

SUNDEE T. FRAZIER

**MIGHTY
INSIDE**





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It's 1955 in Spokane, Washington the year Melvin Robinson starts high school, one of two black boys. He knows about racism; of course he does. People tell his father they shouldn't be living in the white part of town. His grandmother works in a "whites only" club where she's supposed to stay in the kitchen. But mostly, Melvin thinks that the worst kind of racism is limited to the South.

He's focused his worries on his lifelong stutter, which has gotten worse and worse as the first day of school draws near. He's afraid of embarrassing himself in front of Millie Takazawa, whom he'd like to chat up, smooth as silk. He's worried, accurately, that kids like Gary Ratliff will call him "skip" and make his life miserable.

But Melvin doesn't have the luxury of maintaining a focus on school life and crushes. Another Black boy named Emmett Till is brutally killed, his story in every newspaper and magazine. Melvin's sister is nominated for Homecoming Queen and then humiliated at the scene of what should have been her triumph. The cloud of racism advances toward him with the inevitability of an approaching storm.

But Melvin also has strengths that no one can assail; an extended family that loves him (even his pain of a big brother, Chuck) with a constancy and depth that is also a rising force in his awareness. And he has his new friend Lenny, a fast-talking, sax-playing Jewish boy, who lives above the town's infamous (and segregated) Harlem Club, who encourages Melvin to take some risks—to invite Millie to Homecoming, and even audition for a local TV variety show. When they play music together, Melvin almost feels like he's talking, no words required.

But there are times when one needs to speak up.

Set at a time between Mildred Taylor's *THE GOLD CADILLAC* and Christopher Paul Curtis's *THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM*, this is the story of a boy who reaches the moment when he will discover if he can be as mighty on the outside as he actually is on the inside.



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CHAPTER ONE

Melvin Robinson lay in the bottom of the bunk bed he'd been sharing with his older brother, Chuck, for almost all of his thirteen years. In one week, he thought, I'm dead meat.

He closed his eyes and imagined himself walking through Cleveland High's large wooden doors, saying the names of his friends and teachers in clear and confident tones, hearing himself say over and over, "Hi, I'm Melvin," to kids he met.

"Hi" was a good place for him to start because making the *H* sound was a lot like exhaling, and he could do that without getting tripped up. Usually.

Before lying down, Melvin had shut both bedroom doors. One led to the kitchen, the other to a short hall and the tiny bathroom all six in his family shared. He had closed the curtains over the two small, high windows to block the bright summer sun. He was trying to stay cool, and he was trying to stay calm.

He clicked on his reading lamp. His eyes roamed the space where he slept—his own private shelter. Over time, he had plastered the wall and the bottom of Chuck's bunk with maps Pops brought from train depots, and photos from *National Geographic*: Machu Picchu, the great pyramids of Egypt, Hopi caves in cliff walls. Images of

Roman aqueducts bridging chasms made him think of their own Monroe Street Bridge spanning the mighty Spokane River, which cascaded through downtown in a series of waterfalls.

Pops had told him the largest of these falls had been a gathering place for the area's first people, the Spokane Indians, before they were forced to live on a piece of "no-man's-land" by the government in 1881. Melvin's relatives had arrived in 1900 from North Carolina, and what they found in Spokane was apparently better than what they thought they could have in the South. They settled down, and now here he was, fifty-five years later, facing the biggest challenge of his life thus far: high school.

He stared at the Roman Colosseum on his wall. The stone stadium, with its three levels of arched openings, had once seated fifty thousand people and incorporated a retractable roof that had not been replicated in any of the great American stadiums, centuries later. Here, trained gladiators would take on wild animals and slay them or be slayed. Melvin was determined to see the Colosseum in person one day, but first, he had a battle of his own to win . . . at Cleveland High. *Go Tigers.*

He looked across the room to where his turtle, Tuck, sat in the small tank on his and Chuck's desk. Words flowed smooth as honey when he talked to his pet. All other times, he could never be sure. Some days he did okay. Other days, it was a nightmare.

Lately, every day was a nightmare.

He walked over to say hi. The turtle was submerged in the water around the little tropical island with the palm tree in the center. Only his snout showed. "I wish I could shrink myself and get in there with you, Tuck. If it were up to me, I'd do school right here in this room. Got my books, my magazines, my study space . . ." He gestured to his

bunk, his place to hide. Like Tuck's shell, he thought. "You. What more do I need?"

He opened the desk drawer that he'd made very clear to the rest of his siblings, especially snoopy Maisy, they were never to pry around in, and pulled out the booklet that had come in the mail just the day before. "This right here, Tuck?" He flapped the booklet in the air. "This is the answer I've been waiting for!"

He went back to his bed, recalling the moment he had first seen the booklet advertised in *Popular Science*. It had appeared like a miracle, as if God and all His angels were shouting directly at him:

YOU CAN HAVE A HE-MAN VOICE!

His heart had beat a little faster. Eagerly, he had read on:

Send today for FREE booklet "Voice Power & Personal Power" by Eugene Feuchtinger. Just send your name, address, and age. Mailed in plain sealed envelope. No obligation. Write today! PERFECT VOICE INSTITUTE, 325 W. Jackson Blvd., Chicago 6, Ill.

He could sound like a *he-man* instead of a broken record?

Shoot! Sign me up, he had thought.

With a perfect voice from the Perfect Voice Institute, he could speak up in class without fear. He could smooth-talk Millie Takazawa, the way he'd always dreamed.

He had rushed to his and Chuck's desk right then and there, written out the required information in his best handwriting, and sealed it in an envelope as the ad had instructed.

Now he held it in his hands: the key that would free his tongue from the shackles of the Stutter. "Mellifluous Melvin," they'd be calling him when they heard his smooth, baritone sounds, not only when he sang but when he spoke as well. Melvin stretched out on his

bed, still gazing at the precious booklet with its promise of personal success and voice salvation, and opened to the first page. Testimonials with titles like “His Stutter Vanishes” and “Stammering Stopped” were so powerful, and filled him with such hope, that he wanted to read them again.

“Your instruction changed my voice from weak and pitiful to a free-flowing voice getting richer and stronger every day.”

“I suffered from stammering for years. Four different courses in other methods brought no results. In six months after diligent practice in your wonderful, easily mastered lessons I received compliments on my smooth, clear voice. My inferiority complex has left me. Thanks to you, I am free from the stranglehold of stammering!”

And then this, direct from Mr. Feuchtinger himself: “A good voice! That’s the magic key that opens the door to opportunity. What a glorious moment will be yours when your voice, without effort, soars and swells!”

Oh, yes! What a glorious moment, indeed. Or as they would say at Bethel A.M.E. Church, “Amen and amen!” May it be so.

He *needed* it to be so.

The bedroom door from the kitchen flew open and Chuck breezed in, along with the medicinal smell of Listerine. The boy used mouthwash more times a day than he used the toilet. Melvin shoved the Voice Power booklet under his backside and picked up the issue of *Popular Science* he’d been reading earlier.

“Hey, bro,” Chuck said, pushing Melvin’s magazine up so he could survey the cover, which read, “Be Prepared! Build Your Own Basement Bomb Shelter.” He let out a dismissive *puh*.

MIGHTY INSIDE

Melvin winced at the smell. That Listerine stuff was way worse than any natural breath stink could ever be.

“Don’t tell me you’re falling for this whole ‘The Commies Are Coming!’ craze.” He raised a single eyebrow at Melvin. “Look, I’ll tell you what you really need to know to be prepared—for *high school*, which, unlike some atomic bomb dropping on us, is actually going to happen. Next week.”

As if Melvin didn’t know.

“In fact, I’ll do you one better, little bro. I’ll make you a list. So you can study it.” Chuck sat at their desk and pulled out some paper and a pencil. “Studying is your thing, right?”

Chuck wasn’t expecting an answer, of course. He had his back to Melvin and was busy writing. Chuck had spent the morning at Curtley’s Cuts barbershop. The vanilla smell of Murray’s Superior Hair Dressing Pomade—*much* better than Listerine—also wafted from his head. His hair was styled so tight it looked like you could bounce a quarter off it. The edges were pristine. Pops had invited Melvin to go as well, but he’d passed, claiming he didn’t feel well, which was true. His stomach had been on edge for weeks.

They were quiet for the next several minutes, the only sound Chuck’s scratching pencil. When he was done, he walked over and shoved a paper into the space between Melvin’s face and the magazine.

Freshman Dos and Don’ts was written across the top in Chuck’s cramped, tilted lettering.

“Follow my advice, and you won’t end up hanging from a hook by your underwear in the girls’ bathroom.” Chuck jabbed at the column on the left. “Do these things, and you’ll be good.” He ran his finger

solemnly down the column on the right. “These are the *Don’ts*. Do any of *these*, and you’re a goner.”

Melvin scanned his brother’s list:

Dos

1. Carry your books on the side—two max, never a whole stack.
2. Be on time, never too early.
3. Walk into class like you’re a king entering your domain.
4. Nod at upperclassmen. They like to be acknowledged.
5. Address teachers with their names.
6. Put deodorant in your locker.
7. Use mouthwash.
8. Get on a sports team!

Don’ts

1. Carry your books in front. Only girls do that.
2. Walk around like you’re scared. Upperclassmen are like dogs—they sense fear.
3. Walk around like you own the school. You’ve got to know your place.
4. Talk to upperclassmen. Unless they talk to you first, in which case, answer them.
5. Sit by yourself in the cafeteria.
6. Talk about chitlins, fatback, or pigs’ feet.
7. Bring your accordion to school—ever.
8. Look to me to get you out of any jams.

“Wuh-why . . . would I talk about chhhh-itlins? I hate chitlins.” Pig guts were one of Pops’s favorites. Why, Melvin would never understand. Whenever Mom cooked them, their house smelled like the lake-cabin latrine for a week.

“Maybe you’d talk about how much you hate them. I’m just saying, don’t talk about them. White kids don’t even know what they are. And if they find out, they’re going to think your family’s weird for eating them.”

As far as Melvin was concerned, he wouldn’t be talking about *anything* in high school . . . because he wouldn’t be talking. He shrugged. Not because he didn’t care what white kids thought. He knew he did. *Shoot*. White kids made up practically the whole school. If you didn’t get along with *them*, you didn’t get along at all.

Chuck crouched so they were eye-to-eye. “Look, I’m trying to help you out . . .”

Melvin fixed on the last *Don’t*: Chuck had said straight up not to rely on him.

Don’t worry, Chuck, Melvin thought, you’re the last person I’d run to for help. He set the list down and pretended to keep reading his magazine.

“You’ve got to learn to speak up for yourself, Melvin. To stand up for yourself. You’re a runt who plays accordion, and then, with the stut—”

“I know!” Melvin shouted. Shouting routed the Stutter every time, like a surprise attack. And he only played accordion because his mom forced him to. He had no delusions of grandeur, but Mom was convinced he’d appear on television with his accordion one day.

“Easy now.” Chuck gave him a cocked smile. He mock-punched Melvin’s shoulder, but Melvin shoved his hand away.

Chuck stood. “Like I said, I’m just trying to look out for you.”

Melvin watched Chuck leave through the opposite door. No doubt going to swish some mouthwash—if it’s been more than five minutes since the last time, Melvin thought.

He considered crumpling the paper with the *Dos and Don’ts* and using it to practice his shot. (Should he go out for basketball? He was way too short!!) Instead, he closed it inside his *Popular Science*. Then he rolled toward his Wall of Wonders, opened to chapter 1 of *Voice Power & Personal Power*, and got busy studying how to change his life.

CHAPTER TWO

Someone was shaking Melvin's shoulder so hard his teeth rattled in his head.

"Get up, Melvin! Get up!" It was Maisy.

He groaned and rolled over. He had planned to stay in bed as long as he could on this last Saturday of summer vacation.

Maisy's big eyes were wide with excitement. Her hair was freshly braided into two pigtails, and she wore the red-and-blue-checked romper dress Mom had sewn for the first day of school. "I'm going to interview the baseball player." She held up her flip notebook, which she carried everywhere.

She scurried to the door. "I'll be outside writing interview questions. No lollygagging!" Maisy had picked up the unfortunate habit of using Mom's favorite word on the rest of them.

Had his eleven-year-old sister actually gotten a meeting with Spokane's newest minor league recruit? It was worth getting out of bed to find out.

Ten minutes later, Melvin slipped through the kitchen, grabbed an apple from the bowl on the dining table, and left through the back door, successfully avoiding Mom, Pops, and Marian. Chuck had been gone for a while already. Football practice at Cleveland had begun the week before.

Maisy jumped up from her spot on the back stoop. “Took you long enough!”

No comment. It was never worth trying to argue with Maisy.

“You should get your baseball mitt,” she said. “Then he can sign it!”

He had already thought of that, of course, but he wasn’t so sure it was a good idea. The last thing Melvin wanted was for a professional baseball player to think that he was slow—or worse, stupid—which he knew was what people thought when they heard him try to speak.

“Don’t you *want* him to sign it?”

He shrugged, then nodded. Of course he did.

“Well, get it, then! Don’t worry, Melvin, you know I can sweet-talk him into signing it for you.” She grinned. She was right.

Pops always said it was better to be prepared and not have an opportunity than to have an opportunity and not be prepared. So, he headed for the garage, a small detached building, painted the same mustardy color as their house. He took in the soft smell of Pops’s pink, yellow, and white flowers and the bright red blooms that exploded like fireworks alongside the garage. He could never remember the flowers’ names, although Pops had tried to school him on them all.

He found his glove in the corner with the bats and balls, and stepped back out into the bright light. The Spokane sun was already so hot he felt like one of those three Bible men who got thrown into the furnace—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

They walked down the driveway and turned onto Empire Avenue, the street they’d lived on their entire lives. It was a wide, east-west thoroughfare with houses spaced evenly apart, their green lawns as

neatly edged as Chuck's hair. Melvin knew who lived in each home they passed: Mr. Lamb had built the Robinsons' add-on so Marian and Maisy could have their own room. Mrs. Balducci and Mrs. Butler had brought casseroles when Mom was laid low with a bad illness. Mr. Berto and Pops swapped gardening tips.

There were a few trees along the street, but the standout was the giant ash in the Hatchetts' front yard at the end of their block. Melvin and Maisy liked to climb the tree with Jill and Dennis, the Hatchett kids. Sometimes, when they were feeling invincible, they would pluck the orange-red berries and drop them on unsuspecting passersby below.

Not this summer, Melvin thought. He was too old for that, and far from feeling invincible. They turned at the corner and headed toward Providence, Grandma Robinson's street. It was the perfect name, she said, because it was Divine Providence that had gotten her there.

Maisy bounced along, chattering about how she couldn't wait to write an article on the new baseball player—Will “the Cobbler” Thompson—and reciting all the questions she would ask. Why “the Cobbler”? Where had he lived before moving to Spokane? Why had he gotten into baseball? And what was it like, being the first Negro player for their city's minor league team?

“Our very own Jackie Robinson,” Maisy exclaimed. “Living right across the street from Granny! Isn't it exciting, Melvin?”

He nodded. He never needed to say anything with Maisy. She understood how hard it was, which was one of the reasons Melvin liked being with her. She was also entertaining, and a big dreamer, which he admired. She was going to be Spokane's first paid Negro journalist, she said, just like the famous Ida B. Wells, and Melvin had no reason to doubt it. Maisy was going places.

They reached the pale green house that the whole Negro community had been talking about since the day Will Thompson had moved in. Was the Cobbler home now? A big blue Cadillac was parked out front.

Everything in Melvin from the neck up tightened, as if his mouth were one of those mechanical windup toys and someone was twisting the key. He'd been doing Mr. Feuchtinger's exercises faithfully for the past couple days, but so far they hadn't made a lick of difference.

Melvin glanced across the street to their grandma's place, a graying white house with one scrabbly evergreen tree in the front yard. Maybe they should pay her a visit first. She always had a cold bottle of fizzy ginger ale waiting for them.

Maisy flounced up the baseball player's front walkway in her checkered dress and knocked on the door.

Wait! Melvin wanted to shout. He needed to prepare himself. Maybe do a few of the tongue push-ups that Mr. Feuchtinger recommended for strengthening one's "vocal apparatus."

Too late. The door opened. Melvin's heart leapt into his throat, blocking his breath.

A man with bulging biceps, ebony skin, and conked hair—straightened with a wave put in it—stood in the doorway. His crooked nose looked as if it'd been broken, possibly more than once. Melvin recognized him right away as the man in the newspaper photographs, even without his baseball uniform.

"Can I help you kids with something?"

"Hello, Mr. Cobbler! I'm Maisy Robinson and this is my brother, Melvin. That's our grandma's house right there." She pointed across the street. The man's eyes followed. "We live not too far, and anyway,

my brother here's a big fan. He even heard of you before you moved here. Said you were going to be the best thing that ever happened to Spokane's baseball club."

Melvin's face was heating up like a toaster the more she talked.

"Said you're like a celebrity person, like Nat King Cole or Marlon Brando or even Jackie Robinson, which is why I'd like to interview you. I'm a reporter for the highly respected and widely read newsletter of the Bethel A.M.E. Church, and I know for a fact that our readers would be very curious to know more about your many incredibly interesting life experiences."

The perfectly groomed, thin mustache that hugged the man's upper lip curved with his smile.

"And if you are willing, sir, Melvin here would like your autograph."

Melvin slowly moved his arm behind Maisy's back and pinched the skin on her upper arm.

She yelped. "What'd you do that for?"

Will Thompson's eyebrows rose almost to his conked hairline. "Listen, kid, I'm flattered. Really. But maybe you should let the boy speak for himself?"

"He's afraid to talk. Sometimes he acts like he's one of them mutants."

Melvin stomped on her foot for that. Didn't care *what* the man saw.

"I think you mean *mute*." The baseball player looked at Melvin. "You're obviously not deaf." Then he turned and went inside.

"Yyyou're tuh-tuh-talking the mmmman's ear off!" Melvin shout-whispered.

Maisy blubbered something about being sorry, that she was just trying to cover for him since he wasn't saying anything, and in the end, it was his own dang fault because he wouldn't just stop caring about his stammer and talk to people.

The Cobbler came back with a ball and a pen. He scribbled on the ball, and then indicated with a flick of his head that Melvin should go long, which of course he did—scrambled down the steps and shoved his glove onto his hand as he jogged toward the sidewalk, nervousness flooding his chest. The Cobbler cocked his arm and lobbed the ball. It was headed straight for the pocket. Melvin could practically feel it, hear the deep, rich sound of it sinking into the leather.

Instead, it hit his glove with a *thud* and bounced off.

Melvin watched in horror as the ball descended toward the ground, landed on the sidewalk, and rolled away from his feet. He stared at his betraying glove in disbelief. All the strings had been removed.

Chuck!

Melvin would kill him.

He picked up the ball and ran.