

Dear Marcus

A Letter to the Man Who Shot Me

Jerry McGill

“Inspiring.”—Lorrie Moore, *The New York Review of Books*







DEAR
MARCUS

*a letter to the man
who shot me*

JERRY MCGILL

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Dear Marcus is a work of nonfiction. Nonetheless, some of the names and personal characteristics of the individuals involved have been changed in order to disguise their identities. Any resulting resemblance to persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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Dedication

Acknowledgments

About the Author

You, darkness, out of whom I stem,
I love you more than the flame
that hems against the world
while sparkling
for a circle of some kind,
outside whose curve no being knows flame's shine.

Ah, but the darkness holds all in its fee:
figures and flames, beasts and me,
it grabs what it would,
humans and might—

And it can be that a great force could
be stirring in my neighborhood.

I believe in nights.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “You, darkness, out of whom I stem”



author's note

All of my life, for as long as I can remember, I have been in love with the world of movies. For a kid who feared and despised his environment the cinema was the greatest form of escape. It started with watching *The Wizard of Oz* on a tiny TV set in my mother's bedroom and moved on to actually going to the cinema. I think the first film I actually saw on the big screen was *Grease*. From there I saw *Rocky*, *The Deer Hunter*, anything to get me out of the hood and into a fantastic world. As a child I would regularly attend movies on my own, usually sneaking into the theater. Often, in my darkest moments, I would envision my life as one long movie with a series of fade-ins, fade-outs, and dissolves. The film scenes depicted in this memoir are fictionalized accounts of the Movie of My Life.

Another thing: throughout this work I refer to the area where I grew up as the Lower East Side. Today, due to massive gentrification, this area is currently known by many as the East Village. In my stubbornness, I will continue to call it the Lower East Side. At the time that I lived there, no one in their right mind would ever have thought of our neighborhood as part of the Village; it was truly that foreign and desolate.



INT. KITCHEN IN A TINY APARTMENT—DAY

EVELYN, late thirties, black, washes dishes while smoking a cigarette. A semipermanent scowl seems to be etched on her worn face. DOREEN, baby-faced, sixteen, walks in and sits down at the kitchen table. Across the screen reads the SUBTITLE: *MY MOM REVEALS I'M ABOUT TO ENTER THE WORLD.*

EVELYN

I'm a need you to go to the store.

DOREEN

Okay.

EVELYN

Two pack of Pall Malls, a dozen eggs. Money's on the dresser.

DOREEN

Okay. Umm, Mama ... can I ask you something?

EVELYN

What is it, girl? I ain't got all afternoon.

DOREEN

Mama ... umm ... I ain't had my period for near a week now.

After a beat Evelyn stops washing the dishes and turns to her daughter. Doreen stares down at the floor. Evelyn puts down her cigarette and dries her hands on her apron. She walks over to Doreen and smacks her hard across the face.

one

The idea to write to you was not an easy one, but I could no longer ignore the calling. It came swiftly and unexpectedly, like a thunderstorm on a humid afternoon or a tumor returned with a renewed ferocity. You can't keep a strong force down. The question becomes, why write to you now, some thirty years after the fact? Why bother to waste this precious blood, sweat, and energy on you—someone I never even met? Someone whom I can only imagine, but never truly visualize or come to understand? Why put any effort at all into contacting someone who came ever so close to ending my life with just the twitch of a finger? It's a valid question whose response is not very easy to articulate. But I suppose I have to try.

The scar from where the bullet entered my back is still there. It always will be, like a tattoo or stretch marks. I honestly never think about it now, as it is out of my sight line, but every so often it rises from the obscurity of my skin. At times a lover will be running her fingers down my neck in a caring, intimate manner and her finger will catch on that point. It feels like a zit now, no larger than a bee sting really. Still, the question always comes: "What's this from?"

The veracity of my answer will always depend on my feelings for the questioner. If I believe she will be around for a while, if she is someone whom I care enough about to share this darkness with, I will give just a little, but only so much.

"Oh, I was involved in an incident a while back," I'll say. You can't reveal too much too soon, you know. There's gotta be some mystery.

If it is someone I just leaned on for comfort at a particular moment, or someone I can tell is not truly "share-worthy," well, then she will receive the casual, harmless white lie. There will be no follow-up response. Not even eye contact. "Oh, that's nothing. Childish roughhousing," I will rattle off as if swatting away a fly. The majority have received the latter. I don't really like to share. It's not in my nature anymore. The events that occurred to produce that scar are not really a place I care to visit. As the saying goes, *I have moved on*. And I'm proud to make that statement. But now—in this moment in time—addressing *It*, addressing *You*, just feels appropriate. Until I speak to you, I can never fully close this door. And I need that resolution. I think I've earned it.

You—my nameless, faceless friend with whom I share such a close, personal relationship—do you ever think about me? Do you ever wonder what became of me—that kid whom you saw walking down the street that one brisk night in January? Was it your intention to link us indelibly with your simple,

somewhat effortless act of violence? Were you even remotely aware of the potency of such an act? Did you blink? Give it a second thought? Did you say to yourself, *Maybe I shouldn't do this?*

I have created over a hundred scenarios for how we “met.” With all my time in the hospital there was nothing to do but obsess. It was fascinating at first, putting together those shards of a jigsaw that would forever lack pieces. In my mind you are either black or Latino. Why? Simple deduction, since those are the only types of people who lived in that area where we grew up. I’m going to go ahead and make you black. I have the power now. You are positively a male since women don’t typically go about ghettos shooting guns to prove their worthiness. Women don’t really grow up with thuggish gun fantasies, do they? They sure as hell didn’t back in 1982.

Maybe your name is Leroy. Or Tito. Or Dante. Or Hector. Or Tyrone. Or Javier. Or Jamal. Or Luis. For my own purposes, I have decided to give you a name. It helps me, you see, to give you a human character. You and I, we have such a poignant story and without a name for you the story is too difficult to convey. I am going to call you Marcus. Why Marcus? I don’t know. That name speaks to me for reasons not fully apparent, and I believe in going with my first instinct. It fits. It just feels right. And so Marcus it is. Now tell me, Marcus, do you ever ask yourself, *What the fuck ever happened to that little dude that I shot in the back that one New Year’s night? Did he die or what? Or maybe I just grazed him?*

We both know you didn’t just graze me, because an ambulance came and we both know that an ambulance don’t come to the hood unless something serious is going down. Perhaps you were watching as they took me away on a stretcher—sirens blaring, lights flashing, the whole deal. If you tried to follow up with me in the newspapers the next day you were out of luck, bro, because the shooting of a thirteen-year-old black kid on the Lower East Side? That doesn’t make the newspaper in a city like New York.

Since our “meeting” I have lived in cities so tiny, so rural, that this type of event would have been the lead segment on the nightly news. But not here in New York. What with Sons of Sam, Bernard Goetzes, Mafia rubouts, and the occasional bludgeoning. Now if I had been a Kennedy or a Rockefeller or even a Cosby, well that’s a whole other story. But no, I was just little Jerome. I didn’t warrant so much as a byline.

So I’m just curious, always have been—why did you pick me, Marcus? You may recall that there were two of us walking that night. There was me and there was my best buddy, Eric. Same age, same height, same color. Did the fact that I was wearing a bright blue and silver Dallas Cowboys jacket have anything to do with it? Probably not. Were you high? Drunk? Strung out on crack? Were you and a friend screwing around taking pot shots out of your bedroom or living room window like me and Kahlil used to do with his BB gun, aiming at the pigeons on the roof across the street? Was I your pigeon?

Maybe you never really intended to shoot me? Maybe you meant to shoot near me and just scare us, not actually hit either of us. But hey, shit happens,

right? Maybe you wrongly thought I was an old friend or an enemy: local drug dealer who recently dissed you. A guy you heard slept with your woman?

I have created so many scenarios in my head it is incredible. It's a wonderful gift having a creative mind. But sometimes it can be a curse as well. I have the powerful ability to fill in all the crevices and blank spots that you left behind. I get to touch up the masterful painting that you left undone so long ago. I am van Gogh and Matisse, Baldwin and Salinger, Dylan and Lennon. I will make my own reality and place you where I choose. This is my talent. My super power.

In my thoroughness I have conceived of just about every possibility. Like the one that you, Marcus, are no longer even around anymore to read this. That perhaps, once you shot me and left me to die on that cold, hard pavement on Seventh Street and Avenue C, maybe something equally traumatic happened to you shortly thereafter. Maybe you went out to rob a grocery store and you were stabbed by the clerk behind the counter; left to die on a cold, uncaring checkered floor. Or maybe you were riding your bike that afternoon and you were hit by a taxi. Left to die in midtown traffic amid a crowd of hot dog vendors and tourists. Maybe you were busted later that week selling crack, went to Rikers, and got killed in the shower. Or in a prison riot. Or in the laundry room. Hey, maybe, just maybe, you were so riddled by guilt at realizing that you shot a helpless kid that you delved into a life of substance abuse and OD'd on heroin one cool February night. Left to die in a bathtub. Or you took a header off the roof of your building, not too far from where you shot me. Or you hung yourself in the broom closet of your day job as a junior high school janitor. I've thought of it all, over and over. It used to be all that I could do: come up with ways Marcus could die. Should die.

Truth be told, it doesn't really matter much because I didn't write this book for you, Marcus. My reasons for writing this are bigger than you or me, my friend. I wrote this book to release demons into the warm night air. I wrote this book to leave some scant history, a trail of breadcrumbs, for the children I will never have and the children that you probably have had. I wrote this book so that someone else might understand us. I wrote this book for any great number of people who believe that Life really gave them the short and shitty end of the stick. I wrote this book for all of those unfortunate suckers who were in the proverbial *wrong place at the wrong time*. Were we chumps or what? Or were we?

Who knows, maybe in our own way we were actually the lucky ones. Wouldn't that be a wondrous piece of irony, huh? Perhaps, by virtue of circumstance and timing, we avoided an even harsher reality. Cormac McCarthy wrote in *No Country for Old Men*, "You never know what worse luck your bad luck has saved you from." I love this perception. Maybe, just maybe, it was our destiny to be in that so-called *wrong place at the wrong time*. If that should be the case, then I most likely owe you a debt of gratitude, Marcus old boy. If you're still around, call me. I owe you a beer or two.

But I should reiterate, I didn't write this book for you, Marcus. I wrote this for a certain population of the world: Those who endure. Those who manage. Those who cope. Those who get out of bed every morning and continue to go on with the business of their lives *knowing what they know*. Those who look into the eye of the storm and step out of it battered, drenched, and unbeaten. Those who are determined to move on. Maybe you're one of us? Now that would truly make for a great story, would it not?

I hope you are one of us, Marcus, because we all deserve a second chance; that shot at redemption. In many ways, we are probably very much alike, you and I. We were both given lemons. What did you do with yours, Marcus? I, for one, chose to make a martini.

INT. LIVING ROOM IN SMALL APARTMENT—DAY

JEROME, ten, sits on the couch, sad. DOREEN sits beside him. She puts her arm around his shoulder. SUBTITLE: *INTRO TO DEATH—VOLUME ONE*

DOREEN

You gonna be okay?

JEROME

Yeah. I'm gonna miss her. Why did she die?

DOREEN

I don't know. Maybe we kept the windows open too much and she got cold. Maybe we put too much vitamins in her water. I don't know, son.

JEROME

She was just getting used to me, you know? She would fly around and land on my shoulder or my head. I was gonna teach her to talk. It's not fair.

DOREEN

Life is not always fair, Jerome. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. That's just the way it is.

two

So I thought we could get a few things out of the way, Marcus. I wanted to share some of my history with you so that you might have a stronger understanding of the life you affected. I want you to know what I have learned—that all actions have consequences.

I wasn't originally from that neighborhood where we first met—the Lower East Side. No, I was actually from an even worse neighborhood if you can believe that. I was born in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and spent the first five years of my life there. One of the most infamous people to come out of this neighborhood: Mike Tyson.

I honestly don't remember much about that area or that part of my life, I was so young then, and nothing remarkable ever happened there. I have little bits of memories that feel more like dreams. Hanging outside on the stoop watching as a man was viciously attacked by a dog that another man had unleashed on him. Playing marbles in a filthy park. My mother, Doreen, barely twenty years old, making oatmeal on the stove in a tiny, roach-infested kitchen. It was a fire in our apartment that prompted us to move to Manhattan. We arrived via a crappy welfare hotel. There were just the three of us: my mother, my younger sister, Zonnie, and myself. Along the way there were a few pets—three birds, a cat, a hamster—but they never lasted long. One thing there never was? A father. I wonder, Marcus, if your experience was similar.

For me, our new neighborhood was a wonderful change. There seemed to be more light in Manhattan, and I don't just mean streetlights. It appeared to me that the sun was more favorable to Manhattan than it was to Brooklyn. The Brooklyn I remember was gray and full of shadows. In Manhattan, the way the projects were set up, they were all arranged in a kind of circle that allowed daylight more access to us. In Brooklyn, the buildings all seemed to stalk over you like great cement scarecrows, blocking out sunlight and optimism simultaneously. It was as if the Powers That Be were saying: *Such beautiful nature does not belong in such a dark and cold place as this Brooklyn.* Doesn't make sense, does it? I would think that that place needed it more than any I'd ever seen. But who am I to quibble with the Powers That Be, right?

Though we had more sunlight in Manhattan, not a lot else changed aesthetically. There were still the cramped quarters, still the roaches, still the elevators reeking of urine, the staircases reeking of urine, the graffiti-strewn hallways reeking of urine, the overflowing incinerator reeking of stale smoke and days-old French toast, the usual scent of dread and poverty.

And there was always the violence. I remember one absurdly hot summer

day, leaving the bodega on East Third Street when I came upon two Puerto Rican men on the corner, in each other's faces arguing, clearly high on something. The argument quickly progressed into a fistfight and before I even knew what had happened they had drawn knives. I sat there with the rest of the crowd and watched; it was as if we were all viewers at a sporting event. When the skinny guy dug his blade deep into the chubby guy's stomach the match was over. The crowd dispersed and one man lay dead on the blistering pavement. I learned a valuable lesson that afternoon: Life is fleeting. It can leave any of us at any moment of any day. Maybe you were a part of that crowd, too, Marcus? What did you take from it? It's weird, isn't it? The way we get used to certain things like violence, hostility, being the underdog.

I bet you didn't know my mother gave birth to me when she was sixteen, just a high school student. She dropped out to take care of me and had my sister two years later. My father is not anyone I have a solid memory of. His presence in my life was practically nonexistent, less a shadow than a ghost, really. What my mother saw in him I do not know. Well, he was handsome. This I know because I've seen pictures; black-and-whites of him in his navy uniform. But every man looks good in a uniform, doesn't he?

The only genuine recollection I have of him is a terribly unpleasant one. I was barely six or seven when he came knocking at the apartment door. I was alone, as I often was; my mother had a receptionist job somewhere and rather than pay a babysitter she simply entrusted me to watch my sister all day long while she pulled a nine-to-five. I was good at it, too. Except for this one particular occasion with my father and that one time I nearly burnt down the apartment with candles, nothing ever went wrong.

My father, Jerome Sr., came knocking one afternoon. When I saw the man from the black-and-white pictures staring back at me through the peephole, I just knew my mother would want me to let him in. He was the hero from the war, after all. Only he wasn't really in any war and he wasn't in a uniform anymore. Now he was in tattered clothing, a nervous twitchy energy about him. His face was stretched out and emaciated. At the time, I had no idea what a strung-out druggie was, much less the symptoms of one. When I let him in and he proceeded to tear the apartment apart looking for valuables, I knew something was amiss, so I called my mother at her job.

What occurred after that was the genuinely terrifying part. He, carrying our television in his arms; her accosting him at the front door. He, threatening her. She, threatening him. All that yelling and cursing. And then she pulled that kitchen knife on him—the same large, horror-movie-sized one she used to cut raw chicken pieces—and I thought at that moment I might lose her forever. It seemed to me that he could easily overpower her and use it against her. Thank goodness he just decided to leave with the alarm clock radio as a consolation prize. A couple of years later, when my mother woke me up early one morning to tell me he had been found dead, murdered, I was actually relieved. I would never feel that scared of another human being again. I never even got to see him smile.

Did you know your father at all, Marcus? It's okay to admit it if the answer is no. I used to be ashamed of it, but that was before I realized how common it was for people like us to have no relationships whatsoever with our dads. It's actually a disease in our community. Where we come from, Father's Day is one of those bogus holidays analogous to Arbor Day or Valentine's Day. Or Thanksgiving. Fuck them, fathers who are arrogant enough to leave us their names and nothing more. Fuck them. Fucking fathers. They should be shot, not their blameless children. Perhaps you were thinking of your father when you spotted me walking down that street? Forget I said that. You don't owe me any explanations.

But you should know I had lots of dreams; a whole host of aspirations were floating around in that young imagination of mine. There were things I had planned to accomplish. I was a promising athlete. Little League baseball, school basketball team, weekly football games in Tompkins Square Park. I was successful at all of them. And I was a performer as well. My sister and I often sang together; a little brown Donny and Marie we were. Sure, we only did show tunes from the musicals *Grease* and *The Wiz*, but hey, we had potential. People enjoyed watching us. I was a dancer, too. And I don't just mean my popular disco moves that always ensured I would have female companionship at socials and birthday parties. No, in the fourth grade I was handpicked by Eliot Feld's ballet school to take private weekly lessons at their fine dance studio in midtown Manhattan. Once a week I would get my black tights and white T-shirt on and wear those weird dancer shoes and practice my pliés and my ronds de jambe. Yeah, I was embarrassed to be taking ballet class, but excited as well. That entire world was so fresh and intriguing to me. It was my first glimpse at the way another whole society in New York lived; into a world of whiteness that I had always wondered about.

Right up until our fateful night, I was becoming more involved with drama and musical theater. At Intermediate School 70, I was poised to try out for the next school show and someday attend the famous High School of the Performing Arts. Remember that school from the movie *Fame*? How much fun would that have been? Can you imagine it, Marcus? Can you? My goodness, the promise. The potential. My future would have been so bright I would have had to wear shades!

I could have hated you forever. I should have hated you forever. But that's no way to live a life, is it? Anger can be such a draining force. Maybe you were angry, Marcus. If you were, I understand. Maybe none of those things was ever going to be a possibility for you. Life is not always fair. For people like us it's easy to get mired in resentment and ugly jealousies, isn't it? It's okay, I guess, if every now and then we take things out on one another.

I really just want you to know—I had a life. I had ... plans, you know? I want you to be aware of that. For all it's worth.

INT. YOUNG BOY'S BEDROOM—NIGHT

DEAN, white, twelve, LAMONT, black, twelve, ERIC, black, twelve, and JEROME, thirteen, all stand around in a circle. Journey's "Don't Stop Believin' " plays in the background on a stereo. SUBTITLE: *THE LUCK OF THE DRAW*

DEAN

Okay, pick a number between one and fifty.
Go.

ERIC

Twenty-five.

DEAN

Lamont?

LAMONT

Seven.

DEAN

Jerome?

JEROME

Forty-five.

DEAN

It was five. Lamont wins.

Lamont celebrates with Dean while Jerome and Eric express disappointment.

JEROME

Can't we all just stay?

DEAN

Sorry, man, my mom said only one tonight. She's got a headache.

ERIC

Come on, let's go. It's getting colder out.

JEROME

Shit, my mother's gonna kill me.