

TOURÉ

97. Spades.

98. Rhythm.

99. Survival.

100. Soul

101. Genius.

All stories from
The Portable Promised Land
by Touré
Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
2002.

SOLOMON'S BIG DAY

A Children's Story

Solomon Fishkin's morning was going very well. He cleaned up his cubby, enjoyed two squares of graham crackers and a cup of apple juice, showed his turtle Spike in show and tell, listened to his teacher Miss Birdsong read his favorite story, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and not once all morning long did he talk without first raising his hand. That's because Solomon couldn't wait for art class. Today he would do his painting for Parents' Day. Today he would paint his masterpiece.

He'd been thinking about the painting he would make since the moment he woke up. Solomon lived with his father on the top floor of a giant building that stood right beside Central Park. His father was very tall and always wore dark suits with pin-stripes and suspenders. That morning Solomon and his father ate breakfast on the terrace, where they could see the entire city.

"Look, Solly," his father said, pointing. "See those buildings there? Those are crumbling tenements. People live in them."

His father spotted a woman jogging in the park. "Look at her, Solly. She has a can of Mace in each hand."

Then his father yelled, "Solly! Look quick!" Two speeding cars were about to crash. They screeched, they skidded, they missed. Then they collided with other cars. Soon there was honking and yelling and bad words.

"I used to love this city, Solly," his father said, as wailing police sirens approached. "Now I see buildings I wouldn't have been allowed into when I was your age and I know the men who own them. But," and he laughed a dry, self-deprecating laugh, "I have to do everything those men say. They own me. This city is a crucible of corruption filled with predators and prey and if you slow down for a moment, you're someone else's lunch. Ya can't get a cab without being white, ya can't get good Knicks seats without being a celebrity, and ya can't get a decent blow job without going all the way down to Chinatown!"

He stopped sharply. "Isn't it time for you to get to school? Your driver must be waiting. And when you pass Mariana, tell her to bring Daddy another Johnny Walker."

Solomon had his own eyes. He loved the city. The city to him was a party, an all-day every-day carnival, where people slept or stood on the street playing drums and horns, and doing dances, and telling jokes, and the big, green daddy trees of Central Park stood watch over the baby trees and all the cars seemed like animals — there were fast, yellow cheetahs, and sputtering, clunking beetles, and double-decker giraffes, and big hulking elephants, and rhinos his father called *esyuvees* — and all the people and cars and buildings and birds in the city were dancing and singing and playing on a big concrete island that was really a giant theater stage.

The night before making his masterpiece, Solomon had stud-

ied his favorite big art history book more closely than ever, staring long and hard at pictures by Picasso and Pollock, Johns and Cézanne, Twombly, Warhol, and Wegman, losing himself in the pictures. Then he turned to his favorite painting, Romare Bearden's *The Block*. It was a vision of Harlem street life, buildings standing side by side, people walking, driving, communing with angels, sitting alone, deep in thought. It seemed like a painting he might be able to do. It was just a collage of cut and pasted pictures from magazines and colored construction paper. But Bearden had found a way of making those pieces of paper come to life. They seemed still and at the same time moving, as if the people made by the paper were alive and you could speak to them if you only knew how.

After a long time Solomon fell asleep right on the floor of his father's study. It was a hot night and when he fell onto his big art history book his sweaty little face melted into Bearden's painting. When Mariana came to put him to bed she could not pull his face from the book, so she opened the window, put a blanket over him, and left him there on the floor until the cool night winds came and loosened his paper chains. But before she pulled him free the Bearden painting seeped into Solomon and in his dream he morphed into a two-dimensional Bearden cutout, each eye pulled from a different photograph, his legs a different size than his torso, and he moved through *The Block*, bouncing up and down as a cutout would, admiring the Beardenized barbershop, Baptist church, and liquor store, until he came to a dark man standing by himself on the corner of the street at the far edge of the painting, inside of a shadow.

"Solomon," the stranger said in a deep and raspy cigarette-ruined rumble of a voice, "do you know that strangers can teach you a lot?"

“What?”

“Think about this,” the stranger said as cut-out cars passed on the pasted-together street behind them, “sometimes there is more truth in a lie than there is in the truth.”

He didn’t understand.

“If you want to mirror reality, get a camera. If you want to make someone understand reality, then you have to lie a little. You have to distort things, to exaggerate in a way that reveals the way you see things. Do you understand?”

“I think so.”

“You must give your paintings your way of seeing. Don’t tell it as it is. Tell it as it is *for you and you alone.*”

Then the dream faded out.

When it was finally time for art class, Miss Birdsong laid out brushes, water, and lots of little cups of color, and said, “Remember everyone, the paintings you make today will be on the walls for Parents’ Day tomorrow!”

Solomon was seated at a table in between Jessica Wolcott and Henry Hopkins. Both of them had jagged spaced-out teeth that turned all sorts of ways, and raggedy hair, and sagging, mismatched socks. They began drawing happy faces and rainbows and nuclear bombs. Solomon began trying to bring the piece of paper in front of him to life. He fell into a trance. He was so alone he could hear nothing but his brush meeting the paper, and from those quiet parents sprang a city with hundreds of small but distinct people of varying sizes and colors. He went through every color on the table and still had more to say. In his mind he saw an exact shade of green and needed that green like

he needed breath. It was nowhere on the table. He screamed out, “I need green!” Miss Birdsong came quickly.

“Wow, Solomon,” she said. “You’re working hard on that.” She was impressed. But she really had no idea what she was looking at. She was not an art person. Not the sort to pay ten dollars to see an old colored canvas. Not one who could see lines and colors morph into life. “Did you put your name on it?”

Solomon had little patience for her. She was the one who enforced all these rules — don’t talk unless it’s your turn, walk in a line, color inside the lines. He was the sort to live outside the lines. She was interrupting him, tugging him back down to earth. He had to get back to painting. He begrudgingly accepted the limitations of her small world, a world that lacked the green he saw in his mind, and roared back into giving life to a world of people and streets and buildings and trees, all of them bending and twisting in rhythm. His city was dancing, and in the middle of the city was a little square with neon lights like frozen fireworks, and in the very top right corner was a man leaning out a window waving a baton, like the men he saw when his father took him to the opera.

Wrapped up in his growing world, he kept on painting as art class ended, kept on right through recess, and probably would’ve kept on working all day long, but Miss Birdsong finally said, “Either go to dance class with everyone else, or sit on the pink bench for an hour.” The pink bench was the bench for those who’d been bad. The bench of shame. And if you sat on the pink bench they called your parents. The worst fate possible. The artist found himself stymied by the child. He had to relent. *If only she knew what I could do with this page*, he thought. He took a moment to pity her in silence, then trudged off to dance.

At the end of the day, after the masterpiece was completed, after most of the other children had gone home, Solomon sat in the corner reading *Charlotte's Web*, waiting for Mariana to come. He heard two adults using some of the terms he'd seen in his art history book.

"It's metaphor on top of metaphor!"

"Yes, yes, and it's a naïf's style mixed with an extremely sophisticated perspective of civic organization!"

It was Xander's father, Jack Hotchkiss, a member of the board of the Whitney Museum, and Tiffany's mother, Rita Nakouzi, owner of an important art gallery in Soho.

"Is the artist saying that everyone is happily marching to the same tune, dancing together in a gigantic chorus, or that a central mechanism controls us all and we don't even notice it? Or both?"

"It's lovely! It's visually alluring and unsettling. By mixing a benign medium like watercolor with the subtle everyday violence of New York, a collision between innocence and anger is suggested. And yet, there's so much joy in it! It's brilliant!"

"Absolutely!"

"Where's that Birdsong? This must be the work of her aide. You know they have students from the colleges come in to help."

Miss Birdsong joined the pair. "Jack, Rita," she said, "please lower your voices."

For a few moments Solomon could not hear their conversation, but after a moment Tiffany's mother yelled out, "Jack, you bastard! You know I saw it first!"

"The hell you did!"

"People, people!" Miss Birdsong said, "you are in an institution of learning!"

"I don't care!" Xander's father said. "I must have this painting! I must meet the person who did this piece now!" He was pointing right at Solomon's painting.

Solomon walked over to the adults. His eyebrows were the same height as their belts. His blue collared shirt had three different stains. His shoelaces were untied. His left knee had a cut that was open and oozing.

Tiffany's mother knelt to be eye to eye with Solomon.

"Is this your painting?"

"Yes."

"Did someone help you with it?"

"Yes."

"Darling," she said, "who helped you with this?"

"My friend."

"Where is your friend?"

"Inside the painting in the book at my house."

"What do you mean your friend *inside* the painting?"

Miss Birdsong said, "I saw Solomon make this wonderful painting all by himself."

"I'll give you five thousand dollars for it right now!" Xander's father said.

"Jack!" Tiffany's mother said, offended by his brashness. Then she had a vision of future art historians recalling the discovery of an impossibly precocious prodigy in a kindergarten classroom and the art dealer who let the find of the decade slip through her fingers because of some obscure thing called decorum. "Sweetie," she said, employing a grand dose of feminine seductiveness, "you don't want to get wrapped up in the politics of big museums. I can have this on the wall of my gallery tomorrow. I have a client in Beirut who'll simply love it!"

"All right, ten thousand dollars!" Xander's father said.

The impromptu improvised auction went into warp speed as the ego-heavy pair pushed aside the flabbergasted Birdsong and threw money at the child. As her own little one tugged at her skirt, Tiffany's mother got Frankfurt on the line and \$20,000 came and went, then \$30,000, the pair bidding and battling over the extraordinary piece, the novelty of a child-genius, and the bragging rights to this exciting new find. When Mariana finally arrived, Xander's dad was on the line with his partners at the museum, Tokyo was getting involved, and it wasn't at all clear if anyone was going to win.

That night at home Solomon got a piece of paper larger than himself and spread it out on the floor. He used some books to keep the edges down, then organized his brushes, water, and paints. He tried to imagine something to paint. But his mind was blank. He tried to paint freely, but each time his brush met the page he thought of Tiffany's mom and Xander's dad and if they would like each stroke.

After a while he put down his brushes and opened his favorite book. He sat staring at all of his favorite paintings, soaking them in, trying to imagine what Monet, Matisse, and Miró were thinking while they worked. When he felt tired he opened the book to *The Block*, laid down so that his cheek was pressed across the work, and closed his eyes.

Once again he became a Beardenized cutout bouncing down the block as a cutout would, past the stores and the churches, right to the shadowy corner where the stranger was standing.

"I can't think of anything to do," Solomon said.

"Yes you can," the stranger said. "You can think of ways to please your friends. That'll be the end of you."

Solomon was listening closely.

"Everything you do must be done for you," the stranger said. "Just make something you would like if you hadn't painted it."

Solomon opened his eyes and looked toward the window. It was still nighttime. He spread out another giant piece of paper and laid down his brushes, his water, and his paints. This time the brush began moving and his hand fought to keep up with it as a city sprang to life below him. All sorts of buildings in all sorts of colors flowed into view, but they were small, smaller than Solomon's own fingers, and when nearly every bit of the canvas had been covered with little buildings he watched a giant figure spring up from the middle of the minicity, a watercolor boy who looked a lot like him. The boy was the only person in the painting and he was floating in midair.

Solomon stepped back from the painting. It had come out of him so quickly it seemed someone else had painted it. Then, careful not to make a sound, he tiptoed through the hall, down the stairs, and into the kitchen. He got three Oreos and a glass of milk with three ice cubes and sat in the dark with his little snack, pulling the Oreos apart and eating one half at a time, then gulping milk while his mouth was filled with Oreo pieces, feeling his teeth get cold as the ice cubes touched them. He snuck back up to his father's study, closed the big art book, put his head on the cover, and fell asleep with his cheek stuck to that cold, hard, square pillow.

Soon he was back in Miss Birdsong's class, seated between Jessica Wolcott and Henry Hopkins, painting again. But in the middle of painting another vision of New York City, a horde of adults poured into the room, men in dark suits and suspenders, women in skirts that covered their knees, some holding fistfuls of money, others thrusting tape recorders and cameras. The

well-dressed mob knocked Miss Birdsong down and moved straight toward him.

"Solomon! You're so brilliant!"

"Solomon, are you the new Basquiat?"

"Solomon, would you do a piece on commission for our London contingent?"

"I'm trying to paint," he said.

"What is it you're trying to say about New York City in your work?"

"When will you finish your next painting?"

"Do you think you're a celebrity painter and the quality of your work is less important than the fact that it comes from you?"

"Leave me alone! I have to paint!"

"Would you take three-hundred fifty zillion for the one with you flying? What about four hundred gakillion?"

"Let me paint!" he screamed out. "Let me paint! LET ME PAINT!" The suited attackers disappeared. His eyes popped open. He was still in his father's study. The window let in the dull high yellow light of a still-young morning. He felt himself empty, as if something was gone, though he knew not what. He opened the big art book to *The Block* and laid his head down on it. He tried to fall asleep but could not. His eyes were heavy, but the more he tried the harder it was. The morning sun was flooding in now. He heard the creak of footsteps on the floor below. He smelled croissants and turkey bacon. Soon Mariana would come and take him back to his regular life. But he wouldn't go back. He couldn't go back to a place where people made him live in between the lines when he knew there were places where you didn't have to.

He laid down in the middle of his own painting, in the mid-

dle of the little buildings and the big boy. He began to fall asleep, then heard footsteps heading toward him. He fought to fall asleep, prayed to fall asleep, but the approaching feet made his heart race. He knew from the sound there were only twenty-three more steps before Mariana reached the door. He tried to ignore her but could not. Steps nineteen, eighteen, seventeen. He forced his eyes closed and his mind blank. Twelve, eleven, ten. He poured himself into falling asleep as he had thrown himself into his two masterpieces. He heard six, and five, and four, but no more. He opened his eyes to a watercolor city. There were buildings, there were trees, there was silence. His shirt was cornerless like watercolors are. His arms were red and his legs were green. He was all alone and he was free to paint and he was happy. Mariana turned the knob and opened the door, but she couldn't find Solomon anywhere.