

THEY TAUGHT ME TO BE THE MAN I AM

BOOK EXCERPTS

“You tellin’ me you lost your driver’s license, boy?!” the police officer shouted.

“Yessum,” The old Black man said softly, head lowered, his eyes cast down, sweat stained straw hat held chest-high in both hands.

“Well, what am I gon’ do with you, boy? I can’t keep givin’ you another license if you keep losin’ em, can I?”

“No-um,” the sad figure responded, standing in front of an olive-green army desk that separated him from the seated abusive uniformed officer. Fresh sweat steins punctuated his blue coveralls and gray long-sleeve shirt as he stood there dejected waiting his punishment.

“Get on out’re here now. Come back tomorrow, I’ll see what I can do,” the officer ordered finally.

Dipping his head even farther, the old man turned, legs shuffling left the room without lifting his eyes or looking left or right.

Sitting alone in a chair against the room’s back wall, I could not believe what I had just witnessed, an updated scene from a 1930s Stepin Fetchit movie I recall seeing that stereotyped Black Americans as submissive and uncouth. But this was 1957. How could this be happening now?

Suddenly I heard, “Next!” “Next!” The only person left in the room, that was me.

Still in shock, I stood slowly, walked to the desk, and sat down in the chair next to where the old man had stood. The policeman stared at me with a sneer. For a moment I wondered why, finally realizing I sat down without his invitation. But after a long silence, during which I did not stand up, he proceeded, his eyes still slicing through me.

“Give me your driver’s license,” he snapped.

I managed to comply, though still not clear-headed.

“Is the permanent address on the license still the same?” he asked, examining my license.

“Yes,” I said.

He glared at me. “What did you say?”

“Yes,” I repeated, thinking he didn’t hear me the first time.

“What. Did. You. Say?”

“Yes, the permanent address is correct,” I said a bit louder.

Then it hit me. He wanted me to say, “Yessum,” just like the old man had. Adrenaline shot through me, my anger rising. A long moment passed when neither of us said a word.

“Well, I don’t have to issue you no license, boy!” the officer shouted finally, looking somehow even whiter.

“And I don’t need a license from you either!” I responded while snatching my license out of his hand, surprising him and myself. Standing up abruptly, I turned and stomped out of the office.

“John L. What’s going on,” was the next voice I heard as my mother met me at the door, responding to the shouting. Concerned about the officer following me and others showing up, we hurried out of the courthouse, jumped into our car and anxiously drove home under the speed limit, obeying every stop sign and traffic signal, making sure not to draw attention.

This was near the end of my 1957 college Christmas break, happily home in Bastrop, Louisiana. Me and my mother had driven to the Morehouse Parish courthouse to renew my driver’s license, while she took care of personal business in the same building. Now safely back home, my mother worried that I would become one of the rapidly growing number of young Black men missing or found dead in the Deep South.

After all, only two years earlier in the summer of 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till’s horribly mutilated body was discovered in the Tallahatchie River in Mississippi, just 140 miles northeast of Bastrop. Till, a middle class young Black teenager from Chicago, was visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi, when he was kidnapped, brutally beaten, and shot, allegedly for whistling at a white woman. The two white men who kidnapped and murdered him were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury.

Since my birth, my parents had worked diligently to protect me from such evil white hands and did not intend now to lose that battle. And after my courthouse confrontation, I hoped I hadn’t damaged the respected reputations they had worked so hard to establish among Bastrop’s white citizens in order to safely pursue their dreams. It was not uncommon for Black residents of southern towns to suddenly find themselves losing their jobs and their livelihoods, sometimes without provocation. My mother, a public-school teacher, was the most vulnerable. Until that day, she and my father had somehow managed to steer clear of targeted racial hostilities, while maintaining their dignity and pursuing racial justice.

“Well, no one followed you home and it appears everything is alright,” my father said calmly after hearing our story. “I am really proud of you son for standing up for yourself,” he continued, “and I don’t believe we have anything to worry about. But since you are due back at Lincoln University next week, I think you should leave tomorrow.”

The next day, after driving twenty-five miles to the state police office in Monroe and acquiring a renewed driver’s license without incident, my parents put me on the train to Jefferson City, Missouri, Lincoln’s college town.

“That stadium’s public property!” someone shouted.

“Yeah!” shouted another. “If we played there once, why not again! Especially for our regional championship game!?”

“You’re right! Let’s go down to the school board office and protest. Make them change their mind!”

We viewed this as an overt racist act and a slap in the face to our principal. It required a response. A small group of self-designated leaders without my knowledge met in a corner of the

campus away from teachers, and after vigorous discussion decided to lead a protest march to the school board office. When the time came, Mr. Alexander, my geometry teacher, casually standing in the classroom door, did not object when I exited through the window near the industrial arts shop, our meeting place.

So, there we were, December 1953, fifteen students willing to risk the unknown—one-year before the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* school desegregation decision, and almost ten years before the first student non-violent civil disobedience sit-ins—leaving the campus and heading downtown to the school board office, with hastily improvised protest signs held high in our hands. I was very angry as I gripped my sign demanding “Stadium Now!” and disappointed at the small turnout.

Mr. Adams was away from the campus at the time, unaware of our impromptu action, but spotted us as he was driving back and pulled over, blocking our path with his car as we neared the West Madison Black business district. He jumped out and walked around the car to confront his courageous students defiantly holding-up our signs.

He stood composed, face expressionless, eyes unblinking, as he read our signs demanding, “Stadium Now!” and “Equality Now!” and then spoke to us in an unfamiliar voice: soft, calm, monotone and deliberate.

“I understand your disappointment and anger about the board’s decision,” he began, “and I appreciate your wanting to take action. But this is not the right way. You don’t know the danger and personal harm this march can cause. For your safety, you need to turn around.”

We stood motionless, silent, not knowing how to explain ourselves to our principal who caught us off guard by the way he spoke. We were accustomed to loud commands rather than rational persuasion.

Breaking the deafening silence, Mr. Adams continued, “You all have not entirely thought through the consequences of your actions, your protest. This could result in your arrest and the horrible things that happen when Black people, especially Black boys, are put in jail.” Then again, I heard the empathetic tone, “I completely understand how you feel, the anger and the frustration, but you have chosen the wrong way to respond. You must turn around and go back to the campus. Now.”

Just then, a police car approached, stopping in the middle of the highway next to our small gathering, evoking our usual anxious reaction to white policemen. The cruiser sat there without twirling lights or blaring siren. Intimidating, nevertheless.

The music was urgent, unpredictable, full of energy; sounds that were alien to my ear. Yet, I listened intently.

Head bobbing back and forth, left to right, slightly slouched with alto saxophone held loosely in both hands, the music maker spewed out intoxicating jazz riffs filling the room’s

nooks and crannies, reflecting his vacillating mood and temperament. He was obsessed and desperate to find a unique voice to deliver his compelling message.

Facing a window, I watched him through the periphery of my eyes standing in a corner not far away, seemingly digging deeper and deeper within, connecting soul and mind with his dancing fingers, testing the instrument's capacity to respond to his artistic will.

Feet slightly apart, planted firmly on the rough, wood-slatted floor, eyes closed tightly embracing an anxious frown, Mr. Charles Strickland, our new Morehouse Parish Training School band teacher, seemed completely oblivious to me and other students in the band room. It appeared so personal, that I felt as though I was intruding while listening to the new and unfamiliar style.

But in retrospect, that scene highlighted a personal resemblance between Mr. Strickland and the great and popular jazz alto saxophonist, Julian "Cannonball" Adderley (1928-1975), who I met and watched perform years later in the 1960s; the same intense musical expressions, gyrating gestures and physical features.

After a tuba lesson near the end of my sophomore year and his one-year appointment, I was sitting with my tuba resting on the floor putting my music away, when Professor Baker made an unexpected proposal.

"Why don't you transfer to Indiana University next year?" he asked.

"Uh, what?" I stuttered, stopping physical motions and looking over at him.

"You ought to go to IU next year. Your junior year."

"Well... I don't know," trying to figure what that means in speed-dial.

"You are competitive with the students there, and I think you would have a lot to gain."

I stared at him, curious. Still wondering about the unknown, and not able to ask the right questions.

"Transferring won't be a problem. I'll help you," he continued. "And IU has great graduate programs if you decide to continue studying."

Going to IU, or any other school, was something that had never come to mind. Lincoln's music department had become a deeply encouraging and nurturing home where I was growing musically and personally, building the confidence I needed as an individual and as an African American. Plus, I was grooving along comfortably through my sophomore year, focused on completing my degree on schedule and teaching high school band, perhaps back in my home state of Louisiana.

But he was my teacher, and his proposal at least deserved consideration.

"Well, I appreciate the thought, Mr. Baker. Let me think about it."

But what was there to think about? I knew my parents, the college-purse-string comptrollers, would quickly nix the idea with little or no thought. My mother's signature twisted-top-knot hair would surely fly loose from vigorous headshaking.

“No, no, no, no. No!” I could hear her saying. “Finish up where you are!”

A few days later I approached Professor Baker in the hall.

“Well, about your suggestion to transfer, Mr. Baker. I don’t believe it’s a good idea for me right now. There are too many things that would make it difficult. But thanks a lot for your confidence.”

Only seconds passed before he countered with, “Oh, that’s okay. But you should seriously consider going to IU for your master’s when you graduate from Lincoln. I think you would really want to do that.”

Oh nooooo! I thought. *I am not getting off the hook easily. I must give blood! Continue school? Graduate study?*

I couldn’t imagine that.

But now David Baker, the man who had arrived at Lincoln just months earlier under a suspicious cloud, had planted the idea of graduate study in my mind. It was a completely unanticipated and frightening proposition—one that I was inclined to provide a flippant response to like, “Maybe a few years later, somewhere down the road. I’ll give you a call.”

But at the very least, he deserved a diplomatic response.

“Oh my, well, that’s an interesting thought,” I dodged. “But graduation’s a couple of years away, so I have time to think about it and see if that’s what I want to do.”

“Well, if you decide you want to attend IU, let me know,” he said. “I can help make that happen.”

I thought that would be the end of that subject. “Continuing school? Not me. Enough time in classrooms.”

But the seed was now planted firmly under soil made fertile by my education-championing parents. And there was no escaping its presence in my subconscious, no matter how hard I tried.

“Hallelujah!”

“Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!”

“Hallelujah!”

The worshipers, feeling the powerful moving spirit, forcefully urged on by thundering rifts from the full-volume organ, energetically praised God their savior,.

“Hallelujah! Rump! Praise God! Rump! Rump! Hallelujah!”

The church was packed. Many standing. Their piercing shouts captured by the sanctuaries high angled ceiling and slammed back down like a rumbling avalanche; embellishing the emotional responses inspired by the devout sermon just delivered.

Its compelling message was profoundly based on ancient Christian gospel expressed in contemporary narrative. It referenced human stories enhanced by relevant metaphor, touching the depth of the congregants welcoming souls. The sermon was powerfully delivered by the exhausted black-robed preacher, now retreating from the light oak-wood pulpit where he had

saintly stood, to the stately chair directly behind. He seemed content that perhaps he had succeeded in his noble mission: to spread the word of God.

I sat there with Juel and our children near the back of the chandelier-lit sanctuary, mesmerized and thinking: Finally! Perhaps this is the church I am seeking. One with a pastor whose sermons were as intellectually provocative as the spiritual message they conveyed. And, judging by the organ prelude I heard before the sermon, a church with music that balanced emotion and musicality. Perhaps, I thought, if Juel agrees, we need not look any further for a church home for our family. Later that day, I discovered happily, she was already on board.

Almost a year earlier, August 1972, we had arrived in Tampa, Florida, with our five young children knowing absolutely nothing about the city's social life, particularly for African Americans. Having accepted an assistant professor position at the University of South Florida (USF), and visited Tampa for three days earlier to secure living accommodations, Juel and I did not have a sense of the area's ambiance. After seeking information in advance from local Black organizations without success, we relocated from Sapulpa, Oklahoma to Tampa with guarded optimism about our future, knowing that learning the new community would be left to our own intuitive exploration.

Accustomed to attending Sunday worship service, and eager to continue our children's religious education, we commenced visiting Black churches immediately. Juel was a well-entrenched Baptist, but I was Episcopalian, after growing up Methodist with a brief Catholic interlude. So, for me it was less about religious doctrine and more about the worship experience, primarily the sermon and music. Initially, Juel was more methodical and persistent than I in the search for our family church home. Each Sunday she identified and visited a church with or without me; sometimes a different church, other times a repeat visit, but all were Baptist—her comfort zone of theology and worship traditions.

On this particular Sunday, the church we visited was Beulah Baptist Institutional, and the inspiring sermon we heard was delivered by the Rev. A. Leon Lowry, Sr. The beautiful soul-wrenching organ performance was by Wayne Leonard, the minister of music. I felt that together, they would compel me to wake up Sunday mornings looking forward to attending church.