

went into business for himself, opening a convenience store in the basement of an old townhouse; Sonny had graduated from high school, joined the air force, and grown into a handsome ladies' man. He did some running around, but pretty much stayed out of trouble. Their younger brother, Joe, was another story.

Authority didn't agree with Joe. He argued with teachers and brawled with other students. He dropped out of school in the seventh grade and ended up in court for "assault by striking" right after his seventeenth birthday. He joined the military at eighteen, but his anger and attitude got him in even more trouble there. He fought his superiors and other soldiers. Sometimes he ended up in the hospital, but more often than not, his fighting landed him in solitary confinement, a dark hole with dirt walls ominously similar to the basement where Ethel once locked him as a child. He preferred being in the hole because it meant no one would bother him. As soon as they let him out, he'd fight another soldier or get belligerent with an officer and they'd throw him back in. He spent nine months in the service, most of it sitting in the hole, growing angrier and angrier. After multiple psychiatric evaluations and treatments, Joe was discharged for an inability to adjust emotionally to military life.

His family had hoped the military would help control his rage and teach him some discipline and respect for authority. Instead, he came out of the military angrier than ever.

A week or so after Joe got home from the military, a tall, skinny neighborhood kid named Ivy walked up to him with a knife and asked if he wanted to start something. Most people wouldn't have done that. At nineteen, Joe was at least four inches shorter than Ivy and only 155 pounds, but people in the neighborhood called him Crazy Joe because he seemed to enjoy violence. Ivy didn't care. He'd been drinking heavily and shooting heroin for years, and he was covered in scars from fighting. He told Joe he was going to kill him.

Joe ignored Ivy the first time. Then, about three months later, on September 12, 1970, Joe was walking down an East Baltimore street with his friend June. It was Saturday night, they'd been drinking, and

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"The Most Critical Time on This Earth Is Now"

When Deborah was a junior in high school, at the age of sixteen, she got pregnant with her first child. Bobbette cried when she found out. Deborah stopped going to school and Bobbette said, "Don't get too comfortable cause you're goin to graduate." Deborah yelled right back, saying she couldn't go to school all big and pregnant.

"That don't matter," Bobbette said, "you're goin to that special girls school where all the pregnant girls have big bellies just like you."

Deborah refused, but Bobbette filled out the application for her and dragged her there for her first day of class. On November 10, 1966, Deborah gave birth to Alfred Jr., who she named after his father, Alfred "Cheetah" Carter, the boy Galen had once been jealous of. Each morning, Bobbette made Deborah's lunch, got her to school, then took care of Alfred all day and most of the night so Deborah could go to class and study. When Deborah graduated, Bobbette made her get her first job—whether Deborah liked it or not, Bobbette was going to help her and that baby.

Deborah's older brothers were doing fine on their own. Lawrence

they'd just started talking up a group of young girls when three other men walked up the street toward them. One of those men was Eldridge Lee Ivy.

When Ivy saw Joe and June talking to the girls, he yelled, saying one of them was his cousin, and they'd better stop messing with her.

"I'm tired of your junk," June yelled back.

The two started arguing, and when Ivy threatened to punch June in the face, Joe jumped between them, calmly telling Ivy he would do no such thing.

Ivy grabbed Joe by the neck, choking him while his two friends tried to pull him off. Joe kicked and yelled, "I'm going to kill your motherfuckin ass!" But Ivy beat him bloody while June watched, terrified.

That night, Joe knocked on Deborah's door. He stared ahead, covered in blood, eyes burning with hate as she cleaned his face and put him on her couch to sober up with some ice packs. He glared at the wall all night, looking scarier and angrier than Deborah had ever seen a person look.

The next morning, Joe went into Deborah's kitchen and took her good carving knife with the black wood handle. Two days later, on September 15, 1970, Joe went to work at his job driving for a local trucking company. By five o'clock, he and a coworker had shared a fifth of Old Granddad whiskey, then another pint. It was still daylight out when Joe got off work and walked to the corner of Lanvale and Montford Avenues in East Baltimore, where Ivy stood on the front stoop of his house, talking to some friends. Joe crossed the street and said, "Hi Ivy," then stabbed him in the chest with Deborah's knife. The blade went straight through Ivy's heart. He staggered down the street and into a neighbor's house with Joe close behind, then collapsed facedown into a pool of his own blood, yelling, "Oh, I'm dying—call an ambulance!" But it was too late. When a fireman arrived a few minutes later, Ivy was dead.

Joe walked away from the murder scene, dropped the knife in a nearby alley, and headed to a pay phone to call his father, but the

police had beaten him to it. They'd told Day his son had killed a boy. Sonny and Lawrence told their father to get Joe to Clover, back to the tobacco farms, where he could hide from the law and be safe. Deborah said they were crazy.

"He's got to turn himself in," she told them. "The police got a warrant out saying he wanted dead or alive."

But the men didn't listen. Day gave Joe twenty dollars and put him on a Trailways bus to Clover.

In Lacks Town, Joe drank all day, picked fights with his cousins, and threatened to kill several of them, including Cootie. By the end of Joe's first week, Cootie called Day saying somebody had better come get Joe before he killed someone else or got himself shot. Sonny borrowed Day's car, picked Joe up in Clover, and took him to D.C. to stay with a friend. But Joe couldn't get along there either. The next morning he called Sonny and said, "Come pick me up, I want to turn myself in."

On the morning of September 29, 1970, Joe walked into the Baltimore police headquarters and calmly said, "I'm Joe Lacks. I'm wanted cause I killed Ivy." Then he filled out this form:

Is the defendant employed?	No
Cash on hand or in banks?	Zero
Name of parents?	David Lacks
Have they been to see you?	No
Do you have any friends or members of your family that can get you an attorney?	No. Can't afford one

After that, Joe waited. He knew he was going to plead guilty—he just wanted to get on with it. After five months awaiting trial in a cell, Joe wrote this letter to the criminal court judge:

Dear Sir or Your Honor,

In the most critical time on this earth is now on this atmosphere today of my missteak no I'll say wronge

comprehension of corruption that I've place on myself. A very misslead problem that was not ment to be. Feel so frustration in making me obnoxious within me, Asking for a (speedly trial) to Let me know what lays ahead in the future, I feel as thod I sure be castigate or chastise for the wronge I've did, So I'm ready to get it over now with it.

Joe Lacks

(Speedly trial)

(Thank you)

(Your Honor)

Finally, on April 6, 1971—seven months after Ivy's death—Joe stood in a courtroom and pleaded guilty to murder in the second degree, with Sonny watching nearby. The judge warned Joe repeatedly that a guilty plea meant waiving his right to a trial, his right to testify, and his right to appeal her ruling. As the judge spoke, he said "yes ma'am" and "no ma'am." He told her the alcohol had made him do it and that he hadn't meant to kill Ivy.

"I tried to hit on top of his shoulder, and he panicked and turned and caught it in the chest," Joe said. "I was trying to wound him so I wouldn't let him hurt me. . . . He told me he was going to kill me that Saturday night me and him got into the argument. I just hope you see I was trying to protect my life. I was not really wanting any trouble out of no one at all."

But Ivy's fourteen-year-old neighbor, who'd seen the whole thing, said Joe had walked right up and stabbed Ivy in the chest, then tried to stab him again in the back as he staggered away.

When Joe stepped from the stand, his court-appointed lawyer approached the judge to make this final point:

The only thing I would add, Your Honor, is that I talked to his brother about the young man, and the problem that he also had in the Army, is a problem that possibly got him into the situa-

tion he is in Court for today. For some reason, somewhere in his life, he has gotten an inferiority complex. And it seems to be a sizable one. It seems that whenever he is confronted by any individual, he sort of takes it rather aggressively, more so than the average individual . . . for the record, [he] had some psychiatric help in the service, but he has never been in any hospital.

Without knowing anything about Joe's life or the abuse he experienced as a child, his lawyer said, "He feels it more necessary to protect himself than the average individual. And possibly, this sets him off, where it would not set off the average person."

"Do people call you Crazy Joe?" the judge asked.

"There was a few friends that called me that," Joe said.

"Do you know why they call you that?"

"No ma'am," he said.

The judge accepted Joe's guilty plea, but asked to see medical and psychiatric reports before deciding his sentence. Those records are sealed, but whatever they contained led her to give him a sentence of only fifteen years out of a possible thirty. The state sent Joe to the Maryland Correctional Institution in Hagerstown, a medium-security prison about seventy-five miles west of Baltimore.

In the beginning, Joe spent his time in prison much as he'd spent it in the military: in the hole for insubordination and fighting. But eventually he stopped fighting and focused his energy inward. Joe found Islam and began spending all his time studying the Koran in his cell. Soon he changed his name to Zakariyya Bari Abdul Rahman.

Meanwhile, on the outside, things were looking pretty good for the other Lacks brothers. Sonny had just been honorably discharged from the Air Force, and Lawrence had a good job working for the railroad. But things weren't so good for Deborah. By the time Zakariyya ended up in prison, Deborah had married Cheetah in a blue chiffon dress in Bobette and Lawrence's living room. She was eighteen. When Deborah and Cheetah first met, he threw a bowling ball at her on the sidewalk in front of her house. She thought he was playing, but things

only got worse after they married. Soon after their second child, LaTonya, was born, Cheetah fell into drugs and started beating Deborah when he was high. Then he started running the streets, disappearing with other women for nights on end, and coming back only to sell drugs out of the house while Deborah's children sat and watched.

One day, as Deborah stood at the sink doing dishes, her hands covered in soap bubbles, Cheetah ran into the kitchen yelling something about her sleeping around on him. Then he smacked her.

"Don't do that again," Deborah said, standing stone-still, her hands still in the dishwasher.

Cheetah grabbed a plate from the drying rack and broke it across the side of her face.

"Don't put your hand back on me no more!" Deborah screamed, her hand shooting out of the dishwasher, gripping a serrated steak knife.

Cheetah raised his arm to hit her again, but he was clumsy from the drugs and booze. Deborah blocked him with her empty hand and pinned him against the wall. She stuck the tip of the knife into his chest just deep enough to break the skin, then dragged it down past his navel as Cheetah screamed, calling her crazy.

He left her alone for a few days after that, but eventually came home drunk and high and started beating her again. As Cheetah kicked her one night in the living room, Deborah yelled, "Why you always have to be arguing and fussing with me?" When he didn't answer, Deborah decided right then she wanted him dead. He turned and staggered toward the stairs of their apartment, still yelling, and Deborah pushed him hard as she could. He tumbled to the bottom, where he lay bleeding. Deborah stared at him from the top of the stairs, feeling nothing—no fear, no emotion. When he moved, she walked down the steps and dragged him through their basement onto the sidewalk outside. It was the middle of winter and snowing. Deborah dropped him on the ground in front of the house without a coat, slammed the door, and went upstairs to sleep.

The next morning she woke up hoping he'd frozen to death, but instead he was sitting on their front stoop, bruised and cold.

"I feel like some guys jumped me and beat me up," he told her.

She let him in the house and got him washed and fed, all the while thinking what a damn fool he was. While Cheetah slept it off, Deborah called Bobbette, saying, "This is it, he gonna die tonight."

"What are you talking about?" Bobbette asked.

"I got the monkey wrench," Deborah said. "I'm gonna splatter his brains all over the wall. I'm sick of it."

"Don't do it, Dale," Bobbette said. "Look where it got Zakariyya—he's in jail. You kill that man, then what about your children? Now get that monkey wrench outta there."

The next day, after Cheetah left for work, a moving van pulled up to the house. Deborah took the children and everything they owned, then hid at her father's house until she could find her own apartment. As Deborah worked two jobs and struggled to settle into her new life as a single mother, she had no idea she was about to get news that would be harder to handle than anything Cheetah had done.