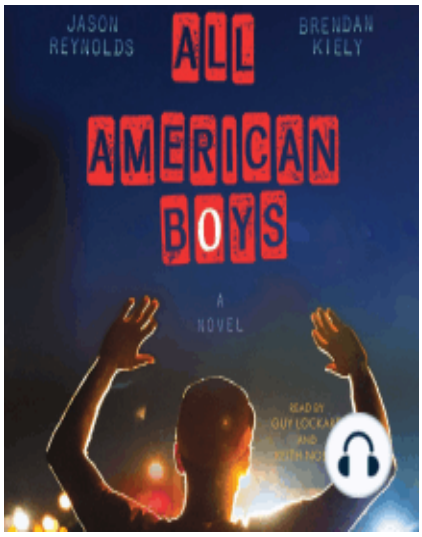
Book Review: ALL AMERICAN BOYS BY Jason Reynolds

PARENTAL ADVISORY - EXPLICIT CONTENT

SEXUALLY EXPLICIT CONTENT – AVAILABLE AT TEXAS INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICTS



Another cop car raced past the entrance to the alley behind me.

"Oh shit," Guzzo said again.

"We have to get out of here now," I hissed.

"What the hell happened?" Guzzo asked.

I looked up at the chain-link fence behind us. It was higher than a basketball rim, maybe fifteen feet. But climbable. On the other side were the tracks to the commuter rail. "Dude," I said, putting my hands on the fence. "It's your brother. He busted some guy in the store. It's fucking ugly and we need to get the hell out of here. Now!"

I started to climb.

"The tracks?" Dwyer asked. "Are you crazy?"

When I got to the top, I looked both ways. No trains. Still, it was probably a high traffic time, so that wouldn't last for long. I dropped one leg on the other side of the fence, swung myself over, and began to climb down.

"What the fuck, man?" Guzzo shouted.

"No one saw me," I said when I hit the ground. "If we get out of here right now, maybe nobody will, and we can all just pretend like we weren't here. Like it didn't happen."

"What happened?" Guzzo asked, one hand on the fence, but hesitating. "Is Paul okay?"

"Yeah, man," I said. "But he just beat the piss out of some kid on the sidewalk and we don't want to be around to have to answer any questions—it was fucking ugly. Now get over here before a train comes."

They hauled ass over the fence, and we ran along the pebble embankment of the railway until we came to the Fourth Street bridge, and then we slid down the embankment to the fence along Fourth Street and climbed over that one. I heard a whistle in the distance, but we all made it over and away from the tracks in plenty of time.

"Paul?" Guzzo said again, his voice cracking.

"It was bad," I admitted.

"What the hell do you think the kid did?" Guzzo asked.

"I don't know," I said. "But whatever he did, your brother just put him in the hospital for it."

"You know what?" Dwyer said. "Let's just get a slice and chill. Seriously."

It was a good plan, but when we got there, I couldn't stop thinking about what I had seen. I swear I thought about the guy on the ground, but mostly I thought about Paul, because Paul was Guzzo's older brother, and after my own father died, Paul had basically been my older brother too. And I couldn't shake that look of rage I'd seen on the face of a man I knew and thought of as family.

enough players there to run a play. They sure as hell couldn't run "Rashad." What would they call it instead? There'd be consequences for all of us skipping practice, I knew that, but that would be Monday. Today—yes, Ma—I was trying to *take some responsibility*.

I was marching.

I repeated it to myself like a mantra. I was marching. I kept saying it as I scanned the crowd for Jill, pumping myself up, because some people had told me racism was a thing of the past, they'd told me not to get involved. But that was nuts. *They* were nuts. And more to the point—they'd all been white people. Well, guess what? I'm white too—and that's *exactly why* I was marching. I had to. Because racism was alive and real as shit. It was everywhere and all mixed up in everything, and the only people who said it wasn't, and the only people who said, "Don't talk about it" were white. Well, *stop lying*. That's what I wanted to tell those people. Stop lying. Stop denying. That's why I was marching. Nothing was going to change unless we did something about it. *We!* White people! We had to stand up and say something about it too, because otherwise it was just like what one of those posters in the crowd outside school said: OUR SILENCE IS ANOTHER KIND OF VIOLENCE.

I found Jill, and we walked with a huge group of kids, making our slow march to Jerry's. By the time we got there, the street was a river of people—an enormous group already!—winding back from the corner store. They were chanting and waving signs. All the streets behind us were open, but the police had cordoned off the side streets along the march route ahead of us. We were stuck in a kind of tunnel. Fucking hell! Sure, they'd let us march from Jerry's to the police station—that was the plan—but if anything went wrong, we'd be trapped. Thousands of us. Noise already echoed off the walls of the buildings on either side of the street.

There were thousands of cops, too, or what might have been cops. They looked more like an army of Robocops—black paramilitary outfits, helmets, automatic rifles. Jill and I kept squeezing our way closer and closer to the front, and when we could see beyond the first row of marchers, we could see the first line of the police guard, too. With the row of police tanks, like the one I'd seen that morning, and the rank upon rank of infantry, I swear it looked a lot less like Springfield and a lot more like Kabul. But it was the corner of Fourth Street. I held my breath for a moment, feeling again what I'd seen there.

Jill and I scooted toward the edge of the street, closer to Jerry's. I could see the black canisters of tear gas in the belt loops of the cops. I pulled out my phone and start filming them. I didn't know if I was allowed to film them or not, but I filmed them anyway. I filmed the tanks, too. I filmed the guys who had their guns raised and aimed toward the marchers. Then I tilted the phone back to me.

"Hey, Will," I said into the picture. "This is for you. Ma's always telling us to take responsibility. That we have to live up to what Dad died for. We need to get good grades and go to a good college and take advantage of every damn minute of our lives because he died for us. I believe that. But I believe he died for this, too. If he died for freedom and justice—well, what the hell did he die for if it doesn't count for all of us?"

Someone was blowing a whistle up front and I hit stop. People shouted instructions through a bullhorn. Jill pointed, excited. "I think I see Rashad up there! I think he's here." We tried to edge our way a little closer to the front line, and with all the camera crews hovering, and people watching us on their TVs back home, I wondered if anybody thought what we were doing was unpatriotic. It was weird. Thinking that to protest was somehow un-American. That was bullshit. This was very American, goddamn *All-American*. I craned my head, trying to see Rashad. And seeing who I thought might be him, right next to his family and English, I couldn't help wondering how, years from now, Rashad would be remembered.

The kid at the front of a march. Speaking truth to power. Standing up for injustice. Asking only to be seen and heard and respected like the citizen he was. Would he be thought of as the "All-American" boy?

But as the march began, and we trudged forward, shouting along with the people around us, "Spring-field P-D, we don't want brutality!" I just wanted to see Rashad, the kid who went to school with me. Rashad, English's friend. Rashad, the guy walking along with his family, the son they were probably all just grateful was alive.

The march wound its way from the West Side back into Central. The streets swelled with bodies and chants, and as we got down to Police Plaza 1, the crowd started to fan out around the square. I followed Jill and joined a cluster right near the front. Whistles blew around the square and the chanting stopped, the marching stopped, and everyone began to lie down on the ground.

"It's a die-in," Jill told me, and I dropped like everyone else.

Somebody had a microphone and a PA speaker, and she started reciting the names that I quickly realized were of young, unarmed black men and women who had been killed by the police in the last year. I knew some of the names from the news, but many I didn't. So fucking many.

As I listened, I looked up into what should have been the dark, autumnal evening sky, but instead the haze of flashing police lights, streetlamps, giant spotlights, the headlights of cars, the kaleidoscopic reflection off the cold concrete and glass of Police Plaza 1, all obscured the sky. There were no stars. The moon was hidden somewhere behind the blinding glare, and it felt like the city itself was collapsing, pressing in, taking only the shallowest of breaths in the squeeze of lost space.

The list of names went on.

And as I heard them, my mind sort of split in two—one part listening, and the other picking up the ideas I'd been kickin
to witness a violence like they knew aga

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three years old when 9/11 happened, so I didn't remember it like all the teachers in school did. But Ma did, because she knew what it meant for Dad. Adults were always asking each other: Where were you when it happened? Where were you?

Well, where was I when Rashad was lying in the street? Where was *I* the year all these black American boys were lying in the streets? Thinking about scouts? Keeping my head down like Coach said? *That* was walking away. It was running away, for God's sake. I. Ran. Away. Fuck that. I didn't want to run away anymore. I didn't want to pretend it wasn't happening. I wanted to turn around and run right into the face of it.

I took a deep breath as the breeze picked up, and as I stared down the street at Paul's house, I knew for damn sure what I was doing *this* Friday night.

I went back inside and began my usual morning workout, and as I was pumping through my squats, I had an idea. I ran into the kitchen and rifled through the junk drawers, looking for a black marker. I couldn't find one. I knew I didn't have one, but Willy might, so I crept through our room while he still slept and tried to find something that might work. Finally, in a green plastic box on the floor on his side of the closet, I found a big, black permanent marker. Then I dug out one of my plain white T-shirts.

On the front, I wrote: I'M MARCHING

On the back, I wrote: ARE YOU?

There were plenty of kids, black, white, and everyone else, who looked at me like I was a dumbass when I got to school wearing the T-shirt. And there were plenty of kids, black, white, and everyone else, who nodded or slapped hands with me. Even in English class, Mrs. Tracey looked at my T-shirt and smiled. "Me too," she said. And I was actually daring to think that the day was going down much easier than I thought it would when I saw Dean Wykoff walking down the hall between second and third periods. He stepped in front of me, one eyebrow raised, and read my T-shirt. I assumed he was going to give me one of his signature finger curls, that thing he does that's kind of like he's making fun of himself but also isn't and he actually expects you to come closer when he does it. As dean of students, he was also Dean of Discipline, and since I was "the model son" Quinn Collins, I'd never been called to his office before, and I thought, well, if this was going to be my first time, it was worth it. But he didn't give me the finger curl. He nodded, threw a little frown in, but kept on walking, not giving me a hard time at all.

Yes, there were some kids giving me the stink eye for wearing the shirt, but no one directly gave me shit until Dwyer found me in the hall after fourth period. He grabbed my elbow and pulled me over to the lockers.

"What the hell, man?" His freckly face was so close to mine he barely had to speak much louder than a whisper. "What are you doing?"

"What it says I'm doing."

Dwyer glanced around the hall. "I said don't fuck this up, not fuck this up even more. What the hell, man? You better not let Coach see that shirt. No protest, remember?"

"Dude," I said, yanking my arm out of his grip and stepping back. "People should be able to go to the protest if they want. It's important, man."

He pulled up and looked down at me, giving me a face worse than Dean Wykoff had ever given anybody. "You're wack," Dwyer told me. "What the hell happened to you?" And then he split for class, leaving me to chew on that by myself. I didn't have the words for it, but I felt I had an answer to the question.

The rest of the day was a blur of distraction. Nobody was getting much done in class, and I had to hand it to Mrs. Erlich, because she trashed her trig plan for the day and wrote a bunch of facts and figures on the board, which I started copying into my notebook, fast.

> *In 2012, in the United Kingdom, the number of people (regardless of race) shot and killed by police officers: 1*
>
> *In 2013, in the United Kingdom, the number of times police officers fired guns in the line of duty/the number of people fatally shot: 3/0*
>
> *In the United States, in the seven year period ending in 2012, a white police officer killed a black person nearly two times a week.*

"I'm not much of a talker," she finished up. "You know that. But I know numbers. The numbers don't lie, kids. The numbers always tell a story."

Guzzo was nowhere at lunch, but even though he'd avoided me all day, I knew he'd seen me, seen my T-shirt. At basketball practice, though, he couldn't avoid me anymore. He showed up late, just as Coach blew his whistle and a chaotic warm-up came to an end. I tried to catch Guzzo's eye, but he wouldn't look at me. Coach had us run drills to get the blood pumping, and then we practiced four or five plays. The last play was designed specifically for English, and Coach called it "Fist." It was an isolation offense to run when another team played us man-to-man defense. We'd all form a column in the paint as English called the play at the top of the key, and then we'd scatter and make a wide box away from the net so English could take his man one-on-one to the hoop, because he could beat anybody off the dribble. And he did. Even though we knew the play, as we ran it, English beat us all, again and again. He was unstoppable.

And when it was finally time to scrimmage, Coach asked us to play hard, and he let the point guards call whatever plays they wanted. He struck a good balance—I was playing on the team opposite English most of the time, and even though Fist was designed for him, he didn't call it. He ran every other play, once, twice, he ran Gold three times, and then finally, after I'd sunk a three from my sweet spot, English calmly walked the ball up the court to the hash mark and called Fist. He blazed past Nam for the easy layup. We missed

the fast break. He slowed it all down, g

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Nothing about patent leather says "war."

"Argue about all this at the party. Just make sure y'all there. It's supposed to be live," English said, the sound of his footsteps moving toward the door. He and Shannon didn't have mandatory basketball practice like usual, but were still going to the gym to shoot around because, well, that's what they did every day. For those guys, especially English, basketball was life. English knocked on my stall twice. "Look for me when you get there, dude."

"Bet."

"Later, 'Shad," from Shannon.

"Aight, 'Shad, hit me when you on your way over," Carlos called as the door closed behind them. Carlos grew up right down the street from me, and, like English, was a senior and therefore could drive, and therefore (again) was always my ride to the party. We smoked him with the jokes all the time because he'd tried out for the basketball team every single year, and got cut every single year, because he just wasn't very good. But if you asked him, he was the *nicest* dude to ever touch a ball. What he actually *was* good at, though, was art, which is also why he and I got along. He wasn't into drawing or painting, at least not in the traditional sense. He was into graffiti. A "writer." His tag was LOS(T), and they were all over the school, and our neighborhood, and even the East Side. Whenever we were heading to a party, for him it was just another opportunity to speed around the city in his clunker, the backseat covered in paint markers and spray cans, while he pointed out some of his masterpieces.

Really they were more like *our* masterpieces, because I was the one who gave him some of the concepts for where and how to write his tag. For instance, on the side of the neighborhood bank, I told him he should bomb it in money-green block letters. And on the door of the homeless shelter I suggested gold regal letters. And on the backboard of a basketball hoop at the West Side court, I suggested he write it in gang script. I never had the heart to do any actual tagging. I mentioned how my father was, right? Right. Plus Carlos was a pro at it. He knew how to control the nozzle and minimize the drip to get clean tags. Like, perfect. I never really told him, just because that wasn't something we did, but I loved them. All of them.

When I walked out of that stall a few minutes later, I was a different person. It was like the reverse of Clark Kent running into the phone booth and becoming Superman, and instead was like Superman running into the booth and becoming a hopefully much cooler Clark Kent, even though I guess Superman might've been more comfortable in the cape and tight-ass red underwear than an ROTC uniform. But not me. No cape (and for the record, no tight-ass red underwear). I stepped out as regular Rashad Butler: T-shirt, sneakers that I had to perform a quick spit-clean on, and jeans that I pulled up, then sagged down just low enough to complete the look. My brother had given me this sweet leather jacket that he had outgrown, so I threw that on, and *bam!* I was ready for whatever Friday had in store for me. Hopefully, a little rub-a-dub on Tiffany Watts, the baddest girl in the eleventh grade. At least to me. Carlos always said she looked like a cartoon character. Like he could ever get her. A *cartoon character*? Really? Please. A cartoon character from my *dreams*.

But before I could get to Jill's and get all up on Tiffany, I had a few stops to make. It was still early, and I had a couple bucks, so I could get me some chips and a pack of gum to kill the chip-breath. Can't get girls with the dragon in your mouth. But other than that I was flat broke, and it was never cool to party without cash, just because you always had to have something for the pizza spot—Mother's Pizza—which everyone went to either after the party was over or when the party got shut down early, which happened most of the time. Plus, you had to have money to chip in for whoever's gas tank was going to be getting you to and from the party, like, for instance, Carlos. So I caught a bus over to the West Side to first pick up my snacks, then meet Spoony at UPS, just a few blocks from home, so he could spot me a twenty.

The bus took forever, like it always did on Fridays. Forever. So at Fourth Street, I got off and walked the last few blocks toward Jerry's Corner Mart, the day darkening around me—crazy how early it gets dark in the fall. Jerry's was pretty much the everything store. They sold it all. Incense, bomber jackets, beanies, snacks, beer, umbrellas, and whatever else you needed. It was named after some dude named Jerry, even though nobody named Jerry ever worked there. Jerry was probably some rich old white dude, chillin' on the East Side, doing his thing with some young supermodel with fake everything on a mattress made of real money. Lotto-ticket money. Cheap-forty-ounce money. Bootleg-DVD money. My money.

I pushed the door to Jerry's open. It chimed like it always did, and the guy behind the counter looked up like he always did, then stepped out from behind the counter, like he always did.

"Wassup, man," I said. He nodded suspiciously. Like he always did. There were only two other people in the store. A policeman and one other customer, back by the beer fridge. The cop wasn't a security guard, the weaponless kind with the iron-on badges. The kind my dad tried to get my brother to apply for because they pay decent money. Nah. This cop was a cop. A real cop. And that wasn't weird because Jerry's was pretty much known for being an easy come-up for a lot of people. You walk in, grab what you want, and walk out. No money spent. But I never stole nothing from anywhere. Again, too scared of what my pops would do to me. Knowing him, he'd probably send me right to military school or some kind of boot camp, like Scared Straight. He'd probably say something to my mother about how my problem is that I need more push-ups in my life. Luckily, I'm just not the stealing type. But I know a lot of people who are, and there was no better playground for a thief than Jerry's. I guess, though, after a

decided to keep a cop on deck.

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"But I still don't know what to do. Like, tell the police?"

She paused, and I heard her breathe. "Maybe."

"Jesus." Telling the police meant telling Paul's friends. Meant Paul's friends telling *him* what I was doing.

"But everyone's seen it, Quinn. It's *all our* problem. But what *is* that problem?" Then it was my turn to be quiet, and I shuffled over to the couch and sat down. "What is it?" Her voice rose. "Excessive violence?"

"I don't know. Unnecessary beating. Uh... shit, police brutality?"

"Yeah."

"And, you know. The way it's all working out. It's more."

"Like who was sitting where at lunch?"

I looked at the carpet between my feet. "Yeah."

"And whose lockers they looked in first for spray paint cans?"

"Yeah. Shit, really? That happened?"

"That's what I saw. Three black students, boys, in a row. Then Martinez. They skipped me!"

"Fuck!" I let the air in my cheeks fill and then slowly blow out. "So yeah. Like all that."

"Like Paul's white and Rashad's black."

I just sat there staring at the door to the kitchen like a dumbass zombie trying to find some words.

"Paul says he did what he did because he was protecting some white lady in the store," Jill added.

"What?"

"Yeah. That's what my mom says. But, uh, really?"

"Seriously."

"You think it would have been the same if the lady wasn't white, or if Rashad wasn't black?"

"Seriously."

"Seriously, what?"

"Why is it taking me five minutes to say the word racism?"

"Maybe you're racist?"

"Don't joke. This is serious."

"I'm not."

"I'm not racist!"

She hesitated, and I sat there, stinking in my own sweat, needing her to say something. Eventually she did.

"Not like KKK racist," she said. "I don't think most people think they're racist. But every time something like this happens, you could, like you said, say, 'Not my problem.' You could say, 'It's a one-time thing.' *Every time* it happened."

I wanted to say something, but it was like my head just pounded and every word that came to mind just shook and fell back into my throat.

"I think it's all racism," Jill said for me.

"And if I don't do something," I finally mustered, "if I just stay silent, it's just like saying it's not my problem."

"Mr. Fisher spent our whole history class talking about it. If anybody wanted to talk about it more after school, he would. Me and Tiffany talked about it all day, so we went. There were a bunch of us there, and Fisher's helping us figure out what to do."

"I wish I could have gone. But I had basketball. But I have to do something!"

"Let's see what other people are doing tomorrow."

We said our good-byes, and I sat there on the couch, staring into the kitchen looking at Willy. His head bent down so close to the paper he was scribbling his answers on, the red headphones like beacons on either side of his head—it was like he was buried deep within his own little world. I felt like I'd been doing the same damn thing the last couple days—trying to stare so hard at my own two feet so I wouldn't have to look up and see what was really going on. And while I'd been doing that, I'd been walking in the wrong direction.

I didn't want to walk away anymore.

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Acknowledgments

From Jason Reynolds:

First and foremost, I'd like to acknowledge all the men, women, boys, and girls who have lost their lives as a result of police brutality. Your names, though too many for these pages, will always live on in our hearts and minds. Your untimely, unjust deaths will hopefully serve as the cornerstone of change for the growing generation. I'd also like to acknowledge the people of all walks of life, in all professional and social sectors, who have been fighting this fight. The protesters and community activists, the artists, the political allies, the teachers and librarians, the everyday folks who can't quiet the internal screams—we all have a necessary part to play. ALL OF US.

I'd also like to extend a separate but very important salute to the women of every civil rights movement, whether victim or leader, who always seem to get overlooked. You have always been on the front lines. You have always been the backbone. So this is to say, I SEE YOU. WE SEE YOU. THANK YOU.

Obviously, I have to acknowledge Brendan Kiely for co-writing this book with me. My respect for you is immense. It's a true honor to call you a friend. Special thanks to Alicia Lockard and Christopher Smith for research help. I definitely appreciate you both. And as always, a huge thank you to Elena Giovinazzo, my agent, for always believing in me, and to Caitlyn Dlouhy and Justin P. Chanda, my editor and publisher, for once again providing me with a megaphone.

Last but not least, I want to thank my mother and father, and their mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers, for giving me an impenetrable sense of cultural pride, an unwavering sense of responsibility, and a childlike sense of hope. I do believe we can do better, be better. But we can't hide behind fear. We can't tuck truth between the cushions of comfort. We have to deal with it, really confront it, so that our children can live with a lot less weight. We owe it to them.

From Brendan Kiely:

It is one thing to write a novel, but it is another thing to live the life, and I firstly want to acknowledge the families and individuals affected by police brutality. It is my hope that this novel will be a productive voice in the vital public conversation about the many injustices inflicted upon those lived realities. I believe that we need to face honestly the legacy and effects of racism in our country, and that white people like myself—whose privilege is the result of systemic racism—have a particular responsibility to help dismantle it. We all live here. There are no bystanders. We all have a role.

There are many people who have been doing the essential work to foster the conversation about the effects of systemic racism and to deconstruct that system. I'd like to thank in particular the educators and organizers who I've worked with directly and who have inspired me, including the folks involved with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, the Carle Institute, the White Privilege Conference, the Anti-Racist Alliance of Educators, my colleagues at the Calhoun School, and other independent schools and public schools; and teachers, librarians, and friends in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts—I love you and thank you and honor the change that you make in the world every day.

To my family—Maryanne Kiely, Tom Kiely, Niall Kiely, Trish Kiely, Heide Lange, John Chaffee, Joshua Chaffee—I love you all and I'm so deeply grateful for your love, encouragement, and support. Thank you all. And thank you especially Jessie Chaffee, my partner in all things in life, who teaches me about the expansiveness of the word love—this and everything for you.

Thank you Rob Weisbach, super-agent and super-friend, for your enthusiasm, intelligence, and your belief in me and my work. I hold our partnership close to my heart.

In the making of this book, I am extremely fortunate to work with the amazing folks at Simon & Schuster, in particular Caitlyn Dlouhy, an editor who works with such speed, intelligence, and care, I have to wonder if she didn't anticipate the whole story before it was written. Thank you for making this book more the book it wanted and needed to be.

Thanks to Katy Hershberger, the tireless publicist who seems to be three people in one, and to whom I am especially grateful because she introduced me to Jason when she first put us on tour together last year. And thanks also to Ruta Rimas and Justin Chanda, for believing in my work from the beginning and welcoming me into the S&S family—here's to many more years of partnership.

And most importantly, thank you, Jason. The process of making this book was inspiring and challenging, and I'm so deeply grateful to have worked through it together with you. Thank you for your friendship, because as we remind ourselves, it is always the friendship that matters most. Thank you for trusting me, working with me, and believing that with both rage and love we could write this book.

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they don't trust us, I don't trust them."

"But Ma, all we want is to feel like we can be who we are without being accused of being something else. That's all," Spoony tried again.

"But do protests even work?" I asked. I mean, I was all for the idea. I really was. But the only time I had ever heard about any protests actually working was Dr. King's. That's it. Ain't never heard of no other ones making a difference.

"Do they work?" Spoony looked at me crazy, a *how I could even ask such a question* look.

Berry stepped in. "They're a piece to the puzzle. I mean, there are a lot of pieces, like reforming laws and things like that. But protests are what sends the message to the folks in power that something needs to change. That people are fed up," she explained. "We have a right to voice how we feel, and isn't that better than just doing nothing?"

Spoony and Berry tag-teamed me with the more political activism mumbo jumbo than I could stand, until at last, thank God, English, Shannon, and Carlos showed up. They all hugged my mom and Berry, and dapped up Spoony.

"Yo, you heard about the protest?" Carlos shot off instantly, picking up right where my brother and Berry had left off. "Hashtag RashadIsAbsentAgainToday."

I looked at him. He looked at me. Friendship ESP.

"So this thing is really gonna happen?" I asked.

"Dude, even Tiffany was talking about it in Mr. Fisher's class," English said. Mr. Fisher was a history teacher at the school. Kind of a weird guy, but still supercool. White hair. Jacked-up bowl cut. Weird cloth ties. Shirt tucked in tight jeans. But he knew all about history and would celebrate Black History Month in February *and* March. The only other teacher who was down for stuff like that was Mrs. Tracey, the English teacher. Shannon and Carlos used to always joke about how Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Tracey were probably dating, probably having gross sex after school on Mrs. Tracey's desk, on top of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* or something.

"For real?" I asked.

"Yeah, man. Fish is really supporting it. Like, he's helping us plan it and everything." English was gassed. "He kept saying how we are part of history. How this is part of history."

"Word? Is he giving out extra credit for it?" I joked, just to try to lighten the mood.

" 'Shad, we serious, man," Carlos said. "Like, for real."

"Told you, 'Shad," Spoony said. "This thing is bubbling. People are sick of it." He looked at Ma, who seemed caught somewhere between mad and worried. "Ma, seriously, what if he was killed?"

"But he wasn't," she said, straight, the same way my dad had said a few days before when Spoony said the same thing.

"But what about all the others?" Spoony said. "Matter fact, how many of y'all been messed with by the cops?"

"Man, what? I've been pulled over so many times," Carlos said.

"Because you speed," I jumped in.

"Yeah, true. But at least three times, they've made me get out the car while they tore it apart looking for drugs or guns or whatever they thought I had. Then when they didn't find nothing, they let me go with a speeding ticket, but left my car a mess. Glove compartment emptied out. Trunk all dug through. Just trashed my ride for no reason."

"Man, I've been stopped on the street," English said.

"You have?" Berry sparked up.

"Yeah. More than once, too. Cops wanting me to lift my shirt so they could see if I had weapons on me. Pat-downs and all that."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Berry asked.

"Because I already know what time it is. I'd seen it before, so it was nothing. Plus I didn't want you freakin' out."

"At least yours were only pat-downs. One time they had me facedown on the sidewalk on Overlook Street. Said they got word that there was a robbery and said the description of the person was five-foot-nine, dark skin, with a black T-shirt and black sneakers on," Shannon explained. "That could've been anybody."

"That could've been any kid I work with at the rec center. Matter fact, that could've been me!" Spoony chimed in.

"Exactly," Berry agreed.

And I wished the stories stopped there. I really did. But they didn't. They went on and on, story after story about not trusting police officers because they always seemed to act like bullies. And even though there were times when they'd been helpful, the bad times... were BAD TIMES. And it just seemed like they didn't... I don't know. Like, they see us. But they don't really *see* us.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay what?" Spoony asked.

"Okay. I'm down with the protest." I have to admit, I said I was down but I wasn't really sure I meant it. I was scared. And it's not like they needed me to sign on. This wasn't really about me. This was bigger than me. I knew that now. But I wanted my brother and my friends to know, since the spotlight was on me, that I was in. That I would stand with them.

That is, if I could get out of the hospital.

"Name a word that rhymes with grain."

"Pain."

"Good answer! Good answer!"

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I didn't say anything. I just took another bite of my burger. Jill watched me as I chewed.

"What?" I finally said with my cheek still full.

"You haven't watched it, have you?"

I took a sip of soda. "No," I admitted.

"You should," she said. She sounded almost a little pissed at me.

"I was there. I don't want to see it again," I argued. "I just keep thinking about how extreme it all was. I mean, I don't know what Rashad did, but whatever it was, I can't imagine he needed to get beaten like that. I mean, as far as I know, he's a guy looking to stay out of trouble."

"Yeah. Exactly." She paused. "And did you hear?" she asked with more concern. "He has internal bleeding."

"Jesus."

"He has to stay in the hospital for like days."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. It's awful."

I was silent again.

"And you were there," Jill continued. "I can't believe you were there."

"I was," I said. But as I was freaking out that she might have been saying she'd seen me in the video, my pulse suddenly quickened because—oh, my God!—I'd been there with Paul before. Or, sort of been there. Years and years ago. How had I forgotten about that? Paul, with another kid. Marc Blair. "Oh, Jesus," I said.

Jill nibbled on a fry and waited for me to continue.

"It was almost like that time he kicked the shit out of Marc Blair," I said. "I mean, that was different. But this thing with Rashad. That thing with Marc. They're like side by side in my mind right now."

"Oh my God," she said, scrunching up her nose. "I forgot all about that. Paulie killed that guy."

Not literally. But it was bad. I hadn't actually seen it. But I'd seen the aftermath. And here's the thing—Paul'd done it for *me*. I felt sick.

Jill tapped the empty plastic Coke bottle against the table nervously. "You think those are the only two times?"

"I don't know. I mean, it's Paul. This is the same guy I've seen carrying my mom up the front steps, for God's sake." I was thinking about that time Ma got trashed because it was her first wedding anniversary without Dad. Paul had been so gentle. He'd taken the frigging day off just so she didn't have to spend it alone. "She was tanked," I said to Jill. "And he helped her home. I remember him putting her down on the couch and pulling the afghan over her."

"Paulie's always been the good guy."

"That's what I want to think."

"That's what my mother kept saying last night after the party, after she was done yelling at me for being the world's most ungrateful daughter for the hundredth time. 'Paulie's the good guy,' she kept saying. 'Why is anyone giving him a hard time?' But people *are* giving him a hard time. I don't know. I was watching some of the news online. It's kind of hard not to wonder. I mean, I wasn't there, but..."

"You've seen the video," I said, flat. The fear that I was in it kept buzzing through me.

"Yeah, Quinn. Everyone's seen it. It's crazy."

I swallowed hard and finally asked. "Am I in it?"

"What?" Jill said. "No. You must have been too far away. Different angle. I don't know."

I couldn't help it. I sighed with relief. "Jesus. Thank God."

Jill narrowed her eyes. "This is not about you, dumbass."

I took a deep breath through my nose and just held it. She was right. I'd been all worked up about whether or not I was on the video. Rashad was in the video and he was in the hospital. Paul was in the video too. Where was he now? Sitting at his parents' house watching all the news about himself on TV? Was he hiding?

"Look," Jill went on. "I get why you're worried, but when you see it, well, it's just crazy." She hesitated. "I feel so stupid saying this, but I don't know. It just changes things for me."

"Yeah," I said quietly.

We finished the last few fries and had to get back to school. But before we got up, I reached across the table and put my hand on Jill's. "I know this sounds weird, but I kind of feel like you are the only person I can talk to about this right now."

She turned her hand beneath mine and squeezed back. "I know. Me too."

As we walked back to school, we tried to joke a little about the party on Friday, but we both knew we were just putting on a show and really thinking about Paul and Rashad. Because as Jill was telling me about the guy who spent half the night puking in the upstairs bathroom because he'd done a keg stand right before I'd gotten there, I was thinking more about how I spent all this time playing basketball with a bunch of guys who were friends with Rashad and I didn't know jack-all about him—which made me feel all kinds of asshole-ish.

When we got back, Jill had to rush to get all the way over to the physics lab, but I had econ with Ms. Webber, so I took my time at my locker, playing with my phone, but really, now I was stuck on that time Paul had beaten up Marc Blair.

When I'd been much younger, and I first started going down to Gooch on my own, there was a guy who lived right next to the park who was a few years older than me, Marc Blair. Compared to my scrawny ass, he was all muscle—if it didn't get too cold in the winter, he'd have played shirtless year round, a pit bull charging up and down the court on these squat, beefy legs. I was too young, and he never let me onto the court when he was there. I
kids younger than him either, but he di

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Book Review: ALL AMERICAN BOYS BY Jason Reynolds

I bopped down the magazine aisle toward the back of the store, where the chips were. Right by the drinks. Grab your chips, then turn around and hit the fridge for a soda or a beer. Boom. I looked at the chip selection. Like I said, Jerry's had everything. All the stank-breath flavors. Barbecue, sour cream and onion, salt and vinegar, cheddar ranch, flaming hot, and I tried to figure out which would be the one that could be most easily beaten by a stick of gum. But plain wasn't an option. Seriously, who eats plain chips?

While I was trying to figure this out—decisions, decisions—the other person in the store, a white lady who looked like she'd left her office job early—navy-blue skirt, matching blazer, white sneakers—seemed to be dealing with the same dilemma, but with the beer right behind me. And I couldn't blame her. Jerry's had every kind of beer you could think of. At least it seemed that way to me. I didn't really pay her too much mind, though. I figured she was just somebody who probably had a long week at work, and wanted to crack a cold brew to get her weekend started. My mother did that sometimes. She'd pop the cap off a beer and pour it in a wineglass so she could feel better about all the burping, as if there's a classy way to belch. This lady looked like the type who would do something like that. The type of lady who would treat herself to beer and nachos when her kids were gone to their father's for the weekend.

Now, here's what happened. Pay attention.

I finally picked out my bag of chips—barbecue, tasty, and easily beatable by mint. That settled, I reached in my back pocket for my cell phone to let Spoony know I was on my way. Damn. Left it in my ROTC uniform. So I set my duffel bag on the floor, squatted down to unzip it, the bag of chips tucked under my arm. At the moment the duffel was open, the lady with the beer stepped backward, accidentally bumping me, knocking me off balance. Actually, she didn't really bump me. She tripped over me. I thrust one hand down on the floor to save myself from a nasty face-plant, sending the bag of chips up the aisle, while she toppled over, slowly, trying to catch her balance, but failing and falling half on me and half on the floor. The bottle she was holding shattered, sudsy beer splattering everywhere.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry!" the lady cried.

And before I could get myself together, and tell her that it was okay and that I was okay, and to make sure she was okay, the guy who worked at Jerry's who everyone knew wasn't Jerry, shouted, "Hey!" making it clear things were not okay. At first, I thought he was yelling at the lady on some you-broke-it-you-bought-it mess, and I was about to tell him to chill out, but then I realized that he was looking at my open duffel and the bag of chips lying in the aisle. "Hey, what are you doing?"

"Me?" I put my finger to my chest, confused.

The cop perked up, slipping between me and the clerk to get a better look. But he wasn't looking at me at all. Not at first. He was looking at the lady, who was now on one knee dusting off her hands.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" the officer asked, concerned.

"Yes, yes, I'm—"

And before she could finish her sentence, the sentence that would've explained that she had tripped and fell over me, the cop cut her off. "Did he do something to you?"

Again, "Me?" What the hell was he talking about? I zipped my duffel bag halfway because I knew that I would have to leave the store very soon.

"No, no, I—" The lady was now standing, clearly perplexed by the question.

"Yeah, he was trying to steal those chips!" the clerk interrupted, shouting over the cop's shoulder. Then, fixing his scowl back on me, he said, "Isn't that right? Isn't that what you were trying to do? Isn't that what you put in your bag?"

Whaaaaa? What was going on? He was accusing me of things that hadn't even happened! Like, he couldn't have been talking to *me*. I wanted to turn around to check and make sure there wasn't some other kid standing behind me, stuffing chips in his backpack or something, but I knew there wasn't. I knew this asshole was talking to... at... about... me. It felt like some kind of bad prank.

"In my bag? Man, ain't nobody stealing nothing," I explained, getting back to my feet. My hands were already up, a reflex from seeing a cop coming toward me. I glanced over at the lady, who was now slowly moving away, toward the cookies and snack cake aisle. "I was just trying to get my phone out my bag when she fell over me—" I tried to explain, but the policeman shut me down quick.

"Shut up," he barked, coming closer.

"Wait, wait, I—"

"I said shut up!" he roared, now rushing me, grabbing me by the arm. "Did you not hear me? You deaf or something?" He led me toward the door while walkie-talkie-ing that he needed backup. Backup? For what? For who?

"No, you don't understand," I pleaded, unsure of what was happening. "I have money right here!" With my free hand, I reached into my pocket to grab the dollar I had designated to pay for those stupid chips. But before I could even get my fingers on the money, the cop had me knotted up in a submission hold, my arms twisted behind me, pain searing up to my shoulders. He shoved me through the door and slammed me to the ground. Face-first. Hurt so bad the pain was a color—white, a crunching sound in my ear as bones in my nose cracked. After he slapped the cuffs on me, the metal cutting into my wrists, he yanked at my shirt and pants, searching me. I let out a wail, a sound that came from somewhere deep inside. One I had never made before, coming from a feeling I had never felt before.

My initial reaction to the terrible pain was to move. Not to try to escape, or resist, but just... move. It's like when you stub your toe. The first thing you do is throw yourself on the bed or jump around. It was that same reflex. I just needed to move to hopefully calm the pain. But m
time I flipped and flapped on the pav

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"No, but like, it's saying that Rashad is innocent, so that makes his brother guilty."

English put the bar back up on the rack and sat up. He looked at me like I was nuts. "Man, Rashad didn't do shit."

"Yeah, but what if Paul was just doing his job? Then no one's guilty." But even as I said it, I felt like I was Guzzo suddenly, or someone in the family, his family, and I wished I wasn't. "Ah, never mind. Let's just forget it."

"Forget it? Forget my friend is in the hospital?" English stared at me, pissed. "Since when is beating the shit out of somebody who hasn't done a damn thing *just doing your job*? Man, there's no way I'm going to pretend it didn't happen." He leaned back, looked at the ceiling, and pressed the weight back up. "I can't." He brought the weight down, and then up again. "I won't."

He lifted the bar again quickly, but on the eighth rep, he struggled.

"Look," I said, reaching out, ready to help him with the next rep. "I just wish this wasn't happening. I mean, for everyone's sake."

He fought to get the ninth rep more than halfway up.

"You need a hand?" I said, putting my fingers beneath the bar, helping him lift it slightly.

"Fuck no," he spat. I pulled my fingers back but kept them close. He pushed the bar up slowly, then lowered it and began the last rep. He grunted and got the last one up and onto the rack.

"Maybe he got out of hand?" I just had to say. "Maybe he was on drugs."

"On drugs? What are you? Seventy-five? Since when have you ever gotten off your ass, let alone thrown a punch, when you were stoned, man?"

"Meth?"

"Only white people do that shit."

"Fuck you, man."

"No, fuck you, Quinn." He stood and pointed at me. "Why does it automatically gotta be Rashad's fault? Why do people think he was on drugs? That dude doesn't do drugs. He's ROTC, man. His dad would kick his ass. *You* do drugs, asshole."

"Just a puff here and there, man, come on. I don't *do* drugs."

"I've seen you smoking a blunt. Metcalf sold you that shit. Metcalf—a white dude, by the way. Man, that shit could have been laced with crack, or fucking Drano. You don't know what you talkin' 'bout."

"Look, man, I'm not trying to say anything bad about Rashad. I'm just saying that spray painting 'Rashad is absent again today' on the concrete in front of school is like, I don't know, extreme. He's not dead."

"But he *could* be. You have no idea. You have no idea, Quinn. The point is, he could be. Then what? Is that what it would take to look at this thing differently? You need him to be dead? Shame on you, man. I had no idea you were such a dick. You want to forget all this. Maybe you can. But I won't." He stood and caught his breath. "What do you know, anyway? White boy like you can just walk away whenever you want. Everyone just sees you as Mr. All-American boy, and you can just keep on walking, thinking about other things. Just keep on living, like this shit don't even exist." He waved his hand in my face and blew a breath out the side of his mouth. "Man, I'm done with you." Then he sauntered off slowly, making sure I knew he was dismissing me, leaving me looking like the idiot I was.

When Coach called us back out to the court, I was now not just physically wiped, but mentally wiped too. I was getting a drink of water at the fountain and Guzzo came up behind me. He jabbed me in the back and I coughed up the water. He laughed. "Thanks," he said, grinning. "I mean it. I heard all that with English. Thanks for having Paul's back."

An unexpected wave of anger surged through me. That hadn't been my intention at all. I'd seen what Paul had done. I didn't think it was right. But I hadn't thought the spray paint was right either.

"Maybe somebody should spray paint something else tomorrow," Guzzo said. "Whaddya think it should say?"

"Don't," I said.

"What?"

"Don't be an asshole."

Guzzo slapped the wall with his open palm. "I don't fucking get you, man. One minute you're in there defending my brother and the next you are basically telling me to fuck off. You're demented." He stomped off to join the huddle at half-court.

Thank God Coach didn't try to get us all together in a rallying cry, because I sure as hell wasn't up for it, but neither was anyone else, probably. Instead he broke us into two teams of five and put the others on the bench, ready to sub in. I was on the same team as English, and before we began I pulled him aside.

"Look," I said. "I'm sorry, man. I sounded like an idiot." He didn't say anything back. "No, seriously. I'm sorry. I don't want to be a dick. I'm just trying to figure this all out. Rashad's your friend. But I get what else you're saying too. So—I'm sorry."

"Man, you have no idea how many times you've sounded like a dick. You think it was just today? Look," he said, passing me the ball hard. "Just don't miss when I give you the ball."

But I did. When we got into the scrimmage, I popped free and missed the first open shot. I got another chance on a fast break, and I could have passed, but I forced a difficult shot because I'd missed the last one. I missed that one too. Coach called me over. "Where's your head?"

"Up my ass," I blurted.

"What?" He grabbed my arm. "What did you say?"

"My head," I said. "It's up my ass. I do

"Maybe a couple suicides will wipe th

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march on Friday. It would start on the West Side, go right by Jerry's, and wind its way through town to city hall and Police Plaza 1. The march through town would begin at five thirty p.m., approximately the same time Rashad had been arrested for petty theft, resisting arrest, and public nuisance—whatever the hell that meant. And just as I was thinking it, I heard someone else ask it: "Will Rashad be there?" Nobody knew.

At the bell, Jill and I took off in different directions. I tried to catch up with Tooms, but he ignored me and hustled ahead of me into our English classroom. When I walked into class behind him, Mrs. Tracey stood at the window, looking down over the front steps and the entrance to the school. Even when everyone had taken their seats, she remained by the window, and the rest of the class kept talking, waiting for her to go to her desk. But she didn't. In her hand, she held her copy of the novel *Invisible Man*. A week earlier she'd made photocopies of the first chapter, a short story Ralph Ellison published as "Battle Royal." That story—I'd never read anything like it. The violence. The all-out warfare. The *N* word all over the place. When it had been assigned a week earlier, I'd read it all twisted up in discomfort, like the actual reading of the story was painful, but now, as Mrs. Tracey clutched her book and looked down to the sidewalk, a kind of nervousness rose in me. I'd hated the way the old white men in the story had acted—watching black boys getting beaten, beating each other, for sport—and I'd put as much distance between them and me as I could. I wasn't them, I'd told myself as I read. White people were crazy back then, eighty years ago, when the story took place. Not now. But watching Mrs. Tracey stare out the window, a weight of dread dropped through me. Were we going to talk about the story again? After Rashad? Because after what had happened to Rashad, it felt like no time had passed at all. It could have been eighty years ago. Or only eight. Now it wasn't only the city aldermen. Now there were the videos, and we were all watching this shit happen again and again on our TVs and phones—shaking our heads but doing nothing about it.

Mrs. Tracey still didn't move from the window, and everyone began to fidget, looking at everyone else, and my eyes landed on the whiteboard. Her notes from what must have been her last-period class the day before were still on it. Active versus passive voice. I remembered the exact same lesson from ninth grade. I'd thought it was all a pain in the ass, but what had once been a stupid grammar lesson now formed a weird lump in my throat.

Mistakes were made, Mrs. Tracey had scrawled. And beneath it she'd written, *Who? Who made the mistakes?*

In my mind, I ran through the exercise I remembered from the time, rearranging the phrases, making something passive active, but this time I found myself changing the other words too, because I was clearly becoming obsessed—even if I didn't want to be.

Mistakes were made.

Rashad was beaten.

Paul beat Rashad.

Mrs. Tracey finally moved from the window and did something just as surprising. She sat down behind her desk. Usually she walked around her desk, or she perched on the front of her desk. But she never *sat*. Now, slumped behind it, she'd never looked so small, the whiteboard as big as the sky over her tiny, hunched shoulders. I thought she was about to begin the lesson, but she pushed the book away from her on the desk and began to cry.

I clenched my jaw tight and stared down at the floor, trying not to let her tears make me cry back in response. I just sat there breathing heavily through my nose.

She pointed to the window and dropped her head into her hands. "I don't want to see this happen to any of my students," she said, catching her breath. "I don't want to believe it still happens."

I gripped one hand with the other, hoping to disappear. I wasn't the only one. The room had never been so quiet. No one spoke or whispered. Mrs. Tracey just sat there, with her head in her hands. After a few last sobs, she apologized. "I'm sorry for my outburst—it's just—" And then the tears came again and she apologized again and continued. "Mr. Godwin thinks it's best if I don't assign papers for this story. He thinks it's best to just move on to the next unit."

Something felt off about that. Don't get me wrong, nobody wants to write a paper if he doesn't have to, but this time, it felt like we were getting cheated out of something. Everyone still kept absolutely silent, but I wondered what was going through Tooms's mind. He was nodding a slow, hesitant nod. An *I read you* kind of nod. I leaned back in my chair but couldn't actually go anywhere, because the damn thing was all one unit and I felt trapped. It was too damn small for me anyway. And as I was sitting there, shifting around in that tiny-ass chair-desk, I remembered Mrs. Tracey making fun of Mr. Godwin, saying she'd never follow what the department head or the administration wanted her to teach. But now, suddenly, when they actually did direct her, she was blaming them for not talking about the book.

And then I thought about what was right there in the text. Ralph Ellison talking about invisibility. Not the wacky science fiction kind, but the kind where people are looking at you but not seeing you, looking through you, or around you—like, why the hell shouldn't our classes be talking about what happened to Rashad? Was what happened to him invisible? Was he invisible?

I scribbled a note. *I might be an asshole, but I know this isn't right. Should we do something? The Invisible Man at Central High: Rashad.* I tore the note from my notebook, wadded it, and threw it at Tooms.

The crumbled ball bounced off his desk, into his chest, and onto the ground. He squinted at me. "Read it," I mouthed. He hesitated, but then he snatched it up and smoothed it out. He stared at the note for what seemed like forever, and then

Book Review: ALL AMERICAN BOYS BY Jason Reynolds

PROFANITY COUNT

F*uck – 86	**Police brutality – 6**	**Beer - 13**
Ass – 2	**Sex – 1**	**Dick - 6**
Sh*t – 80	**A**hole – 18**	**Racism – 18**
D*mn – 52	**G*dd*mn – 9**	**Bastards -2**
H*ll – 82	**Jesus (in vain) – 13**	**Beating - 9**

RED FLAGS

Language
Race identification and discussion
Police Brutality
Beating of black boy by police
Discussion of Selma riots

CONCLUSION

Not appropriate literary content for K – 12 schools