

BACKSTORY (Copyrighted Material)

Prologue One

In the beginning,
I was evolving in my mother's womb, seven months on, when my
father died.
Rage, fear, terror, hate, sorrow, horror, grief, comprehension, gave way
to resolve, determination, acceptance.
Throughout, in Hell, I roiled, kicked, twisted in the fluid wind.
Dragon's breath, hurricane boiling within.
His essence of spirited, heart of love passed through. Mainline, undiluted,
held thus stuck.
So, was he thoroughly misguided? I'm sure. Hindsight is great for that.
True to his honour, superstitious to the bone. Mistrusted doctor's lies.
Feared cameras would steal his soul.
When doctors finished carving the body. Cameras would finish the
left-over scraps. The Devil be damned, glad to claim the rest.
Father was honourable, true to his word and world. Walked his talk as
he talked his walk.
Steered clear of both when saving his life-force,
In danger of passing on, long before his time became mine. After his life,
and before my birth.
We met in Mom's womb-verse. We chatted father to son,
Dad's spirit cradled and cuddled his only living legacy, his bond, his son.
Stroked my eyes, soothed my troubled brow, amidst Mom's turbulent
sea.
Whispered softly, deep within my fretful
slumbering . . . Honourable above all, honour above, all.

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BACKSTORY: THE MANY LIVES OF GRANVILLE JOHNSON PROLOGUE ONE

I am now the only one to carry his banner, yet his legacy lives on. The
gift of truth is a heavy burden, carried by the wise.
Honour is a priceless dream. Its piper demands are without peer. The
eternal price of honour is self-sacrifice for whoever's most dear.
Mom's love child, conceived in love with the love of her life. Born of life,
born in death throes.
Life and death laced with self-sacrifice, karma's the choice.
Made to protect and preserve the love, sacrifice to live the life deserved.

Stand for your mother . . .!
Stand for your sister . . .!
Stand for your brothers . . .!
Lay down for the cousin who raped you last night. He will rape once
more tomorrow . . .
Again, you will lay . . . still . . . quiet . . . the pain somehow soothing . . .
The rage of invasion . . . the touch soft/hard . . . malignant reek.
To protect all of the above . . . gifted child did endure
Stillness endured . . . silence . . . the theft of body sans soul . . .
Price of self given to savage a non-life shackled by fear.
Predators within and without . . .
Smiles all about.
Trust be ruinous . . . faith tenuous . . . living death a certainty.
Tarnished . . . damaged beyond worth.
I have done terrible wrongs in fear, hate, and loathing.
Symphony orchestra of wrongdoing . . . slime and shame.
My demons kept time, the refrain and chorus . . . I, only I, the verse.
Shame eternal in memory forgotten . . . yet forgiven not.
Make right the wrong at what cost be your home. Your life and all
around you abide still.
What price will I pay . . . What price will I pay?

"I Am an Honourable Man" (Excerpt) by Granville Johnson

Prologue Two

RAPE, WHETHER IT occurs once in your life or multiple times, as it did throughout
Granville's adolescence and teenage years, becomes a defining
event that perpetuates its insidious influence for the remaining years
of breath and growth. All that you are, all you will ever become, is altered
by that violation of body and soul.

Rape obliterates all sense of self. Rape destroys your consciousness,
taints your personality, perverts any hopes and dreams that precede it.
Rape strips your ability to experience the fulfillment, intimacy, and
joy of physical contact.

A hollow imitation of life remains; a forever hunger for wholeness that can never be sated. Life itself is perverted. The guilt of the damaged becomes unworthy of true affection or love.

Familiar rape exacerbates the horror, for it takes place in the home, where nature, nurture, and protection are a given. Betrayal by those claiming to love as family opens the door for strangers to repeat the rape and the rendering of hope and dreams, as they claim to love you only to devour your soul as they rape and rend your mind and body.

Rape of a juvenile by an older woman, often characterized by elaborate, subtle seduction as part of the grooming process, is frequently thought, by society, to be a coming-of-age experience for the male child and, therefore, less an invasion and perversion of the victim; rather, it is considered part of an early sexual education, a “Mrs. Robinson” experience.

Rape is rape. The sex and age of the participants is irrelevant. The effect, both in the short and long term, is the same: insidious and equally damaging.

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Being a sexual object, an ever-ready sex toy to abuse and discard when the fun runs out, is all you can be worthy of.

Worthless . . . hopeless . . . without forgiveness; Granville’s future obsesses in ever trying to rid himself of the sense of being “only good enough to be fucked and to suck . . . fucked ‘n’ suck . . . fucked ‘n’ suck!”

On the block, in the ghetto, the obscene betrayal of familiar rape was a common perversion in the desolation of the familiar bond, occurring in secret, in silence, and in loud cries for help unheard. Never spoken, seldom revealed for contemplation or intervention.

Yet abuse survivors can be drawn together, recognizing in each other the struggle to find and be themselves; their common ground; a sense of not being alone in this non-human land; their mutual bond; and a life preserver in a quicksand sea.

A sexual abuse survivor wears a badge of honour and courage in unending fear. Yet, living within that awareness of what was done to you does not define you, even though it may have been a watershed, lifechanging experience that helped make you the beautiful human being— an example of true humanity—that you have become.

Granville Johnson, Grade One

CHAPTER ONE: The Kid’s Just Weird

GRANVILLE WAS IN love. Well, as much as a first grader in elementary school could be; it was more like an intense, very intense, like. Emma was coal black of race and colour. A deep, dark round face with brilliant sparkling blue eyes and sunrise-white teeth that smiled through her thick, full-lipped expression each time, gracing Granville’s presence from her desk next to his.

She liked him as well, and it often touched her heart when Granville would respond quickly to almost any question that their teacher would pose. Their hands would spring into the air simultaneously, punching the electric atmosphere above them, rockets to the moon, each wanting to be the first to be chosen.

Mrs. Roman would pick Emma more often than Granville. He believed she liked to see young girls excel, more so than boys, because she felt life presented them with more challenges. Thus, she supported Emma’s obvious smarts at every opportunity. Emma was brilliant; so was Granville.

[[Author’s Aside]]

Though it would be many years before he would look upon his intelligence as a boon.

Together, they enjoyed, even relished, their competition for the little golden stars Mrs. Roman would place alongside their names next to

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various subjects—math, English, spelling, et cetera—at the end of the day. Their marks were the “best” in class.

Emma and Granville would often sit, again, side by side, under the school’s side entrance awning, to have lunch, sometimes trading for favourite lunch choices. Granville’s mom made great PB&J sandwiches, which he would share and trade for the cookies or chips that Emma’s lunch box often held.

They even would pool their after-school snack money to buy a Coke from the lunchroom vending machine, sipping with two straws,

so much better than the lunch-box juices.

Emma was indeed beautiful; the love of his young life, his first love. She glowed, a Black child in a Black world that appreciated her youthful shine.

As a young boy, Granville was cute to some, and pretty—too pretty to be a man-child. Though tolerated generally within his world, Granville was thought to be too pretty, too smart, and too independent not to be set apart, as though suspect of nefarious ways, in a place where he did not belong. Like Emma, Granville was young, gifted, and Black. They were a matched set.

Where Emma fit the mold that the expectations of their society, their world, had prepared for her, Granville did not.

Granville could read with comprehension at two years old. He absorbed the language of the adults within his family, to the extent that he would mimic their speech with clear intonation and expression. As he grew, he would use this particular talent to mock their accents and colloquial slang. Granville's brothers thought he was much too smart for his own good.

Granville was a late baby: nine years after his sister, Laura, and ten years after his elder brother, Levi—siblings from a separate father. As such, Granville was the apple of his mother's eye. Her love child, conceived with the love of her life. The spitting image of his father, who had had the eternal misfortune to die, with little warning and less care, when

Granville's mom was seven months pregnant. A life loss that was never forgiven, of a man she never forgot or forgave.

Granville, her living memoir, lived in that special place within a secret heart held by the woman who gave him, only him, of all her five children, her surname.

[[Author's Aside]]

There would be many decades that passed before Granville discovered and realized the significance of that gift.

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Upon entering formal schooling, his propensity with language combined with his naivety, enabled him to adopt the speech of his teachers, who were generally white. Thus, Granville began to speak above his "station."

"Who taught this child to speak 'proper,' taking on airs of those damn white-assed teachers? Boy, you think you better than us? You trying to disrespect your elders?" That was the common refrain from extended family members around the dinner table or as they lounged in the living room.

Granville's mom understood the innocence of his youthful play with language and voracious appetite for all knowledge, as he loved and lived in books.

Nonetheless, it was a source of rancor that bubbled up in conversation between the adults and reinforced the idea that he was different.

"Yes, Gran,"—his familiar nickname that, to this day, only his family and several dear, life-long friends are allowed to use— "was a different child from his siblings," his mother would condescend in response to the continued barrage of familiar opinions. "He's just a weird kid" was the defining expectation and conclusion that he lived under.

Part 1: Big Buck Says "Hello"

Recess and school ground filled happy sounds bounding off the red brick edifice that was Granville's scholarly home away from home.

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"Hey! Hey, too-pretty-assed boy! Hey, Emma! Why are you hanging with that little sissy?" The hulking shadow blocked all sunlight. The shade it brought was cold and menacing.

Big Buck—BB to his friends—was in grade three. He had been held back from moving on to grade four. Buck was big, very big, for his age and as mean to all around him as his father, Big Brutus, was to him. The son of a brutal drunk that played the "numbers" and never won. Buck's mother had escaped, as he put it, on Christmas Eve, boarding a southbound sleeper coach, chasing a new life with a new man. A tear-stained note from his mom and a rage filled beating from his dad were Buck's only Christmas presents that morning.

Buck fancied Emma. He would crow to all who'd listen that Emma was his little Black girlfriend, a boast she simply ignored.

Now, once again, Emma ignored Buck's presence. His jovial greeting wrapped in a ham-hock put-down of her best friend and classmate drew no response from "his girl," his person of interest, or from his intended target, the wimp sitting next to her. The slight did not go unrecognized. No one ignored Big Buck.

“Thwack” was the sound of the blow to the back of Granville’s head. “Thud” was the sound of his right temple striking the hard gravel surface of the playground’s walkway. Loud was his scream of pain from the coldcock attack.

Big Buck had just said “hello” in his characteristic manner. The bully bullied every kid smaller, and sometimes bigger, than himself. When he did lack in size compared to his opponent, he made up for it through sheer meanness and love of violence. He lived for the fight; the bigger, the tougher, the better.

It was his only way to assuage the true demon living deep in his gut: his father.

All the kids stopped whatever they were doing to watch Buck do his thing. It was live entertainment of the first order.

Bouncing off the ground in a tear-filled growl, Granville charged the beast, only to be struck and thrown head-over-heels to the ground once more in one smooth motion. A rainbow of blood marked Granville’s airborne descent on the back of his neck and upper back. Blood spatters surrounded his face, nearly blinding him, as he saw the hulk descending upon him; a huge foot aiming for his abdomen.

Screaming through the panic, he kicked upward with all the force he could muster, grazing Buck’s knee to strike high on his inner thigh. It was enough to unbalance Buck’s momentum, causing him to land askew. His knee gave with a loud pop. Mad with rage and fear, Granville doubled his small fists together and tried to crush the bully’s snarling face. Granville broke his nose.

Ham-hock hands grasped his throat as his fists continued a rapid-fire drumbeat about Buck’s face and neck, seemingly unnoticed by Buck. Red starbursts filled his eyes; breath ceased. Stronger hands pulled the vicegrip from his windpipe and lifted him up and away from the fuming, mad dog who was cursing death threats. Promises of mayhem to come.

Mr. Jenkins sighed as he watched Buck approach the pair of primary students sitting apart from the harum-scarum hodgepodge of children during recess at Gladstone Elementary. His sense of foreboding was well-founded in the knowledge among the staff of Buck’s propensity to create havoc wherever he went

Buck had become the bane of any staffer unfortunate enough to have drawn playground duty when the troubled kid had felt the urge to create more trouble and grief for everyone around him. The boy had gathered a following among the others, many of whom he had recruited through combat. The rumour was, “Be my ‘friend’ or suffer the consequences.”

To join Buck’s little gang was to bathe in the glow of his badder-than-bad-ass reputation. Buck’s gang was growing on and off the school grounds despite efforts by the staff and the parents of other children to thwart his influence and its growth.

Jenkins was hungry for a smoke. The nicotine craving usually struck when anything triggered his anxiety. His premonition of coming events probably did just that. Still, brushing that aside, he gave the playground a brief visual scan and headed for the area behind the yard keeper’s toolshed.

He was just enjoying the successful formation of the third of his smoke rings within rings floating aloft (a talent he was proud of) when he heard the sound. Children screaming, children running pell-mell toward the school’s side entrance; gathering, chanting, “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

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His gut knew immediately what the source of the chaos was and who was at the centre of it all. His somewhat somnolent day had suddenly taken a dark turn for the worse.

He could hear the principal’s diatribe burning his ears and his pride when she eventually heard of another violent incident on his watch. Of course, it was his job to report whatever was happening.

He broke into a full stride run when he saw what looked like little Andrea, one of the brainy children in primary, sailing helter-skelter through the air. His landing could be heard clearly even from this considerable distance, as the crowd gasped.

Breathing heavily, Jenkins’ heart skipped a beat as he barged through the crowd of children, now deathly silent, to see Andrea’s limp body hanging in a death grip from a hangman’s noose of Buck’s hands.

Removing those hands took no small effort. Jenkins, who worked out regularly despite his smoking, was amazed at the power within this child’s rage, in his lust for blood. He now realized how much everyone on the staff was underestimating the danger within this young boy.

Little Andrea’s cough of re-breath was the sweetest sound the teacher had heard in a while, a long while.

Principal Adams had a migraine. It had started on the commute to

school from her upper-north-side suburb and was threatening to burst into full bloom before mid-morning. Having arranged the afternoon off, she was watching the clock, trying not to count down the minutes.

“Knew I should have resisted that second cup of coffee with sweetener, and the double-chocolate donut with sprinkles. High blood pressure is hell!” Adams had a serious sugar jones.

Her phone rang, startling the principal out of her regrets for a habit that had controlled her life since her university years. Now, well into middle age, the dreaded mid-life crisis had cost her a second marriage, her health, and quality of life.

This high-pressure position in this ghetto school, these ghetto kids, this damn Nigger-burdened dead-end posting; it was perfectly suited for the only female principal in the district, a bitter recipe destined for failure.

The board, not wanting to get their everything-white pristine hands dirty dealing with all this Nigger shit, were more than happy to let her carry the weight. “Tow that barge, lift that bale, sho’ goin’ to Heaven, doin yo’ time in Hell!”

“You’ve been called to the schoolyard, ma’am. There’s been an incident. Jenkins is there and wants an ambulance called!” the school nurse blurted, two octaves too loud, into her right ear,

“What?” Adams’s migraine had found rocket fuel and ballooned into a white-hot burst between her ears. Adams groaned under the heat of the onslaught.

“Are you all right, ma’am?”

“Hell no, I’m not all right! What the hell happened out there? Who was involved? No, let me guess. It wasn’t that damn Buck, that little bastard, was it?”

“Yes, ma’am, it was him, and the little Andrea boy.”

“Oh my God! That poor kid! Is he badly hurt?”

“Head injury, possible concussion, temporary loss of consciousness, abrasions.”

“And Buck?”

“A broken nose and a badly dislocated knee.”

“Well, I’ll be damned! The little guy must have put up quite a fight?”

“Yes, ma’am. Should I call that ambulance?”

“Of course, can’t be too cautious with a concussion, and the knee may need to be reset.”

“Yes.”

“And tell that idiot Jenkins I want to see him in my office, ASAP!”

“Right away, ma’am. Are you still planning to book off this afternoon?”

“Contact and inform the parents that I will be in my office if and when they arrive to see to their children, available to discuss the incident at their convenience.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Adams knew that Buck’s father needed no invitation to show up in her office breathing hellfire and determined to burn the place down with her in it. She knew the drill and would be sternly professional while he would be cursing her up, down, and sideways. He had no trouble in

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expressing his hatred of white people and the power he felt they wielded with impunity over Black people.

The same was doubly true if said whitey happened to be a woman. All out to emasculate and destroy Black people in general and Black men in particular. His boy was a bully, yes, true enough when truth be told, even a “little asshole,” and he said so without batting an eye. Yet we clearly made him that way and his boy was just defending himself against a system determined to grind him into dust rather than to educate, which, of course, is our job to do!

A lose-lose situation all around.

Part 2: Ines Andrea

Granville’s mother was at work when she got the call. By temperament a worrier, she was immediately concerned that something very bad had befallen her young son. Small of size, quick of mind, and big of mouth, he tended to draw trouble when it could otherwise easily be avoided. He was a perfect target for the school and neighbourhood bullies.

Being precocious was a problem that had set all kinds of pitfalls in his path forward. Protecting him from all dangers small and large had become her full-time maternal focus. The thought that he had been badly hurt in a place and time beyond her ability to defend him troubled her deeply. It wasn’t his fault that he was, well, different; this world around them

just didn't have a place for him, at least not yet anyway. Deep in her heart-of-hearts she knew he was destined for some kind of greatness, that is if she could manage to keep him alive and well long enough for him to grow into his future, whatever that might be.

Shrugging with a heart-deep sigh, she went into the yard office to arrange to book the afternoon off.

Ines Andrea did a man's job at the B&O Railway yard. She was a coach cleaner; the only woman working on the crew. Considering her an exception to the rule was an egregious understatement when describing Ines. Her physical strength, which was considerable for a woman of her size, was clearly superseded by her round-featured visage, honey-brown complexion, near-hourglass physique, and jet-black-eyed beauty. In her time and culture, her exceptional physical appearance, presented as a "velvet glove," belied the tempered-steel spine within that was her strength of character.

The lady was a brickhouse in every aspect. The type of enviable woman memorialized by the legendary R&B group The Commodores. Her yard boss, Mr. D'trinaire, was a good man as men went in her world. He tended to "look out" for Ines. He knew that, as a single mom, she was rearing five children on her own for all intents and purposes. Admittedly, that was no small or insignificant task in any man's world.

His mother had been a single mom and "made me what and who I am today." He often recited this well-worn phrase to his wife, Harriet, who ceased listening years ago. She despised her pompous late mother-in-law, turning over in her still-warm grave, just as she sometimes hated the woman's arrogant, self-important son.

A quiet knock came at his office door that D'trinaire knew well. "Come in, Ines."

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Her form through the frosted half-glass office door, even in coveralls and heavy yard coat, was unmistakable. The yard boss, like all the other men in the yard, practically drooled when Ines walked by. She was so unlike his forever-whining, prim 'n' proper, bone-thin wife. Not Harriet, she certainly was not like Harriet.

The Black woman just didn't look or carry herself like an overworked single mother of five, with two children well under four years of age. No matter how many hard shifts she put in with the most menial and disgusting jobs that were her assignment (the jobs that were understood to be beneath the men), she walked with a ramrod down her back, head high, shoulders thrown back, fire hose slung-wrapped across her chest and waist, sometimes pushing a tool cart almost as big as she was, eyes straight ahead. All the way forward, all the time. Ines exuded strength, a no-nonsense woman.

"Good day, Mr. D'trinaire, I just received a call from my son's elementary school. There was an incident in the playground during recess. My Granville, he's in grade one, has been beaten up by one of the older boys, the school bully, in fact. I'm told that he is okay, though an ambulance has been called. I will be bringing him home after I speak with the principal concerning what occurred and why he had to fight. My son is a lightning rod for trouble, but I know he never would pick a fight, not even on his worst day."

"Ines, sorry to hear that. You take the rest of the day off. Though you know that the line of VIP sleeper coach cars will be arriving at sixteen hundred hours for turn-around in the morning, at seven hundred hours. Think you could finish the remainder of your shift with the evening crew to get those cars done right 'n' proper?"

"We need this job done just right to impress some power people that we hope will make a regular practice of traveling with the B&O. After all, you are the best CC we have. I'll even sign off on time- 'n'-a-half for your trouble. Of course, we will expect you to work your regular shift with your day crew tomorrow. Sound good?"

The carrot and the stick thought Ines. Yes, the half-day off with time- 'n'- a-half for the extra shift sounds good. Heaven knows we could sure make good use of that bit o' bonus come pay day. Still, it means working with that evening crew of closet-drunk slackers, and doing a double shift back-to-back come morning. I'll have to make arrangements with Sara to cover for me overnight and get the kids off to school. She won't mind.

If I say no, I reject your offer and your "good" graces, the only thing keeping the other cock-hounds at bay. You will have your pound of flesh; so, I can have this important time with my son.

"That sounds fine, sir."

...

"Mom, I didn't say anything!"

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Emma and I were sitting having a snack. She was teasing me about her having more gold stars last week than me. I said that this was Monday and I bet her Friday lunch money that I would outdo her this week. Anyway, Mrs. Roman always picks her first cause she’s a girl. Mrs. Roman likes girls.”

“Then what happened?”

“Then Big Buck came over and asked Emma, ‘Why you hanging with that little sissy?’”

“That’s what he said?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you answer back?”

“Neither of us answered. We ignored him.”

“Then?”

“Then, he hit me hard on the back of my head. I never saw it coming, couldn’t duck. Mom, I didn’t start that fight with Buck. I’m scared of him—everybody is!”

“I know, son. I just had to be sure. I know you wouldn’t go out of your way to fight with anyone. We’ll get you home and patched up. That dark bruise on your temple’s giving you a black raccoon-mask shadow across your eyes and those welts around your throat could use a bit of TLC. Does it hurt?”

“A little, when I swallow.”

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“I’m off for the day, but I will have to work the evening shift to make up for it. I’m getting time- ‘n’-a-half for that bit of inconvenience, though. How does popcorn and your choice of cartoons sound to you?”

“Sounds great, Mom.”