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# Coleman and I

by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah

“A black man in this country’s gotta have a hustle,”

my cousin Coleman used to always tell me.

“And if he doesn’t?” I would ask, being my usual contrary self, an advocate for doubt (better known to some as the devil.)

“Well, then he’s either gonna die, or end up becoming a ghost,” Coleman would say quickly and flatly, as if he were holding the statement out as a self-evident truth.

“And you’d better believe that’s not gonna happen to me.”

We were young then, Coleman and I. He was nearly 20 and I was barely 16, but already I could see that he had the makings of a con artist. He was handsome and charming, a well-rehearsed gentleman, fast-talking and convincing. But more than any of those things, Coleman had heart. Just plain magnetic, that cousin of mine.

He had recently immigrated from Ghana, our native country, and was living with us — my mother, younger sister and me — in our suburban Washington, D.C. home. He brought a lot of laughter into our lives. Unintentionally, of course. But intentions are usually meaningless in the face of a resulting action. Coleman taught me that. He also taught me about the complexities of emotions, of circumstances — how hate and love can exist in the same heart, how the words stupid and smart can be used to characterize the same head.

Often, Coleman would sit at the dining room table, pen in hand, studying the Want Ads. He had no experience, no college degree and a rabid aversion to traditional nine-to-fives. “Ugh,” he would cringe, his entire body shivering in disgust. “Slave labor. They want you to give them your soul for three fifty an hour. Not me, uh-uh.” It was this sort of attitude that made his lengthy employment search so frighteningly comical. Like the time that he decided to apply for a job as a professional tree climber.

“Doesn’t that require a certain level of skill and experience?,” my mother asked.

“Climbing a tree?” His eyes were wide and wet, brimming with incredulity. “I’m an African man, a few weeks off the airplane. I’ll tell them I’ve been climbing trees all my life. Trust me, they’ll believe it, and that’s all the skill and experience they’ll need.” And he was right. They gave him the job, no questions asked, no resume required. They also fired him at the end of his first day when they realized that he wasn’t the Tarzan of their fantasies and, in fact, didn’t know a damn thing about climbing trees, let alone operating the machinery that was required to trim the branches once he’d reached the top.

There were plenty of these sort of anecdotes. He would talk his way into the most unimaginable situations. And I would wonder how and where Coleman learned to run game like that. His father was a highly regarded economist and professor, his mother was a middle class homemaker. His was no sad, bad-luck story. He came from a solid, hardworking, successful family. We were of similar background, Coleman and I, yet of completely opposite beliefs. I believed in meritocracy and equal access, believed in climbing the ladder, one

steep rung at a time. Coleman believed that, as a black man in America, the only ladder that society would ever allow him to climb was one he had built himself. “Even then,” he would add. “I wouldn’t trust those folks to not try to block my ascension.” He thought I was naive; I thought he was paranoid. However, as the years passed, as I witnessed what became of Coleman, what became of his life, this cousin of mine, I slowly began to put it all in proper perspective.

After a year of many failed attempts in the D.C. area, Coleman set his sights on the West. He moved to Los Angeles, bought a car, and earned extra change as a day laborer, standing with the Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans and other foreign-tongued illegals in the parking lots of paint stores waiting, just waiting for a chance to earn an honest day’s pay. Either that, or he would return to his Want Ad antics, bullshitting his way into jobs he knew he wasn’t qualified to take, and wouldn’t be able to hold for more than a day. Eventually, he ended up living in his car, sleeping on the torn upholstery of the backseat, showering at the YMCA in the mornings. “Jesus Christ,” I would say, whenever Coleman called and filled me in on his shenanigans. “Why are you so insistent on being triflin’ and under-achieving?”

“Under-achieving?” he would laugh. “Don’t place too much faith in your eyes, little sis. They will deceive you. Things aren’t always what they look like.”

“Sure,” I would say to him. “You’re right. I shouldn’t be so judgmental. I’m sorry.” But really, I would be rolling my eyes at the telephone receiver, thinking, *There he goes again with that crap. What a fucking nut.*

Once I’d completed high school and moved out of my mother’s home, we lost touch, Coleman and I. He was who-knows-where doing who-knows-what. I was out in the world, discovering how fragile many of my beliefs truly were, learning the painful politics of proletarian life: a one-step-forward-two-steps-back-shuffle designed to always keep you on your toes, working hard to meet only the bare minimum. Nothing more. After a few of my own failed attempts in the D.C. area, I followed Coleman’s lead and moved to Los Angeles where I would maybe try to re-enroll in college.

I had been living in L.A. for six months before we reconnected, Coleman and I — and when I saw him, I could hardly believe my eyes. He was a changed man, my cousin. He was attending one of the most prestigious colleges in the city. The man was sharply dressed, living in a clean dorm room in an enviable zip code. Knowing him as I did, I knew, too, that there had to be a scam attached to his current situation. “The catch?” I asked suspiciously. “No catch,” he swore. “It’s straight up studies for me. I have to maintain a certain GPA because I’m on all kinds of scholarships and grants. I told them that my father was a shepherd, that he used his entire life’s savings to buy me a ticket to come to the U.S. so that I could escape the poverty of my country and try to make something of myself. They’re paying for everything, and giving me spending money, too.”

Because I hadn’t yet lived in California long enough to qualify as a resident, my tuition fees were substantial. It was a struggle for me to work, pay for housing, school, transportation and, with any remaining cash, food. I glared at my cousin, unable to hide my rage. “I guess a black man’s gotta have his hustle, huh?” I said, bitterly. “And if he doesn’t,” Coleman continued, “the system’s gonna keep beating him down until he either dies or kills somebody. Come here, let me tell you something, little sis.” With that he gently took my hand, sat me down on his couch and told me what he knew:

*There’s only one of two things you can be, a winner or a loser. And it’s up to you to decide your fate. If you decide to play somebody else’s game, then you’ve already positioned yourself to become a loser; you’ve already put the cards in somebody else’s hands and allowed them to make up the rules. But it doesn’t matter who holds the cards so long as you hold on to the power. Your power. You need to always be sure you keep in mind what game you’ve chosen to play. You need to always keep your mind at least one move ahead. You need to always play to come out on top.*

Coleman had apparently acquired this knowledge from years of studying, of reading newspapers and books, of posing questions to visitors and expatriates, all in preparation for his life in America. He wanted to succeed, to come out on top and he had learned that in order to do this, as a black man, he had to keep himself from being relegated to the bottom. So he drew his own map, paved his own path. “It’s an issue of sanity,” he explained. “And humanity.” That day, we made a pact, Coleman and I. We swore to each other that we would both be winners, that we would name and claim our own destinies.

Many years have passed since that day in his dorm room. We each devised extremely different strategies to help us meet the mutual goal we’d set for ourselves. But we are both right where we want to be. Me, I’m a writer with a few initials behind my name. Coleman, he’s a rocket scientist. Literally. He’s got a huge house, and enough degrees to be able to hang one on a wall in each room.

We’re still very close, Coleman and I. Just the other night, we ate dinner together. Afterwards, I told him about this essay, warned him that I would be telling his secrets. “Not the tree climbing incident, okay?,” he laughed. I was about to ask why when two young black men suddenly walked out into the street in front of Coleman’s car. We came to a screeching halt, missing them only by a foot or less. They were unfazed, in the middle of a loud, drunken disagreement, yelling and cussing at each other as they walked. Though the men were arguing, it was obvious that they shared a bond. They might have been best friends, brothers even. I looked at Coleman, staring at them through the windshield, his eyes filled with a certain sadness. “Under the weight of so much history,” he muttered to no one in particular. “It’s a wonder anyone can ever come out on top.” And even after the men had passed, we continued to sit there, Coleman and I, looking straight ahead. ●

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