

GHOST BOYS

Jewell Parker Rhodes

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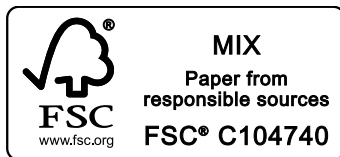
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*Dedicated to the belief that we can
all do better, be better, live better.*

*We owe our best to each
and every child.*



DEAD

How small I look. Laid out flat, my stomach touching ground. My right knee bent and my brand-new Nikes stained with blood.

I stoop and stare at my face, my right cheek flattened on concrete. My eyes are wide open. My mouth, too.

I'm dead.

I thought I was bigger. Tough. But I'm just a bit of nothing.

My arms are outstretched like I was trying to fly like Superman.

I'd barely turned, sprinting. *Pow, pow*. Two bullets. Legs gave way. I fell flat. Hard.

I hit snowy ground.



Ma's running. She's wailing, "My boy. My boy." A policeman holds her back. Another policeman is standing over me, murmuring, "It's a kid. It's a kid."

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Ma's struggling. She gasps like she can't breathe; she falls to her knees and screams.

I can't bear the sound.

Sirens wail. Other cops are coming. Did someone call an ambulance?

I'm still dead. Alone on the field. The policeman closest to me is rubbing his head. In his hand, his gun dangles. The other policeman is watching Ma like she's going to hurt someone. Then, he shouts, "Stay back!"

People are edging closer, snapping pictures, taking video with their phones. "Stay back!" The policeman's hand covers his holster.

More people come. Some shout. I hear my name. "Jerome. It's Jerome." Still, everyone stays back. Some curse; some cry.

Doesn't seem fair. Nobody ever paid me any attention. I skated by. Kept my head low.

Now I'm famous.

Chicago Tribune
OFFICER: "I HAD NO CHOICE!"

Jerome Rogers, 12, shot at abandoned Green Street lot. Officer says, "He had a gun."





ALIVE

December 8
Morning

“Come straight home. You hear me, Jerome? Come straight home.”

“I will.” I always do.

Ma leans down, hugs me. Grandma slides another stack of pancakes on my plate. “Promise?”

“Promise.” Same ritual every day.

I stuff a pancake into my mouth. Kim sticks out her tongue.

I’m the good kid. Wish I wasn’t. I’ve got troubles but I don’t get *in* trouble. Big difference.

I’m pudgy, easily teased. But when I’m a grown-up, everybody’s going to be my friend. I might even be president. Like Obama.

Kim says she believes me. That’s why I put up with her.

She can be annoying. Asking too many questions.

Like: “What makes a cloud?” “Why’re their shapes different?” Telling me: “*Minecraft* is stupid.” Begging me to help pick out a library book.

“Hurry up. Else you’ll be late,” says Grandma. She hands Ma a lunch sack. At school, me and Kim get free lunch.

Everybody works in our house. Ma is a receptionist at Holiday Inn. Her shift starts at eight a.m.

Me and Kim’s job, says Ma, is going to school.

Pop leaves the house at four a.m. He’s a sanitation officer. He drives a truck. In the old days, there was a driver and two men hanging off the truck’s sides, leaping down to lift and dump smelly trash cans. Now steel arms pick up bins. Pop does the whole route by himself. He stays in the air-conditioned cabin, steering, pressing the button for the mechanical arm, and listening to Motown. The Temptations. Smokey Robinson. The Supremes. Sixties pop music. Lame. Hip-hop is better.

Grandma keeps house. She cooks, cleans. Makes it so me and Kim aren’t home alone. Have snacks. Homework help (though I prefer playing video games).

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“After school is troublesome,” says Ma.

Pushing back my chair, I kiss her.

“Come straight home,” Ma repeats, tucking in her white uniform shirt.

Grandma hugs, squeezes me like I’m a balloon. She pecks my cheek. “I’m worried about you. Been having bad dreams.”

“Don’t worry.” That’s my other job – comforting Ma and Grandma. Grandma worries the most. She has dreams. “Premonitions,” she calls them. Worries about bad things happening. But I don’t know what, where, when, or why.

“Sometimes I dream lightning strikes. Or earthquakes. Sometimes it’s dark clouds mushrooming in the sky. I wake troubled.”

Remembering her words, I worry. I know Ma will remind her to take her blood pressure pill.

Pop worries, too, but he usually doesn’t say so. Early morning, before he leaves for work, he always stops by my room. (Kim’s, too.)

He opens the door; there’s a shaft of hallway light. I’ve gotten used to it. Eyes closed, I pretend to

be asleep. Pop looks and looks, then softly closes the door and goes to work.

“Jerome?” Grandma clasps my shoulder. “Tell me three good things.”

I pause. Grandma is truly upset. Half-moon shadows rim her eyes.

“Three, Jerome. Please.”

Three. Grandma’s special number. “Three means ‘All’. Optimism. Joy,” Grandma says every day. “Heaven, Earth, Water. Three means you’re close to the angels.”

I lick my lip. “One, school is fun.” Hold up two fingers. “I like it when it snows.” Then, “Three, when I’m grown, I’m going to have a cat.” (A dog, too. But I don’t say that. A dog would be *four* good things. Can’t ruin the magical three.)

Grandma exhales. I’ve said exactly what she needed to hear. *Fine*, I’ve told her. *I’m fine*.

I stuff my books into my bag. I wink, wave bye to Ma.

“Study hard,” she says, both smiling and frowning.

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She's happy I comforted Grandma, but unhappy with Grandma's Southern ways.

Ma wants me and Kim to be "ED – YOU – CATED." She pokes her finger at us when she says "YOU".

"ED – YOU" – *poke* – "CATED, Jerome." Sometimes the poke hurts a bit. But I get it.

Grandma dropped out of elementary school to care for her younger sisters. Ma and Pop finished high school. Me and Kim are supposed to go to college.

Kim is by the front door, backpack slung over her shoulder. Kim's nice. But I don't tell her that. She's bony, all elbows and knees. When she's a teenager, I'll be grown. Everybody will worry more about her than me.

Ma always says, "In this neighbourhood, getting a child to adulthood is perilous."

I looked up the word. *Perilous*. "Risky, dangerous."

I pull Kim's braid. Frowning, she swats my hand.

Can't be good all the time.

Later, I'll take my allowance and buy Kim a book. Something scary, fun.

We walk to school. Not too fast like we're running; not too slow like we're daring someone to stop us. Our walk has got to be just right.

Green Street isn't peaceful; it isn't green either. Just brick houses, some lived in, some abandoned. Out-of-work men play cards on the street, drinking beer from cans tucked in paper bags.

Eight blocks to travel between home and school.

On the fifth block from our house is Green Acres. A meth lab exploded there and two houses burnt. Neighbours tried to clear the debris, make a basketball court. It's pathetic. A hoop without a net. Spray-painted lines. Planks of wood hammered into sad bleachers. At least somebody tried.

Two blocks from school, drug dealers slip powder or pill packets to customers, stuffing cash into their pockets. Pop says, "Not enough jobs, but still, it's wrong. Drugs kill." Me and Kim cross the street,

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away from the dealers. They're not the worst, though. School bullies are the worst. Bullies never leave you alone. Most days I try to stay near adults. Lunchtime I hide in the locker room, the supply closet, or the bathroom.

Kim slips her hand in mine. She knows.

"I'll meet you after school," I say.

"You always do." She squeezes my palm. "You going to have a good day?"

"Yeah," I say, trying to smile, searching the sidewalks for Eddie, Snap, and Mike. They like to dump my backpack. Push me, pull my pants down. Hit me upside the head.

Kim clenches her hand, purses her lips. She's smart for a third grader. She knows surviving the school day isn't easy for me.

She never tells.

Ma, Pop, and Grandma have enough to worry about. They know Kim's popular and I'm not. But they don't need to know I'm being bullied.

"Kimmeee!" a girl shouts.

Kim flashes me a grin. I nod. Then she skips up

the school steps, her braids bouncing as she and Keisha chatter-giggle, crossing left into the elementary school. Middle school is to the right.

“Yo, Jerome.”

I look over my shoulder, hugging my backpack closer. Mike’s grinning. Eddie and Snap, fists clenched, thug-posing, stand by his side. Damn. Have to be super careful.

During lunch, I’ll hide in the bathroom. Maybe they’ll forget about me? Find another target?

I can hope.

Just like I hope I’ll win the lottery. A million dollars.