

Voting Day

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The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.

—Winston S. Churchill

If you count street smarts, my father was brilliant, even though he never made it past the eighth grade. A story he repeated often, not for attention or pity, but a slick, underhanded way to inspire his four children. When my younger brother's report card showed declining grades one year, Daddy shouted strong enough for all four of us to hear: "Boy, you not moving forward, you going backwards." For days, the three of us teased Robert: "You not moving forward, you going backwards."

I don't know if my father ever read a book—probably not—a street kid from Baton Rouge, Daddy grew up using the anti-white slur *Cracker* in everyday language. The same outdated word Trayvon Martin mentioned over the phone to his friend Rachel Jeantel moments before he was killed by George Zimmerman. "A creepy ass *Cracker* is following me."

Silently, I've envied friends whose fathers told them they could be whatever they desired; fathers who encouraged big dreams. My father never mentioned dreams, as though it was a bad word or something only a *honky* did. In his older, Chicago days, *honky* became his trendy anti-white slur.

I imagine the power of voting hit Daddy like a bullet to the head on Thursday,

April 4, 1968, the day Martin Luther King Jr. was gunned down in Memphis by a white man. The next night, grief and rage exploded more destructively and deadly in Chicago than in any other city, with the death of nine Black men (ages sixteen to thirty-four). One was shot in the back while walking home on the dark West Side streets with his wife.

Just thirty-four years old, my handsome, midnight-blue-colored father with the pleasing, relaxed smile could have been number ten on that casualty list. Daddy never served in the military, but he understood that the riot of 1968 was war. A war that saw 350 people arrested for looting and 162 buildings destroyed by arson. The most tormenting, the politician Daddy voted for in the last mayoral election ordered police to shoot to kill any arsonist and shoot to maim anyone looting stores. *Shoot to kill . . . shoot to maim*: orders from Mayor Richard Daley. Translation for Southern migrants such as Daddy: *Kill or cripple them Niggers*.

Bulldozers cleared away the charred debris, but the scars—vacant lots—are still visible on the West Side in 2020. Wonder how Daddy would have voted in the next election if he knew the hidden story behind the riot circulating decades later? Several witnesses along Madison Street told the *Chicago Sun-Times* about a “killer squad” of four white officers, each equipped with a shotgun, who at intervals fired into stores from a blue Chevy. The West Side was flooded with reports that the KKK had substantially infiltrated the Chicago police. It made sense and would undoubtedly give Black fathers like mine another legitimate reason to be angry.

The polls couldn’t open early enough in 1975. In our house, voting day resembled the movie *Groundhog Day* with plenty of predictable and entertaining dialogue.

Daddy: Inez, you better come on. We need to get to them polls at six. I got to be at work right at seven.

Mother: Man, stop rushing me. I’m making my lunch. Go warm up the car. How cold is it?

Daddy: Woman, hurry up, already. It’s winter. It’s cold.

After years of voting for the same white mayor, Daddy was surprisingly given the opportunity to create voting history. During my junior year in high school, State Senator Richard Newhouse Jr. was the first Black candidate on the ballot. Even my teenage eyes could see he didn’t stand a chance with both the Chicago defender and *Ebony/Jet* publisher John Johnson endorsing Daley. When Daddy got home that

night, I asked: “Is Daley always going to be the mayor?” “Sure looks that way, honey.” Daley won his last election by a landslide 59 percent margin. He reigned for 21 years and died the following winter, December 20, 1976, from a heart attack at age 74.

Regardless of the predicted outcome, Daddy never stopped believing his vote was a Black man’s weight in gold. As kids growing up in the projects, we were early Chicagoans who delighted in every construction phase of the Eisenhower Expressway, a convenience with voters’ roots.

Uncharted waters and riots demand voters’ attention. In the age of Trump, coronavirus, and Black Lives Matter, there is no debate. Gone four years now, Daddy would be 87 on election day 2020. I can hear him yelling from his favorite seat on the front porch: *The hell with this damn virus, get me to the polls.*

Some fathers instill dreams in their kids. Mine cleverly showed me the reality of dreams each and every voting day. Lessons and dreams are not a straight shoot; they show up in everyday rituals. Why has it taken so long for me to realize the dreams my father harbored for his children? Not voting was not an option for him, his most vivid, unspoken dream.

April 1983, Daddy was elated. The unimaginable happened. Chicago’s fifty-first mayor was a mirror reflection of my father. A radiant smile, full mustache, salt-pepper hair, stocky build, and Black. The election of Harold Washington as the city’s first Black mayor gave my father immense pride. Washington was a politician who climbed the ladder of success one slippery step at a time. He got a GED, then went to law school. He was about making neighborhoods better. In his words: *I want to be a mayor who helped, really helped.*

Most Black folks expected the real help to come in Washington’s second term, but the unimaginable struck again. Washington died in office seven months after his reelection. His death consumed our front-porch chatter all summer long. Daddy talked about the long lines he stood in to say goodbye to the first politician he was excited to vote for. I actually believe Daddy silently spilled out a few teardrops over the loss of Washington.

Daddy’s best voting memory: A summer afternoon after mowing the lawn, a handsome, tall, young Black candidate running for the U.S. Senate sat on the front porch and talked story with Daddy. The two shook hands and Daddy told him: “Boy, you should run for president.” And that, let my father tell it, is how Barack Obama came to run for president.



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