

“Seductively enigmatic ... Brinkley’s portrait of New York and its edges are full of people who feel contained pushing at the boundaries of their lives ... through pages of peerless prose and startlingly sharp sentences, what emerges is a constantly reframed argument about the role and power of masculinity.”

—*L.A. Times*

“Among *A Lucky Man*’s many wonderful accomplishments—the way the length of each story affords its characters room to move; the use of linear, progressive time to knit the individual stories into a social fabric, à la Alice Munro or John Edgar Wideman—one in particular is genuinely path-clearing. Brinkley offers visions of manhood and masculinity that demonstrate candor without false intensity, desire without ownership. His male characters have fictional experiences that, in the hands of the right reader, can become equipment for living.”

—*Los Angeles Review of Books*

“Brinkley’s depictions of love’s many varieties are subtle and deeply observant ... In the space of 25 pages, he’s capable of creating complex and memorable emotional worlds.”

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“One of the many striking qualities in Brinkley’s stories is how precarious his male characters tend to be, so uncertain, deep down, of their cocky masculinity. He observes his characters from a small distance, watching patiently as their swagger, their anger, their love and lust deflate like a leaky balloon. It’s an extraordinary process to witness ... Brinkley’s stories ... together become a series of small tragedies.”

—*Paris Review*

“In Brinkley’s work, no character is left untended, no aspect of identity is overlooked, and the results are well-inhabited worlds that feel infinite. A lot of short stories exist in a snow globe, but the nine stories presented here are each a big bang. They burst forth through space and time. They are larger than the sum of their components ... *A Lucky Man* is not only a standout debut for the year, but also a testament to what can be achieved in a short story.”

—*Chicago Review of Books*

“With equal parts precision and poetry, these nine audacious stories step into the minefields awaiting boys of color as they approach manhood in Brooklyn and the Bronx—testing the limits of relationships, social norms, and their own definitions of masculinity.”

—*O: The Oprah Magazine*

“There’s something magical about a great story collection ... In *A Lucky Man*, Jamel Brinkley’s stunning debut collection, the stories are not formally linked, and yet they are, implicitly, by their beautiful prose, by their intimate gaze at character, by their focus on black men, by their setting in New York City. A collection as fine as this, of fiction that is reflecting our world and searching for the truth, is one to be treasured, read and reread, admired, and loved.”

—*Ploughshares*

“An assured and important collection that could not be more timely.”

—*Kenyon Review*

“A stunning debut imbued with pathos, sexuality, and moments of violence and tenderness. With this memorable collection, Brinkley emerges as a gifted and empathetic new writer.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“An assured debut collection of stories about men and women, young and old, living and loving along the margins in Brooklyn and the Bronx ... It’s difficult to single out any story as most outstanding since they are each distinguished by Brinkley’s lyrical invention, precise descriptions of both emotional and physical terrain and a prevailing compassion toward people as bemused by travail as they are taken aback by whatever epiphanies blossom before them. A major talent.”

—*Kirkus* (starred review)

“*A Lucky Man* is just one of those collections that takes your breath away: the voices we hear, the people we meet, they scratch and pull and ache and rage, revealing secrets we usually keep hidden. Every line is pitch perfect. Jamel Brinkley is a writer of extraordinary talent.”

—Daniel Alarcón, author of *The King Is Always Above the People*

“Jamel Brinkley writes the kind of fiction that reads like the whole truth. As his characters—from estranged siblings in Virginia to surrogate families in Brooklyn—love, hurt, challenge, and sometimes save each other, their stories vividly expose our ideas of masculinity and the fumes of racism and injustice in the American air we breathe. *A Lucky Man* is full of insight and music—a bold, urgent debut.”

—Mia Alvar, author of *In the Country*

"I loved this book. From sentence to sentence, these stories are beautifully written, and they are wonderfully moving and smart about the connections—firm, broken, or mended—between siblings, and parents and their children, and couples who profess to love each other. Jamel Brinkley writes like an angel, but he also knows how low human beings can sometimes go, despite their own best intentions. How does luck, or its absence, visit our lives? Read these stories and find out." —Charles Baxter, author of *There's Something I Want You to Do*

"There's just no way to overstate this: *A Lucky Man* is a stunning debut. Richer than most novels, this collection calls a whole world into being, and the names and fates of these people will follow you into your life and never leave. Ambitious themes arc across the entire book—troubled masculinity, family in all its broken forms—but on a lower frequency these are love stories, intimately told. And they could come from no other than Jamel Brinkley, so there's the pleasure of that encounter too, of hearing a new voice for the first time, and taking a deep plunge into the allegory of an artist's soul."

—Charles D'Ambrosio, author of *Loitering*

"The stories in *A Lucky Man* have a necessary urgency—their characters need to confess or seek comfort, to tell the reader how they've been wounded or whose hurt they carry. These stories do not shy away from heartbreak and brutal consequences, but they always remember how much of the way to despair was beautiful and full of tenderness and joy. An unforgettable collection by an important new voice."

—Danielle Evans, author of *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*

"This is the rare debut that introduces not a promising talent but a major writer, fully formed. The psychological penetration of these stories astonishes me, as do the grace and emotional scope of their sentences. Jamel Brinkley is brilliant, the real thing, a revelation." —Garth Greenwell, author of *What Belongs to You*

"*A Lucky Man* is subtle yet loud, heartbreaking yet utterly unsentimental, uncompromising yet a damn good read. These breathtaking stories find energy in the friction of humanity's contradictions. In this masterfully written debut, Jamel Brinkley proves he's got next." —Mat Johnson, author of *Loving Day*

“Jamel Brinkley’s stories tell of absence and abandonment, sometimes confronted and sometimes met with resignation, but always edged with pain and beauty. In vibrant yet restrained prose, Brinkley illuminates the longing for home, which lurks in all of us. A magnificent debut.”

—Laila Lalami, author of *The Moor’s Account*

“There’s true magic in Jamel Brinkley’s stories. He finds the subtle and humane lurking within the drama of our lives. Brinkley writes with great insight and honesty about people you’ll recognize, flawed but still worthwhile. By using all his formidable talents, he’s shown us a vision of ourselves.”

—Victor LaValle, author of *The Changeling*

“*A Lucky Man* is filled with characters who long to become better sons, better fathers, better friends, better lovers. Often they have no words for their complicated feelings. Happily they are the creations of an author who has all the words. Jamel Brinkley is a wonderful writer and these richly imagined stories will stay with the lucky reader long after the last page.”

—Margot Livesey, author of *Mercury*

“The lucky men of Brinkley’s debut are haunted: by the past, by family, by love and ultimately by masculinity itself. These sober and elegant stories delve deep. A debut of subtlety and power.”

—Ayana Mathis, author of *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*

“An extraordinary short story collection.”

—George Pelecanos, author of *The Man Who Came Uptown*

“Jamel Brinkley’s *A Lucky Man* captures so perfectly the myriad ways in which we struggle daily not only for connection but to be heard and understood. At once covert and exuberant, ferocious and tender, heartbreaking and hilarious, these are the stories we always needed. A marvelous debut, glowing with life, and a major new voice in American fiction.”

—Paul Yoon, author of *The Mountain*

# A Lucky Man

Stories

Jamel Brinkley



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# Contents

No More Than a Bubble	3
J'ouvert, 1996	29
I Happy Am	55
Everything the Mouth Eats	75
A Family	113
A Lucky Man	141
Infinite Happiness	159
Wolf and Rhonda	187
Clifton's Place	215

## No More Than a Bubble

It was back in those days. Claudius Van Clyde and I stood on the edge of the dancing crowd, each of us already three bottles into one brand of miracle brew, blasted by the music throbbing from the speakers. But we weren't listening to the songs. I'd been talking into the open shell of his ear since we'd gotten to the house party, shouting a bunch of mopey stuff about my father. At one point, sometime around the witching hour, he stopped his perfunctory nodding and jerked his chin toward the staircase. "Check out *these* biddies," he said. Past the shifting heads of dancers and would-be seducers I saw the two girls he meant. They kept reaching for each other's waists and drawing their hands quickly away, as if testing the heat of a fire. After a minute of this game the girls laughed and walked off. We weaved through the crowd and followed them, away from the deejay's setup in front of the night-slicked bay windows, and into the kitchen, where we took stock of the situation. One of the girls was lanky and thin-armed, but notably rounded at the hips. She wore a white tank top, which gave her face and painted fingernails a sheen in the dimmed light. A neat, lady-like afro bloomed from her head, and she was a lighter shade of brown than her friend with the buzz cut, a thick snack of a girl whose shape made you work your jaws.



The party, thrown by a couple of Harvard grads, happened just weeks before the Day of Atonement, in late September of 1995. Claudius had overheard some seniors talking about it earlier that Saturday after the football game, as they all smoked next to the pale blue lion statue up at Baker Field. Later he dragged me from my dorm room. We slipped out of the university's gates and took the subway down to Brooklyn, determined to crash. The party had been described as an affair for singles, so when you arrived you had to write your name on a sticker and affix it to your body. The taller girl with the afro, Iris, wore her sticker on her upper arm like a service stripe. The friend had placed hers cleverly, as both a convenience and a joke meant to shame. "Hello," her ass told us, "my name is Sybil."

"Dizzy chicks," Claudius said to me, and we gave each other these goofy, knowing grins. The main difference between a house party in Brooklyn and a college party uptown was that on campus you were just practicing. You could half-ass it or go extra hard, either play the wall or go balls-out booty hound, and there would be no actual stakes, no real edge to the consequences. Nothing sharp to press your chest against, no precipice to leap from, nothing to brave. You might get dissed, or you might get some play. You would almost certainly get cheaply looped. But at the end of the night, no matter what, you would drift off to sleep in the narrows of a dorm bed, surrounded by cinder block walls, swaddled in twin extra-long sheets purchased by someone's mom.

We approached the girls and pointed to our stickers to introduce ourselves. The tall one with the afro said her name was Iris and did so with her nose, putting unusually strong emphasis on the *I*. True to this utterance, she seemed the more insistent and lunatic of the two. She vibrated. We asked where they were from. Most of Iris's family came from Belize. Sybil was Dominican. Claudius and I liked to know these kinds of things.

"You enjoying the party?" I asked. Iris didn't respond. Her attention flew all over the place. The party house was old—you felt its

floorboards giving, perceived its aches being drowned out by the music and conversations that swelled with everyone's full-bellied bloats of laughter. In hushed moments, you heard the creaking of wood, followed by the tinkle of glass, the crunch of plastic, or the throaty rise of the hum. Iris seemed attuned to all of it, to every detail of the house and its subtle geographies. She stared now through the glass doors that led to the backyard, where lit torches revealed little groups of smokers breathing vividly into the air.

I tapped her on the shoulder and she turned to me.

"Oh, it's you again." Then she gave her friend a bemused look.

"Yep, they're still here," Sybil said.

"Enjoying the party?" I repeated.

Iris waited a long time to reply: "We're bubbling." From the living room the deejay began to play a new song. "What is this?" she said. "I've heard it before."

"You don't know about this?" said a guy standing near us. He had a patchy beard and double-fisted red cups of foamy beer. Maybe he was a Harvard man. "Man, y'all are late," he said. "This is 'Brooklyn Zoo.' Ol' Dirty Bastard."

Claudius and the girls nodded in recognition but to me it all sounded like code.

"Why's he called that?" I asked.

The guy laughed at my ignorance. "Because," he said, "there's no father to his style."

The girls turned to each other and began a kind of stomping dance. "Damn damn damn," Iris said, "this song is so bubble!"

They understood the good life according to the image and logic of this word—simultaneously noun, verb, and adjective—its glistening surface wet with potential meaning. Their faces became masks of anger, nostrils and mouths flexed open as they danced. Iris kept her arms pinned to her sides while Sybil jabbed the air with her elbows. Claudius nodded at Sybil and told me, "I call dibs."

“Nah, man.”

“Already called it,” he said.

We both preferred girls of a certain plumpness, with curves—in part, I think, because that’s what black guys are supposed to like. Liking them felt like a confirmation of possessing black blood, a way to stamp ourselves with authenticity. But Claudius had made his claim. I was left to deal with Iris, the prophet of the bubble. Fine, no big deal. He could have his pick. This was all his idea anyway. We wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for him. He knew I needed a good distraction.

A few weeks earlier, late one August morning in Philadelphia, shortly before the start of sophomore year, I sat with my father, Leo, at the kitchen table and got drunk with him for the first time. He told me to beware of crazy women, angry women, passionate women. He told me they would ruin me. “But they are also the best women,” he said, “the best lovers, with a jungle between their legs and such wildness in bed that every man should experience.” I felt I knew the kinds of women he meant, and I knew for sure he was talking about my mother, Doreen, but I didn’t give a damn. She had left us, left him, a few years earlier, and recently she’d announced she was getting remarried. I saw how this news affected my father. He had stalked around our house all summer and appeared smaller and more frantic by the week. He searched as though the answer to the question of how his life had gone so wrong were hidden in one of the rooms. All but undone by this effort, my father regarded me that morning through his heavy eyelids and long Mediterranean lashes. He’d inherited bad teeth from his own father, and before he turned sixty he’d had a bunch of them yanked right out of his mouth. He wore a partial denture but didn’t have it in as we drank. The bottom of his face was collapsed like a rotten piece of fruit. “The best,” he repeated. “And so . . .” His Italian accent deepened the more he drank. His tongue peeked out of his broken grin. “And so every man should experience this, Ben,”

he said. "Once." He held a chewed fingernail up by his high nose and then reached into his pocket for something. It was a condom, wrapped in silver foil. "Use this with the most delicious woman you can find, *una pazza*. Let her screw your brains out, once and never again. Then marry a nice, boring, fat girl with hands and thighs like old milk. Make a dull life. It's the only way to be happy." He gave me the condom. It was an ill-timed ritual—I'd already gone out into the world. Still, he believed in it, just as he believed there was a guaranteed way to be happy. Since I was his disciple, and quite drunk myself that morning, I believed in it too.

Claudius and I slid in behind the girls and danced with them right there in the kitchen. Iris moved well but with aggression. She spun around, hooked her fingers into my belt loops, and slammed her pelvis into mine. She ground herself against me for a while and then backed away to show her perfect teeth and claw the air between us. She was a kitten on its hind legs, fiercely swiping at a ball on a string.

I leaned in and asked if she'd gone to Harvard too. I tried to sound older, like I'd already graduated and was fully a man.

"We're Hawks," Iris said in her nasal voice. Then she spread her arms like wings and slowly flapped them. Claudius had a theory that I liked about girls with nasal voices. He said girls who spoke this way, cutting their voices off from their lungs and guts, did so as a kind of defense, a noisy insistence meant to distract men from the flesh.

"Hawks?" I asked.

"Hunter College, ninety-four. Hey, why don't you get me and my girl some whiskey bubbles?"

"That would be whiskey and . . . ?"

"Magic."

"Where do I get that?"

She gave a disappointed shake of her head. "It's just whiskey," she whined. "Be a good boy."

Passing Claudius and Sybil as they danced, I winked to let him

know we were in. The sensation of Iris's moving hips ghosted against me. There in the face of the kitchen cabinet floated her pretty smile and dark eyes, flecked with a color close to gold.

After making four healthy pours of Jack, I carried the cups back over. Sybil sniffed the whiskey and let her eyes cross with pleasure. Iris lifted her cup and with a dignified tone and expression said she was thankful for the universe and all of its moments. "And for whiskey and music and madness and justice and love," she added.

"And for the sky," Sybil said. "Have you seen the fucking sky tonight?"

Their words were completely meaningless. It was a toast to nonsense.

"And for your tits," Iris said. She reached out and squeezed Sybil's right breast. "Doesn't she have great tits?"

Claudius stared brazenly at them. "She does," he said. "She really does."

He had come to New York from West Oakland with certain notions regarding life out here, that the city's summer heat and dust, and its soot-encrusted winter ice, were those of the cultural comet, which he ached to witness if not ride. Because of these notions, he manipulated gestures and disguises, pushed the very core of himself outward so that you could see in his face and in the flare of his broad nostrils the hard radiance of the soul-stuff that some people chatter on about. Though the features of his face didn't quite agree, he could convince you he was handsome. For this trickery his implements included a collection of Eastern-style conical hats and retro four-finger rings. His choice for tonight: a fez, tilted forward on his head so that we, both of us, felt emboldened by the obscene probing swing of the tassel.

Claudius and I knew what *we* were toasting: the next phase of life. At parties like this the crowd was older, college seniors who already had New York apartments, graduates who were starting to make their way, and folks who were already far enough into their youth to

start questioning it. The booze was better and the weed was sticky good. The girls were incredible, of course, especially here. You could taste a prevalent Caribbean flavor in the air, as if the parade through Brooklyn's thoroughfares on Labor Day had never stopped and this had been its destination all along. If not Caribbean like Sybil, the girls were something else distinct and of the globe. Each girl had her own atmosphere. We were convinced they wore better, tinier underwear than the girls we knew, convinced they were mad geniuses of their bodies.

"So where'd you two escape from?" Iris asked, though her gaze drifted out to the backyard again.

"Uptown," Claudius said. "Columbia."

"*Roar, Lion, Roar*," Sybil said.

"We graduated in May," I lied.

"Mazel tov," Iris said.

Sybil shook her head.

Iris's attention snapped all the way back now. "What? I can totally say that."

Sybil made a popping sound with her mouth, and the two of them laughed.

Claudius and I laughed too, though neither of us really knew what was funny. Before we could pick up the thread of the conversation, the girls left without saying a word.

We slid up the stairs after them and wound past the partygoers perched there gossiping or flirting or losing themselves in mazelike privacies of thought. On the second floor, a group of people stood shoulder to shoulder in the doorway of one room, as though to block something illicit from view. Claudius and I pushed past them and found ourselves in an immense bathroom, where voices echoed off the tiles. Two girls stood fully clothed in a tacky, powder blue Jacuzzi, their heads framed by a backlit square of stained glass over the tub, but they weren't our girls. We returned to the hallway and caught Iris and Sybil

coming out of a bedroom, trailed by the skunky-sweet odor of marijuana. We pursued them downstairs and out into the backyard.

Claudius jumped into their line of vision and said, "So let's play a game."

For a moment the girls acted as though they had never seen us before, then Sybil's eyes widened. "Wow," she said.

Claudius announced that we should all trade confessions. "Shameful stories," he said. "Secrets. The worse they are, the better." This idea seemed to have been inspired by the refrain of "Brooklyn Zoo"—*Shame on you! Shame on you!* The girls seemed amused but unconvinced by his suggestion; Claudius went on anyway. "Who wants to go first?" he said, and waited. But this waiting was just a sham. Of course he would be the one to begin.

What we aimed to achieve in these moments required patience and a strategic silence. Then, when we did speak, there was a distinct lowering of our voices—even in loud places, so that we'd have to lean in close. We made eye contact that was both firm and soft, not quite a stare, and we broke it occasionally to let our gazes trickle down the full lengths of their bodies. This had to be less wolfish than a leer, more a sly undressing. The total effect would be a kind of hypnosis, inducing a gradual surrender of the self. As we'd developed it, this method had worked plenty of times with the girls on campus, but we knew that this was nothing to be proud of. College is nothing if not four years of people throwing themselves recklessly at one other.

In his affected murmur, Claudius told us a story I had heard before. The story may or may not have been true, but it shocked people, or aroused them, or made them feel vulnerable and sad. Claudius wasn't what you would call a patient guy. He needed to know as soon as possible where people stood, especially girls. Here is the story: When he was in high school, he discovered that the old lady who lived alone next door was watching him from her window. Every morning and evening, with the door locked against his alcoholic mother, he

would exercise in his room wearing only his briefs. Furiously blinking, Claudius told them: "Calf-raises, push-ups, chin-ups, and crunches till I dropped. And there she was, this old biddy, looking dead at me with her old biddy glasses on like it was the most natural thing in the world, like I was putting on a show. So that's just what I did. At first I stood at the window and stared right back at her, rubbing my chest and abs. Then, after a week or so of this, I started rubbing baby oil on myself. Took it up a notch by walking around butt-ass naked, and when that didn't faze her, I tried to get my girlfriend to help me put on a sex show. Well, she wasn't having it. Too innocent, I guess, so get this: I masturbated instead, stroking it right in front of the window. The old biddy watched this too, but the next night she wasn't there. Poof, gone. Wasn't there the next night either. That was the last night she watched me. I guess she got to see what she'd been waiting for all along."

In unison the girls let out a shriek, which spilled into rapid chatter that was like another language. Even in the dim party lights, their darting eyes stood out, fine russet and amber stones. Their bodies shook with laughter as they slapped their thighs and rocked their heads back. The flurry of motion seemed to release scent from them: ripe sweat and vanilla oil with traces of almond. Iris's perfect afro eclipsed broad sections of the room in its orbit. Other girls had been either repulsed or aroused by the story, unambiguously so. None had ever reacted like this. And something else was off. Iris's wild mouth and eyes appeared to move independently of the rest of her face. She looked like a defective plastic doll.

"What the fuck?" Sybil said finally. In her accent, the word *fuck* became for us a powerful sexual clue. "This one thinks he's a freak," she said and then sent Claudius's tassel spinning with a flick of her finger.

"Shame is the name of the game," he replied, with a flare of his nostrils. "It was the nonsense of that age." He was speaking a little too grandly now, even for him. "Let's get on with the nonsense of *this* age."



The girls whispered to each other, blew soft gibberish onto each other's necks.

"Well," Claudius said, "who's next?"

"Him," Iris said. We had their attention now. "What's he got to say?"

All three of them stared at me, waiting. There were a million ways I could go, but every corridor of my mind led to the same place.

"My dad," I began, saying the first and only words that came to me. I explained that he was a white man, born and raised in Italy. He would always call my mother his *cioccolata*. Whenever she was angry with him, yelling for one reason or another, he would laugh and pet her cheek. In those moments he would tell her she was *agrodulce*, always retaining some of her sweetness.

Claudius smiled when I said this. He liked when I used my Italian on girls.

I told them how much my father loved my mother and her family. He especially liked when her younger sisters would visit us. This was when I was a boy. Before they arrived I would sit on the rim of the tub and run my finger along the edge of the shower curtain, watching as he beautified himself. He'd put on cologne and decide whether to leave one or two buttons open at the neck of his finest shirts. He'd make sure his cheeks were perfectly stubbled. During the visits he charmed as he mixed drinks, kissed the backs of hands, and admired new hairstyles. He ladled praise over my pretty aunts in easy pours. I had always adored him.

Claudius had stopped smiling. I wasn't telling a shameful story. My story wasn't helping our cause at all. I wasn't sure what I was doing, but I kept on.

Things like this would frustrate my mother, I told them; she accused him of flirting and loudly complained about his lack of respect for her. One day, when I was twelve, something else really brought out her fury. She came home from work hours before I was expecting her, and found me at the kitchen table looking through my father's collection of dirty

magazines. I had seen his nudies before, and had previously avoided detection by taking only quick peeks, but this time I discovered, or could no longer ignore, the fact that my father had specific preferences. I was riveted by the curves of the women's buttocks, their dark nipples, and the dense blackness displayed between their thighs. My mother picked through the pile—I hadn't realized until then how many there were—and from time to time, between glances at me, she would touch a finger to the mute faces of the women in the pictures, strained into expressions of pleasure. Her deeply brown skin pressed against the images of theirs. My mother's silence unnerved me. I desperately wanted her to say something, anything at all, but she didn't. She simply took the entire stack from the table and gestured for me to go to my room.

When my father got home, he and my mother argued in the living room. I crept out and watched from the hallway.

"He's *twelve*," she kept saying to him. It was as if my father had sat me down to show me the magazines himself, or, worse, as if he had taken me to a whorehouse. Why would she blame him for what I did? I couldn't understand.

"Benito's curious, Doreen, almost a grown boy," my father replied. He thought it was no big deal, nothing to fuss about, and I agreed. "And isn't it good that he learns such women are beautiful? That his *mamma* is beautiful?"

"That's not what he's learning!" my mother screamed, and in that moment she looked hideous to me. "Don't you realize what you're teaching him? Don't you *see* what you're doing?"

At this, he took her into his arms and kissed her on the neck, a generous response to her wild nagging. She struggled against him for a little while, infuriated more by his actions than his words. But he kept kissing her neck, and biting it. He snuffed out her anger with his embrace, and between laughs he murmured his pet names for her: *cioccolata*, *agrodulce*. I raised myself a little, still observing them from the hallway, filled with a distinct feeling of pride.