

## Level Four

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*nonfiction by Rashaun J. Allen*

Year 1

We leave Breukelen Projects for the mile trek into East New York. Nerves flaring, I break the silence. “How you think Gersh will be?”

“Better than Bildersee,” Sha-sha says. “Nothing but fights between us and the private houses.”

“But our school is in the hood,” Macho says.

“Junior high ain’t more than Breukelen,” I say.

We pass Linden Park. We pass other students. But none of us speak about dropouts, slightly older than us, up to nothing on the park benches. Our school is on the far corner of Van Siclen Avenue.

We might have a chance. We’re in the auditorium sitting with Asians and Indians. Class 702. Honors Program. A black man grabs the microphone. “Welcome new and returning students. My name is Dr. Barnes. I’m your principal.” A black man in that position is like a glitch. But the way he moves the room is smooth.

“Why are you talking when I’m talking?” Dr. Barnes calls out a student in the back row. “This is an example of level one behavior.”

*Any business we have here, I’m thinking, he plans to be all up in it.* A peer makes me laugh when he mentions Dr. Barnes is a wanna-be Joe Clark.

“A level one or two student follows the crowd, but a level three or four student

achieves academic excellence,” he continues.

We’re all standing at this point heading to class but he’s not done. “What level student are you?” No one responds. But I want to be a level four.

I hit a piano key while classmates enter the classroom. A lonely irked key. But the sound brings me closer as I hit another and another key until the sound mimics the chords to “Lean on Me.”

The desire to play the song transforms from a want to a need. It’s not like the Mary J. Blige songs Mom blasts at home. It’s music coming through me.

“What are you doing?” my music teacher says, entering the classroom.

She couldn’t tell my infatuation. Nor see my desire.

“Get away from the piano before you break it.” Her heavy but judicial hands pass out copies of paper that have a bunch of weird letters with notes around them. “Today, we’re going to go over how to read music.”

Our responses wane. I’m thinking, *We should be playing instruments in George Gershwin Junior High School.*

“You either pay attention or you won’t get to play any instrument.” Her words force my concentration on her doldrum movement. *What instruments?* My aspiration to learn the piano returns like the sunlight creeping through the window.

Finally, she says, “Bring five dollars to next class for a flute.”

It doesn’t take long to figure my music teacher relates more to her flute than to us. When she plays for our class, she comes alive. Somewhere in the sound is a person she once was. Someone who

doesn't hate her job.

I practice enough to annoy my neighbors. When I gently blow air in the flute. When the sound is too harsh. When the sound is off rhythm. Somehow, I learn about three notes and a song. But a flute isn't sexy. Reminds me of myself when I talk to girls.

Mr. New-girlfriend-each-marking-period is the best way to describe Macho. Puerto Rican suave. He makes girls feel special. I should've taken notes. Maybe then my crush would've been my girl. (I end up being her shopping buddy). While we're trooping to Gershwin, leaving late Sha-sha behind, Macho sips his Malta and says, "Angie is who I plan to take out next." The more hype we get the faster we walk.

"You think you can get her?"

"Of course."

I never witness him make his move. But it only takes a few weeks for some Linden and Boulevard Projects boys to get jealous. Maybe they saw Macho hand Angie breakfast. Or surrounded by girls at lunch. Whatever, he's a threat.

This day all three of us, Macho, Sha-sha, and me, are walking home, down Linden Boulevard, the farthest block from the two projects and this lil' dude presses Macho. "What you say in the lunchroom?"

Macho's confused. We've only seen the lil' dude in passing. Another guy chokes Macho from behind. They start beating Macho like his whole body is a drum.

My mind is tilting. A classmate shouts, "Stop it, guys." I swing at the nearest one. But chin checks air. School Safety comes. The lil' dude, the choker, and who I swung at run off. Macho's shaken up. I'm staring through Sha-sha. "You didn't help us."

"I didn't see y'all fighting until it was too late."

I can't decipher the truth.

Sha-sha's easygoing. He's the only one of us who is liked. It's his basketball

finesse boys respect. He hands out losses in the gym and the school yard. But he's not leveraging his gifts. He's about six feet, one-eighty, and for us seventh graders size goes a long way. If Sha-sha had said, "Those two are my friends," we would've gotten a pass.

The next day Macho's mom is war ready at Gershwin. It's everybody's fault. School Safety. School Counselors. Dr. Barnes. I don't blame her. Dr. Barnes is a hawk in the halls between periods but still misses that kids are preyed on.

He says, "We make students go straight home once the bell rings."

I'm thinking, *He has to know the dangers of walking home.*

We're in his office swaying questions at this point.

"I don't know their names," I say.

"I don't want no safety transfer," Macho says again. We could point them out. But there's a whole lot of two years left.

Macho and I go back to math class where Sha-sha hates doing homework. Our math teacher, Mr. Brino, gives us fifty problems a night. We write them all out. No textbook to take home. One by one he brings us to his desk to check our homework. Once draws a big red zero on Sha-sha's homework. It has me doubt my level four ambition.

"He needs braces," the dentist says to Mom. I'm thinking, *There's no room for braces between fights and homework.*

"I'll grow into my two front teeth and overbite," I swear. "Look at my smile."

Mom doesn't budge.

She's probably concerned about the price. Her Coding Clerk job has ended. Downsizing. The day it happened she gives it to me plain, "I was let go." I didn't understand. Only listening not to be rude. Then I go play *Final Fantasy Tactics*. My mission is to find rare items; her mission is to find work. But finding work has not

gone well. She signed up for Temp Services and dove into her savings. We're on our second tour of public assistance. Once she says, "I only use welfare if I need it. I'm not one of those people who live off the government."

We go home and I never hear her complain about the cost.

A couple months later, I'm at the orthodontist on Ocean Parkway, a nicer Brooklyn—less litter, newer cars, and Jewish. My stomach turns while Mom checks me in with the receptionist. I'm sipping water constantly and end up using the bathroom twice.

"Come inside," the receptionist says.

I lie down on the chair and the orthodontist's calm voice greets me. "You ready to begin?" He makes me feel like a two-hour procedure ain't bad. He puts bands around my molars. He sticks brackets on my teeth, placing wires through them. And he finishes with gray rubber bands. "No," he sings, "No candy or chocolate, Hershey's, Now and Later's."

We leave the orthodontist's office to sunshine. But my mood isn't like the weather. I imagine jokes like, "Railroad Mouth," "Jail Bar Face," and "Barbwire." They overwhelm me.

While we wait for the bus, Mom reads my body language. "Kids who tease you will be jealous when they're off."

The next day wearing braces in the seventh grade is trial by combat. Lined up on the hallway wall of my French class, I stand attentive, aware my height doesn't allow me to blend in with the shorter kids.

But I'm grinding my teeth shut. Nodding and giving fives until Risma arrives. There's this thing between us. She's short, pale, and kinda cute but irks me.

"Hi, babe," she says.

It's foolish to one word answer her.

"Hi."

"What's wrong?"

I want the conversation done. Mr. Lehman, our French teacher, opens the classroom door and I make my way inside. Just to sit next to her in the rear by the window.

"Bonjour, Remi." Mr. Lehman only uses French in class. Verbally taking us to the Eiffel Tower. But we're in East New York, on the second floor, where police sirens, outbursts, and weed smoke creeps in like birds' chirping.

"Bonjour, Mr. Lehman," I say covering my mouth. I know enough French to answer. Now he should go to the next student. But it gets complicated.

"Comment allez-vous?"

Before I embarrass myself, Risma whispers, "Je vais bien."

I repeat it.

He nods and moves on.

"Thanks." With Risma's help I could be a level four student. She shares her homework right before Mr. Lehman collects it.

"Why did you ignore me earlier?"

"I'm fine."

Her face turns Gala apple red. She looks me dead in the face, "The braces don't look bad on you."

We're heading to Breukelen Projects and Buck's a block away from us. He's my friend. But Sha-sha and Macho make it clear that they don't share the sentiment. He has this "I'm the man" attitude. But we're nearly family. We have multigenerational friendships. Our granddads hang out on the benches together. Mom and his aunt cookout together. And our cousins play spades all the time.

I slow my pace but Sha-sha and Macho keep going.

"Why those lames rushing home," Buck says loud for all to hear. "Mad girls out here."

“Trying to stay drama-free.”

The next time I see Buck his jaw is swollen. His wound is his red badge of courage. “They hit me with a pipe ‘cause they soft.” It’s right before he’s transferred to Bildersee Junior High School.

Year 2

Eighth grade we have an actress come to our class every Tuesday or Thursday. The first day she delivers a monologue about how she came to theater. But what stands out is when she says, “Who wants a role in a play?” My hand shoots up.

“You’ll be the father,” she says.

Mom had taken me to see *Aladdin on Ice*, *The Nutcracker*, and *The Phantom of the Opera*. But this is my moment to be in a performance and be a child star like Jaleel White.

Actors wear costumes that transform them into characters. I’m wondering, *What will we wear?* I picture performing in the auditorium. Stage lights enhancing the scene. But the actress says, “Our imagination will be the magic of the play.” Translation: There’s no costumes and we’re performing in the classroom.

We practice for weeks. My scene is to take the father through layers of depression. I shake the desk. I shout. I scream. But a couple weeks out, I miss class to tighten my braces at the orthodontist’s.

The next day at Gershwin rumors are swirling, “You’ve been replaced.”

“Nah. Not me,” I say. “My understudy is a quiet kid. He couldn’t steal my spot.”

But in class, the actress pulls me to the side, “He’s a better fit.” I figure out how my role is stolen—he has real anger issues.

On performance day, the play goes well. Everyone gives the actors a standing

ovation. I clap once.

Mrs. Crawford, my eighth-grade black English teacher, stands about five seven. She wears dresses that cover her from head to toe. She wears plenty of makeup, too. But she never accepts excuses from us. “All children can learn,” she says when classmates try her.

One day she loses it with us. I’m not sure if it is after going over a book we’re reading or a test when she says, “I didn’t have it easy, if anything, it was worse growing up in segregation. Being humiliated. Restaurants wouldn’t serve you. Regulated to color-only sections. People spitting on you because you’re black.”

The class quiets down.

Then she relives another moment, “And I’m a breast cancer survivor.” Jaws drop. I have no concept of cancer except that it kills. “You think learning is hard, try doing chemotherapy.” I would never have guessed she had lost her hair and questioned her ability to live. “Look at me now,” she shouts. Then she demands our best efforts. The attitude of the class shifts. She never has trouble controlling us again. But her lesson never reaches outside the classroom.

One day walking home, the dropouts up to nothing find something in us. One with a scruffy face and his two henchmen approach me in front of a Popeye’s restaurant. “Give me fifty cents.”

“No, I don’t know you. Get out my face,” I say.

He gets pissed. He tears off his t-shirt to fight me.

But the odds are even, walking with Macho and Sha-sha, a fair fight could happen. The best case, his henchmen jump in between us and my boys defend me. The worst case, my boys watch me get pulverized. Glancing at them, I’m looking

for a sign, a head nod would've been good. Hearing "I got your back" even better. I would've rejoiced if either had swung. But all I see in their faces is bewilderment. So, I do what any George Gershwin Junior High School student would do. I run.

They chase me down a factory block until I'm cornered in front of a Wendy's restaurant. Stunned, I bluff, "You're going to regret beating me up."

They don't budge. Scruffy Face says, "You still running your mouth." I cover myself. I wish I had the courage to swing. But fear steals it. Punches and kicks rain down on my body. The blows cram my head.

The walk home is painful. No visible marks. But my pride is torn. My face is red. *Why would Macho and Sha-sha let me get jumped? Why can't I just stress over being a level four student?*

Speaking to either one of them again is out of the question.

I enter my Breukelen Projects apartment. "Sweetie, what happened?" Mom says.

I'm hesitant to look Mom in her dark brown eyes. I settle to stare at her six-month-pregnant stomach. Mom is dating Mush, a man she re-met at Breukelen Day. What had started as another Tenants Association-sponsored event to celebrate community blossomed into a relationship. We're expecting Mya, not an ass whipping.

"I was jumped," I say.

"Are you okay?" Mom's face is full of concern and her lips are full of questions.

"Who jumped you?"

"What happened?"

Mom wants to know everything. But the details fail to describe how I feel about myself. I want to be a level four student. But surviving is more important.

Mom makes a split-second decision to take us to Kings Plaza and purchases me a Sega Dreamcast. And for a moment the lumps are gone.

The next day Mom and I are in Dr. Barnes's office. She's calm, but she wants answers. "What procedures are in place to secure my son's safety?"

Dr. Barnes says, "We got around three hundred students and School Safety at every exit." He reads her face. "Maybe your son can take the bus." His logic is off. Nobody waits in someone else's hood for the bus.

Case in point—we head to the B6 bus stop and I spot Scruffy Face. "That's him in front of the bodega," I say to Mom. I don't know what she'll do.

She goes off. "Who the hell do you think you are putting your hands on my son? You ever touch him again. I'll beat your ass. Pick up a brick and bash him over the head next time he touches you. You hear me?"

His body tenses up. I'm speechless. She's showing. But she's fearless.

The next week or so Risma catches on to how I'm moving.

She asks, "Why you not speaking to Sha-sha or Macho?"

"You think the math test will be hard?" I say.

She doesn't notice the anxiety. The fight has wrecked my mind like a knocked-out boxer. *Study? Please.* I'm reading *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu.

A few weeks later, as I'm walking home alone, Scruffy Face dropout spots me. He runs through Linden Park pumping a Super Soaker. "Humiliate" is written all over his face.

"Where you think you're going?"

"Leave me alone."

He squeezes the Super Soaker.

*I'm not running. I'm not running.*

I clench my fists.

I strike him in the face. He's more shocked than hurt. He's taking off his t-shirt. I swing again while he's holding his t-shirt over his head. He swings wildly.

But one punch catches my braces.

Less than half a block away from Gershwin, no one seems to notice we're brawling until a classmate shouts, "You better leave!" Her panic stops our fight. I notice his henchmen are coming. But my resolve is steel.

They should've rushed over to knock me on the head. The odds are like five to one. Instead, they're shouting and one throws a bottle. I hear it shatter while pacing my steps home.

On graduation day, Dr. Barnes says, "You scholars being here today proves you are all level three or level four students." He doesn't talk about the real challenges of junior high school. Or that half the Breukelen Projects kids transferred.

The graduation ceremony lets out and we're looking for room to move. Mom is racing to capture memories. She passes her camera between Cousin Carmen and Mush like a baton. Looking at both her children, fourteen years apart, she knows each second is precious. "I'm proud of you," Mom whispers.

Mush pushes Mya in a carriage. We make waves around Brooklyn College campus. But he seems to be further in the background. Annoyed. He's limping. He's wearing the sharp pain in his leg on his dark face as it needles him with each step. He has a bad hip from an injury playing basketball. Watching him struggle to keep up makes it hard to believe he was as good as he claimed. But through basketball, our relationship has formed. At home, we watch the Knicks and once we saw them play at Madison Square Garden. Carmen captures us together.

Carmen has had my back since we pretended to be Power Rangers in Aunt Grace's basement. She took a day off from Murrow High School to celebrate me. She says, "My cousin's a ladies' man."

I want to find Sha-sha and Macho. We should've enjoyed prom at Le Cordon Blue

together. Instead, Mush drove me to the Queens' venue where I entered fresh and alone. Sha-sha was the second person I saw. We stood silent until I reached out my hand like, "We're good." Macho had cleared the air between us a week prior. But you know the air in my head is thick.

Now I have to find Sha-sha and Macho at graduation. I find them together at the campus yard. I don't talk about what we've been through. We stand size order with me in the middle. Carmen fiddles with the camera. I'm not thinking about my level three grades. I'm thinking that we are going on to our separate schools. Maybe a picture can save our friendship.

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