Disillusioned

by Frederick Taylor II
CHAPTER ONE

The only way I know how to tell this story, is to go all the way back to the beginning. My name is Anthony (Ant) Caldwell and I grew up in the South End section of Albany, New York. Now, growing up in the projects in the 70’s wasn’t as bad as it may seem. Hell, I didn’t even know we lived in the projects until years later, which is a testament to the phenomenal job my parents did. There was six of us in a three bedroom apartment. My older brother (Marcus) and I shared a room, as did my two younger sisters (Keisha and Crystal) and of course my parents shared the third room.

Now, to me… my parents were complete opposites. So much so, I actually had to ask my father one day… “why did you and mommy even get married?” See, my mom was the nurturer; very loving, laid back and if it didn’t involve church, she wasn’t too much interested. My pops…? He was more flashy and outgoing; he was stylish, charming and had charisma to spare. Pops was a hard working man and he believed in playing hard as well… some would say too hard. Many of my earliest memories are of pops in the mirror on Saturday night making sure his gear was just right before he stepped out the house. I was fascinated by the way in which pops would carefully coordinate his clothes.

Everything had to match. The platform shoes, the butterfly-collar shirt, the leather coat, the neatly pressed slacks and last but not least… the pimp-styled hat tilted slightly to the side. And with that child-like enthusiasm, I remember saying “go on daddy, you look bad!” (Meaning good). He would smile at me with that sly grin; the kind of grin that said “I know I’m bad!” My father sometimes had a single man’s mentality and self-admittedly, probably wasn’t going to win any father of the year contests anytime soon. He worked hard and made sure the bills were paid and moms loved him for that. I think my father loved my mom too, but
he loved the streets, his liquor and other women as well. Now, one could argue that it really wasn’t my father’s fault, as we’re talking about a man that grew up in this environment. By the time pops was sixteen years old, he was playing the bass in clubs all over Mobile, Alabama and we all know what comes with that...alcohol and women.

Now, whoever said ‘the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,’ knew exactly what they were talking about. I was all of nine years old when I realized I had acquired my father’s charisma. As a matter of fact, I acquired many of my father’s qualities... good and bad. Not only was I the spitting image of him, but I was named after him, shared his same wit, flair for dressing and penchant for the fairer sex among other things. My only problem...? I couldn’t talk all that well. I couldn’t pronounce my words with regular clarity. The truth of the matter was most of the times, you couldn’t understand a word I was saying. I’d have to repeat myself four or five times before you could make heads or tails out of what I was saying. I’m really not sure what caused this or where it came from but it took a couple of years of speech therapy before my speech got corrected. But once that happened...? I became silky smooth with my tongue - just like my father.

However, in the winter of ’75, things took a terrible turn for the worst. I was all of eight years old and had just gotten over a very bad case of the mumps. On my first day back to school, I could tell something wasn’t right with me... but I didn’t know what it was. I was feeling weak and lethargic but I ignored it and was able to make it through the rest of the school day. I caught the bus home and had to be awakened by the bus driver when I got to my stop... I had actually fallen asleep on the bus. I couldn’t believe it - I had never done that before.

According to my mother, I went straight to my room, laid across the bed and started crying. For some strange reason, I couldn’t communicate to my mother, exactly what it was that was ailing me. As my mother left my side to call the doctor, I immediately began to projectile vomit. This scared me to death because I had never seen or heard of anyone vomiting as violently as I was (except for Linda Blair from The Exorcist). I was literally ejecting the contents of my stomach across the room.

My mother rushed me to the doctor and whatever he gave me made me feel better instantly. I’m not sure if he ever really told us what was wrong, but I had stopped crying, the vomiting had stopped and I felt just
fine… or so I thought. I was home for only a couple of hours when it all started again. This time, the vomiting had returned with a vengeance. I was still projecting, but now it was kind of gushing out of me. I’ll never forget the look of horror in my mother’s eyes as she helplessly looked on. This time my mother rushed me to the emergency room and I was immediately rushed to the back.

Test after test revealed little to nothing as to what was wrong with me, but the x-rays showed that a large amount of pus had built up around my brain. Panic set in and began to have its way with my mother. To add insult to injury, the receptionist had the audacity to tell my mother that she’d “seen this before and I don’t think he’s gonna make it.” Wow, really? Why would you tell a distraught mother that?

Finally, the doctor determined that I had a severe case of meningitis - “one of the worst cases” he’d ever seen. The vomiting had subsided but the pus was still there and the doctor was concerned by the fact that I had now slept for six days straight. I would wake up when he came in to do what he needed to do, but I’d go right back to sleep. At this point, the doctor then confessed to my mother that “there’s a real chance that your son may not make it.” “My son is gonna make it!” my mother retaliated, even though doubt was beginning to creep into her mind. “If he does, he’ll probably be sterile among other things,” he continued to say. My mother just glared at the doctor as he turned and walked out of the room.

I had now been asleep for seven consecutive days. My mother had just bathed me and laid me back in my bed. About twenty five-thirty minutes later - out of nowhere, I opened my eyes and said “ma… em hungry.” According to my mother, it was like music to her ears. I was back!

Now, by the time I was twelve, I was very much noticing girls. This is the age where a lot of parents start to lose their children. It’s really not the parents fault per se, it’s just something about the age of twelve that kids start coming into their own and lose some of the morals and values instilled in them; and I was no exception. This is also right around the time that my parents split and pops moved out of the house. Now even though I’d had a few ‘so-called’ girlfriends in elementary school, it wasn’t until middle school (at the age of twelve) that I had my first real girlfriend. Carmella Patterson!
Carmella was one of those light-skinned, wavy girls with more curves than any 7th grader should have... not that I'm complaining. She was always nicely dressed, had Gucci-curls in her hair and I remember her always smelling like Babe deodorant and Irish Spring soap. Carmella's mom was my third period English teacher so I'd always see them talking right before third period started.

Now understandably so, all the boys were scrambling to get next to Carmella, so I knew I had to come differently if I was going to even stand a chance... so I ignored her. That's right, I ignored her. Now, rap music was just now taking off and since I knew how to rap (rhyme) a little bit, people would pay me to make a rhyme with their name in it; so I was able to keep a couple of coins in my pocket. I would then take that money and pay a couple of my female friends to pretend I was the object of their desire whenever Carmella was around. Now, my best friend's name was Blackout (we called him that because that's what you'd do when he punched you). Blackout was the school bully. We were all scared of him; but you know how I do... I had to get him on my team. So one day I went up to him and started playfully punching on him intimating that I was the bully and not him. It worked; and not only was I never scared of him again, but we became the best of friends.

Back to Carmella. One day I'm eating lunch with Blackout and someone tapped me on my shoulder... it was Carmella. "How you doing luv?" nonchalantly I said, as I continued to pretend to be uninterested.

"I'm doing fine" she said, with her sweet angelic voice. She said "aren't you in my mother's third period English class?" I said "yeah, how you know?" She said "I see you in there when I stop by to talk to her."

Jokingly, I said, "oh yeah, I think I do remember you looking at me the other day."

She said "no I wasn't... you were looking at me."

"Well, how would you know I was looking at you, if you weren't looking at me?" I said.

After an awkward pause, we all just burst out laughing - Carmella, Blackout and myself.

She said, "Your name is Ant, right?"

Surprised that she even knew my name, I stuttered but managed to eek out a "yeah."
I figured she was trying to size me up, like she was trying to figure out what’s up with this dude that doesn’t pay me the least bit of attention. Her curiosity had been piqued.

I said “it was nice talking to you Carmella, let’s go Black” (as I sometimes called Blackout). I left Carmella standing there… confused and wondering. Now, I often kept my conversations short because I’d rather you hate to see me go, than to hate to see me come. But in the case of Carmella… I kept it extra short.

Carmella hadn’t come to her mother’s third period English class for a couple of days leaving room for all kind of thoughts to enter my mind. Did my plan backfire? Did I scare her off? Maybe she’s giving me a taste of my own medicine. Whatever the case, the fact that I’m spending this much time thinking about it wasn’t good. At that very moment, I decided that if I ever got the chance, I would bring this charade to an end and ask her for her phone number. And wouldn’t you know it? Who do I see walking with her girls on the other side of the street? Carmella! And just that quick, I went right back into my charade and pretended like I didn’t see her. “Hey - Ant” she called out. I pretended like I didn’t hear her. “Anthony,” she said, this time a little bit louder. Out the corner of my eye, I could see her crossing the street heading towards me. I turned towards her and said “oh, hi Carmella.”

She said, “Hi Ant, didn’t you hear me calling you?”

“Yeah, I heard you” I said matter-of-factly. I was trying to keep a straight face but after a brief silence, we both burst into laughter once again. I said “you know what Carmella; you’re kind of cool. We should exchange…”

Carmella finished my sentence and said “numbers?” All I could do is say “wow!” as she pulled out a pen and wrote her number in my hand.

Carmella and I grew close and after a whole three weeks of marathon phone conversations, I asked Carmella to be my girlfriend. She said “yes,” but quickly added that if I ever tried to get some, she would break-up with me. I didn’t have a problem with those terms because even though I was somewhat curious about sex, I was probably more scared than she was. We did our very best to keep our relationship a secret because Carmella’s mother would ring her neck if she knew Carmella had a boyfriend.

I think Miss Patterson suspected something was going on between Carmella and I because her tone seemed to have changed in the way that
she spoke to me. She wasn’t as friendly, she didn’t smile at me as much and she seemed to single me out more than she had ever done before. But it really didn’t matter much, as Carmella and I grew closer every day. We had begun to at least talk about sex but neither one of us was quite ready for it. Then one day, I went to Carmella’s to take her to the movies, and it happened! I had my first sexual experience... but it wasn’t with Carmella though.