There Are No Children Here

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALEX KOTLOWITZ

Raised in New York City, Alex Kotlowitz attended Wesleyan University, Connecticut, where he discovered his passion for reporting on issues of urban life and social policy, in particular race and poverty in America. Throughout his career, Kotlowitz has shown a commitment to delving deep into people's life stories to give voice to the powerless and illustrate larger societal problems. As a *Wall Street Journal* staff writer from 1984 to 1993, Kotlowitz began writing about the difficulties that children face in poor, urban environments. This led him to publish *There Are No Children Here* in 1992, which became a national bestseller and won many awards. In 1998, he published his second book, *The Other Side of the River: A Story of Two Towns, a Death and America's Dilemma*, which explores racial inequality in the United States through a mysterious death in a small town. In addition to the written word, Kotlowitz also uses film and radio to share his reporting—pursuits that have earned him multiple awards. He currently lives with his family just outside of Chicago, Illinois.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The end of the 1980s marked the end of the Cold War, in which the Eastern Bloc (in particular, the Soviet Union) and the Western Bloc (in particular, the United States) opposed each other in an ideological war centered on the two blocs' antagonistic attitudes toward communism. Ronald Reagan, president from 1981 to 1989, is considered by some to have played an important role in bringing an end to the Cold War. In the United States, however, Reagan gave birth to a new kind of war: the War on Drugs. To fight the problem of drug abuse, he focused on criminalization instead of prevention or rehabilitation, signing a bill that established a mandatory minimum sentence for even non-violent drug offenses. However, this policy largely failed to reduce the availability of drugs and, because of differences in sentencing for crack and powder cocaine, proved disproportionately harmful to minorities, especially the African-American population. This led to a phenomenon of mass incarceration of minorities. In parallel, in the 1970s and 1980s, the country experienced urban decay. As white and, later, black middle-class families left city centers to live in safer, more peaceful suburbs, many inner-city urban areas became isolated and impoverished. These phenomena generated feelings of alienation and injustice among inner-city dwellers.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Alex Kotlowitz's second book, *The Other Side of the River* (1998), focuses more specifically on race than *There Are No Children Here*. It uses two neighboring yet racially opposed Michigan towns as an illustration of a problem that affects the country as a whole: the conflict of narratives and the difficulty of fostering communication and empathy between whites and blacks in the US. Published one year later, *The Freedom Writers Diary* (1999), written by Erin Gruwell and her group of students, provides a more optimistic view of race relations. Giving a voice to adolescents whose life experiences are rarely publicized, the book recounts the true story of a group of high school students who live in a violent, gang-filled neighborhood in Los Angeles but find and hope and strength through education. Focusing more specifically on the black community, Ta-Nehisi Coates's autobiography, *Between the World and Me* (2015), examines structural foundations for racial discrimination in the US. He uses his own experience of growing up in a violent neighborhood in Baltimore to reflect on the vulnerability of African Americans, who are constantly threatened by abusive police and the dangers in the street.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America
- **When Written:** 1985-1990
- **Where Written:** Chicago, Illinois
- **When Published:** 1991
- **Literary Period:** Post-Modernism
- **Genre:** Non-Fiction, Essay, Biographical writing
- **Setting:** The Henry Horner Homes, a public housing complex on the outskirts of Chicago, Illinois
- **Climax:** Horner residents learn that Craig Davis has been shot by a police officer at the same time as Pharoah finishes second in his school's spelling bee
- **Antagonist:** While gangs are strongly responsible for the climate of violence at Henry Horner, the police is also at times seen as an oppressive, potentially brutal force. More generally, negative factors impacting people's lives at Horner are poverty, drug trafficking and abuse, and lack of help from institutions.
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Zoology. At Wesleyan University, Alex Kotlowitz initially wanted to study zoology before realizing that his true calling was journalism.

The Interrupters. Alex Kotlowitz's movie *The Interrupters*, released in 2011, expands on themes broached in *There Are No Children Here* by focusing on the issue of gang violence from a more optimistic angle of social policy and activism. It follows a group of social leaders who use their own experience with gang life to stop (or "interrupt") violence in inner-city neighborhoods.

PLOT SUMMARY

For two years, from the summers of 1987 to 1989, journalist Alex Kotlowitz follows the lives of two young children, Lafeyette and Pharoah Rivers, who live in a public housing complex in Chicago. When Kotlowitz first writes about them, Pharoah is nine and Lafeyette twelve. They live at the Henry Horner Homes (which they usually refer to as "the projects" or "the ghetto") in an environment marked by constant fear and gang violence. Over the years, the two brothers face near-constant insecurity and emotional trauma, as they are forced to watch their friends die and often protect their own lives, which are also at risk.

Their mother, LaJoe Rivers, has lived at Horner for decades. She moved into the newly built Henry Horner Homes in the 1950s, during a period in which residents had hope on the future and in the community. Even though the public housing complex was built at the outskirts of Chicago, isolated from the central institutions in the city, the entire Horner community learned to organize to protect the well-being of the neighborhood's residents, fighting for better schools, healthcare, and security. Soon, however, the development of gangs, especially Jimmy Lee's Conservative Vice Lords, put people's lives at risk, generating a culture of fear and retribution in which neighbors gradually lost trust in each other. As drug trafficking and gang rivalry intensified, community bonds were destroyed. People learned to retreat into themselves, trusting only their closest family members and friends for care and support.

The evolution of LaJoe's family life mirrors this general decline. After meeting Paul Rivers at the age of fourteen, LaJoe soon becomes pregnant and, in the space of a few years, gives birth to LaShawn, Paul ("Weasel"), and Terence. She then marries Paul Rivers but soon discovers that her husband has become addicted to drugs. As a result, her marriage crumbles and, from that moment onward, LaJoe singlehandedly takes care of her numerous children. In addition to her husband, her children, too, later disappoint her. All three of them drop out of school, have problems with drugs, and run into trouble with the law. LaShawn becomes addicted to drugs, supporting her habit with occasional prostitution, and Weasel is incarcerated for participating in a burglary.

Of the three children, it is Terence whose life choices most affect LaJoe. The two of them are extraordinarily close until the birth of LaJoe's younger children, Lafeyette, Pharoah, and the triplets, when Terence begins to feel that his mother is not giving him enough love and attention. In reaction, at the age of nine, Terence leaves the house. A local drug dealer, Charles, adopts him and uses him to sell drugs. Even though both LaJoe and Paul try on various occasions to convince their son to come back, Terence remains involved in a variety of illegal activities throughout his youth. Ultimately, he is sentenced to eight years in prison for his alleged participation in a burglary.

To compensate for these past failures, LaJoe decides to put all her effort and trust into Lafeyette and Pharoah, whom she hopes will not grow up to become like their older siblings. She also relies on twelve-year-old Lafeyette for emotional support, often confiding in him beyond what his young mind can take. Lafeyette worries so much about his family that he takes on a parental role toward his younger siblings, and his desire to protect the ones he loves sometimes expresses itself in overly aggressive ways.

The summer of 1987 proves particularly violent in the neighborhood. Multiple shootings cause the Rivers family to seek refuge in their hallway, far from windows where bullets may pass through. Lafayette's life changes significantly when his friend Bird Leg dies, as this marks the beginning of what Horner residents call the "death train" in Lafeyette's life. Bird Leg, a fifteen-year-old boy, who had recently joined the Vice Lords and had become passionate about gang rivalry, is killed at point-blank by a member of the Disciples, a rival gang, during a dispute. Later, at the young boy's funeral, which takes place at a storefront church away from the neighborhood so that the Disciples will not interrupt the ceremony, Jimmie Lee himself is present. Pharaoh cries during the ceremony, but Lafeyette remains stoic, incapable of expressing his grief. After the funeral, he and his friend James share their conviction that that they might die soon.

Overwhelmed by the violence around them, the two Rivers brothers develop different reactions to the general insecurity of their lives. Pharoah develops a stutter whose intensity is directly related to his fear. Pharoah feel so embarrassed by his stutter that he rarely speaks. Unlike his brother's visible signs of emotional trauma, Lafeyette begins to hide his emotions. Convinced that life at Horner is unpredictable and that friends can die or turn on him at any moment, he tells his mother that he will no longer have friends, only "associates," since he does not trust people enough to consider them friends.

Pharoah's only refuge from the chaos of the neighborhood is school and academia. When he is chosen to participate in the school's spelling bee, he feels immensely proud. On the day of the contest, however, he becomes overwhelmed by nervous excitement and, because of his stutter, finds himself unable to articulate a word, which leads him to be eliminated. Instead of

letting this event discourage him, though, he resolves to work even harder to win next year's spelling bee. In the meantime, he makes a new friend, Rickey, who is known for getting into fights but gives Pharoah some protection. While Lafeyette initially disapproves of this relationship, fearing that Rickey might be a bad influence for his little brother, he, too, becomes fond of Rickey.

Meanwhile, Terence is arrested for his alleged participation in a robbery, even though he professes his innocence and his entire family believes him. Around the same time, the Public Aid Department retracts LaJoe's welfare benefits after receiving some information that Paul Rivers sometimes sleeps in her apartment. LaJoe resigns herself to this decision but shares her worries with Lafeyette. Soon, she realizes that she is making her son overly stressed, turning him into what she calls "a twelve-year-old man."

Some positive developments still bring hope to the Rivers family. At Horner, a young man named Craig Davis sets up turntables in front of the Riverses' building, encouraging residents to come out and dance, thus providing residents with one of the few moments of freedom and joy that they have ever experienced. Craig impresses Lafeyette with his open attitude and his respect for the young boy's opinions. More generally, Craig displays a positive attitude toward life, as he is committed to working hard in the hope of one day buying a house far from the projects. He tells Lafeyette to work hard at school and stay away from gangs, and Lafeyette looks up to him. Other exciting events involve LaJoe's niece Dawn's graduation from high school, which the children find inspiring, and LaJoe's successful reapplication for welfare.

Over time, the boys struggle to protect themselves from problems in the neighborhood. As Lafeyette becomes closer to Rickey, he also begins to suffer from the boy's bad influence. The two of them are caught shoplifting, which marks Lafeyette's first trouble with the law. At the nearby stadium, where many neighborhood boys try to earn some money by helping people park their cars, Lafeyette suffers from a violent encounter with a policeman, who grabs him and throws him into a puddle for no reason. This causes Lafeyette to become even more suspicious of the police. Pharoah, too, is moved to think about social issues. Reflecting on the inequality between the white stadium goers and himself, he wonders if all black people are poor and live in the projects.

However, Lafeyette's problems with the police do not end there. He feels most angry against the police and the justice system when Craig Davis is wrongfully killed by a policeman. Craig's death devastates Lafeyette and marks a turning point in his life. He becomes even more introverted, temperamental, and unwilling to express his emotions. He believes that Craig's death is deeply unfair and that he, too, could be killed anytime, despite having done nothing wrong. Unfortunately, the Rivers family learns of Craig's death on the very same day that Pharoah participates in his second spelling bee—in which, after many weeks of hard work, he earns second place. The boy's happiness and pride, however, is overshadowed by his family's sadness at Craig's death.

In the next few weeks, the local manager of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) discovers a nightmarish scene in the basement, where rotting appliances lie in puddles of water amid excrements and the bodies of dead animals. This situation explains many of the building's problems and leads the CHA to finally take action and improve residents' lives. Vincent Lane, the new head of the CHA, tries to regain control over gang-dominated buildings so that he might renovate them and make them more secure.

Despite these encouraging developments, however, the Rivers family receives an additional blow when, one night, at the stadium, Lafeyette is arrested with four other boys for allegedly breaking into a parked truck. Despite insisting that he is innocent, Lafeyette is deemed guilty, along with the four other boys. This episode only fuels his anger at the injustice of life.

In the Epilogue, Alex Kotlowitz describes what has happened in the year since Lafeyette's arrest. He explains that he has personally helped Lafeyette and Pharoah attend a private school in the area where Pharoah thrives but Lafeyette has struggled to keep up with the workload and, as a result, has had to return to public school. Although Lafeyette has succeeded in graduating from eighth grade, he has also been caught smoking marijuana before school, and LaJoe is worried that he might fall prey to the neighborhood's bad influences. At Horner, too, the CHA's success is mitigated by its lack of funds, which keeps it from renovating and securing all the buildings at Horner. The characters' lives, then, like the future of their neighborhood, remains largely uncertain, vulnerable to the oscillations of chance but also to the positive influence of people's strong will, determination, and hard work.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

LaJoe Rivers – A mother of eight, LaJoe devotes most of her life to protecting her children from the dangers of the neighborhood. She has her first child at fourteen and, after her husband, Paul, becomes addicted to drugs, she is soon forced to care for her growing family on her own. Her older children include LaShawn, Weasel, and Terence, and her younger children include Lafeyette, Pharoah, and the triplets. Characterized by an inability to say no to people, she often takes on more responsibilities than she can handle—like agreeing to raise vulnerable children in the neighborhood in addition to her own children. Her shyness and frequent feelings of despondency also keep her from defending herself and her

family against certain problems, like retaining her welfare benefits or keeping even people from moving into her cramped apartment. The stress of living at Horner, in an environment of poverty and near-constant violence, often weighs on her and occasionally leads her to loses her temper against her children. Overall, though, she remains committed to accompanying her children through the various moments of their life, however exciting or difficult.

Lafeyette Rivers – At twelve years old, Lafeyette is LaJoe's closest confidante. He is a devoted older brother to Pharoah and the triplets, and is a younger brother to LaShawn, Weasel, and Terence. Lafeyette works hard to reduce his mother's stress and take care of his younger siblings, protecting them from shootings and negative influences that permeate the neighborhood. At the same time, this causes him to become overcome by stress and, like his mother, to give in to anger when he feels overwhelmed. The deaths of his friends Bird Leg and Craig Davis cause him to turn inward and to keep his emotions to himself. Upset by the violence around him, he develops an increasingly cynical attitude toward life, believing that friends are not reliable and should therefore be considered mere "associates," and trusting that he is probably going to die young instead of growing up into an adult.

Pharoah Rivers – LaJoe and Paul's nine-year-old son, Pharoah (whose name is a misspelling of the Egyptian "Pharaoh"), is the Rivers family's success story, as his hard work at school pays off, allowing him for example to place second in the school's spelling bee. Like Lafeyette, though, Pharoah suffers from the trauma caused by the near-constant violence at Horner. After a series of shootings in the neighborhood, Pharoah develops a stutter whose intensity is proportional to his fear. To shield himself from the effects of death and injustice, though, he clings onto his childhood, keeping himself from thinking about difficult events and often claiming that he is too young to understand what is happening around him. At the same time, he is characterized by a fierce determination to succeed at school, improve his life, and make his family proud, hoping one day to escape the projects. His siblings include Lafeyette, the triplets, Terence, Weasel, and LaShawn.

Terence Rivers – LaJoe's third son, Terence, is also her greatest disappointment. Despite sharing an extraordinarily close relationship with his mother, Terence leaves the house at the age of ten and begins selling drugs for a local drug dealer, Charles, who takes him under his wing. As a teenager, he runs into many problems with the law, which ultimately result in an eight-year sentence for burglary. However, throughout these ordeals, Terence remains loyal to his family. He often expresses his love to his mother and younger brothers (Pharoah and Lafeyette), as well as his desire to help the family out financially.

Paul Rivers – LaJoe's husband, to whom she is still married after seventeen years, only visits his family sporadically. Both LaJoe and her children, especially Lafeyette and Pharoah, feel resentful toward Paul for choosing drugs over his family. Paul does not actively participate in family life and has stolen and sold some of the family's belongings to buy drugs. Paul understands his family's grievances and often adopts an attitude of self-pity and despondency, as he blames himself for his family's situation but does not believe himself capable of overcoming his addiction to drugs and alcohol. Nevertheless, he does occasionally defend his children and, through his presence, constitutes a rare example of fatherhood in the neighborhood, as many children at Horner are forced to grow up without a father.

Alex Kotlowitz – The narrator and author of *There are No Children Here*. Kotlowitz's friendship with the Rivers family began while he was working on the written content for a photographer's essay on childhood and poverty, which featured a photo of Lafeyette and Pharoah. Two years later, Kotlowitz began writing an article in *The Wall Street Journal* about urban violence's impact on children. To do so, Kotlowitz spent a large amount of time with Lafeyette and Pharoah. With LaJoe's permission, Kotlowitz then began writing a book so that Horner residents' stories could be brought to public attention.

Rickey – A tough, violent student at Pharoah's school, Rickey takes a liking to Pharoah and defends him against other students. Pharoah and Lafeyette both befriend Rickey, but they also try to distance themselves from Rickey's illegal, often violent activities, which lead to his arrest on many occasions. Rickey harbors a deep anger against the world and uses violence as an outlet for his feelings of frustration and injustice, especially after his cousin Bird Leg's death. At the same time, he mourns the innocence of his childhood, and wishes he could be young again to make different choices in life.

Calvin "Bird Leg" Robinson – Lafeyette's friend Bird Leg is a dog lover who, over time, becomes involved with the Conservative Vice Lords gang. Although he never sells drugs, he becomes passionate about gang rivalry and, at the age of fifteen, is killed by a member of the Disciples, a rival gang, during a dispute. Even though Lafeyette had started distancing himself from Bird Leg when he joined a gang, Bird Leg's death impacts him deeply, marking the beginning of a long series of deaths of people close to the Rivers family.

Craig Davis – Perhaps the only person Lafeyette considers a true friend and not a mere "associate," Craig Davis brings joy and positivity to the Horner community. Characterized by an optimistic trust in his own potential to one day escape the projects, he also believes in strong principles: working hard in school and staying away from gangs. His openness impacts Lafeyette deeply, inspiring to follow Craig's life path. When Craig is killed because of what appears to be a policeman's mistake, Lafeyette is grief-stricken and never fully recovers from the trauma of such an unjust death.

Rochelle – LaJoe's only and closest friend, Rochelle, plays an important role in her life. Rochelle is devoted to LaJoe's family and is "like a second mother" to Lafeyette and Pharoah. She often tries to support the Rivers family emotionally and financially. She does not have a steady job but organizes monthly card games that give her enough money to live.

James Howard – James is initially a close friend of Lafeyette's, and the two of them live in the same building and have grown up together. James is more athletic and easygoing than Lafeyette. Even though the two of them spend a lot of their time together, when James moves to another housing complex, Lafeyette shows little emotion, accepting that people he cares about are bound to abandon him.

Leonard "Porkchop" Anderson – Pharoah's cousin and closest friend, Porkchop, is a couple of years younger than him. Unlike Pharoah, who is often more reserved, Porkchop initially seems shy but is animated by a strong, nervous energy. The two of them are inseparable and usually do all of their activities together, from playing basketball at Horner to working by the stadium for some pocket money.

Dawn – Dawn, LaJoe's niece, is a rare success story in the Rivers family. Despite already having four children with her boyfriend, Demetrius, she succeeds in graduating from high school, impressing Lafeyette and Pharoah with her achievement. She is a hardworking student and responsible mother, and does not give up on her hope to leave the projects. Despite struggling to find a stable job, she and Demetrius ultimately manage to leave Horner.

Jimmie Lee – Jimmie Lee is the head of the Conservative Vice Lords gang and reigns through fear over the Henry Horner Homes, as he controls the trafficking of drugs, the punishment of "snitchers," and the defense of his territory against rival gangs. At the same time, he impresses Horner residents with his gentlemanly attitude, his refusal to let young adolescents join his gang, and his surprisingly moderate use of drugs and alcohol. Despite seemingly having more control over Horner than the police, Lee is finally arrested and condemned to thirty years in prison for drug trafficking.

Lelia Mae Anderson – Originally from West Virginia, LaJoe's mother, Lelia, leaves the South to find a job in Chicago. After moving into the Henry Horner Homes, she is active in the local Democratic Party, but moves out of Horner after LaJoe's sister is murdered. Paralyzed by a stroke, she then moves back into LaJoe's apartment but promptly leaves Horner again because of the overcrowded apartment and the neighborhood's violence.

Audrey Natcone – Terence's lawyer proves devoted to her client. Impressed by Terence's professions of innocence and his strong relationship with his family, she feels sorry for Terence's plight and fights to reduce his sentence. She does not give up on the young man, even after he is arrested again for armed robbery, instead trusting that her duty is to defend him at all costs.

Anne Rhodes – The public defender in charge of Lafeyette's trial seems unfriendly and harsh but is actually moved by a desire to do the best she can in difficult circumstances, as she lacks the time and resources to best defend her clients. She is a perceptive observer and becomes convinced that most of the accused boys are innocent. In the end, though, she feels despondent about the justice system and criticizes its failure to protect vulnerable children.

Charles – A local drug dealer who takes nine-year-old Terence under his wing, giving him a well-furnished room to live in, Charles teaches Terence to sell drugs and decides that he has become his own son. Eventually, though, Terence tires of belonging to Charles and wants to return to his own family.

Alonzo Campbell – At Horner, Alonzo is shot in the head by a stray bullet. His experience with violence contrasts sharply with another shooting that takes place at the same time in the country and, unlike Alonzo's plight, receives widespread media attention, thus demonstrating the ordinary nature of violence in inner-city neighborhoods such as the Henry Horner Homes.

MINOR CHARACTERS

LaShawn Rivers – LaJoe's oldest child, LaShawn, is addicted to drugs and occasionally uses prostitution to finance her drug habit. She moves back in with LaJoe and often leaves the house without warning, thus forcing LaJoe or Lafeyette to look over LaShawn's own children, Tyisha, Baldheaded, and DeShaun.

Paul "Weasel" Rivers – Weasel is LaJoe's second-oldest child. Although Weasel is mentioned very little in the story, he occasionally demonstrates his loyalty to his family by defending LaJoe from Keith, a man in the neighborhood who was assaulting her, and giving Lafeyette and Pharoah puppies as a present.

The Triplets (Tiffany, Tammie, Timothy) – The triplets are LaJoe's youngest children, who are four years old at the beginning of the narrative.

Demetrius – Unlike many young men in the neighborhood, Dawn's boyfriend, Demetrius, is devoted to his family and takes care of his children, sacrificing himself so that Dawn can finish high school while he earns his GED.

Terence "Snuggles" Rivers – Terence's first son, whom Terence has at the age of fourteen, experiences the harrowing event of seeing his father taken away from him when Terence is arrested.

Tyisha – LaShawn's seven-year-old daughter. Her siblings are Darrel and DeShaun.

Darrel "Baldheaded" – LaShawn's one-year-old son. His siblings are Tyisha and DeShaun.

DeShaun – LaShawn's son, who is born in 1989 with opiates and cocaine in his system. His siblings are Tyisha and Darrel.

Roy Anderson – LaJoe's father, who is also originally from the American South, dies of cancer a few years after leaving Horner with his wife, Lelia.

Brian – LaShawn's boyfriend sells fake jewelry to tourists at the airport. He lives in LaJoe's apartment.

Larry – Brian's brother also lives in LaJoe's apartment.

Diana Barone – Pharoah's teacher is a passionate educator who devotes an extraordinary amount of energy to her students. Admiring Pharoah's determination to speak clearly despite his stutter, she gives him responsibilities throughout the school year, noting the pride and joy he takes in performing well at school.

Clarise Gates – The star pupil in Ms. Barone's class, Clarise develops a deep partnership with Pharoah as both students prepare for the school's spelling bee. An unusually mature student, Clarise proves deeply committed to helping Pharoah succeed, encouraging him in a motherly fashion and feeling proud of Pharoah's achievements.

Andrea Muchin – Like many other legal workers, the state's attorney at Lafeyette's trial is also horrified by the lack of attention that is paid to children in court cases, even though these children desperately need it.

Charlie Toussas – Charlie Toussas, a plainclothes policeman, knows Jimmie Lee well and respects Lee's gentlemanly attitude. When he sees Lee lead a group of Conservative Vice Lords to take revenge on the Disciples for Bird Leg's death, he succeeds in convincing the gang leader to avoid violent retaliation.

Mario Vera – The assistant manager at the store where Rickey and Lafeyette are discovered shoplifting behaves kindly toward them, realizing that Lafeyette seems sincerely apologetic. Embracing compassion instead of punishment, he decides not to press charges against the boys.

Urica Winder – This eight-year-old girl is stabbed forty-eight times by two young boys of Horner, who also murder her family. Overcoming a culture of silence and fear, she testifies at the young men's trial, impressing everyone with her extraordinary courage and calmness.

Christine – Craig Davis's mother proves persistent in her desire to seek justice for her son's death, as she plans to file a lawsuit against the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.

Dede – Lafeyette and Pharoah's nine-year-old cousin, who dates Rickey for a while.

Dutt – The mother of Craig Davis's girlfriend.

The Soto Brothers – Two brothers from Horner who were killed by the police on two separate days in 1969. Their deaths, which local residents considered unfair and unjustified, sparked riots against the police.

Damien "Scooter" Russell – One of Lafeyette's friends, who is killed in a car accident, as the driver was trying to escape from the police.

Jane Byrne – Mayor of Chicago in the early 1980s, Jane Byrne moves into Horner for a few weeks to enforce order, thus highlighting the dramatically violent situation of inner-city, public housing complexes in Chicago.

Jeff Fort – Jeff Fort, the head of El Rukns, an African-American street gang, is initially seen as a potential force for good in poor inner-city neighborhoods, but is later convicted of conspiracy in 1987.

Brenda Daigre – The principal at Henry Suder Elementary School, the school that Lafeyette and Pharoah attend, succeeds in establishing discipline at school but is sometimes seen as overly harsh in her punishments. However, she has also created a renowned program to send a dozen students to Africa over the summer.

Ruby Everage – Lafeyette's teacher demonstrates her emotional commitment to her students by allowing Lafeyette to stay after class and talk to her about his troubles at home and in the neighborhood. She is perceptive and notices that Lafeyette spends a lot of his time worrying about his family.

Michael Berger – The man whose truck Lafeyette and four other boys are accused of breaking into.

Jimmie Lee's Lawyer – The lawyer who represents gang leader Jimmie Lee when he is tried for drug trafficking. Jimmie Lee's lawyer points out that simply ridding the neighborhood of Lee won't erase the large-scale problems of drug trafficking and gang violence.

Carla Palmore A friend of Bird Leg. At Bird Leg's funeral, Carla gives a speech in which she makes clear that Bird Leg is not simply a member of a gang, but rather a young man whose future was ripped away from him.

Keith A man in the neighborhood who threatens and even assaults LaJoe to try to force her into accepting his sexual advances. Weasel takes it into his own hands to defend his mother, and attacks Keith until Keith begs for mercy.

Gwen Anderson A new building manager at Horner who discovers immense negligence and waste by those who are supposed to support and maintain the development.

Vincent Lane A new chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority. He works hard to improve the situation at Horner, with some success. But he faces immense funding and institutional obstacles.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes

occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FAMILY, LOVE, AND CARE

At Henry Horner Homes (also known as the "ghetto" or the "projects") in Chicago, family can never be fully separate from the exterior environment. While LaJoe Rivers hopes that she will succeed in keeping her children away from the drugs and gangs that plague their neighborhood, she realizes that she does not necessarily have the power to keep her family away from negative pressures. However, even though LaJoe feels disappointed in some of her children's life choices, she continues to give them love, care, and support throughout their life. Instead of giving up on her family, LaJoe remains present for her children, accompanying them through various ordeals, from struggles with drug addiction to arrests and incarceration. Her behavior shows that true commitment to family means giving people unwavering love and loyalty in good times as well as bad, providing emotional support even in a deeply unstable, insecure environment.

LaJoe's inability to fully protect her children from drugs and crime does not reflect a lack of motherly care. Instead, it is an illustration of the overwhelming power of the negative pressures at play in her children's environment. At Henry Horner, so many families "lose" their children to neighborhood drug trafficking and gang rivalry that "a common expression among the mothers at Horner is: 'He ain't my child no more'" when children abandon their families to take part in criminal activities. Mothers' desire for their children to grow up safely is insufficient in ensuring that their children will actually escape the web of illegal activity in the projects. Instead, families learn to accept that they cannot control everything that happens to their children, and that some will inevitably fall prey to illegal behavior.

LaJoe's favorite son, Terence, begins selling drugs for a local drug dealer when he is only ten years old, which separates him from his mother and the rest of the family. This comes as a major disappointment to LaJoe, as she felt closest to Terence and failed at protecting him from the outside world. When Terence is sent to eight years in jail for alleged participation in a burglary, LaJoe is forced to accept that she can't always keep her children on the right path. However, none of these events can be directly attributed to lack of love or care among members of the Rivers family. LaJoe's relationship with Terence is one of "extraordinary closeness" and, on multiple occasions, both LaJoe and even her mostly-absent husband, Paul Rivers, attempt to convince Terence to abandon his illegal activities. Despite their efforts, Terence's choices demonstrates that there are limits to parental care, and that a child's destiny is not necessarily directly correlated to parental involvement. Rather, Terence's illegal activities and eventual incarceration highlight the difficulty—and even the impossibility—of maintaining a stable family unit in a world filled with negative external pressures.

Instead of giving up on her children because she can't effectively shield them from their dangerous environment, LaJoe keeps her family united through her tireless love and care. Her actions, as well as her impact on her children, shows that love should not be affected by external circumstances. Unlike mothers who disown their children when they join gangs or deal drugs, LaJoe stays by her children's side even in their darkest moments. Such commitment is rare in the projects, and public defender Audrey Natcone is impressed by the mutual love and respect that animates the Rivers family. Most of Audrey's clients are left alone at court, but LaJoe always makes a point to accompany her son on his court dates, showing that her motherly love endures even in difficult situations.

LaJoe's love and unwavering support imbues the family with a feeling of unity and stability. This consequently inspires her own children to support one another in return, thus strengthening the family as a whole. Even when he is sent to prison, Terence writes long letters to his mother and his younger brothers Lafeyette and Pharoah to remind them how much he loves them. Even though Terence has spent a lot of time away from his family, he remains unshakeable in his commitment to being a loving son and brother—a behavior that his mother modeled for him by loving and supporting him regardless of the circumstances. In turn, Terence's brothers continue to look up to him, refusing to use Terence's separation from his family as an excuse to show him less affection.

Lafeyette also demonstrates a strong loyalty to his family that mirrors that of his mother. Even though he is one of the youngest children in the family, Lafeyette takes on a fatherly role toward his brother Pharoah and the young triplets as he tries to protect them from the neighborhood's violence, just like his mother did for him. Although Lafeyette occasionally lashes out against Pharoah, both boys know that their greatest responsibility is to protect each other. "It wasn't that Lafeyette and [the younger children] didn't get along; it was that he worried about them, like a father worrying about his children." Lafeyette's love and efforts at protection illustrate how the Rivers family is able to maintain relative emotional stability in a chaotic, dangerous environment.

Despite the toxic, dangerous environment at Henry Horner, LaJoe succeeds in maintaining a degree of stability and unity in her family. She remains a pillar in her children's lives throughout all of their ups and downs, ultimately inspiring them to treat one another with the same unflappable loyalty and love. The novel praises LaJoe for showing her children tireless love and care even when they seem undeserving. Even though she can't fully insulate her children from their environment, LaJoe serves as an example for readers, encouraging them to

remain similarly committed to their family even in difficult times.

VIOLENCE AND GROWING UP

Lafayette and Pharoah grow up in a public housing complex in Chicago where gun violence—the result of drug trafficking and gang rivalry—is part of ordinary life. Everyone at Henry Horner Homes grows up knowing friends and family members who have either been killed or have joined the ranks of brutal gangs. Even though many people in the neighborhood build resilience and develop techniques to deal with the frequent shootings and aggression, *There are No Children Here* argues that the greatest violence children face at Horner is not necessarily physical but, rather, mental and emotional. While a fatal bullet can take away a child's life in an instant, the constant threat of death can slowly destroy life from within, forcing children to give up their childlike innocence and joy in the simple effort to survive. This less visible, more pernicious effect of violence is just as cruel and unfair as death itself, as it deprives children the opportunity to actually be children.

Children at Horner are forced to deal with the near-constant threat of death. However, the mental and emotional pain they face as a result of their violent neighborhood is just as detrimental—and sometimes more so—than the physical violence itself. During the course of their childhood, Lafayette and Pharoah are often forced to hide near school, in their building, and even within the enclosed space of their own home in order to escape shootings unscathed. In the apartment, they know to lie down on the hallway floor, far from windows, whenever the sound of gunfire is heard, as bullets have gone through the apartment in the past. These automatic physical reactions reveal the customary nature of violence in their neighborhood. In this way, the boys have to constantly deal with the mental and emotional impacts of hiding from the bullets rather than the physical impacts of the bullets themselves.

Pharoah refuses to even acknowledge the violence and injustice that makes up his everyday life, which is a coping technique that puts him under severe mental and emotional strain. He soon develops a stutter whose intensity is directly related to his fear, showing how his mental and emotional pain slowly corrodes even his speech. By contrast, Rickey, one of Pharoah's friends, paradoxically reacts to violence by immersing himself deeper into it, showing that the emotional impact of violence is just as dangerous as the violence itself. "Often, when Rickey became embroiled in a fight, he began to relive [his friend] Bird Leg's last minutes, and as he did so, his anger turned to rage. In class, he once choked another child so long and hard that, in the words of Pharoah, 'he put him to sleep.'" Rickey turns his frustration and pain regarding the violence that surrounds him into more violence.

One of the less visible, more pernicious effects of violence is the way in which it deprives young children of their own youth. Physical violence—and its mental and emotional repercussions—forces children to grow up too quickly, thus essentially "killing" their right to exist as carefree, curious children. Overwhelmed by the stress of helping his mother cope with violence and poverty, Lafeyette finds that his role as his mother's confidant weighs heavily on him, and he soon loses much of his youthful energy and innocence. "The things I should of been talking to Paul about I was talking to Lafie. [...] [He] became a twelve-year-old man," LaJoe confesses. The strain of family life thus places Lafeyette in an awkward position between child and adult. While he sometimes refuses to engage in what he considers childish activities, at other times he expresses regret for not being able to behave as an ordinary child.

Immersed in violence at a young age, Rickey soon decides to join gang life. "Rickey told Lafeyette he wished he were younger, that he were eight years old again. 'Just to skip over things that I did,' he told him. To make different choices. Rickey mourned for his lost childhood." Rickey realizes that his early experiences with violence have marked him for life, depriving him of a period of innocence in which he could have chosen a different future for himself.

After the brutal deaths of various close friends, Lafeyette feels that death can strike at any moment, regardless of how well one behaves in life. "I ain't doing nothing, I could get killed, or if not get killed I might go to jail for something I didn't do. I could die any minute," Lafeyette concludes. Grappling with the mental and emotional impacts of violence makes Lafeyette feel that life is purposeless. Instead of enjoying a carefree childhood, Lafeyette is forced to process a great deal of emotional trauma and accept the inevitability of his death. Although death is cruel in taking away the physical lives of those who have died, the constant threat of death is sometimes equally cruel. This threat, along with the emotional pain that accompanies it, permanently cripples the children at Horner.

PERSISTENCE, LUCK, AND SUCCESS

At Henry Horner Homes in Chicago, most inhabitants classify success as one day escaping their violence-filled, gang-controlled neighborhood and living a peaceful life somewhere else. For Horner residents, achieving success is a difficult process that requires a combination of determination, willpower, and luck. Using LaJoe's niece, Dawn, and Pharoah as examples, the novel argues that succeeding in school and in life requires sustained commitment and persistence more than it does intelligence and talent. However, though important, academic success and persistence is insufficient in determining one's future. To truly achieve success, Horner residents must also stay away from

drugs, crime, and violence, which requires a combination of willpower and sheer luck.

The experiences of Pharoah and Dawn, the two most striking success stories in the Rivers family, demonstrate that sheer persistence, more than raw intelligence or talent alone, is a crucial impulse behind success in school and beyond. When Pharoah participates in his first spelling bee, he is overcome with stress and begins to panic and stutter, which leads him to lose the competition. However, instead of feeling discouraged and giving up, he puts all his effort in preparing for the second spelling bee. During many months, he trains himself to relax and to speak slowly so that he will not stutter when asked to spell a word. He finishes second in his second spelling bee, proving that hard work and persistence are necessary for one's talents to come to light. It is Pharoah's constant practice and fierce determination—not his ability to memorize words—that allow him to win the spelling bee and to keep on investing in his academic life.

LaJoe's niece, Dawn, further shows that hard work and determination must not end with school. When Dawn graduates from high school, everyone in her family assumes that she will immediately be able to leave Horner. However, despite her intelligence and academic success, Dawn soon finds herself struggling to find a job and is forced to accept any employment opportunity she can find, however temporary. Like Pharoah, though, she does not give in to discouragement. Dawn and her boyfriend, Demetrius, remain committed to their goals, and through hard work, they are both able to relocate to a quieter housing complex, which is a significant achievement. Their story demonstrates that perseverance and hard work—not necessarily talent and intelligence—are essential in order to achieve success.

At Horner, one's capacity to stay out of violent and illegal activities is just as important to achieving success as remaining persistent and dedicated to one's goals. However, this ability to remain out of trouble is in part the product of strong will and, often, too, of sheer luck. Despite his desire to escape from Horner, Lafeyette seems to lack the will to distance himself entirely from the negative pressures of the neighborhood, which jeopardizes his ability to escape Horner and build a healthy, successful life for himself elsewhere. Over time, Lafeyette finds himself increasingly drawn into the dangerous environment of the housing projects. At fifteen, he is caught smoking marijuana before school. In a neighborhood where drugs are so intimately tied to substance abuse, death, and gang violence, this is a dangerous behavior for Lafeyette to adopt, capable of compromising his successes at school, such as his successful graduation from eighth grade.

Craig Davis's story demonstrates that even the most non-violent, promising individuals can fall prey to the violence of the neighborhood without intending to. This young man, who sets up turntables in front of the Rivers' building for everyone to come out and dance, provides the community with rare moments of lightheartedness and joy. Lafeyette looks up to him, and Craig repeatedly tells the young boy to stay away from gangs and to work hard at school so that he might one day leave the projects. However, Craig's positive attitude does not protect him from senseless brutality. When he dies as a result of a police blunder, it becomes apparent that, in the projects, even the most peaceful individuals can fall prey to the violence in the neighborhood. Therefore, to survive at Horner and eventually escape it, one must be endowed with hope and conviction, but also, sadly, with sheer luck.

Success at Horner is a fragile achievement, as escaping the lures of the neighborhood requires long-standing commitment to one's goals and non-violence, but also sheer luck—the capacity to avoid being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In such a chaotic context, the difficulty of trusting in oneself and believing in the near-impossible—leaving the neighborhood—means that only few people are ever truly able to escape the oppressive environment they have grown up in. This may seem pessimistic, but the novel actually shows success in a more realistic light. While individuals have control over their own determination and willpower, other uncontrollable factors, such as luck, also dictate success.

JUSTICE AND THE LAW

At the dangerous Henry Horner Homes neighborhood on the outskirts of Chicago, gangs often have greater authority than the police, and the law's capacity to protect residents is limited. It's no wonder, then, that Horner residents regard police with suspicion. What's more, the flawed justice system often has the opposite effect than the one it tries to achieve: it breeds anger and resentment and, in this way, often lays the foundation for greater violence. The root of Horner's problems is not necessarily the violence itself but, rather, the lack of trust that the law generates in the very citizens it is supposed to protect. In order to function effectively, the law must generate trust in the people it works with, proving that the police is accountable for its actions and that the courts are fair.

At Horner, residents do not trust that the law effectively condemns crimes and ensures people's safety. Instead, the law can preserve and, at times, perpetuate injustice. In a neighborhood in which gangs have near-total power and sometimes directly target police officers, few residents actually trust the police to solve their problems, since giving them information about crimes might lead to retribution from gangs. In addition, police officers only operate in the neighborhood during the day, whereas gangs exert their control day and night. The police's limited influence and authority contributes to the residents' overall distrust of law enforcement.

In addition, the police has perpetrated injustice in the past. Horner residents remember the late 1960s, when, during a

period of intense community activism, the police killed two African-American brothers (the Soto brothers) on separate days without—according to Horner residents—any apparent motive. Barely two months after people rose up to denounce these actions, the police killed two prominent local Black Panthers leaders in a raid. The men's deaths deeply hurt local residents, who respected the Black Panthers because of their help with community issues. Yet these unjust acts were never punished. Instead, despite evidence of malpractice, all the police officers involved in the raid were ultimately acquitted at court. The weight of these past actions prevents citizens from feeling that the police's priority is citizens' safety and well-being.

The larger legal system is not particularly fairer or more effective than the police. Although courts should protect innocent citizens, they often fail to differentiate between the guilty and the innocent. Overworked attorneys and judges are unable to spend time with their clients individually and to effectively determine whether they are guilty or innocent. As a result, many youths, including both Terence and Lafeyette, are condemned for crimes they never committed. The law makes people feel angry and isolated, rather than protected, creating a difficult situation in which residents stop trusting in the very agents meant to enforce the law and protect their lives.

When the legal system is considered arbitrary and unfair, it often fails to solve pre-existing problems and even breeds greater violence. Instead of reducing violence, the criminal justice system can breed more dangerous behavior. Young people who are wrongly judged by other adults—for example, those who are inaccurately categorized as criminals or gang members—often rebel against this judgment in a paradoxical way, by confirming it through violence. Terence and Rickey, one of Lafayette's friends, both adopt rebellious attitudes. "Rickey at times felt that if they expected him to be bad, he'd be bad. He'd be mean." Terence, too, who is wrongly accused of a crime, considers that "*They* didn't listen. *They* didn't understand. So if *they* thought he was a bad guy, if they wanted him to be a bad guy, then he'd be a bad guy. […] It was a tangled and tragic form of reasoning, but then it was a tangled and tragic life that had got him into trouble. It was his own confused method of seeking justice." As the criminal justice system generates alienation and resentment instead of justice and trust, people lose faith in the very system that is supposed to protect them. Many young people's only solution, from their perspective, is to take justice in their own hands.

To have a sustainable effect on the community, the law should adopt a humane approach to the accused, recognizing young people's specific needs and potential for growth, instead of treating them as impersonal cases. During Lafeyette's trial, both the young boy's lawyer, Anne Rhodes, and the state attorney, Andrea Muchin, express their horror at a system that fails to pay attention to the individual lives of those accused. "We're looking at our future [in these kids] and we're not doing our job," Rhodes says. Muchin admits that her job feels senseless when she sees that "such little attention [is] paid to the defendants, all of them children, who most needed it." Both lawyers highlight the lack of sustained, individual relationships with their clients. Such a flawed, impersonal justice system can potentially destroy people's future—and, perhaps, that of an entire community.

Therefore, rebuilding trust and accountability with local residents is necessary to modify the dynamics of crime and violence in the neighborhood. *There are No Children Here* argues that, without adequate credibility and without spending enough time to get to know local residents on a personal level, neither police officers nor legal staff will succeed in putting an end to criminal behavior and, ultimately, in ensuring the safety of the citizens they are meant to protect.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

PHAROAH'S STUTTER

After the particularly violent summer of 1987, Pharoah Rivers develops a stutter whose intensity is directly related to his fear. This stutter symbolizes the trauma that children at Horner undergo throughout their childhood, as they are surrounded by brutal shootings, drug abuse, gang violence, and frequents deaths. Pharoah's stutter also highlights the physical and emotional consequences of excessive stress on the human body and mind—and especially that of a child. For Pharoah, this stutter is initially a source of embarrassment but later becomes a challenge: an unfortunate obstacle that he is forced to face but, also, that he might be capable of overcoming. His tenacious attitude toward his stutter soon mirrors his attitude toward school, as he becomes convinced that he can learn to overcome it through hard work. His stutter, then, reveals both his vulnerability and his strength, bringing to light his determination to succeed in school and in life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *There Are No Children Here* published in 1991.

Preface Quotes

I asked Lafeyette what he wanted to be. "If I grow up, I'd like to be a bus driver," he told me. *If*, not *when*. At the age of ten, Lafeyette wasn't sure he'd make it to adulthood.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), Lafeyette Rivers

Related Themes:

Page Number: x

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation between Alex Kotlowitz and Lafeyette highlights the two speakers' completely different conceptions of childhood and life. While Kotlowitz assumes that all children dream and think about their future in a carefree way, Lafeyette proves that some children are unable to project themselves so far ahead. Violence, insecurity, and the general unpredictability of life threatens children's abilities to consider the future and have big aspirations. Kotlowitz, therefore, is less shocked by Lafeyette's low ambition to become a bus driver—which might be an incongruous aspiration for a twelve-year-old—than by his belief that he might die before then.

Kotlowitz's first-person presentation of Lafeyette's mindset emphasizes just how foreign and surprising the young boy's attitude is to the adult journalist, even though both of them live in the same city. It highlights the divisions that exist within a single city, both in terms of socioeconomic status and experience with violence, and the underlying inequality and injustice that such divisions reveal. Indeed, while Kotlowitz has the privilege of not having to worry about being killed any minute, Lafeyette leads a deeply unfair life in which death can affect everyone arbitrarily, even innocent children.

They have joined gangs, sold drugs, and, in some cases, inflicted pain on others. But they have also played baseball and gone on dates and shot marbles and kept diaries. For, despite all they have seen and done, they are—and we must constantly remind ourselves of this—still children.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), Lafeyette Rivers, Pharoah Rivers, Rickey, Calvin "Bird Leg" Robinson

Related Themes:

Page Number: xi

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kotlowitz describes the difficult situations that children at Horner can find themselves in. He explains that not all children have succeeded in avoiding death or staying away from violence, but that some have actively taken part in harmful activities. While he does not necessarily argue that children lack agency, will, or the capacity to separate right from wrong, Kotlowitz does insist on children's inherent innocence. His goal is to make the reader view the children's actions with compassion and understanding. In contrast to the title of this book, Kotlowitz insists that there *are*, in fact, children here.

To this end, he complicates issues of morality by placing children's actions in perspective, showing that they are a reflection of a larger environment in which drug trafficking and gang violence are prevalent. He reminds the reader that everyone—and children in particular—is moved by contradictory impulses: a possible inclination to take part in violence, perhaps, but also to enjoy moments of joy and tenderness. Therefore, children should not be defined only by their past (for example, the suffering they have experienced or inflicted on others) but also by their *potential* to grow, learn, and, perhaps, change.

Chapter 2 Quotes

LaJoe had watched and held on as the neighborhood slowly decayed, as had many urban communities like Horner over the past two decades. First, the middle-class whites fled to the suburbs. Then the middle-class blacks left for safer neighborhoods. Then businesses moved, some to the suburbs, others to the South.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), LaJoe Rivers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Aiming to explain why LaJoe looks so tired and worn-out at the young age of thirty-five, Kotlowitz does not focus on the details of LaJoe's life but, instead, on the area's larger socioeconomic history. Implicitly, Kotlowitz is arguing that no one is uniquely responsible for Horner's decline, since it was spurred by socioeconomic developments that took place across the entire country. At the same time, the government has been unable to provide a solution to these problems and to protect the lives of its most vulnerable

citizens. In this way, Horner residents feel not only that their living conditions have deteriorated, but that the government has abandoned them, leaving them helpless and isolated.

Unable to prevent or alleviate such events and lacking funds to relocate LaJoe has thus been a passive witness to Horner's changes. The change in her living conditions has played an important role in her current sense of fatigue, as it also reveals feelings of weariness and despondency, the result of lacking control over one's external reality. This description also serves to connect LaJoe's life with a larger societal reality, showing that, however extraordinarily violent her neighborhood might seem, the decline of inner-city urban areas has taken place across the entire country. This means that Lafeyette and Pharoah's story is not unique but, rather, similar to that of many other people in poor, inner-city neighborhoods.

❝ But though the isolation and the physical ruin of the area's stores and homes had discouraged LaJoe, it was her family that had most let her down. Not that she could separate the two. Sometimes she blamed her children's problems on the neighborhood; at other times, she attributed the neighborhood's decline to the change in people, to the influx of drugs and violence.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), LaJoe Rivers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

The isolation that Horner residents suffer from is the result of fear, which leads them to keep to themselves instead of interacting with their neighbors. Reflecting on people's alienation from each other, LaJoe wonders whether the lack of positive social interactions, combined with pervasive poverty, have been the leading factors impacting her children's life choices. She becomes convinced that it is impossible to separate her family's fate from the neighborhood's pressures.

In LaJoe's view, her efforts to build a united, loving family unit seem to have been in vain, since her three oldest children have all experienced a variety of problems with drugs and the law. This makes LaJoe feel that she lacks control over her children's lives, which leads her to feel angry and frustrated. However, despite LaJoe's professed disappointment toward her children or anger at the neighborhood, the difficulty of separating the different influences in a person's life means that no one might is fully responsible for their own life or for that of the people they love. Rather, a Horner resident's fate is influenced by a combination of factors: their personality, their family life, and *especially* their external environment.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Cleaning house was the only way she could clear her mind, to avoid thinking about what might happen or what might have been. It was cathartic in demanding focus and concentration. She scrubbed and washed and rearranged furniture, particularly when things got tense—with family problems, shootings, and deaths. The kids knew to stay out of her way, except for Lafeyette, who, like his mother, also found cleaning a useful distraction.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), LaJoe Rivers, Lafeyette Rivers, Pharoah Rivers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

While Pharoah is the family member who seems most inclined to give in to escapism through daydreaming, LaJoe and Lafeyette also seek ways to escape the negativity of their environment—in this case, by cleaning the house. This activity might not aim to *solve* the problem of violence or to provide long-term comfort, but it does succeed at alleviating the weight of the present moment.

Lafeyette's imitation of his mother's behavior shows that he is just as affected by the neighborhood's violence as she is. It presents him on the same level as his mother—as an adult capable of taking care of himself, not as a typical child seeking care and comfort. At the same time, the futility of such an activity (cleaning the house) in comparison to the problem itself (violence, loss, fear, death) emphasizes that neither Lafeyette nor his mother are ever going to be capable of *preventing* violence and pain. In the absence of any clear-cut solution, they can only resort to temporary coping mechanisms.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Lafeyette, Pharoah, and the other children knew to keep their distance from Jimmie Lee. But they also knew that he and no one else—not the mayor, the police, or the housing authority—ruled Henry Horner. The boys never had reason to speak to Lee or to meet him, but his very presence and activities ruled their lives.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), Lafeyette Rivers, Pharoah Rivers, Jimmie Lee

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

The fact that Jimmie Lee, the head of the Conservative Vice Lords gang, is more powerful than any other local institution shows how defenseless Horner residents are to chaos and violence. Instead of being ruled by authorities whose power can be checked and who are accountable in some way, Horner residents have fallen prey to the tyrannical power of gangs.

The summer of 1987, in particular, proves extremely violent and reveals the lack of power that Horner residents have in their own lives: although they have no control over gangs' actions, gangs have the power to completely change—and, often, destroy—their lives. In such a situation, residents—even children like Pharoah and Lafeyette—learn to prioritize their own survival and adapt themselves to gangs' actions instead of trusting in the democratic institutions that are supposed to protect them. This necessity for self-reliance sets the foundation for people's distrust in democracy and the justice system, breeding cynicism about the possibility of change.

❝ Even at Horner, the viciousness of this slaying unnerved people. By summer's end, as the Vice Lords established their dominance, the war had touched the lives of almost everyone living in Henry Horner. Lafeyette and Pharoah, as well as the adults, began talking of the "death train" that drove smack through their community.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), Lafeyette Rivers, Pharoah Rivers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

During the summer of 1987, in order to assert their dominance over Horner, the Vice Lords attack a rival gang in a particularly violent way, killing even innocent members of the community indiscriminately—in one case, for example, shooting an unarmed man for thirty seconds. Residents' inability to defend themselves leads them to describe such violence in an impersonal way, as a seemingly inevitable phenomenon: a "death train," something that no one can control.

However, Horner residents never get used to the violence. Just like Lafeyette and Pharoah, the entire neighborhood remains traumatized by such events, fearing both for their safety and that of those they love. Violence in poor inner-city neighborhoods might be a constant, but it certainly is not something that people ever accept or become comfortable with. Without adequate help from institutions, though, residents' anger and frustration does not lead to any actual change. Instead, people are forced to handle the harm on their own, retreating into their own grief and fear.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Lafeyette confided to LaJoe, who tried vainly to get him to verbalize his grief, that talking wasn't going to help him, that everything that "goes wrong keeps going on and everything that's right doesn't stay right."

Related Characters: Lafeyette Rivers, Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), LaJoe Rivers, Calvin "Bird Leg" Robinson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

After his friend Bird Leg's death, Lafeyette becomes more withdrawn, keeping his thoughts and emotions to himself, even though he is visibly upset by what has happened. His reluctance to share his feelings comes from an underlying belief that sharing emotions should be useful in some way. If, on the other hand, reality is bound to stay the same and disappoint him, there is no purpose to sharing his emotions, since this will only make him feel bad about something he cannot change.

Lafeyette's cynicism at such an early age can be seen as a similar reaction to Pharoah's daydreaming: both strategies allow the young boys to keep from thinking about difficult emotions and their chaotic reality. In Lafeyette's case, though, this attitude risks leaving him out of touch with his

emotions and failing to teach him how to handle his feelings in a healthy, productive way. It also keeps him from having hope for his own life, as he remains convinced that the world is governed by disappointing, unjust forces, and that he is unable to take control over his own future.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ "The kids want this orderliness," Ms. Barone reasoned. "They appreciate it. They like it. It gives them a sense of being in an environment that is safe and comfortable."

Related Characters: Diana Barone (speaker), Pharoah Rivers

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Pharoah's teacher, Ms. Barone, forces her students to adhere to a strict set of rules in her classroom, influenced by her training in the military. Children follow a set procedure to go to their desks and can only go to the bathroom twice a day, along with the entire class. While these measures might seem draconian in another environment, Ms. Barone considers that children who live in such chaotic neighborhoods appreciate having to follow rigid rules, because they lack any sense of order in their home environments, where life is violent and unpredictable.

Pharoah thrives so much in this environment that his buoyant personality at school seems at odds with his usually more fearful self. This highlights how crucial school is to children's development. While Pharoah might benefit from a loving family, LaJoe cannot protect him from the chaos that arises around him—within or outside the family. Ms. Barone, by contrast, can create an orderly world in which potential problems can remain under control. School thus provides an important measure of stability in Pharoah's life, capable of making him trust in a better present and future for himself.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Often, when Rickey became embroiled in a fight, he began to relive Bird Leg's last minutes, and as he did so, his anger turned to rage. In class, he once choked another child so long and hard that, in the words of Pharoah, "he put him to sleep." These flashbacks, which were nor unlike those of a traumatized war veteran, haunted Rickey for well over a year after Bird Leg's death.

Related Characters: Pharoah Rivers, Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), Rickey, Calvin "Bird Leg" Robinson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Pharoah's new friend Rickey seems like Pharoah's polar opposite. If Rickey is tough and aggressive, Pharoah is shy and soft-spoken. Rickey is rebellious and disobedient, whereas Pharoah enjoys the order that school provides him. However, beyond these appearances lie a similar sensitivity and trauma. Like both Lafeyette and Pharoah, Rickey is deeply upset by Bird Leg's death, which strikes him as unfair and unacceptable. Instead of retreating into himself, though, he projects his anger and pain outward, thus harming others in the process. This shows the underlying, long-term effects of violence on young children. In this case, violence breeds pain and anger, which in turn can lead to more violence, as young people find themselves unable to handle their pain.

While knowing the roots of Rickey's behavior does not free him of blame, since he is actively hurting others, it does put his behavior in perspective, showing that his individual actions might not be moved by an evil desire to harm others, but by the harm and unbearable pain he already feels.

❝ He secretly wished his mother would push him more, make him go to sleep early, make him do his homework. LaJoe conceded that she could be too soft on her children, though she wanted nothing more than to see Lafeyette and Pharoah graduate from high school.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), LaJoe Rivers, Lafeyette Rivers, Pharoah Rivers

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

While Lafeyette is proud of his younger brother Pharoah's success at school, he finds himself personally unable to devote the same amount of time and energy as his younger brother to his school work. If Pharoah is driven by strong internal motivation, Lafeyette finds himself needing the help of others, such as LaJoe, to push him to perform well. Despite his status as older brother and the impression of self-reliance he tries to project, Lafeyette proves more vulnerable than his brother and more dependent on the

encouragement of his family. This places a lot of pressure on his family, making Lafeyette's success conditional on what happens at home, but also emphasizes the importance that family plays in the young boy's life, which seems greater than the motivation that school alone might bring.

However, such an attitude also makes Lafeyette less likely to succeed, given the heavy responsibilities that LaJoe already tries to handle and Lafeyette's own reluctance to communicate to his mother his worries and desires. In order to build a better future for himself, he will have to find the strength and self-confidence to work hard on his own.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Because he had lately responded to nearly every instance of violence and family trouble with the same refrain—"I'm too little to understand"—she feared that the problems, when he was at last ready to confront them, would be too deeply buried for him to resolve. Now, though, she was convinced that Pharoah's attitude gave him some peace of mind and the strength to push on, so she avoided burdening him with stories of hardship.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), LaJoe Rivers, Pharoah Rivers

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

When LaJoe loses her welfare benefits, she confides her anguish to Lafeyette but decides to spare Pharoah such worries. Recently, Pharoah has adopted an attitude of denial toward violence—and, in general, toward adult problems—which translates into a fierce desire to cling to his childhood and keep from thinking about issues such as pain and injustice. Instead of making him weaker, this attitude allows him to retain a measure of stability in his life, convincing him that he does not have to worry about anything.

At the same time, this attitude does not completely shield Pharoah from the psychological effects of violence. His stutter serves as visible proof that his body *does* register the effects of harmful events around him, at least unconsciously, even if he rejects their potential impact on a conscious level.

❝ "The things I should of been talking to Paul about I was talking to Lafie," LaJoe said. "I put him in a bad place. But I didn't have anyone to talk to. Lafie," she said, regretfully, "became a twelve-year-old man that day."

Related Characters: LaJoe Rivers (speaker), Lafeyette Rivers, Paul Rivers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100-101

Explanation and Analysis

After LaJoe loses her welfare benefits, she realizes that the only person who can listen to her worries is her son Lafeyette. When Lafeyette adopts an attitude that oscillates between anger, frustration, and disappointment, he begins to lose all hope in the future, concluding that everyone and everything is bound to disappoint him. LaJoe realizes that, in sharing her adult problems with her young son, she has helped turn him into a premature adult—a child overburdened with worries and responsibilities, unable to enjoy the carefree joys of childhood.

LaJoe attributes this in part to Paul's absence since, as the other parent and adult, Paul could help her bear this burden. LaJoe's situation, though, reflects a common situation at Horner. Given the lack of trust that people have toward each other, in times of crisis, residents are forced to keep their thoughts to themselves or to rely on a very limited number of family members for support. The limited number of choices that people have often means that it is always the same ones who end up taking responsibility for their family and thus seeing their worries accumulate.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ "Pharoah is Pharoah. He's going to be something. [...] When he was a baby, I held him up and asked him if he'd be the one. I've always wanted to see one of my kids graduate from high school. I asked him if he'd be the one to get me a diploma."

Related Characters: LaJoe Rivers (speaker), Pharoah Rivers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

After Pharoah loses his first spelling bee, his mother does not give up on him. Instead, she reminds him how much she

loves and admires him. To friends, she affirms her trust in Pharoah's abilities. Even though her first three children have all dropped out of high school, LaJoe remains convinced that Pharaoh is special and will achieve unprecedented academic success.

Although LaJoe's emphasis on the importance of school does not always translate into practice, as Lafeyette complains that he wishes his mother would push him more, her encouragement does give her children moral support—which, in the case of family members such as Dawn, has played a crucial role in encouraging them to succeed. Therefore, moral support on its own might not be sufficient but, combined with Pharoah's seemingly natural gifts and ambition, it might be capable of providing the support children need to remain optimistic and hard-working even in moments of disappointment and failure.

Chapter 14 Quotes

"To treat this as a cause célèbre, to give this man some long, long term in prison, is not going to change the narcotics problem. I wish I knew the answer—maybe some form of legalization, something to take the profit out of it. I don't know. But I know it doesn't stop it by giving people long terms in prison."

Related Characters: Jimmie Lee's Lawyer (speaker), Jimmie Lee

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137-138

Explanation and Analysis

While *There Are No Children Here* does not necessarily discuss the problem of gang violence and drug trafficking from a national perspective, focusing instead on the effect these problems have on individual lives, it does highlight the fact that such issues are larger than the individuals themselves.

Jimmie Lee's process serves as such an opportunity for reflection. Even though his lawyer is self-interested and, to a certain extent, disingenuous, as his goal is primarily to win his client's trial, he does accurately highlight that drug trafficking is a *societal* problem. While sentencing Jimmie Lee might serve a symbolic purpose, it does not actually solve the roots of the problem: the demand for illegal drugs and the consequent criminalization of drug supply. These issues underline the fact that the most pernicious problems affecting the lives of Horner residents are a matter of national legal and ethical debate, with no clear solution in sight. The structural foundations for poverty and violence at Horner, then, are likely to remain unchanged, however many criminals the justice system tries to lock up.

Chapter 16 Quotes

Pharoah became more alert and prudent. He had never stolen anything. Nor had he ever gotten into any trouble other than talking in class. He wanted it to stay that way. The best way was to hang out more by himself. Pharoah decided he no longer had any friends. Like his brother, he just had associates. "You don't have no friends in the projects," he said. "They'll turn you down for anything."

Related Characters: Pharoah Rivers, Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), Lafeyette Rivers, Rickey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

After Lafeyette is caught shoplifting with Rickey, Pharoah realizes that Rickey is not necessarily a good influence on his brother. Since he trusts in Lafeyette's good intentions, knowing that his brother would not have tried to shoplift if he had been on his own, Pharoah places a large part of the blame for what has happened on Rickey. His conclusion is that friends are unreliable. Out of self-protection, one should therefore learn to distance oneself from people in general.

This distrustful attitude is surprising in Pharoah, who, up until this point, has shown an innocent ability to trust in other people. Now, though, he realizes that illegal or violent action can be just as harmful to the person who commits the act as to the person affected by it, since it can be the result of peer pressure, not necessarily of individual will. In contrast to his usual escapism, Pharoah's realization that the neighborhood's influence is just as dangerous as people's potentially evil motives shows a new, more critical awareness of the world around him. As with his brother, though, the process of growing up involves disillusionment, since staying out of trouble involves accepting the unpleasantness of reality and acting against it.

Chapter 18 Quotes

> *They* didn't listen. *They* didn't understand. So if *they* thought he was a bad guy, if they wanted him to be a bad guy, then he'd be a bad guy. If *they* wanted to put him away for something he didn't do, then he'd give them something to put him away with. It was a tangled and tragic life that had got him into trouble. It was his own confused method of seeking justice.

Related Characters: Terence Rivers, Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), Rickey

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

After Terence is arrested then released on bond for a crime he did not commit, he adopts a paradoxical attitude in which his anger at being *wrongly* convicted leads him to misbehave and then to become *rightly* convicted. The outcome is the same—Terence is ultimately convicted—but, this time, at least relies on factual evidence, not error. Terence's attitude mirrors Rickey's, as both youths use their anger against a larger "system" to commit criminal acts. Both boys feel that society categorizes them prematurely, constraining them to behaving like criminals because that is how people expect them to behave. To fight such external judgment, the boys' conception of justice involves taking matters into their own hands, instead of allowing an external authority judge them for what they are not. It is this desire for control and agency that motivates their actions—even if, in the end, all they succeed in doing is reinforcing the judgments that already exist about them.

Ultimately, though, Terence's desperate search for justice reflects the utter lack of true justice that he has experienced in his life. Faced with poverty, gang violence, police brutality, and the deaths of people he loved, he has had to accept injustice so many times in his life that this might represent, to his eyes, his only opportunity to make a statement about his life.

Chapter 19 Quotes

> In preparation for the singing of the national anthem, the emcee yelled, "Don't you love this country?" "Noooooooo," the crowd roared, drowning out Pharoah's meekly spoken "yes." Only a few in the crowd, including Pharoah, placed their hands on their hearts during the anthem's singing.

Related Characters: Pharoah Rivers, Alex Kotlowitz (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

At the Boys Club annual talent show, which Lafeyette and Pharoah attend, gangs take part in a short-lived truce to allow everyone to enjoy themselves. However, this event does not mean that people are able to forget about their problems. Rather, while Horner residents might be angry about the violence that gang rivalry brings to their lives, they remain lucid about other source of harm in their lives: the state's neglect.

People's resentment not only toward local institutions, but also toward the entire country, reveals their outrage about the isolation they suffer from. Their refusal to celebrate their American identity is not an act of ingratitude but, rather, the recognition that the state has abandoned them, proving neither willing nor capable to put an end to the persistent problems that affect the entire community.

> There were some words Pharoah had trouble pronouncing because of his stutter. "I can't say this right," he'd cry out in frustration. "No such thing as can't," Clarise would remind him, like a mother encouraging her son. And the two would work at sounding out the word, syllable by syllable.

Related Characters: Pharoah Rivers, Clarise Gates (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

In preparation for his second spelling bee, Pharoah partners up with the class's star pupil, Clarise, so that the two of them can practice together. Pharoah's greatest obstacle is not necessarily spelling itself, but, rather, the difficulty for him to remain calm and to articulate his words slowly so that he might not stutter. Clarise's kind yet firm words encourage Pharoah not to give up on himself, but to keep on trying hard. More than intelligence itself, this is ultimately what will matter most during the contest itself. Indeed, Pharoah lost his first spelling bee not to problems with spelling, but because his stutter kept him from pronouncing a word. This time, though, Pharoah finishes second and is

still extremely proud of himself, because he knows he has done his very best.

Pharoah's struggles with his stutter are also symbolic of a larger struggle in his life. Given that his stutter has been caused by the violence and fear he experiences on a regular basis, overcoming this obstacle proves his capacity not only to take control of his academic life, but also to overcome the neighborhood's negative influences. Ultimately, it shows his capacity to build a more positive life of his own, based on hard work, optimism, and self-confidence.

Chapter 21 Quotes

Pharoah realized that something was terribly wrong. He didn't want to ask. No one seemed to care about his spelling bee triumph. No one wanted to hear what he had to say. Dutt was weeping. Lafeyette, while he had one ear to the conversation, stared vacantly out the window; he didn't even congratulate Pharoah. LaJoe tucked Pharoah's red ribbon into her pocketbook.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), LaJoe Rivers, Lafeyette Rivers, Pharoah Rivers, Craig Davis, Dutt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

After Pharoah finishes second at the school's spelling bee, he returns home excitedly, expecting to be congratulated on this impressive achievement. However, instead of being greeted with joy, he soon realizes that the neighborhood has once again been affected by tragedy: Craig Davis's death.

The injustice of this scene is twofold. Pharoah's family laments the unjust death of such a promising young man, whom everyone in the neighborhood loved and who was killed because of a policeman's mistake. In addition, this death is also unjust in that it keeps Pharoah from celebrating one of the most important successes in his young life. Violence and death, then, proves pernicious not only to those who succumb to it, but also to the living, who are forced to deal with the weigh of tragedy and injustice in their everyday life.

Luckily, though, this disappointment does not lead Pharoah to feel sad or depressed. Instead, knowing that his family's lack of interest is only the temporary result of grief, he simply decides to escape this scene to avoid feeling such sadness. Later, at the school's end-of-the-year assembly, his mother and siblings are able to express how proud they are of his hard work and academic success, thus proving that they do take interest in his achievements.

It was not that they wanted the horrible bloodshed. Nor was it that they wanted to rise up in arms against the police again. It was just that they ached for a time when the community had a collective conscience, when neighbors trusted one another and had enough confidence in their own powers of persuasion to demand a better and more peaceful life. Everyone now seemed timid and afraid.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), Craig Davis, The Soto Brothers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

After Craig Davis's funeral, Horner residents recall another example of injustice from the past: the death of the Soto brothers, who were killed because of the police's mistakes. While that event had led to collective outrage and rioting against the police, Craig's death is marked by silence, as members of the neighborhood are no longer capable of organizing collectively in the name of truth and justice.

This does not imply that residents no longer care about such issues but, rather, that gang rivalry and violence have led to widespread distrust in the community. Changing this situation would require living in a safer environment. Given the impossibility of achieving this in the short run, people are thus forced to accept that they can do nothing about injustice or, like Craig Davis's mother who plans to file a lawsuit, that any action they take will have to be purely individual.

Memories for Lafeyette became dangerous. He recalled nothing of Bird Leg's funeral. He couldn't remember the names of any of the performers at the talent show. He sometimes had trouble recounting what he had done just the day before in school. Shutting out the past was perhaps the only way he could go forward or at least manage the present. Besides, he knew, nothing could bring Craig back.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), Lafeyette Rivers, Calvin "Bird Leg" Robinson, Craig Davis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

After Craig Davis's death, Lafeyette's mind and body react to grief in unconscious ways. He begins to lose his memory, as though his mind could simply erase unpleasant episodes from the past in order to feel better. This erasure affects not only memories of trauma and injustice, such as Craig or Bird Leg's death, but also neutral or positive memories, such as his day at school. Such reactions prove that the trauma of living in a violent environment is uncontrollable and can have long-term effects on a person's mind.

However uncontrollable, though, these reactions follow a logic that Lafeyette has expressed in the past. According to him, sharing feelings is only useful insofar as it might allow reality to change. If, instead, sharing emotions only brings pain, without affecting external reality, there seems to be no purpose in sharing them. The logical solution, then, is to keep emotions from surfacing. As a result, in addition to keeping his thoughts from LaJoe (through a conscious process), Lafeyette finds himself keeping his thoughts and memories from himself, through an unconscious process of self-protection.

Chapter 24 Quotes

She had seen Terence change in the year she had known him. He had hardened. The weight lifting made him look older and more menacing. He seemed more defiant. "When I first saw him he was a little kid. He was soft-looking and soft-spoken," she said. She didn't think a long sting in jail would do him any good.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz, Audrey Natcone (speaker), Terence Rivers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 232

Explanation and Analysis

When Terence's lawyer, Audrey Natcone, tells him that she is only going to be able to reduce his sentence to eight years, Terence becomes frustrated and upset, almost to the point of tears. Audrey feels bad for her client, not only because Terence's initial arrest was unfair (although he later committed another robbery), but because prison can turn innocent, vulnerable boys into hardened young men.

The justice system, then, can harm young people not only in failing to correctly identify who is guilty and who is innocent, but also through the form of punishment it entails. Indeed, instead of redeeming people, prison can turn them into a greater potential threat to society, making them more aggressive and more disappointed in the very concept of justice itself—which might lead them to break the law once again. The problem of injustice, then, never seems to end.

Chapter 28 Quotes

The judge looked bewildered. "Did we have a case by that name?" Someone in the courtroom stifled a giggle. Three minutes had passed and he didn't even remember Lafeyette. LaJoe felt as if no one cared. It was as if they were invisible. No one saw them or heard them or cared enough to treat them like human beings.

Related Characters: Alex Kotlowitz (speaker), LaJoe Rivers, Lafeyette Rivers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

After the judge hands Lafeyette his court date, LaJoe realizes that her son has received a different appointment from that of the other four boys arrested with him. When she returns to the judge after barely a few minutes to clarify this issue, though, the judge shows no sign of recognizing Lafeyette's name. His judge's surprise highlights the mechanical nature of these legal processes, in which people are treated not as individuals with a life and story worthy of respect, but as impersonal cases to which no one seems to pay real attention.

This episode highlights what young, innocent people like Lafeyette must perceive as the cruelty of the justice system. In an overburdened system, no one has time to treat others with the empathy and care they deserve. Therefore, such experiences only heighten Lafeyette's feeling that the law is arbitrary and unfair, and that it does not deserve his respect.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

Alex Kotlowitz describes his first encounter with Lafayette and Pharoah Rivers in 1985, at the Henry Horner Homes public housing complex, when Lafayette was ten and Pharoah seven. Kotlowitz was writing the text for a photographer's essay about childhood and poverty. After seeing a picture of the two brothers and noticing how, despite their youthful clothing, they looked like old men who have suffered through traumatic events, he was intrigued to learn more about their lives. When he finally meets them, he is shocked by the continuous violence the two children experience and is deeply upset to realize that Lafeyette cannot project himself into the future, as he believes that he is likely to die at an early age.

Even though all three characters live in the same city, Kotlowitz's early description of Lafeyette and Pharoah emphasizes the difference between Kotlowitz's reality and the two Rivers brothers' reality. What might seem normal to the young boys, such violence and an inability to think about the future, strikes Kotlowitz as sad and disturbing. These disparate understandings of the world highlight a deep inequality in American society, as people's entire worldview depends on their social identity—for example, which neighborhood they live in.

Two years later, in 1987, Kotlowitz returns to Henry Horner to report on Lafeyette and Pharoah's lives for an article in *The Wall Street Journal* about the impact of urban violence on children. As he spends time with the two boys, taking part in their daily activities, from basketball to video games and walks, he becomes friends with them. Soon, he asks their mother, LaJoe, if she would allow him to write a book on the children in the neighborhood. Realizing that it is important for these children's stories to be told, LaJoe accepts but adds hesitatingly that there are no *real* children here, as these children have seen too much to retain their innocence.

LaJoe's comment becomes a central problem that There Are No Children Here *attempts to address—namely, what are the effects of being forced to grow up too fast because of violence, and how can children retain their innocence in such a chaotic environment? Kotlowitz emphasizes that his approach to this problem is highly personal, aimed at understanding important societal problems from the in-depth perspective of a few individuals.*

Kotlowitz notes that in Chicago, one in three children live in poverty. Through his reporting on the Rivers family, he realizes that these children's lives are often filled with horrors, as well as the need to make adult decisions about their life choices at an early age. However, while many of these kids have seen death up close and have contended with the difficulties of gang life, drug trafficking, and gun violence, they have also played games and, in that sense, remained children. Over the course of two years, Kotlowitz reports on Lafeyette and Pharoah's lives, following the changes they undergo as they struggle to grow up and establish their identities in a chaotic world of crime and insecurity. Kotlowitz notes that while their story does not have a perfect, novel-like ending, its central axis remains Lafeyette and Pharoah's process of growing up, as well as their close friendship.

Kotlowitz identifies what will become a central paradox in the book: children can be both adults and children at once, as they adopt their behavior to the responsibilities they are given and the circumstances they find themselves in. Kotlowitz's insistence on childish activities aims to show that a person should not be reduced to the neighborhood they come from or, perhaps, the crimes they have committed, but that we should recognize everyone's inherent vulnerability through understanding and compassion. The author also suggests, through Lafeyette and Pharoah's friendship, that people are capable of love and resilience even in the most dire of circumstances.

CHAPTER 1

Nine-year-old Pharoah, his twelve-year-old brother Lafeyette, and their friends are climbing through dirt and vegetation to reach the railroad tracks near their housing complex. The railroad connects downtown Chicago to the suburbs and, when the group reaches the tracks, Pharoah stops to admire the vision of downtown Chicago in the distance. The glow of the buildings contrasts starkly with his own home, a seven-story building that looks permanently dirty and run-down. Pharoah soon finds himself admiring a butterfly's elegant movements, but Lafeyette pushes him roughly to play, which makes Lafeyette laugh but annoys Pharoah.

The contrast between the vision of Chicago in the distance and Pharoah's home emphasizes the physical and socio-economic distance between the city and the "projects." It serves as a metaphor for the difficulty of achieving socio-economic mobility, as certain families find themselves at a clear disadvantage, compared to well-off city dwellers. The scene thus signals the existence of a structural (and visible) reality in society: social and economic inequality.

The two brothers and their six friends include "Porkchop," Pharoah's cousin and closest friend, and James Howard, a close friend of Lafeyette who has grown up with him and lives in the same building. With crowbars, the boys dig holes in the dirt around the railroad tracks in the hope of finding snakes. A friend of theirs (who was later killed after playing with a gun that he thought was unloaded) had recently showed them a snake he had found. Inspired by their friend, the boys want to dig a snake up in this wild, deserted area, and to keep it as a pet. Their search is fruitless, although they do spot a big rat. Bored by the search, Pharoah and Porkchop play in a pile of old tires.

At this point, neither Lafeyette nor Pharoah seem suspicious of the concept of friendship or of childish games. Rather, both boys seem to enjoy this group activity, working together to achieve the common goal of finding a snake. However, the passing mention of a boy who was killed while playing with a gun signals, from the very beginning, an undercurrent of violence—one that might be so ordinary that it does not even require a lengthy explanation.

When the boys hear a train approaching, they frantically hide in the dark corners of a boxcar and tell each other to keep quiet. The boys are scared of the passengers heading to the suburbs because they have heard rumors that passengers would shoot them for trespassing on the tracks. Passengers in the train are afraid of the neighborhood children, since they have heard rumors that the neighborhood children might shoot at the train windows. Both the neighborhood boys and the train's passengers thus hide from each other, terrified of this invisible, unknown enemy.

The fear and suspicion that the neighborhood boys and the train passengers feel toward each other is humorous, since it turns out that neither group is actually dangerous. At the same time, it is also tragic, because it emphasizes the enormous lack of understanding between two communities who live in the same urban area, but have little chance of interacting with each other due to tightly held stereotypes and rumors.

After the train passes, the boys laugh among themselves. Lost in thought, Pharoah appreciates the smells and sounds of this peaceful place, which offer him a much-needed respite from the chaos and violence he is accustomed to in the neighborhood. Although all the boys want to linger, they decide to go home when the sun sets, since staying longer could be dangerous. On their way back, Lafeyette takes Pharoah's hand to cross the street, and the two of them walk home.

The boys' awareness of potential dangers signals the habitual nature of violence in their lives. Although they are children, they are forced to consider their safety before pure enjoyment as if they were mature adults. Lafeyette's protection of Pharoah reveals the two boys' tight-knit bond, as well as their awareness that they need to defend each other from the dangers of their environment.

CHAPTER 2

The buildings at the Henry Horner Homes public housing complex, which children call "the projects" and Pharoah nicknames "the graveyard," are so poorly constructed and run-down that, in the absence of functioning light bulbs, residents are forced to carry flashlights to walk through the corridors during the day.

Pharoah and Lafeyette's run-down housing complex highlights the city's lack of care toward such neighborhoods, where residents are forced to handle large-scale problems on their own. It seems unjust that innocent children such as Pharoah should be forced to live in such an environment, riddled with danger and death.

Danger, at Horner, might arise within one's building, and is also most likely to arise in the summer. One June day, on Lafeyette's twelfth birthday, the young boy and his nine-year-old cousin, Dede, are walking around their neighborhood to spend the eight dollars Lafeyette received for his birthday, when gunfire erupts suddenly. The two children fall to the ground, and Lafeyette covers Dede's head with his jacket, thus keeping the young girl from running off in the open, which is dangerous when gangs are fighting. When the shooting subsides, the two of them walk home carefully, only to realize that Lafeyette has only fifty cents left, having lost the rest of the money in their hurried escape.

The seemingly absurd association between violence and summertime suggests that violence at Horner does *follow certain patterns, which can be analyzed from an objective perspective, but also that it* is *inherently absurd and arbitrary in the way it affects individual lives for no apparent reason. In this case, violence forces two children to lose all of their precious change, even though they have done nothing wrong. Lafeyette's protection of Dede shows that he is accustomed to violence and committed to helping others in critical times.*

In such a violent neighborhood, Lafeyette and Pharoah depend on their mother, LaJoe, for comfort stability, and LaJoe, in turn, depends on them. Known for her warmhearted nature, LaJoe has welcomed so many children in her home over the years that many young people in the neighborhood still consider her their mother. However, even LaJoe has recently become overwhelmed by the stress of living at Horner. Like the many women who, by the age of forty, are grandmothers (and sometimes, great-grandmothers), LaJoe is worn out from caring for so many people—her husband, her children, and grandchildren. While she has maintained the beauty of her youth, her body has been affected by fatigue, and she looks both physically and spiritually exhausted.

At Horner, family and the neighborhood are not fully separable. While Lafeyette and Pharoah clearly love their mother, part of their strong attachment to her stems from the chaotic nature of the neighborhood. Family provides not only love, but also much-needed stability, a respite from the violent outside world. In turn, part of LaJoe's fatigue can be understood from the perspective of the neighborhood, since the reason she is forced to take care of so many people is because of social problems in the neighborhood, such as insecurity and the prevalence of single-mother families.

LaJoe has witnessed the neighborhood's decline over the decades, as white families left urban life for the suburbs, and middle-class blacks soon followed suit, seeking safer living conditions. Most businesses also left, and the decline in manufacturing jobs has left more than one in five people at Horner jobless. While other urban communities might be poorer, Horner has become famous because of how visible its decline has been, given that the neighborhood was once so wealthy, dynamic, and full of commercial activity. LaJoe laments everything that the neighborhood lacks, from public libraries and skating rinks to clinics, homeless shelters, and rehabilitation centers, despite widespread drug abuse. Despite their proximity to downtown Chicago, Horner residents feel that the city has completely abandoned them.

Kotlowitz places LaJoe's family situation in a larger context. In this way, her story functions as an expression of her personal choices and life experiences, but also as a reflection of large-scale, social and economic changes that have affected the neighborhood and other urban areas across the country. Broad social changes such as "white flight" (the migration of white families to suburbs) and economic decline have led to the current situation at Horner—and, therefore, have contributed to the current situation of the Rivers family. Individuals' vulnerability to such large-scale, societal changes have generated resentment and a feeling of injustice among those who suffer from them most—here, Horner residents.

In addition to feeling abandoned by local institutions, residents also feel isolated from each other. Nearly half of families don't have a phone, and some people find themselves without any friends who might allow them to borrow theirs. Worried about insecurity, some families refuse to let their children outside to play. What has disappointed LaJoe the most, however, is her own family, which she finds she cannot fully shield from the neighborhood's decline. Her three oldest children, LaShawn (who sometimes work as a prostitute to support her drug addiction), Weasel (who was incarcerated for participating in a burglary), and Terence (who began selling drugs at an early age) have all dropped out of school, been incarcerated, and had problems with drugs. Terence, though, was LaJoe's biggest disappointment, because he was a child she had felt particularly close to.

Horner residents are trapped in a vicious cycle: insecurity breeds lack of trust among residents, but lack of trust or knowledge about other residents only breeds more fear and insecurity, as people lack the social networks necessary to solve or alleviate their problems. In addition, the neighborhood's extreme violence makes it difficult to determine the amount of power a family has over an individual's future. Paradoxically, violence thus forces people to turn inwards, trusting only the closest members of their family, but this does not constitute a solution, as families alone might not be capable of keeping their children away from violence.

LaJoe's family life now revolves around her younger children. Despite being married for seventeen years, LaJoe and her husband, Paul Rivers, have long been estranged, and LaJoe now depends on her son Lafeyette to take on a fatherly role. Although Lafeyette used to be a bubbly, energetic young boy, he has begun to change. Last year, for example, he was caught stealing candy in a store. More generally, though, the responsibility he feels toward his family leads him to behave in domineering, aggressive ways—his own attempts at trying to keep his younger siblings from harm.

Lafeyette is visibly affected by the serious responsibilities he is forced to shoulder. Instead of behaving like an ordinary child, he must take on an adult role of protecting his younger siblings. His inability to do so in a calm, reasoned way shows that he is overwhelmed by this double identity—the need to protect his family like an adult and the fact that he is still a child, perhaps not yet capable of the same emotional maturity as a parent.

Very different from Lafeyette, Pharoah is also unlike most other children. He has an imaginative, loving spirit and desperately clings to his childhood, although a stutter he has recently developed reveals his fears and vulnerability. While LaJoe has promised herself to protect her sons' childhood and to keep them from the same fate that befell her other children, the violent summer of 1987 has made her so worried for their lives that she has begun to pay burial insurance for them.

The burial insurance that LaJoe pays for serves as a reminder that, at Horner, life and death are governed by unpredictable forces—even her children, whom she loves and cares for, could die any moment. Pharoah's emphasis on his childhood serves as his strategy to avoid thinking about adult problems—like the possibility of dying.

To alleviate LaJoe's worries, Lafeyette knows that he must actively protect his younger siblings. However, one day after school—barely three days after the violent events on his birthday—Lafeyette almost loses Pharoah, as gunfire erupts when children are exiting school. From the apartment, Lafeyette watches his brother walk out of school, which is just one block away, but then loses sight of him. He begins to fear that Pharoah, in panic, might run straight toward the gunfire instead of doing what his mother has taught him: walking slowly to figure out where the shooting is coming from, then running. Luckily, though, Pharoah soon notices Lafeyette's friend James running toward their building and follows him, finding safety in their apartment. Despite the severity of the shooting and the police's presence, reporters were never able to obtain a record of the incident from the police.

Pharoah and Lafeyette's world is governed by forces outside of their control, such as the sudden eruption of shooting. To handle such unpredictability, everyone is forced to learn survival techniques. The adoption of a pragmatic attitude toward violence—instead of Pharoah's tendency to react to violence in a more emotional way, by ignoring it or panicking—is necessary in this chaotic world. Indeed, the police's lack of communication suggests that residents are truly left to handle life on their own, learning not only to develop survival strategies but also to give up on the hope that their stories might be brought to public attention.

CHAPTER 3

LaJoe remembers moving into the Henry Horner Homes in 1956, at the age of four, when the buildings were brand new and looked majestic to her. LaJoe's parents, Roy and Lelia Mae Anderson, had left poverty in the South to find work in Chicago. The two of them lived in an apartment that was going to be demolished and felt lucky when they were given the opportunity to move into newly constructed public housing.

The contrast between LaJoe's initially optimistic attitude toward the housing complex and her later sense of disappointment suggests that feelings of success are sometimes short-lived, impacted by forces beyond people's control, such as the lack of maintenance of buildings that were initially satisfying.

The history of public housing complexes begins after World War II, when the government started building high-rise buildings to solve the housing crisis. However, powerful white politicians soon opposed building housing for the poor and for black families and led a strong opposition to the housing project. Due to such opposition and lack of space, the complexes were finally built at the outskirts of the city, thus only increasing the social and racial segregation that already existed in the city. Lack of funds also meant that the buildings were poorly designed and constructed. At Horner, the buildings have no lobbies, the trash chutes are too narrow, and the elevators break down on a regular basis. Additionally, the buildings' design stifles communication and creates insecurity among residents.

The construction of housing complexes such as Horner reveals larger problems, such as racism, discrimination, and a refusal to help the most vulnerable members of society, such as the poor. Instead of creating a sustainable environment for its residents, the city constructed buildings that were bound to be inadequate in the long run. Therefore, the problems of violence and insecurity at Horner are not exclusively the result of economic changes or the development of gangs—which took place after *the construction of Horner. Part of the issue is the housing complex itself, which is the result of bad urban planning.*

On the day her family moved in, young LaJoe was mostly excited about their new apartment. At the time, children at Horner could enjoy a variety of activities in the neighborhood, joining groups such as the Girl Scouts and organizing parties in the building. In addition to this community ebullience, LaJoe and her siblings felt connected to politics. Their mother was an active member of the Democratic Party, and politicians were forced to pay attention to people's concerns because, at the time, Horner residents were well organized and capable of fighting for their rights. When LaJoe's family moved in, they were moved by hope and pride, trusting that they would all grow into successful individuals.

The contrast between LaJoe's carefree childhood at Horner and Lafeyette and Pharoah's present atmosphere of fear is striking. It highlights a generational change: while LaJoe's parents trusted politics and collective organizations to achieve change, current Horner residents have largely given up on their own power to connect to outside institutions, because they feel isolated from each other and from local authorities. The reasons behind this shift in attitude is part of what Kotlowitz attempts to solve in this book.

Problems began in the 1970s, when funds ran out to maintain the apartment buildings. In addition, one of LaJoe's sisters was brutally assassinated, and her brother died of a heart attack after hearing the news, which led LaJoe's parents to move out of Horner. LaJoe decided to stay in the building, assuming that the quality of life would remain the same, instead of declining dramatically as it later did. By 1987, the situation at Horner had become so dangerous that the mayor, Jane Byrne, decided to move into Horner for three weeks to enforce order. While courageous, to many residents and observers this decision highlighted the striking alienation of the poor, mostly black residents of Horner. Chicago, Kotlowitz argues, was so segregated that such housing complexes felt as dangerous and distant to politicians, police, and reporters as a Third World Country.

The very fact that the mayor felt the need to be physically present at Horner reveals the lack of ties between the housing complex and the rest of Chicago. This isolation highlights a deep economic and social divide, as different parts of the city seem sectioned off from each other according to residents' race and socio-economic background. Paradoxically, then, instead of building bridges between Horner and the rest of the city, the mayor's action only emphasizes how isolated the community truly is.

During the violent summer of 1987, the Rivers children learn to play in the narrow, extremely hot hallway in their apartment during shootings, staying away from windows where stray bullets might pass through. One day, after a shooting, LaJoe, feeling particularly nervous, begins to sweep the floors. Cleaning allows her to focus her energy on a single task, serving as a distraction and an outlet for the stress of gun violence. Lafeyette offers to help and, knowing that LaJoe is only cleaning to handle her stress, tries to reassure her that no one is going to get hurt, but LaJoe merely tells him to go watch the triplets.

Lafeyette takes on an adult role when he tries to reassure his mother. He gives up his own childlike need to be reassured in order to make his mother feel better, thus proving his capacity to sacrifice himself for the well-being of his family. The children's efforts to keep playing despite the violence reveals their desire to shield themselves (both physically and emotionally) from the world around them and to take refuge in a reality they can both control and understand: their own games.

Despite LaJoe's frequent cleaning, the apartment remains eternally messy, due to overcrowding (eight people live there), and the lack of building maintenance and adequate infrastructure to handle people's garbage, which causes apartments to overflow with roaches. In one of the two windowless bathrooms in the Rivers family's apartment, one toilet smells continuously of rotting meat. In the other bathroom, hot water continuously pours out of the bathtub from a faucet that cannot close. The heating is so poorly controlled that it is more unbearably hot in the winter than it is during the hottest of summer days. Despite the cluttered, run-down aspect of the apartment, LaJoe tries to decorate it with drawings and maintain security by placing furniture against the window to protect her family from stray bullets.

LaJoe's cleaning gives her an outlet for her stress, but also serves to make the apartment more pleasant for the entire family. Her determination to keep cleaning the apartment might not yield the expected results, but that is because of issues beyond her control. This goes to show that hard work is not always sufficient to guarantee perfect success. However, it also emphasizes the human power for resilience and persistence. Indeed, LaJoe does not give up on her goal to make the apartment more livable, since she tries to make it both a safe and comfortable space.

Even the spaces outside the buildings are in bad condition. A baseball diamond has been filled in, and the basketball court usually lacks usable rims. In addition, Lafeyette often fears playing at the court because he doesn't want to be recruited by gangs. Both Lafeyette and his friend James fear being recruited into gangs and forced to commit violent acts, such as killing someone—which Lafeyette has heard that one of his friends had to do. James concludes that the safest strategy is to avoid making friends. Often, the children dream of living in a place without gangs, where they might enjoy nature and a peaceful life.

Lafeyette and James's fear of being recruited by gangs highlights their understanding that a person's bad actions, such as killing someone, are not always the result of evil will. Instead, these actions can sometimes be the result of social pressure or coercion, such as the initiation to a gang. In this way, the two boys conceive of violence as behavior caused by one's environment, not necessarily by one's personality. As a consequence, they give up on fun and collective activities for the sake of safety.

CHAPTER 4

One July day, Jimmie Lee, the head of the Conservative Vice Lords gang, gets out of his car at Horner and is welcomed by a large group of enthusiastic teenagers. When Lee sees a drunken man yelling at his thirteen-year-old daughter, calling her a "bitch," Lee punches the man in the jaw, berating him for being so disrespectful to his own daughter. The man falls to the ground and remains in shock, while Lee leaves the scene to join a meeting with some of his workers.

Although Lee leads a violent life as a gang leader, he also seems to want to protect vulnerable people and promote respect within families. This stark contrast suggests that people are not inherently good or bad. Rather, people are not easy to categorize in a moral way, and even seemingly evil characters have their own conception of justice and respectability.

Jimmie Lee and his gang control Henry Horner and have more authority than any other group, including the police. Lafeyette and Pharoah have learned to stay inside when Lee arrives at Horner, as the gang is known to have a variety of assault weapons and to use torture techniques against their enemies. Because Horner residents know that "snitching" (giving the police any information about gang activity) can easily get them killed, they refuse to call 911 and even to talk to each other about the shootings that take place.

As Lee's gang has replaced traditional authority, people's isolation becomes both the cause and consequence of gang dominance. Without getting help from the police, people are bound to live in unrestrained violence, but getting help from the police can also lead to violence. Therefore, people are forced to accept social and physical isolation in the hope to survive.

Surprisingly, while Lee is dangerous because he rules over a variety of crimes, he is also seen as a positive influence in the neighborhood. Horner residents see him as a respectful, reasonable person who, despite his involvement in drug trafficking, does not personally use drugs or drink excessively. He is also respected for his decision to keep overly young adolescents from joining the gangs and for his twenty-year marriage, a rare feat of fidelity in the neighborhood. Even a local police officer, Charlie Toussas, considers him a "gentleman."

Once again, the contrast between Lee's gang-related actions and personality suggests that it is not always easy to establish standards of justice and morality. However, a focus on Lee's personality also ignores the fact that his leadership of a violent gang is responsible for shaping a social environment in which families are torn apart and many young people are addicted to drugs—the very dangers he eschews on a personal level.

People's attitudes toward gangs have varied over time. In the 1960s, gangs were relatively tolerated because people thought they might use their resources to improve neighborhoods. After funding job-training programs and serving as a calming force during the riots following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death, Jeff Fort, leader of the El Rukns (another African-American street gang), was even invited to President Nixon's inauguration. However, the gangs' positive actions did not prove sustainable. After a local hospital gave the Vice Lords a former Catholic boys' school in the hope that they would build a neighborhood center, the gang soon looted the school, using the money to buy a vehicle and uniforms for the gang. Jeff Fort was also sent to prison on charges of planning a terrorist attack with Libyan leader Moammar Ghadhafi.

The government's initial decision to let illegal groups such as gangs perform good deeds in their neighborhood suggests that the government lacked either the funds, resources, or, perhaps, political will to do so itself. However, the limitations of the gangs' positive actions serves as a reminder that—unlike the government—their main goal is not to please local residents or to effect social change, but merely to protect their business interests and maintain their territorial dominance. In this way (as well as in Jeff Fort's more obvious anti-state actions), gangs' objectives often clash with the government's efforts to improve people's living conditions.

By the 1970s, the expansion of drug trafficking turned the local street gangs into big businesses focused on making a profit. This increased their economic power dramatically and also gave them political power, as politicians recruited gangs to promote their campaigns. As gangs began drug wars, though, they also turned significantly more violent, which deeply impacted ordinary people's lives. At the age of ten, Lafeyette saw someone die before his eyes. In a fight to take control of Henry Horner, Jimmie Lee's Vice Lords killed a young member of a rival gang, the Disciples, whom Lafeyette watched bleed to death in the stairwell of his apartment building.

Politicians' willingness to use illegal, criminal groups as campaign promoters is a clear marker of hypocrisy, suggesting that politicians are sometimes more interested in defending their narrow interests than the people they're supposed to be serving. Meanwhile, Lafeyette's early encounter with death—which forces him to confront mortality in such a vivid, horrific way—may have a long-term psychological impact.

By 1986, the Vice Lords occupied two buildings across from the Riverses' apartment, taking over apartments that they used as safe houses for storing drugs, guns, and money. The Vice Lords used symbols, such as baseball caps turned to the left, to differentiate themselves from other gangs. After the Vice Lords succeeded in defending their territory against the Disciples, though, they began to attack another gang, the Gangster Stones. The viciousness and frequency of shootings upset all Horner residents, as everyone soon knew people who had been killed by gangs.

In implanting themselves at Horner, the Vice Lords show no interest in respecting ordinary residents' lives. Rather, they choose to dominate the entire neighborhood—rival gangs and ordinary citizens alike—to cultivate a climate of fear and ensure their physical and emotional control over their territory. As a result, people's experiences with death and loss become those of innocent witnesses to a brutal war over which they have no control.

CHAPTER 5

At his young age, Lafeyette has already had to reckon with death and injustice on a deeply personal level. One of his friends, Bird Leg, known for loving and communicating with dogs, becomes involved in gang activity, finding love and protection in Jimmie Lee's organization even though he does not actually deal drugs. Before joining a gang himself, Bird Leg was personally harmed by gangs, since, as someone who lives in Disciples territory but has a relative who belongs to the Vice Lords, he was often beaten simply because of his relative's allegiance. Bird Leg's involvement with gangs causes Lafeyette to distance himself from his friend but, at the same time, to miss his dog-loving companion.

Bird Leg seems to have joined gangs not out of a desire to take part in illegal actions, but as a form of protection and a desire for stability—which, unlike Lafeyette, he might otherwise lack. This suggests that, in such a vicious war between rival gangs, some people might implicitly become forced to take sides.

In the summer of 1987, Bird Leg is becoming increasingly reckless. He has since dropped out of school, and his loyalty to the Vice Lords leads him to shoot at Disciples randomly—a common behavior among young gang members. Even though his family has moved to another neighborhood to avoid gang violence, Bird Leg frequently returns to Horner to visit friends. In August, the gangs reach a temporary truce because of increased police presence in the neighborhood, which keeps them from trafficking drugs in impunity. Despite this, Bird Leg still feels strongly about attacking rival gang members.

Bird Leg's interest in gang rivalry does not necessarily reflect a desire to inflict harm on others but an interest in the competition, belonging, and group identity that gang rivalry involves. He is not invested in gangs' power per se, which depends on drug trafficking, but focuses on the social consequences of belonging to a gang. Such a sense of community is precisely what most Horner residents lack, now that so many ties among residents and with local authorities have been destroyed.

One day in August, Bird Leg is shot by a rival gang member with a buckshot and jokes to his family that he would want to be buried in his white jogging suit. The next evening, after he begins fighting with some young Disciples at Horner, one of the Disciples suddenly shoots him in the chest, taking Bird Leg by surprise. News of Bird Leg's near-immediate death soon reaches Lafeyette, but unlike James and the rest of the growing crowd, Lafeyette refuses go see Bird Leg, having already witnessed too much violence.

While it is not necessarily surprising that Bird Leg would enter into a dispute with a rival gang member, the violent nature of this conflict is surprising for such a young boy. If, in other environments, such rivalry might lead to a mere fight, here it leads to unpredictable, life-or-death outcomes, which seem absurd and unfair for such young children.

Jimmie Lee soon arrives on the crime scene and immediately proceeds to lead a group of Vice Lords to seek revenge on the Disciples for Bird Leg's death. However, policeman Charlie Toussas, who knows Lee well, interferes to keep him from doing so. Lee follows Toussas's advice and returns with his group to the Vice Lords' territory, thus avoiding yet another brutal shoot-out.

Lee's decision to listen to Toussas' advice is surprising, given the superior power that gangs have over the police. Perhaps Lee tries to reduce direct confrontation with the police so as not to attract more police presence in the neighborhood. However, Lee's initial reaction highlights the logic of revenge and retaliation that animates gangs, which simply perpetuates violence instead of achieving peace.

A few days later, afraid that groups of Disciples would storm the young boy's funeral, Bird Leg's family organizes the ceremony at a storefront church outside the neighborhood. At the church, Lafeyette, Pharoah, and James all walk up to Bird Leg's casket. The young boy's swollen face makes him look much older, but he is wearing the jogging suit he had jokingly requested. The children are all overwhelmed by the emotional weight of this death. James begins to cry when he sees their dead friend's body. Pharoah later remains troubled by the cries of Bird Leg's sister, who is wailing that her brother is not dead, and Lafeyette remains impassive during the ceremony. The service takes place in an uncomfortably humid atmosphere. Even Jimmie Lee attends, serving as a pallbearer.

Bird Leg's family's fear of the Disciples' interference reveals that, in such a gang-filled environment, even the most private expressions of grief (such as a family's pain in the wake of their son's death) might be considered public. The rival gang might use the funeral as an opportunity to continue a feud, or might interpret the family's pain as expressing a desire for vengeance. Meanwhile, Lafeyette's inability to cry foreshadows his emotional withdrawal and inability to express his pain.

Carla Palmore, one of Bird Leg's friends, gives a speech about remembering that, more importantly than his membership to a gang, Bird Leg was a young boy whose future was brutally taken away—something that could happen to anyone else in the crowd. At the end of the speech, Jimmie Lee thanks the young girl for her thoughtful words. Pharoah and James begin to cry when people begin to sing an emotional pop song, but Lafeyette remains stoic. Later, he explains that he cried on the inside, as he did not feel that he had enough energy to let the tears out.

Carla's words are a plea to forget about gang differences and to recognize the precious nature of human life. As such, Lee's words of thanks to the young girl are deeply hypocritical, since he is personally responsible for fueling a gang rivalry that causes people like Bird Leg to die. Her speech, which fails to elicit any concrete action among the gang members present, highlights the difficulty for one individual to change an entire system or culture.

After the service, Pharoah asks Lafeyette about heaven, but his older brother tells him to shut up. They hear a mother tell her son that he could have been killed just like Bird Leg, and they see gang members make the Vice Lords' sign at Bird Leg's body. Once they are outside the church, James tells Lafeyette that he knows they are going to die somehow, but that he would rather die "plain out" instead of "by killing," which Lafeyette agrees with.

Pharoah's words suggest that he is seeking emotional comfort from his brother, but Lafeyette seems unable to give him the kind of reassurance or information that Pharaoh need—and that Lafeyette himself might need as well. The mother's warning words to her son seem weak in contrast to the gang members' signing over Bird Leg's body. Instead of shielding her son from harm, she seems to highlight individuals' vulnerability in the face of group dynamics.

CHAPTER 6

The summer's violence has deeply upset Pharoah and he develops a stutter that often keeps him from speaking, giving the impression that he has become physically incapable of communicating. LaJoe finds her son's stutter particularly sad because Pharoah has always been so articulate, to the point of sounding, as his friends liked to tease him, "like a white person." Pharoah feels embarrassed about his newfound verbal difficulties and begins to shy away from people. His fear becomes increasingly apparent, as any loud noise makes him tremble, and he pleads with LaJoe to make the shooting stop, as though his mother could influence the gangs' actions.

While violence affects both Lafeyette and Pharaoh's behaviors, the two boys express it in different ways. Lafeyette's reaction to violence is mainly emotional, as Lafeyette becomes less willing *to express his emotions. Pharoah's response is emotional* and *physical, making it seem as though his body is bent on keeping him from expressing his thoughts—even if Pharoah might have originally wanted to. In both cases, communication is impaired, and the brothers are forced to rely primarily on themselves to cope with the chaotic world around them.*

Pharoah becomes obsessed with the idea of returning to the train tracks, which he had found so peaceful. Pharoah finally convinces Lafeyette and James to go with him, and the three boys are walking in the street toward the tracks when they are attacked by a group of adolescent gang members who try to beat them. The three boys succeed in running back home but remain shocked by what has just happened. The next day, they hear a rumor that someone has lost their legs after being run over by a train at the tracks, and the boys accept this brutal rumor as truth, deciding to never return to the railroad tracks.

One of Pharoah's typical strategies to cope with violence is to try to escape it, which he does here by wanting to return to the train tracks. However, as in this moment, he is never able to escape it for long, as violence can erupt even in the most seemingly innocuous moments, such as the boy's expedition. The boys' ready acceptance of the rumor about the train tracks suggests that they are used to such violence and, instead of tempting fate, choose security over childlike fun and curiosity.

While he has not developed a stammer like his brother, since Bird Leg's death, Lafeyette has become more introverted, refusing to show his emotions and concerns. He is occasionally harsh with Pharoah, but LaJoe knows that this reveals his fear and his desire to protect his younger brother. Once, he braves gunfire to save an acquaintance whom he sees stuck in the middle of a shooting. Too shocked to react and run away, the acquaintance repeats to himself over and over that he wants to die, but Lafeyette refuses to leave him alone in the middle of the shooting.

Pharoah's reactions to violence result in part from his feeling of being helplessly subjected to it. By contrast, Lafeyette's reactions are rooted in his need to be active and protect the people around him. His outbursts of violence show how overwhelming his role is, which requires constant bravery and the ignorance of one's own fear. He is forced to behave like a protective adult when he is just a young child.

One day, Lafeyette witnesses a firebombing after teenagers throw Molotov cocktails into the apartment next door. His trauma is so entrenched that he refuses to talk about this event until two years later, when he barely mentions a few words about it. Talking about the event, he argues, would not only upset him emotionally, but can also bring trouble to himself and to his family, as other people could interpret his words as an affront to gangs.

Lafeyette's refusal to communicate does not indicate apathy or rebelliousness but, rather, reveals hidden pain and vulnerability. His pragmatic considerations about the dangers of speaking up also highlight how isolated members of the Horner community have become, as simply talking to relieve one's emotions can spur more violence.

Despite being haunted by Bird Leg's death and encouraged by his mother to articulate his emotions, Lafeyette concludes that talking about his grief will not help, since everything always goes wrong in the neighborhood, and he will never be able to change anything. His expression becomes stoic, empty, and unforgiving, revealing what Kotlowitz sees as both loneliness and fear. He tells his mother that, instead of having friends, he has only "associates," since he does not trust people enough to call them friends.

Lafeyette loses trust not only in his own power to change things, but also in the very concept of change or justice. Instead, he becomes resigned to pain and injustice. Such cynicism at a young age sacrifices an important part of the human experience—like the possibility of forming true friendships and of having hope in the future—in favor of mere survival in the present.

CHAPTER 7

LaJoe has known her best and only friend, Rochelle, since they were children. Before they were even born, their mothers were already best friends, and now, Rochelle is like a second mother to LaJoe's children. While she does not have a job—instead organizing a monthly card game that gives her enough money to live—she often brings the family clothes or toys.

Because of her closeness to LaJoe, Rochelle is like a family member to the children. Her willingness to sacrifice herself for LaJoe's family shows that, even in gang-controlled areas, people still feel the need to give and receive emotional support, and that friendships can thrive even in the most hostile environments.

When gangs enter in what they call "peace treaties," adults and their children can finally gather outside to meet and play in the narrow parking lot by the Riverses' building. One such day, when LaJoe and Rochelle are watching the children play around, LaJoe worriedly notes that Pharoah has recently been daydreaming a lot and forgetting things, as though he is living in a different world than everyone else. The city's teachers have been on strike for a couple of weeks, fighting to obtain a pay raise, and Pharoah desperately wants to go back to school. He asks his mother when the strike will end, but his stutter keeps him from finishing his question. Knowing what he is trying to say, LaJoe still answers him, telling him that he will soon be back at school.

The irony of the word "peace treaties" to refer to a truce in gang violence suggests that the gangs' actions can actually be compared to a war, given the scope of the damage they inflict. Pharoah's desperation to go to school is similar to his desire to return to the train tracks. In the same way that his daydreaming reveals his preference for imagination over reality, both the train tracks and the school allow him to escape the neighborhood for a few hours and find temporary peace.

Pharoah loves school. Despite his stammer and being two months below what is considered a standard level at his age, he is one of the best students in fourth grade at his school, because so many of the other students' grades are lower than his. He usually rushes to school as fast as he can in the morning and often reads at night until his eyes hurt. In his spare time, he practices his handwriting so much that his teachers are impressed by how neat it looks.

Pharoah's academic motivation clearly sets him apart from most of the other students. Even though the school experiences serious difficulties—which paradoxically allows a student who is behind a nationwide, standard level to be considered one of the best in his class—Pharoah is eager to improve, using his free time as an opportunity to keep learning.

In the meantime, during the strike-extended summer, the neighborhood remains violent. When a family friend is killed, both Lafeyette and Pharoah refuse to attend the funeral, because they still have not gotten over Bird Leg's death. The strike finally ends in early October, and Pharoah is excited to start a new, important school year.

Even though Horner residents are somewhat accustomed to the violence that plagues their neighborhood, they are not numb to it—every death is a huge emotional blow. Lafeyette and Pharoah's refusal to attend the funeral shows that they can't emotionally keep up with the pace of street killings.

The Henry Suder Elementary School, which both Lafeyette and Pharoah attend, was once a symbol of controversy and racial inequality, due to the school board president's discriminatory policies. Despite the school's historically high drop-out rate, Suder is special in comparison with other inner-city schools because of its relatively good discipline which the school's principal, Brenda Daigre, has played an important role in maintaining. Ms. Daigre also launched "Project Africa," which raises money to send a dozen students to Africa during the summer, and the project has received national attention and praise. At the same time, Ms. Daigre's authoritative attitude can also turn into overly harsh judgment, as she's quick to label students as "bad" and administer punishment that is too severe.

Even though Suder Elementary is Pharoah's safe haven, it is still affected by the same discrimination and potential violence that exist in the neighborhood. Students who live in neighborhoods such as Horner, then, are doubly disadvantaged in comparison to other students across the country: first, because of the dangers of their neighborhood, and secondly because of the way their neighborhood negatively affects the quality of their school. At the same time, some programs, such as Project Africa, also bring hope and show some individuals' will to allow their students to grow and learn in innovative ways.

The school also suffers from increasingly limited funds, which has forced it to cut art and music classes, have only one counselor for seven hundred students, and share a nurse and psychologist with three other schools. In addition, Suder suffers from a severe lack of male teachers, who could serve as positive role models for children and show them that employed men do not only work as policemen.

The striking inadequacy of Suder Elementary's services suggests that students will probably never receive the psychological or social help they might need, even though so many of them deal with problems at home or in the neighborhood that make them particularly vulnerable. The lack of male role models implies that male students' awareness of life opportunities remains extremely limited, which is bound to impact their own aspirations.

Pharoah's fourth-grade class is led by Ms. Barone, an enthusiastic, experienced teacher. While Ms. Barone devotes extraordinary energy to her class, she has also suffered from fatigue over the years, and she is tired of large class sizes and lack of funds. Due to her emotional involvement with her students, who often face violence and trauma outside of school, Ms. Barone suffers from excessive stress, which has led her to develop a ulcerated colon.

Ms. Barone's vulnerability to stress mirror LaJoe and Lafeyette's own reactions to violence. These examples suggest that the problems facing the school or the neighborhood cannot be handled by single individuals, but require large-scale institutional support—which is sorely lacking.

Ms. Barone insists on maintaining strict order in the classroom because she argues that her students, who experience chaos in so many other aspects of their life, need it desperately to grow and feel safe. When she noticed Pharoah's stutter on the first day of school, she was mostly impressed by the young boy's determination to get the words out, and she has since felt a "soft spot" for him.

Ms. Barone's insistence on order might seem inappropriate or too authoritarian in another setting, but makes perfect sense in such a chaotic, violent neighborhood. Ms. Barone's well-ordered teaching style makes the students feel secure, knowing that a trusted adult is in control, and gives them an important glimpse of stability.

Unlike in the rest of the neighborhood, Pharoah feels so comfortable and free at school that he spends his time talking in class, and Ms. Barone has had to place him in the front row to keep an eye on him. At the same time, Pharoah constantly asks to be given responsibilities and tasks to perform, and he has also impressed his teachers and peers alike with his writing and spelling, composing essays that convey his imaginative powers. He felt proud once when the entire class laughed at one of his humorous essays, instead of teasing him, as his schoolmates sometimes do when they make fun of his studiousness or his buck teeth.

Pharoah's talkative, ebullient behavior at school contrasts sharply with his stutter and his more reserved attitude in the neighborhood. The striking difference in his personality at school and at home suggests that people's behavior is largely determined by their environment. At the same time, it also shows that Pharoah is intrinsically motivated to work hard, and that his creativity and talent distinguish him from other students. Unlike at home, where he feels passive and vulnerable, at school, Pharoah actively takes control over his life.

CHAPTER 8

Pharoah has made an unusual friend at school. Ever since Rickey asked Pharoah to ask his cousin Dede out for him, the two of them have become friends. Their friendship is unusual, given that Rickey lives on the other side of a line dividing different gangs and that Rickey is tough and muscular while Pharoah is skinny. Pharoah is studious and respectful, and Rickey is rebellious and aggressive, and is notorious at Suder for having been involved in so many fights.

The friendship between Pharoah and Rickey indicates that appearances, such as one's typical gang affiliation or outward aggressiveness, might not be sufficient in determining someone's true nature. Perhaps Rickey and Pharoah have more common ground than their appearances suggest.

Most importantly, Rickey was deeply affected by his cousin Bird Leg's death, since he considered him a big brother and actually witnessed him being shot. Yet instead of shying away from violence like Pharoah, Rickey uses his anger about his friend's death to immerse himself even more deeply in violence, once almost choking a classmate to death. Like a war veteran, his attitude bears the deep mark of trauma. He has become so used to his pain and anger, as well as participating in fights, that he has become almost apathetic toward violence, feeling that he has the right to kill people as retribution for Bird Leg's death.

Rickey's behavior illustrates how trauma can be expressed in different ways. While Pharoah, Lafeyette, and Rickey might all feel sad and helpless after learning of a friend's death, the Rivers brothers tend to hide their emotions by turning inward, whereas Rickey transforms it into outward rage, a pernicious desire to make others suffer as he has suffered. Both attitudes, however different, express the boys' shared inability to handle such large-scale problems as injustice and violence, which lie beyond their control.

Rickey can also be kind and protective, helping younger children cross the street and behaving politely to adults, thus showing that kindness lies beneath his aggressive features. Rickey demonstrates his desire to protect people weaker than him in other ways. One day, in gym class, a boy taunts Pharoah and tries to hit him while playing basketball. Without thinking, Rickey grabs and punches the other boy to defend Pharoah, visibly weaker and in need of protection. Rickey often behaves toward Pharoah like an older brother, giving him protection and help.

Rickey's mixed aggressive and protective behaviors show that he is not inherently "good" or "bad" but, rather, that his belligerent attitude is in large part influenced by his environment. Perhaps he has only learned to protect himself from violence through violence itself, and perhaps he has not found a non-violent way to process and express his emotions. Regardless, Rickey's behavior suggests that he probably feels conflicted about his role in the world and the kind of person he wants to be.

Aware of Rickey's reputation, Lafeyette worries about Pharoah's new friend. At the same time, he admires Pharoah's academic successes. While he himself is smart, he does not work as hard as Pharoah and often misses school. Secretly, though, he wishes that LaJoe would put more pressure on him, encouraging him to have healthy habits and do his homework. However, Lafeyette is particularly good at math and science and, toward the end of the year, has become fond of his teacher, Mrs. Everage. He has admitted to her that he often worries about his siblings' safety and feels, in particular, that Pharoah needs to learn to fight in order to protect himself. Surprisingly, though, while Lafeyette worries about Pharoah's new relationship with Rickey, which he feels can get him into trouble, it is Lafeyette who will end up being more influenced by Rickey.

Lafeyette's desire for his mother to give him more academic encouragement highlights a hidden vulnerability. It suggests that he wants *to perform better at school, but that he finds himself at a loss as to how to actually accomplish this—unlike Pharoah, who does not seem to need the same kind of guidance. Even though the two brothers might both be equally talented and smart, it is ultimately the ability to believe in themselves and persevere that distinguishes them in terms of academic achievement. In addition, Lafeyette's need to share his worries is evident. It demonstrates his loyalty and feeling of responsibility toward his family, and the emotional burden of such a hefty responsibility.*

CHAPTER 9

When Pharoah's two pet goldfish die, the young boy cries for hours but goes to bury them in the ground by his building, handling the emotions of this event on his own.

Pharoah's deep emotional response to the death of his two goldfish highlights his sensitivity and childlike innocence. It also emphasizes how entirely overwhelming his environment is, which is filled with death on a much wider scale than just goldfish.

The apartment has become seriously overcrowded, as LaJoe's eldest daughter, LaShawn, has moved back in with her boyfriend, Brian, her boyfriend's brother, and her two children, Tyisha and Darrell (nicknamed "Baldheaded). LaJoe does not want to kick her own children out of her apartment and feels that LaShawn, who is addicted to drugs, might not be able to take care of her own children. When LaJoe's husband, Paul, stays the night, the small apartment totals thirteen people. While this makes Pharoah feels safer, he also finds himself unable to focus on his schoolwork.

LaJoe's love for her family carries both positive and negative consequences, as it allows others to benefit from her care but takes a serious toll on her own comfort and well-being, as well as that of her children. Her inability to say no makes it easy for other people to take advantage of her, without reciprocating the same time and energy that she freely gives to her family.

While LaJoe understands the dangers of leaving some of her children homeless in a neighborhood without any homeless shelters, she also soon becomes overwhelmed by the stress of having so many people around her, since she worries about everyone's problems. LaJoe suffers from episodes of such severe anxiety and stress that she at times loses her temper and finds that her body is affected physically by the violence and general insecurity in her life. Most recently, Terence has been arrested for his alleged participation in an armed robbery, and the Department of Public Aid is threatening to take away her welfare benefits because they have been told that her husband sometimes stays with the family.

Because of the lack of adequate services in the neighborhood, LaJoe takes in too many people in her apartment and becomes burdened by a situation that more efficient social institutions could have alleviated. At the same time, LaJoe does have some control over what happens in her house. She could perhaps protect herself more by being firmer with people who take advantage of her generosity or fighting more tenaciously against certain dangers such as losing her welfare benefits.

LaJoe's most severe disappointment in her family has been Terence. LaJoe's family responsibilities began early. She met Paul Rivers when she was barely fourteen and Paul seventeen. They started a family immediately, as LaJoe gave birth to LaShawn and then Weasel within two years of their meeting. Paul used to be a boxer, a voracious reader, and an active debater of politics, but he soon proved unfaithful and, over time, addicted to drugs. Even though LaJoe wanted her children to have a stable father figure in their life, which many families in the neighborhood sorely lacked, the couple's relationship began to fall apart when she learned about her husband's drug habit.

Like her own children, LaJoe was forced to grow up prematurely and face adult responsibilities in the middle of adolescence. In addition, she was largely left alone to take care of her children, thus handling the difficult tasks of parenthood on her own. Despite LaJoe's love for her children, these conditions created an unstable family foundation from the very beginning—financially and, perhaps, emotionally—as Paul and LaJoe both seem unprepared for such a long-term investment.

Unable to say no to anyone, LaJoe did not want to kick Paul out, and over the years, she had Terence, Lafeyette, Pharoah, and the triplets with him. LaJoe used to work off and on as a clerk but, during times of unemployment, has depended on welfare benefits. As her marriage crumbled, LaJoe found comfort in her son Terence, whom she loved dearly and felt close to. However, when the younger children were born, Terence began to feel that he was no longer receiving enough attention from his mother. As a result, at the age of nine, Terence decided to leave the house. Charles, a local drug dealer took care of him, adopting him into his home and using the young boy to sell drugs.

LaJoe's decision to continue having children with Paul despite their economic struggles and the disintegration of their relationship remains hard to explain. Terence's decision to leave the home at such a young age is also hard to understand—Terence wanted more attention and love from his mother, but by leaving the house, he cut himself off from that possibility. It is possible that a stressful family environment and, perhaps, negative pressures from the neighborhood all contributed to make him feel unhappy and alienated.

When LaJoe discovered, months later, what had happened to her son, she was still unable to bring him back. Terence would stay home for a few days after being caught by the police, but he would then escape again. Paul decided to intervene. In a bold move, he confronted Charles directly, but Charles argued that Terence should be free to make his own choices. The confrontation between the two men risked turning violent, as Charles's friends offered to kill Paul, which Charles refused. This episode had a temporary effect on Terence's behavior but, in the end, the young boy has continued to escape his home.

Paul's decision to fight for his son to return is surprising, given his usual lack of involvement in family affairs. His willingness to confront Charles also shows courage, given the intensely violent nature of the drug-trafficking world. However, Terence's behavior remains hard to understand. While both his parents clearly wanted him back, he still felt the need to leave his home and engage in illegal activities. This gestures to the profound pressures that exist in the outside world, which Terence's parents couldn't protect him from.

The reasons for such behavior remain unclear. In the neighborhood, it is so common for young people to fall prey to the attraction of crime and drug trafficking that families learn to give up on their children, considering that those who leave are not their children anymore. Terence, though, loves and misses his family. Lafeyette adores his brother and wants him to come home, but Terence usually just gives him some money before heading off again. Once, when Terence found out that his father had been robbed, he sent money to his family's apartment to compensate for his father's loss.

The routine nature of cases like Terence's suggests that there is a structural phenomenon, beyond individual will, that is at play in the neighborhood—which sometimes attracts young men to street life, regardless of how much their family loves them or how much they love their family. The mystery of such a process is all the more baffling for LaJoe, who feels deprived of all parental control and influence.

After an incident with his mother, Terence finally returns home. Seeing LaJoe in the street, he asks his mother for a few dollars. While LaJoe refuses, saying she has no money on her, she later returns with grocery bags in her hand, which her son helps her carry. This episode impacts Terence, who realizes that his mother is teaching him a lesson, and that he wants to go home. However, he does not succeed in staying away from illegal activity, as he begins to shoplift and use the money to buy drugs.

The realization that his mother is unwilling to give him money unless he proves himself as a responsible son was a wake-up call for Terence, who understands that his mother can (and will) punish him for leaving the home. Terence's fear of becoming excluded from his family seems to have been the main motivation behind his decision to return. This highlights the strong bond that exists between members of the Rivers family, whatever wrong actions they might have committed.

Terence also briefly joins the Disciples, taking part in fights and witnessing one of his friends get killed. He soon abandons the gang when, after being sent to prison, he realizes that none of the gang members come to visit him. Terence also struggles to care for the children he has fathered after having his first child, Terence (nicknamed Snuggles), at the age of fourteen, just like his mother. By the age of eighteen, despite occasionally trying to have a legal job and stay away from trouble, Terence has been arrested forty-six times.

Terence's realization that gangs are not reliable in the same way that his family might be serves as an important lesson, highlighting the fact that gangs are not organized around principles of solidarity but around self-interest—that of the group as a whole, as well as of individuals within that group. In light of the struggles that LaJoe has gone through after having her first child at fourteen, the future of Terence's family remains precarious and uncertain, especially given Terence's own criminal record.

Meanwhile, in 1987 and 1988, many taverns in the north side of Chicago are suffering from robberies, in which a few black males break into video game machines to steal the change inside. The robberies follow a common pattern, and the police soon organize to stop the young men. Still a juvenile, Terence is arrested during one of these robberies. Two weeks later, he is accused of participating in an armed robbery, after a tavern owner recognizes him in one of the police's pictures. When the police comes to the apartment to arrest Terence, however, he proclaims his innocence. Despite LaJoe's protests, the officers handcuff him in front of Lafeyette, Pharoah, and Snuggles, who begins to cry for the police to leave his father alone.

The police's lack of sensitivity when it comes to protecting family life has the potential to affect not only the life of the person who is arrested, but also that of the young, vulnerable witnesses. In the same way that seeing death at a young age might have made Lafeyette emotionally closed-off, seeing his father's arrest at such a young age could traumatize Snuggles for life. It could also normalize such events, perhaps making him see arrests as an ordinary occurrence in life. These episodes merely add to the physical and emotional violence the children already experience at Horner.

CHAPTER 10

LaJoe is called to the local welfare office because, in light of the allegation that her husband sometimes sleeps at home, her eligibility needs to be re-examined. Nervous and subdued, she is taken to the "interrogation room," which is an austere, impersonal room where four people walk in without introducing themselves and begin to question her about her husband's habits. LaJoe speaks in such a soft voice that the inquisitors have to lean in to hear her.

LaJoe's attitude at the welfare office reveals her inability to project herself in a clear, confident way and defend her rights. The impersonal quality of the interrogation room contributes to making her feel that these people are less interested in hearing her story and protecting justice than in judging and punishing her.

The inquisitors show LaJoe evidence, such as joint tax incomes and her husband's unemployment benefits, where Paul has claimed LaJoe's apartment as his residence. Even though LaJoe does not actually receive any money from Paul and desperately needs her welfare money, which she spends mostly on groceries, she finds herself unable to defend her case. Troubled, LaJoe walks out of the room without denying that Paul occasionally spends the night nor asking about her legal or social rights.

Perhaps out of shyness or a lack of understanding that she can actually defend herself, LaJoe seems resigned to lose her benefits and does not explain the complexity of her situation. It seems that what would have benefited her most—and would have ensured that her rights be protected—is more guidance and counsel, as well as information about what her various options are.

When she arrives home, Lafeyette, who knows his mother has gone to a meeting about her welfare benefits, asks her about it, and LaJoe tells him they will no longer receive any. Lafeyette is visibly upset, and LaJoe decides not to tell Pharoah about it because Pharoah has tried hard to keep from being burdened by adult problems—an attitude of denial that seems to give him some inner peace. While LaJoe feels guilty of burdening Lafeyette with these problems, she realizes that he is the only person he can confide in.

LaJoe's isolation only increases her stress, but overcoming this isolation by confiding in Lafeyette increases his *stress, which keeps him from protecting his childhood like Pharoah. The family clearly lacks adequate outlets to express their emotions and a feeling of control over seemingly unfair events such as the removal of welfare benefits.*

Lafeyette responds to his mother's trust by wanting to protect her and shield her from the difficulties of life. One year ago, after LaJoe and Rochelle were robbed by two teenagers who severed nerves in LaJoe's fingers with a knife, Lafeyette swears that he would have killed them had he been there. This time, after LaJoe loses her benefits, he joins her at night when he sees her worrying. He asks her why he doesn't simply kick Paul and LaShawn out, since they bring her so much trouble, but LaJoe says she could not do that, evoking their drug problems to argue that she needs to take care of them. Lafeyette says that his mother should stop being "weak-hearted." He knows that she has such difficulty saying no to people, which can make her seem passive and weak.

Lafeyette's eagerness to help his mother also leads to frustration when he finds himself unable to resolve the situation, for example when the problem lies in the past (as in the theft) or when it has to do with LaJoe's personality (as when LaJoe cannot say no to her children). His inability to truly comfort his mother or to keep himself from worrying comes from his inability to influence their outward environment—to prevent violence in the neighborhood and to change LaJoe's patterns of behavior. In this situation, both Lafeyette and LaJoe seem doomed to the only course of action: worrying.

To comfort his mother, Lafeyette tells LaJoe that he will one day have a white house, outside of the projects, where he will take care of all his siblings instead of living in the projects. At other moments, Lafeyette's strong desire to leave Horner sometimes can lead him to become aggressive, wanting his mother to try harder, and to suggest that he quit school to work. Frustrated by the difficulty for life at Horner to improve, he tells LaJoe that speaking and sharing his thoughts is useless, since nothing ever changes.

Unable to solve the problems in the present, Lafeyette resorts to a kind escapism similar to Pharoah's daydreaming: a belief in a more positive, fantastical future, in which there will be no problems. However, when such thoughts prove unfeasible in the immediate future, Lafeyette gives in to frustration, anger, and cynicism, retreating even more deeply into himself without trusting the world around him.

Lafeyette feels used to disappointment, and to knowing that he can only rely on his mother, his brother Pharoah, and himself in life. His "associate," James, has succeeded in moving out of Horner, after his mother reached the top of a waiting list for subsidized housing. While Lafeyette might feel sad about losing his friend, he rarely seems to dwell on the issue. LaJoe realizes that, by worrying so often about their family with Lafeyette, she has forced her son to turn into "a twelve-year old man," someone who shoulders heavy responsibilities.

Lafeyette's decision to only trust his close family might give him a sense of security about preventing possible disappointments, but does not relieve his frustration or discouragement, since his family is so often the source of his worries. Although he has been forced to grow up prematurely to take care of others, Lafeyette lacks his own support network, which could provide him with comfort and reassurance.

Pharoah learns about his mother's situation a few weeks later after the fact, when he realizes that LaJoe is no longer doing her monthly shopping. He does not seem too upset by the news, instead trying to not make her mother feel bad about it. In the meantime, LaJoe receives some help from friends and family, who help by giving her food stamps and food, but she begins to play cards for money to help her family survive. Often, she plays through the night and only comes home in the morning. When she isn't home to prepare breakfast for the children, Lafeyette takes over and gets everyone ready for school.

Pharoah's reaction to the news about his mother's welfare benefits is surprising, since LaJoe had thought he would be worried. Perhaps what usually upsets Pharoah is violence, and he does not fully understand the importance of welfare, or perhaps he has become more accustomed to unfortunate events. Either way, this situation proves Pharoah and Lafeyette's capacity to take care of their own lives without further burdening their mother, even if this might not bring them comfort or emotional relief.

While LaJoe has also searched for work, her extreme shyness has often made her seem overly nervous or detached during interviews. Her worries also make her feel stressed and tired, which sometimes leads her to lash out in anger against her children, for which she later tries to apologize.

While LaJoe's personality might make her seem passive, she does actually try to find work. Her personal troubles impact her family, as they generate a climate of stress and frustration, thus proving that family cannot be a perfect buffer against a difficult environment.

LaJoe still has an appeal hearing with a judge to give her response to the Public Aid's case, but she feels resigned to losing her benefits. At the same time, she is angry to be deprived of money that she so sorely needs. She feels that any social worker who would visit her apartment would immediately know that she is not trying to cheat the system, but that she truly deserves her welfare benefits.

LaJoe's feelings of injustice lead to frustration, but this does not prove sufficient to make her defend her case more aggressively. Rather, the unfairness of the system only increases her apparent passivity. This is a crucial moment, though, in which greater assertiveness could have alleviated her troubles.

Feeling guilty about this situation, Paul himself tries to talk to a caseworker before the appeal, explaining his problems with drugs and his separation from LaJoe. He asks that this information be kept confidential from his employer, but the caseworker understands this as a request for confidentiality in general and does not mention any of this at the appeal hearing, thus further weakening LaJoe's arguments. Her weak defense at the hearing is deemed insufficient, and the judge decides to take away her benefits, noting that she can choose to reapply.

Paul's willingness to step up to defend the truth and LaJoe shows that, while he might not always be present in his family's life, he does care about their well-being. While his testimony could have played an important role in allowing LaJoe to keep her benefits, mere miscommunication or inefficacy invalidates his attempt to help. LaJoe's benefits are thus taken away for superficial reasons, not because of any actual cheating on her part.

In the meantime, violence at Horner continues to traumatize the children. Pharoah shakes at any loud noise, and Lafeyette desperately wants to get out of Horner. When Alonzo Campbell, a nine-year-old friend of theirs, is shot in the head because of a stray bullet, this shooting raises outrage in Horner because of how it contrasts with another, widely reported event that takes place around the same time. After an emotionally disturbed woman shoots at a group of children in an elementary school at Winnetka, citizens mobilize to give the children psychological help and to denounce gun laws, thus giving the shooting a visibility that the one at Horner never receives.

Even though Horner residents sometimes seem resigned to their isolation and incapable of taking collective action to solve their problems, they are capable of recognizing injustice when the violence they suffer on an ordinary basis is so blatantly ignored by the media, which prefers to focus on a wealthier area in the region. The contrast between these two events only highlights the neglect that Horner residents suffer from and the invisibility of their often tragic lives.

The contrast between Alonzo's violent experience at Horner and the publicity that the Winnetka murder receives, which spurs nationwide social debate and activism, reveals the injustice between what is considered ordinary and extraordinary violence. To many Horner residents, it highlights the extraordinary burden that they have to bear, as such tragedies form part of their everyday life, whereas other people experience them as extraordinary occurrences. LaJoe tells herself that she needs to keep on moving rapidly through her life, because she might go crazy if she stops to think about what she and her children have been through.

While it might seem logical that people who are accustomed to violence might be able to bear it more easily, the opposite seems to be true: LaJoe is highly aware that violence is capable of driving her insane, and that the only way to cope with it is not to think about it. As soon as Horner residents are moved to think about the violence they endure—like during moments of crisis after Alonzo's murder—their anger and indignation comes forth, revealing that they do not, in fact, consider their current life ordinary or acceptable.

CHAPTER 11

When LaJoe, Lafeyette, Pharoah and the triplets go to the county jail to visit Terence, they have to talk to him through bullet-proof glass but are all extremely excited to see each other. When Terence walks in, he is visibly thrilled to see his family and smiles happily. Everyone tells Terence that they love him. Lafeyette strives to listen to Terence's words, but Pharoah soon becomes distracted by the commotion in the room, and in particular, by a woman next to them who is having a fight with her boyfriend on the other side of the glass window.

This scene of family reunion is both heartwarming and tragic, since it highlights the fact that these loving family members are currently forced to live apart. At the same time, the children's words of love to their older brother serve as a reminder that their family is meant to stay united, whatever actions Terence might or might not have committed. This affirmation of stability offsets the uncertainty of Terence's trial.

As the initial joy at seeing everyone fades, Terence becomes tense and aggressive, drumming his fist against the counter and repeating that he wants to get out of jail. He also repeats that he is innocent, which he has only done once before and was indeed wrongly accused. LaJoe believes him and tells him not to lose hope.

While injustice might affect Terence's life greater than his family's, this scene serves as a reminder that one person's sentencing does affect the entire family, as it can tear children apart from their parents and siblings, thus making the entire family bear the weight of injustice.

When Lafeyette softly says hello to his brother, Terence gives him a long lecture telling him to stay in school and stay away from trouble, telling him how hard it is to be in jail. Lafeyette listens carefully and nods at his brother's words, as Terence seems eager to share his thoughts with his younger brother. After an hour, a guard tells them they have to leave. After Terence gives Lafeyette a few more parting words of advice and tells everyone how good it was to see them, they are forced to separate. When Pharoah asks how Terence can get out from behind the glass, Lafeyette tells him to shut up before LaJoe has time to answer.

Terence seems eager to protect his younger siblings and keep them from making the same mistakes he did. His recommendations to work hard at school might seem trite, but they are difficult to commit to in such an unstable environment as Horner, where young people are constantly affected by a host of negative pressures. Lafeyette's angry reaction to his brother's question shows that he, like Terence, is deeply angered by the possibility that his brother might be unjustly incarcerated.

A few weeks later, Lafeyette himself asks LaJoe when Terence will get out of prison, LaJoe admits that she doesn't know and asks Lafeyette to stop asking, which he has been doing repeatedly for the past weeks. He has had dreams about his brother that wake him up during the night, but he refuses to talk about them.

While Lafeyette initially seems to prefer not to dwell on the issue, he soon proves just as eager as Pharoah to know when his brother will get out. His repetitive questions and nightmares indicate how much this apparent injustice affects him under the surface.

Pharoah is also upset by his brother's incarceration. He is deeply troubled by notions of right and wrong and, in particular, the possibility that his brother might be suffering from injustice. Two years ago, Terence had been arrested for allegedly shooting a young girl in the stomach, but was released from prison five months later when the girl admitted that it was a rival gang member who shot her. The experience was deeply upsetting for the Rivers family, who knew that Terence was innocent.

Terence's previous arrest proves that some people place gang loyalty before any other considerations, such as justice, and that innocent people often suffer as a result. Such injustice, though, cannot be directly attributed to the legal system itself, but can make Pharoah and Lafeyette distrustful of the law's capacity to ensure that higher notions of right and wrong are respected.

Lafeyette and Pharoah are upset by Terence's arrest, as it represents yet another loss in their long experience with losing friends and family members to violence. While LaJoe argues that prison could be good for Terence, as it keeps him from getting into trouble in the street, Lafeyette and Pharoah miss him deeply and want their brother back.

Even though Terence has not yet disappeared from Lafeyette and Pharoah's life fully, the young boys understand his arrest as a form of violence, since at affects them—provoking sadness, worrying, grief—as any other form of injustice would.

CHAPTER 12

When Pharoah is selected to participate in the school's spelling bee, he prepares for weeks before the contest, repeating words and training himself to relax and think calmly before speaking so that he will not stutter. On the day of the event, he wants his friend Rickey to be there, but Rickey has been sent to the principal's office out of fear that he could lose control and disrupt the contest. Pharoah is confident enough about his abilities and his practice that he believes he can place second or third. However, when he stands on the stage, he becomes extremely nervous, afraid that he will stutter and embarrass himself, and that everyone will make fun of him.

Pharoah's training before the spelling bee shows how dedicated he is to his academic work. However, he soon realizes that his greatest obstacle is not necessarily his ability to spell, but to control his stutter. This episode thus serves as a highly symbolic event, as Pharoah is given the opportunity to show whether he can overcome the fear that his environment instills in him (which his stutter renders visible) or whether his emotions will overwhelm him.

Pharoah succeeds at spelling words until only five contestants are left. However, when asked to spell "endurance," which he knows how to spell, he becomes so excited that he begins to speak to fast. His stutter returns, and he finds himself unable to spell the letters out. The buzzer sounds, marking his elimination, and Pharoah tries to keep himself from crying in public. Ms. Barone congratulates him, telling him she is proud of him, but Pharoah returns home disappointed and sad.

Pharoah's inability to spell a word he knows because of his stutter gives the impression that his body is more powerful than his mind. It seems unfair that a physical problem would impede him from expressing his intellectual capacities. At the same time, though, Pharoah benefits from support, and Ms. Barone's words are meant to remind him that he has done well, especially considering his speaking impairment.

At home, LaJoe also tries to reassure him. She knows that Pharoah will succeed at school and that he might be the first of her children to bring home a high school diploma. Pharoah, however, has higher ambitions, since he knows that he could have won the contest. He decides to work hard to prepare for next year's contest.

Pharoah proves his true strength in deciding not to give up and not letting a physical difficulty keep him from proving—to himself and to others—that he can be an outstanding student. It is his trust in his abilities and his high ambitions that drive his efforts to succeed.

CHAPTER 13

In contrast to what LaJoe calls the "war-zone" summer of 1987, the summer of 1988 begins with hope. Craig Davis, a young man from another housing complex who comes to visit his girlfriend at Horner, has the double ambition of being a good father and becoming a DJ. Despite a slight learning disability, he has worked hard in school to make it to senior year, which a large majority of students at his high school fail to do. He writes raps and sets up turntables in front of the buildings at Horner, thus encouraging people to come out and dance.

While Craig's ability to set up turntables in front of the building is probably due to a pause in violence, since gangs would otherwise have the power to tell him to stop, it is primarily his unique personality that brings joy and excitement to Horner. His hopeful example shows that, sometimes, a single well-intentioned individual is capable of changing an entire community's atmosphere and mindset.

Lafeyette particularly admires Craig because Craig listens to Lafeyette's opinions, treating him as an equal, and has a big dream of living in a home in a safe neighborhood, far from Horner—a capacity to project himself into the future that, as Kotlowitz notes, many young men at Horner usually give up on. He talks about "good things" and tells Lafeyette to stay away from gangs.

Unlike Lafeyette, Craig has not given up on dreaming about the future, which could give Lafeyette hope and make him feel that he, too, could one day achieve his dreams. Craig's advice mirrors Terence's, thus highlighting the fact that, even though Craig is not part of Lafeyette's family, he truly seems to want what is best for his friend.

As the evening drags on, Horner residents become more comfortable. Pharoah dances freely to the music, making LaJoe laugh, while Rickey, James, and Lafeyette stay to the side. Lafeyette has come to accept Rickey, and Pharoah and he have begun to spend time with him. They sometimes play basketball together, and Rickey occasionally buys them something if he has money.

The lack of violence seems to draw the community together, allow people to forget about their problems, and make everyone feel that they can finally relax—and that they can, as Pharoah demonstrates, fully behave as children, at least for a short amount of time.

Rochelle insists that Lafeyette dance. As everyone encourages him, Lafeyette reluctantly begins to dance but is ultimately able to enjoy a few minutes of peace and freedom, as he lets his body follow the rhythm of the music. Lafeyette looks up at Craig, whom he idolizes and considers a true friend, not an "associate," but when Craig smiles back at him, he becomes self-conscious and stops dancing, watching people from the sidelines with his friends. Most people remember the nights when Craig DJs as the most carefree fun they have had at Horner.

Lafeyette's ability to enjoy a few minutes of freedom contrasts starkly with his usually stoic attitude, showing that he secretly desires to behave like a child and enjoy life's simple pleasures. However, as his later self-consciousness demonstrates, Lafeyette would have to develop an openness to being vulnerable and connecting with other people before finding such happiness in his ordinary life. Of course, this happiness and freedom would ultimately require the suspension of violence, insecurity, and fear, too.

In the meantime, public defender Audrey Natcone feels sorry for her client Terence, who looks young and nervous and will probably be deeply affected by spending time in prison. After working as a lawyer for three years, she has decided that she wants to start teaching instead. She finds that she is overworked, has too little time to spend on cases, and that trials usually destroy her clients—whether or not they are actually guilty.

Audrey's mix of compassion and cynicism shows that even lawyers know the legal system is imperfect and often unjust. This illustrates that the problems within the system are not due to the staff's lack of competence or good will, but to structural problems seemingly beyond individuals' reach.

In this case, Audrey is particularly impressed by Terence's relationship with his family. Unlike most of her clients, LaJoe is always present on Terence's court dates. Terence's seemingly sincere insistence that he is innocent, combined with LaJoe's devotion to her son, slowly convince Audrey that Terence may be innocent after all. The fact that the police has still not provided the photographs from which the tavern owner identified Terence further convinces Audrey that something suspicious is happening, and that the photographs might prove that Terence is not guilty. While the young man who planned the robbery could have testified that Terence was innocent, such an act would have indicted him, and the law of the streets requires him to protect himself before family and friends. Audrey, though, feels confident about winning the case.

Audrey's surprise at Terence's strong family bonds paints a gloomy picture of family tension and potential abandonment in so many other families—factors that may also contribute to young people's misbehavior in the first place. The police's suspicious behavior suggests that not all law enforcement institutions or personnel are necessarily dedicated to protecting justice and truth, and that they can have hidden, potentially self-interested motives.

At Horner, things begin to seem more hopeful. LaJoe begins to feel more optimistic about Terence's case. She also reapplies for welfare benefits and, in light of Paul's recent unemployment, sees her welfare restored. In addition, Craig Davis serves as a positive influence on Lafeyette, someone whom he can look up to as a role model. Most importantly, though, LaJoe's beloved niece, Dawn, has recently graduated from high school—a feat that nine other children of her generation in the Anderson family have failed to achieve. To celebrate this, LaJoe organizes a party in her apartment. Dawn's achievement is even more extraordinary given that she already has four children, whom she raises with the help of her devoted boyfriend, Demetrius.

Even though Terence's case is not yet resolved, LaJoe receives justice through the restoration of her welfare benefits, which proves that the system is not entirely ineffective. Meanwhile, Dawn's graduation is a celebration of her hard work, but also highlights the sad reality that most children in the Rivers family—and, probably, in the neighborhood as a whole—fail to complete their high school education.

Lafeyette and Pharoah are amazed by Dawn's success, and both of them want to work hard to become like her. They also note that they never want to go to Dawn's high school, Crane, which is notorious for being overcrowded, having extremely low success rates, and having serious security problems. In addition, other students have criticized Dawn for being part of the honors course. On various occasions, she has wanted to drop out, but LaJoe has always encouraged her to stay strong and trust that investing in her school work will bring her a bright future. A short article comes out a month later in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, relating Dawn and Demetrius's surprising success story, as they have overcome obstacles such as Dawn's four pregnancies and the difficulties of living in inner-city public housing and now want a better life for themselves.

Dawn's success is all the more impressive given the tremendous obstacles she has had to overcome. In that light, her success is only partly the result of her talent and intelligence. Another important factor was mere grit—the willingness and capacity to work hard despite important setbacks. Family has played a crucial role in Dawn's success, through LaJoe's encouragements. This shows that although a family might not be able to shield its children from all troubles, it can give children the self-confidence and motivation necessary for them to overcome such troubles on their own.

CHAPTER 14

In 1988, two notorious criminal cases affect Horner residents in particular. The first one involves an eight-year-old girl, Urica, who saw a man named Lawrence and his friend Bobbie stab Lawrence's girlfriend—a friend of Urica's family—to death. They also killed Urica's mother, her mother's boyfriend, and her four-year-old sister in the building across from the Riverses'. Lawrence and Bobbie then stabbed Urica forty-eight times, leaving her for dead, before a cousin found her and realized that the young girl was not only alive and conscious, but surprisingly calm.

The viciousness of this first crime seems extreme and almost unbelievable, even for a community like Horner where acts of violence are commonplace, since it does not seem motivated by gang rivalry or self-protection, but by the pure desire to kill. Urica's survival is impressive not only from a physical perspective, but also because she has retained her calm in a situation in which other people might have gone insane.

The crime's gruesome details leave the Horner community shaken. Everyone considers Urica a "miracle child," not only because she survived such an attack, but because she had the courage to testify, which many would not have dared to do. After the murderers are convicted, though, no one at Horner dares celebrate publicly or even talk about the murder, out of fear that they might be punished for talking.

Despite celebrating Urica's courage, Horner residents find themselves unable to display the same commitment to truth and justice—not because they reject these principles, but because defending them would involve potentially sacrificing their own life, which Urica's example demonstrates so vividly.

A few weeks earlier, Jimmie Lee was arrested for possession of a large quantity of heroin. Despite escaping law enforcement for many years and even having an agreement with policeman Charles Toussas to have gang members protect his car when he is at Horner, Lee is finally caught in possession of a large quantity of drugs and of a semi-automatic rifle.

This second crime shows that even seemingly all-powerful figures such as Jimmie Lee are not immune to the authority of the law. At the same time, the law has failed for many years to actually protect Horner residents from gang violence, and it remains uncertain whether it will be able to do so now.

At the trial, the prosecution attempts to prove that Jimmie Lee is the head of the Vice Lords. Charlie Toussas recounts Lee's plan to take revenge on Bird Leg's death by leading gang members to fight the Disciples. A police veteran expert on the Vice Lords organization describes the Vice Lords' power. While the prosecutor wants to condemn Lee to a long sentence so that he might become an example of the dangers of drug trafficking, Jimmie Lee's lawyer argues that his conviction would not change the narcotics problem, which is a structural problem rather than a matter of individual action.

Even though Lee's attorney is undoubtedly moved by the necessity to defend his client, he makes a strong point when arguing that Lee's removal from Horner will not necessarily put an end to violence. While Lee is a crucial part of the Vice Lords, he is not the gang's driving force. Like big businesses, gangs are driven by the need to make profits but do so through illegal activities such as drug trafficking. Without destroying such illegal networks, Lee's arrest will probably only have a small effect on drug-related activity at Horner.

In the end, the judge sentences Lee to the maximum sentence, thirty years in prison. News travels fast from the court room to Horner, but LaJoe tells her children not to talk about it, since doing so could get them killed. Indeed, it soon becomes evident that the Vice Lords are willing to defend their power and to fight internally for Jimmie Lee's position.

Once again, Horner residents find themselves unable to celebrate justice, as they need to think about protecting their own lives first. Lee's lawyer's prediction seemingly proves true, as gangs do not disappear but, instead, engage in a new competition for power and territory, which only invites more violence.

CHAPTER 15

When LaJoe receives her Public Aid check, she hires a taxi cab to go shopping with Rochelle in supermarkets farther from the neighborhood, where they charge much lower prices. She returns with enough food to feed thirteen people for a month. Back at Horner, she expects Pharoah to come running toward her to help her with the groceries, which he loves to do, but realizes that her son must have forgotten that today was grocery day. Pharoah has been daydreaming a lot lately and become more forgetful. He has also discovered a secret paradise: a condominium complex called Damen Courts where he sits in the grass for a while and forgets about the violence at Horner, without having to fear for his security.

Horner residents are doubly disadvantaged. Not only do they live in poverty, but the few stores in the neighborhood charge higher prices than those in other neighborhoods, which limits residents' purchasing ability even more. Meanwhile, Pharoah's daydreaming emotionally protects him from the chaos and violence around him. At the same time, the forgetfulness that accompanies this attitude is worrisome, as it suggests that the stress he has lived through might have affected his very memory in an unconscious way.

In the weeks following Jimmie Lee's conviction, violence at Horner slows down a bit. This allows Pharoah's stutter to subside, and he and Lafeyette go to an outdoor swimming pool or to the Boys Club to play. Pharoah still wants to return to the railroad tracks but everyone refuses to take him, as rumors have spread of more dangerous tales of violence taking place there. After hiding the truth about Damen Courts for weeks, he finally tells LaJoe about it, revealing that he feels completely carefree there.

When Pharoah's stutter subsides with the decrease in violence, it becomes obvious that his stutter reflects the intensity of his fear, serving as an unconscious measure of the instability around him. Pharoah's desperate pleas to return to the train tracks reveal not only his desire to forget about to violence, but to engage in play and exploration—childish, lighthearted activities that he has often been denied.

CHAPTER 16

Between summer and fall, Lafeyette and Rickey, who are closer in age than Rickey in Pharoah, have become "associates." Rickey introduces Lafeyette to his group of friends who, like Rickey, have run into many troubles with the law, in particular for breaking car windows and stealing from them. Pharoah begins to spend less time with him, because he is too young and innocent for such a group.

Even though Rickey has proven capable of protecting Pharaoh and being kind to the two brothers, he also does begin to appear like a bad influence, capable of luring Lafeyette down the wrong path. Rickey's anger does not only express itself through fighting and aggression at school, but also through illegal activities.

One Saturday, Pharoah, Lafeyette, Rickey, and other friends go window shopping. When they enter a video-cassette store, Rickey suggests to Lafeyette that they steal some. Pharoah intervenes, asking his older brother to go home, but Lafeyette, hesitating at Rickey's proposition, tells him to leave. Deeply disappointed in his brother's behavior, he and the other friends leave. Rickey and Lafeyette then grab tapes, hide them underneath their jackets, and try to leave the store. However, Mario Vera, an assistant manager who had been suspicious of the group when he saw them whispering among themselves, stops the two boys on their way out. With help from another employee, he discovers the tapes the boys were trying to steal.

The dangers of being Rickey's friend become all too apparent when Lafeyette finds himself agreeing to steal some tapes, proving that peer pressure is indeed a powerful force. While the two friends' behavior is not violent, it does introduce Lafeyette to illegal activity, which could potentially escalate in the future. Even though this proves a stressful experience for Lafeyette, Mario Vera's intervention might play a positive role in Lafeyette's growth, showing him that illegal actions do not always go unpunished and that he should stay away from trouble.

While Rickey is acting overconfident, Lafeyette is apologetic and asks Vera if he can let them go, but Vera needs to follow protocol and wait for the police to arrive. Vera behaves kindly with the two boys and Lafeyette later talks about returning to the store to apologize to him. When the police arrives, they simply give them a lecture about shoplifting and drop them off near a few blocks away from the Henry Horner Homes.

Rickey and Lafeyette's behaviors are polar opposites, contrasting Rickey's defiant attitude to Lafeyette's inexperience and sincere repentance. While this experience might not modify Rickey's reckless behavior, it does impact Lafeyette, who realizes that he has done something wrong and feels bad about it.

When a neighbor tells LaJoe about this incident, she becomes worried about Lafeyette since she remembers how little time it took for Terence to fall prey to other people's bad influences. LaJoe punishes Lafeyette, making him stay home for a week and a half, and gives him greater responsibilities. She talks to him about cremating her instead of bearing the cost of a funeral when she dies. This conversation upsets Pharoah because he fears that Lafeyette will not provide for him when LaJoe dies, despite Lafeyette's protestations to the contrary. His brother's incident with Rickey also leads him to distance himself from Rickey, as he does not want to get into trouble and compromise his future. Like Lafeyette, Pharoah decides that he, too, will not have friends, only associates, since friends can easily betray him.

Even though LaJoe sometimes feels she has little control over her children's behavior, she remains committed to keeping them on the right path. She knows that social pressures can have a strong influence on her sons, and thus resolves to try to make her own influence greater than that of Lafeyette's friends. This time, then, Lafeyette's distrust of the people around him proves warranted and not overly cynical, since Rickey's behavior shows that people outside Lafeyette's family are not necessarily interested in defending his best interests. However, as the story has shown on other occasions, such distrust also has negative repercussions, since it can keep the children from taking part in enjoyable activities outside their home and forming satisfying friendships.


CHAPTER 17

One night, Pharoah and Lafeyette go to the nearby stadium to try to make some money. Children from the neighborhood often go to the stadium on game nights to offer people to watch their cars in exchange for some money. Occasionally, when drivers refuse, the children might break a window and steal something as retribution, although most children simply want to earn some spending money.

Neighborhood children's participation in such money-making activities emphasizes the poverty they live in, as they feel inclined, at such a young age, to earn their own money instead of depending on their family. The occasionally violent behavior that emerges seems to indicate some children's belief in retribution, beyond what is allowed by the law.

Pharoah takes this task seriously and partners with Porkchop to guard people's cars. He also sometimes asks stadium-goers if they have any extra tickets, which he often receives thanks to his small build and innocent face. He might then use them to watch a game, although sometimes stadium attendants refuse to let the children in even if they have tickets. This attitude only fuels the anger that Horner residents harbor against the stadium, as they feel that game nights reveal a deep injustice. Horner residents wonder why the police only appears on game nights, to protect the mostly-white stadium goers, but refuses to enter the neighborhood at other times to protect the local residents' security.

The injustice that affects Horner residents is socio-economic and racial. On the basis on the neighborhood children's mere appearance, stadium attendants seem to assume that they are more likely to bring trouble than other stadium goers. Similarly, the police's behavior signals that they are more dedicated to protecting the security of white, middle- or upper-class stadium goers than the mostly black, lower-class residents of Horner. Despite this evidence of injustice, Horner residents still feel either unable or unwilling to bring their complaints to authorities' attention.

That night, after the police tells the neighborhood children not to watch cars, Pharoah and Porkchop return to Horner to play basketball. However, Lafeyette decides to stay and help a parking attendant wave in cars, which can give him some pocket money, until the police tells him too to stop. It remains unclear whether Lafeyette talks back to the policeman or is too slow to obey, but the policeman suddenly grabs him by the collar and throws him into a puddle of water, telling him that "These white people don't have no money to give no niggers."

Lafeyette's experience with the policeman is brutal, as the officer uses excessive force to subdue an unarmed adolescent who was only trying to earn some money. The policeman's words are also overtly, unapologetically racist, focused not on the illicit activity Lafeyette is taking part in, but aimed at making him feel ashamed for being black, conveying to him the message that there are certain spaces, such as the stadium, where Lafeyette does not belong.

When Lafeyette's friends run to tell LaJoe about what has happened, she hurries to the stadium and the police releases Lafeyette. One of the policemen told Lafeyette that he could get hurt if he stays out all night, but Lafeyette retorts that, so far, in his life, only the police has hurt him. This episode impacts Lafeyette, forcing him to question his previously neutral attitude toward the police.

The policeman's words to Lafeyette function as an implicit threat, aimed at scaring him from returning to the stadium. This violent encounter places the police on a similar level as another source of violence in Lafeyette's life: gang members who use intimidation as a technique to defend their own interests.

Pharoah, too, begins to think about important social issues, such as race. After staying away from the stadium for a few weeks, he realizes that he can make money by performing a humorous dance for one of the stadium goers, a white man, who finds Pharoah's imitation of a chicken humorous. Pharoah, though, realizes that there is something embarrassing about doing this. He begins to wonder if all black people live in the projects and are poor, why there are not more black politicians, and concludes that the police does not like black children—his very first expression of bitterness against anyone in his life.

Despite his tendency to avoid thinking about upsetting issues, Pharoah is able to think about racism when it affects him personally, especially in situations that are not necessarily violent. Through his experience at the stadium, he begins to wonder about the gap between white and black people's perceptions, lives, and socio-economic statuses. This reflection about injustice transforms into bitterness—for which his later interest in politics might prove a useful outlet.

Lafeyette's incident at the stadium reminds LaJoe of the neighborhood's fraught relationship with the police. While Horner residents understand that spending the entire day at Horner can be dangerous for policemen, they also feel that the police is inefficient. Given that they never patrol at night, they essentially relinquish full control of the neighborhood, allowing gangs to be the primary authority that Horner residents are forced to defer to.

The police's inability to be present all the time at Horner means that people have to relinquish trust in ordinary law enforcement and adopt their own survival strategies. Such a situation increases the likelihood that people will give up on the law and seek other methods to protect their lives and to effect justice.

Mostly, though, Horner residents recall past episodes of police brutality. In the 1960s, moved by hope in activism and a feeling of community, Horner residents organized to demand a traffic light at a boulevard where two children had recently been hit. When the city refused, residents formed a never-ending picket line across the boulevard, thus forcing traffic to stop. When the police arrived, people feared a violent confrontation but the police only arrested a few people.

The confrontation between the city and the police against Horner residents about a traffic light seems extreme, given that residents were merely demanding their children's safety be protected. The reason for the city's refusal remain unclear, but gives the impression that the safety of Horner residents was not taken seriously. People's fear of a violent confrontation already indicated the lack of trust they had in the police's motives and behaviors.

Later, however, the police killed the Soto brothers, two brothers from the neighborhood, in the space of five days, with motives that did not convince the residents. The neighborhood immediately exploded into a violent, armed riot, in which ten policemen and a twelve-year-old girl were killed.

The neighborhood's reaction to police brutality proved equally brutal, as it affected an innocent young girl. Through the riot, Horner residents expressed an impulsive desire to signal their outrage more than a sustainable effort to maintain a productive relationship with local authorities.

Although this encouraged the city to finally install a traffic light, two months later the police killed two Black Panther members in a raid, claiming that the men had opened fire first even though it was later obvious that the Black Panthers had fired only one shot, in contrast to about ninety by the police. These deaths became famous across the nation because of the men's political relevance and, despite evidence of police malpractice, all the officers involved in the raid were acquitted.

The injustice of this scandal is twofold. Not only did policemen commit a crucial error in killing unarmed men regarded as benefactors in the community, but the legal system was unable to recognize this error and bring justice to outraged citizens. Such episodes portray the police as a powerful force acting with impunity, without having to respond for their actions.

These deaths destroyed a lot of trust between Horner residents and the police. LaJoe has never understood how the police could kill people and then lie about their involvement instead of simply apologizing. At the same time, she also knows that some police officers are good people and actually care about the children. However, the police's lack of accountability makes her feel resentful and hurt. Experiences of injustice, too, LaJoe knows, will also only increase Lafeyette's cynicism and suspicion.

The potentially good intentions of members of the police force does not change Horner residents' impressions that the system is skewed against them. The police's lack of accountability increases people's feelings of isolation, making it seem as though their right to safety, dignity, and justice is disregarded by the very people who should be protecting those things.

When LaJoe's mother, Lelia Mae, and Weasel's girlfriend move into the apartment, it becomes even more overcrowded than it already was. At the same time, Lafeyette enjoys Lelia Mae's company, as she tells them stories about Horner's past wealth and safety, and gives Lafeyette, who enjoys helping others, someone to take care of. Lafeyette and Pharoah are less affected by the overcrowding than by their father's depression. Unable to get rid of his alcohol and drug habits, Paul feels pessimistic about getting his job back and even steals the television set Lelia Mae had given the boys to buy drugs.

Paul's behavior shows that he is more willing to indulge in his own self-interest than protect the well-being of his family—in particular, that of his children, who already have so few opportunities for distraction. Unlike Lelia Mae, who at least brings some amusement to the apartment, Paul seems to bring nothing but greater problems. However, LaJoe still finds herself unable to kick her own family members out.

Lafeyette deeply resents his father for failing to deliver on his promises and for choosing drugs instead of his family. Paul understands these feelings, since he knows he has harmed his family's life and his own life by taking drugs. Still, he wants to be present in the apartment if he can, so that his children do not grow up fatherless like he did. Unlike Lafeyette, Pharoah usually tries to cheer his father up. One day, though, he asks his father why he drinks, saying it smells bad and makes his father behave in a strange way. The question surprises Paul, who tells himself that he should try to stop drinking.

Given how little Paul actually helps LaJoe deal with parental responsibilities, it remains ambiguous how much Paul's desire to be present for his children actually has a positive impact on their lives. Pharoah's awareness of his father's problems with addiction reveal that he is not as naïve and ignorant as Paul might have believed. However, Pharaoh's direct, uncomplicated approach to problems contrasts with Paul's feelings of hopelessness and despair, as he seems unable to give up on drugs and alcohol.

CHAPTER 18

In the winter, the temperature in the apartment rises so much because of the family's lack of control over the heating system that the Riverses feel as though they are inside an oven. In addition, on the weekend, there is nothing to do at Horner except sit around all day or go to the Boys Club. Therefore, LaJoe decides to give her children some entertainment and get them out of this terrible heat. She takes Pharoah, the triplets, and her grandchildren Tyisha, Baldheaded, and Snuggles to downtown Chicago as a Christmas surprise.

The irony that the apartment is too hot in the middle of winter serves as a semi-tragic, semi-comic symbolic depiction of how terribly wrong things can be at Horner. Also, the fact that going to downtown Chicago is such an unusual event highlights how isolated the Rivers family is from the city's main sights and institutions, and how little the children know about neighborhoods other than their own.

The group takes a bus to the city and the children stare in awe at the high-rise buildings. As the children's excitement increases, LaJoe begins to feel part of a normal family. When they get out the bus, the children are mesmerized by the large crowds and the activity around them, as well as the passersby's elegant clothing. Trying to stay together, the children move excitedly from window to window, admiring the Christmas decorations and toys in the stores. They eat at McDonalds, and LaJoe then takes them to have two large bags of popcorn, despite Pharoah's protestations that she should keep the rest of the money for herself.

To the children, downtown Chicago looks like an entirely different world. Their excitement at these new sights reveals the deep socio-economic inequality between their ordinary reality and that of the wealthy crowds and well-stocked stores they encounter in the city At the same time, Pharoah demonstrates his ability to think as a responsible adult when he worries about LaJoe's money, thus showing that he is willing to sacrifice his own enjoyment for the well-being of the entire family.

Overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of the city, the children return home on the bus, imitating adults' way of speaking, concluding that they had a "lovely day." Even LaJoe laughs at their imitations. When they return to the apartment, however, Lafeyette, seemingly hurt at having been left alone, asks why LaJoe didn't ask him to come. LaJoe then realizes that she has been used to considering Lafeyette an adult, instead of the thirteen-year-old boy that he is.

LaJoe's moment of laughter in the bus allows her to forget temporarily about her worries and to rejoice in the young children's innocent behavior. Lafeyette's sadness at not enjoying such an activity himself reveals that he, too, prefers behaving as an ordinary child than having an adult role, which the neighborhood so often forces him to adopt.

Days later, the family learns that Terence might be sentenced to ten years in prison. While both Lafeyette and Pharoah are shocked by this news and worry about their brother, they keep their thoughts to themselves, since they do not want to make their mother more nervous than she already is. After wondering why Terence needs to be locked up, Pharoah prefers to insist that he is simply too young to understand what is happening.

Instead of finding comfort in their common worries, the members of the Rivers family prefer to keep to themselves—a generous decision aimed at protecting others, but one that also forces them to handle the weight of sadness and the feeling of injustice on their own. Pharoah's ultimate solution, as usual, is escapism, as he decides not to grapple with the daunting issue of injustice.

Terence will spend ten years in prison if he agrees to plead guilty. Even though Terence still proclaims his innocence, the situation has become more complicated since he was arrested again for armed robbery while he was out on bond during the summer. After being let out of prison on bond, instead of staying away from illegal activity, Terence felt that the entire justice system had let him down and that, if they were wanted to see him as a criminal even though he proclaimed his innocence, he would give them a real reason to send him to prison. This time, though, Terence's fingerprints were found at a bar after a robbery, and Terence did not deny his involvement.

Paradoxically, Terence's feelings of injustice and anger at the law have led him to take part in illegal actions—a behavior that mimics Rickey's, whose only way to handle the burden of violence is by being violent himself. Both boys' attitudes seem to indicate a complete lack of trust in the justice system's ability to determine innocence or guilt, which expresses itself as defiance toward the law—which then results in condemnation, the very issue Terence was upset about.

While this new arrest has upset Audrey Natcone, since she hoped that Terence would stay out of trouble unlike most of her clients. However, she still wants to try to negotiate to get Terence six years instead of ten. Lawyers on both sides would rather enter negotiations than go through a trial because of the large number of cases they are handling, which have increased since the man in charge of prosecutions has been running for mayor and wants to show that he is a strong law-and-order man.

The fact that the increase in cases has political causes and is not directly related to an increase in crime suggests that even the justice system is vulnerable to individuals' self-interest. Indeed, increasing the number of cases that lawyers have to handle increases the likelihood of error—which, in this field, has serious consequences, as it could mean sending an innocent person to prison for years.

CHAPTER 19

After weeks of saving up for the Boys Club's annual talent show, one of the few community gatherings which even rival gangs attend peacefully, Lafeyette and Pharoah head there on a Friday evening. Once in the gym, they find a place at the top of the bleachers where they can see the stage.

As is usually the case at Horner, the children's enjoyment is the result of a decrease in violence—here, a single-day truce. Only in such circumstances can residents enjoy a few hours of peace and amusement.

Before the national anthem, the emcee asks the crowd if they love this country and the crowd yells a loud "no," overwhelming Pharoah's soft "yes." As the show begins, alternating dance routines, singers, and humorous skits, the room becomes more and more crowded. Rickey buys Pharoah a hot dog, and the crowd later follows along as a rapper calls out the names of the local gangs, which emphasizes that they are respecting a truce.

The crowd's hostility toward the United States reveals entrenched feelings of isolation and alienation, as they are convinced that the country does not respect and protect their lives in the way it should. Pharoah's answer, by contrast, shows a more innocent, optimistic trust in the country—and, perhaps, in his life in general.

In the meantime, Lafeyette looks for Craig Davis but doesn't find him anywhere. He goes to visit the young man a few days later in the building. Craig shows Lafeyette a rap entitled "Children of the Future" and asks him for his opinion, which makes Lafeyette feel proud and happy, as well as soothed by the positive energy that always seems to emanate from Craig. Craig invites Lafeyette to stop by his DJing session at the Boys Club in a few weeks.

Craig's capacity to invest in his art and project himself into the future serve as inspiration for Lafeyette. With Craig, too, Lafeyette can be listened to and respected just as he is. This serves as an affirmation of Lafeyette's worth, capable of giving him more self-confidence.

In February, Pharoah works hard every day after school to study words for the spelling bee. While his brother Timothy sometimes wants to see what he is doing, he usually tells Timothy to leave him alone because he is studying. Lafeyette sometimes helps Pharoah, giving him words to spell. At school, Pharoah also benefits from his partnership with Clarise, the star pupil in Ms. Barone's class. Twice per week, they get to school half an hour early to practice for the spelling bee. Clarise always encourages Pharoah, even when he becomes frustrated by his stutter.

While his family can occasionally detract Pharoah from studying, it can also bring him the love and support he needs to build self-confidence. Family members such as Lafeyette, for example, are committed to actively helping Pharoah succeed. Unlike in the neighborhood, at school Pharoah can engage in a close friendship and partnership, knowing that Clarise is worthy of trust, and that she wants to see the both of them succeed.

Pharoah's environment becomes particularly chaotic a few weeks before the spelling bee. A couple of weeks earlier, two acquaintances of the family have a violent fight in their apartment, and one of them shoots a pistol. The police arrives, and LaJoe screams in outrage at the neighbor who shot the pistol and has to be restrained to keep from banging onto his door. Overwhelmed by the constant activity and violence around her, Lelia Mae decides to move out. A few days later, LaShawn gives birth to her third child, DeShaun, which makes Lafeyette and Pharoah excited, but also worried about the impact the baby will have on the family's finances.

What might have been a non-violent fight in another environment is here resolved through gun violence, which shows that violence does not only come from gang activity, but can truly arise in unpredictable moments. Meanwhile, the birth of LaShawn's child is surprising, given her preexisting difficulties to take care of herself and her two children. Lafeyette and Pharoah's awareness that this child might be a burden reveals their pragmatic attitude toward certain family issues and their knowledge of adult problems such as finances.

Despite these events, Pharoah remains extraordinarily focused on his work. Excited by the prospect of the spelling bee, he begins to have pleasant dreams. In one of them, he gets a job and is admired for his intelligence. The dream makes him feel that he might one day succeed in getting his mother out of the projects.

Despite the instability within his own family, Pharoah proves strong enough to trust in himself, having built the motivation and self-confidence necessary to have high ambitions and dream of a better life.

CHAPTER 20

On March 2, Craig Davis visits his girlfriend at Horner and returns to his own housing complex, the ABLA homes, where he lives with his uncle and his uncle's girlfriend. That evening, he walks out the house, telling his uncle he will be back in a minute, since he simply needs to pick up turntables and speakers from a friend's house. Meanwhile, two police officers are driving around the neighborhood, looking for someone called "Craig" who had bought a shotgun in the past few days.

The story's sudden focus on the specific details of one particular day in Craig Davis's life—even though Craig is, after all, only a secondary character—creates a sense of impending doom, suggesting that what is about to happen is important. The police officers' search for "Craig" further gives the impression that a catastrophe based on a misunderstanding is about to take place.

Craig Davis was arrested a few months earlier for allegedly stealing cookies. He was in a friend's apartment when the police came in, arresting everyone present because they had a box of cookies that had supposedly been stolen from a delivery truck—which Craig claims he never did. This experience has made him fear the police and, that night, when he sees the police car, he begins to run even though he has done nothing wrong. One of the police officers gives chase and, after a while, finally catches him. He grabs him and holds him against a wall, holding a gun up to his head. According to the officer, Craig begins to struggle and the pistol accidentally discharges, although later evidence shows that the policeman was holding the gun to Craig's head when it discharged.

The triviality of the motive for which Craig was arrested and the unfortunate set of circumstances that allowed for such an arrest—namely, Craig's presence in the wrong place at the wrong time—illustrates the law enforcement's deeply unjust (and absurd) attitudes toward Horner residents. However, this seemingly unimportant incident has a significant impact on Craig's attitude toward the police. This time, though, the policeman's actions, which might be equally unfair and misguided, have much deeper consequences, as they bring a tragic end to Craig's life even though the young man seems to have done nothing wrong.

A newspaper article about this incident later claims that Craig Davis was a member of the Disciples and calls him "a reputed street gang member," arguing that his death was the result of "a scuffle" with a policeman, which Davis was responsible for starting.

It remains ambiguous whether the media's perspective is intentionally deceptive or based on erroneous information from the police. Either way, this news piece reveals how the media presents the public with a severely distorted picture of the reality in inner-city neighborhoods.

CHAPTER 21

The next day, on March 3, Pharoah prepares himself for the spelling bee, ironing his clothes and putting on some of Weasel's cologne. At school, he meets his friend Clarise, who is impressed by her partner's appearance, and the two of them promise the other to keep on going even if one of them is eliminated, so as to represent their class. During the spelling bee, Pharoah seems calm and composed, and succeeds in spelling all the words until only Clarise and he are left.

Pharoah's preparation for the spelling bee has been both psychological and intellectual, as he knows that his relaxed attitude on the day of the contest will matter just as much as his spelling abilities. To this end, his careful choice of clothing reflects his desire to be seen as a dignified, competent contestant, even if he does not succeed in winning the contest.

Even though both Pharoah and Clarise would have gladly accepted to stop there and share first place, they have to continue. In the end, when they are asked to spell one last word before a tie can be declared, Pharoah misspells the word "darken" and Clarise wins the contest. Nonetheless, both of them congratulate each other and Pharoah is overjoyed and proud of himself, trusting that he did a good job.

Even though Pharoah does not win the contest, he knows that it is not due to lack of preparation or excessive excitement, and can therefore enjoy his performance fully. Clarise and Pharoah's happiness at celebrating this victory together demonstrates that their partnership has proven stronger than their potential rivalry.

After walking joyfully back home, Pharoah enters the apartment and notices a dark, silent atmosphere. Even though he is happy and excited, he is also worried about the strange silence around him and gives his mother his ribbon, telling her he made second place. He describes the contest but realizes that no one seems to care about it and that everyone seems absent. Dutt, a neighbor and the mother of Craig's girlfriend, has been crying, and Lafeyette is staring out the window, failing to congratulate Pharoah on his success.

The contrast between Pharaoh's excitement and the family's gloom is heartbreaking and sobering, given that the young boy's achievement is something he has been planning and working on so hard over the past year. This scene, then, reveals the terrible impact that violence and death have on people's lives, as it turns even the most loving family members' focus away from hope and exciting events, overwhelming them instead with the injustice of life.

Although LaJoe tries to console Dutt, Lafeyette says that Craig's death is unfair and that he shouldn't have died, because he was living such a good life. Despite their efforts to accept Craig's death, everyone agrees with Lafeyette and stays silent. In the meantime, Pharoah has decided to escape the sadness in the apartment, realizing that this is not is moment to celebrate, and goes to look for Porkchop.

Even in a situation he does not fully understand, Pharoah's perceptiveness and willingness to set his own needs aside is striking. Perhaps accustomed to violent catastrophes, Pharoah neither sulks nor draws the attention to his success more than he already has, but instead simply goes to look for his friend, accepting to postpone his moment of success in order to let his family grieve.

Unlike Bird Leg's funeral, Craig Davis's is organized at a reputed place, the city's most famous black-owned funeral home and is attended by the many people who admired the young man. Even though both Lafeyette and LaJoe hate funerals, they attend the ceremony, but Pharoah decides to stay home because he does not like being around sad people. Unlike Bird Leg's funeral, in which people cried and yelled out for the dead boy, silence marks the ceremony for Craig Davis's death.

The difference between Bird Leg and Craig Davis's funeral highlights the fact that although both involved the seemingly unjust death of a young person, Bird Leg's was a gang-related death, whereas Craig has died for no apparent reason. The injustice of this seemingly arbitrary death is so striking that people remain stunned, focused more strongly on the sorrowful event than on the possibility of revenge.

This silence mirrors the authorities' silence about what happened, as they have failed to contact Christine, Craig's mother, to give her explanations about the circumstances of her son's death. Instead, they've continued to tell reporters that Craig was a gang member, even though everyone who knew Craig considers the police's explanations implausible and intentionally deceptive. Despite its outrage, the community, too, finds itself unable to act. Unlike the time of the Soto brothers' death, when the community was able to rise up against the police and demand accountability, people turn inward, unable or unwilling to fight for the community's well-being.

Once again, the police proves unwilling or unable to own up to its deeply unjust actions. Instead of trying to rebuild trust with the community, the police makes people feel angry and even more distrustful of authority than they already were. At this moment in time, though, the weight of this anger is even heavier to bear in the absence of collective organization, because isolation forces people to give up on the fight for truth and justice, and accept that injustice can remain unpunished.

During the service, Lafeyette steps out. He cannot keep the image of Craig smiling and waving at him from his turntables out of his mind, and becomes silent, unable to cry. Craig's death makes Lafeyette feel cynical and apathetic toward death, believing that he could die and be killed even if he has not done anything wrong. Believing that memories will only bring him despair, he begins to shut down memories of all kind, even having trouble recounting his activities at school. Over time, he falls into depression and begins to look older.

The effect of this loss impacts Lafeyette's mind and body. While he is conscious of his sadness, his body shows that unconscious processes are also at play, eliminating memories in an effort to ease the trauma. In losing his friend, Lafeyette has lost all hope, not only because Craig was such a supportive friend and positive role model, but because Lafeyette can identify with Craig's fate and can imagine himself dying in a similarly senseless way.

Barely two days after Craig's funeral, another friend of Lafeyette's, Damien Russell (nicknamed Scooter), dies after a police car chased the one he was in, because the police was suspicious of the driver's attitude. Going way too fast, the car spins out of control and hits a light pole, killing three of the adolescents in the car. Lafeyette's reaction to this death is subdued. He concludes that the "death train" has taken Scooter, and that he does not want to talk about him anymore.

In the same way that his mind is shutting out harmful memories, Lafeyette begins to shut out all episodes of injustice. Instead of trying to make sense of such events, he simply accepts that death is arbitrary and uncontrollable, and that dwelling on the issue will only bring more harm. Lafeyette, in this way, gives in to the community's general appearance of passivity toward violence.

CHAPTER 22

It has been a week since Craig Davis's funeral, and Lafeyette is irritable, often gets angry at his siblings, and cleans the apartment frantically to channel his excess energy. He orders the younger ones about, telling them to help him clean the apartment, and they soon learn to stay away from Lafeyette's unpredictable, occasionally violent temper, which makes it seem as though Lafeyette has no control over his moods and emotions.

Lafeyette's lack of control over his moods mirrors his lack of control over the reality around him. Despite the boy's apparent cynicism and apathy, his violent temper reveals that he is not able to accept death passively, but that the injustice of it still tortures him, making him feel helpless and outraged.

Although he worries about Lafeyette, Pharoah handles Craig's death by claiming that he is too young to understand it, thus avoiding the pain it might cause him. LaJoe, however, finds herself at a loss to try to get Lafeyette to talk about his grief. Lafeyette begins to repeat that he is tired, which worries LaJoe because Terence used to say something similar to express his general anger or dissatisfaction with his life. One day, when a shooting erupts outside their window, LaJoe and the younger children go to hide in the hallway but Lafeyette remains impassive, watching television in his sister's room, refusing to shield himself from the threat of death.

As usual, Pharoah prefers ignoring issues of death and injustice instead of having to process them thoroughly—and, potentially, falling prey to the same unhappiness that affects his brother. LaJoe's fears that Lafeyette might become like Terence underscore that some violent or illegal behavior in the neighborhood is not necessarily the result of gang affiliation, but of suppressed frustration and outrage. Lafeyette, though, seems more inclined to let himself die than to inflict harm on others.

CHAPTER 23

Rickey and Lafeyette have begun to spend more time together, and Rickey has included him in his group, the Four Corner Hustlers, which is not a real gang because they do not sell drugs but is meant to control their territory: Rickey and Lafeyette's building. The group, then, appears to be a gang in preparation.

LaJoe's fears for Lafeyette prove well founded, as Lafeyette joins a group that professedly aims to imitate gangs. Such a decision is puzzling, given that gangs are so often the cause of the young boys' unhappiness and pain.

In the meantime, LaJoe has begun to feel more distant from Lafeyette. Her son has started dating a girl but is adamant that he does not want to have children before a long while. LaJoe wants to make sure her son does not get anyone pregnant but, more importantly, is worried about his relationship with Rickey, especially since she has seen the young boy break a car window and steal the driver's necklace in broad daylight. She is worried that Lafeyette might fall in with the wrong crowd and end up like Terence.

In the same way that she knows her son Terence is not a bad person, LaJoe feels that the greatest dangers in Lafeyette's life do not necessarily come from him, but from the negative influences in his environment—for example, his grief for Craig's death and, through Rickey, his potential subjection to peer pressure to participate in illegal, violent activities.

At the same time, even though Rickey is turning into a tough, reckless and seemingly uncontrollable youngster, using a gun to shoot at the Disciples who dare cross the Four Corner Hustlers' territory, he is also conflicted about his behavior. He tells Lafeyette that he wishes to return to his childhood and make different choices. The two boys enjoy their conversations and, when Rickey talks about dying, he admits that he feels as though he might die at any point and that he is afraid to go to sleep, thinking he might die. Neither boy thinks about the future, focusing instead on the present.

Even Rickey cannot be neatly categorized as a "bad" person, since he does not seem to enjoy causing harm but, rather, feels that something in his life has constrained him to take this path. The regrets he feels about his childhood shows that preserving the innocence of that period in life—as Pharoah so often strives to do—is crucial to a person's development, as it can give one the time and hope necessary to build self-confidence, ambitions, and an optimistic trust in the future.

While Lafeyette enjoys Rickey's company, he does not appreciate his group of friends and hopes that he can be a good influence for Rickey, encouraging him to stay out of trouble. In an environment where adults categorize children early on to figure out who belongs to a gang and who doesn't, Rickey feels that people expect him to behave badly—and that, as a result, he will behave exactly as they expect him to. Lafeyette, too, has become cynical, trusting that everyone has let him down: school, Public Aid, his older brother, his father, the police, and even himself.

Unlike what observers such as his mother might think, Lafeyette is aware and highly critical of Rickey's more violent behavior. The two boys' past shoplifting incident might have given Lafeyette the confidence to know when to say no to Rickey. Lafeyette understands that Rickey is not inherently mean, but that he is reacting to what he perceives as an oppressive environment.

In contrast to his brother, Pharoah becomes interested in politics even though his mother, whose own mother had played an important role in the local management of the Democratic Party, has given up on politics a long time ago, since she has felt abandoned by local representatives, who have not helped improve life at Horner. Pharoah, however, becomes interested in the mayoral elections and begins to dream about becoming a politician.

Unlike his brother's loss of hope, Pharoah's interest in politics reveals his hope that life can change. His interest is a form of action, as it allows him to take intellectual control over what is happening in his life, instead of accepting that he is simply bound to suffer from injustice.

In the meantime, the violence continues, as usual, continually harming Horner residents. When LaJoe hears running by the apartment, she sees a group of young boys, including Lafeyette, hit an old man who had apparently molested one of the boy's cousins in a parking lot. Instead of calling the police, the young boys decided to enforce justice themselves, to LaJoe's consternation.

This particular incident is not typical of the violence at Horner, since it does not involve gangs or the police. However, its underlying mentality reflects Horner residents' distrust of authority, as these boys have given up on the law, deciding instead that pure retribution might be more effective at solving the problem at hand.

CHAPTER 24

For many young men from Horner, the courts represent their first contact with the outside world. Often, it constitutes a humiliating encounter, as everyone has too little time to devote to the accused and can treat cases in impersonal ways, with apparent lack of care for the impact of their actions on the young men's lives. At the courthouse, Audrey Natcone walks up to the state's attorney handling Terence's case. She succeeds in convincing the attorney to lower Terence's sentence to eight years. Even though Audrey would prefer six years, she understands that this is a pretty reasonable offer, given that Terence's fingerprints were found at the site of his most recent robbery.

Even though the legal system is supposed to bring justice and be fair to its citizens, internal problems (such as the number of cases) prevent dedicated lawyers from doing their job with the care and efficacy their clients deserve. For young people from Horner, this can leave them even more isolated than they already are. An unjust and impersonal system shows young people that the outside world is just as unfair as the life they already know, which would then prevent them from seeing authorities outside the neighborhood as trustworthy and just.

This time, Terence has asked LaJoe not to come to court, since he feels that he has let his entire family down. The last time, two months ago, LaJoe came with Pharoah, who was interested in all the details of the proceedings, and Terence's trial was postponed. LaJoe and Pharoah were still able to see him, and he told them that he lifted weights in prison, showing them his strong muscles, and also insisted that he would not accept to stay away ten years from his family.

The change that prison has had on Terence is physical, as his muscles demonstrate, but Terence's horror at the idea of ten years indicates just how mentally and physically harrowing prison is for him. His feelings of having disappointed his family seem to mirror his own father's feelings.

Before the trial, Audrey meets with Terence and tries to convince him to accept an eight-year sentence, arguing that it is even more likely that Terence could get over ten years. Audrey sees Terence's despair and knows that he has changed in prison, adopting a defiant, potentially menacing attitude, in stark contrast with the fragility he had exhibited before he was sent to prison. In the end, the judge gives Terence a two-week period to allow him to talk to his mother about his offer.

Terence's physical changes are accompanied by psychological changes, which are precisely what Audrey had initially feared for her client. Terence has given in to the impulse to appear tougher and hide his emotions—even, perhaps, with people he used to trust, such as Audrey. Terence's family proves a slight relief, as he knows that he can count on LaJoe for counsel.

In the meantime, LaJoe has had trouble with Keith, a man in the neighborhood who makes sexual advances toward her and has threatened to attack her physically if she refuses. One day, when she returns home after an interaction with the man, her son Weasel overhears her talking to Rochelle about it and decides to take the matter into his own hands. At Horner, family is always in charge of exacting revenge, and Weasel goes to grab Keith, who is high on drugs and begins punching him, ultimately letting him go after hearing Keith's vulnerable, childlike pleas.

Although Keith has not yet touched LaJoe physically, his verbal threats are equally harrowing and make LaJoe feel unsafe. Weasel's violent reaction shows that people at Horner not entrust family matters to authorities, but adopt an attitude of retaliation. Weasel's behavior aims to show Keith—and perhaps the rest of the community—that certain behavior is beyond limits, even in a pervasively violent and insecure place such as Horner.

LaJoe remains shaken and enraged. She is angry that Keith could make her feel insecure and, in her anger, snaps at Lafeyette. Then, she begins to cry, angry at her husband, Paul, for ruining her life and expressing her desire to get out of the ghetto. Her friends hug her while Pharoah feels that he is going to cry and Lafeyette decides to sweep the room. LaJoe eventually calms down apologizes to her friends and family for her reaction.

LaJoe's anger against Paul shows that this particular event is not the full cause of her anger, but that she is expressing deep-seated feelings that she has probably experienced for a long time. This behavior leaves her children helpless, as they feel that they can do nothing to make their mother feel better.

Over time, to cope with the stress of living in the projects, LaJoe begins dreaming about leaving Horner. At the same time, she begins to spend more time away from her family, spending more time playing cards or talking with Rochelle, seeking support in her friend. While her children claim that they understand her absences and succeed in taking care of themselves alone, they also worry about her, knowing that she is all they have.

It remains ambiguous whether LaJoe's decision to spend time away from her family is incidental or intentional—whether it shows her need for adult support through her friend Rochelle, or, perhaps, hidden, unconscious resentment toward her family, similar to the anger she previously directed at Paul.

On April 4, Terence is sentenced, on the very same day that the new mayor is elected. LaJoe is angry that these two events are so unrelated to each other, since she feels that if politicians cared about neighborhood children, some of Horner's children could have been saved. LaJoe went to the jail a few weeks earlier to convince Terence to accept the eight years, arguing that he could end up getting out after four years if they counted the years he had already served. Terence, who always listened to his mother, accepted.

LaJoe's anger at the separation between Terence's fate and politics shows that she understands Terence's case as one that is representative of the common fate of young boys from the neighborhood. In other words, LaJoe recognizes that what has happened is part of a structural problem, related to the neighborhood's isolation from helpful institutions and political life, instead of a problem due solely to individuals' behavior.

Three days before Terence is sent to prison, his family goes to visit him at the jail to say goodbye. Terence is shocked and impressed to see Lafeyette so grown up, but the rest of the meeting is awkward, filled with silences, and lasts no more than thirty minutes. Although LaJoe tries to convince herself that prison might be better for Terence, keeping him away from the dangers of the street, she also knows that it will make him lose his gentleness and feels, more generally, that he has disappointed her.

The uncomfortable moments in the meeting illustrates the distance that will inevitably grow (and, perhaps, already has) between the family members, due to Terence's incarceration. Despite feeling that this legal decision is unfair, LaJoe tries to rationalize it for herself, as she tries to convince herself that, perhaps, it can be seen as a good opportunity for her son.

LaJoe keeps her grief for herself, having decided that she does not want to make Lafeyette more worried than he already is, and hopes that neither Pharoah nor Lafeyette will end up like Terence. Terence sends a letter from prison three days later, sending his love and telling LaJoe not to worry about him but focus on her other children instead. Lafeyette and Pharoah both seem to accept that they will not see their brother in a long time, but they also worry about him.

The strength and unity of the Rivers family, evident in the love everyone feels for each other, is admirable in such trying times. At the same time, LaJoe has also realized that she cannot depend on her young children for comfort, because that will only deprive them of the possibility to enjoy the present and to live their own lives as fully as Horner will allow.

CHAPTER 25

On April 20, Gwen Anderson, the new housing manager of Horner, discovers a nightmarish scene in the building's basement that makes her vomit. She describes finding about two thousand appliances (some new) that have rusted from sitting in pools of water and are inhabited by roaches, fleas, dead and live cats and rodents, all of which have created a horrible, putrid odor. New kitchen cabinets are also rusted beyond use from lying in water, and are placed in the middle of human and animal excrements and dead animals.

The scene that Gwen Anderson discovers is violent not only in its attack to the senses, but also in the longstanding neglect it exposes, as no previous authority figure has cared to maintain the building and tangibly improve residents' lives. In particular, the presence of usable appliances is incensing, given the low-quality living conditions Horner residents have to contend with on a daily basis.

Anderson discovers that these appliances have been in the basement for over fifteen years. Now, LaJoe understands that the horrible smell coming from one of her toilets is caused by all the dead animals in the basement, and that her kitchen sink is backed up because of the pools of water in the basement, as sewage has risen up through the pipes into LaJoe's sink. Mostly, though, LaJoe is furious about the new appliances uselessly rotting away in the basement, while her family and so many others could have used them.

The fact that no one has ever taken the time to investigate the problems that LaJoe has in her apartment—and, perhaps, that she has lacked the means to contact the relevant authorities—reveals how absurd it is that she has had to deal with these problems for so long, whereas they had a relatively simple, straightforward cause that no one would have imagined.

This physical rotting mirrors, LaJoe feels, her general spirit about her life and the neighborhood. An uncovered sewer in the neighborhood has almost swallowed up a child, the local health center has recently declared bankruptcy, Hull House is considering putting an end to their first aid care at Horner, and the Boys Club's recently repaired swimming pool is experiencing new problems.

LaJoe's generalization about the basement shows that this new nightmarish scene is only one of the many catastrophic developments affecting the neighborhood. Although less vividly shocking, the lack of adequate health services is potentially more harmful to the neighborhood in the long run.

Dawn, too, who is a role model for LaJoe's children, has been experiencing trouble. She still lives at Horner and has recently felt so depressed that she sometimes pretends she is not home. Neither Pharoah nor Lafeyette understands why Dawn—their family's success story—has not yet moved out of Horner, but Dawn has put her name on a long list to receive public housing and has been struggling to find a job. At the same time, though, Dawn has managed to maintain a close, reliable family, as she and Demetrius have worked hard to take care of their children. One day, Pharoah goes to visit her with Porkchop and asks her about college. When he asks her why she still doesn't have a job, she replies that she is trying.

Pharoah and Lafeyette attribute Dawn's past success to her own talent and ability, so they are consequently confused as to why she can't succeed now. The two boys fail to recognize the external factors (such as financial resources and job availability) that are currently affecting Dawn's situation. In this case, the problem is not that Dawn is suddenly apathetic about getting out of Horner. Instead, such a step requires a mix of pure grit, hard work, and luck. However, her family unity has played an important role in keeping her from giving up, as it gives her the stability that the rest of her life lacks.

CHAPTER 26

On May 19, LaJoe and Rochelle prepare a surprise birthday party for Pharoah, who recently mentioned that he has never had one. Excited, the two of them arrange decorations in the apartment. Recently, LaJoe was able to buy bunk beds for her children and new mattresses, on which Lafeyette and Pharoah leave the plastic covering, saying that that will keep them clean. She has also bought new furniture that makes the apartment look more orderly.

Things seem hopeful for the Rivers family, at least temporarily. LaJoe's improvement of the apartment shows that change and progress is possible. Her shared excitement with Rochelle also demonstrates that not everything at Horner has to be gloomy—under the right circumstances, people can also revel in the joys of special moments.

When Pharoah walks in, he is so surprised to realize that his family has prepared a party for him that he feels nervous and smiles without knowing what to say. He goes to his room, where his mother gives him his gift, a pair of green shorts, and quietly gets ready for the party, trying to take it all in. Lafeyette tells his brother he looks handsome and wishes him happy birthday.

Pharoah's difficulty to react accordingly to his surprise party demonstrates how unusual such an event is to him. At the same time, his quiet attitude simply emphasizes his tendency to turn inward when he's overwhelmed. The support of his family is palpable, as everyone seems happy to make this day special for him.

While Lafeyette and Rickey soon leave the party, which disappoints LaJoe, Pharoah spends the party smiling and waiting for Porkchop to come. Porkchop arrives two hours late, having forgotten all about the party. During the party, Dawn arrives with her four children after a fight between drug dealers in her building, which she believed might lead to more violence, but nothing ends up happening.

Pharoah's constant smile during the party reveals his joy and gratitude in a way that his words might not be able to. The possibility of violence serves as a reminder that, while this party is exciting, it does not eliminate the pervasive dangers of the neighborhood, which can bring catastrophes at any time.

During the next few weeks, Pharoah not only celebrates his birthday, bus is also asked to recite a poem for Suder's end-of-the-year celebration. LaJoe and Lafeyette come to the assembly, happy and excited for Pharoah. When Pharoah walks onto the stage and begins to recite the poem about the benefits of working hard, he feels nervous but succeeds in reciting it from beginning to end. All of LaJoe's children receive ribbons for various aspects of academic achievement except for Lafeyette, which makes Pharoah feel bad. The entire day, LaJoe wears her children's colored ribbons, looking like a war veteran.

This end-of-the-year celebration is an ode to Pharoah's academic achievements, but it also showcases the hard work he has done to control his stutter and anxiety. Lafeyette's exclusion from academic rewards signals not a lack of ability, but a reminder of all the stressful events that have kept him from focusing on school during the year. It also highlights Lafeyette's hidden vulnerability and potential lack of self-confidence.

Pharoah is also chosen to attend a special summer school at the University of Illinois, Project Upward Bound, for minority students to improve their reading and math scores. When the staff asks Pharoah what he wants to be when he grows up, he says that he wants to be a congressman so that he can change rules and put gang members to jail.

Unlike his brother Lafeyette, who has difficulties projecting himself into the future, Pharoah has high ambitions for his own life and for the entire community. While this might not necessarily translate into success, it does give him the hope and motivation necessary to work hard.

These events have led LaJoe's family to feel renewed hope and energy. Everyone is happy about Pharoah's summer program, and he is delighted by the university campus, even telling his mother that he wants to go to university there. However, LaJoe is once again confronted to violence when she sees a young boy of Pharoah's age shoot at rival gang members. Her anger returns, and she tells Lafeyette that she will not let him wear hats or earrings, since these symbols could mistakenly identify him as a gang member.

Given the extremely high percentage of high school dropouts in the neighborhood, Pharoah's desire not only to graduate from high school but to attend college is truly extraordinary. Meanwhile, LaJoe's anger at the senselessness of gang violence, in which such young boys are involved, reminds her that violence is largely arbitrary, and that the best way to protect oneself is to take no risks.

CHAPTER 27

On July 13, Vincent Lane, the new chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), organizes a small meeting with Horner residents to discuss the situation in the basement. After reading Gwen Anderson's report, he had felt sick and realized that CHA employees care little about residents at Horner, worrying instead only about keeping their jobs. His charisma and warmth lead people to trust him, and he succeeds in giving Horner residents some hope that things might change.

The fact that a member of the CHA recognizes the lack of care and support that has affected Horner over the years confirms that residents' impressions are not misguided, but reflect an objective situation of neglect. The contrast between CHA employees' petty desires to keep their job and the harrowing, potentially life-and-death effects they have on an entire community only highlights this injustice.

At the same time, the challenges facing Lane are enormous, since politicians and administrators have known for decades of the situation at public housing in Chicago which, in one report, is compared to "a concentration camp from which [children have] little chance of escape." Lane soon realizes that the CHA is even more poorly run than he expected, and is particularly moved by residents' stories about gang violence. His frustration leads him to try to regain control over buildings, but he then discovers that gangs have informants even within the CHA, and that the problem will not be easily resolved. At the Horner meeting, Lane promises to clean up the basement and fix the buildings' heating, but is still not sure what to do about drugs and violence.

The existence of information about the dreary living conditions in neighborhoods such as Horner only heightens the impression of injustice and neglect. It means that authorities were aware of the situation but either refused or proved unable to do anything about it. In essence, the government has essentially abandoned residents to lead unjust, disadvantaged lives. The ability to change this situation depends not only on building the political will to do so, but on resolving long-standing inefficiencies and security issues within the CHA itself.

When CHA workers begin to try to repair buildings at Horner, which is a direct attack against gangs' control of buildings, gangs repeatedly destroy the work that has been done and, on one occasion, shoots at Gwen Anderson. In one building, she discovers that gangs have built a tunnel to reach another building to escape the police, which no resident has ever reported to the police. Anderson reports the gangs' efforts of intimidation, including shooting near the CHA's local management office, and begins to wear gym shoes so that she can run away if she needs to. The shooting does not stop and, while Pharoah hopes that Lane will take care of their building, lack of funds does not allow the CHA to try to secure all public housing complexes. Pharoah begins to worry about dying and never getting out of the projects.

The CHA's work at Horner unveils layers of implicit cooperation between residents and gangs—less the result of residents' open acceptance of gang activity than their fear of gang retaliation. Gangs' violence against any effort to improve buildings at Horner is pragmatic, since they need some of the buildings' apartments to maintain their territorial power. This shows how much gangs' self-interest affects others, as their mere presence hinders efforts to make everyone's life more comfortable. The CHA's vulnerability to gang violence also shows that no authority lies beyond the threat of gangs.

CHAPTER 28

Today is Lafeyette's first date in court. Four weeks earlier, on June 2, he was arrested with four other boys for allegedly breaking into a truck parked by the stadium and stealing from it. Lafeyette, though, insists that he merely saw a boy break into the truck and then ran with the four other children out of fear of being accused of the boy's deed. Terrified at what is now happening to him, Lafeyette begins to pack his clothes, believing that they might keep him in jail. LaJoe tries to reassure him that nothing will happen to him, but she is not sure herself.

Despite moments of hope, the misfortunes of the Rivers family seem to follow each other in close succession, as pre-existing patterns of injustice repeat themselves over and over, laying the foundations for young boys' feelings of alienation from the system. Lafeyette's fear of being sent to jail has nothing to do with his potential guilt or innocence. Instead, it illustrates his knowledge of what usually happens in such situations.

Since Lafeyette's shoplifting incident, though, he has been staying at home more, distancing himself from Rickey when he feels that he is planning some misdeed and generally believing that getting out of the house is dangerous and could get him into trouble. That night at the stadium, a policeman saw five black teenagers running toward Horner and arrested everyone, including Lafeyette.

The policeman's reasons for arresting the boys remain vague, suggesting that Horner residents are right to view the police with suspicion. This new encounter with the justice system means that Lafeyette must accept that his fate is not directly correlated to his good will and hard work.

LaJoe and Lafeyette head to the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, where judges and attorneys are so overworked that they handle twice the number of cases that they would in an adult court. The number of cases has increased dramatically in the past couple of years, perhaps because of increased drug use or greater prosecution for political reasons. In the same building, the juvenile jail is seen, for some, as a relief from ordinary life, thanks to the good food and high-quality school, but can also drive children insane if they are locked up in solitary confinement for misbehaving.

The fact that lawyers handle more cases for children than for adults—and that this only results in greater inefficiency—is paradoxical and unproductive, since children are more likely to be affected by such an experience for the rest of their lives. In other words, by making children more vulnerable to injustice, the criminal system is sacrificing lives that constitute the very future of the nation.

When LaJoe enters the building, she remembers the number of times she came with Terence, but is committed to always coming with her children and not leaving them alone like other mothers. When LaJoe goes to the information desk to ask about her son's hearing, the woman cannot find Lafeyette's name and LaJoe is forced to insist for the woman to look again. When Mr. Smith, the court official, calls a scared Lafeyette in, he asks him a series of fast-paced, impersonal questions. When Lafeyette recounts his version of the story, Mr. Smith clearly does not believe him and proceeds to give the young boy a lecture about what neighborhood kids do to cars at the stadium. Lafeyette stays blankly onward, seemingly not listening to Mr. Smith's words.

The legal staff is perfunctory and inefficient. Instead of making the young boy feel that people care about him and want to help him, they do exactly the opposite: they prove to him that people are more likely to judge him based on stereotypes, derived from the neighborhood he belongs to, than on his actual personality. Lafeyette's blank stare reveals that moralizing speeches only make him more cynical and disaffected, convinced that no one will actually try to understand him.

LaJoe and Lafeyette are sent to a waiting room, where they wait three hours and a half for Lafeyette's name to be called. In the courtroom, the judge asks Lafeyette questions at an even faster rate than Mr. Smith. He then hands Lafeyette a trial date, but LaJoe later realizes that he has given him a different court date from that of the other boys involved in the case. Wondering if the judge might have made a mistake, she walks back into the courtroom. Even though barely three minutes have passed since Lafeyette's hearing, the judge does not remember anyone with Lafeyette's name, and LaJoe feels that no one sees them as human beings worthy of consideration and respect.

While LaJoe and Lafeyette's impressions at court could be considered subjective, the judge's behavior only proves to them that no one is paying attention to them. Instead, the legal staff treats their very lives and stories as mere formalities, not realizing how much they are impacting a child's life and future. In this particular case, LaJoe's attention—which so many boys like Lafeyette might not benefit from—plays a crucial role, allowing her to protect her son at least minimally from future trouble.

A few days later, the family receives a letter from Terence. While Lafeyette and Pharoah still care about their brother, they do not worry about him as much as they used to, as they seem reassured that he is doing fine in jail.

Pharoah and Lafeyette's acceptance of their brother's fate makes their lives easier, but it also underlines the sad effect of incarceration on families, as it forces previously close members to grow detached from each other.

CHAPTER 29

Earlier in the summer, Weasel gives Lafeyette and Pharoah two pit bull puppies, which remind Lafeyette of Bird Leg and his passion for dogs. While Pharoah ends up giving his away, Lafeyette enjoys taking care of the puppy, whom he calls Blondie. One day, after coming home, he cannot find her and becomes angry, convinced that someone has taken his dog.

While these puppies emphasize Lafeyette's capacity to love and care for another being and take childish joy in this new present, his reaction to the dog's disappearance also stresses his growing distrust of everyone around him.

Lafeyette immediately thinks that his father must have sold his puppy for drug money and begins to accuse him. Paul gets angry at him but Lafeyette calls him a "dope fiend" and punches him in the face. Paul, who used to be a boxer, gets in position to fight and begins to hit his son in various places, while Lafeyette glares at his father, not even trying to fight back.

Lafeyette's accusations are based on previous experiences in which his father actually did steal his possessions to sell them for drug money—like when Paul stole the television that LaJoe's mother had generously given the children.

LaJoe, who is just as angry as her son, succeeds in restraining Paul for a second and Lafeyette runs out of the apartment before returning with a metal chain in his hand. LaJoe tries to calm the situation down, and both men hesitate. Paul realizes that his son is actually scared, and feels ashamed for his own reaction. He decides to sit back down and, as Lafeyette continues to speak out in anger, realizes that the drugs have destroyed his relationship with both his wife and his son. As he broods on the topic, ashamed at having hit his son in that way, he knows he is failing his family. Later, Lafeyette finds Blondie hiding under the stove.

Despite her more amenable personality, which keeps her from kicking Paul out, LaJoe is just as resentful toward Paul as her son is, since she considers him responsible for many of the problems that plague her family. While Lafeyette was wrong in accusing his father this time, Paul knows that his general attitude is justified. At the same time, Paul's self-pity frustratingly leads to no tangible action on his part.

While Pharoah always goes excitedly to summer school in the morning, enjoying being away from the neighborhood during the day, Lafeyette becomes increasingly nervous about leaving Horner. One evening, LaJoe sees him trying to break up a fight between a group of adolescents who are beating another boy. LaJoe tries to intervene, but it is only when another boy (whom LaJoe took care of as a child, like many other children in the neighborhood) disperses the group, that LaJoe and Lafeyette can escape unharmed. On their way home, Lafeyette has a vacant stare. He has stopped confiding in anyone and seems completely emotionless. That evening, Lafeyette falls down to the ground, telling his mother he is tired.

The contrast in Pharoah and Lafeyette's attitudes foreshadows their two very different futures. Pharoah seems capable of maintaining relative distance from the problems of the neighborhood, whereas Lafeyette often finds himself involved in them. His participation in violence, though, is never gratuitous. Here, he tries to fight back in the name of justice and compassion, keeping others from harming another boy. The weight that such events have on him is obvious in his emotional and physical fatigue and despondency.

Meanwhile, Dawn has been evicted from her apartment and moves into her mother's apartment. One day, Lafeyette puts a picture of Craig on his wall, which LaJoe interprets as a good sign, but she is later forced to remove it after it gives her son nightmares that leave him drenched in sweat in the middle of the night.

Dawn's eviction seems like yet another sign that Horner does not reward intelligence or hard work. Instead, poverty and violence are two massive roadblocks that can thwart the possibility of success altogether. Meanwhile, Lafeyette's nightmares reveal the fears and grief that he carefully conceals during the day.

CHAPTER 30

When Pharoah and Lafeyette go to buy some fries near their house, they run into Rickey, who has just spent a few weeks in jail for theft, and invite him along. Rickey buys Pharoah fries, while Lafeyette purchases his own. Suddenly, Pharoah begins to stutter excitedly, pointing to the first rainbow he has ever seen. The three boys are impressed by the sight, and Pharaoh suggests that they go chase it. Lafeyette refuses, considering this idea childish, but Rickey follows Pharoah. The two of them run after the rainbow before realizing that they cannot do so, as the rainbow has vanished back into the sky.

Despite Rickey's experiences with violence and jail, this has not affected his friendship, as he still proves willing to please Pharoah. Most importantly, though, he proves just as excited as Pharoah at the sight of a rainbow, thus demonstrating that his violent behavior has not erased his capacity to behave like an innocent child. If anything, Lafeyette is more despondent and cynical than he is, and even less capable of expressing his emotions and his vulnerability.

When they return to Lafeyette, Pharoah is disappointed because he thought he might find out if there truly is a treasure at the rainbow's end. He had hoped so hard that he might make a wish for his family, so that Terence could get out of jail and they could find a house outside the project that the mere thought of this makes him cry. Lafeyette later admits that he, too, had nursed a secret hope to discover something more magical than their bleak reality.

Despite Lafeyette and Pharoah's opposing external attitudes toward the rainbow, both boys are secretly moved by the same desire: to see their life improve and their family's well-being increase. Both of them want to enjoy the full fruits of their childhood, but are forced to give up on some of their dreams.

CHAPTER 31

When LaJoe and Lafeyette return to the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center on Lafeyette's court date, the young boy's face reveals his fear. He asks his mother what is going to happen, and LaJoe reassures him, telling him they will let him go. Although Pharoah is worried about his brother, he decides not to come.

Lafeyette's fear, despite his own knowledge that he has done nothing wrong, reveals his utter lack of trust in the legal system, as he believes that his innocence is not sufficient to guarantee his freedom.

When the public defender, Anne Rhodes, calls the five boys and their parents into a room, she comes across as brusque and impersonal. However, her attitude is partially the result of lack of time and resources. Even though she is committed to her job and believes that she is doing something useful, she is often horrified by the lack of effective communication between lawyers, judges, and the accused, which often leads to hasty trials that fail to protect the children's lives.

Anne Rhodes's attitude reflects that of the system in general. The criminal system does not commit errors and indict innocent people out of a desire to do harm, but because of problems within the system itself. Empathy and justice are linked, because it is impossible to truly understand and defend a person's story without taking the time to get to know them personally.

In this case, Anne Rhodes believes most of the five boys are innocent. She tries to avoid trial by telling the boys' parents that each family could pay one hundred dollars to Michael Berger, the man whose car was broken into, and that the children would be placed on supervision, without a finding of guilt. Unable to pay such a sum, the families refuse, and the children are forced to go to trial.

The legal system also seems skewed against the poorest, most vulnerable members of society. In this case, financial resources are the main factor determining the children's guilt or innocence—a factor that tragically has nothing to do with what actually happened on the day of the arrest.

Anne only has five minutes to prepare for the trial and asks to meet with the five boys alone. She quickly hears their stories, determines who is most articulate, and easily notes that they are not all friends and, therefore, cannot have organized to break into a truck together. Anne becomes convinced of the innocence of most of these boys and believes they have a good chance of being acquitted because the judge is known for her compassion and fairness.

What seems evident to Anne as an experienced lawyer does not necessarily guarantee the boys' innocence, since this decision depends on somebody else—paradoxically, a judge who knows Anne's clients even less than she does, and must therefore make a hasty decision based on incomplete evidence.

Anne Rhodes, the children, and their parents then walk into the courtroom. LaJoe tells her son who, like the other children, is nervous, to stand up straight. The trial lasts barely twenty minutes. Michael Berger describes what was taken from his truck and identifies one of the boys as the one who had offered to guard his car. Andrea Muchin, the state's attorney, questions him but feels nervous, since this is her first trial.

The short duration of the trial emphasizes once again that the potential impact of a condemnation on these boys' lives is not taken seriously. The fact that Berger identifies only one of the boys serves as additional proof that there lacks sufficient evidence to incriminate the entire group, yet this detail does not play an important role in the trial.

Two police officers then testify and, while they do not provide details that seem sufficient to incriminate this entire group of boys, the boys' alibis also seems unconvincing, because they seem unable to recall precise details of what they were doing that particular night, four months ago. Even though Anne tries to identify contradictions in the police's testimony, showing that there does not seem to be sufficient evidence to incriminate all the boys, the judge ultimately decides to declare the five boys guilty, giving a moralizing lecture about the danger of such boys who break into parked cars.

Once again, even the police's testimony shows that there is something wrong with the decision to incriminate the entire group, as the arrest of these boys seems to have happened as a result of mere contingency, simply because they were all physically near each other. Like so many other members of the legal staff, the judge is more interested in giving a reproving speech about a general phenomenon than he is in determining the participation of these five individuals.

Both Anne Rhodes and Andrea Muchin are surprised by this decision and grow convinced that the legal system is not adequately protecting these vulnerable children's lives, even though they so desperately need to feel listened to and to benefit from a fair trial. Lafeyette, though, is relieved to realize that he will be able to go home. At the same time, he is angry that the boy whom he knows is guilty did not confess his crime and that Lafeyette is condemned for a crime he never committed.

The fact that lawyers on both sides of the legal system (one defending the accused, and the other defending the accuser) agree that the system is unfair signals that their critiques are not self-interested, but identify deep problem in the state's capacity to protect truth and justice—and, in particular, to build sustainable communities based on mutual trust and a respect for the law.

Back at the apartment, when Pharoah comes home from school, he is excited to see that Lafeyette has not been detained. LaJoe later hears the two of them argue over a T-shirt, and feels happy to know that at least she still has her two boys.

LaJoe realizes that however much this new injustice might harm the family and the children's future, she can at least enjoy the present moment and maintain the tight-knit family unity she has worked so hard to protect.

EPILOGUE

It has been one year since these events. After Lafeyette's trial, he is given a year of probation and has to perform hours of community service at the Boys Club, where he works with small children, which he enjoys doing. In the meantime, Kotlowitz succeeds in getting both Lafeyette and Pharoah into a private school outside of Horner, which is strict but has no problems of drugs or violence. While Pharoah thrives there, working hard despite being behind on reading and math, Lafeyette has struggled with the workload and returned to public school toward the end of the school year.

Despite being an unfair punishment, Lafeyette's community service proves potentially productive and highlights the boy's capacity to commit to a just cause and work hard to care for others. These qualities, however, are insufficient in guaranteeing his academic success or a hopeful future, as part of the problem lies in the disadvantages he has already suffered from and in the need for him to work hard, trust in his future, and believe in himself.

Lafeyette's experience at a private school has made him enthusiastic about learning, but he is now struggling to stay out of trouble. After being caught smoking marijuana before school, he promises his mother to stay away from drugs, but LaJoe is worried that he might fall prey to Horner's bad influences. However, Lafeyette successfully graduates from eighth grade, an event that makes him feel proud and happy—one of the few carefree moments in his life. Next year, he hopes to enter a parochial school geared toward children with learning problems.

Despite Lafeyette's difficulties with school, he has not given up on his future and knows how important academic success is in life. However, his success will ultimately depend both on academic achievement and on his ability to stay out of trouble, maintaining a safe distance from the neighborhood's pressures. Lafeyette's success thus depends on himself, his friends, his family, and also—as Craig so poignantly demonstrated—on sheer luck.

One year since Craig Davis was shot, the police still refuses to discuss the case, and Christine, Craig's mother, plans to file a lawsuit against the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, responsible for her son's death. In the meantime, Rickey has since begun selling drugs for a local gang. He has been arrested for breaking into a car and has seen multiple court psychiatrist, who have concluded that he is generally angry at the world and feels personally wronged.

The police's actions show that they are far from being the just, accountable force that they are supposed to be. Instead of promoting transparency and justice, which would lead to a better relationship with the community, the police generate anger and distrust among neighborhood residents—which only increases the likelihood of police-related violence in the future.

At Horner, the violence has not subsided, even though tragic shootings never seem to make the news. Lafeyette and Pharoah both want to move out of the projects, and Pharoah worries so much about it that it sometimes moves him to tears. Vincent Lane and CHA, though, have improved some of the infrastructure at Horner. In some housing complexes, they have also succeeded in moving gangs' drug operations elsewhere, and some residents of these neighborhoods now feel safer than they have in years. However, funds to organize similar maintenance and security operations at Horner are often sorely lacking. Other changes, such as the creation of drug- and gang-prevention programs and the creation of a drug rehabilitation center, have improved life at Horner somewhat.

The lack of news coverage of what happens at Horner shows just how undervalued and misunderstood residents' lives are—not only by the government, but also by the general public. At the same time, this disinterest is neither inevitable nor permanent, as Vincent Lane has proven that some individuals do care and, through forceful action and sustained commitment, are capable of changing a long-standing situation of neglect on their own. This restores trust in individuals' potential to improve their own lives—and, perhaps, that of entire communities.

Dawn and her boyfriend, Demetrius, have succeeded in receiving an apartment at the ABLA homes, where Craig used to live. The two of them now have five children and, while they still struggle to find a permanent job, they rarely return to Horner. As for Terence, after earning his high school equivalency in prison, he should be released in 1991. Finally, Paul has a new part-time job and has been able to give LaJoe money so she can buy Tammie and Tiffany sandals.

Other hopeful developments have impacted the Rivers family directly. Dawn and Demetrius' success at moving out of Horner proves that progress is possible through hard work and hope. Similarly, Terence's diploma and Paul's new job show that individuals are capable of improving their lives if they are persistent, even in the most harrowing of circumstances, such as incarceration or drug addiction.

A NOTE ON REPORTING METHODS

Alex Kotlowitz explains that most of the material for the book derives from the time he spent sharing Pharoah and Lafeyette's ordinary life. He also interviewed over a hundred people, whose thoughts and life stories are included in the narrative. He witnessed about half of the episodes in the book, and describes the other ones based on interviews with direct witnesses. He has always striven to respect people's privacy and, in particular, Pharoah and Lafeyette's wishes, such as their occasional desire for their thoughts not to be recorded. He has relied on numerous reports and interviews to discuss events such as Craig Davis's shooting, Jimmie Lee's life, and the history of Horner and Chicago.

Kotlowitz's attitude toward his own work and the lives of other people is marked by a desire for fairness and transparency. He demonstrates the kind of empathy and understanding toward his subjects that the justice system so sorely lacks—but that he, through his storytelling, might be able to counteract at least minimally. His commitment to precision and accuracy highlights that no sense of justice or fairness can emerge from drawing hasty conclusions about certain actions or individuals.

On a few occasions, Kotlowitz helped the family financially in small ways, for example buying one of the children a new item of clothing. He intends to set up a trust fund for the children, which they will be able to access upon graduation from high school. In general, he is committed to assisting these children as much as he can, in order to honor their friendship.

Kotlowitz's occasional financial intervention into the Rivers family's life might infringe on his role as an external observer, but proves that his primary commitments are, first and foremost, justice and the possibility of social change.

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