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## To the Mountaintop

Earnest Bickerstaff  
*College of DuPage*

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## To the Mountaintop

"Do these kids today have any values?" Dudley asked me. He sat upwards in a tall leather chair, facing a large mirror as Big Joe, the shop's owner, chopped away at his spotty silver-haired afro with scissors.

"What?" I asked him.

"You know," he continued on while quick strokes of a brush smacked across his hunched shoulders, knocking away fallen strands about his head, dark loafers dangling above the ground. "I just feel these teens are not as progressive," he said.

I tried to grasp the idea he was trying to convey to me, but no such luck—rarely did I understand his motives. Old-man Dudley, what the kids called him, a fairly gray haired deprecating man, was an aging war veteran. He spent his days criticizing the kids that lived in his own community, and I got the impression that he was on the verge of being discerning, ready to impose his well-aged will right there in the barbershop.

"How do you mean?" I asked him, sitting on a sofa, crouching over my knees to hear him over the scattered buzzing clippers. I looked up at Big Joe at random times, hoping he would really recognize me for once.

"Hear me out, hear me out," Dudley said twice, "our youth," talking with his hands now, "our schools, and our neighborhoods continue to suffer." I began to pick up on the verbal gestures he was giving me. Big Joe tapped him on the shoulder, and held a smaller mirror before his face. Dudley nodded approvingly. "That's cool," he said. Big Joe removed the red cape from Dudley's neck, and prepared for his next client—me.

He stood 6'3" and roughly 200 pounds; you could hear each step he took—Big Joe was big. In addition to his size, Big Joe had done time in prison and had the ink to prove it. A scar fit nicely below his left cheek, a battle wound I assumed, to complete his rugged appearance. A sleeveless shirt exposed the activities he'd done while incarcerated. His own hair was due for a trim, but I got the impression that no one, not even Big Joe himself, touched his hair. Acquiring a 'Don't mess with me' look, Big Joe awakened fear within just about everyone in the neighborhood—gang members, dealers—even a few police officers. And yeah, even me. Dudley and I started to rearrange seats.

Dudley got up from the chair, grabbed the collar of his gray buttoned shirt, shook it to get rid of fallen hair, and continued his argument "When I walk out my door some mornings, or turn on my television, all I see is crime. I see it almost every day. What is it with these kids? It's bad and continues to get worse. Why do these young folks live on like this? Do they not care for progression—maybe they don't. Our youth today must not have any hope."

"Stop," I said, holding my hand in the air, ready to impose my youthful will on him now. I made my way over to where Dudley had sat for twenty minutes; the warmth of the seat cushion provided me the ballpark figure.

Big Joe placed the red cape over my neck and asked, "The usual?", I said yes. I continued on with my opposition: "Our kids, especially the kids, Dudley, these young guys, are no different than you and I. Less equipped with opportunity, perhaps,

and certainly not hopeless. Our youth seemingly contain the most hope." I noticed two young boys hanging outside in front of the shop, through the window. "Look at that young man in the blue shirt" I said, pointing in the direction I wanted Dudley to notice.

"Uh-huh," he said, turning his head in the path of my guiding finger.

"He has all the opportunity in the world, he can be a doctor, lawyer, a teacher, hell, and he may even be the next president. But—but, Dudley, it is up to him to obtain success. He cannot look for it in others—certainty not with those guys he's hanging around. His society does not provide him with opportunities to become successful; they provide cages wrapped thirty feet around asphalt with a net hanging on opposing ends. The law enforcement in his own neighborhood has little concerns of his well-being. He's got old gray bitter men, like yourself, criticizing every move he makes. He cannot search for guidance among his elders because they are not to be bothered with kids wearing low hanging pants. That young boy, with all the potential in the world, old man, probably doesn't have the one person in his life to teach him right from wrong. So he has to find his own father. His own way."

Big Joe let out a loud cough accidentally jabbing my head with the clippers. "Sorry, kid," he said. His referring to me as "kid" hurt.

Dudley nodded to my claims in comprehension. I could tell, reading his face, he was pondering over his neglect for others. "I just don't understand it," he said, "we didn't act like that back in my day," hinting at his age, leaning back on the sofa.

"Just as you marched, Dudley, in your time, and faced your own battles," I said, "they have to face theirs now, too. At their age, you marched with your heroes; you went to the rallies and heard them speak, you understand the true meaning of what King and X once spoke, they don't, not yet anyway."

Dudley nodded along. I waited for him to interject, possibly to provide some knowledge of his own, to see if he would respond with his own viewpoints. He remained silent, looking in my direction, and I continued on with my ideology.

"Their schools," I began to express in my own hand movement, "are probably no better than the street corners they hang around. Who can they really look up to? Their history books tell them of great men, like Roosevelt, Lincoln, and Kennedy, but fail to inform our future leaders of their own great men, like X—or any other critical world-viewing outspoken activist."

"Like Garvey," Dudley suggested.

"Sure," I said. "Didn't learn about him by sitting at a wooden desk, I found my own leaders, not the ones they told me I should respect." I watched as Dudley listened intently, mostly enlightened. I talked with them like they were college grad buddies, engrossed in critical argument. Schooling them on lessons of a race they lived longer than I. I could see a look in Dudley's eyes that said he wanted to hear more of my argument, I could not see behind me, but maybe Big Joe did, too. He needed to hear it most of all.

"When real life happens," I continued, "when school is over, and they are on their own, jobless, stomachs empty, expressing themselves in illegal means to make ends meet—to simply eat a meal, for that matter, do you think they will stop and ponder on their actions, living an immoral life, being criminals," I put air quotes around the words for emphasis, "to society, and decide to change their ways? No, they have no other way, Dudley; they are left only with two basketball nets and a single mother to help support."

"Mhmm-huh," I heard Big Joe mumble. I wondered if we shared some of those same experiences, among other qualities. I often heard his mumbling ad-libs throughout my rant, but could not entirely make out the noises due to the dispersed sounds. The buzzing sound ended abruptly.

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"All done," said Big Joe.

"Well, kiddo, I best be heading off, nice talkin' with ya'" said Dudley, lifting himself from the sofa, putting on his windbreaker and flat cap.

"Take care," I told him.

He tipped the brim of his hat towards me, slipped Big Joe a twenty dollar bill, said, "Keep the change," and walked through the door. Outside the window, I noticed Dudley walking up to the young boy in the blue shirt, the one I'd made an example out of, say something to him and shake his hand. I smiled. I must have said something that resonated with him.

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Moments later I stood face to face with Big Joe, not for the first time; however, it certainly felt so.



**BOSTON GARDENS**  
*Photography*

"What'll it be?" I asked him, reaching in my back pocket for my wallet, flipping through three singles and two fives.

"Ten even," he said. I extended my hand to give Big Joe the money. Ours hands met, almost like we were greeting each other, or closing a business deal; either way, the gesture was nice. He slipped the two bills into his front pocket and gave me a look that read: Why are you still standing there? I wanted to tell him, but as always, I wasn't ready.

"Say Big Joe," I said, "I come here almost twice a month. Don't you recognize me?" I asked him.

"Other than business, no why," he asked me. "Should I?"

"No, no, you shouldn't," I said, "you really shouldn't." He looked confused. I grabbed my coat from the couch; in case of tiny strands of hair, cigarette ashes left by Dudley, or God knows what else, I shook it by its collar to be safe. I extended both arms through their counterpart, buttoned the jacket, and walked out the door of my father's barbershop.

## ALYSSA AHLERT

