

Chess Rumble



art by JESSE JOSHUA WATSON

by G. NERI

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To my family, who is eternally patient and supportive.
To my writing groups, who consistently make me better.
To Karen Bachman and her middle school readers, who gave me confidence.
To my editor, Jennifer Fox, who guided me through the jungle.
And to Chess Mentors like Eugene Brown, who help turn
young pawns into kings—G.N.

For my Queen, Mariah Evergreen—J.J.W.

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Summary: Branded a troublemaker due to his anger over everything from being bullied to his sister's death a year before, Marcus begins to control himself and cope with his problems at home and at his inner-city school when an unlikely mentor teaches him to play chess.

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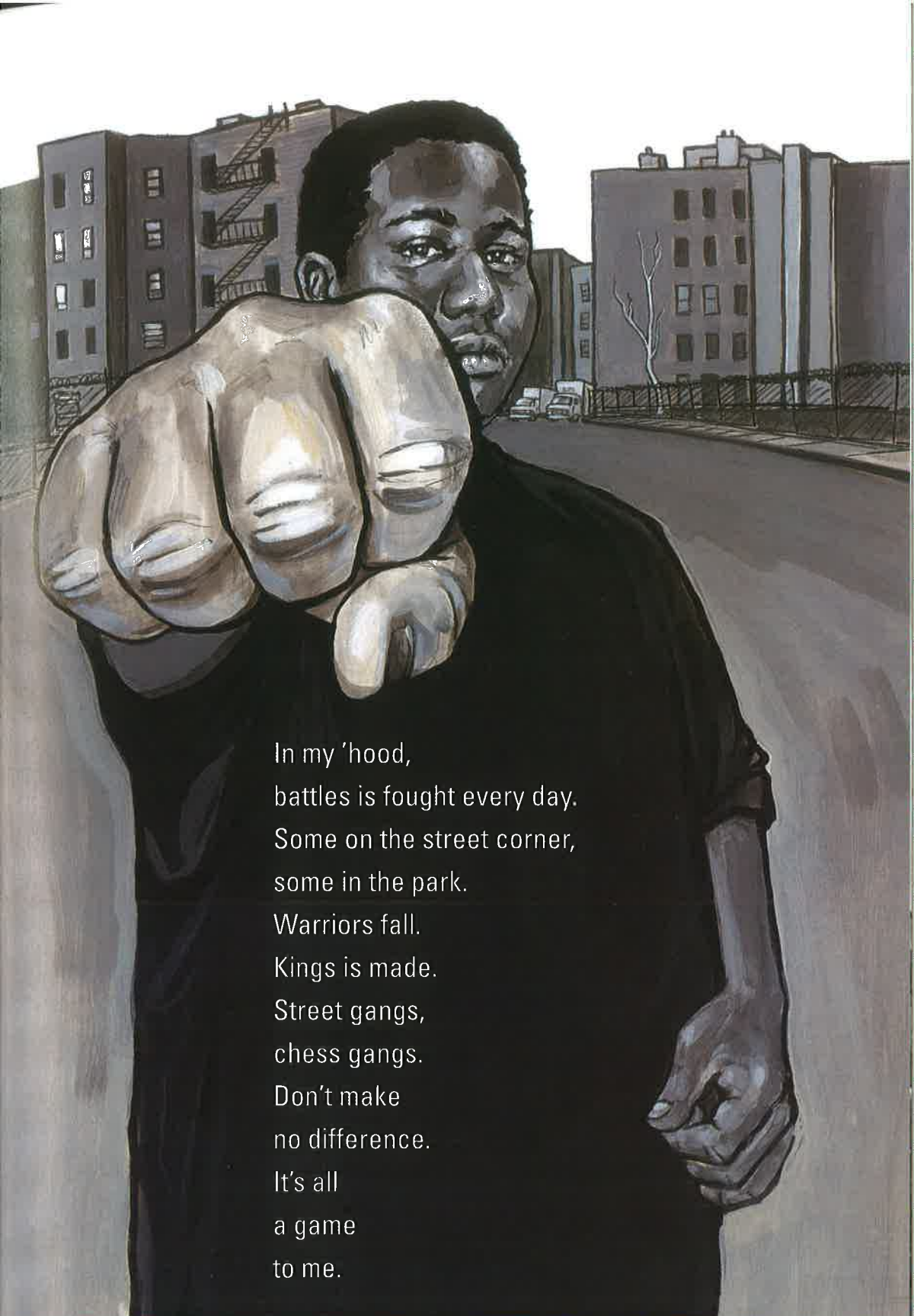
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In my 'hood,
battles is fought every day.
Some on the street corner,
some in the park.
Warriors fall.
Kings is made.
Street gangs,
chess gangs.
Don't make
no difference.
It's all
a game
to me.

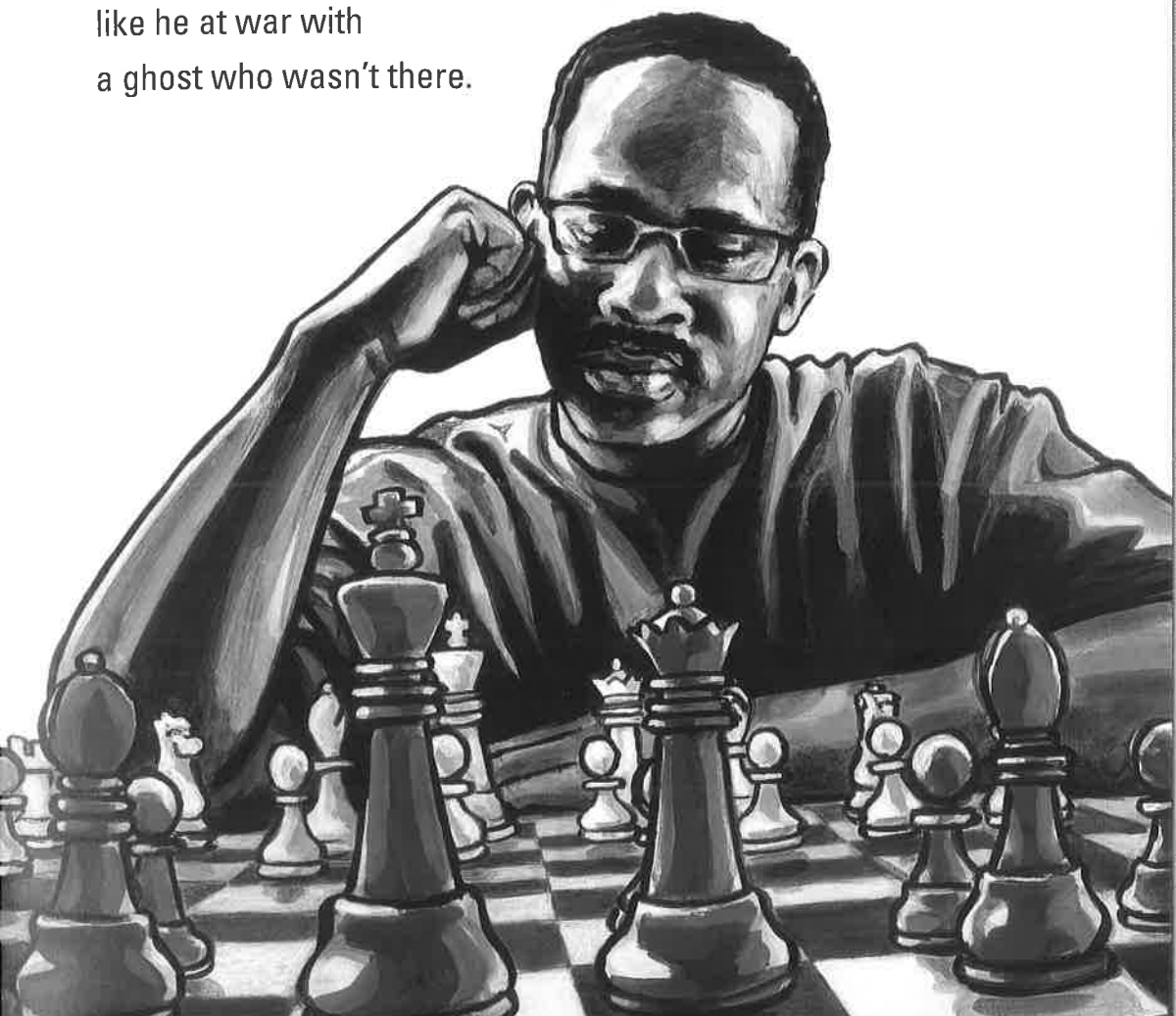


Opening Move

My Daddy
used to play chess
to calm his nerves
after workin' all day
in a room
with no windows.
I wanted to play him,
but he always say
I wasn't ready.
"This a man's game," he say.
"You a man?"

He made me play checkers
with my sister.
We watched him
from 'cross the room
just sittin' there,
movin' pieces

back
an' forth,
playin'
by hisself,
just starin'
at the board.
He pretended
to be both sides,
talkin' late into the night,
like he at war with
a ghost who wasn't there.



But sometimes the haze lifted,
and he noticed
we was in the room too.
When he put us to bed,
he told us stories
'bout all them crazy things
he done when he was young.
Them times I remember the best—
me, my sis, the twins, an' Mama,
all sittin' in bed
tellin' stories, laughin' an' screamin'
till it was time to go to sleep.
But that all stopped,
when my sister
died.
After that,
Daddy didn't tell stories no more.
Just sat by hisself
at that dang chessboard
till all the ghosts in his head
chased him
away
forever.

He never did show me
how to play.

Weeks an' months pass you by.
You don't notice till
you open your eyes one day
and it's a whole year later,
like God came down
and just took it away
without tellin' you.

Now I wake up
and I'm not sure
what day it is no more.

I get headaches
and lotsa things
make me mad—
like

my little brothers,
the twins.

They always gettin' me
in trouble,
findin' ways to make me crazy.

"Mommy!

Marcus ripped up my
homework!"

"Mommy!

Marcus poured grape drink
on the couch!"

Them weasels blame me
for everything,
and Mama believe 'em!

She make *me*
apologize
and clean up.

After that,
I just wanna
hurt somebody.

"You squeal on me again,
and there'll only
be one a you left."
POW!



Mama
always on the twins' side,
sayin' I'm almost
a teenager
and that I'm way
too big
to hit my little brothers.
"Even though you just eleven,
you almost as big as
your daddy now.
You need to set
an example
for the twins,
not send 'em
to the hospital," she say,
lightin' up her cigarette.
"They don't know better.
You should."
"They almost eight," I say.
"They ain't
so innocent."

I try
bein' a good brother.
I try
playin' with them
an' readin' with them
an' pretendin'
to be a space alien
so they can use
their secret weapons
on me.
But all they do is
try to see
who can make Marcus
go crazy first.

Like once,
they put my goldfish
in the toilet
and waited for me
to show up
before they flushed it
away.
That made me sad.
But then I got real angry
'cause that goldfish
was my friend.
The twins
just thought it was funny.
So I made 'em cry for what
they done.
Maybe next time,
they'll think twice
'bout messin' with me.

I got enough problems at home.
But school even worse.
Everyone out for me,
'specially Ms. Tate, the principal.
She always got her eye on me.
But worse
is havin' to see Latrell Jones
every day.
That fool
with his big mouth an' pretty-boy looks
is always up in my grill
'bout somethin'.
We used to be friends,
back when we was kids
and his mouth
wasn't so big.
We'd spend all afternoon
flippin'
on them old mattresses
in the lot 'cross the street.
But one day
Latrell smacked my sister
square in the face
just 'cause she laughed at him.