

Englewood
by Marcia Bradley

Cecilia

The way they list it, the way I saw it when I typed *gun deaths* into the old Dell laptop my brother gave my son, so I guess it is mine now, was Marcus, Jason, Vaughn, Scottie, another Jason, Tremayne, Lucy, yes, there are girls, Jarell, Gary, Donald, and Theresa, Shaneda, a second Tremayne, Sterling, Juan, Antonio. The causes are listed. Gunshot, gunshot, gunshot alley, gunshot street, gunshot street, gunshot park, gunshot hallway, gunshot porch, and then more to the point, gunshot chest, head, abdomen, gunshot back, gunshot face, gunshot leg, one more chest, a girl through her head, the boy right through his neck.

All shot in our little community, in Englewood, which used to be quite the place to be. That's what old man Jasper next-door said when I sat with him on his porch just weeks ago. A cool evening. The end of summer. I'd made a pot of Lipton. Brought him a warm drink in a lovely ceramic mug adorned, yes, that's how I think of it, adorned with tawny-colored mermaids that swim in a Lake Michigan blue-green sea. His hand welcomed the large cup. Perfect for such a long tall man. His big feet in faded plaid slippers. He wore a black sweater so elderly the holes in the elbows wanted their chance to speak. Every tired bit of Jasper wraps together and smells like an ashtray waiting to be emptied. Not that I mind.

"Cecilia, after Chicago's fire," the old man began another of his history lessons, "the big fire before I was born. This was where people headed. Downtown burned to the ground. People moved to the South Side, to Englewood. Built beautiful homes. They sure did. Proper folks lived here then."

Proper?

Jasper said this like we should be proud, like isn't it great that we get to live in houses that proper folks built? It wasn't that he wanted to be one of them. I know he didn't. I heard the something-more lodged inside his words. Had to do with a need to take pride. In his life. In Englewood. In anything. I understand this. Didn't say nothin but I wanted to tell him it's also where those people shit, and them folks grew old and died, and their people moved on.

"No Macy's here," is what I said instead. Some things I keep to myself.

I turned 'round and swung my arm towards the street.

"Look." I pointed cuz maybe Jasper didn't see the boarded-up stores and empty lots and men in twos and threes hanging on the corners. "Nowhere I can get office clothes or a good dress. Gotta go way over to Ford City just to get to Penney's. Down to a size 12 by the way. Why, yes, I am working hard." I may be quiet but I ain't meek.

"You're a good woman. Good to those children. You do your best."

"Thank you," is all I said."

"How're those girls? Martin? Ready for school?"

"As much as we can be." I pushed my braids behind my shoulders. Wondered if we're ever ready.

"He's got a future that young man." Jasper pressed his wrinkled fingers together, prayerlike, as if his pronouncement was some kind of insurance. Which it was not.

"You know, old man, nights' gettin cooler. You notice?"

"Yes, that's for certain. Isn't it just marvelous?"

Jasper doesn't care about cold. He loves any moment when he can see clear into the great beyond where his faith reigns supreme. He wrapped his warped fingers around

the mermaid cup. Picked it up and held on real tight as if it was a treasure. Brought the cup to his mouth to take a sip. The mermaid winked at me, her outstretched arms way more welcoming to life than mine could ever be.

“It’s always better to be outside.” The old man bent his already bowed shoulders forward towards me. Like as if he was about to share the deepest of secrets. Tipped that cup, the way one might tip a hat, and lifted his eyes up to the heavens. “It’s a blessin to be sittin under God’s sky, to look up and know that if I get shot tonight my destination is already before me.”

“Mm-hmm.” I nodded.

I couldn’t disagree. Stretched all 37 years of my aching back against his porch railing. The beads on my braids clicked and clacked. He sipped. The mermaid swayed in his grasp. Not much else to say to such truth in Englewood, our neighborhood, ours alone. No one comes here if they can avoid it. Englewood sits within a tic tac toe grid of Chicago streets—55th to 75th, Racine to the Dan Ryan. A square frame of city blocks that hems us in. The Metra, used to be called the L, runs here.

“Old man,” I snapped the elastic band I kept on my wrist and began to rant because my head had nodded just too much, “they ruined us, put the last nail in our coffin when they changed it on us. The Metra? It’s the L to me. Always be the L. Why? Why does stuff change?”

“Don’t know. Just does.”

Jasper sipped. He glanced behind me for just the time it takes a heart to beat and I turned ‘round to look. We always check behind us in Englewood—even though the shots don’t have to come that way. A bullet ripped straight through the heart of a boy named Jonson when he walked his grandma down the sidewalk to the CTA red white and blue bus. She lives across Englewood

on May Street. Neighbors said she fell, her cane flew into the air, a red hat was found in blood on the ground.

“Lord, Lord Jesus, not Jonson,” she cried into the Channel 5 microphone. “Not our sweet child.”

Mighta been the red hat. I knew that.

A few blocks over from here, from right where the old man and I live, there was a boy named Charles. He was shot cuttin cross the alley on his way home. His mama named Mildred. Works at the Y on Homan. I’ve seen her at the Altogether Lovely on 63rd Street. Where I get my braids. Mildred’s Charles shoulda known better than to be in the alley. We are all smarter than that. No alleys. I tell mine every single day.

“Take the long way home,” I called to my children one-two-three Tuesdays ago. “Go down to 69th, cross at the light, and watch out.”

“Watch out!” I yelled to Martin when he left for school that day. I remember he wore his school jersey. “No red or black for you,” I reminded him.

“Don’t worry, Mama,” he turned to me from the sidewalk. Gave me our special wink. “I know better than that.”

Of course, he knew.

No colors that start street wars. Martin wore Robeson blue and white.

My child, my seventeen-year-old sweet as any boy could possibly be. My too tall to be a boy but not yet a man. My son who turned from the street and winked at me. Martin was just a boy in the park that day.

The day school got out early.