

The Algorithm Doesn't *Know My Son*

A story. Companion to "Stop Lying on Black Americans."

*"You memorize the drill.
But you do not ever memorize the lie."*

Marcus Bell found the video on a Tuesday, the way you find a splinter: not by looking, but by the sudden small pain of it.

He was scrolling in bed, half asleep, thumb moving on its own, when the clip surfaced. Grainy gas station footage. A fight, somewhere far away, in a city he'd never been to, between people he'd never met. The caption underneath had four hundred thousand likes. It said: *Every. Single. Time.* And below that, a string of numbers he'd started seeing everywhere lately, posted like scripture: 13/50.

He knew what it meant. Everyone knew what it meant by now.

Marcus put the phone face down on the nightstand and lay in the dark listening to his wife Renee breathe beside him and, down the hall, the small mechanical hum of his son's fish tank. Jordan was eleven. He still slept with the closet light on. He still said "excuse me" to the dog when he stepped over her.

And somewhere out there, an algorithm was teaching the world what to see when it looked at him.

The Bells lived on Cascade Road in southwest Atlanta, in a brick house Renee's grandmother had bought in 1974 with money she saved cleaning other people's houses. There was a magnolia in the front yard older than the neighborhood itself. Renee taught eighth grade math. Marcus did logistics for a shipping company, fifteen years, employee of the quarter twice. Their daughter Imani was sixteen, ran the 400 meters, and wanted to study epidemiology because, she said, "diseases don't care about your excuses, and I respect that."

They were, by any measure anyone had ever invented, a family doing everything right.

That was the part that kept Marcus up. It didn't matter. The video didn't know about the magnolia tree or the honor roll certificates on the refrigerator or the fact that Jordan cried at the end of *Charlotte's Web*. The video only knew what performed. And what performed, what fed the machine, what strangers in comment sections consumed like popcorn, was a version of his children that did not exist.

Imani saw it first, of course. Kids always do.

She came into the kitchen one evening while Renee was grading quizzes and stood by the counter too long, the way she did when something was sitting on her.

"Mom. Tre sent me this account today." Tre was her boyfriend, a gentle beanpole of a boy who played trombone. "It's got like two million followers. It's just crime videos. All day. Only ever us."

She paused. "The comments, Mom."

Renee set down her red pen. "Don't read the comments, baby."

"I know. But they read them." Imani's voice cracked just slightly, then steadied itself, because she was sixteen and had already learned to steady it. "The kids at the meet last weekend. The ones from the county schools. They've read them. You can tell. It's in how they look at us before we even run."

Renee had spent nineteen years teaching children that numbers tell the truth. Now she sat at her own kitchen table trying to find the words to explain to her daughter that a number can be true and still be a lie, that a statistic without its context is just a costume a prejudice wears.

"Sit down," she said. "Let me show you something about denominators."

She pulled a napkin over and drew a hundred small circles. She colored in three of them.

"In any year," she said, "this is about how many of us get arrested for anything at all. Anything. A taillight. Everything." She tapped the ninety-seven empty circles. "These are the people the videos will never show. These are the people the account has no use for. Two million followers, and not one of them will ever see a clip of your daddy leaving for work at 5:40 in the morning, because nobody films that, because nothing happens. Our whole lives are the part of the math they delete."

Imani stared at the napkin. "So it's a numerator with no denominator."

"That's exactly what it is."

"That's the whole trick?"

"That's the whole trick. It's an old trick. It used to travel by pamphlet. Now it travels by feed, and the feed gets paid every time somebody's scared."

Imani was quiet for a moment. Then she folded the napkin carefully, like evidence, and put it in her pocket.

Jordan's turn came in the spring, and it came the way it always comes for boys like him: early, and over nothing.

A new family had moved in three streets over, into the big house with the camera doorbell. Jordan and his friend Dre were cutting through the neighborhood the way eleven-year-olds have cut through neighborhoods since neighborhoods began, arguing about a video game, when the neighborhood app lit up.

Two suspicious males near Lennox Ct. Anyone know them?

A photo, taken from the doorbell. Two skinny children in backpacks. One of them mid-laugh.

Marcus saw the post an hour later, forwarded by a neighbor who was furious on his behalf. He sat in his truck in the driveway for a long time before he went inside. He was not thinking about the woman who posted it, not really. He was thinking about the pipeline. She had watched something, and the something had told her what an eleven-year-old with his son's face is, and she had believed the something instead of her own eyes, and she had reached for the word *males* to describe a child who still slept with the closet light on.

That night, Marcus and Renee had The Conversation with Jordan. Every Black family knows the one. Keep your hands visible. Don't run, even when running is the sanest thing a scared child can do. Don't reach. Say sir.

Jordan listened the way he listened to fire drill instructions, seriously, nodding, and then he asked the question that broke his father's heart cleanly in two:

"But what did I do?"

"Nothing," Marcus said. "You did nothing. That's what I need you to understand, son. This is not about anything you did. Some people have been lied to about you before they ever met you. The lie got to them first. That is their sickness, not your crime. But I can't let their sickness put its hands on you, so I'm teaching you the drill anyway. Do you hear the difference? You memorize the drill. But you do not ever, ever memorize the lie."

Jordan nodded slowly. "The lie is that I'm bad."

"The lie is that you're bad because of what you are. And baby, nobody on this earth is bad because of what they are. People are only ever bad because of what they choose. And look at me. Look at your mama. Look at your sister. Look at what this family chooses, every single day."

Here is what the algorithm never learned about the Bell family, because the algorithm has no category for it:

It never learned that Imani won the 400 at regionals in May, and that when she crossed the line, the girls from the county schools, the ones with the wary eyes, were the first to hug her, because children unlearn lies faster than adults when you give them a denominator, and a season of shared bus rides is a denominator.

It never learned that Renee started teaching a unit she called "How to Read a Scary Number," and that a white father came to conferences in October and stood awkwardly by the door and

finally said, "My son showed me that napkin thing you do. The circles. I, uh." He looked at his shoes. "I follow some accounts I'm going to stop following. That's all I wanted to say."

It never learned that Marcus printed a stack of papers, a real document with real charts and citations, and left copies at the barbershop and the church and, after thinking about it for a week, in the community mailbox kiosk on Lennox Court, with a sticky note that said *Before you post, read page 3*.

It never learned that Jordan, at twelve now, keeps a folded napkin with a hundred circles on it taped inside his school binder, and that when a kid at lunch parroted the numbers he'd absorbed from somewhere, Jordan didn't fight and didn't fold. He pulled out the napkin. "Ninety-seven of these are me," he said. "Which videos have you seen of the ninety-seven?"

The kid didn't have an answer. There isn't one.

The lie is still out there. It will be out there tomorrow, refreshed, reposted, monetized, wearing new captions. No single family defeats an algorithm.

But the Bells sleep at night knowing something the machine will never compute: that a lie needs your silence to raise your children for you. And in that brick house on Cascade Road, under the old magnolia, silence lost.

The fish tank hums. The closet light stays on a little longer. And in the morning, at 5:40, a man leaves for work, unfilmed, unremarkable, and utterly unashamed, one of the ninety-seven, which is to say: the truth.

The statistics referenced in this story are documented in the companion paper, "Stop Lying on Black Americans: A Receipts-First Response to a Viral Lie."