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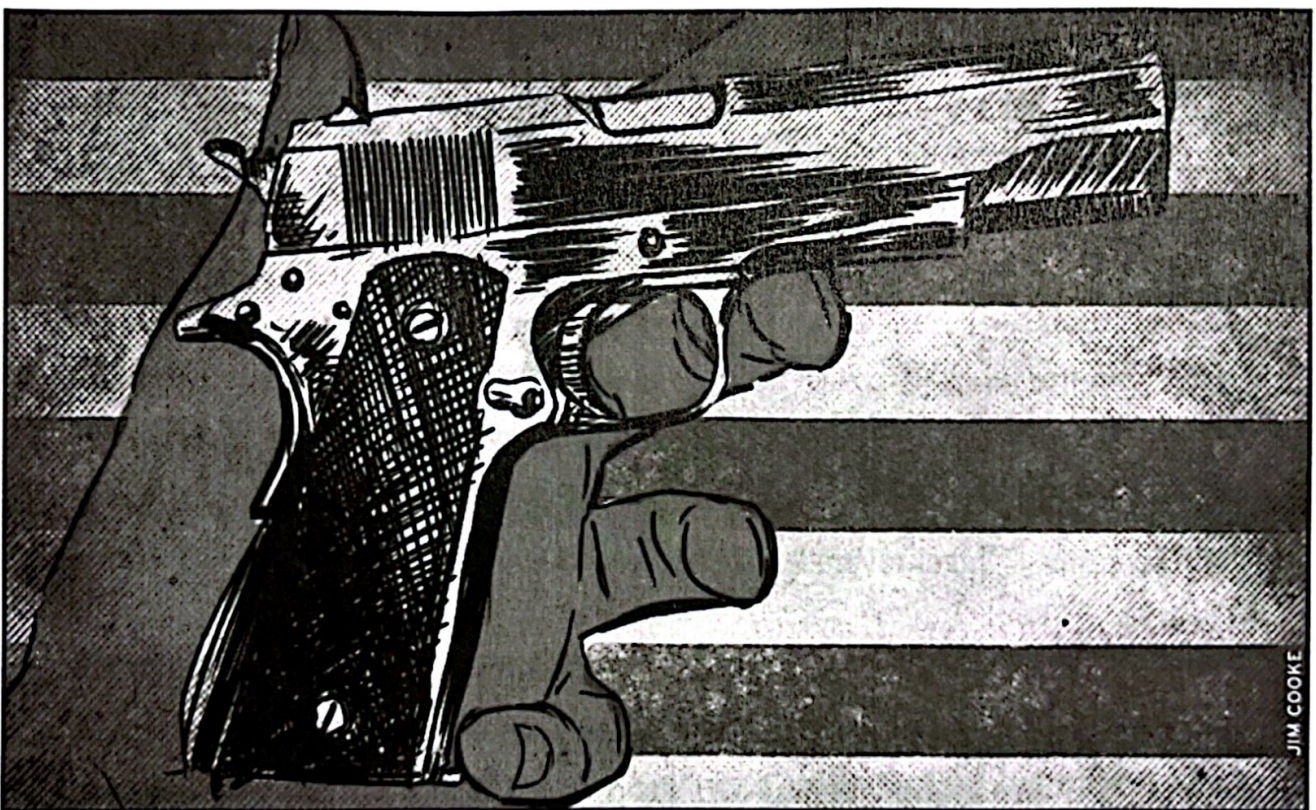
How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America: A Remembrance



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Gawker published the essay, "How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America" last year, three weeks after George Zimmerman told Sean Hannity that the shooting of Trayvon Martin "was all God's plan." As the jury deliberates in the State vs. George Zimmerman case, we are rerunning it.

I've had guns pulled on me by four people under Central Mississippi skies — once by a white undercover cop, once by a young brother trying to rob me for

the leftovers of a weak work-study check, once by my mother and twice by myself. Not sure how or if I've helped many folks say yes to life but I've definitely aided in few folks dying slowly in America, all without the aid of a gun.

I'm 17, five years younger than Rekia Boyd will be when she is shot in the head by an off duty police officer in Chicago. It's the summer after I graduated high school and my teammate, Troy, is back in Jackson, Mississippi. Troy, who plays college ball in Florida, asks me if I want to go to McDonald's on I-55.

As Troy, Cleta, Leighton and I walk out of McDonald's, that Filet-o-Fish grease straight cradling my lips, I hold the door open for a tiny, scruffy-faced white man with a green John Deere hat on.

"Thanks, partner," he says.

A few minutes later, we're driving down I-55 when John Deere drives up and rolls his window down. I figure that he wants to say something funny since we'd had a cordial moment at McDonald's. As soon as I roll my window down, the man screams, "Nigger lovers!" and speeds off.

On I-55, we pull up beside John Deere and I'm throwing finger-signs, calling John Deere all kinds of clever "motherfuckers." The dude slows down and gets behind us. I turn around, hoping he pulls over.

Nope.

John Deere pulls out a police siren and places it on top of his car. Troy is cussing my ass out and frantically trying to drive his Mama's Lincoln away from John Deere. My heart is pounding out of my chest, not out of fear, but because I want a chance to choke the shit out of John Deere. I can't think of any other way of making him feel what we felt.

Troy drives into his apartment complex and parks his Mama's long Lincoln under some kind of shed. Everyone in the car is slumped down at this point. Around 20 seconds after we park, here comes the red, white and blue of the siren.

We hear a car door slam, then a loud knock on the back window. John Deere has a gun in one hand and a badge in the other. He's telling me to get out of the car. My lips still smell like Filet-o-Fish.

"Only you," he says to me. "You going to jail tonight." He's got the gun to my chest.

"Fuck you," I tell him and suck my teeth. "I ain't going nowhere." I don't know what's wrong with me.

Cleta is up front trying to reason with the man through her window when all of a sudden, in a scene straight out of *Boyz n the Hood*, a black cop approaches the car and accuses us of doing something wrong. Minutes later, a white cop tells us that John Deere has been drinking too much and he lets us go.

16 months later, I'm 18, three years older than Edward Evans will be when he is shot in the head behind an abandoned home in Jackson.

Shonda and I are walking from Subway back to Millsaps College with two of her white friends. It's nighttime. We turn off of North State Street and walk halfway past the cemetery when a red Corolla filled with brothers stops in front of us. All of the brothers have blue rags covering their noses and mouths. One of the brothers, a kid at least two years younger than me with the birdest of bird chests, gets out of the car clutching a shiny silver gun.

He comes towards Shonda and me.

"Me," I say to him. "Me. Me." I hold my hands up encouraging him to do whatever he needs to do. If he shoots me, well, I guess bullets enter and

hopefully exit my chest, but if the young Nigga thinks I'm getting pistol whipped in front of a cemetery and my girlfriend off of State Street, I'm convinced I'm going to take the gun and beat him into a burnt cinnamon roll.

The boy places his gun on my chest and keeps looking back and forth to the car.

I feel a strange calm, an uncanny resolve. I don't know what's wrong with me. He's patting me down for money that I don't have since we hadn't gotten our work-study checks yet and I just spent my last little money on two veggie subs from Subway and two of those large Chocolate Chip cookies.

The young brother keeps looking back to the car, unsure what he's supposed to do. Shonda and her friends are screaming when he takes the gun off my chest and trots goofily back to the car.

I don't know what's wrong with him but a few months later, I have a gun.

A partner of mine hooks me up with a partner of his who lets me hold something. I get the gun not only to defend myself from goofy brothers in red Corollas trying to rob folks for work-study money. I guess I'm working on becoming a black writer in Mississippi and some folks around Millsaps College don't like the essays I'm writing in the school newspaper.

A few weeks earlier, George Harmon, the President of Millsaps, shuts down the campus paper in response to a satirical essay I wrote on communal masturbation and sends a letter to over 12,000 overwhelmingly white Millsaps students, friends and alumnae. The letter states that the "Key Essay in question was written by Kiese Laymon, a controversial writer who consistently editorializes on race issues."

After the President's letter goes out, my life kinda hurts.

I receive a sweet letter in the mail with the burnt up ashes of my essays. The letter says that if I don't stop writing and give myself "over to right," my life

would end up like the ashes of my writing.

The tires of my Mama's car are slashed when her car was left on campus. I'm given a single room after the Dean of Students thinks it's too dangerous for me to have a roommate. Finally, Greg Miller, an English Professor, writes an essay about how and why a student in his Liberal Studies class says, "Kiese should be killed for what he's writing." I feel a lot when I read those words, but mainly I wonder what's wrong with me.

It's bid day at Millsaps.

Shonda and I are headed to our jobs at Ton-o-Fun, a fake ass Chuck E. Cheese behind Northpark Mall. We're wearing royal blue shirts with a strange smiling animal and Ton-o-Fun on the left titty. The shirts of the other boy workers at Ton-o-Fun fit them better than mine. My shirt is tight in the wrong places and slightly less royal blue. I like to add a taste of bleach so I don't stank.

As we walk out to the parking lot of my dorm, the Kappa Alpha and Kappa Sigma fraternities are in front of our dorm receiving their new members. They've been up drinking all night. Some of them have on black face and others have on Afro wigs and Confederate capes.

We get close to Shonda's Saturn and one of the men says, "Kiese, write about this!" Then another voice calls me a "Nigger" and Shonda, a "Nigger bitch." I think and feel a lot but mostly I feel that I can't do anything to make the boys feel like they've made us feel right there, so I go back to my dorm room to get something.

On the way there, Shonda picks up a glass bottle out of the trash. I tell her to wait outside the room. I open the bottom drawer and look at the hoodies balled up on the top of my gun. I pick up my gun and think about my Grandma. I think not only about what she'd feel if I went back out there with a gun. I think about

how if Grandma walked out of that room with a gun in hand, she'd use it. No question.

I am her grandson.

I throw the gun back on top of the clothes, close the drawer, go in my closet and pick up a wooden T-ball bat.

Some of the KA's and Sigs keep calling us names as we approach them. I step, throw down the bat and tell them I don't need a bat to fuck them up. I don't know what's wrong with me. My fists are balled up and the only thing I want in the world is to swing back over and over again. Shonda feels the same, I think. She's right in the mix, yelling, crying, fighting as best she can. After security and a Dean break up the mess, the frats go back to receiving their new pledges and Shonda and I go to work at Ton-o-Fun in our dirty blue shirts.

I stank.

On our first break at work, we decide that we should call a local news station so the rest of Jackson can see what's happening at Millsaps on a Saturday morning. We meet the camera crew at school. Some of boys go after the reporter and cameraman. The camera gets a few students in Afros, black face and Confederate capes. They also get footage of "another altercation."

I don't know what's wrong with me. My fists are balled up and the only thing I want in the world is to swing back over and over again.

A few weeks pass and George Harmon, the President of the college, doesn't like that footage of his college is now on television and in newspapers all across the country. The college decides that two individual fraternity members, Shonda and I will be put on disciplinary probation for using "racially insensitive language" and the two fraternities involved get their party privileges taken away for a semester. If there was racially insensitive language Shonda and I could have used to make those boys feel like we felt, we would have never stepped to

them in the first place. Millsaps is trying to prove to the nation that it is post-race(ist) institution and to its alums that all the Bid Day stuff is the work of an "adroit entrepreneur of racial conflict."

A few month later, Mama and I sit in President George Harmon's office. The table is an oblong mix of mahogany and ice water. All the men at the table are smiling, flipping through papers and twirling pens in their hands except for me. I am still 19, two years older than Trayvon Martin will be when he swings back.

President Harmon and his lawyers don't look me in the eye. They zero in on the eyes of Mama, as Harmon tells her that I am being suspended from Millsaps for at least a year for taking and returning *Red Badge of Courage* from the library without formally checking it out.

He ain't lying.

I took the book out of the library for Shonda's brother without checking it out and returned the book the next day. I looked right at the camera when I did it, too. I did all of this knowing I was on parole, but not believing any college in America, even one in Mississippi, would kick a student out for a year, for taking and returning a library book without properly checking it out.

I should have believed.

George Harmon tells me, while looking at my mother, that I will be allowed to come back to Millsaps College in a year only after having attended therapy sessions for racial insensitivity. We are told he has given my writing to a local psychologist and the shrink believes I need help. Even if I am admitted back as a student, I will remain formally on parole for the rest of my undergrad career, which means that I will be expelled from Millsaps College unless I'm perfect.

19-year-old black boys can not be perfect in America. Neither can 61-year-old white boys named George.

Before going on the ride home with Mama, I go to my room, put the gun in my backpack and get in her car.

On the way home, Mama stops by the zoo to talk about what just happened in George Harmon's office. She's crying and asking me over and over again why I took and returned the goddamn book knowing they were watching me. Like a black mother of black boy, Mama starts blaming Shonda for asking me to check the book out in the first place. I don't know what to say other than I know it wasn't Shonda's fault and I left my ID and I wanted to swing back, so I keep walking and say nothing. She says that Grandma is going to be so disappointed in me. "Heartbroken," is the word she uses.

There.

I feel this toxic miasma unlike anything I've ever felt not just in my body but in my blood. I remember the wobbly way my Grandma twitches her eyes at my Uncle Jimmy and I imagine being at the end of that twitch for the rest of my life. For the first time in almost two years, I hide my face, grit my crooked teeth and sob.

I don't stop for weeks.

The NAACP and lawyers get involved in filing a lawsuit against Millsaps on my behalf. Whenever the NAACP folks talk to me or the paper, they talk about how ironic it is that a black boy who is trying to read a book gets kicked out of college. I appreciate their work but I don't think the irony lies where they think it does. If I'd never read a book in my life, I shouldn't have been punished for taking and bringing back a library book, not when kids are smoking that good stuff, drinking themselves unconscious and doing some of everything imaginable to nonconsenting bodies.

That's what I tell all the newspapers and television reporters who ask. To my friends, I say that after stealing all those Lucky Charms, Funyons, loaves of light

bread and over a hundred cold drinks out of the cafeteria in two years, how in the fuck do I get suspended for taking and returning the goddamn *Red Badge of Courage*.

The day that I'm awarded the Benjamin Brown award, named after a 21-year-old truck driver shot in the back by police officers during a student protest near Jackson State in 1967, I take the bullets out of my gun, throw it in the Ross Barnett Reservoir and avoid my Grandma for a long, long time.

I enroll at Jackson State University in the Spring semester, where my mother teaches Political Science. Even though, I'm not really living at home, everyday Mama and I fight over my job at Cutco and her staying with her boyfriend and her not letting me use the car to get to my second job at an HIV hospice since my license is suspended. Really, we're fighting because she raised me to never ever forget I was on parole, which means no black hoodies in wrong neighborhoods, no jogging at night, hands in plain sight at all times in public, no intimate relationships with white women, never driving over the speed limit or doing those rolling stops at stop signs, always speaking the king's English in the presence of white folks, never being outperformed in school or in public by white students and most importantly, always remembering that no matter what, white folks will do anything to get you.

Mama's antidote to being born a black boy on parole in Central Mississippi is not for us to seek freedom; it's to insist on excellence at all times. Mama takes it personal when she realizes that I realize she is wrong. There ain't no antidote to life, I tell her. How free can you be if you really accept that white folks are the traffic cops of your life? Mama tells me that she is not talking about freedom. She says that she is talking about survival.

One blue night my mother tells me that I need to type the rest of my application to Oberlin College after I've already hand-written the personal essay. I tell her that it doesn't matter whether I type it or not since Millsaps is sending a Dean's report attached to my transcript. I say some other truthful things I should never

say to my mother. Mama goes into her room, lifts up her pillow and comes out with her gun.

It's raggedy, small, heavy and black. I always imagine the gun as an old dead crow. I'd held it a few times before with Mama hiding behind me.

Mama points the gun at me and tells me to get the fuck out of her house. I look right at the muzzle pointed at my face and smile the same way I did at the library camera at Millsaps. I don't know what's wrong with me.

"You gonna pull a gun on me over some college application?" I ask her.

"You don't listen until it's too late," she tells me. "Get out of my house and don't ever come back."

I leave the house, chuckling, shaking my head, cussing under my breath. I go sit in a shallow ditch. Outside, I wander in the topsy turvy understanding that Mama's life does not revolve around me and I'm not doing anything to make her life more joyful, spacious or happy. I'm an ungrateful burden, an obese weight on her already terrifying life. I sit there in the ditch, knowing that other things are happening in my mother's life but I also know that Mama never imagined needing to pull a gun on the child she carried on her back as a sophomore at Jackson State University. I'm playing with pine needles, wishing I had headphones—but I'm mostly regretting throwing my gun into the reservoir.

When Mama leaves for work in the morning, I break back in her house, go under her pillow and get her gun. Mama and I haven't paid the phone or the light bill so it's dark, hot and lonely in that house, even in the morning. I lie in a bathtub of cold water, still sweating and singing love songs to myself. I put the gun to my head and cock it.

I think of my Grandma and remember that old feeling of being so in love that nothing matters except seeing and being seen by her. I drop the gun to my chest. I'm so sad and I can't really see a way out of what I'm feeling but I'm

leaning on memory for help. Faster. Slower. I think I want to hurt myself more than I'm already hurting. I'm not the smartest boy in the world by a long shot, but even in my funk I know that easy remedies like eating your way out of sad, or fucking your way out of sad, or lying your way out of sad, or slanging your way out of sad, or robbing your way out of sad, or gambling your way out of sad, or shooting your way out of sad, are just slower, more acceptable ways for desperate folks, and especially paroled black boys in our country, to kill ourselves and others close to us in America.

I start to spend more time at home over the next few weeks since Mama is out of town with her boyfriend. Mama and I still haven't paid the phone bill so I'm running down to the pay phone everyday, calling one of the admissions counselors at Oberlin College. He won't tell me whether they'll accept me or not, but he does say that Oberlin might want me because of, not in spite of, what happened at Millsaps.

I drop the gun to my chest. I'm so sad and I can't really see a way out of what I'm feeling but I'm leaning on memory for help.

A month passes and I haven't heard from Oberlin. I'm eating too much and dry humping a woman just as desperate as me and lying like its my first job and daring people to fuck with me more than I have in a long time. I'm writing lots of words, too, but I'm not reckoning. I'm wasting ink on bullshit political analysis and short stories and vacant poems that I never imagine being read or felt by anyone like me. I'm a waste of writing's time.

The only really joyful times in life come from playing basketball and talking shit with O.G. Raymond "Gunn" Murph, my best friend. Gunn is trying to stop himself from slowly killing himself and others, after a smoldering break up with V., his girlfriend of eight years. Some days, Gunn and I save each other's lives just by telling and listening to each other's odd-shaped truth.

One black night, Ray is destroying me in Madden and talking all that shit when we hear a woman moaning for help outside of his apartment on Capitol Street. We go downstairs and find a naked woman with open wounds, blood and bruises all over her black body. She can barely walk or talk through shivering teeth but we ask her if she wants to come upstairs while we call the ambulance. Gunn and I have taken no Sexual Assault classes and we listen to way too much *The Diary* and *Ready to Die*, but right there, we know not to get too close to the woman and just let her know we're there to do whatever she needs.

She slowly makes her way into the apartment because she's afraid the men might come back. Blood is gushing down the back of her thighs and her scalp. She tells us the three men had one gun. When she makes it up to the apartment, we give the woman a towel to sit on and something to wrap herself in. Blood seeps through both and even though she looks so scared and hurt, she also looks so embarrassed. Gunn keeps saying things like, "It's gonna be okay, sweetheart," and I just sit there weakly nodding my head, running from her eyes and getting her more glasses of water. When Gunn goes in his room to take his gun in his waistband, I look at her and know that no one man could have done this much damage to another human being. That's what I need to tell myself.

Eventually, the ambulance and police arrive. They ask her a lot of questions and keep looking at us. She tells them that we helped her after she was beaten and raped by a three black men in a Monte Carlo. One of the men, she tells the police, was her boyfriend. She refuses to say his name to the police. Gunn looks at me and drops his head. Without saying anything, we know that whatever is in the boys in that car, has to also be in us. We know that whatever is encouraging them to kill themselves slowly by knowingly mangling the body and spirit of this shivering black girl, is probably the most powerful thing in our lives. We also know that whatever is in us that has been slowly encouraging us to kill ourselves and those around us slowly, is also in the heart and mind of this black girl on the couch.

A few weeks later, I get a letter saying I've been accepted to Oberlin College and they're giving me a boatload of financial aid. Gunn agrees to drive me up to Oberlin and I feel like the luckiest boy on earth, not because I got into Oberlin, but because I survived long enough to remember saying yes to life and "no" or at least "slow down" to a slow death.

My saying yes to life meant accepting the beauty of growing up black, on parole, in Mississippi. It also meant accepting that George Harmon, parts of Millsaps College, parts of my state, much of my country, my heart and mostly my own reflection, had beaten the dog shit out of me. I still don't know what all this means but I know it's true.

This isn't an essay or simply a woe-is-we narrative about how hard it is to be a black boy in America. This is a lame attempt at remembering the contours of slow death and life in America for one black American teenager under Central Mississippi skies. I wish I could get my Yoda on right now and surmise all this shit into a clean sociopolitical pull-quote that shows supreme knowledge and absolute emotional transformation, but I don't want to lie.

I want to say and mean that remembering starts not with predictable punditry, or bullshit blogs, or slick art that really ask nothing of us; I want to say that it starts with all of us willing ourselves to remember, tell and accept those complicated, muffled truths of our lives and deaths and the lives and deaths of folks all around us over and over again.

Then I want to say and mean that I am who my Grandma thinks I am.

I am not.

I'm a walking regret, a truth-teller, a liar, a survivor, a frowning ellipsis, a witness, a dreamer, a teacher, a student, a joker, a writer whose eyes stay red, and I'm a child of this nation.

I know that as I've gotten deeper into my late twenties and thirties, I have managed to continue killing myself and other folks who loved me in spite of me. I know that I've been slowly killed by folks who were as feverishly in need of life and death as I am. The really confusing part is that a few of those folk who have nudged me closer to slow death have also helped me say yes to life when I most needed it. Usually, I didn't accept it. Lots of times, we've taken turns killing ourselves slowly, before trying to bring each other back to life. Maybe that's the necessary stank of love, or maybe — like Frank Ocean says — it's all just bad religion, just tasty watered down cyanide in a styrofoam cup.

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Frank Ocean performed his song "Bad Religion" on tonight's Late Night with Jimmy...

I don't even know.

I know that by the time I left Mississippi, I was 20 years old, three years older than Trayvon Martin will be when he is murdered for wearing a hoodie and swinging back in the wrong American neighborhood. Four months after I leave Mississippi, San Berry, a 20-year-old partner of mine who went to Millsaps College with Gunn and me, would be convicted for taking Pam McGill, a social worker, in the woods and shooting her in the head.

San confessed to kidnapping Ms. McGill, driving her to some woods, making her fall to her knees and pulling the trigger while a 17-year-old black boy named Azikiwe waited for him in the car. San says Azikiwe encouraged him to do it. Even today, journalists, activists and folks in Mississippi wonder what really happen with San, Azikiwe and Pam McGill that day. Was San trying to swing back? Were there mental health issues left unattended? Had Ms. McGill, San and Azikiwe talked to each other before the day? Why was Azikiwe left in the car when the murder took place?

I can't front, though. I don't wonder about any of that shit, not today.

I wonder what all three of those children of our nation really remember about how to slowly kill themselves and other folks in America the day before parts of them definitely died under the blue-black sky in Central Mississippi.

*Contributing editor Kiese Laymon is the author of the essay collection **How To Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America**, of which this is an excerpt, and the novel, **Long Division**. He is an Associate Professor of English and Africana Studies at Vassar College.*

How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America

Illustration by Jim Cooke.

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