

## **MICHAEL SULLIVAN** | *THE COMFORT AND SAFETY OF MY OWN HOME*

“Put your hands on the wall,” the two oversized officers clamored! They looked like two NFL linebackers moonlighting as police officers. Startled by their emboldened invasion, me and my friends complied. The officers had just forced their way into the small apartment I shared with my mother and two younger siblings. The bold, brazen officers had claimed they were responding to a reported armed robbery.

I was babysitting my three year old nephew, in the comfort and safety of my own home; the next thing I knew, my hands were spread across the white plastered wall that aligned the west part of my front living room. My forehead was in an intimate relationship with the wall, pressed firmly on the immovable structure. My feet were also spread, approximately twenty inches apart. Time had frozen, and I became a standing paraplegic, paralyzed from the waist down, by the overbearing authority of the strange presence that hovered over my body.

My impulse to dissent influenced me to look behind me. As I turned my head, a black shiny gun came into view. It was pointed directly at me. I looked down its barrel, a black hole turned inside out, an omnipresent image in my subconscious. As I ascended my startled gaze, my eyes met the officer’s eye. His eyes were fiery red, a strong contrast to his dark color skin. I looked past the foreground of the dark officer, into the dense background—an almost silhouette-like figure spoke:

“Put your head back on the wall!”

It was the dark officer’s partner, speaking with an authoritarian tone. His back was hunched and his shoulders were arched; ready to pounce on his prey.

“We aren’t going to tell you no more!” reinforcing the words of his partner.

I felt like a boxer, fighting out of his weight class, who had been hit with several devastating blows by the bigger and more experienced boxer. Each threat, with a hand on the trigger pushed me further and further into a state of suspended animation.

Grasping the current reality, my rationale snapped back into focus. My eyes continued to search the room—disobeying the officer’s command. I gazed to my left and then to my right looking for my nephew. Suddenly, I detected movement at the bottom of my vision.

Directly on the side of me was my three-year old nephew with his hands on the wall. His small innocent frame mirrored my larger innocent frame. A toddler assuming the position of a suspect. His small hands were evenly spread on the wall. He left a chocolate handprint from the cake he just ate. His blameless face was puzzled. That night the police had determined our future worth. Guilty until proven innocent was the theme that was being pressed on the souls of teenagers and a toddler.

“Y’all bogus as hell.” I said to the officers as I disregarded my own safety.

This image I drew is me telling a didactic story with an ambiguous undercurrent of the now and then. It’s meant to provoke thought and influence individuals to have a conversation about mass incarceration and slavery. These two events are joined at the hip and co-mingle in this contemporary time.

I was 19 years old when this intergenerational event occurred. I was cloaked with the way my ancestors were treated. To have mass incarceration, one must incarcerate at least four generations at one time. For instance, if an individual gets incarcerated at age 20 and sentenced to life in prison, by the time she is 70 years old, he or she would be in prison with her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren’s generations.

*Michael Sullivan is a father of four and a grandfather of ten grandchildren, a visual artist, and a writer. He was born on the South Side of Chicago, IL in the early 70’s. At an early age, his mother recognized his artistic gift and invested in it, but without community and academic support from school, he abandoned his artistic gift.*

*While incarcerated, Michael reached for his state issued pencil and paper and began rendering shades of gray into beautiful portraits of his loved ones. It was then that his autodidactic journey began. Since then, Michael has obtained*

*multiple certificates and is currently working towards earning his second degree in Arts Education and Activism through Northeastern Illinois University's University Without Walls. He works hard in hopes to make his family proud of him; and to let them know he is trying to be the man he was meant to be.*