A LOVE STORY

BALDWIN

NICHOLAS BOGGS

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Baldwin

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Nicholas Boggs

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For my parents

And for my godchildren, Avery, Sophie, Sam

Love is the only reality, the only terror, and the only hope.

—JAMES BALDWIN

PROLOGUE

We appear to come into the world looking backward, looking for something we remember. As our eyes begin to focus after the storm of birth, we isolate the shapes of our relentless desire.

—JAMES BALDWIN

James Baldwin was just ten or eleven years old when he sat down in a darkened movie theater to watch *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*, starring a screen siren who was about to become a source of unlikely salvation. As he would go on to tell it one day: "So here, now, was Bette Davis, on a Saturday afternoon, in close-up, over a champagne glass, pop-eyes popping." He was transfixed by her eyes, which looked just like his mother's, a shocking recognition that would allow him to understand, albeit years later, why the man he called his father—who unbeknownst to him at the time was actually his stepfather—was always at pains to remind him that the large, heavy-lidded eyes he had inherited from her made him "the ugliest boy he's ever seen." For it was not his "hatred of *my* frog-eyes which hurt me," he would come to realize, but the fact that "he was not attacking me so much as he was attacking my mother," and also, by extension, then, "my real, and unknown father." But what he did see in this moment, clear as the daylight beyond the movie theater's walls, was that he had caught his embittered father not so much in a "lie" as in an "infirmity"—for he "must have been stricken blind if he was unable to see that my mother was absolutely beyond any question the most beautiful woman in the world."

This was a lesson in self-love that would be tested time and time again as he moved through the trials and tribulations of his adolescent years, and indeed throughout the entirety of his life. It was also a lesson about kinship, by blood, and beyond it.

He had been brought to this matinee by his teacher at PS 24 in Harlem, a twenty-four-year-old white woman whose tutelage would change his life

forever. Orilla Miller, or "Bill" as he called her, had come to this "dreadful ancient New York schoolhouse," as she described it, to teach drama and put on student plays thanks to an internship connected to the graduate degree she was pursuing at Teachers College. When Baldwin was sent to her by his regular classroom teacher because he was so far ahead of the other students, she was astonished by his intelligence. "To my amazement," she later recalled, "I found we were both reading Charles Dickens, very enthusiastically, and in our discussions I soon realized here was an exceptional and brilliant boy." She gave him more books to read, and talked to him about these books, and about the world, as Baldwin would later write, and eventually she took him to see the plays and films "to which no one else would have dreamed of taking a ten-year-old boy." For all this, he "loved her, of course, and absolutely, with a child's love," and it was because of her, he conceded, "that I never really managed to hate white people—though, God knows, I have often wished to murder more than one or two."

It was also because of her, he would write, and that day at the movies, in particular, "that my first conscious calculation as to how to go about defeating the world's intentions for me began." For he knew that not only did his father consider him ugly but he was also "considered by everyone to be 'strange.'" Too bookish. Too sensitive. Too undersized. Too effeminate. But after seeing Davis on-screen, he abruptly stopped his practice of putting pennies on his eyes every night before he went to bed in his misguided effort to make them smaller. He now realized that "my infirmity, or infirmities, might be forged into weapons." And if he was indeed "'strange'—and I knew that I must be," he would go on, "otherwise people would not have treated me so strangely, and I would not have been so miserable, perhaps I could find a way to use my strangeness. A 'strange' child, anyway, dimly and fearfully apprehends that the years are not likely to make him less strange. Therefore, if he wishes to live, he must calculate, and I knew I wanted to live."

The presence of Bill Miller in Baldwin's life confounded his parents, particularly his father, David Baldwin. The first time she came home with

Baldwin after school to ask permission to take him on an excursion to see a real play on a New York stage, she was taken aback when they stepped into a steam-filled kitchen with a clothesline stretched all the way across it, his mother doing laundry by hand. The air was warm and moist and the small, hungry faces of Baldwin's many younger siblings were peeking out from behind the drying clothes. In the face of such poverty—the apartment, located in the East Harlem neighborhood known as "The Hollow," was dark and gloomy with a dismal view of the uptown railroad tracks—Miller became even more desperate to help. When she was told that his father was not home yet, they set a date for her to return another day. Soon, as Baldwin later wrote, "my father took me aside to ask *why* she was coming, what *interest* she could possibly have in our house, in a boy like me." The only white people who ever visited them were welfare workers and bill collectors, and Baldwin's mother, Berdis, usually dealt with them because his father's temper was too excitable and he felt violated by their presence. After all, he spent his days laboring as a worker in a ginger ale factory on Long Island and his weekends preaching in a storefront church about how white people were the Devil. Theatergoing, like books, was forbidden in their household. But Baldwin desperately wanted to go and he intuited that the color of Miller's skin, and the fact that it was all in the service of "education," might cow his father into agreeing to it.

He was right. The fresh-faced teacher came back to the apartment and they all sat down in the living room. Miller found both of the parents dignified. Underneath, David Baldwin was seething. But as Baldwin would put it, "I then, very cleverly, left all the rest to my mother, who suggested to my father, as I knew she would, that it would not be very nice to let such a kind woman make the trip for nothing." His mother knew very well that as miraculous as it had seemed, by the time he was just five years old he'd already read all the way through the only book they had in the house, the Bible; and that by eight he had somehow managed to get his hands on a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which he had read over and over again so compulsively she'd feared he was damaging his eyes, or that her husband

might see it and lash out. But even after she'd stowed it away in a closet above the bathtub, her son had still managed to climb up and drag it down. These excursions with his teacher would at the very least allow him to explore his interests in relative safety outside the home, and, as Miller later recalled, she "seemed glad to see James happy but also for him to see a different side of life."

And so began the first of many trips to see plays and films and visit museums, an education that Baldwin sorely needed. Although his still largely segregated school was headed by a dedicated principal, Gertrude Ayers, who for twenty-five years was the only Black person to hold such a position in the New York City public school system, the teachers were overwhelmed by the decrepit classrooms of up to fifty students at a time, all of them boys, and couldn't possibly have provided Baldwin with the stimulation and attention he needed. A particularly memorable outing occurred when Miller got them tickets to an Orson Welles production of *Macbeth*. It was at the Lafayette Theatre on 132nd Street and Seventh Avenue, just a few blocks from his home. Baldwin was so excited, he read the play in advance enough times that he practically knew it by heart. The house lights dimmed and, as he sat next to Miller, he watched the slim ribbon of light connecting the stage curtain to the stage's floor. Then the curtain rose. Baldwin was so entranced he didn't say a word throughout the whole production. Welles had transposed the play to Haiti. It was an all-Black cast. Nothing he had seen at the movies prepared him for this, not even the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film adaptation Miller had taken him to of one of his favorite books, *A Tale of Two Cities*. These were real Black actors at work, in real roles, on a living stage. They were his people—the actress who played Lady Macbeth was "a colored lady," Baldwin later wrote, and "Banquo's face was a familiar face." They were his flesh and blood, and their struggles were his own.

By now he'd already had his first brushes with the more blatant forms of racism. When he was ten years old, two Harlem patrolmen had stopped him in an empty lot. Even though he was very small for his age, they'd frisked him as they joked to each other about what they felt his ancestry meant

about his sexual prowess, and then left him lying on his back. This only seemed to confirm the truth of his father's rants about the evils of white folks. But Miller wasn't white to Baldwin. Or at least she was a different kind of white person. Perhaps this had something to do with the fact that she had grown up on a farm in Illinois, and when her family lost everything, she had dropped out of college and taken a job as a housekeeper in Queens, becoming involved in labor politics. Now she was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party; when she took Baldwin and some of his brothers and sisters to a picnic downtown, she became incensed when policemen handed out free ice cream to all the white children but balked at offering any to the children in her charge. "I don't remember anything Bill said," Baldwin later wrote. "I just remember her face as she stared at the cop, clearly intending to stand there until the ice cream all over the world melted or until the earth's surface froze, and she got our ice cream, saying, *Thank you*, I remember, as we left."

When David Baldwin was laid off from work, Miller helped the family survive an especially brutal winter by dropping off food and provisions regularly. It earned her Berdis Baldwin's greatest compliment—she was a "Christian." The love between Miller and Baldwin was quickly becoming a familial one. As Miller later said, "He was like my little brother." When he wasn't helping his mother care for his younger siblings, he spent time at her apartment on 124th Street near Eighth Avenue, which was just a few blocks away from his, marveling at how different her relationship with her husband, Evan, was from his parents' marriage. He watched them silhouetted against their apartment window at dusk, in awe—they were actually speaking to each other, their faces lit up with affection and laughter. Evan, too, was committed to left-wing politics, and as Baldwin later wrote, together, the couple became, for him, "models of courage and integrity and love," while she, in particular, "helped me to get beyond the trap of color." But as close as Miller and the young Baldwin had become, there were still conversations he could not have—secrets he could not share with anyone.

For it had been just before she came into his life when he was about ten years old, as he would write one day, that he became infatuated with, and even felt he was "very much in love" with another boy, named Romeo Clarke. Baldwin remembered his friend, who lived directly across the street, as "very handsome and very gentle and we were so clearly and openly in love that we were known as Romeo and Juliet." Although there was never anything "overtly sexual between us," as he recalled, they "lived, practically, in each other's nostrils." It wasn't long before Romeo and his family moved away, quite likely, he later realized, because their families felt they needed to be separated. Baldwin remembered how he stood before their shut front door not long afterward, "weeping." They never saw each other again.

This was a precursor to what years later, in his first and most autobiographical novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, published in 1953, would become the story of a boy in Harlem, John Grimes, who is locked in an emotional battle with himself and with his overbearing preacher father. In it he would draw heavily on the shame of his own adolescent yearnings, writing: "He had sinned. In spite of the saints, his mother and his father, the warnings he had heard from his earliest beginnings, he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive." All alone in the school bathroom, he continues, "thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak."

It wasn't just his confusion over these first stirrings of desire that Baldwin could not share with Miller. As he later wrote: "Bill could instruct me as to how poverty came about and what it meant and what it did, and also, what it meant to do so; but she could not instruct me as to blackness, except obliquely, feeling that she had neither the right nor the authority." Indeed, without his father's love or support Baldwin was in search of role models who looked like him, and he found one when he entered Frederick Douglass Junior High School, located at 140th Street and Sixth Avenue, in the fall of 1935: another teacher, Herman Porter, who was also Black and advised the school paper, *The Douglass Pilot*. Like Miller, he quickly realized Baldwin's

talent and did all he could to support him. Baldwin became its editor in chief. The taunts of his classmates, who had regularly been calling him a "sissy," fell silent. They were replaced by admiration. One Saturday, Porter picked Baldwin up at home to take him to the New York Public Library on Forty-Second Street so he could conduct research for his ninth-grade essay, "Harlem: Then and Now." He was greeted at the door by Baldwin's father, clad in a bathrobe and slippers and surrounded by Baldwin's younger siblings. Also like Miller before him, Porter was overwhelmed by the clutter and the number of poverty-stricken children—in addition to Baldwin, there were now six of them, with two more still to come. When he explained why he had come there, David Baldwin accused him of exposing his son to books written by white devils. But he let him go.

On the bus downtown Baldwin was so upset he became sick to his stomach, and as soon as they got off at Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street, he vomited on the sidewalk. Baldwin would recapture some of the more positive aspects of this experience in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: "He loved this street," he would write, "not for the people or the shops but for the stone lions that guarded the great main building of the Public Library, a building filled with books and unimaginably vast, and which he had never dared to enter." He knew he was allowed to do so, since he belonged to the Harlem branch, but he was cowed by his feeling that the "building was so big that it must be full of corridors and marble steps, in the maze of which he would be lost and never find the book he wanted." Moreover, he feared that "all the white people inside, would know that he was not used to great buildings, or to many books, and they would look at him with pity." And so he decided that he "would enter another day, when he had read all the books uptown, an achievement that would, he felt, lend him the poise to enter any building in the world."

Unlike his protagonist, the young Baldwin did enter the library that day, and once he acclimated to its imposing size and serious-looking and almost exclusively white patrons, it became another sanctuary for him. Alongside his excursions with Miller, he was beginning to learn that his life needn't be

confined to Harlem. The literary and cultural resources of the whole city were open to him. Not that this lesson was uncomplicated. As he left the library one day a white policeman asked him, “Why don’t you niggers stay uptown where you belong?” But helped along by teachers like Miller and Porter, he was building the confidence to withstand these early encounters with racism and emerge with a stronger sense of his mission and destiny as a writer. As he wrote in an issue of *The Douglass Pilot*, “If I am a playwright, I should try to improve a troubled world, and try to be numbered among the great artists of my race.”

Baldwin’s ambition was growing and already gaining him recognition. He wrote a school song that earned him a letter of praise from Mayor La Guardia, and he published his first short story, about the Spanish Revolution, in a church newspaper. After school, he often returned to his favorite hill in Central Park. It was a refuge. He ran up the hill, gazing at the sky above. At the summit he would survey all of New York—from Harlem to downtown. Later, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, he re-created the exaltation he felt in these moments: “He felt like a long-awaited conqueror at whose feet flowers would be strewn, and before whom multitudes cried. Hosanna! He would be, of all, the mightiest, the most beloved, the Lord’s anointed; and he would live in this shining city which his ancestors had seen from far away.”

These lofty aspirations also surfaced in a recurrent dream. In it he was all grown up, living in a fancy apartment somewhere in the city he’d looked down at from the hill. He was always wearing a gray suit as he drove his big Buick uptown to his block in Harlem, where his family was waiting for him, all of them proud, even and especially his father. He picked them all up and drove them to his house in the country. They ate together at an expensive restaurant, harmonious, happy. All because he had become a rich and famous writer. He *had* to become a rich and famous writer—which despite his humble beginnings was exactly what he was destined to become, the house in the country (though it would be in the South of France, not New York) included.

A year later, in 1936, as his relationship with Miller continued to grow, a third teacher also took the young Baldwin under his wing while he was still at Frederick Douglass Junior High School: the noted Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen, who had taken a job there teaching French, which he had perfected during his many trips to Paris, one of them funded by a Guggenheim. It was in his French class that Baldwin first fantasized about traveling to Paris himself. He also read and imitated Cullen's poetry, along with that of Langston Hughes. Cullen frequently took his students on tours of Harlem and instructed them to write down everything they saw, describing the buildings and the people. Soon Baldwin had left behind his attempts at writing a version of one of his favorite books, *Oliver Twist*, with leading Black characters replacing white ones. Instead, he began to take his own life as inspiration in what he would later call the "first version" of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, working through his desire to exact revenge on his father through the character of a ten-year-old boy named Teddy who poisons his deacon father.

Cullen was the adopted son of a minister, with whom he'd had a conflicted relationship. He, too, had struggled with the impression that he was ugly, but had a cultivated charisma and sartorial elegance to which Baldwin aspired. Unlike Baldwin's father, Cullen was emotionally open and physically affectionate with all his students, which surely provided Baldwin some measure of comfort during an increasingly confusing period. But since Cullen did not acknowledge his homosexuality publicly or to Baldwin, their connection must also have been an especially complex one. For while Cullen is perhaps best known for his 1925 poem "Yet Do I Marvel," with its famous lines—"Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black and bid him sing!"—several poems included in that same award-winning collection, *Color*, are notable for their implicit homoeroticism, including "Tableau":

Locked arm in arm they cross the way,
The black boy and the white,
The golden splendor of the day,

The sable pride of night.

From lowered blinds the dark folk stare,
And here the fair folk talk,
Indignant that these two should dare
In unison to walk.

Oblivious to look and word
They pass, and see no wonder
That lightning brilliant as a sword
Should blaze the path of thunder.

The image of James Baldwin as an intellectually precocious and sexually confused adolescent reading and likely imitating this and other homoerotically charged love poems written by Cullen is a striking one, even if he may not have been fully aware of their subtexts. On the one side, you have Cullen, whose career many believe was derailed not only because of racism but also because the closet constrained his literary voice. His dreams of supporting himself as a poet and writer, and living an extravagantly international life, had not materialized. On the other side, you have in Baldwin the person who will grow up to throw open the closet door for Black writers while fashioning precisely the kind of glamorous transatlantic life his predecessor yearned for. Even if neither student nor teacher (nor indeed history itself) was prepared for an explicit conversation about homosexuality, the mere existence of Cullen and his poetry must have sent an early signal to the young Baldwin that there were other ways of living his life, and other models of Black manhood, in particular, than the one his father and society in general mandated.

Still, when Baldwin fell hard for another boy at school, Arthur Moore, he would have to face his growing confusion alone. As Baldwin later wrote, “I was in love with my friend, as boys indeed can be at that age, but hadn’t the faintest notion of what to do about it.” Two years older, Arthur was more athletic and physically mature than Baldwin, who could not join him playing

handball in the streets. But Arthur also loved books. The two of them would go to the used bookstore on 125th Street after they scrounged enough change to buy a book for a nickel or, if they were lucky, six for a quarter. Later, Baldwin would immortalize Arthur as the inspiration for the character Elisha in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The conflict at the heart of that novel—the protagonist John's struggle to choose between his devotion to God and the truth of his sexual desires, embodied by Elisha—was a major preoccupation for the remainder of Baldwin's teenage years; indeed, the summer of 1938, in particular, was a turning point.

As he would recount decades later in one of his final essays, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," published in *Playboy* in 1985, a crucial encounter occurred during this period, just after he graduated from junior high school and turned fourteen years old:

> I was certainly unbelievably unhappy and pathologically shy, but that, I felt was nobody's fault but mine. My father kept me in my short pants longer than he should have, and I had been told, and I believed, that I was ugly. This meant that the idea of myself as a sexual possibility, or target, as a creature capable of desire, had never entered my mind. And it entered my mind finally, by means of the rent made in my short boy-scout pants by a man who had lured me into a hallway, saying that he wanted to send me to the store. That was the very last time I agreed to run an errand for any stranger.

The essay moves on quickly to other topics, but portions of an unpublished earlier draft paint a far more elaborate picture of what happened that day, and why it was so traumatic. Baldwin concludes his narration of this disturbing encounter by acknowledging how fortunate he was that before things could have gone even further than they already had, a door had slammed above them and the man had stood up, fumbled in his pockets, and then shoved some coins into Baldwin's hands and disappeared down the stairs. Baldwin then recalled how moments later he had run down the stairs

himself, then out into the street and all the way home. Overcome with confusion and shame, he'd locked himself in the bathroom, where he'd counted the money the man had given him and then tossed it out the window: "A quarter or two dimes."

Baldwin's decision not to include the more explicit passages in the published version of the essay could have been for any number of reasons—he may have found it disrupted the flow of its overarching argument, the editor may have jettisoned it, or he may have questioned the veracity of his own memories. Indeed, just a few pages before narrating this sequence of events in the unpublished manuscript, he had also written about how "fantasy and memory are powerfully connected in our dreams," so that it was "very difficult to be certain of the distinction between fantasy and a dream—or a memory." And as he explained in an interview late in his life as to why he never wrote an autobiography: "I don't trust my memory." And while with few exceptions his essays are guided by and structured through personal anecdotes and reflections on his life that sometimes stretch back to his earliest years, they often come with the caveat of his recognition of the unreliability of his own recollections.

In one of his later works, for example, *No Name in the Street*, published in 1972, he would write: "Much, much, much has been blotted out, coming back only lately in bewildering and untrustworthy flashes." These memories include two key events that took place when he was four or five years old. In the first, his father's son from a prior marriage, Sam, who was eight years older than Baldwin, rescued Baldwin from nearly drowning during a trip to the beach at Coney Island: he "slung me over his shoulder like a piece of meat, or a much beloved child," Baldwin would recall, "and strode up out of the sea with me, with me!" Sam despised his father, and soon left the house for good, only to return to Baldwin's life momentarily years later for David Baldwin's funeral, so this moment marked him: "He had saved me, after all, and I learned something about the terror and the loneliness and depth and the height of love." Yet the second event, which also happened when "I must have been about five," held no such redemptive potential, Baldwin adds, as