One Black Runaway and Two White Hippies go Hitchhiking

by Maggi Laureys (September 2017)

Eddie and Dwayne, *from the author's collection*

Mom once sent my big brother Kenny on a simple errand to get some milk. He came home with the milk and three Hari Krishnas to boot. He had found the trio of bald teenagers dancing around the parking lot, tapping their tambourines and singing, *Hare Krishna! Hare Krishna!* It was 1975 and the Krishnas, like hippies, were everywhere. Kenny figured they must be hungry.

"I don't want the poor kids to starve," Mom had said, "But I don't know what to feed them. They won't eat any meat. They

won’t even drink milk!” They stayed with us for a week, during which my brother Eddie pointed out that when the lone girl was not looking, the two male Krishna’s had devoured our hamburgers. “Well thank goodness,” Mom said.

We were a family of ten kids and Kenny and Eddie were the eldest and the first ones to go away to college. They both attended George Washington University in DC. We younger kids always looked forward to seeing what Kenny and Eddie would bring back when they hitchhiked home from DC because they did not bring inanimate gifts wrapped with a bow like ordinary people did. Nope, they brought home people. One time they bought back an affable drunk who’d picked them up hitchhiking somewhere in Delaware. The drunk had nowhere special to go so Kenny invited him home to meet us. But the all-time, hands-down, best Coming Home Gift that they’d ever brought to us was Dwayne.

Dwayne was a ten year old black kid whom Kenny and Eddie found in the men’s room of a highway rest-stop when they were hitchhiking home from college for spring break. The other men just milled around the bathroom peeing and washing their hands, taking no more notice of the lone little boy than of any other kid in the bathroom. Kenny, however, knew something was wrong. Kenny said hello to the kid and asked where his parents were. “I ain’t got none,” the kid said. Eddie told us that he and Kenny couldn’t possibly leave a ten-year-old boy open to perverts at a roadside bathroom. Dwayne must have been frightened to be alone in that restroom, because from that second onward Kenny said that Dwayne had gleefully glued himself to their sides. They figured Dwayne, a cute kid, might even help score them more rides so they let him hold their sign “To Netcong, NJ.” Dwayne was thrilled to know he was doing his part to help; it made him feel like one of the guys.

They got from him that he was an only child and had always wanted brothers like them, but not much else—not much that was true, anyway.

“He told us he was 16,” Ken said, “And that he was alone because he was a Travelling Man”

“That boy’s no more than 10 years old,” Mommy said.

Dwayne was immediately comfortable with my mother—a short, plump, olive-complected woman who went about in cheap polyester slacks from Kmart, wore her apron from breakfast right up to bedtime, and who always had a couple of rubber bands stacked on her wrist. “Just in case,” she’d say. She had an open-door policy at the house and the subsequent stream of our friends in and out made it all the easier for Dwayne to blend into the crowd. It was an entertainingly chaotic house and, since each one of we ten kids invited own respective clique of friends, it wasn’t uncommon for there to be over twenty people in the house at a time. Mom held command over it all somehow without ever leaving the kitchen, where she cooked, cleaned and did laundry all day. She had started a small charity called FISH (Friends In Service to Humanity) from that same kitchen and succeeded in running the entire charity within. FISH was a network of other housewives from the parish whom Mom coordinated to drive the elderly, the sick, the poor, the addicted and the just plain needy to doctors, hospitals, grocery stores, laundromats, AA meetings and any other critical destination (any of we kids who had a license were enlisted to drive as well). She did this all the while washing dishes, folding clothes, or cutting vegetables with the phone clamped between her chin and shoulder. The charity helped many troubled teens who ended up becoming our

foster kids and every one of those foster kids had instantly and happily called my mother Ma. Heck, all our friends called her Ma and, within a day, Dwayne had acclimated to our household culture so verily that he did the same. He seemed to find it rather a game, and addressed her as often as he could simply to relish the chance to say Ma. "*Ma, I'm going to bathroom, ok? Ma, we're gonna go play outside. When's dinner Ma*?"

Dwayne was having a terrific time, especially since the younger half of my family was in his own age range. I was 10 at the time, my brother Christopher was 9, Vincenia 11 and Tommy 12. We were the perfect ages to play with Dwayne. We were also young enough to be gobsmacked impressed that he had run away from home. Tommy was the only one in our family who had ever tried such a thing and, until learning of Dwayne's escapade, Tommy's try had always struck we kids as rather daring. Indeed, Tommy would boast about how Mom had once ordered him upstairs to his room, whereupon he got the bright idea to escape by stringing belts together and climbing down from the window. Alas, the belts were not true durable leather but cheap leatherette made of pressed fibers. He had only just crawled out the window and climbed down a foot or two when the belts snapped in two like a strip of crisp bacon. Tommy fell plop down to the ground—and that's as far as he got from the house.

"He broke his arm," we bragged to Dwayne. "We thought he was still upstairs but then we heard somebody crying outside *Help! Help!* and Mommy was like, *What is that sound?*"

Dwayne failed to be impressed. After all, he had made it on his own well beyond his town's border and all the way to an

interstate highway rest-stop before our brothers found him. Thereon, he got to hitchhike with two college boys all the way through Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey. Moreover, he called my big brothers his “good pals.” My big brothers even let Dwayne into the inner sanctum of their bedroom, where none of we littler ones were ever allowed. It was incredible to us that Dwayne got to hang with *The Big Boys*! Our three eldest brothers, Eddie, Kenny and Stevie, were known, literally, as *The Big Boys* in my family while we littler ones were called *The Little Kids*. Of the three Big Boys, Kenny was the paternal fun one who organized activities for us, such as hiking and roller skating. Eddie, however, was reserved and impatient with people, especially with annoying little kids.

Eddie also had bipolar and a kickass drinking problem of which we’d seen incipient signs since his teens and which had become full blown by the year we’d met Dwayne. He was twenty-one at that point and in his third year of college, which should be the time of one’s life. Yet our brother had no social life and instead holed up in his room in the Washington apartment downing three bottles of wine a night and painting (he was a fine arts major). The ever-affable Kenny kept things running and found Eddie a job as bicycle messenger and motivated him to stick to his classes. Eddie’s antisocial habits at college were nothing new; he’s been inclined toward the morose all his life and even in high school the only friends he had were guys that Kenny had introduced to our home. We used to call Kenny the sociable, caring brother Theo to Eddie’s solitary, alcoholic Van Gogh.

Eddie had had one friend, and only one in his entire life, who did not come via Kenny, and it was similarly odd kid named Roger Gerstenschlager with whom he hung out in the eighth grade. The friendship was not about enjoying each other’s

company so much as a shared obsession with model airplanes. Eddie had always been a person of manic obsession and went from building intricate model airplanes in elementary school, to an obsession with wrestling in high school, to running in college (such was his obsession with running that he would run until he split his shins). Through it all, he was most loyal to his obsession with art. He was a cute guy and with his physical activity he had a terrific physique as well. Girls hovered near him but he, a loner, was oblivious to the attention. Given all of Eddie's singular obsessions and anti-social inclinations, we Little Kids were awed to see him suddenly so taken with funny, feisty little Dwayne. "Oh sure," Dwayne told me and the other Little Kids, "Me and Eddie's good friends. Whaddya think?"

Indeed, all of the Laureys kids became fast friends with Dwayne. He was with us for the entire two week spring break, most of which I recall in only a general sense. There is one interaction, however, that I remember specifically and in detail. Scientists say that people remember something when they analyze it or surround it with other layers of meaning directly as it's happening, because then the thought process becomes something laden that will sink more deeply into the brain, as if a needle sinking deeper into vinyl to make permanent grooves in a record (once you make the grooves, they are permanently there and you can always replay your memory). Well, I sure as hell analyzed this one interaction with Dwayne because it was my first personal engagement with the concept of race. In 1975, there were no black people in little, working class, Italian/Irish Netcong. I had only met one other black person in my life, and that was a boy in the second grade with me at St. Michael's School. He came from a town five miles away that was also predominantly white, and he transferred out after only one year. I knew nothing about him. Dwayne was the first black person I ever really *knew,* with

whom I talked and played and engaged up close. I had so many questions—questions which I knew in a vague way were verboten for white people to ask, but which I had risked anyway because Dwayne was so friendly. It was a warm spring evening a little before dinnertime and Dwayne and I, along with my siblings Tommy, Vincenia and Christopher, were all in the basement where we kept our games and toys. We may have been playing Monopoly, I'm not certain. However, I am absolutely certain of the precise words I had used to ask what to me right then was a perfectly logical question.

"Do black people get tan?"

"Sure we do," Dwayne said, enjoying a highly authoritative tone. "Whaddya think?"

"What happens?"

"We get more black! What about you? I heard that the sun hurts white folks' skin."

"Only if we get a sunburn."

"Black folks' skin gets white if it burns and starts peeling. Grandma calls it ashy."

"So does ours! Ours gets white and peels off too!"

The gates were open to racial comparison, such that Dwayne could approach the ultimate taboo difference between whites and blacks—which is not, as we assume, pigmentation, but hair texture. Even at 10, I knew the topic was taboo and this, of course, is the reason I remember so distinctly that Dwayne had extended his hand toward my hair, which was long, wavy and a golden kind of blonde, and asked if he could touch it. “It’s soft,” he said. Then he touched Vincenia’s hair, which was dark and super curly, so much so that when she cut it a couple of years later it sprang into a full afro. “Yours is like black folks’ hair,” he said to Vincenia. “See?” he said while patting his own hair. Yours is curly like mine.” Then he asked us to do that which I’d never again done for the rest of my life, despite having had a number of black boyfriends. “Wanna touch my hair?” he asked while patting his head. We touched it.

I would sometimes feel a black boyfriend’s hair near my thumb when I rested my hand on the back of his neck. But I dared not run my hand over it as I would with a white guys’ hair for fear it would be somehow racist. I had a black roommate once and I was fascinated by her process of straightening her hair with a flat iron. I was a girl, after all, and the beauty treatments of other girls, of any race, interested me. By then, however, I was already 17 years old and thus old enough to be shamed out of asking an innocent question about hair. I spent my twenties and thirties with my ex, a Moroccan man named Adnan. Back then, I thought of Adnan as foreign, Islamic and vaguely European since he spoke French and was fond of Armani but, otherwise, the same race as me. He was dark-complected and had tight afro hair but, since I did not think of him as black, I had no problem touching his afro because, in assuming his sameness with me, his body and hair were not fraught with identity politics. When I had met Dwayne decades

earlier, I was simply still too young to conceive of the human body as fraught with *isms*. To a little kid, blacks and whites are different physically, simple as that, and there's no reason to be all weird about race. Likewise, it seemed bizarre to pretend that we didn't notice it. "Why not ask a question?" I thought to myself. "It's not like there's anything wrong with being black, so why act like talking about it aloud is as bad as cussing?"

I noticed that the palms of Dwayne's hands were not black like the rest of him, but a tender kind of beige imbued with pink. "I like how your palms are a different color than the rest of you," I said. It was true too; I liked how the contrasting, softer color inside his hands made the cup of his palms seem more supple, somehow vulnerable.

"Lemme see yours," he said. He was sitting closer to Christopher and looked at his hands, which Christopher lifted for him, palms up. "What about your feet? Lemme see the bottom of your feet too." I not only recall showing my feet, but the sandals I wore as well. Dwayne inspected our body parts and concluded that the insides of white folks' hands and feet were pretty much the same color as the rest of their bodies. "Huh," he said as if it were a rather peculiar thing, and left it at that.

Dwayne had one more question: "How come your brother Brian doesn't talk? And how come he sits on the floor all the time? I never saw a white person act like that."

One of us—either Tommy, Vincenia or Christopher, I cannot

recall who—explained to Dwayne that Brian was not odd because he was white. “It’s because he’s autistic.” We were accustomed to having to explain autism to people in the early seventies, well before autism became a household word. It was so unknown that Brian was not diagnosed with it until the age of 13, before which he’s been misdiagnosed as mentally retarded and then as deaf and dumb since he never spoke a word in his life. I’m certain Dwayne had seen Down Syndrome kids before, but never anyone like Brian, who sat on the floor Indian style, rocked to music all day, never spoke and instead made a braying kind of noise, “Eeeh, eeeh, eeeh.”

Once we had settled that black people and white people looked different on the outside we got down to far more important business—which is to say, we went outside to play.

Meanwhile mom was going crazy making phone calls to see where the hell the Dwayne had come from. Eddie and Kenny had picked him up at a rest-stop in Maryland so mom called some local precincts near the rest-stop as well as the Maryland State Police. Sure enough, someone had reported a missing 10-year-old black male. Mom was put in touch with Dwayne’s grandmother and assured her that Dwayne was fine—more than fine, in fact, he was having a ball playing with her kids and had become quite tight with her eldest boy, Eddie. Plans were made for Eddie and Kenny to drop off Dwayne in Maryland on their way back to DC. I cannot recall if they hitchhiked back with Dwayne or not but I imagine they did because I would have remembered if Dwayne’s grandmother was afraid about him hitchhiking again and they had to take a bus instead—something my brothers never did as it cost too much. What I do recall is that we Little Kids were thrilled with the plan since it meant that they wouldn’t be leaving until the end of Spring Break and thus Dwayne could spend the whole 2 weeks with us.

“Man,” Eddie said after bringing Dwayne back to Maryland. “You should’ve seen his dad. The Grandmother was this sweet old religious lady. But that father scared the shit out of us.”

I was thusly prepped for when I eventually saw Dwayne’s dad for myself. He was a retired military man who wore a short-sleeved button down which revealed the anchor tattoo on his bicep. His afro was shaved flat at the top in the military fashion and he stood with his arms folded across his chest, staring one down with a granite expression. His wife had abandoned the family when Dwayne was a baby, apparently because she’d fallen into drugs. “I wouldn’t blame her for running away from that guy,” Eddie said, “That guy was a hard-ass.” Kenny said that the dad looked them over as if he’d thought they were two pot-smoking, long-haired, hippie freaks. Which they kind of were. Eddie wore bellbottoms and a denim jacket that was 100% covered in colorful patches. Both had long hair, which they wore unkempt as was the fashion in the 70s. And just as Dwayne’s dad suspected, they smoked pot. Lots of it.

“Christ,” Eddie had said to us, “Can you imagine the beating Dwayne got from the old man after we left?”

Dwayne told Eddie and Kenny that he had run away because his dad was going to give him a whooping—that’s the precise term he used: a whooping. If he already had a whooping coming to him for a past infraction, well, Eddie explained, just imagine what’ll he get for running away on top of it. Running away with two white, pot-smoking, long-haired hippie freaks from NJ!

“Poor kid,” Ken said.

Dwayne begged his grandmother to go visit his new pals Kenny and Eddie, who were only a half hour away from Maryland in Washington, DC, but phone calls appeared to be the best it would get. His grandmother did, however, invite our whole family to dinner at her house. We were going to visit our brothers in Washington that summer, as we often did, and thus we arranged to stop off at Dwayne’s house for dinner on the way.

Whenever we visited Washington, we would look out the car windows and observe how so many residents were black, especially in my brothers’ neighborhood—where Eddie and Kenny were actually the only white people at all. Daddy would roll his eyes and ask what they were trying to prove by living in the ghetto, to which Eddie and Kenny would reply, quite simply, “That we have no money.” We slept in sleeping bags on the floor of their apartment but, other than their own apartment building, we saw nothing of their neighborhood. All our time was spent sightseeing in white touristy areas and thusly we did not think much more about how racial demographics differed from our town to DC. However, we did think about it when we went to Dwayne’s house.

My knowledge of black people in those days had all come from TV and the movies which back then always portrayed them as poor and living in urban neighborhoods, just like the one where my brothers lived. Even Sesame Street was an urban street. But Dwayne’s family lived in a nice little town exactly like our own town, Netcong. It was a working class

suburban terrain where kids were riding bikes down the street and playing ball in the yard just like we did in Netcong. It had the same sort of split level aluminum sided houses all down a row along tree-lined streets just like in Netcong. It was just like Netcong except that everyone in Netcong was white and everyone in Dwayne's town was black.

"Are we the only white people here?" I asked Dwayne. I realized that it was my turn to be the minority now.

"Sure," he said, "Whaddya think?"

I recall that the little kids across the street had stopped their bikes and stared at us. I knew it was because we were white. I don't recall exactly what Dwayne had said to them, but he was a plucky kid so I could see him being proud of the novelty and saying something like, "Look! I got white people at my house!"

The neighborhood kids had been staring from the moment our station wagon pulled up and the first of 7 white people exited the door. Then a second white person exited from the other door. And then another and another. There were even kids coming out the station wagon's backend. White people were pouring out the doors of this station wagon like clowns from a circus car. Kathy, Cecilia, Tommy, Vincenia, Maggi, Christopher and Mom. Dwayne had bragged to his grandmother that all ten of us were coming for dinner (*My ten new friends*, as he put it), but Eddie and Kenny were waiting for us at their apartment in Washington and my big brother Stevie (the third of the three Big Boys) was out West climbing the Grand

Tetons that year. Brian stayed home with Dad. No matter, because Dwayne was so fascinated by Brian that he told his grandma all about him anyway—how Brian never spoke, brayed like a horse, plopped onto the ground Indian style and proceeded to pick blades of grass that he rolled between his fingers and flung (Brian loved the texture of rolling things like grass and lint between his fingers). I've no way of knowing what exact words Dwayne used to explain Brian to her, but I like to imagine him explaining it just as we had to him: "It's not because he's white. It's because he's autistic."

We spilled into Dwayne's house as a pack of loud, unruly kids, which must have been at least a little startling to Dwayne's grandmother, who kept a pristinely clean, orderly house for herself, her son and her grandson. It was just the three of them in a nice, normal little house in a nice, normal little neighborhood. I had never, not once in my life, used the word normal to describe my own family. Dwayne's grandmother even looked like the stereotypical, normal grandma. She was of average height, a bit plump with age, wore a pressed, checkered housedress and swept her gray-white hair up into a tidy bun at the top of her head. And she was one helluva cook.

She had set up a long folding table with a tablecloth in an enclosed front porch and covered every square inch of it with platters—homemade biscuits, macaroni and cheese (with cheddar, not Velveeta as we used up in New Jersey), corn on the cob, collard greens (which I'd never heard of till that day), mashed potatoes and the best fried chicken any of us had ever tasted in our lives. His grandma filled our plates and poured our drinks while chatting with Mom, who knew what it was to run a food assembly line and thus kept saying, "Please, let me help." But old Grandma wasn't having it. "Oh no," she said, "You're guests in my home. Just you relax." One of my siblings

had observed that she treated us like royalty and this phrase stuck. “Oh my god, Eddie, Kenny, listen,” we exclaimed when we saw them later that night, “You should’ve seen! Dwayne’s grandmother treated us like royalty! Like royalty!”

I don’t recall anything else that the grandmother said, and otherwise see her in my mind’s eye continuously bustling about to fill our plates and glasses and expediting courses, including a glorious desert spread that covered the entire surface area of the table just as the dinner spread had. There was homemade apple pie, blueberry pie, cherry pie, pound cake, rice pudding and ice cream. Finally, as we were finishing desert, Dwayne’s father came to meet us. He shook Mommy’s hand and thanked her for taking care of Dwayne. I remember him as rigid, and only staying the perfunctory moment or two that good manners would dictate, before getting the hell out of there. He seemed to regard all we strange kids bouncing around his porch as a jumble of flailing little arms and legs and a chaos of voices and laughter that he wasn’t especially interested in sussing out as individuals. He likely thought it was kooky that our entire family was going to camp out on our brothers’ apartment floor that evening and perhaps even bizarre that my mother had no problem with her sons hitchhiking to and from college. He surely recognized my brothers’ address at M Street NW to be a hardcore ghetto and this was likely one reason why there was no way Dwayne was ever going to go visit his new pals Kenny and Eddie over there. I was certain he appreciated what our family had done for Dwayne, but I was just as certain that he was looking at us thinking, “Man, white folks sure are odd.”

Yet the oddness he saw with this particular group of white people had nothing to do with their whiteness and everything to do with being a Laureys. The Laureys family was just plain

odd. There were the pot-smoking, long-haired hippie freaks. There was the way dozens of friends freely rolled in and out of the house without knocking. There was the rotating cast of foster kids. A boy with a condition nobody ever heard of who sat on the ground flinging blades of grass all day. A mother who packed her tribe of little ones into a station wagon and drove off to visit the eldest sons who lived in one of the worst ghettos in the city. This was who we were. This was how we were raised.

Ours was a family where everything transpired in freewheeling, open, organic ways—including our life lessons on morality. My mother never gave any of we kids, old or young, didactic lectures on our responsibility to special needs people like our brother Brian or on compassion for the poor and needy like her FISH clients; we learned from example and did the real work. Nor did she ever preach on racial equality or social justice; that was covered with her most favored mantra, *Be kind to people. Just be kind.* I did occasionally need to be chastised and reminded to be kind, but otherwise my every life lesson as a kid was gleaned from living it and watching it in real time. And so it was that my first sustained contemplation of race came with my bohemian big brothers sticking out their thumbs on an interstate highway and finding our own Huck Finn runaway at a rest-stop.

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