

always working like a riddle. It was entendres, breaking down words into symbols, trying to understand what's around you."

His mother, Rosita Barker, emigrated from Panama, in 1979. She saved enough money to buy a co-op apartment, on Eastern Parkway, but the family struggled financially. "Both of my parents were artists," Storyboard said. His father, who is from Goldsboro, North Carolina, had tap-danced in his youth, and served for a time in the Navy. "My dad drew," Storyboard said. "My mom did, too. They made collages. Not for a living, but as a passion. My mom didn't work, my dad didn't work." For a stretch, the family collected welfare checks. Storyboard's clothes, many of them hand-me-downs from cousins and his older brother, Eli, fit him oddly. "We were penny-rollers," he recalled. "We'd collect pennies, roll them, bring them to the bank. My dad would have me knocking on doors, asking neighbors for pennies. There was this guy Ashton from downstairs. We'd go down to Ashton to get money all the time—my dad would send me with a little envelope and a note."

I visited Barker at the co-op, in December. Along the living-room walls, painted powder blue, were cardboard boxes, some chairs, and a cluttered shelving unit. Barker, a slight woman with a ready smile, showed me a full-size mattress that had been pushed into a corner of the apartment's sole bedroom and covered with a black sheet. The entire family used to share the bed. "We had an extra little bed," she noted, which came in handy as the boys grew. "Me and their father slept in the little bed, and Saalim and his brother slept in the big bed." She recalled the cozy sleeping arrangement with fondness—"It was fun, it was happiness," she said—but Storyboard came to find the situation stifling. "As I got bigger, I was out of the house more," he told me. "From early on, I'd be out all night, or in the hallways sleeping. Most of my nights were that, because I was extremely lonely, so I would always be around friends or a girlfriend or something."

Growing up, Storyboard's best friend was a kid named Nelson Adolphus, who wanted to be a scientist. Shawn Graham, a cousin of Adolphus's who lived in

Brownsville, recalls, "Both of them were very into school. Saalim had, like, the big glasses—now he has contacts and stuff, but, before, he was a skinny kid, big glasses, not very into the streets. He used to get clowned on." Barker recalls, "He was honor roll in everything, from kindergarten to high school." When Storyboard and Adolphus weren't studying, they played video games and watched professional wrestling at Adolphus's place.

Storyboard wasn't close to his brother. They'd fight in the apartment over food and territory. "Eli never wanted to hang out with me," Storyboard said. He spent some time with older kids who, he says, were "millionaires in the drug trade"; their wealth and their condescending attitude angered him. "I was in Mercedes CLs and SLs when I was eleven, twelve, riding with them," Storyboard said. "They were living so luxurious. Seeing that, and then going home to see my mom struggle, I had a hatred toward them, and it fuelled my artistic ambitions. When I was with them, they ridiculed me: 'How come you don't take showers, how come you don't do this?'"

His father, meanwhile, was "this dictator, disciplinarian," Storyboard said. "I didn't feel like I controlled anything." He recalled his mother, by contrast, as "absent, very withdrawn." Barker told me that she suffers from bipolar disorder, and that she was frequently hospitalized

during Storyboard's youth. She and Adib Muslim split up in the late aughts. Adib moved to Canada, where he lives with another woman.

Storyboard says that he was hospitalized several times, in high school, after suffering nervous breakdowns. "I'd just sit and not talk for a whole two days, three days," he said. "I'd come out of it and I'd be somewhat normal, but restrained, in a way. I think that was the adverse effects of my circumstances, and just dealing with a household where everyone's isolated. Over time, I just can't cope anymore. And you shut down." During these episodes, Storyboard says, his father would take him to the hospital; sometimes, he was kept there overnight. Storyboard has told interviewers that he is schizophrenic and bipolar, although when I asked him if a doctor had given him an official diagnosis he shook his head. He took lithium briefly, but otherwise, he said, "they'd give me meds, I'd take two and go off it." (Barker said of her son, "I think he has a lot of stress. I don't think he is bipolar.")

At home, deprivation forced him to be crafty. "Not having a lot, you're going to create," Storyboard said. "When I got a toy, I always broke it apart, put a new arm on it, reinventing it. I'd get one toy, get tired of it, and I'd want to make a new toy." He went on, "When my brother left me for his friends, it was



*"Do you know you've had your caps lock on for the last ten miles?"*