

King boy

by J. E. Cammon

“He had emerged from slavery, -- not the worst slavery in the world, not a slavery that made all life unbearable, rather a slavery that had here and there something of kindness, fidelity, and happiness, -- but withal slavery, which, so far a human aspiration and desert were concerned, classed the black man and the ox together.” — W.E.B. Dubois

The clippers snapped and then there was a bee in his ear. With the cracked leather wrapped around the rigid frame of the spinning chair pushing against his back, J.R. snuck his thumbs into the belt loops of his pants, waiting. He was rewarded with the feel of the gyrating teeth scooping in and out of his afro, diminishing him.

“Young man losin the ‘fro?” a voice called across the barbershop. The ends of thick fingers carefully touched his scalp to adjust the position of his head. J.R. could almost see the rye smile on Mr. Jones' face.

“He say it's time for somethin' new,” Mr. Jones answered the first speaker, loudly. He was competing with the noise from a chorus of other spinning chairs and shop workers and customers. It was like a high school dance with everybody spinning in place, with thick tufts of dark hair instead of balloons. “Lean down a bit fuh me,” he said, more quietly. J.R. pushed with his back, scrunching down in the chair, half asleep.

“Well I be,” the onlooker replied excitedly. There was a clap, and the slight screech of the metal legs on the black and white floor. J.R. lazily opened an eye. He'd seen the man before, across the street at the gas station, hustling people for change or whatever he could get that they would give. He looked old enough to be retired in some places, patches of gray hair spotted all over his head, a mouth only half full with lonely, crooked teeth. He could laugh genuinely, though. The clap came again, a full body gesture, and he pointed

with a gnarled hand. "I told Joe he wadn't gone stop growin that thang til it was as big as the ball!" he clapped-chuckled again. Over his shoulder the world was getting splashed with the yellow of dawn. J.R. had to yawn, but he repressed it, and closed his eye again.

"Got a scout comin' tonight," Mr. Jones said. His breath was warm on J.R.'s neck. "Is it tech or state?" he asked. J.R. stirred as his face burst into a toothy grin.

"And," he corrected. "Tech and State," he put the capitals on himself. The entire place exploded with ooh's and ah's. Beneath the regal apron, J.R. struck a pose just for himself. The old gas station man clap-chuckled again. The buzzing persisted, and the fingertips, and the peace and rest and silent noise.

Half an hour later, J.R. was back up the street. He reached down deep into a back pocket and retrieved the carelessly folded paper. Unfolding it, he searched both sides for the circled number and dialed on his cell phone. It rang once. When it rang again he checked his watch and his memory, checking the street lights at the upcoming intersection.

"Hello," this after the fourth ring. J.R. frowned.

"Uh, I think I got the wrong number," he checked the paper again, squinting.

"Boy, you don't know the voice of yo own mama?" the woman on the end yelled. With her voice came the image of her stiff curls and loud, long nails. The smell of her perfume. J.R. made sure he was safe to walk across the street.

"Tracy. She awake? Put her on," of course she was awake. The doctor said she'd be awake. The woman on the other end made a dismissive sound with her mouth, paused, then assented. J.R.'s grandmother came on, cracked and quiet.

"Hey, baby," J.R. pushed the phone into his ear, slowing his walk.

"Mama. You okay? You sound quiet," he was ambiguous about the care pressed into his voice.

"Oh, I'm fine. Just tired, you know. Everything went fine. Doctor say," she paused to clear her throat. Words J.R. couldn't make

out were passed between his mother and his grandmother. "Yo mother is here, visitin wit me," she said, sounding a bit brighter. J.R. nodded but did not respond, beginning his walk uphill. He adjusted his backpack on his shoulder. "My hair look amess?" she asked Tracy, speaking into the phone. J.R. could scarcely make out the 'Yeah, yo hair look good, Mama.'

"That's good," J.R. said, going uphill. "You know I got that game tonight," he baited.

"Yeah, yo mama said they sendin' some people to see you play. That's good, baby," she hummed a little. J.R. looked around for a moment while walking.

"Yeah. If they like me, they gonna give me a scholarship," he tried again.

"That's good, baby," she responded. He could see her patting her ample belly and idly moving her head from side to side. Tracy said something that came through in a whisper. "Tracy say she gone come to the game," it was more of a question than a statement. He didn't want her there, and his grandmother knew it, but she was always talking about family and 'she's all you got.'

"You won't be out?" J.R. put his head down.

"They gone keep me overnight. They say the insurance will let me go tomorrow. They say I'm fine, though," she hummed a little again. Her voice was coming back, though the phone couldn't really transmit her; so much of her was posture and expression. He was entering the parking lot, and checking his watch, he could see it was about half way through first period.

"Mama, I gotta go," he paused, "I was out of class for a minute," he ducked around the back in the direction of the gym.

"Oh, ok, baby," she said. More conversation he couldn't make out. When Tracy came on, smiling through the phone, he hung up the phone, pushing his hand against the cracking paint of the back door.

Beyond the door was the court, and the bleachers that surrounded it, all of it empty except for a buffing machine at the free throw line and a push broom propped up against the scorer's table.

For a moment, the day fast-forwarded, and the stands were filled with screaming people cheering for him. Speaking voices made him rewind into the present; he could pick out the voice of his coach anywhere. The other voice wasn't familiar though.

Buck was a big black man with a big gut which was probably just as black. He was always in a jump suit with the edges of a rubber suit poking up out of the neck and out of the sleeves. His face has lines in it, and a lot of people thought he looked like a gorilla. Buck was nice back in the day, J.R. knew; he had seen the pictures and trophies. The white man next to him had a little gray in his hair, a smooth forehead and gray eyes behind those glasses that were just lenses with legs. Upon seeing J.R., Buck's expression darkened just like when one of his players would take a bad shot; the other man just put his hands in his pockets. J.R. hustled like going to the bench, his hand stuck out. White men with nice glasses didn't just show up to say hello to Buck. J.R. smiled and didn't hold the eye contact.

"Hello. I'm J.R. Davenport," the man took his hand confidently, looking down at him.

"Hello, J.R. I'm Mr. Crest," his grip wasn't strong. It was sort of flimsy. "Your coach was just telling me about you and the game tonight," he exposed his watch to look at it. It was nice like the rest of him. "Took us a bit of time, shouldn't you be," he looked down at J.R.

"Oh, yeah," J.R. started, glancing at Buck. "I have a special class first period so I can help my grandmother with her dialysis," the lie was a small one. He begged with his eyes that Buck go with him.

"Though he still has a faculty advocate," Coach interjected. "Mr. Leaks is good about his home situation, but today he's pushing it," his eyes said more, but he eased into a smile that addressed Mr. Crest. "There'll be plenty of time for you two to talk after the game," Mr. Crest gave another look down at J.R. and turned back to Buck, agreeing.

“Yes. Good luck tonight, J.R.,” it was an odd end to a conversation. Mr. Crest had an immovable confidence; J.R. was out of the gym and down the hall before he realized that was his goodbye, that he had sort of scuttled from the scene.

The other students in his class were going as he was coming. Wonder was the only teammate that he had a morning class with, and he pulled J.R. to the side when he saw him.

“Jay, where you was at?” he asked, frowning up his face before he even heard the reason.

“My mama was in the hospital,”

“Leaks ain't buyin that with the fresh cut,”

“Man I don't give a damn what Leaks gotta say to me,”

“You gonna mess around and get on probation again,”

“Mr. Davenport,” Mr. Leaks liked to call everybody by their last name because it came first in the grade book. Before turning around, he fixed his face, he and Wonder both. Mr. Leaks was tall with a carefully cared after beard; he wore ties with strange patterns and drove a BMW. “I need to talk to you,” and then to Wonder, “Mr. Brown, I'll see you Monday,” and with that Wonder saluted and walked off. J.R. frowned after him, having déjà vu. He watched Mr. Leaks walk back into the room, and followed him, trying to conceive of a good lie, keeping in mind what Wonder said. Leaks held the door open until he was inside then he closed it, a bit forcefully. “So,” he said.

“I'm sorry I missed your class, Mr. Leaks,” J.R. said, adjusting his backpack.

“Is that it? J.R. you missed a quiz today,” J.R. frowned, squinting to remember the syllabus.

“That wasn't on the schedule,” it was a shot in the dark.

“All quizzes aren't listed,” Mr. Leaks responded.

“What,” J.R. composed himself. “Man, look, if I had known there was gone be a quiz, I would've showed up,”

“I'm sure,” Leaks responded, looking into his face.

“Man, this ain't my fault. I been here for every other quiz and test except for that other time,”

“Except for that other time,”

“Man, you pulled this same,” J.R. stopped suddenly, wiping his mouth with his hand. “Alright. Alright, Mr. Leaks, you gave us this syllabus right, and it said what our grade came from right. I read it, and I knew all I had to do was... I'm not skipping your class every day, and even when I do, it's not my fault, I mean I got other stuff to be doing. My mama on dialysis.” Mr. Leaks put his long arms behind his back and looked at his shoes for a moment, licking his lips carefully.

“Mr. Davenport, with the zero on today's quiz you're failing my class,” he paused to let that soak in. J.R. understood that he had more to say, and waited, simmering. “You say you read the syllabus, and you precisely calculated how much effort you had to give just to get by. Why not just do the work I asked you to do?” his words were careful, and he was going to be late for second period. J.R. sighed, his posture slumping.

“I can make the work up so I ain't failin’,” was all he said. Mr. Leaks looked at his face, the shirt, the jeans, the shoes.

“I'll see you later, Mr. Davenport,” he said, opening the door. The situation with his grade was unresolved. But he left; he couldn't stay. J.R. told himself it was because he couldn't get into any more trouble. Not today.

Getting to his next class wasn't difficult. He wouldn't run, but he talked fast enough with his hand in the door to get into the room and into his seat. When his name was called he raised his hand. The teacher spoke, and he accounted for what amounted to notes on a sheet of paper. This class melded into that one, and between each snippet of history, literature, and government was a doodle of a drawing. J.R. never spoke in class; overall his teachers said he had satisfactory conduct. His phone went off in class once before lunch; he apologized respectfully.

At lunch he met up with Big Will. They had been playing together since third grade when Will's family moved into the neighborhood. Both his dad and his mom were tall; at some point

J.R. was told they were from Africa, where everyone was tall like Akeem Olajuwon.

“Wonder said you got into it with Leaks,” Big Will said, holding his tray with his huge hands. The tray was about at J.R.'s shoulder.

“Yeah, he gave me crap about his class. He know my mama in the hospital,” Will's face was contemplative, and always calm, except when he was on the court, then it was an angry mask, sometimes simmering, sometimes boiling over.

“He gone tell Buck.”

“Man, he ain't gone do nothin'. Even Leaks know I gotta play tonight,” a win meant that the school would go to the playoffs for the first time in ten years. They'd been close before, but J.R. would take them there. As Will stood behind J.R. while he fumed, Twin showed up with Wonder. Greetings were exchanged; they all expressed their worry over Leaks, who had defied their world before. J.R. quieted them all, and lead them to a table. Twin waved to his brother, a similar image in different clothes who lived in a different world. Wonder sat next to Will, and the lightness of the bread after which he was named came out juxtaposed against Will's dark complexion. Wonder's father was white, and he had spent his childhood fighting anybody that brought it up. He was friends with J.R. because they both battled over being bastards. Twin was smart; he always went to the assemblies where they handed out the little medals with the American colors. He had a bunch, and his brother had more. Most everyone else called him the dumber one, but he saw it like J.R. saw it: he was the one that started on the varsity squad.

At their school there were cheerleaders, and then there were cheerleaders. Sometimes they beat white schools who had young girls in little dresses with the colored over-panties. They had those, but the people who danced at half time wore tight outfits made from colorful cotton. The Diamond Dancers. A group of them sashayed by the table, slow enough to be noticed but too quickly to be caught. Both groups knew all the others' names.

“Hey J.R.,” they cooed. Among them, Big Will was the only one that was still a virgin, and his mouth always opened wide. J.R. just waved with one hand, while closing Will's mouth with the other. Once Wonder had asked J.R. why he didn't put Will down with one of the diamonds. J.R. had said that Will would lose his mind and stop getting rebounds then they'd lose the rest of their games. They had all laughed, but they all looked out for Will. He was angry about it, but understood.

“I met a scout this morning,” everyone perked up their ears.

“Where was he from?” Twin wanted to know. J.R. shrugged.

“Man, Buck caught me sneakin on campus. Had this white man with him,” Will always looked at Wonder when white men were brought up, but he had learned not to say anything. “I know he's a scout though. He must be paid, he had a rolex or somethin’,”

“I wonder what kinda car he drive,” Wonder asked. Will nodded gravely.

“We gotta beat Lake. Not just beat em, beat em bad, to impress him. Crest. His name Mr. Crest,” J.R. continued.

“Like the toothpaste?” Wonder asked.

“Maybe,” J.R. said. Twin frowned, but didn't say anything. Will nodded gravely again. “Anybody seen Easy today?” he asked, looking around the lunch room.

“He was in history,” Twin volunteered.

“Sometimes he eats outside with Monica,” Big Will said. His voice was deep, and had a power that silenced other conversation. J.R. looked into the boy's dark eyes. At the prompting, Will finished his food, and together, en masse, they left the lunch room. The day had been going downhill from the very beginning, but in a good way. As they left every now and again, a classmate slash fan would congratulate them, or wish them good luck. At their front, J.R. lead them out.

It was common knowledge that Harvey had gotten Monica pregnant. A lot of boys liked to say they had had sex, and how many

times, and with how many girls, but it was an ironic thing that with the proof came overawing dread. Harvey seemed happy about it, though. As the rest of them arrived, he was feeding her and rubbing her round stomach. Monica was a former Diamond, and she seemed as happy as Harvey tried to be. He stood up as they approached, exchanging a familiar handshake with J.R. They called him Easy because of his all-around flawlessness. Everything came naturally to him; he was extremely versatile, the generalist that made the perfect forward.

“E,” J.R. started, pulling him away from the group momentarily. “Hey, Monica,” She waved, rubbing the front of her stretched shirt.

“Jay. Heard you got into it with Leaks,” he grinned. J.R. cursed. “You keep playin' around and he gonna have you benched.”

“Can't nobody bench me but Buck, and Buck know he need me in the game if we gone win,” the committee agreed. Monica waddled to her feet and came over to stroke Easy's arm gently.

“I'm goin inside,” she had a way of being intimate even with all of them there watching. Easy matched her detachment momentarily as they kissed goodbye. He called her boo, and it wasn't fake or forced. J.R. had been with a lot of girls, and had had lots of girlfriends but none of them stuck. Watching Easy, he was that much more familiar with why he was named such, and how awkward it was that all of his relationships ended with screaming. Monica left the scene, and Easy returned to his place in the group, to the right of J.R. with Wonder on the left, Big Will in the back and Twin on the far right. They weren't physically together again for the rest of the day until they were all in the locker room, but anyone that saw any of them that day understood that the atmosphere was changing.

Buck had always told them the difference between good players and great players was confidence. J.R. had repeated that in his sleep since he had met the man in 8th grade. He had repeated it to all of them.

The game had all the expectations of a competitive game between two teams that didn't like each other scrapping for the playoffs, and played out that way, too. J.R. had his eye on Mr. Crest and his very still place in the swimming crowd. He had been so confident that there would be two scouts. He caught sight of his mother only because she was screaming his name. Sometimes she accidentally said his name wrong, called him Junior instead. It made him run faster, jump higher.

After the victory, they talked about him in the local papers and classrooms; he had a triple double, and was taking the Panthers to the playoffs. Will had twenty rebounds, and Easy was perfect from three-point range.

He called his grandmother afterwards and she told him she was proud of him, and also that she wanted him to get her the bootleg of the new Tyler Perry movie so she could watch it when she got home from the hospital.

After he hung up, as Buck promised, he and Mr. Crest talked. He was from tech. He said they could use somebody like J.R.

"And we have personal tutors that can help you surmount your academic struggles," J.R. frowned, not understanding all the words.

"What? I'm smart, Mr. Crest,"

"Oh, I know you are. I talked to your professors. If you come to tech, you'll be getting a quality education as well as be playing for a seminal powerhouse in the ACC." Confused, J.R. found Mr. Leaks and Buck staring at him across the madness of celebration. They looked like they had been talking, and not just right then. J.R. remembered that Buck used to be nice. He had seen the pictures and trophies. J. R. looked up into Mr. Crest's smiling face. Looking down, he could see that although they were standing a foot apart, he was still on the court and Mr. Crest wasn't. The man's shoes were nice, but they'd scuff up the hard wood; he didn't belong there. "Anyway, I think I'm going to go back to my coaches, and tell them I think you'd make a good addition to their roster." And like

last time, Mr. Crest was gone out of the conversation before J. R. realized they were done talking.

“Yeah,” Wonder exulted, putting his arm around J. R. “Playoff time, shawty!” J.R. turned to see Will was there, and Twin also, even Easy. They were all cheering. They were all waiting. The moment stretched, as J. R. glanced down, and thought about the significance of the line marking the boundary of his excellency.

“Hell yeah!” he shouted, and jumped up and down as if he was excited. The rest of them seemed happy, too.

