

Prologue: Track 01

Right now I am doing exactly what good white people teach good white boys like me not to do.

I am walking alone in what my peers would classify as one of the worst neighborhoods in Charlotte. It is late, nearing midnight. I do not exactly know when I will return, nor did I leave information on my whereabouts with anyone else. I am not particularly worried or especially alert. I have no way of defending myself. The first stop on my journey is to knock on the door of a house that my neighbors tell me is the local trap house. That is a residence managed by an entrepreneur in the business of pharmaceutical sales, which is to say, you can buy drugs at the trap house. They generally keep a good house party going most of the time, and I am about to crash it. My mother would not approve of this scenario.

I am not looking for a fix. I am trying to find Monique. She does not keep the most savory company. I am looking for her because I want to find her son Anthony, who is supposed to start summer camp tomorrow. He is a first-grader experiencing homelessness, and right now the likelihood is that he and his mom are temporarily staying in this trap house. The summer camp is a great offer for him, given by a local church who puts on a high-quality program for Anthony's peers every summer.

I knock on the door, a little annoyed that our planned meeting earlier did not take place. As I am knocking, the recognition that I am transgressing several boundaries is starting to work up through my body. A little sweat on the back. A tremble in the hands. Stomach clenching into knots. I am afraid. Standing still for a moment helps me to feel it. I do not want to feel this way, but fears grip tightly. They bury themselves deep in bones, arising in unexpected ways and inconvenient times. Late night at the door of the trap house is as good a place as any to contemplate these things.

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There's not long to reflect. The door opens, and the guy on the other side looks back from under his flat-brimmed hat, pulled down to his eyebrows. His eyes are barely visible, but they register some fear also. I am not what he expected to see.

A gentle thickening of the Southern accent can help soften tense moments, something Southerners learn just by drinking the water here. It happens automatically, without planning or thought. "Hey man. I'm sorry to be interruptin' you this late. I'm lookin' for Monique, and I heard she might be 'round here at the moment." I have no idea how the doorman receives my stretched-out drawl. It comforts me, though.

To my surprise, he invites me in. I did not expect a welcome. I thought I may be perceived as a nuisance, or suspected as a cop ready to break up the business. "I don't know who that is," in reference to Monique, seemed to be a likely response, something to protect everyone. The best case scenario I imagined just a moment ago is that I would be left on the porch, and she would come outside. But now I am inside.

I guess every trap house proprietor has a unique style of decoration. Perhaps a sparse minimalism. Maybe shabby chic, or cool modernism. This particular one chose to go for the frat house look. The featured piece is a couch that looks to have made several laps through the secondhand store. Michael Jordan sails mid-flight above the couch. He glides over two young men staring at the flat screen across the room, choreographing its millions of pixels into a virtual football game. There is a recycle bin full of beer cans. Eco-friendly drug dealers—who knew? The lights are dim, the curtains drawn, and the noise of a rowdy card game spills in from the next room.

It all looks surprisingly fun. And it seems so normal—young adults up late playing video games and drinking cheap beer. This scene inspires fear? The house has a reputation for trouble, but there is none of that at the moment. My stomach has not unknotted itself all the way yet, but I am settling in and have decided that if someone offers me one of those beers, I'll take it.

My host walks to the back of the house, grasping the back of his jeans with his right hand as he goes to hold his pants onto his slim frame. He knocks on the back bedroom door while I lean against the front wall taking it all in. He waits, knocks again, and then finally stops being patient and just opens the door to interrupt. The folks in the room are loud, so he shouts over them, "Monique!"

Into the silence that follows, he says, "There's a white man at the door to see you."

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There's that knot in my stomach again. Tighter this time. The back of my t-shirt is getting wet.

In the world I'm from, we don't say things like "white man." White is normative. It can safely be assumed. Whiteness need not be spoken. No—it ought not be spoken. Calling me a white man is not only unnecessary, it is plain old impolite. To my ears, modifiers about race are only needed when a non-white person is involved. There are Black-owned businesses, Black churches, Latino credit unions, Asian restaurants, the "ethnic" foods aisle at the grocery store, and so on, but nothing gets labelled "white." It is assumed that white is regular, normal even. The code is clear, although the specifics of it are unwritten. Whiteness should not be named. Unless, of course, one is looking to create a scene. Which is what I have here now.

Hearing "white" sends all my discomfort rushing back. I am transgressing boundaries to be in this space. All of my racial assumptions come with me, though I do not yet know about many of them. I assume a reasonable measure of safety, a safety partly assured by my whiteness. The well-known barrier that stands guard around this space is insufficient to keep me on the outside. To knock on the door is an opportunity I am entitled to, despite the fact that many of my neighbors would not dare attempt it. I bring my whole self when I knock on that door, even though there is a lot of myself I do not know about. I'm learning now.

"White." It sounds so aggressive when he says it. I wonder if this was a good idea after all, to come here and have my fragility shattered. I'm just trying to do good. But this young man, so that everybody can hear it, has named for me the obvious thing that I am hoping no one will notice. Somehow I wanted my whiteness to be the miracle salve for all racial discomfort—everybody be calm, there's a white guy here! I hold a near-religious belief that it is powerful enough both not to be noticed, and at the same time to be the reassurance of the benevolence of the universe.

I have crossed barriers to get here. My host is doing the same in return. He has stepped across one of my boundaries—one I have never been confronted with in this manner, one I scarcely knew I had. We are encountering one another in an unusual and vulnerable way. The trap house seems like a fortress from the outside. It is a place of danger. There are drugs. Word on the street is that there are guns as well. One does not just carelessly knock on the door. The house inspires fear around the neighborhood. No one knows what may be happening inside.

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Now I am seeing the chinks in the armor. This place is vulnerable, and my presence is heightening the feeling of vulnerability. These people are outcasts of society. Some are homeless and are being taken in. Many have gone through the humiliation of arrest and prosecution, their bodies being taken from them and warehoused in undesirable places. They have been controlled, treated as menaces. With records and rap sheets, only illicit work and under-the-table odd jobs remain as reasonable options. Why not go into sales? There is at least the illusion of safety in this house, and if not safety then a chance to forget for a little while. I am disturbing a refuge of the heavy-laden.

I am scared and wondering whether this was the right idea. He is scared and wondering whether I will be bringing this gathering to a halt. We are acting out a drama that has been happening on this land since my ancestors first brought his ancestors here by kidnapping and rape and murder. Our bodies know this even if our minds cannot speak it. We have our parts memorized without anyone ever passing out the script. For my part, the fear of Blackness comes silently—not by nature, but by wordless teaching. No one ever told me to perceive danger in dark skin, but all my people learn the lesson and pass the test. The idea that a house party is dangerous never crossed my mind in my lily-white college. In a Black neighborhood, I suppose it to be one step from a riot.

My host has learned the script as well, though likely for him by personal experience and not surreptitious rumor. He is afraid that I may be a cop, or that I might call the cops, or that my invasion of this space is an initial step towards his eventual displacement from it by the mysterious forces of The Market. His fears are well-founded, learned through generations of experience. We are performing a drama that we did not choose, that we cannot escape. And so here we stand, afraid. We can do no other.

Trap house. Midnight. *There's a white man here to see you.*

And then Victor, a neighbor and friend who I have known for a year or so, steps away from the card game and into the front room to see who the strange white man is. He finishes swallowing his most recent sip of beer, and shouts to the back of the house, "That's not a white man. That's Brother Greg."

2

Thriving from a Riff¹

A RIFF IS A small piece of musical information. It is a few notes, perhaps four or five, not quite long enough to be a melody, but it is at least the beginning of one. A riff is the essence of the full melody, the foundation from which a whole work is constructed.

Imagine a riff this way: The club is packed in 1930s Kansas City, home of the Count Basie Orchestra. Basie walks onto stage and strikes up the band. The bass walks, pulling out each beat on strings. The drums clang-a-lang, snare, tom, and hi-hat each doing their job. Basie sits down at the piano. He plays a riff—just a couple of notes—and looks over at the sax section. All five of them repeat it, first in unison, and then harmonizing it among themselves. The rhythm section keeps burning underneath, the drummer sizzling on the hi-hat to drive the band. The saxes keep playing the riff, holding onto the figure like a monk holds a prayer, examining each syllable. As its beauty is revealed, it starts working up into the feet of the dancers.

Basie plays another riff on the keyboard, this one in counterpoint to the first. The trombones grab it as it comes by, sliding into the groove with the second riff. The saxes call, the bones answer. Folks are getting partnered up now. The rumble of the bass is moving up past their feet, into their legs and overtaking their hips. Basie does it once more, this time for the trumpets. They glide over the top, decorating, highlighting, tying together the

1. Charlie Parker and the Be-Bop Boys. “Thriving from a Riff” is a classic Charlie Parker tune built on the chord progression of George Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm.” It is also called “Anthropology.”

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whole. The horn sections work together as a three-in-one. They are slowly building, building, building a crescendo that seizes the soul. Each player does his part, riding the riffs with energy and precision.

Soon the whole joint is jumping. Dance floor packed, sweat pouring, Basie jumps up and points at Prez. The star sax player takes off, building from the riffs a symphony of energy and beauty. Everybody in the building, from the bandstand to the dance floor, the bartender to the doorman, gets worked into a frenzy. One shouts. Another moans when Prez hits a blue note—that's the one that tugs on the ears and rouses the conscience, the one that elicits a moan too deep for words when it hits the soul. The vibration of the bass pulsates through the floor, up through shoes and feet and shoulders and head. The drums send out an ancient call that resonates within the bones, a call so deep that it can only be answered by the hips. Prez soars above and swoops down within, growling and moaning and drawing it all upward to the sky.

When Basie's band is swinging like this, there are no words for it. You feel it with your body. You let it settle into your soul. It works on your insides, nestles in your bones, gets you from way down deep. And it all starts with a riff.

Here in Enderly Park, just two miles from the central square of Charlotte, it often seems like a riff is about all most people have. The money almost always runs out before the month does. Improvising on just the barest amount of resources is a standard life skill. One place to watch this skill come alive is in the kitchen. Freddie and Michelle are masters of this. I have walked into their house many times to see that the fridge is mostly empty. There are few cans stored on the cabinet shelves, which lack doors thanks to a lazy landlord. Their need is visible to all, but this does not stop them from offering an invitation to supper, nor does it stop the meal at their house from becoming a bounty of delight.

Freddie and Michelle like to entertain when they can. They throw big birthday parties for their kids, and every child within three blocks joins the fun. At holidays, lots of extended family come for big cookouts. Every once in a while they wind up needing to throw a rent party. These are the most entertaining. They feature a sound system and a neighbor trying to DJ. The adult beverages flow. The rules of decorum required of a child's birthday party are suspended—for Freddie, they are most always suspended—and things get a little rowdy.

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Freddie's dream is to be a comic and a comedy promoter. It is more than a little late for him to get started on that career. The rent party gives him a chance to try his act out. He features himself and whoever else he can coerce or cajole into trying an amateur comedy set. These are excruciating to sit through, which also makes them endearing. The difference between being humorous in real life and being funny behind a microphone is profound. I did not recognize how different these things were until Freddie asked me to be one of his headliners. I took this as quite an honor and prepared accordingly. With just a couple days notice, I did the best I could to get some material together and practice my set. When the time arrived, my stomach was beginning to churn and my hands trembled. I've played music in front of thousands and preached for some intimidating crowds. I don't get nervous anymore, but this backyard assembly of a few dozen had my knees trembling.

I bombed. Not a single laugh. These folks wanted to laugh, wanted me to do well, and they were tipsy on top of that. If you can't make drunk people laugh, you're pretty bad.

But the rent party was a huge success, and the food was amazing. I have no idea where it came from or how there was enough. Freddie and Michelle cooked it. I know because I saw them do it, and helped them carry it from the kitchen to the picnic table. The fried chicken wings were a business plan unto themselves. On the grill, Freddie elevated a hot dog to a work of art. The potato salad competed with my mother's, which is not a compliment a southern boy easily hands out. There were plenty of cold drinks to keep the party rollicking until the wee hours. A hat got passed a few times, and enough came in for the rent to get paid. Everybody got full and had a good time. But also, everybody knew why we were there, and it was not for a comedy show. The abundance on display at the party was not food and drink, but determination, and prayers, and the hard-won knowledge of how to make something out of nothing.

Just barely getting by, always living in scarcity, is not the same thing as flourishing. Thriving from a riff is possible, but if you only ever have a riff or a morsel or a crumb, the constant struggle of improvising something beautiful from nothing is exhausting. One rent party might be fun. Monthly ones are debilitating. Sitting down to supper nightly with your children and just barely having enough food to keep them satisfied can be an adventure once. Do it night after night and it chisels away at your dignity. Making a big party happen with the help of some friends by digging

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deep and praying for a minor miracle is a victory to be celebrated. Relying on your sons' school to feed them twice a day because you cannot afford to is a burden.

One of the miracles of life in Enderly Park is that somehow no one starves or freezes to death. Though there is no oversupply in cupboards, no children go without eating. The calories they consume are often not healthful—indeed they have long-term consequences that take years off the lives of the poor. There are many reasons for this, including both individual choices and public policy that privileges overabundant corn production over growing collards and peas. The decisions for that type of food supply and consumption have a cost to pay later, but in the short-term, there are enough calories for the day. The only reason this works is sharing. Rhizomes of the sharing economy here stretch far and wide. The underground economy of sharing and ensuring the wellbeing of neighbors is alive and active, happening in secret, unpublished ways.

The monetized “sharing economy” has opened up new economic possibilities around the country. Clever entrepreneurs are making fortunes off connecting people with some need with people who will share in exchange. Car-sharing services, ride sharing, bike sharing, home sharing for vacation rentals, co-working spaces—the sharing economy is inciting the imaginations of young and old alike. These are new, exciting business models for some, but in Enderly Park, the sharing economy is simply called “regular life.”

“Brother Greg, I’m in a pinch right now. I’m trying to find some money to get my light bill paid.”

“What did you spend your paycheck on?”

“Well, I paid my rent, but then my mom needed some help with food, and my neighbor across the street needed to get her phone turned back on. And my other neighbor is having a struggle right now with her bills, and I have to help because I hate to see her kids suffer. So now I’m a little short.”

Curtis and I must have had this same conversation twenty-five times. Amazingly, his rent always gets paid, and his lights never seem to get shut off. Curtis never has enough money but somehow he makes things work. This happens because neighbors who have something share it with someone in need. They trust that when they do this, someone else will show similar kindness in their time of need.

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Getting by from the kindness of neighbors sometimes fails. Curtis winds up walking through some hard times. When he fails to get the bills paid, the results can be disastrous. Bank fees rob him at a time when every dollar counts. Predatory financial services—check cashing services, private loans, and so on—deepen the financial hole. As the hole gets deeper, temporary relief by way of drugs or alcohol becomes more and more tempting. Eventually, a life falls into chaos.

But even the disastrous is met by another example of the rich hospitality of God through neighbor. Couches and extra beds are always full in Enderly Park, as people host a neighbor in the midst of a hard time. The sharing goes deep. It has consequences. It requires sacrifice. This looks like the wisdom of an ancient way of life. Jesus says, “Give to everyone who begs from you; and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”² The upside-down logic of the gospel is that those whom the world despises because they have too little are near to the heart of God, who shares in their suffering and the joy of their self-emptying.

Curtis lives deeply into the good news in a way that confounds me. He does give to everyone that begs from him. I will gladly lend him some money, but I count the cost. I know that it might pinch my budget a little until he can pay me back. Curtis trusts in the same God who provides just enough for the Israelite journey across the desert into freedom. Simply walking with this God who provides in the desert, who feeds us with himself, results in proximity to the kind of neighbors who enliven the journey, even when the road is steep and dangerous. No other reward is needed outside of the chance to walk in this pilgrim way.



KNOCKKNOCK. KNOCKKNOCK.

The door flies open.

This how we mark time in our hospitality house. Two quick knocks, and then across the threshold zooms Khalil. He is an alarm clock. Khalil is here? Must be 3:15, and the bus has just dropped kids off.

Khalil is always the first to arrive in the afternoon. He pinballs across the room offering fist bumps, hugs, jokes, grins. He picks up my two boys, a sure way to win the affection of preschoolers. If I'm not paying attention, Khalil may slip them some candy, which seals their bonds forever.

2. Matthew 5:42.

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For preschoolers, this is the best part of the day. A youth—old enough to admire and young enough to be a friend—showers them with affection. No matter what is happening, the sound of Khalil's voice sends JT and Z running in search of the attention they know he will provide. They are learning friendship, and Khalil is a good teacher. A tag game breaks out, maybe, or a tower of blocks gets constructed. Perhaps we all head outside to toss a football or play in the leaves. Whichever way we bounce, a sense of wonder awaits.

The streets of west Charlotte can be mean. They take our young people and harden them. They grind them down into sharp edges. They steal their imaginations and assault them with trauma after trauma. The streets rob them of the chance to carelessly explore their environment. But Khalil has resisted the meanness so far. He still has his softness, his curiosity, his tenderness. His imagination is big. He still believes he can give birth to his dreams. So many others, at frighteningly young ages, have built tall, thick walls around their psyches and their hearts. Their imaginations are alive, but kept hidden away. They have dreams, but they stop believing that they are the ones who can make them come true. This is a strategy for survival. It is a way of maintaining a sense of security when trauma can be just around the corner, in the form of stop-and-frisk policing, or a person driven to despair who feels the need to rob, or the sight of a domestic dispute taking place on the sidewalk. Anyone subject to these assaults must turn tough quickly, and children learn that soon.

Khalil has maintained a wild-eyed, childlike way of being in the world. I love that about him, and I love that he brings that out in everyone else. The boys engage in his goofy games. He gets them interested in things they would otherwise ignore. Their imaginations break free again. They get silly.

The girls adore him. With his small frame, his playful hair, his voice still high-pitched, he is their kid brother, only if they liked their kid brother. Where it might take weeks or months, even years, for me to see behind the wall with some young people—or to feel like I can fully be myself—with Khalil it is instantaneous. His play begets play. The room is more fun and interesting with him in it. He invites everyone into belonging. This is a gift for which there is no accounting. It is simply to be enjoyed.

Sharing things big and small creates connection. Khalil bubbles over with self-giving generosity. Wherever he goes, he connects with people. Curtis not only offers some hard-earned money to a neighbor, he offers

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a piece of himself through the work he has done, through his desire to be kind to parents who are struggling to make the bills.

In our hospitality house, we have learned that the act of sharing a meal or offering a guest room to a stranger can establish a quick intimacy. We offer the gentle care of another's body by providing protection from the cold and rain. A guest offers a gift in return by doing dishes while I help kids with homework. These are small offerings to one another that quickly build connections. Our bodies and even our homes can be, in Paul's terms, "living sacrifices," acts of worship to God. Some of our best worship experiences are simple acts of kindness in caring for each other's fragile bodies. We make our offerings to a brother or sister in remembrance of Jesus.

Life composed with mutual care and offering ourselves as gifts to one another has a rhythm to it. By sticking around long enough and paying attention, you can learn to fall into that rhythm and find a place in it. Creation teaches rhythm. There are seasons of life—times of want and times of plenty. There is time for the shedding of leaves, time for hibernation, time for new growth, time for producing fruit and harvesting. There are droughts and famines, bumper crops and floods. Households experience this as well. Good news clusters together. Bad news, my neighbors often tell me, comes in threes. The rhythms of bounty and want guide us along, by sunset and sunrise, by birth and death, by anticipating and reflecting.

In Enderly Park, one of the ways injustice shows its face is by the intervals between seasons of want and seasons of plenty. The seasons of plenty tend not to last long—there is so much need. When Curtis has a nice check with some overtime pay in it, it disappears just as quickly as his regular paycheck does. The money keeps moving. The bill collectors keep hounding. The seasons of want can last a mighty long time—the winters turn long and unrelenting. Sharing keeps people going in the short term, but it can drive them to despair in the long term. Even a robust sharing economy, with rhizomes secretly spreading across the neighborhood, cannot cover up a lack of resources. It cannot hide the plain fact that opportunity is scarce here, even as it abounds in places just a mile or two away. No one starves in Enderly Park, but plenty go to bed hungry. Families and friends double up in houses. Someone walks an hour to and from work to save on bus fare. Medicines get prioritized, some of them having to go unpurchased, whatever the consequence. There is nothing romantic about living from a riff. Neighbors say it this way: *The struggle is real.*

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The struggle *is* real, and it has real and sometimes dire consequences. It takes lives from families. The Charlotte city government publishes detailed demographic data every two years about every neighborhood in the city. Those figures say that in Charlotte as a whole, the average age of death is 72 years. In Enderly Park, it is 62 years. Which means that on multiple fronts, poverty is killing my neighbors. They are dying because of the difficulty of accessing consistent health care. Exposure to toxic environmental factors is higher here. The greater difficulty of accessing fresh food, coupled with the relative cheapness of processed calories, leads to increased risk of diabetes and heart disease. Violence takes people away too soon.

“The struggle” costs my neighbors, on average, about ten years of life. That is a decade of loving your grandchildren, of singing and painting, of cooking for your family, of making love to your spouse. A decade of watching the sky explode with color during the fall. Ten opportunities to anticipate the first tomato from the garden or to light candles for visitors at Christmas.

To see in clearer detail what opportunities are lost in those missing years, or how the gift of years is made beautiful through riffs—a visit on a neighbor’s porch or the sound of children jumping into piles of leaves—requires proximity. By being close enough to notice, by sticking around and paying attention, the beauty of Enderly Park begins to seize anyone with eyes to see. The crepe myrtles in flower are like pom-poms lining the street, cheering on neighbors as they head to work and school. The old house with chipping paint and sagging porch looks wise, as though it could tell stories to illumine the world.

Most neighbors here are poor, but contrary to the recent American characterizations of poor folks as static, unchanging, pitiable characters, poor people live fascinating and complex lives. They are not problems to be solved or objects to whom to offer charity. They are the subjects of their own stories, the authors of their own liberation. My neighbors are God’s people, full of beauty and goodness, comprised of interesting contradictions and peculiar brokenness. They live close to the heart of Jesus.

Those like me, who grew up with access to power and privilege by the simple fact of our whiteness, can have a hard time imagining the complex beauty of such a place, where almost everyone is poor, and almost everyone is African-American. But we know and celebrate and consume the music of the people with those complex and beautiful stories. Almost all American popular music has roots that can be traced back to Congo Square in New

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Orleans, where enslaved people would gather on Sundays to remember and build the cultures threatened Monday through Saturday by their captors and their captivity. One of the musical traditions that eventually grew from that culture-building is the Blues. The Blues tradition builds meaning in a world where the hard times just won't quit.

The Blues is music, but it is not just music. It is a way of approaching life. It is a tradition that is passed down in storytelling, in music, in preaching, in the ways that bodies move and encounter one another. When regular old sense just won't do, Blues sense constructs meaning in the cruel world. The blue notes capture what Paul calls "moans too deep for words."

There is a rhythm of life, molded by the Blues, that dances across the sidewalks of Enderly Park, vibrating through the blocks and coloring both the days and the nights. Especially the nights. The streets dance with melodies composed with shades of soul and hip-hop and gospel. Life teems with joy and laughter, with rage and determination, with love and leisure. You hear it all just by stepping outside. The living is sensuous and lyrical, a teasing dance that draws you into its charms. The Blues has always been a strategy for coaxing beauty out of hard times. It is a tradition from a specific people with a particular story, but it says something universal.

In the middle-aged man walking to the corner store, you see the Blues incarnated. He is tired after a hard day's work. His body aches from a day's labor, so he moves slow. He gets there when he gets there. But though he is worn, he carries resilience in him. His back is not bowed, though his boss is too demanding, nor is his spirit cast down, though the rent man keeps meddling around. He strides with cool, walking to a rhythm only he hears but everyone sees. The Blues has taken up residence in his body. Even if you can't name it, you know it.

Echoes of drums are in his body, but not just there—they are everywhere. Teen boys beat on furniture. A car stereo rattles the whole frame of its vehicle. A church choir rehearses with the doors open, and heaven fills the streets. Heaven sounds like a clap and a stomp and a tambourine, always the sound of skin stretched over a frame, any available frame, the skin taut though worn. Flesh on flesh, shoe pounding floor, air rushing through throat—the sounds call out the ancient, bone-deep secret that this is what home sounds like. Here is an age-old reminder of who we all are. Even those like me, whose bodies have long forgotten the distant call of the drum, begin to feel the vibrations pulsing, bumping, aligning with heart,

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feet, hips, echoing around to long-forgotten places within. The struggle is real. The blues is real-er.

So have there always been riffs of drum and melody to nourish the resistance, to straighten the spine for what is to come. In the hush-harbor, enslaved people sang a simple song with deep theology: “O Mary, don’t you weep, don’t you mourn—Pharaoh’s army got drowned-ed.” In face of trials and want, a little riff will do. A song ushers in a new world. KnockKnock. ThumpThump. Rat-a-tat-rat-a-tat. The rhythms of the heavens rupture the world.

Songs build worlds. They educate, inspire, and create cultural identification. Music binds tribes together. It tells a people’s story. But people cannot eat songs. Songs may nourish movements, but bodies need fruits and vegetables. In Enderly Park, the need for basics—food, warm clothing, decent shoes, quality shelter—is on display right alongside the resilience and creativity that keeps people singing their lives. In a place where it often seems there are too few meals, still there is enough. There could be more, and probably should be more, but because a spirit of abundance lives here, there is enough. The thriving of a neighborhood begins from within—by mutual care, by recognizing and naming gifts, and by neighbors working to use those gifts to discover how to solve their problems together.



Jesus, wandering through the wilderness with his disciples, comes to a spot on the shore where a great crowd meets him. After he teaches them for a whole day, his disciples point out that everyone is hungry. Jesus responds to them, “Don’t look at me. You do something about it.”

The disciples are perplexed. What are they to do? They obviously lack what they need to solve the problem. Should they write a grant to the local foundation seeking some funding? Can they find an angel investor interested in hunger issues in this food desert? Would crowdfunding work? They see clearly the pressing issue, but they have no idea how to feed the people. There simply is not enough food. They state the problem with the focus on what is missing from the scene. They feel compelled to look elsewhere for the answer, perhaps in the nearest town. But, even if they went to town, they have no money to buy food. They are paralyzed by their lack. They can only see what is missing.



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Jesus, the great community organizer, asks them, “What is here now? What do we have?” He is not interested in what they don’t have.

“Teacher, we have five small loaves of bread and two fish from a peasant boy.”

They have a riff. Jesus takes their little offering while everyone in the amphitheater watches. All five thousand men, plus women and children, who, it’s worth remembering, ought to count also, have their eyes trained on the Teacher. He begins to work off the riff given to him. He is composing on the spot. He sends an idea over to the disciples, asking them to help him. He improvises a song heavenward. And then he invites the crowd to join in their own feeding, using only what they already have. One section of people after another breaks a loaf, shares a fish. They join in the song until everyone is full, and there is yet more food that goes uneaten. From almost nothing, just a little riff of a meal, a banquet is born. Soon they are flourishing, if only for a moment, before heading back into the heat of the Roman occupation. They are thriving from a riff.

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is a narrative about Abundance. With thousands of poor Palestinian peasants gathered together, Jesus brings among them two key ingredients—imagination and power. When the disciples look out at the crowd, they can only imagine a disaster coming. Their imaginations have been formed by Scarcity, a tyrant who insists that there is never enough, that what is needed is always somewhere else. Living in a world where everyone believes in Scarcity (Caesar’s house is ruled by it, as are his armies, and his financial advisors, and his business interests) has taken the imaginations of the people gathered, including Jesus’s disciples, and deadened them. They can only see what is missing.

It is no surprise that the one who disrupts Scarcity’s narrative is a child. He comes forth with a little offering. He still has his imagination, still thinks he can do big things with his little gifts, still believes he can make his dreams come true. There is no wall around his heart yet, and the streets of ancient, occupied Palestine have not yet taken the softness of his spirit. He finds an easy companion in Jesus. And in Jesus, the boy and the crowd have someone who can combine Abundance’s imagination with power. Jesus has power, wonder-working power, and at least some of that power is because his imagination is at least as big as the boy’s. Jesus believes that all the people who did not get counted—the wild-eyed children playing on the

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edges, the wise and weary mamas—have more than can be seen. Among the people are immense gifts ready to be shared.

Now I'm not saying that Jesus did not make food appear out of thin air. If anybody could, it was him. But I know how children operate—little gifts tucked in pockets, gentle spirits ever ready to share. And I've been observing mamas my whole life—raised by one, married to another, nurtured by many others. Those Palestinian mamas didn't just head out for the day, babies in tow, with nothing hidden in their bags. Wonders happen—symphonies are composed!—not just when manna falls from the heavens, but when regular people start putting what they have together to help meet each other's needs. The power that transforms Jesus's words into bread and fish, and his congregation's hunger into a banquet, is the kind of power that believes in abundance, and is willing to give from abundance without fear.

When the shine came off the bank towers in Charlotte, following the release of the Chetty study in 2014 regarding the scarcity of opportunity, municipal and civic leaders in town scrambled to respond. The city has a long history of making policy change in a way that preserves the appearance of good, genteel politics on the outside, while maintaining the same fortress of scarcity on the inside. The initial reaction to the Chetty study was no different. One common denial was that while the study was good, its methodology did not fit well with Charlotte because of the peculiar nature of the place. Others appealed to the city's resolve to work together, an appeal that failed to account for the fact that people had been working together, and economic inequality was still historically bad. Eventually, the formal response was the formation of a "task force," a panel of experts to study the problem and return with recommendations as to courses of action.

Halfway through the task force's study, some public interviews began to appear regarding the process and what the panel was learning. One article, written in March 2016, noted that "some members of the task force found themselves surprised at the wish of some poor families for their children to remain in neighborhood schools and not be bussed to higher-performing schools."³ Among the panel of experts, it was news that parents in poor neighborhoods wanted to live in better neighborhoods without having to move. That surprise is born from the imagination impoverished by that old tyrant Scarcity. The idea that the good life is accessible only by proximity to the wealthy misses the ways that goodness thrives in places

3. Boschma and Deruy, "Where Children Rarely Escape Poverty."

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like Enderly Park, through little riffs of neighborliness. The parents in opportunity deserts saw the possibility already in their neighborhoods. *They were* the possibility already in their neighborhoods. They lived out of the abundant imagination that made their lives possible each day. But they lacked the organized power needed to make important changes for themselves and their children.

Scarcity teaches that making change is the domain of the “expert.” Experts come from far off neighborhoods and towns. They charge fees and receive grants to enter into communities with answers and programs and recommendations, things they gleaned from task forces and boards of inquiry and publications on “best practices.” But what is missing from poor neighborhoods is not expertise. Poor people understand their lives—and the reasons they remain poor—perfectly well. What is missing from their lives is power. The power to institute change in suffering places is almost always held by someone who is not poor, someone who belongs outside that place. Government institutions, developers, non-profit organizations, police, doctors, legislators, and even ministers almost all live elsewhere and locate the power of their institutions elsewhere, on the outside of poor communities. When change is led by experts, who are funded and employed from outside a community, then the change-makers are accountable to someone else, someone other than the people whose lives their work is supposed to affect. This process, enacted by foundations, caseworkers, churches, nonprofits, grantmakers, and task forces, keeps the power and the responsibility for making change outside of those most directly affected by the problems a community experiences.

Communities have within them the assets they need to develop the solutions to their problems. Even the poorest place has a basket of loaves and fish. Organizing people to act on issues that matter to them starts with drawing out the gifts and assets of a community, and binding people together to work and share in building solutions. A community’s problems are best solved by the members of the community joining together to work in common, employing experts and outsiders only as needed. As an organizer friend tells me often, “Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution.”⁴

4. I’ve learned this—and much more—from amalia deloney, a good friend and brilliant organizer.

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The story of the gospels shows Jesus and his band of disciples wandering through the Palestinian countryside, eventually headed toward Jerusalem, the seat of political, economic, and religious power in their region. The last week of his life will be spent there, as the long-brewing conflict between him and the imperial authorities will reach its climax. When the band of castoffs finally make to the capital, they announce Jesus's curious sort of power by having him enter the city with a performance of street theater. He enters the gates, greeted by throngs of excited people, on a humble donkey rather than a large war horse. He claims to be king, but not in the way common to rulers of his day. He lampoons the whole system by coming in humility proclaiming a different sort of reign.

Jesus's last week on earth keeps moving toward its conclusion when he gathers his followers together for the last time to share a meal. The remembrance of this meal is to become a central moment in all of the Christian theology to follow. This peculiar God, being found in human form, has chosen an odd group of nobodies in an occupied state in a relatively obscure part of the world, and has sat down to eat supper with them. This is strange.

While they are dining together, Jesus takes the most ordinary elements of the meal, bread and wine, and uses them as a riff on which Christian theology is still building. For two millennia, this little improvisation on the elements of a regular meal has been the central act in Christian worship gatherings. Jesus, the host of the meal, takes bread, breaks it, and begins spinning out the meaning of it. The bread is his body, he says. The ordinary loaf, shared with ordinary people, is the body—the form, the being, the substance—of the God who comes to us enfleshed as the peasant king, as one of the despised ones. He hits the blue notes, emphasizing that this will be the last time they eat together until “that great gettin’-up morning.” The wine—just a little of it!—is his blood, he tells them. It is the life that flows through the veins of the one whose breath creates and sustains the universe. The existence of everything that is depends on the contents of this cup, and Jesus is offering a share of it with his friends. They will eat and drink of it, and then they will find themselves swallowed up by this life they are taking into their bodies. They eat the meal, but the meal consumes them.

What is happening in that little meal is not the institution of a symbol world to be contained inside a sanctuary. What is happening is the fracturing of everything thought to be true about the way the world works.

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The rupture of the normal order of things will continue to be worked out through the Triduum of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. In the room sits the God of the universe, one sometimes called “omnipotent,” possessing all power. This God is using the plain stuff of the world to redistribute power. The illusions of empire, that power is best centralized and wealth is best trickled up, are being shattered in an unremarkable room by a riff on ordinary ingredients. The meal enacts the structure of God’s power in the world. That power is given form in sharing, in love that gives itself away for the sake of friends. The depth of one ordinary meal of bread and wine transfigures all of our ordinary meals. The revolution starts at the Table, where the God of creation joins friends and reorients lives back to God and out to one another.

God’s dream is as plain as the thriving of family—both blood family and neighborly kinship family—at a banquet. The dream is made manifest in the riff on bread and wine. God’s dream persists. Even now, it thrums through veins, this power begging to be given away. And the more it is given, the more powerful it becomes.

The Annunciation of good news, when it comes, is always a blessed surprise, a rift in the world of fear and brokenness we inhabit. The blood will never lose its power, and its power keeps showing up in places we never expect, offering a riff on which to build an improvisation of beauty. At the trap house, while I was looking for Monique, good news came to me in a surprise I never could have expected. “That’s not a white man!” Ray only needed a couple of words, and the house party was back on. Before he popped around the corner, all of us were all acting out the drama the world had spelled out long before that night. Ray gave us a new song to sing and a laugh to share. And Anthony went to summer camp, for eight full weeks. He adored it so much that he cried all the way through the closing ceremony, and for an hour after that.

A good riff sticks in the ears. Ray’s riff stuck in my ears and buried itself down deep within me. I am still unwrapping what it means, and still questioning whether I am worthy of such a gift. But good gifts are not given only to worthy recipients. This was a gift to keep learning to live into, both an affirmation in the present and a riff with which to keep improvising the world to come.

That’s not a white man.

Basie strikes up the band.

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KnockKnock.

Do this in remembrance of me.

We are thriving from a riff.