



Gangsta Rap

By Benjamin Zephaniah

Chapter 1 — School, What School?

Ray was woken up by the sound of his parents shouting at each other downstairs. He pulled the duvet over his head so that he could not hear them, but after five minutes his alarm clock rang anyway and he was forced to face the day. He dragged himself out of bed, went to the top of the stairs and shouted, 'Give it a rest will you.' His parents heard him, but carried on.

Back in his room Ray searched through his massive collection of CDs until he found his favourite Tupac Shakur album, 'Me Against the World'. Dressed only in his boxer shorts, he strutted around the room rapping along with Tupac, imagining that he was on stage and the CD player was his audience. Tupac was Ray's hero. Ray knew every word of the track and rapping along with him made Ray feel as if Tupac were in the same room as him. When his music was on he could no longer hear his parents arguing, but before the first track was over he could hear the sound of his sister Kori singing along to the R'n'B singer Beyoncé in the other room. Ray turned his volume up. Kori turned her volume up. Ray turned his volume up even more. Kori turned her volume up even more. Ray turned his volume up until the room began to shake. Kori turned *her* volume up until the whole house began to shake.

'What the hell do you two think you are doing?' shouted their father from the landing. He was a short stocky man who had shaved his head the moment his hair had started to go grey, and had obviously spent a lot of time pumping iron in his youth. He stood in a position from where he could shout into both bedrooms.

'This is no rave, this is not a discothèque business you know. What are you trying to do, shake the house down?'

Both players went silent.

'She started it,' Ray said, opening his bedroom door wide to see his angry father standing there.

Kori stormed out of her room. 'He started it with that hip-hop rubbish,' she said as she locked herself in the bathroom.

'What hip-hop rubbish?' Ray shouted in the direction of the bathroom. 'It's better than that stuff you play, that stuff doesn't say a thing, that stuff sounds like babies crying. And hurry up and get out of the bathroom, other people want to use it too.'

'If the music I play sounds like babies crying, yours sounds like dogs barking,' Kori shouted at the door.

'Oh yeah, ' replied Ray. 'You wait until I get my rap band together, we'll teach you about good music, all that stuff that you listen to does is brainwash you.'

'You and your so-called band. It will never happen Ray, and if it does you'll be crap.'

Their father stamped his foot down hard. The house shook. 'Both of you shut up, and you, Ray, you should know better. I told you to start being an example to your sister, didn't I? And put some clothes on.'

'You should know better,' Ray said, turning his back on his father. 'Every morning this week you and Mum wake me up with your arguing.'

Ray could see that his father wanted to lash out. He had hit Ray before but this time he managed to control himself.

'Who do you think you are talking to, boy? Don't you talk to me like that, you are only a boy, do you understand? A boy, so don't come giving me your backchat.'

'It's true though,' Ray said fearlessly.

'I said shut up.' His father stamped his foot again.

'At least Kori and me make noise with music,' Ray said self-righteously.

His father stood in the doorway and shouted at the top of his voice, 'I will make a noise on your head if you don't shut up. Now get dressed and piss off to school, boy, and I hope you learn some manners when you're there.'

'Yes, Dad, I'll piss off to school, just like you said, and I'll be an example just like you.'

His father didn't reply. He looked hard at Ray and then turned and went downstairs.

Ray got dressed and after shouting Kori out of the bathroom he went downstairs and sat at the breakfast table with the rest of the family. The atmosphere was tense. His father spoke to Ray without looking at him.

'You have to learn some manners you know? You won't live long in this world if you don't have some respect for people.'

Ray's mother looked at his father. 'Respect, what do you know about respect?'

'I know a damn lot more than anyone in this house, ' Ray's father shouted, standing up. 'This is my house and I don't get no respect here.'

'You don't know what respect is,' Ray's mother shouted back.

'And you don't know what manners is.'

'And you don't know what it takes to be a father and a husband.'

'And you don't even know what it takes to be a real woman.'

Ray stood up, rocking the table, and shouted over them. 'You know what, you two make me sick. Everyday you're arguing, every day you go on and on at each other, from morning till night that's all you do, and you want respect? I'm going to school.'

Ray left the room, picked up his coat in the hallway and left the house, slamming the door behind him. Kori left a minute later, and she stayed a minute behind him all the way to school.

Kori was fourteen, a year younger than Ray. Their parents believed that Ray could have been a role model for her, and they encouraged her to learn from him, but it soon became clear that they were two completely different people. So she continued to watch him, but from a distance.

It was a long, lonely school day for Ray. He missed his two best friends, Tyrone and Prem, and by the last lesson it was beginning to show. It was history and Ray just was not interested. He looked out of the window watching aeroplanes in the sky and waited for the lesson to end. Mr Harrison, the history teacher, spotted him.

'So, Ray, I take it you know all there is to know about the Roman Empire?'

'No,' Ray replied quietly.

'Well, pay attention and you may learn.'

Ray continued to look out of the window.

'Are you listening?' Mr Harrison said, walking towards him.

'No, I'm not,' Ray replied.

'Well, I have an idea,' Mr Harrison said, still walking. 'Why don't you stop looking out of that window, turn your face round to the front of the class, turn your brain on, and then try listening - you could learn something.'

Mr Harrison was now standing over Ray. Ray looked up. 'Well, I have an idea too, why don't you shut up.'

The class became suddenly quiet and then noisy. The pupils had heard similar exchanges before, but some were still shocked by Ray's words. Others giggled and laughed. Mr Harrison turned to face the class.

'OK you lot, be quiet.' His normally pale face was reddening with anger. The class waited for him to explode. 'There is absolutely no reason why you should talk to me like that, Ray. All I'm asking you to do is to pay attention.'

Ray continued to look out the window. 'And all I'm asking you to do is leave me alone.'

Mr Harrison raised his voice. 'Right, Ray, turn and face the front. I don't know what your problem is, but I cannot allow you to disrupt the rest of the class like this.'

'Well, if you leave me alone you can carry on with your stupid class, can't you?' Ray said, still looking out of the window.

'How dare you talk to me like that? Get out now.' Mr Harrison was beginning to shout.

Ray stood up. 'Yeah, that's cool, 'cause I'll talk to you how I like and you can't do anything, and if you think you can, come, see if I don't box you down.'

'Are you threatening me?'

'You can call it what you like, I'm just telling it as it is, all I'm saying is you can't do nothing to me.'

Mr Harrison pointed to the door. 'We'll see about that.'

Ray pushed his desk and chair away with his feet and headed out of the room, pushing past Mr Harrison who followed him into the corridor, leaving the rest of the class to talk amongst themselves.

'I don't know what has come over you, Ray, but you cannot speak to me like that.'

Ray looked everywhere except at Mr Harrison. 'You got the problem, you're always picking on me, so if you pick on me I'll talk to you how I want.'

Mr Harrison dropped his voice and tried to sound as reasonable as he could. 'Look, Ray, I'm not picking on you, and let's not make this a personality thing. You are in a lesson, a history lesson, and all I'm asking is that you take part in that lesson.'

Ray turned to face him. 'No, stick your history, who cares about history?'

Mr Harrison strode off. 'Right, that's it. Follow me.'

Ray followed him to the head teacher's office where Mr Harrison explained the reason for Ray's behaviour to the head teacher, who was sitting in his large leather swivel chair. Ray stood in front of the desk, and Mr Harrison stood next to him with folded arms.

The head teacher, Mr Lang, got straight to the point. 'Now, Ray, you have already had three temporary exclusions and a spell in the Learning Support Unit. Let's face it, I told you what would happen if you came before me again. Do you have anything to say for yourself?'

'No.'

'Well, you leave me no alternative. This is not the first time that you have threatened a member of staff and as always you show no remorse, so from today you are permanently excluded from this school. I simply will not tolerate this type of behaviour. Your parents will be contacted by the local education authority who will advise them as to what will happen next, but the simple fact is that you are no longer a pupil here. You must understand, Ray, this is for your own good, and the good of the other pupils.'

'Shut up,' Ray growled as he walked towards the door. 'You know what you need, you need a good beating, you big pussy, look at you. You leave me no alternative but to bust your lip but you're lucky I'm in a good mood.' Ray slammed the door behind him so hard that the pictures fell off the walls and the head teacher jumped.

For a moment Mr Lang stared at the closed door. He cared about the pupils and had spent a lot of time on Ray. Now it seemed like it was all going down the drain. Ray had slammed doors on him before, but this felt like it could be the last time.

Outside the school Ray took off his tie and put it in his bag. He hung the bag on his shoulder for a moment but then took it off again. He looked at it, thought about its contents, and then stuffed it into a large rubbish bin that was already full of sweet packets and soft drinks bottles. He walked with a bounce, taking off his jacket and undoing his top shirt buttons as he went. It was all about making himself look like someone who had just finished school rather than someone who had been excluded. He was free. As he walked through Stratford shopping center he looked at every girl between the ages of thirteen and nineteen as if he were in love with them, and in his mind he thought that they too would love him if only they knew how bad he was.

On West Ham Lane he went into Flip Discs, his regular hang-out shop, a small music shop specialising in hip-hop. The shop was run by Oswald Jolly, known to all as Marga Man, a Jamaica-born reformed bad boy who weighed nineteen stone before breakfast. No one knew where he had got the name Marga Man, not even Marga Man himself, but it seemed that back in Jamaica someone was being ironic. In Jamaica 'marga' means skinny, very skinny. Marga Man was big, very big.

Leaning over the other side of the counter, listening to music, were Tyrone and Prem, Ray's best friends. Tyrone looked like a younger version of Marga Man, a bit large and a bit menacing, until the moment he smiled, when, like Marga Man, he became charming and cuddly. But Tyrone didn't talk much. He was a thinker; he always looked as if his mind was working overtime. Prem really was marga. Thin, fit, energetic and good-looking, he was less funny than he thought he was but he always tried to look on the bright side of life, even when things looked very dark. He also believed he could look after himself. One of his cousins once represented India in a world-class karate tournament and Prem claimed that this cousin had taught him many karate skills - but he never mentioned that this was when he was eight years old, and that all that karate had long been forgotten.

Tyrone and Prem turned round like two cowboys in an old Western movie to see Ray standing inside the shop.

'What's up, Ray?' said Tyrone, surprised. 'You suppose to be at school, guy.'

Ray smiled, walked over to them, and with his right fist clenched he touched fist. 'I don't do school no more.'

All three broke into laughter. Marga Man stood nodding his head to the beat, pretending not to listen to them.

'What you saying, guy?' said Prem.

'I told you man, I don't do school any more, I'm like you now, excluded.' Ray stretched the word out.

'What happened?' asked Tyrone.

'Well, you know that Mr Harrison, I had to deal with him, you know what I'm saying. I had to show him the truth. Then that headmaster bloke, he wanna try come on some authority trip, so I just deal with him too.'

They laughed more and touched fist again.

'So what is it, how long for?'

Ray stepped back and threw his arms open. 'I told you, I'm like you now, permanent exclusion.' Once again he dragged the words out. 'Permanent exclusion, this is no long weekend, this is no go home and calm down. I told them where to stuff their school and that's it.'

Marga Man turned the volume of the music down low and folded his arms. 'What you mean, all three of you now not going school?' His voice was deep, his accent heavy Jamaican, the type of voice that had never made any attempt to sound more English. 'Listen, all I know is dat if you three roam de streets is trouble, yeah man, big trouble, and de tax payer will not foot de bill.'

'No, Marga Man,' Ray said, rocking to the beat. 'We ain't going to roam the streets, we're going to hang out with you in here.'

Marga Man quickly turned the music right off. 'You mad? No way, you not hanging here. Hey, let me tell you something, I survive Trench Town Jamaica, I survive women wid beards in New York, I survive de British immigration system, but I can't survive you three, no sirs. Yo, look, I run a respectable business here.'

The three boys laughed as Marga Man tried to hold a serious face.

'Respectable,' said Prem. 'I bet most of these CDs are pirates.'

'Yeah,' Tyrone continued. 'One of your Jamaican pirate friends got his computer and just made up copies to order.'

Marga Man pointed to various CD racks. 'Every musical biscuit in dis joint is legal, me is an upright citizen, you see? Me is what dem call boni fido.'

The laughter got louder and now the boys began to strut around the shop teasing Marga Man.

'Marga Man,' said Prem, 'it's bona fide, not boni fido. Boni fido is a dog or something like that.'

Marga Man now cut a smile as he saw the funny side. 'I don't care what you say, me is a pillar of de community. Tax payer is me, one day I shall be Lord Mayor wid gold round me neck and Rolls-Royce outside.'

'Yeah, one day you'll own a pet shop,' said Prem. 'With a nice little dog in it called boni fido.'

'Get out of me shop,' Marga Man shouted, but still smiling. 'Now I permanently exclude you, move, I expel you for ever.'

'Yeah, yeah, OK, let's go,' said Ray. 'But we coming back later Marga Man.'

Marga Man turned the music back on, then shouted over it, 'I told you, you permanently excluded.'

'But Marga Man,' Prem pleaded. 'We coming back with some nice bitches for you.'

'I don't care 'bout bitches, is money I deal wid, I out to mek a living. If you want to bring any bitches being me some bitches wid money, bring me woman who want to buy records, bring me some consumer types.'

'Later,' they all shouted back as they left the shop.

'Look after yourselves, you guys,' Marga Man said as he watched them leave.

This was typical of the kind of banter Marga Man and the boys always had. Marga Man was a father figure for them. Even though they all had fathers, Marga Man was in tune with their way of life. They could talk to him about things their real fathers would never talk about. His knowledge of the world meant that they would listen to him and respect him much more than other adults. And Marga Man had the best music shop in town. He didn't just rely on regular distributors, he had contacts in the hip-hop business all over the world, and that meant that he would receive discs long before most high street stores would and get music from smaller, more radical labels that would never be released in Britain. So this piece of east London was the boys' connection to the rest of the hip-hop world.

The boys made their way down West Ham Lane towards their homes. Prem was still asking about Ray's exclusion. 'So you're really out?'

Ray was getting fed up. 'How many times do I have to tell you, yes.'

'And you really did deal with Mr Harrison?'

'Yes.'

'So what your parents gonna say? Did they threaten to send you back to the Caribbean like mine were going to send me back to India?' Prem asked.

Ray thought for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders.

'I don't know, they'll probably say what they said when I got excluded before.'

Tyrone thought for a moment, trying to remember what Ray's parents had said before, but he couldn't remember. 'What *did* they say before?'

'I don't know,' Ray replied, after a moment. 'They don't talk to me about these things.'

* * *

It was true. After all Ray's previous exclusions his parents had barely spoken to him. His father's attitude was, *he made his bed, let him lie in it*. His mother's instinct was to side with Ray but she tried to convince herself that his father knew best. Prem and Tyrone had been excluded for pretty much the same reason as Ray. They too had just lost interest in school and after a couple of exclusions Prem had decided to verbally terrorise every teacher in sight. Tyrone had quietly backed him up with clenched fists and a macho stare.

Tyrone was an only child. His parents did try to talk to him but they simply couldn't control him. They tried threats, they tried beatings, they tried the church, and they even considered sending him to relatives in Trinidad, but they changed their minds when he calmly threatened to kill the family cat. Now they had reached the point where they would try to do their best for him in the hope that he would see the dead-end street that he was on and change his ways of his own accord.

Prem came from a working-class, trying hard to be middle-class, Indian family. He had an older sister at Newham College, a younger sister in primary school, his father worked in a travel agency, and his mother was proud to be a mother, although not so proud of him. His parents felt very let down by their only son leaning towards black culture and by his indifference to education.

Tyrone and Prem lived on the same road, and when the boys came to the road where Ray lived, Ray led them into a spontaneous rap session, freestyle.

Ray: *I know I'm getting older as I look over my shoulder
And my lyrics just get bigger and my lyrics just get bolder
Like musical rebel full of bass and full of treble
Take it brother Tyrone, take it to another level*

Tyrone: *You gotta hear me when I say just be cool X-Ray
I'm the guy the girls admire so I gotta take it higher
And any boy come challenge me that boy hot to retire
But if you want come rap with me I promise to inspire*

Prem: *Well I could rap in Hindi but for now I'll say nameste
And I'm worried 'bout the future 'cause the girls are out to get me
Some of them want kidnap me and some want tek me on safari
Some of them dress up in mini; some of them dress up in sari*

Ray: *The moral of the Hip-Hop is the Hip-Hop never does stop
'Cause it travels from the bottom and it gets right to the top
So do it to the fullness, never let your rap be shallow
Now I'm going to see my parents and I'll see you guys tomorrow*

They burst into laughter and touched fist.

'We got it going on,' said Prem. 'But I think we should still think of a name for ourselves. Whoever's heard of a rap band with no name? When you have a name people know that you're serious.'

'The name will come with time,' said Tyrone.

'Yeah, first we gotta get the style right, you know what I'm saying? Then the rest will fall into place,' Ray said. 'See you tomorrow, round the music shop.'

Tyrone and Prem nodded in agreement and went on their way. Ray turned to go home. He couldn't show it to the others but he was apprehensive about the future, and he walked down the street rapping to himself in a whisper until he reached his house. He let himself in and went to his bedroom.

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