

I Wanna Be Rich

The Bronx . . .

Mack doesn't go to school anymore. He finishes his busboy shift and heads home. His dog is dead, poisoned by his neighbor. Mack kicks in the neighbor's door and beats the man to death.

This is a scene from a book. I'm reading it to half a dozen young men in a non-secure detention facility not far from Yankee Stadium. Non-secure means fewer locks. Come night, the kids go to group homes. "Mack was right, right? We're not talking about the law. We're talking about justice. Who's with me?" I ask.

Hands rise, the debate begins. We agree on two things: 1) Mack is going to pay. 2) How much depends upon the story he tells the judge: "I did what I did. What else can I say?" That gets him twenty-five to life. My friends are silent, then angry. It's just not fair, they say.

The word-for-word is long gone, the faces and places have blended over the years, but I'm sure the dialogue that morning began the way it always does: "First person who guesses my favorite story wins a very cool prize."

"What's the prize?"

"It's better than sex or maybe even pizza. Let's go, gentlemen: the greatest story ever."

"*The Bible.*"

"Nice, but just now I'm thinking of another one."

They yell TV plotlines, movies, video games, lyrics. The quiet kid says, "My story." Now everyone's quiet.

"And what's your story?"

"Where's my prize?" Call him Domingo.

"In the palm of your hand. It's your future. You own it when you know the best story is yours. What's your dream?"

The big talker—Kenny—jumps in. "I wanna be rich."

"I want you to be. How do we get you there?"

"Basketball."

"Beautiful. I need your help—maybe. C'mere."

"Nah."

"Stand with me. Stand tall. Good. You just grew four inches. I like you, your vibe, solid. Now, I work for Nike."

"I thought you wrote books."

"When I'm not recruiting folks to promote this street ball tournament I sponsor. I need someone to work the concrete, tell everybody about the MC's coming to call games, the celebrities signing autographs, the jerseys, sneakers, bracelets I'm giving away. The ladies especially I'd need you to reach out to. Where the ladies go, the fellas follow. We have to fill those seats. The pay's okay."

"How much?"

"Hundred a day. Look, if you put your heart into this, I'll double your salary to help me promote my other tournaments. You mind traveling to California, Hawaii, Australia? You'll get plenty of court time, too. We play while we talk business. You'll meet NBA players, scouts, college coaches, people on the marketing side. Imagine getting paid to hang out on Facebook and talk up what's hot. Lots of jobs in the game. Mine gets your foot in the door. When I was your age, I was a dishwasher and then a cook, and now they pay me to cook up stories."

“When you’re not working for Nike.”

“I’d like you to work with me. Here’s the problem: Lots of folks want this gig, but I only have one spot. How do I pick who will do the best job for me?”

“Interviews.”

“This is your interview. Why should I hire you over everybody else?”

“Why? I just like basketball, I guess.”

“Guessing scares me. I need to know.”

“I *love* it.”

“So does everybody else.”

“But I *play*. I’m *good*.”

“I need great. The one with the best story wins. What’s yours?”

“My *story*? I don’t know.”

“You do. It’s nothing but a skill, storytelling. It’s practice. You can get good at it. You have to. We all do. It’s life or death. No story, no money. Give me you—your dream—in two minutes, and you’re gold. Keep it simple. What does every story have? I’m thinking of three things.”

“Simile.”

“Simi-what?”

“Simi *lee*. Miss K told us. Like when you use like. Like, she floats all soft in my dreams like dandelion fuzz.”

“I love that. That’s a window into your soul, what you said. Before we put in windows, let’s build the house. Three things. Beginning?”

“Middle, end.”

“What’s your favorite memory, playing ball?”

“Lots. I don’t know.”

“Who’d you like to shoot with most?”

“My brother.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Because that was the only time he was for real.”

“Real.”

“He smiled. He forgot. His teeth were wrong. Crooked and broke on the left side. His front tooth looked like Florida.”

“Florida.”

“My mom’s boyfriend was a punk.”

“Stick with your brother. You two are tight.”

Shakes no. “He’s gone.”

“Okay. I’m with you. I feel sorry for you. Here’s the thing: I feel sorry for everybody. Make me feel

hope for you, and I’ll remember you. Let’s say you win this job. Where are you twenty years from now? Who are you?”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Good father to my son. Good to my family.”

“House, apartment? Where you all live?”

“House. House.”

“Where?”

“Eastchester.”

“Definitely. Two-family, right? You live up top, rent out the bottom to cover the bills? Where you working?”

“I’m hustling the tournament, like you said.”

“No. You’re an authority now. You have wisdom. You’re running the tournaments.”

“Your job?”

“Not anymore. I’m playing golf by then. I better be.”

“Maybe I’m coaching, like at a camp.”

“That’s exactly what you’re doing.”

“Or maybe I’ll be a dentist.”

We wrap up, and it’s time to grab a bite with the teachers. Tap on my back. Domingo: “They said I could eat lunch with you.”

“Then let’s eat.”

“Petroleum engineer. You asked my dream before.”

“I happen to be an admissions officer for Texas A&M.”

“You have a lot of jobs.”

“Moving target’s harder to hit. You in two. Let’s go.”

“Energy. Where I come from, I didn’t see a lot of it. Folks were stuck. When I did see something moving, I followed it. Direction didn’t matter. They sold crystal in my building. They were moving up, I thought. I started as a spotter; then I stole a bag and a car and went to sell the shit in Hunts Point. I was eleven. Had to sit on my backpack to see over the wheel. I forgot to bring toll money—that’s how I got pinched. I control my energy now. I read all the time. I have perfect grades. I’m going into college with a plan, math and science. I’m finishing in three years. Summers I’m working for the biggest energy company

that will take me. I'll do whatever. You want me to work a truck? Love to. Need me in the office? I'm there for you whenever I'm not sleeping, and if you have a cot for me, I'll sleep there, too. Maybe you'll pay my way through graduate school, and I'll give you my next ten years. The company is my family, around the clock. Then, and I'm telling you up front, I'll have my own company. I need to run things, nice and steady. You have to plan ahead. Think before you drill. As a petroleum engineer, I find energy. I control it. That's my beginning, middle, end. So?"

"You thought that up just now?"

"My IQ is crazy high, no offense. I'm gonna be rich, right?"

"Crazy rich. I have zero worries about you. Can I offer you just a touch of icing for the cake? The end, when you're running your own company—you're hiring folks. That's what makes you rich. The way you feel knowing that you're giving twenty people jobs, folks like you maybe, who got a rocky start in business."

"Pretend I'm a good dude, you're saying. Give back. Make the world a better place."

"The world is where I live. You want to make my house nicer? How can I help you? Also, when you do good, you make me look good, picking you for my school. I pick enough of you, that's a promotion, money in my pocket."

"What if I'm just doing it to make the most bank I can?"

"Lie."

"I can do that."

"You tell that lie enough, I bet you start to believe it yourself. Domingo, if you keep laying down that story the way you did just now, you'll win every scholarship out there."

"I already got tuition covered. Won a settlement that pays out when I turn eighteen."

"Yeah?"

"Got myself hit by a car. I limp a little, but I get by."

"Once you get this petroleum engineering thing going, I have a second job for you."

"I'm listening."

"You should write books."

"How much does it pay?"

Manhattan, highly selective private school . . .

"What's your dream?"

"Oncology." Call her Kate.

"Why?"

"Why? My father's an oncologist."

"Mine taught English, and I can barely diagram a sentence. That doesn't keep me from running Harvard Medical School in my spare time. For every thirty people who apply, I let in one. Kate, you're the one. You just have to tell me why."

"Why I'm the one?"

"Ever know anybody with cancer?"

"Yes."

"Somebody close?"

Nods, wet eyes.

"Whatever you're seeing right now? Write it down, scene by scene. Zoom in for a close up, a detail that symbolizes how powerless you felt. How empowered. Maybe you're looking out the hospice window. You haven't slept for days. Is the sun setting or rising? This is how your story begins. End it forty years from now, in your prime, with the people you're helping. The middle is the people you'll comfort and save on the way. Pack all that into two minutes, and there's your ticket to a premed program."

Nods, writes and writes and writes so fast.

Brooklyn . . .

They all have individualized education programs, and their hopes are just as varied. They want to be singers and nurses, electricians and vet techs, day care providers, army specialists, wedding dress designers. One wants to be a cop, but Internal Affairs, so she can bust cops. They've written them down, these dreams, and now they're reading them to each other. This giant of a kid, call him Ray, reads, "I know you all think I am retarded. I'm just shy. But I listen to you, and I want us all to make our dreams be real. I am going to design video games. I'm-a get rich and make it so my moms doesn't have to work. I love gaming because when I play, it's the only place they let you be free."

Wet eyes all around, but why? I missed something. I look to Ms. M, Ray's teacher. She whispers that Ray hasn't spoken until today. Now Ray is falling apart, and I have to be a hard ass, take him aside. "Stand tall. Pull your shoulders back. What are you, six-four?"

"Three."

“Stop crying. Breathe. Good. Bring it home.” He does, and he wins cheers and applause. This lights him up. “I’m the man,” he says. “I’m the man.”

Orlando . . .

Call her Elisette. She’s been scribbling away while the rest of us were talking. End of the workshop, she asks for a word. “Can you read this? I mean like now?”

It’s a poem called “My Friend Ana.” I’ll paraphrase in case the poet wants to publish. Nobody ever sat next to Elisette on the bus, until this new girl Ana came along. Ana was quiet, such a good listener, always there for Elisette. They became inseparable.

By the time it hits me she’s writing about anorexia, she’s shaking. “Stand tall. Breathe. This story has a happy ending.”

“How?”

“You’re an amazing writer. You have a ridiculous amount of courage. You’re one-in-a-million. I have zero worries about you.” I tell that lie every time I do this. “Let’s go see Ms. F. She’s gonna help us get the help we need.”

“I don’t want to be friends with her anymore—Ana. She’s messing me up.”

Melbourne...

“What’s your dream?”

“To live like you do.”

“Out of a suitcase?”

“Like an artist.” Call her Steph. “I want to be an actress.”

“You already are. Say it.”

“Can I read you my story?” She takes out her phone. “Wait, you probably don’t like *Twilight*.”

“I love it.” (Especially since my agent sold it.)

“I was born the day Bella died.” She remembers the movie theater sound wasn’t great. You really had to listen, and everyone did. The house was silent as Kristen Stewart gave up her last breath, and Steph realized she wasn’t breathing either. That same day, she did a Web search on, “How do I become an actress?” She has acted in plays.

“I happen to be a casting director for the movies. Your acting is great, but so is everybody else’s. Why should I give the part to you?”

“I want to be famous, okay? I want to be totally rich. But even if that never happens, I have to keep acting. When I’m not acting, life feels fake.”

Brooklyn, secure detention . . .

“What’s your story?”

“Ask somebody else.” Brandon.

“I’m asking you.”

“Okay, it’s like this: I’m going to hell.”

“Look at me. You’re not going to hell.”

“Shut up, man. I shot some jelly head nigger in the face. I executed somebody. Nobody cares what happens to me. That’s my story. Now, tell me where the fuck I’m supposed to go with that.”

I have some ideas, but Brandon’s not up for hearing them just now. He slams his fists on the table, and he’s out of there with more ways to yell fuck than you’ll hear in *Goodfellas*.

Another young man, Kevin, says, “My court date’s next week. I’ll try that ‘you in two.’ Say I go home and get some money. Why should I buy your book?”

“You shouldn’t. Get your books from the library.”

“Then what are you selling?” he says.

Good question. This is one of those days I feel like I’m hustling some second-rate Svengali act that makes a kid remember when all he wants is to forget.

After, I walk for a bit and end up at my grandmother’s house. She died a long time ago, and so did this ramshackle old rental, boarded up, bulldozer food. I sit on what’s left of the back porch steps and crack a beer. I don’t have a good feeling about Brandon’s story. I think it might end in the middle.

Springfield, Illinois . . .

Another torn-out page of spiral notebook handed to me at the end of the day, but this time the kid runs. I get to it that night at the hotel, interesting bedtime reading: “Dear Paul, I have been feeling it build up lately. Im afraid what the results are going to be. Afraid that Im going to do horrible things and throw away everything I’ve workd so hard for. A’s and B’s is my grades. But holding the anger in has been causing anxiety and hate, towards everyone that is blind about the real world.” And there’s: “I want a odd feeling to kick someone in the face and not stoping, I want to show them my rage, I want Them to bleed.” And: “I dont want to just beat someone into the sack of shit they are. My mom doesn’t care as long as I dont kill them.” And: “Im sorry about the hand writing I have a small form of type of dyslexia but I havent really looked into it and Im a horrible speker. Help me find

a way to cope with it. My name is (Joe Smith),” and then he gives his home address.

I have to rat him out, of course. I email the letter to Ms. D, the lovely media specialist who invited me to Joe’s school. And she really is lovely: when she emails back, she doesn’t say Joe will get the help he needs; she “promise(s) he will get the help he deserves.”

With my email to Ms. D, I send a message for Joe, praising his bravery, his writing, the honesty there, the beauty in that. I ask him to understand why I had to forward his story to Ms. D, that she will partner him with someone trained to help him channel his passion and talent, that his remarkable courage will bring him remarkable opportunities.

I won’t hear from Joe, or about him. His situation is medical. Confidentiality laws keep me from learning how his story ends. That’s how it is with most of the kids I meet. I’m with them for a visit, maybe two, and then I’m gone. Sometimes they send letters, but right after the workshops; there’s not enough time in between to see how their stories are playing out, to see if Kenny is letting the game take him to that house full of family in Eastchester or if Domingo is any closer to striking black gold. If Kate’s in med school or if Ray’s still the man, designing the next Call of Duty. If Steph is on her way to the big screen, if Elisette and Ana are

still friends, if Kevin’s story persuaded the judge to assign him to an alternative-to-incarceration program. If Brandon is . . . if Brandon is. And then, every few years, I do get a glimpse of the next chapter.

Manhattan . . .

In my neighborhood, 181st Street is go-to shopping. I’m hurrying in and out of stores, knocking things off the list. A guy behind a counter knows my name, asks if I know his. Call him Shawn. He comes around to say hi. I met him years before in one of the facilities. He looks terrific. What a smile. “You in two,” he says. He hugs me. I feel it, a happy ending, the beginning of the sequel. Maybe it only happens once in a while, but once in a while is enough to make a man rich.

Paul Griffin wrote the YA novels Ten Mile River, The Orange Houses, Stay with Me, Burning Blue, and Adrift. A middle grade novel, Travelers and Magicians, comes out in 2016. He loves working with Behind the Book (behindthebook.org) and Literacy for Incarcerated Teens (literacyforincarceratedteens.org). Visit Paul at paulgriffinstories.com.

Reference

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