

Ghetto- a section of a city, esp.
a thickly populated slum area,
inhabited predominantly by members
of a minority group.

*Phoenix- a fabulous bird that after a
life of five or six centuries immolates
itself on a pyre and rises from the
ashes to begin a new cycle of years:
often an emblem of immortality or of
reborn idealism or HOPE.*

TRUTH- IDEAL OR FUNDAMENTAL
REALITY APART FROM AND
TRANSCENDING PERCEIVED
EXPERIENCE.

Gettin' Paid

The Truth in Fifteen Minutes

A Novel

J. Lewis Celeste

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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"The knights dared not disobey, so tying their bridles together, that they might be with him to the end, they led their brave master to the field. There when the battle was over, and the English were left on the field victorious, the Black Prince found the dead body of the blind King of Bohemia, his horse's bridle still tied to those of his knights, who lay dead beside him, his snowy plumes lying stained and crushed. The Prince gazed at his royal enemy, and at the useless plumes. Then he took the three white feathers, and kept them for his own, together with the Bohemian King's motto, "Ich dien," meaning "I serve."

Not here, but in hearts dwell

SMURF, B.J., STED, KOA, FER

Brothers all

Brothers always

Preface

My original intent, when I began writing this story, was to capture a snapshot of life, as I knew it growing up in my hood, Washington Heights, New York City, from 1970 to 1993. This story was supposed to be short, but the flow would not stop and my pen kept moving. The story then would be a novella, but that also did not suffice for the pages kept accumulating. At some point, after a hundred pages or so, I discovered that the story could not be limited and would play out until complete. This implies that the story wrote itself, and to a degree, this is so. Often, when my pen touched paper, I would not stop writing until my hand cramped and I could no longer continue. The characters directed the scenes, events developing without design or anticipation by me (at least not consciously). This may sound far-fetched, but it is true. This story was simply meant to be and so it became.

The idea to write about the criminal life of an inner city youth is not original or unique, however this piece, written in two vernaculars that blend and switch with the scenes, offer readers a different approach and may even question some perceptions. I have intentionally blurred which city Nat and Poodle live in. This is based on my belief that a ghetto is a ghetto and the reader should be able to pick the city and even the neighborhood in order to maintain the realism and understanding necessary to fully appreciate the story.

Of course, there are a few hints that suggest the city I refer to, but my intention is to not limit the imagination, but rather allow you, the reader, to provide the background with your own streets, scenes and memories.

As to the language of the novel, it is natural for me to write in urban slang. The dialogue between the characters and some of the narrative are true to the street language of my generation, as I know it to be. One glaring discount is the

exclusion of the slang term “nigga,” derivative of the hateful and offensive word "nigger." In its place, I have chosen the almost equally disturbing term "motherfucker." This may seem asinine, but only for those of you who do not know inner city culture. The following explanation may not be acceptable to many of you, but then this novel may not either. Regardless, my reasoning is sound and my foundation is solid, for the culture of which I speak is *my* culture. Allow me to enunciate: motherfucker and nigga are synonymous in inner city neighborhoods. They are interchangeable and quite often neither term has any negative connotation when spoken within a particular group, or if referring to someone others in the group know. What many consider degrading in a broader sense is simply the way people speak in the hoods and ghettos of America. Not specifically from ignorance, or lack of education, but from a developed inner city culture.

In this sense, I no longer consider the term limited to Americans of African descent; nor do I consider its sub form, when used in the inner city, particularly offensive or negative. Up until the mid 1980's, I would agree that the term in any form was very specific, with crude and derogatory meaning. However, in the past twenty-five years, through an inner city Cultural Revolution spearheaded by Hip Hop, the term in its sub form has evolved into common hood slang for person, guy, or kid. As for motherfucker, many conversations in the inner city that refer to a specific person switch between nigga and motherfucker just as if someone in "the burbs" was switching from dude to guy. And for many reasons, to include the overall commonality of the term, *motherfucker* is actually more palatable for persons outside the inner city, and even more, for those who are trying to sublimate inner city culture.

I want to make it perfectly clear that I do not disregard the history of the word nigger in any written or spoken form, or the impact the use of the word invokes in many people. Nor do I condone the use of the word in any form by *any* group. However, progress requires society to overcome its painful history, not to forget, never forget, but to move constantly forward. If used archaically or by any persons to denote less value, for denigration or prejudicial purposes, then the term holds the shameful power of its origin. Nevertheless, as I've described, when applied in the cultural language created in the inner city, the word is commonplace with minor if any negative connotation.

If while reading this, you're reminded of that other often used derogatory word "bitch," yes, that term is also frequently used in the inner city, again though, without the specific negative inflection that may be attributable in other settings. However bold and controversial this piece may turn out to be, I purposely replaced nigga with

motherfucker for these reasons. And whether you accept what I am saying or not, those who grew up in the hood, know the truth of the matter, but it is not my place to throw it in your face and I will not provide an opportunity to detract from this story because I happen to be white.

As for the other vernacular, standard literary prose, Nat speaks to you from a podium, he challenges you to think, agitates you to question your beliefs, your perceptions. He is a teacher, one with personal experience to support his position. It is not remarkable that intelligent minds in our prison populations spend a great deal of time reading and studying. And for the greater part of his life, Nat has been acquiring and retaining all sorts of knowledge. He can engage any crowd on any level. It was very entertaining watching Nat switch back and forth between vernaculars (even pointing it out when he fancied) and I think these transitions are seamless, and that in itself indicates something very profound.

There are many points in this story, too many to cover-- not that I would anyway, but I hope that readers from different backgrounds: racial, cultural, socio-economic, religious, age . . . will gain something from this story. I think some will gain more than others will, but Nat's message is meant for the street thug, the ghetto kid, my inner city brothers and sisters. It is to you Nat is speaking. You need to realize that if you remove every negative influence that can cause you to make a bad decision, if you can reverse it even, and make every influence positive, the bottom line is and always will be choice, *your choice*. No matter how bad it seems, or how grim it looks, you will always have to reconcile your decisions. Don't live with regrets.

Nat and Poodle are a blend of people from my past. They are as much a part of me as they are a part of this story. As for the fantastic events that occur-- it is up you to decide which are factual and which are not. There are many Nats and Poodles in our society, along with others that might not

fit a convenient stereotype. Nevertheless, they are routinely labeled so that the public can point fingers with accusations and condemnations.

Throughout my life, I have listened to "experts" explain why inner city youth commit violent crimes. These experts usually focus on every reason other than the individual to explain the behavior. They are quick to highlight exterior influences and claim these are the principal factors for criminal behavior. Over the years, I have reacted in many different ways: shaken my head, snorted in derision, laughed, but most often I just walk away or turn it off. I finally asked myself, why do I dismiss my own experiences, why do I stand by while these fools convince people that children in the ghetto are somehow *unable* to rise above diversity that the external factors are so overwhelming that they *can't* escape, that these poor kids got no chance.

So Nat and Poodle came to me and said, "J, we got to explain some shit, we got to let them know that we choose, just like everybody else. So instead of looking *around* us, look *at* us."

Nat and Poodle want someone who got the creds to say to you-- choose right motherfucker-- in *your* language for *your* future. They want you to get paid.

Crime in the ghetto, as crime in any other environment, is based on individual choice. If you cut away all the excuses, a person who is truly guilty will lay down each night and no matter how hard he tries to point to other reasons, he'll end up realizing again and again that he fucked up by choice. So, regardless of your circumstances, regardless of how far down you are, the choices you make will determine your future. Stop the excuses-- J

Chapter One

Name's Nat, Nat T. Johnson. The “T” is for Turner, though some say it stands for Terror. They also say I’m a reincarnation of my namesake, 'cept I ain’t selective, don’t got much religion, and care only about gettin’ paid. My father named me, mom tried to change it to Nathan, but the ol’ man wasn’t having it.

“Fuck that yuppie name, my boy gonna be named after a bad motherfucker, a proud motherfucker, a motherfucker befo’ his time. He gonna know that name too! He gonna love it, respect it, man he gonna be that fuckin’ name!”

I wonder sometimes, why mom wanted to change my name. What’s a name anyway? Lucifer, Adolph, Mao, does it matter? And Nat T, he wasn’t evil or nothing, maybe a little nuts thinking he was talking with God and all, but just a man who didn’t like his circumstances and tried to change them. What’s wrong with that? Balls if you ask me. Had he been another color, fighting a different struggle, he’d

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probably be a few monuments 'bout now. Besides, if you're bound to be a bad motherfucker, then your name don't really mean shit. Whatever her reason, I'm sure she didn't push it too much, just putting on airs. Mom had more important things to think about-- Heroin. Yeah, she was all about getting high to forget who she was, let alone worry about who I was gonna be. As I understand it, all she really cared about was how to score her next hit, a blowjob here, a hand job there, whatever. I heard she was a sight too, a walking wraith, hopeless, miserable, and surrounded by misbegotten burdens.

I'll never know why she wanted to name me Nathan, but I wonder sometimes if it would have changed things. I doubt it, I seriously do, but thinking about shit like that, helps pass the time. In any event, I carried my namesake down a real bad path, or maybe my namesake carried me, whatever the case, this story is my testimonial, my tidbit to society, a special message for my brothers and sisters living in the ghettos where I cut my teeth.

Pop was a crazy ol' bastard, purposeful in a singular way, like the "Terminator." His only goal, at least the only one I know of, was to have himself a son. He wouldn't give up. Try, try again, he was gonna have a boy no matter what. He plowed that wasteland, my mother, over and over again

like a mad farmer. And when it was harvest time, year after year after year, he'd shrug off the disappointing yield and start all over again. He tilled that beaten earth silly to plant his boy child. Can you imagine? I mean can you *really* imagine. He was fifty-three when I was born. Some say 53 ain't old, but he wasn't no daisy, and he worked hard to see my dangling balls. Fate is a funny motherfucker sometimes; he likes to mess with stubborn folk, stupid folk, like Pop. Some shit just ain't meant to be, but if you push hard enough, Fate just might throw you a bone, but that don't mean it's a wishbone. Pop got what he worked so hard for, and maybe he felt like he earned it, all that toil and trouble and what not for his posterity. But the price was high, some say the price was too high, and they know who really paid, and it wasn't Pop, it was only his sweat. His efforts became society's burden, cause Natty was havoc from the get-go and that's the truth!

Countless people have crossed my path, one way or another, and all of them probably wish I had never been born. They curse a stubborn motherfucker for chasing a dream that became their nightmare. Shit makes me giggle when I think about it, what his effort brought into this world.