

A MOST BEAUTIFUL THING

The True Story of America's First All-Black
High School Rowing Team

ARSHAY COOPER



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TO STACY AND SASHA,
TO MY MOTHER, WHO REPRESENTS HOPE,
AND TO THE CITY OF CHICAGO, WHO'S IN SEARCH OF IT

We take off. I'm in the two-seat rowing port, and I can feel the spray of the stroke seat blade splashing water back at me.

"Balance the boat!" I yell. We find our timing and hit 200 meters.

We settle in, driving hard and recovering. Driving and recovering.

We reach 600 meters, and I feel the boat slow. My pulse quickens.

"We're halfway there! Keep pushing! You have been through much harder than this!" Coach screams. I kick up the gears even though

my body is ready to give in. But when you no longer can row with your legs, you must row with your heart. Now 200 to go. "Lighten

fast," Coach calls. My mind starts playing tricks on me, saying shit like you're not built for balancing boats, callused hands, open

water, and regattas—that I don't belong in this ancient sport so long reserved for schools like Harvard and Yale, Oxford and

Cambridge. Places light-years away from the West Side of

Chicago. In this moment, I am in a game of tug-of-war between the me in the boat and the me the world expects. But I am not the only

one fighting here. My muscles surge with adrenaline as my team pushes forward in unison.

Holy City

Growing up, we had a fan in our apartment that made a loud clicking noise. We couldn't afford a new one so we kept it. After a while, the clicking noise didn't bother us, almost like it wasn't there. We only remembered when new people visited and reminded us of the noise. That's how the violence in our city was during the summer.

I came from the West Side. At fourteen years old in my neighborhood, kids had experienced what most soldiers witnessed in war. At fifteen, I had already run for my life, had bullets fly straight past my head, skipped over pools of blood, and witnessed dead bodies on the street. On my block, there were eleven raggedy-ass buildings, five vacant lots filled with empty forty-ounce beer bottles, and four liquor stores that lock down each corner. It's hard to believe in the American Dream when you walk home through streets of abandoned buildings scattered with baggies of drugs. It was like God existed everywhere but here.

The rules of each street were set by different gangs. If I wore certain colors in the wrong neighborhood, I could get shot. If I wore my baseball cap slightly to the left or to the right in the wrong neighborhood, I could get shot. If I scratched my head and it looked like my fingers were making a certain gesture in the wrong neighborhood, I could get shot. I couldn't even wear Converse shoes in some neighborhoods because the star symbol is a five-point star, and the five-point star represented the Almighty Vice Lord Nation.

My neighborhood was called "Holy City" because every gang in it ends with the word Lord. There were Conservative Vice Lords, Traveling Vice

Lords, Insane Vice Lords, Renegade Vice Lords, and Unknown Vice Lords. When the guys saw one another they said, "What up, Lord?" In Holy City, there were also zombies in every direction. That's what I called the drug addicts. My mother used to be one of them. My aunts and uncles were, too. Their arms were the first thing I'd notice, always clawing for something. Their eyes had no soul, like the life had been sucked out of them. They were as thin as drinking straws and spoke no words, only noises. They were in the hallways of my building, and I was petrified every time I tiptoed past them through the cloud of rock cocaine.

There were no pictures of me from before the age of thirteen; drugs took them. There were no memories of kisses good night or the smell of breakfast in the morning; rock cocaine's to blame. There were no good grades, no junior high sweethearts, no ability to be popular at school, and no sense of belonging, thanks to alcohol abuse. These were not my addictions, but my mother's, and bitterness was stamped on the tablet of my heart.

Back when I was thirteen, I did something I regret. I chose to believe my mom was dead. I had a funeral in my heart. I knew she was going to die in the streets. She was losing so much weight, she stole our Christmas gifts, and she would only come home two or three days a week. When she came home, she would cry aloud in the middle of the night and scream for her fix. I didn't know who she was anymore. She would dress herself in so many layers, one on top of the other, and when I saw her in the streets she was always with a different guy.

I counted her out. I didn't respect her and treated her like a dead woman roaming the streets. I didn't really know my biological father and figured he left my mom for the same reason I wanted to leave, so I was bitter and blamed her. I have heard of other parents in our neighborhood dying from overdoses and my mom seemed far worse than they'd been. I wanted to prepare myself mentally and emotionally for when my mother left us because of drugs, so I could be strong for my brothers and sister. I reached inside and decided she was already gone. It was the same feeling you get when the police or state troopers are behind you and it's only a matter of time before they stop you. I stopped thinking about her, I stopped worrying about her, but I still cried because I loved her too much and knew she couldn't stop. She had four kids she loved, so she would stop if she could, right? She was all I ever wanted and needed, but I felt like I had to be strong at thirteen. I would

stay up at night waiting for her to come home with her usual hysterics, just so I could fall asleep afterward.

A week passed with no sign of her. Two weeks, no mom. I was annoyed because she had gotten a check and was supposed to buy us clothes. Three weeks, no sign, and I thought to myself that maybe she was gone. I was worried, but not upset. It was as though my heart went cold. We were all living with my grandmother at the time, and after a month passed, there was finally a call. My grandmother said that my mother had checked into a rehab home called Victory Outreach Christian Recovery Homes and wanted us to visit. I figured it wouldn't last. Six months passed. My brothers and sister would visit, but I never did; I didn't want to see her. She was dead to me.

A month later, my grandmother forced me to go to a Victory Outreach service to visit my mom. My mother was sweating her to make sure I came. The church was on the corner of Twenty-sixth Street and South Karlov Avenue, a tumultuous Mexican neighborhood. The Two-Six gang was hanging on the corner and I thought to myself, "Will I survive this night?" If you are black and live on the West Side of Chicago you know you do not cross the viaduct into the Mexican neighborhood. This is where the police drop you off when you mouth off to them and try to be a tough guy; it's like being dropped in the middle of the ocean.

When we entered the building there was beautiful music, different from anything I had ever heard. There were pictures of people of different ethnicities along the wall leading up the stairs. There was a black man and a white woman at the front door to the sanctuary, greeting me with a big smile. When I entered, everyone had their hands lifted. There were blacks, whites, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans. Young people and old, and they all looked at peace. I had never witnessed such a thing. There was ocean-blue furniture, bright white walls, and fresh flowers everywhere. The instruments were polished to a shine and the smell was invigorating. This was not a service but an experience.

I looked toward the stage and saw my mother up there singing. I was in shock. Her eyes were watering and her face was glowing, and she beamed when she saw me. When I smiled back something churned inside and I thought, *She's alive*. She was beautiful, devilishly beautiful, and she had joy like a river in her soul. After the songs, a man went onstage, grabbed the microphone, and spoke to us.

“Happy Thanksgiving and welcome to Victory Outreach Church. Take your seat. You are going to hear some live testimonies from people that were once not people.” I wondered what that meant.

“Sister Linda Cooper, come to the mic!” he shouted. My heart started pounding. I felt a little embarrassed, hoping she didn’t point me out. Very softly and slowly, her hands shaking, she said, “Hey, my name is Sister Linda Cooper. I am a mother of four and my kids are here today.”

Everyone started clapping. She went on, “I want to thank God for my salvation, because I was supposed to be dead in some alley by now. I can’t believe I didn’t lose my mind from all the drugs. I mean, every drug you name, I done it and I was addicted to it.”

She started crying and people shouted to encourage her. “Come on now, you got this!”

She continued, “I was all messed up, I was a cheater, and I stole from my kids. I didn’t know how to love my kids. I was angry, I hated my life, and so I made a decision after I spent all my kids’ money that I was going to kill myself. I mean, I was sitting there with rock cocaine in a TV antenna, smoking it. I couldn’t look my kids in their eyes anymore. I was walking down the street with my head down on my way to end my life, and then a guy handed me a flyer and said ‘Jesus loves you.’ When I looked back, he was gone.

“I walked to this woman’s house to call this place on the flyer, her name was Ms. Stella. She was an old wise lady in the neighborhood who helped me out from time to time. We called the Victory Outreach program, and they said they were full. Ms. Stella wouldn’t let me leave her house. She said, ‘If you go back out there, don’t ever speak to me again.’ I stayed there in bed for three days until I got a call from Victory Outreach. They said there was room.

“So, I got up and left and walked and walked. It was so far, it had to be miles. I had no money, my feet were hurting, but I felt something pushing me towards the Victory Outreach home. I wanted to turn around but I couldn’t. Something was pushing me. Ever since that day, seven months ago, I been clean, I been changed, I have hope and a future, and there is no looking back.”

I was clapping; I didn’t cry, but I wanted to. At that moment, I decided to try to let it go, all the hatred I had toward her, the pain, the memories of kids at school making my life hell because of her addiction, the sleepless, hungry

nights. In my heart, I had forgiven her before she opened her mouth. I didn't want to, because that year had seen my darkest hours and my deepest depression. But I knew when she came home, I had to be patient with her, love her, laugh with her, talk with her, pray with her, walk with her, and try to get to know her.

After the service, my mother sat with us and had dinner downstairs in the church fellowship hall. My mother told us that her father was a very violent man—that he beat and raped her and that she often felt it was her responsibility to keep her two younger sisters safe. I kept staring at this woman, my mother, staring right into her eyes and I could see all her hurt and feel all her feelings. I wanted to hug her, but we were not an affectionate family. But as she was telling us she looked so different, she even sounded different.

I had known my grandfather was a violent man. When I was nine years old, he pushed through the door drunkenly, yelling, "I am the war lord! I am the G!" He was a very big man. My grandmother came into the kitchen in her nightgown telling him to calm down and cut the noise out. He grabbed her and tried to rip her gown off as he dropped his pants to force himself on her. My grandmother was screaming, so my brother Shaundell jumped on my grandfather's back and I started pushing him off her as she was hitting him upside the head with a boot. My grandmother pushed him toward the stove, which had all the burners lit—it was how we got heat. I saw my grandfather put his hand onto the grate, directly over the flame. I got scared, so I tried to pull him off but I couldn't move his arm. I didn't scream but I do remember thinking to myself that even though my grandfather was a bad man, *I saved his life*. I also felt like I was cursed with weakness, because he deserved to burn.

Remembering that incident alone, I can only imagine what my mother went through.

I never believed in God because of my situation and my environment. I was always very confused about this God. Growing up, I saw people shot and killed, and I heard their families say there was no God if all their babies were dying. Then there were those who would get hit and survive, and say it was only God who spared their life. I was indeed confused. That day, I wondered what it was that saved my mother. I was interested to find out.

Hearing the testimonies, I learned that Victory Outreach was a Christian-

based but nondenominational church that could be found in nearly every inner city in the world. I heard the pastor say that their mission was to reach the drug addicts, the gang members, the prostitutes, and the brokenhearted. Even the “Goody Two-shoes” who have never broken a plate in their lives.

“What we have in common is that we are suffering from a void,” he said, “so we look for love in all the wrong places. We try money, drugs, sex, fame, parties. And because of that we end up crying out for help. That’s where Victory Outreach steps in. We offer a home for men and women. We have youth programs, church services, sports programs, workshops. See, we are not just some other program, some social agency, or some little church on the corner. Some of our people tried AA, tried psychiatrists, doctors, gang programs, jail, and nothing worked. It wasn’t religion but a spiritual relationship with God that changed us.

“It’s like a big watermelon, I can take it and split it open and eat it and tell you it tastes good, it’s so juicy, but until you try it yourself you will never know. God called us out of the ghettos to go back to the ghettos and make a difference. We are called to reach the treasures out of darkness, people who were once not people, but are now beautiful people of God.”

In that moment I thought *God, if you’re there, open my eyes and heart to see that this is for real.*

★ ★ ★

At 6:00 a.m. my alarm goes off. I jump up quickly, as if from a bad dream.

It’s the fall of 1997 in Chicago. The city is still vibrant after the Bulls won their fifth championship this past summer. When the trophy is home, every Chicagoan jumps on the L train downtown straight to Grant Park wearing the number 23. While Richard Daley is the mayor of the city, I feel like it should be Michael Jordan. The celebration rally brings together a diverse group of people in ways local leaders have not. On that day, there are no differences. You get to experience all that Chicago has to offer, from stuffed pizza to the Magnificent Mile. When that day is over, you’re back in your community with people who look like you, separated from other communities by viaducts.

I live in this dingy one-bedroom apartment with my two brothers, Isaac and Shaundell; my little sister, Pamela; and now my God-fearing mother,

Linda. I still don't know why my mom named me Arshay, but I love that it's unique. I am the middle child between the oldest, Shaundell, and Isaac, the youngest. My mom and Pamela share the sofa bed in the front room, and my brothers and I share the bedroom. We have an old bunk bed from the thrift store that Shaundell and Isaac sleep on and I have the mattress on the floor. That's what happens when you are the middle child. There is only one TV in the apartment, and it sits on an old wooden chair. Most fights at home start over whose turn it is to watch their favorite show, but when that happens, my mom always changes it to TBN, the Christian network. Those old white men preaching have the opposite effect and scare the Jesus *out* of me. We don't have much at home besides this TV, a wooden chair, kitchen table, bunk bed, and mattress, but we have each other.

My little sister is the prettiest little doll I know. She has thin Twizzler-like braids and she wears colorful berets. At twelve years old, she is very mouthy and we joke that she swallowed a radio. Isaac is just one year older than Pamela, and he is an asshole to the tenth power. I wring his neck at least once a day. He is short and bulky. It is my belief that he is the cause of a few teachers deciding to make a career change. Isaac wants to be like Shaundell. Shaundell is one of the cool kids. He is slender, and the ladies love his dimples. He is sweet-tempered and always finds a way to buy Mom gifts. I am not sure how he gets the money, but I'm afraid that we are losing him to the streets. He comes home late smelling like Mary Jane, and the guys he rolls with are gang members. My mom prays daily for Shaundell. So do I. In the Cooper household, we are always loyal to family.

As I lie in bed, I hear my mom shout, "Time to get up and pray!"
She is clapping her hands and singing.

He that believeth, he that believeth have an everlasting life.

He that believeth in the Father and the Son have an everlasting life.

When I get to heaven I'm gonna walk all around, have an everlasting life.

When I get to heaven, I'm gonna put on my crown, have everlasting life.

Isaac complains about having to wake up so early to this noise.

“As for me and my house, we serve the Lord,” my mother responds. Shaundell is quiet, his head down, not saying a word.

Morning devotion is a daily routine in our apartment Monday through Sunday. We wake up to my mom’s songs, we complain a little, and then we fight to get into the bathroom. We each have to find a scripture to read out loud, we sing a song (usually “Amazing Grace” or “God Will Make a Way”), and my mother asks if we have a prayer request. Afterward, we get on our knees and pray for a half hour. Most of the time we just fall back to sleep, but if we get caught sleeping, we have to stand the whole time. The weird thing is that sometimes my siblings will pray, sometimes they won’t, but you can always tell one from the other. The sibling who prays always feels good afterward and minds their own business. Mother asks of us daily to pray for Ike, who she married many years ago. He is the father of Isaac and Pamela. Right now, he is a captive bird in the state penitentiary for selling drugs. Ike always said, “There are no rules when it comes to survival and feeding your family.” I felt like the money was feeding his drug habit. Mom was always intrigued by his edginess, I think. Secretly, I hope he stays in. Mom needs no harmful influences. So that’s my prayer.

★ ★ ★

We head in different directions to school. My younger brother Isaac and little sister Pamela are at Mason Elementary School, Shaundell is a junior at Farragut Career Academy, and I attend Manley Career Academy as a sophomore. Manley is known for its success in basketball, but we also have a rep for being one of the most violent schools on the West Side. Manley graduates less than 60 percent of its senior class every year and only sends 10 percent of its senior class to college. A day at Manley starts with waiting in a ridiculously long line to walk through the metal detectors. I get that it keeps us safe, but no one can get to class on time. I’ve seen security guards confiscate wrenches, pocket knives, screwdrivers, and even box cutters. Most of these weapons are generally for protection after school. There are school security guards on each floor of the building to protect the 600 kids that go to school here. All these kids are African American and, for the most part, love being Wildcats. Everyone refers to one another as *joe*. In California, they say “What’s up, homes”; in New York, it’s “What’s up, son”; and we say

“What’s up, joe.” At Manley, you have to bring it when it comes to the clothes you sport. All the cool kids wear Levi’s, Echo, COOGI, and Phat Farm. When it comes to kicks, they better be Nikes, Air Jordans, Adidas, or Timberlands if you want to be spotted by the ladies. I am wearing Filas and Lee jeans, which means another year of being the invisible man.

Manley has decent basketball, football, and baseball teams for boys and the girls have volleyball and basketball. To make these teams, you have to be incredibly gifted. You have about 400 students trying out for these programs and only about 150 of them making it. That leaves 250 people just chilling between afterschool and six o’clock, which is prime time for risky behavior like sexing it up, getting jumped into a gang, fights, and horseplay. Public school is tough for teachers, too. In our classes, there are at least thirty students; sometimes one class has members of three or four separate gangs. Our teachers spend a lot of time breaking up fights. Good teachers are creative enough to keep us interested in our subjects so there is no room to think about the guy on the other side of the classroom. I realize that it’s tough; some of these gangs are even separated from each other in prison. The teachers have to be peacemakers, mentors, parents, friends, security guards, and social workers. It’s stressing them out; I notice it when I see them leaving the restroom or teacher’s lounge in tears.

I take the city bus to school. The L train is faster, but I have to walk through three different gang territories to get there, and I don’t feel like being chased today. Every so often, when I’m late for school, I will haul ass down Pulaski Road to the L train. My bus rides are usually the same: loud. When I get on the bus, it’s crammed with students from four different high schools. I call it “the pickle jar.” Half the time when a fight breaks out the bus driver keeps rolling. They make it known that they don’t get paid enough to break up fights. When I get off the bus on Sacramento Street, just a few blocks from the school, there is always the risk of being greeted with a beating by the Travelers Vice Lords. The city of Chicago has about fifty different gangs and hundreds of different cliques—splinter groups. Some are known for their fancy cars, and others are notable for being stone-cold killers. These guys were born into this village, and this is all they know. I don’t think these guys join because they believe it’s going to be a good time, but for protection from the gang on the next block over and to be a part of something.

I steer clear of the Travelers Vice Lords and find my way to first period.