

PILLOWS  
FOR YOUR  
PRISON CELL



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MARK D. BULLARD



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To Elle, the Bride of my youth.

Your hair got my attention first,  
your wit and wisdom kept it.  
Through many years of best and worst,  
your love for me reflected.  
That no matter where I go,  
no matter what I write,  
Your love for me will be there still,  
through every day and night.

Thank you.



## PROLOGUE

**A**MIR WAS PLAYING on the floor with his little brother when the door opened and his father walked in.

“Papa!” the two boys yelled as they jumped up and ran to him in the doorway. Amir, six, got there first and gave his father a big hug. Mamluk, who was only three, caught up and joined the hug. The man picked up the two boys, one in each arm, and looked back and forth at their two smiling faces.

“I love you two.” Then he took in a deep breath. “What is that wonderful smell?” he asked.

Amir replied, “Mama is making lamb stew.”

“She is? I love lamb stew, but we don’t have that every day. What’s the special occasion?” asked his father.

“Umm, your birthday?” proposed Amir.

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“Is it my birthday today?” asked his father.

“Mama said it’s your birthday. Are you teasing me? It’s your birthday. I know it is because mama got the Jar down,” said Amir.

“Well, if mama got the Jar down, it must be somebody’s birthday, and it might as well be mine!” said his father.

Amir squirmed out of his father’s arm and landed on the ground. “Mama! Papa is teasing me. It is his birthday, right?” he shouted.

Just at that moment, his mother came in from the kitchen and looked first at Amir. “You don’t have to shout, dear, and yes, it is his birthday.” She looked at her husband and smiled. “Happy birthday, my love.”

Amir’s father set Mamluk down and embraced his wife. “Thank you, Love. That stew smells so good. I will never grow tired of it. Thank you for making it.”

“Thank you for making it possible,” said Mother. She then returned to the kitchen to finish preparing the special dinner.

“All right, boys, will you help me get the table ready

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for dinner? Amir, will you please get the bowls and put them out?”

“Yes, Papa,” replied Amir.

Father then continued, “Mamluk, please get four spoons, and put one in each bowl.”

“Yes, Papa,” replied Mamluk.

Father then went into the kitchen and came back with the kettle of stew, which he set on the table. Mother followed him out with some warm, freshly baked bread. After blessing the meal, he poured some lamb stew into each of their bowls, and Mother cut up the bits of lamb and vegetables in Mamluk’s bowl into very small pieces while Father did the same for Amir.

Father took a bite and moaned with approval. He finished the bite and said, “Love, I swear you make it better every year.” After everyone had finished their servings, the boys asked for more.

Father looked at the two boys. “I know you boys are young, but I want you to learn something important. Mama and I gave you enough lamb stew so that you would be well fed. Mama loves to hear that you like

it so much that you want more. And I want more too because I liked it so much. But remember that the desire for more is insatiable. That means that it never quits.”

Amir protested, “But I only want a little bit more.”

“I understand, Son, and I want to give you more. But it’s even more important to me that you learn this lesson. It’s important to be a master over your wants. Speaking of wants, who wants to get that Jar down?”

The children cleared the table, and Father grabbed the Jar.

“What is this, Mamluk?” he asked.

“The Jar,” Mamluk replied.

“That’s right. And what is in it, Amir?” he asked.

“Money!” shouted Amir.

“That’s right. And what is it for, boys?” he asked while looking at both of them.

“For buying a country,” said Mamluk.

“Well, that’s close, dear; it’s for buying some land out *in* the country—some land of our own,” said Father.

“Yeah, so we can have our own sheeps and chickens!” said Amir.

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“And flowers,” added Mamluk.

“That’s exactly right. So we can have our own sheep, chickens, cows, vegetables, honey, and grain,” said Father.

“And flowers,” added Mother.

“And flowers,” concluded Father.

“Papa?” asked Amir.

“Yes?” replied Father.

“When are we going to get our land in the country?” asked Amir.

“Well, that’s why we get the Jar down every birthday. We count the money that we’ve added every day since the last birthday, and then we add a little extra. Let’s count it,” said Father. With that, he upended the Jar. Gold and silver coins came out of the Jar and landed in a pile on the table. Father added two gold coins to the pile, and together as a family, they counted out the money.

“Well, we are more than halfway there! We’ve been saving since before Amir was born, and we only have about five years to go. If we keep it up, we’ll be there soon,” said Father.

“Papa, why can’t we just get it now? Why do we have to wait?” asked Amir.

“That’s a good question, Amir. The answer is that we don’t have enough money yet,” said Father.

“Why don’t you just get some more money from work?” asked Amir.

“I will. Every day that I work, I bring home money. Some of it goes to pay for our home, and our food, and our clothes, but I always put some in the Jar.”

“I wish you could just work a whole bunch and get all the money, and then we could just get our land in the country right now!” said Amir.

“Me too, my boy, but that’s not the way it works. We have to be patient. But if I continue to work hard and you and your brother help Mama by taking care of the things we have, we can save more money every year. Before we know it, we’ll have enough to buy that land and get those animals, and our dream will come true.”

His father leaned down to look at Amir face-to-face.

“Just watch,” he said with a wink.

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## THE DECISION



**T**HE DAY HAD STARTED like every other. Amir woke up to a kiss from his father, who was heading off to work. “I love you,” said Father.

“I love you too, Papa,” replied Amir in the middle of a big stretch. He got ready for school, gave his mother a kiss and a goodbye hug, and did the same for his little brother.

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That afternoon as he walked home from school, he and his friend were pretending to be soldiers. They were marching to their own cadence and trying to keep serious expressions on their faces, but every time they looked at one another, they started laughing. As they came around the corner to the street they both lived on, Amir saw a commotion around his house. His eyebrows furrowed, and his head tilted as he tried to imagine what could be going on. He started running toward his house and looked back to wave goodbye to his friend. As he approached the house, his mouth fell open. His aunt was standing outside the house rocking his sleeping brother on her shoulder while tears streamed down from her swollen eyes. His uncle was standing next to her. Amir had never trusted his father's brother. It felt like the man did everything out of duty and nothing out of love. When he saw Amir approaching, he spread his arms out between Amir and the front door of the house and stepped toward Amir. His uncle's face was very serious. "Amir..." he started.

But Amir ducked under his arms and ran through

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the open door. In the middle of the floor lay his father, surrounded by his mother and some people Amir didn't know. There were rags and towels soaked in blood all around his father. His uncle followed Amir inside and told him that his father had been in a bad accident at work and that he was not expected to live much longer. Amir did not take his eyes off of his father.

Suddenly, his father's eyes opened and looked over at Amir. Amir moved closer.

"I love you..." his father uttered.

To which Amir replied, "I love you too, Papa." Big tears streamed down Amir's face, even though he tried not to cry.

Then his father continued, "Just... watch." He closed his eyes and breathed his last breath.

Amir fell to the floor, wailing and pounding it with his fists. His uncle grabbed him from behind and lifted him up. "Amir..." he said.

But Amir wriggled out of his arms and ran out the door. He sprinted down the dusty street, tears burning his eyes and streaming down his face.



Almost ten years later, Amir walked down the same street. Now sixteen, tears were a thing of the past, especially with Mamluk walking beside him. “I can’t believe she’s doing this,” Amir muttered.

“What?” asked Mamluk.

“Nothing, just shut up and keep up with me,” responded Amir a little louder.

“Can’t believe she’s doing what?” said Mamluk.

“I told you: it’s nothing. Now shut up and keep up,” said Amir, who was walking quickly because the only shirt he owned was hardly enough to keep him warm against the morning breeze.

“I think it’s good to buy the chicken for Father’s birthday,” suggested Mamluk.

“Of course you do. You always agree with Mom,” said Amir. “Plus, you just want to eat chicken. All you really care about is yourself.”

Mamluk responded, “Mama loves us. She wants us

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to celebrate. She hates to see us working so hard and missing school and everything.”

“Well, that’s great because now we’re going to have to work even harder anyway,” said Amir.

“Why?” said Mamluk.

Amir abruptly stopped walking and turned to face his brother directly. He shouted, “Because now the Jar is empty, you idiot!” Amir reached into his pocket and pulled out the five coins his mother had given him that morning. “*These* are all that is left of Father’s dream for us. That’s it. After today, we’ll have nothing left.”

“Maybe that’s what was best for us in the long run,” said Mamluk.

“No, that’s what was best for us in the short run. You and Mom are always thinking about today, never about tomorrow,” countered Amir.

“Well, today is Father’s birthday, and we need to celebrate,” said Mamluk.

“And tomorrow we’ll have nothing if we buy that chicken today,” said Amir resolutely.

“Oh yeah, well Mama told me that Father always

said, ‘Just watch,’ and she believes something good is right around the corner,” said Mamluk.

“But he didn’t mean, ‘Sit back and do nothing and just watch.’ He meant, ‘Get out there and do everything you can, and *then* just watch what happens,” Amir reasoned. “And he also said, ‘The desire for more is insatiable.’ But all you want is more and more. And Mama doesn’t want to say ‘No’ to you.”

“Well, I like Mama,” said Mamluk.

“You like what she does for you,” mumbled Amir under his breath as he turned toward the market and returned to a brisk walk. Then, loud enough for Mamluk to hear, “Just keep up with me.”

They arrived at the market to find a pageant of colors, people, smells, and sights. Stalls dripping with brightly colored fabrics, ornamental beads, lamps, and teapots lined the narrow paths. The smells of spices, flowers, fresh fruits, and vegetables filled the air. Old and young, men and women, wealthy and poor were all there to acquire, to see, and to share in the experience. Normally, the boys relished the opportunity to walk through the

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whole market and soak up all the possibilities, even if they couldn't afford any of them.

Amir's favorite stall was the one stuffed with beautiful pillows of all sizes, shapes, and colors. The vendor was a kind man who always showed Amir the latest addition to his collection. Amir had been visiting this stall for years and had noticed early on a young girl who usually hid behind the booth. She looked roughly his age, and he learned from the vendor that she was his daughter and that she was very shy. The vendor's wife had died a few years earlier, and the daughter came to the market with him on market days, and helped him make and embellish the pillows every other day. Over the years, Amir's interest in pillows never waned, but it was no longer his only reason for stopping by that booth. The daughter had grown into a lovely young woman, and Amir had noticed. In fact, in the previous week's visit to the market, he had spent the better part of the morning learning about pillows. He asked about how the tassels were attached, where the fabric came from, how they were stuffed—more than any normal 16-year-old boy would care to know.

On this trip to the market, however, Amir went straight to the rice vendor.

“What? You’re not going to see the pillow princess?” taunted Mamluk.

“Shut up!” said Amir.

After buying the week’s supply of rice and beans, the brothers arrived at the chicken vendor.

“Hi there, boys. I haven’t seen you or your mother in quite a while. What can I get for you?”

“We’d like half a chicken, please,” said Amir.

“Only half? Last year you boys bought a whole chicken from me every week. What’s wrong?” pried the butcher.

“Just half a chicken this time, please,” repeated Amir.

“Okay, that’ll be five coins,” replied the butcher.

The words hit Amir like bricks. “What? It was always three coins before. We only have three coins left. What happened?”

The butcher started off rather quickly, “Well, Son, perhaps you’ve heard about the drought?” But when he saw the look in Amir’s eyes, he changed course. “Look,

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I'm really sorry about your father and all. I can give you a dozen eggs for three coins."

Amir was choking as he said, "My mom really wanted the chicken."

Just then, he heard a familiar voice from behind him. "I'll buy the chicken for the boys."

Amir turned around quickly to find the pillow vendor standing there. "Sir, I very much appreciate your generosity, but we cannot accept it."

"Please. I know today is an important day for your family. Allow me to give you this gift," said the vendor.

Amir closed his eyes for a second, took a breath, then reopened them. "No. Thank you very much, sir. But I must say 'No.'"

The vendor tilted his head down and looked into Amir's eyes. Amir looked at the ground, and the vendor lifted his head back up. "I understand. Blessings to you and your family." And he walked away toward his stall.

Amir pulled the last three coins from his pocket and exchanged them for the eggs.

“I hate eggs,” winced Mamluk.

“Shut up,” said Amir.

“You shut up,” said Mamluk as he reached over toward Amir to shove him. As he did, Amir turned to leave the stall, and Mamluk’s hand collided with the egg basket. All but one of the eggs toppled out of the basket and onto the hard, dusty earth at their feet. Amir watched each of the eggs as they fell through the air then one by one collided violently with the ground. He then snapped his head back up to lock his eyes on his brother. Mamluk’s lips were pursed, but he could see in Amir’s eyes that he was not safe.

Amir reached into the basket, grabbed the remaining egg, and threw it at Mamluk with all of his might. Ten years of frustration and fear exploded out of the two boys in fists, feet, elbows, and knees. Amir repeatedly hit Mamluk with his bigger, stronger, faster fists while the younger brother kicked, kneed, bit, and scratched in retaliation. The pain of the blows from his little brother’s knee in Amir’s side fueled his arms and tightened his fists. He could see

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blood running from his brother's nose and his eyes swelling, but he couldn't stop his fists until he heard a woman's voice coming from the crowd that had gathered around the boys.

“Stop! Please stop!”

Amir stopped for a moment and looked up to find the source of the voice. It was the pillow vendor's daughter. She stood, staring at Amir, with tears streaming down her face. “Please don't do that.”

As soon as he saw her face and realized who had spoken, he immediately looked down at the ground then at his brother, who was wiping blood from his nose and a cut over his eye. Both boys were covered in blood, eggs, and dust. Amir stood up, shaking his head back and forth, then looked at the crowd of people that had formed around him. He could see disapproval in the women's eyes and disappointment in the men's.

Amir nudged his brother with his foot. “Let's go.” He couldn't bear to look at the girl again, but he was looking for the rice and beans. They were gone, most likely stolen during the fray. At this, he let out a string

of obscenities and threw a punch at his brother, who saw it coming, ducked out of the way, and retorted with his own curses.

Amir began to walk in the opposite direction of the girl, and his little brother followed at a safe distance. As they approached the exit, Amir suddenly stopped and looked to one side. Mamluk stopped and looked but didn't see what his brother saw. He then looked back at Amir, who continued staring intently down the aisle. Mamluk slowly approached his brother to discover the object of his interest.

All of a sudden, Amir started running in the direction he had been staring. Mamluk ran up to the spot where his brother had been standing and then saw for himself. A butcher had fresh chickens hanging in front of his stall, 50 paces away. Mamluk slowly followed Amir while looking at the stalls on either side of him.

A moment later he heard some yelling ahead of him, and out of nowhere, Amir came barreling past him with a chicken under his arm, yelling, "RUN!"



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**M**ark D. Bullard is somewhere between a Jack of all Trades and a Renaissance Man. A proud Washingtonian who was actually born in California, he barely got into Cornell University, but graduated in three and a half years. By the age of 18, he had already worked in a print shop, four restaurants, an auto detailer, a boat detailer, a landscaping company, and even got a Hollywood acting gig.

Since Cornell, he has worked in a big hotel in Dallas, a little consulting firm in Seattle, a real estate developer in San Francisco, and a community college in rural North Carolina. The only contiguous string in his resume is software. He has worked at five software companies having from 2 employees to 90,000 in roles as diverse as tech support, partner development, new

market evangelist, project manager, VP of Sales, and founder.

He has started a few businesses, been fired at least once, and at one particularly low point, he was rejected by Walmart for a cashier position.

Mark lives on an island near Seattle where he and his delightful wife and daughter maintain a mini-farm with eight chickens, a couple lambs, and one very proficient cat.

He would love to hear your story. You can reach him in a number of ways:

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## NO MORE PILLOWS

**H**as this story struck a chord for you? Can you relate to Amir? While this story is pure fiction, it is in many ways an autobiography of my own life. Though I'm not completely free yet, I have experienced some freedom and would love to be a catalyst to help others do the same. To that end, I have created a community called No More Pillows (<http://nomorepillows.com>) where people may come together to share their stories, their successes, their failures, their hopes, and their dreams. Please visit us there and share your story or come to be inspired by others. Remember that no matter where you are in your journey, there is always someone ahead of you to encourage you along, and someone behind you looking to you for encouragement.

## PILLOWS FOR YOUR PRISON CELL

If you witness examples of “pillows” in your world, share them with this **#nomorepillows** tag on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and whatever else is hot by the time you read this.

Lastly, if you would like to have me speak to your book club, community group, anonymous group, support group, school group or any other club, group or organization, please contact me directly at [Mark@pfypc.com](mailto:Mark@pfypc.com). If I can't make it in person, I would be glad to speak to your group remotely.

Upward and Onward,  
Mark D. Bullard