One Summer

A Prelude to a Summer

Near midnight on August 19th, 1998, the phone rang, an unusual occurrence at my parents' home in upstate New York where I was visiting with my wife and infant daughter. I got out of bed, and scrambled to the hallway to grab the phone. The voice on the other end sounded familiar but I couldn't quite place it. "It's Anne Chambers," she said. Anne was a Chicago violent crimes detective whom I knew. She told me she was calling from the kitchen in our home in Oak Park, a suburb bordering Chicago. She told me that Pharoah was there with her, and that he may have been involved in a murder. My legs buckled. I sat down to catch my breath.

This was the Pharoah from my book *There Are No Children Here,* a boy who tread cautiously, who loved school and who was so charming and vulnerable that adults went out of their way to protect him. Shortly after the book came out, Pharoah, who had grown up in one of the city's housing projects, had moved in with me -- for what I thought would be a short period. I'd helped get him into Providence St. Mel, a college prep school on the city's west side, and he was struggling, understandably. He couldn't find quiet in his first-floor public housing apartment as rivers of people flowed in and out daily, mostly family and family friends. He called and told me he just wanted to catch up with his school work. *Could I be stay with you, for just for a while*? he asked. *Maybe a week or two*? I was single at the time, unencumbered and with a spare bedroom, so I invited him to stay. Though only 12, he knew what he needed. He brought with him a garbage bag filled with clothes – and his school backpack. Those two weeks turned into six years.

When I got married, Pharoah walked my wife Maria down the aisle -- along with her dad. We moved to Oak Park as we wanted to be near his school, and we figured it was a community that wouldn't look askance at this unusual arrangement. His adolescent years were rocky. I didn't anticipate how this living situation would pull at his sense of identity. While his mother, LaJoe, supported his decision to live with Maria and me, others in his family didn't. One time, his mother called and after leaving a message forgot to hang up, and so on my answering machine I listened to a five-minute rant by a friend of their family berating LaJoe for letting Pharoah live with a white couple. *He don't belong there*, the woman told LaJoe. *He ain't white*.

I knew it had to be hard for Pharoah. He undoubtedly heard these harangues, as well. It's tough enough to be a teen in the best of circumstances, grappling with who you are and who you want to be, and here Pharoah had to figure out who he was while living with two white adults who were not related to him by blood, who were not his parents, who were not even his legal guardians. In particular, he had an older brother -- I gave him the pseudonym Terence in the book -- who clearly resented Pharoah's decision to live with us, and so he would try to pull Pharoah into his activities in the street. There was also a measure of opportunism here as he knew Pharoah, who had never been in trouble with the law, would not likely draw the attention of the police. It felt like a tug of war, and I often felt on the losing end. At one point, Pharoah knew he had to get away, to find some reprieve from these forces pulling at him, and so at his request we sent him to a boarding school in Indiana, a military academy where he had attended summer camp.

A week after he left, I was tidying up his bedroom, picking clothes off the floor, making his bed and finally cleaning his closet, where on the top shelf I noticed a worn black leather bag the size of a medicine ball. I reached to pull it down. It was bloated with cash. I mean lots of

cash. Tens. Twenties. Hundreds. All of it stuffed into the bag without much concern for appearance or organization. I knew right away that it belonged to Terence, that he had probably asked Pharoah to hold it for him. I called a friend, an attorney, for advice. His words were simple: "Get rid of it." He called me back a few minutes later, and clarified, "I don't mean throw it away." So, I called Terence, and told him I had something of his which he needed to retrieve. He refused to come to Oak Park, worried that I'd set him up with the local police so I agreed to meet him on the city's West Side, and there in the middle of a one-way, residential street in the early afternoon, in the open so that we both felt protected, exchanged what turned out to be somewhere in the neighborhood of $18,000. (Terence later accused me of taking $300 from the bag, but that's another story.)

This is what Pharoah was up against -- and what we were up against, as well. Pharoah got kicked out of the boarding school for selling marijuana, and eventually graduated from our local public school. He was accepted at Southern Illinois University and had decided not to visit New York with us during this summer trip because he wanted to get ready for school. Classes began the following week. And then I got this call.

I knew the detective, Anne Chambers, from my time reporting *There Are No Children Here.* Anne, whom everyone in the neighborhood called “Mary” (for reasons I never could discern) had been a member of the plainclothes tactical unit in the neighborhood, and had a reputation as a fair-minded officer. She was tough, but cared deeply about the kids. She was a single mother, and we use to talk about her son who at the time was headed off to Harvard with ambitions to be a police officer. She pleaded with him to do something different. Here's what she told me in that short midnight phone call: Pharoah had taken a taxi from our house to his mother's home on the West Side, and when the cab pulled up two young men pulled Pharoah out

of the backseat, and then jumped in. One of them held a pistol to the cabbie's head, demanding his money. The cabbie must have panicked, and when he pressed down on the accelerator one of the assailants shot him in the back. Anne told me that some detectives suspected Pharoah might have set up the driver. Fortunately, Anne knew Pharoah from her time in the projects, and knew that he wasn't that type of kid. I told her I, too, couldn't fathom Pharoah pulling such a stunt -- though privately I worried that maybe his brother had put him up to it.

By the next morning, Anne and her colleagues had determined that in fact Pharoah knew nothing of the robbery. Pharoah's sister saw much of what transpired, and could identify the assailants. For my part, I tried to reach Pharoah. This was before cell phones. His mother said he was out, but wasn't sure where. I tried calling regularly throughout the day. Both Maria and I were concerned. He'd just seen someone murdered. It wasn't the first time, I knew, but I also imagined how disorienting it must be. Morning came and went. As did the afternoon. Finally, that evening I reached him at our house.

Where have you been? I asked.

Shopping.

Shopping?

At Marshall Field's. For school.

Shopping? I was incredulous.

Yeah.

Pharoah, how are you doing?

Okay. Why?

Why? You just saw someone murdered.

I'm okay. I got to go. I need to get packed for school.

I hung up, shaking my head. I was dumbfounded -- and angry. How could he not be grieving? How could he not be upset? Shopping? I told my wife if it was me, I'd be curled up on our couch in a fetal position. I thought to myself, something must be terribly wrong with Pharoah. How can you not feel? How can you not cry? How can you not express gratitude for not getting killed yourself? Pharoah gets yanked out of the backseat of a taxi by two men with a pistol, and then watches as they shoot and kill someone he'd just shared time with. Something, I thought, was off. Out of kilter. And for the longest time, I thought Pharoah was without heart, that he'd become hardened if not numb to the violence around him. This of course is the mistake we all make, thinking that somehow one can get accustomed to it.

I feel like I've been working my way to this book for a long while. In reporting *There Are No Children Here*, it was the violence that most unmoored me. Since the publication of the book in 1991, four of the kids I befriended have since been murdered, including Pharoah's nephew whom even at the age of 21 everyone called Snugs, short for Snuggles. He was killed in retaliation for someone else getting shot; he was the last person murdered before the Henry Horner Homes were razed. Another young man, Jojo Meeks, had joined me, along with Pharoah and his brother Lafeyette, on a fishing trip one summer. He had a smile so wide you felt like you could just walk right in. Jojo became a stick-up artist, of drug dealers mostly, and was killed when he tried to rob some drug dealers with a bb gun. They were better armed.

The numbers are staggering. In Chicago, in the twenty years between 1990 and 2010, 14,033 people were killed, another 63,000 wounded by gunfire. And the vast majority of these shootings took place in a very concentrated part of the city. Let me put this in some perspective, if perspective is possible; it's considerably more than the number of American soldiers killed in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq. Combined. And here's the thing, Chicago is by no means the

most dangerous city, not even close. Its homicide rate doesn't even put it in the top ten. But the city has become a symbol for the personal and collective wreckage caused by a kind of civil war raging in the streets of the nation's most impoverished neighborhoods. Citizens killing citizens, children killing children, police killing young black men. A carnage so long lasting, so stubborn, so persistent that it's made it virtually impossible to have a reasonable conversation about poverty in the country, and has certainly clouded any conversation about race. One friend who worked for a local anti-violence organization -- the fact that such groups even exist speaks volumes to the profound depth of the problem -- calls it "a madness." What's going on?

Let me tell you what this book isn't. It's not a policy map or a critique. It's not about what works and doesn't work. Anyone who tells you they know is lying. Consider that in Chicago, the police have tried community policing, SWAT teams, data to predict shooters, full saturation of troubled neighborhoods, efforts to win over gang members. And the shootings continue. Anti-violence gurus insist they have the answers. I've seen one – the founder of a local program -- take credit for the reduction of shootings in the years before his organization even existed. What works? After twenty years of funerals and hospital visits, I don't feel like I'm any closer to knowing.

And so, what you have here, in these pages, is a set of dispatches, sketches of those left standing, of those emerging from the rubble, of those trying to make sense of what they've left behind. A summer in the city. 2013. There's nothing special about this particular summer other than it's the one I chose to immerse myself in. Over the course of three months, 172 people were killed, another 793 wounded by gunfire. By Chicago standards it was a tamer season than most.

I need to be upfront with you, the reader. When I would tell friends about this book, they'd roll their eyes. Such grimness. Such despair. Such darkness. I know what they were

thinking, why would I want to go there? Why would you want to go there? Indeed, this is a book about death -- but you can't talk about death without celebrating life. How amidst the devastation, many still manage to stay erect in a world that's slumping around them. How despite the bloodshed, some manage, heroically, to not only push on but also to push back. How in death there is love. It's also about who we are as a nation. After the massacre at Newtown and then Parkland we asked all the right questions. How could this happen? What would bring a young man to commit such an atrocity? How can we limit access to guns? How do the families and the community continue on while carrying the full weight of this tragedy? But in Chicago neighborhoods like Englewood or North Lawndale, where in one year they lose twice the number of people killed in Newtown, no one's asking those questions. I don't mean to suggest that one is more tragic than the other, but rather to point out that the national grieving and questioning doesn't extend to corners of this country where such carnage has become almost routine. It's in these, the most ravaged of our communities, among the most desperate and forlorn that we can come to understand the makings of who we are as a nation, a country marked by the paradox of holding such generosity beside such neglect.

Look at a map of the murders and shootings in Chicago, and it creates a swath through the city's South and West sides, like a thunderstorm barreling through the city. How can there not be a link between a loss of hope and the ease with which spats explode into something more? There's a moment when we were filming the documentary *The Interrupters*, and Ameena Matthews, one of the three Violence Interrupters whose work we chronicled, reflected on what she calls "the thirty seconds of rage." She described it like this: "I didn't eat this morning. I'm wearing my niece's clothes. I just was violated by my mom's boyfriend. I go to school, and here comes someone that bumps into me and don't say excuse me. You hit zero to rage within thirty

seconds, and you act out." In other words, these are young men and women who are burdened by fractured families, by lack of money, by a closing window of opportunity, by a sense that they don't belong, by a feeling of low self-worth. And so, when they feel disrespected or violated, they explode, often out of proportion with the moment, because so much other hurt has built up, surging like a flooded river.

Then there's the rest of us who reading the morning newspaper or watching the evening news hear of youngsters gunned down while riding their bike or walking down an alley or coming from a party, and think to ourselves, they must have done something to deserve it, they must have been up to no good. Virtually every teen and young man shot, the police tell us, belonged to a gang, as if that somehow suggests that 'what goes around, comes around.' But life in these communities is more tangled than that. It's knottier and more lasting than readings of a daily newspaper or viewings of the evening news would suggest.

I was talking with a long-time friend Don Sharp, the Baptist pastor of Faith Tabernacle, a mid-size church in a middle-class, African-American neighborhood. Class doesn't immunize the congregation from the street clashes. He told me that once he was preaching a Sunday service when a deacon from the church came to get him from the pulpit: Don's thirty-one-year-old grandson had been shot. Even now, Don is still not entirely clear what happened, maybe in part because his grandson isn't either. But as he understands it, his grandson and two friends were driving to the corner store that morning when they passed a group of young men hanging out on the street corner. Something about them didn't feel right to Don's grandson, but for reasons he can't (or won't) explain, the friend drove the car back around. One of the young men then pulled out a semi-automatic weapon and started shooting and Don's grandson was shot in the head. (The bullet's permanently lodged in his skull). The other passenger was killed. At the funeral,

Don told a story from the Old Testament about a group of villagers who mistakenly used poisonous herbs while preparing a meal for the prophet Elijah. 'Our pot's been contaminated,' Don preached to the deceased friends and family.

Don, who is seventy-two, is broad-shouldered with a commanding, baritone voice. He has a natural ease about him, an infective calm, and so over the years I've leaned on him for advice and guidance. I jokingly call him my Baptist rabbi: he's a wise man. But when it comes to the violence, he's at a loss. "Why is it that violence has such a glamour to it?" he asked, not at all rhetorically. "How is it that young men don't fear death? It's almost a blasé attitude to death; to violent death. It almost gives one esteem," he said. "They're angry, but they don't know why they're angry." For over twenty years, I've wrestled with this, looking for theories, for explanations that make sense, but I'm still as perplexed as I was at the first funeral I attended in 1987, which was for a fifteen-year-old boy shot on the lawn outside his public housing high rise. The numbers don't begin to capture the havoc wreaked on the soul of individuals and on neighborhoods, nor do they grapple with the discomforting fact that the vast majority of the shootings are of African-Americans and Hispanics by African-Americans and Hispanics. What to make of all this? I don't know that I fully know myself, but what I've come to realize is that if you're black or Hispanic in our cities, it's virtually impossible not to have been touched by the smell and sight of sudden, violent death. And again – and this seems rather obvious – the violence occurs in communities for whom a sense of future feels as distant and arbitrary as a meteor shower, communities that in fact have been shunted aside precisely because they are black and Hispanic.

It's my hope that these stories, will help untangle and upend what we think we know. Trauma splinters memory. Soldiers who have fought in war speak of holding on to fragments of

remembrance, like a disjointed slide show which periodically gets stuck on a single image, on a single moment. This collection of stories, I realize now, mirrors that. It's how I remember the summer, in slivers, which I keep coming back to, trying to make sense of the moments I've witnessed and the stories I've heard, trying to sort out what is true and what I and others have misremembered. The novelist and Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien has talked about how the atrocities and nastiness of battle gets in your bones. The same can be said for young and old living in certain neighborhoods in our cities. You have to fight -- and fight hard -- not to let the ugliness and inexplicability of the violence come to define you. With just one act of violence the ground shifts beneath you, your knees buckle and sometimes all you can do is try as best you can to maintain your balance. There are those who right themselves and move on, but for most, their very essence has been rattled.

Not long ago, over lunch at a restaurant, I asked Pharoah how much he remembered of that evening from nearly twenty years earlier. "I can't get it out of my mind," he told me. He said the cab driver, a middle-aged white man whose name I later learned, Michael Flosi, engaged him in conversation, that he wanted to know all about Pharoah. When Pharoah told Flosi he was headed to Southern Illinois University, Flosi told Pharoah, "God must have really blessed you." Flosi shared with Pharoah that he'd been saving for years to move his family to Texas, and that the move was imminent. "He seemed so happy," Pharoah told me. When they pulled up to Pharoah's mom's house, the young men leaped into the cab as Pharoah was getting out. It's here at this restaurant where I come to realize how much this incident is a part of him. In recounting that afternoon, Pharoah seemed in a different place. One minute, he is sitting across from me in the booth, and then he scoots out as if he's getting out of a cab. He recoils as if someone's just jumped in front of him. He's not present. Instead, he's there, in that moment. Pharoah tells me he

ran to the porch, and then after he heard the gunshot returned to the cab which had rammed a parked car. Flosi, he says, was slumped over the steering wheel, the windshield splattered with blood. (What Pharoah doesn't remember is that according to court records he later called the cab company to see whether Flosi lived.) Pharoah at this point looks around. His eyes are wide with fright. He's hyperventilating. In the middle of the restaurant, he's crouching, as if trying to disappear. I tell him to sit down. I have to tell him again. "It's like I'm there," he tells me. "I'm out of breath." The violence is in his bones.

There doesn't seem to be a sense of urgency, especially among the rest of us. "We're in the midst of an epidemic," Don told me. "If people were dying of some kind of disease, there'd be all kinds of alerts, but it's become a way of life for us, and that's dangerous." I often think of a Chicago Sun-Times front page from a number of years ago. The banner headline read: Murder at a Good Address. The story reported on a dermatologist who was discovered bound and brutally stabbed at his office on the luxurious Michigan Avenue. I admired the headline for its brazenness and honesty. It was one of 467 murders that year in the city, though the others didn't warrant such attention, mostly because who would want to read a feature with the headline: Murder at a Bad Address? In Chicago, the wealthy and the well-heeled die headline deaths, and the poor and the rambling die in silence. This is a book, I suppose, about that silence -- and the screams and howling and prayer and longing that it hides. Over lunch that day, Pharoah told me, "There's a lot of stuff I want to forget." This book is written with the hope that we won't.