

## Synopsis

Where is Gabriel Clay?

In *Empty Doorways*, detectives Ben Schwartz and Al Di Natale join the rest of Boston in searching for a missing black 12-year old. The neighborhood, where he lives with his grandmother, is plagued by drugs and violence. The George Washington Carver Charter School in Mattapan offers Gabriel a chance at a good education -- and basketball. He dreams of an NBA career. Few know that he has a secret, easy money with hidden dangers.

The school joins in the search, along with a recent graduate. Army captain Ty Douglass, wounded in Afghanistan, has returned to Boston for a state-of-the-art artificial leg, from a prosthetics company, which the Boston Marathon bombings made famous. Douglass reconnects with old friends Solomon Greer and Charles O'Toole, aka Tool. The three Afro-American men share a tragedy from their youth: the unsolved murder of a friend. Douglass suspects that his boyhood pals know more than they are saying.

*Empty Doorways* is about secrets. Gabriel Clay has his. So do Greer and Tool. Greer struggles with a bad conscience and drug addiction. Through Narcotics Anonymous, he hopes to find sobriety and peace. Tool's secret is that he is a criminal, posing as a businessman. Like his model, infamous gangster Whitey Bulger, Tool uses his connections in government, specifically to a city councilor, to stay ahead of the law, but the law of averages is catching up. .

The two detectives make scant progress. Personal problems also take their toll, such as Detective Di Natale's upcoming divorce. And more trouble is coming. Drug cartels are moving from wholesale into retail, threatening local drug dealers and suppliers. Tool and his confederates are in their sights.

The detectives risk their lives to solve their cases. Otherwise, there will be more empty doorways, loved ones never coming home.

Len Abram

[len.abram@verizon.net](mailto:len.abram@verizon.net)

[www.lenabram.com](http://www.lenabram.com)

# Empty Doorways, A Novel

## Len Abram

*A poem should be equal to:  
Not true.*

*For all the history of grief  
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.*

*For love  
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—*

*A poem should not mean  
But be.*

-- Archibald MacLeish

## Chapter One

The boy read the story in Ms. Colavita's eighth grade English class. He couldn't recall all the stories she taught. Forgotten things live in a place she called oblivion. He lost things there too. Not this one. For Gabriel Clay, the memory of what he read was as close as the sweat on his palms.

In the story, first the butterflies come and then the ice. Fighting for his life, the secret agent on the run felt as if butterflies were landing in his belly. They finally left, flew away, but his fear remained. Then came the cold: the agent felt frost coating his throat and chest, and his blood freezing into red snow. The boy shivered. Ms. Colavita said fear was powerful. She was right. It could turn people inside out.

Gabriel was scared, watching the walls of his bedroom, the posters thumb-tacked to the powdery plaster. Hoop stars and legends were shooting jumpers or driving through arms and legs for a perfect layup. He leaned against the headboard of his bed, stacked with the books he hadn't finished, and some he needed to start. The window shades were drawn. The light of the street lamps, white as milk, leaked through the thin blinds and spilled onto the floor.

Here it comes, he thought. The first insect landed inside his belly. Wings scratched, dry as bay leaves, until they grabbed onto a puff of air, and rose. Gabriel felt lighter, although the insect probably weighed less than the air lifting it. He had seen this flight in the nature films back at middle school. It was magical.

Few butterflies could be found around the neighborhood where he lived with his grandmother Maddie Clay. Gabriel had to go about three miles to Franklin Park. In broiling July woods and steamy August fields, butterflies flew by the dozens, yellows, whites, blues, and reds, and his favorite, orange and black, all the way from Mexico, he read.

The butterfly gone, chills started up his spine, knob by bony knob. *Settle down*, he cautioned himself. *Didn't JJ say, You player now?* The boy noticed that he too was starting to drop his verbs. *Player* meant to be in competition – yes, Gabriel was a competitor now, along with JJ, in his business. Ms. Colavita would have corrected JJ in his talk. It's not *ast*, but *ask*," she would insist, even in speech.

In English class, Ms. Colavita wouldn't let up on subject-verb agreement. "If we don't agree on anything, class, we will agree about subjects and verbs. It's not 'You be a good friend', but 'You are a good friend'," she commanded. "And make sure he or she is a *real* friend, interested in your well-being," she added. Gabriel could not say for sure if JJ was a friend, or a *real* friend. Maybe JJ's favorite expression answered this: "It ain't good or bad; it's good for business or bad for business. Ya know?"

Ms. Colavita influenced Gabriel long after school. She expected things from her students, things he didn't want to give. He heard her voice, warning, encouraging, biting down on the important words, like breaking nuts with her brilliantly white teeth.

"And I don't want to hear that profanity," she said, "the low words, the gutter words, borrowed from rappers! The N-word, the M-F-word, and that atrocious B-word, contempt for the women who make your lives possible. Do you know who these so-called artists are? They sell

poisons: hate, low expectations, and anger, all the while getting rich off of you. You're their victims, not their fans."

Gabriel hardly understood what Ms. Colavita said much of the time, but he did listen. She made him feel special. Tall as he was, she sat him in the front row so that the kids behind looked around him. She whispered to him after class, "I am keeping not one, but both eyes on you, Gabriel Clay. You have more in that mind of yours than you like to show."

She made him do his assignments over and over until they were perfect, then she called them acceptable. He had an A- last paper and a compliment. A smiley face. What a silly thing, but from her the smiley face was hard to get.

He was careful to avoid what she disliked. She didn't tolerate Ebonics. At first, Gabriel thought it was a disease from Africa. "Leave street talk out on the street," she told them. Her chocolate skin, darker than most of her students, and her straightened hair earned her the right to tell the class how to speak.

Gabriel was black too, more mocha than the darker-skinned Haitians or Somalis. His size might be from Africa, at least from what he read. JJ picked him because he looked older, Gabriel guessed. Wasn't he African-American? The African part was from the Masai warriors in Tanzania. His friend Henry pointed to a picture on the wall of Mr. Douglass's classroom. The African plains with a million animals like black smudges and in the forefront, tall, lean as saplings, black men with long spears and small shields.

The Masai too would probably bang their heads through doorways. The boy had to remind himself to duck. His grandmother said for him to get used to it: he'd spend a lifetime bending. "Doorways made for average folks. You most certainly not that," she said, half proud and half worried. People who are not average can get the wrong kind of attention.

Gabriel played competitive basketball on the neighborhood courts, his height advantages clear in his rebounding and jump shots, eyes nearly level with the hoop as he leaped. In the summer, some business dude, Mr. O'Toole, put up the money for prizes and a tournament. Gabriel played for his neighborhood, the Forester block, and won medals there and at the school. His charter school was still working on getting a competitive sports program, but Gabriel's physical ed teacher hinted that next year he could be on a JV team.

Everyone thought he was more grown up, mature they called it, looking and acting older than he was. They did not know how well he hid his anxieties, his butterflies and ice. When nervous as a toddler, Gabriel bit his lower lip. The spike of pain made him stop fretting. He bit down now, but it did no good. Before he tasted blood, he let up. Nothing helped, except getting it done and be home again. He walked barefoot to the kitchen, careful not to wake his grandmother. *Steady*, he told himself, and the word did nothing to settle him down.

In the light from the refrigerator door, he filled a glass with whole milk. The thick viscosity cooled his throat. Grandmother Maddie bought the whole milk to put weight on his scrawny backside. In the reflection of the glass cabinets, he saw the white mustache of the milk against his dark skin. He wiped it off with his arm. By then, his stomach had settled. He went back to

his room. Time to go. The underwear on the chair was cold. In the dark, he dressed and shivered. He pulled the blanket over his legs, and waited to warm up and for the clock to read a quarter to.

Twice, sometimes three in a month, he snuck out to meet JJ. That's what the neighborhood called him, *JJ*, although his last name was Filbert or Gilbert, and had nothing to do with *J's*, except maybe slang for the weed he sold. He was thinking back on how he hooked up with JJ, a few months ago.

The kids hung out in front of the 7/11 store, run by the Pakistani Mr. Malik. The wife came in a few days a week. She wore shiny dresses, wrapped up like a Christmas present, with her hair covered in a silk scarf. Mr. Malik alone watched the crowd that day, eyes like knife points darting from kid to kid, looking for a bag of chips stuffed under a sweater or a candy bar slid into a back pocket. The expensive things, the cigarettes and scratch tickets, stayed behind the counter.

Mr. Malik waved his arms to the boys to quiet down. He stood like a sentinel at the register, took in cash, and counted change. The store burst with noise, kids liberated from classrooms. They pushed against each other, spilled out the swinging doors until they filled the sidewalk, their racket scattered among the sounds of cars and trucks passing by.

A car sidled up to the curb in front of the store, the dual mufflers coughing with idling combustion. JJ was in his low-slung, silver Honda with the smoked black windows and the chrome wheels that spun after the car stopped. He just had the car detailed because the paint looked polished, wheels sparkling like glitter, tire walls glossy black. He parked in the handicapped zone, got out, and leaned against his car, making conversation with the high school and middle school kids, his current or future customers. This close to the school, a few hundred feet, he didn't do his drug business. It was a mandatory two years in jail, plus any additional *MDs*, that is, misdemeanors; or *felonious shit*, that is, felonies, as he called them.

JJ was watching the crowd of boys, and especially one way taller than the other kids. The students were holding their soda and candy. A few chewed on microwaved corndogs or bagels leftover from the morning. After six hours of charter school with its "No, sir," or "Yes, ma'am," they were rowdy, enjoying time, theirs to waste.

JJ thought himself an up-and-coming rapper. He hinted that he had done an album at a studio in Mission Hill, although none of his friends had heard it. While the bucket-sized speakers aimed from the trunk of his Honda blared bass and drums, JJ did a few hip-hop moves, old break dancing stuff, and then rapped to the assembled students about the 300 foot rule:

*JJ no fool  
300 by school  
do extra two  
DEA gotta rule.*

JJ surveyed his audience, in their charter school uniforms, wrinkled white shirts and crooked ties, matching blue backpacks, which they leaned outside against the store front. The

students laughed, bright white teeth and pink gums in the black and brown faces. That wasn't the response he was looking for, but JJ joined in. The kids accepted, even enjoyed him. He didn't look much older or larger than the group around the store.

JJ stretched his thin back against the door of the Honda, his knuckles under the eggs of his biceps to make them bulge. His feet tapped to the beat from his speakers. He fingered a braided gold chain so heavy it made marks on the pole of his neck. JJ pulled the pendant up on the chain from behind his T-shirt, and out came large gold letters, D-O-P-E.

One day after chatting up everyone, buying drinks and snacks, exchanging knuckle bumps and high-fives, JJ motioned to Gabriel to come over to the car. The boy held back. JJ called him by his first and last name, and offered him an ice cream. Gabe asked for a cone with chocolate and nuts on top. "Want a ride?" JJ asked. The boy hesitated until one of the others said, "Go ahead, Gabe. He ok."

JJ drove while the two of them finished their ice creams. The dealer seemed to inhale his and tossed the sticky cone on the highway. Gabriel ate his cone, after he had unwrapped three of Mr. Malik's thin napkins so it wouldn't drip on the imitation leather seats. They drove up Blue Hill Avenue and then to woodsy Blue Hills, where they parked in the lot near the nature trail. JJ offered Gabriel a joint, but the boy passed.

The dealer opened all the windows and smoked, the sweet odor mixing with pine from the trees. JJ got right to it: he had a job opening. *A job?* the boy thought. As JJ explained it, he was in the entertainment business, like video games and TV shows, except this was personal, "the game inside a dude." The law just didn't understand.

"So what? Drugs? Doctors give all kinds of pills. They use needles too, the docs. Every CVS and Walgreens got counters full of drugs. Well, I'm kind of a doctor, bringing joy to the world. If there were more joy in it, people wouldn't need what I sell."

To Gabriel, JJ seemed like a thoughtful person, meaning he did some thinking about things -- different from what they taught in school, but thinking all the same. JJ could teach courses about the streets, how they worked, who owned or controlled them. JJ explained that he had his own rules, the streets had its own rules. and they were righteous rules, no matter what the police said.

"Rules?"

"Yeah, sure," JJ said, disappointed that Gabriel didn't know their significance. "You gotta have rules, or nothing makes sense. A basketball hoop at home plate in a football game? No way. You gotta keep things separate."

"I don't sell to nobody under the age of 14," JJ continued. "When I was 14, I be a man, if you know what I mean, and a Daddy by 16; bitch left with the kid, went South, real South, where they got farms and corn and cotton and shit. What I going to do there? Plant weed? I sends her money once in a while. Her lawyer after me, but you know what the cost of living up here is, right? So I got to do my business."

"We're talking business now, man to man. This is how I run my entrarprise. These youngins, if they be 15, let's say, want to do weed or ice or molly and they got the cash, why I

say no? But 14 be my limit for weed and for sure anything else. If you over 16, you can buy what you got the cash for.”

“Do you check their ID’s?” Gabriel asked. It was a silly question, he knew, but a way to hold his own in the conversation.

“No, why would I?” JJ sounded annoyed again. “I always can tell them ages. You 14, right?”

“A couple of weeks,” Gabriel said. He didn’t look 12, his real age, or even 13. More like a high schooler, where he was headed. He hoped he spoke the words smoothly enough to sound like the truth.

“I been watching you. You look like a dependable,” JJ said.

*A dependable?* The boy did not know what JJ meant, although Gabriel was in line for advanced placement in English next year.

“Dependables,” JJ continued, “are them that do the right thing when no one looking. Most people are good in front of a police man or judge. Real test is what you do all alone. You get my thing?”

Gabriel got it – JJ’s *thing* meant *thinking*, but he couldn’t quite come up with the word. Close enough.

“Of course, if you be religious, then Jesus looking down and keeping score. But if you don’t believe in nothing, then you gotta keep your own score. It’s how I thing, you’ll see what I mean, that you a good student and a church goer. I seen you and your grandma walking up Blue Hill Avenue in any kind of weather, heading to that little church on the corner, one that used to be a fried chicken place.

“I got work for you to do, young man. The work be easy,” JJ said, “Delivery and pickup, like UPS. Nothing much to do and the money be good. You try it once and see for yourself.”

JJ passed a couple of twenties to Gabriel. “See, you already on payroll.”

Gabriel thumbed the two twenties. They felt good, so crisp the edges could cut skin. The bills seemed to warm his hands after the cold ice cream. What would his grandmother or the church deacon say? The boy knew JJ’s business. Everyone did. The church leaders warned the youngsters about the drugs and their dealers.

The closest lesson was his own mother; when she was using heavily, Maddie wailed that she couldn’t recognize her own daughter. The need for the drugs took her, like another person inside of her. JJ was not her supplier, that much the boy knew. It was someone who traveled through the neighborhood like a black ghost, in a Lexus, white as the North Pole.

JJ let on he knew who the man was, maybe even worked for him. They were in the same business. No wonder his grandmother thought drugs a demon, something the Devil thought up in his battle with the Lord. The deacon of their church confided that he didn’t think the Lord was winning.

His grandmother took Gabriel with her once when she went to get his mother from rehab. He was very little. His mother had been sleeping in bad places, abandoned buildings, and her skin was covered in bumps. She got out of rehab and went home, slept in Gabriel’s room on

his single bed, he on the couch again. She stayed with them off and on, once for a whole year. She got herself a job cleaning offices in Boston late at night, joined them at church, even attended his grammar school graduation.

Then she drifted, in Grandma Maddie's words. She stopped going to work, as if work came and went like the weather. She visited a friend, she said, and when she came back, her head sagged, chin resting on her chest, too heavy to lift. She stayed away more, until she didn't bother coming home. She forgot to say goodbye.

Now, he knew where she was, Framingham, where the women had their own prison. His grandmother had said that her daughter was in rehab again, and she might be, inside the walls of the prison. If she didn't get rehabbed soon, she might never come home. Maybe this time she'd make it.

If drugs took so much from him, why shouldn't he get something back? Why shouldn't he make some money? JJ's job paid way better than minimum wage. The hours were odd, but the money be good, as JJ would say.

Gabriel stuffed cash in a doubled sock in the back of a drawer. The more it bulged with cash, the more JJ influenced him. There was a computer camp this summer – and now he would have the money for that and a new computer, an Alienware or Razer Blade laptop, professional ones that would display the games with full graphics and sound. He could tell Grandma that he got a scholarship. In a way, it was the JJ scholarship. The money would have to be a secret. *His grandmother would wallop him with her heavy handbag*, the boy thought.

While his grandmother asleep, the boy began to slip out to meet JJ on a street or vacant lot. The location changed each time. JJ texted him: “*WS Locst end spring, same.*” JJ always called his business, *Wall Street*, or *WS*. The meeting was at the corner of *Locust and Spring Streets*, and it was the *same time*. JJ couldn't spell. By *end*, he meant *and*.

The drug dealer was never Ms. Colavita's student at George Washington Carver school. But JJ still encouraged Gabriel to continue his studies, what JJ called his *civil duty*, when Gabriel knew he meant his *civic duty*. Gabriel offered to be JJ's interpreter, but the dealer didn't get the joke.

JJ explained that he had been in the drug trade since the ninth grade. The truant officer ran after him until JJ turned 16 and was free. Excluding two years in juvenile detention and a year in grown-up prison, JJ stayed in his own business, with a dependable supplier nearby and many customers. He had his own territory, which he subdivided into franchises. The older kids said the fellow in the white Lexus had given JJ his territory. Gabriel heard that he controlled blocks of neighborhoods all the way to the expressway.

JJ said he'd recruited the boy to “solve his distribution problem from his franchisees.” He said this perfectly from watching TV, without an accent, a dropped syllable, or a curse word. The franchisees were the small dealers on street corners or by vacant lots. Gabriel would exchange bags with them from his school backpack for a tight roll of cash in an elastic band. He made the exchange smoothly, usually in an alley or a hallway. No one paid much attention to a tall middle school kid in his charter school uniform and backpack. JJ was proud that he thought the gig up.