MISEDUCATED

A MEMOIR

BRANDON P. FLEMING

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CONTENTS

Discover More

To my students—the reason for my second chance.

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

—Langston Hughes, 1926

FOREWORD

BY DR. CORNEL WEST

As I enter the last stage of life, one of my great joys is to be inspired by those of a much younger age who plan and pledge to pick up the bloodstained and tear-soaked banner of truth and justice. I first met my dear brother Brandon in the hallowed halls of Harvard University. His brilliance, charisma, and commitment were undeniable as he visited my lectures on Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Lorraine Hansberry, and other Black scholars.

It became clear to me that his heart, mind, and soul were on fire for truth. We broke bread and I learned about his painful past, I learned of his resilient present, but he primarily focused on an ebullient future—one that held a commitment to his scholars and the plight of American education at the center. It was infectious, his deep delight and genuine glee at reflecting on the great talent and grand victories of his brilliant students. I was elated to greet them upon their arrival in Cambridge, but our plans were thwarted when the coronavirus lockdown set in and university programming shifted to distance learning. But on the virtual platform, I had an opportunity to spend time with them and share rich and wonderful dialogue. And I can attest to their magic.

Fleming stands in the great tradition of Black writers and fighters who unite thought and action, reflection and execution, based on a deep love of people—especially for young Black people who grow up on the kicking fields of America's hoods. Like those who helped Brandon turn his life around, he has now taken the lead in transforming the lives of so many young brothers and sisters by means of paideia: a deep education rooted in truth, justice, and love.

Miseducated is paideia. It is power and insight wrapped beautifully in prose. It is art that touches the heart, incites the

mind, and reaches deep down into the depths of the soul. It is poignant the way Fleming's formation unfolds—from a life of drugs, violence, and hoop dreams to a quest for intellectual and spiritual excellence. The way he cultivates critical thinking in young people puts a premium on academic debate, joyful learning, and the transformative power of language. And his journey in finding self and helping others do the same is both heart-touching and soul-stirring.

In *Miseducated*, the upward climb is not about making it to the top, it is about pulling others up when you get there. And Fleming's fight to moral greatness and societal significance is boundless. The following pages lay bare the stages of failure, of triumph, and the discovery of a special calling that will lift us all in such a grim moment in the history of this country.

CHAPTER ONE

GOLDEN TICKET

I could not seem to die. I opened my eyes in a hospital bed, the faint beeping of a monitor signaling I had been given a second chance I did not want. I was still here. Forced to see, hear, feel, and face the reality I had desperately tried to flee. I did not want to feel anymore, but I felt. I felt cold. I felt pain. I felt alone.

I scanned the room searching for the culprit, the one who was no friend of mine for dragging me back to the life I was desperate to leave. How could they? I did not want to be saved. I wanted to be free. And if they could feel, see, or sense my anguish, they would not have thwarted my exit, barring the door to my escape. They would have opened it. They would have let me through.

"Mr. Fleming?" My rush of angry, frustrated thoughts was stilled by a gentle, compassionate voice. "Mr. Fleming, how are you feeling?"

I averted my eyes from the infusion pump to a petite woman dressed in white. Her blonde hair was backlit and luminescent. She looked harmless enough, but I felt vulnerable, exposed, weak. Surely she would take one look at me and see everything, all the insecurities that fueled my cowardly desire to run. Surely she would see I had no reason to be alive. I felt ashamed to be here, in this room, receiving this attention. It took a while for me to gather the courage to look at her. At her soft gray eyes that made me somehow feel safe. Her smile was perfectly appropriate. It was subtle enough to respect my circumstance yet assertive enough to assure me that everything would be okay.

"Here, drink this." She gently braced my neck as she held a bowl of gritty black liquid to my lips. "This is activated charcoal. It will help to dissolve the drugs you took."

I grimaced as I gulped the elixir. It tasted like cement mixed with the castor oil my aunt made me drink as a child. As I gagged through the last swallow, the nurse dabbed the corners of my mouth and carefully nestled my head back at rest. She promised to return to check on me and disappeared through the veil that separated me from other patients.

I did not want her to leave. She was all I had. My feeble hand lifted and beckoned her to stay, but I did not have the strength to speak. Wide-eyed, I lay back and gazed at the ceiling as tears welled in the gutters of my eyes and streamed slowly down the contours of my face, dissolving in the stubble on my chin. I was alone—with my thoughts, my feelings, and the life I did not want.

Lying there, I thought about the day before. It was my last shift on the assembly line of Vitamin Manufacturing. I was an eighteen-year-old college dropout dating a girl whose mother insisted that I try to earn a living. My girlfriend had not yet developed a radar for detecting low-lives, so her mother had intervened with a passive-aggressive introduction to the local temp agency. In this way, she'd avoided challenging her daughter's taste in men while also demonstrating her distaste for jobless suitors. I had no education, no resources, and no skills, so menial labor was my only hope for making a decent living.

The agency had assigned me to a vitamin plant in Anderson, South Carolina, about twenty miles from Greenville, where I'd finished high school almost two years prior. Mom's deployment to Iraq had separated and scattered my siblings and me. Sierra was twenty-two and had gone to live with her boyfriend. Barry was a year older than me and had gone to live with his father in New York. I'd moved to Greenville, where I temporarily stayed with my aunt. Ben, the youngest of us, was the only one with nowhere to go. So he'd gone with me until Mom's return.

Mom was away in Iraq for a year. She was now back home in suburban Washington, DC, settling into civilian life as a retired veteran. She, too, had no job, no education, and limited resources. And she did not have the emotional capacity to take me back in. She was tired, and getting older. Raising us took everything she had, between Sierra's teenage pregnancy, Barry's street fights, and my drug peddling. After all that strife, she was still not yet an

empty nester, watching my little brother—now at home with her—be kept back in school while he followed my footsteps into delinquency and danger. Instead of intervening and imposing strict rules like she'd tried with us, she raised her hands in surrender because she had nothing left to give. The chances that she would take me in, after I'd gone off to college and dropped out my first semester, were unfavorable. "When you turn eighteen," she'd always said, "you're on your own." And she'd meant it. Now I jumped from house to house, sleeping on couches and floors belonging to friends whose parents were kind enough to shelter an unemployed boy who was barely a man. But even those kind parents had a threshold.

One of those friends was Kevin. His family allowed me to make a pallet on their living room floor. The floor was much more comfortable than their derelict sofa, whose yellow cushion seeped through the abrasions in the aging leather. They gave me six months, but under one condition: I was to maintain a job or be out of the house looking for one during business hours. For a few months they had kicked me out and banned my reentry until 5 p.m. each day. But instead of job searching, I spent most of that time with my girlfriend. Until her mother self-aligned with Kevin's parents in trying to pressure me into responsibility. That's when I'd started at the temp agency.

Once I began work at the vitamin factory, my old-fashioned tabletop alarm clock blared at 5 a.m. each morning. I despised the dreadful sound. I swiped blindly at the clock, my face still buried in the pillow, hoping to hit snooze, or I yanked the cord from the wall to silence the damn thing. New days were nothing to look forward to. Sometimes I would lie there in the dark contemplating my options, which were few. Reluctantly, I rose, donning my blue long-sleeved coveralls and boots, remembering the imposed conditions of my stay.

I was out the door by 5:30 a.m. In my Honda Accord, I'd blaze down a dark freeway as day was breaking. I'd lower the windows and blast the music to fight back drowsiness. I tried coffee. I tried Red Bull. But my heavy eyelids and grizzly yawns never acclimated to the early rise.

The factory was a dystopia. No one laughed. No one smiled. No

one hugged in the morning. The first-shift workers filed into the factory like androids, punching our time cards and fastening our goggles, assuming our positions on the assembly line, where we'd slave for the next ten hours.

I was there to collect a check, like everyone else. But I had never labored so hard in my life. The assembly line was about twelve feet long. I'd start on one end of the machine, where the forklift drivers delivered endless boxes. The towering stack nearly rose to the ceiling whenever I fell behind. The forklift man would grow increasingly irritable and growl, "Pick it up! You're slowing me down!" I'd be going as fast as I could, but sharp spasms would shoot through my spine from the bending and rising and bending and rising to break down boxes and load bottles into the machine. Then I'd sprint to the middle section of the line, where another forklift operator piled bins of vitamins that had to be poured into the machine. But the vitamins were gelled and stuck together. To break them up enough for the machine to ingest, I had to deadlift each twenty-pound bin, lofting it over my head and slamming it on the floor. I'd reach my hand into the bin to loosen the capsules that were stuck together, gagging as I inhaled the abysmal stench. I'd do an overhead press with a bin as I climbed a ten-foot ladder to the mouth of the machine. After dumping the vitamins, I'd climb back down and dash to the end of the line to help screw caps on the bottles. Then I'd run to the front of the line to start all over —for ten hours a day, six days a week.

On this day, I was supposedly unpacking boxes of bottles and lining them up on the conveyor belt when Rita, my line leader, caught me daydreaming. Every chance I got, I stopped and leaned against the machine to catch my breath while thinking, *I can't do this shit*. But I was quickly reminded that I had no choice. On this occasion, I was imagining the life I wanted—one where I didn't have to sacrifice my sanity and my body while toiling like a cotton picker in high August for a measly two dollars above minimum wage.

"Watch out!" Rita screamed from the end of the line, snapping me back to my miserable reality.

I rushed to organize bottles on the belt, but it was too late. The timer opened the valve that dispensed vitamins into waiting

bottles, but no bottles were in place. Pound after pound of gelled capsules spilled onto the conveyor, quickly building a mountain that became an avalanche onto the factory floor. Another coworker slammed the emergency button and the entire machine jerked to a halt. I stood in shock, breathless and ankle-deep in pills. I felt laser beams of anger from my coworkers' eyes hit me like the red dot of a sniper's sight.

"What the hell are you doin'?" Rita shouted. Her voice was a thunderstorm. She looked like her grandchildren might call her Big Mama. She was as large as Tyler Perry and she was channeling Madea in a towering, dramatic rage. Her voice was so terrifying that, at first, I could not raise my eyes to see the expression on her face. I flipped through a mental index of excuses that might break the tension but came up empty. Finally, I looked at her and said nothing, hoping she would somehow take pity on my youth.

A few seconds of awkward silence was broken by her sigh. Hands on her hips, she rolled her eyes as if she felt sorry for me. We were all dressed in the same coveralls, face mask, and elastic nets on our head and shoes. The place felt like the contemporary hotbox version of a plantation. This one was filled with industrial workers tending robotic machines and looking as busy as possible when "Massa" strolled by our stations with his checklist and clipboard. I was tired. Tired of the same steps, same movements, same people, same routines. Every minute. Every hour. And every single day. It was a living nightmare of drudgery on an endless loop.

Rita grabbed me by the arm and whisked me off to the side. Once out of the other workers' hearing range, she released my arm and returned her hands to her hips. She looked carefully over both shoulders and pulled down her face mask. "The hell you doin' in here anyway, boy?" I didn't understand why she was whispering so aggressively. "You ain't got no damn business being in this factory." Her tone sounded like she was telling me a secret—like she wasn't mad anymore. She seemed sympathetic and loving. But this was that hard love, like when Mama says, "I'm doing this because I love you" before she swings the belt across your hind. For a moment it felt like she knew me. Her voice sounded like she loved me, like she knew something that I didn't. It felt like she was

begging me to get out.

"I dr-dropped out of college," I muttered. I flinched as her hands flew from her hips. Her arms folded across her chest, she leaned forward and hissed, "You did what?" Her tone had shifted toward the one she used when the pills hit the floor. I was confused by the sound of rage layered with disappointment and a touch of love. I barely knew her but, in that moment, I felt like her son.

"Look around this room, boy." With one hand she gripped my arm and with the other she made a sweeping gesture. Instantly, I knew what she wanted me to see. I saw a warehouse full of blue bodies moving as fast as foot traffic in Times Square. I saw hundreds of intense faces moist from labor. I saw dozens of backs hunched with soreness and fatigue. I saw drudges sneak tiny moments of relief each time their machines were temporarily inactive. That's what I saw: a seemingly endless cycle of heaviness and hopelessness. And I couldn't bear to look anymore. I wanted to run back to the dream where I had been before I screwed up with the bottles. Those daydreams were often my only fleeting moments of escape. Sometimes nostalgia made the hours pass quicker. My mind left the factory in those moments and traveled back in time to relive basketball triumphs. I replayed championship wins. I reenacted game-winning shots by counting down, "Three... two... one" and making a buzzer sound as I held my arm arched in the air after shooting bottles into the mouth of the machine. It made me remember the time when I once had a purpose. And I smiled. But then Rita's desperate voice yanked me back into reality.

Rita's voice quivered through her gritted teeth. "Do you understand what the people in this shithole would have done to trade places with you? Don't you know you threw away your golden ticket?" Her grip got tighter. "Don't you?" she exclaimed.

I didn't. But I would soon.

I sat in the cafeteria during my lunch break, turned to stone by Rita's words. I held a sandwich in my left hand but couldn't raise it to my mouth. I could only stare straight, paralyzed by the image Rita had forced me to confront, and overwhelmed by a truth I carried inside me but had somehow ignored. There was no one else

my age. They were all older, two and three times my senior. I could see their sullen faces in my sleep. Temp workers were overjoyed when the factory switched their employment to permanent jobs. They celebrated the announcements, cheering, "I got on!" in the cafeteria when they won the coveted positions like they were grand prizes. I could not understand it, because it seemed like we were all just stuck in sinking sand.

My anxiety soared at the thought of getting such an offer, and of being there forever. Rita's voice echoed in my head: I had thrown away my golden ticket, she said. My golden ticket. It sounded so beautiful, so liberating, yet so far from reach. And here I was, in the factory lunchroom, wondering if I could ever get it back.

I laid my head down on the table for the last few minutes of my lunch break. Moments later, I was jolted awake by the commotion of people being herded back to work. I did not want to go. Before I could rise from my seat, my eyes caught the movement of the third-shift workers clocking out. I watched them punch their yellow time cards and disappear into the blinding sunlight breaking through the doorway, wishing that I, too, could be cast into that emancipating glow.

Above the door was a bright red EXIT sign.

"Come on, son," said Rita. "Break is over." Rita touched my shoulder as she passed by, but I did not move. I was captivated by the sign I had seen a million times but never like this. Those four boxy letters spoke to me in a way they never had before. The sign was summoning me to leave, to get out, to seize my one and only chance. So I listened. And I left. I got up and walked straight through the door into the parking lot. I got in my car, I drove away, and I did not look back.

I felt liberated, but only for a moment. I was at a portentous crossroad, having no idea what to do next. I had walked off the job without notice. There was no way they would keep me or hire me back. I was officially unemployed, with no money, no real home, and no plan. But I was finally free, it seemed. But freedom without hope is like living in a black hole.

I was tired of going to the cash advance store to get payday loans, parking all the way down the street and creeping in with a

hood and sunglasses to hide my identity. I was tired of going to the gas station for daily five-dollar fills, which I probably wasted driving miles in search of a gas station displaying a price that was just a couple of cents cheaper per gallon. I was tired of sorting through the items I owned, conducting a cost-benefit analysis to see which I could do without and which would be most valuable at the local pawn shop. I was tired of cup noodles and beans-and-weenies and stretching one serving of Hamburger Helper to last three days. I was tired of being broke. I was tired of being needy. I was tired of the weight of simply being.

The full punch of what I had done didn't hit me until I was parked in the driveway. When I got inside, the first thing I did was dump my blue coveralls in the trash can. I fixed a grilled cheese sandwich and sat in the dark, hypnotized by the shambles that was my life. I wanted to watch TV, but I couldn't. I wanted to call somebody, but I couldn't. I sat in the still house and descended into a depressive abyss, accepting that what everyone had said about me over the years was obviously and painfully true.

I heard the voice of my stepfather as he palmed my head and told me I was ugly, pressing my face against the mirror until I agreed. And his enraged voice when he beat me with any inanimate object within reach. I heard the screams of my sister as he smashed her bloodied face into the table, daring her to try to save me again.

I heard the voice of my mother, crying and asking where she went wrong as she cupped her hand full of Vaseline and polished the welts on my back.

I heard the voice of my father call me a thug, a reject, and a disgrace to his family before walking out of my life.

I heard the voice of my eighth-grade teacher call me a piece of shit as she kicked me out of class and slammed the door.

I heard the voices of administrators discussing my ten-page disciplinary record and devising a plan for my expulsion.

I heard the voices of coaches say, "He's too short. He can't play at the next level." And I heard the voice of the coach when I'd made it to the next level as a collegiate athlete say, "He's injured. We don't need him."

I heard my college advisor say it's not too late to withdraw.

I heard my mom say I couldn't come back home.

I heard Rita say I threw away my golden ticket.

I heard the EXIT sign say I could just run and be free.

So I ran.

And when I made it to the medicine cabinet, I reached for the pills that promised relief. The ones I remembered hearing were meant for numbing pain and sleeping with peace. I needed both. So I took one, then two, but the pain was still there.

I saw the EXIT sign again. And I just wanted to ride the rays of that emancipating glow right through the doorway. I could feel the drugs coursing through my veins. My heart started pounding against the cage of my chest, telling me I was almost there. And I filled my mouth with another handful, desperate to make it to the other side.

I closed my eyes and lay back, embracing the peace I had only hoped to find.

I was ready to let go. I was ready to die. Ready, I was, to just be free.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DEVIL PREACHES

When people imagine the devil, they picture him in different ways.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton saw the devil as the most beautiful of the angels, until he wasn't.

In his painting *The Last Judgment*, Fra Angelico saw the Renaissance version with horns, scales, cloven hooves, and an arrowhead tail.

Generations of cartoonists have drawn him as a puckish red figure perched on a person's shoulder, with an angel standing on the other.

This is how some envision the devil.

But not me.

When I imagine the devil, I see a man that few people would recognize as Satan, the Prince of Darkness.

I see Lucas.

I watched him creep into our home at night—slippery, angry, high. We suspected it was the alcohol or cocaine that stained his eyes as red as blood.

But on Sundays, he preached. I watched him lead worship at church. Like heaven's minister of music—Lucifer the archangel—he preached God's word, played the guitar's melodic strings, and aroused the parishioners until they quickened and quivered in a Baptist convulsion.

After church, I watched him disappear into the night. Sometimes alone. Sometimes with my baby brother. And it was Ben's recollections—confided many years later—that filled in the details about my stepfather's whereabouts. How he had sex with prostitutes in the back seat of our minivan as his toddler son sat

silently in the passenger seat, forever marked by what he watched in the rearview mirror.

My mother had no idea that she funded these exploits. Or maybe she did. But there was nothing she could do. When duty called, Mom had to answer. Roughly every month, the army sent her on temporary duty assignments that lasted for weeks at a time. This was when we were left in Lucas's care, or rather at his mercy. He owned us. And we wore his wrath like metal collars clinched around our necks.

We gathered at the front door to say goodbye. It was our custom. Mom kneeled and wrapped her entire wingspan around her children, hugging our necks and planting kisses on the crown of our heads. Sierra and I cried—partly because we'd miss her, and partly because we knew what would happen when that door closed behind her. With short breaths and hearts filled with fear, we waited. Counting the seconds until our safety ended. Clinging to those final moments before the dark clouds opened and brimstone rained down. Searching for a reason that would make her stay. Hoping she could see the infrared signal of distress radiating from our eyes.

She saw it.

She always saw it.

But it did not matter.

Because she still had to go.

"I left money on the counter," she said. "This is for food and food only. You hear me?" She gripped my cheeks and lifted my chin to make sure that I paid heed.

We didn't have time to go grocery shopping before she left. On the table was enough money for two weeks' worth of pizza, Chinese, and our standard Sunday dinner at Western Sizzlin.

She rose to her feet, our four tiny bodies entwining her legs and arms and waist. "You're in charge," she said to Sierra. She hugged us one last time. It was long and tight and full of remorse. She looked him in the face with tearful eyes. She did not say a word to admonish him or plead, though her fraught expression said it all. She tilted back her head and looked upward, as if petitioning God and fighting back her own tears. She made no sound. She said no words. But her lips trembled as she silently

mouthed something that looked like "Please" and turned away as if she could look no more.

"Shut that noise up!" he yelled after the door closed behind her. We stood still, frozen by his rolling rage. He hated when we cried, especially for her. Affection didn't live here. He barely even seemed to like my mother. I never saw him hug her or kiss her. Not a word of affirmation. He only used his words to malign her as a mother and to defame her as a wife. He called her stupid and dumb. "She don't know nothing," he always said. Everything that went wrong, he attributed to her lack of knowledge and overall unfitness. He shamed her. And we listened, because there was nothing else we could do.

"If your mother wasn't so dumb...," he said when it pained her to punish us. Like the time we were caught accepting candy from a stranger at the grocery store. Going to the grocery store was like a trip to the amusement park for us. Sierra fastened Ben in a cart and pushed him down one aisle, while Barry and I were in another lane cruising on carts like scooters. "Faster, Barry! Faster!" I begged. Barry was at the back, kicking and steering, while I rode on the front of the buggy, smiling from ear to ear and yelling, "Woohoo!" as we darted down the aisle. Customers gaped and snatched their children from our path. But we didn't care, we were having the time of our lives—until Mom seized us by the ear and dragged us away. The fun was over.

All four of us followed Mom through the exit, trailing like a line of pups. She always made us boys dress identically from head to toe: same gold cross necklace, same matching outfit and shoes, same haircut.

An older white man approached us on our way out. He complimented us on our outfits and kneeled to offer us lollipops. Our faces lit with excitement as we reached for the candy. Mom was heading for the car when, suddenly, she glanced behind her and saw that we were missing. In a panic, she rushed back into the store, snatched the candy from our hands, and roared, "Get away from my children!" Then she whisked us away, dragging us on her heels like tin cans on the back of a wedding car. She slammed to a stop when we got outside, like she couldn't wait another second to explode. She popped us in the head and wagged her finger in our


image
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asked questions that began, "So you mean to tell me...?" and "Wait, but how come...?" They learned what I learned: that we had all been miseducated. Day after day, we wrestled with the hard questions. We cried. We laughed. We did the gritty work of undoing their miseducation. I taught them how to remove the noose from their necks. I taught them about their responsibility to do the same for somebody else.

At this stage, there was only one thing missing. They were starting to talk like scholars. Now I wanted them to feel like scholars, which meant they had to look the part. I knew that style was one of their concerns as popular teens. I realized that meeting them where they were meant marrying my agenda with their interests. So I wanted to redefine the image of a "scholar" into something with swag. After weeks of car washes and bake sales and borrowing money from my girlfriend, I saved up enough funds for a special surprise that I wanted to give them.

One Saturday they arrived to find a box sitting at the foot of each desk.

"You got us gifts?" Shontae said, lunging at a box with her name on it.

"Wait, don't touch it," I said. "Just take your seats. I need to explain something first."

I did that annoying thing that my mother used to do on Christmas, where she gave a speech before each gift she presented. Waiting was pure torture and I'd ravage the box the second she was finished. They looked at me with the same impatience as I went around the room to give each student a personal affirmation about what made me most proud of them. They smiled with appreciation, but I could see that they were antsy, so I made it quick.

I opened a bigger box that had been sitting in front of me. I pulled out a batch of fancy plaid ties and held them up, saying, "These are for the girls." Then I showed off custom-made, hand-sewn, polka-dot bow ties for the boys. Finally, I pulled out a crisp navy blazer with a custom embroidered emblem that read SCHOLARS PROGRAM. The girls gasped and shrieked with excitement and the boys yelled, "Yoooo!" as they ripped into their individual boxes like it was Christmas morning. The girls threw on the blazers and

the boys wrapped the ties around their necks.

"Wait, what does this mean?" Shontae said, examining the emblem on her chest.

"We're legit now," I explained. "These are your outfits for class. Just like athletes have uniforms, so do debaters." I explained that they were scholars now, that we were starting a new renaissance, and that we were giving scholarship a new look.

"I feel smart already," Cordell said, stretching out his arms and stroking the new blazer like a royal robe.

"You are smart," I said to him. "These clothes are just a declaration of that."

They were never the same after that day. They walked differently, with a certain scholarly swag. Even the way they sat in their seats, erect and attentive, was different. Now they felt too fresh to slouch and squirm. When I greeted them as scholars, they smiled like they believed it. Being smart looked so fashionable that they even wore their outfits to school. Most kids hate uniforms, but we did what Black people do best and sprinkled some seasoning on their ensemble. Their dress shirts and blazers were the perfect color contrast of red, navy, and white. The boys complemented their dotted bow ties with flamboyant socks that peeked out above their shoes. They walked down the hallway in packs, like they were strutting for a *GQ* magazine cover shoot.

They were the only Black kids wearing dressy tailored blazers to school. The unique style earned them a badge of popularity. They looked like a movement, like they belonged to something bigger than themselves. Lynchburg began to buzz with word about "that new program for Black kids." More kids showed up, and I was eager to teach them all. We had no enrollment system at first, so it was come one, come all, until we ran out of space.

Local news media even caught wind of the movement. But my first interview with a reporter was unpleasant. She attended one of our Saturday classes to interview a few students and me. I was a nervous wreck. I had not been interviewed since high school basketball. The cameraman gave the on-air reporter a signal that we were live. I clenched my armpits because sweat was seeping through my suit jacket. She asked me a few questions about the program and its inception. Then she asked me a question that