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Prologue

I'd known Precious forever, Stacia a year, and Tonya for just a minute. We were *so* different, but everybody loved them some double Dutch. Sometimes we made a tight-knit crew; other days we couldn't get along for nothing.

Our friendships started with "What's your name?" The answer carried with it looks that I can still see clearly: Stacia's begged me not to talk to her, and Tonya's asked, "Is she talking to me?!" We got past those facial expressions and gave our names. Names that sound like heartbeats: *Fe Fe, Precious, Stacia, Tonya*.

It's kind of a miracle that we formed those bonds, because our mothers couldn't stand each other. To this day, I wonder how me and Precious were cool for so long. And Stacia? Everybody had something negative to say about the Buchanan family. I knew there'd be backlash for bringing Tonya around, but I couldn't know, at twelve, how bad things would get.

That summer, one by one, they dropped out of sight as if we were in a game of All in Together.

When you play All, you get two people to turn the rope, and then a ton of kids, it could be eight of us, we'd all jump in. The people turning sing *All, All, All, All, All* at the word until

there's no more room in the rope. Precious and I began that song before we could even walk.

Stacia jumped in when we started sixth grade, and Tonya appeared months later, in the middle of June. The song went on, and we jumped, screaming the lyrics, attempting to overpower the sounds of construction vehicles as they dismantled our South Side neighborhood in the Robert Taylor Homes.

*All in together, any kind of weather
I see teachers
Looking out the window
Ding, dong, the fire bell
January, February,
March, April, May, June, July . . .*

When we played the game, people left the rope one at a time, reliably, when they heard their birthday month. But in real life, their departures were sudden. Tonya got pulled out of the rope, and not long after her disappearance, Stacia vanished too. Precious stuck around until pretty late in the summer, like her birthday was in August, and then she just slid out and rode away in her family's Camry.

They left me standing there with the rope.

After all these years, I can still hear their voices screaming, "First!" "Second!" and "Zero no higher!" and arguing over who said "Zero no higher" first. The memories won't go away; they're proof that once upon a time, I lived in a brick skyscraper on State Street, in a place where stairwells filled with echoes of stamped-in gym shoes and harmonizing winos. Those memories won't let me believe that I dreamt up Precious, Stacia, and Tonya, but All in Together is

ONE

The Square

By the summer of 1999, me, Precious, and Stacia—all twelve years old—ran around in this tight formation, snapping through the block in neon colors like a school of tropical fish. Sometimes you'd catch us flowing through the masses of guys in white tees on a quick trip to buy candy from Ms. Rose, or at Food & Liquor. There were dudes draped around the building's opening, standing guard in the parking lot, the tunnel inside the building leading to the stairway, everywhere, really. All the spaces around the building belonged to them, but we had our own spot, and for the longest time, no one bothered us there.

If you drove up the 90/94, a highway built to separate Blacks and whites without Jim Crow language, the Robert Taylor Homes loomed off to the side of your car. The buildings stared you down, their windows like eyes, watching. Off the highway, on State Street, the number 29 bus would take you on a ghetto tour, passing all those projects. You would see building after building and people just standing around.

Half the structures were off-white. The other ones, rust colored,

and they'd alternate: red buildings, then a few white, then red, then white, then red, and it would go on like that for two miles.

From the exterior, these brick towers shot up sixteen stories in the air with neat rows of windows on one side and on the other, iron gates running the length of each floor, creating an opportunity for the residents to see out into the world and for people outside to catch a glimpse of project life.

The elevator moved up and down the middle of each building in an enclosed column of brick, and that's where my friends and I gathered, on the third floor, in that covered square of space. Though it housed the elevators, it was also spacious enough for people to carry their trash and large items they needed to dispose of. We were grateful for its large, smooth, cement floor, wide enough for our crew to run around and, most importantly, to jump rope.

I watched the traffic flow in and out and around the square. That summer, all these new faces popped up; they had moved from closed-up high-rises. On both sides of us, up and down State Street, there were blocks that looked like someone had dropped a bomb, leaving the destruction of brick towers. The wires clawed out from the sides of the high-rises that were ripped open, exposing colorful walls of vacated apartments. It seemed random, the Chicago Housing Authority's choice of which buildings to destroy first; some blocks—like mine—were completely intact, others a mess. I'd seen these horror scenes from the State Street bus on trips downtown and knew that the construction vehicles would appear on our block someday, but *someday* could be translated into *never* when you're a kid.

Once a building had been attacked, falling apart in this way, the residents were already settled into other project buildings or

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out in other parts of the city. Some people were relocated into my building, 4950. I kept an eye on these strangers but always watched for this one girl. She walked up and down the stairs all day. I couldn't tell her grade, mostly because she had a body all curved and rounded out like a grown woman. I bet, that summer, she had developed fast, because she seemed to be bursting out of what was probably a free D.A.R.E. T-shirt she'd gotten at school. Some girls loved to show off their bodies, but she didn't have that kind of energy. Instead, she acted more like a small, timid child.

We didn't look like her; Stacia and I were bony, with no curves at our hips and bumps for breasts. Precious hadn't shed her baby fat and still looked like a little kid. Even Tonya's skin color was different. Her complexion was a few shades darker than Precious's but still considered light, while Stacia and I were much darker. The four of us represented a gorgeous spectrum of tones.

She'd walk down the stairs, then I'd see her coming up again a few minutes later. The building served breakfast in the summertime on the first floor, so tons of people went by in the mornings going to Chokes—that's what everybody called the food, though it actually wasn't that bad. Sometimes, only ten minutes passed between her coming and going. Other days, I wouldn't see her again until night. She rarely looked over at the square. It was like she couldn't even see us. Then one day, as she passed our floor, she slowed down a little and looked over at us, as if she was going to say something, then she kept marching up the stairs.

I let go of both ends of the rope and ran after her. I caught up with her on the stairway landing between the third and fourth floors, and shouted, "What's your name?"

She turned around, raised her hands up as high as her ears, and backed up against the cinder block wall. Her eyes popped as

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wide as they could go. I took a step back and said, “My name Fe Fe.” Then I asked her again, this time slower, and not so loud. She let her shoulders ease a little, and her eyes went back to normal.

“Tonya.”

I looked down the stairs and saw Precious’s and Stacia’s faces. Stacia, a puddle of attitude, had her neck all stuck out and a hand on one of her hips. Precious just seemed confused about why I’d dashed up the stairs after a girl we didn’t know.

All the signs were there, that this was a terrible idea, but I ignored them, and asked Tonya, “You want to play rope with me and my friends?” Her eyes widened again, but this time, out of shock.

Stacia had heard enough and stomped away from the stairs, audibly sharing her disgust at what I’d just asked Tonya. Precious remained, understanding what I was about to do.

The year before, I’d invited Stacia to join our little duo. In the building, it had been Precious and me for most of our lives. Our other friends were kids we saw in specific places, like at school or the girls that Precious saw on the weekends at church. For as long as I’d known her, Precious had a sweet spirit, and made friends easily, so even though Stacia was a Buchanan, and we had all heard that they were bullies, Precious didn’t mind playing with Stacia.

Stacia was different: very territorial of her people and things.

Tonya moved toward me, and when she was inches away, I could smell her, a combination of soured milk and armpit funk. She had a shiny jelly stain on her T-shirt.

We walked back into the square, where Stacia and Precious huddled together, whispering. I raised my voice, smothering them out. “This Stacia. That’s Precious. This Tonya.” The tension made the square seem cramped, and I tried my best to get everybody’s mood back up. **Copyrighted Material**

“Stacia, can you pick the next song?” I knew it would be something vulgar.

“Tonya, you can get on the end, it’s Precious’s turn.” And for a second, they’d forgotten that I’d pulled in a new girl without asking if it was cool.

It was kind of a betrayal to open up a friendship, something so private and special, and walk a stranger in like that; Stacia’s facial expression and body language confirmed this very notion. I didn’t know that things wouldn’t ever smooth over, that it would be so hard to fold in Tonya. In fact, the day our crew grew to four, that’s when everything terrible started. It was like Tonya was the catalyst for the summer’s events. I’d blame Stacia, but sometimes I wonder if Tonya was the real omen. I feel bad for thinking this way, but I can’t help it.

With four people, we could play Beat, competing to see who jumped the longest, and wouldn’t have to turn the rope. Days later, when Stacia got in my face about inviting “that dirty girl” to play with us, this was the reason that I gave, but truthfully, it had little to do with jumping rope. Tonya reminded me of Stacia when I met her, a kid with no friends. My heart went out to her, this lonely-looking girl; I wanted to help her. If I told that to Stacia, I knew she wouldn’t care. That summer, Stacia watched Tonya go up and down the stairs too. Sometimes, Stacia would roll her eyes at her or just make a face as if she’d tasted something awful. This may be why, before today, Tonya stopped looking at us at all and passed by our double Dutch game without a glance.

Maybe because of the disruption of meeting Tonya, or because there was a stranger among us, Precious wasn’t feeling so confident in her ability to jump into the rope the regular way. Usually, she’d run in while the ropes were going, but that day she said, “I want to stand in.” So while the ropes lay limp on the

ground, she stood in the middle of them, then we slowly rocked them back and forth, saying, “Ready, set, aaand . . . go!”

Stacia couldn’t “run in” either. She could jump pretty well, but the challenge was getting her in the ropes. For a while, she had to stand next to one of the turners and dig potatoes, her hands scooping the air as she rocked toward and away from the ropes but not actually jumping in. The more time she spent digging, the angrier she got. When she finally jumped in, there was almost always a bad landing, and somebody got snapped on. That day, I knew it would be Tonya.

“She can’t turn!” Stacia said, the ropes looped around her shoulders and torso as if she were a lassoed criminal. “You can get that over,” I said. She freed herself, then tried it again. The real trouble started when Tonya got off the end and jumped into the rope without any problems. She knew how to crisscross *and* all-around. She made it through the song about George Washington, then the alphabet. When we got to numbers, Stacia couldn’t take it anymore. The rope stopped, and Tonya got whacked across her arm. Her hand flew up to the spot, and she cringed. Maybe if Stacia’s face looked concerned, even a little, I would’ve believed that it was an accident, but she smiled and sang, “Your turn, Fee!”

“No it ain’t. She get that over,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because *you* messed up her turn.”

My friendship with Stacia was always exhausting, but the day that Tonya joined us, I worked overtime trying to keep the peace.

When Precious stepped in to help, saying, “Let’s play Down Down Baby!” that defused the tension, and I was grateful that Precious was there. We rushed together and danced and sang. After each cheer, somebody would yell out, “Rockin’ Robin,” or

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“Slide,” and we got in position and sang and danced. Tonya already knew the words.

So, for a few hours, we had fun, without any more drama. Jumping rope and playing these hand games were our only real distraction from the ongoing demolition of the neighborhood, and as much as we could bury our heads in this joy, we did.

THE FOUR OF US SANG these same songs and played these same games even though we grew up in three different buildings. While our high-rises looked the same, how they were run, the people that lived in them, even the varying levels of structural damage—some had endured fires or were marked by different graffiti—distinguished them.

Stacia’s family had to relocate from 4848 at the beginning of that school year because the buildings on her block were coming down, and Tonya moved into our building from 4946—which was one of the other two buildings on my block—because her old building was being demolished that summer.

All three of our buildings could’ve been three different countries, where people spoke their own slang, with unique customs, led by whichever gang ruled them. But since our families had all migrated from small towns in Mississippi, bringing the same superstitions, games, and cheers with them on those Illinois Central trains, we had these common things in our DNA; that’s what glued us together for a time.

TWO

In War

After Precious calmed things down, we went back to jumping rope and played round after round, sometimes singing songs, other times jumping and listening to the sounds of the block. Woody and Earl were winos, but they could really sing. We loved the way their voices sounded in the stairway, a layered echo. They sang songs that we recognized as the “dusties” that made the soundtrack of our hairdos and cleaning days. My mama couldn’t get anything done without listening to V103, her favorite radio station. This day, Woody and Earl harmonized a tune from the Spinners called “Games People Play.” Not long after they’d passed by with their sweet song, we heard the rumbling of a stampede.

When people ran down the stairs in groups, it sounded like an angry herd of beasts. The feet slowed down and stopped on our floor. Ricky, Derrick, and Jon Jon rushed into the square, pretending to jump rope, mimicking our girlish mannerisms and singing rope songs they’d heard us belting out on the school playground. They were all like me.

With the exception of Tonya, we were all in Ms. Pierce's class. At school, we had to be kind and respectful to each other, because Ms. Pierce made us act like a loving family, but back at the building, we pretended we couldn't stand one another; none of us really knew what to do with the actual affection that we felt. It seemed like a flaw to have these emotions. We didn't know then that the practice of burying emotions created adults who'd struggle to build meaningful relationships; some of us would eventually completely forget how to access true feelings. In my family, we expressed love in many ways, reaching out to touch an arm in a sad moment or smothering one another in a hug, but I knew, even from a very young age, that this behavior was rarely meant for people outdoors.

"Come on," Ricky said to Stacia, "turn it."

His face changed to serious as he concentrated, then rocked his chest back and forth, following one of the ropes. Stacia's arms flew out wider than they needed to, and she popped her hips while blowing these huge bubbles with her wad of Bubblicious gum.

"Just jump in," I said, laughing. Then he did it. Stacia and Tonya turned the rope around him. We were shocked at how he jumped in and skipped over the ropes like he did this all the time. Ricky was one of those kids who could play any sport you threw his way.

Tonya didn't know them, but she laughed with us, and I could tell she was enjoying herself. Ricky's boys, Derrick and Jon Jon, who were cousins, yelled and cheered for him and after the rope stopped, he jumped around the square, waving his hands up and down like he'd won an NBA championship. We each screamed something, cheering for Ricky or pretending to shoo him away.

In the middle of the rope, Ricky and Tonya look at