

*NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER*

# ANOTHER BROOKLYN

*A NOVEL*

# JACQUELINE WOODSON

*NATIONAL BOOK AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF  
BROWN GIRL DREAMING*





# ANOTHER BROOKLYN

*A Novel*



Jacqueline Woodson



Amistad

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*

## DEDICATION

For Bushwick (1970–1990)  
In Memory

## EPIGRAPH

Keep straight down this block,  
Then turn right where you will find  
A peach tree blooming.

—RICHARD WRIGHT

# CONTENTS

Dedication

Epigraph

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

On Writing *Another Brooklyn*

About the Author

Advance Praise

Also by Jacqueline Woodson

Credits

Copyright

About the Publisher

# 1

For a long time, my mother wasn't dead yet. Mine could have been a more tragic story. My father could have given in to the bottle or the needle or a woman and left my brother and me to care for ourselves—or worse, in the care of New York City Children's Services, where, my father said, there was seldom a happy ending. But this didn't happen. I know now that what is tragic isn't the moment. It is the memory.



If we had had jazz, would we have survived differently? If we had known our story was a blues with a refrain running through it, would we have lifted our heads, said to each other, *This is memory* again and again until the living made sense? Where would we be now if we had known there was a melody to our madness? Because even though Sylvia, Angela, Gigi, and I came together like a jazz improv—half notes tentatively moving toward one another until the ensemble found its footing and the music felt like it had always been playing—we didn't have jazz to know this was who we were. We had the Top 40 music of the 1970s trying to tell our story. It never quite figured us out.



The summer I turned fifteen, my father sent me to a woman he had found through his fellow Nation of Islam brothers. An educated sister, he said, who I could talk to. By then, I was barely speaking. Where words had once flowed easily, I was suddenly silent, breath snatched from me, replaced by a melancholy my family couldn't understand.

Sister Sonja was a thin woman, her brown face all angles beneath a black hijab. So this is who the therapist became to me—the woman with the hijab, fingers tapered, dark eyes questioning. By then, maybe it was too

late.

*Who hasn't walked through a life of small tragedies?* Sister Sonja often asked me, as though to understand the depth and breadth of human suffering would be enough to pull me outside of my own.



Somehow, my brother and I grew up motherless yet halfway whole. My brother had the faith my father brought him to, and for a long time, I had Sylvia, Angela, and Gigi, the four of us sharing the weight of growing up *Girl* in Brooklyn, as though it was a bag of stones we passed among ourselves saying, *Here. Help me carry this.*



Twenty years have passed since my childhood. This morning, we buried my father. My brother and I stood shoulder to shoulder at the gravesite, willows weeping down around us, nearly bare-branched against the snow. The brothers and sisters from mosque surrounding us. In the silver light of the morning, my brother reached for and found my gloved hand.

Afterward, at a diner in Linden, New Jersey, my brother pulled off his black coat. Beneath it, he wore a black turtleneck and black wool pants. The black kufi his wife had knitted for him stopped just above his brow.

The diner smelled of coffee and bread and bleach. A neon sign flickered EAT HERE NOW in bright green, dusty silver tinsel draping below it. I had spent Christmas Day at the hospital, my father moaning for pain medication, the nurses too slow in responding.

A waitress brought my brother more hot water for his mint tea. I picked at my eggs and lukewarm home fries, having eaten the bacon slowly to tease my brother.

*You hanging in, Big Sis?* he asked, his deep voice breaking up a bit.

*I'm good.*

*Still whole?*

*Still whole.*

*Still eating pork and all the other Devil's food, I see.*

*Everything but the grunt.*

We laughed, the joke an old one from the afternoons I had snuck off with my girls to the bodega around the corner for the foods I was forbidden to eat at home and the bits of bacon still on my plate.

*You still could come stay with me and Alafia you know. Bedrest isn't contagious.*

*I'm good at the apartment, I said. Lots to be done there. All his stuff to go through . . . Alafia doing okay?*

*She'll be all right. Doctors talk like if she stands up, the baby's gonna just drop right out of her. It's all good. Baby'll be fine.*

I started my way into the world two days before July ended but didn't arrive until August. When my mother, crazed from her long labor, asked what day it was, my father said, *It's August. It's August now. Shhh, Honey Baby*, he whispered. *August is here.*

*You scared?* I asked my brother, reaching across the table to touch his hand, remembering suddenly a photo we had back in SweetGrove, him a new baby on my lap, me a small girl, smiling proudly into the camera.

*A little. But I know with Allah all things are possible.*



We were quiet. Old white couples surrounded us, sipping coffee and staring off. In the back somewhere, I could hear men speaking Spanish and laughing.

*I'm too young to be someone's auntie.*

*You're gonna be too old to be somebody's mama if you don't get busy. My brother grinned. No judgment.*

*No judgment is a lie.*



*Just saying it's time to stop studying the dead and hook up with a living brother. I know a guy.*

*Don't even.*

I tried not to think about the return to my father's apartment alone, the deep relief and fear that came with death. There were clothes to be donated, old food to throw out, pictures to pack away. For what? For whom?

In India, the Hindu people burn the dead and spread the ashes on the Ganges. The Caviteño people near Bali bury their dead in tree trunks. Our father had asked to be buried. Beside his lowered casket, a hill of dark and light brown dirt waited. We had not stayed to watch it get shoveled on top of him. It was hard not to think of him suddenly waking against the soft, invisible satin like the hundreds of people who had been buried in deep comas only to wake beneath the earth in terror.



*You gonna stay in the States for a minute?*

*A minute, I said. I'll be back for the baby though. You know I wouldn't miss that.*

As a child, I had not known the word *anthropology* or that there was a thing called Ivy League. I had not known that you could spend your days on planes, moving through the world, studying death, your whole life before this life an unanswered question . . . finally answered. I had seen death in Indonesia and Korea. Death in Mauritania and Mongolia. I had watched the people of Madagascar exhume the muslin-wrapped bones of their ancestors, spray them with perfume, and ask those who had already passed to the next place for their stories, prayers, blessings. I had been home a month watching my father die. Death didn't frighten me. Not now. Not anymore. But Brooklyn felt like a stone in my throat.

*You should come out to Astoria for a meal soon, a clean meal. Alafia can sit at the table, just not allowed to stand at the stove and cook. But I got us. It's all good.*

*A minute passed. I miss him, he said. I miss you.*

In my father's long, bitter last days of liver cancer, we had taken turns at his bedside, my brother coming into the hospital room so I could leave, then me waking him so he could go home for a quick shower and prayer before work.

Now my brother looked as though he was seven again, not thirty-one, his thick brow dipping down, his skin too clear and smooth for a man.

I wanted to comfort him. *It's good that he . . .* but the words wouldn't come.

*Allah is good*, my brother said. *All praise to Allah for calling him home.*

*All praise to Allah*, I said.



My brother drove me to the subway, kissed my forehead, and hugged me hard. When had he become a man? For so long, he had been my little brother, sweet and solemn, his eyes open wide to the world. Now, behind small wire-rimmed glasses, he looked like a figure out of history. Malcolm maybe. Or Stokely.

*I'll be by day after tomorrow to help you out, cool?*

*I'm good!*

*What—you got a man over there you don't want me to meet?*

I laughed.

*Still doing the Devil, I bet.*

I slapped at him and got out of the car. *Love you.*

*Love you, too, August.*



On the subway heading back to the old apartment, I looked up, startled to see Sylvia sitting across the aisle reading the *New York Times*. She had

aged beautifully in the twenty years since I'd last seen her. Her reddish brown hair was cut short now, curly and streaked with gray. Her skin, still eerily bronze against those light eyes, was now etched through with fine wrinkles. Maybe she felt me watching her because she glanced up suddenly, recognized me, and smiled. For several slow seconds, the years fell away and she was Sylvia again, nearly fifteen in her St. Thomas Aquinas school uniform—green and blue plaid skirt, white blouse, and plaid cross bow tie, her belly just beginning to round. As my body seized up with silence again, I remembered Sister Sonja, her hijabbed head bent over her notebook, her fingers going still the first time I cried in her office.

*Sylvia.*

*Oh my God! August!* she said. *When did you get back to Brooklyn?*

The child would be a young woman now. I remember hearing she had Sylvia's reddish hair, and that as a newborn, her eyes had been gray.

Somehow I knew the train was pulling into Atlantic Avenue. But the station and everything around me felt far away. Somehow, I rose from my seat. Voice gone again. Body turning to ash.

Maybe Sylvia thought I was coming toward her, ready to hug away the years and forget. Maybe she had already forgotten, the way years allow us to.

*You look good, girl,* she said.

The train doors opened. It wasn't yet my stop.

But I got off anyway.



Years erase us. Sylvia sinking back into the dust of the world before I knew her, her baby gone, then her belly, then breasts, and finally only the deep gap in my life where she had once been.

Angela fading next, across the years, just a faint voice on the answering machine when I was home on college break. *I only just heard about Gigi. So awful. Were you there?* Promises to reconnect when both of us were

next in New York. Promises she'd find me again. So much air around the lies distance allowed us to tell as she sank back into the world she had become a part of, a world of dancers and actors—redrawn into royalty without a past.

*Gigi.*

Each week, Sister Sonja said, *Start at the beginning*, her dark fingers bending around a small black notebook, pen poised. Many moments passed before I opened my mouth to speak. Each week, I began with the words *I was waiting for my mother . . .*

The office was small, ivy cascading down from a tiny pot on an otherwise stark windowsill. Maybe it was the ivy that kept me coming back. Every week, I spent forty minutes, my eyes moving from the ivy to Sister Sonja's hijab to her fingers closed around the notebook and pen. Maybe I spoke only because each week I was allowed to look into the brown, angled face of a woman and believe again that my mother was coming soon.

*I know when I get there, my brother and I used to sing. The first thing I'll see is the sun shining golden. Shining right down on me . . .*

How did I get there, to that moment of being asked to start at the beginning? Who had I become?

*She's coming, I'd say. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.*

*What about your friends? Sister Sonja asked. Where are they now?*

*We're waiting for Gigi, I'd say. Everyone's waiting for Gigi.*

Sylvia, Angela, Gigi, August. We were four girls together, amazingly beautiful and terrifyingly alone.

This is memory.



In eastern Indonesia, families keep their dead in special rooms in their homes. Their dead not truly dead until the family has saved enough money to pay for the funeral. Until then, the dead remain with them, dressed and

cared for each morning, taken on trips with the family, hugged daily, loved deeply.

## 2

The year my mother started hearing voices from her dead brother Clyde, my father moved my own brother and me from our SweetGrove land in Tennessee to Brooklyn. It was the summer of 1973 and I was eight years old, my younger brother four, his thumb newly moving to his mouth in the hot city, his eyes wide and frightened.

The small apartment was on the top floor of a three-story building. My brother and I had never been this high up, and we spent hours staring past the painted-shut windows down to the street below. The people passing beneath us were all beautiful in some way—beautifully thin, beautifully obese, beautifully Afroed, or cornrowed, or bald. Beautifully dressed in bright African dashikis and bellbottomed jeans, miniskirts and halters.

The green of Tennessee faded quickly into the foreign world of Brooklyn, heat rising from cement. I thought of my mother often, lifting my hand to stroke my own cheek, imagining her beside me, explaining this newness, the fast pace of it, the impenetrable gray of it. When my brother cried, I shushed him, telling him not to worry. *She's coming soon*, I said, trying to echo her. *She's coming tomorrow*. And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.



It was during this summer that I first saw Sylvia, Gigi, and Angela. The three of them walked down our block, dressed in halter tops and shorts, arms linked together, heads thrown back, laughing. I watched until they disappeared, wondering who they were, how they . . . *became*.

My mother had not believed in friendships among women. She said women weren't to be trusted. *Keep your arm out*, she said. *And keep*

women a whole other hand away from the farthest tips of your fingernails. She told me to keep my nails long.

But as I watched Sylvia, Angela, and Gigi walk past our window, I was struck with something deeply unfamiliar—a longing to be a part of who they were, to link my own arm with theirs and remain that way. Forever.

Another week passed and they appeared again, this time stopping below our window, untwining and doubling a long line of telephone cable, Gigi and Angela turning as Sylvia stood just outside the double ropes, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet before jumping in. I watched them, my mouth slightly open, intrigued by the effortless flow of them, how each one moved so that the other could continue moving.

My father, brother, and I were different from this. I went through my days connected to them, but inside myself, holding my brother, laughing with my father, always deeply aware of their presence. But it was a presence in shadow, a presence etched in DNA. When I watched my brother and father bending toward each other to speak, I'd see their fluid connection, a *something* I was on the outside of. Maybe this was how my mother and I bent into each other. When she returned, we'd bend this way again. In the meantime, I pressed my face against the hot glass, palms flat against the window, wanting to be on the inside of Sylvia, Angela, and Gigi's continuum.

In late July, my father took a knife to the top window frame, wedging it along the lines of thick green paint until the frame gave in and the sound of the city finally wafted up toward us.

A tinny radio from somewhere on the block seemed to play “Rock the Boat” all day long, and sometimes my brother sang the lyrics around his thumb. *So I'd like to know where, you got the notion. Said I'd like to know where . . .*

From that window, from July until end of summer, we saw Brooklyn turn a heartrending pink at the beginning of each day and sink into a stunning gray-blue at dusk. In the late morning, we saw the moving vans pull up. White people we didn't know filled the trucks with their belongings, and in the evenings, we watched them take long looks at the buildings they

were leaving, then climb into station wagons and drive away. A pale woman with dark hair covered her face with her hands as she climbed into the passenger side, her shoulders trembling.

My brother and I were often alone. My father's job in the Men's Section at Abraham & Straus Department Store was downtown, and he left just after sunrise to take the B52 bus. We had never been on that bus or any city bus. Buses were as foreign to us as the black and brown boys on the street below, shooting bottle caps across chalk-drawn numbers, their hands and knees a dusty white at the end of the day. Sometimes the boys looked up at our window. More than once, a beautiful one winked at me. For many years, I didn't know his name.

Early one morning, as my brother and I took our place by the window, cereal bowls in our laps, a young boy pulled a wrench from his pocket, used it to remove the cap from the fire hydrant below us, then turned the top of the hydrant until white water pounded into the street. We watched the water for hours. Children we didn't know but suddenly hated with a jealousy thick enough to taste ran through it, their undershirts and cutoffs sticking to their brown bodies. I saw Sylvia, Angela, and Gigi again that day, pulling each other into the water, their voices floating up to our window.

*Is she laughing at us?* my brother asked. *That red-haired girl. She just looked up at our window and laughed.*

*Shush,* I said. *She isn't even anybody.*

I was beginning to hate them. I was beginning to love them.

Sometimes, Angela stood apart from the others, biting fiercely at her nails, her short Afro dripping. The high yellow of her skin was as familiar as Tennessee to me. At the small church our mother took us to sometimes, four sisters who looked like Angela sat up front, their hair straightened, braided, and white-ribboned, their backs straight. As their father preached, I watched them, wondering what it was like to walk the edge of holy. *For God so loved the world,* their father would say, *he gave his only begotten son.* But what about his daughters, I wondered. What did God do with his daughters?



---

My father had grown up in Brooklyn but joined the military at eighteen and was stationed at a base near Clarksville, Tennessee. Then Vietnam. Then my mother and SweetGrove. He was missing a finger on each hand, the pinky on his left, and on his right hand, the thumb. When we asked him how it happened, he wouldn't answer, so my brother and I spent hours imagining ways to lose two fingers in a war—knives, bombs, tigers, sugar-diabetes, the list went on and on. His parents had grown old and died only a block from where we now lived. That summer, when we begged him to let us go outside during the day, he shook his head. *The world's not as safe as you all like to believe it is*, he said. *Look at Biafra*, he said. *Look at Vietnam*.

I thought of Gigi, Sylvia, and Angela walking arm in arm through the streets below our window. How safe and strong they looked. How impenetrable.

One Sunday morning, on the way to the small church my father had found for us, a man wearing a black suit stopped him. *I've been sent by the prophet Elijah, in the name of Allah*, he said, *with a message for you, my beautiful black brother*.

The man looked at me, his eyes moving slowly over my bare legs. *You're a black queen*, he said. *Your body is a temple. It should be covered*. I held tighter to my father's hand. In the short summer dress, my legs seemed too long and too bare. An unlocked temple. A temple exposed.

The man handed my father a newspaper and said, *As-Salaam Alaikum*. Then he was gone.

In church behind the preacher, there was a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ, white and holy, his robe pulled open to show his exposed and bleeding heart.

*The Psalm tells us*, the preacher said, *I call on the Lord in my distress and he answers me*.

Gold light poured in through a small stained glass window. My father lifted his gaze, saw what I saw—the way the light danced across the

folding chairs, the rows of laps, the buckling hardwood floor. Then the sun shifted, melting the light back into shadow. What was the *message for you, my beautiful black brother*, in all that church light? What was it for any of us?

Behind me, an old woman moaned an Amen.



The streetlights had come on and from our place at the window, my brother and I could see children running back and forth along the sidewalk. We heard them laughing and shouting *Not it! Not it! Not it!* We could hear the Mister Softee ice cream truck song weaving through it all. My brother begged again and again for the world beyond our window. He wanted to see farther, past the small, newly planted tree, past the fire hydrant, past the reflection of our own selves in the darkening pane.

If anyone had looked up just that minute before, they would have seen the two of us there, as always, watching the world from behind glass. I was ten and my brother was six. Our mother was still in SweetGrove. Our words had become a song we seemed to sing over and over again. *When I grow up. When we go home. When we go outside. When we. When we. When we.* Then my brother's palms were against the window, pushing it out instead of up, shattering it, a deep white gash suddenly pulsing to bright red along his forearm.

How did my father suddenly appear, a thick towel in his hands? Had he been just a room away? Downstairs? Beside us? This is memory. My father's mouth moving but no sound, just my brother's blood pooling on the sill, dripping down onto the jagged glass glinting at our feet. The red lights of an ambulance but no sound. My father lifting my paling brother into his arms but no sound. The trail of silent blood. The silent siren. The silent crowd gathering to watch the three of us climbing into the van.



In the bright white of the hospital room, sound returned, bringing with it taste and smell and touch. The room was too cold. We had not yet eaten dinner. Where was my little brother? A nurse handed me a paper cup of red juice and a Styrofoam plate filled with Nilla wafers. I wanted water. Milk. Meat. There was blood dried to a burnt brown on my T-shirt. Blood

on my cutoff shorts. Blood on my light blue Keds. I pressed the cookies together in pairs, chewed slowly.

My mother said Clyde hadn't died in Vietnam. They had the wrong man. *So many brown and black men, who could know?* my mother said. *It could have been anybody. He told me.*

Another nurse wanted to know if I was all right.

*Your brother will be fine, she said. Everything's going to be all right, Sweetie.*

*Clyde is fine, my mother said. He'll be home soon.*

Kings County Hospital. No rooms, just wards. Slide a curtain back and there's a baby crying. Slide another one and there's the girl with the crazily hanging arm. Curtains and children. Nurses and noise. Where was my brother?

*You enjoying those cookies, Sugar, the nurse asked. You was hungry, wasn't you?*

The Benguet of the Northern Philippines blindfold their dead then sit them on a chair just outside the entrance to their home, their hands and feet bound.

My mother turned the telegram around and around in her hands, smiling. Her eyes on the door.



For a long time after the broken glass, there was no room in my head for the newness of Sylvia, Angela, and Gigi. When they hollered at each other under my window, I didn't look down. I lay in my bed, my eyes on the ceiling. A medallion circled the bulb. Off-white flowers orbited the light, stem to blossom to stem again. If my mother was coming, she would be coming now, so close to splintering glass, my brother's slit-open then sewn-up arm.

When my brother called, *Those girls are out there again*, I didn't answer, curled my toes inside my socks, and turned my face to the wall. Beneath

the bandages, black stitches folded my brother's skin back onto itself. I wanted my mother.