A Dream Too Big
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The Story of an Improbable Journey
from Compton to Oxford

Caylin Louis Moore
To Mom.

To the spirit of my ancestors.
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Introduction

I didn’t start out with the goal of becoming a Rhodes Scholar. As a kid, I didn’t even know what a Rhodes Scholar was. If I had known, I would have seen it as most people around me did: a dream too big for a kid from Compton. But that wouldn’t have stopped me from dreaming it. I’ve always dreamed big. For some people, that’s been a problem.

You see, in underserved inner-city communities like Compton, people don’t always like dreamers. Gangs look at a dreamer and think, *He’ll never be one of us. And if he isn’t one of us, he’s a problem.* Bad teachers look at a dreamer and think, *That boy needs to know his place.* The wealthy look at a dreamer and think, *He’ll never succeed outside of shooting a basketball or rapping over a beat.* Sometimes even neighbors and family members think dreamers are up to no good, because who would dare have big dreams in such a place?

They all think those things, but the truth goes deeper.
INTRODUCTION

Dreamers who reach high and strive to rise illustrate the stark realities of those who are left feeling like it’s better to just stay down than to climb and risk falling. Kids trapped in the same circumstances start off as dreamers too. Every kid I knew in elementary school had big dreams. But the dreams slowly faded away as the reality of dilapidated schools, gang violence, the unbalanced criminal justice system, and the lack of family support networks began to set in. Who can blame those kids when their environment is molded by oppression, systems ingrained long before their grandparents were even a thought? Living within the confines of what others tell you is possible is all they have ever known. A dreamer can also make outsiders think he is a threat to the status quo. It’s hard for a dreamer to find his place in this world. Any dreams coming from an inner-city neighborhood are tentative and can easily die from malnourishment. They are all dreams too big as far as a lot of people are concerned.

I’ve never let that stop me.

My first big dream was to make it to the NFL. I dreamed of using the NFL to change the lives of the people in my community, in my world. I worked hard to reach that goal, but I didn’t make it my only priority. Here’s the surprising part: the pursuit of that goal led me to even greater dreams. Achievements in academics, pursued to expand my opportunities for a football career, earned me scholarships to two great colleges. And those
environments opened my eyes to the potential of education, to the possibility of changing the world in a way I never could imagine doing as a professional football player. My college experiences then led me to apply for scholarships. I was awarded several, including a Fulbright and, ultimately, the Rhodes Scholarship.

Along the way, I cofounded the Texas Christian University student organization TCU SPARK (Strong Players Are Reaching Kids) and began to speak across the United States to any corporation, university, prison, or gang that would be willing to hear my voice. Those experiences helped me realize what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to help. I wanted one day to know how it feels to have changed the world. I wanted to put big dreams within reach of young people as well as anybody who seeks to better themselves and the world we live in. This book is my story, and I want my story to inspire. Most of all, I want it to provide hope to people who might be having a hard time holding on to it.

I’ve been brutally hungry, so much so that it seemed like the pains in my stomach might never go away. I’ve been treated like a throwaway person, given no due by an inner-city educational system that is not only broken but punitive. I’ve known crushing poverty. I’ve had guns flashed at me as I walked home from school, and I’ve lost friends to senseless violence.

If all that has taught me anything, it’s that you can
get by without food. You can be cold and hungry. You can survive poverty, and you can transition from victim of violence to victor over violence. It is only when you give up hope that will you be beaten and lost. A wise man once told me a well-known saying: “Man can live about forty days without food, about three days without water, about eight minutes without air, but not for one moment without hope.” In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” The greatest hope lies in dreams that seem too big to be realized. Audacious dreams that you have no right even thinking about.

Competing for a Rhodes Scholarship was part of my still-ongoing journey, and the process was enlightening. During the final interview for the scholarship, the questions posed to candidates are intellectual, largely related to a given candidate’s interests. In my interview, I was able to make the questions personal and relate them to my life experiences. The interview was an entrance into a new world. The Rhodes Scholarship, with a history rooted in colonial imperialism and consisting of individuals drawn from the world’s elite, is about as far removed from where I come from as is possible to imagine. Nevertheless, the interviewers wanted to hear about my dreams, and their questions implied that they believed my dreams might help others. I already knew in my heart this was true, but it was clarifying to discover others might think so too.
Question by question, the interview gave me a chance to tell the Rhodes committee my story. It’s what won me a scholarship and is why I’ve chosen specific questions from that interview to introduce each chapter in this book. The questions describe the journey and the themes that define me; each one represents a signpost I’ve followed on my quest to be my very best.

If there’s a key message here, one thing I want readers to take away from reading this book, it’s that you have to dream dreams that are too big. Dreams that are on the edge of impossibility to everyone else, but live on the edge of possibility in your heart. Dreams worth fighting for. You don’t have to win every fight, but you have to fight every fight. It makes no sense to let the possibility and fear of failure get in the way of trying. Have dreams that scare you. Dreams that, when you close your eyes, the best your mind can bring forth into your consciousness pales in comparison to the magnificent reality of the dream. Many years ago, I committed myself to dreaming dreams that were so big, so unimaginable, so unfathomable, so unrealistic, that without divine intervention they were destined to fail. They were all dreams too big. And this book is the story of how they came true.
QUESTION: “How do you get people on board to try to change these social issues?”
Things could have been so much different. I could have lived the rest of my life like I did the first six, safe and secure in a place where all the dangers of the hood were far away, were something you only see on TV. I think one word sums up the first six years of my life, in the Inland Empire suburb of Fontana: insulated.

Fontana is an upper-middle-class, mostly white city about sixty miles east of Los Angeles, shoehorned between San Bernardino and Rancho Cucamonga. It is the polar opposite of Compton, where I grew up. Living in Fontana was like living in one of those TV commercials featuring a happy family in a bright, sunny, and tidy suburban house. You know, the State Farm commercial or the Procter & Gamble ad, with the token perfect black family all smiling around a brand-new kitchen table with sun pouring through squeaky-clean windows. My father was a barber and my mom worked in medical management while studying for her law degree at night. My mom likes to say that we were the Huxtables, the picture-perfect family on *The Cosby Show*. Only we had a dark side, hidden deep.

That darkness was my father. Although my mother
shielded us and I wouldn’t understand the extent of it for years, he psychologically, emotionally, and verbally abused my mother. As a father, he was at best distant. He was medium brown-skinned, tall, muscular, and extremely good looking. Even though he had an ideal family and big house in a suburban paradise, he was a deeply unhappy man who harbored an unreasonable anger inside him.

What I wouldn’t know until I was an adult was that my father was a victim of abuse by his stepfather when he was young, and he felt his mother failed to protect his emotional and physical well-being. As the reality set in, my father’s innocence and childhood were lost, and he never received the help that he needed to recover from those wounds. I don’t think my mom even knew about all that until much later. When he finally did tell her, he told my mom that he married her because he thought she could fix him.

I never saw my father laugh, and I rarely saw him smile. He was a control freak. It could have been a tendency that he developed in response to the control that was taken from him as a child. That didn’t work too well when mixed with my mom’s tendency of being unstructured and free-spirited at times. If you didn’t do things exactly the way he wanted them done, there would be hell to pay. And, a lot of times, there was no telling how he wanted things done, or what he wanted done just wasn’t reasonable. Like all control freaks, he was really trying to
control everything about life. But life doesn’t work that way. He once got mad that I had wet my bed as a three-year-old. His solution? Make me walk around in a black garbage bag fashioned as a diaper.

So it wasn’t surprising that I grew up with a combination of respect and fear for the man. Even so, I can remember the rare light moments, like my dad dancing in the living room with my sister and me. I remember him teaching me to ride my bicycle, out in front of the house. I remember being five years old and holding his hand as we walked into the barbershop where he worked. I was so happy to shake the other barbers’ hands. My father let me sit and watch the fish swimming around in the huge aquarium tank that stood in the middle of the shop.

He wasn’t a man you expected a hug from, and I would have been shocked if he had ever consoled me over something like a scraped knee. I stayed out of his way, which wasn’t all that hard because he had little to do with us kids. When it came to potty training, my mom even taught me how to stand when I pee. She would put cheerios into the toilet bowl and tell me to aim and sink them, as if they were battleships. Taking care of us—mentally, physically, emotionally—fell to my mom. We were her children. I thank God for that, because I was more influenced by, and grew up to be more like, my mom. My father’s anger is not a weight I would wish on anyone, and I’m glad I don’t carry that burden.
My mom made my childhood wonderful, because she understood me. After my first day of kindergarten, she picked me up from day care. She noticed I was upset and asked, “What’s wrong, baby?”

“Miss Gallagher told me to do my homework when I got home.”

“Okay, well come on, honey. We’ll do your homework.” But when she looked through my folder, she saw that I had done it all at day care.

“Well, this is really good—your homework is done, baby.”

“No, she told me to do my homework at home. But I’m home, and I have no homework.” Tears of frustration rolled down my chubby cheeks.

She got it. She knew that I was tenacious and wanted to get the most out of every opportunity in front of me. Exactly as it was supposed to be done. I wanted to go above and beyond the homework and the standard that was set for me, and achieve more than was expected. That was true even as a kindergartner. So rather than just laugh and tell me I was being silly, my mom started making extra homework for me every day so I would have some to do at home. My mom saved up for three months to purchase the first computer she ever owned in her life. She’d create a list of spelling exercises or simple math problems and then print them out for me to do. Sometimes I would even take the homework she had created for me to school.
the next morning, turning it in with the homework I’d been assigned by the teacher.

I loved school from the start. Sugar Hill Elementary was a few cities over in Moreno Valley, where we moved when I was five. It reflected the same pride and values that homeowners in Fontana enjoyed. They considered themselves progressive and enlightened, and put money and time into their schools. I was never made to think about the color of my skin or how I was different from my classmates, even though I was one of only three black kids in my class. I was surrounded mostly by white people, but I never encountered racism. Certainly there were many things I couldn’t know, things said in kitchens and living rooms down the street, real estate agents encouraging black families to purchase homes only in certain areas, or what someone might think to himself passing by my family in the grocery store. Nothing that I would be conscious of as a kid. The most important color in a place like Moreno Valley is green. Can you afford it? Because if you can, you’re like everyone else there. You’ve paid your admission fee, and you’re welcome. The fact is, the first time I ever heard the N-word was after we moved to Compton.

Life in Fontana and Moreno Valley was calm, comfortable, and easy. At least for me. I spent so many pleasant hours just playing with my older sister Mi. Mi was an incredibly fun sibling, always looking for interesting
things to do. I would happily sit on the floor in her room, playing beside her: she with her yellow suburban Barbie house and cool red truck, me with my log cabin complete with its own tool shed and a dune buggy jeep. My younger brother Chase was little and pretty much played whatever Mi encouraged us to play. It was our version, however simple, of the American Dream.

School was part of that dream. Unlike later in Compton, the environment at Sugar Hill Elementary was kind, patient, and professional. Even loving. Robin Gallagher was my kindergarten teacher, a ginger-haired thirtysomething who was—in body type and personality—completely huggable. She was the consummate kindergarten teacher, equal parts kind mentor and patient, guiding instructor. She started and ended each school day with the same bright, beaming smile, as if she were so incredibly happy to see all her students.

My best friend in school was Michael, a poor white kid who lived in a trailer park. He had the most ragged clothes of anyone in the school, along with unkempt hair and a snaggletooth smile. But even he wasn’t ostracized. And, in turn, he acted like everyone else. He was one of the nicest, most fun, and most respectful kids in our class. That was the Sugar Hill way. And, consequently, I never thought of him as being different—economically or culturally—until much later when I looked back at those rose-tinted years.
Moreno Valley wasn’t a place where you dwelled on the bad. Traumas were kept contained and limited. In my first year at Sugar Hill, Andrea—one of twin girls who were the other two black kids in my class—was playing out in front of her house. I imagine Andrea was chasing a ball or running away from her sister in a game of tag. She ran out between two parked cars into the street and was hit by a car, killed by someone just driving to Ralphs Grocery.

Everyone was saddened by her death. I was sad too. But because I was so insulated, so far removed from thinking the same thing might happen to me, I was mostly sad that I had lost someone to play with. School went on. I went on. As if by silent agreement, we all moved on as quickly as decorum allowed and put her death behind us. We just didn’t talk about her anymore. It was my first brush with death and it seemed inconsequential. When forced to look unblinkingly into its face, most people see death as ugly, and ugly things have no place in pretty corners of the world like Fontana and Moreno Valley. The deaths of friends and schoolmates in Compton would hit home much harder and stay with me much longer.

I sometimes think about who I would be if my family had never moved from Moreno Valley. The thought often pops up when I’m speaking to a room full of inner-city schoolkids in a place like the Polo Grounds projects in Harlem, New York. In a building nicknamed “the
Vietnam Building” for the gang warfare that occurs there, I can see and feel the effect of my words. I’m talking their experiences, because I’ve walked in their hand-me-down sneakers and felt their one-meal-a-day hunger. But it’s the kids in that auditorium at Sugar Hill who may need to hear my words just as much. That’s because change starts with an understanding that doesn’t come out of a book or a newspaper. If you want people to understand and embrace social issues as their issues—to act on those issues—you need to make those issues personal, make them tangible. Believe me, I know that these issues are easy to ignore. Insulate a house well enough and you’ll never notice whether it’s hot or cold outside. And you won’t care. I know that, sooner or later, if anything is going to change in society, it’s the kids in Sugar Hill’s classrooms—and the parents at the PTA meetings—who will need to take my truth to heart. I will have to reach them as well.

Had I stayed there, grown to a man in Moreno Valley or someplace like it, I would have remained insulated. I would have had a more traditional upbringing. I might have been passionate about something, but not necessarily education for those in poverty. Maybe I would have gone into investment banking or consulting. I wouldn’t have collected bottles and cans from trash bins to help pay for groceries and youth football; my first job would have been at sixteen so I could have money for clothes and gas for the car I would have been given. I might not have dreadlocks
and I wouldn’t know Snoop Dogg, and I would have worried less about those left behind. Compton, Harlem, Chicago, Watts—those would be place-names, vague ideas, not realities.

Instead, we left. It was perhaps the most traumatic event of my young life, even considering what would come later. But we could not stay there. Not because of racism or a lack of money. No, we had to leave because of my father.

When anyone abuses his role, whether it’s a father or husband, a coach, priest, or politician, it’s like someone poisoning the source of water for a massive river. The poison will now flow from the source all the way down to the smallest tributary stream. This type of poison can damage the ecosystem and everything that depends on the river, sometimes permanently. Abusers live in fear that others will see the blackness they see when they look in the mirror. I know now that my father had horrible demons. He was haunted by terrible ghosts of abuse, neglect, and abandonment as a child. My mom believes he suffers from mental illness, and maybe she’s right. I have to think that his need to dominate, that abusiveness, comes from somewhere deep, from when he was young. It would eventually lead him down the darkest of paths. But first, it led my mother away from him.

Kids are oblivious. Whatever is happening around them is “the normal” until they are old enough to know
anything different. I think back and what I remember is a happy childhood in Fontana and Moreno Valley. That big house and all the things we had—dirt bikes, a full refrigerator, the Sega Dreamcast, and the big-screen Mitsubishi TV. The luxury and ease of it all. My sister and brother there with me. But behind these peaceful domestic scenes, my mother was made to suffer and the big house in Fontana was a prison to her. Once, when my dad was heading to work before a trip out of town, my mom asked him for some money for groceries. She was a few days away from her payday and needed a little help. He refused. So I remember a fun weekend of nights camping in the backyard, eating watermelon and hot-dogs. Only later would I learn that those hotdogs and watermelon were all the food we had left in the kitchen, and the backyard camping adventure was my mom’s way of turning a negative situation into a positive experience in light of the fact that our food was scarce. It was a way for her to ensure my sister and I didn’t catch on to what was happening.

When she took us to visit her mother (she never went alone, because my father let her know that he “wasn’t a babysitter”), my father would demand that she check in several times a day. He dictated how much she spent on groceries and he had to approve any money she spent on herself, even though she brought in more money than he did. If she did anything to displease him, broke any of his
many, many rules, he would rage. He never hit her, but he would punch walls by her head and broke furniture many times. And even though he didn’t hit her, she feared that he could, at any time. The older we got, the more she worried that she wouldn’t be able to protect us from him, that he would get to us with his rage, possibly even hurt one of us.

To hear her tell it, there was no grand master plan to leave. Her sister had been urging her to get out of the relationship for a long time. My father had once pulled a gun on one of my auntie’s boyfriends, so there was no love lost between him and his in-laws. Adults around her could see the damage he was doing, the abuser he was. Then, on October 17, 2000, the opportunity just presented itself.

My father was a Mason. The Masons were having a convention in West Covina, and he told my mother that he was going to spend the week there. On Monday he said, “Look, I’m going to be at this convention for four days. I don’t want you calling me. I don’t want you texting me. I don’t want to hear from you. I’m going to be with my brothers and I don’t need to be bothered with you and the kids.”

My mother just nodded her head, but inside the wheels were turning. It was a gift. She said, “Okay, fine. Just do me a favor, please. Once you check into the hotel, give me a call and let me know that you made it safe.”
When my father got to the hotel, he called her to let her know he had checked in and that he was safe. He told her not to bother him by calling while he was away. She hung up the phone, took a breath, and started calling her family. She gathered my sister, my brother, and me, and told us, “We’re going to go to Grandma’s house for a while. Grab some toys you want to take.”

It seemed like an adventure, like fun. There were my mom’s relatives, my grandma and my aunties and other people, and this bright orange U-Haul truck. We regularly went to my grandma’s on weekends, so it didn’t seem that unusual, except that the adults were putting a bed, a dresser, and our TV in the truck and piling our clothes in my mom’s forest-green Ford Explorer. My aunt drove my mom’s midnight-green Infiniti behind us, a car that would be sold a few years later to make ends meet.

We drove away from the beige-and-brown Moreno Valley house on Odessa Drive on a warm October evening. It would be the last time I would see that house.

We settled in at my grandma’s house on the border of Compton and Carson. Though it was already packed with a collection of aunts, uncles, and cousins, my mom felt that having us around family would be the safest option away from my dad. We set up my mom’s California King-size bed in one of the bedrooms and we all slept in the bed together. For the first few weeks, my mom did everything she could to keep as much normality in our lives as
possible. Before leaving, she had been working part-time so that she could study for law school. But she had to flee from her job for her own safety and that of her children. We took a heavy financial hit as a result. My mom had saved up a few thousand dollars that would help us get by, but the money slowly dwindled without any income from my dad, the loss of her part-time job, and law school tuition. She was attending law school during the day by that time, and she drove Mi and me back to Sugar Hill Elementary every morning on her way to school. But she soon got to a point where she had to deal with the reality of living in Compton. She simply couldn’t continue to make the nearly hour-and-a-half commute to keep us in Sugar Hill, so she enrolled us at the nearby elementary school, about six blocks from my grandma’s house.

I still didn’t completely understand what was happening. When my mom took me to the school to sign me up and explained I would be going there instead of Sugar Hill, I trusted her that there was a good reason. I didn’t ask why I was switching schools. It was kind of cool and novel at first. The school looked very different from Sugar Hill, more beat up, and it seemed a little edgy and exciting. Then I sat in one of the classrooms and man, it was different. In a really bad way. I came home scared.

Attending this new elementary school was the tipping point, when I realized that everything we were doing,
everything we were going through, wasn’t temporary. It was the new reality and my world was upside down.

Classes at my new school were a shocking change from Sugar Hill, as different as night and day. My first-grade class didn’t sit in chairs, as we had at Sugar Hill. Instead, it was more like a preschool class. In place of chairs, there was a mat with colored squares covering the floor. Each child sat on a square and it seemed like the main goal of my teacher was to keep the kids quiet and behaved. The teaching was far below anything I had experienced at Sugar Hill. Most of the students in Moreno Valley came into school already able to read. But in this first-grade class, nearly half the kids were illiterate. And the teacher did little to remedy that situation. She was a short, top-heavy woman who dressed every day in the same red sweater and black pants, her “twisty” dreadlocks her only nod to the fashion of Compton. She wasn’t nasty or bitter; she was just an entirely disinterested, unequipped, and perhaps unqualified teacher. Many of those kids who came into her first-grade classroom unable to read would, at the end of the year, be unceremoniously passed on to second grade, still illiterate.

The lessons I learned were no longer academic; they were about how things worked—or didn’t—at the school. One day when my teacher was out sick, and we had a substitute teacher from the special education department.
She began asking the class questions: if we knew what something was, or how to spell certain things.

“Does anybody know ‘encyclopedia’?”

My hand shot up, and then, before she could even acknowledge me, I spelled the word. Confident and fast, as we had done at Sugar Hill.

The substitute sneered at me. “What, you think you’re smart?”

“No.” It seemed, by her tone, like the answer she wanted.

“You think you know stuff?”

Now I was a little confused. She was really making it sound like I had done something wrong. “Well, I know some things.”

“Well, guess what. You don’t know everything.”

I was hurt. I was getting torn down for something I would have been praised for at Sugar Hill. The rules had changed, but now they didn’t make any sense. You were supposed to be in school but not show any enthusiasm or knowledge? And the nasty way the teacher had said it cut me to the core. I sat quietly, hiding my tears. I felt completely belittled and alone.

I had butted up against one of the rules in the hood: Don’t stand out too much. If you appear exceptional in any way, outside of sports and entertainment, people will tear you down. Teachers did it. Other kids did it. Gangbangers and even cops did it. People make sure
you know your “place.” Sometimes you even keep yourself in check, making sure that your priorities are kept in line with the people around you. It can be scary when someone takes an alternative path to success, especially through education. Especially a young black kid. It can make others feel smaller in the difficulties of their lives.

Just the same, I knew I had to excel. Because I transferred to my new school in the middle of a semester, I wasn’t able to take the entrance exams for placement in the higher-level classes. So I was placed in the lowest “track” in school—that level of kids the school system essentially writes off. Many elementary schools in Los Angeles Unified School District had a track system based on test scores from when students were six years old. A perverse logic was at work: rather than give low performers the help and attention they needed, they were grouped in larger classes, with less resources, and taught by the least capable teachers. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. For the remainder of their schooling, the students were held accountable for their academic performance at six years old, hostages of the lower track all the way through twelfth grade.

Schools like mine have “magnet” tracks, with better teachers and newer books. Much of your future depends on which track they slot you into as a six-year-old. I had heard a rumor that private prisons determine how many facilities they want to build for the future based on
third-grade test scores in the track system. At the time, I didn’t understand the word *private*, but I knew for a fact that I never wanted to go to prison.

My first-grade year at my new school was horrible. I had a tough transition. The first conversation I ever engaged in on the schoolyard was with some kids in my class who were talking about what they would do when they went to prison one day.

“When I go to prison, Imma become a Crip automatically. They gon’ have my back.”

“For me, Imma pretend to be a Muslim. I heard they leave you alone if you’re religious.”

When it came my turn to say what I would do when I went to prison one day, I didn’t know how to respond. I had never thought of going to prison until that point.

In first grade, I got into at least one fight per week. I was singled out by other kids because I had not fully adapted to life in the hood yet. My mom cut my hair, and she didn’t know how to edge me up the way my dad did, so she left my hairline looking crazy. At recess kids would clown me for my uneven taper or for my mom pushing my hairline back too far. Unbeknownst to me, it was also uncool to wear your pants at the waistline, exposing your socks. Kids called it “flooding” or wearing “high-waters.” They would say, “Your hairline looks like my grampa’s” or “Why are your pants so high? You about to go crush some grapes?”
When I would report this to my teacher or the recess supervisors, I was told not to let anyone pick on me. So I responded to their advice by putting my chubby little hands on anyone any time they had something funny to say about me. I hated fighting. I also hated that my teacher didn’t seem to care about my well-being, let alone my education. At six, I began entertaining ideas of not going to school anymore. But there was Mom. The only bright spot from my first-grade year was that my mom graduated from law school in May. I saw my only super-hero walk across the stage with a pride, honor, and esteem that I had never seen in human form. That lit a fire under me again, underlining my feeling that education was important indeed. I didn’t know how I was going to do it, but I wanted better for myself. I wanted to at least be in a magnet program, in a higher track.

I saw my opportunity when my second-grade teacher announced there would be a school-wide spelling bee. I somehow convinced myself that after the school saw my performance in the spelling bee, they would move me up to a magnet program automatically. Each class would hold its own bee, and the winners would compete in front of the whole school. We were given a packet of sixty sheets containing potential words. For three months, I studied those sheets like they were scripture. If the power was out in the house, I’d study them by flashlight or even by
candlelight. To my surprise, I won our classroom spelling bee easily.

On the day of the school-wide competition, I put on a dark green turtleneck and fake black glasses, thinking they made me look like Harry Potter. I didn’t own a Harry Potter book and had never read one. But I thought Harry Potter looked smart. People were surprised to see me up there, with all the kids who had parents that fought to get them into the magnet program. The entire school filled the auditorium and there was an air of excitement. I was ready and in the zone.

We went around and around, people falling out on a regular basis. Some would start crying; others would just leave the stage nonchalantly, as if it were nothing. Perhaps for them it wasn’t. Many of the magnet kids had stable home lives, two parents, and not a lot of worries. They didn’t have a lot riding on a spelling bee, but I convinced myself that if I could win it, I could make my mark and it would lead to great things.

Before I even realized it, there were only two people left on stage, me and a magnet student named Tyra. I was asked to spell “building.” Easy. I said, “Building . . . b, i . . .” I stopped. I knew right away what I had done. I put my hand on my head, stunned. I walked back to my seat with tears welling in my eyes. Tyra spelled it right without hesitation. For me, it was such a simple word to lose on. It was a pivotal moment in my young life.
I had my face in my hands when the kid next to me tapped me on the shoulder. They called me back up onstage to receive my trophy, and then I realized I had won second place. It wasn’t first, but I had done well. I had never won anything before. I had an epiphany, right there. I realized that if I applied myself as I had for the spelling bee, and if I had an opportunity to apply that hard work, I would be able to manifest something positive. I might not make my goal, but I would realize something good from it. Though my resources were limited, I hoped for more opportunities like the spelling bee to come along. The experience gave me a work ethic that I could trust in regardless of what was going on around me in the hood. That second-place trophy in the second-grade spelling bee remains, for me, the most important accomplishment of my life. That trophy is what set the tone.

I think that simple victory actually did lead me further than I had expected. The next school year, someone looked at my records, considered what I had done, and placed me in the magnet program. It would ultimately open doors to a better middle school, which in turn led to a stellar high school and beyond. Like dominoes falling in a row. I traced that all back to the work I put in studying for a simple little spelling bee. But I have to think back to those other kids who were left behind in the lower tracks. The other kids who didn’t make it to the spelling bee.
The kids who didn’t win a trophy. Some I’ve never heard of again, and some I’ve seen in handcuffs on the news.

Of course, there were other more bitter lessons. Compton was the start of a very different type of education for me. When I came home from school I no longer asked the questions of innocence, questions like, “Why is the sky blue?” or “Why is the grass green?” I came home one day after having overheard some of my classmates talking about the candlelight vigil on the center-divider that stood across the street from their house, and what might have happened on the scene. I asked my mom, “Mom, what’s a Crip?”

Much of what I had to deal with and learn were blank spaces that, in any young man’s life, a male role model would have normally filled in. But I didn’t have one. We were completely cut off from my father because my mother had gotten a restraining order. She was concerned he might confront her and get violent. We didn’t see him, we didn’t talk to him on the phone, and we didn’t even talk about him. Hard as that was, time and subsequent events would prove how good my mother’s judgment had been.

I would learn as much from the street, from the brutality born of poverty and fear, as I would in any classroom. From that young age, I realized that Compton was abnormal, an outsider society. Everyone there had, in one way or another, been marginalized. Later I would understand that if I were ever to change that place and places like it,
I’d have to use to my advantage all the lessons Compton taught me. I’d have to be an example of why the Comptons of the world should not define the people who live there. I’d also have to seek out a platform that would allow me to reach people outside Compton. Changes can come from the people in Compton, but large-scale change in similar communities all over the country will take a collective effort to bring about. The platform I would find would be education and football. Getting there would involve using my raw intellect, survival skills, street smarts, hard work, and faith in things unseen. But in a place like Compton, most of the time, that’s not enough.