

“Prince Shakur’s deft writing evoked a multi-layered emotional reaction almost immediately when I began reading. He writes from a place of honesty that is both searing and poignant in its transparency. His story will resonate deeply for those who hold hidden stories of sadness and grief tightly behind a smiling public mask.”

—KHADIJAH ALI-COLEMAN

“*When They Tell You to Be Good* is a swirl of indelible images, language, and action that adds up to a daring coming-of-age memoir unbound by chronological time. Here, Prince Shakur insists on the irreducibility of history, family, masculinity, race, identity, and geography. He refuses to allow manufactured borders between political, personal, and spiritual storytelling. This beautiful, antic, and deeply felt book makes the claim that love is not an emotion as much as it is a large and mysterious storm, encompassing deep pain and unbearable gulfs, yet always reaching for attachment and understanding. I love the anarchic confidence with which Shakur claims visionary thinkers and writers right alongside the people in his neighborhood, his family, friends, and comrades as his intellectual and emotional companions, establishing intimate, playful, heartbreaking, and powerful connections across all boundaries. I know we will be hearing much more from this irrepressible new literary voice.”

—MADELINE FFITCH, author of *Stay and Fight*

“When They Tell You to Be Good is as inspiring as it is detailed. Being a gay, classified black male in America is not easy. Prince Shakur and I first crossed paths when I presented him with an award from GLAAD, but reading about Prince’s shared but different experience made me feel the steps, levels and the purpose of the journey; handling love and abuse and learning that there can be a thin line between both. ‘Would you care if I was gay?’ is a question many members of the LGBTQIA+ family ask ourselves every day, whether to the bus driver or our father. Prince also intelligently explores the complicated yet straightforward relationship many men of all colors deal with: the subject of race.”

—ZEKE THOMAS

“In *When They Tell You to Be Good*, Prince Shakur attempts to make sense of being born into, flung into, both the maw of American violence and the legendary lures and pressures of Babylon. While reckoning with the history of the murders of family members in Jamaica alongside the American state’s history of murdering its Black beings, Prince charts a path through his queerness, his family history, films, literature, the Black radical tradition, as well as his own twin cultures, until an activist, a rigorously-fought-for sense of morality, and the contours of a lucid self comes into view. *This is how I’ve come to locate myself in time and space and legacy*, Prince seems to say, while unraveling a map of his own life. With *When They Tell You to Be Good’s* evergreen pairing of both finesse and confidence, it’s miraculous to witness Prince assert that he is his own best cartographer.”

—BERNARD FERGUSON

**WHEN THEY TELL
YOU TO BE GOOD**

**WHEN THEY
TELL YOU
TO BE GOOD**

A MEMOIR

PRINCE SHAKUR



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

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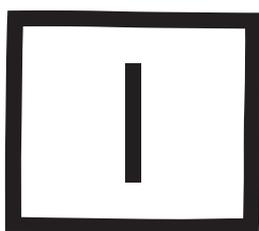
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*To Crystal, James Baldwin, KL Burd, Steven Yeager,
and every little kid writing towards a dream*



Athens, Ohio, United States, 2014

I was nineteen years old and traveling cross-country when my mother told me that I'd die soon, like a man lunging out of a car and away from attackers. I stood in the antique shop in Montana, frozen by the cracking sound in my chest. It was the second time in five years that my mother brandished my father's murder, like a long and rusted machete. Is a mother's heartbreak worse than the heartbreak she gives her son?

Her words on that phone call rose a dark omen that said, "Your exodus means you are doomed. The great duppy will come for you, will chew you up like it got him." I spent weeks of that summer refusing my mother's calls. I only called my mother when my best friend from high school, Nadia, let me know more news about her mother, Crystal.

Nadia and I met when I considered myself a bookish, too-shy freshman, which was a world away from the college student drinking malt liquor at house shows that I'd become. We sat next to each other during our second year of high school, laughing on the phone after class as we watched yaoi anime on our laptops. Shortly after I came out at fifteen, my sobbing

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mother called Crystal for advice on how to grapple with having a gay son. It was Nadia and her family's acceptance of me that made living through the hell of my mother's homophobic reaction more bearable. At Nadia's house, I could talk about crushes on boys, while at my own home I wouldn't dare.

Weeks after coming out, Nadia accompanied my mother to help me move into a two-week summer workshop for teen writers. I lost my dorm key before they left. My mother and Nadia helped me search. My mother's nose burned brighter shades of red as we searched for my key for an hour. Her eyes flickered across all the white faces. Her embarrassment reached a fever pitch when she screamed at me in a bookstore as I searched. Heads around us turned in surprise.

Nadia eyed me and understood the double meaning in my mother's outburst. She stepped forward, touched my mother's arm, and whispered, "Ms. Shakur, we're calm. We're not freaking out. It's okay."

Nadia and her family bearing witness to my familial turmoil, even if it was from the periphery, calmed some of my feelings of abandonment. Through our senior year, I helped Nadia cope with her parents' divorce. We debated our college prospects after class, went to prom, and finalized our dorm packing lists together. While I skimmed by in classes and started to party, Nadia transferred universities and started to online date. Our collegiate phone calls became a needed check-in as we grappled with adulthood and how it changed the way we related to our parents.

I learned during the spring semester of my junior year that Crystal was battling stage 4 lung cancer. The mobile and cantankerous woman became bedridden and unable to eat many foods.

My mother, a hairstylist who had cancer patients before, helped Crystal look for wigs, connected her with a local resource center for cancer patients, and even invited a priest to her bedside.

My mother, a very introverted woman, savored her role as Crystal's caregiving friend. However proud I could be of my mother's tenderness from afar as I attended classes, it all perplexed me—the many promises my mother made to Crystal to look out for her daughter, the piousness in my mother's voice whenever she brought up how God brought her to Crystal, and how all the pain solidified her belief in a forgiving God who could offer spiritual relief to people in their last days. A God that had been weaponized against me.

During my fall semester of my junior year, which was before I learned of Crystal's cancer, my mother called and demanded to know how many people I'd come out to. She eventually revealed that my cousin, Anthony, was spreading the news of my sexuality. When my mother told me that she confronted him, it hurt the most to know that she'd said to him, "You can't be saying these bad things about my son."

Her version of defending me bothered me so much that I called her after a week of avoiding her and sank to the basement floor of my college house in defeat. I asked if she would ever be willing to understand my sexuality. My mother replied, "It's not in me. That's something I'll never want to understand. It hurts my heart, makes it hard to sleep at night. You understand?"

If even death couldn't sway my mother to love me more clearly, then what could shift the scales? What could bring us closer together as death, the only certain thing in life, inched closer and closer?

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A year later during my fall semester as a senior, Nadia sent me a text while I was in a meeting—“My mother died an hour ago.” Reading the words that Crystal had died hollowed out an unexpected place in me. I stumbled into the hallway, tried to decide what to text her back, and called my mother.

“What do I do? Should I buy a bus ticket home right now? Does she need my help?”

My mother thought for a moment, “Wait until the funeral is announced. Give her a little time to tell you what to do.”

I hung up the phone, reached for my swelling throat, and started to cry. The kind of crying that tore through a stomach, sprinkled jagged glass there, and stitched it back together again. I couldn’t get enough of the water out of my chest, so the coughing and near gagging began. At twenty years old, I was just starting my life and now death was framing it, moving in closer and closer.

In August 2014, a month before Crystal died in her hospital bed, a Black teenager was walking home with his friend. They stopped at a gas station and the tall Black teenager bought a few things from the store. As he and his friend jaywalked, a cop arrived and allegedly ordered them to leave the street. Michael Brown was shot six times. Hours later, his body lay still in the street and the nearby crowds grew larger. His murder and display was a harkening to Nina Simone’s “Strange Fruit,” a song that Nina Simone said was unappealing, in a certain sense, and whose namesake became the title of a 2017 documentary on Brown’s effective lynching. Black people, once again, had to choose how to deal with America’s torture and how to reclaim our dead.



The funeral home was small and not far from where my mother lived. We walked through the maze of cars in the parking lot to the open front door. My mother spent most of the morning and the night before on the phone, talking about Crystal's decline to friends. I wanted to be supportive to her and listen, but it irked me when she said things like, "I think God really wanted me to help. I learned a lot about myself through helping her."

My mother believed that God or the devil placed horrible things in your path to test your faith, which to me meant that Crystal's sickness served some high power. Good people suffer to bring empathy to the world. This belief seemed like an easy way out of my mother being vulnerable enough to acknowledge the terror of Crystal's demise to me. I wanted to scream that pain did not equal faith. Even in my anger, I buried my words because everything about the world was moving too fast. Knots collected in my stomach as I hugged Nadia's brother and father. A few minutes before the service started, my mother leaned toward me.

"Did I ever tell you about one of the last times I saw her?"

"Um . . ." I sighed. "No."

"I visited her in the hospital. She started coughing and coughing. Then she started coughing up blood with *things* in it."

I tried to look ahead and not respond to my mother. A thousand things raced through my head: whether to tell her to shut up, whether to slap her across the face, or how to blink away the heat rushing to my eyes. I wanted the version of my mother that helped my brother make the miniature volcano for

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a science fair on the kitchen floor, who bought me McDonald's after nosebleeds in elementary school, and who stood between the world and my brother and me when I was twelve. Now my mother stared at me and kissed her teeth.

"You've had an attitude all morning and now you're not talking to me."

I excused myself to the bathroom. A man stood at the counter counting his pills in a pill dispenser. I locked myself in a stall and wondered why the fuck he was there. I shook my head repeatedly and told myself that it was too early to cry. Then the image crossed my mind. Blood and body parts leaving Crystal's lips, her face pinched in pain. I wanted a different image. More than anything, I wanted to be walking into Crystal's living room with a soda in hand and a laughing Nadia at my side, or for that image to be burned into my mind.

The service was well enough. The funeral director was an older Black man that sometimes stumbled over his words. He said all of the expected things after someone's passing, especially on how one's life can be measured by how much they moved people. Nadia walked out in a beautiful black dress with her brother by her side. They sat at the front. Not being able to read the emotions on Nadia's face terrified me. I wished that I was sitting right next to her. I was angry that I didn't have the courage to speak at the wake about what Crystal meant to me out of fear that the true face of my grief would offend my mother. I wanted to stay longer at the end, but my mother rushed us away and said that our presence wouldn't be helpful.

I stared out the window during the short drive home and loosened my tie.

"I'm going to my room," I said as soon as we got back.

I tried to take a nap. I didn't feel like scrolling through my phone. I didn't feel like texting or calling anyone, and I didn't want to cry. Eventually, my phone buzzed. It was Nadia.

"Can you help me pack up my mother's room tonight?"

"Of course I can. I'll get my mother to drop me off."

I opened my bedroom door and found my mother in the kitchen. I asked if she could take me to Nadia's house.

"If I drop you off there, then how are you going to get to the bus to go back to school tomorrow?"

My mother turned off the kitchen faucet and left the half-filled pot in the sink. Then she turned to me slowly. My older brother was back home to eat a home-cooked dinner. She was hoping that we would all sit together and reminisce about how much Crystal had meant to us, or more specifically, to her. I chose my words carefully.

"Nadia really needs help right now. Tonight's gonna be hard because she has to clear out her mother's room. Her father isn't there. Her brother isn't there. I—"

"So you need to be there?"

If you were actually Crystal's actual friend, maybe you'd be going there too, I thought.

I knew what was coming—the sometimes pained twinkle in her eye whenever I talked about how fun Crystal was, how threatened my mother felt over my level of ease with Crystal's family, and how this could mean that I, in turn, didn't care enough to understand my mother. Pretty soon, all the hurt bubbling beneath the surface would all come flying out of my mouth. My heart started to race. I bit down on the inside of my

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lip. Through the fresh, hot grief in my mind, I stared at myself standing in a little vintage shop in Wyoming, trying to imagine the horrible things my father had done to make my mother curse me to death. I was staring at my mother peel open Crystal's door to find her on the ground. I was watching my mother use her religion to rationalize everything, even pushing me away by demanding I be something that I wasn't. I was waiting for her God to bring Crystal back. I wanted to scream.

I had dared to hope that Crystal's passing would somehow bring my mother and me closer together, that death would even us out on the same plateau of grief. Instead, it revealed the ways we used love and loyalty differently. For me, Crystal's death was the equivalent of an anchor's rope being cut. To my mother, her death was proof of God's willingness to have mercy on those capable of change and devotion.

I spoke with a clear voice, "Her mother, your friend, died today."

"And I haven't seen you, my son, in months. Now you're going to hang out with your friend? Prince, I don't think you realize how selfish you are sometimes."

I turned away. She shouted, "You can find your own ride to the bus tomorrow."

I spun around and walked toward her, then stopped saying, "I knew you would do this. I knew you would do this. Nadia's mother has been sick for over a year. You swoop in and pretend like you have this big heart. I'll find my own way to the bus station tomorrow, but it's really sick for you to make today about you."

"Shoot me for wanting to see my son."