

Dear Justyce



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NIC STONE

Nic Stone was born and raised in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia. She studied psychology at Spelman College but left after her junior year. She then spent the following four years in Israel, where she worked as a tour guide. It was her experiences there, listening to other people's stories and writing long narrative emails to friends and family at home, that spurred her to become a writer. After returning to Spelman College and completing her psychology degree, Spelman hired an agent and began to write. Her first novel, 2017's *Dear Martin*, which is the companion to *Dear Justyce*, topped bestseller lists upon its initial publication and again when it was rereleased in paperback. Her other young adult and middle grade novels have received similar accolades. All of Stone's published works tackle either the experiences of African American or LGBT youth, or some combination of the two. In addition to novels, Stone has also written a number of short stories and essays, as well as edited anthologies. She currently lives in Georgia with her husband and two sons.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though Stone never mentions it by name, *Dear Justyce* takes aim squarely at the school-to-prison pipeline (or, as it's become known more recently, the school-to-prison nexus). The pipeline refers to the fact that a disproportionate number of kids from disadvantaged backgrounds—specifically kids who are Black, Latinx, and/or disabled—end up incarcerated as teens or adults. Experts trace this to the now common presence of police officers in schools and disparities in educational quality and opportunities. Most important, though, are zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, which state that every student who commits a certain offense will receive the exact same punishment. The punishment is often suspension, even for minor offenses like tardiness. For some offenses, such as bringing a firearm to school, schools are required to report the student to local law enforcement—meaning that students will get in trouble with the law, not just with the school. Suspension, studies have found, increases the likelihood that students will feel alienated from their peers, get arrested, or drop out of school entirely—all of which increases the chances of a student being incarcerated. And as Quan observes, Black and Latinx people regularly receive harsher sentences than white people for the same crimes and are more likely to serve time in prison. According to the NAACP, as of 2014, 34% of inmates in the United States are African American, like Quan.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Dear Justyce was conceived of as a companion novel to Stone's 2017 novel, *Dear Martin*. Both books feature stories about young Black men growing up against the backdrop of mid-2010s American racism. These two novels, in addition to Stone's other books, join a growing group of young adult novels featuring Black characters by Black authors. Notable works include Jason Reynolds's verse novel *Long Way Down*, Angie Thomas's novels *The Hate U Give* and *On the Come Up*, and the Legacy of Orisha series by Tomi Adayemi. Stone herself has said that she writes about the kind of Black characters she wishes she could've read about as a young person, and many of the authors listed above have said much the same thing regarding their own writing. Quan mentions reading a number of novels over the course of the *Dear Justyce*. He grew up loving Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events series, which focus on the misadventures of three profoundly unlucky siblings. Once Doc begins visiting Quan in prison, he assigns classic 20th century works like Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. One of the most important books Quan reads, though, is Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son*. As Quan explains, *Native Son* dives into the racist systems that seem to give Black men few options other than to commit crimes.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Dear Justyce
- **When Written:** 2019
- **Where Written:** Atlanta, Georgia
- **When Published:** 2020
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel; Issue Novel; Epistolary Novel
- **Setting:** Atlanta, Georgia
- **Climax:** Quan learns that the prosecutors are dropping his charges.
- **Antagonist:** Dwight, racism, poverty, and violence; Martel is arguably an antagonist, but not entirely.
- **Point of View:** *Dear Justyce* employs a variety of points of view, including third- and first-person narration in addition to scripts.

EXTRA CREDIT

Help from a Star. While attending Spelman College, Stone had the opportunity to meet bestselling author Jodi Picoult, who helped her get a literary agent.



PLOT SUMMARY

Part One of *Dear Justyce* is comprised of flashbacks that chart how Quan, the African American protagonist, ended up where he is in the novel's present: incarcerated for shooting and killing a white cop, Officer Castillo—a crime, readers later find out, that Quan didn't actually commit. Part One of the book also includes letters that Quan writes to his friend Justyce, a Black boy who grew up in the same impoverished neighborhood but now attends Yale as a prelaw student.

Quan and Justyce meet when they are 9 and 10, after they both run away from home to the **rocket ship** structure at the new neighborhood playground. Quan ran away because he couldn't stand to see Mama's abusive boyfriend, Dwight, beat Mama again.

Two years later, Quan's life changes forever. Cops violently arrest Daddy for dealing drugs while Quan is staying with Daddy one weekend. At first, Quan vows to be strong for his younger half-siblings, Dasia and Gabe (Mama and Dwight's kids). But this becomes increasingly difficult when Dwight moves in with Mama full-time, continues to beat her, and seizes control of the family's finances. Meanwhile, Daddy never responds to Quan's letters, so Quan feels alone and unsupported—but it's the final straw for him when Mama believes a teacher's false accusation that Quan cheated on a math test.

Quan steals for the first time when Dwight leaves Mama and the kids with no money and no food. He begins to steal small things in addition to foodstuffs and is arrested when he's 13, after he steals a pack of playing cards. After this, Mama treats Quan coldly. Fortunately, Quan met an older boy named Trey and the boys become close friends. Quan continues to steal, is in and out of juvenile detention centers, and serves a yearlong sentence for trying to steal a man's cellphone to buy shoes for his siblings. When Quan finishes this sentence at age 15, Trey decides it's time for Quan to join the local gang, Black Jihad.

The leader of Black Jihad, Martel, is a former social worker who now sells arms through his gang. He's intimidating, but generous. He notices and encourages Quan's aptitude for math, and when he learns of Dwight's abuse, he has Dwight murdered. Though Quan is relieved that Dwight is gone, he's also disturbed to be so indebted to Martel—Dwight's death means that Quan will never be able to leave the gang. Around this time, Quan discovers that Dwight had been hiding Daddy's letters to Quan—Daddy has been writing all this time.

One day, while Quan is at Martel's house, cops arrive to break up Martel's noisy birthday party. Combative and fearful, Officer Castillo pulls a gun and points it at Martel. Without thinking, Quan panics and pulls out his gun, and chaos ensues. Officer Castillo is shot and dies. A few days later, the police arrest Quan and charge him with murder—of Officer Castillo *and* of

Dwight.

The book jumps forward two years: Quan has been incarcerated for 16 months with no court date in sight. Justyce visited recently, and he and Quan begin writing letters back and forth. In the letters, Quan wonders how he and Justyce ended up in such different places when they started out much the same. He concludes that if he'd had the support that Justyce had, things might've been different. Now, he's getting the support he needs from Doc (his current tutor and Justyce's former teacher), his counselor, Tay, and his social worker's intern, Liberty, but it's too late. Quan knows he'll be in prison for at least the next decade, assuming he accepts the DA's plea deal of a shortened sentence. In his final letter to Justyce, though, Quan makes a confession. He's just been diagnosed with PTSD and panic attacks, so he doesn't remember everything, but he does know one thing for sure: three other gang members pulled guns the day that Officer Castillo died, and someone else fired the fatal shot. Quan didn't fire his gun at all. He refuses to say who's guilty.

The novel shifts to the present and follows both Justyce and Quan. Justyce receives Quan's final letter in May, right before he heads home for the summer from Yale. On the drive home, he tells his girlfriend SJ and white friend Jared about Quan's confession. They all agree that they have to prove Quan's innocence. They realize that this will be complicated: Quan didn't insist he was innocent to begin with because of his loyalty to Black Jihad. But when Justyce and his friends call a meeting with Quan's prison support team and SJ's mom, Adrienne, who's an attorney, Jared makes an important point: Officer Castillo's partner has since been killed, so there are no witnesses for the prosecution—and the ballistics analysis should reveal that Quan's gun didn't fire the fatal shot.

Justyce visits Quan and convinces him to replace his current lawyer with Adrienne. Following this, Adrienne and Justyce ask the DA to rerun the ballistics analysis, and Quan reveals that his confession of guilt was coerced. He allows himself to feel cautiously optimistic that he'll go free. At the same time, Quan's Mama visits him for the first time. She shares that Dasia has been diagnosed with cancer and that Black Jihad is footing the bill for her treatment. As Quan sees it, this means he's stuck. The only way to stay out of Black Jihad is to stay in prison—but the longer he stays in prison, the more debt he owes the gang. To remedy this, Justyce bravely goes to Martel's house and asks for Martel to allow Quan to leave the gang. Martel agrees, on the condition that Quan pay his debts—and that Doc tutor young gang members.

One day, guards pull Quan out of a tutoring session for an emergency meeting with Adrienne and Justyce. Adrienne got ahold of the footage of Quan's interrogations, and it's clear from the footage that the police intimidated and harassed Quan until he confessed. A few weeks later, due to the lack of any other evidence, the DA drops all charges. Quan can go free.

Upon his release, Quan receives an invoice from Martel. Though Quan sends checks to Martel regularly to pay his debts, Martel curiously never cashes them. Quan spends his first few months out of prison living with Doc and then moves in with Mama, Dasia, and Gabe, who recently moved to the suburbs. He takes a job working for Doc's new tutoring service and maintains his friendship with Justyce. Six months after his release, he feels he has everything he needs.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Quan Banks – Quan Banks, whose full name is Vernell LaQuan Banks Jr., is a 17-year-old African American boy and the protagonist of the novel. Quan has been imprisoned for shooting and killing Officer Castillo but, unbeknownst to most people, Quan didn't commit the crime. Through letters to his childhood friend Justyce and flashbacks to his childhood, Quan traces how he transformed from an academic young kid with a bright future to a gang member and supposed killer. As a kid, Quan seems to be on the path to success: he has a gift for math and adults who support him. But after Daddy is arrested and Quan's favorite teacher goes on maternity leave, things begin to go downhill. Mama's boyfriend, Dwight, is abusive, so Quan partially blames Mama for his unsafe home environment. Around this time, Mama believes a false accusation that Quan cheated on a math test, which adds to Quan's sense that Mama has betrayed him. The only place Quan feels safe is at the park in the **rocket ship** structure, where he fantasizes about blasting off to a better place. With Dwight controlling the family's finances and EBT card (food stamps), Quan begins to steal things so his family can eat and serves jail time for this. Ultimately, he finds a supportive family with Martel and the local gang he runs, Black Jihad. Martel has Dwight murdered when he finds out about the abuse, which leads Quan to take the charge for killing Officer Castillo in an effort to protect his fellow gang members. In the novel's present, Quan feels hopeless that things will ever change for him. He thinks it's destiny that he ended up incarcerated. But through his letters to Justyce and as he winds up with a supportive team of teachers, counselors, and caseworkers, Quan begins to hope for the better—and tells Justyce that he didn't kill Officer Castillo. Though things start to look up for Quan legally, Quan still feels like he's destined to fail. He doesn't think he can leave Black Jihad in good conscience after all they've done for him—and they probably wouldn't let him leave, either. But thanks to a deal that Justyce bravely strikes with Martel, Quan is able to leave the gang and work for Doc's tutoring service. By the end of the novel, Quan feels hopeful about his future for the first time since childhood.

Justyce – Justyce is an African American boy a year older than Quan and the recipient of most of Quan's letters in the novel.

The boys were childhood playmates and had several advanced classes together, but while Quan stopped focusing on academics, Justyce took the opposite route. Justyce eventually attended a fancy prep school for high school, and he attends Yale as a prelaw student in the novel's present. He and Quan first met when they were 9 and 10 years old, when both ran away from home to escape abusive father figures. Due to their similar upbringings, Quan often wonders how he and Justyce ended up so different. Quan decides to begin writing to Justyce after Justyce visits and leaves Quan a journal. In the journal—the basis for *Dear Justyce's* predecessor, *Dear Martin*—Justyce wrote letters to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. about racism, implicit bias, and his experience of growing up Black in the United States. The journal helps Quan see that he and Justyce weren't so different—as a kid, Justyce just had more support and more mentors than Quan did. Readers don't meet Justyce in person until midway through the novel, when Justyce is on his way back to Georgia after his first year at Yale. After reading Quan's secret confession that he didn't shoot Officer Castillo, Justyce knows he can't allow Quan to stay in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Justyce is committed to making sure that young Black men like Quan receive actual justice, so in addition to remaining Quan's best friend, Justyce takes on the role of Quan's legal advocate. He assembles a team of legal professionals and other support people, like Doc and Quan's social worker Liberty, to work together to prove Quan's innocence. Though he stumbles at times, he manages to preserve Quan's trust as he does this. Ultimately, Justyce is successful, and he even bravely negotiates Quan's exit from the Black Jihad gang.

Martel – Martel is Quan's first mentor and the leader of Black Jihad. He's a tall, clean-cut Black man who likes to crack jokes—but the boys in his gang revere and fear him. Martel was inspired to start Black Jihad after earning his master's degree in social work. He implies that he studied Huey Newton, one of the founders of the Black Panther Party, and the aims of the Black Panthers. Martel decided that the best way to help young Black men who grow up in poverty and in unstable homes is to give them support through a gang. Thus, Black Jihad was born. Though Black Jihad deals in arms, it provides young men like Quan a sense of family and belonging. Martel understands that his charges crave structure and recognition, so he schedules two meetings per week and gives the gang members opportunities to use their talents. This is why he promotes Quan to his bookkeeper—Quan is a math whiz, and he earns Quan's loyalty by recognizing that. By the time that a member of Black Jihad shoots Officer Castillo outside Martel's house, Quan feels as though he owes everything to Martel. Martel is the one adult who has seen and supported him ever since Daddy went to prison, so rather than let the cops discover who did shoot Officer Castillo, Quan confesses. And though Quan fears that Martel abandoned him after Quan ended up in jail, he later learns that Martel is supporting Mama through Dasia's

cancer diagnosis. Quan remains loyal to Martel to the end, but thanks to a deal that Justyce strikes with Martel, Quan is able to leave the gang on the condition that he pay back his debts. Martel also asks that Doc tutor the gang members, suggesting that he doesn't think that gang life is the only way for young Black men to get ahead—he'd possibly rather see them earn an education. Martel never cashes the checks that Quan sends to repay his debt, suggesting that Martel continues to support Quan even after Quan leaves by allowing him to be free financially.

Dwight – Dwight, the novel's primary antagonist, is Mama's abusive live-in boyfriend and Dasia and Gabe's father. Though he's not a big man, he's powerful and violent—he regularly leaves Mama covered in bruises or in need of a wrist brace. His violence also extends to the children; Quan hides Dasia and Gabe in the closet to protect them, and the one time Quan attempted to intervene, Dwight through him into the dining table. In addition to his physical violence, Dwight uses fear, intimidation, and financial pressure to control Mama and the children. He constantly threatens violence, requires payment for any perceived offense, and even steals Mama's EBT (food stamps) card, thereby taking control of whether or not the family eats. From conversations he overhears, Quan ascertains that Dwight believes Daddy left Mama money and that Mama is hiding it. Throughout the novel, Quan refuses to see Dwight as human. Instead, Quan thinks of Dwight as a Black version of Count Olaf, the antagonist of the *A Series of Unfortunate Events* novels. Once Martel catches wind of Dwight's abuse, he has Dwight murdered. While this frees Mama from his abuse, Quan sees it as the end of his life as he knows it. With Dwight's murder, Quan feels like he has no choice but to stay with Black Jihad and continue to demonstrate his loyalty.

Mama – Mama is Quan's mother, as well as the mother of Quan's step-siblings Dasia and Gabe. She had Quan with Daddy but had Dasia and Gabe with her abusive live-in boyfriend, Dwight. Quan reveals little about Mama's personality. It's possible that some of this has to do with how deeply betrayed Quan feels by Mama. Dwight is physically and financially abusive, and Quan doesn't understand why Mama doesn't just leave him. As Quan sees it, it'd be better for all of them without Dwight in the picture—when Dwight is around, Mama can't work because she's constantly injured from his beatings and ashamed to show her bruises. And because Mama can't work, she relies on Dwight financially. It's unclear how or even if Mama tries to protect her children from Dwight's abuse. To add to Quan's sense of betrayal, Mama believes a teacher's false accusation that Quan cheated on an important math test and starts to ignore Quan after he's arrested the first time. Though the novel implies that Mama might be doing this out of self-preservation (she implies that the men in her life, like Dwight and Daddy, have consistently let her down, and she may be lumping Quan in with them), Mama's neglect nevertheless

pushes Quan right into Black Jihad. She remains distant and cold with Quan even after Dwight is murdered. With no one at home to support or believe in him, Quan has to look for family elsewhere. He and Mama begin to repair their relationship in the month before Quan is released from prison. Mama moves the family to the suburbs (one of Martel's requirements for Quan's exit from Black Jihad), and by the end of the novel, seems to fit in and be happy in her new life.

Doc – Doc is Quan's tutor in prison. He taught Justyce at a private high school in Atlanta, which is how he ended up becoming Quan's tutor. Doc is an African American man with piercing green eyes, and Quan finds him annoying at first. Doc uses academic language and asks Quan to think about things that are difficult or complex, such as how the United States fails to uphold its ideals. Eventually, Doc becomes one of Quan's most trusted and valued supporters. From this position, Doc is able to ask Quan questions and give him assignments that ask Quan to reflect on his identity. One of the most important ways that Doc does this is by assigning Quan classic 20th century novels like *Native Son* and *Catch-22*, and by getting Quan interested in poetry. It's Doc's questions that ultimately lead Quan to confess to Justyce that he didn't kill Officer Castillo. At one point, Doc asks if Quan is a "killer" in an attempt to pry into Quan's intent when he fired his gun. But once Quan feels secure in the support of Doc and his other mentors, Quan feels safe telling the truth and saying that he's not a killer. Doc continues to support Quan through achieving his high school diploma while in prison and even opens up his home to Quan following his release. Quan spends several months with Doc and Doc's husband, which gives Quan the opportunity to observe two happy, successful Black men at close range. And given how much Quan loves academics, reading, and eventually working for Doc's tutoring service, Doc becomes a major role model. He shows Quan what's possible if he continues to pursue academics.

Daddy – Daddy is Quan's father. He's been serving a 25-year prison sentence since Quan was 11 and only appears in the novel in flashbacks—specifically, Quan's recurring nightmare of the night that Daddy was arrested. Daddy was a drug dealer, and the police sent almost a dozen cars, dog teams, and a helicopter to arrest Daddy in the middle of the night. Quan focuses on the fact that Daddy always told him that it's important to take responsibility for one's actions. Daddy said that he'd made the choice to deal and understood what the consequences would be if he got caught. Prior to his arrest, Daddy was one of Quan's biggest supporters. He wanted his son to do better than he did in life and to excel at school, and Quan did everything he could to make Daddy proud. It was devastating when Daddy went to prison because this meant Quan lost Daddy's support—and to make matters worse, Daddy seems to never write. As a result, Quan gives up on trying to make Daddy proud. Much later, though, Quan

discovers that Daddy *did* write, and Dwight hid the letters. Following Quan's release from prison, he and Daddy reconnect and write regularly.

Trey – Trey is one of Quan's best friends in Black Jihad. He's two years older and, like Quan, he's Black, has an incarcerated father, and his mother is absent and neglectful. The boys meet when Quan is 13 and Trey is 15, and Quan knows at this point that Trey is trouble—they meet for the first time at the police station, where Trey is being booked. Trey understands that in the aftermath of his first arrest, Quan desperately needs a friend who understands what he's going through. He validates that being arrested is a frightening experience and that the justice system isn't entirely fair. He recognizes, for instance, the ridiculousness of treating young Black boys like adults when they commit crimes, even though they're children. But Trey doesn't believe that there are many avenues for young Black boys like himself and Quan. So a year later, he takes Quan to meet Martel and, ultimately, to join the Black Jihad gang. Trey seems to have a sixth sense and can pick up on when a person is feeling off, so he's the one Quan finally tells about Dwight's abuse. This culminates in Dwight's murder once Martel finds out. Trey seldom appears in person in the novel after Quan is imprisoned, though Quan learns that he's been supporting and helping out Mama. At the end of the novel, Quan learns that Trey and his girlfriend are expecting a baby and that Trey is thrilled to become a father.

Liberty Ayers – Liberty is Quan's caseworker's intern—though the caseworker never appears in the novel, and Liberty seems to be on Quan's case by herself. She's a gorgeous young Black woman and a sophomore at Emory University. As a kid, she got in serious trouble, fell in with a gang, and served a 12-month sentence for stealing a car at age 14. Rather than ruin her life, though, that sentence changed her life for the better. Liberty's own caseworker made her feel seen and presumably inspired her to study to become a caseworker herself. Liberty's life trajectory helps Quan understand the importance of having positive, invested role models. Quan's relationship with Liberty is somewhat complicated, as he develops a major crush on her the first time they meet. This isn't unusual; both Justyce and Jared experience much the same thing to varying degrees. Liberty is extremely confident and has no issue telling the boys off for expressing interest in her. At the end of the novel, Quan discovers that Liberty has a girlfriend.

Jared Christensen – Jared is one of Justyce's best friends. They were classmates in high school during the events of [Dear Martin](#) and are now classmates at Yale. In [Dear Martin](#), Jared was obnoxious, entitled, and racist. However, the murder of their Black classmate Manny brought about a change in Jared. He's still annoying and entitled at times, but he makes more of an effort to recognize when his privilege clouds his interpretation of something. Along with Justyce and SJ, Jared throws himself into proving Quan's innocence after Quan

shares that he didn't kill Officer Castillo. Jared is the one to point out that with Officer Castillo's partner, Officer Tison, dead, the prosecution has no witnesses—and therefore, no case against Quan. Justyce is extremely surprised when Jared connects with Brad, a white member of Black Jihad. Though they come from very different backgrounds and have taken different paths, Jared and Brad laugh and joke like brothers.

Dasia – Dasia is Quan's younger half-sister; they share the same mother, but her father is Dwight. Quan throws himself into caring for Dasia, who's five years younger, and he also cares for her little brother, Gabe. To cope with their abusive home life, Dasia becomes prickly, snappy, and appears grown-up at a very young age. When Quan is either not there to protect her and Gabe or gets in trouble, Dasia is always lashes out in ways that make Quan feel horribly guilty. Dasia is diagnosed with an aggressive form of leukemia while Quan is in prison. By the end of the novel, six months after Quan's release, she's doing well and seems on track to make a full recovery.

Attorney Adrienne Friedman – Adrienne is SJ's mother, and she's also a lawyer who agrees to take on Quan's case. According to Justyce, she has a lot of experience with cases like Quan's in which a Black young man is incarcerated after ending up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Quan is skeptical of her at first, but he soon comes to appreciate her. Unlike Quan's other lawyers, Adrienne actually listens to what he has to say and believes his version of events. Most surprisingly, though, she's the first lawyer Quan has ever had who wants to see him be entirely free and reintegrate into society. She also acts as a mentor to Justyce, who is an aspiring lawyer himself.

Officer Tommy Castillo – Officer Castillo is the white police officer whom Quan is accused of shooting and killing; he died on the night that he and Officer Tison came to Martel's house to break up a noisy party. Officer Castillo was combative and terrified of the armed Black boys outside of Martel's house, one of which was Quan. He pointed a gun at the boys and at Martel, ignoring Officer Tison's attempts to calm him down. Though Quan *didn't* shoot Officer Castillo in this moment, the novel never reveals who did.

Tay – Tay is Quan's counselor while he's in prison. She's a Black woman and is much easier for Quan to connect with than his last white counselor was. This is in part because she seems genuinely interested in helping Quan process his emotions and learn coping mechanisms to get him through his episodes. These episodes, Tay realizes, are actually panic attacks and are the result of clinical anxiety and PTSD. She also identifies Quan's sleep paralysis (nightmares from which Quan can't wake up). Her willingness to diagnose all of this impresses upon Quan that Tay actually cares about him and empathizes with his situation.

Manny – Manny is Quan's cousin; he's deceased in the novel's present after being shot by an off-duty police officer during the

events of [Dear Martin](#). He's a year older than Quan and lives in a wealthy part of Atlanta. Quan only meets Manny once, when Manny is about 13. He seems comfortable in his wealth and in the fancy restaurant where they have lunch. However, Quan learns that there's more to Manny as he reads Justyce's Martin Luther King, Jr. journal (the basis for the story in [Dear Martin](#)). Manny seems far more relatable when Quan discovers that Manny was frustrated with how his white peers treated him and even resorted to violence at times.

Aunt Tiff – Aunt Tiff is Manny's mother and Quan's aunt, though he only meets her once. She and her family live in a wealthy part of Atlanta, and the one time that Quan meets Aunt Tiff she's well put-together and glamorous. Tiff and Mama are half-sisters, but they didn't know the other existed until Tiff's mother died and the women's shared father admitted to having relationships with multiple women. Mama seems to resent Aunt Tiff for having grown up with their father and for living a life that's so different from her own.

Gabe – Gabe is Quan's younger half-brother; they share the same mother but his father is Dwight. Quan takes it upon himself to care for Gabe, who's seven years younger, and Gabe's older sister, Dasia. Gabe idolizes Quan, which can be annoying—but the desire to set a good example for Gabe motivates Quan to try to do well.

Mrs. Pavlostathis – Mrs. Pavlostathis is an ancient, fiery Greek woman who lives next door to Daddy. She frequently insists that she is *Greek*, not white, and she is the only person who doesn't give young Quan strange or suspicious looks when he plays outside. When the police arrest Daddy, Mrs. Pavlostathis produces a document naming her Quan's temporary guardian and rescues him from the police.

SJ – SJ, which is short for Sarah-Jane, is Justyce's girlfriend and a fellow student at Yale who is well versed in the language and theory of social justice. She doesn't understand why Justyce has agreed to befriend Jared, a former high school classmate, to let him help with their mission to free Quan. Despite her distaste for Jared, she throws herself into helping the boys prove Quan's innocence. Her mom, Adrienne Friedman, takes over as Quan's lawyer.

Ms. Mays – Ms. Mays was Quan's most beloved teacher in middle school. Unfortunately, she went on maternity leave right before Quan took an important test, and when Quan was falsely accused of cheating on said test, his life went downhill without Ms. Mays around to support and advocate for him. Quan thinks of Mrs. Mays often and how his life might've turned out differently had she been around to help him.

Brad – Brad is a white boy in Black Jihad. He wears his hair in fuzzy locs that Quan and Justyce both think look awful, and he has a grill that spells his name. He befriends Jared when Jared accompanies Justyce to speak to Martel, and the two maintain their relationship as Jared and Justyce tutor members of Black

Jihad.

DeMarcus – DeMarcus is a fellow member of Black Jihad. He's a year older than Quan, and when they were in middle school, DeMarcus was expelled for an "anger problem." Years later, when Quan joins Black Jihad, he learns that the anger issues developed after DeMarcus's dad was killed by a cop during a traffic stop right in front of DeMarcus's eyes. Because of this, he clings to his pistol and always has it on him.

Marcus Anthony Baldwin Sr. – Attorney Baldwin is the local DA, so he's responsible for overseeing Quan's case. He's tall, stately, and Black—so when Justyce meets him, he's instantly in awe and sees him as something of a role model. Attorney Baldwin seems quietly proud to see Justyce, a young, Black, future lawyer in his office, so he encourages Justyce to voice his opinions and advocate for Quan.

Officer Garrett Tison – Officer Tison is the police officer who shot and killed Manny in [Dear Martin](#). He was Officer Castillo's partner and appears in one of Quan's flashbacks. Officer Tison was there the day that Officer Castillo was shot and attempted unsuccessfully to coax his partner into putting his gun down. In *Dear Justyce*, Officer Tison is deceased; he was killed while in prison.

John Mark – John Mark serves as Quan's lawyer for a short time. He's young and inexperienced; Quan's is the first case that Mark will handle on his own. Though Mark is bright and attempts to connect with Quan, his overtures are unwittingly offensive and therefore tend to fall flat. Quan also takes offense to Mark's lack of curiosity about Quan's perspective on things; Mark takes everything written in Quan's file as gospel. At Justyce's prodding, Quan fires Mark.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Roosevelt Justyce's racist roommate at Yale. Roosevelt is privileged but unhappy.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



CHOICES VS. FATE

Dear Justyce follows an African American teenager named Quan, charting his trajectory from a gifted student to a gang member and a criminal who's incarcerated for shooting a police officer. The novel mostly takes the form of flashbacks charting how Quan ended up in this place, interspersed with letters that Quan writes to his

friend Justyce. The two friends had similar upbringings as Black boys in a poor Atlanta neighborhood, but while Quan is now in prison, Justyce is a prelaw student at Yale. The book suggests that Justyce's life trajectory is the exception, not the rule, for Black kids in America. It's far more likely, the book bleakly suggests, that Black kids who battle poverty, violence, and systemic racism in childhood will end up on a similar life path as the incarcerated Quan. So while many of Quan's caseworkers and counselors hold that it was Quan's poor choices that led him here, the book suggests that for Quan and many poor Black kids like him, criminality doesn't feel like a choice.

Throughout his childhood, Quan feels powerless and like he can't make his own choices. An example of this is the first time Quan steals. Mama's abusive and domineering boyfriend, Dwight, took away Mama's EBT card (food stamps) and left the house—leaving Mama, Quan, and Dwight and Mama's two small children, Dasia and Gabe, with no money and almost nothing to eat. When Quan stole a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter from the local convenience store, it seemed like the only option to feed his family. Bad or illegal choices, in this sense, sometimes don't seem like choices at all to someone in Quan's situation—they're just what are necessary for survival. This sense of powerlessness is also what leads Quan to join the gang Black Jihad as a teenager. When the other gang members are the only ones in Quan's life who show him respect, care, and compassion, it doesn't feel like a choice to join up. It's what Quan must do in order to keep himself safe and feel a sense of purpose and belonging.

Many people in Quan's life, though, treat actions like stealing as choices. Before his arrest when Quan was 11, Quan's Daddy was a successful drug dealer who always said that he knew exactly what he was doing. From Daddy's perspective, dealing was a choice he consciously made, and he always knew he might have to "take responsibility" for it at some point—and indeed, Daddy receives 25 years in prison for dealing. Daddy's outlook, though, makes it seem to Quan as though choosing a job that "wasn't exactly 'statutory'" was a thought-out choice Daddy made after looking at "statutory" (legal) alternatives. Thus, even though Quan feels as though the fact that he lands in a juvenile detention center at various points throughout his teenage years isn't exactly fair (he notices that Black kids like him receive harsher sentences for minor crimes like the theft of small items), he nevertheless feels like he has no right to make excuses. Like Daddy, Quan thinks he has to take responsibility for what he did—even if what he did to end up in juvie was to steal a cellphone so his siblings could have shoes.

Ultimately, though, *Dear Justyce* shows that Quan really *didn't* have a choice when it came to committing crime; his circumstances made it hard to choose anything but what he did. Quan articulates this succinctly in a letter to Justyce, where he writes about reading the novel [Native Son](#). Quan describes the plot as follows: "Dude had all these obstacles he couldn't seem

to get past no matter how hard he tried, and it was almost as though falling into the life of crime everybody expected of him was (sorta) unavoidable[.]" For Quan, this is relatable—he goes on to write that similarly, he "can't really see where [he] could've just 'made different choices,'" even if he tried. In other words, Quan doesn't see how he was supposed to alleviate his family's crushing poverty and Dwight's financial manipulation without turning to crime.

This, of course, raises the question of where Quan and Justyce differ, given that they came from such similar backgrounds. When the boys are 9 and 10, they first meet inside the **rocket ship** structure at the playground. It's nighttime, and each ran away from home to escape a violent and frightening father figure. But this isn't all the boys have in common—while Justyce is winning academic prizes in the humanities, Quan has a gift for math. At this young age, they're both doing well at school despite less than ideal circumstances at home. But in terms of academics, this is where the similarities stop. After Quan's most supportive teacher (Ms. Mays) goes on maternity leave, a substitute wrongly accuses Quan of cheating on a math test and Quan's Mama believes the substitute. Without support at school or at home, Quan feels like there's no point in trying at school anymore. Justyce, on the other hand, has support from his mom, so he continues to succeed academically and even receives a scholarship to study at a prestigious prep high school. This allows him to earn admission to Yale after graduating. Overwhelmingly, *Dear Justyce* suggests that Justyce's success was a matter of luck—while Quan's trajectory is perhaps unsurprising, given his struggles with poverty, racism, and violence. With this, *Dear Justyce* suggests that Quan didn't really have a choice as to whether or not he ended up incarcerated. Rather, he's the product of a system that made crime his only option. And while the novel doesn't go as far as to detail the far-reaching structural changes that would be necessary to help kids who grow up in situations like Quan's achieve stability and success, it nevertheless insists that it's unfair to characterize incarcerated youth as troubled attention-seekers who choose to commit crimes for fun—criminality may seem like their only option for getting by.



JUSTICE, RACIAL BIAS, AND GROWING UP

Quan is only 13 years old when he's arrested for the first time, and he's 16 when he confesses to shooting a white police officer (a crime, readers later find out, he didn't actually commit). Throughout the novel, Nic Stone goes to great lengths to make sure that readers understand that Quan, his peers in the Black Jihad gang, and the vast majority of other characters in *Dear Justyce* are children, not adults, and should be treated as such. Because these children are Black though, others—especially those in the overwhelmingly white justice system—treat these children as

though they're adults starting at a very young age. Through Quan's story, the novel suggests that racial bias robs Black children of their childhoods and their innocence long before they're ready to grow up.

The structure and setup of *Dear Justyce* underscore that Quan, Justyce, and their peers are children. Chapters, for instance, have titles like "Snapshot: One Boy Alone in a Library (2012)" and "Snapshot: A Boy Meeting a Man (2016)." The boy referenced in these chapter titles is Quan, though chapter titles also sometimes refer to boys like Justyce or Justyce's white friend Jared, driving home the point that Quan and Justyce (who are 18 and 19 in the novel's present) are children in the novel's many flashbacks. This highlights and calls into question the cultural narrative that sees Black people in the United States (and Black males in particular) as adult and dangerous at a very young age. This line of thinking reflects widespread racial bias amongst white people, and it has no basis in reality—in other words, the novel emphasizes that a 12-year-old Black boy is a child, just like a 12-year-old white boy is a child. The novel also shows that Quan is a child through his love of the **rocket ship** structure at the local playground. For years, Quan goes and hides in the rocket ship so he can imagine blasting off to a place where he's safe and happy. This is something he does well into his teen years, illustrating how young and powerless Quan feels. Like many children, Quan has to turn to his imagination to protect himself from the harsh realities of the real world—and when the city removes the rocket ship from the playground, Quan feels like his childhood is effectively over.

Dear Justyce emphasizes that Quan is still a child to show how he's unfairly treated as an adult by law enforcement—and sometimes, he's not even treated like a human being. For instance, when Quan's Daddy is violently dragged out of his home and arrested one night for dealing drugs, Quan (who's 11 at the time) doesn't escape unscathed. Rather, a huge, burly police officer picks Quan up and squeezes him so tightly that he can barely breathe. In his terror and confusion, Quan screams and struggles—understandably, given that he watches officers knock Daddy out before tossing him into a police van. Further, this passage includes clues that drive home just how young Quan is—he's wearing Iron Man pajamas, and he's so frightened that he wets himself. It's clear to readers that Quan is a terrified little boy, not a dangerous adult who needs to be forcibly restrained. Later, as Quan begins committing crimes, the novel still encourages readers to see him as a child, not as an adult. During his first arrest at age 13, he steals a pack of playing cards simply because he feels like he needs to control some part of his life, and stealing allows him to have that sense of control. But the storeowner doesn't give Quan the opportunity to simply put the cards back and leave the store, something that would acknowledge that Quan is a child in need of guidance and possibly a warning. The storeowner instead calls the cops—and the cop manhandles and verbally abuses Quan

until, terrified, Quan wets himself again. The cop taunts Quan for acting like a scared little boy, but the novel suggests that that's precisely the point: Quan *is* still a child.

Dear Justyce insists that the criminal justice system robs Black boys of their childhoods, unlike their white counterparts. After his first arrest, Quan meets an older boy named Trey. At 15, Trey has been in trouble with the law for years already, so he's able to comfort Quan after the arrest. But Trey also articulates how unfairly Black boys like him and Quan are treated when they get in trouble. He describes how his Jewish lawyer told him about his son's upcoming bar mitzvah, which would symbolically make his 13-year-old son a man. The lawyer was "shook" when Trey asked if he'd ever tell his son what the top cop did to Trey upon Trey's arrest, that if "You wanna act like an adult, the law will treat your ass like one." To the lawyer, it's disturbing and shocking to think that the law would treat his 13-year-old son as an adult—while for Black boys like Trey and Quan, this is the norm. Years later, Quan sees the effects of this in the juvenile detention system. He writes to Justyce and tells him about how the Black and Latino kids in detention serve long sentences for minor crimes, like petty theft or even just knowing someone who's in a gang. But white kids who end up incarcerated—like one boy who murdered his sleeping father with a butcher knife—get short sentences if they're sentenced to serve time at all, and are assigned community service otherwise. Those white kids, in other words, aren't treated like adults in the eyes of the law. They're allowed to move on from their mistakes and resume their childhoods, while their Black counterparts will often end up imprisoned well into middle age. While the novel offers no tangible remedies for this, it advocates strongly for seeing Black children as children, who are just as deserving of compassion, kindness, and understanding as anyone else.



IDENTITY, SUPPORT, AND COMMUNITY

As Quan embarks on his letter-writing project to Justyce, he becomes increasingly interested in questioning his personal identity. With prodding from Justyce, his counselor Tay, and his tutor Doc, Quan—who's in prison after shooting a cop—begins to grapple with whether or not he's a killer and a bad person, or whether he's a victim of a racist system that guarantees his failure. Overwhelmingly, the book suggests that for a young person like Quan to be able to successfully tackle these questions surrounding their identity, it's necessary to have a network of people to act as sounding boards and provide guidance. Figuring out one's identity, in other words, isn't a solo project; it's one that takes community and support.

For much of his life, Quan doesn't feel like he has the power to dictate who he is or how others see him. After Quan's Daddy is arrested when Quan is 11, things begin to go downhill. Since Daddy always encouraged Quan to do well in school, it's hurtful

when Daddy seems to never return Quan's letters and continue to offer support after he's incarcerated (much later, Quan discovers that Daddy was writing regularly, but Mama's controlling boyfriend, Dwight, hid the letters). Quan feels alone and unmoored, especially when his favorite teacher, Ms. Mays, goes on maternity leave. Without support and encouragement from Daddy and Ms. Mays, Quan stops seeing the point in trying at school. To him, it isn't worth it if no one is going to support or believe in him. To make things worse, Dwight starts calling Quan "Delinquent Junior" when Quan is very young, baselessly branding Quan as a dangerous troublemaker. Then, once Quan is arrested at age 13, Quan experiences an identity crisis. He wonders, "Was that who he really was for real," and "Could he really *be* anyone different than who he was? Who even was he?" In Quan's mind, it seems impossible that he grow up to be anything other than the "delinquent" Dwight insists he is. And all of this sets the stage for Quan to feel helpless to do anything but continue with his life of crime until eventually, when he's 16, he's arrested for shooting and killing a white police officer.

In prison, Quan begins to rethink his identity with the help of his new mentors. One of the most important people Quan meets in prison is Doc, a Black teacher who teaches at the prep school Justyce attended. Doc takes over as Quan's tutor at the beginning of the novel and is different from any tutor Quan has ever had. In his letters to Justyce, Quan describes how Doc asks him tough questions about his identity—and most importantly, during a discussion of the novel [Native Son](#) (which is about a Black man who commits murder), Doc asks if Quan is a "killer" like the protagonist. Doc uses this question to pry into Quan's intent, wanting to find out if Quan purposefully shot Officer Castillo or if he was forced into making a bad decision. Initially, the question helps Quan see that he's a victim of a racist system and isn't evil—but later, when it's revealed that Quan *didn't* fire the shot that killed Officer Castillo, Doc's question takes on new meaning. Up until this point, everyone around Quan believes he is a murderer and, to some degree, even Quan seems to buy into this narrative. Voicing that he didn't commit the crime is the first time that Quan attempts to take control of his identity and dictate who he is: a boy who has made mistakes, but one who's innocent of the most egregious one.

In the aftermath of the revelation that Quan didn't murder Officer Castillo, the support of Quan's newfound community helps him transition from thinking of himself as a criminal to thinking of himself as an innocent young man. After reading Quan's admission that he didn't kill Officer Castillo, Justyce pulls together a team dedicated to proving Quan's innocence. This is no simple task: Quan confessed to the murder in part because the truth might implicate Quan's fellow members of the Black Jihad gang, which might then result in Quan's being murdered in retaliation. At first, Quan is angry that Justyce

shared information that was supposed to be kept secret. But what bothers and frightens Quan even more is that if Justyce successfully proves Quan's innocence, Quan will have to completely rethink his identity. By this point, Quan has spent almost two years in prison, being told that he's a bad person who needs to prepare to be in prison for the next decade.

But ultimately, thanks to the support of his community, Quan is acquitted and released from prison, while both Justyce and Doc remain important friends and allies. By the end of the novel, Quan seems well adjusted to his new life. By this point, he understands how imperative to have a robust, caring community to support him—he ended up in prison because he felt alone, and now he has people who will hold him accountable and expect good behavior.

Even though Quan gets a happy ending, Stone makes it clear in her author's note that the support system she portrays is the most unrealistic part of the entire book. In Georgia, where the novel takes place, inmates are limited to sending two postcards per week, so Quan wouldn't have been able to send Justyce the lengthy private letters that he does in the novel. Further, she notes that it's unlikely in real life that Quan would've had the quality caseworker, attorney, counselor, and teacher he does in the novel—and since inmates' visitors are limited to legal counsel and family, a real-life Quan wouldn't have been able to see someone like Justyce in person at all. With this, the book makes the case that a strong and unified support system is essential for people to figure out who they are and be the best person they can be—but unfortunately for incarcerated young people like Quan, this becomes an almost impossible task.



FAMILY, LOYALTY, AND BELONGING

It's a major turning point for Quan when he joins the local gang known as the Black Jihad. The gang offers Quan something he hasn't experienced before: a sense of belonging and the knowledge that, no matter what happens, someone will always be there to come to his rescue. By comparing Quan's experiences with his biological family and those with his chosen family members in Black Jihad, the book shows how dangerous or unreliable family structures can push kids like Quan to look for safety and a sense of belonging elsewhere, sometimes in the wrong places.

Though Quan loves his biological family, his family fails to be loyal and caring—two things the novel suggests are essential for a child's development and sense of security. As a young child, Quan gets loyalty and care from Daddy, with whom he spends his weekends. Daddy encourages him to be the best he can be. But during the weeks, Quan lives with Mama. This situation isn't nearly as positive, as Mama's boyfriend, Dwight, is physically abusive. To young Quan, it's obvious that all his family's problems stem from Dwight—but yet, Mama won't leave him. While there are certainly a variety of legitimate reasons domestic abuse victims don't or can't leave their

abusers, in Quan's mind, it seems simply as though Mama chooses to be loyal to Dwight over Quan. In the years after Daddy gets arrested and Dwight moves in with Mama, Quan feels less and less like his family supports him. It's devastating when, after earning 98% on an important math test, a substitute teacher falsely accuses Quan of cheating—and Mama believes the substitute's version of events. This impresses upon Quan that no one at home is going to show him loyalty.

Starved for support, Quan latches onto an older boy named Trey and finds the sense of loyalty he's been missing. In the aftermath of Quan's first arrest, Mama stops speaking to him and Quan's younger half-siblings begin to treat him with fear and suspicion. Thus, when Trey approaches Quan at the local park, Quan attaches himself to the older boy who can empathize with his experiences at home and of being arrested. The narration makes it clear that, at this point, Quan is vulnerable—he needs someone to listen to him and see that he's valuable. And because Trey is the one to step into that role of an empathetic mentor, Quan feels a sense of loyalty to Trey that later leads him into trouble.

Quan's loyalty to Trey leads directly to his involvement with Black Jihad, a local gang. It's important to note that Quan doesn't necessarily support Black Jihad's aims of dealing weapons. His interest in the gang lies not in its illicit activities, but in the social support it offers him. For instance, Black Jihad's leader, Martel, is the first person in years to recognize Quan's aptitude for math. Quan soon finds himself counting money and performing accounting duties, which makes him feel appreciated and proud. Martel also takes it upon himself to have Dwight murdered as soon as he realizes that Quan and Quan's family are living in an unsafe situation—he tells Quan that "The safety of our members and their families is one of the highest priorities of this organization. Any person or thing threatening that safety will be swiftly taken care of." But though Quan feels a rush of emotion at being one of "[Martel's] guys," he's also fully aware that Dwight's murder means that Quan can never leave Black Jihad. If Quan is going to be appropriately loyal to Martel and the gang, he has to repay them for Dwight's murder with his continued participation and loyalty—something that looks increasingly dangerous the more involved Quan gets.

Ultimately, while the gang does provide Quan with a sense of loyalty and belonging, the novel shows that this is a particularly toxic and dangerous form of loyalty. Indeed, Quan goes to prison for the crime of shooting a police officer, Officer Castillo—a crime that Quan didn't actually commit. But his loyalty to Black Jihad means that Quan can't tell the truth. Telling the truth would put the gang member who actually killed Officer Castillo in prison, and this offense would cause the gang to turn against Quan and almost certainly kill him. But even after Justyce is able to prove Quan's innocence without implicating anyone else, Quan still feels stuck because of his

financial debts to Martel and the gang. He knows that he'll have to pay Martel back for the groceries, gas, and medical appointments that Martel covered for Quan's family while Quan is in prison. In this sense, Quan sees that Black Jihad has been loyal to him and his family and is therefore perhaps still worthy of some measure of loyalty in return—so even if Quan did want to leave the gang, he sees no way of doing so.

Quan is ultimately able to escape the gang thanks to the work of his other friends. Justyce is able to negotiate Quan's freedom from Black Jihad by promising that Doc will tutor the young gang members, and that Quan will pay back his debts. True to his word, Martel serves Quan with a bill at the end of the novel—and knowing that his life depends on this one expression of loyalty and trust, Quan dutifully sends Martel checks every few weeks. But Martel never cashes the checks. With this, *Dear Justyce* offers the possibility that Martel himself recognizes the toxicity of gang affiliation. He recognizes, in other words, that he *could* keep Quan trapped for the rest of his life by taking Quan's money—but instead, he chooses to show Quan care and support by quietly allowing Quan to not pay up. While Martel might not be able to totally change the way that Black Jihad works, he can make it so that one former member can find a sense of belonging elsewhere after getting out.



SURVIVAL, POVERTY, AND VIOLENCE

While Nic Stone criticizes the school and justice systems in *Dear Justyce*, she also makes the case that it's not just the school, prison, and legal systems that are to blame for Quan's failure to succeed by doing well in school, attending college, and landing a job. Rather, these systems exacerbate existing issues that Quan faces, such as growing up in poverty and being surrounded by domestic violence. With this, the novel proposes that growing up surrounded by violence and poverty necessarily makes survival a child's primary concern, leaving them with little time or energy to focus on school or work.

For much of his childhood, Quan doesn't have a safe place to live. Quan's parents separated some time before the novel begins and by the time Quan is nine, he spends weekends with Daddy in the suburbs and weekdays with Mama. Mama's boyfriend Dwight (and the father of Quan's younger half-siblings, Dasia and Gabe) doesn't live with the family full-time, but when he's around he's violent and unpredictable—to the point that Quan hides his younger siblings in his closet to protect them from physical harm every time Dwight goes on one of his rampages. Because of this, Quan lives in fear. He never knows when Dwight will appear, or how damage he'll do when he does show up. Following Daddy's arrest for drug-dealing, Dwight moves in with Mama and the kids full-time, making the situation at home even more dangerous for the family. In addition to his domineering physical violence, Dwight also takes control of the family's finances. He starts charging

family members—even the kids—money for minor transgressions (such as Quan stepping on the squeaky spot on the floor) and steals Mama’s EBT card (food stamps). His beatings also make it impossible for Mama to hold down a job, since he often hurts her badly enough to render her unable to work or unwilling to be seen covered in bruises. In this way, Dwight renders the parental figures in Quan’s life unreliable and unsafe, forcing Quan to look elsewhere for safety and support.

The result of this fear, violence, and poverty is that Quan turns to crime to support his family. Quan quickly realizes that stealing is the only way to keep his family afloat in light of Dwight’s manipulation. Stealing food doesn’t require cash or the EBT card, while stealing items to sell—like cell phones—provides Quan with cash that he can keep hidden from Dwight. When it seems like there are no other options for Quan, crime starts to look necessary. But ultimately, these thefts land Quan in juvenile detention, where it’s impossible for him to support his family. And worst of all, after Quan’s first arrest, Mama begins to treat Quan coldly and as though he’s dangerous. With this, Mama makes Quan feel increasingly alone and as though it’s impossible to help his family—his efforts will only get him in trouble, either with Mama and her lack of appreciation or with the law.

Survival is only possible, the novel suggests, in the absence of fear, violence, and poverty. It’s possible to take issue with the novel’s neat ending (Quan is acquitted and Mama moves the family to the suburbs, several years after members of Black Jihad murdered Dwight), but it nevertheless shows what’s possible when money and fear of violence are no longer pressing issues. With Dwight murdered and therefore not in the picture, Mama is able to recover fully from her injuries and hold down a job that allows her to support two kids in the suburbs. With the high school diploma he earned in prison and his new job working for Doc’s tutoring service, Quan is able to help support the family financially too. The novel implies that this happy outcome is rare. But Quan’s relaxed, hopeful, and joyful demeanor at the end of the novel nevertheless makes it clear that his run-ins with the law were only symptoms of the deeper issues in his life. Instead, it was poverty and a dangerous home life that made it impossible to get ahead.

and shiny—which isn’t all that different from nine-year-old Quan. At this point, he’s a young kid poised for success, as he’s doing well in school and has the support of his Daddy. And in tough times—like when Dwight abuses Mama and threatens Quan, Dasia, or Gabe with violence—the rocket ship provides Quan a place to escape. In the ship, Quan can imagine blasting off somewhere happy and safe. The fact that he’s able to do this suggests that, at this age, Quan still has hope for his future. He still believes that if he dreams hard enough, he can have as bright of a future as Daddy says he does.

However, like Quan, the rocket ship struggles from the beginning. It soon becomes a favored spot of drug users or couples looking for a private spot to have sex, so much of Quan’s time at the rocket ship includes carefully cleaning up hypodermic needles and used condoms. Around this time, Daddy is arrested and things begin to go downhill for Quan. With Daddy gone and Mama busy dealing with Dwight’s abuse, Quan feels unsupported; he begins to act out and stops trying so hard to succeed in school. In the days after his first arrest, Quan escapes to the rocket ship. But it’s there that Quan meets Trey, the older boy who ushers Quan into premature adulthood by convincing him to join the Black Jihad gang.

In the days after Dwight’s death, Quan discovers that the rocket ship has been removed from the park. Seeing its absence makes it clear to Quan that his childhood is permanently over. With the rocket ship gone, there’s nothing now to facilitate Quan’s imaginings of flying away to a better place or a better life. This is especially true since he knows that Martel, a fellow gang member, was the one who had Dwight murdered as a favor to Quan and his mother. The rocket ship’s absence, then, seems fitting: Quan is stuck in the Black Jihad gang with no way of escape, even an imaginary one, because he now owes Martel a major debt for getting rid of Mama’s abuser. In this way, Quan’s childhood effectively ends, and he feels like what comes next—being incarcerated—is inevitable.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Crown Books edition of *Dear Justyce* published in 2020.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE ROCKET SHIP

The rocket ship structure at the local park symbolizes Quan and his hopes for the future.

When the novel opens, the park and the rocket ship are new

Chapter 1: Doomed Quotes

☞ His foot hit [a cup of ginger ale] as the officer with his dumb, muscly arm crushing Quan's rib cage carried Quan through the kitchen like Quan was some kind of doll baby.

The sudden freezing air as Quan was whisked outside in his thin Iron Man pajamas with no shoes or jacket...and the subsequent strange warmth running down Quan's legs when he saw Just. How. Many.

Police cars.

There were.

Outside.

Related Characters: Daddy, Quan Banks

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15-16

Explanation and Analysis

The Quan of the novel's present is dreaming about the night that Daddy was arrested, which happened back when Quan was 11. In addition to violently arresting Daddy, a cop also picked up Quan—who'd fallen asleep on the couch—and carried him outside, seemingly for no reason.

The details and descriptions in this passage—like the superhero pajamas and the fact that Quan wets himself—clearly show that Quan is a child, whereas the cop is treating Quan harshly, as if he were an adult (and a criminal, at that). And along with this, it's also clear that even if Quan wanted to fight back, he has no leverage to do so. The cop makes Quan feel like a "doll baby"—that is, entirely powerless—and he's also surrounded by a staggering number of police cars and officers. In light of this, the book implies that the officer's treatment of Quan is particularly inhumane. He's not only treating a child like one might a dangerous, violent offender; he also seems unconcerned that he's frightening Quan or that it's too cold for a child to be outside without a coat.

It's also worth noting that Daddy is being arrested for dealing drugs. Quan never gives any indication that Daddy's dealing (while certainly illegal) included weapons or threats of violence. All of this gives the impression that just as the police overreact in how they treat Quan, they're also arresting Daddy with far more fanfare than is necessary. Between Daddy and Quan's treatment, the novel illustrates one way that implicit bias in law enforcement can play out. Because Daddy and Quan are Black, the police seem to view them from the start as dangerous and potentially violent, despite no evidence to support this assumption. And for

Quan, experience will alter his perception of law enforcement going forward and make every experience with a police officer terrifying, whether or not anything untoward happens.

☞ But then his lungs started to burn. Images of Dasia and Gabe popped into his head. He remembered telling Gabe he'd teach him how to play Uno when he got back from Daddy's house this time. Little dude was four now and ready to learn.

Quan's head swam.

Dasia would be waiting for Quan to polish her toenails purple. That was the prize he'd promised her if she aced her spelling test. And she did.

[...]

And Mama...

Dwight—

Related Characters: Daddy, Gabe, Dasia, Mrs. Pavlostathis, Quan Banks

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

Following Daddy's arrest, Daddy's elderly Greek neighbor, Mrs. Pavlostathis, takes Quan in temporarily and runs him a bath. In the bath, Quan attempts to drown himself. It's significant, though, that Quan chooses not to drown himself for the sake of his family members. A loyal person by nature, Quan can't fathom what might happen to Dasia and Gabe if he's not around to protect them, or how Mama would fare without Quan to step in and help out.

Most tragic here is what's implied when Quan thinks of Dwight. While Quan should stay alive for a whole host of reasons, it's thinking of Dwight's control and violence that spurs Quan's choice to live. Even though Dwight doesn't live with Quan's family full-time at this point (but does move in eventually), he still manipulates and abuses all of the family members. In doing this, Dwight makes Quan's home an unsafe place to live for everyone. While Quan acknowledges at multiple points in the novel that he's powerless to stand up to Dwight, he's also the one who steps in and hides Dasia and Gabe when Dwight goes on his drunken, violent rampages. Quan, in this sense, feels responsible for keeping his siblings out of harm's way.

So while Quan may be choosing to stay alive in this moment, he also acknowledges that he is trapped. Because of his

deep and enduring loyalty to his family, he doesn't feel like he can abandon them. This sense of loyalty and duty will only increase as Quan gets older—and it no doubt makes him a valued member of the Black Jihad gang when he joins as a teenager.

January 12 Quotes

☛ The minute that van drove away with him in it, I felt...doomed.

It's why I stopped talking to you. Everybody else too, but especially you. I woulda never admitted this (honestly don't know why I'm admitting it now...) but I kinda looked up to you. Yeah, you were only a year older and you were dorky as hell, but you had your shit together in a way I wanted mine to be.

I knew if I could just be like you, my dad would be proud of me.

Related Characters: Quan Banks (speaker), Justyce, Ms. Mays, Daddy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In Quan's first letter to Justyce, he describes feeling "doomed" when he saw the police drive away with Daddy after his arrest. When Daddy left, Quan's life began to go downhill in earnest. The fact that Quan pins his eventual decline on Daddy's arrest speaks to what an important figure Daddy was in Quan's life. Up until the moment of Daddy's arrest, Quan was trying his hardest in school (and succeeding) because he wanted to impress Daddy. So losing out on that supportive figure was a major blow.

But even more importantly, losing Daddy made Quan turn inwards and stop connecting with others. After losing Daddy (and, at around the same time, Ms. Mays, his only supportive teacher at school), Quan didn't feel like he could connect with others anymore, even kids like Justyce whom he looked up to. Some of Quan's unwillingness to connect with Justyce may have had to do with the fact that, as far as Quan knew, Daddy never wrote to him and continued to encourage him from prison (Dwight hid Daddy's letters from Quan). Without that encouragement, Quan may have decided that Daddy didn't care anymore and that it therefore wasn't worth even trying to associate with smart kids like Justyce.

Given the novel's insistence that positive connections are extremely important if a child is going to make good choices and be successful, it's possible to see that had Quan

remained friends with Justyce, he would've been more likely to remain on a path that would've made Daddy proud. But because Quan didn't think anyone cared, he instead felt like he shouldn't care either.

Chapter 2: Downhill Quotes

☛ Even at twelve, it didn't escape Quan's notice that the men in his mama's life—Daddy included—used money to get her to do what they wanted her to do. It bothered him no end. But he wasn't sure what he could do about it.

Which became a running theme: not knowing what he could do about anything.

So he stayed focused.

Related Characters: Quan Banks (speaker), Dwight, Daddy, Mama

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Following Daddy's arrest, Quan doesn't feel like he has control over much in his life—but he decides that if he "stay[s] focused," he can gain some modicum of control over what happens to him. It's significant that Quan recognizes how men use money to control Mama. Quan's family lives in tough, if not dire, financial circumstances. It's not too long after this that Quan attempts to steal a cell phone so that he can buy his siblings shoes, an indicator of just how poor his family is. But at this point, before Quan has turned to theft to support his family, he doesn't know what he can do about the injustices he sees.

Some of Quan's powerlessness comes from still being a child. At this age, he's not old enough or physically strong enough to either stand up to Dwight or take control of the family finances himself. He's not old enough to get a job, and he can't force Mama to leave Dwight, either. And though at this point, this powerless just "bother[s]" him, later, this transforms into rage—and the rage leads to theft and other illicit activities. Powerlessness, in this sense, is at the root of all of Quan's later issues.

It's also worth considering Mama's powerlessness. Throughout the novel, Quan sees her as something of an antagonist. When she works, she works too much and isn't there for him; when she's around, it's because Dwight has abused her to the point where she can't work and she won't put a stop to it. As a child, Quan might not grasp that Mama

may have been pushed into becoming his antagonist as an act of self-preservation. Dwight is openly hostile to Quan throughout the novel—and so openly supporting Quan may have put Mama at risk of further abuse.

“And best believe your father is gonna hear about this. Might even send him the evidence of your indiscretion.”
Quan could hear the paper crinkle as she surely held it up in the air. “Cheating. I can’t even believe you—”

And that was all he heard. Because in that moment everything crystallized for Vernell LaQuan Banks Jr.

It didn’t matter what he did.

Staying focused didn’t give Quan any control at all.

Related Characters: Mama (speaker), Ms. Mays, Daddy, Quan Banks

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

After Quan earns almost a perfect score on a difficult math test, he rushes home to show Mama—only to find that a teacher just called, accusing him of cheating, and that Mama believes the teacher. In this moment, Quan sees that he can’t control anything about his life. Prior to this point, “staying focused” had been Quan’s way of dealing with the trauma and powerlessness he felt after Daddy’s arrest. In his quest to stay focused, Quan studied hard for this math test and his hard work paid off. But when Mama refuses to listen to Quan and seems to not have questioned the cheating accusation, Quan feels he has no choice but to accept that he’s powerless.

While Mama may be caring for Quan in a very basic sense by feeding and clothing him, she doesn’t make Quan feel like he matters at all to her. Quan seems to imply that if he’d been talking to Daddy, or if Ms. Mays, his previous math teacher had been around, they would’ve asked him about what happened rather than accuse him outright of cheating. That would’ve given Quan a chance to defend himself. Even more importantly, though, it would’ve shown him that the adults in his life trust him. Right now, every adult in his life is telling him that they don’t trust him—even though he’s shown himself to be trustworthy thus far, they don’t expect him to be honest. When it seems like nobody trusts him or thinks highly of him anymore, Quan decides that he doesn’t have any power.

February 8 Quotes

“Dude had all these obstacles he couldn’t seem to get past no matter how hard he tried, and it was almost as though falling into the life of crime everybody expected from him was (sorta) unavoidable? I know it probably sounds crazy to an upstanding young gentleman such as yourself, but for real: based on the systems in place—the “institutions of oppression,” as my former mentor, Martel, would say—homie’s situation and how he ended up kinda seemed like destiny.”

Related Characters: Quan Banks (speaker), Martel, Justyce

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In one of his early letters to Justyce, Quan describes the plot of the novel *Native Son* and explains that he found the novel relatable, even though the events of *Native Son* take place in the 1930s. *Native Son* is an important book for Quan because it gives him a way to think about the “institutions of oppression” that oppress *Native Son*’s protagonist, Quan himself, and other young Black men who also grow up in poverty and surrounded by violence. Prior to reading *Native Son*, it doesn’t seem as though Quan has truly put together that he’s not the only one who feels like he’s been set up for failure. Indeed, Quan sees himself as a failure because of the choices he made—rather than a person who didn’t receive the support or encouragement he needed, and so ended up committing crimes out of necessity.

What Quan learns from *Native Son* forms the basis of his questions of whether he was destined to end up in prison, or whether he chose a path that landed him there. Overwhelmingly, the novel suggests that, for Quan, prison was a sort of destiny because of the struggles he faced early on in life. Quan was a victim of poverty, which led him to steal both food and money with which to buy food. He was a victim of domestic violence, which meant that he didn’t have access to a safe or stable home life. Perhaps most importantly, after Daddy’s arrest, Quan didn’t have adults who would advocate for him or push him onto the right path. In this way, Stone makes the case that Quan certainly made choices that led him to prison—but Quan didn’t necessarily feel like he had a choice. Instead, he was just doing what he needed to do in order to survive.

Chapter 3: Disrespect Quotes

☝ So he told Mama—who for the first time wasn't healing from a COAN encounter—that he was going out.


And he headed to his former favorite playground place.

Stepping over the latest evidence of unsavory activity inside his rocket ship (at least there wouldn't be any babies or diseases?), Quan climbed up to the observation deck. Largely to hide himself from anyone who might take issue with/make fun of an almost-thirteen-year-old hanging out in the grounded space vessel.

But once he got up there, Quan relaxed so much, he fell asleep.

Related Characters: Quan Banks, Mama, Dwight

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

To cope with Dwight's abusive and controlling behavior, Quan escapes to the rocket ship structure at his playground. "COAN" refers to "Count Olaf Ass Negro," which Quan has taken to calling Dwight in his head—Count Olaf is the antagonist of Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* novels, and he manages to find a new way to be horrible in each installment, just like Dwight.

The condom that Quan finds in the rocket ship suggests that while Quan thinks of the rocket as a safe space, it might not be as safe as he thinks. In turn, this idea encapsulates Quan's childhood as a whole. Quan talks about himself in reference to the playground at several points, and like the playground, he wants to see himself and his childhood as fun, bright, and full of hope. Finding the condom—representative of sex, adulthood, and maturity—implies that adulthood is coming for Quan far sooner than it should.

But the fact remains that Quan is still a child who just wants to feel safe. So it's not surprising that he falls asleep in the rocket ship, one place where he does feel safe—Dwight never seems to come to the park, after all. But given that Quan just found a condom in the rocket and has, in the past, found needles and evidence of drug deals, it's possible that the rocket ship isn't the safe space Quan wants it to be. This mirrors the way that, throughout the novel, Quan is lulled into a false sense of security because something reminds him of a better time in the past. He joins the Black Jihad gang, for instance, in part because Martel uses the same scent diffuser that Quan's favorite middle school teacher

did—and that made Martel seem trustworthy. Quan's sense of what's safe or positive, in short, has been warped by the dangerous environment in which he's growing up.

Chapter 4: Defiance Quotes

☝ He locked eyes with the cop, and the Bad (Dad) Night washed over him, and his chest locked up

the way it had when kid-snatcher cop had Quan's scrawny eleven-year-old torso wrapped in that death grip.

Wasn't the best time for it either. Swole Cop took Quan's inability to answer questions—

We got a problem here, son?

You hear me talkin' to you?

So you're a tough guy then?

Not gonna answer my questions?

—as an act of defiance.

Quan found air the moment Swole Cop's ham-ish hand locked around Quan's (still scrawny) upper arm in a death grip.

Related Characters: Daddy, Quan Banks

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

When the cop arrives to deal with Quan, who attempted to steal a deck of playing cards from a convenience store, Quan can't speak—and as the book later pieces together, it's because he's experiencing a panic attack. The idea that the "Bad (Dad) Night" is "wash[ing] over him" suggests that the memories of that night are taking over and making it impossible for Quan to deal with the situation in front of him. Quan is later diagnosed with clinical anxiety, PTSD, and panic attacks, and his panic is triggered when he experiences situations that remind him of the night Daddy was arrested. This definitely qualifies—he's face to face with a cop who is using excessive force on Quan, who has committed a minor and non-violent crime.

But it's also worth keeping in mind throughout this conversation that Quan is a child. He's only 13; his arm is "still scrawny," a reference to the fact that he's barely started to physically mature. Quan goes on, moments later, to wet himself out of fear and then cry. While the cop has no way of knowing that he himself is a trigger for Quan's panic

attacks, the book frames it as inhumane that he'd speak to a 13-year-old who stole a pack of cards this way. The cop refuses to see Quan as a human child in need of compassion and possibly a warning, a reflection of the cop's cruelty.

☛☛ "Delinquent Junior,"

Dwight had been calling him for years.

Was that who he was for real?

There was no denying the impulse to take what wasn't his. Was the D in his DNA for *delinquent*? The Jr. shorthand of "Junior" for *just repeating*?

Maybe Daddy had been wrong. Ms. Mays too.

There was no way out.

No way up.

Maybe a way *through*...but he had no idea what to.

Could he really *be* anyone different than who he was?

Who even *was* he?

Related Characters: Ms. Mays, Daddy, Dwight, Quan Banks

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Quan is sitting in the police station after his first arrest. He was arrested for stealing a pack of playing cards and now, he wonders if Dwight is correct and Quan really is a delinquent. That Quan is thinking this at all shows how powerful the adults in his life are, even if they're poor role models or are outright abusive. Dwight has never had anything nice to say about Quan and has physically hurt him when Quan has tried to intervene with Mama. There's no reason that Quan should listen to anything Dwight says—and yet, he does. Even if Dwight is cruel and abusive, he still holds sway over Quan's life and can dictate how Quan thinks about himself.

Calling Quan by the nickname "Delinquent Junior" is a reference to Daddy, who's currently incarcerated for drug-dealing. And while Dwight might be wrong to insist that Quan is destined to go to prison just because Daddy was incarcerated, this does get at the idea of generational trauma. That is, because Quan's family has been ripped apart and denied opportunities, Quan doesn't have the support he needs—and is therefore more at risk of ending up in prison himself.

The unfortunate result of all of this is that now Quan doesn't think of himself as the successful, academic kid he was only a year or two ago. Now, if he can even come up with an answer to the question of who he is, he can't come up with anything positive. He's a "delinquent" and feels destined to repeat his Daddy's mistakes. Quan doesn't have the power to dictate who he is anymore—so he's at the mercy of whatever powerful adults in his life say about him.

Chapter 5: Delinquent Quotes

☛☛ They couldn't have known it (or maybe he could've?), but in that moment, Quan didn't actually want to be alone.


He needed a friend.

Someone who cared.

Because from the moment Mama and Quan had stepped out of the fluorescent-lit law-and-order lair into the crisp Georgia evening, it was crystal clear to Quan that she no longer did.

Related Characters: Mama, Trey, Quan Banks

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

A few days after Quan's first arrest, he finds 15-year-old Trey waiting for him in the rocket ship at the playground. He's thrilled to meet someone who seems to care about him, unlike Mama. This passage drives home how much young people in particular crave friendship and understanding. Quan had hoped that Mama might show him compassion or understanding—he was arrested, after all, for stealing a pack of cards in an attempt to control some part of his life. With this, the book makes it clear that Quan needs help and guidance as he manages his anger, not an arrest.


While Quan never learns why Mama behaves so coldly toward him, the fact remains that by treating him with the disgust that she does, Mama makes Quan vulnerable to finding support in the wrong places, like in a gang. As Quan notes later in a letter to Justyce, developing teens desperately crave the attention of someone who sees them—and while ideally those kids have parents or other mentors in their lives, Quan isn't so lucky. So because Quan is so desperate for attention and understanding, Quan turns away from Mama and toward Trey, a member of the Black

Jihad gang. Unlike Mama, Trey makes Quan feel like he does have a friend in the world, which makes the confusion and horror of his arrest easier to bear.

“It’s this ceremony where a young Jewish dude becomes ‘accountable for his actions.’” He used air quotes. “So he goes from ‘boy’ to ‘man,’ essentially. Lawyer homie is sitting there all geeked, telling me about it, and I’m thinking to myself: So your son is a grown man by Jewish standards, yet still gets treated like a kid. Meanwhile ain’t no ceremonies for kids like us, but if we get in trouble we get treated like adults.”

Related Characters: Trey (speaker), Quan Banks

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

During Trey and Quan’s first conversation in the park after Quan’s arrest, Trey tells Quan about what a bar mitzvah is. Through talking about the bar mitzvah, Trey takes issue with the idea that for white (and Jewish) kids, they undergo a ceremony that essentially turns them into adults—but due to the color of their skin, law enforcement would treat them like children if they were to get in trouble. But in contrast, Black kids like Quan and Trey are often treated like adults when they get in trouble, even though there’s no basis—symbolic or otherwise—for this treatment.

Given the descriptions of Quan’s experiences with law enforcement and Trey’s story of being cuffed and arrested at age 11, the novel offers mountains of evidence to support the idea that Black kids aren’t treated like children when they get in trouble. And this treatment has dire consequences. In short, it asks these children to grow up and accept adult consequences for childish actions long before their ready. And this is only one way that kids like Trey and Quan are forced to grow up too fast. Quan has been taking on the mature responsibility of protecting his younger siblings from Dwight for years now, and he’s also taken it upon himself to feed his family when Mama can’t and Dwight won’t. This treatment by police becomes just another way that kids who grow up surrounded by poverty and violence are forced to abandon their childhoods long before they’re ready. The fact that Trey and Quan are having this conversation in the rocket ship, meanwhile, reminds readers that despite having to take on these

responsibilities and act like adults, these two are still children. Their preferred hangouts are playgrounds, not adult spaces like bars.

What’s particularly striking about this passage is how unaware Trey’s lawyer seems of his hypocrisy. It seems to never occur to him that the very child he represents is, at a very young age, being treated like an adult for no reason other than the color of his skin. This drives home that this is a widespread issue of implicit bias; it’s not something that’s unique to law enforcement. The entire system sees Black kids like Trey and Quan as adults, which is what results in their harsh sentencing as though they were far older than they really are.

Snapshot: A Boy Meeting a Man (2016) Quotes



“You mad about it?”

This gives Quan pause. It’s a question no one’s ever asked him, case managers included. He meets Martel’s gaze. “Yeah,” he says. “I am.”

“Why? You did the crime, didn’t you?”

Now Quan gulps. Last thing he wants to do is start sounding like some of the dudes in lockup who constantly complained about how “unfair” the system is. “Always take responsibility for your actions, Junior,” Daddy used to say. “I know the potential consequences of what I do, and I choose to do it anyway, so if it comes down on me, I don’t get to complain.”

Related Characters: Daddy, Quan Banks, Martel (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

When 15-year-old Quan goes to visit Martel with the intention of joining the Black Jihad, Martel asks a question nobody has ever asked before: whether or not Quan is mad about having been incarcerated. This is significant in part because Quan answers affirmatively; yes, he is angry. And readers, who have been following Quan for several years now, won’t find this surprising. Quan began to act out years ago because he was angry. He stole the deck of cards that got him arrested for the first time precisely because he was angry. Quan is angry because he can control so little of what happens in his life—and because he has few or no healthy outlets to deal with his anger, he turns to crime. Stealing things allows him to feel a tiny bit of control over his life—and moreover, as Quan gets older, he steals most often to try and support his siblings when Mama can’t.

But throughout Quan's life, Quan has been told that if he breaks the law, he needs to be prepared to take responsibility for it. And as Quan remembers here, Daddy was one of the biggest proponents of this outlook. A drug dealer, Daddy eventually took responsibility for his actions by going to prison for a 25-year sentence. But as the novel shows, it's not particularly useful to tell people like Daddy and Quan that they need to just take responsibility for their actions. Quan, for instance, may have chosen to steal—but the novel underscores that he *didn't* choose to experience poverty, racism, and domestic violence, the things that pushed him to theft in the first place.

April 4 Quotes

☝ The reason I joined the Black Jihad: I needed backup. Support without judgment. People who hadn't—and wouldn't—give up on me.

I needed a family.

Related Characters: Quan Banks (speaker), Justyce, Daddy, Mama, Martel

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 93-94

Explanation and Analysis

In a letter to Justyce, Quan responds to a question Justyce asked: why Quan joined the Black Jihad in the first place. Quan's response spells out that, prior to joining the gang, Quan was alone and unsupported. Due to growing up in poverty and surrounded by violence, Quan slowly lost his support network. He lost Daddy to prison, Mama as she attempted to navigate Dwight's abuse, and mentors at school and at the library as people retired or had families. Essentially, as poverty, violence, and a racist criminal justice system picked off his support system one by one, Quan found himself increasingly alone—and so it's not surprising that he turned to a gang to find support and a sense of belonging.

This also feeds into Quan's question of whether he was destined to end up in prison, or whether he actively made choices that landed him there. Given how unsupported and alone Quan felt before joining Black Jihad, the novel suggests that he didn't have a real choice in whether or not to join the gang. He couldn't meet his normal, human desire for support and connection anywhere else; the gang became his only option. So in this sense, it's unsurprising and perhaps even expected that Quan would end up in

prison as a result of his involvement with the gang.

Snapshot: A Boy Alone on a Run-Down Playground (2017) Quotes

☝☝ Quan's gaze drops. Lands on a word carved into one of the bench's wooden slats in little-kid lettering:

F U K C

What are kids like *Quan* supposed to do?

He swipes at his dampening eyes and shifts them back to the black hole where his galactic getaway vehicle used to be.

Dwight is dead.

And Quan is here. Stuck. Grounded.

Forever.

No getting out.


No flying away.

No lifting off.

Because Dwight's death wasn't an accident.

Related Characters: Quan Banks, Martel, Dwight

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Following Dwight's murder by a member of Black Jihad, Quan goes to the park to think—but he discovers that his favorite rocket ship play structure has been removed. To Quan, this heralds the end of his childhood and the impossibility of a bright future, since now, Quan doesn't think he has any choice but to stay with Black Jihad forever. In order to repay them for getting rid of the biggest antagonist in Quan's life, Quan now essentially owes them that life.

The misspelled curse word impresses on Quan how impossible his situation feels. He is, after all, just a kid—he doesn't totally understand how the adult world works, just as the writer of this graffiti doesn't know how to spell an adult word. He feels poorly equipped to handle the mess in front of him, and the graffiti encapsulates this. Quan is trapped and knows this will only bring him trouble, even if he's too young to fully grapple with the consequences.

Then, the passage drives home how young and ill-equipped Quan is to deal with this when Quan laments the loss of the

rocket ship. Throughout his childhood, Quan was able to escape the horrors of his life by imagining that he could escape everything by blasting off to space. He needed the physical rocket ship to engage in this imaginative escapism—and even though he’s 16, he still needs that help. Quan is still a child and still wants to see the world like one, but his circumstances don’t allow him to maintain this sense of childlike innocence, wonder, and optimism.

In this moment, Quan’s childhood effectively ends, whether he’s ready or not. He has no choice but to move forward into the murky, dangerous adult world and try to navigate it the best he can, even though he’s still a child. The fact that he equates the end of his childhood with the removal of the rocket ship also shows that he thinks of his dreams of a bright future as being childish. Quan now has to face the real world—which, as he sees it, means that he has to give up on ever being more than a member of Black Jihad.

September 10, 2017 Quotes

☝☝ Doesn’t matter now. I chose my path. Though, real talk—and I promise this isn’t me making an excuse—I don’t really see where there was a different path for a dude like me. Just like there probably wasn’t a different one for a dude like you. Is what it is, right?

Related Characters: Quan Banks (speaker), Daddy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

Following Officer Castillo’s death, Quan knows he’s going to end up taking the charge—so he goes home to finish reading his newly discovered letters from Daddy and here, writes Daddy a letter in return. Quan is wondering whether he had a choice in how things happened, and he ultimately decides that he didn’t have much of a choice.

By this point in his life, Quan is already able to chart how exactly he transformed from an academic and promising young kid to a young man staring down a murder charge he doesn’t deserve. As he sees it, he didn’t have the support of people like Daddy to push him to continue with school, so he stopped trying so hard. He also had no choice but to steal, given that Dwight manipulated the family and took control of the family’s finances—so it fell to Quan to make sure his siblings were fed. And when Quan felt aimless and alone, Black Jihad came along to support him and give him a sense of community and structure. They earned his loyalty, and so

Quan knows at this point (or thinks he knows) that he has no choice but to repay that loyalty and take the charge. In his mind, all of this is to be expected, given the way he grew up and the way that he gradually lost support over the years.

Quan now suspects that Daddy didn’t have much of a choice either. Daddy was incarcerated for dealing drugs and is currently serving a 25-year sentence. And prior to Daddy’s arrest, he made it clear that he understood the consequences of what he was doing—and chose to do it anyway. But here, Quan suggests that Daddy might have ended up dealing for many of the same reasons that Quan ends up in prison. While the novel doesn’t go into specifics about Daddy’s life, it does mention that Daddy gave up a college football scholarship because Mama became pregnant with Quan and Daddy didn’t want to abandon her. Without a college degree, Daddy might not have had many other ways of making enough money to support a partner and child. Dealing may have looked like his only option to support his family. Both Daddy and Quan, in other words, were motivated by loyalty—but that loyalty got them in trouble.

April 24; Snapshot: A Postscript (Present Day) Quotes

☝☝ I guess I didn’t realize just how big of a difference it could make to have somebody really believe in you. I been thinking a lot about Trey and Mar and Brad and them. We were all looking for the same things, man—support, protection, family, that type of shit. And we found SOME of it in one another, but we couldn’t really give each other no type of encouragement to do nothing GOOD because nobody was really giving US any. Matter fact, we typically got the opposite. People telling us how “bad” we were. Constantly looking at us like they expected only the worst.

How the hell’s a person supposed to give something they ain’t never had?

Related Characters: Quan Banks (speaker), Justyce, Martel, Brad, DeMarcus, Trey

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

In one of Quan’s letters to Justyce, Quan lays out how important Martel and Black Jihad’s support was for him and all the other boys in the gang. This, Quan suggests, is why he

and the other boys joined Black Jihad in the first place: when they couldn't find support or encouragement elsewhere, Martel was there to tell the boys that they mattered, that they had power, and that they'd be okay if they stuck together. In this way, Quan suggests that he and the other members of Black Jihad aren't so different. They all came from situations where they felt out of control and alone. The gang gave them a place to find some of that.

Quan also dives into how other people's biases against people who are Black and/or poor makes it far more difficult to feel good about oneself. It's useful to compare what Quan says here about what people said about the gang members to how supported Quan felt as a kid, when he had Daddy and Ms. Mays to encourage him to do well in math. With Daddy and Ms. Mays around, Quan believed he was a good kid and could one day tackle the world. It was the support of those adults that made Quan confident that he could do well. In contrast, once Daddy and Ms. Mays were out of the picture, all Quan had were people telling him that he was a bad kid, that he was a delinquent, and that he was a career criminal. Over time, Quan started to believe this—or at least to believe that there was no reason to prove people wrong.

And without support and positive role models, Quan and the other gang members were unable to push each other to do anything different. Illegal and ultimately unhelpful behavior was, by the time they joined the gang, all they knew. They missed out on examples of how to be successful, and so they weren't able to set those examples for each other. In this sense, though Black Jihad provided Quan and the other young men with support and proof that they weren't alone, it also didn't give them the support they actually needed—that is, someone to tell them that they were good, that they could be successful, and that their existence is worthwhile.

Chapter 8: Deal Quotes

☝☝ But then they'd start searching for the gun that *did* match. Which could lead to trouble for everyone, Martel especially. Quan knew what contraband the guy had in his house. Which surely could lead to searches of Martel's *other* properties.

Quan couldn't let that happen. Especially not after everything Martel and the guys had done for him. He wouldn't've been able to live with himself.

Related Characters: Officer Tommy Castillo, Martel, Quan Banks

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Quan thinks back on the events that led him to confess to shooting and killing Officer Castillo. He makes it clear that what ultimately made it seem like he had no choice but to take the charge was his intense loyalty to Martel and to Black Jihad. Through this, *Dear Justyce* illustrates how gangs require their members to develop a sense of loyalty that's overblown and even toxic. In a healthier, more functional relationship, Quan shouldn't have to throw his entire life away by knowingly condemning himself to prison just to demonstrate his loyalty.

But even more than loyalty to the gang, Quan is motivated by his loyalty to Martel specifically. This shows that Martel has a firm grasp of what's important to his young gang members—and how to manipulate that for his own gain. Martel is the only adult in the last few years who has treated Quan like someone who's valuable and wanted. He's recognized Quan's gift with math and he removed Dwight from Quan's life when he realized the extent of Dwight's abuse. For the first time in years, Quan feels like he has purpose and support thanks to Martel. So for Quan, the thought of allowing the police to incarcerate Martel instead is unthinkable. Not only would it deprive Quan of the only person who seems to still support him, it would also deprive the other guys in the gang of their support network. With this, the novel shows again how fractured family structures push kids into finding gangs—and how that ultimately makes it seem like they have no choice but to end up in prison.




Chapter 9: Dawg Quotes

☝☝ He kept pushin'. *Come on, kid. We know you did it. Might as well just say so...shit like that.*

When he said *You know if we get one of your little buddies in here, we can get 'em talkin'.* You should just save 'em the trouble, that's when I broke. Just said

Fine, man. I did it. You happy now?

Related Characters: Quan Banks (speaker), Officer Tommy Castillo, Justyce

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

Over the summer, Justyce comes to visit Quan in prison so he can ask Quan about how his confession of killing Officer

Castillo unfolded. Though it makes him uncomfortable and anxious, Quan obliges and gives Justyce the entire story. Here, he describes his third and final time in the interrogation room, when the cop ignored Quan's request to remain silent and pushed Quan to confess.

What Quan describes shows that the cops who question him aren't actually interested in getting justice for Officer Castillo. If they were genuinely interested, the book implies, they wouldn't be badgering Quan to confess to a crime that he didn't commit—instead, they'd be gathering evidence and questioning more people. Their lack of interest in finding out the truth points to the distinct possibility that they see Quan as an easy target. This is likely in part because Quan is Black and they know he's involved with Black Jihad—so they may see him as partially responsible for Officer Castillo's death anyway, even if Quan wasn't the one to pull the trigger. In short, the cops target Quan because he's easy and because they already see him as a criminal. They refuse to acknowledge his humanity—that is, the fact that Quan is a young person deserving of respect and compassion, even if he's also made mistakes and done illegal things.

The cops also take advantage of Quan's loyalty to Black Jihad. Even if they're not totally versed in how Black Jihad works, the cops no doubt understand that Quan will probably do anything if it means he can protect his fellow gang members and especially his mentor, Martel. This is why they bring out the threat of finding one of Quan's friends—they seem to know that if anything will push Quan to confess, this will. Quan's loyalty, in other words, puts him at risk of manipulation and is a major reason why he ultimately ends up incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit.

June 1 Quotes

☝ She came in and we talked for a while and she asked me a bunch of questions the other dude never asked. And I'm pretty sure she actually believes everything I told her. Which was even a little bit uncomfortable despite the fact that I was telling the truth.

I just didn't realize what a difference it would make to be in conversation with someone who genuinely wants to keep me OUT of prison altogether. Shit made me realize that in all my years dealing with the system, I ain't never had an attorney who wanted to see me totally free.

Related Characters: Quan Banks (speaker), Justyce, Attorney Adrienne Friedman

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

Quan tells Justyce about his first meeting with Attorney Friedman, which is dramatically different than Quan's meetings with lawyers in the past. It's first worth celebrating that Quan is having this experience. Because Attorney Friedman believes in Quan's innocence and that he'll be able to make a difference in the world out of prison, she throws herself into proving that Quan is innocent and becomes an important member of Quan's support team. With this, the novel shows yet again how important it is for kids to have a variety of people in their network who believe in their worth and want to see them succeed. It's only with that kind of support that kids like Quan, who come from poverty and home lives rife with domestic violence, can overcome these obstacles and become the exceptional math tutor, for instance, that Quan becomes at the end of the novel.

But while it's important to celebrate this turn of events, Stone also intends to anger readers by driving home how ridiculous it is that Quan has spent so many years without this support. Quan implies that all the lawyers he's had in the past may have made a show of trying to reduce Quan's sentences, but none of them have attempted to keep Quan out of prison altogether. And this, the novel suggests, is a major problem. Indeed, it's a significant part of the reason that Quan is currently in prison for a crime he didn't commit.

Quan's negative experiences with lawyers in the past means he's not used to receiving this kind of support. He's so used to going it on his own that it's uncomfortable to have someone believe his story and believe in his goodness. Quan doesn't believe in his own capacity for good because, in recent years, no one else has acknowledged it in him or encouraged him to be good. In this way, Quan was doomed from the start.

☝ But he was telling me how growing up, he was this real good kid, until some stuff happened to his family.

So he went looking for a new family. Like a lot of us do. Same story with another dude we call Stacks. He's constantly talking about "this guy" he knows (aka himself) and how "he was workin' to become a musician," but "he was young and ain't have no guidance"; how "he just wanted a family so he went and found one," but then "he got in trouble doing family shit."

And that's what it comes down to. We find the families we were desperate for and learn different ways of going about things. Ways that sometimes land us in places/positions we don't really wanna be in.

Related Characters: Quan Banks (speaker), Justyce

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

In a letter to Justyce, Quan talks about why he and so many other young people turn to gangs: they want to be a part of a family and when their biological families can't support them, they have no choice but to look elsewhere. It's significant that Quan mentions two other young men as he talks about this phenomenon. Prior to this, Quan has remained convinced, for the most part, that he made bad choices of his own volition, and that his experience exists in a vacuum. But now, Quan sees that this isn't true. He's not that different from so many other young men who grow up in poverty or without a stable, supportive family.

Through this, Quan comes to see even more clearly that a stable family situation is imperative if one expects a young person to be able to make good choices. Parents, he sees, have the unique ability to point their children in the right direction—and, in parents' absence, those children go out looking for someone else to fill that gap. And when it comes to gangs, those parental figures (like Martel) may take on the work of teaching young people, but their lessons don't help those kids grow up and come of age on their own terms. Rather, gang affiliation puts kids at risk of coming into contact with law enforcement and getting them in trouble.

Chapter 10: Dasia Quotes

☝ "Gabe misses you," his mama says, and she might as well have dropped a bucket of ice water on his head.

He'd get up and walk away if not for the fact that it's his *mama*.

And beneath all his fury,
he still wants her to love him.

Related Characters: Mama (speaker), Gabe, Quan Banks

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

Quan struggles to get through Mama's first and only visit in prison. As he struggles to control his emotions during their conversation, he feels angry—but he still craves his mother's love and thus doesn't lash out at her. The fact that Quan still craves Mama's love and support speaks first to how hopeful Quan is at heart. He may have given up hope of making Daddy proud or of making more of his life, but he hasn't lost hope that Mama will, under the right circumstances, show Quan that he cares. Part of this has to do with the fact that, even though Quan feels like Mama abandoned him, he's remained loyal to her and to his siblings. When Dwight withheld access to food and money, Quan made sure the family ate and was clothed, even though Mama greeted his efforts coldly and unappreciatively. This is why Quan feels such a rush of emotion when Mama brings up Gabe. As Quan sees it, he's been loyal to Gabe for Gabe's entire life—and though Mama recognizes that her sons love each other, she's unwilling to acknowledge the ways in which her behavior has minimized Quan's contributions to Gabe's life.

The emotion in this passage drives home just how alone and unsupported Quan feels. He should've been able to rely on Mama throughout his childhood, but he couldn't. He should've been able to count on Daddy's support, but Daddy disappeared when he was imprisoned. And his feelings of abandonment and neglect have, in the last few years, morphed into anger—and with Mama now in front of him, acting like things are normal, it's too much for Quan to bear.

June 14 Quotes

☝ This is a real-ass [Catch-22](#). I read that shit a couple weeks ago. (HELLA trippy book.) The only way to stay OUT of what I really have no choice but to go back to is to stay IN here. But the longer I'm IN here, the more debt I'll rack up for when I do get OUT.

Kind of a no-win, ain't it?

Story of my damn life.

Related Characters: Quan Banks (speaker), Trey, Martel, Justyce

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

When Quan learns about Dasia's cancer diagnosis, he also learns that Martel and Trey have been stopping by to help Mama out and help with the bills. In Quan's mind, this is a problem: before learning this information, Quan may have been able to bring himself to try to walk away from Martel, thanks to the robust support network he now has. But this information makes Quan see that he can't actually do that—he needs to return to Black Jihad so he can repay his growing debts to Martel and the rest of the gang.

Underpinning this passage is the implication that, despite his sense of loyalty to the gang, Quan doesn't *want* to return to Black Jihad. He knows they're bad for him and will only get him into trouble again—and after spending so much time with Justyce, Doc, and the other people supporting Quan in prison, Quan is starting to see that he can be more than the gangster he used to be.

Quan doesn't feel like he can leave because of his intense sense of loyalty. Importantly, Black Jihad isn't just covering Dasia's medical bills and helping Mama get by—they also removed Dwight from Quan's life when Martel learned of Dwight's abuse. Thus, Quan sees that Black Jihad is responsible for Quan's improved quality of life at home, even if that life was one lived in service to the gang. In other words, it seems like Martel and Black Jihad are the people who have done the most to improve Quan's life, so he feels like he has no choice but to show his loyalty by going back.

Though Quan doesn't say so outright, he implies that being so indebted to Martel might make it seem worthwhile to stay in prison indefinitely. In prison, Quan won't get in trouble again and doesn't have to deal with the stress of running with the gang. But, as he notes, even this poses its own problems, as Quan would then have even *more* debt to pay off when he gets out of prison. In this sense, Quan once again feels like he's destined to fail. No matter what he does, he owes someone money or loyalty that's impossible to repay. To him, this seems like just the next thing in a long line of tragedies. He's grown up believing that things aren't going to get much better for him and it's naïve to hope things will improve—and this seems like more proof.

Chapter 11: Debt Quotes

☝☝ *What if it wasn't me? What if it was a kid*

LIKE you? One with your exact history?

Quan had to think then. But not for long. Because that answer was obvious too. "I'd still invest."

Invest what?

"Time. Energy. Resources..." The next word shocked him as it popped off his tongue; it bounced around the room in an echoish way the others hadn't: "Belief."

Belief?

"Yeah. Everyone should have *somebody* who believes in 'em. Like no matter what they've done. Somebody who won't give up on them."

Then:

"No strings attached."

He *did* get the point then. *HE* was willing to do for someone else what was being done for him. At no cost and with no strings. It was the right thing to do.

Period.

Related Characters: Quan Banks, Tay (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 225-226

Explanation and Analysis

In his head, Quan relives a conversation he had with his counselor, Tay. At this point, Quan is sleep deprived and too anxious to concentrate on his lessons, as he's recently received a bill from Martel for his debts—and that caused Quan to wonder why anyone would spend their time and money on him and what he must owe them.

As Quan thinks through this conversation, he realizes that it's not necessary to put a monetary value on everything. It may be true that Attorney Friedman and Tay, for instance, may be helping Quan as part of their jobs (in Tay's case) or, possibly in Attorney Friedman's case, taking Quan's case on pro bono. But just because they could earn money through helping Quan doesn't mean that's their primary objective. Rather, Quan starts to see that there's value in volunteering one's time and energy to support kids like him because those kids deserve the help and the support. And that, in and of itself, is more than enough of a reason.

Further, Quan is at the point now where he thinks that if he were in the position to help someone who was in his exact circumstances, he'd do it, no questions asked. This shows that Quan is becoming more mature and is starting to take

his mentors' examples to heart. Quan is starting to believe in himself and see that he has the capacity to act as a mentor, too. He's valuable and deserving of others' help, and if he can pay that forward by helping others, it would be a net gain to society. More than anything else, this realization answers Quan's earlier question of what he has to offer the world. Quan can offer mentorship and positive regard for other young people. He can show them what's possible and make it so they don't have to seek support from gangs, as he did.

Snapshot: Two Young Men on a New (To Them) Playground Quotes

☝☝ The two BIG boys—if you can even call them that—chillin' at the top of the climbing wall are wildly oblivious to the glares aimed at them from the actual children below.

Related Characters: Justyce (speaker), Quan Banks

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening of the final chapter, which takes place six months after Quan is released from prison, the book describes Quan and Justyce as “two BIG” boys and implies that really, they're not boys anymore. This is significant because this is the first time in the entirety of the novel that Stone allows readers to see Quan, Justyce, and the other young men she portrays as adults and not children.

At this point, both Quan and Justyce are over the age of 18—that is, they've both become adults in a legal sense. In the law's eyes, they are adults who can vote or even join the military. But the fact that Stone portrays Quan and Justyce on top of the climbing wall suggests that even if they have passed the legal threshold into adulthood, there's still parts of these two characters who are still boys—just big ones. With this, Stone's message is twofold. She completes her project of illustrating that Black children are children, just like white children are, and insists that they should be treated as such. But she also makes the case that turning 18 doesn't necessarily make a person an adult. Quan and Justyce, for instance, don't have the wherewithal to notice that they're being glared at by the kids below—a mark of their immaturity and persistent youth.

☝☝ “You miss [the rocket ship]?”

At first, Quan doesn't respond. Because he really has to think about it. His eyes roam the always-clean park space. Touch on his mom [...] his sister [...] his brother [...] his best friend right beside him.

Only thing missing is his dad. But they write to each other weekly, and Quan's been out to visit the old man a few times, so even that's okay.

[...]

He smiles. “You know what, man? I don't.”

“You don't?”


“Nah,” Quan says. “No need to go to outer space.”

[...]

“Everything I need is right here.”

Related Characters: Justyce, Quan Banks (speaker), Gabe, Dasia, Daddy, Mama

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

In the closing lines of the novel, Quan and Justyce chaperone Gabe's 11th birthday party and reminisce about the rocket ship play structure at their old playground. Quan now lives with Mama and his half-siblings in the suburbs, and he's reconnected with Daddy.

For much of the novel, the rocket ship represented Quan's hope that he was going to be able to escape the horrors of his lived experience. It's where he went to escape Dwight's abuse or the crushing sense that he wasn't going to live up to Daddy's expectations. As he got older, it became a place where he began to proverbially take off into adulthood, by joining up with Trey and ultimately becoming a member of the Black Jihad gang. Through all of that, Quan retained hope that he'd one day find himself where he is now—living happily, in control of his own life, with his family around him.

But for a long time, Quan did miss the rocket ship. The rocket ship disappeared around the same time that Dwight was murdered, so Quan equated the rocket ship's removal with the fact that he was stuck in Black Jihad. Now, though, Quan doesn't have misplaced gang loyalty holding him back, and he doesn't need to rely on his imagination anymore to craft a perfect life. Instead, all he has to do is look around at the community and family that already surrounds him. In this sense, Quan has finally come of age and made amends

with his blood family. He now feels supported enough in his relationships that he doesn't have to look to a gang—or to

imaginary flights to space—to protect himself.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SNAPSHOT: TWO BOYS ON A BRAND-NEW PLAYGROUND (2010)

It wasn't a hard choice for Quan to decide to run away. He feels bad about leaving Dasia and Gabe, but Quan is only nine and can't run away with a four-year-old and a two-year-old in tow. He doesn't think anyone's following him, but he takes a circuitous route in case Mama's boyfriend, Dwight, noticed Quan leave. Quan couldn't stay to watch Dwight leave bruises on Mama. And Dwight is too strong for Quan to intervene—the one time Quan tried, Dwight threw him into the dining room table. It was nearly impossible to hide the bruise from Daddy, who would surely do something scary if he knew what was going on. So Quan hid his siblings in the closet and left.

When he gets to the new playground, Quan heads straight for the **rocket ship** and wipes his eyes on his shirt. He's glad there's no one around to see him cry. The rocket ship is Quan's favorite place in the world, though he'd never admit it. Once inside the ship, he's so relieved that he sinks to the floor and sobs. Suddenly, a cough comes from above. A boy stares down silently and doesn't respond to Quan's hello. Quan is annoyed—this is the one place he can relax. He snaps at the boy, who looks down and picks at the skin on his thumbs. Quan does this all the time too and gets yelled at for it, so this makes him pause. The boy, who introduces himself as Justyce, says he didn't expect anyone else to be here.

Quan recognizes the name—Justyce is “that smart kid” who just won a contest. Justyce asks if Quan is going to make fun of him. Quan is confused, but Justyce explains that kids have been making fun of him since the school announced his win. With a shrug, Quan suggests the other kids are jealous. After a comfortable silence, Quan asks if Justyce is going to get in trouble for being out late. Justyce says he will, but his mom knows he'll come back. Quan sighs that he wishes he didn't have to go home. He starts to stop himself but remembers seeing women being laced into corsets in the movie *Titanic*. He feels like a corset is loosening from around his chest as he explains that Dwight is an “asshole,” even if he is the father of Mama's other kids. Quan hates Dwight for taking out his anger on Mama.

The novel's opening introduces its protagonist, Quan: a nine-year-old boy who feels extremely loyal to his family members, but who also feels mostly powerless to protect them. He also walks a fine line as he negotiates what seems like a complicated relationship between Daddy, Mama, and Dwight. This tricky dynamic seems to deprive Quan of support, since he doesn't feel able to approach Daddy for help with Dwight's abuse.



The rocket ship becomes a symbol for Quan and his childhood. At this point, Quan is doing everything in his power to preserve his childhood. In this instance, that means running away from the danger at home. As Quan runs away, he feels alone and unsupported. But finding Justyce in the rocket ship and pausing when he sees that he and Justyce both pick at their thumbs offers hope that Quan might be able to find a sense of community and support elsewhere.



The fact that Justyce fears that Quan will make fun of him for winning a contest implies that doing well in school is neither easy nor expected in the boys' community—and also that it's “cool” to underperform in school. So Quan's suggestion that the other kids are jealous is both kind and unexpected for Justyce, and it also begins to suggest that Quan has the capacity to be a good, supportive friend. This passage also drives home the importance of open, supportive communication. When Quan feels alone, he feels constricted, as though he's wearing a corset. But as he talks to someone about the things going on in his life, that constriction lessens.



Justyce says that Quan's homelife sounds familiar, explaining that his dad was in the military and has been "different" since he came home. Now he has "episodes" and throws stuff. Sometimes he hits Justyce's mom. Justyce wipes his eyes. When Quan asks if Justyce comes to the playground during the day, Justyce says he does "occasionally." Quan scoffs that no fifth grader uses the word "occasionally"; no wonder Justyce won the contest. He says he's going home to check on his siblings and that Justyce should check on his mom. An understanding passes between the boys. After Quan turns away, Justyce asks for his name; Quan offers his full name, Vernell LaQuan Banks Jr., but asks Justyce to call him Quan. The boys say goodbye and head home.

Hearing that Justyce's dad can also be violent impresses upon Quan that he's not alone in navigating domestic abuse. There's at least one other boy—and probably more—in his community who lives in a similar state of fear and dread that he does. But even if Justyce and Quan can't rely on their parents to support them and give them a safe place to live, their meeting and passing understanding shows that the boys can find companionship and support elsewhere, like in each other. Friendship, in other words, will become extremely important for these two, especially in the absence of supportive family.



CHAPTER 1: DOOMED

Quan remembers the night everything changed. He'd fallen asleep in front of *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* and dreamed that the evil Count Olaf looked like Dwight. Suddenly, a big boom jolted Quan awake and terrified him. Police officers poured into the house with guns. Quan heard thuds and Daddy shouting that he wasn't resisting. Then, all of a sudden, a cop snatched Quan and squeezed him so hard that Quan couldn't scream. That's how Quan feels now as he jerks awake at the Fulton Regional Youth Detention Center. He can't breathe. He wishes he were back in his big, comfy bed at Daddy's house. Unable to escape the dream, Quan sees the cops shoving Daddy out the front door. Daddy yelled at the cops to not hurt Quan.

The third-person limited narration in this passage provides an authoritative perspective on what happened the night Daddy was arrested. It makes it clear that the cops treated Daddy and Quan cruelly—especially since, at this point, Quan is only 11, and he's clearly not resisting or causing trouble. The cop who snatches Quan seems to be under the impression that Quan will cause trouble, which reflects the cop's implicit biases. It's also significant in this moment that Quan feels so powerless. As this passage makes clear, Quan is just a kid and his beloved father is being ripped away from him by cruel, violent officers.



The cop whisked Quan outside. It was too cold for Quan to be in just his Iron Man pajamas and the police cars were so terrifying that Quan wet himself. There were dogs and a helicopter. Cops wrestled Daddy into a van. Daddy shouted encouragement to Quan before police knocked him out and shoved him in. Quan screamed and kicked, wanting to believe that it was just a dream. He hoped that Mama would hear him and show up with Dwight, who could take Daddy's place in the van. Finally, an old woman screamed at the officer to put Quan down and to let her take him. It was Mrs. Pavlostathis, Daddy's neighbor. She gave the cop a legally binding document that named her Quan's temporary guardian in the event of Daddy's arrest.

By including details like the fact that Quan is wearing Iron Man pajamas and that Quan wets himself, Stone drives home that Quan is a child. He's a little kid who still sleeps in superhero pajamas and loses control of his bodily functions when he's frightened—and all of this makes the cop's treatment seem even more inhumane and cruel. Quan's fantasy of Dwight taking Daddy's place reiterates Quan's powerlessness. All he has is his imagination; he doesn't have the ability to make anything right in the real world. Instead, he has to rely on the kindness and support of others, like Mrs. Pavlostathis.



Mrs. Pavlostathis led Quan into her house, grousing about “the nerve of those whites.” He’d smile under other circumstances—Mrs. Pavlostathis is Greek, not white. She babysat Quan for years while Daddy made “emergency runs,” and she was one of Daddy’s clients too. Quan remembered Mama saying that all the white people in the suburbs would call the cops on Daddy one day. He wondered if that’s what happened and hated Mama for not being there for him. Mrs. Pavlostathis ran Quan a bath. Once in the bath, Quan let himself sink under the water as he thought about Daddy’s arrest. At first, it was easy to let the water envelop him. But then Quan remembered Gabe and Dasia. He shot up out of the tub, just as he shoots up now off of his bed. He knows he won’t die—he can breathe now.

When he considers Mama’s concern that suburban white people would call the cops on Daddy, Quan has to grapple with the fact that nowhere is safe. In Mama’s mind, the suburbs aren’t a safe place—there are people there who wish Black people like Daddy and Quan ill. But Mama’s house isn’t safe either, given the way that Quan has described Dwight’s abuse.



JANUARY 12

In a letter to Justyce, Quan writes that it’s weird to write an actual letter, especially to Justyce. When Quan woke up earlier, he saw the Martin Luther King notebook that Justyce left. He thanks Justyce for visiting and says the notebook was interesting—especially the info about Manny, whom Quan didn’t know well. Most surprising about the notebook was realizing that he and Justyce have a lot in common. Quan was struck by the line, “Those assholes can’t seem to care about being offensive, so why should I give a damn about being agreeable?”

Manny was Quan’s wealthy cousin who, in Stone’s previous novel [Dear Martin](#), was murdered by an off-duty police officer. As Quan muses that he, Justyce, and maybe Manny aren’t all that different, he realizes that racism affects Black people no matter how financially well off they are. Justyce’s line about being “agreeable” gestures to the idea that Black people in America face a double standard. White people are allowed to make mistakes or engage in offensive behavior—while for a Black person, something like that could land them in deep trouble.



Quan writes that his Daddy was arrested a few years after he and Justyce met in the **rocket ship**. Daddy got 25 years in prison. Reflecting on the terrifying experience of watching Daddy get arrested, Quan notes that he’s only been that scared one other time in his life. He really misses Daddy, especially since he just realized that today is the sixth anniversary of Daddy’s arrest. This also means that Quan has been in detention for 16 months. He doesn’t have a trial date yet. Though he tries to remain unaffected, it’s hard to ignore the awful food and how defeated everyone seems. He keeps wondering how disappointed Daddy would be if he knew.

The revelation that Daddy got 25 years in prison means that Quan will be without his father for another two decades. In this sense, it becomes clear that Quan has lost a major pillar of support and is still mourning the loss. While it’s unclear at this point why Quan is in juvenile detention (though readers of [Dear Martin](#) will remember that Quan killed a white police officer), Quan nevertheless shows that prison breaks a person down. Life is joyless and feels like a state of limbo—and, worst of all for Quan, he knows he’s disappointed Daddy by ending up here.



Quan notes that Daddy's job wasn't "statutory," but Daddy was insistent that Quan would do better. He'd even leave Quan at the library when he made runs (the head librarian was one of Daddy's clients). Quan used to love the Series of Unfortunate Events books. Daddy is why Quan ended up in the Challenge Math class with Justyce—but then Daddy was gone and things turned upside down. This is why Quan stopped talking to Justyce, even though Quan looked up to him. Justyce seemed to "ha[ve] [his] shit together," and Quan wanted to be like that. That would make Daddy proud.

In wanting "better" for Quan, Daddy implies that he wants Quan too have a "statutory"—that is, legal—job. And given what Quan has said about his love of Lemony Snicket's books as a kid and his mention of being in an advanced math class, it seems like as a young kid, Quan was incredibly bright and poised for success. But without Daddy's encouragement, things fell apart. Quan, for whatever reason, didn't feel like he could continue to rely on Justyce, even if Justyce was what Daddy wanted Quan to be. This passage speaks to the dangers of losing one's support network—for Quan, that's what made everything fall apart.



But seeing what Justyce wrote about being set off, Quan wonders if Daddy's attempts were pointless. At this point, it doesn't matter—Quan will probably get more time than Daddy. Maybe Quan won't even send this letter. If he does, Justyce had better write back.

Here, Quan wonders if there was any hope for him to do better than Daddy, given the circumstances. At this point, he begins to question whether it was fate that he's ended up in prison, a question he grapples with throughout the novel.



CHAPTER 2: DOWNHILL

Quan tries to keep it together, even though he withdraws a bit. He stays focused by controlling what he can and ignoring everything else. He cares for Dasia and Gabe, and whenever they go to the playground, Quan cleans nasty things out of the **rocket ship**. He reads A Series of Unfortunate Events books obsessively. The series gives him hope that like the kids in the books, he'll be able to escape everything crashing down around him. Unsurprisingly, Dwight moves in not long after Daddy's arrest. The only reason he hadn't already moved in is because Daddy said he wouldn't give Mama money if Dwight was around Quan. But now, money is tight—so Dwight offers to help with the bills, as long as he doesn't have to pay rent.

The descriptions in this passage paint a picture of Quan as a dedicated, focused, and community-oriented young person. He wants to make his neighborhood a better place for his siblings and does so by keeping the rocket ship clean, and he wants to help his family by taking on some of the responsibility for his younger siblings. And he's still looking for hope that things are going to improve—just like they do for the characters in Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events books. Dwight moving in complicates things, though. It makes his home life less safe and reliable, and it becomes clear that Dwight is financially manipulating Mama.



Quan overhears the conversation and, when it's over, he heads straight for the **rocket ship**. He kicks a hypodermic needle out, even though a little kid could find it. Later, he picks the needle up and throws it away. Even at age 12, Quan can see that the men in Mama's life use money to manipulate her. It bothers him, but he doesn't know what to do—so he just "stays focused." He stays focused when Dwight smashes things, when Mama asks Quan to get Dasia and Gabe ready for school, and when he notices the bruises under Mama's makeup. It works—Dasia and Gabe are fine. Quan is too, since he throws himself into school and wants to go out for football in a few years. Daddy never got to use his college football scholarship since Mama got pregnant with Quan and Daddy chose to stick around.

The idea that Quan can see the things that are off in his life but can't fix them occurs time and again throughout the novel. It drives home that Quan is observant and knows when things are going downhill, but he's powerless to do anything. Part of Quan's powerlessness stems from the fact that he's still a child. He's already mentioned that he's not big enough to take on Dwight and protect Mama, and he's not old enough to get a job and support the family financially. Despite being in prison, Daddy is still a major role model for Quan. When Quan thinks of football, he thinks of possibly earning his own scholarship as a way to show Daddy that sticking around after Quan's birth was worth it.



Then, a year after Daddy's arrest, The Math Test arrives. Quan is the only seventh grader in the Algebra 1 Challenge Math Class, which is difficult but not impossible since it's taught by Quan's favorite teacher, Ms. Mays. A week before the test, though, Ms. Mays goes on maternity leave. Before she leaves, she tells Quan that he's going to succeed—and Quan vows to prove her right. He studies and earns a 98% on the test. Thrilled and proud, he dreams of showing it to Mama and mailing the test to Daddy.

Quan sprints from the bus, knowing that Mama will be home (Dwight beat her up again last night, and she doesn't go out when that's obvious). But when he gets inside, Mama is upset. Quan can't figure out why, but then Mama says the school called. They informed her that Quan cheated on his algebra test; the teacher saw Quan looking at a classmate's paper. This is technically true, but the *classmate* was trying to cheat off of *Quan*. Mama won't let Quan defend himself and insists it's impossible he'd score so well, given his previous grades. Worst of all, Mama promises to tell Daddy about this. In this moment, Quan realizes that staying focused doesn't give him any control.

Quan's result on his math test and his respect for Ms. Mays illustrate the positive effects of supportive role models. With someone around to support and believe in him, Quan discovers that he can do great things. At this point, Mama is also still a revered figure in Quan's life, which is why he also fantasizes of showing her the test.



Quan might be able to study hard and earn good grades—but that's not enough when it seems like everyone is against him. The teacher clearly didn't think to investigate what he thought he saw, so Quan is now in trouble for a crime he didn't commit. And worst of all, Mama's choice to believe the teacher and invalidate all of Quan's hard work shows him that he can't count on anyone at home to believe in him. Quan seems to think that Daddy will believe Mama—and his disappointment will be the worst consequence of all.



SNAPSHOT: ONE BOY ALONE IN A LIBRARY (2012)

Quan is pushed over the edge when he discovers that his favorite librarian retired. Now, the lady behind the desk gives him dirty looks and makes regular passes by the castle nook, where he's reading an *Unfortunate Events* book. She acts like she expects him to steal the books. Annoyed, Quan leaves his book on the floor and walks out. At least now they have a reason to give him dirty looks.

The new librarian seems suspicious as to why a young Black boy would be hanging out in a library, betraying her biases against Black people. Based on her behavior, it seems unthinkable to her that Quan would be here just to read; in her mind, he must be up to no good. Now, the library no longer feels like a safe and welcoming space to Quan, so he loses yet another avenue of support.



FEBRUARY 8

Quan thanks Justyce for sending the stack of graphic novels featuring Black superheroes. He also thanks Justyce for his other "gift": Doc, who's now Quan's teacher. Doc was annoying at first, but he's pretty cool. He asks Quan to think about things Quan doesn't want to consider, like how the U.S. fails to uphold the standards it set for itself. Today, though, Doc noticed Justyce's Martin notebook and revealed that he used to teach Justyce and Manny. At first, Quan was upset—he'd asked Justyce to keep it a secret that his tutor quit. But then he decided to write and say thank you.

At first, Doc seems like just another nosy, annoying adult to Quan, but his redeeming quality is that he's connected to Justyce. With this, Quan begins to piece together a support network that seems genuinely interested in helping him and pushing him to do and be better. Quan also learns to trust Justyce, since he decides that it's really okay that Justyce told someone about Quan's tutor quitting. Justyce seems like he'll always try to help make things better for Quan.



Quan is also writing to share something he and Doc talked about earlier. Doc brought the book [Native Son](#) for Quan to read. It's brutal—it's about a Black man who accidentally kills a white girl and fabricates a plot to frame the girl's boyfriend. He's eventually convicted. But even though the story is set in the 1930s, Quan felt like he was reading something contemporary. The protagonist couldn't get past obstacles, no matter what he did, and it was almost unavoidable that he committed crimes. As Quan's former mentor, Martel, would say, the "institutions of oppression" made the protagonist's fate seem like destiny.

Quan and Doc discussed how Quan could relate to the story. Quan's ex-counselor, for instance, thought that Quan was just making excuses—but Quan can't see how he could've chosen differently. He tried, but it seemed impossible. The prosecutor even called Quan a "career criminal" after Quan was arrested the second time for stealing a phone. He intended to sell it to buy his siblings shoes. Quan has been thinking about Justyce's mentions of beating up white boys in his Martin journal. He wonders if those incidents were bound to happen.

When Quan brought this up with Doc, Doc asked if Quan thought the protagonist of [Native Son](#) was a killer. Quan acknowledged that the man killed someone, but calling him a "killer" seems like the guy meant to do it. Then, Doc asked if Quan is a killer. Quan tells Justyce he couldn't answer. He wanted to say no, but he also wondered if it's inevitable that he's a killer. All this makes Quan wonder how Justyce managed to succeed. When they first met in the [rocket ship](#), they had a lot in common—but they turned out so different. The questions seem pointless now, but Quan keeps thinking about them.

It's telling that Quan feels like [Native Son](#) could've taken place in his present day—this implies that, for Black men in particular, not a lot has changed in America as far as racial injustice goes. Quan sees himself in the protagonist, and because he's able to make this connection, he can start to think about the systems that caused him to end up in prison. In other words, Quan now sees that he's not an anomaly. He doesn't need to feel abnormal or like a failure, because he's not the only one.



In talking about his ex-counselor, Quan shows how the people who are ostensibly supposed to help him succeed fail to take into account the full picture of who Quan is and where he came from. The book shows that there's something seriously wrong if he needs to steal in order to buy his siblings shoes—and while Quan made the choice to steal, it might not have felt like a choice to him. It probably seemed like just what needed to be done to help his family.



Doc asks Quan if he's a killer, seemingly to pry into Quan's intent in committing the crime that landed him in this juvenile detention center (readers will later learn that Quan imprisoned for killing a white police officer). So essentially, Doc asks if Quan killed in cold blood—or whether he felt like he had to. Quan's inability to answer suggests that there's more to the story, but it's also telling that he thinks becoming a killer might be inevitable. This reminds readers of how powerless Quan feels. He doesn't even feel like he has the ability to stop himself from taking another's life. And given his own feelings of powerlessness, it seems even more curious that Justyce ended up in such a different place (Yale), one where he has power.



CHAPTER 3: DISRESPECT

The "First Time" Quan does "it," he, Dasia, and Gabe are hungry. Dwight has been living with the family for a year and a half, and Mama hasn't worked in four months. Quan knows she was fired for taking too many sick days. Now, Dwight withholds money for any offense, like disagreeing with him, moving things, or making noise. He doesn't want his kids spending time with "Delinquent Junior," but he also takes offense when Quan leaves the house to spend time alone. The lead-up to the "First Time" begins after Mama applies for "assistance." She received an EBT (food stamp) card the family can use at grocery stores, and she sent Dwight to the store with it. He then refused to give it back.

Dwight creates a home environment that's terrifying and dangerous for everyone—and it gives no one but him power. Mama no longer has the power to earn a living, and she perhaps doesn't feel like she can defend her children from Dwight's abuse given his proclivity toward violence. Taking away the EBT card cements Dwight's power over the family, as he now can control how, when, or even if the family eats. In this sense, Dwight controls the family's survival.



Upset with everything, Quan escapes to the **rocket ship** to relax. He accidentally falls asleep, and it's dark when he wakes up. He sprints home. Dwight is gone, but Mama's face is swollen and it doesn't look like she can use her arm. Quan apologizes, his guilt growing. In his bedroom, he finds Dasia cradling a sleeping Gabe in the closet. Dasia spits that she can go to her room now and hits Quan with her shoulder on her way past. He can barely handle how grown-up she is. Quan scoops up Gabe and climbs into bed with him.

Dwight is gone for more than a week, but Quan can't feel happy about it because Dwight took the EBT card with him. Dwight also managed to find Mama's meager stash of cash and left a note accusing her of hiding things. The first few days are okay, since there's a bit of food. But by the sixth day, things are dire. After Gabe goes to bed, Dasia settles on the couch and insists she's hungry. Quan goes to the local corner store, where the elderly owner knows Quan. The owner smiles and goes to the bathroom. Quan gulps, knowing the owner trusts him. But he quickly grabs bread and peanut butter. Dasia cries when she bites into her sandwich. The next day, Dwight comes home with groceries.

SNAPSHOT: TWO BOYS NOT SPEAKING (2013)

Quan has no idea what to say to his cousin Manny. They live in different universes. Manny's mama, Aunt Tiff, is Mama's older half-sister. They didn't know the other existed until Mama's mother died and their shared father came clean about having two families. When Quan goes with Mama to have lunch with Manny and Tiff, he looks anywhere but at Manny. The restaurant is fancy because it's on a river, and Mama offers to pay even though she can't afford to. Tiff insists that paying is the least she can do, which is true. She and her husband are rich—Tiff and Manny showed up in a Jag.

Quan wonders if Manny would leave if he knew that they barely have food at home, or the reason why Mama is wearing a long-sleeved turtleneck dress in summer. Would he leave if he knew Daddy is in prison? Manny would be shocked if he knew Quan stole things. His eyes would go wide if he knew that Quan started calculating all the things he could buy with just one of Aunt Tiff's sparkly rings.

The food arrives. Quan got a lamb burger and sweet potato fries without the fig jam and goat cheese, items that don't belong on a burger. Manny got asparagus and pink fish, which he ordered without looking at the menu. Quan can tell that Manny has been to this restaurant before, and Quan knows that it'll be his first and last visit. Both boys sigh, but they don't look at each other or speak to each other.

It's understandable that Quan would fall asleep in the rocket ship. It's where he feels safe—a sharp contrast to how he feels at home. But seeing what abuse Dwight carried out in his absence, Quan starts to feel like he can't ever leave home. He's trapped there because if he leaves, even worse things will happen to the people he loves. At least if he's there, he won't have to live with the crushing guilt of not defending his loved ones.



The book implies that Dwight is a skilled manipulator—it seems that he knows Quan won't even enjoy his absence due to feeling anxious about food. The note Dwight leaves also means that the family waits in fear, as there's no telling what Dwight will do to Mama when he gets back. In this dire, seemingly hopeless situation, Quan does the only thing he can think of and steals food to support the family. His desire to be independent and care for his family himself means that he can't ask for help, either at school or from this storeowner.



Manny and Aunt Tiff provide a useful counterpoint for Quan. They show Quan how different life could be if only he and Mama had access to money. With this, Stone makes it clear that one of the major issues that keeps Quan from succeeding is growing up in such deep poverty. When Mama offers to pay despite not being able to afford it, it suggests that she (and possibly Quan) are ashamed of their financial situation. Again, this may keep them from asking for help.



Wondering whether Manny would leave if he knew these things is another way that Quan's shame bubbles up. This shame keeps him from seeing any of the things that he and Manny have in common and instead, make him focus on all the ways that they're different.



It's perhaps unsurprising that Quan seems so uncomfortable with the menu, given his limited access to food at home and his immediate family's poverty. Manny's ability to order without looking at the menu makes it even clearer to Quan that the boys are fundamentally different.



CHAPTER 4: DEFIANCE

The only time Quan has ever felt as scared as he was the night the cops took Daddy was during his own first arrest. He's 13 and mad for no reason, but this isn't unusual. Sometimes, the rage just overtakes him. He's not violent like his classmate DeMarcus. Instead, he deals with his anger by stealing small things, like pencils or lip balm. On this day, Quan goes into a recently remodeled convenience store. He's drawn to a display of things like Pez, marbles, and pipes. A deck of cards catches his eye. He pockets the cards, uses the restroom, and heads for the doors. But the clerk—who's brown, but not Black—stops Quan. He says he's calling the police and makes sure Quan can see his hand on a gun.

Later, Quan realizes the remodel included an upgraded security system, so the clerk saw the whole thing. But the cards don't seem like such a big deal. They only cost \$2.99, and Quan would gladly put them back and agree to never return. It seems excessive that the clerk would call the cops over this, so Quan's rage expands. He tries not to cry and starts to say that he can put the cards back, but then the cop arrives. The cop is huge. As Quan meets the cop's eyes, his chest locks up and he remembers the night Daddy was arrested. Quan can't answer when the cop demands Quan answer his questions, and the cop thinks Quan is being defiant.

Quan can breathe again when the cop grabs his upper arm. It hurts, and Quan screams. The cop drags Quan out forcefully, even though Quan isn't resisting. In his mind, Quan sees Daddy go limp as the cop cuffs him. Quan wets his pants and begins to cry. He knows Mama will be upset and Dwight will be impossible. Quan also wants to set a better example for Gabe. The cop asks Quan why he's crying and says he's not so tough now. When Quan blurts that it was just a deck of cards, the cop says it'll be a lady's purse tomorrow.

Quan sits alone in an interrogation room for two hours. He's not sure how he got here or what he's supposed to do. Will he go to jail, like Daddy did? It was just a deck of cards, but it seems like things are stacked against him. When he did well in school, he was accused of cheating. His very best is never good enough.

It's significant that Quan isn't violent and turns instead to petty theft to deal with his negative emotions. This detail helps flesh him out as a non-threatening person; he's just scared, in a tough spot, and dealing with his emotions in an inappropriate way. So when the clerk shows 13-year-old Quan a gun and threatens to call the police, the book frames this as an overreaction. The clerk seems to expect Quan—who has darker skin—to be violent and dangerous, and so escalates the situation.



By emphasizing the cards' insignificance, the book underscores that the treatment Quan receives is ridiculous and inhumane. He's a kid who made what seems like a small mistake—and his inner monologue reveals that he'd readily set things right if given the opportunity. But instead of giving Quan the opportunity to apologize and put the cards back, the cop intimidates Quan and treats him like an adult—all while making it even clearer that Quan is just a scared little kid.



The cop is under the impression that stealing something little now means that Quan will inevitably move on to more valuable things in due course. In this sense, he assumes that Quan is stealing with nefarious intent—not just because he's mad and wants to feel like he can control something. And because Quan doesn't get the opportunity to put things right by just giving the cards back, he knows that things are going to get even worse at home.



Quan's inner monologue again shows that he's just a frightened child, thus implying that he shouldn't be treated as an adult by law enforcement. This moment is precisely when Quan starts to give up. No matter what he does or how hard he tries, he'll never be good enough.



Quan knows that no matter how much Dwight hurts Mama, she won't kick him out. He doesn't understand why, but he does know that telling someone about the abuse won't help. Quan would probably end up with a random relative of Daddy's, and Quan isn't sure if Dwight even has family to take in Dasia and Gabe. He's sure that Aunt Tiff won't want them. It seems like there's nothing he can do. Dwight has been calling Quan "Delinquent Junior" for years now, and Quan wonders if that's who he really is. Maybe Daddy and Ms. Mays were wrong, and there's no way out.

Finally, the door opens and Mama leans in. She says, "Let's go" and nothing else. In the lobby, while they wait for Quan's belongings, cops bring a dark boy in kicking and screaming. He's only a year or two older than Quan and when he notices Quan, he says hi. Quan recognizes the boy, but can't remember if his name is Dre or Trey. He remembers finding this boy in the **rocket ship**, counting money as another guy ran away one of the last times he took Dasia and Gabe to the playground.

Quan still feels powerless to understand or change his circumstances. At this age and from such a close perspective, he doesn't understand that there are many reasons why abuse victims can't or don't leave their abusers (e.g., it may put the entire family at risk of more violence or even death). But what he does understand is that he's powerless. Now that he's been arrested. He seems to be the delinquent that Dwight says he is, and he has no way of refuting that anymore.



It's telling that as Stone describes Quan and this other boy, she refers to them both as boys. The other boy might be older and in trouble—but he's still a boy, not an adult man. With this, she reminds readers that most of the novel's characters are children and should be treated as such. They may be involved in illicit activities (like the deal that seems to have happened in the rocket ship), but the fact that this happens in the rocket ship at all—at a children's playground—drives home their youth.



MARCH 12

Quan writes that he's in love. Her name is Liberty Ayers and she's gorgeous, though she told Quan off for checking her out. She's the case manager's intern, so Quan can't ask her to marry him. But talking to her makes Quan wonder how things might've turned out had he met her instead of Trey at 13. She's Trey's age, 19, and attends Emory University. But as a kid, she was a troublemaker. She was locked up for the first time at 12 and for the third time at 14 after stealing a car. According to her, though, serving 12 months for that offense was the best thing that happened to her.

Liberty met someone who wouldn't let her "bury her bright spots." And all this has Quan wondering what might have been. Quan and Trey met at the police station and when they were both released, Trey sought Quan out. Even though Quan knew he was trouble, he started hanging out with Trey. After talking to Liberty, he knows why: she talked about how people are driven to do things so that others know they exist. In middle and high school, influences are extra important—and that's the time that Quan lost both Daddy and Ms. Mays. Trey wasn't a good influence, but he "saw" Quan. Now, Quan wonders if his life would've ended up different had he made a positive connection instead of meeting Trey. Quan adds that Doc has really grown on him, and he wishes he'd met Doc sooner.

Liberty shows Quan that it's possible to come from troubled beginnings but still find conventional success—the kind of life that would make Quan's Daddy proud. But in order to do this, Quan is beginning to suspect, it's necessary to meet the right people. At the time that Quan met Trey, Trey was 15—and apparently, Trey wasn't the type of person Quan should've been hanging out with. Liberty also suggests that under certain circumstances, prison can change people for the better, as it did her.



Liberty met a mentor who took the time and energy to encourage her. Looking back, Quan can see that he lost Daddy and Ms. Mays—the two people who supported and encouraged him—at a crucial point in his development. He can see now that without a "positive connection," there wasn't really any way for him to do any better. Trey was the first one to acknowledge Quan's existence and make him feel like he mattered, so Quan understandably felt compelled to follow him. But as Quan makes these connections, he starts to put together how he could move forward after prison. He now knows that positive connections will be essential.



CHAPTER 5: DELINQUENT

Trey is waiting for Quan inside the **rocket ship**. Quan came to the playground hoping to escape, so he stops short when he sees Trey. Trey quips that he's been coming every day, hoping to run into Quan. This makes Quan feel good, and he climbs into the rocket ship when Trey tells him to. Quan desperately needs a friend who cares, because Mama clearly doesn't. From the moment she walked him out of the police station, she's been cold and distant. She won't speak to him except in one-word answers, and Dasia mimics her. Gabe, heartbreakingly, seems afraid of Quan now. Quan is alone because of a deck of cards.

Back in the **rocket ship**, Trey asks if Quan is going to cry and assures him it's okay if he does. He admits that he cried after his first arrest, too. Trey was first arrested at 11. He was so little that the cuffs barely fit. His mother wouldn't speak to him either, and his father is also locked up. Quan asks what Trey did, and Trey says he skipped school and got an MIP. He explains this means a minor in possession of alcohol, and he had to go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. They eventually dropped the charges, but the arrest was terrifying.

Trey says it's crazy—he had a white lawyer once whose son was having his bar mitzvah soon. It's a ceremony where Jewish boys become men, and all Trey could think was that the kid is a man by Jewish standards but still gets treated like a kid. For Black boys, though, they're treated like adults if they get in trouble. That time, Trey had been arrested for possession and the cop had told him that if he wants to act like an adult, the law will treat him like one. When Trey asked his lawyer if he'd say something like that to his son, the lawyer was "shook." Trey says that Quan is "in it" now and throws an arm around Quan's shoulders. He says that there "Ain't a whole lotta pathways for niggas like us," which rings true for Quan.

Quan gets lucky with his second arrest. He'd just gotten caught with a tiny pistol from Trey, which is a misdemeanor. But the juvenile court DA gives Quan community service and tells him to shape up before it's too late. The third time, Quan serves 90 days for breaking and entering. The fourth arrest solidifies things. He's at the mall and sees white men laughing loudly. If they'd been Black, someone would've asked them to leave already. One man has two cellphones on the table, and Quan expertly bumps a stroller and steals one phone. For this, Quan serves 12 months.

Having this meeting take place in the rocket ship reminds readers that both Trey and Quan are children who still escape to playgrounds. This is especially true for Quan—Trey seems to be in the rocket ship in part because he knows Quan will be there, not because he likes it that much. In this moment, Quan is lonely, which consequently makes him vulnerable. Mama seems to have revoked all support, care, and love, and she's teaching her other children that Quan isn't worth their time or energy. In this way, the book shows that her coldness pushes Quan right to Trey.



Trey's description about how small he was during his first arrest is intended to tug at readers' emotions—the thought of handcuffs on an 11-year-old child is perhaps a difficult one to stomach. The fact that the police cuffed Trey at all, though, suggests that they didn't see him as a child. Instead, the book implies that they saw him as a dangerous young Black man who needed to be restrained—all for the (nonviolent) crimes of skipping school and drinking.



Trey describes how white people see Black kids, boys in particular. Implicit biases mean that white people see young Black kids as adults long before those kids are actually adults—to the detriment of those kids. And while Trey can see that this is harmful and misguided, his lawyer's "shook" reaction is telling. The lawyer clearly hadn't thought about the difference in how Trey and his own son are treated—and when faced with the possibility that his 13-year-old would be treated like an adult, he's disturbed. When Trey says that he and Quan don't have many "pathways," he suggests that there are few options for impoverished Black boys with criminal records. Overcoming those obstacles becomes increasingly difficult—and one of the only options is to turn to illicit activities.



In his last letter to Justyce, Quan wrote that he knew Trey was trouble from the beginning. Here, readers see that Trey is, in part, responsible for at least one of Quan's arrests, since he'd provided Quan with the offending pistol. But since Trey seemed like the only person who cared about Quan, Quan quickly became susceptible to Trey's influence—even though he knew that Trey would lead him into more trouble.



Quan comes out of this experience different and “Enlightened. To darkness. His own.” There are other Black kids in the facility who are serving long sentences for drug possession or just being associated with a gang. But White Boy Shawn only gets 60 days and an assault charge for stabbing his sleeping father with a butcher knife. It’s impossible not to notice that Black and brown boys come and stay, while white boys come and leave again.

When Quan gets out, Trey has also had an interesting year. His grandma died, he was expelled for drinking at school, and his mom moved to Florida and refused to take Trey with her. Trey shares this with Quan as they sit by the **rocket ship**, passing a vape pen back and forth. Trey says he needs to meet some boys and shows Quan his new sparkly watch. He looks at Quan calculatingly and then tells Quan to come with him.

SNAPSHOT: A BOY MEETING A MAN (2016)

Quan is nervous, even though he’s been hanging with Trey and the other guys for a while now. He’s only ever been on the porch—it’s a big deal to be invited inside. The house’s interior is different than he expected. There are framed pictures of Egyptian monarchs and a poster bearing a Huey Newton quote. It says that the police must stop murdering Black people, or they’ll have to face *armed* Black people. Quan isn’t sure what to make of this.

There’s no one in the living room, but a voice tells Quan to take a seat. From his perch on a sofa, Quan realizes that the room smells just like Ms. Mays’s classroom did. She’d used one of those plug-in things that disperses fragrance, and Quan spots one across the room. This makes everything even more confusing.

What Quan sees firsthand in prison is that Black and brown boys serve harsh sentences for relatively minor crimes. But white boys—like the one Quan refers to as White Boy Shawn—serves very little time for murdering his father in cold blood. Because Quan is Black, he knows he’s going to have a far more unpleasant experience when it comes to dealings with the law than his white counterparts.



Revealing that his mom wouldn’t take him when she moved suggests that Trey has a home life that’s perhaps even worse than Quan’s, since there’s no mention of a father to care for him. In this sense, Quan finds more proof that he’s not alone in this regard. But this shows how Trey has been forced to grow up far faster than most children, as he’s on his own now at about age 16.



Huey Newton was one of the founders of the Black Panther Party, which advocated initially for its members to carry arms and keep tabs on cops. For Quan, seeing something that advocates so clearly for Black power might be jarring, given how little power he currently has over his life.



The memory of the plug-in scent may give Quan a false sense of security. He associates the scent with Ms. Mays, who genuinely cared about and supported him—but given that he’s here thanks to Trey, it’s likely that whoever Quan is here to meet might not be such a positive figure.



A guy with a beard and an African shirt enters and offers Quan ginger beer. He makes Quan recite his full name and tells Quan to call him Martel, not sir. Martel asks where Quan's father is and asks if Quan has been incarcerated. When Quan says yes, Martel asks if Quan is angry about this. Nobody has ever asked this before, but Quan says he is mad. Martel asks why. Quan doesn't want to sound like the guys in prison who always complain about how unfair things are; he remembers Daddy saying it's important to take responsibility. But Quan always felt like the complaints contained nuggets of truth. He tells Martel that he committed the crime, but a year for stealing a cellphone just seems excessive.

Martel seems like the first adult to understand that what motivates Quan is anger about his situation. He's angry he has so little power, he's angry about how the justice system treats Black people, and he's angry that he hasn't been able to make Daddy proud. When Martel seems to understand all of this, it makes him seem sympathetic and trustworthy to Quan. However, Quan has been raised to take responsibility for his actions, so he doesn't feel good about insisting that things are stacked against him. He's been made to feel like it's his fault that he's so powerless and has been pushed to theft to feed his family. But in a lot of ways, the book underscores that it's not Quan's fault. It's part of a system that offers young, poor people little in the way of support.



Martel asks what else Quan is mad about. When Quan looks confused, Martel explains that he did his master's thesis on African American teen boys who grow up with single moms in poverty—so kids like Quan are Martel's area of expertise. They're the reason Martel does what he does now. Martel gestures to a poster of a guy in a beret and says that the man is Huey Newton, a founder of the Black Panther Party. One quote of his motivated Martel, and that is that "Black Power is giving power to people who have not had power to determine their destiny." Again, Martel asks what Quan is mad about.

It's perhaps unsurprising that this particular Huey Newton quote spurred Martel to work with what seems to be Black youth—kids like Quan and Trey haven't, as Newton said, "had power to determine their destiny." Martel seems to understand that being powerless is what makes kids like Quan angry. But even more than that, Martel understands the importance of talking about that anger.



Quan is stunned. He never expected Martel to be college educated, and the Huey Newton quote rings true. Martel asks Quan to talk about his home life, and Quan mentions Mama and Dwight. He shares *almost* everything. When Quan is finished, Martel shares how the "organization" works and offers Quan membership if Quan can follow the rules. He never mentions what happens if a person breaks the rules, which gives Quan pause, but Quan accepts. He agrees to be at the Morning Meeting tomorrow and then asks what scent Martel has in his diffuser. It's indeed the same one that Ms. Mays had.

Though Martel refers to what he runs as an "organization," the book soon reveals that he's running a gang. For Quan, it doesn't seem like much of a choice to join. The gang will give him structure and people to support him—things he hasn't been able to find anywhere else since Ms. Mays and Daddy left years ago. In this way, it's bittersweet that Martel has the same diffuser as Ms. Mays. Given that readers already know that Quan will soon end up in prison due to his dealings with Martel's gang, the diffuser shows that this support is just a lie.



APRIL 4

Quan writes that when Doc was here earlier, he mentioned that today's the anniversary of MLK's assassination, which made Quan think of Justyce. In Justyce's last letter, he'd asked why Quan joined Black Jihad. Quan had been annoyed, but then he started thinking about the assassination thing. Doc told Quan about all the assassination attempts on Dr. King, and it made Quan think of one of Justyce's letters written right after Manny died. Justyce had lamented that Manny died even though he hadn't done anything wrong, and this is exactly the reason that Quan joined Black Jihad. People fighting for equal rights or kids who haven't done anything are murdered.

In this letter, Quan expands on his thought process from the previous chapter. In hindsight, he can clearly see that he—and many other Black people—are powerless and constantly in danger. Black Jihad gave Quan the sense that membership would protect him and those he loved from some of that. As Quan thinks about Manny and Dr. King, though, he also comes to the realization that he's not alone—he's one of many young Black boys who feels this way.



Then, there's the thing where Black kids like Quan and Trey get punished more harshly than white kids for the same crimes. If Quan had a dollar for every white kid who came to prison and left within a few days, Quan would be able to buy his way out. Seeing this happen over and over again, all while ending up in prison and then finding things the same at home, was too much. Mama didn't seem to care much, and Quan hadn't heard from Daddy since he went to prison. There was nobody to support Quan, which is why Justyce's question went over so poorly. Quan knows things weren't great with Justyce's dad, but Justyce's mom wasn't going to let Justyce mess up.

But Quan realizes there's a huge difference between the letters Justyce wrote when he gave up and when he got to Yale. Justyce visited Quan at some point in between, and Quan asks if Justyce ever used the number he gave him. In any case, Quan joined because he needed support. He needed a family. And it wasn't all bad; Martel is a "visionary." He wants to build a community center and a bookstore, and it was awesome to be part of it. Quan is in prison now, sooner than he thought he'd be, but he's alive. It's more than Quan ever expected.

Quan felt like he was trapped in a vicious cycle from which he couldn't escape. He'd be punished too harshly for some petty crime and then discover that Dwight was still being controlling and abusive at home—and this was more than he could bear. He reacted so poorly to Justyce's question because, in his mind, Justyce had the support Quan lacked. In other words, Quan initially thought that Justyce's upbringing was so different that he wouldn't be able to empathize or understand.



For readers unfamiliar with [Dear Martin](#), Quan references a time about a year before this novel's present when Justyce visited Quan in prison. Quan offered Justyce Martel's phone number and suggested Justyce join Black Jihad. Justyce did visit Martel, but he didn't join—instead, he went on to Yale. But because Quan didn't have the same kind of support Justyce did, he felt he had no choice but to join a gang that was going to be able to fill those gaps. And Black Jihad, as Quan tells it, didn't have nefarious aims—indeed, the mention of a community center suggests that Martel modeled it off of the Black Panthers in a number of ways. The Panthers ran community centers and children's nutrition programs at their height.



CHAPTER 6: DISCLOSE

What comes next stands out in Quan's mind. He's been with Black Jihad for five months now. It's a real organization, with meetings, rules, and business. Martel sells weapons. Like all new recruits, Quan starts out doing security. But as soon as it gets out that he's a math whiz, he begins counting money and stuffing envelopes. Everyone likes Quan, especially when he suggests a tweak to the sales model that significantly increases profit.

One night, as usual, Dwight goes on a drunken rampage. Quan hides Dasia and Gabe and has to flash his pistol to keep Dwight off of him. When this has happened before, Quan has just gone for a walk or to hang with Brad and DeMarcus. But instead of going to Brad's, Quan changes his mind. He takes a new turn and sees a couple kissing passionately in the street. He's never seen a kiss so tender in real life. One member of the couple is Trey. Trey has a sixth sense and can tell when things are wrong, so he kisses his girlfriend goodbye and leads Quan to an abandoned house. Quan realizes Trey has been living here, which makes him emotional. When they get to the roof, Quan tells Trey everything.

*The structure of Black Jihad may appeal to Quan, as it provides him security and predictability. Further, it's no doubt an exciting thing for him when Martel recognizes Quan's math abilities. This will be the first time since *The Test* when he was 12 that he's had a reason to try at math—and all of this will increase Quan's loyalty to the group.*



When Quan remarks on the tenderness of the kiss he witnesses, it reveals that he doesn't see much (or any) love, passion, or affection in his day-to-day life. So seeing that Trey has a girlfriend with whom he can be so tender and passionate may make Quan feel even more alone. This sense is certainly heightened after leaving Dwight's rampage and essentially seeing what things at home could be like. All of this makes Quan feel vulnerable and in desperate need of connection, hence why he tells Trey about his struggles at home.



Four days later, the school office calls for Quan. He can't figure out what he might've done wrong, but he's certain he's headed back to jail. When he sees Mama crying, he stumbles backward. She stands and throws her arms around him. Quan knows what she's going to say, but it still feels like a bomb when she says that Dwight's dead.

Though it's no doubt a relief that Dwight is gone, Quan's description of the news being like a bomb implies that Dwight's death wasn't an accident: it came about on purpose, probably because Quan told Trey what was going on, and the gang got involved.



SNAPSHOT: A BOY ALONE ON A RUN-DOWN PLAYGROUND (2017)

Quan knew he wouldn't find the **rocket ship**; some guy overdosed in it and the city removed it. But when he sees it missing, he feels like there's a similar hole inside of him. There are other holes in him too, like for Daddy and his childhood. This hole, though, feels like a closed door. Now, Quan will never have a brighter future.

Seeing that the rocket ship is gone makes Quan feel like his childhood is over. And more than that, it also seems to herald the end of what was once a bright future. The idea that Quan is full of holes speaks to all that Quan is missing in his life, like supportive parents, food security, and the ability to be a kid.



Quan sits on a graffiti-covered park bench. He remembers when he used to actually play here and the time he first met Justyce, and he wonders if Justyce would be sad that the **rocket ship** is gone. He goes to a fancy school in the rich part of town now. Quan looks down and sees "FUKC" carved into the bench in childish writing. He wonders what kids like him are supposed to do.

The misspelling and poor handwriting on the curse word scratched into the park bench suggests that whoever carved it was young—possibly too young to fully grasp the meaning of the word. This small inscription is deeply significant for Quan, as it spurs him to wonder what "kids like him" should do. This suggests that he feels just as alone and unprepared to tackle the world.



Quan looks back to where the **rocket ship** once stood and knows he's stuck. Dwight's death wasn't an accident, though Mama doesn't know that. Before Quan came to the park, he went to Martel's. Martel scolded Quan for not telling him about things at home. He said he couldn't help if Quan never spoke up, and he affirmed that one of "[his] guys" shouldn't have to live that way. This made Quan emotional. Then, Martel held out an envelope of money. He told Quan to tell Mama that it's from community members and reminded Quan again to speak up in the future if he has a problem.

Confirming that Martel had Dwight murdered shows Quan that someone cares about him and his family's wellbeing. This is why Quan gets so emotional. He's dreamed for years of someone doing away with Dwight—and now, not only has Martel done that, he's also calling Quan "his guy." Quan is truly part of the group and part of the family.



Then, Martel told Quan that the safety of Black Jihad's members is a priority, and they'll take care of anyone or anything that threatens that. Quan turned to leave, but looked back when Martel asked if he had anything to say. Quan felt like there were spiders under his skin, gulped, and said thank you. With a smile, Martel told Quan to be good and to be at the meeting in the morning.

However, Dwight's death also shows Quan that he can never leave Black Jihad. Saying thank you wasn't enough—Quan has to repay Martel's loyalty by sticking with the gang, even if he doesn't want to stay. The spiders under Quan's skin suggest that Quan doesn't really want to stay with the gang forever—he knows this will get him in trouble.



Quan has been good since he got out of prison. He's doing well in school and stays out of trouble. But he also knows that his life resembles this playground. Once, it was bright and full of ways to take flight, just like how the playground used to have a **rocket ship**. Now, though, his life is broken and hopeless. Quan looks down at the misspelled curse word and amends it to "FUKCed." That's how he feels now that his rocket ship is gone. There's no way out.

In this moment, Quan realizes he's trapped. He no longer has his childish imaginary escape route—and there's no way out of Black Jihad now that Dwight is dead. This moment, then, is the moment when Quan truly leaves childhood behind—but rather than this being a good thing, he sees it as something that will doom him.



CHAPTER 7: DISASTER

Quan is determined to make this drop fast. While cleaning out the closet, Mama opened one of Dwight's boxes and found packets of letters from Daddy to Quan. Daddy wrote over a hundred letters over the course of four years—and Dwight hid them all. Quan needs to complete this drop so he can go home, resume reading the letters, and respond to Daddy. Picking up the money goes as planned, so Quan takes the pouch to Martel's. Martel is throwing himself a birthday party; he was pulled over in Alabama last month and is now under house arrest.

Discovering that Daddy actually has been writing all these years gives Quan hope. Not everyone has given up on him—he just didn't know that he still had Daddy's support. And because Quan has this newfound avenue of support through Daddy, doing the work for Black Jihad feels more like a chore than a way to feel like he belongs. This shows again that Quan is dedicated to his family and desperately wants to please his father. If he can reconnect with Daddy, there might be hope for the future.



Martel has had a few drinks, so he's chatty. He seems annoyed that Quan is in a hurry, but just then Brad races in. Brad says that the cops rolled by; this means they'll come back and charge them with something random. Quan tries to control his breathing. Since Dwight's death, Quan has been having "spells" where it's hard to breathe and he feels convinced that bad things are going to happen. Martel confirms that people are leaving and then tells Brad to sit outside with Trey, DeMarcus, and Quan. Quan rushes after Brad. By the time Quan gets to the car, he feels like he has a headache, heartburn, cramps, and diarrhea. Something bad is going to happen.

Quan's reaction to hearing about the cops is significant. His anxiety spikes, and he even experiences physical symptoms of it, like pain and breathing trouble. All of this looks like he could be panicking, which shows that coming into contact with the police is extremely stressful for Quan. This is perhaps unsurprising, given his first brush with the police when Daddy was arrested.



Trey pops the hatch of Martel's Range Rover and sits in it. He instructs Brad to stand on the left, Quan to take the right, and DeMarcus to stand next to Trey. Quan remembers DeMarcus getting expelled in middle school for anger issues, but now he knows why: DeMarcus watched a cop murder his dad during a traffic stop. DeMarcus's presence means that something bad is going to happen—he never leaves home without his pistol. Quan's ankle itches. That's where he keeps his pistol.

DeMarcus's story is a reference to Philando Castile, who was, like DeMarcus's dad, shot during a traffic stop in 2016. His partner and her daughter were in the car and witnessed his murder. This trauma has affected DeMarcus by making him violent—and now, as an older teen, DeMarcus seems more than willing to seek out violence or revenge whenever he sees the opportunity.



The cop car turns the corner and Brad, apparently having lost a bet, gives Trey money. The cruiser pulls across the driveway and stops, blocking oncoming traffic. Two officers get out and Quan's consciousness seems to detach from his body. He feels like he's watching a movie as the officers approach, their hands near their guns. They received a noise complaint. When Brad makes a joke about white neighbors being upset about not getting an invite, Officer Castillo grips his holstered gun. Quan runs to tell Martel that the cops are here. Martel comes onto the porch and Quan returns to the Range Rover, though he doesn't know why and doesn't remember walking there.

Officer Tison asks Martel to take his hands out of his pockets and Martel asks what the cops want. When Tison asks for a word, Martel grabs his pant leg. Castillo moves into a shooting stance and points his gun at Martel. Martel pulls his pant leg up to reveal his ankle monitor and explains he can't leave the porch. He asks that Castillo lower his gun before approaching. Tison tells Castillo to put the gun down, but Castillo refuses.

Quan can't breathe and his ankle itches. Castillo is pointing his gun at the only man who's ever been around to support and protect Quan. He tugs at his pant leg as Tison tells Castillo to lower his gun. Someone moves by the Range Rover and Castillo whips around. There are three gunshots and Quan blinks. His ears are ringing, his head swims, and his temple hurts. The lights on the cruiser are on, somehow. Someone grabs Quan and says they have to go. Quan notices Castillo's body, facedown on the ground. He then notices there's a gun in his hand. He drops it and follows whoever's pulling him along.

SEPTEMBER 10, 2017

In a letter to Daddy, Quan writes that he's not sure how to start. There's too much to write, though he does want to note that he did get the letters, and he apologizes for not writing and for thinking that Daddy gave up on him. It made Quan feel something when, in the last letter, Daddy wrote that he wouldn't blame Quan for pretending he doesn't exist, but he loves Quan and wants the best for him. To Quan, this feels backwards. He apologizes for making Daddy feel that way and says he never wants to pretend Daddy doesn't exist.

The fact that Quan experiences this event as though he's watching a movie illustrates just how traumatic this interaction with the cops is for him. He's barely even there; instead, he's trapped in his head. The aside that Quan doesn't remember walking back to the Range Rover suggests that his memories of what happens this evening might be inaccurate. Because of his traumatic past experiences with police, his brain flags this event as frightening—even though nothing has really happened yet.



Martel seems to enjoy worrying the cops by making a show of pulling up his pant leg, but it's important to note that Martel has no real power here. He's Black, unarmed, and facing two armed white authority figures, so the scales aren't tipped in his favor.



The hazy way that Quan describes his memories of this evening suggests that readers should be skeptical of what happened. Importantly, there's nothing that says outright that Quan pulled the trigger—or indeed, who did. However, it's still worth considering why Quan pulls his gun and if he may have fired it. As Quan sees it, the cops could've taken out the only person who's been there to support him. This means that Quan feels immense loyalty toward Martel, so it may seem worth it to sacrifice his own future to protect Martel.



Quan feels that, in a way, he's guilty: he didn't continue writing to Daddy, even though he could've. In this sense, Quan recognizes that he hasn't been as loyal to Daddy as he perhaps should have. That Quan was writing this letter to Daddy in 2017 (about 18 months before the story of the novel's present begins) suggests that it's not a new development for Quan to be writing to Justyce. Writing, and writing openly about his feelings, is something he's been comfortable doing for a while now.



Quan apologizes one more time for failing to become what Daddy wanted him to be. He can't explain everything, but someone hid Daddy's letters from Quan. Without Daddy, Quan didn't have anyone to support him. Quan tried, but he wonders how different things would be if he'd gotten the letters. He admits he cried as he read Daddy's words about believing in Quan's ability to do better. But it doesn't matter now. Quan chose this path, even though he's not sure he had an option. He supposes Daddy didn't have an option either. Quan will go away for a long time, but he has to let Daddy know he loves him. He's not mad at Daddy for being gone and thanks Daddy for the words, even if they're too late. Quan takes it back. It's not too late, and he knows what he has to do.

It's also worth noting how mature Quan seems in his letters. He may still be a child in many ways, but he understands how he's ended up where he is and what the consequences will be. In this letter, Quan also sheds doubt on the idea that Daddy chose his illegal job, which is what Daddy implied earlier. Here, Quan suggests that Daddy didn't really have much of an option—just like Quan didn't feel he had much of an option but to join Black Jihad. With this, he acknowledges that people who grow up fighting racism, poverty, and violence have few options—and those available tend to be illegal.



APRIL 24; SNAPSHOT: A POSTSCRIPT (PRESENT DAY)

Quan scolds Justyce for asking so many questions in his last letter. But Quan has answers, since both Doc and Liberty have been asking him the same things. But first, some news: Quan will graduate high school in three and a half weeks. He's excited, but he's also mad and sad. It's weird writing that he's getting in touch with his feelings, but a few weeks ago he mentioned his "episodes" to Doc. Quan got a new counselor, a Black woman named Tay, and Tay thinks Quan suffers from panic attacks and PTSD. Some of the things that happened to him as a kid qualifies as trauma, so now his brain reacts to triggers that remind him of those events. Even the word "trigger" is a trigger, so Quan calls them "sparks" instead.

It's a huge step for Quan to finally have his panic attacks and PTSD diagnosed. With a diagnosis, he can begin to develop coping mechanisms and strategies to deal with triggering situations—such as referring to his triggers as "sparks" instead, since the word "trigger" may remind him of guns. Quan is growing up and changing for the better, now that he has a team of friends and adults who are invested in helping him do so. His excitement to graduate high school offers hope that he could still become the academic that Daddy wanted him to be—a high school diploma is the first step in what could be a long educational journey.



Quan has been writing a lot about the sparks. Most of the sparks are linked to the night Justyce asked about, though some are older. The more Quan thinks and talks about it, the more frustrated he gets. For instance, Doc pushing him so hard makes him want to do well—but Quan feels great for five minutes when he receives praise and then realizes he's stuck in prison for a long time. He didn't realize it would make such a difference to have someone to believe in him. Trey, DeMarcus, and Brad were all looking for support, protection, and family, but nobody gave them that so they couldn't give that to each other. Quan writes that if they'd had the support that Justyce did, none of them would've been at Martel's that night.

Since readers aren't privy to the full text of Justyce's letters it's hard to know for sure what Justyce is asking about, but it seems likely that Justyce wants to know about the night that Officer Castillo died. The very fact that he feels comfortable asking speaks to how much the boys' friendship has deepened over the course of the novel. They're developing trust and now, Quan can pour his heart out to Justyce and feel safe doing so. He also now understands the power of supportive mentors and can look back and see how Black Jihad worked more clearly. He can see that every boy in the gang wanted the same support—but the type of support Martel offered wasn't the kind boys actually needed.



This brings Quan to Justyce's question of what happened the night Officer Castillo died. Honestly, Quan doesn't remember. He has vivid flashbacks and a lot of black. But there are two things Quan can say for sure. The first is that under other circumstances, it would've been considered self-defense. Castillo was aiming his gun and almost made the encounter go south. Quan can barely remember, but he does know Castillo was pointing his gun at Martel before he swung around to point it at everyone else. According to Georgia law, shooting Castillo was justified since Quan thought he needed to defend himself. That probably won't fly in court, though, given that the deceased is a cop and the witnesses are Black boys.

But the other thing Quan knows is that three others pulled guns. Quan took the charge because he felt he owed the gang a debt. (The interrogation was awful.) He says that Doc once asked if Quan was a killer. Back then, he couldn't really answer. Now, he can. He wants Justyce—and *no one* else—to know that Quan isn't a killer. He never fired that night and didn't kill Officer Castillo. In a postscript, he says he'll never say who did.

That Quan's memories of the night that Officer Castillo died are so disjointed seems to be a product of his PTSD and panic attacks—the blackness and vividness of his memories are things people commonly report experiencing during panic attacks. But even if Quan doesn't actually remember everything that happened, he doesn't necessarily need memories to come to conclusions. He can plumb Georgia law to discover that Officer Castillo essentially provoked some of the shots by pointing his gun at people without reason. But the witnesses in Quan's defense are all Black boys and are therefore less likely to be taken seriously due to implicit biases.



Quan shows here the consequences of the toxic loyalty Black Jihad requires: Quan is now in prison and facing decades there, all in the name of loyalty. But this moment is also significant because this is the first time that Quan asserts who he is: an innocent boy who made mistakes, but who is in no way a killer. In this way, Quan begins to take control of his identity.



SNAPSHOT: TWO BOYS AND A GIRL IN A CAR (PRESENT DAY)

On the drive from New York to Georgia, Justyce McAllister has a lot to think about. He thinks about finals and his racist roommate, Roosevelt. Although Roosevelt comes from money, Justyce pities him because he clearly isn't happy. Justyce, however, is very happy after a great first year at Yale. During the year, he often wrote to his childhood friend and secret "Fellow smart guy," Quan Banks. In fact, Justyce checked his mailbox quickly before leaving campus on a hunch. There was a letter from Quan—and its contents still disturb Justyce.

From the backseat, Jared groans and asks if they're there yet. Justyce's girlfriend, Sarah-Jane, nicknamed SJ, snappily asks why "it" is talking and scolds Justyce for deciding to room with Jared next year. SJ insists it shouldn't be Justyce's responsibility to get Jared home safe, especially since Jared's dad will go after Justyce if something happens on the trip. Justyce thinks about his new friendship with Jared. Since they met at Manny's grave last year, they've been close friends, and Jared is improving. He often asks for a "privilege check." All of this annoys SJ. She reminds everyone that Jared is only riding with Justyce because Jared's license was suspended after getting a DUI, running from the cops, and getting caught with marijuana.

Roosevelt's example makes Justyce understand that privilege doesn't mean much if a person doesn't have the mindset to enjoy it. In other words, it's possible for anyone of any social class to be unhappy. But it's also worth noting that it's no doubt easier for someone like Roosevelt—who's white, grew up with privilege, and so doesn't have to contend with racism, implicit bias, or poverty—to find contentment.



In [Dear Martin](#), Jared didn't believe that the United States was still racist. But Manny's death showed Jared that he was incorrect. Now, it seems as though Jared is taking steps to educate himself and recognize his privilege. In this way, Jared becomes a model of what's possible when a person with privilege chooses to acknowledge that fact. Even if Jared hasn't yet won over SJ, Justyce sees that Jared is doing the best he can to square with his mistakes.



SJ spits that an Black person would be in jail or dead if they'd been in Jared's situation. Justyce and Jared are silent. What SJ doesn't know is that Jared knows and has cried about all of this, even if he was lucky (his dad showed up and got him out of jail). Out of nowhere, Justyce says that Quan didn't do it. SJ scolds Jared when he asks if Justyce actually believes Quan, and SJ rolls her eyes when he asks why Quan is in jail if he's innocent. Justyce explains that "Dudes like us" don't snitch. Instead of asking why, Jared simply asks what they're going to do about it. They're qualified to help, since they're all prelaw students at prestigious colleges. With some coaxing, SJ agrees to help the boys prove Quan's innocence.

The book suggests that it's important for both Jared and readers to remember how inequitable the justice system in the U.S. is, especially given that the novel itself is about how Quan has been incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit. But it's a mark of how much Jared has improved when he asks how he and his friends can help Quan. He's no longer willing to sit by and believe unquestioningly that a person who's in jail belongs there. Instead, because he recognizes how unequal things are—and how privileged he is—he knows he has to step up and fight for change.



CHAPTER 8: DEAL

Quan sits across from Doc, working on the final essay that will earn him his high school diploma. Doc tells Quan to flesh out his argument more, but Quan just grunts. He's not in a great mood. It's been three weeks since he confessed something to Justyce that he hasn't told anyone else. He's been tempted lately, especially yesterday when Tay explained that earning membership to a group "through mental or physical hardship" creates a sense of misplaced loyalty. He's been having nightmares about his arrest, too. The arrest itself wasn't traumatic, but the look on Mama's face will haunt him forever.

Mentioning that a person's sense of loyalty increases if a person joins a gang "through mental or physical hardship" is a reference to the beating Quan received as an initiation to Black Jihad. While there's no indication he's shared this event with Tay, it's clear that Quan is getting a better sense of the fact that his loyalty is indeed misplaced. At this point, that sense of loyalty is starting to feel like the source of trauma. His loyalty is why he's in prison in the first place, even though he doesn't belong there. And it's getting harder and harder to sit with it when Quan knows he should be free.



Quan had known the police would come for him from the moment he realized he didn't have his gun on him. He went home, finished reading Daddy's letters, and wrote Daddy a letter in return. Then, he waited and considered his dilemma. He knew he'd been arrested for a crime he didn't commit. But he knew that once the ballistics came back, the police would release him and look for the matching gun. This would lead to trouble for Martel, and Quan couldn't fathom condemning a person who's done so much for him. So he surprised himself and confessed.

As Quan saw it, he didn't have any choice but to take the fall for Martel. If Martel had been arrested, it would've been devastating for Quan and all the other boys in Black Jihad. Martel's arrest would've destroyed that sense of community and taken away their one source of support.



Quan didn't mean to confess to Justyce; it just happened. He felt lighter at first, but three weeks on, he feels anxious and stupid. He hopes that nobody else got ahold of the letter and read it. His mind spins at the thought of cops running ballistics and searching Martel's house. When Quan looks down at his paper, he's written the questions he's thinking about instead of his essay. Doc tells Quan to not worry about this essay, and Quan takes a deep breath. He starts to tell Doc that he needs to share something, but the door to the classroom flies open. The superintendent tells Quan he has a visitor. Quan needs to leave his things and come immediately.

Thanks to the support Quan is getting in prison, he now feels more comfortable telling the truth and talking to his mentors. This is why he presumably is on the cusp of telling Doc what he's thinking—and sharing with someone else the truth of what happened. Even if Quan's attempt is thwarted here, the book seems to commend him for feeling comfortable enough to broach the topic. It suggests that he trusts Doc enough to not just believe him, but possibly to help him figure out how to move forward.



Quan follows the superintendent in a panic, since they're going into an unfamiliar hallway. He's shocked to see John Mark, his lawyer, in a room. Quan's is Mark's first case where he's "legally flying solo," and Mark gets on Quan's nerves. He doesn't ask questions, which seems odd. Mark greets Quan as Vernell, tries to be friendly and call him "man," and finally drops the act when Quan responds with disgust. Mark smiles and says he got a call from the prosecutor's office. They're offering a plea bargain.

John Mark reads a lot like Jared did in [Dear Martin](#)—he's trying to be cool, but his behavior just comes off as offensive. And it's even worse given how much power Mark has over Quan's life—as Quan's lawyer, he has a lot of weight to throw around as he shapes the contours of Quan's case. So it's significant that he's offering this plea deal without asking Quan any questions. Marks seems to want to be done with this case—even if getting it done means getting it wrong.



MAY 18

Quan writes to Justyce that he has lots of conflicting emotions right now. He's excited to get his diploma tomorrow, but he's still reeling after his lawyer shared that the state is offering him a plea deal. The state is offering to reduce the murder charge to voluntary manslaughter and drop the four other charges. He might be able to go back to juvenile court, but either way he could get up to 20 years. This complicates things. Quan's lawyer was all too chipper as he pointed out that if things go well, Quan could be out by his 30th birthday.

John Mark's enthusiasm makes it clear that in his mind, this seems like a fantastic deal. But this ignores the fact that if Quan accepts the deal, he's still incarcerated for at least the next decade for a crime he didn't commit. Because of this, Quan feels stuck. If he'd actually committed the crime he might accept the deal without hesitation, but he's already started down the path of telling the truth—so it would be a step backward to continue taking responsibility for a crime he didn't commit.



The deal is tempting, but it's brought up a lot of Quan's newly diagnosed clinical anxiety. He's been waiting for a trial date for 18 months now, but he's terrified to wind up in a courtroom. Maybe taking the deal wouldn't be so bad. He could be out in a decade if he's good, which is more than he ever expected. Quan asks Justyce for advice. He's sending this letter with Doc, since he knows Justyce is home from school now. Quan asks that Justyce respond promptly—he hasn't gotten a response to the last letter yet.

It's significant that Quan has been diagnosed with clinical anxiety. Just as was the case with his PTSD and panic attacks, now Quan and his support team can come up with coping mechanisms and figure out how to work through the anxiety. The fact that his anxiety grows as he considers taking the plea deal, however, implies that he knows, on some level, that it's the wrong thing to do. It's a mark of how much healthier Quan's relationships are that he's asking for Justyce's advice before making a choice. He knows now that he needs support and can't do this alone.



SNAPSHOT: TWO BOYS, A GIRL, A TEACHER, A LAWYER, AND A CASE MANAGEMENT INTERN IN A BASEMENT

Justyce almost feels like he's studying for a debate tournament—but this time, a "young (almost) man's freedom is on the line." Justyce thanks Attorney Friedman, Doc, Liberty, Jared, and SJ for coming. He lays out the facts: Quan has been incarcerated since September of last year for a crime he didn't commit. The state is offering to reduce Quan's charges, but he'd still serve up to 20 years. If Justyce can convince Quan to fire his lawyer and hire Attorney Friedman instead, they can fix this. He opens the floor for others to speak but then hastily introduces Liberty to everyone. Jared looks like he's in love with her.

Showing readers this meeting allows Stone to illustrate just how invested Quan's support team is in him. While Tay is notably absent, Justyce has been able to pull together nearly everyone else who cares about Quan and has some degree of power to help him. And choosing to take this on isn't just an expression of Justyce's friendship. For all of these people, proving Quan's innocence is a way to use their privilege for good and help make the world a more equitable place.



Doc and Liberty say that Quan is loyal to a fault. When Attorney Friedman asks them to elaborate, Doc notes that Quan refused the counsel offered by the gang because he didn't want *anything* to link back to the gang. Liberty adds that she was part of a gang as a kid, and loyalty becomes a "psychological imperative" when a person finds someone to support them for the first time. Attorney Friedman promises to not make it seem like she'd implicate anyone else.

Justyce brings up the fact that Quan's gun didn't fire the fatal shots. Jared is confused as to why they arrested Quan without running ballistics first, but Attorney Friedman explains that they probably arrested Quan as soon as they found his prints on the gun. If they ran ballistics, the report is probably buried. Then, Justyce brings up Quan's desire to plead self-defense. He briefly explains that Officer Castillo pointed his gun at lots of people that night and had no reason to start firing. However, the only witnesses are Quan's fellow gang members—all young men with criminal records, which won't be helpful in court.

Jared asks if they even need more than a witness or two, since the state doesn't have any witnesses. Officer Tison is dead; he's the only person who could've disputed the testimony. No one else has thought of this. To Justyce, this seems like a done deal—but SJ, Doc, and Attorney Friedman point out that Quan confessed, and his confession is admissible in court. Justyce says it might not be and runs off.

CHAPTER 9: DAWG

Quan is flipping through a volume of poetry that Doc gave him when a guard barks his name. It startles Quan so much he falls off his bed. The guard informs Quan that he has a visitor. As Quan follows, he worries that it's his lawyer and that Mark will want a decision on the plea deal. It's only been about 48 hours since Quan sent his last letter to Justyce with Doc, and Quan really wants to hear from Justyce before he makes a choice. Confusingly, the guard leads Quan past the classroom and past the lawyer rooms. In a visitation, room, Quan's head feels ready to explode. It's Justyce.

Doc and Liberty underscore the idea that Quan's loyalty to Black Jihad isn't positive. Quan is loyal to the point where he's hurting himself to protect the gang—though this is unsurprising, given what Liberty says about the psychology of gang loyalty. She encourages empathy for Quan's misplaced loyalty, rather than scorn or disbelief.



Even though the objective evidence might be on Quan's side, the fact remains that widespread implicit bias might hurt him in the courtroom. The comment that Quan's fellow gang members won't be helpful witnesses is a nod to the idea that Black people—especially young Black men who are viewed as dangerous—likely won't seem as trustworthy to a white jury. So even if the evidence ends up helping Quan, Justyce and his friends will still have to figure out how to deal with a biased court system.



Despite SJ's derisive attitude toward Jared, Jared proves that he has reason to be here in this passage. He points out what perhaps should've been obvious to others when he notes that the state doesn't have any witnesses.



Again, it's clear that Quan is starting to lean more heavily on his new support network as he hopes his visitor isn't Mark. In his mind, it's essential that Justyce show up in some way to help him make sense of what's going on—and fortunately, Justyce does just that. For Justyce, showing up to visit is a way to make it clear to Quan that he's taking Quan seriously and wants to help. Whatever he's here to discuss is important enough to warrant an in-person visit, not just a letter.



The boys hug despite the guard's scolding. Quan feels like he's on top of the world, but Justyce acts weird. He looks around and does a terrible job of acting normal—and then he says that Quan has to fire his lawyer. Quan tells Justyce he has to explain himself. Justyce says he's gotten Quan's letters—and he understands why Quan doesn't want to say more "About the thing," but he finds what Quan is thinking about doing troubling. Justyce wants to help. He and some friends got Quan a new lawyer who has experience with cases like Quan's, in which a young Black guy ends up in the wrong place at the wrong time and ends up incarcerated. Quan finds this description borderline offensive and says he can't let the cops go after his crew.

Justyce says that no one would be implicated. There's enough evidence to get Quan acquitted. This seems like it should be a no-brainer, but Quan is worried walking away from the deal will put him at risk of being convicted of murder if Justyce ends up being wrong. When Justyce looks over his shoulder again, Quan tells him to stop or they'll get in trouble. Justyce says he's just nervous because he needs to ask about Quan's confession and how it happened. Quan is tense and sweaty. He says that the cops came a few days after the incident with a warrant. He steels himself and then begins to tell the story of how he ruined his life.

The first time they questioned Quan, he exercised his right to remain silent. They left Quan alone for a long time. It was late, since they'd arrested him after 10 p.m., and Quan was exhausted and hungry. Eventually, someone took Quan to a cell. He tried to sleep, but every time he began to doze off, a noise would wake him up. Finally, a female officer brought him back to the interrogation room, where Quan again said he wanted to stay silent. He hung out alone and then went back to the holding cell. The same thing happened where he couldn't sleep. Quan felt himself cracking. The third time they took him to the interrogation room, Quan said he wouldn't talk. The cop badgered Quan and said they'd get someone else to talk if Quan wouldn't. At this, Quan said he did it.

Quan wipes his eyes and looks up at Justyce, who wears a "thinky" face. Justyce confirms that Quan told the cops each time that he was choosing to remain silent, and then Quan knows he won't push any further. (Quan knows he'll have to talk about this with Tay now, though.) Justyce tells Quan to ditch his lawyer and assures him he won't lose the plea offer—he might even get a better one, since it seems like Quan was overcharged. The guard barks that visiting time is up. The boys stand and Quan thinks hard. He asks if Justyce is sure, and understanding passes between them.

Justyce's inability to act normal seems to read as dangerous to Quan. If the guards think that the boys are up to something nefarious, Quan will have to suffer the consequences—and that might mean losing access to his support network. But when he speaks, Justyce does show restraint and compassion. In addition, though, his privilege also shines through. His description of Quan's case contains no nuance, which is why Quan takes offense. It wasn't just that Quan was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He had to be there and had to take the charge to protect people he loves.



It now becomes apparent why Justyce is acting so weird: he knows that he's going to have to ask Quan something very uncomfortable, and he feels bad about putting Quan in this position. But in this moment, both boys resolve to trust each other. Justyce knows that learning the truth will be essential to proving Quan's innocence, while Quan feels comfortable trusting Justyce with a story that seems to trigger his anxiety and panic.



Quan went into these interrogations believing that the justice system would at least get one thing right and respect his right to remain silent. But it soon becomes clear that the police wanted a confession—and were willing to do all sorts of cruel things to get one, like preventing Quan from sleeping. It's also telling that Quan finally confessed when the police threatened to find someone else who would confess. They no doubt knew that in Quan's exhausted and hungry state, he'd be more likely to do whatever he felt he needed to do to protect his gang members and make the abuse stop.



It's a mark of the boys' friendship that Quan is able to tell that Justyce won't push further. Both boys got what they needed out of this conversation—Justyce now knows that the cops acted illegally, and Quan knows that Justyce will respect his boundaries. With the truth of Quan's confession out in the open with one person, Quan has more hope that communicating openly will help him. He doesn't have to keep everything to himself, even if it might feel safer to do so.



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Quan writes that he fired John Mark, which Justyce probably already knows. Adrienne is his lawyer now, though he feels weird calling her by her first name. In any case, she came in to talk today and she asked questions no one has ever asked Quan before. She seemed to believe him, which was kind of uncomfortable. Quan didn't realize how different it would be to talk to someone who wants to keep him out of prison. Now, he realizes that he's never had an attorney who wants to see him free.

Quan has been thinking about all the guys he's met who have gone away for a long time. They never really talked about their problems, but they all came from messed up homes and people expected them to mess up. None of that's an excuse, but it's really different having people around who believe that Quan is a good person.

At the end of their meeting, Adrienne shocked Quan by saying that they all want to see him reintegrate into society and contribute to bettering the world. Quan wonders if he can integrate—and he doesn't know what he has to contribute. He's tried to be good, though he stopped caring when he was about 15.

Looking back now, Quan sees that so many kids who wind up incarcerated want to do the right thing and be successful. But there's so much else to contend with. There's a new kid on the cellblock, a Latino boy named Berto. He's in for a murder charge, too. He was a good kid, but something happened to his family and he went looking for a new one. Other guys have experienced the exact same thing. It comes down to guys having to find their own families out of desperation.

Quan wonders what will happen if he can't escape this. He might disappoint everyone helping him now and he has no idea what he'd do if he gets out of prison. He hates that he's even thinking about what life might be like on the outside. This might not work out—and what happens then if he gets locked up for life? He's not sure he'll be able to deal with it.

As Quan lays out the differences between Attorney Friedman and his previous lawyers, he emphasizes that no other lawyers have believed him or wanted to keep him out of prison. With this, the book suggests that the justice system is designed to put kids like Quan in prison, rather than keep them out of it. In other words, it gestures to an entire system that's stacked against Quan—showing again that Quan isn't an anomaly.



Here, Quan succinctly lays out that what lands kids in trouble isn't just the color of their skin. Rather, it's that they grow up in poverty and surrounded by violence, while also lacking supportive parents or mentors. It makes a world of difference for Quan to have people who want to see him do well—but since he hasn't had that kind of support in a long time, it's uncomfortable.



Adrienne clearly has high hopes for Quan if she's talking about him contributing to making the world a better place. But to Quan, this seems like an impossibly high standard when he's been told for the last several years that he's a career criminal with nothing to offer.



In this passage, Quan makes it clear that even more than the poverty and violence, what condemns kids to lives of crime is the lack of familial support. When kids like Quan and Trey have imprisoned fathers, dismissive mothers, and men like Dwight in their lives, it's no wonder they look for family elsewhere. But the gangs that these young men find can't really fill these gaps, due to the toxic loyalty the gangs require.



In this passage, Quan begins to look more like the people-pleasing kid he was years ago who proudly brought home his math test. He wants to make others proud of him—but unlike back then, he doesn't have the confidence in his abilities to do so. And it's possibly dangerous to hope that he'll get out of prison, given that the criminal justice system appears stacked against him.



SNAPSHOT: A PRELAW YALE UNDERGRAD, A DEFENSE LAWYER, AND A DISTRICT ATTORNEY IN A LAW OFFICE

Justyce is in awe of Attorney Marcus Anthony Baldwin Sr., even though he's technically here to oppose the DA. The man is tall, stately, and Black—and seems proud when Attorney Friedman introduces Justyce as a prelaw intern. Justyce explains to Baldwin that he's known Quan since childhood and they've been exchanging letters since January. They don't plan to enter the letters as evidence, but Justyce wants to share a few things. First, Quan's weapon didn't fire the fatal shot. Baldwin agrees to order the right information but notes that there's a confession on file.

Justyce cuts Attorney Baldwin off and immediately regrets it. But he presses on and says that he thinks Quan's Miranda rights were violated. Attorney Baldwin takes a few notes and promises to investigate these matters. Justyce forces himself to meet Baldwin's eyes as the DA compliments Attorney Friedman for taking Justyce on. Baldwin then tells Justyce that Quan is lucky to have him as a friend and an advocate. Justyce says he doesn't want to see another Black boy incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit—and he hopes Baldwin feels the same way. Baldwin blinks and agrees.

District Attorneys are the most powerful law enforcement official in their jurisdiction, and for Justyce, it's a huge deal to see a Black man in this position of power. It shows him what's possible—that one day, he could find himself in a similar position of power. Baldwin also demonstrates that he's not trying to abuse his power when he's receptive to this new information on Quan's case. His interest, it seems, is in actually making sure Quan gets the justice he deserves.



Miranda rights include a person's right to remain silent and request legal counsel—which the police officers violated during Quan's interrogations. When Baldwin says that Quan is lucky to have someone like Justyce on his side, he bleakly implies that most kids who end up in Quan's situation don't have a supportive person to advocate on their behalf.



CHAPTER 10: DASIA

Even though Liberty and Tay prepared Quan for Mama's visit, Quan still feels like he's going to be beheaded. Whatever she's here for has to be really bad, since she hasn't visited in 21 months, hasn't sent any letters or packages, and never answers when he calls. Quan stops in the doorway, staring at Mama. Her chin is quivering.

Quan thinks back to the prep meeting he had with Liberty and Tay. Their desire to protect his mental and emotional health shook him. Liberty explained that Mama had called and asked about visitation hours. The woman at the front desk reached out to Liberty, who reached out to Tay. For the next hour, Quan discussed the visit with Liberty and Tay. They asked if Quan had questions for Mama. There are a lot, like why now, what does she want, and if this means she still cares—but he didn't ask them. He just wants to know what happened.

Quan doesn't feel like Mama loves or supports him, given that she hasn't made an effort to stay in contact. Because of this, he assumes that there must be something wrong that will affect him or someone else he loves—otherwise she wouldn't bother coming to see him.



Though the woman at the front desk only receives a passing mention, it's significant that she reached out to Liberty. This implies that there might be even more people in Quan's corner than he thought. He might not even know who those people are, but they're there if he's willing to look. Tay and Liberty also seem to grasp the significance of Mama's visit, a reflection of how much they care about Quan. They've been listening to him and his fears about Mama for months now, so they know this visit is important.



Quan half wants to flip the table over as he sits down across from Mama. She looks tired and unwell. After a long silence, Mama says that Gabe misses Quan. Quan is furious, but he still wants Mama to love him. He asks her to please tell him what's going on, knowing if he says more it won't be nice. Mama says that Dasia was just diagnosed with leukemia. Quan tries to speak, but Mama spills the whole story as fast as she can. The first doctor gave Dasia a few months to live and said chemo was pointless, but Dasia's stubborn. The second doctor was a Black woman who seemed to care, but cancer is still cancer and treatment is expensive. They have insurance now, but Mama lost her job last week.

Mama says that right after she lost her job, one of Quan's friends came to check on them. It was Trey. Quan feels guilt, anger, and fear. He hasn't heard from his friends, but does this mean they haven't forgotten about him? Mama continues her story. She ended up telling Trey everything, and Trey insisted that all of Quan's friends would take care of them. Hours later, some guys showed up with groceries, cooked dinner, cleaned, and left her with money. Mama seems to come back to herself. She looks away, apologizes for scaring Quan, and says she just thought he should know.

Quan knows Mama won't look at him again. He asks if Dasia knows Mama is here, but he already knows the answer—she didn't want Quan to know. Mama says that Gabe *does* miss Quan. With a smile, Quan says he misses Gabe and will see him soon. Mama stares at Quan skeptically. She's done with the conversation. Quan chokes up as she says things are alright and walks away without looking back. He wants to ask her how things can be okay when his being in prison is so wrong.

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Quan writes to Justyce that he's not in a god place. He found out something about his sister when Mama came. Quan knows he'll be working on his "unresolved 'mommy-issue' shit" with Tay for weeks to come, but what Mama said was so bad that Quan had a panic attack on the way back to his cell. In short, Quan's crew is helping Mama out. He was surprised to learn this, since he thought they'd abandoned him. He can't ignore that Justyce is the only person who's ever written to him in prison, not that he can imagine any of his Black Jihad friends actually writing a letter. But the silence is hard to deal with.

More than anything, Quan wants proof that Mama, Daddy, and his biological family still care about him. He needs to know that Martel and Black Jihad aren't the only ones, aside from Justyce and his support team in prison, who care. But as Mama speaks, it becomes clear that she's not here to convey her love. Rather, she appears to see the visit as her duty, not necessarily something she's doing out of love or care. But when Mama describes Dasia's experiences with doctors, it becomes clear that Dasia is going through much the same journey Quan is. It takes finding someone who actually cares about seeing them live and thrive for the kids to get the help they need.



Quan is going on two years in prison at this point, and he hasn't heard a word from Trey or any of the other Black Jihad boys, other than Martel's offer of legal counsel early on. Quan seems to have taken this silence to mean that they don't care about him anymore, but hearing that they're stepping in to help Mama and Dasia challenges this belief. Hearing that they're feeding and caring for Mama shows Quan that his old friends do care, they just aren't showing it in ways visible to Quan.



Mama has clearly stopped believing in Quan, as her behavior here implies that she doesn't believe he's getting out. Some of this might be self-preservation on Mama's part. She may be unwilling to trust yet another man who has since let her down. But the fact remains that she's not there for Quan when he needs her, and for Quan, this is heartbreaking and offensive.



Now, Quan has to grapple with the different ways his friends have shown him support. Both Black Jihad and Justyce have shown him support—Justyce by writing, and Black Jihad by stepping in when Quan can't. But given what Quan has learned while in prison, Quan sees that there might be more value in Justyce's continued contact than in Black Jihad's choice to step up only now.



Quan feels so messed up that they're taking care of his family when he can't. He transcribes a stanza from a Jason Reynolds poem (courtesy of Doc) that has stuck with him. It's about needing rest, but it reminded Quan of what it felt like to have support from guys who were there, even when Mama wasn't. Now, all Quan can think about is that it seems like he *has* to go back.

A real man would pay his debts and show appreciation through words and deeds. Quan thinks he owes them that kind of loyalty and then some, but what is he supposed to do? He still has felonies on his record; nobody will employ him and nobody will pay for his college education. In any case, though, Quan can't walk away from his crew. He knows too much. It's like in [Catch-22](#). He has no choice but to go back, so the only way to stay out of the gang is to stay here. But he accrues more debt to the gang the longer he stays in prison. It's a no-win situation, just like the rest of Quan's life.

After learning about Black Jihad's support, Quan may be moving back to thinking that he can only connect with guys who share his background of poverty and violence. He seems to suggest that he owes the people with whom he shares that background more than he owes someone like Justyce.



Here, Quan suggests that he doesn't really have a choice in life. It's not that he doesn't have enough in common with Justyce—it's that, in terms of finances, he certainly owes the gang more, since they're taking care of Mama. And for that matter, the plea deal might start to look better in this moment. Accepting it and going to prison would mean that Quan won't have to go back to Black Jihad, even if it means he'll be even more in debt to them when he gets out.



SNAPSHOT: A BLACK BOY (AND A WHITE BOY) VISITS A BLACK MAN (AND A WHITE BOY)

Jared insisted on coming on the grounds that it would be educational, enlightening, and that he'd need to be familiar with the kind of people he'll serve eventually. But when Justyce catches sight of Trey, he remembers Jared's ill-fated Halloween experiment two years ago. Trey greets Justyce warmly. Brad comes out of the house with a grin. Secretly, Justyce wonders if one of these two is Officer Castillo's killer. Jared introduces himself and compliments Brad's grill, which Brad doesn't appreciate. He recognizes Jared from Halloween and now, Trey does too. Trey sends Justyce in, but says that Jared has to stay outside. Jared looks thrilled.

Justyce tries not to think about the crazy thing he's about to ask Martel. He's read up on gang exit strategies and didn't learn anything reassuring. Martel greets Justyce, shows off that his ankle monitor is gone, and asks why Justyce is here. Justyce stares at the floor and finally says he's here about Quan. They've been communicating, and Martel looks almost impressed by this. His look turns suspicious as he asks what the boys talk about. Justyce knows he has to be careful—his request is outlandish, so he needs to create a solid foundation before he makes it.

Jared doesn't seem to fully grasp the significance of visiting what the book implies is Martel's house. He's taking this as an educational opportunity—which reflects his naïveté and his privilege, since he doesn't seem to understand the possible threat that Brad and Trey pose to him. The mention to the Halloween experiment is a reference to Jared's choice in [Dear Martin](#) to wear a KKK robe for Halloween, a wildly offensive choice.



Though Justyce doesn't say it outright yet, his mention of gang exit strategies and an "outlandish" request implies that he's going to request that Martel allow Quan to not return to Black Jihad. It may be a reflection of Justyce's innocence and sense of privilege that he's trying at all, given how far-fetched he thinks Martel's cooperation will be.



Justyce says he's been encouraging Quan. One of Justyce's teachers took over facilitating Quan's education, and Quan got his diploma. Martel looks genuinely happy at this, which gives Justyce hope. Justyce explains that Quan also has a new lawyer, and there's a chance that Quan's rights were violated when he was arrested. The lawyer is working hard at freeing Quan. Justyce stumbles over his words and Martel asks him to get to the point. Justyce finally asks if Martel will let Quan go free, too. Quan has been working hard. He has a support team who cares about him and now, he can see a future for himself.

In this passage, it's important to recognize the moments in which Martel seems genuinely happy. When he's happy that Justyce and Quan are writing and that Quan got his diploma, it offers hope that Martel sees the value in education and in having comparatively privileged friends like Justyce. Martel has a master's degree in social work, so even though he's a gang leader, he may still have it in himself to cheer on the Black boys who work hard to take the "statutory" (legal) path to success.



Justyce notes that Quan would probably be livid if he knew Justyce were here, but Justyce knows that Quan can pursue his dreams with just a bit of help. Martel asks what those dreams are. Justyce doesn't know what they are, so he says he knows that Quan wants to take care of his family. He reiterates that he's not trying to be disrespectful, but they both know that when Quan gets out, he'll be back. And if he comes back, his hard work will have been for nothing. Justyce asks Martel to not let Quan back in. Martel's eyes narrow, and he says that Justyce has a lot of nerve.

Both Justyce and Martel understand that Quan is in debt to Black Jihad—and that Quan also feels like he must demonstrate his loyalty to the one person who's been there for him. But Justyce and Quan also know that if Quan goes back to Black Jihad, he's at risk of ending up back in prison or even being killed in the course of his work for the gang. Quan's success, in other words, depends on him getting out of the gang—but this hinges on if Martel will let him.



Justyce stares at the poster of Huey Newton as Martel asks what he gets out of this. The request is outlandish; he should get something. Justyce asks what Martel wants. Martel wants the teacher who helped Quan get his diploma to tutor his boys. Hoping Doc will be cool with this, Justyce agrees. Then, Martel says that Quan can't come back, and his family has to leave, too. Quan won't exist anymore, but he'll have to pay his debt back with interest. Trey will contact Justyce with the details, and Justyce will be the responsible party. Martel warmly tells Justyce that Quan is lucky to have a friend like him and tells him to leave. Outside, Justyce finds Jared, Trey, and Brad laughing about keg stands and college. Justyce feels free.

When Martel asks for Doc, it shows that Martel runs his gang out of perceived necessity. It may give young men in the neighborhood the structure and support they crave, but right now, it can't give them the education they'd need to do better. However, it's still worth considering why Martel needs Doc rather than just to require gang members to attend classes. Trey was expelled—and Quan has been pulled out of school too. A tutor will be less beholden to a school system that, due to punishing kids with expulsions and suspensions, doesn't make it easy for kids battling other pressing issues to get an education.



CHAPTER 11: DEBT

Quan is certain Doc can tell he hasn't been sleeping well. Doc is part of the problem: Quan shouldn't be receiving an education anymore now that he has his diploma, but Doc still shows up and gives assignments. Apparently Attorney Friedman and Liberty pulled some strings and now, Quan is earning college credit. Doc also wants to set up a tutoring service, and he wants Quan to work for him. Quan suddenly jerks awake when Doc touches his shoulder. Quan looks down at the drool spot in his economics textbook and his eyes fixate on the word "debt." He wonders why there's a "b" in it. Maybe it's for burden. Doc asks what's going on.

Again, the fact that Attorney Friedman and Liberty have somehow worked it out so that Quan can earn college credit shows just how invested Quan's support team is in him. They may feel like he'll be more likely to continue with college once he's out of prison if he's already started. It's also significant that it sounds like Quan has a job lined up for when he gets out. Doc will finally put Quan's gift for math to good use and give Quan the opportunity to earn and control his own money. With that earning power, the debt Quan is so worried about might not be as much of an issue as Quan fears it will be.



Doc asks if Quan has been talking to Tay. He hasn't, but he says he has. Quan knows that Doc doesn't believe it. Dollar signs swirl in Quan's head, and he's afraid he'll cry. He wonders if Doc can tell that Quan is terrified, helpless, and hopeless. He wonders if Doc knows about the odd letter Mama sent, saying that she, Dasia, and Gabe are moving to the suburbs. Doc might know that Liberty turned down a job offer to stay on Quan's file.

It's possible that Doc knows that what's been keeping Quan awake is the envelope he received with one of Martel's houses as the return address. It contained a ledger, using the template Quan created. It laid out costs related to Quan's family, like gas, groceries, medicine, and meals. Thankfully it didn't mention Dwight, but the ledger still had a total and a one-word note: "Exactum." This is the note Martel gave clients when he wanted them to pay up and disappear. The number at the bottom is what's bothering Quan. Because if he owes Martel that kind of money, he must also be in debt to Tay, Attorney Friedman, Liberty, Doc, and Justyce. The ledger makes Quan ask his least favorite questions: why *anyone* is helping him, why they care, what they want in return, and how he's supposed to pay them back.

For Quan, the worst question is how long will it take for them to realize he's not a scholar, visionary, or future leader. He's just a dumb kid who's deep in debt. He's not a worthwhile investment. In his head, he hears Tay telling him to flip the script: would he invest in her if their situations were reversed? Quan has to think about it, but he'd still invest. He'd invest time, energy, resources, and belief. He knows now that everyone needs someone to believe in them, no strings attached. With this, Quan realizes that he'd be willing to do for another what everyone is doing for him because it's the right thing to do. Suddenly, the door flies open. It's Attorney Friedman, and she asks Quan and Doc to come with her.

SNAPSHOT: TWO BOYS, AN ATTORNEY, A TEACHER, AND A DISGRUNTLED GUARD IN A CONFERENCE ROOM

Quan almost trips when he sees Justyce in the conference room, dressed in a suit. He's clearly trying hard to look like a "Professional Negro," but Justyce can surely tell that Quan is making fun of him for it. But seeing Justyce also makes Quan feel like he can breathe easier. Attorney Friedman invites Quan and Doc to sit. An image appears on a screen and Quan frantically thinks of how to smash the projector. It shows Quan, seated in an interrogation room. Quan feels stabbing pain in his shoulder and his chest tightens, so he tries to take deep breaths and ward off a panic attack. He comes to when he feels a hand on his arm. It's Adrienne asking if he's okay.

Throughout the novel, when Quan gets scared he clams up. This used to be a defense mechanism that warded off teasing or danger—but now, when Quan evades Doc's questions, it seems like Quan is afraid of what Doc might offer in the way of help. Quan doesn't yet trust that his support network will indeed be there to support him when things seem scary or insurmountable.



The fact that Martel used the template that Quan created likely makes the notice even more jarring for Quan. It is, in many ways, proof that Quan was once an essential part of the gang—even as it lays out what Quan owes them if he's to get out. But even though the notice is frightening on its own, it also makes Quan aware of what everyone else has done for him. Because of the way that Quan understands loyalty, he seems to attach a monetary value to what his support team has done for him. And while the novel never reveals whether or not Quan will owe these people money, the novel as a whole does answer his other question. People help Quan because he deserves it—and he can pay them back by accepting their gifts and making the most of them.



Quan is dealing with feelings of worthlessness. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that he's grown up with few people telling him that he matters. So Tay's request that he flips the script is important, as it forces Quan to see that he—and other kids like him—is worthy of support, respect, and belief. The novel underscores that every kid who grows up in adverse circumstances can succeed—but they need help, and they need people to believe in them.



Justyce's presence helps Quan feel like he can breathe, which drives home the strength of Quan and Justyce's friendship. This suggests that Quan trusts Justyce to not put him through anything awful. Though this is called into question when Quan experiences the beginnings of a panic attack upon seeing the image of himself in the interrogation room. But with the support of Attorney Friedman and Justyce, Quan is able to believe that he can get through whatever is about to happen.



Quan notices that everyone else (aside from Justyce in his suit) is wearing normal clothes. He'd give anything to be in normal T-shirts and sneakers. In the video still on the screen, Quan is wearing his favorite hoodie. He misses it. He tells Attorney Friedman that he's fine. She goes to the front of the room and says that they're going to watch footage from the night of Quan's arrest. An intern condensed 19 hours of video into 12 minutes. Quan watches as the Quan in the video transforms from a resolute young man to a little boy. It blows Quan away how quickly the cops broke him.

When it's over, Justyce is grinning. He starts to say that he knew it, but Quan is angry and confused. Justyce says that Quan's Miranda rights were violated. Attorney Friedman explains that Quan invoked his right to remain silent every time he went into the interrogation room, but the cops ignored it. She also suspects coercion, since he wasn't given food or water, and he also wasn't allowed to sleep or use the restroom. Justyce says that even without the coercion, the confession should be inadmissible in court. Everyone else is fighting a smile, but Quan is confused. He asks what this means, and Doc says that it looks like Quan is a step closer to freedom.

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Justyce writes that Quan can't tell anyone, but documents from the state labs just arrived at Attorney Friedman's office. He included a photocopy. Quan was right: the ballistics don't match. This should help the case and hopefully give Quan some comfort. Attorney Friedman has been bugging the judge to set a trial date. For now, the state has no evidence or eyewitnesses, so unless they've got something hidden, there's not enough for them to convict Quan. They're hoping to hear back on the motion to suppress Quan's confession, which means the state has absolutely nothing. Justyce tells Quan to keep his head up and that SJ says hi. She can't wait to meet him.

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Quan writes that he feels weird writing to Justyce already, two days after Justyce left, but he's struggling. Liberty is headed back to school too, which means she won't be on his case anymore. Then, Quan just found out that because of budget cuts, he'll only have lessons with Doc once every other week. Quan is trying to not be dramatic, but he feels like he's sinking now that he won't see these people who were keeping him afloat. And there's still no word on the motion to suppress the confession, or about a court date. He's trying to keep his head up, but it's getting harder. Quan did talk to Mama the other day, though. Dasia's hair is starting to grow back, and he wishes she could share some of her optimism with him.

Seeing people wearing normal street clothes instead of prison garb makes Quan feel even more set apart from the outside world. While he's in prison, he's physically marked as a prisoner and is denied the chance to express himself through his clothing. Getting that opportunity to choose what identity to portray, he realizes, is a privilege.



Getting Quan's confession thrown out is significant, as it means that Quan's case will now be decided on the evidence (or the lack thereof) and not on a lie he told when coerced. That Justyce and Attorney Friedman were able to make this happen speaks to the necessity of having such a robust community with a variety of different skills. In all his study of the Georgia legal system, Quan never realized that the police violated his rights—he needed help to get to this point.



The first (and only) letter from Justyce that appears in the novel reflects the rapport between the boys and Justyce's hopeful excitement. He wants Quan to know that he and Attorney Friedman are doing everything in their power to help Quan—and though things are moving slowly, their mission is looking good. Again, the novel shows that it's possible to get justice for a wrongfully accused kid like Quan, but it takes a number of people to make that happen.



Losing the in-person support of Justyce and Liberty is difficult for Quan. It's telling that he feels their losses so acutely—this shows that he now relies more on this group of people to support him rather than relying on Black Jihad. Making this even worse is the fact that it doesn't seem like his case is going anywhere—but on the plus side, it seems like Quan is starting to repair his relationship with Mama. While it's unclear who initiated the conversation, the fact remains that Mama seems willing to talk to her son for the first time in years. This offers hope that when Quan does get out, he'll have a supportive parent to turn to.



CHAPTER 12: DONE

Quan has been having wild nightmares for the last five nights. Tonight, he's dreaming of Justyce opening up Quan's chest, frowning, and then telling Doc to shoot Quan. For the fifth night in a row, Quan's eyes pop open, but he can't move. He's sweating and can't breathe—but something's different. He hears a voice say that it's not sure what's going on. Tay puts a hand on Quan's arm and tells him the paralysis will pass, and she'll be here. Another familiar female voice asks if things are okay as the guard grouses that the women are breaking protocol. The second woman asks if Quan can hear them. Tay says that Quan can probably hear them, but not see them. He's starting to come down though.

Suddenly, Quan can breathe and he sees Tay and Attorney Friedman leaning over him. This is embarrassing, and he asks what day it is—he sees Tay on Thursdays and Attorney Friedman every other Monday. Tay says it's Monday, but the guard tells the women they must leave the cell. Quan smiles, even though it's weird to have them in here. He knows that something happened and it must be bad, given that his lawyer and his counselor are here. Once he's dressed Quan finds them in the common area. They head for one of the meeting rooms.

Quan gulps and sweats, but Tay and Attorney Friedman smile at each other. They have news: they heard back on the motion. The court ruled to suppress the confession, but there's more. The trial is never going to happen; the DA is dropping all charges. Quan can barely breathe as Attorney Friedman says that with no weapon, confession, or witnesses, there's no case. Quan will be free. Quan turns to Tay and asks if she's really saying that. He asks if he's done, and she agrees.

SNAPSHOT: TWO YOUNG MEN ON A NEW (TO THEM) PLAYGROUND

There are two "BIG boys—if you can even call them that" sitting at the top of the climbing wall, oblivious to the real children who want to climb it. Quan tells Justyce that they look creepy, but Justyce insists this is the best spot from which to chaperone Gabe's birthday party. Quan shakes his head. He's shocked that Justyce chose to spend his spring break here, instead of on a beach somewhere. Justyce says he's broke, though Quan insists that's just a mindset. They go quiet when Justyce says that Quan sounds like Martel.

Quan seems to be experiencing sleep paralysis, or nightmares that render him unable to move. This is probably due to the immense stress he's under after losing a lot of his support network and to his case being in a state of limbo. But again, the novel shows that Quan doesn't have to go through these frightening situations alone anymore. He has people like Tay and the second woman to hold his hand and help alleviate his feelings of stress and fear—and even break protocol to do so. With this, the novel underscores that Quan doesn't have to hide his emotions anymore.



Due to his anxiety and his upbringing, Quan still jumps to the worst-case scenario every time something unexpected happens. Part of this is a self-defense mechanism. If he hopes that Tay and Attorney Friedman are here to tell him something good, then it would be even more emotionally painful if they do indeed bring bad news. Quan's reaction, then, shows that he's going to be dealing with the effects of his upbringing for some time.



The outcome, of course, shows that Quan didn't need to be so worried about what Tay and Attorney Friedman were going to say—it truly was just a defense mechanism. The women's glee at getting to tell Quan that he's free makes it clear to Quan that they didn't help him out just because they had to. Rather, they invested in him because they care and they genuinely want to see him succeed.



When Stone describes Quan and Justyce as "BIG boys" who, perhaps, aren't boys anymore, she suggests that Quan and Justyce have reached the point of being young men. By now, they're both over the age of 18—so they're both legally adults. But even if they're on the cusp of adulthood, they still hold onto as much of their childhood as they can. They may be chaperoning Gabe's party, but it's also possible that they still enjoy the playground like a child might.



Quan knows he shouldn't ask, but he asks if Justyce has seen him recently. Justyce nods. He was at Martel's the other day to help DeMarcus with an essay, and Jared and Brad took the opportunity to joke like brothers. Quan sighs. Months ago, Justyce shared the story behind the *Exactum* notice and the fact that Doc is now tutoring the gang members. Justyce works for the tutoring service without pay—but Quan gets paid better than he thinks he should. But he's learning from Doc that he shouldn't undervalue his skillset. Doc also made Quan open up a checking account on his 18th birthday. Now, Quan mails checks to Martel every few weeks to pay off his debt, but Martel hasn't cashed any of them.

Quan asks if the guys in Black Jihad are doing well, and Justyce says they are. Trey is going to be a dad soon, and he's over the moon about it. Quan would give anything to see Trey that happy and asks Justyce to pass on his congratulations.

Justyce changes the subject and asks how Quan is doing. Quan smiles. It's nice to have Justyce around. He says the suburbs are hard to get used to. It's quiet, and parks close at 7 p.m. Right after his release, Quan spent a while living with Doc and his husband. This gave him a good amount of time to adjust to his newfound freedom, and it was great seeing two successful Black men madly in love. It was helpful when later, Quan ran into Liberty. He didn't bat an eye when he asked her out and she said she had a girlfriend.

Quan asks how Justyce and SJ are doing. They're doing well. Quan admits he'd love to find someone like Liberty, and Justyce laughs and shares that Jared ran into Liberty at a restaurant. She chewed him out for trying to flirt with her. Quan bursts into laughter, but Justyce says that Jared reverts to being an entitled, rich white boy sometimes.

The boys, who are really young men now, fall silent. The kids below snottily ask them to move, so Justyce and Quan jump down. Watching Gabe climb, Quan marvels that Gabe is 11—two years older than when Quan and Justyce met. Justyce asks if Quan remembers the **rocket ship**, which Quan insists is a silly question. When Justyce asks if Quan misses it, Quan thinks for a minute. He looks around at the clean park, at Mama laughing, and at Dasia on the swings with a boy. Gabe is having a great birthday, and Quan has his best friend with him. Daddy's the only one missing, but they write weekly, and Quan has visited him in prison. Quan says he doesn't miss it. He has everything he needs here. In an undated letter, Quan thanks Justyce for everything.

Doc helps Quan secure a checking account, which gives Quan more power over his life and his future than he's ever had before. Now he has the opportunity to save and pay back his debts. However, it's significant that Martel isn't cashing any of Quan's checks. This may be how Martel is showing Quan support for his new life path. Martel surely knows that he could keep Quan under his thumb for years by demanding that Quan repay what's surely a huge amount of money. But by seemingly allowing Quan to not pay up, Martel quietly gives Quan the ability to live his life and keep the money for himself.



Loyal to the core, Quan desperately wants his old friends to be happy and fulfilled. Hearing that Trey is expecting his first child offers hope that Trey will be able to do better with his own son than his dad or Quan's Daddy did, thereby ending a cycle of broken families.



Doc once again showed Quan how much he cared by opening his home to him after Quan was released. In addition, Doc and his husband showed Quan that it's possible for Black men to be successful and happy. Just as Justyce looked at Attorney Baldwin as an example of what he can be, Quan now sees that it's possible that he too can one day find success and happiness as a young Black man.



Jared's relapse reads as comic relief more than anything else, but it does make the case that people with privilege must constantly work to do better. It's not enough to treat people respectfully or say the right thing sometimes—it's a constant process of improvement.



The book drives home that Quan and Justyce are really young men when Quan says he doesn't miss the rocket ship. The rocket ship represented Quan's need to run away and escape in order to find happiness. But now, when he looks around, he sees that he is happy. His family is on the road to recovery, he has an amazing friend in Justyce, and he's free of the constricting loyalty that Black Jihad required. In all ways, Quan has escaped the poverty and the violence that kept him from success as a child, driving home the novel's assertion that it's impossible to succeed if a person doesn't have safety and security at home.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Brock, Zoë. "Dear Justyce." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Nov 2020. Web. 20 Nov 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Brock, Zoë. "Dear Justyce." LitCharts LLC, November 20, 2020. Retrieved November 20, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/dear-justyce>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Dear Justyce* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Stone, Nic. *Dear Justyce*. Crown Books. 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Stone, Nic. *Dear Justyce*. New York: Crown Books. 2020.