



# THEY CALLED ME PRISONER 183645

The inside of an ICE detention centre is as horrific as you think. I know because I spent 45 days in one, unsure if I'd ever get out. My only salvation: voluntary deportation. Toronto became my home and my path to redemption

THIS IS MY STORY

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## HERE'S AN UNCOMFORTABLE FACT.

People like me aren't supposed to go to law school. And that's not just because I'm a black kid from a poor family. Or because my parents are Muslims from Nigeria. It's also because I sold a lot of pot and got caught. That fact still tortures my parents.

My father was an imam, strict and principled, and my mother was a teacher and the main caretaker of me and my three siblings. My parents believed strongly that hard work leads to success. When I was three, they decided to leave our small market town in Nigeria and look abroad for opportunity. My dad landed a job at a mosque in Toronto near High Park. We settled into a basement apartment in Little India. I was the only black kid in

my class, and I quickly made some friends, but the sense of belonging was fleeting: we soon moved into a two-bedroom apartment across town. At school, I was once again the new kid. When my mom got a job as a nurse's assistant at a senior's residence, we moved again.

My mom stretched our family's tiny income impressively. We took the bus everywhere. My clothes were hand-me-downs from my brother, and his clothes were bought on sale from Zellers or Honest Ed's. At home, my mom would make massive, rich pots of Nigerian staples like obe ata, a meat stew, and pounded yam, called iyan. She eventually adopted new dishes like chicken biryani and pizza, except her version included tuna

as a topping. Today, if I close my eyes, I can smell her jollof rice, light and aromatic.

Our existence was modest and our family dynamic unemotional. There weren't many hugs or I love yous. In Nigerian culture, you show love not with words or affection but with work and devotion. And if that meant moving constantly in search of the next step up, then so be it.

In 1993, we had been in Canada long enough to become citizens. Four years later, my dad was hired as an imam at the State Correctional Institution at Graterford in Pennsylvania. That meant a good wage with benefits, so, at the age of 13, I once again said goodbye to my friends and we packed everything into my dad's rusty Sentra and moved to Philadelphia. I had no idea that the next time I crossed the border back into Canada, I'd be a convicted felon and an embarrassment to my family.

**E**lkins Park is Philadelphia's Forest Hill, a wealthy community a short drive from the city centre. Our apartment was in a complex called Lynnewood Gardens, mostly black and considered "the hood" by the white people I knew. Still, it became home, and my siblings and I no longer felt anchorless, making friends only to lose them. That's not to say I fit in. I couldn't relate to my rich white friends who seemed like they didn't have a care in the world, and the black kids told me I spoke like a white person. I was a "blerd"—a black nerd, someone who looked like them but was definitely not one of them.

Eventually, I became good friends with a few guys, most of them white. My buddy Max's mom, Meryl, was an otherworldly specimen: she called me "sweetie" and would ask how I was doing. Max's dad, Terry, was a partner at an accounting firm. I'd marvel over the carefree way in which they would decide to go to a nice restaurant and encourage me to order whatever I wanted—not for a special occasion, but just because it was, say, Tuesday. Over time, Meryl and Terry became like second parents to me. The more I felt at home under their roof, though, the more I resented my own family. My parents didn't show their love and I took it personally, rather than for what it was: cultural differences and, more often than not, bone-weary fatigue.

I wanted what Max had. And if my parents couldn't give me that, I decided I'd find it elsewhere. The summer before high school, I got a job as a caddie at a golf and country club, the most amazing place I'd ever seen. There was a grand limestone clubhouse, a glistening pool and tennis courts. The members, perfectly tanned and cosmically at ease, drove Jaguars, Ferraris, Benzes. Their kids, my age, would roll in, have a bite in the clubhouse, play the front nine, swim a few laps and then head home. At first, I was a terrible caddie, but I would do what few would: two 18-hole loops, back to back, a gruelling exercise even without the two full golf bags I'd lug around. Before long, I became the most popular caddie there, raking in \$200 a day in tips.

At school, my grades weren't amazing—mostly Cs with the occasional A. I didn't care. My caddying enabled me to buy the same Mavi jeans my friends wore and to afford the latest cellphone. My parents didn't approve of my obsession

with material wealth, but they were impressed by my hustle, my dad especially, who saw in me his own drive. Their encouragement fuelled me even more. By the time I turned 16, I had saved \$7,000—enough to buy my dream car: a 1993 black Infiniti J30 with leather interior and wood-grain accents. To me, it was the height of class. But it was also a symbol, a way to convey to my friends and their parents that I was on their level.

I first tried pot in Grade 9. My friends and I huddled giddily in someone's suburban basement and rolled a joint using a sheet of printer paper. I liked it immediately. It made me less stressed, less nervous, more creative. We were hardly pioneers. Pot was everywhere at my high school, and we were soon smoking on the way to school, during lunch and after class.

As high school was wrapping up, I left my job at the golf club and, with Meryl's help, secured an educational grant for low-income students. I enrolled in business management at a community college near Philadelphia. One day, outside class, I met a guy who drove a Chevy Tahoe custom-painted in Pepsi blue, with TVs in the headrests and 24-inch rims. We became friends, and he asked me if I wanted to deal some weed. At first, I just sold ounces here and there to friends, but soon it became

quarter-pounds, and I shovelled those earnings into a new, legitimate venture: event management. The first party I organized was supposed to be a small gathering of friends to ring in the new year together at a club downtown, but I sold a hundred tickets in two days. From there, I got involved in increasingly splashy events. I partnered with another promoter and launched a company called Velvet Elite. We hosted the two-day grand opening of a multi-million-dollar event space at Harrah's in Atlantic City and recruited Questlove of the Roots to DJ and the cast of *Entourage* to appear. We averaged 1,400 partygoers per night. For that gig, my partner and I netted

about \$30,000 between us, and I was supplementing that legitimate income with weed sales. I was on a roll. I moved out of my parents' place and into a loft with a friend. To my parents' dismay, I dropped out of school. I told them it was only temporary and that I'd soon go back. I think I even believed it.

## The guard led me to C Block. The 50 or so inmates milling below turned to size up the new arrival: Carlton Banks in a jumpsuit

**I**n 2007, the Philadelphia police were cracking down on the pot market, and some of my former high school classmates got arrested. I was terrified, expecting my door to get kicked in at any minute, so I stopped dealing and concentrated on Velvet Elite. It was a huge relief. The constant fear was gone, but so was a considerable revenue stream. Then, one day in 2009, I went to a party where I overheard a guy talking about some life-changing California pot. Curious, I introduced myself and he offered me some. He was right: the quality was incredible. When I had been dealing, the market rate for a pound had been \$4,000, of which \$500 was my profit; I knew I could sell this stuff for \$5,000, of which \$1,000 would be my profit. The opportunity seemed too good to pass up. I made a few inquiries and was soon connected to the grower, and we talked over Skype, a kind of bizarre job interview. Suddenly, I was back in the game.

Before, I'd been a low-level guy. Now, I was one step removed from the grower, the hub of what would become a small drug



◀ IN NIGERIA AT AGE THREE BEFORE DEPARTING FOR CANADA

▼ THE ADERONMU FAMILY IN TORONTO IN 1991



▼ WITH MERYL AT DAISHŌ IN THE SUMMER OF 2014



network in Philly with hundreds of buyers. I wasn't proud of what I was doing but I could list a hundred justifications for why it made sense. I told myself this was how a young black man could catch up in an unfair world. That wasn't untrue, exactly. But I also liked the cash. And that's because cash meant *stuff*: nice clothes, meals at steakhouses, a luxury apartment, an Audi A6, the ability to go on vacations with my girlfriend. And after a childhood of exclusion, it felt good to be not only included, but powerful. Jay-Z started out as a drug dealer and became an entertainment mogul and billionaire. Why couldn't I?

The arrangement seemed foolproof: the grower would send the pot in the mail, vacuum-sealed three times, placed inside a box, gift-wrapped and mixed in with a few real gifts to make it all seem innocuous. After about a month of being in business, I

was selling five pounds per week, on track to earn \$240,000 that year. Soon, I doubled my order to 10 pounds a week. Every so often, I'd deposit a few thousand in cash into a business account. Business was good, but I was nervous. I knew that I could make half a million in a year, which would be enough to get me out. I could buy a house, get married, help my parents and be set for life. Is this what all drug dealers tell themselves? Probably. But

I had gone a step further down the path of legitimacy: I invested in an upscale general store in a swishy new retail development called the Piazza. My store would be a place to buy newspapers and magazines, cigarettes, lottery tickets, doggy treats, chocolate and more. I bankrolled it almost entirely with the proceeds of my pot sales. But money was flowing out faster than it was coming in, and I was stressed. I had January 20, 2010, marked on my calendar, the date I was expecting a shipment from my California connection, which meant an almost immediate injection of \$10,000.

I didn't know that my grower had gone on vacation and deputized a friend to send the shipment. Unfortunately, he wrote "Pizza" instead of "Piazza" on the shipping label, and for the return address, he scribbled down a fake name. I suspect he failed to properly vacuum-seal the bags, too. In any case, something tipped off the Pennsylvania Bureau of Narcotics Investigation's interdiction unit.

That afternoon, an officer, dressed as a UPS man, buzzed my apartment. I'd never had to sign for an order before, but I didn't think much of it. I walked out and informed him that the shipping label was incorrect—it was Piazza, not Pizza—and showed him one of my pamphlets as proof. Big mistake. That was what he needed to establish my connection to the package. Suddenly, the officer and five of his colleagues were surrounding me and pointing their shotguns at my chest. One of them yelled, "GET THE FUCK ON THE GROUND!" Before I could comply, they tackled me, hard, handcuffed me and placed me in the back of their van. Four officers piled in. My mind was racing. I was scared the other cops were searching my apartment. Inside, they would have found a couple of pounds of pot, \$35,000 in cash and a money counter, evidence I wouldn't be able to explain away in court.

They interrogated me for hours but I knew enough not to talk. Eventually, they gave up and transferred me to a south Philadelphia police station, where I was placed in a dingy holding cell. I lay down on a cold metal bench and curled into the fetal position. I naively held out hope that I wouldn't have to tell my family—so when I was allowed a phone call, I dialed my friend Seth, who knew a criminal lawyer. Before I'd had a chance to meet with him, I was taken for my arraignment, which was conducted via video before a magistrate. As my name was called, I sat down in front of the camera and let out a long, loud yawn. It wasn't intentional or contemptuous; I was simply exhausted. The magistrate was furious. He said something like, "You're tired, huh? Well, you can go get some sleep at the county jail." He set my bail at an insanely high \$200,000, which I thought I could probably scrounge up. But the magistrate was one step ahead of me. He tacked on something called a Nebbia hold, which meant I had to prove that none of the bail money was the proceeds of crime.

At the county jail, corrections officers marched me to a holding cell with an exposed toilet. There were roughly 25 other prisoners, most of them bigger than me. As the doors opened,

all eyes turned my way. I kept mine firmly on the ground, walked to an empty corner and sat down. Some guys were withdrawing from drugs and were agitated; others were clearly not first-timers, chatting with each other like long-lost friends. I closed my eyes and pretended I was somewhere else.

I still had some dignity and a sense of control, mostly borne of defiance, which was borne of arrogance. That all vanished the second the guard led me into a small room and told me to strip naked in front of him and lift up my genitals. I complied. He then asked me to bend over, spread my butt cheeks and cough. I felt subhuman, like a caged animal, trapped and powerless.

I was issued an orange jumpsuit, a rubber thimble with bristles to use as a toothbrush, toothpaste and a bar of soap, and sent to a grimy shower for a quick rinse, all under the watch of a leering guard. Finally, a guard led me to what would be my new home: C Block. As the doors opened with a heavy thunk, the 50 or so inmates milling below turned to size up the new arrivals—a parade of grizzled, hard-living men. And then there was me: Carlton Banks from *Fresh Prince* in a jumpsuit. I avoided eye contact and tried not to stand out.

My cell was a three-man with two bunks, both occupied. I was to sleep on the floor, which was visited by rats at night. My cellmate, a Puerto Rican guy in his 20s, kindly showed me how to stuff a towel under the door to keep them out. The other guy, a short white dude covered in tattoos, kept mostly to himself. I lay down and fell asleep.

The next day, I made my debut on the range. The rest of the population was what you might expect: mostly black and brown. There was a skinny white kid in for arson, an Indian man in his 50s accused of murdering his wife for life insurance and a trans woman charged with prostitution. At one point, a black officer asked me in front of the other inmates: “Why you talk like a white person?” My Jordan XIIs happened to perfectly match the navy-and-Carolina-blue uniforms worn by some of the already-classified prisoners, and they’d look me up and down and say, “Dope sneaks.” It was more a threat than a compliment. I was so scared I didn’t eat for almost three days and, eventually, my body rebelled. I wolfed down everything put in front of me, no matter how vile: oatmeal or grits for breakfast, bologna sandwich or a breaded chicken patty for lunch, and mystery meat with green beans for dinner. That still wasn’t enough. I was famished. When one of the prisoners who worked in the kitchen eyed my shoes, I told him I’d swap them for his worn-out sneakers if he’d give me an extra tray every lunchtime. He agreed. The next day, when I was in line for food, he acted like he’d never met me. I chalked it up to a lesson learned: never trade for something you can’t physically hold.

I hadn’t yet called my parents, partly because I didn’t want to worry them but mostly because I was too ashamed to tell them. Nine days after my arrest, I had my first court date. By this time, Seth had told Max about my ordeal, and he’d told Meryl, who told my mom. During the drive, I craned my neck to look out the paddy wagon window and realized we were passing by the street where a week earlier I had gone to Ruth’s Chris for lollipop lamb chops.

My lawyer successfully lowered my \$200,000 bail to \$50,000, and my mom had borrowed \$5,000 to get me out. Unfortunately, the Nebbia hold meant she had to prove that the money had been in her account previously, and it hadn’t. Thankfully, Seth and Meryl were there and fronted the money. I had my freedom back, for the moment at least.

Max and Seth drove me to meet my mom. Her hands were shaking. She gave me the kind of prolonged hug I hadn’t had from her in a long time. My dad was at work, but my mom called him. His tone was, as always, stoic. He asked me how I was, said “Inshallah”—God willing, everything will be okay—and said he would pray for me. I acted as if I was fine, but I wasn’t. From the day I’d started at the golf club, I’d been making them proud. All of that was now gone. Despite my legitimate business success, I was known as Ish the drug dealer, and anything else would be eclipsed by that fact. I called around to my friends, cautiously probing to see who knew what. To my dismay, everyone knew everything.

My case went to trial, but in the courtroom, on day one, my lawyer told me an offer was on the table: if I pleaded guilty to possession with intent to deliver a controlled substance, I’d get six months of house arrest followed by two years of probation. I wanted to think about it, but he said there was no time. If we lost, I could get up to five years in the state penitentiary. My mom teared up. I took the deal. Then, in the middle of the proceedings, the judge said that because I was Canadian, a guilty plea could affect my Green Card. That was news to me. I turned to my lawyer, who stated he had assurances from the DA that the state would not flag my case with the federal government. I carried on with my plea.

As I was walking my dog, two ICE officers approached, flashed their badges and said they had a warrant for my arrest

I couldn’t blame my girlfriend for breaking up with me. I was a convicted felon. I found a cheap apartment, and my parents helped me cover rent. I searched for a job, but no one would hire someone with a criminal record. Finally, a friend hooked me up with a gig making smoothies and sandwiches at a café for \$10 an hour. I tried making amends with my parents and I adhered faithfully to the conditions of my plea deal: I met with my probation officer every month, submitted to regular drug tests and made sure I was either at home or work. My mom would stop in a couple of times a week with groceries and stay to visit, and we became closer than ever. My dad would drop in occasionally, too. The majority of my social network, however, had vanished. That was partly my fault—I was too embarrassed to reach out.

I thought the worst of it was over. Then, two years after my release, I took my dog, Sasha, for a walk. On the way back, steps from my building’s front door, two guys dressed in khakis approached. They asked me to identify myself, so I did. They flashed their badges—“Immigration and Customs Enforcement”—and said they had a warrant for my arrest. They cuffed me and drove me to the Homeland Security office downtown.

On the way, they said that because I was Canadian, it was likely that I’d be deported. I politely corrected them, explaining



▲ ISH AT HOME WITH KATE, THE KIDS AND THE FAMILY DOG, ARCADES

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that my lawyer had received assurances from the district attorney that my status wouldn't be affected. District attorneys, they said, have no jurisdiction over immigration. I couldn't believe it.

After getting processed, I was sent to York County Prison, 160 kilometres west of Philadelphia, which had a wing specifically for ICE detainees. I was in my block within five hours of arrival, a range with open bunks instead of cells. I called my parents and Seth and Meryl immediately. The first time, I was to blame, and they were disappointed in me. This time, they felt betrayed by the justice system.

Inside, the population was mostly undocumented immigrants from South and Central America. They would chant "*Carne fresca*"—fresh meat—whenever the officer on shift was a rookie, which was frightening and yet somehow built camaraderie among the prison population. Local inmates from the county jail were mixed in with us, too: there was one kid who'd shot an assistant district attorney on the courthouse steps, a 40-year-old townie in for his third DUI, a guy who'd beaten up his wife a few times, another guy arrested for gun trafficking. One of my bunkmates was from Grenada, the other a poor guy from Mexico. The food was gross, though marginally better than at county, and there was a commissary, so I could buy Snickers bars, cheap ramen noodles, chips and the like. We'd get an hour in the yard twice a week.

Prison is jarringly segregated. If you're black, your friends will be black. The whites and the Hispanics kept to themselves. It's weird and backwards but that's just how it is. I spent most of my time with a pot importer named Panama and a gunrunner we called Black. We'd play Scrabble, my proficiency at which earned me the nickname "the Professor." The worst part was the boredom. I craved anything that would break up the monotony, to take my mind off the inane and repetitive

stories that guys would tell about their immense wealth or the respect they'd garnered outside—fiction, all of it. I'd do push-ups, read books, write and read letters. Meryl wrote often with messages of love and news from the outside, which would buoy my spirits. The rest of the time, I stayed in my bunk and slept.

Every so often, ICE officers would come to our cellblock and let us ask them questions. When I told them I was Canadian, they said that if I wanted to get out of prison soon, I could opt for voluntary departure to Canada. In theory, that sounded good, but I didn't want to leave my family and friends behind. No problem, said the guard: I could apply to return to the U.S. as soon as I got to Canada. I checked out the law textbooks in the prison library to research other options, but there weren't any. Finally, I made up my mind to leave the U.S. voluntarily. So on my 45th day in the ICE detention centre, guards put me in the back of a van and drove me to the Peace Bridge in Buffalo. Canadian Border Services was expecting me. The agent inside the office was kind. He looked me in the eye and said with surprising sincerity, "Welcome back." He told me to walk outside, carefully cross the car lanes of returning vacationers, climb up some steps and I'd be through. Sure enough, minutes later, I was back in Canada, a 27-year-old expat making his shameful return home.

Family friends I hadn't seen in a decade met me and put me up at their house in Brampton. It was a lovely gesture, but I knew I was a burden. They had a newborn they moved to their bedroom, and I slept on a mattress in her room—pink paint, freshly applied.

I set about finding work. Thankfully, there were no news articles about my ordeal, so a Google search didn't ruin my chances. But any company headquartered in the U.S. inevitably ran a background check. I cycled through a series of jobs, mostly

in tech, always hiding my dirty secret: I couldn't travel to the U.S. Every time I'd be asked to fly south, I came up with an excuse. That only worked so many times.

The constant churn of getting hired and fired made employers suspicious, and eventually no one would hire me. I applied for hundreds of jobs and got rejected every time. I was living near the poverty line, trying to make ends meet, and I spent my time mostly alone. I struggled with being uprooted from my life and finding my place in the world. I was desperately lonely. I knew no one. I'd go to a bar, have a beer, then another, then go home to my basement apartment and go to sleep, sad and pathetic. To make matters worse, I applied for my return to the U.S. and was denied.

Eventually, I made some friends, but the grind of life became too much. I started to feel tired constantly, no matter how much sleep I got. I didn't want to get out of my bed or leave my apartment. I fell behind on rent. I gave up on everything. I got so depressed that I didn't think I could go on with life. Finally, a few days before Christmas in 2017, I broke down mentally. I remember going to a bar on Queens Quay. I was surrounded by drunk revellers full of holiday cheer. I looked around and muttered to myself, "Why is everyone so *fucking* happy?"

I knew I needed help. I went to a walk-in clinic in Liberty Village and saw a doctor who started me on antidepressants. For the first few weeks, the drugs put me in a stupor, but my terrible thoughts subsided. I found a therapist who felt for me and took me on for free. I had never really unloaded my thoughts, and I told him everything: about my parents, and reconciling my liberal beliefs with their relatively conservative ones. About the fact that I was never really comfortable in my own skin, and how intoxicated I was by the white world I encountered in suburban Philadelphia. About feeling abandoned by my friends when I got arrested. The trauma of being in prison. My romantic relationships that never seemed to work out. The stigma I carried as a convicted felon. The alienation and loneliness I felt in Toronto. And on and on. The more we talked, the more honest I became with myself. Instead of running from my past, I decided to own it, which was liberating. I was only 33, with lots of time to make a fresh start.

At the time, I was living in a rooming house in Cabbagetown. One evening, I caught an episode of *60 Minutes* about a convicted bank robber named Shon Hopwood who had turned his life around to become a law professor at Georgetown. I was stunned. I watched the episode four or five times. I felt a connection to Hopwood. I'd long had an interest in law, forged in the library at York County Prison, and I knew my way around the courts. Hopwood had been on society's lowest rung—he spent 11 years in prison—and slowly climbed up. Why couldn't I do the same? For the first time in a long time, I saw a path forward. I reached out to Hopwood on Twitter and explained my story. To my surprise, he wrote back. "Don't let anyone say you can't do something," he said.

I had been dating without much success. Then, just when I was ready to give up on ever finding a meaningful romantic

relationship, I met Kate. She was amazing. Smart. Pretty. She was an impact advisor, counselling investors on the social and environmental side of funds. I told her about my arrest, my time in jail. Everything. I told her I didn't have much money and had had a hard time holding down a job. She found my honesty refreshing and saw someone she could trust. She introduced me to her kids, then preschool-aged. They had been born in Zambia and Kate had become their adoptive mother a few years earlier. Over time, our relationship developed, and we became a couple, supporting each other, and she encouraged me to follow my ambitions in law.

I applied to Osgoode Hall at York full of optimism. Mine wasn't the most compelling application: a poor LSAT score and a mediocre set of marks from college, with a few courses from university, no degree. But I met with the registrar, who told me I could apply as a mature student. I wanted to get in, badly. I'd catch myself daydreaming about the cases I would win, the injustices I would correct. Unfortunately, I didn't get in. It was crushing. I had told so many people about my plan.

I knew I couldn't improve my marks, but perhaps I could demonstrate how serious I was about the law and try again. I reached out to members of the legal community in Toronto, including the former dean of Osgoode Hall Law School. Instead of keeping my criminal history a secret, I led with it. He encouraged me to reapply and be fully honest. I also reached

out to a defence lawyer who was convicted of dealing pot as a teenager and spent years homeless before she turned things around. I shadowed her on a constitutional challenge, peppering her with questions along the way. She also encouraged me to reapply. I joined the board of the John Howard Society, volunteered for Spring for Peace, an annual fundraiser for restorative justice programs for youth, and spent a lot of time at the University Avenue courthouse, observing cases. Finally, I applied once more, this time to Ryerson's new law school as well. Ryerson seemed

perfect for me. The school is trying to be a leader and an innovator, to admit people who reflect the society it serves, not just kids who ace the LSAT.

By this time, I was living with Kate and the kids in a house with a small backyard in Long Branch. After a decade on my own, after a lifetime of jumping from one house to the next, I finally had stability, and people who cared about me and showed it. The kids call me Papa, and being a father figure to them is my greatest source of joy and inspiration. Fatherhood has taught me about unconditional love, reinforced the importance of giving back and made me a better human. Toronto is home to me now. I grew up in Philadelphia, but I've become the person I want to be here.

On January 22, I woke up in the middle of the night to go to the washroom and decided to check my application status. "Congratulations! You have been admitted to the Ryerson University Faculty of Law..." I couldn't believe it. I was ecstatic, but Kate was at a work retreat and the kids were asleep, so I couldn't tell anyone. I got back into bed with a wide smile on my face and eventually drifted off to sleep. In the morning, I told my parents, and Meryl and Terry, and my friends from Pennsylvania. A week later, I accepted. I start in September, the inaugural class of 2023. ■

The Canadian Border Services agent looked me in the eye and said with surprising sincerity, "Welcome home"