

THE PROMISE:

EPISODE 2: A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE PROJECTS

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MERIBAH KNIGHT: Just a note before we begin, this episode involves explicit language and descriptions violence.

BIG MAN: Today Friday. Today a good day to Barbeque. Couple pieces of ribs. Some porkchops and some good ol' hamburger. But you can't say ain't nothing going to happen.

CAYCE RESIDENT: I'm tired of looking at death out my back window. Out my back door. I'm tired of it.

BIG MAN: People are literally scared to have their kids outside.

BIG MAN: Boom boom boom boom.

DETECTIVE: Can you tell me what you saw?

BIG MAN IN RESPONSE: Yes, somebody got killed. They was in the car.

BM: I mean, I wasn't waking up thinking that this was going to happen.

MK: I'm Meribah Knight, and you're listening to The Promise a podcast from Nashville Public Radio. A series of stories about life in public housing smack in the middle of a city on the rise. One neighborhood, two realities, and the city's bold promise to bring it all together.

MK: Episode Two: A Beautiful Day In The Projects

BM: You might jump over here and see, ooh, barbecue chicken, but they give you and old dry pork chop. I mean, you got to understand, it's not always what you see is what you get.

[VOICE FADES OUT]

MK: If you live in the Cayce you know Dexter Turner. Not by Dexter, but by his nickname Big Man. On any given day Big Man is usually holding court from his back stoop on South 8th Street.

[MURMURS IN THE BACKGROUND].

A pair of dingy cement steps surrounded by a couple decrepit wire clotheslines.

When he's not telling jokes, waxing philosophical or yelling at young men to pull their pants up, he's selling single cigarettes for .50 cents a smoke. Cigars go for \$1.

MK: So what I do is I test my levels. So do you just want to introduce yourself?

[SOUND OF BIRDS IN THE BACKGROUND]

BM: Which one? Big Man.

MK: What else is there?

BM: I mean there's nothing else. What you want to know? I mean I'm just a person a human being I mean you know a person that I still respect and appreciate it even though it's always going the wrong path but... We try to make it better. It's going be better.

MK: As you can imagine, Big Man is, well, big. He's tall and broad-shouldered. He wears his baseball hats cocked to the side. He's missing a few front teeth, but he's not unkempt. And he prefers delightfully irreverent t-shirts with phrases like, "I'm not anti-social, I'm anti-stupid." He's been called Big Man for as long as he can remember. So long, in fact, that one time he applied for a job at Johnny Rockets and wrote Big Man on the application.

BM: I actually did that for real. And actually got the job. That was the killer part about it. Actually got the job.

MK: Big man is sporadically employed. Mostly seasonal labor. But often he's on dad duty since his wife, Narketta works full time. His son Roderick, who they call Man Man is 7. And his daughter Valencia is 9. Most days he picks them up at the bus stop. Makes sure they start their homework. On summer weekends they like to get out of Cayce and go swimming in the lake.

MK: On a sunny Friday in late May, I went to see Big Man. We had made plans to spend the afternoon hanging out. Me with my tape recorder and him barbequing with his family. Big Man's apartment is right next to a playground. So it's easy for him to man the grill and keep an eye on his kids as they play outside.

BM: Today Friday. Today a good day to BBQ...

MK: What do you like to barbeque?

BM: Oh, chicken. Couple pieces of ribs, some pork chops and some good ol' hamburgers. But ain't nothing like a barbeque burnt hot dog. It's the best. Gotta have a little burn on it. Gotta have a little burn.

MK: Big Man grew in a public housing development about two miles north of here. He moved to Cayce in 1999. Back then, he says, the community was pretty tight. But today, that closeness has frayed. Shootings are way up. The police are bearing down. And the project is about to be completely torn down and rebuilt. So people are on edge. Still it's Big Man's home. It's where he's raising his kids. Where his friends live. He's trying to have a good life here. Some days it is. And some days it isn't. He grapples with that paradox. No matter what though, there's always Big Man's sense of humor. And his flair for colorful analogies.

[SOUNDS OF TRAFFIC]

BM: I mean, I done learned how to adapt to this. It's like a cactus. You can throw me out in the sand and I am going to grow.

MK: Big Man is sort of a ham. Sometimes it can sound like he's putting on a show, but trust me, that's just him.

BM: What's up old son. Yeah I'm groovy baby. I'm blending like rice and cheese. Everything blending just right. What's up baby?

MK: Everyone in Cayce has a deep fondness for Big Man. For all his bluster, he's a good listener. And a sensitive guy who wants to see better from his neighborhood.

[SOUNDS OF OUTSIDE]

MK: So tell me like who you are to the neighborhood.

BM: Shhhhhh. I don't know. I ain't figured that part out yet. I guess what they call it. I guess I'm like everybody daddy. Everybody therapist.

MK: He likes to dole out little profundities about life here. Like the time, he tried to explain how folks feel about the constant churn of social programs. Something starts in Cayce, and soon enough, the funding runs out and poof, it's gone.

BM: You ever look at Jerry Seinfeld, the Soup Nazi. The Soup Nazi episode. He said, "I serve you no more my friend." So see that's how they look at it. They give you a little something, get your hopes up, and 'No more my friend.' And they cut you off.

MK: He says it's like some angry deli man is telling them: "No soup for you!" But instead of soup it's job programs and youth engagement. Here's a case in point: Cayce has a non-profit right in the middle of the complex, the Martha O'Bryan Center. It's been here since the 50s. And for many years it was the heart of this community. Offering job training, parenting classes and low

cost pre-school. But recently it's switched gears, moved away from all that and started opening charter schools. Big Man used to frequent the center. But these days, he doesn't have much good to say about it.

But if there is one thing that really gets Big Man in a negative frame of mind. It's the violence around Cayce. It makes him irate. And lately, he's been pretty worked up about it. In a matter of weeks, four people were shot and killed outside Big Man's apartment. It's a bit of a mystery as to why it's gotten bad. Police don't blame gangs or drugs. They say the incidents are isolated, interpersonal beefs gone haywire. And residents say it's outsiders, coming in, making trouble. Which is accurate. Many of the people responsible for the shootings don't actually live in Cayce. But they often have connections — they used to live here, or they have friends or family here.

So on Friday morning, Big Man starts prepping for the BBQ. He pulls the meat out of the freezer, makes note of what he needs to buy at the store—he's out of charcoal. Then, at 1:15 he's in his kitchen when he hears it, a pop pop pop. And that's when his day goes from good to bad, just like that.

BM: All I heard was some shots. Came out the door. They said that somebody was shot. Dude ran down the sidewalk. I looked at him. He fell on the ground.

MK: It was a young man with light skin and shoulder-length dreadlocks, sitting in Big Man's front yard with a large bullet hole in his stomach. Big Man told him to be still and stay calm.

BM: The other one, I don't know which way he went. And they said there was a dude up there in the car dead. I didn't go all the way up there. I came right back in my house.

MK: It was a triple shooting in his front yard. Right outside his apartment. One person was killed and two people were injured. I arrived about 30 minutes after the incident. The ambulances had just pulled off. And officers were still stringing up yellow crime scene tape.

BM: I mean, this shit right here is just ridiculous. I'm through. I can't even do this. I can't even do it. It's not making no sense.

See, now I got to worry about what I'm going to tell my kids happened in front of the house. I try to protect them from stuff like this.

MK: A little after 2 p.m. it's time for Big Man to go pick Man Man and Valencia up from the bus stop. Before we set off, I ask him if he knows what he's going to tell them about the shooting. As a parent of kids growing up in Cayce, this has got to be one of the most difficult things to navigate.

MK: Someone just got shot and killed. And now you gotta go pick your son up. I mean, what are you going to tell your son?

BM: ... I can't hold no truth from them. They going to see that anyway. I not finna to hold the truth. If he don't hear it from me he going to hear it from some other child out here.

MK: Before heading off, Big Man grabs his phone, his keys and tucks a pack of Newport cigarettes into the pocket of his cargo shorts.

BM: I don't know what else to say about shit around here. I ain't got tired.

MK: Big Man starts walking across the courtyard, passing the rows of drab two-story brick apartments and up the hill toward South 7th street where he picks up his kids. He doesn't get far before running into an old friend, whose ambling along eating a bag of chips.

BM: Yeah, a man died up there.

MAN WALKING: He did?

[FAINT SOUNDS OF POLICE SIRENS IN THE DISTANCE]

BM: Yeah.

TK: How many people get shot? It wasn't Baldhead was it?

BM: Three of them all together. Naw, Baldhead right here?

TK: No not that one. He used to have dreads they call him baldhead. He be upstairs up there. He skinny. Little skinny short dude.

BM: Naw. Not him. He wasn't.

TK: So somebody got killed?

BM: Yeah, somebody got killed. They was in the car. All them niggas they ran around there. Boom boom boom boom boom. I am tired, bro. Got to get away from over here.

MK: At the bus stop Big Man stands with a few other parents and grandparents all waiting to get their kids from East End Prep Elementary, a charter school a few miles away that serves a number of kids from Cayce.

BM: Good Evening.

FELLOW PARENT: Hi.

MK: They stand there waiting with a mixture of blank stares and frustration on their faces. A few offer theories on the shooting—was over a dice game? Or maybe a murder from years back? But most of them just look worn out.

CAYCE RESIDENT: I'm tired of looking at death out my back window. Out my back door. I'm tired of it.

RESIDENT: It's a dog-eat-dog world. That's why ain't nobody going to get nowhere.

RESIDENT: It's a curse to live over here. It's a curse.

MK: When one of the mothers, Gracie Foxx, hears I'm there with a recorder she comes up to talk with me.

GRACIE FOXX: This ain't no place for nobody. It's not. It's not. Too much going on over here. Every time you turn around somebody getting shot, killed. I just had a cousin a year ago got killed down here on 7th. And then a couple a weeks ago, April 21, I had another cousin get killed over there by Nissan Stadium. Got shot and killed over there by Nissan Stadium. And his name was D'Angelo Foxx. And they caught the guy up here. The same day. Thank God. Big Man, put your input Big Man.

BM: My input is the same.

GF: What's that?

BM: Burn it down. I used to think about it could be saved over here. For real. I mean. But after seeing what I just seen today. For real talk, it's nothing over here no more.

MK: While it sounds dramatic, Big Man has been thinking a lot about the fate of Cayce. And what tearing it down and rebuilding it as mixed income could mean for his family. Will the city will really make good on its promise to let them stay? And if so, does he even want that?

Coming up after the break: Big Man and the kids head home, but chatter about the shooting is all around them.

[SCHOOL BUS]

MK: Before long, the bus pulls up. Man Man and Valencia tumble out of it, dressed in their school uniforms of khaki shorts and navy blue polo shirts. Their oversized backpacks trail behind them.

BM: Let's go y'all.

MK: Without needing a prompt, Man Man reports on his day.

MAN MAN : I had a good day.

BM: OK, that's a good job. I'm proud to hear that.

BM: OK we got to go to the house we'll get you all something when we get to the house.

MK: I ask Valencia about hers. She responds in her deep whisper of a voice.

VALENCIA: Good. Yeah, Really good.

MK: As they begin their walk home, Big Man says nothing to the kids about the shooting that just unfolded, or the crime scene they're about to walk into. The yellow tape crisscrossing the yard. The detectives posted up at their front door. He says nothing of all that, as he hustles Man Man and Valencia across the busy street.

BM: Move, move. Let's go. I don't need y'all getting hit. I ain't got no money for y'all to get hit.

MK: But it's impossible not to hear the banter about the shooting. It's everywhere.

BM: Somebody shot at him?

WOMAN: What the hell he done done?

BM: I don't know but they got to shooting. He got two of them. They killed him though.

W: Damn! Right there? I see it right behind your house.

MK: Back at his apartment, Big Man sits down on his stoop and pulls out a fresh cigarette. He takes a long drag and gets really quiet, like he's deep in thought. Earlier that morning, after taking the meat out to thaw, he'd gone to see a house in Dickson. About 45 miles west of Nashville. A single family home on six acres of land, it's a rent-to-own deal, eventually selling for \$185,000. And right now, he wants that house more than ever. But he needs \$2,000 for a deposit.

BM: I'm tired of over here, man. I am officially through dude. I mean, officially through. Tired of over here. Tired of just shit in general over here.

MK: Big Man's friend Mall chimes in.

MALL : Shit you know what you got to do.

BM: It's already happening. For real talk. It's already in motion. I'm through. I can't do this.

MK: And then one of his kids opens the back door, letting out Muffin and Pie, the family's two Jack Russell terriers.

BM: Muffin.

M: Muffin!

BM: Hey Muffin. How ya doing dink? Hey dink?

MK: The dogs lighten the mood for a few minutes. Mall and Big Man chat about this and that. Valencia is watching the dogs when she turns to me:

V: I wish we had a house. I hate living in apartments and stuff. When there are shoots. Especially when kids are around.

MK: In the middle of all this, Big Man's wife, Narketta, comes home from her job at Aramark, a food and cleaning services company where she's worked for 23 years. Valencia runs to meet her as she comes around the corner, limping from a recent flare up of her gout.

V: Look how she walking! Look how she walking! Finally you here!

NARKETTA: Ooh, it's hot out here. What happened over here?

BM: Man, they killed that man.

NT: Who got killed? For real.

BM: Yeah

MK: Narketta shakes her head. Too tired to declare her utter disappointment. Her work day began before dawn, and now she comes home to yellow crime tape zig zagging the yard and a bunch of police at her front steps. She goes inside and Big Man resumes his post on the back stoop. Though he's distracted by a plainclothes police officer who's hovering on the other side of his door.

Cayce can feel really cut off from a lot of the city — there is no grocery store, no coffee shop, no restaurants. But the one institution it has regular interactions with is the police. And the relationship is a tenuous one. In February, an officer shot and killed a Cayce resident. Since then tensions have been high. And lately officers have been saturating Cayce, putting cameras up around the complex and doing patrols on foot and on bike.

A minute later, a detective comes walking around the corner holding a note pad and a pen. His name is Detective Cole Womack, and he asks to speak with Big Man away from my microphone. Big Man says he's fine with me recording.

Detective: OK, can you tell me what you saw?

BM: hmm, that's basically what it is. Heard it, came out the door. That's all I can tell you. Seen one guy laying on the ground. Walked up the sidewalk they said there was a guy in the car.

Detective: What's your name? I'm sorry.

BM: Big Man, that's what they call me. I'm just being honest.

Detective: I'm just taking notes.

BM: I'm just giving you my notes. You understand what I'm saying. You ask me what I heard. I told you what I heard.

Detective: So then after you heard the gunshots you came out from upstairs. Or you're downstairs aren't you?

BM: I'm downstairs.

Detective: So you came outside?

BM: Yup, came outside. Guy laying on the ground.

Detective: Do you know...

BM: I don't know, because I don't know nobody around here. I just come outside. For real.

Detective: I didn't finish the question, so I was going to ask you what you saw he was wearing. I didn't ask you if you knew who he was.

BM: I think it was a red shirt. He was right there on the ground.

Detective: Could you tell where he was shot at?

BM: I didn't, I just told him 'Be still, calm down' and walked off. I said, "don't cry."

Detective: Did you see a gun anywhere? Between the houses.

BM: well, I don't know. I didn't see that much. The only thing I can tell you is when I came out the door he was there. When I walked up the sidewalk everybody was right at a grey car out there. So I left it at that because the thing about it is. The reason why I left is because I got to get my kids off the school bus.

Detective: Gotcha. Do you have a phone number so maybe I can reach you later on and put it in my notes?

BM: What you want?

Detective: Nothing, you all have a good day. Be careful.

MK: Detective Womack taps his pen closed. Turns on his heels and briskly walks away.

BM: Now what did you just get?

MK: He sounded very frustrated.

BM: I mean, what are you frustrated at me for? I am telling you what I seen and what I heard. That's it. I didn't see it. I can't tell you nothing. See that's the whole point about this. They don't look at the situations. I am not out here. I don't patrol these streets. See that is what I am saying. Why was he so blustered to 'I don't want to talk on the mic?' Why? It's nothing but a radio podcast.

MK: OK, that was a lot. And to be honest, I am still struggling to make sense of that exchange. And I completely understand why Detective Womack wouldn't want that conversation recorded. After all, he's trying to gather the first scraps of a murder investigation. But what that conversation looked like to me was two people who didn't know how to talk to each other and, frankly, didn't really want to. Each had their guard up. Each had their assumptions about what the other was or wasn't saying. And neither got what they wanted out of the conversation.

MK: By this point, Big Man looks so exhausted. He's been saying it all afternoon. But this is the first time I really see it in his face. The frustration and the disappointment in his neighborhood. He had plans for a chill Friday, one spent with family, eating a hamburger and some burnt hot dogs. And now his front yard is a crime scene.

BM: I wasn't expecting to come home and get ready to go out and get the stuff and first thing you hear is gunshots. That's not part of my plan. That's not part of nobody's plan. It's not part of my plan to come out the house and see somebody laying in the front yard. That's not part of my plan. It's not part of my plan to hear somebody done got murdered.

MK: It's not the barbeque Big Man had been prepping for. But his kids are safe, and that's all that really matters. Now it's time to make the best of what's left of Friday. His friend Chico goes to his car and returns with a couple of cheap beers that have been sitting in his hot trunk all day.

BM: You know what, that's not bad.

CHICO: It's quite good.

BM: It's quite refreshing.

MK: It's a tough day in the projects if a hot Bud Ice tastes *this* good. Big Man had such high hopes.

MK: Next time on The Promise. That conversation between Big Man and the detective, it meant a lot more than what either of them said, or didn't say.

BM: Man, I know the hardest job in the world is being a police officer, but you know.

RESIDENT: Just cuz I'm running from the police, that don't mean you're supposed to shoot me.

RESIDENT: He just need to be held up to what he did. He's a murderer. That's just how I feel?

MK: Why is the relationship between cops and residents on such thin ice? Turns out, a viral video has a lot to do with it. That's next on The Promise, stories from public housing on the brink of transformation.

CREDITS:

MK: The Promise is a production of Nashville Public Radio. Editing for this episode came from WPLN's Blake Farmer and Anita Bugg. With additional editing by Tony Gonzalez, Emily Siner, Chas Sisk and Julieta Martinell. This episode was written and produced by me, Meribah Knight. Sound design by Tony Gonzalez. Fact checking by Steve Cavendish.

Our music is by The Insider and Fleslit, all found through the Free Music Archive. Go to our website, wpln.org, to see photos of Cayce and listen to previous episodes.

BM: Bud Ice, hot beer of champions. See, now you got yourself a free commercial.