

*Claude Brown grew up on the streets of Harlem in the 1940s and 1950s. His autobiography, **Manchild in the Promised Land**, shows how he emerged from a life of crime, drugs, and violence to attend college and law school. In this excerpt, Brown is about to leave for a juvenile detention center. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.*

## *from* **Manchild in the Promised Land**

by Claude Brown

1 It was snowing real hard outside. Mama was so nervous, she tied my tie about six times before getting it right. I was all set to go downtown to an office to meet somebody who was going to take me upstate. Mama had locked my shoes in the closet the night before to make sure I didn't get out of the house while she was getting the other kids ready for school. Even though I couldn't get my shoes, Mama made me stay in the front room till we were ready to go. And every chance she got, Mama would come in the front room to check on me. She knew that if I had enough time, I would get my shoes out of that closet somehow. When Mama couldn't come out of the kitchen, she would call to me and ask me what I was doing. Every time she asked, I told her the real truth, that I wasn't doing anything.

2 It seemed like I had already started serving my time that morning, sitting there all dressed up, with everything on but my shoes and hat, in the room farthest away from the door. I was just sitting there at the window watching all that snow falling and feeling kind of sad. The snow just kept on falling, and I knew it was covering more than just the sidewalk. I knew Knoxie was waiting for me to come to his house, and I knew I wasn't going to make it, but I didn't care. Maybe it was because I knew what I would be doing for the next few days if I went to Knoxie's house. And I was wondering what would happen if I went to that office. Who would I meet there? Would there be something to steal there? Maybe I didn't care about not meeting Knoxie because I knew I couldn't get my shoes out of the closet.

3 Watching the snow fall made me think about a lot of things. I thought about what Dad had said the night before. He knew he would already have left for work when I got up that morning, so he gave me his good-bye speech the night before. I never used to listen to Dad when he talked to me—I never thought he had anything to say worth listening to—but I always used to make believe I was listening to him. But that night, I didn't even pretend I was thinking about what he said.

4 Dad started telling me that it would be a long time before I would see the streets of New York City again. And that maybe when I got back, I would appreciate them enough to stop all that . . . stealing and stay home like somebody with some sense. He talked on and on like that. Then he said something. Dad asked me if I remembered when I used to get up every Sunday morning to go out and watch Mr. Jimmy win money from people who were dumb enough to go hunting for a pea that wasn't there.

I told him I remembered. Then he asked me if I knew what a fool was. I said a fool was somebody stupid. Dad said I was right, but there was more to it than that. He said it takes a stupid person to keep looking for something that is never there. Dad told me to go into the kitchen and get a black-eyed pea.

- 5      When I came back with the pea, Dad had set up the card table and was sitting at it with three half nutshells in front of him. I gave him the pea, and Dad started switching the shells around the way Mr. Jimmy used to do. It looked like Dad was doing it real slow, and I was sure I knew where the pea was all the time. I never knew Dad could do that trick, and even then I was sure he was doing it too slow. When Dad stopped sliding the nutshells around, he told me to pick up the one I thought the pea was under. We did this ten times. Each time, I was sure the pea was under the shell I picked up. Ten times I picked the wrong shell. After I made that last wrong pick, Dad looked at me and just kept shaking his head for a little while. Then he said, “That’s jis what you been doin’ all your life, lookin’ for a pea that ain’t there. And I’m mighty ’fraid that’s how you gon end your whole life, lookin’ for that pea.”