospects, Larry turns to Esau and says, “Go ahead, cousin, lean in and give her a kiss.”

My dad will have none of it. “I just met the girl,” he says. “I ain’t kissing nothing.”

After the date, my mom boasts that my dad was “the perfect gentleman.” She does not yet know that his tenderness comes from grief, which lingers at the edge of his attempts at humor and charm. After a few dates, in a real show of vulnerability, he tells her, “My father died a few months back. Right before he died, he told my mother that my brother Barney and I weren’t no good. I just thought that I would give you fair warning.”

Believing she can fix what is broken, my mother is hooked. When I prodded her for information years later, she told me, “I think that his whole life he was trying to prove a dead man wrong.”

My dad was six feet tall, with an athletic build from his time as a basketball player, his brown skin a shade lighter than the ebony complexion I inherited from farther up the family tree. His Afro was medium-sized and tasteful, such that it both fit with the natural style of the time and could be maintained at the same length without drawing much attention in the 1980s and 1990s. He didn’t have the most expensive clothes, but they were always clean and well ironed. That tendency for cleanliness would remain his whole life. According to my mom, he was “fine as the day is long, and all the girls wanted him.”

After they had dated for a short time, my father, Esau Sr., brought his new girl home to meet his mother, Wavon, and his grandmother Sophia. According to my mother, Sophia took one look at her and opined, “That is a very good woman

right there. You don't deserve her, Esau." Turning to my mother, she said, "Laurie Ann, you seem like a nice girl. I would run. This boy will be the source of unending trials for you." Used to barbs like this, my father didn't defend himself. His normally wide smile tightened, and he lowered his gaze.

My mother did not know how to process Sophia's warning. Even now, she is not clear on whether she should have heeded it. When pressed, she returns to the fact that the relationship that gave her so much pain also produced four cherished children.

She made her decision about the man who would shape the rest of her life at Johnson High School, between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. They were just kids, and their courtship was brief. By the spring of 1977, my mother's junior year, she was pregnant with my sister Latasha. They married in the summer of 1979, six months before my birth. My mother is not yet showing in the wedding pictures, but I am there, forming in her belly, when they exchange their vows and first kiss as a married couple.

Once they married, my parents moved into a trailer on the land where my father grew up. My great-grandmother Sophia and grandmother Wavon still lived together in the larger house to the right of the gravel road that divided the plot in two. After a few years, when my folks had saved enough money to afford a place of their own, they rented a tiny three-bedroom house in a lower-class neighborhood near Alabama A&M University, the historically Black college in our city, a neighborhood for people who were broke but not yet on government assistance.

I was excited to get out of the trailer and move into the city. The well water on Grandma's property always tasted funny. With few kids my age to play with, I spent much of my time watching TV, learning about what happens to people who live in a single-wide from news reports about trailers being swept up by tornadoes every spring. Our new home would be built into the ground, not balanced uneasily on top of cinder blocks.

The new house doesn't have much furniture when we move in. That first night, my father brings home McDonald's, which we eat sitting on the kitchen floor under light cast from our only lampstand. Brandon, my little brother, still a toddler, contents himself with Gerber, a family staple. The light is dingy, but we sit together smiling and talking.

That night, I have not experienced enough of life to realize that happiness will not continue indefinitely. Instead, I figure we will gather regularly for family meals. We will become the Huxtables from *The Cosby Show* or the Seavers from *Growing Pains*. We might not have a deluxe apartment in the sky like the Jeffersons, but we no longer live in a home that has wheels. My fond memory of that night may explain why, whenever I'm restless, stressed, or sad, I like to scroll through listings on real estate websites. Houses offer a chance to dream about the lives we might live inside them and the people we might become.

A little while after we move in, I begin to play sports. I am five when my father signs me up to become a member of the Lakewood Rams. Our gold jerseys match the color of the NFL franchise, but the material feels like plastic and scratches like wool. The numbers on the uniforms look like they were

cut from black electrical tape. After a few washes, some jerseys are missing portions of their numbers, so that 88 begins to look more like 44.

We are, all of us, Black boys, ranging in color from high yellow to deep chocolate, and from short and chubby to tall and slender. The coaches are a hodgepodge of former athletes, none of whom made it all the way to the future in the pros that we long to see. But it doesn't matter to us. We follow their every instruction like the words that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai.

At our first practice, I learn how to get into a three-point stance. The coach blows his whistle and shouts, "Spread your legs shoulder width apart. Bend your knees. Get on the balls of your feet. Now lean forward and put one hand on the ground." Half the kids fall over.

"All right, McCaulley, you seem to be able to get into a stance. I want you to try to get past Jackson over there. He is going to try and block you. Run him over and get to the quarterback."

That being the sum total of the instruction I will receive, I look up, unsteady in my newly acquired stance, and wait for the whistle. Then I charge. I quickly learn that the coaches' goal is to figure out which of us has the stomach for the violence necessary to play a sport built on collisions. It turns out that I love the contact and embrace it from the start.

There are other skills beyond the violence. We dash around cones and plunge our feet into and out of a row of tires designed to improve our agility. The most gifted of us get to practice running with the ball, throwing, and catch-

ing. I don't get selected for those drills. The willingness to place my body in harm's way is all I have, and I offer myself up enthusiastically.

My heart is warm because when I look over to the fence that separates the parents from the field of play, I see my father smiling and cheering for me. In this moment, he is no different from the multitude of parents all over the world who show up and yell in support of their children's first halting attempts at athletics. With my dad watching, I feel like Superman. Or, better yet, my favorite X-Men character Wolverine. I can scale any wall, vanquish any foe.

When I get home, he tells my mom how well I did: "That boy's got potential. He might be something."

After dinner, he takes me out to the backyard and reviews the stance:

*Spread your legs this far.*

*Get on the balls of your feet so that you're ready to move left or right.*

No father believes that his son will be a lineman, so we play some catch as well. He warns, "Keep your eye on the ball or it will hit you in the face." I run passing routes and take handoffs from my father. I am happy. Still, life is not like it is on TV. Unlike *Family Matters*, there is no Urkel next door; Bud from *The Cosby Show* does not stop by. The only neighborly visits at our house involve my father's drinking and smoking buddies. They gather in the living room to watch TV. My father is one of the few Black NASCAR fans I will ever meet, but he can never convince the other neighborhood folks to watch it, so the channel inevitably gets switched to football. The beer flows as the games progress, and they

make jokes about Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders that soar over the comprehension of my young mind.

The tentativeness I will learn to recognize in my mother's voice as she welcomes my father's friends into our house, the hesitancy in her movements as she passes around the snacks, are still some ways off. My mother is aware of my father's bad habits, but for now, they don't seem that big a deal to her. He drinks a little and smokes a little, like everyone else.

Clean, my father bursts with life. His smile spreads out from his lips, up through his cheeks, and into his eyes. His whole face radiates joy when he laughs. And he laughs often. Everyone agrees that my dad is hilarious, the kind of man who has a nickname for every family member, friend, or neighbor. When he meets you, he sizes you up and decides whether you are an Onion Head, a Potato Head, or even, occasionally, a Banana Head. Whatever he decides to call you, that's your name. The habit of renaming everyone he meets is the one practice of his that I adopt as an adult.

Shortly after my parents' wedding, my father begins working as a truck driver. It's the one job he will return to whenever the terms of his parole do not prohibit travel out of state. Maybe he is drawn to it because driving carries with it an element of escape. He can be on the road, unconstrained by the demands of family and the limits of being poor, Black, and undereducated. He can be whoever he wants to be to the other truckers he talks to on the CB radio. He can be gone for days at a time and return home a hero with money in his pocket.

When he comes back, he tells his jokes and boasts of his

exploits, and we are all so happy to see him. When it is time to leave again, I beg him to take me with him. I want to be his copilot, to travel with him on the road and have adventures. He promises that one day he will take me.

When I am eight or nine, old enough to insist, he finally relents.

I jump up and down and run over to my mom. “Did you hear? Did you hear? Dad and I are going on a road trip.” My mom smiles, happy to see me happy.

I pack my bag with a few outfits, my Optimus Prime Transformer toy, and my Bible. My mom comes in to make sure that I have all the things I really need, like my asthma inhaler, a toothbrush, and enough socks and underwear. While I prepare everything, my dad chats with Latasha in the living room. She has no interest in going on the road, but she is excited to have a few days without her little brother to get on her nerves.

Rolling my bag from my bedroom to the front room, I am ready for the open road. I have never left my hometown, nor have I ever been alone with my father for longer than it takes for my mom to have a quick nap or go to the store. But I gather my courage, doing everything I can to look like I am mature enough to handle an extended trip.

Just as I’m about to head outside, he stops me. “Son, I need to run to the store and get us snacks for the trip. Then I’ll come back and get you.”

“Sure, Dad,” I say.

While he is at the store, I review the contents of my suitcase to make sure I have everything I need. Then I go outside to wait for him. What should be a fifteen-minute jaunt

starts to seem frighteningly long. Cars, delivery trucks, and the occasional SUV rumble past our home, but no eighteen-wheelers.

After an hour, my mom comes outside. She is gentle, calling me by my middle name in a silent nod to the fact that my given name, Esau, evokes too much pain. “I don’t think he’s coming back, Daniel.”

Fighting back tears, I wipe at my eyes. “I know he’ll come for me. I know it.” I wait until the sun gives way, and then I wheel my bag back inside. We will not see him again for months. He does not call or check in. One day he just returns home as if nothing has happened. I never ask to travel with him again.

There is no subtle shift or slow descent. His addiction springs into my life fully formed, dividing the man in two. One man is the kind and funny person I love, the other much more formidable. My mom tells me that he switched from marijuana to the hard stuff while on the road. “His trucking buddies introduced him to crack,” she remembers, “and he was never the same.” The drugs turn my father into something cold and terrible, a danger to my siblings, my mother, and me.

On days as unpredictable as the lottery balls that dash the hopes of every poor person who’s purchased a ticket at a gas station, he leaves the house and returns home in a rage. The slamming of the door and the barrage of profanities indicate a rough evening ahead. Inevitably, he finds fault with something my mother has done:

*Why is this house so f\*cking dirty all the time? Can you clean?  
Why does this dinner taste like sh\*t?*

*And you, son, I hear you acting up in school. If I hear of that again, I am going to wear your hind out. You hear me?*

*What's a matter? Why are you so quiet? You scared now? Why weren't you scared when you were acting a fool in that school?*

When he is high, he hits us whether we answer or remain silent. There is no clear path out of danger.

Kneeling at my bed at night, I pray that God will help me grow so that I can defend my family. Too small and weak to fight back, I do what my mother has taught me to do: I cry out to God. In the Bible, Esau and Jacob are brothers. Jacob is the chosen one. It is Jacob, not Esau, who wrestles with God during the night, trying to come to grips with his calling and destiny. But within the four walls of our Huntsville home, it is Esau Jr. who tussles with the Almighty.

I know many people who have struggled to believe in a God who allows such suffering, especially of innocent children. To them, my childhood pain is evidence that God either doesn't care or isn't powerful enough to help. Religion, they then conclude, is a false promise that keeps people shackled in fear, waiting for a salvation that never arrives.

Such criticism becomes even more urgent in Black contexts, where the question of why God didn't intervene to end slavery sooner looms large. Where was God on the slave ship, in the cotton fields, in courtrooms where innocent men and women were condemned to death for crimes they did not commit? Where was God when I was a child in need of his protection? There is no Black faith that doesn't wrestle with the problem of evil.

My reply to these questions is: We who have suffered must have some say in how that suffering is interpreted. We

won the right, through our scars, to discern the significance of what we endured. My grasp of that significance begins with my experiences of God as a child, on my knees in front of my twin bed, hands clasped and eyes shut tight in prayer, repeating the simplest of prayers: “Help.”

In those prayers, God came to me not with logical explanations of the problem of evil but with his presence. When I prayed, a sensation of warmth that began in my chest moved throughout my body. The room seemed less empty. The lack of a speedy deliverance frustrated and perplexed me, but I never doubted my experiences of God. It was how I survived. God and I have been through hard times together; we have a relationship born of that intimacy. If there is a testimony that deserves our attention, it is the large number of folks who believe there is no other way to tell the Black story in the United States without affirming that God carried us through.

Prayer did not resolve all my issues. With my father, the difficulty was not just the abuse; I felt ashamed. I didn’t want anyone to know what happened inside our home. I didn’t pour my heart out to friends or teachers. But I knew they sensed that something was wrong, because the police visited my house multiple times a year.

One night—I cannot be more than eight or nine years old, because I am sleeping in the glow-in-the-dark Transformers sleeping bag I got for my birthday—I am awakened by yelling. Usually when I’m scared, I zip it all the way up and slide all the way to the bottom, making sure that no part of my body is visible. But tonight, instead of burrowing

down, I unzip the bag, roused to action by the sound of something crashing in the hallway. With concern for my mother overtaking my fear, I tiptoe to the door. Upon exiting my room, I see, next to the closed door of my parents' bedroom, a hole in the wall—made, I presume, by my father's fist or leg going through it. Then I see my father's back. "Open this g\*ddamned door right now, Laurie Ann. Open it!"

My mother shouts back from inside the room, "You better get outta here, Esau! I have called the police." Frustrated that he can't get in, he makes his way outside, kicking another hole in the wall as he goes and yanking the side door off its hinge. Too wrapped up in his rage to notice my presence, he walks right past me.

I pray the police will arrive soon. And they do. My mother emerges from her room with a bloodied lip and a half-ripped shirt. She adjusts her clothing and speaks in the proper English required when addressing agents of the state.

My father goes off to jail, and I return to my sleeping bag. The next morning, I get up, get dressed, and go to school. What else is there to do but carry on? I, like so many other children, bring my trauma with me to class. I sit in the back and crack jokes, because my adrenaline is still so high that I cannot pay attention to the teacher.

Those nights spent in fear set the trajectory for the rest of my life. They simplify my dreams: All I want is to love and be loved. I want to have children who go to school without shame and secrets weighing them down like book bags much too heavy for them to carry. I never want the woman I love

to have hands reaching for her with affection in one moment and malice the next. My father's failures turn me into a family man at a young age.

Hate is such a simple emotion, and for long stretches of time it is all I feel. It provides me with a sense of clarity and moral superiority. I believe I have unraveled the world's great mysteries by age ten. There are good guys and bad guys. My father is the latter; I will be the former.

One night years later, my father returns home from yet another night of drinking and drugs and starts making threats to my mom and sisters. Older now, in the seventh or eighth grade, I go to the kitchen and pick up a pot and a knife. Holding the knife in one hand and the pot in the other, I tell my father, "You are not hitting anyone else in this house again." My hands tremble. I am not sure what I will do if he decides to test my resolve. Instead, he says, "F\*ck you and this house," and he storms out.

Shortly after this incident, he will be arrested on a theft charge. He will cycle in and out of jail for the next few years. In his absence, my mother, my siblings, and I come into ourselves. We gain confidence. He won't be in a place to harm us again.

But his constant departures and brief returns mean that for most of my childhood, my mother and her four children—Latasha, Marketha, Brandon, and myself—go it alone in a world made to swallow up poor Black families.

You might expect that my father's departure would draw my mother closer to her parents, but it didn't. Surprisingly, she began to spend more time with my father's mother: Grandma Wavon.

Maybe it was the bond built from living on the same property at the beginning of my parents' marriage, or maybe it was because my grandmother knew what it was like to raise children alone. In any case, we returned often to see Grandma Wavon. While my siblings and I would play outside, my mother would sit in the front room, and they would chat the afternoon away.

Whenever Wavon saw me, she would call me over and say, "Old man Daniel prayed three times a day," recounting the story of my namesake from the Bible. She explained that Daniel was taken from his homeland in Israel and carried off into exile in Babylon. Despite all the temptations of life in a foreign land, Daniel remained faithful to God, as evidenced by his habit of praying three times per day. "Have you prayed your three times?" she'd ask.

Back then, I dismissed her reminders as the idle words of an aging loved one. But now I can see that Wavon was sharing wisdom passed to her, the best guidance she had to offer. Our family, like Daniel and his companions, lived in a land surrounded by danger on all sides. Given what was coming, my best chance of survival was prayer to the God who rescued an exile from the mouths of lions.