

## **Americorps: Saving a Child**

Michael watched his breath turn to vapor as it hit the cold Chicago morning air. He wished that he would never have to leave the nest of wadded up blankets he affectionately referred to as his bed. Today was his thirteenth birthday, or at least he thought it was; his birth certificate had been lost years ago, most likely while moving from one apartment to another as his family often did. By now, though, he knew better than to expect any sort of formal observance of the event. In fact to an outside observer, even Christmas day would be difficult to distinguish in this household, let alone such a seemingly insignificant occasion as a birthday that probably wasn't accurately regarded anyway.

His mother worked as a housekeeper at a hotel during the day and a waitress at a restaurant downtown in the evenings. She had already left two hours before Michael woke up, and most likely wouldn't be home long, before he would have to go to bed. Michael knew nothing of his father, other than that his name was Maurice.

Across the room, Michael's only other immediate family member, his older brother Darryl, laid sprawled out on the floor in a fashion that suggested police detectives would be along at any moment to take photographs and collect necessary evidence. Michael had always looked up to his brother as a role model, someone he wished to emulate in every facet imaginable. Although this sort of admiration doesn't simply go away, seeing Darryl with the bandanna that seemed a permanent parasitic adornment, and the expression of an irritated pit bull on his face as he slept, made Michael very afraid, though he would never admit it. Both he and his mother knew what Darryl had become, but it was something that simply was not spoken of.

Michael knew that both he and his brother would soon need to arise from their respective sleeping quarters, if they were to make it to school on time. Michael let out a deliberately exaggerated cough in order to avoid physically rousing his brother. Darryl groaned and rolled over, then slowly arose and staggered to the bathroom without uttering a word. While his brother showered, Michael made his way to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator: ketchup, taco sauce, and soy sauce packets, a bucket of chicken bones and skin, and a box of wine. He decided not to bother looking in the cupboard. His stomach growled.

The bathroom door swung open, and Michael sauntered toward it as Darryl exited. Their eyes met as they passed, and they both gave a slight nod of recognition. Michael encountered his reflection in the bathroom mirror with subdued despondency. The lack of accumulated condensation meant yet another day of bathing beneath an Antarctic cascade. He thrust himself under the icy waters and hastily unscrewed the cap from the small bottle of shampoo his mother had thoughtfully pilfered from her employer. While rinsing his hair, he simultaneously swiped a small bar of soap, which was acquired by the same means, across his exterior. After a quick rinse, Michael shut off the faucet and grabbed the damp, musty smelling towel wadded up on the floor. He could barely feel the fabric against his numbed skin as he patted himself dry. He draped the towel over the curtain rod, and gathered his pajamas, which had apparently undergone metamorphosis during his shower, as they were now considered his school clothes. A malodorous aroma wafted into his nostrils as he dressed. He had other clothes, but they were even more repugnant. It would only be a few more days, and then his mother would have enough money to do the laundry.

Michael and Darryl left the apartment together. They descended nine flights of stairs, and pushed open the prison-like door to make their departure. Darryl warned Michael to be especially careful today. He said there was a lot of "bad blood" from the night before. Hardly a minute had passed, when suddenly Darryl pushed Michael to the ground behind some trash cans. Before he could even make a sound, Darryl firmly put his hand over Michael's mouth. Darryl's eyes burst into flames; Michael held his breath

to avoid making even the slightest sound. Michael peered through a small crack between two of the trash cans just in time to see an older, maroon colored Pontiac with glistening silver rims, very slowly pass by. Despite the bitter cold, Michael could feel himself start to perspire. He looked intently at the driver of the vehicle, who couldn't have been much older than his brother. He was tremendously relieved that their eyes never met.

After what seemed like an hour had passed, Darryl finally stood up. Michael remained crouched near the ground until Darryl made a gesture that everything was alright. Michael cautiously arose, and the two resumed their quest. They were about a block from the school, when suddenly, a white, rusty Buick pulled up next to them. Instinctively, Michael ducked behind a parked car nearby. This time, however, Darryl did not join him in hiding. Instead, he approached the back window of the vehicle, which was rolled down just a crack by the occupant. A thick fog came pouring out, and within a few moments, Michael could smell its pungent odor. Darryl told Michael to keep going without him. The door quickly opened, then slammed shut, and the Buick sped off.

Michael finished the solitary trek towards the imposing, red-brick school building. When he was still in elementary school, he remembered a rumor that they had to use red bricks to hide the blood stains from kids getting beat up all the time. It didn't take long for Michael to realize the validity of that statement. Fistfights were an almost everyday occurrence, some of which were accompanied by the use of weapons, ranging from a cigarette lighter held in a clenched fist, to knives. Michael had personally been involved in two fights since he started junior high two years ago. He was considered well-behaved.

Michael's morning classes lurched forward at the pace of a sloth skiing uphill in the summertime. He spent more time trying to fight gravity's tremendous pull on his eyelids, than absorbing any content from his teachers' lectures. By his fourth class he could feel the energy draining from his body. He grinned to himself as he imagined the energy dripping through the cracks in the floor, onto the head of a popular girl. He pictured one girl in particular, the daughter of a wealthy Chicago attorney, who often gave him looks that made him feel more unclean than he already was. Her name was Sophia. How this strategic integration of students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds was in any way beneficial, was to Michael at least, anybody's guess. Suddenly, Michael's thoughts were interrupted by a startling, yet pleasantly familiar sound. Instinctively, he looked up at the clock on the wall for ascertainment. The ringing bell played a veritable symphony in Michael's ear. It was time for lunch.

Michael hurriedly crammed the textbook that served him better as a pillow than a learning tool into his backpack, and scurried like a frightened cockroach to the lunchroom. As he navigated his way through the swarm of students, the tantalizing scent grew stronger and stronger. Like a moth to an incandescent light bulb, nothing could come between Michael and the allure of a hot meal. Sometimes, if not most of the time, lunch seemed to be Michael's only reason for attending school at all. It was often his only reliable source of sustenance. After scarfing down a slice of pizza, some soggy French fries, a scoop of canned fruit, and a carton of chocolate milk, Michael finally felt a slight sense of satisfaction. As he knew, however, the feeling was only temporary.

After lunch, Michael's next three classes went by at a moderately quick pace. However, toward the end of his seventh hour class, his mood began to change. He began to feel a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. His hands became cadaverously cold and clammy. His jackhammer legs trembled violently. Michael's final class was fast approaching, the class which caused him great terror and trepidation. The class was Literature.

Several factors contributed to Michael's odium of Literature. First, the teacher was of the type that most likely took great pride in being a stringent disciplinarian. To most students, however, this persona was perceived as misanthropic sadism. Second, the classroom was infested with the progeny of prosperity, the proverbial "better half". Of course this included the very girl who so despised him, Sophia. To Michael, it seemed that with a single glance she could empty the entire contents of the classroom

wastebasket onto his head. It probably just wasn't worth the effort, as even a shower of pencil shavings and used facial tissue couldn't possibly make him any more repugnant to her. Then there was the final and most imperative reason that Michael so despised this class; Michael was in eighth grade, but he was reading at barely a third grade level. Whenever he was made to read aloud, it became a complete spectacle. The other students would turn around, so as not to miss a single moment, and would occasionally burst out laughing at Michael's mistakes. The teacher did nothing to stop this behavior. In fact, Michael suspected that she often times purposely used him as a "bad example".

Today would be an especially arduous class. They had been studying drama, and today Michael's class was acting out a scene from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Michael had been assigned the role of Tybalt. On a typical day, he probably would have succumbed to the temptation of ditching his last class, and going home early. However today, Michael hoped at least, would be different.

Not more than a week ago, as Michael was leaving school, he noticed a sign hanging on a wall by the door. The sign was for an after-school literacy skills program. Normally, this wasn't the kind of thing Michael would be interested in, however the sign also read, "free chips and soda". Perhaps for once Michael's tendency to think more dominantly with his stomach than his brain had paid off.

Michael found the room mentioned on the sign and quickly located the free chips and soda. Before anyone could even acknowledge his presence, he had a mouthful of nacho flavored tortilla chips. Soon, however, a young woman perhaps a couple of years older than his brother Darryl introduced herself to him. Michael returned the greeting as best he could through the glob of chewed up chips. The woman, whose name was Tanya, told Michael that she was volunteering through the AmeriCorps organization. She and several other AmeriCorps volunteers wanted to help teenagers like Michael, who had trouble with literacy and reading. Michael began thinking that he could really benefit from this program. Besides, he had already eaten several handfuls of chips, and he thought it might be rude to just walk out. So, the two of them started working together practicing Michael's lines for the play. Before long, three hours had passed, and Michael realized he should get home soon in case his brother was looking for him. Before he left, Tanya told Michael that she would be there every day after school, in case he ever wanted to come back. The next day, Michael did come back. In fact, he started coming to the after-school program every single day.

Now, Michael stood at the front of the classroom readying himself to speak. He thought that he had a pretty good part in the play, because not only did he get to kill someone, but he also got to die in the same scene. He went over the lines in his head, and tried not to notice the whispers and giggles of his classmates. The play had begun. He spoke his first line. The other students in the room went silent. Michael did not screw up. He spoke his second line, then his third. Before long he was engaged in a mock sword fight, still speaking his lines correctly. As the words poured out, Michael's confidence grew. Before he knew it, it was time for him to be slain. Romeo's wooden sword pierced Tybalt right through the vulnerable spot between the arm and the body. Feeling very self-assured, Michael went over the top with his acting. He groaned, coughed, and staggered around, before he finally collapsed on the tile floor. As he lay there, he heard what sounded like several gunshots in the distance. At the end of the performance, everyone applauded, even Sophia. All of the cast members took a final bow before returning to their respective seats. Michael could not remember the last time he had ever felt this blissful.

Michael could not wait to tell Tanya about his accomplishment. He rushed to the room where the after-school program met. Everything around him was a blur as he dashed down the hallway. He opened the door, and his excitement immediately vanished. The room was completely dark; no one was there. He lowered his head, turned around, and began to walk away. Suddenly, the lights flashed on, "Surprise!" Several voices shouted. Michael whirled around to see Tanya, along with the other volunteers and a few of the students they worked with, all smiling at him. "Happy birthday, Michael!" Tanya exclaimed. She said they didn't have a real cake, but she had a box of Twinkies. Michael began to cry. This was truly the happiest day of his life.

After the celebration, Michael set off on his long walk home. It had started to snow, and a soft, feathery blanket was delicately covering the ground. He looked up at the sky. The moonlight glinting off the snowflakes made it look as if the stars themselves were falling to the earth. A loud, thumping stereo took him by surprise. Michael looked down to see a maroon Pontiac driving towards him on the street. Its silver rims sparkled against the newly fallen snow. Michael wanted to hide, but it was too late, and there was nowhere to go. He held his breath as he looked at the driver. The young man looked back at him. Their eyes locked as they passed; the moment seemed frozen in time. The car kept going. The driver looked away. Michael took a huge breath and ran the rest of the way home.

As time went by, the fear began to subside. Now sitting curled up in his blanket in the corner, Michael started recalling his new, happy memories. He could not wait to tell his mother and Darryl. He hoped that one of them, at least, would be home soon. He closed his eyes and began replaying the day's events in his head. He smiled, as he drifted off to sleep thinking of Twinkies. Michael had been asleep for hours by the time his mother had gotten home. Tears streamed down her aged face as she looked at her beautiful child sound asleep, her only beautiful child. Darryl wouldn't be coming home tonight.

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