



Every parent's nightmare

A famous Canadian singer-songwriter's family was almost destroyed when his son started bringing home dangerous new friends

DAN HILL | February 13, 2008 |

Over the last year and a half, three young adults who have set foot in my house, in the well-to-do, tree-lined Beaches neighbourhood of Toronto, have been murdered. All black, all by gunshot, all in Toronto. All three of these men had been in contact with my son, David, now 19. The first two murder victims I'd categorize as less than friends but more than acquaintances. But the third and most recent, Eric Boateng, I'd known quite well, because he had once been a close friend of David's. That friendship had eventually turned bad. Dangerously bad. Eric was shot to death Oct. 22, 2007, shortly after leaving the Don Jail, where he'd been visiting an inmate.

My son, in his dramatic and perilous journey to come to grips with his mixed-race identity, had opened up to me a world that had previously been closed. A world where violent deaths for young black males in Toronto have been, for quite a while now, a matter of course. This story is my attempt to open up a tiny window on that world for people like me, who have lived a relatively blessed and sheltered life. The product of a middle-class, mixed-race upbringing in Toronto's squeaky clean suburban Don Mills and the son of a celebrated black human rights leader and white mother committed to social change, I was desperate, as a teenager, to forge my own identity. In my case this meant dropping out of school, adopting an apolitical, what's-all-this-race-stuff-got-to-do-with-me-anyway attitude (anything to piss off my parents), and then, somehow, achieving significant fame and wealth as a singer-songwriter before hitting my mid-twenties.

It was precisely that success that, to some degree, alienated my son — partly because, throughout the first dozen years of his life, I was working for long stretches of time out of the country. The considerable material wealth that resulted made my family vulnerable to the predations of some of the less fortunate kids my son chose to befriend. And brought me face-to-face with all manner of political and racial realities; the kind of things my father had always struggled to address, the kind of things I'd tried my best to ignore.

The last time I saw Eric was on an afternoon three years before he was murdered. I'd just barely managed to escort him out of my house, an accomplishment akin to winning a split decision in an inner-city boxing competition — except that the contest had just begun. Now, we were face-to-face on nearby Queen Street, staring each other down.

"David, get home," I shouted at my son, who at 16 was two years younger than Eric. Eric was glowering, not so much at me as through me. His hooded brown eyes seemed more detached than threatening, as if he really didn't give a f--k about anything — his life, my life, anybody's life. I knew I had to stop staring at the cast on his right forearm (he'd broken his wrist while fracturing another ill-matched opponent's jaw).

"David, I told you to get home."

If Eric was going to beat me up, I didn't want David to be there, watching. No son should witness his father getting creamed in a street fight. But I could tell by the nervous smile fixed on David's face that he wasn't going anywhere. He wasn't about to miss this matchup for the world.

I'd never, in my 50 years, been in a fight. Eric had spent the better part of his life fighting. He was damned good at it. Over the last year, his frame had muscled up. Maybe it was Eric's turn to strike back now: at his father, who had brought him to Canada 10 years before; at the distant memory of his mother, who had refused to leave their native Ghana; at this cold and sterile country. Or maybe my theories were complete crap. I once believed that Eric could be saved; look where that had landed me now.

"Eric, it's time for you to go home. You know you're not welcome here."

I'd wanted my voice to sound resolute. But what escaped my mouth sounded more like a plea than an order.

"David's coming home with me," said Eric. "To finish up our trade. He owes me."

I knew that "trade" was code for "extort." Meaning that Eric expected David to accompany him home to hand over a wad of money or several hundred dollars' worth of his faux hip-hop wardrobe in order to avoid being knocked unconscious. Eric had pulled this kind of "give me your stuff or I'll knock you out" stunt on a lot of kids. He'd perfected his "lights out" method: darting behind his victim and then quickly wrapping his powerful forearm around his victim's neck, cutting off the oxygen supply and causing the victim to lose consciousness. Of course, no one dared call the cops on Eric. Snitching was tantamount to taking a leap off the CN Tower.

"David isn't going anywhere. He's grounded."

"I'm not leaving till me and David settle things."

"Whatever needs to be settled can be settled with me."

"You can't buy me. I don't need your f--kin' money. I got plenty of my own."

Yeah, right. Three guesses where you got that money, I almost said. But another glance at Eric's cast caused me to reconsider.

"Look Eric, all I'm saying is if David owes you something, he's not in a position to make it up to you. You need me for that."

This bought me a little time as Eric regarded me with a mixture of suspicion, contempt and boredom. I didn't know that Eric had already robbed David that afternoon. But then, in an unbelievable display of greed and bravado, Eric had returned to our place to rob David again. Knowing he'd been banned from our house, he'd been wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap yanked down over his face when my wife happened upon him, rummaging through David's bedroom closet.

"That's not Eric," David had insisted when Bev ordered Eric to leave the house. Eric, emboldened by his 70-lb. weight advantage, refused to budge until Bev threatened to call the cops. When I appeared from my studio (I'd been listening to music on headphones with the volume obliterating all outside sound), late for the parade as usual, Eric, clenching and unclenching his hands, had reluctantly moved to our front foyer. He only retreated further, to Queen Street, because he assumed David was returning home with him. I might just as well have fed my son to the lions.

Had it ended at our house, with Eric swiping some of David's overpriced clothes and calling it a day, I would have considered it a valuable lesson for David. He knew that Eric was serious trouble, that he had already been in and out of jail for a variety of crimes. David had been warned, time and time again, to stay far away from Eric. But it was the danger, the drama, the distinct, heady possibility of violence, that fascinated my son. That and the fact that there's no thrill, as a 16-year-old, like the rush of defying your parents.

"I want what's owed me. David's lost some of my jerseys. They're worth a lot."

"I'm confused Eric. How do you think David should pay you back?"

"Some of my jerseys and jeans are still there. In his room. And I have some of his stuff at my place. He's gotta come back to my place so we can finish our trade."

"But what I don't understand is that if he owes you stuff, why does he need to go to your place?"

"That's none of your business."

Eric, twitching with restlessness, glared over at David. Then back at me. Clearly, this conversation wasn't going to get him what he wanted. As he weighed the pros and cons of smashing his cast across my condescending mouth, he did a quick scan of the immediate surroundings, checking for . . . what? Witnesses? Cops? Getaway routes? He spotted the barber across the street watching the scene unfold. Two neighbours walked by. What the hell, I thought, doesn't anyone know how to dial 911? Still, the ominous spell, the standoff that drew Eric, David and I together, had been broken.

"You and me will finish this later," Eric said, eyeballing David with an almost laid-back menace. It was his very matter-of-factness that made me realize that this was no idle threat. Then he thrust

his right arm, dull white cast and all, in the air, gave me the finger, turned around, and slowly loped down Queen Street as if he were window shopping on a Saturday afternoon.

Three years before that confrontation, six years before he was murdered, Eric was working at Lick's, a hamburger joint in our Beaches neighbourhood where the patty-flippers sing goofy sixties pop songs to affect an air of candy-floss merriment. David had a summer job close by, coaching little kids in a theatre day camp. David, who took his lunch breaks at Lick's, had immediately noticed Eric, the only black kid working there. When Eric discovered that David shared his enthusiasm for basketball and rap music, something of an anomaly among the skateboard-crazed, Blink182-brainwashed Beaches teenagers, he started to give David free ice-cream cones. What better way to strike up a friendship?

From David's vantage point, the timing was perfect. He was 13, and gradually pulling away from his Caucasian friends, who were baffled by his abrupt and seemingly inexplicable desire to embrace the black side of his heritage. This was a 180-degree turn from a few years earlier, when David, like me at his age, was embarrassed by and frequently in denial of his African-American heritage. I rather naively took this as a passing stage, hoping that, ultimately, after ping-ponging back and forth between I'm-white-only and I'm-black-only extremes, he'd come to embrace his mixed-race background.

So Eric became a fixture at our house, one of many black kids regularly camped out there. He would patiently listen to David spit out his latest rap lyric, always offering encouragement. "If your friends don't respect you for doing what you love, then they're all fakes," he'd scoff, the odd time one of David's old neighbourhood friends would drop by, trying earnestly to figure out why David appeared to be changing before their eyes. Eric bore a passing resemblance to the famous rapper, 50 Cent. That, along with his obvious strength and athletic skill, made him popular with girls. He'd won Classmate of the Month a few years back, but now, at 15, appeared embarrassed by his intelligence, as if it might possibly take away from his more obvious appeal to starry-eyed suburban girls and affluent, sheltered kids like David — an appeal that was as primal as it was discomfiting, drawing as it did on his distant, brooding intensity and his exotic African accent.

But if Eric was made to feel like something of an alien, flipping burgers for predominantly upper-middle-class white Beachers, he felt equally uncomfortable amongst David's other new black friends, who were from Regent Park, Toronto's culturally diverse and oldest social housing project, where seven in 10 families live below the poverty level. Eric, an only child with no community ties, lived at the city's western edge. He must have been struck by the fact that almost all of David's Regent friends had grown up together, in large families, with strong, single mothers. He never referred to his mother, and only spoke of his father on the odd occasion he showed up, late at night, at our door, explaining that he'd had a fight with his dad and asking to stay with us for a few days.

"Please dad, can't Eric move in with us, for good?" David would plead, as if Eric was some stray human desperately in need of shelter. And love.

I only lost my temper with him once. It was one of those wretched freezing-rain winter nights and I'd agreed to drive him home. We headed west on the expressway, the roads slippery,

visibility next to nil, my diabetes-weakened eyes stinging from the strain of squinting. I was trying to make sense of the five feet of highway I could barely see.

"C'mon, Eric. For the tenth time, where's your f--king exit?"

"Ahhh, mmmm, somewhere 'round here."

"Well, which one? Jesus, do you want me to just drop you off at some random intersection so you can walk home?"

"Uh, I think maybe not this turn, but the next one."

Then it hit me. Eric had never been driven, by car, to his apartment. For all I knew, short of me taking him and David to the occasional movie, he'd never even been in a car before.

The second to last time I saw Eric was five years before his murder. He was in my kitchen, 16 years old and straining so hard to be on his best behaviour that I felt sorry for him.

"I've come to ask you to not ban me from your house anymore. I really like David. We're friends. I've always watched his back. I got his jersey back from that guy who stole it."

"Eric, trust me, you're not the only person banned from this house. Only one or two of David's friends are allowed in here anymore. Too much stuff has gone missing."

"I've never stolen a thing from here."

"I'm not accusing you. All I'm saying is that my job, as David's father, is to protect him. He's not street-savvy like you. I know you won't hurt him but the people he meets through you could. And they already have."

While David too, thankfully, didn't want Eric around the house anymore, it was important that Eric get the impression that I was the bad guy here, so that David not suffer. And naturally, I couldn't tell Eric that I knew he'd swiped some of David's clothes out of his duffel bag when they were both at the downtown YMCA. Or that he'd beaten up a TTC streetcar driver. (A deserved comeuppance from my son's point of view, as the driver had reportedly called Eric a nigger for sauntering onto the streetcar without paying.) Then David would be labelled a snitch, and be in for some serious reprisals.

"No one's gonna dare hurt David. Not when I'm with him."

Incredible. Eric was suggesting an exchange of services: if I gave him full rein of my house and looked the other way whenever he "borrowed," say, David's DVD player, or my video camera, or one of my vintage microphones, he'd be David's bodyguard.

"Look Eric," I continued, ignoring David's squirms and sighs and exaggerated eye rolling — his signal to Eric that he sided with him and not his lunk-headed dad — "you keep getting into serious trouble with the law. There are some charges still pending against you."

"I never did any of those things. If I did I'd already be in jail." The sudden, startling sound of Eric yelling — the mention of "law" had evidently struck a chord in him — caused me to bolt upright in my chair, as though I'd been slapped. For a few long seconds all that could be heard was the scratch of my chair scraping backwards across the kitchen floor, out of striking distance.

That was the truly scary thing about Eric. One wrong word, at the wrong time, could cause him to erupt. There was a frying pan within my reach. I was waiting for an excuse to crash it over his head. But somehow I knew that Eric, even as he was measuring me through his suspiciously familiar sunglasses (didn't David own a pair just like them?), wasn't going to try anything. Not this time.

"I'll tell you what, Eric," I said. "Let's see. If I find that you've stayed out of trouble for several months, and if all of these charges against you are dropped, and if you're still in school, you and I will have another chat."

"Yeah, alright," Eric said, his voice once again whisper quiet, his anger subsiding, or rather, retreating as quickly and mysteriously as it had exploded. Now he just looked sad and defeated. How humiliating, to ask to be invited back where you're not wanted. What kind of person would be so desperate as to subject himself to that kind of rejection?

Shortly after Eric was officially banned from our house in 2002, David was badly beaten by a group of white Beaches thugs, whose sport of choice was attacking kids of colour. They dragged him off his bicycle late one evening and muscled him into the park across from the library. They pinned him on his back while the gang's leader shot him in the knee with a flare gun. The force of the explosion blew off massive chunks of David's skin and flesh, cutting deep into the bone.

I have no idea how he made it home, afterward, unassisted. Nurses had to come to our house every day for three weeks, cleaning and then packing his wounds. (He was to walk with a pronounced limp for a couple of years.) David, fearing, among other things, more beatings from this group if he snitched, refused to press charges. Bev and I reported the incident to the police, but without our son's co-operation, and with no witnesses willing to come forward, there was nothing the police could do. They did warn us, however, that the leader of this group, still a minor, had been in and out of juvenile detention for armed robbery. Eric's offer of protection was starting to make a kind of nauseating sense.

With Eric banned, though, I wasn't surprised that David was hanging around with his Regent friends so as not to feel vulnerable. I was shocked at my growing attachment to some of them, at least the law-abiding ones. They were, for the most part, wonderfully sweet, engaging kids, eager for even the slightest connection with an older male role model. They may have thought they could learn things from me, but really, I was the one getting the education, realizing that male role models, be it older brothers with jobs, or fathers to attend their football games, or a group leader at a local rec centre, appeared to be a vanishing species.

"That was an awfully long time for you to be away," Manley, David's closest and most loyal friend, could be counted on to say, in a scolding tone, whenever I returned from an out-of-town songwriting assignment.

After our Queen Street standoff in 2004, Eric was soon back in detention, convicted of dealing cocaine. But with Eric out of the picture, I was forced to come to terms with something I'd been painfully slow to figure out, perhaps because I didn't want to face it: there were a lot more Eric's out there, that really, Eric was a symptom of a far greater, potentially life-threatening problem of David's. Even though he was only bringing the "good" kids back home, he hadn't lost his puerile fascination with the out-and-out thugs, whose behaviour was criminal to the extreme. They never hurt David, but they stole from him constantly, something he took to be the price of admission. Hanging with this crowd was like hanging with the mob: easy to get in, damned hard to get out. And the price kept getting higher.

David started receiving collect calls from inmates at the Don Jail and related juvenile detention cells. (By calling David, and then pressuring him to connect the call to a third party — say a girlfriend — both the inmate and his girlfriend escaped payment.) One time I overheard a kid threatening David when I picked up the extension.

"Shhh, my dad's on the line."

"I don't give a f--k. What's your dad gonna do? Call the cops on me?"

When Bev cancelled the three-way feature, she started getting death threats on her voice mail: "David, we're gonna make you and your dad watch while we slit Bev's throat."

Bad enough that they knew my wife's first name. But the vicious cackle that followed the threat, dovetailing into a manic chorus of group laughter — how many kids were in on this threat? — transformed me, briefly, into the kind of knee-jerk reactionary I'd always loathed. Time to buy a gun and move into one of those gated upper-class communities so many of my U.S. songwriting partners resided in, the very places I'd always been so quick, in my Canadian haughtiness, to judge. Bev, wisely ignoring my Charlton Heston impersonation, called the police.

They determined that the threats had come from a stolen cellphone and, on their recommendation, we started to record all the conversations that took place on Bev's line. The death threats slowed down, replaced by fake 911 calls that saw ambulances squealing up to our house in the middle of the night, followed by phone messages promising that next time, the three of us would be carried out on stretchers.

"The three of you should move to another province," said our visibly shaken family therapist. That this same doctor had recently emigrated here from South Africa, due to the violence he and his family had been exposed to in his homeland, gave his suggestion all the more weight and immediacy.

Most troubling of all was that, regardless of the never-ending consequences imposed by Bev and me (grounded, with no allowance, no computer, no phone, no friends over, and worst of all, two

hours a week with some absolutely befuddled and ever-changing shrink), despite the growing swirl of ominous drama choking all manner of life out of our household, David's pattern of conduct remained the same. A week or two of laying low and playing contrite would be followed by an impulsive outburst of shockingly self-destructive behaviour. It culminated in my (and perhaps David's) first-ever knock-down, drag 'em out. We broke the bed, a lamp, and Bev's heart: her "both of you, get out of this house!" were the magic words that persuaded me to release David from my headlock, whereupon I wrestled him out of our bedroom and locked the door. Only later did I realize I'd scratched his face, badly, with my long, guitar-playing fingernails. That's when Bev and I decided that, for everybody's safety, David would move, and we'd stay put.

In September 2005, we shipped him off to stay with close friends of ours in Vancouver, Wash., where he'd attend school for the year. The sad irony of flying David to the U.S. to escape harm in Canada was by no means lost on us. The following year, we sent him to a strict boarding school in St. Catharine's, Ont. Those turned out to be years of relative calm. The death threats, the screaming ambulances, the eerie three-way phone hookups from jail stopped completely.

In June 2007, David was out of school and back living with us. At 18, he'd grown out of his wannabe thug phase, and had let go of his long-held ambition of becoming a rap singer. Now, inspired in part by his uncle Lawrence Hill's success as an author, David had hopes of someday being a writer. He'd always been gifted with words, particularly the written word. The recent murders of two black males, both part of David's sprawling network of friends (another half-dozen kids in David's circle were in jail), had left him badly shaken. And most importantly, he'd developed some empathy, not to mention a realization that he was but one blunder away from being shipped off (quite possibly to jail) if he reverted back to his earlier behaviour. His core of "good" Regent friends fell back into his life, maturing from gangly, uncertain 14-year-olds to self-assured, considerate young men, employed or in school.

And despite David's anger at me for working outside of Canada for so many years, at Bev and me for shipping him away to school for two years ("It was your decision to have me! Mom, you chose to f--k Dan Hill! Now you can't just get rid of me!" he would rail, as though Bev was some brazen groupie and I was Gene Simmons on Viagra), the three of us gradually grew closer. Family life, still rocky at times, was incrementally improving.

Then Eric was released from jail. David started receiving messages from him, on Facebook and MSN. According to Eric, they had some old business to settle. More trades. Only now Eric, after surviving years in the penal system, was more dangerous than ever. Possibly lethal. He'd been rounded up as a suspect in the 2005 Boxing Day murder of high-school student Jane Creba on Yonge Street and, although charges against him had been dropped due to insufficient evidence, the mention of his name always brought back the warning of our family therapist: "Move out of Toronto. The sooner the better."

Then Eric appeared on our lawn at 2 a.m. one summer morning, taunting David, who was standing on the front porch with a couple of his friends: "What would your parents do if they saw me in your house?" When Bev spotted him, Eric dashed down the street and hid under a parked

car. Fortunately, there were too many kids around for Eric to pull anything. If he was going to inflict damage, he was likely to do it when none of David's friends were milling about.

I didn't want to tell David that I was frightened. Over the years I'd stood eyeball-to-eyeball with kids who'd spent years in and out of jail, for pretty well every crime imaginable, and told them to get off my property and stay off. I'm not tough, but I acted tough. My strategy worked with them and they backed off. But it wouldn't work with Eric. Unlike any other kid, Eric had spotted the fear in my eyes during our Queen Street standoff. And jail — "it sure as hell beats sleeping on the streets in the dead of winter," he'd once told David — was an unlikely deterrent. Not that we could go to the police. What were we going to say? Eric had served his time and, besides, the old lose-lose situation hadn't changed: calling the cops could very possibly result in a death sentence for David.

A month passed since Eric was spotted outside our house. Then another month. I relaxed a little and went on tour across Ontario with Stuart McLean's Vinyl Café show. I tried to convince myself that Eric had decided to back off. Maybe he considered David, despite his obvious material advantages, not quite as vulnerable as other kids whose parents were rarely around to run interference.

"I saw Eric at the barbershop today," David told me, anxious, as always, to get an extreme reaction. I was at home for a couple of days before resuming the Vinyl Café tour.

"What the hell were you doing at the same barbershop as Eric?"

"It's where everyone goes. Eric shows up every Friday. People there have told him to stop coming by. That he's pissed too many people off."

"Have you learned nothing from these last two years?" I snapped. "Every time I pick up a newspaper, a kid's been shot dead. Kids you've invited into this house. Do you want us to send you away again? Because hanging round a barbershop that Eric frequents is likely to get you shot."

"Eric's not going to do anything to me with everyone around," David said, at once delighted by my predictable parental horror, and rattled by the thought of being kicked out of our house. "He just laughed at the people who told him to stop coming by. He knows nothing's gonna happen to him when everyone's scared of him."

"David, it's not Eric I'm worried about. It's you." David was almost 19. He was running out of time, running out of mistakes, running out of lives. And he was also reaching out to me, looking for me to impose more boundaries.

"David, you have a choice. You can live with us and promise to stay clear of places Eric, and his like, frequent, or you can move out of the house and feel free to live and die by your own rules."

David chose the former option. Hard as he tried not to show it, he has a sweetness and gentleness about him that I find heart-wrenching. Even though, by and large, he'd grown out of his mind-

boggling impulsivity, a part of me wondered, every Friday and Saturday night that he ventured outside the house with his friends: "Will I ever see him again? Alive?"

One beautiful fall day, a week or so after our barbershop conversation, I returned from a long bike ride. Bev greeted me with the strangest look on her face.

"Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for the past two hours."

"Out cycling. What's wrong?"

"Eric's been murdered."

"What?"

"He was shot to death. In front of the Don Jail. He'd been visiting a prisoner there."

I felt an intense relief. Then, an immense sadness. For the third time in 18 months a young man I knew, a man who'd spent time in my house, who'd shared meals with my family, had been shot dead. No one has ever scared me the way Eric did. But still, I kept thinking back to that time five years before when he'd begged to be let back into my house. Maybe, had I been willing to put in the time and the mentoring, I could have possibly saved him. I'll never know. What I did know, or at least hope, more than anything, was that for the first time in years, my family was safe. M

Grammy and five-time Juno award winner Dan Hill is working on a memoir, to be released in 2009, about his father, Dan Hill III, the founding director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Dan's son, David, worked very closely with his father on this article. It couldn't have been written without his help.