

GARDEN'S CORNER

A novel by
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The Hurricane Group

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This is a work of fiction. The events described here are imaginary; the setting and characters are fictitious and not intended to represent specific places or living persons. The Gardens Corner, Yemassee and Belle Chase of this novel, while undoubtedly real bastions of Southern hospitality and nobility, are, nevertheless, quaint towns of invention.

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*“For His eye is on the sparrow,
and I know He watches over me”.*

—His Eye Is On the Sparrow, old Gospel hymn

CHAPTER ONE

I am not like most people.

I'm not good at soupin' myself up or selling myself or doing anything else that involves talking about me—Little “Speedy” Copeland. Because, you see, I've heard the things people say just to impress somebody or to try and give their life meaning in the eyes of others and, yo, it's wild. Like, have you ever peeped in on a conversation between some brother and a young lady? Homeboy could be a lowly messenger down on Wall Street, but when the girl asks what kind of work he's into, homeboy says something like, “Yo, baby, I got me a good job. I work in the financial business. I'm in acquisitions and distribution.” Let me tell you, it wouldn't even *dawn* on me to think up some nonsense like that. What imagination! That's something I don't have when it comes to talking about myself.

It wasn't all that long ago when I was afraid to admit to such a thing. I had a fear of being confronted by a voice telling me that—like many other things—this claim of a lack of imagination was nothing more than an excuse for me not to talk and open up to people. That it was just my excuse to cut myself off and kind of, like, live in my own little world. *Come on, Speedy, you know that life ain't about nothing as honest and noble as using the imagination. It's just about bullshit. That's what life's about. It's about how much you can bullshit people.*

I don't hear this voice as much as I used to because I've been working on gathering up some faith and convincing myself that, yo, life *ought* to be about being real with people, you know, and

being honest about who you are and all that. I *need* to think this way despite all the things I see on TV and in the newspaper. And despite all the stuff I see happening right outside my apartment window, too.

My doctor, Doc Rosen—although he’s just a regular doctor and is no psychiatrist of nothin’—he says that it is no crime to think like I do. He says it’s kind of a good way to be because so many young people like me are already too cynical. And my man knows that if anybody has the right to be hardened, it would be me on account of some stuff I encountered along the way in a place I called The Dead Zone. He says maintaining a sense of honesty and being open to things will help me come to terms with stuff. Homeboy is also real quick to add that noble virtues don’t mean much if you go through life keeping emotions and feelings all bottled up inside.

Sometimes, though, I need to remind Doc that this is precisely what *everybody* is doing these days. Yo, you can’t go one hour of the day without seeing or hearing someone, somewhere, sharing some “personal” feeling or experience. People’s lives are like an open book. The only problem is it’s like reading a book with blank pages. The message gets lost because people only seem to share themselves in an attempt to get that 15 minutes of fame or to get paid or to just draw attention to themselves. These ain’t exactly the most admirable reasons around.

I know me, I wouldn’t want to diminish the experiences I’ve gone through by having those kinds of intentions. Maybe that’s why I’ve never been all that crazy with the idea of getting, like, naked and holding my life up for examination. I’ve been scared that somehow my life would lose value in talking about it. Yo, who knows? All I’m trying to say is that I’m going to attempt to follow Doc’s orders and share with you some changes I went through not too long ago. Hopefully, I won’t come across sounding retarded or anything like that. I’m only doing it because the good

doctor assures me that I will feel better about myself when I'm done and that I might even touch somebody in a constructive sort of way. We'll just have to see about all that.

I might as well begin at the point when I was doing something real simple—filling out college applications. I know this doesn't seem to be the most dramatic way to begin a story, but it's as good a place to start as any. I guess. I mean, you'll be the judge. Now, most of that filling out college applications was easy. You know, writing in your name, address, ethnic type, etc. I was having a little problem with making a list of my after-school activities. I had the basics down: varsity basketball, film club, and yearbook staff. But I wanted to spice up that list because, yo, my extracurricular activities were sounding kind of shabby.

So, I began debating whether or not to put down on the list that I was in the band. The thing is, I wasn't remotely in nobody's school band. It's just that nearly every day after basketball practice I had to cut through the band's *rehearsal* when they used to play on the girls' side of the gym. I was thinking of telling them college folks that I was in the band and that I played the clarinet. I felt that I could get over because, after all, I did play the clarinet in my *elementary* school band. Now, the only reason I even thought about doing something devious like this was because some of the fellas on the team did it. A few of them non-Mozart-knowing-can't-hold-a note knuckleheads put on their applications that they were in the band, and that they played something easy, like those big bass drums where all you have to do is keep the beat. But I ended up chickening out from doing the same thing because deep in my heart, I knew it wasn't the right thing to do. I figured knowing my luck, I'd be in some college interview with some important CEO alumnus who would take a look at my after-school activities and then start reminiscing about when *he* was in school and in the band playing, yo, the clarinet. Then he'd ask me what level did I play at, and instead of correctly saying first,

second or third clarinet, I'd freeze up and say something stupid like, "Yo...ahh...I played a black one."

Anyway, the real problem for me with those college applications was that they all wanted some type of creative writing sample or self-portrait, which required exerting a whole lot more effort than what I was willing to give at the time. It was like having to do a two- to three-page book report on yourself—*typed* and double-spaced on top of that.

There was one question in particular that was bustin' my ass. It was on an application for one of the local schools in the City. This is what they asked me to do:

Write a self-portrait detailing a life experience or experiences which have helped to define who you are, and which have helped you to shape a particular outlook on life. Include how such a perspective will influence your intended course of studies at the university.

Let me tell you, re-reading that question over and over some 20 times made me just throw my hands up in the air and say out loud to myself, "Son of a bitch! I hate these kinds of questions!" Cause, yo, I didn't know what to say. I mean, what was I going to write about myself? That I am a near crippled teenager from Brooklyn?! That I used to be one helluva ballplayer who had a deft jump shot? All of that would be honest and real, but, hey, what kind of imagination is that when talking about oneself?

I began to curse myself for having picked up the application. I don't even know what led me on that particular morning to even start filling it out in the first place. Maybe I thought my moms was going to nag me if she saw that I hadn't even begun to fill it out. Maybe I felt guilty about procrastinating on account that the application had been staring me in the face for almost a month. All I knew was that I needed to get something down on paper. I didn't want to hear my moms and pops running their

mouths about me needing to be more assertive and responsible. I definitely didn't want to listen to my pop's "In My Day Responsibility" sermon because that would turn into an hour's retrospective speech about his youth and how, as a teenager my age, he had to help his mother support a family of five children.

But I didn't know where to begin with that essay question, and I really wasn't in no mood to write either. I just started to doodle instead. I must have done a million zigzag lines on a scrap piece of paper before finally writing down a few lines, which I *thought* would make for a chill sounding introduction. It went something like this:

If experience has taught me anything, it's that I know a little something about paralysis. I know the obvious kind—the physical—which can start with a bit of numbness in the hands and arms, gradually moving down to the legs. But experience has taught me about the paralysis of the soul, too. I've seen it in people who can't view a world beyond his or her own little neighborhood. It can be the worst kind of paralysis because to hide and tuck yourself away in your own little corner somewhere, is kind of how one begins to die...

But that's as far as I got. I had to stop because one paragraph into the essay question and already I was making shit up. What I mean is that I didn't see being on that isolation tip as a fate worse than death. I actually *liked* the idea of being by myself and of staying in my own neighborhood with my own family. To me, if anything, that type of detachment doesn't lead to death. Yo, it's how one stays *alive*.

The only reason why I had written the things I did was because I had assumed that was what them college folks wanted to hear. I had written the stuff of fairy tales and Hollywood movies, and what them bougie black intellectual types talk about with

their “can’t we all live in peace, in the same house” nonsense. If I had any balls, I would have written the truth as I so felt it to be at the time. But I don’t care what anybody says, you can’t always be so honest about what you feel. There are times when an honest opinion may mean offending somebody or sounding ignorant. Yo, some people, black and white, get turned off or uncomfortable with all my pro-black/pro-family kind of talk. And even though I’m all about keeping it real, I’m kind of a softie because I’ll think nothing of keeping an intense viewpoint to myself. I’m afraid to hurt a person’s feelings. I’m all about keeping the peace. Like, I can have a girlfriend who just came back from the beauty shop with a *fucked-up* haircut, but when she asks me, “How does it look?” I’ll put on my most sincere face and say, “Oooh, baby doll, it looks real nice.” Or on a more serious tip, I can be around somebody who’s a homosexual or somebody who likes to date white people, and if the conversation drifts onto something deep about gay or interracial couples, I never have an opinion to offer except to say, “Yo, I’m cool with whatever makes you happy.” Which is the truth...sort of. Still, deep down inside, if I’m honest, I’m wondering, “How can a person ever be a homo? How can they go out like that?” or “How can you sell out your black people by dating some white honey?” Sometimes it’s not about shootin’ straight and being a little cruel. Instead, sometimes it seems that the honorable thing to do is to deceive just a bit, so you can come off sounding nice and spare somebody’s feelings at the same time.

Mainly though it’s about the hustle and being in the game. And despite wanting to be my own man, I knew that if I wanted to impress those admissions people, then I was going to have to make my essay sound a little more positive and write about things like living and unity and all that other nice stuff. That’s what people want to hear, even if it’s not necessarily the truth. But I wasn’t ready to get into any of that. That’s why I quickly convinced myself that until I could come up with a more *honest*

lie—an honest lie I could at least fake believing in—I needed to just chill, sit back, and relax.

But then again, that's all I had been doing since I returned home from the hospital after a little incident in The Dead Zone. My mind was on all that paralysis stuff because of this "event" that had left *me* a little numb in a physical sort of way. I'm not going to get into a whole lot of specifics, but the incident left my legs so messed up that I will never be able to walk without the use of a cane. And I get these badass dizzy spells, too. So basically, I'm not in the best of shape, although I am a little bit better now. But back then, when I was filling out those applications, I was still in the process of healing.

And I was kind of healing in luxury. My moms had me set up in a comfortable chair by one of the living room windows. Moms *said* she put me there so that I could look out onto the street below and still feel a part of everything. But I knew better. She just wanted me to keep still and not move around too much. She had even set a small table beside me with a small refrigerator underneath it where I could put my snacks.

Now, my family lives on the fourth floor of this four-story apartment building. From my window, I have a pretty good view of the whole neighborhood. I can see clear through the park across the street from us. I can see all the way down to the opposite end of the block, too, all the way down by the subway station. I used to spend all day just watching shit from my little spot. I would watch everybody coming and going to work and school; I'd watch folks chillin' in front of Manny's bodega, and I'd check out the fellas playing ball in the park. I had all this going on right before my eyes, but a lot of the times I wasn't really paying attention. Instead, I'd be in my own little world just daydreaming.

And that's exactly what I began to do when I decided to stop working on that self-portrait. I just sat there and began to daydream. Now the typical brother would be daydreaming about