

**Tyrec Taylor** and I meet in the living room of the house his mother bought a few years earlier; it is only a block from where he and his family lived when he was in fourth grade. Tyrec has grown tall, and he wears his hair in long, neatly kept cornrows. He is dressed in an ironed white T-shirt and casual pants. As with many of this generation, Tyrec sports a tattoo on his forearm bearing his nickname, “Ty.” His manner is quiet; he seems low-key, and at times depressed, as he talks about the violent deaths of some of his friends.

Tyrec has a key to his mother’s house and comes by often, but he lives with his father (and his father’s girlfriend); he also spends quite a bit of time with his own girlfriend. He has weathered numerous school and work transitions, as well as periods of unemployment. But his mother says, “He’s coming along. He isn’t doing as well as I wish he was doing, but he’s coming along.” Similarly, at the end of the interview I conduct with Tyrec’s father, Mr. Taylor says, “He’s surviving. He’s staying one step ahead of the cheetah.” The issue of survival is very much on Tyrec’s mind, since two of his good friends have been killed in recent years. Indeed, when I ask what he plans to be doing five years from now, Tyrec says he simply hopes to be alive: “I don’t even know. Tell you the truth, I hope, like right now, I’m not dreaming at nothing like extravagant, I’m just hoping I’ll be okay. It’s crazy out here. I’m hoping I’m still alive. . . . A lot of people that I grew up with not even here.”

Tyrec attended three different high schools. Ms. Taylor, hoping to provide her son with an alternative to the neighborhood school, Lower Richmond High School, helped him apply to a new public charter school. He was accepted and did well academically, but he missed his friends. Also, fulfilling his dream of playing high school basketball was not an option at the charter school. In a decision Ms. Taylor has come to bitterly regret, she permitted Tyrec to transfer to Lower Richmond High in the middle of his sophomore year. “Once I got in school with my friends, I was just running loose,” Tyrec confesses, “doing what we was doing, just running the streets,

leaving school.” Tyrec passed only three courses (“stuff that I was interested in”—“math class, science class”), which meant he was not eligible to play basketball. About three-quarters of his friends dropped out of high school. At sixteen, he “got locked up” because he “was running with the wrong people, being around while they do dumb stuff, stealing, they was stealing and stuff.” Tyrec insisted in the interview, “I never really did nothing . . . I was just with them.” He found juvenile hall “crazy,” but when he went to court, “I didn’t get found guilty or nothing.”<sup>1</sup> Upon his release, he moved in with his father.

Ms. Taylor’s attempts to get Tyrec readmitted to his previous school failed, as did her efforts to get him admitted to a different charter school. In the summer of his junior year, Ms. Taylor was frantic with worry. Promising to repay half of it, she persuaded her ex-husband to take out a \$6,000 loan to cover one year of private school tuition. At the private school, Tyrec regained a sense of stability, met his (current) girlfriend, and focused more on schoolwork. His parents’ shouldering of substantial debt on his behalf was a major motivator. As he puts it, “[I felt] like I better pass.” He graduated.

Tyrec’s girlfriend, Whitney, is two years his junior. Her parents both own small businesses. Although she was accepted at more than one college, in the end, Whitney decided to stay at home and work while attending a real estate class. Tyrec feels Whitney has been an enormous help to him. He credits her particularly for helping him cope with the death of his friends. Neither of his parents, however, is thrilled about the relationship. Both report dramatic, public conflicts between the couple, with Whitney throwing things at Tyrec and hitting him. Still, they seem close. They have faithfully used birth control and have no plans for children. Two years ago, Tyrec gave Whitney a ring that his mother terms a “pre-engagement” ring.

Referring to college, Tyrec says, “I always was supposed to go, like right after high school I took, I was supposed to go straight in. I took like a year off. I worked all

year at 7–11. And I just was like, I want to go back to school, I didn't really want to make seven dollars [minimum wage] . . . so I went back to school.” Like many of his male peers who also had college aspirations, Tyrec never took the SAT or ACT, nor does he seem to have taken many of the high school courses four-year colleges require for admission. He enrolled in the local community college for two semesters, spread over a four-year period. He got C's in the remedial, non-credit courses in algebra and writing that are compulsory for students with academic records like Tyrec's. He managed a B in a computer course, but he failed English composition, having never turned in two required essays. The four courses cost \$2,500, which he and his father paid for in cash.<sup>2</sup> His mother helped cover the cost of his books. Thus, four years after high school graduation, Tyrec had completed two remedial courses and had received college credit for one other course.

His work experiences also have been erratic. He has worked in fast food restaurants and in a shopping mall, and he has been a sales clerk in a drug store and a convenience store. None of these jobs has lasted more than a few months. (Mr. Taylor reports that Tyrec was fired from one position for tardiness, and that he quit another, outraged over the manager's unfair treatment of employees.) He was unemployed for many months. Ms. Taylor was extremely agitated about this period of unemployment, part of which overlapped with the time I interviewed her. At one point during the interview, she began to yell about the importance of Tyrec finding work.<sup>3</sup> Her anxiety about his future was palpable. Ms. Taylor retains hope that Tyrec will go to college: her dream is that “he would be a successful lawyer.” He needs to be employed full-time, however, to support himself. Given her financial situation, she is unable to help him with the cost of college, although she “could help him get a loan” and possibly help with books or other expenses.<sup>4</sup>

With his cousin's help, Tyrec landed a highly desirable construction job in a lead abatement program. After a two-week-long training program—at a cost of

\$500—he got a certificate and immediately began working, for \$12.00 per hour. The work consists mainly of scraping paint from walls and removing lead from other parts of houses. He says he likes the work, but he does not want to do it for the rest of his life, in part because he thinks the pay is insufficient. He wants to form a business with his cousin, remodeling homes and selling real estate. In the meantime, a few months after I spoke to Ty, Ms. Taylor tells me that he has been laid off again. He was filling out an application to work at J.C. Penny. Ms. Taylor continues to hope her son will return to college.