# The Other Wes Moore

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WES MOORE

Wes Moore was born to Westley and Joy Moore, with one older half-sister, Nikki, and a younger sister, Shani. When he was three years old, he witnessed his father's sudden and unexpected death from acute epiglottis. After his father's death, Joy and the children moved in with her parents, Jamaican and Cuban immigrants who owned a house in the Bronx. While living in the Bronx, Moore attended the prestigious Riverdale County Day School. However, he was a poor student with a bad record of attendance, which eventually led to his mother withdrawing him from Riverdale and sending him to Valley Forge Military Academy. Moore graduated from Valley Forge's junior college with an associate's degree, before enrolling at Johns Hopkins University. He graduated from Johns Hopkins Phi Betta Kappa and was the first Rhodes Scholar in the university's history. After completing a master's degree in international relations at Oxford, Moore worked at Deutsche Bank on Wall Street and in London, served as a paratrooper in Afghanistan, and was an assistant to secretary of state Condoleezza Rice through the White House Fellows Program. He then left DC to work for Citigroup in New York. Moore's first book, *The Other Wes Moore*, became a bestseller; following its publication, Moore wrote a young adult version entitled *Discovering Wes Moore*, two other young adult novels, and a memoir entitled *The Work: Searching for a Life that Matters*. Moore has also worked as a TV producer on programs such as *Coming Back with Wes Moore* and *All the Difference*. He has written for a variety of news publications and appeared on political programs ranging from *Morning Joe* to *The Daily Show* to *Real Time with Bill Maher*. Moore has spoken widely about the issue of veterans and has worked alongside several veteran advocacy groups. He is married to Dawn Moore, and the couple have a son and a daughter.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The lives of the young Wes Moores are dominated by the crack epidemic that began in the 1980s and the subsequent War on Drugs, which saw a rapid escalation of police brutality and incarceration rates of young African-American men. Meanwhile, President Ronald Reagan's sweeping cuts to public spending also affect the boys, particularly "the other" Wes, whose mother is forced to drop out of college after her Pell grant is terminated. The experience of Moore (the author) in South Africa is affected by the legacy of the apartheid regime, which ended in 1991 thanks to the work of Nelson Mandela and other "freedom fighters." Meanwhile, Moore begins his time at Oxford immediately after the September 11 terrorist attacks, which he argues significantly shape his understanding of international relations while confirming his desire to dedicate his life to intercultural understanding and public service.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Moore mentions several autobiographies by other African Americans that inspired him both in life and in writing his own book. These include James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time," Colin Powell's *My American Journey*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Other books that explore similar themes to *The Other Wes Moore* include Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which describes the experiences of a young Native American boy at an all-white school, and Shaka Senghor's memoir *Writing My Wrongs*, which describes the personal transformation the author underwent while serving a 19-year prison sentence for murder. Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* describes the author's experience growing up in West Baltimore during the same period as the Wes Moores, and Jeff Hobbs' *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* tells the true story of a young African-American man who managed to escape the streets of Newark for Yale, only to end up killed in a drug-related shooting.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates
- **When Written:** 2006-2010
- **Where Written:** Flint, Michigan, USA
- **When Published:** 2010
- **Literary Period:** 21st century African-American nonfiction
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Baltimore and the Bronx
- **Climax:** Wes and Tony's bank robbery during which Sergeant Bruce Prothero is killed
- **Point of View:** Wes Moore (author). The sections about the other Wes's life are told in the third person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Community leader.** During his time at Johns Hopkins, Moore founded an organization called STAND! that works with young people in Baltimore caught up in the criminal justice system.

**A tragic story.** After Wes told the story of his brief (and ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to leave the drug trade through the Job Corps, Moore was so saddened that he sat in

his car for half an hour, unable to move.

## PLOT SUMMARY

In the introduction, Moore (the author) explains that the book tells the story of himself and another man named Wes Moore, both of whom were born in Baltimore in somewhat similar circumstances. However, where Moore himself grew up to achieve great things, "the other" Wes will spend every day of the rest of his life in **prison** for his part in the murder of Sergeant Bruce Prothero. After learning about Wes, Moore begins a correspondence with him that eventually turns into in-person visits in prison. The two men agree to work collaboratively in order to produce a book about their lives that will hopefully give an insight into the nature of destiny and inspire young people to make positive choices.

In the first interlude, Moore and Wes discuss the impact that their father's absences had on their lives. While Moore is deeply emotional just thinking about his father, who passed away when he was young, Wes is bitter about his own father's (chosen) absence from his life.

Chapter One begins when Wes is three years old and playfully punches his older sister, Nikki. His mother, Joy, is furious. Moore explains that Joy immigrated to the United States from Jamaica when she was young. As an undergraduate at American University, Joy met an attractive man named Bill who later became her husband and father to Nikki. However, it soon became clear that Bill had a drug abuse problem; he was also violently abusive to Joy. Ultimately, Joy chose to leave Bill, and not long after met Moore's father, Westley. Westley was a radio journalist who had graduated from Bard College and hosted his own public affairs program. One day after work, Westley feels ill and goes to the hospital. The doctors send him home with an anesthetic, but the next day Westley collapses and dies of acute epiglottis, a virus that causes suffocation. Although Wes and his younger sister Shani are too young to properly understand what has happened, Nikki is devastated by her stepfather's death.

The narrative switches to Wes's family. Wes's mother, Mary, is an undergraduate student at **Johns Hopkins** before federal cuts mean that her Pell grant is terminated, and she is forced to drop out. Wes's older half-brother, Tony, lives with his father and grandparents in the notorious **Murphy Homes Projects**. Wes feels protective of his mother, as his father, Bernard, is not present in his life. Mary's mother, Alma, died of a failed kidney transplant when Tony is a baby, and her father, Kenneth, is an alcoholic. When Wes is eight years old, he meets his father for the first time, as he is sitting on Wes's grandmother Mamie's couch in an alcoholic stupor.

Two years later, Mary and Wes have moved to Northwood, a safer neighborhood in the Northeast Baltimore. Wes plays football for the Norwood Rams, one of the best rec football teams in the country; yet despite being naturally intelligent, his academic grades are poor. One day, Wes is playing football with some kids from his neighborhood and gets into a scuffle with one of them. As the conflict escalates, Wes's friend Woody urges him to stay calm, but Wes runs into his house and grabs a knife. The police are called and both Wes and Woody are put in handcuffs.

Meanwhile, Joy and the kids have moved in with Joy's parents, James and Winell. The Bronx neighborhood in which Moore's grandparents live has been badly impacted by the crack epidemic and increasing levels of gang violence. James and Winell met as teenagers in Jamaica before immigrating to the United States. James is a minister, and both play an important role in the local community. They establish strict rules for Moore and the other children, but they are also loving and supportive.

Nervous about the prospect of sending Moore to public school in the Bronx, Joy opts to send him to Riverdale, a prestigious private school that was attended by John F. Kennedy. Moore is one of the only black kids in school, along with Justin, a friend who is also from the Bronx. The two boys are teased about attending a "white school," and Moore begins to feel increasingly conflicted and alienated both in his neighborhood and at Riverdale. As a result, his grades slip; a concerned Joy threatens to send him to military school, but Moore does not take this seriously.

Back in Baltimore, Tony has recently been shot during a botched drug deal. As he recovers in hospital, Wes begins to envy his older brother's expensive wardrobe. Wes sees a group of kids wearing headsets without realizing that they are working as lookouts in the drug trade, and asks where he can get one; the kids explain that that they are paid to wear them. Skipping school one day, Wes discovers Mary's weed stash and gets high for the first time. That night, he decides to join the drug game.

In the second interlude, Moore and Wes discuss maturity. Moore states that he believes he became a man when he first became responsible for others; Wes notes that providing for others can be difficult. Wes argues that both he and Moore received "second chances" when they were young, but that a second chance is only meaningful if it involves a change of circumstances.

Chapter Four begins when Wes is fifteen and has been working in the drug game for three years. Tony has noticed that his little brother has a large collection of brand-new sneakers and angrily interrogates Wes about where he is getting the money from. Wes insists that it is from DJing—the same lie he has been telling Mary—but Tony doesn't believe him. Later, Mary discovers a stash of Wes's drugs and flushes them down the toilet. Wes, panicked and furious, yells that at Mary that she has thrown away $4,000.

In the Bronx, Moore continues to perform badly in school. One day he and his friend Shea are spray-painting their "tags" on a wall when they are stopped and handcuffed by the police. While Shea shrugs off the incident and behaves rudely to the police officers, Moore is tearful. However, the next week he is back on the streets spraying graffiti again.

The narrative jumps forward in time; Joy has made good on her threats and Moore is now in military school. The final straw came when Moore was playfully hitting Shani and accidentally split her lip. In Moore's first few days at Valley Forge Military Academy, he is rude to his superiors and attempts to run away four times. During the final time, he is caught and brought to the office of Colonel Battagliogli, who allows Moore to speak on the phone for five minutes. Moore begs to come home, but Joy insists that he must stay. After the call, Moore is assigned to be mentored by Captain Ty Hill, a 19-year-old African-American man who is a distinguished cadet.

Wes is popular with women and has "a dozen girlfriends," including Alicia, who becomes pregnant only two months after meeting Wes. This news is revealed to Wes's family during Mary's baby's first birthday party; Tony is also about to become a father himself. Despite Alicia's pregnancy, Wes fails to stop seeing other girls, and one day gets into a fight with one of these girls' boyfriends, Ray. The fight quickly escalates into a shootout, with Wes and his boys chasing Ray down the street. Ray is shot in the shoulder and Wes is arrested.

Wes's friend Woody makes it to graduation, but most of their other friends do not. Wes was lucky to be sentenced in a juvenile court for the attempted murder of Ray, and serves only six months in a juvenile detention facility. After getting out, Wes lives with his Aunt Nicey and begins dealing drugs again. At peak efficiency, Wes's crew brings in $4,000 a day. One day, Wes accidentally sells drugs to an undercover cop and finds himself arrested again.

Military school has had a transformative impact on Moore. He is now disciplined, polite, and hard-working. A star basketball player, he is sent recruitment letters from a large number of colleges, though Moore's Uncle Howard reminds him to have a backup plan as, despite his talent, he is statistically unlikely to make it to the NBA. Meanwhile, Justin writes with news that Shea has been arrested for possession with intent to distribute. One evening, Moore and another cadet, Dalio, walk to the pizza place in a local town when they are harassed by a group of drunk teenagers, one of whom claims to be Colonel Bose's son. The teenagers shout racist abuse and throw a heavy object at Moore's face, but he chooses not to retaliate, instead ensuring that both he and Dalio get home safely.

In the final interlude, Moore asks Wes if he thinks that people are products of their environments. Wes admits that he does, and that he believes that people's fates are determined by other people's expectations; if they are expected to succeed, they will succeed, and if they are expected to fail, they'll fail.

Moore is now training as a paratrooper. He has discovered a love of reading and has been particularly inspired by Colin Powell's autobiography. He has decided to stay at Valley Forge's junior college to earn his associate's degree and is one of the youngest officers in the entire American military.

Wes now has two children with Alicia and two with Cheryl, a 23-year-old woman struggling with an addiction to heroin. Wes has grown sick of the drug game and wishes to get out. He asks his friend Levy for advice, and the two of them enroll in the Jobs Corps program. Wes adores the Jobs Corps campus, earns his GED in record time, and thrives in his vocational training as a carpenter, even building a house for his daughter. However, things become more difficult back in the outside world; Wes earns minimum wage working temporary, menial jobs and has no time to spend with his family. Eventually, he starts dealing drugs again.

The narrative jumps forward in time again. Mary has just learned that Tony and Wes are wanted for the murder of an off-duty cop, Sergeant Bruce Prothero, during a jewelry store robbery. She is aggressively searched and interrogated by the police, who even interrupt Aunt Nicey's daughter's wedding to question the guests about Wes and Tony's whereabouts. In reality, Wes and Tony are hiding out at their uncle's house in North Philadelphia. After 12 days, the men are found and arrested. While Tony accepts a plea deal to avoid the death penalty, Wes maintains his innocence and his case goes to trial. He is found guilty and sentenced to life in prison.

Moore, meanwhile, is in his senior year at Johns Hopkins University and completing his second internship with Mayor Kurt Schmoke. Schmoke advises Moore to pursue the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship, which Moore is awarded. The next semester, Moore travels to South Africa for a study abroad program. There, he meets Mama and Zinzi, who teach him about the legacy of apartheid and the maturation rituals of the Xhosa tribe. It is while Moore is in South Africa that he first learns about Wes.

In the epilogue, Moore provides an update on each of the major characters in the book. Wes is a grandfather at 33 and is serving the tenth year of his prison sentence. Most of Moore's family members have found success and happiness, whereas most of Wes's continue to struggle, and both Tony and Cheryl are dead. Moore himself has led an extraordinary career. After graduating from Oxford with a master's degree in international relations, he works at the White House and on Wall Street, serves in Afghanistan, and marries his "best friend," Dawn. Moore reiterates that it is difficult to identify any single factor that caused the differentiation between his and Wes's destinies, but that the support of Moore's family and community had an enormously positive impact.

In the afterword, Moore notes that some readers were disappointed by his lack of conclusive statement on what made the difference between his and Wes's fate. He adds that each

reader tends to come up with their own answer, which is the way it should be. Moore is moved that so many people enjoy the book, and admits that he was particularly heartened to hear from a 15-year-old in juvenile detention who told him that the book inspired him to make positive changes in his life.

In the "call to action," Tavis Smiley argues that the book helps to show how people's destinies are shaped, and that it encourages the reader to realize their own power. He advises the reader to try their hardest and let God "take care of the rest."

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Wes Moore (Moore/The Author)** – The author of the book is named Westley Watende Omari Moore, a name he admits that he himself was not comfortable spelling until he was "well into elementary school." Like "the other" Wes Moore, he goes by Wes. Born in Baltimore, he moves to the Bronx with his mother and two sisters following the sudden death of his father, Westley. The book charts Moore's development from a wayward child to a disciplined, distinguished teenager and adult. Although Moore admits that there is no single thing that made the difference in distinguishing his destiny from that of the other Wes, he says the most important factor was the support of his mother, Joy, along with the rest of his family and community.

**The Other Wes Moore (Wes)** – "The other" Wes was also born in Baltimore and is the second child of Mary and the younger half-brother of Tony. Moore's father, Bernard, is absent throughout his life. Although Tony and Mary make efforts to keep Wes on a responsible path, he ultimately ends up following his older brother into the drug game. Popular with women, Wes has many girlfriends and is the father of two children with Alicia and two with Cheryl. In 2000, he is arrested for the murder of Sergeant Bruce Prothero, which took place during a jewelry store robbery he conducted with Tony. Sentenced to life in **prison**, Wes converts to Islam and assists Moore in his research for the book.

**Tony** – Tony is Wes's older half-brother, born to Mary when she was only 16. He spends most of his time in the **Murphy Homes Projects** and has been dealing drugs since before the age of ten. By the time he is 14, he is a "certified gangsta" with a fierce reputation. He is also the closest thing Wes has to a father figure. Although Tony tirelessly tries to convince Wes to pursue a different path, eventually he gives up, admitting that there is nothing he can do to stop Wes making the same decisions as he did. When Wes and Tony are arrested for the murder of Sergeant Prothero, Tony is convicted as the "trigger man" and pleads guilty in order to avoid the death penalty. He dies in **prison** of kidney failure at the age of 38.

**Nikki** – Nikki is Moore's older half-sister, the daughter of Joy and her first husband, Bill. She struggles after the death of her stepfather, Westley, as this causes Bill to cease all financial and emotional support of her. While Nikki has a difficult time at high school in the Bronx, things ultimately turn out well; in the Epilogue Moore notes that she now runs her own events company in Virginia.

**Joy** – Moore's mother. Herself the daughter of Rev. James and Winell, Joy is born in Jamaica before immigrating to the United States as a child. At American University, Joy meets Bill, and the pair get married and have a child, Nikki. However, Joy ends up leaving Bill on account of his drug addiction and violent abuse. Soon after, she meets and marries Westley and has two children with him, Moore and Shani. When Westley dies, Joy moves the family back in with her parents in the Bronx and works three jobs in order to send Moore to Riverdale. Although she and Moore have a troubled relationship during this period, things improve dramatically after Moore's time at military school. At the end of the book, Moore credits the support of his mother as the most important element guiding his success.

**Westley** – Westley is Joy's second husband, the father of Moore and Shani, and the stepfather of Nikki. A radio journalist educated at Bard College, Westley has an "insatiable desire to succeed" and lands his own public affairs show. He dies unexpectedly when Moore is three from acute epiglottis, a virus that—if left untreated—causes fatal suffocation.

**Rev. Dr. James Thomas** – Moore's grandfather James is originally from Jamaica, where he meets his future wife Winell while a ministerial student at the age of 18. The couple immigrate to the United States so James can study theology at an American university. As a minister, he takes pride in serving his community in the Bronx. Although he and Winell originally plan to return to Jamaica to retire, they end up spending their retirement savings to pay for Moore's first year at military school.

**Alma** – Alma is Wes's maternal grandmother. When Mary tells her she is pregnant at 16, Alma replies that it's fine as long as Mary gets her education. Mary intends to rely on her mother for help with the baby, but shortly after Tony is born Alma dies of a failed kidney transplant.

**Bernard** – Bernard is Wes's father. Within a few months of meeting Mary, Bernard gets her pregnant with Wes; however, after this point he disappears. An alcoholic, Bernard never graduated high school and doesn't have a stable job. During the handful of times Wes meets him, Bernard is in an alcohol-induced stupor and doesn't recognize his son.

**Justin** – A close friend of Moore, Justin is one of the only other black kids at Riverdale. Justin is an excellent student and is warned by the Riverdale faculty to stay away from Moore, however Justin ignores this advice. Justin undergoes an unusual level of hardship in life; his mother dies of Hodgkin's Lymphoma while he is in high school, and in college Justin

develops a rare form of cancer himself at the same time as his father dies in a house fire. Despite this, Justin recovers and goes on to a successful career in education.

**Mayor Kurt Schmoke** – Mayor Kurt Schmoke grew up in Baltimore and attended Yale, Oxford, and Harvard before being elected the first African-American mayor of the city. As mayor, he is known for his progressive and effective policies, although Moore points out that he also struggled to address some of Baltimore's more enduring social problems. A Rhodes Scholar, Schmoke encourages Moore to apply for the scholarship while Moore is an intern at his office.

**Shea** – Shea is a friend of Moore's from the Bronx who gets involved in the drug game at a young age. When Moore is at Valley Forge, Justin tells him that Shea has been arrested for possession with intent to distribute and is thus likely to go to prison for a long time.

**Ray** – Ray is the boyfriend of a girl Wes sleeps with, who subsequently gets into a fight with Wes. After summoning his boys, Wes chases Ray downs the street shooting at him. Ray is shot in the shoulder, although he recovers quickly. Wes is sent to a juvenile detention facility for six months for his involvement in the shooting.

**Mary** Mary is the mother of Wes and Tony. Only 16 when she becomes pregnant with Tony, she is nonetheless determined to get her education and is the first person in her family to enroll in college. However, when her Pell Grant is terminated, she is forced to drop out of **Johns Hopkins University** and return to work full-time as a medical assistant. When Wes is a child, Mary is still young enough to go out dancing, and she has another baby a year before Tony and Wes become fathers themselves.

**Woody** Woody becomes friends with Wes when Wes moves to Northwood. When they are children, Woody is a positive influence on Wes, and tries to stop him from pulling the knife on the neighborhood boy. Woody is the only one of Wes' group of friends to graduate high school, although he still spends time in and out of prison after this point. Eventually, he resolves to leave the streets by getting a job as a truck driver.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Sergeant Bruce Prothero** – Sergeant Prothero is a Baltimore police officer and father of five who is working his second job as a mall security guard during Wes and Tony's jewelry store robbery. Tony shoots Prothero three times in the mall parking lot, and Prothero dies while the brothers drive away.

**Shani** – Shani is Moore's little sister, the youngest child of Joy and Westley, and is only a baby when her father dies. Moore describes her as a "prodigy," and she graduates from Princeton and Stanford Law School.

**Winell Thomas** – Winell is James's wife and Moore's grandmother. Originally from Cuba, she moves to Jamaica before moving again to the United States with James. Strict yet supportive, Moore describes her as a "lioness" and the "matriarch" of the family.

**Bill** – Bill is Joy's first husband and the father of Nikki. They meet through the black student association at American University and quickly fall in love. However, Bill's addiction and abuse force Joy to leave him.

**Mamie** – Mamie is Wes's paternal grandmother. Although Wes barely knows his father, Bernard, Mamie loves her grandson and likes to spoil him.

**Kenneth** – Kenneth is Wes's maternal grandfather. While he is usually a "gregarious and fun-loving person," he has a problem with alcoholism. When Alma dies, he drunkenly tells his children: "Sorry, guys, mom's dead."

**Kwame Nkrumah** – In 1957, Kwame Nkrumah led Ghana to independence from the British and served as the country's leader until 1966. Moore's grandfather James meets Nkrumah by chance after moving to the United States, and the two develop a close friendship.

**Uncle Howard** – Howard is Moore's uncle. A positive influence in Moore's life, Howard's attempt to integrate Moore's Riverdale friends with the neighborhood kids ultimately fails. Years later, he reminds a cocky 16-year-old Moore that—while he hopes Moore makes it to the NBA—it is important to have a backup plan.

**Alicia** – Wes meets Alicia on a school bus and is instantly attracted to her. Two months after they meet, Alicia discovers she is pregnant. She and Wes end up having two children together, although Wes continues to see other girls.

**Cheryl** – Cheryl is another of Wes's girlfriends. Slightly older than he is, she is a heroin addict who unsuccessfully tries to hide her drug use from him. She and Wes have two children together. Cheryl dies at 24 after falling down the stairs.

**Cadet Captain Ty Hill** – Captain Hill is a young African-American man who achieves an exceptional level of distinction at Valley Forge. He becomes a mentor to Moore, and years later is one of the groomsmen at Moore's wedding.

**Aunt Nicey** – Nicey is Wes's aunt. After he gets out of prison, Wes lives with her, hiding the fact that he is dealing drugs again. Aunt Nicey attends Wes's trial for the murder of Sergeant Prothero and comforts Mary when Wes is sentenced to life in **prison**.

**Dalio** – Dalio is the platoon sergeant of the other platoon in Moore's company. He and Moore are attacked by a group of drunk teenagers that includes Colonel Bose's son while they walk to town to get strombolis.

**Colonel Bose's Son** – Colonel Bose's son, who is never named, attacks Moore and Dalio while they are in the town near Valley Forge. While at first his targeting of the two cadets seems random, he later begins shouting racist abuse at Moore.

**Levy** – Levy is a friend of Wes's whom Wes goes to for advice when he decides he wants to get out of the drug game. The two men enroll in the Jobs Corps program together.

**Mama** – Mama is Moore's host mother during his study abroad program in South Africa. Her husband was a freedom fighter during the struggle against apartheid.

**Zinzi** – Zinzi is Mama's son. He and Moore become close friends when Moore is in South Africa. While Moore is preparing to go back to the United States, Zinzi is preparing undergo the Xhosa ritual of initiation into manhood.

**Dawn** – Dawn is Moore's wife, to whom he proposes while working as an assistant to Condoleezza Rice in Washington DC. Although we learn little about her, Moore describes her as "the most remarkable woman I know and the best friend I have."

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### LUCK VS. CHOICE

The central conceit of *The Other Wes Moore* lies in the question of how two men born into a similar position – and who even share identical names – ended up leading wildly different lives. Is this divergence simply a matter of luck, or because of the choices that each of them made? Moore the author does not give a definitive answer, but rather presents a detailed portrayal of his own life alongside that of the other Wes in order to show how both men's lives were shaped by both luck and choice.

As he tells his own story, Moore highlights key moments at which he made responsible decisions, which sometimes clash with the choices Wes made. For example, he explains how—after initial resistance—he ended up thriving in military school by embracing the philosophy of discipline and respect. Similarly, there are several moments at which it is clear Wes should have made a different decision; for example, when he pulls a knife on another kid in a neighborhood fight, when he steals his mother's marijuana, and of course when he participates in the robbery that results in the murder of a policeman and Wes's life imprisonment.

But, without denying that choices *do* have consequences, Moore doesn't simply chalk up good and bad decisions to people's intrinsic character. Rather, he shows that other factors can impact decisions. For instance, he shows how people's ability to make good choices develops with age.

When both boys are young, they can be selfish and short-tempered; they tend to disregard the advice of their elders and are disproportionately focused on seeming tough and cool to their peers. As Moore grows older, his values change, and he comes to understand the importance of discipline, education, and compassion. Wes also matures to a degree, growing frustrated with the world of drugs and crime and deciding to get out of "the game." However, he finds that this all but impossible—there are no longer other options available to him.

For Wes, the choices he made in his past limit the choices he can make in the present. Unable to leave behind a life of crime, he continues along that path until he takes part in the crime that results in the murder of a police officer and his own life imprisonment, which of course even further limits his choices. So even when in prison he makes selfless, responsible choices—dedicating his life to the Islamic faith and religious leadership—it is too late for him to have much impact over his own destiny.

If bad choices lead to more bad choices, though, how did Moore manage to escape the sort of cycle that Wes never could? The book's answer to that question is luck. Moore was lucky enough to have a mother with the knowledge, ability, and resources to send him to the military school that helped him to change his values. Wes had no such luck. And while one could argue that this too was a matter of choice rather than luck – that Moore's mother made good choices while Wes's didn't – the book makes clear that before Wes was born his mother had dreams of graduating college and admission to **Johns Hopkins University**, but couldn't afford to stay in school when her Pell grant was terminated due to government cuts. Wes's life is thus significantly impacted by an unfortunate circumstance that was out of both his and his mother's control. Although Moore does not argue that his and Wes's fates are entirely the product of circumstance, he does emphasize that people have less control over their own lives than we might like to think.

### FRIENDSHIP, FAMILY, AND BROTHERHOOD

The book is not only a portrayal of the two Wes Moores; it is also a depiction of their families. Moore emphasizes the extent to which our families shape who we are, and stresses that without family support, most people have little chance of achieving success. Moore begins the narrative with a discussion of how he and Wes each had to cope with having an absent fathers, before moving on to describe his own father and recalling the few memories he has of life before his father's death. Although Moore's father Westley dies when Moore is very young, he remains a significant figure in the narrative and continues to exert a positive influence on Moore even after death. Moore reflects that the experience of researching and writing the book is, to some extent, a tribute to his father, who was a radio journalist. Thus Moore suggests that even though his father is not physically present in his life, he

still shaped the man who Moore becomes. Similarly, although Wes barely knows his father, he ends up repeating his father's destiny by not being present to raise his own children. The experience of the two Wes Moores suggests that often we cannot help but be defined by our parents' legacies.

At the same time, families' deliberate attempts to control their children's destinies often backfire. When Joy enrolls Moore at Riverdale, she imagines that this will expand his "horizons" and help him to create a better life. However, she underestimates the impact that the social alienation of attending a "white school" will have on her son. Moore's rejection of Riverdale and poor academic performance there puts a significant strain on his relationship with his mother. Meanwhile, Wes's family are even less successful in controlling his destiny. Mary reacts harshly when she finds out that Wes is dealing drugs, vengefully flushing thousands of dollars of drugs that Wes intends to sell down the toilet. Similarly, Tony is determined that his younger brother does not follow his example of being a drug dealer, but rather stays in school and out of "the game." However, Tony and Mary's efforts fail to deter Wes from the drug trade. Rather than following Tony's advice, Wes prefers to emulate his older brother, and the two men eventually end up being sent to life in **prison** for the same crime. Again, this suggests that it is the examples set by our families—rather than the deliberate attempts they make to influence our fates—that has the bigger impact.

Moore also works to show the way in which a larger network of relationships is crucial in shaping young people as they grow up. Moore's friendships with Justin, Captain Hill, Mayor Kurt Schmoke, and Zinzi all push him to improve himself and make him feel supported as he moves through life. Meanwhile, Wes's non-familial relationships pull him in opposing directions; while Woody and Levy support Wes in making responsible decisions, his relationships with Cheryl and his drug crew have more of a destructive impact. Cheryl steals from him in order to support her heroin addiction, and his crew help escalate the situation that leads to the shooting of Ray. Throughout the book, Wes is shown to lack people who will guide him away from harmful decisions and toward better ones. While his relationships with friends and family are important, they sometimes exacerbate his existing destructive tendencies. In this sense, Moore suggests that the people we choose to surround ourselves with tend to reflect our own self-image, and in turn propel our destiny in a good or bad direction depending on how we view ourselves.

## INCLUSION VS. EXCLUSION

Both Wes Moores experience powerful moments of inclusion and exclusion during their lives, and these experiences have a significant impact on the choices each of them makes. Born into loving—if shattered—families, the Wes Moores begin life with a strong connection to their relatives. Both boys also experience a sense of community through their participation in sports; Wes feels a sense of belonging when he puts on his Northwood Rams football jersey, and Moore describes the group of kids who he plays basketball with in the Bronx as a "brotherhood." As Moore moves through life, he is inducted into a series of new communities—first at military school, then **Johns Hopkins**, then as a Rhodes Scholar—each of which supports him and pushes him to become even more successful.

This is a distinct contrast to Wes' experience. Unlike Moore, Wes does not remain in sporting and academic communities, and the importance of these communities only becomes clear to him after they are gone. At the Jobs Corps campus, for example, Wes is stunned by the chance to live and work on what looks like a college campus; however, this too is taken away once Wes graduates from the Jobs Corps and is forced to return to the real world. Meanwhile, even Wes's experience as a boyfriend and father is marred by his infidelity to Alicia and Cheryl's drug addiction. Similarly, his relationship with Mary is strained due to his lying and criminal activity. It is not until he is in **prison** and converts to Islam that he experiences a sense of inclusion again. Yet although his religious community supports him as he serves his time, it cannot undo the fact that Wes is permanently excluded from the outside world and cut off from his family. In many ways, prison is the ultimate exclusionary force in the book.

Moore also traces how he and Wes are subject to larger forces of inclusion and exclusion that govern the world around them. As African Americans, both are excluded and marginalized within American society. Because he remains in a majority-black neighborhood, this large-scale exclusion is less immediately apparent to Wes. Moore, on the other hand, is strongly affected by exclusion based on race and class, particularly when he attends Riverdale. Describing his time at the school, he notes: "I was becoming too 'rich' for the kids from the neighborhood and too 'poor' for the kids at school." He encounters a similar dilemma when he first considers applying to **Johns Hopkins**; despite growing up minutes away from the Johns Hopkins campus, Moore doesn't believe that there are any students there like him. Although Moore overcomes his concerns about applying to Johns Hopkins and goes on to find great success there, the book highlights the tension between the worlds Moore ends up living between. Although he secures a prosperous future for himself in both an academic and professional context, he remains tied to the poor, excluded community into which both he and Wes were born.

## RACE, INEQUALITY, AND INJUSTICE

Perhaps the most important parallel between the two Wes Moores—even more significant than their shared name, age, and birthplace—is the fact that they are both black. This creates a bond between the two men

that endures even though almost everything else about their lives is in stark contrast. At the same time, the two men do not share the exact same ethnic identity; whereas Wes is entirely African-American, Moore's mother and grandparents are immigrants from the Caribbean. Joy's family are thus more obviously "outsiders" to American life, and Moore describes his mother's studied efforts to integrate into American modes of behavior. On the other hand, both Moore's parents are college graduates, and thus experience less of the marginalization that results from being poor, non college-educated African Americans like Wes's family members.

Although Moore does not necessarily focus on racial injustice explicitly in *The Other Wes Moore*, it is a theme that runs throughout the book. Moore notes that though **Johns Hopkins** is only five miles away from his and Wes's homes, "it might as well have been a world away." The lack of opportunities and resources in both their lives (and particularly in Wes's) is undoubtedly fuelled by the impact of racial discrimination, which Moore hints at by referring to the impact of poverty, drugs, and cuts to public assistance on both his Baltimore neighborhood and the part of the Bronx in which his mother grew up. Similarly, Moore details many moments in which he and Wes are subject to racially-charged police brutality.

One of the passages in which Moore addresses racial inequality most explicitly is in his description of his visit to South Africa. He notes: "It was obviously a far more egregious situation, but I could sense faint echoes of Baltimore and the Bronx in the story of these townships," thereby highlighting the fact that the United States is afflicted by the same problems of stark racial segregation and inequality as South Africa, even if they may seem less apparent on the surface. It is in South Africa that Moore is also confronted with a new image of his own racial identity. His host, Mama, explains that in South Africa he would be considered "colored," not black, due to his light skin. This realization—alongside Moore's awareness of even more drastic poverty in South Africa than what he witnesses in Baltimore—suggests that all inequality and injustice is flexible and relative, even if it works according to similar logic and intersects all over the world.

## DISCIPLINE AND VIOLENCE

*The Other Wes Moore* features a great deal of violence, yet this violence comes in many different forms. Perhaps the most obvious example is the violence of the streets, which affects both men yet is a far bigger part of Wes's life than Moore's. Both men are born in Baltimore at a time in which drugs and gang violence are taking a devastating toll on the city. However, as Moore moves through life he becomes increasingly insulated from the violence of the streets—first through moving out of Baltimore, then enrolling in Riverdale, finding success as a football player, being placed in military school, and so on. Wes, on the other hand, has no escape route. Although Mary, Tony, and Woody attempt to keep him away from the world of crime and violence, Wes's entrance into this world seems inevitable; this is true even though Wes himself has no desire to engage in violence, and tries multiple times to pursue a different path.

For Wes, violence is less a deliberate choice or action and more a reality that surrounds and suffocates him: "Wes was tired… tired of being shot at and having to attend the funerals of his friends." In this way, Moore implies that there is a note of injustice in Wes's life imprisonment for murder. When the judge sentences Wes, he accuses him of behaving as if he lived in "the Wild West," a statement that fails to grasp the fact that Wes's environment is just as violent and chaotic (if not more so) than the Wild West was. Although Moore believes that Wes is guilty, the overall portrait of Wes's life suggest that there was never any real chance of him escaping the violent world into which he was born.

To some extent, the book suggests that the antidote to violence is discipline. Moore's enrollment at military school, for example, is shown to be the turning point that enables him to succeed in life and escape the streets for good. On the other hand, discipline—and particularly the criminal justice system—is also shown in the book to be a form of violence in itself. When both Wes Moores are young, they have frequent interactions with the police in which the police behave in a violent and aggressive manner, despite the fact that the boys are only children. Meanwhile, Wes's life imprisonment illustrates the injustice of the **prison** system. Although Moore does not deny that Wes should have been sent to prison due to his involvement in a violent crime, it is clear that the discipline of prison has significantly changed Wes, such that he could likely emerge a non-threatening and responsible member of society. Yet unlike Moore, whose experience of a disciplinary institution (military school) ultimately enables him to flourish, Wes is stuck with discipline for discipline's sake, working every day in order to make 53 cents and with no hope of release.

# SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

## PRISON

The central concept of *The Other Wes Moore* is that, despite similar beginnings, Moore the author ended up leading a successful and fulfilling life while "the other" Wes will spend every day of the rest of his life behind bars. Prison is a haunting presence in the narrative. Each of the book's three parts begins with a conversation between Moore and Wes during visitation at Jessup Correctional Facility, where Wes is incarcerated. Moore vividly recreates the grim

reality of the prison environment, from the bulletproof glass that separates the prisoners and their visitors to the "DOC" emblazoned on each of the prisoners' uniforms, reminding them that they are "owned by the state." The repetitive routine of each visit—Moore waits to be searched, waits for the inmates to enter, and speaks with Wes for the strictly-monitored allotted time—mirrors the repetitive monotony of each of Wes's days. In the Epilogue, Moore notes that Wes begins each day at 5.30am, works as a carpenter for 53 cents a day, is instructed when to eat, wash, and sleep, and is allotted two hours of free time every day. In contrast to Moore's life, which is filled with a diverse series of achievements and adventures, Wes's existence will be the same every day for the rest of his life.

Ironically, it is this monotony that allows Wes to look to the future for the first time. Before being sent to prison, Wes's life is full of instability, and his involvement in the violent drug game makes it difficult for him to imagine a future for himself. (When Wes finds out he will become a teenage father, he does not worry about parenthood ruining his future plans "because he didn't really have any future plans.") Once he knows that he will spend the rest of his life incarcerated, Wes is finally able to "see his future." This tragic observation evokes the idea that many poor young black men like Wes are destined to end up incarcerated due to lack of resources, opportunities, and support. Indeed, earlier in the book Moore mentions that the way "many governors projected the numbers of beds they'd need for prison facilities was by examining the reading scores of third graders," thereby confirming the idea that the broader social system pre-determined that Wes would end up behind bars.

Despite the monotonous and inescapable nature of incarceration, however, Wes does use his time in prison to undergo a dramatic personal transformation. He converts to Islam and becomes a leader in the Muslim community at Jessup; his newfound faith gives him a sense of moral direction and purpose. Furthermore, despite the fact that he personally will never be able to leave prison, Wes hopes that through Moore's telling of his story, he will be able to help other young people avoid the same fate.

## JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Johns Hopkins University, an elite institution located in Baltimore, symbolizes both the chance to succeed as well as the dark reality of segregation, inequality, and injustice. One of the first things we learn about Wes's mother, Mary, is that she was the first person in her family to attend college, and that after completing her associate's degree at the Community College of Baltimore, she enrolls at Johns Hopkins. Mary works part-time in order to support herself and her family during her time as a student; however, she is forced to drop out when government cuts mean her Pell grant is terminated. This tragic turn of events serves as a reminder of how difficult access to higher education can be for those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

The location of Johns Hopkins in Baltimore highlights the extent to which American society is divided into two worlds, which—despite existing side-by-side—can seem like whole separate universes. Moore describes Johns Hopkins as "the beautiful campus you could walk past but not through," comparing Johns Hopkins' relationship to Baltimore to that between Columbia University and Harlem and the University of Chicago and the Southside. Despite their proximity to struggling neighborhoods, these elite institutions exist as isolated worlds. Later in the book, Moore is hesitant about the prospect of applying to Johns Hopkins (despite being encouraged to do so by his adviser) because he believes that the university is "full of kids who did not look or sound like me." It is only after Moore meets the assistant director of admissions, a young black man with whom Moore can personally identify, that he decides to make an application. Moore's admission into Johns Hopkins and his success once there—he graduates Phi Beta Kappa and is the first African-American Rhodes Scholar in the school's history—show that it is possible for a person from the "forgotten" side of Baltimore to make it through to the other side. But on the other hand, Moore never forgets that, for those less fortunate than him, the prospect of attending a school like Hopkins will simply never be a serious possibility.

## THE MURPHY HOMES PROJECTS

Where **Johns Hopkins** symbolizes achievement and opportunity, the Murphy Homes Projects represent the opposite: violence, crime, and wasted potential. Named after the legendary Baltimore educator George Murphy, the Murphy Homes could not be further from Murphy's legacy. The buildings are in a desperate state of filth and disrepair and are overrun with violent drug crime, such that they are nicknamed "the Murder Homes" by local residents. Wes's older brother, Tony, spends most of their youth living in the Murphy Homes with his father and grandparents, and Tony's choice of residence reflects the fact that he has been deep in the drug game from an early age. For Tony, drug crime is not just a way of making money but a reality that totally surrounds him and from which he cannot ever escape.

Toward the end of the book, Moore mentions that Mayor Kurt Schmoke has overseen the demolition of the Murphy Homes Projects as part of his efforts to solve the social problems plaguing West Baltimore. While to some extent this is presented as a sign of progress and success, it also raises questions about what the destruction of the homes will actually

solve. Throughout the book, Moore describes the gentrification that forces the urban poor of Baltimore to leave their homes and neighborhoods. At one point Wes ponders what is supposed to happen to all those who are displaced to make way for wealthier, white residents. Does the destruction of the Murphy Homes Projects really address the issues facing Baltimore directly, or is it more of a symbolic gesture that leaves the real problems unresolved?

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Spiegel & Grau edition of *The Other Wes Moore* published in 2011.

### Introduction Quotes

The chilling truth is that his story could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his. Our stories are obviously specific to our two lives, but I hope they will illuminate the crucial inflection points in every life, the sudden moments of decision where our paths diverge and our fates are sealed. It's unsettling to know how little separates each of us from another life altogether.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), The Other Wes Moore (Wes)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** xi

**Explanation and Analysis**

Moore has explained that the book tells the story of himself and another man named Wes Moore, both born in Baltimore. Yet while the two men's lives began in a similar way, they diverge drastically; Moore lives a successful life he "never even knew to dream about," while Wes has murdered a father of five and will spend the rest of his life in prison. Although both men are unique individuals with different personalities and life experiences, Moore emphasizes that they each *could* have ended up with the other's destiny. He does this not to excuse Wes's crime or diminish the importance of the choices each man made, but rather as a way of exploring how each person's destiny is shaped.

We definitely have our disagreements––and Wes, it should never be forgotten, is in prison for his participation in a heinous crime. But even the worst decisions we make don't necessarily remove us from the circle of humanity. Wes's desire to participate in this book as a way to help others learn from his story and choose a different way is proof of that.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), The Other Wes Moore (Wes)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** xiii

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Moore discovers Wes's existence, he writes a letter that sparks a long correspondence between the two men. Moore is astonished to find that telling their stories to one another really does bring the men close and makes Wes's world seem less alien than it first appeared. In this passage, Moore underlines the sense of common humanity that stretches to Wes despite the fact that Wes has committed a "heinous crime." Although he doesn't wish to excuse Wes, Moore is a firm believer in respecting every person as a human being. His words in this passage foreshadow the conversation he has with Mama at the end of the book, in which she explains that she follows the lead of Nelson Mandela in forgiving the crimes of apartheid.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

Johns Hopkins University was only five miles from where Mary grew up, but it might as well have been a world away. To many in Baltimore, Johns Hopkins was the beautiful campus you could walk past but not through. It played the same role that Columbia University did for the Harlem residents who surrounded it, or the University of Chicago did for the Southside. It was a school largely for people from out of town, preppies who observed the surrounding neighborhood with a voyeuristic curiosity when they weren't hatching myths about it to scare freshmen. This city wasn't their home. But after completing her community college requirements, Mary attempted the short but improbable journey from the neighborhood to the campus. Her heart

jumped when she received her acceptance letter. It was a golden ticket to another world.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), Mary

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 17

**Explanation and Analysis**

Moore has introduced Wes' mother, Mary, who is the first in her family to enroll in college. After earning her associate's degree from the Community College in Baltimore, she moves on to fulfill her "longtime" dream of earning a bachelor's. In this passage, Moore describes the tense relationship between Johns Hopkins University—a prestigious institution located in Baltimore—and the city that surrounds it. It is not proximity that separates Mary's world from the world of Johns Hopkins, but rather race, poverty, and other forms of social inequality. Although there is no physical barrier telling Mary that she doesn't "belong" on the Johns Hopkins campus, other, more subtle signs indicate that it is a world for white "preppies" and not single, black teenage mothers from West Baltimore.

Mary's miraculous acceptance in spite of this barrier indicates that such barriers *can* be overcome, and foreshadows Moore's acceptance to Johns Hopkins later in the book. However, although Moore describes Mary's admission as "a golden ticket" in this passage, the reality turns out not to be so magical. The forces dividing the elite world of Johns Hopkins and the impoverished reality of West Baltimore turn out to be more stubborn than Mary anticipates.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ The walls and floors were coated with filth and graffiti. Flickering fluorescent tubes (the ones that weren't completely broken) dimly lit the cinder-block hallways. The constantly broken-down elevators forced residents to climb claustrophobic, urine-scented stairways. And the drug game was everywhere, with a gun handle protruding from the top of every tenth teenager's waistline. People who lived in Murphy Homes felt like prisoners, kept in check by roving bands of gun-strapped kids and a nightmare army of drug fiends. This was where Tony chose to spend his days.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), Tony

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 27

**Explanation and Analysis**

Moore has explained that Tony, who is six years older than Wes, is the closest thing that Wes has to a father figure. However, Tony isn't around all the time because he lives with his father and grandparents in the Murphy Homes, a notorious housing project nicknamed the "Murder homes." Moore's description of the Murphy Homes brings to mind a warzone more than a residential community. It emphasizes the extent to which West Baltimore is a neglected, forgotten community forced to deal with living conditions that would horrify many affluent and white Americans.

Although many in the Murphy Homes Projects would undoubtedly rather live elsewhere, Moore emphasizes that the Homes are "where Tony *chose* to spend his days." This comment illustrates the way in which luck and choice intermingle in the cruel environment of West Baltimore. While Tony likely doesn't enjoy spending time in "urine-scented stairways," he has made the decision to participate in the drug trade. The consequences of his role as a drug dealer can never be blamed on either choice or luck alone, but rather a combination of the two.

❝ 'Wes searched around his room for his football jersey. He played defensive end for the Northwood Rams, one of the best rec football teams in the nation. Wes loved football, and his athletic frame made him a natural. Even if he was just going out to play in the streets with Woody and some other friends, he wore that jersey like a badge of honor. The crimson "Northwood" that blazed across his white jersey gave him a sense of pride, a sense of belonging."

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), The Other Wes Moore (Wes)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 29

**Explanation and Analysis**

Mary and Wes have moved to Northwood, a safer neighborhood populated by members of the black professional class. Mary is thrilled about the move, and in this passage Moore describes Wes's increased feelings of belonging as a result of playing football for the Northwood

Rams. Thanks to his innate talent, Wes is able to secure a place on the team; however, the prestige of the team means less to him than the simple fact of feeling like he belongs to a community. This moment of hope becomes tragic in light of Wes's broader trajectory. What would have happened if he had had more opportunities to develop his skills and feel like a valued member of a team?

When my grandparents moved to the United States, their first priority was to save enough money to buy this house on Paulding Avenue. To them a house meant much more than shelter; it was a stake in their new country. America allowed them to create a life they couldn't have dreamed of in their home countries of Jamaica and Cuba.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), Winell Thomas, Rev. Dr. James Thomas

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 39

**Explanation and Analysis**

Following Westley's death, Joy has decided to take the kids and move in with her parents in the Bronx. As they drive through the neighborhood, the family is alarmed by the palpable toll that drugs and crime have taken. In this passage, Moore explains that his grandparents started saving to buy their house from the moment they arrived in America. They wanted to have a "stake" not only in their new community, but in their new country. In many ways, James and Winell's story is the classic immigrant narrative; they leave everything back home in order to have a chance of prosperity, social mobility, and a slice of the "American dream."

While this is a slightly oversimplified and romanticized version of Moore's grandparents' reality, it nonetheless highlights an important distinction between Moore's family and Wes's. Whereas James and Winell earnestly believe in the possibility of creating a better life for themselves in the United States, the relationship between African Americans and their country is decidedly more complicated. The oppression and marginalization that began during slavery has, for people like Wes, not disappeared but simply transformed into new forms, manifesting itself in the destructive reality of poverty, discrimination, and the drug trade. It is simply not possible for Wes to view America from the same perspective as James and Winell.

We were all enclosed by the same fence, bumping into one another, fighting, celebrating. Showing one another our best and worst, revealing ourselves––even our cruelty and crimes––as if that fence had created a circle of trust. A brotherhood.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 45

**Explanation and Analysis**

For the first time, Moore has joined a basketball game in his new neighborhood in the Bronx. He has described the diverse range of characters brought together on the court, from drug dealers to straight-A students. He notes that within the court's chain-link fence, the boys put aside their differences and embrace one another in "a circle of trust." His comments recall the sense of belonging that Wes feels when donning his Northwood Rams jersey. While the neighborhoods in which both boys live are often driven apart by petty disputes and dangerous conflict, in this moment the feeling of belonging is powerful. By referring to the group of boys as a "brotherhood," Moore emphasizes the importance of feeling supported by a family group, whether one created by blood or by chance.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

My mother saw Riverdale as a haven, a place where I could escape my neighborhood and open my horizons. But for me, it was where I got lost.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), Joy

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 48

**Explanation and Analysis**

Moore has explained that his mother was nervous about the prospect of sending him to public school in the Bronx, and thus opted to enroll him at the prestigious Riverdale County Day School, an institution with a "lush" college-like campus and a decidedly affluent student population. However, in this passage Moore indicates that his mother was mistaken in her excitement about the opportunities Riverdale presented. Moore finds himself "lost" at the school because

he feels alienated from the other students—who are almost all wealthy and white. It is impossible to reconcile the "horizons" presented by Riverdale and the reality of his life in the Bronx. Without feeling like he is a welcome and valuable member of the Riverdale community, Moore is unable to take advantage of the potential opportunities presented to him there.

I was becoming too "rich" for the kids from the neighborhood and too "poor" for the kids at school. I had forgotten how to act naturally, thinking way too much in each situation and getting tangled in the contradictions between my two worlds. My confidence took a hit. Unlike Justin, whose maturity helped him handle this transition much better than I did, I began to let my grades slip.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), Justin

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 53-54

**Explanation and Analysis**

Moore has been struggling to hide his family's lack of wealth from the kids at Riverdale; meanwhile, the neighborhood boys in the Bronx tease him about attending a "white school." Increasingly caught between these two worlds, Moore struggles to cope. This passage illustrates the ways in which Moore's academic performance is inherently tied to his social status and confidence. While Moore's concerns might seem childish and frivolous (especially compared to the more driven and mature Justin), they are in fact caused by the very serious issues of racism and inequality. It is easy to dismiss Moore's neglect of his schoolwork as irresponsible; yet the reason why Moore and many children like him fail to succeed is because they are suffering from the effects of social inequality and exclusion.

Later in life I learned that the way many governors projected the numbers of beds they'd need for prison facilities was by examining the reading scores of third graders. Elected officials deduced that a strong percentage of kids reading below their grade level by third grade would be needing a secure place to stay when they got older. Considering my performance in the classroom thus far, I was well on my way to needing state-sponsored accommodations.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 54

**Explanation and Analysis**

Due to his feelings of social inadequacy, Moore starts to perform badly in school. His grades slip to Cs and Ds, and in third grade he is reading at a second-grade level. Moore notes that third grade reading scores are in fact often used to determine the amount of prison space that will be needed in the following generation.

Immediately, Moore's casual anecdote of his slipping grades becomes much more sinister. If third grade reading levels can be used to accurately gauge the number of prison beds needed, what does this say about the possibility of second chances, personal improvement, and social mobility in American society? While it is true that Moore does not end up incarcerated, this passage emphasizes the extent to which he truly is the exception to the norm. His observation proves that many children's fates are sealed by the time they are 10 years old.

## Part II Interlude Quotes

From everything you told me, both of us did some pretty wrong stuff when we were younger. And both of us had second chances. But if the situation or the context where you make the decisions don't change, then second chances don't mean too much, huh?

**Related Characters:** The Other Wes Moore (Wes) (speaker), Wes Moore (Moore/The Author)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 66

**Explanation and Analysis**

During prison visitation, Wes has asked Moore when he felt like he first became a man. Moore replies that it was when he felt he was accountable to people other than himself; Wes responds that "providing for others isn't easy," and that it can be difficult to get second chances when you mess up. In this passage, Wes further explains that it seems like both he and Moore made mistakes when they were younger. While they both got second chances, Wes's second chances

were not really meaningful, because they had no impact on the circumstances in which Wes made the decisions in the first place.

Wes's understanding of second chances places a heavy emphasis on the influence of external circumstances rather than people's individual choices. This foreshadows his and Moore's conversation in the third and final interlude in which Wes argues that people's destinies are shaped by the expectations of others. Wes's observation also suggests that he has a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of second chances, perhaps more so than Moore. Whereas Moore places a heavier emphasis on people's ability to autonomously make the right decisions and turn their lives around, Wes emphasizes the importance of external change, which in turn allows people to change internally.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

I found in hip-hop the sound of my generation talking to itself, working through the fears and anxieties and inchoate dreams—of wealth or power or revolution or success—we all shared. It broadcast an exaggerated version of our complicated interior lives to the world, made us feel less alone in the madness of the era, less marginal. Of course, all that didn't matter to my mother. All she knew was that I could effortlessly recite hip-hop lyrics while struggling with my English class.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), Joy

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 76

### Explanation and Analysis

Moore has been performing badly in school, a fact that is causing Joy to be increasingly concerned. One day while Moore and Joy are in the car together, a hip hop song comes on the radio and Moore starts rapping along enthusiastically. Joy is furious; while Moore's teachers at Riverdale have suggested he might have a learning disability, Moore's mastery of the lyrics indicates to Joy that he has simply been focusing his energies in the wrong direction. In this passage, Moore explains that—rather than being a frivolous diversion—hip hope gives him a sense of meaning and community, particularly in the context of the pressures he experiences as a young boy growing up in the crack epidemic-era Bronx.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

Wes, you are not going anywhere until you give this place a try. I am so proud of you, and your father is proud of you, and we just want you to give this a shot. Too many people have sacrificed in order for you to be there.

**Related Characters:** Joy (speaker), Westley, Wes Moore (Moore/The Author)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 95

### Explanation and Analysis

After four attempts to run away from Valley Forge, Moore is brought to the office of Colonel Battagliogli, who allows him to make a five-minute phone call. When Joy answers the phone, Moore immediately begins begging to be allowed to come home; however, Joy cuts him off and tells him that he has no choice but to stay. This passage demonstrates Joy's particular mix of strictness and support, the combination of which ultimately enables her son to flourish. Although Moore is miserable at military school, it is clear that he needs the discipline and boundaries of the institution in order to make a positive change in his life. Joy's mention of the sacrifices made to facilitate Moore's attendance then emphasizes the fact that Moore's journey is not being taken alone, but rather with a whole community supporting him.

In Baltimore in 1991, 11.7 percent of girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen had given birth. More than one out of ten. He also didn't feel burdened by the thought that early parenthood would wreck his future plans--because he didn't really have any future plans. And he wasn't overly stressed about the responsibilities of fatherhood--he didn't even know what that meant. But in some unspoken way, he did sense that he was crossing a point of no return, that things were about to get complicated in a way he was unequipped to handle.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), The Other Wes Moore (Wes)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis

Wes has discovered that Alicia is pregnant and that he is about to become a teenage father. Wes's first reaction to

the news is shock; he cannot bring himself to believe that Alicia is really having a baby. But after this initial disbelief subsides, Wes treats the pregnancy with a kind of numbed apathy. At the same time, Moore mentions that this does signal a turning point for Wes, a comment that relates back to their conversation in the interlude in which they discuss being responsible for others. While Moore describes the onset of this responsibility as a positive thing—the moment at which he becomes "a man"—Wes is more ambivalent. He is neither happy nor sad about Alicia's pregnancy; he has no emotional investment in his future.

In the Afterword, Moore mentions that some readers believed the major cause of Wes's downfall is his "indifference to contraception." Although this is perhaps a rather crude understanding, Wes's attitude toward his life is undeniably characterized by profound indifference. However, rather than placing blame entirely on Wes for this fact, it is important to view this indifference in the larger context of the resources and opportunities available to Wes. Given the environment in which he lives, how could he have much hope of a brighter future?

## Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Wes had his entire operation organized with the precision of a military unit or a division of a Fortune 500 company. The drug game had its own rules, its own structure. He was a lieutenant, the leader of his small crew. Everyone in the crew had a specific job with carefully delineated responsibilities.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), The Other Wes Moore (Wes)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 110-111

### Explanation and Analysis

After Wes is released from juvenile detention, he moves in with Aunt Nicey. A high school dropout with a criminal record, Wes finds it difficult to get a legal job, and thus returns to the drug trade. In this passage, Moore describes the skill with which Wes runs his drug operation. Moore's references to the military "the precision of a military unit… he was a lieutenant" explicitly relates Wes's experiences in the drug game to Moore's time at Valley Forge. However, where Moore is learning skills that will allow him to assume a valued and respected role in society—that of an Army officer—Wes's (similar) skills only serve to further malign him in the eyes of society. This discrepancy emphasizes the notion of Wes's wasted potential and of the injustice of his circumstances.

❝ I had to let this one go. I had to look at the bigger picture. My assailant was unknown, unnamed, and in a car. This was not a fair fight, and the best-case scenario was nowhere near as probable as the worst-case scenario. If I was successful, who knew how the fight would've ended? If I failed, who knew how the fight would've ended? I thought about my mother and how she would feel if this escalated any further. I thought about my father and the name he chose for me.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker), Westley, Joy, Colonel Bose's Son

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 121

### Explanation and Analysis

During a trip to town with his fellow cadet Dalio, Moore is attacked by a group of drunk teenagers, one of whom identifies himself as Colonel Bose's son. As the teenagers' aggression escalates, one of them shouts a racist slur at Moore and throws something hard at his face. Although Moore is tempted to retaliate, he reasons that this is too great a risk. The kind of reasoning Moore displays in this passage is a direct contrast to Wes's reaction to the conflicts with the young boy during the football game and with Ray. In these cases, Wes leaves no time for rational reflection, but simply recalls Tony's advice to "send a message" and grabs a weapon.

Moore's words in this passage emphasize the extent to which he is able to make rational, responsible decisions because of the love and support of his family. Rather than fixating on his own pride, Moore's thoughts immediately jump to the impact his injury or death would have on his family. This moment thus reveals a turning point in Moore's maturity, in which he has left behind the desire to prove himself and is more focused on the responsibility he has toward others.

## Part III Interlude Quotes

"I think so, or maybe products of our expectations."
"Others' expectations of us or our expectations for ourselves?"
"I mean others' expectations that you take on as your own."
I realized then how difficult it is to separate the two. The expectations that others place on us help us form our expectations of ourselves.
"We will do what others expect of us," Wes said. "If they expect us to graduate, we will graduate. If they expect us to get a job, we will get a job. If they expect us to go to jail, then that's where we will end up too. At some point you lose control."

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author), The Other Wes Moore (Wes) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 66

**Explanation and Analysis**

During one of his visits to prison, Moore has asked Wes whether he thinks that people's fates are determined by their external circumstances. Wes replies that he does, and that he thinks people internalize others' expectations. Once again, Wes reveals a notably sophisticated understanding of the way in which people are influenced by external circumstances. While some may argue that Wes shifts the blame too far away from personal responsibility, his words are also supported by much of the evidence in the book. Although both men make mistakes when they are young, Moore is consistently surrounded by people who hope and expect him to achieve great things. Meanwhile, no one seriously expects Wes to achieve much at all.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

As I started to think seriously about how I could become the person I wanted to be, I looked around at some of the people who'd had the biggest impact on my life. Aside from family and friends, the men I most trusted all had something in common: they all wore the uniform of the United States of America.

**Related Characters:** Wes Moore (Moore/The Author) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 132

**Explanation and Analysis**

Moore has explained that over the course of the time he has spent at military school, he has begun to excel at academic work and genuinely enjoy reading. One of the books he most enjoys is Colin Powell's *My American Journey*, which describes Powell's relationship to the United States and to the military. This book particularly resonates with Moore because of his own experiences as a cadet at Valley Forge. Military school has given him a new sense of perspective and direction, and inspired him to devote his life to the kind of disciplined public service encouraged by his teachers and mentors there.

Moore's words also highlight the importance of the sense of belonging provided by the military. His comment about the "uniform of the United States of America" emphasizes that the military creates a feeling of united community as much as it does an individual sense of purpose and responsibility. It is Moore's membership in this community that ultimately facilitates his success in life, both within and beyond the Army itself.

"Fuck God," he said, drawing in a lungful of smoke. "If He does exist, He sure doesn't spend any time in West Baltimore."

**Related Characters:** The Other Wes Moore (Wes) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 140

**Explanation and Analysis**

Wes and his friends have gone to get tattoos together. When it is Wes's turn to decide which design to get, he opts for a black devil's head. Although Wes attended church services occasionally when he was younger, he now no longer believes in God—or at least, doesn't believe that God is present in his own community. As a young man, Wes does not often vocally express his feelings and beliefs and thus this is one of the only points in the book in which he provides any insight into his personal view of the world. Where most of the time Wes projects a kind of tough apathy, in this passage it is clear that beneath that apathy is a deeper and more painful form of anger and resentment.

It is difficult to blame Wes for having such a bleak view of the world and of God. Throughout his life, he has been

surrounded by injustice, poverty, violence, crime, and suffering. Even people who try desperately to improve themselves—such as Wes's mother Mary—rarely succeed. Rather than channeling his anger at this injustice in a constructive way, Wes becomes increasingly cynical and indifferent to his own fate. Yet can we really blame him, considering how powerless life in West Baltimore makes him feel?

# SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## INTRODUCTION

Moore introduces the book, explaining that it is the story of two men born in Baltimore with the same name: Wes Moore. While one of them grows up to achieve great success, the other will spend the rest of his life in **prison**. The book will examine the decisions that shape our destiny and highlight how easy it is for our lives to take an entirely different direction. While Moore himself won a Rhodes Scholarship while studying at **Johns Hopkins University**, the other Wes was imprisoned along with his older brother, Tony, for his involvement in a robbery that led to the murder of an off-duty police officer named Sergeant Bruce Prothero.

*The lives of the two Wes Moores could not be more similar or more different. On paper, they could be mistaken for the exact same person; yet their destinies are practically caricatures of success and failure. Moreover, during the point at which the author Moore discovers the other Wes, his successful life is only just beginning, as he has just been awarded the Rhodes Scholarship. Wes's life, on the other hand, has already been cut short, as he will spend the rest of it in prison.*

Two years after discovering the story of the other Wes, Moore cannot stop thinking about him, even though he isn't the type of person to usually become obsessed by coincidences. He quotes a passage from John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers*, in which the author describes feeling a sudden, renewed sense of connection to his brother after discovering he is on the run from the police. Moore finds it strange that he feels this same sense of connection, considering that he and Wes have never even met. However, he ultimately decides to write Wes a letter asking him about himself and his life. Moore feels uncertain about whether this was the right decision until he receives a letter from Wes that begins, "Greetings, Good Brother," and contains answers to Moore's questions.

*The connection Moore feels toward Wes is mysterious and instinctive, similar to the ties between real family members. Despite having nothing to do with Wes's life, Moore feels personally implicated in his fate and curious about how their lives turned out so differently. Rather than seeing Wes simply as a criminal who committed an unforgiveable act of violence, Moore feels desperate to understand the choices Wes made that caused his life to turn out this way. By addressing Moore as "Brother," Wes mirrors the same sense of fraternal connection (while also using the language of his new Islamic faith).*

After this initial contact, the men continue to exchange letters, and eventually Moore begins visiting Wes in prison. Moore is astonished to learn of further parallels between their lives, and feels that their discussions illuminate "the larger story of our generation of young men." Although Moore never lets himself forget that Wes committed a "heinous crime," he believes that together they can make a positive contribution to the world by creating a project that would help people understand how life is shaped by certain key decisions. Moore spends hundreds of hours interviewing Wes and his friends and family, along with Moore's own friends and family. In addition, he consults "teachers and drug dealers, police officers and lawyers" in order to establish the objective facts of both his and Wes's lives.

*Moore suspects that the story of his and Wes's lives will be of interest not only to the two of them, but also to a wider audience interested in how people shape their own destinies—and how their destinies are shaped for them. Although the book is focused on the specific details of the two men's lives, the message it contains is universal. At the same time, this message is rooted not in Moore's own reflections on his and Wes's lives, but rather objective facts. Thus it is up to the audience to figure out for themselves just* what *the message is and how it might apply to their own lives.*

The book is divided into three sections that correspond to the "three major phases" in the boys' developing maturity. Each section begins with a short extract from a conversation between Moore and Wes during one of their visits in **prison**. At the end of the book, Moore provides over 200 resources to help young people create "positive change" in their lives. Moore expresses his hope that people do not read the book as "self-congratulatory" or as a denial of the terrible injustice committed against Sergeant Prothero and his family. Rather, he simply hopes to show how those born into difficult circumstances can change their entire lives by "a single stumble down the wrong path, or a tentative step down the right one."

*Although Moore does illustrate the way in which our destinies can be dictated by external circumstances, he also places emphasis on people's ability to take control over their own lives. The main purpose of the book is not necessarily to create sympathy for Wes and other people in a similar position to him, but rather to inspire people to make positive, responsible decisions. At the same time, Moore acknowledges that without the necessary resources, it is often simply not possible to make these good decisions.*

## PART I: FATHERS AND ANGELS (INTERLUDE)

Moore has asked Wes about how his father's absence affected him, but Wes denies that it had much impact. Wes contrasts his experience with that of Moore, whose father wanted to be with his family but wasn't able to be. Moore explains that this conversation took placed during one of his first visits to **prison**. He describes witnessing many signs indicating that "the prisoners were owned by the state." Talking on the phone through bulletproof glass, Wes asks Moore about the impact of his own father's absence. Moore admits that he misses his father "all the time," but that he isn't sure about the impact that his father's absence had on him. Both men ponder the question in silence.

*Despite Moore's impressive educational and professional success, he still has much to figure out and is able to learn more about himself through his conversations with Wes. The constructive nature of their relationship is haunted, however, by the constant reminder that Wes is trapped in prison and "owned by the state." Although Wes can learn and grow in his mind, there is little he can do to alter his life in a substantial way.*

## CHAPTER 1: IS DADDY COMING WITH US?

At three years old, Moore is playing a game with his sister, Nikki, which involves him chasing after her and "playfully" punching her. Moore's mother sees and is furious, ordering her son up to his room and shouting that he should never hit a woman. Moore runs upstairs to the room he shares with his youngest sister, Shani, unsure of why his mother is so angry. He then hears his father telling his mother not to be too hard on him, as yelling at a young boy will likely not do much good in the long run. Moore explains that he was named after his father, Westley, and that he has two middle names, Watende Omari. As his parents continue to argue, Moore looks out of his bedroom window, where he spots a friend walking down the street—the only person he knows with green eyes. On the dresser is a picture of himself and Nikki; she is seven years older than he is and her real first name is Joy, the same as their mother.

*The opening scene of this chapter reveals that Moore comes from a close-knit community. Although his mother is strict, she is clearly motivated by a deep concern that Moore grows up to be a compassionate, responsible person. The fact that both Moore and Nikki are named after their parents highlights the close nature of the family, as well as the idea that children inherit their parents' identities. Meanwhile, Moore's comment that he only knows one person with green eyes hints that he lives in an almost entirely African-American community.*

Joy immigrated to the United States at three years old from a quiet, rural part of Jamaica, where her family had lived on the same land for generations. Joy's father dreamed of studying theology at an American university, and moved his family to the Bronx. Here, Joy studied the other children "like an anthropologist," copying their manner of speaking and behavior in order to fit in. She enrolled in American University in 1968, where she became involved with the black student organization. The treasurer of the organization was a man named Bill, to whom Joy quickly got engaged and, after another two years, married. However, Bill was addicted to alcohol and drugs, and after the couple had a child (Nikki), he became increasingly violent toward Joy. After one particularly awful episode, Joy pulled a knife on Bill, ordering him to never touch her again; within a month, she and Nikki had left him for good.

*To some extent, Joy comes from a position of class privilege; her family in Jamaica own their own land and her father moves to the United States to pursue higher education. The references to academic study (such as Moore's comment that the young Joy is like an "anthropologist") highlight Joy's connection to intellectual pursuits. On the other hand, this class privilege does not protect Joy from racial discrimination or the horror of an abusive marriage. Indeed, Joy's experience is a key example of how easy it can be to slip from a position of success and privilege into one of danger and violence through no fault of one's own.*

The chapter jumps back to the three-year-old Moore in his room. Westley comes upstairs and gently tells his son that he must "defend" women, not hit them. He assures Moore that his mother loves him, and brings him down to apologize to Joy and Nikki. Moore looks admiringly at his father, hoping to imitate him in every way. He admits that this is only one of two memories he has of Westley, and that the other is of witnessing him die.

*It is obvious even from this short scene that Moore's father had a deeply positive impact on him, setting an example of fair, responsible, and compassionate masculinity. Westley's words also suggest that kind words are a better form of discipline than harsh punishment, an idea that remains important throughout the book.*

Moore explains that, as a young person, Westley was both gifted and extraordinarily driven. He graduates from Bard College in 1971 and immediately begins a successful career as a reporter, traveling all over the country before returning to Maryland in order to host his own radio program. It is in this position that he meets Joy, who loves how different he is from Bill. The two marry, and Moore is born. Three years later, Westley is feeling ill as he finishes work, and that night has trouble sleeping. In the morning, he goes to the hospital; later that day, Joy is shocked to find him unable to open his eyes or hold his head up. The doctors presume Westley is exaggerating and that he is only suffering from a sore throat. They send him home with an anesthetic, but later that evening, he collapses down the stairs, unable to breathe.

*In many ways, Westley's life illustrates the advantages of responsibility, hard work, and dedication. Through making good choices, Westley gains a rewarding career and loving family. At the same time, Westley's death reveals how quickly this can all unravel. The speed at which Westley's health deteriorates highlights the fact that, no matter how many good choices we make or how much we try to protect ourselves against misfortune, in a moment our destinies can be changed forever.*

Nikki calls an ambulance while Joy attempts CPR on Westley. When the medics arrive, Nikki makes Moore wait outside the house. Eventually, the ambulance take Westley away, with Joy and the children following in the car. At the hospital, they wait with other relatives before a doctor announces that Westley has died, at which point Joy passes out. The next day, an autopsy reveals that Westley had contracted a rare virus called acute epiglottitis, which he could have survived had it been accurately detected and treated. Nikki is the worst affected by Westley's death, not only because she is older but also because afterward Bill stops visiting her or supporting her financially. Moore is still too young to truly grasp what has happened, and at Westley's funeral asks: "Daddy, are you going to come with us?"

*The story of Westley's death shows how our lives can be transformed by events that we may be unable to understand at the time. At only three years old, Moore cannot comprehend what has actually taken place—hence why he asks his father's dead body if it is coming home with the family—let alone how it will affect him in the future. It is only with the benefit of hindsight that Moore is able to see how Westley's death impacted his own life. Moore thus shows that we must often make decisions before we fully understand how they will affect our futures.*

The narrative switches to focus on Wes's family. Wes's mother, Mary, tells him to pack his things for a trip to stay with his paternal grandmother, Mamie, with whom he is close despite having never met his father. As he packs, Mary wipes tears from her eyes after reading a letter informing her that her Pell Grant has been terminated. The first in her family to attend college, Mary receives her associates degree from the Community College of Baltimore. Although she grew up five miles from **Johns Hopkins University**, "it might as well have been a world away." Johns Hopkins symbolizes privilege and opportunity, and is fundamentally disconnected to the Baltimore poverty surrounding it. Against all odds, however, Mary is accepted, working for $6.50 an hour at a medical centre in order to supplement the money from her Pell Grant. When the grant is terminated, she is forced to drop out of Johns Hopkins in order to survive.

*Like Westley, Mary is an example of someone whose hard work and dedication was suddenly undermined by a random act of misfortune. Her experience shows that no matter how responsible a person tries to be, they can never ensure that opportunities remain open to them. The sudden termination of Mary's Pell Grant also highlights the theme of injustice and inequality. As Moore notes, Mary is already socially excluded from the world of Johns Hopkins and other elite institutions due to her race and class; her one opportunity to access this world and achieve social mobility was then dashed by federal cuts to public assistance.*

Wes feels protective of Mary, as his father has never been around to support her; meanwhile, Wes's older brother Tony spends most of his time with his grandparents and father in the **Murphy Homes Projects**. Despite the termination of her Pell Grant, Mary still dreams of leaving her Baltimore neighborhood behind, perhaps by becoming an entrepreneur. The part of Baltimore in which Mary has always lived "never fully recovered from the riots" that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King in the 1960s. The sustained carnage sparked by King's death spoke to "anger and hurt so extreme that rational thought was thrown out the window"—not only over King, but the ongoing issues of racism, segregation, poverty, and oppression. Although Mary was only a child when the riots took place, it was at this moment that she resolved to one day leave the neighborhood behind forever.

*Mary's relationship to her neighborhood highlights the fact that people are often simply born into unjust circumstances, with no control over their fate. Her experience also reveals how the broader issues of racism and inequality affect people's chances in life. Although the riots of the 1960s were extremely destructive and chaotic, Moore is sympathetic to the pain that initially sparked them. After centuries of oppression, poor African Americans were driven to extreme action in order to make their voices heard. While the riots ultimately had a negative impact on the city of Baltimore, this is not necessarily the fault of those who rioted.*

Wes watches Mary as she gets ready to go out dancing, which she often does to relieve stress. Only 27 years old, she enjoys partying and receiving male attention. She sits Wes down and explains how important it was to her that she graduate from college, and why she now won't be able to. When Mary told her mother, Alma, that she was pregnant at 16, Alma responded that she didn't care as long as Mary went to college. After Tony was born, Alma went to the hospital for a kidney transplant, and Mary struggled to take care of her new baby alone. Soon after, Alma died, a fact that Mary's father, Kenneth, revealed bluntly in the midst of an alcoholic stupor. At the funeral, Kenneth seized Alma's body from the casket and attempted to take it with him. In the wake of her mother's death, Mary was the first of her eight siblings to leave home.

*On the one hand, Mary has had to grow up fast; having given birth to her own child as well as losing her mother at 16, Mary immediately became responsible not only for herself, but also for Tony. At the same time, by the time Wes is 6, Mary is still only 27, and is thus still a young woman. At an age where other people are still finding a sense of purpose and identity, Mary has already experienced immense emotional and pragmatic pressure. Despite this, her love of going out dancing reveals she is not fundamentally different to any other woman in her 20s.*

Having learned of Mary's dilemma, Wes offers to get a job to help out. Mary laughs and tells him he can wait until later to start work. At only six years old, Wes is tall for his age, "with a reserved, quiet dignity." This is a marked contrast from his father, Bernard, a neighborhood boy and abusive alcoholic who left Mary before Wes was born. When Wes was eight months old, his father drunkenly banged at Mary's door, shouting that he wanted to see his child. Mary ignored him, and Bernard never tried to see his son again. After his mother drops him off at Mamie's house, Wes notices a strange man sitting on the couch, stinking of whisky. The man tells Mary she looks good, and asks who Wes is. Mary responds, "Wes, meet your father."

*If, as Moore suggests earlier in the chapter, children inherit their parents' identities, Wes has received a tangle of contradictory qualities. Although still young and fun-loving, Mary is undoubtedly sensible, altruistic, and hard-working. Bernard, meanwhile, is irresponsible and destructive, and has had his life ruined by addiction. These two opposites present a fork in the road for Wes: will he take after his dedicated, compassionate mother, or his selfish and careless father?*

## CHAPTER 2: IN SEARCH OF HOME

Two years later, it is summer break and Wes wakes up to the sound of the phone ringing. It's Tony, asking where Mary is. Tony is very protective of Wes, although Wes doesn't see him often as Tony spends most of his time in the **Murphy Homes Projects**—a filthy cluster of buildings, nicknamed the "Murder Homes," which are overrun by criminal activity. Tony asks about school; Wes attends an elementary school nicknamed "Chicken Pen," where 99% of the students are black and 70% receive free lunches. Tony tells his little brother to "take this shit seriously," urging Wes not to follow in his own footsteps. Although Tony is only 14, he has been dealing drugs for four years and has an intimidating reputation. Yet despite his tough and impressive exterior, he wishes he could undo the past and put himself back in Wes's position.

*Tony is a somewhat paradoxical figure in Wes's life. On the one hand, he is a positive and supportive influence, the closest thing to a father Wes has. Moreover, he checks in on Wes and tries to ensure that Wes works hard in school so as not to repeat Tony's own mistakes. However, Moore suggests that this advice is undermined by Tony's own behavior. Wes is dismissive of Tony's words, admiring his brother for his actions. Regardless of what Tony says, Wes is impressed by Tony's tough status and seeks to behave like his older brother, rather than following his advice.*

After Tony hangs up, the phone rings again. This time it's Woody, Wes's new friend, who tells him to come outside. Wes has just moved away from Cherry Hill, a neighborhood plagued by poverty, drugs, and crime, to Northwood, "a paradise of neat houses" occupied by members of the college-educated black professional class. Wes now plays for the Northwood Rams, "one of the best rec football teams in the nation," and loves the sense of belonging that comes from his membership on the team. However, as Wes becomes more dedicated to football, he pays less attention to this academic work. He is intelligent and capable, and gets bored easily, which means his grades have slipped. Wes rummages around the house for loose change before running out to meet Woody.

*Wes is naturally gifted, but perversely this ends up working against him at school. Without sufficient resources and opportunities to push him to succeed, Wes remains apathetic in class. While football provides a positive outlet and sense of belonging, it also distracts Wes, arguably giving him a false sense of confidence about his future prospects. Although both Tony and Mary have encouraged Wes to prioritize his education, Wes prefers the more immediate reward and sense of community that come from playing sports.*

Woody's parents are still together and his father is an army veteran. Woody is the only person Wes knows whose father is still with the family, and Wes feels envious of Woody's close relationship with his dad. Woody and Wes toss the football, and are soon joined by "White Boy" who, despite being Lebanese-American, is seen to be "a real black dude." The three of them approach another group of kids, asking if they'd like to play. Wes plays defense to a boy who yells at him to back off, which only makes Wes more aggressive. The boy punches Wes, who stands still for a moment, stunned, before sprinting home. Wes thinks of Tony, who sometimes brings him to the **Murphy Homes** to practice fighting. Wes grabs a long knife, ignoring Woody's pleas to let the argument go. Woody notices that the police have pulled up outside, but before he has time to warn his friend, Wes runs out holding the knife.

*This is the first moment in which we see Wes make an objectively bad decision. Although he is not the one to throw the first punch, it would have been possible for him not to retaliate, especially considering that Woody encourages him to drop it. Moreover, not only does Wes decide to get the kid back, but he dramatically escalates the situation by running to retrieve a knife. Wes's sense of pride and hot temper thus cause him to overlook reason and act in a destructive manner. On the other hand, it's also clear that Wes has been influenced by Tony's advice. Although Wes is only a kid, he lives in a tough, dangerous world in which he must prove that he is not weak.*

One of the police officers tells Wes to put down the knife, but he barely notices. He hears Tony's advice ringing in his mind: "Send a message." The police officer yanks Wes and slams him against the car, pinning him down while he puts handcuffs around his wrists. Woody protests, until the police put him in handcuffs as well. Both boys are taken away, and Wes calls Tony's father to pick him up; it is only many years later that Mary finds out her son was arrested.

*Moore is clear that Wes made a bad decision by drawing the knife, and especially by then ignoring the police's demands that he drop it. At the same time, the way Woody and Wes are treated by the police also seems unjust. Although they are engaged in violence, they are still only 8 years old. Is the violent reaction of the police really justified?*

Moore describes walking downstairs one night to find his mother half-asleep on the couch. Since Westley's death, Joy has been sleeping in the living room in order to "stand guard" against their increasingly dangerous neighborhood. She is haunted by her husband's death, wondering if there is something she could have done to save him. Worried about the impact of a legal battle on her children, Joy chooses not to sue the hospital; she puts the out-of-court settlement toward training paramedics in a technique that addresses respiratory failure. Moore notes that his mother looks tired and "defeated," and that people believe she is not coping well with Westley's death. Eventually, Joy calls her parents and asks if she can move in with them in the Bronx. Three weeks later, she and the kids pack up and leave Baltimore for good.

*Westley's death is a random act of misfortune that has turned Moore and his family's life upside down. Although Joy blames herself for not doing more to prevent Westley's death, it is ultimately impossible to place blame on any one person—even the doctors who misdiagnosed and paramedics who mistreated him (after all, as Moore points out, they had simply not received the proper training). While it is tempting to try and make sense of such a random event, Moore shows that it is more important to focus on making good choices in the aftermath of the event.*

Moore's grandparents have recently retired; his grandfather, Rev. Dr. James Thomas, used to be a minister, while his grandmother, Winell, taught elementary school. Joy tells the children happy stories of growing up in the Bronx, but when they arrive it is clear that the borough has become far more dangerous since Joy's childhood. Moore describes the Bronx as a highly diverse, "amazing place," but adds that by the late '70s it resembled a "war zone." When Moore's grandparents first came to America, they immediately began saving up to buy a house in order to feel like they had "a stake in their new country." As Moore approaches this house, he is greeted warmly by his grandparents, while Joy expresses her concerns about how the neighborhood has changed. Moore's grandparents concur, describing the devastating effect of drugs and violence on the community.

*Like their daughter, James and Winell Thomas have worked hard all their lives, dedicating themselves to making a positive contribution to their adopted country and community. In this sense, they fit into the narrative of "model immigrants." However, despite their responsible, hard-working nature, they have still found themselves caught in the midst of an increasingly destructive situation as a result of living in the Bronx in the midst of the crack epidemic. Once again, Moore highlights that no matter how many good choices a person makes, their external circumstances will always be beyond their control.*

James and Winell met as teenagers in Jamaica. As newlyweds, they immigrated to the United States so Moore's grandfather could attend a historically black college called Lincoln University. In James's first days on campus, a man approached him and offered to help him buy some warmer clothes, telling him that when he first arrived in America he, too, was under-dressed. The man, Kwame Nkrumah, became James's mentor before going on to be the President of independent Ghana. James, meanwhile, moved to the Bronx and became the first black minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. Now, in the era of the violent crack epidemic, James remains determined to "do his part to heal what was broken in the Bronx."

*When Moore's grandfather first arrives in the United States, he is a total outsider to the country, as is shown by his poor preparation for the cold weather. Through a combination of luck and determination, James works to make himself a crucial part of his new community. In doing so, he lays the groundwork for his children and grandchildren to feel the same sense of belonging within a society still plagued by racism and inequality.*

Moore's grandparents establish strict guidelines for behavior, which Moore describes as "not Bronx rules… [but] West Indian rules." Moore rushes out to play basketball, and is greeted by the sounds of early hip hop, "still young and close to its Bronx roots." Moore describes the surrounding neighborhood as "postapocalyptic," destroyed by drugs, poverty, and arson. He reaches a court where all the players are older, bigger, and better than him, and enjoys playing against them. He notices how the Bronx kids are different from those in his old neighborhood, with their own slang and style. Within the basketball court, many different kinds of people congregate, from drug dealers to straight-A students. For a moment, they put aside their differences and become "a brotherhood."

*From the outside, the Bronx neighborhood into which Moore's family has moved seems dangerous and intimidating. Poverty and violence have ravaged the community to the point that it seems like a hellish, forgotten corner of the world. However, beneath the surface lies a different story. The Bronx is bubbling with culture, including the new musical genre of hip hop and its associated street style. And of course, kids in the Bronx—while tough on the outside—are actually not different from kids anywhere else.*

## CHAPTER 3: FOREIGN GROUND

Moore and his friend Justin have spent the day in Manhattan, window shopping for sneakers that they can't afford. The two boys bonded as soon as they met; they have the same haircut, know each other's neighborhoods and families, and—most importantly—are two of the only black kids in their school. Despite having graduated from the New York public school system herself, Joy was worried about the prospect of sending her son to public school, thinking it would be too dangerous. Joy works three jobs to support the family and sends Moore to Riverdale, a university-like private school whose alumni include John F. Kennedy. She hopes that this will allow Moore to "escape" his own neighborhood in pursuit of a brighter future; however, this plan does not succeed.

*Joy's decision over whether to send Moore to Riverdale shows how difficult and uncertain such decisions can be. On the one hand, Riverdale offers safety, resources, and opportunities that could transform Moore's destiny. Although he has strict rules at home, there is nothing Moore's family can do to mitigate the effects of attending a dangerous, poorly-equipped school. On the other hand, attending Riverdale alienates Moore from his community, which in turn has a negative, isolating impact on him socially and psychologically.*

Moore and Justin walk home, the smells of Jamaican, Chinese, and Puerto Rican food wafting through the air. The smells, graffiti, and words mixed in English and Spanish now "feel like home" to Moore. They meet up with a couple of friends, one of whom asks them how they like their "white school." Moore is embarrassed and tries to change the subject, but the other kids press it. Eventually, Moore tells them about his recent suspension for fighting, exaggerating the story to make himself seem more tough. The boys, however, realize that Moore isn't telling the truth and begin laughing. Moore is only saved by the distraction of an elderly, bad-smelling panhandler who comes over asking for change. Moore explains that even though "drugs were not new to the Bronx," crack has totally transformed the community, tearing apart families and causing a drastic jump in the homicide rate. Although the boys laugh at the panhandler, they know he represents a dark and dangerous reality.

*By this point in the narrative, Moore feels a sense of inclusion in his new neighborhood; the sights and smells are familiar, and he has a "crew." On the other hand, he is kept in a position of permanent outsider because he attends Riverdale. This passage reveals the ambivalent relationship Moore and his friends have to the Bronx. On the one hand, they are proud to come from a "tough" neighborhood, as shown by the fact that the boys tease Moore for attending a white school and exaggerating the story of his suspension. On the other hand, they seek to distance themselves from the less appealing sides of their neighborhood by laughing mercilessly at the panhandler.*

Moore and Justin head home, and Moore mentions the rules of the street: don't make eye contact, don't smile, stay aware of where the drug dealers and police are "at all times." They talk about Riverdale, and Moore reflects on how he doesn't fit in, confessing that he is constantly trying to hide the fact that his family is so much poorer than the families of other students. Moore usually goes to play in the other students' neighborhoods rather than inviting them to his, but on one occasion Moore's Uncle Howard suggests that he invite some friends over to play baseball in the park, sensing that this might help Moore feel less like he is living in two "mutually exclusive worlds." However, after only 15 minutes a fight breaks out between the Riverdale students and the kids from Moore's neighborhood.

*At this point, Moore's life is dominated by a stark contrast. During his time at school, he desperately tries to hide his difference from the other kids, whose lives are filled with expensive possessions and lavish vacations. Back home, meanwhile, he must seem tough and intimidating simply in order to stay safe on the streets. As a result of this contrast, Moore feels that he doesn't belong anywhere; in both these environments, he is seen as not good enough. Meanwhile, Uncle Howard's well-meaning attempt to bridge Moore's two worlds ends up proving the irresolvable conflict between them.*

Plagued by a constant feeling of alienation, Moore's academic performance suffers. Justin encourages Moore to study harder in order to avoid probation. While Moore gives excuses, he is reminded of the fact that Justin comes from a very similar background yet is receiving top grades. Moore confesses that Joy is threatening to send him to military school, but doesn't really believe she'll follow through with it. He notes that in Caribbean households, boys are "often indulged like little princes." In addition, his mother rejects all forms of violence, so the idea of her sending him to military school is somewhat absurd.

*Moore's relationship with Justin evokes the central question of the book: why is it that some people thrive in adverse circumstances, while others struggle to cope? Both Moore and Justin must deal with issues of alienation, racism, fatherlessness, and inequality. Yet while Moore uses this as an excuse for his poor grades, Justin is inspired to succeed—a fact that is reflected in his academic performance.*

The narrative jumps back to Wes, who has moved neighborhoods once again. Kurt Schmoke has recently been elected the first African-American mayor of Baltimore; a graduate of Baltimore public schools, he went on study at Yale, Oxford, and Harvard, but is heavily criticized for suggesting that the drug epidemic should be classified as a "public health problem" rather than an issue of crime. Wes's family is a perfect example of the devastating effects of drug crime. At 18, Tony is living in the **Murphy House Projects** and has recently been shot during a drug deal gone wrong. Wes has been forced to repeat the 6th grade, which Mary worries is the first sign that her son is headed down the same path as his brother.

*The key issue within Kurt Schmoke's desire to reclassify the drug crisis as a "public health problem" is the question of whether drug use and crime is a "choice" in the conventional sense. Many people argue that the decision to use or sell drugs is exactly that—a decision—and that people should take responsibility for this illegal act. Others cite research indicating that people are driven to sell and use drugs through poverty and lack of resources—a view supported by the example of Tony.*

Wes feels envious of Tony's new, expensive clothes, and begs Mary to let him buy some. Mary replies that Tony may have a flashy wardrobe, but he is also in hospital as a result of being shot. Walking in the neighborhood, Wes spots a young boy wearing an expensive ring and headset. It is "the coolest thing Wes had ever seen." He asks a group of kids wearing them where he can get one, and they respond that he will be paid to wear one and look out for the police. Wes understands that this means he will be part of "the game," but reassures himself that he is not actually *selling* drugs, just keeping lookout. When Wes grows up, he dreams of being a pro football player or rapper. In the meantime, Wes doesn't see much harm in wearing a headset for money.

*Wes doesn't want to get in "the game," but the game is all around him, encouraging him to join. And outside of drugs, Wes's life contains few opportunities for success. He has failed the sixth grade in a city with a 70% dropout rate, and though he dreams of being a rapper or football player, this is more of a fantasy than something rooted in reality. The only examples of affluence, glamour, and autonomy around Wes come from people who sell drugs. Is it really fair to blame Wes for wanting to get in on "the good life" in the only way he can?*

A few months earlier, Wes had been planning to skip school and have a cookout with Woody and their other friends. After Mary leaves for work, Wes searches for change in her bedroom, only to accidentally find some of her marijuana. Wes brings it to show Woody, and they decide to smoke it with some older kids. The group smokes, drinks malt liquor, and stops for Chinese food; Wes begins admiring a girl across the street, only to be told that he is looking at a trash can. When he comes back home, Wes tries to play it cool but Mary and her boyfriend both realize that he has been drinking. Mary tells him that she hopes his queasiness puts him off drinking; yet despite the aftereffects, Wes enjoys the sensation of being high. He resolves to don a headset and make some money.

*This is another major turning point in Wes's life. Although he is aware of the dangers of entering the drug game—his older brother is, after all, in the hospital as a result of being shot—Wes can't resist the temptation to steal his mother's weed and see what it feels like to get high. This decision leads him to make further destructive choices, including getting involved with selling drugs. However, it is arguably unfair to judge Wes too harshly for this decision. Drugs are all around him, and it is normal for teenagers to experiment. Is it realistic to expect kids like Wes to abstain completely?*

## PART II: CHOICES AND SECOND CHANCES (INTERLUDE)

Back in **prison**, Moore wishes Wes a happy 32nd birthday, but Wes admits he almost forgot about the day altogether. Walking into Jessup Correctional Facility, Moore is reminded of the "daily miracle of my freedom." He watches the other inmates during visitation, one of whom is meeting his baby for the first time. Wes asks him when he first felt like he'd become a man; Moore responds that it was when he first felt "accountable to people other than myself." He then reflects on this answer, realizing that he's not sure when exactly that was. He admits that for some people, maturity comes more gradually, whereas for others adult responsibility is such a sudden and jarring event that it throws their lives off course. Wes concurs, arguing that being responsible for others can be difficult and "unforgiving." He points out that both he and Moore made mistakes when they were younger and both received second chances—but that second chances are only meaningful when external circumstances also change. Moore agrees, concluding that sometimes it's difficult to tell the difference between "second chances and last chances."

*Perhaps more than any other point in the book, this interlude directly addresses the question of how the two Wes Moores' destinies came to be so different from one another. As Wes points out, both men made mistakes, and both faced adversity. And while it's true that Wes arguably had a much tougher experience overall than Moore, this alone seems insufficient in explaining how the two men's lives diverged so drastically. As Moore argues, everyone gets second chances to some extent. Yet if there are no resources to properly turn your life around, what does a second chance really mean other than another opportunity to fail? The emphasis on maturity in this conversation is also significant. More privileged people are given an ample period in which to make mistakes, learn, and grow; Wes was not so lucky.*

## CHAPTER 4: MARKING TERRITORY

Three years after Wes first decided to start work as a lookout, Tony is furiously asking his younger brother where he got the money to buy so many new pairs of sneakers. Wes tells him he's become a popular neighborhood DJ, which is the same story he's been telling Mary. Unlike Mary, however, Tony doesn't believe him, and he asks Wes again and again. Wes keeps lying until Tony takes a swing at him, punching him in the face. Mary walks in to the sound of her sons fighting and asks what's going on. Although Wes has been arrested twice before—once for pulling the knife in front of the police and another time for carjacking—Mary wanted to believe that Wes had been staying away from drugs. Now she knows that both of her sons' innocent childhoods are truly over.

*Tony's anger at Wes is somewhat difficult to understand. Considering Tony deals drugs himself, how can he be so angry that Wes is doing it too? Is he simply hypocritical? Tony's actions make more sense, however, when we consider that his anger is not really directed at Wes at all, but rather at a younger version of himself. As Moore has mentioned, Tony regrets getting in the game so young, but now feels like there is no way out. His regret and frustration turn to violent anger, which he takes out onto his younger brother.*

Tony announces that he is giving up and leaves. Mary tends to her younger son's wounds, but Wes is inconsolable. He wants desperately to be like Tony and for Tony to like him, but the more he tries, the more Tony pushes him away. After the encounter, Mary digs through Wes's belongings and comes across pills, marijuana, and both crack and powder cocaine. Furious, Mary flushes the drugs down the toilet. When Wes arrives home and discovers the drugs are missing, he panics and yells at Mary, telling her she flushed away $4,000. Mary, however, is unremorseful. Wes urgently tries to figure out a way to make the money back. He realized long ago that the demand for drugs is "bottomless," and thus making money in the game comes down to being both fast and intimidating. Wes's girlfriend agrees to let him store his drugs at her place from now on. Meanwhile, Mary despairingly wonders how both her sons turned out to be drug dealers. To make matters more desperate, Tony is about to have his first child.

*Although Wes has clearly made a series of bad decisions leading up to this moment, it is difficult not to feel some level of sympathy with him—particularly in light of his relationship with Tony. Like most younger brothers, Wes looks up to Tony and wishes to emulate him. In doing so, he not only lies to and deeply upsets Mary, but he ends up alienating Tony as well. With his relationship with his two closest family members under strain, Wes is left alone to figure out how to move forward. While this could have turned into an opportunity to reevaluate his decisions and get out of the game, Wes does not have a chance to reflect due to the fact that he needs to make the $4,000 back immediately.*

Back in the Bronx, Moore is rapping along to a song about drugs while a horrified Joy looks on. Moore has been performing badly in school, and Joy is beginning to believe his teachers' claims that he has a learning disability. Joy has gone "through the stages of grief" in response to Moore's poor academic performance, although she is now in a permanent state of anger. While hip hop has become a more and more important part of Moore's identity, Joy is dismissive of this interest and only focuses on her son's poor grades. Moore is skipping school frequently, encouraged by a teacher who told him that the class runs better when he is not there. Joy is overworked and constantly busy, leaving the kids to look out for themselves. Nikki has struggled ever since the move to the Bronx but Shani is a "prodigy" who has already overtaken Moore in reading ability.

*Moore does not hesitate to admit that he was making irresponsible decisions during this time, and neglecting the education that his mother is working so hard to pay for. On the other hand, it is also clear that Moore feels misunderstood by the society around him. The cruel words of his teacher confirm Moore's existing feeling of alienation at Riverdale, making him feel unwanted and worthless. It is thus somewhat unsurprising that Moore does not feel motivated to perform well in school, and prefers to spend time listening to the messages of racial empowerment in rap music.*

Moore mentions an occasion in which Shani ends up in a physical fight with two other neighborhood girls called Ingrid and Lateshia. Infuriated, Moore marches over to confront Lateshia (who punched Shani) accompanied by his aunt. In spite of the presence of Lateshia's tough older brother, Moore warns her not to touch Shani again. At this stage, the streets are a big part of Moore's life. He has had direct experiences of gang violence, drug crime, and encounters with the police, and some of his friends have started working as "runners" for drug dealers, including his friend Shea. All the kids have a "tag," which they spray-paint around the neighborhood; Moore's is "KK," standing for "Kid Kupid." One day when Moore is spray-painting his tag with Shea, police officers pull up and handcuff the boys. During this era, tensions between black communities and the police have been drastically escalated by the drug issue.

*Although Moore is still only a child, he is forced to deal with serious and often dangerous situations. The fight between Shani and Lateshia may seem tame, but the presence of Lateshia's older brother indicates how easily their scuffle could escalate into something far more threatening. Moore's childishness is revealed in his tag, which takes the form of a rather comic boast about his romantic prowess. Yet being a child does not protect Moore from having to deal with difficult, dangerous issues such as drug crime, gang violence, and police brutality. The world around him forces him to grow up fast, even if he is not yet emotionally ready to do so.*

Moore panics, dreading the thought of Joy having to collect him from jail. His relationship with his mother is already under strain as a result of his problems at school, and although Moore pretends to be casually dismissive of this fact, in reality he is desperate for Joy's support and approval. He feels lonely, suspecting that even his friendship with his crew is "contingent" and flimsy. While Moore grows increasingly distressed, Shea seems "cocky and smug." The police officer gives the boys a stern lecture, warning them that although they are only children now, if they don't choose a different path he'll be seeing more of them in years to come. Moore is furious that Shea is treating the situation so casually, thereby putting both of them at risk. Moore feels an intense sense of regret not only about this particular moment, but also the whole "King Kupid" situation altogether. The police release the boys, and Moore pulls Shea away before he gets the chance to do anything provocative. A week later, however, Moore is back on the streets spray-painting his tag once again.

*Reading Moore's account of this period in his life can be exasperating. He repeatedly ignores the advice of his mother, the police, and even his own conscience, instead choosing to pursue activities that risk ruining his life. Given that Moore is aware of the dangers of engaging in criminal activity, why does he choose to do it anyway? Peer pressure is certainly a factor—driven by a desire to fit in with the neighborhood kids and to distance himself from his preppy "white" school, Moore feels the need to seem tough and rebellious. It is also important to bear in mind that spray-painting graffiti is arguably not a serious crime, but rather a form of youthful self-expression. Moore is not harming anyone or even causing real damage. Is it fair that he is handcuffed and threatened with arrest?*

## CHAPTER 5: LOST

It is 5.30 am, and Moore is awoken by a chorus of loud shouts telling him to get out of his "racks." His roommate urges him to get up and is "dumbfounded" by Moore's protests that he'll wait until 8. As his roommate leaves, Moore is left in a state of disbelief about the situation he's found himself in. First Sergeant Anderson enters the room and begins screaming and cursing at Moore in decidedly unfamiliar language. Anderson then flashes a "devilish smile" before leaving. Moore explains that this is his first morning at military school, which Joy has sent him to after he was put on academic and disciplinary probation at Riverdale. On the same day as he receives the news of probation, Moore is sitting next to Shani at home, punching her arm out of boredom. At one point, he misses and splits her lip open. Furious, Joy slaps him across the face, and for a moment it seems as if Moore might hit her back. Joy breaks down in tears, fearful that she is "losing" her son.

*Being sent to military school at first seems somewhat drastic, but in this passage Moore makes it clear that his mother had already given him a long series of second chances. After watching her son skip school, fail his classes, run into trouble with the law, and hit his sister, Joy is forced to acknowledge that her plan to send him to Riverdale in order to give him a positive start in life is not working out. Perhaps the most tragic aspect of this turn of events is Joy's sadness over the fact that she has not been able to ensure that her son stays on the right path, a sadness reminiscent of Mary's despair on discovering Wes's drug stash.*

Moore is unafraid of Sergeant Anderson; compared to the Bronx, military school does not seem particularly intimidating. However, suddenly Moore's entire chain of command bursts into his room and flips Moore out of his top bunk onto the floor. The school Moore attends is named Valley Forge Military Academy; it is in Pennsylvania, and its pristine campus reminds Moore of "a more austere version of Riverdale." Life at the institution is strict and exhausting, requiring a formidable level of discipline. The new arrivals ("plebes") are treated as "less than nothing," and their first names and life histories are never mentioned. In his first days at the school, Moore is filled with rage at Joy for sending him there, and tries to run away four times in as many days. Moore's roommate is from Brooklyn, and it was his grandmother who first told Joy about Valley Forge—a fact that leads Moore to deeply resent him.

*At Valley Forge, the need to make decisions—as well as the ability to do so—is stripped away entirely. Moore no longer has control over his actions, but must simply follow a strict set of rules that encompass everything from when he goes to sleep to how he walks to how quickly he eats. This disciplinary regime is undoubtedly oppressive, and it is little wonder that Moore attempts to escape it. At the same time, Valley Forge gives Moore something that has been lacking in his life thus far: structure. Instead of having to constantly decide between making responsible or irresponsible choices, Moore simply has to obey the rules.*

After four days, Sergeant Austin enters Moore's room and says it's clear that Moore doesn't want to be at Valley Forge, adding "we don't want you here." He gives Moore a map of the local area, including instructions on how to get to the train station. Overwhelmed with joy, Moore thanks Sergeant Austin and feels a sudden surge of respect for him. That night, Moore packs his things and creeps out of his room. He follows the map closely, but soon finds himself in a completely dark and unfamiliar wooded area. Frightened and confused, Moore beings to cry. At that moment, Moore notices that his whole chain of command is there laughing at him, including Sergeant Austin. The map he had been given was completely fake. The older boys take Moore to the office of Colonel Battagliogli, a distinguished and enthusiastic retired Army officer in charge of the plebes.

*Moore's many attempts to run away, his naïve belief that Sergeant Austin is genuinely trying to help him, and his eventual collapse into tears in the woods all serve as reminders of how young he is. At Valley Forge, he has been placed in a strict, strenuous environment completely devoid of emotional support, and—like any young person—Moore is overwhelmed by homesickness. Furthermore, at this point Moore still feels completely alien and excluded from the community at Valley Forge. While the harsh initiation tactics he undergoes aim to ultimately create a sense of belonging, it is difficult for Moore to see that now.*

Colonel Battagliogli tells Moore that he will allow him to speak on the phone for five minutes. Moore looks around at the members of his chain of command and notices a stranger, a black man who seems to be a teenager even though he has "an old soul and frighteningly serious demeanor." Moore calls his mother and immediately begins to apologize for his past behavior and beg to be let home. Before he can finish, Joy cuts him off and tells him that he is not going anywhere; his family are proud of him and have already sacrificed too much for him to be there. At the time Moore doesn't understand his mother's words, but years later he learns that Valley Forge is even more expensive than Riverdale, and that his mother was forced to write to family and friends for help in paying the fees. Eventually, Moore's grandparents decided to use their retirement savings (which they had been hoping to use to move back to Jamaica) in order to pay for Moore's first year at Valley Forge.

*Moore's conversation with his mother puts his decision of whether or not to stay at Valley Forge in a different light. Up until this point, Moore has been considering his experience at military school from a decidedly self-centered perspective. Although he promises Joy that he will behave better when he comes home, Moore's desire to leave is entirely motivated by how much he hates military school, not because he's actually undergone any kind of transformation. Moore's brief conversation with his mother reminds him that it is more than just his own personal experience at stake. His entire community has made sacrifices in order to support him in making a change.*

Joy repeats that she loves Moore and is proud of him and that "it's time to stop running." The next day, Moore notices the black man again standing next to Colonel Battagliogli and sees that he is a member of F Company, the most distinguished and disciplined company. His name is Cadet Captain Ty Hill, and Moore is impressed by how he demands "real respect" from those around him. It is a different kind of respect than that inspired by Shea and other drug dealers, which more closely resembles intimidation. Moore later learns that the previous night, Joy had asked Captain Hill to "keep an eye out" for her son. Sure enough, Colonel Battagliogli soon tells Moore that Captain Hill wishes to speak with him.

*This passage describes the beginning of Moore's shifting opinion about military school. It begins with Joy's confirmation that he has no choice but to stay at Valley Forge, making Moore aware that he must accept his fate. Another turning point emerges as a result of Moore meeting Captain Hill. While Moore still feels alienated by the Valley Forge community at large, he develops an admiration for Captain Hill, a young African-American man who has excelled to the highest level of achievement.*

Back in Maryland, Wes has slowly grown used to his new suburban neighborhood, although he still misses the "speed" and "intensity" of the city. On the school bus, Wes and his godbrother, Red, notice two girls and decide to approach them. Wes is popular with girls, and he has "a dozen girlfriends," although these relationships all remain casual. One of the girls on the bus is called Alicia, and she and Wes quickly become close. Two months later, she discovers that she is pregnant. Wes is so shocked that he enters a state of denial. Eventually, he tells Tony, who has just become a father himself. Tony bursts out laughing, pointing out that Mary has recently had a baby too and that "this is some sitcom shit." Teenage pregnancies are common in Baltimore, yet Wes still feels despondent about the prospect of becoming a dad. He senses that he has suddenly reached "a point of no return."

*While Wes has had to grow up quickly as a result of his involvement in the drug game, he is still very much a teenager—emphasized by the fact that he and Alicia met on a school bus. The "point of no return" Wes describes thus arguably refers to the definitive end of his childhood. Where other young people grow out of their youth more gradually, Wes is forced to become an adult virtually overnight. However, his maturity—including his ability to make responsible decisions—cannot accelerate at the same drastic rate as the responsibilities placed upon him. From this perspective, it is not surprising that Wes feels panicked.*

At Wes and Tony's little brother's first birthday, Tony indirectly reveals that Alicia is pregnant. On learning this news, Mary takes a deep breath before offering everyone cake. Meanwhile, Wes's approaching fatherhood fails to stop him from seeing other girls. Alicia remains hopeful that she can raise the baby in the stable, two-parent household that she and Wes didn't have. Yet the fact that Wes grew up without a father means he is uncertain and ambivalent about his role in his child's life. The last time Wes saw his father, Bernard asked Wes, "Who are you?". Wes simply smirked and left without responding.

*There is an obvious difference in Wes and Alicia's reactions to their approaching parenthood, a difference that reveals much about gender, teenage pregnancy, and inequality. While Wes effectively buries his head in the sand about the pregnancy, this option is not available to Alicia. Immediately, Alicia develops an adult sense of responsibility. Wes, meanwhile, seems more on track to become like his own father.*

One day, Wes's new girlfriend sleeps in late at his place and wakes up in a panic. The two creep down to the front door only to find an angry older teenager named Ray waiting out on the street. Ray first yells at the girl (his girlfriend) before coming for Wes, beating him ruthlessly. Wes manages to run inside the house and quickly retrieves a gun. The girl attempts to stop him, but Wes charges outside, signaling for his partners in the drug crew to join him. The crew chase and shoot at Ray, who eventually lets out a scream before falling behind a car. Back outside Wes's house, the girl is hysterical and threatens to call the police, but Wes feels no regret. Inside, Mary asks her son what has happened, but Wes simply shuts himself in the bathroom and starts washing away the blood. Mary calls Tony, who immediately drives over. Wes throws his bloodied clothes in the garbage and sinks his gun into the family's fish tank.

*What is perhaps most startling about this scene is the way it mirrors the episode described earlier in the novel in which Wes pulls out a knife during a boyhood scuffle. In both cases, a minor dispute rapidly escalates into a violent fight due to Wes's anger and desire to "send a message." Neither Ray nor the neighborhood boy do anything to particularly offend Wes (indeed, in Ray's case it seems to have been Wes himself who was in the wrong), yet Wes's reaction is deadly. As Moore shows throughout the book, Wes is not an evil or even particularly violent person; however, he has a dangerous fixation with inspiring fear in those who cross him.*

The police arrive at Wes's house and immediately arrest him while Mary shouts at him through tears. Mary asks him if he shot Ray, but Wes does not reply. Just as the police car pulls away, Wes tries to shout out to his mother that he doesn't know the answer to her question. By the time Tony arrives, Mary informs him that it's too late—Wes is gone.

*Mary's statement that Wes is "gone" is true on a metaphorical level as well as a literal one. Wes's involvement in the drug game, his approaching fatherhood, and his arrest for shooting Ray all confirm that his family have lost him in an irrevocable way.*

## CHAPTER 6: HUNTED

Moore describes graduation day at Northern High School and points out that Maryland has one of the highest high school graduation rates in the country: 76%. Yet while Baltimore County's graduation rate is 85%, in Baltimore City—where Northern High School is located—it is only 38%. Woody has just managed to scrape through to graduation along with 86 of his classmates. He dances joyously as he approaches the stage, before stopping to think of all his friends who haven't made it to this point, including White Boy and Wes, who dropped out two years ago. After being arrested for shooting Ray, Wes was lucky; Ray sustained only a minor injury and Wes was tried in a juvenile court, and thus was given only six months in a juvenile detention facility. After serving his time, Wes re-enrolled in high school, but by this point he had missed so much that his teachers gave up on trying to catch him up. After Wes' child is born, he drops out for good.

*By this point, we know that Wes has made some seriously bad decisions. However, by mentioning the graduation rates of Baltimore City versus Baltimore County and the overall state of Maryland, Moore reminds us that the odds have been stacked against Wes because of his race, his socioeconomic status, and where he was born. While Woody has managed to make it to graduation, most of his friends have not. Perhaps the greatest tragedy about Wes's story is not the story itself, but the fact that, in inner-city Baltimore, dropping out of school, teenage fatherhood, and arrest are not the exception, but the norm.*

However, the combination of his criminal record and lack of high school diploma make it almost impossible for Wes to get a job. Alicia and the baby live with Alicia's mother, while Wes lives with his Aunt Nicey, from whom he hides the fact that he is dealing drugs again. Wes runs his operation "with the precision of a military unit." His crew is made up of runners, hitters, housemen, and muscle, all of whom play a different role while working together as a harmonious group, almost like a large family. Wes runs the operation very effectively, and at one point is bringing in 4000 dollars a day. Over 1 in 7 residents of Baltimore are addicts, and thus there is an enormous amount of money to be made. However, Wes feels guilty about the size of his cut compared to the lower-ranking members of his crew who put themselves at greater risk. He knows that this is just how the game works, but it still troubles him.

*It is easy to blame Wes for getting back into the drug game so soon after he is released from prison. Theoretically, he was lucky to get a light sentence and be given a second chance—how can he be so quick to throw that chance away? However, as Moore points out, in reality Wes has little choice. His chances of getting a legal job are almost nonexistent, and he now must provide for his family. Furthermore, the comparison of the drug crew to a family highlights why staying in the game is appealing. As a dealer, Wes gets to use his skills, earn money, and feel a sense of belonging to a community—things it would be all but impossible to find elsewhere.*

One day, Wes is standing on a corner with his crew. A stranger approaches and asks the guys if they know where he can "buy some rocks." There are multiple indications that the man is an undercover cop, so Wes says he doesn't know. Wes starts walking away, but although he knows it isn't wise, he also doesn't want this potential sale to go to waste. He turns back to the man and points him toward a nearby phone booth, saying someone there will give him the drugs. Wes accepts $20 from the man, and as he does so notices the man's hands are smooth and clean—another suspicion sign. Quickly, Wes starts walking away; yet almost immediately, he hears a shout to put his hands up. Within seconds, Wes is surrounded by ten officers and arrested.

*Wes's catastrophic mistake in this passage shows that his strength as a drug dealer is also his weakness. Earlier in the chapter, Moore describes Wes's talent at running his operation effectively, which allows him to bring in a large income. However, this desire for money ends up being a fatal flaw, through which—like a hero from classical tragedy—Wes is led to his downfall. Wes's arrest also reveals how luck and choice often work in tandem; while it was misfortune that led the undercover cop to target him, Wes's actions are also to blame.*

Back in military school, Moore is now leading his own platoon, who address him with "a coordinated 'Yes Sergeant.'" He has now been at Valley Forge for three years, and Joy has noticed that he is more polite, has better posture, and carries himself with a general sense of dignity and honor. Moore has internalized the moral code of military school, and—thanks to the support of Captain Hill and others—now even enjoys his time there. He has received both academic and athletic scholarships, significantly reducing the financial burden on his mother. Moore goes to the mailroom and finds that he has two letters from colleges and one from Justin. Moore is the only sophomore on the starting squad of the Valley Forge basketball team, and colleges have already started courting him.

*The young man described in this passage is almost unrecognizable. In only three years, Moore has gone from aimless and self-destructive to hard-working, purposeful, and distinguished. However, because he does not describe the intervening years in much detail, it is hard to know how exactly this change took place. Moore mentions that he enjoys the moral message and sense of belonging he receives at military school, although it is hard to reconcile this with his initial reaction to Valley Forge. Was it luck that led to Moore's change of heart, or did he deliberately work on shifting his opinion?*

During the summers, Moore attends "prestigious" basketball camps and daydreams about the day he is drafted into the NBA. One day, Moore is shooting hoops in the Bronx with his Uncle Howard and tells him about the letters he's been receiving from colleges. Howard says that he hopes Moore makes it to the league, but that he should remember that the odds are against him and that he should not rest all his ambitions on the NBA. Moore is startled by this "dose of reality," but remembers his uncle's words as he receives more letters from colleges.

*This conversation is a reminder that, while it is vitally important that young people are supported in their hopes and ambitions, it is perhaps equally important that they are given advice on the realistic chances and limits of those dreams. Moore's dreams of going to the NBA recall Wes's hope of growing up to be a pro football player and rapper; ultimately, both are rather unrealistic.*

Moore opens the letter from Justin. They have remained close friends in spite of a dean at Riverdale who, when the boys were 12, warned Justin to stay away from Moore. In the letter, Justin informs Moore that Shea has been arrested for possession with the intent to distribute, a charge that could put him away for life. Meanwhile, Justin's mother is dying from a rare form of cancer, and Justin has been using all his free time to take care of her—a fact that has had a negative impact on his grades. Moore is upset by the news, and starts imagining what his life would be like if he weren't at Valley Forge. Although he likes life at the academy, he still feels conflicted about being there. He misses home and feels that he is in a "bubble," kept at a distance from the real world.

*Justin's story is an example of the tragic impact that misfortune can have even on the lives of those who work hard, play by the rules, and never make mistakes. Although Moore does not say so explicitly, his mixed feelings about Valley Forge arguably seem to be inspired by a sense of guilt over the different directions in which his and Justin's lives have moved. Where Justin was a perfect student, Moore was selfish and irresponsible; yet it is Moore who now seems destined for success, while Justin is left floundering.*

Moore is occupied by overseeing his platoon from the moment he wakes up to the moment he goes to sleep. He is charged with taking care of his class, making sure they are performing well academically as well as meticulously following the many rules of Valley Forge. One Saturday evening, the sergeant in charge of the other platoon in Moore's company, Dalio, asks Moore if he wants to get a Stromboli (a folded pizza popular in Pennsylvania). While strolling through town, the boys are addressed by a teenager in a car with "unkempt black hair and a distinctive scar." The teenager asks them what they are doing and demands that they call him sir, before telling them that he is Colonel Bose's son. Moore and Dalio treat the boy with polite (if confused) courtesy, and he drives away. Moments later, however, the car speeds back and swerves dangerously close to the boys. Dalio is scared, but "the kid from the Bronx" inside Moore leads him to confidently tell Dalio that they should just keep heading to the pizza store.

*While it may not be obvious straight away, the actions of Colonel Bose's son are reminiscent of the kind of racist intimidation that was common in the South during the Jim Crow era. Rather than exploiting the legal discrimination that left black people unable to testify against white people, Colonel Bose's son takes advantage of Moore and Dalio's cadet training, which encourages them to be respectful and obedient to anyone who presents themselves as their superior. The problem with this training, of course, is that it can be abused by those who wish to use authority in order to intimidate and mistreat others.*

Moore and Dalio keep walking, but soon hear a voice shouting, "Go home, nigger!". Moore then feels something hard slam against his mouth, cutting his tooth. They hear laughter as the car drives away. Moore is overcome with rage and embarrassment, and the lessons of his childhood in the Bronx are telling him to retaliate. At the same time, he is realistic about the threat facing him and imagines the impact on his family if he were to get killed. Moore leads Dalio back to campus through the wooded area where Moore'd been tricked during his early attempts to escape from Valley Forge. Despite his hurt and anger, Moore smiles at the way his feelings about military school have changed—where he was once desperate to flee, he now runs willingly back toward it.

*There is a clear parallel between this scene and the two fight scenes in which Wes pulls a weapon and ends up arrested. Whereas Wes is not able to control his temper and fixation with "sending a message," Moore takes a more pragmatic, selfless approach. He envisions the possible outcomes of retaliation in his mind, and considers the impact of those outcomes not only on himself, but on his family. This kind of thinking is a sign of maturity; at the same time, it relies on support systems that have never been available to Wes.*

## PART III: PATHS TAKEN AND EXPECTATIONS FULFILLED (INTERLUDE)

In the **prison** visiting room, Moore notices that almost all of the visitors are women and children. During his conversation with Wes, Moore is shocked to hear that Wes still insists he wasn't there during the armed robbery that led to the murder of Sergeant Prothero. Moore wonders if Wes is trying to convince himself of his own innocence by repeating it out loud. Moore doesn't respond to Wes's claim, but instead asks if Wes thinks that people are "products of our environments." Wes replies that he thinks each of us is the product of other people's expectations, which we internalize as our own. Wes argues that we are so influenced by other's expectations that we eventually "lose control." Moore is sympathetic to Wes' perspective, but feels resistant to how much blame Wes puts on other people. After visitation is over, Moore is still overwhelmed by questions.

*This is one of the moments in which Moore explicitly addresses the main theme of the book: are our destinies determined by our environments, or do we have control over them? It is perhaps unsurprising that Wes holds the view that our fates are largely a matter of luck, and equally unsurprising that Moore feels the opposite. The men's differing opinions suggests that when things go right we like to take credit for it, and when they go wrong we prefer to blame external circumstances. Yet Wes's view is notably nuanced; he shows that we internalize external circumstances such that they influence our choices.*

## CHAPTER 7: THE LAND THAT GOD FORGOT

Moore is in a plane in the state of Georgia, being trained by a group of instructors called Black Hats. He has 50 pounds of equipment strapped to him, and is about to jump out of the plane; he is "about to become a paratrooper." It has been just over a year since Moore decided to join the Army after high school. Although he had continued to be aggressively recruited by colleges for basketball, he soon began to realize that there was a stark difference in talent between himself and the guys who had a chance of going professional.

*When he was younger, Moore fantasized about the glamour and glory of playing basketball professionally. However, thanks to his own pragmatic perspective (and the advice of Uncle Howard), he was able to realistically assess the limits of his talent and reorient his goals. Yet while perhaps not as glitzy as the NBA, training as a paratrooper is hardly an unimpressive or unexciting vocation.*

At the same time, Moore has grown to enjoy academic life and is now an enthusiastic reader. He reads Colin Powell's autobiography, in which Powell describes the Army as "living the democratic ideal ahead of the rest of America." This argument is a stark contrast to the view contained within other major texts of the black autobiographical canon, such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. However, Moore is drawn to Powell's message. Rather than the revolution that Malcolm X describes, Moore simply wants "a fair shot," a chance to develop himself and find a sense of purpose in life. One of his high school teachers, Lieutenant Colonel Murnane, has inspired him to dedicate his life to public service. Meanwhile, the commandant of cadets, Colonel Billy Murphy, teaches Moore to make his time on earth "matter." In the past, Moore witnessed the knowledge of life's "transience" causing kids in the Bronx to act with recklessness and indifference; however, this same knowledge now makes Moore see life as "precious."

*Moore is sympathetic to the anger and apathy expressed by Malcolm X and the kids in the Bronx who feel marginalized and forgotten by American society at large. However, due to his time at Valley Forge, Moore no longer feels that sense of alienation himself. He has found a sense of purpose, community, and direction, which in turn creates in him a desire to serve a greater good. This change of heart suggests that, in order for young people to develop constructive ambitions, they must not only have opportunities and resources but feel like valued members of a broader community. If Moore had not been sent to military school, would he have found this sense of purpose, or would he have ended up listless and destructive?*

Moore decides to attend the Valley Forge junior college, receive his associate's degree, and become a second lieutenant in the Army. Back in the plane, he looks around at the other paratrooper trainees around him. For some, it is their first time in a plane, as well as their first time jumping out of one. Moore has recently been selected as the regimental commander for the 70th Corps of Cadets, the highest-ranking position in a group of 700. He is now responsible for the safety, well-being, and efficacy of the whole corps. He is only 18, one of the youngest officers in the entire American military. The Black Hats yell at him to prepare, and Moore asks God to protect him and the others in the plane. Moore flings himself into the air, flailing in the long three seconds before his parachute opens. Suddenly, he is lifted up by his perfectly functional, symmetrical parachute, and is overwhelmed by feelings of peace and gratitude.

*Despite Moore's rigorous training, he knows that there is always a chance that something could go wrong. No matter how prepared he is, he relies on faith in order to have a final level of assurance that everything will be ok. This passage highlights a shift in Moore's attitude to authority. When he was younger, authority figures such as teachers and the police were more of an oppressive presence than a protective or encouraging one. During his time at Valley Forge, however, Moore has begun to see authority in a different light. He now places complete trust in the hierarchical structure of the military, as well as the greater authority of God.*

Cheryl, the mother of Wes's third and fourth children, is lying on the couch in a heroin-induced stupor. Horrified, Wes splashes a glass of water over her face. Soon after having two children with Alicia, Wes had another two with Cheryl. Wes furiously asks Cheryl where she got the drugs, thinking of the fact that she and her friends have been stealing from him. Until this point, his love for her and their kids have kept him in a state of denial about her addiction. Wes has grown tired of witnessing the devastating impact of constant violence, incarceration, and addiction on his community. He thinks of his friend Levy, who managed to get out of the drug game and live "straight." At first Wes thought Levy was crazy, but now he feels that Levy made the right decision.

*This passage certainly supports Wes's point that we eventually "lose control" over our own fates. While Wes originally chose to get involved in the drug game, he is feeling increasingly disillusioned and trapped by it. Meanwhile, addiction is perhaps the best example of losing control over your life. While using a drug like heroin is (usually) voluntary the first few times a person does it, after that point the physical effects of addiction are so strong that the addict all but completely loses their ability to control their use of the drug.*

Wes arrives at Levy's house and tells him he wants to get out of the game. Levy advises him that it won't be easy, but Wes assures him that he is "ready to try something. Anything." Levy tells him about Job Corps, which is helping Levy get his GED and train as a boiler repairman, but Wes is hesitant. His aunt started Job Corps but quit because it reminded her too much of **prison**. Meanwhile, Wes wonders how he will be able to support Mary, Alicia, Cheryl, and his four kids on the minuscule salary from Job Corps. Wes looks at his most recent tattoo, a black devil that symbolizes his conviction that he and his community have been abandoned by God.

*To some extent, Wes has undergone a major shift in maturity and responsibility since the previous chapter. While before he acted in a short-tempered, reckless, and self-interested way, he now prioritizes the needs of his family and doesn't wish to add to the destruction caused by drugs. However, Wes is also (rightfully) disillusioned with the world around him. Without optimism and faith, is it possible for Wes to change his life in a positive way?*

Wes eventually decides to go the Job Corps interview, and soon afterward he packs his bag and joins Levy on the bus to the Woodland Job Corps Center. At the campus, Wes smiles as he notices there is a football field. Walking to his assigned room, Wes sees "manicured lawns," a beach volleyball court, a basketball court, and a wooden gazebo. Wes is encouraged; this is what he imagines a college campus looks like, although he has never seen one personally. When training starts, Wes excels academically; he receives his GED within one month and is soon reading at the level of a college sophomore. Wes frames his GED certificate to display back home in Baltimore. Other Job Corps participants turn to him for help—Wes has become "a leader."

*For Wes, it is less the discipline of the Job Corps campus than the support, resources, and sense of community that allow him to flourish. He is clearly naturally gifted, a fact that has been obscured so far in his life by lack of encouragement and opportunities. From this perspective, it is tempting to agree with Wes's assessment that we are products of our environments. As soon as Wes's environment changes, he begins to excel. Is it thus fair to blame him for the direction his life has taken before this point?*

For the vocational element of Job Corps, Wes chooses to train as a carpenter. He enjoys the feeling of building and perfecting something, and vows to build a house for his five-year-old daughter "to protect her." Although a little surprised by the level of Wes's ambition, his carpentry teacher is encouraging. Over the course of seven months, Wes completes the house; when finished, it is five feet high, with a door and even window shutters. These months have been the happiest of Wes's life. He is inspired by his desire to provide a better life for his children and Mary, and not to end up like Tony, who is perpetually in and out of **prison**. When graduation comes, Wes is excited but also nervous, uncertain of what lies beyond the supportive confines of the Job Corps campus.

*For the first time, Wes has a positive sense of control over his life. He is able to choose his vocational training, choose what to build, and complete the project himself. With these options in front of him, Wes chooses to do something constructive, ambitious, and selfless, suggesting that Wes is not inherently destructive or irresponsible. Rather, he simply responds to the options available to him. At the same time, it is also clear that Wes has natural talent. Would a less skilled person in his position be able to make the same positive change?*

After graduating from the Job Corps, Wes takes on a series of temporary jobs, first as a landscaper, then a construction worker, and then a food preparer at a mall. Each pays only $9 an hour and leaves Wes exhausted after 10 hour shifts; he has no energy to play with his children and insufficient money to take care of them. One day, Wes walks through his old neighborhood and is stunned by how little the game has changed. He picks up a package of cocaine and brings it home. Sitting in his kitchen, Wes despairs; Cheryl is still using drugs and Alicia and Mary don't have enough money to look after the kids. At the Job Corps campus it seemed like all these problems had disappeared, but in reality Wes had simply escaped them. Now they are very real again. Despondent, Wes dumps the baking soda and cocaine in the pot to start cooking up crack.

*On the Job Corpus campus, Wes is treated like an important, valuable, and talented citizen who has much to contribute to society. However, once he graduates and returns to Baltimore, he is placed on the bottom rung of the social ladder. He earns minimum wage, is forced to switch between a series of temporary jobs, and in his role as a food preparer at the mall isn't even able to utilize his construction skills. It is perhaps unsurprising that Wes then ends up turning back to the drug game. As a dealer, he is at least treated with respect and is able to provide for his family.*

## CHAPTER 8: SURROUNDED

The phone at Mary's house has been ringing for three minutes nonstop, but she ignores it. She has watched a news item on the TV that has made her freeze with panic. Three days before, four men entered a jewelry store carrying mallets and guns and ordered the people inside to get on the ground. Among the people in the store was Sergeant Bruce Prothero, a police officer and father of five who had a second job working as a security guard at the mall. The men grabbed almost $500,000 worth of jewelry and sprinted out; Sergeant Prothero dashed after them. In the mall parking lot, the men shot him three times from the car. Sergeant Prothero died as the men sped away.

*Mary's shock at learning through the TV about what Wes and Tony have done highlights the massive gulf between her impression of her sons and the depiction of them on the news. Although Mary is aware that both Wes and Tony are involved with drug crime and have spent time in prison, she still views them as family—as the children she birthed and raised. Now she must contend with the horrifying revelation that her sons took the life of another.*

The Baltimore police department conduct a fervent search for the four jewelry store robbers, provoked by the fact that the men killed "one of their own." They capture the first two suspects within two days of the shooting. Mary watches as the news reporter announces that the final two suspects—Tony and Wes—are still on the run, and that they are being treated as "armed and dangerous." Days pass, and Mary cannot sleep. She is plagued by guilt and panic. One night at 4 am the police knock loudly on her door; when she opens it, some already have their guns raised. An officer takes Mary outside, even though it is February and she is only wearing a cotton bathrobe. He asks if Mary knows that both her sons are on probation, and if she knows where they are. Mary promises to co-operate; meanwhile, the police aggressively search her house. Although they find nothing, they promise they will be back until Tony and Wes are found. Meanwhile, Wes and Tony's family are "bombarded" with requests for interviews.

*Although Moore does not question the justice of Tony and Wes being punished for their role in killing Sergeant Prothero, he highlights the unfairness in how the police treat Mary. Arriving for the search at 4 am and making her wait outside in her robe suggest that the police have little respect for Mary, despite the fact that she has personally done nothing wrong. Even after she promises to co-operate, the police treat her no better. This shows that criminality has a tainting impact that goes beyond criminals themselves. Family members and even whole communities are treated as criminals or accomplices even when they themselves are innocent.*

At Aunt Nicey's daughter's wedding, the family try to forget the ongoing manhunt and think of more positive things. On the way to the reception, one of the cars of attendees stops at a 7 Eleven for snacks. A group of police that have been trailing them since they left the church orders everyone get out of the car and sit on the snow-covered curb. The police officers remind them that there is a reward for turning in Wes and Tony, as the guests silently shiver in their soaking clothes. When it is clear that none of them have any information, the officers let them go.

*The ruthlessness of the police department is made obvious by the fact that they will not cease hounding Wes and Tony's family even on the wedding day. Again, the family members have done nothing wrong themselves, but are mistreated and humiliated due to their (possibly only distant) connection to the Moore brothers.*

In reality, Wes and Tony are in North Philadelphia, staying at an uncle's house. Walking down the street, Wes notices that the same police car has been following him on more than one occasion and hopes it is just a coincidence. He gets home and starts eating a Philly Cheesesteak. Tony says he is heading out, but Wes doesn't hear him shut the door; as Wes runs down to shut it himself, he sees his brother on the floor while a police officer puts handcuffs on him. Suddenly, six officers jump on Wes and pin him to the ground, too. There are both Baltimore and Philadelphia officers present as well as ATF and FBI officials. Back in Maryland, the Baltimore PD rejoice at the news that Tony and Wes have been caught, while Mary cries at home.

*It is difficult to reconcile the impression of Wes given in the book with the level of intensity with which he is pursued by law enforcement. Although Wes has committed violent crimes in the past, it still seems remarkable that the FBI are involved in his capture. Meanwhile, the difference in reaction between the Baltimore Police Department and Mary is striking. Again, Moore never suggests that Wes and Tony shouldn't have been captured. Yet why do the officers celebrate, considering there is nothing that can bring Sergeant Prothero back?*

During questioning, Wes does not feel nervous, as he knows he has lost all control over his fate. He has waited almost a year to be extradited to Maryland from Pennsylvania for his trial. Tony was identified as the shooter and pleaded guilty in order to avoid the death penalty; the two other men involved also pleaded guilty. Only Wes has maintained his innocence, and thus his case goes to trial. Wes's lawyer argues that Wes simply accompanied Tony to Philadelphia and points out that since being in jail, Wes has converted to Islam and calls his children every day. As Wes waits to hear the jury's verdict, he is overwhelmed by feelings of isolation and apathy. Ultimately, he is found guilty of first-degree felony murder and sentenced to life in **prison** without parole. Sergeant Prothero's widow sobs, as do Mary, Aunt Nicey, and Alicia. The judge tells Wes that he acted as if he was in the "Wild West" and that he is "dangerous." Wes reflects on his fate; he has been to prison before, but never expected to spend the rest of his life there. For the first time, he has a clear idea of what his future looks like.

*The reason why Wes maintains his innocence is one of the book's major mysteries. It is clear that since being captured and sent to jail he has dedicated himself to living a better, more constructive life, as evidenced by his frequent phone calls with his children and conversion to Islam. Perhaps it is too painful for Wes to reconcile this new, improved image of himself with the reality of his past. Yet surely his new faith demands that he is honest about his actions? Meanwhile, Wes does not seem frightened by the prospect of spending the rest of his life in prison. Indeed, he seems to have been numbed by his experiences. This makes it even more puzzling why he maintains his innocence. Ultimately, the answer to this question is something that neither Moore nor the reader will ever know.*

Moore is at the office of Mayor Kurt Schmoke, who teasingly calls Moore "General" despite the fact that he is only a second lieutenant. By this point, Schmoke has been the Mayor of Baltimore for 12 years, and Moore is currently doing his second internship working alongside him. Although the city has seen real progress during Schmoke's tenure (including the destruction of the **Murphy Homes Projects**), the murder rate has still not fallen and teenage pregnancy rates are up. Moore argues that "there are two Baltimores," like all major cities in America; on one side is culture, history, and capital, and on the other, crime, poverty, and violence.

*Schmoke's affectionate nickname for Moore represents a distinct contrast from the previous hierarchical institution governing Moore's life—military school. Whereas at Valley Forge, the precise rank of each member of the community was a matter of serious concern, Schmoke takes a more playful attitude. Moore juxtaposes these two styles of leadership without suggesting that one is better than the other, but rather by showing the ways in which both have helped him develop.*

Although Mayor Schmoke could easily be elected for a fourth term, it is clear that he is getting ready to leave politics behind and spend time with his family. He asks Moore if he has enjoyed his internship. Moore responds, "I've loved it, sir," but adds that this is an understatement. While earning his associate's degree at Valley Forge, Moore's adviser suggests he apply to **Johns Hopkins**. At first Moore is resistant; he is aware of Johns Hopkins from having grown up in Baltimore, but doesn't know anyone who actually attended. He feels that the university is filled with people "who did not look or sound like me." Moore's adviser introduces him to the assistant director of admissions, a young black man who convinces Moore that he should apply. Moore likes the idea not only of attending such a prestigious institution, but also going home to Baltimore. His relationship with Joy has improved dramatically since he first enrolled at Valley Forge and he now sees her as not just as his mother, but also his friend.

*Moore's reservations about Johns Hopkins show that it is sometimes hard to make the right decisions because we assume that they are not available to us. Although Moore grew up in Baltimore, comes from a highly-educated family, and excelled in military school, he still assumes Johns Hopkins is somewhere he does not belong. If someone like Moore feels hesitant about applying to an elite university (even after being encouraged to do so by his adviser), what chance do others in a less privileged position have? Moore is then fortunate to have a personal meeting with the assistant director of admissions, who happens to be a young black man—his mere presence thus comforting Moore's main reservations about applying. How many others would get so lucky?*

Moore is now convinced to apply to **Johns Hopkins**, but still worries about getting in, and his SAT scores are significantly lower than the average Johns Hopkins student. However, not only is he accepted, he also receives a scholarship. Moore thinks about how lucky he is to have had "an advocate on the inside" in the form of the assistant director of admissions. He thinks of the kids he knows back in the Bronx who never felt like they had a chance to be successful, or people in the generation above who believed that they did only to have that chance taken away, like Mary and her Pell Grant. As someone who did manage to get several breaks, Moore feels it is his responsibility to help others who are less fortunate.

*This is perhaps the closest Moore gets to arguing that our external circumstances determine our fate more than our choices. Moore's surprise acceptance to Johns Hopkins reminds him that he is beating the odds to be where he is—and that he would not be able to do this without the support of others who believe in him. While it is Moore's own talent, hard work, and achievements that impress the assistant director of admissions, Moore's acceptance hinges on the luck of meeting him in the first place.*

Back in the Mayor's office, Schmoke asks Moore if he has ever heard of the Rhodes Scholarship. Moore knows that President Clinton, Maryland state senator Paul Sarbanes, and Mayor Schmoke himself all received the scholarship. Schmoke tells Moore about other distinguished people in his own Rhodes class and recalls his time at Oxford. After Moore's internship, he is going to spend a semester studying abroad in South Africa, and Schmoke advises him to learn about who Cecil Rhodes was. Later, Moore learns that Rhodes was a vicious white supremacist colonizer.

*In this passage, Moore illustrates the extent to which major opportunities and resources often come shrouded in moral complexity. While the Rhodes Scholarship has uplifted black men like Schmoke and enabled them to do good in the world, the scholarship is also inseparably tied to violence and injustice. Schmoke encourages Moore not to forget or disregard this moral complexity, but rather to confront it head-on.*

Moore is able to travel to South Africa after receiving a grant from the School for International Training to study "culture and reconciliation" in post-apartheid Cape Town. At first, Cape Town looks remarkably similar to American cities. However, as Moore leaves downtown and enters the township in which he will be living, he is confronted with a strikingly different picture. Moore describes the legacy of apartheid as "glaringly obvious," the effects of racial segregation creating "despair and hopelessness." Although the situation in South Africa is more extreme, it reminds Moore of Baltimore and the Bronx. Rows of shacks stretch in every direction, and Moore realizes that the poverty he's witnessed in America is nothing compared to what exists in South Africa.

*Once opportunities start coming Moore's way, they do not stop. After his entry into the formerly unfamiliar world of Johns Hopkins, Moore is given the chance to experience a whole other level of unfamiliarity by spending a semester in a completely different country. While Moore is certainly shocked by certain ways in which South Africa is different from the United States, he is also reminded of key similarities. Despite our differences, people all over the world face similar problems, and are thus united in a common humanity.*

At the house where Moore is staying, a short woman, Mama, greets him with "Molo!," the Xhosa word for hello, and her son, Zinzi, calls him "bhuti," meaning brother. A week after Moore's arrival, he has a long conversation with Mama, in which they exchange stories about their lives. Mama tells him about the history and culture of South Africa and her husband's role as a freedom fighter during apartheid. Moore is shocked that Mama is so at peace after so many years of pain. Mama replies that she forgives those who did her harm "because Mr. Mandela asked us to." Moore reflects that finding a sense of common humanity and peace is of vital importance. When Moore next speaks to Joy on the phone, she tells him about the crazy coincidence that the Baltimore police department is conducting a manhunt for another young man with Wes's name.

*Moore's conversation with Mama teaches him about the most important choice of all: the choice to forgive and be at peace with suffering. By this point in the book, Moore has come to terms with the fact that much of his destiny—perhaps even most of it—is beyond his control. However, while it is not possible to decide exactly how his life will turn out, he does have control over whether he will hold on to anger or instead embrace acceptance. Mama's words serve as a reminder that sometimes people need moral leaders in order to reach a state of acceptance.*

A few weeks before Moore returns to the United States, he is walking through his township with Zinzi and his friend Simo, "feeling at home." Moore feels preemptively nostalgic about leaving South Africa, but focuses on the future. In a few months, he will be graduating from **Johns Hopkins** Phi Beta Kappa, and as the first African-American Rhodes Scholar in the school's history. Zinzi, meanwhile, will shortly undergo the traditional Xhosa initiation into manhood that comes in the form of spending a month in the "bush." Moore asks him if he is nervous, especially about undergoing circumcision without anesthetic. Zinzi replies that he is not nervous; he views the experience as a transformative process through which he will come to be treated with a newfound respect by his community. Moore reflects that the challenges young people face in South Africa are not dissimilar to those faced by the ones he personally grew up with. However, whereas in South Africa the journey into manhood is celebrated and achieved in junction with the broader community, in America young men are often treated with fear.

*Moore's observations about the way young men are treated in South Africa versus the United States recalls Wes' comment that people tend to live up to the expectations of others. In the United States, young men—and young black men in particular—are treated in a fearful way, and thus rather than feeling that they are supported and valued members of the community, young black men develop an image of themselves as intimidating, violent, and destructive. Meanwhile, Zinzi's description of the initiation process evokes a decidedly different attitude to adulthood than the norm in the US. Whereas American young people are mostly left to figure things out for themselves, in the Xhosa tribe there is a formal process and system of support that helps guide young people as they become adults.*

## EPILOGUE

Inside Jessup Correctional Facility, Wes works as a carpenter for 53 cents a day. He gets 2 hours of free time, and is in bed with lights out at 10 pm. He converted to Islam at first so he could see Tony at Friday services, but he is now a devout believer and leader in the Muslim community in **prison**. His family visits, but he finds these occasions difficult. When Barack Obama is elected President, the inmates at Jessup are overjoyed; this joy subsides, however, when they once again confront the monotony of their lives behind bars. At the time Moore is writing, Wes has become a grandfather at 33, and is serving the tenth year of his life sentence.

*Perhaps the saddest thing about Wes's fate is the contrast between how much he has changed personally and how little his environment ever has or ever will change. Wes is now responsible, disciplined, and devoutly religious. Yet despite this positive transformation, Wes will never be able to make an autonomous contribution to society. Instead, he is forced to perform what is essentially slave labor in prison, knowing that every day of his life will be the same until he dies.*

Moore moves on to describe how the lives of other characters in the book progressed up until the point at which he is writing. Joy lives just outside Baltimore, working for a consultancy that works with charitable foundations. Nikki runs an event-planning business in Virginia and Shani graduated from Princeton and Stanford Law School, and now lives with her husband. Uncle Howard was the "co-best man" (alongside Justin) at Moore's wedding. Justin received a scholarship to college; during his senior year, his father died and he himself was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. He recovered and is now the dean of a "prestigious high school" in Pennsylvania. Captain Hill served as an Army officer for seven years before becoming a corporate lawyer; he was a groomsman at Moore's wedding and is still an important (if "intimidating") mentor to Moore. Moore's grandfather James passed away, and although Moore rushed back from Afghanistan to be with him, he was sadly too late. Moore's grandmother Winell, now in her 80s, "watches over her family like a lioness protecting her pride."

*It is not only Moore himself who finds success in life, but also those closest to him, highlighting the way in which the success of one person is implicated in the success of their community (and vice versa). At the same time, this passage also illustrates the fundamental injustice in the distribution of misfortune. Whereas everyone undergoes some level of hardship in life, the experience of someone like Justin serves as a useful reminder of just how cruel fate can be. Justin was a good friend and disciplined student; what did he do to deserve the death of both his parents and his own battle with cancer all before he finished college? The fact that Justin is able to overcome this level of misfortune and still succeed is perhaps even more remarkable than Moore's own story.*

Meanwhile, Mary still works in medical technology while raising six children: three of Wes's kids, her niece and nephew, and her youngest son. Aunt Nicey works in elder care; all her children have graduated from high school. Sentenced to life in prison, Tony died of kidney failure at 38. After graduating from high school, Woody spent time in and out of prison before getting a job as a truck driver. He has three children. White Boy is married and lives in Atlanta, running the printing press for a magazine. Alicia works for TSA and is raising one of her two kids with Wes. Cheryl continued to struggle with addiction and lost custody of her children. At 24, she died of injuries sustained from falling down the stairs.

*Just as Moore's family and friends followed his general trajectory of success, Wes's loved ones tend to have had a much harder time. While certain individuals such as Woody and Aunt Nicey managed to avoid disaster, they are still left working poorly paid jobs, close to the bottom of the social hierarchy. Meanwhile, many of those closest to Moore died young, highlighting the impact of poverty not only on quality of life, but also life expectancy.*

Moore spent two and a half years at Oxford through the Rhodes Scholarship and graduated with a master's degree in international relations. Back in the United States, he interned in Washington DC before taking a job on Wall Street. He then took a leave of absence and headed to Afghanistan with the Army, before being accepted into the White House Fellow program. He became a special assistant to secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and during this time married his wife, Dawn. Moore has climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and has visited Seoul, Istanbul, Havana, Egypt, Amsterdam, Venice, Berlin, Brazil, and countless other places. He also delivered a speech at the event during which Barack Obama accepted the Democratic party nomination.

*Moore's achievements since college are almost comical in their impressiveness and diversity. Perhaps the most striking thing about Moore's biography is the extent to which it is clear that he feels at home all over the world. This is evidenced not only in his tales of travel to exotic locations, but also in the fact that he moves seamlessly from Oxford to DC to Wall Street to Afghanistan and back again. Clearly, Moore has internalized the idea that he is a welcome and valuable no matter where he is—arguably the ultimate form of freedom.*

Moore reflects that *The Other Wes Moore* was a labor of love, rigorously researched even though Moore has no journalistic training. He hopes that in writing the book, he has honored the legacy of his father, Westley, who was himself a journalist. He acknowledges that the central question in the book is over what "made the difference" between his life and Wes's. He confesses that he doesn't know the answer, and that it would be impossible to isolate a single factor. Moore admits that life has not always been perfect for him and that he's made his fair share of mistakes. He argues that the most important transformation in his life was the moment when he realized he was surrounded by a community of people—his family, friends, and mentors—who were all pushing him to succeed. This encouragement taught Moore what it means to be free. He and Wes both hope that other young children feel that same sense of freedom, and argues that "it's up to us, all of us," to make that possible.

*Moore's admission that he doesn't know what made the difference between him and Wes may seem frustrating. After spending so many hours interviewing, researching, and writing, how is it possible that he cannot determine how their two fates came to diverge? As Moore indicates throughout the book, however, destinies are shaped not by single, decisive events so much as the accumulation of millions of much smaller moments that are impossible to view in isolation from each other. Moore's hope that other children will be encouraged to be "free" as a result of his work is bittersweet; for Moore, this means a chance of others following in his footsteps. For Wes, it means others opening doors that are closed to him forever.*

## AFTERWORD

Moore admits that after the book came out, readers pressed him for an answer on what factors caused the divergence in his and Wes's fates. He's found that each reader comes up with their own answer, pointing to anything from the role of mentors, the influence of cultural capital, or the importance of waiting to have kids. Moore mentions that he once received a letter from a 15-year-old from Baltimore who'd already served time in juvenile detention. The young man confesses that *The Other Wes Moore* is the only book he'd read in its entirety, and that it inspired him to think about his fate in a new light. Moore has found that the book speaks to an extraordinarily diverse range of people who each have their own unique understanding of its meaning. His greatest hope is that the book will inspire young people to see "success as a possibility" and to believe that struggle can result in a happy ending. Moore concludes with a poem by Sir William Ernest Henley that ends: "I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul."

*In the afterword, Moore highlights another important reason for his reluctance to emphasize any one message in the story: the fact that we are all unique individuals, and that each person will thus have their own individual interpretation of the book and its implications. Even if Moore were able to successfully isolate a single factor that "made the difference" in determining his and Wes's fates, this factor might be completely irrelevant to the lives of others. Ultimately, readers should learn what they can from the example of the two Wes Moores while bearing in mind that each person is different and that the lessons from one story will never apply directly in a different context.*

## A CALL TO ACTION

The Call to Action is written by Tavis Smiley, who admits that the book reminds him of a quote by Dr. Cornel West: "Our roots help to determine our routes." Smiley points out that some people are blessed with gifts and privileges for which they should always be thankful to God. At the same time, we must remember that "failing doesn't make us a failure," and that we should always keep trying. Smiley argues that the book describes two boys who required help on their journey into adulthood; while one received it, the other didn't. He encourages the reader to be aware of their own power and to "unleash" it. He explains that the rest of the book is filled with a list of resources that can help young people fulfill their potential. Smiley concludes that the most important thing in life is to try, and that "God will take care of the rest."

*Smiley's "Call to Action" strikes a notably different tone from the rest of the book. Unlike Moore, who adopts a more neutral, reserved approach, Smiley is more emphatic in his invocation of religion and advice for how to move forward. Smiley also hints at a resolution to the question of whether luck or choices is more important in determining people's fates by arguing that the book tells the story of two boys who both needed help but who didn't both get it. This understanding of the book emphasizes both the similarity and difference in the two men's lives, as well as illustrating how luck and choice work in tandem.*

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