

# The Yellow Brownstone

by Lisa K. Stephenson

Irving was kicking up rocks, simultaneously gripping the straps of his backpack in fear that it would fall to the ground or, worse, be taken again. The sneakers squeezing his toes were nothing new, and the unfit pants which stopped inches away from his ankles were another reason he found himself alone. Bullied on campus and a loner off, he made good with his path, meticulously avoiding the pits where he was known to have spent many evenings with his face in the ground.

Too young to understand the depths of his misfortune, Irving was learning to find solace in the thought of simply being alive as many times he found himself unconscious standing amidst the white gates. Sunday-morning churchgoers his parents were, their routine perfunctory—breakfast, shoes, tie, shirt causing mild suffocation, a brush to his roots, oil to his face and off they went.

Their one-bedroom apartment, just off the Grand Concourse in The Bronx, New York, was home to his action figures, his father, mother and himself. His twin bed in the living room just overlooked the bustling streets and angry patrons—he was a second grader fueled by the world's dysfunction, taking pleasure in eavesdropping on his belligerent neighbors, their youngest his nemesis. Never speaking to his parents or administrators about the issues plaguing him within the school walls, he lived vicariously through the G.I. Joe action figure he carried around with him—the action figure resilient and strong. Deciding no longer to dilly-dally in the thought of defending himself, he remained inside even on the warm days like the ones soon approaching.

A pariah he became, socially awkward and afraid to face the challenges set before him while dealing with the challenges at home: his clothes unclean, his shoes two sizes too small and the ringworm to the rear of his head expanding, causing him to bald. As troubling as they were, the cockroaches had become another form of entertainment, and he wondered at night how many would awaken him from his slumber. Counting one, two, three, four—and those pesky ones that would fall from the ceilings onto his mattress, eyes red from being kept up at night itching his bites through his pajamas—but it was good because he was alive and that was more than he could have asked for.

He'd been injured by his mother two years prior at the tender age of five, a sprained arm that was treated at home since his parents had no health insurance. Through the pain then and the chronic discomfort now, he continues to smile. Administrators question him daily, but Irving

now knew better, after the kind woman came to their home years ago informing his mother that he would be taken from her—his mother’s fury causing him to experience his first unconscious state. Remembering that day Irving, vowed to never anger mama again.

Speaking to the action figure just to the edge of his bed, he imagined the broken television set playing cartoons that he would only see in passing on his way to school playing through the curtains of his neighbors—and he was amused.

“Boy!” his mother called; her voice startling him, had he lost track of the time again? He wondered. Michelle Dudley, age forty-seven, gave birth to her son seven years ago, a time when she thought her ability to bear children were no more—then a surprise came. But Irving was no miracle in her eyes, only another mouth to feed on her impoverished income. His father was Marvin Houston, the janitor for the building they resided in. To Michelle’s surprise, Marvin stayed to assist her in raising Irving, and sometimes, was even kind.

But his kindness did not stop his abuse of Michelle; weekly, her right cheek and bottom lip met the back of his right hand as Irving wept from his cradle,

“Shut that damn boy up!” he would scream. Michelle resented her son; punishments were always a direct result of his behavior, he was not a miracle baby at all, she would think, as she allowed him to remain soiled in his pampers, unchanged for days—sometimes weeks—at a time. Marvin, keeping the company of another woman, grew weary of the constant crying and unwanted source of responsibility, but as time pressed on he began to show more interest,

“That little one,” he thought, “my own flesh and blood.” Irving resembled his father more day by day, and Marvin grew accustomed to fatherhood once Irving turned five and could prove himself useful by fetching the beers, changing the television channel and lifting the grocery bags because his father simply chose not to. This infuriated Michelle as she watched her son struggle to carry the milk cartons, eggs, and water. But Irving remained persistent and never complained, no matter how heavy the bag.

Michelle remembered his soft voice telling her, “I got it mama,” all before inching his way up the stairs, grabbing ahold of the passage railings or stepping in the urine found in the elevators, struggling to keep the bags off the ground. Irving was strong-willed; his father taught him this much with his neglect. The public housing projects were filled with disheveled men and women who would mean him harm, but although Marvin did not coddle his son, he swore to protect him from the dangers of the world, even if that danger was him. Marvin found himself depressed, hopeless even, as Irving continued to grow.

Marvin spent many nights away from home, fearful that he would return inebriated and want to inflict harm on his only son. But he knew better and because of that he would simply

spend his time elsewhere. But while this protected the son, it began to create a wedge between the parents, a wedge his mother would continue to blame on Irving—wanting him gone for good. As she struggled to find new ways to keep her boyfriend home and her child outdoors, Michelle decided to get creative, encouraging Irving to play outside and introducing her son to the men in the neighborhood, forcing him to interact, hanging out late at night. By age seven Irving found himself dreading the outdoors, afraid of having to run from the stray bullets, forced to sneak into the bodegas and steal snacks for the older gentlemen who told him he was swift on his feet.

Irving did it, against his better judgment, his own conscience consuming him as he knew right from wrong, but felt it had become too late to reason.

“Boy!” his mother called, again snapping him out of his daydream. As Irving tossed his G.I. Joe aside, he made his way to the kitchen, only a few feet from his bed. Standing by the kitchen threshold, he watched as his mother removed a spoon from a pot in the sink filled with filthy water to share his dinner—boxed macaroni and cheese with a boiled hotdog she was going to slice before placing it on a plastic plate she would serve on the floor before him.

“After you eat this dinner, you going to go outside and play, understand?” She coughed, leaving her mouth uncovered. But Irving did not understand. He had school in the morning and the sun was beginning to set. As he sat cross-legged on the cold floor, he watched as the spiders climbed up and down their webs, the ones they created just under the bottom cupboards. But Irving remained unbothered, having grown accustomed to sharing his home, toys, and his body with the creatures from the beyond, as he would refer to them. Irving did not have an appetite. Stretching his body across the floor as his mother stood in the kitchen cleaning the dishes, he poked his fork into a piece of his hotdog and tried feeding it to the cluster of spiders.

Turning to see, his mother kicked him.

“Boy, that is my good fork, what the fuck are you doing?” she shouted, landing another kick to his ribs. Irving cried, the fork and his food falling to the floor as he lay in the fetal position.

“If I feed them they won’t bite me,” he sobbed, his hands placed firmly in front his face. Michelle could not bring herself to face him; she turned, resuming the dishes.

“Pick up my damn fork and finish your dinner so you can go outside,” she snapped.

Once Irving finished his meal, she forced him into his room to get dressed. All he wanted was a bath and sleep. But Michelle insisted.

“Get them jeans on and go on outside, your father coming home in a minute,” she said. Irving struggled to keep up; the sun had now gone down and outside was pitch black, street lights

beginning to shine. He thought he had gotten acclimated to this, as Michelle would instruct him to leave at least three nights a week, the nights his dad would come home. Michelle was always looking for new ways to please Marvin, to keep him happy and satisfied so he would want to spend more time at home, but nothing she had done so far was enough to keep him for more than twelve hours a week.

As the keys turned in the lock, Michelle made her way back into the kitchen and grabbed a plate from the oven that had been wrapped in aluminum foil, quickly placing it on the dining room table accompanied by a fork and knife. Chicken, rice, and beans with collard greens all sat steaming atop the kitchen table. Marvin made his way inside wearing a navy blue janitorial jumpsuit, his name tag hanging from the left pocket, as Irving scurried past him. Pointing, Marvin asked Michelle, “Where the hell that boy going this time of the night?”

“The boy is fine. Eat your dinner, baby,” she instructed. Marvin did as he was told. Removing his shoes, he took a seat at the head of the table to await the remainder of his meal. Placing a tall glass of lemonade in front of him, Michelle took a seat to begin her cautious interrogation,

“Where do you sleep when you’re not here, Marvin?” Fearful of upsetting him, but unable to resist asking, Michelle prepared herself for the worst—a slap, a punch, a kick. She was willing to risk it all, just for the chance to learn how she could fix what had been broken. Marvin’s absence made her question her own sanity. Years upon years of deception, disappearances, and the uneasy feeling that she may in fact not be the only woman in his life.

“Woman, where I lay my head is not your business. The rent is paid, that boy is taken care of, and the lights are on. That’s all that matters. Why you have to give me a hard time? Have I not done enough?” he asked. Michelle hung her head in shame.

Meanwhile, Irving made his way down to the playground, where he struggled to get onto the swing set to rock himself slowly as the group of men outside his building kept a steady eye on him whilst completing their transactions.

Another young man joined him on the swings, which creaked so loudly that Irving thought he would fall, unable to reach the black mats underneath him.

“What’s your name?” the young boy asked.

“Irving.. Yours?” he replied, extending his hand.

“Kevin,” the young boy said, smiling as he returned the gesture. Something about the cool breeze blowing that night and the lights shining just above their heads created a comfortable atmosphere.

“I’m from Baltimore,” Kevin informed Irving, who in turn told Kevin about the school he was attending and how the children there were terribly mean. Irving found himself dreading the thought of having to return to school in the morning, praying he did not oversleep, because Mama did not like that. The bruises on his stomach began to hurt as he wondered to himself if this was something he would endure forever.

“Do you get hit?” he asked Kevin sadly.

“Not by my mommy, but my dad from time to time,” he said, swinging his legs. Just then his father bellowed from the fifth-floor window,

“Kevin, get on up here.” The voice echoed through the project sector, and the group of men staring at the kids.

Quickly Kevin propped himself up from the swing. “Can I give you a kiss? I will see you tomorrow, right?” he asked, swinging his arms and rocking his body in excitement.

“Sure,” Irving said hesitantly. Kevin stepped lightly toward him and gave him a kiss on the lips.

Marvin, watching from the window up on the eleventh floor, was not sure what he had seen. The alcohol now seeping through his veins impaired his vision as he made his way downstairs. Moving ferociously past a bewildered Michelle, Marvin pushed her slightly as he slipped his feet into his shoes, pulling up his pants, her voice in his ear like the buzzing of a fly, he swatted her away.

“Baby, what’s wrong, why are you so mad, let’s finish, let me finish,” she said begging him as she tugged on his jumpsuit.

“Let me go!” he screamed, a naked Michelle staying behind scurrying to find her clothes. Once downstairs both Kevin and Marvin made eye contact once Kevin neared the steel doors to head inside.

“You fucking pansy ass nigga, did you just kiss my son?” he screamed, pointing his finger at Kevin. The young man stepped backward, wide eyes darting back and forth. The street lamp shone down as the men in front of the building looked on silently (for they knew better than to interfere). As Irving made his way over to his father in hopes that he could speak to him, Kevin’s father came barging out of the doors, shouting obscenities.

“Step away from my fucking son before I knock you the fuck out!” he shouted, pointing his finger at Marvin. It was all happening so fast. Irving did not know how to react. Both Kevin and Irving looked on as their fathers stood before them, quarreling. The older man shoved Marvin in his chest, then Marvin lowered his body to tackle him. They fell to the floor punching one another as Irving and Kevin continuing to watch and the men from the front of the building now decided it was time to intervene. Everyone shouted over one another.

With the police sirens blaring loudly, the men groaning as they continue to throw fists, Kevin disappeared, running toward the forest across the street. Irving shouting his name, but Kevin did not turn around. Instead he kept running as though he was happy to have gotten away. The old man realized his son had gone, but with a police officer now racing toward him had little to no time to process the fact that his son just ran away. The officers beat both fathers with batons—the strange men from in front of the building scattering, the police officers shouting as they prepared themselves to place handcuffs on both the old man and Marvin. Michelle barged her way through the slate doors, shouting to her boyfriend as the police officers escorted them to the back of the squad car, placing hands firmly atop their heads and forcing them inside.

The street lights began to flicker as Irving watched his father be taken away and he turned to face his mother, who greeted him with a slap across the face. Irving fell to the ground as Marvin shouted from the back seat, his voice indistinct.

“Bitch, don’t you dare touch him!” Marvin screamed, the car pulling away. Irving resisted the urge to stand and run away.

“This is your entire fault!” Michelle cried. She always blamed Irving for his daddy leaving. She never took into account that perhaps Marvin simply did not love her; she would not hear of such blasphemy.

That night Michelle prayed long and hard, wishing the good Lord would fix her relationship and that Marvin would make an honest woman of her. Although she prayed, cried, and spoke in tongues, she was losing faith in that part of her life. She was beginning to question whether or not she could continue on this way, unloved, unhappy, and resentful of her own flesh and blood. Then it dawned on her, with the house empty and Irving fast asleep, that she wanted to know the truth. She rummaged through Marvin’s things—uniform, laundry, and casual clothing—she came across an address beneath the name on the inside of his lunch bag.

1748 Allenwood Drive

Bronx, NY 10463

Michelle stopped breathing. She dressed quickly, turned down the lights, and turned the lock behind her. She headed to her 1984 Silver Toyota Camry lift-back, which she drove until she found her way to the front of a house. Inside she could see the kitchen lights on as children and a strange woman all sat watching what appeared to be *The Cosby Show*. They looked elated, oblivious to what could possibly have taken place a few hours earlier.