

*A Question of Freedom, Excerpt*

by R. Dwayne Betts

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**Thirty Minutes**

Sixteen years hadn't even done a good job on my voice. It cracked in my head as I tried to explain away the police car driving my one hundred and twenty-six pounds to the Fairfax County Jail. Everything near enough for me to touch gleamed with the color of violence: the black of the deputy's holstered guns, the broken leather of the seat I sat on and the silver of the cuffs that held my hands before me in prayer. When I closed my eyes I thought about the way the gun felt in my palm. I tried to remember what caliber pistol it was, but couldn't. It was automatic and weighed nothing in my palm, and I couldn't figure how something that weighed nothing could have me slumped in the back of a car driving me away from my life. My wrists almost slipped through cuffs that held me captive as jailhouse dangers swirled red in my head.

I want to tell you that I could talk tough, that I was going over every way I knew to say fuck you. But I wasn't. There were titles of movies and books on my mind: *Shawshank Redemption*; *American Me*; *Blood In, Blood Out*; *Makes Me Wanna Holler*; *Racehoss*; *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Every movie or book I'd ever read about prison bled with violence and I knew the list I was making in my head could go on forever. Stories of robbery, rape, murder, discrimination and what it means to not be able to go home. Sixteen years old and I was headed to a jail cell, adding my name to the toll of black men behind bars. Not even old enough to buy liquor or cigarettes, but I knew I'd be stepping into the county jail in minutes and that my moms was at home somewhere crying.

When I tried to part my hands I thought about the violence, about how real it is when a cell door closes behind you at night. I thought about needing a knife, 'cause from what I knew everyone needed a knife. I stared at my shackled feet. I hadn't seen my Timberlands since the day I was arrested, three months earlier.

I was getting ready to learn what it meant to lock your thoughts inside of yourself and survive in a place governed by violence, a place where violence was a cloud of smoke you

learned to breathe in or choked on. Sometimes there's a story that's been written again and again, sometimes a person finds himself with a story he thinks will be in vogue forever. The story is about redemption, about overcoming. A person finds that story and starts to write it, thinking it will do him some good to tell the world how it really was. That's not this story. This is about silence, and how in an eight- year period I met over a dozen people named Juvenile or Youngin or Shorty, all nicknames to tell the world that they were in prison as young boys, as children. We wore the names like badges of honor, because in a way, for some of us, it was all we had to guard us against the fear. And we were guilty and I was just like everyone else: I thought about the edge of a knife.