100 YEARS
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BOOK EXCERPT

The Death of the American Dream

(7,430 words)

by Arthur Levine and Laura Scheiber

Unequal Fortunes: Snapshots from the South Bronx *is the story of two boys growing up on the same street in the South Bronx 40 years apart. Arthur left to go to college, and Leonel (Leo) was murdered. More than an account of two lives, this book is a testament to the loss of opportunity and the death of the American dream on that street and across urban America.*

Arthur's neighborhood was a community. It was small—four blocks by eight blocks at its largest, but centered on an area two blocks by four. It was bordered on the East by the Grand Concourse, intended to be the Champs d'Elysees of the Bronx, and on the south by Burnside Avenue with its bakeries, butchers, supermarket, restaurants, 5 & 10 cent store, cleaners, movie theater and just about anything a family needed. To the west was Jerome Avenue with more stores and a subway to the East Side of Manhattan. To the north were Arthur's elementary and junior high schools.

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Creston Avenue was populated by working class families and a sprinkling of professionals. Divorce was a mark of shame. Only one girl in Arthur's apartment building lived with a single parent. On hot summer nights, because none of the apartments were air-conditioned, the parents sat on the street in chairs brought from their apartments and chatted. The families went to Orchard Beach in the Bronx or the local movie theaters to get relief from the heat.

During the summers, their kids played all day long on the sidewalks and side streets. They played stickball, punch ball, and a score of other ball games. On rainy days, they played knucks, in which losers had decks of cards slammed on their knuckles. Girls played jump rope and potsy. Throughout the day, when the ice cream truck arrived at their corner, children yelled to parents in the apartment buildings, "Throw down a dime." From the upper floors came socks with change.

When curfews neared, kids yelled up to their parents once again. "Barry's mom said he could stay out later. Can I?" Then Barry would call to his mom, "Arthur's parents said he could stay out later. Can I?" This went on through the evening, until Arthur's parents told him to come in, saying they no longer cared what the other parents allowed their children to do.

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It was a safe neighborhood. There was little chance of getting hurt, although muggings increased in frequency after Arthur left for college. There were no gangs, though there were periodic rumors that the fabled "Fordham Baldies" were going to raid the neighborhood. The only contact with the police came when the beat cop made the kids stop playing stickball or told them to break up as they congregated on a corner. The kids and their parents believed the police were there to protect them.

There was no drinking. Drugs were largely unknown, though two local kids died from drug overdoses during and after college. Secretly smoking cigarettes was the biggest vice.

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Residents lived in the neighborhood for decades and knew each other at least by face. If a child did something wrong or was even rude, his parents knew about it before he got home. One day, Arthur broke three windows accidentally while playing. When he got home, his parents punished him and announced he was starting fulltime day camp the next Monday. Even when Arthur grew up, the parental network persisted. Once while living in Boston, he had a half-day business trip to New York City and did not have time to visit his parents. While taking the subway to an appointment, he met a fellow he had known in the old neighborhood, but had not seen in decades. When he got home that night, his mother called to say how embarrassing it was to hear from the fellow's mother that Arthur had been in New York and had not even told her he was going to be there.

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Despite the religious and ethnic differences among the people living on Creston Avenue there was at least one fundamental commonality—a belief in the power of education and a commitment to the American dream. It bridged the religious and racial differences. Parents wanted a better life for their children than they had. Their kids were going to go to college. This wasn't a hope or expectation, but a given.

A legion of older brothers and sisters demonstrated the power of this thinking. Debby's brothers and sister had gone to college and then law or medical school. Barry's brother and sister attended the university and became a teacher and a city inspector.

The few Jewish kids who failed to complete high school or attend college were known to everyone. It was the equivalent, for Arthur's parents of having been convicted of a crime, and the parents of these children were universally pitied.

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In 1970, Arthur graduated from college and his parents moved to Queens. He did not return to the Bronx until 1994, when he became president of Teachers College.

On moving back to New York City, Arthur made the "old neighborhood" one of his first stops. He had lived in many places, but no place felt more like home to him.

On his first visit, he walked around the old schoolyard. It was littered with broken glass, the occasional used condom, and empty crack vials. There were enough vials to fill a baggie. On this and future visits, Arthur brought a couple of vials back to his office as a reminder of the

challenges facing Teachers College. They were always gone the next day. Arthur joked that the physical plant staff was trying to protect his reputation.

He walked the block from his school to his old apartment building. The smells and sounds of the neighborhood were different. Spanish was the language of the street. There were more graffiti, more trash on the street, and overflowing garbage pails on the corners. There were now a massive iron gate on the front of his old apartment building and piles of rubble where the building across the street had stood. As he walked around, Arthur found familiar haunts gone—the pool hall, which allowed him and his friends to play when they were underage; the movie theater where they were thrown out for running up and down the aisles screaming; the ice cream parlor where he took his first dates; and the bagel factory where he and his father bought hot bagels on Sunday mornings.

There were a lot of men on the street. They stared at Arthur in his suit and tie, or at least he thought they did. Arthur had walked down this street thousands of times in the past. He had never before been afraid.

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Arthur experienced a profound sense of loss. What he had visited was not the old neighborhood of his memory. He was angry. After a peripatetic life, the one place he thought of as home, the physical constant in his life, had vanished. It was, of course, foolish for him to expect that it would not have changed profoundly after 40 years, but he really wanted it to be the same.

His subsequent visits were less emotional. On the second visit, the things that hadn't changed became clearer. Arthur saw that most of the buildings he grew up with were still there—his apartment building, his school, the stores, synagogues, and churches. So were the street where he used to play ball, the library, and the subway stations. Often they were used for different purposes, though. The synagogue, where Arthur had his Bar Mitzvah, was now a church; the Jewish deli, which had the best pastrami he'd ever eaten, had become a bodega. Physically, it was still the old neighborhood—more neglected and rundown, but still the old neighborhood.

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The neighborhood had faced hard times in the years since Arthur left for college. Working-class whites began moving away even before he did and were replaced by minorities. The departures turned into an exodus with the opening of Co-op City in the North Bronx—the largest closed community in the country. Local businesses followed. In 1959, there were 2,000 manufacturers in the South Bronx. Fifteen years later, there were 650. Nearly 18,000 jobs were lost. This was compounded by a recession in the mid-1970s and the export of America's manufacturing industries, a staple of immigrant employment, to other countries.

In the South Bronx, arson boomed as a means for landlords to collect insurance on properties plunging in value and for residents to leave deteriorating and dangerous tenements. Between 1970 and 1980, 30,000 buildings were abandoned and burnt in the Bronx. There was an average of 33 fires a night between 1970 and 1975. Violent crime spiked. The city adopted a policy of "Planned

Shrinkage"—cutting services such as sanitation, health, education, transportation, police, and fire prevention to encourage residents to leave. Banks stopped investing in the South Bronx; new mortgages dropped by 85%. Existing mortgages were sold for as little as a 1/10 of a cent on the dollar. Branch banks on the major thoroughfares closed.

The 1977 blackout came to symbolize the decline. Pictures of broken windows, trashed stores, and massive looting were broadcast across the nation. In the course of 25 hours, there were 307 fires and 473 looted businesses in the Bronx.

A crack epidemic followed in the 1980s. Then out of the ashes, with an improving economy and public and private investment, the old neighborhood began to stabilize.

This was the world Arthur returned to. The residents of his old neighborhood were now poor. Seven out of ten residents were Hispanic. More than one out of every five were black. A greater proportion (45%) of the population was born abroad, largely in the Caribbean and Latin America.

Median family income had declined, according to the 2000 census, since Arthur left the neighborhood, to $24,633 ($30,798 in current dollars), half the national average. A third of all families were living below the poverty line, and the unemployment rate had nearly tripled.

While educational attainment of neighborhood adults had risen since 1960, it has actually dropped significantly relative to the rest of the nation. When Arthur was in seventh grade in 1960, 40% of the adults in the neighborhood had graduated from high school, one percentage point below the national average. Now half the adults in the neighborhood reported having completed high school, in comparison with the 87% graduation rate nationally.

Families changed too. The divorce/separation rate increased sevenfold in the neighborhood. In 1960, 6% of all children were living in a family without both parents. In 2000, 46% of all families were headed by a female without a husband.

And the neighborhood was now a more dangerous place. Gangs, violent crime, beatings, shootings, and stabbings were everyday realities. Children described seeing them. They went to more funerals than weddings.

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But the fundamental difference between Arthur's neighborhood then and now is that the American dream has died. When Arthur lived there, the American dream was the neighborhood religion. Parents and children alike knew that with education and hard work, children could have something better. Though most neighborhood parents had never finished high school, Arthur and his friends knew they were going to college with the certainty that they would be having breakfast the next day. They were aware of friends and relatives who had fallen along the way, their missteps to be avoided. In the end, Marvin and Eddie became doctors. Jimmy became a school principal, and Barry, a teacher. Jay became a lawyer, and Debby, a nurse. Steven became a Wall Street investor. Elliot went to work for the federal government. Terry went to Harvard and was never heard from again.

But today the dream has disappeared. The highway to mobility is gone. Any child who moves up and out must create the road for her- or himself, much as the first pioneers did going west. Most of the children are consigned to remain in a world of poverty, with inadequate education, dead-end jobs, and violence. This is the world where Leonel Disla grew up and died.

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Leo's education occurred as much on the streets as it did in school. One day, he and his friend Pedro headed to the basketball hoop on the corner of Burnside and Creston Avenue. Leo was 12 years old and wore an extra large baggy t-shirt and a basketball jersey. His jeans were so baggy that he pinned the bottoms to his sneakers with thumbtacks and was constantly pulling the sagging jeans up around his hips. Basketball was Leo's favorite sport, and that corner was the best place to play because everyone from the block hung out there.

They passed several drug dealers on the way, avoiding the piles of garbage and dog droppings that littered the sidewalk. Merengue and bachata music blared from open windows and parked cars. The boys said hello to the older men sitting on milk boxes on the street playing a game of dominos on a makeshift table.

Leo noticed a kid across the street staring at him. He tried to remember how they knew each other. A party? A basketball game? When the teenager crossed the street, Leo figured he was going to say hello. Instead the kid socked him. Before he could react, a group of "Crime Fam" gang members jumped him. One guy punched him in the eye four times, another kicked him in the ribs, and a third hit Leo in the arm.

Pedro stood immobile, watching his friend take a beating that was meant for him. The day before, Pedro had gotten into a fight with a kid named David because Pedro looked at him the wrong way. On the streets, staring was a sign of disrespect called *grillin'*, and a way of testing someone's toughness. Grillin' back meant not being afraid. When David grilled back at Pedro, Pedro beat him up. So David and his gang, the Crime Fam, wanted to get even.

Leo went home after the beating. His mouth was numb, and his left eye was swollen shut. His entire body ached. When his mother got home from work several hours later, Leo told her, "Mami, I got jumped." Miriam gasped at her son's bloodied face. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she picked up her purse and took her son to the hospital. What upset Leo more than anything was that the cops never came. Weren't they supposed to protect him? Now he didn't feel safe anymore on his own block.

Miriam concluded that it was too dangerous for Leo to attend school in the neighborhood. He received a "safety transfer," and a week later Leo took the subway about a mile north to a safer area where he would attend M.S. 20.

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Leo hated the new school. It reminded him of his first day at school in the United States. He was eight years old then, and even though he did not speak English, he knew his second-grade classmates were making fun of him. They stole his lunch and cut in front of him in line. Leo felt so lonely he cried in the bathroom everyday and prayed that his family would move back to the Dominican Republic.

M.S. 20 was Leo's fourth new school in four years. His first class was English, followed by math, science, Spanish, social studies, and health. On his first day in the new school, Leo's health teacher discussed the circulatory system, but Leo was distracted. He was worried that the Crime Fam would be waiting for him in front of his apartment building. When the bell rang, Leo flinched. Terrified, he took the subway back to his neighborhood and shakily walked the two blocks from the train station to his apartment. He expected to be jumped, maybe this time with knives. But the only person he passed was a friend standing on the corner. Leo looked at his friend's gold and black beaded necklace—exactly 360 beads, 5 black beads alternating with 5 gold beads. Leo envied his friend, a member of a gang called the "Latin Kings" who didn't have to worry about getting jumped because everyone in the neighborhood respected the Kings.

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Money was a constant worry for Leo's mother, Miriam, and she paid her bills in order of urgency, using every penny for rent, food, electricity, phone, cable, and the kids' expenses. Leo's father Andre—everyone called him Moreno—never sent money from the Dominican Republic since it wasn't worth much in the United States. Leo sympathetically observed, "The whole time we lived in New York, I never seen my mom spend money on herself unless she needed something like a coat. And I ain't ever see her go out on the weekend. Not once."

Even if Miriam wanted to go out, she didn't have the time. She left her apartment for work at 1:30 p.m, traveled two hours to New Jersey, punched in at 4 p.m., and made small boxes for chocolates on an assembly line for 10 hours each day. She clocked out at 2 a.m. and arrived home around 4 a.m. On the days Miriam wasn't working, she cleaned the apartment, washed clothes, and cooked enough food for the week so that her kids had something to eat when they got home from school. Her arms were often swollen from the repetitive motion her work demanded. She suffered from back and leg pain from standing all day. Leo gave her foot massages to help ease the pain.

Near Christmas, Miriam got laid off. She took a train and two buses to the unemployment office in New Jersey where she received $123 per week in benefits, about half of her usual salary. Miriam called friends and relatives to see if they knew of any jobs, and she spent one day each week going from factory to factory filling out applications. She would have gone every day, but couldn't afford the transportation. Several months later, the chocolate factory began hiring again, and Miriam resumed her previous job, with an increased hourly production quota. She wanted to look for another job, but there wasn't time. If she took days off from her factory job, her family didn't eat.

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The only time Miriam saw her kids was on the weekends. When Leo's principal called to talk about a problem at school, she was rarely home. Even when the school sent notices in the mail, Leo got to the mailbox before his mom. Miriam felt like she was losing control of her kids by the time Leo was in sixth grade, Lisandro in eighth grade and Maholi in fourth grade. Lisandro began going to parties, and Miriam insisted that he be home at midnight. After many arguments, she gave up when he continued coming home past midnight. When Leo started going to parties with his brother, Miriam tried to reinstate the curfew, but they didn't listen. By the age of 13, Leo often stayed out until 3 or 4 in the morning.

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Regardless of Miriam's hardships as a single mom, she believed in the Dominican dream. She was determined to build a new house in the Dominican Republic for her family—custom made, with bedrooms for each of the children, a kitchen with new appliances, and a front porch where her family could sit and visit. Her children had already accomplished one of her dreams. They spoke English, an unlikely achievement had they stayed in the Dominican Republic. Miriam wanted her kids to graduate from an American school where they could study for whatever profession they wanted. Then they could get a job they liked, not just whatever job they could get. And then her grandchildren would have an even better life than theirs. That's what pushed her to work so hard.

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When Leo visited his family in the Dominican Republic, his cousin, who had become a Latin King, invited him to join. The Kings Leo knew were always with the prettiest girls and had the best clothes. It wasn't a tough choice for Leo. By the time he was 13, most of his friends had already joined a gang. Although there was no initiation in the Dominican Republic, when Leo returned to the Bronx, he had to prove himself as a King.

He proudly wore his black and gold beads as he walked to his first meeting. He wasn't afraid.

When he got to the meeting, a Latin King friend introduced Leo to "El Supremo," the highest-ranking Latin King in the Bronx, who greeted Leo with, "Tell me what you know about the Latin Kings." Leo was nervous. He wanted El Supremo to like him. After saying the Latin King prayer, Leo recited the basics that all Kings knew. He sat quietly for a moment, and El Supremo asked if that was it. He nodded.

El Supremo looked at Leo for what felt like an eternity, and finally said if Leo wanted to be a Latin King, he had to go to weekly meetings and memorize his lessons on the history and rules of the Kings. If he broke King rules, he'd get a beating. A King only gets a beating for serious

offenses like hitting a girl, going out with another King's girl, or attending a meeting drunk or high. Leo breathed a sigh of relief, happy he had chosen the Kings.

Leo chose the Kings for protection. And maybe it was his imagination, but every time he wore his beads, girls asked him his name followed with, "So whas' good?"

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Leo never did technically graduate from middle school, but he was too old to repeat the eighth grade a third time. It wasn't that Leo was stupid. In fact he got the highest score in his class on a citywide practice test. He got a 52% (65% was a passing score). The problem was that Leo didn't go to class when he was bored, which happened often. Instead he'd hang out in the hallways and make out with his girlfriend.

The only time Leo went to class consistently was during basketball season. He couldn't be on the team if he failed any courses. Mr. Torres, his coach and mentor, personally promised the other teachers that he would make sure Leo, who was one of the best players, did better in their classes. Leo told Mr. Torres and his mom that he was going to do better in school, but also told his girlfriend that he'd meet her in the hallway whenever she asked. He didn't want to disappoint anyone.

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Leo was supposed to go to a high school preparation program, since he never graduated from eighth grade. But he slipped through the cracks and was registered at Kennedy High School. He wanted to forget how many times he had gotten left behind. He wanted to go to school with people his own age. He just hoped that a fight with an Outlaw gang member in the neighborhood wouldn't ruin high school for him.

Leo didn't want to go alone on his first day of high school, so his brother Lisandro and his best friend Carlos went with him. When they arrived at the eight-story school building, they saw a line of students four city blocks long. Only one entrance was opened for the 4,600 students. They joined the line, meeting other friends along the way, and chatted. A linemate informed Leo that the Outlaws were always on the third floor, while most Dominicans "chilled" on the fifth floor. Someone asked Leo if he had heard about the hooky on Friday. "Nah," Leo responded. "I ain't going to hooky parties no more. I wanna do good this year." One of his friends laughed and said, "Nigga, everyone say that when they start high school . . . they always end up cutting. You ain't no different." Leo didn't say anything, but he was determined to prove his friend wrong.

He also figured that if high school didn't work out, he would go to Job Corps, an alternative federal residential program, where he could earn his GED and learn a trade. He had learned about Job Corps two years earlier, when a friend sang its praises, telling him kids got paid for attending, the Latin Kings ruled the school, and girls had sex with the boys in the dorms.

It took more than 45 minutes to get in the door at Kennedy, where a staffer looked at Leo's registration papers and instructed him to go to the auditorium to get his program. He followed his

friends through the crowded hallways. The auditorium was equally chaotic. Leo felt out of place and told his friends, “Yo, nigga, I’m out. This is wack.” They left the school and headed toward the Creston Avenue arcades.

Leo picked up his program the next day. Trying to avoid the hallways where he had heard the Outlaws hung out, Leo managed to find his first period class and took a seat in the back, attempting not to look as uncomfortable as he felt. With heavy eyes, he listened to a substitute teacher lecture for 20 minutes on the importance of getting involved in extracurricular activities. It felt like hours had passed when the bell finally rang to end class. In the hallway, Leo heard another student boast, “No, nigga, that was me who rang the bell. Look at your watch, yo. It’s only been 20 minutes.” Indeed, the entire fifth floor had gotten out of class a half hour early. Leo went to his second class, which was in an uproar as boys fought for girls’ attention and girls gossiped about the latest minidramas.

At the conclusion of class, Leo asked the teacher where he could pick up his subway pass. She looked at his class program and pointed to his counselor’s name and her room number. On the way to there, he was convinced that an Outlaw was going to jump him, or that a group of Bloods might choose him as their next target. He walked nervously down the hallway until he reached room C328.

When he asked about his subway pass, the counselor brusquely told him that freshmen would get their applications on Friday at 9 a.m. and that he should go back to class. She turned to her computer screen without giving Leo another glance. Leo ran into a friend in the hallway, who asked if he was going to that hooky party on Friday. Leo said, “Yeah,” and then left school from the girls’ entrance on the first floor. It took roughly 30 minutes to walk back to the neighborhood and meet up with friends who were also cutting school or had already dropped out.

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By the third week of his first term of high school, Leo stopped going to school altogether. He never attended a full day at Kennedy High School. It was a Thursday in October when the attendance counselor called Leo’s home to say that, if he and his mom didn’t meet with her the following Monday, his mom could go to jail, since she was legally responsible for his attendance.

At 8:15 on Monday morning, Leo and his mom caught the bus to Kennedy. Miriam had gotten home from her factory job at 4 a.m. and slept a little over three hours. She lectured Leo in Spanish that she had brought him to the United States for a better life. All he had to do was go to school and study. But he didn’t do anything. Leo blamed it on the school; there were too many problems. Miriam shot back, “It’s because you are in a gang.” “No, I am not,” Leo told her.

As they walked from the bus stop to the school, Leo continually looked behind them to make sure they weren’t being followed. When they entered the school, three security guards ordered Miriam and Leo to empty their pockets and put their bags through the metal detector. A security guard searched Miriam’s purse while another moved a handheld metal detector over her body.

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When Leo and Miriam reached the attendance office, a counselor offered them a seat and explained that Leo had missed over 25 days of school. Miriam meekly explained that she didn't know that he wasn't in school. He was always gone by the time she woke up. The counselor asked Leo what was going on. He told her there were too many problems at that school. Miriam said her son wanted to transfer to Job Corps. There was usually a six-month waiting period, the counselor explained, and Leo would have to go to school during that time.

Afraid that her son would not change and he'd end up in jail, Miriam asked if she could send him to the Dominican Republic during the waiting period. As long as she had a copy of the plane ticket for Leo and the address of the guardian who would take care of him in the Dominican Republic, the counselor assured her that there shouldn't be a problem.

When Miriam and Leo arrived home, Leo got a two-hour lecture as he sprawled on the couch, his arm covering his eyes, Miriam cried, frustrated and desperate to make her son understand what she was saying: "I came to this country so that you could have a better life. I have to work in a factory because I don't speak English. I work the worst hours in the worst places and get the worst pay because those are the only jobs I can get. I want you to have a better life. But I don't see a future for you. Maybe selling drugs or robbing people or going to jail because you don't like to work and you don't go to school, so how are you going to support yourself?"

Leo responded, "Mami, I'll go to school." Tired of his promises, she continued, "I have gotten so many letters and phone calls from your schools. You always say that you are going to change, but nothing changes. . . ." Leo went to his room and his mom sat on the couch, feeling defeated; when she felt the migraine begin she got ready for work.

* * *

Miriam officially withdrew Leo from Kennedy High School, and he was placed on the Job Corps' three- to six-month waiting list. She bought his ticket to the Dominican Republic with money borrowed from her brother. He left New York City on November 25, 2003. It had been eight years since he had lived in the Dominican Republic.

Leo stayed at his grandma Teresa's house, where his favorite uncle and three cousins lived. At first Leo didn't like living in the Dominican Republic (DR). In the DR, anytime Leo went outside, five minutes later his grandma or his uncle went looking for him. It drove Leo crazy. "My grandma think she slick," Leo told a friend. A few nights earlier, he was flirting with a girl in the street when his grandma told him his mom was on the phone. Leo ran home and he picked up the telephone, but no one was on the line. He was about to go back outside when his grandma insisted he stay home because it was too late to go out. When Leo accused her of lying about the phone call, she simply told him to go to sleep.

Even though Teresa was strict with Leo, they had a good relationship. Leo liked joking around with his grandma; sometimes he'd give her such a big hug that he'd practically lift her off the ground. She'd shoo him away laughing. For a 65-year-old grandma with 10 grandchildren, she was a spitfire. She was happiest when she was taking care of her family. She was proud not to be

the type of woman to stop working just because her kids sent her money from the United States. It was important to Teresa to pay her own bills.

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Leo never really knew his father before that visit. They had only lived together for a couple of years and his father wasn't around much then. But when Moreno found out that Leo was moving back for a few months because he was having trouble in school, he rented a decrepit one-room wooden house a block away from Teresa 's house. Every day, he picked Leo up and took him to work, fixing car tires. At night, they'd hang out and talk about everything—school, girls, hooky parties, Moreno's adventures in the United States. Moreno gave Leo fatherly advice like, "Stay in school. Work hard."

But what Leo really liked about his father was that he knew how to have fun. Moreno knew everyone. He'd slowly drive down the street waving to friends from his car as if he were a celebrity. When one of the pretty young neighbors wanted to mess around with Leo, he took her to his father's house. Moreno happily gave them privacy and told his son, "Make me grandchildren. I'll take care of them." Leo and Moreno were more like friends than father and son.

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Leo had been in the Dominican Republic for almost three months when his mom phoned to say that Job Corps had called, and he was to start school the following week. Miriam couldn't wait to see Leo. She missed him terribly. He was on a plane back to New York a week later and on a bus the following Monday to Delaware Valley Job Corps Center, a few hours outside of New York City. Leo was convinced that if he were in a place where he didn't have to worry about gang "beef," then he would do well in school. He could get his GED and learn to fix cars so he could get a job and make money. He was determined to make his family proud.

* * *

It took a moment for Leo to realize he was barefoot in the middle of winter. It happened so fast. One minute he was walking back from his friend's apartment, and the next minute a group of guys were stealing his coat and shoes.

Leo was angry. He called Juan Carlos, Carlos, and a few others, including his friend Aneudys. Although small in stature, Aneudys was never shy about throwing a punch. They went looking for the muggers but didn't find them.

A few days later, Leo and Aneudys found a kid wearing a coat just like Leo's, so they jumped him. At first Leo felt bad, because he wasn't certain that it was the kid who stole his coat. But when the kid yelled, "Fuck Dominicans," he didn't feel so bad anymore. They sold the coat for

$130. Aneudys got $50 and Leo kept $80. He gave $30 to his mom to pay bills, though she never knew its source, and used the rest to buy two new shirts.

Aneudys graduated from high school and got a job as a security guard. One night after work, Aneudys and a group of friends were on the subway heading downtown to a party when one of his friends spotted a guy who looked like a Blood. He asked him, “You Blood?” The guy said, “No,” but Aneudys’s friend punched him anyway. Aneudys hit him in the head with his umbrella while another friend stabbed him. Passengers fled to other cars.

One of them reported the fight to a subway conductor. Aneudys sat down and tried to blend in with the other passengers, but the man who had reported the crime pointed Aneudys out to the police. They handcuffed him and took him to the station. Aneudys wasn’t afraid because he had been arrested before. During his junior year in high school, he and his friends had jumped a guy who was bullying another kid. The police caught them, but Aneudys didn’t take it seriously because everyone was cracking jokes in the jail cell. In the end, the charges were dropped.

This time, the charges were second- and third-degree assault, rioting, and gang assault. He could potentially get 15 years in prison. A public attorney was appointed and Aneudys pleaded not guilty. His court appearances became one canceled trial date after another.

Nine months later, Aneudys sat next to his court-appointed lawyer in New York’s district court. He was sentenced to 16 months to four years at Washington Correctional Facility in upstate New York for the stabbing his friend committed. The night before Aneudys went to jail, he stayed up all night drinking with Leo and some of his DDP (Dominicans Don’t Play) friends. When it was time to go, Leo promised, “I’m gonna come visit you.”

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Eight months later, Leo and Juan Carlos stood under an awning in the rain at 2 in the morning outside Yankee Stadium. About 25 other people waited with them for minivans, which charged $35 for a round-trip ticket, to take the 4 ½ hour-trip to the prison.

When they arrived, Leo and Juan Carlos filled out the required guest paperwork, left their personal belongings in the visitor lockers, and were denied permission to bring into the prison the cleats that Aneudys’s mom sent for her son.

When their numbers were called, they entered the visitor center for Aneudys’s cell block. The sound of iron doors shutting made Juan Carlos uncomfortable. “I don’t like the feeling of being locked in.” It didn’t bother Leo so much.

After going through three more sets of doors, they were seated at a table assigned to Aneudys and his visitors. It was 8 a.m. At 8:30, Aneudys arrived and smiled broadly. They told him the latest gossip from the block. Aneudys said prison wasn’t so bad, almost like a “ghetto vacation.”

At exactly 2 p.m., visiting time was over. Juan Carlos and Leo gave Aneudys a half-hug and promised to return. They watched Aneudys walk back to his cell with his head down and his feet dragging. Juan commented, "He says he's doing all right, but I know it is harder than he says."

Leo decided this would be the last time he'd visit Aneudys. The 10-hour journey was too long and too expensive. Plus he wanted to use his time and energy to find a job and finish school. He bought some dressy shoes for job interviews and looked into another GED program.

* * *

On Sunday, October 30, 2005, Leo was shot and killed by a police officer on Creston Avenue. There were as many stories about what happened as there were people watching the fight that led to the shooting. Leo was a bystander. Leo was trying to break up the fight. Leo was one of the fighters. He had a knife. He didn't have a knife. Leo didn't hear them, they didn't hear him, or they made a mistake, taking Leo's effort to surrender the knife or show that he didn't have a weapon for an attack.

This much is certain: Two shots were fired by a police sergeant. The first gunshot missed Leo, but the second hit him in the side. The police closed off the street and handcuffed Leo on the ground with his hands behind his back. He lay face down in a pool of blood.

* * *

That night, Leo's family and friends gathered on the street for a vigil. Lisandro stared at the dried blood on the sidewalk and wiped the tears from his eyes. Girls hugged each other. Others prayed. Juan Carlos and Carlos looked at the basketball hoop that hung above the bloody sidewalk. It was ironic that Leo had been shot there, his favorite spot to shoot a three-pointer. When Leo talked about the block, that spot was it, the place they had spent countless hours playing basketball and splashing around in *la pompa,* the hydrant, during the summer.

People who didn't know Leo came for the drama. He was the latest news in the neighborhood. A friend couldn't stand the gawkers staring at the bloody sidewalk, so he poured wax over it. Others helped until only wax could be seen on the sidewalk. At Miriam's, a friend read from the Bible while others looked at pictures of Leo. Miriam sat on the couch and stared at the wall.

The next night a mural was painted on the street where Leo was shot. It was the expected way to memorialize someone from the neighborhood. A graffiti artist painted a picture of Leo taken from a cell phone camera. The mural was large—10 feet high and 12 feet wide. At the center was a picture of Leo in his red baseball cap with a gold chain around his neck. Leo's big brown eyes stared at passersby. Most graffitied walls in the neighborhood eventually got sprayed over by other taggers, but not this one. It was an extraordinary mural that no one dared disrespect.

* * *

The police never contacted Miriam. When she went to the police station, they refused to tell her why they shot Leo. They couldn't release his possessions either—his wallet, house keys and the $1000 gold chain that Leo had borrowed from Carlos. All of it was evidence.

On Tuesday, Juan Carlos, Lisandro, and Carlos went to Jacobi Hospital to identify Leo's body. It was so much more terrible to see him there than just knowing he was dead. Carlos waited outside, too afraid to look. Lisandro stood immobile in front of the window, unable to speak, unable to cry.

Miriam didn't know how she was going to pay for her son's burial. In the end, donations from friends and family paid for most of the expenses. They decided to go with Ortiz funeral home, where Leo had been for the funerals of three friends—one stabbed, one a drug dealer shot in the head, one killed in a fight over a girl.

For a little over $2,000, the funeral home would pick up Leo's body from the hospital, provide a basic casket, host a six-hour wake with artificial flowers, and send the body to the Dominican Republic. It was $3,000 cheaper to bury Leo in the DR than New York, and he could be buried next to his grandmother Teresa, who had died a month earlier. Miriam scrounged up money for plane tickets. Lisandro requested permission from his parole officer to leave the country, but his request was denied.

* * *

Miriam, Maholi, and Lisandro were the first to arrive at the wake on Friday afternoon. Leo lay in a white casket with his hands folded across his stomach, his black and gold beads wrapped around his hands. It looked like a wax version of Leo with a gray skin tone. Miriam's mascara streamed down her face. Lisandro pried her away from the coffin and walked her to a small sofa where she wailed for almost the entire six-hour wake.

By 5 p.m., the room was packed. Girls walked up to the casket and burst into tears. They held Leo's hand. They kissed his forehead. At times the room was silent, except for Miriam's constant crying. Lisandro greeted people in a half-daze. Maholi sometimes comforted friends; other times friends comforted her.

Carlos and Juan Carlos today

Juan Carlos arrived at 5:30. He thought he had cried all he could, but when he saw Leo in the casket, he walked out of the funeral home and collapsed on the sidewalk. About an hour later, Carlos arrived with the same outfit as Juan Carlos's—a t-shirt with a picture of Leo scanned from a cell phone photo, a black sports coat and baggy jeans. Making t-shirts for a wake was the custom on the block. Tears rolled down Carlos's face. He couldn't speak.

The wake ended abruptly at 8 p.m. when the funeral home staff carried the casket away to begin preparations for the 6 a.m. flight. Miriam and Maholi went back to their apartment and tried to

sleep. Juan Carlos, Carlos, and Lisandro went to a party in Leo's building, where they drank to dull the pain. A group of people, including Juan Carlos, ended up in front of Leo's mural. When an argument almost turned into a fight, Juan Carlos got in the middle and tried to break it up. He didn't notice the cop until he pushed Juan Carlos and told him, "Get off my block." Between the loss he felt and the alcohol, Juan Carlos couldn't hold his temper. He pushed the cop back and yelled, "What are you going to do, kill me too?" He pulled his arm back to punch the cop, but a friend grabbed him. Juan Carlos decided to go home for the night.

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