

ONE

One Thing Leads to Another

While witches and goblins lug candy-laden pillowcases and orange, plastic pumpkin-shaped buckets up and down the streets of Philadelphia, black thirty-one-year-old Amin Jenkins is experiencing the best moment of his life. It's October 31 and he's in the delivery room of the University of Pennsylvania hospital welcoming his baby Antoine into the world—a boy who he says “looks exactly like me.” Though he admits the child was far from planned, Amin is proud that he “never said I wasn't responsible, that I had nothing to do with it”—“it” being Antoinette Hargrove's pregnancy. Far from it. “From the time that she was pregnant I was always involved, talking to her and spending time with her and rubbing her stomach.”¹

By the time the baby arrived, Amin and Antoinette were clearly a “couple.” By then, Amin was certain that he “really, really loved” Antoinette and was cautiously optimistic about their future together. Eighteen months later, however, “the communication just stopped.” Amin explains, “as time progressed we started having certain irreconcilable differences and that caused our fire and that spark to diminish.” Soon both were “seeing other people” on the side, which led to a “retaliation-type situation.” Finally, around Antoine's third birthday, Antoinette, fed up with the tit for tat, moved out, leaving no forwarding

address. Antoinette's sister and mother weren't willing to reveal where she was living. A year later Amin is still crazy about Antoine but doesn't know his address; he can only see his son when the boy visits Antoinette's mother.

What brings inner city couples like Amin and Antoinette together in the first place? How well do they usually know each other before becoming pregnant? Is it usually true love or little more than a one-night stand? Faced with an unplanned conception, how is the decision made to go ahead and have the baby? Do the pressures of pregnancy fracture an otherwise strong relationship, or is it pregnancy that transforms a fairly casual liaison into something more—at least for a time? And what aspects of men's larger life stories—their childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood experiences and the neighborhoods they come of age in—both drive their desire and hamstring their attempts to forge a lasting relationship with the mother of their child? As we will see, the way in which men like Amin become fathers can tell us much about the many struggles they will face after their children are born.

Following a quiet career at James Alcorn Elementary, Amin's seventh- and eighth-grade years at Audenreid Junior High were pockmarked by suspensions for fighting, stealing, cutting class, and any other form of trouble available. By fifteen he'd been expelled from South Philly High and assigned to the Absalom Jones disciplinary school, and a year later the criminal justice system remanded him to a year in juvenile detention for burglary.² Immediately after his eighteenth birthday, Amin was convicted of robbery and served his first real time. Out at twenty, he managed to stay free just long enough to father his first child (Antoine is his second) with a woman he barely knew—a child he denied—and acquire a GED before embarking on another and more lengthy prison stint, this time on multiple charges including burglary and aggravated assault. He wouldn't see the outside again until twenty-seven.

Amin's behavior seemed inexplicable to his poor but respectable three-generation South Philadelphia family, ruled by a strict grandmother

with high expectations—the one who helped raise the kids and “steer us right” while his mother worked long hours keeping house for well-off Jewish families in West Philadelphia. This prodigal son’s older siblings embraced and even exceeded their grandmother’s goals, staying out of serious trouble, finishing school, getting married, and going on to lead middle-class lives. The sister he’s closest to because they share the same father pretty much stayed on the straight and narrow too; now she holds a coveted state job.

But Amin is the youngest and the only boy. For him the neighborhood—the racially charged Grays Ferry on the westernmost border of South Philadelphia—took a special toll.³ In the mid-1960s his mother, Betty Jenkins, had been one of the first blacks to move into the hardscrabble working-class Irish community. With her mother and two oldest daughters in tow, Betty took up residence in Tasker Homes, a federal low-income housing development built for white war workers in the 1930s that, three decades later, had just begun accepting black applicants. Amin came of age there in the late eighties and by that time both the housing project and the surrounding neighborhood had taken a nosedive. Amin describes Grays Ferry as a “very, very rough community. Very racist, prejudiced. When you grow up in an environment such as that, it does have a tendency to affect and to *infect* your attitude and your disposition.”

In this community everyone from peers to the police seemed intent on scapegoating black boys like Amin: for the declining economic fortunes of its industrial workers; for the deteriorating streetscapes; for the mounting racial tension; for the plunging property values and epidemic white flight. An enormous animosity toward whites who, in his view, were always ready to “start something” with the neighborhood’s black residents and a bottomless anger toward authority figures were the contaminants that turned to poison in Amin’s teenage years. Engaging in a little self-analysis, he says that it was these dispositions piled on top of the aching sense of abandonment he felt when his father simply drifted away that explained his compelling desire to find trouble whenever the opportunity arose. Not until age twenty-six, in Houtzdale

Prison, located in a remote area of western Pennsylvania, did Amin find the space for reflection that led to redemption. “The last eleven months of my prison term was when I began to realize that I was wasting time,” he explains. “I had to do better things with my life.”

After his release Amin moved back in with his mother, who was still living in the now nearly all-black Tasker Homes. To prove the sincerity of his jailhouse conversion, Amin immediately hit the streets looking for work and eventually landed his first real job stocking shelves at Rite Aid. Determined to do even more to ensure he could “take a different course in life,” he enrolled in evening classes at the Community College of Philadelphia to earn certification as a dietary assistant, a career choice inspired by his twenty-three-cent-a-day job in the prison kitchen. This coursework eventually qualified him for a position in the dietary department at the University of Pennsylvania hospital, just across the Schuylkill River from Grays Ferry.

Flush for the first time with real wages, Amin then made another positive move. He and his mother decided to pool their resources and trade life in public housing for home ownership. Over a year’s time, the two managed to put away five thousand dollars. Thanks to a special program offered by a community-development corporation, this was sufficient down payment for a mortgage on a renovated row house in the Strawberry Mansion section of North Philadelphia. Soon, Amin and his mother were fitting the key into the lock of their own home and marveling at the freshly painted walls, gleaming wood floors, and the kitchen equipped with brand new appliances.

Amin’s new world was the 2900 block of Diamond Street, just east of Fairmount Park and a few streets away from the historically significant “Mansion Row” running the length of the 3200 block. There the traces of the neighborhood’s nineteenth-century heyday as a wealthy Jewish streetcar suburb are most evident, albeit in dilapidated form. On Amin’s own block, the decrepit “mansions” with their turrets and pillars give way to solid, spacious three-story brownstones, some with dusty red or white metal awnings. It is a relatively good block, unbroken by the gaps

of vacant lots that lend a bombed-out look to most others in the neighborhood. In Strawberry Mansion, lots cleared of some of the most flagrantly neglected and structurally unsound structures in the city nearly exceed those with residences. This is not to say that the 2900 block doesn't have "vacancies"—as passersby, we can't help but notice as light reflects off the broken window glass that leaves several abandoned structures exposed to the elements.

Although Strawberry Mansion was well away from the peers that had led Amin astray in the past, "out of the frying pan and into the fire" is how many outside observers would see his first concrete step toward upward mobility. While there is no Grays Ferry-style racial tension here—the neighborhood is 98 percent black—there is little else to commend it: sky-high poverty, unemployment and crime, failing schools, abysmally low property values, and, other than the massive church and synagogue structures that anchor nearly every other block, almost no amenities.⁴ Nonetheless, Amin viewed the move as an astonishing achievement and incontrovertible evidence that the prodigal son had returned home.

About this time, buoyed with newfound optimism about his future, Amin began to take notice of Antoinette, a coworker who was signaling her attraction to him. Flattered by the attention, he reciprocated. "She was attracted to me when I first saw her, and I made my approach," he recalls. We ask Amin to tell us how he and Antoinette met and what led to having a child together. His reply is noticeably succinct. "We began to socialize and communicate and then from there we began to affiliate and at some point in time we became intimate and my son was born."

In just a few words or a single sentence, inner-city fathers like Amin can often summarize what passes for courtship of the women who become their children's mothers. Perhaps this is because everything usually happens so fast: in Amin's case it was only fifteen months' time before "attraction" had led to "affiliation," then to an intimacy that resulted in conception. Nine months later Antoine entered the world. Amin's relationship with Antoinette is the most significant adult bond

he has ever had outside of his tie to his mother, yet he, like most others we spoke to, uses vague, even bureaucratic language to describe his relationship in the period before pregnancy. In these accounts “affiliation”—a term indicating that a couple is “together”—often takes the place of other expected words like love or commitment.

Typically though, the two are definitely “together” by the time a child is conceived; Amin assures us that this was the case for him and Antoinette when Antoine was conceived. In fact, he can more or less pinpoint exactly when the two moved from “socializing” to togetherness. As men like Amin define it, this state is halfway between what middle-class youth refer to as a “hookup”—sex with no commitment—and a “real relationship.” In the hookup phase, many men claim they use condoms quite consistently, and women in these communities confirm these assertions.⁵ But once the couple moves to “the next level” of togetherness, condoms, defined more as disease prevention than birth control, are left in the nightstand drawer. Indeed, if both partners have “tested clean” from STDs, men who continue to use condoms might as well be calling their female partner a “cheater” or a “whore.”

Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas’s in-depth conversations with single mothers in many of these same neighborhoods suggest that women may overinterpret this signal and define what men deem mere togetherness as something more. It is perhaps because of this that their vigilance with regard to the pill, patch, or the shot so often falters once this level of couple cohesion has been achieved. Most—though by no means all—pregnancies brought to term among the men we spoke with across the Philadelphia metropolitan area were conceived in the context of bonds that, in their view, at least meet the minimum criteria of “togetherness,” the point at which he, and then she, typically stops using protection.⁶

How selective are the men about the women who will bear their children? Do they “choose” their children’s mothers with care, or do they just end up together by chance? Let’s turn to the stories of Tim O’Brien

and John Carr. These men have never met, yet their lives have amazing parallels. Both are as Irish as the shamrocks proudly displayed on the marquees and in the windows of their neighborhood's pubs—the Starboard Side Tavern, Dempsey Irish Pub, Shannon's, Bob's Happy Hour—and in the front windows of homes. Both Tim and John grew up in Greater Kensington, northeast of Center City Philadelphia, where tattoos and bumper stickers, like the bars and front windows, often feature symbols of ethnic pride. This area was an eighteenth-century industrial suburb that now encompasses the very economically and ethnically distinct Philadelphia neighborhoods of Kensington, Fishtown, and West Kensington. Tim and John were both raised by single mothers and have had little contact with their fathers since childhood. Both dropped out of Kensington High in the tenth grade due to utter lack of interest in school. Both have been touched by the area's feverish drug trade—John as a dealer and Tim as a user. Finally, both became fathers at a young age and in the context of exceedingly fragile, short-term relationships with girls they “stole” from their friends.

Kensington proper, where John resides, is enmeshed in a slow and bitter battle between its older inhabitants—the Irish and the Poles—and the newcomer Puerto Ricans, Asians, and African Americans, though whites are still the largest ethnic group and make up almost 80 percent of the population.⁷ The nonwhites, whom John and many fellow Irish Americans view as “intruders,” began permeating the northwest boundary between Kensington—the poorest majority-white neighborhood in the city—and the largely minority neighborhood of West Kensington in the 1980s, gradually eroding the de facto Berlin Wall of Kensington Avenue. This frightens young men like John, for across that divide lies West Kensington, once also a relatively stable, working-class, and staunchly white area and now 70 percent Latino and 20 percent black. It is also the poorest and one of the most violent areas of the city; the correlation between the area's changing complexion and social and economic conditions is one many white Kensingtonians take as causation.

John grew up just east of that line on the 1900 block of East Hagert between Jasper and Emerald Streets. Brick two-story row houses are tucked in here and there along the denuded street, dwarfed by multi-story shells of textile mills that still create a decaying corridor five blocks long—the formerly proud homes of Albion Carpets and the Bedford Fast Black Dye Company at the corner of Hagert and Jasper, Job Batty and Sons Carpet Yarn and William Emsley and Brothers' Washington Mills at Hagert's intersection with Emerald, William Beauty's Mills one block farther on at Coral Street, Annot's Steam Power—later Standard Rug—between Coral and Amber, the Weisbrod and Hess Brewery on the corner of Amber Street, and many more.⁸ Several are abandoned, though some have been converted into smaller manufacturing concerns or affordable live and work spaces for struggling artists. Built in the late 1800s, these are Dickensian four-to-six-story red brick affairs—some embellished with arched window openings and other fancy brickwork and topped with tall chimneys. Some area mills are still crowned by rusted iron water receptacles proudly bearing a defunct company's name. Neighborhood lore has it that in the turn-of-the-century golden era, one could walk down any one of Kensington's industrial streets like East Hagert and find a job in fifteen minutes. But more than fifty years of deindustrialization have taken a severe toll.

Any old-timer in John's neighborhood will tell you that as the jobs have fled, so has much semblance of social order. Middle-school kids sell drugs openly in broad daylight on major thoroughfares; John's street bears the mark of the addictions the trade spawns. At the base of Hagert Street, on the corner of Kensington Avenue, is the Saint Francis Inn, a soup kitchen well known for serving meals to the area's neediest, including the worst of the addicts. And just across the street, Inner City Missions offers drug referral and substance abuse counseling. The mean price of the neighborhood's homes sits at just under thirty-five thousand dollars, and given the low value and the very poor condition of so many of the narrow brick dwellings, lifelong residents have been known to simply abandon their houses to squatters or leave them to

children or other relatives as cheap starter homes.⁹ There are still enough stalwart white working-class residents in the neighborhood to keep its primary parish, the impeccably maintained century-and-a-half old Saint Anne, pulsing with parishioners—six hundred to seven hundred on a typical Sunday.¹⁰ This fortresslike Romanesque Goliath and its parish house, graveyard, and school commandeer a wide swath of the beleaguered Lehigh Avenue, another of the neighborhood's old industrial streets and its northern boundary.

Tim was raised in a very different area of Greater Kensington, just south of Norris Street on the 800 block of East Thompson, in the more respectable Fishtown section, once the center of the shad fishing industry. Fishtown now houses families a bit too proud to live in Kensington proper: police officers and firefighters, along with nurses and other health care employees and craftsmen of various kinds—electricians, stone masons, plumbers, sheet-metal workers, teamsters, and skilled construction workers. It also claims an increasing share of young college-educated professionals with a taste for “authentic” urban living. The housing stock is the same aggressively plain red brick monotony of two- and three-story row homes that bleed into Kensington. So, eager to claim a separate identity from their Kensington neighbors to the northwest, residents carefully demarcate the area with potted plants and flower boxes, the occasional crisp metal awning, glossy new aluminum screen doors, manicured side lawns, decorative garden benches, and other flourishes that complement a streetscape neat as a pin. These outdoor environs host impromptu gatherings of residents who while away summer nights on lawn chairs chatting idly with one another.

Back in Kensington proper, we have our first conversation with John late on a weekday morning on his day off. The five hundred fifty dollar a month apartment he shares with a roommate—a female stripper—is simply furnished; the front room, where we settle on a couch and a chair, is dominated by an oversized television but is devoid of other decor. Coming up hard, John says he came to despise both of his

parents. John's mother worked as a cop until recently, when she was suspended without pay pending investigation of a charge of police brutality. While she waits for the official adjudication of the charge, John's mom, whom he characterizes as a "bum," has been collecting welfare—illegally, it turns out, as she's also working full-time as a security guard. His father is a diesel mechanic who lives in central "PA," but John hasn't seen him in more than ten years.

John joined more than seven in ten of his classmates when he dropped out of Kensington High, one of the worst performing schools in the city.¹¹ This white youth was lured away from the tedium of school and into the work world at sixteen by a minimum-wage job at McCrory's, the now-defunct dollar-store chain that was all that remained of the local five-and-dime giant by the late 1990s. After that John worked one "chicken shit" job after another until landing his current position tinting everything from car windows to plate glass, which he got through a friend of his uncle. The summer he turned eighteen he was still working the chicken-shit jobs but had another source of income as well. He and a friend had turned a casual street-corner drug business into a modest empire, setting up shop in a cheap rental apartment where they and their "partners" could deal undetected day and night. John claims he was making money hand over fist and "blowing it" by buying drinks and weed for anyone who would party with him. While the business lasted only a couple of months—things with the police quickly got too "hot" to continue—he remembers it as a glorious time.

In the midst of that Mid-Atlantic summer haze, John met his baby's mother, seventeen-year-old Rayann, through a friend he hung out and partied with in the neighborhood; she was his friend's "girl." When she started hinting that she wanted him and not his friend, John claims he steered clear out of loyalty. "I didn't want to have nothing to do with it," he insists. The neighborhood rumor mill claimed otherwise, though. Soon, John's friend "heard some shit and started talking shit saying he would kick my ass." Furious at his friend's assumption of betrayal, John

resolved, “Then I *will* be with your girl!” John concludes his story in this way: “Eventually, I just got stuck with her for a little while.”

Six years later John’s language reveals that even in the early days of courtship, he didn’t feel that he had found the ideal match. Instead, in headlong pursuit of revenge, he “got stuck” with Rayann through pregnancy; just twelve months after they met, she gave birth to their daughter at the Cape May Regional Medical Center on the South Jersey Shore, where she had moved five months into her pregnancy—to get away from John. Little language of love or even attraction (except her initial attraction to him) enters into John’s narrative, although there may well have been attraction involved. Though John says he badly wanted to “be in love” during this period in his life, things with Rayann just didn’t click. Nor does his use of the phrase “a little while” indicate much commitment.

The conception that made John a father—occurring just three months into the relationship—was actually Rayann’s second with John, following immediately after an early miscarriage. John suspects that in reality, Rayann’s mother forced her to get an abortion. “Yeah, and then we’re making *another* baby,” John says. How did these conceptions come about so quickly? “You know, like she was always cheating on me. So whenever I would catch her cheating on me the first thing she would do is she would turn to sex because she was a nympho. It made me forget about the other guy,” John recalls. In the afterglow of these postfight reunions, “She would start talking that she knows she wants to have a baby.”

Despite these “discussions” John would hardly characterize the pregnancy that culminated in the birth of his daughter Naomi as planned. Indeed, John claimed surprise and even disbelief and insisted they make a trip to Planned Parenthood to confirm Rayann’s news. When he told his mother, she called him “an asshole and stupid.” Rayann’s mother, the alleged impetus of the earlier forced abortion, hated John so badly that to preserve family peace, Rayann decided to name another man—the on-and-off boyfriend she had been secretly seeing on the side and that her mother liked better—as the father. John is

proud to say that he finally put this false claim to rest with a paternity test he paid for himself when his daughter turned two.

In spite of these strong negative parental reactions, John claims that neither he nor Rayann even considered ending this pregnancy, perhaps because a surprise pregnancy after only a few weeks or months “together” is not unusual in the neighborhoods young men like John inhabit.¹² Here, families are often formed through a pregnancy brought to term in a relationship that is neither entirely casual nor serious. John’s story hints at a common truth, that children can often ensue from relationships that have a haphazard, almost random quality. The women who bear these men’s children seem to be indistinguishable from others that they “get with” but don’t happen to become pregnant.

Tim, down in Fishtown, also “ended up with” his child’s mother. At seventeen this high school dropout’s main occupation was getting high. When Tim was introduced to Mazie he had just broken up with Andrea, his girlfriend of two years, because she had chosen an abortion over bearing his child. Andrea was also seventeen and was already caring for a son she had had at fifteen from another man; she didn’t feel she could cope with a second child. This argument held no water with Tim, who discovered—after the fact of conception—that he was desperate to be a father.

One weekend shortly after the breakup, Tim met the woman who ended up fulfilling that dream. He was “hanging at a friend of mine’s house, and Mazie and a couple of her friends were there.” Mazie had just broken up with Tim’s best friend: “My friend was trying to get back with her, and *I* ended up getting with her,” he explains, as if poaching other men’s girlfriends is fair game. “I really wasn’t having sex with her too much,” Tim confides. “She was only fourteen.” But nonetheless, “we were only together for about two months, and she was getting pregnant!”

How did Tim respond to the news that he had gotten a fourteen-year-old he barely knew pregnant? “I didn’t mind at all!” he declares. When pressed to explain his reaction, Tim notes that he “thought I really cared” for Mazie at that time. But, as he is careful to explain, this doesn’t mean he ever considered Mazie a “real girlfriend”—he reserves

that designation for Andrea, his first love. Nor is he willing to characterize his bond with Mazie as a “real relationship.” In fact, he specifically asserts that it was not.

Like John, Tim only “ended up getting with” his baby’s mother—he didn’t choose her. The courtship was exceedingly brief—only two months in duration—but the two were more or less “together” when conception occurred, and there was just enough cohesion to prompt a positive response to the pregnancy. Plus, in Tim’s case, Mazie’s pregnancy was a way to satisfy the strong desire for a child evoked by Andrea’s conception. Mostly, though, Tim is perplexed by the question we pose. Why *would* he mind, the tone of his answers imply.

BEING TOGETHER

So what does “being together” imply? Generally, it means that the two are spending regular time with one another and view the relationship as something more than a mere sexual encounter.¹³ Being together is more than a “hookup,” borrowing from the terms more privileged high school and college students use; hookups have no distinct beginning or end, while the termination of these liaisons requires a “breakup.”¹⁴ There is an expectation of fidelity, at least in theory; outside relationships are still usually designated as “cheating,” though this norm grows a lot stronger once a baby is on the way or has entered the world. Tim clearly knows he’s done wrong when he’s caught having sex on the couch with Andrea one night when he thinks Mazie and his child, Sophia, are asleep in bed. But, as the ambiguous language men use to describe these ties suggests, at the point of conception, Tim and his peers seldom view their unions as serious or “real relationships.”¹⁵

For simplicity we refer to this stage in men’s romantic relationships as “being together.” But blacks and whites use somewhat different terms. In poor black neighborhoods across the Philadelphia metropolitan area, like Amin Jenkins’s Strawberry Mansion, youths and adults alike frequently use the description “associate” to denote persons they spend

time with but who are not “friends.”¹⁶ In the same way, the terms “affiliate” and “associate” depict a bond that is more than just a one-night stand but not exactly a boyfriend or girlfriend relationship either. In economically struggling white neighborhoods like John’s Kensington or even Tim’s more respectable Fishtown, the language tends to be simpler—Tim “gets with” his baby’s mother, while John and Rayann are simply “together.” These terms are as distinctive in what they include as what they do not: much evidence of a search for a life partner.

We asked each of our 110 fathers to tell us “the whole story” of how he got together with the mother of each child, what the relationship was like before pregnancy, and how things developed over time. As was the case with Amin, the prepregnancy narrative is often startlingly succinct: the couple meets, begins to “affiliate,” and then “comes up pregnant.” Few men even mention, much less discuss, any special qualities of their partners or any common tastes or values that drew the two together. Usually, the girl lives on his block, hangs out on the stoop near his corner, works at the same job, is a friend of his sister’s or the girlfriend of a friend, and is willing to “socialize” with him.¹⁷ Obviously, there is a spectrum here; Amin was with Antoinette much longer at the time of conception than Tim was with Mazie. It is also true that some conceptions are to very stable couples who may already share children, while others are the result of one-night stands. In the typical scenario, however, couples are usually together, but for only “a minute”—just a few months is the norm—before their first child together is conceived.¹⁸

In sum, a common feature of our fathers’ narratives about the nature of the relationship before pregnancy is the brevity and modest cohesion of the tie.¹⁹ Only rarely do such couples “fall in love,” get engaged, or get married *before* conceiving a first child together, though they may do so later on. Indeed, they rarely even refer to each other as boyfriend and girlfriend. As we have already indicated, and show in chapter 2, planned pregnancies are rare, yet once the pair deems themselves “together,” any serious attempt at contraception usually fades.²⁰ Then

the inevitable occurs: the woman “comes up pregnant.”²¹ Precious few men are consciously courting a woman they believe will be a long-term partner around the time that pregnancy issues a one-way ticket to fatherhood. Indeed, there is little evidence that many were even attempting to discriminate much among possible partners based on who they felt would be the most suitable mother to their child.²²

COMING UP PREGNANT

Given their haphazard origins, these relationships might well have been short-lived had it not been for an unplanned conception. As the stories of Byron Jones, Will Donnelly, and Jack Day will illustrate, pregnancy, and not a shared history, similar tastes, or common goals, is what typically galvanizes partnerships in the low-income neighborhoods of Philadelphia and Camden, though this is not always the case. An unplanned pregnancy and the decision to carry it to term transforms relationships of mere “togetherness” into something more.

Byron Jones was born in rural South Carolina, but his parents moved to Philadelphia when he turned three. He was raised in “The Bottom,” the local nickname for Mantua, the working-class West Philadelphia neighborhood that black southern migrants began flocking to in the 1920s. His mother was only fifteen when she gave birth to Byron’s sister, and his father was just a shade older. His parents married soon after and had five more children together, Byron right in the middle. While his father labored for a Jewish factory owner in the neighborhood (given racist unions and mill owners, holding a factory job was a rare accomplishment for a black man in Philadelphia at this time), his mother worked as a domestic for a wealthy Jewish family living nearby, whose matriarch took a shine to young Byron. Each summer she paid his way to the leafy Golden Slipper Summer Camp, where he marveled at its gleaming lake, heated swimming pool, and pristine playing fields. Byron grins as he recalls that part of his childhood. “Golden Slipper Camp—I’ll never forget it—all the way up in the Poconos. The

majority of the blacks that was there, their families worked for the Jews 'cause it was a Jewish camp.”

While at camp during the summer between fifth and sixth grade, Byron learned that his father had died of a terminal illness, and the news had a seismic impact.²³ “I didn’t know he was really that sick! They sent me up to summer camp, and the next thing I know he’s dead. I was just starting to get to know him,” Byron says of the man who worked long hours to ensure his family’s survival. “I started getting in more trouble when he passed. I felt like he abandoned me.”

A widow with six dependents, Byron’s thirty-two-year-old mother returned home to her family in South Carolina. “I had a good childhood,” Byron insists, expressing especially fond memories of the three middle-school years he spent down South among extended family: the sound of the ax as his grandmother chopped wood in the backyard and the sizzling of greens fried on a woodstove, Sundays spent sweating for hours in an “old, hot country church” with no air-conditioning, church “suppers” that lasted all day long, and trips of several hours to his uncle’s place even deeper into the up-country of the South Carolina piedmont. The adults in his life there were uniformly strict. “Every child had responsibilities, and the parents made sure we fulfilled them. You had to get your job done, or you would get your tail cut,” Byron says before adding wryly, “There wasn’t no child abuse back then!”

Trouble didn’t find Byron while he attended school down South. His teachers ruled their classrooms with an iron hand, and he thrived within this structure. “There wasn’t any such thing as getting suspended or getting a note home. They beat your butt. They didn’t spare the rod,” Byron says in an approving tone. But once the family moved back to Philadelphia, Byron was assigned to Sulzberger Middle School for ninth grade, where chaos reigned. He began cutting class with increasing frequency, a practice that accelerated when he entered the tenth grade at West Philadelphia High. “I didn’t get into a lot of trouble until I came back up here for ninth grade when I played hooky. Then in tenth grade I started hanging out with a worse crowd. I started drinking.”

It is tempting to speculate about what might have been different had Byron's mother decided to stay in the South, surrounded by this exacting but supportive extended family. Did the sudden separation from kin rekindle Byron's feelings of paternal abandonment? Was it the fact that his mother now had to work several jobs to support the family and seemed to have no time or patience for her children? Perhaps it was simply the added temptations of city life. Reliving that return, Byron quips, "The city didn't have that much brotherly love, as they call it—you know what I mean?"

After showing up drunk at school on several occasions, Byron was expelled from West Philly High. The School District of Philadelphia then transferred him to Bartram High, which was taking on increasing numbers of black students in Kingsessing, an area of the city experiencing rapid racial turnover. Like in Grays Ferry, racial tensions in Kingsessing were palpable. It should be said, though, that Byron didn't get into any really serious trouble during these years—he drank a little too much and at the wrong times, he once stole the tires off a car to put wheels on the junker of a friend, he went joyriding when an absentminded motorist left his keys in the door of his car, and he got into a knockdown, drag-out fight with four other youth in a convenience store—all of them intoxicated. But after the convenience store altercation (which earned him a night in jail), the antics of Byron's peers escalated further. Byron was convinced he needed to get out of Philadelphia. With his mother's blessing, he dropped out of Bartram in twelfth grade and joined the marines.

Discharged after four years of service, Byron took a job as a book-binder, but the business soon closed. While searching for another job, he subsisted on revenue from an informal speakeasy he opened in the basement of the house he rented in Kingsessing, where he had gone to high school. It is there that he met Shari. "I had my little house. I used to sell a little wine, a little weed. She and one of her girlfriends, they'd come over. She was a lot younger than me. She said she was eighteen, but she wasn't. When she came over to the house with her friend, me and my cousin was there, and I was like, 'Dag. I like her, man!'"

Despite Byron's initial attraction, he was "messing with" a number of other women and didn't add Shari to his roster for a long time. Meanwhile, he found a job as a truck jockey for a suburban U-Haul franchise, servicing, delivering, and picking up trucks, and, after that business closed, as a caretaker at a downtown apartment building. After that job fell through—he was drinking too much to perform his duties reliably—he met his expenses through part-time cab work, putting in only enough hours to pay the bills and support the alcohol habit nurtured by four years in the military. He was selling weed on the side, often to fares who assumed a black cab driver would know where to find it.

Byron can instantly recall the date that he and Shari first had sex—April 14—and the clear memory hints that he imbues the event with some significance. A couple of months later Shari was pregnant, and while he was twenty-five, she was only sixteen. In Byron's section of the city, remaining fatherless for that long merits an explanation. Men like Byron with less than a high school education have more than an even chance of becoming a father before that age.²⁴ "I waited until I was twenty-five years old before I had my first child, but I always wanted to be a father," Byron says, careful to emphasize that delaying fatherhood longer than most of his friends was not due to lack of desire—he just hadn't had the opportunity yet.

Upon hearing the news that the woman they are "with" is expecting, men such as Byron are suddenly transformed. This part-time cab driver and sometime weed dealer almost immediately secured a city job in the sanitation department and quickly worked his way up to what he viewed as an exalted post on the back of a garbage truck. "I was doing the right thing," he brags. "After I found out I had that baby coming, shoot! I was giving up my money to *her!* You know what I mean?" In addition to working more, many feel a sudden urge to clean up their personal lives. Byron, for example, stopped "messing around with certain people," meaning other girls. Suddenly, his relationship with Shari was "all I wanted. Shoot! I was talking about getting married!" We ask how the pair got along during pregnancy. "We had a good time, man,"

he recalls, grinning. “While she was pregnant, I couldn’t go *nowhere*. Shoot! She wanted me to do this, wanted me to do that. I was like a puppy anyway. I waited on her. I’d do certain things that she wanted me to do, getting pickles and ice cream. I didn’t mind at all. I was *glad*, man!” Note that Byron’s description of the relationship before and after conception stands in sharp contrast. Shari, once just another girl Byron found himself with, suddenly became “all I want”—a potential marriage partner, and Byron was her willing servant.

A “REAL” RELATIONSHIP

Getting a job and settling down are part of a deeper metamorphosis triggered by news of a pregnancy. Suddenly, what was mere “togetherness” is becoming transformed into something more: the “real relationship” that building a family requires, as the stories of Will Donnelly and Jack Day show. Will and Jack were raised in nearly all-white enclaves at opposite ends of the city—Will in Northern Liberties just west of Fishtown and Jack in Elmwood Park, located just below Byron’s Kingsessing neighborhood in Southwest Philly. Both come from lower middle-class white families—Will’s stepfather owns a used-car lot, while Jack’s father works as a cop. In childhood, both saw their neighborhoods change almost overnight from white to black, though Will’s family stayed while Jack’s fled. Both dropped out of school to help support their pregnant girlfriends, Will at sixteen and Jack at twenty-one. Finally, both experienced relational transformation after conceiving children within haphazard unions and encouraged their girlfriends to go ahead and have the babies. Rather than cutting and running at the news of a pregnancy, or denying paternity, the news galvanized both of these tenuous unions into something that looked more like a “real relationship.”

Will now lives in the Fairhill section of North Philadelphia, has four children by the same woman, and works as a part-time mechanic and a boxing instructor. Fairhill is a beleaguered section of the city just two

neighborhoods north of his childhood home. Its only real claim to fame is that the Fairhill cemetery contains the remains of several famous Philadelphians, including Quaker abolitionist and proponent of women's rights Lucretia Mott, and Robert Purvis, the unofficial "president" of the Underground Railroad. Fairhill is overwhelmingly poor—more than 50 percent—and largely Hispanic and black; only 2 percent of the neighborhoods' residents are white. Yet Will, like the handful of other whites living there, says he was drawn by the cheap home prices—the median value for owner-occupied units is fifteen thousand dollars less than in the cheapest majority-white neighborhood in the city—which allowed Will to purchase the apartment where he lives despite marginal employment.²⁵

Will recounts his relationship with Lori this way: "I had just come out of a juvenile institution. I think I just turned seventeen . . . and I started going with her friend. And then one day she came around and we started talking, then I went with her and left her friend, and me and her got together and started having kids together and then we got closer and closer. Then we started living together." Will's story, like Byron's, reveals a typical sequence of events: attraction and a moderate level of couple cohesion produce a pregnancy that is taken to term. For Will and most others, it is at this point that the real relationship commences. Getting "closer and closer" and then "living together" are things Will and his peers often accomplish only after they conceive children and not before.

Jack went through eighth grade at Mary Mother of Peace Catholic School in the heart of Southwest Philly, a Polish and Irish residential quarter organized around a cluster of Catholic parishes that developed during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1985 two Elmwood Park families broke the unspoken neighborhood code by selling their homes to the "wrong" buyers, one to a black family and the other to an interracial couple. Local whites rioted and Wilson Goode, the city's first black mayor, declared a state of emergency in an effort to quell the violence, but to little avail. Ultimately, though, the white-hot protest of

residents like Jack's parents could not prevent the neighborhood's transformation: between 1990 and 2000 the white population was cut in half, with corresponding increases in nonwhites. Jack's father, the Philadelphia police officer, and his mother, who worked for the school district, fled north along with other white civil servants from the southwest side, moving to the working-class enclave of Manayunk, with its tiny row homes perched precariously on steep streets reaching up to the bluffs above the Schuylkill River.

Jack rebelled at the move and was kicked out of the prestigious Roman Catholic High in his freshman year for cutting class, exhibiting a belligerent attitude toward authority figures, and bullying other students. His parents felt they had no choice but to enroll him in what they viewed as a second-best educational option, the local public school, Roxborough High. Given the relative ease of the classes, he breezed through with almost all As. Penn State was his next stop, the "party school" where he spent three years studying journalism and "polishing my drinking up to a fine art." Like Will, Jack's baby's mother was just a "girl" he met by chance on a weekend visit home. "My grades weren't great, but I was getting through. I was going back home every other weekend.... Met some girls, and in turn met my baby's mother. Shortly afterwards, she became pregnant, so I quit school, got a job to support her."

Jack elaborates, "I was coming home one day, and I was pulling up to my driveway, and my next-door neighbor, Michael, was out front with this guy and a girl, and he says, 'What are you doing tonight?' And I go, 'Nothing.' 'Why don't you hang out with us...?' After a couple of drinks I told her that I thought she was gorgeous." Marie was working at an eyeglass manufacturing plant when she happened upon Jack in the driveway. She was also a new bride of four months but was contemplating leaving her husband. "She was unhappy at the house where she was. She kind of married this guy—her words: 'I never really liked him in the first place, but I wanted to get out of the house and have a baby and start a whole new life...?' Then we met, and the next day we moved in together," Jack recalls, of the move to a tiny apartment financed by

Marie's wages. According to Jack, Marie's family is, "I hate to say this—kind of a lower-class white trash." Jack comes from an "educated" family and is proud of the increase in status he provided her at the time. "I pulled her out of that situation."

Eager to spend as much time as possible with Marie, Jack began leaving State College each Friday for the three-hour drive east. After three months of this arrangement, Marie turned up pregnant. We ask whether they'd discussed having children beforehand. "No, that was a subject we never talked about," Jack replies. "But I knew she wanted to get pregnant because she didn't want to use any protection." For Jack, Marie's failure to employ birth control is the equivalent of a bullhorn broadcasting her maternal desire and no direct conversation is necessary to establish that fact. When asked to describe how he felt about this, Jack simply says, "I was OK." The two decided to terminate this pregnancy due to their ages—both were twenty at the time—but another pregnancy almost immediately followed. This time, both were adamantly opposed to an abortion. Jack then dropped out of college.

"We were made for each other," Jack crows, recalling this time, evidencing more than the usual level of romantic feeling. Yet he admits, "I don't think we'd agreed that we were going to stay together forever." Marie had never bothered to get a divorce from her husband, yet once they decided to carry the pregnancy to term, Jack and Marie were firmly a couple who "though never married in the eyes of the law" nonetheless thought of themselves as a family.

ATTRACTION, AFFILIATION, CONCEPTION, BIRTH, AND BEYOND

For the middle class, pregnancy is usually the outgrowth of a relationship, not its impetus. It is a reflection of a couple's decision to commit to each other, not the cause for commitment. On Philadelphia's affluent Main Line or in well-heeled New Jersey suburbs like Cherry Hill and Haddonfield, shotgun marriage is largely a thing of the past.²⁶

Unplanned pregnancies that occur before marriage are typically avoided or terminated. And while poor men like Byron often become fathers in their early twenties, their middle-class counterparts typically put off parenthood until their late twenties and beyond, and then almost always within the context of a relationship that is years in duration, one in which the signals of commitment—that is, marriage—are unequivocal. But in the neighborhoods we studied, with their lack of opportunities and many challenges, nothing seems to work the way it should. It is not so surprising, then, that this order of events is often turned upside down. Here, once a young “couple” becomes pregnant and decides to take the pregnancy to term (a decision generally ceded to the woman), the bond between the two typically coalesces into more of a “relationship,” though often in dramatic fits and starts.²⁷

While pregnancy often serves as a galvanizing force that transforms “togetherness” into more of a “real relationship,” the birth of a baby can solidify a disadvantaged young man’s dedication to his partner even more, at least in the short term. Take the story of David Williams, a black thirty-year-old father of five, as an illustration. David grew up in Hunting Park, just one mile north of Will’s Fairhill home, across the street from the park the neighborhood is named for. Because his parents were still teenagers when he was born and were soon overwhelmed with the responsibilities of raising him and his three younger sisters, all close in age, David was brought up in his paternal grandmother’s home on Lycoming. This tidy row home built of native sparkly granite “shist” on the first level and with pristine aluminum siding on the second was further embellished by a two-story bay window on the side. The property was secured by a chain-link fence and the pincushion front lawn was filled with freshly trimmed shrubs and well-tended flowers. “My grandmother had a *nice* house,” he recalls. The neighborhood, now half-black and half-Hispanic, centers on the park, which is its jewel.

Hunting Park was still a desirable residential neighborhood when David was a child—a far cry from the industrial neighborhoods of Fairhill and West Kensington just to the south, known colloquially as

the “Badlands” because of the drug activity there. But by the mid-1990s, when David hit his teens, the Badlands had clearly crept north and the jewel of a park had become little more than a haven for drug dealers. Its western boundary, Old York Road, with its imposing three-story Victorian twins and occasional grand stone singles, began to draw prostitutes, pimps, and street hustlers like a magnet.

The father of five children by three different women, David describes his current girlfriend, Winnie, as the “best” of his children’s mothers and refers to her as his common-law wife. Yet their relationship and entry into joint parenthood also had a haphazard quality. “When I was first with Winnie I had a girlfriend on the side too, Kathy,” David explains. “She’s somebody that I met at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. We got close and we were helping each other with our addictions. One thing led to another, and we got intimate. Me and Winnie would get into an argument; she’d tell me to leave; I’d go stay with Kathy.” “So how did you end it with Kathy?” we ask. “Winnie got pregnant, and I had to do what was right, stand by Winnie.”

David may have been “together” with Winnie at the time his son Julian was conceived, but the relationship was hardly ideal—why else did he find himself so often with Kathy? It took a pregnancy to resolve the dilemma of which woman David should choose. Suddenly, because of an unplanned conception, his course was clear; he “did the right thing” and chose Winnie. The two then began to form a family around the promise of a shared child. As evidence of this decision, David left Hunting Park for South Philly, where Winnie had secured a unit in the Wilson Park Homes, a newly renovated mix of two-story family townhouses and high-rise buildings for the elderly just a stone’s throw south of Tasker Homes (from which Amin and his mother had escaped), where the two now live. He views the Wilson Park location as a big step downward in the local prestige hierarchy from his grandmother’s semidetached Hunting Park residence.

Nonetheless, “each month of the pregnancy, you know, we got closer and closer. I wanted to be with her more. And then like two or three o’clock in the morning, she had me running to a Pathmark grocery store

buying different foods. So that brought us a lot closer too. And then, watching him born brought us even closer. On her last push he came spinning out like a bullet!” David recounts, beaming at the memory. “Nothing was more beautiful than Julian. The way he came out of his mother, that was amazing. And I held him, I didn’t want to let him go.”

The child has become David’s obsession, despite the fact that he sees his daughters, now in their teens, only once a month or so and has no contact with his sons, who are ten and twelve. And Julian’s birth has further stoked David’s desire to stay with Winnie, whom he now professes to love. Despite the lack of a marital tie, the two have begun to “go for” husband and wife. The way he sees it, his new job description is “being there for her. Um, ah, um, helping her, when things is rough you got to be in her corner, sharing, compassion, closeness, communication. That’s what I’m trying to say: communication.”

There are many things David says he loves about Winnie. Her culinary skills get first mention: “What’s the saying, ‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach’? She’s a good cook. That’s the truth.” And besides, he adds, “She’s a good housecleaner—she keeps the house clean. We work our problems out together. Most of the time she’s pretty cool.” But what quality does he treasure even more? “She takes care of the kids—she’s very firm—she’s there for them. That’s what I love about her the most.”²⁸

David is making what he views as a bold attempt to form a family that can withstand the test of time. Yet his background, his current circumstances, and the fragile relational context into which his child is born all dramatically reduce the probability that he will succeed. When we last speak with David he is still together with Winnie—Julian has just turned one—but by the time Julian celebrates his fifth birthday, a father like David has less than a one in three chance of still being together with the mother of his child.²⁹

The experiences of Amin, John, Tim, Byron, Will, and Jack all bear these statistics out. Things between Antoinette and Amin grew

impossibly strained when Antoine turned three. Not only had the “retaliation-type situation”—both of them cheating to get back at the other—become unbearable, Amin had also been laid off from his job. Due to his felony convictions, he had had a hard time finding another. Now, a year later, the two still haven’t spoken; though he sees his son at Antoinette’s mother’s home, Amin doesn’t even know his son’s address.

John’s girlfriend left him during the pregnancy, infected by her mother’s downright hatred of John. And Tim’s relationship blew up when Mazie found him on the couch having sex with Andrea—only one in a string of poorly disguised infidelities. Byron hung on for thirteen years and enjoyed a fairly good relationship with Shari, but then lost his city job due to drinking, and she put him out of the house. He blames her actions on the fact that he was suddenly unable to contribute financially, not on the drinking that cost him the job. He also blames her for “cheating”—though her so-called infidelities occurred after she had broken up with him and kicked him out.

Will went on to have three more children with Lori, who then became an addict and left Will to move in with her drug-dealer boyfriend, trading the children back and forth every other day. Finally, the mother of Jack’s two children, ages nine and eleven, moved out after twelve years together—she could no longer deal with his outbursts of anger. He is hoping to reconcile. In the meantime, he lost his job when a judge ordered him into a residential rehabilitation program: just after the breakup Jack was charged three times in a single week for driving under the influence.

Through the life stories of these men, whose backgrounds and circumstances are fairly typical of the range of fathers we spoke with, some of the seeds of relationship destruction—the first deadly strike against those who wish to stay involved with their children and father them well—are revealed. Tenuous relationships and a lack of sufficient desire to avoid pregnancy produce unplanned conceptions and births. Drawn by the possibility of a profound connection to another human being, a child of one’s own, future fathers and mothers—young people

who may barely know each other—often work fairly hard to forge a significant relationship around the impending birth. The new baby often spurs these efforts further, at least for a time. But the conditions under which these conceptions occur make the odds of success very low. Next, we explore in greater detail how these so-called unplanned pregnancies actually come about, how fathers react to them, and why.