

Will

What's in it for me? Get to know the real Will Smith

How do you build a wall? When Will Smith was a boy, he learned the hard way. The wall by his father's shop was crumbling. Will's father was a contractor back then, so he wasn't going to hire anyone to fix it. He put Will and his brother, Harry, on the job instead. That summer went slowly. It was a long wall: 20 feet. The task seemed endless. They'd never get it done, Will said. His father marched over and told him to forget the wall. There is no wall, he said. All you have to do is think about the brick in your hand. You add the cement and then you lay it down, perfectly. And then you take another brick and do the same with that one too. Building a wall and building a life are surprisingly similar. Welcome to the Blink to Will Smith's memoir. Fittingly enough, it's called Will. Oprah called it the best memoir she has read in her lifetime. Obviously, we don't have enough space to cover everything about Will's life. So, instead, we'll cover seven defining moments of his life. By the end, you won't have the full, detailed picture. But you will have a little mosaic – a mosaic of moments. So let's begin our journey. It all starts in – you guessed it – West Philadelphia.

Will's Future

It's the year 1985, we're in Philly – more specifically, in the leafy, middle-class neighborhood of Wynnefield. Will is just returning from school. He's seventeen years old. As he enters the house, he senses that something is wrong. Sure enough, his mom's at the kitchen table, with a look somewhere between sadness and anger on her face. That's unusual. With his father, trouble's never been far away. There's no pleasing the man. A hard-drinking disciplinarian with a mean streak, he's always been moody and unpredictable. But with Mom, it's different. They've never not been on the same page. Until now. Will is no scholar, but he's done well in school so far – well enough to be able to get into a good college. That means everything to his mother. What you have to know about Mom is that she came up in a poor family in a bad neighborhood during hard times. College saved her. It's what put her in this comfortable brick house in leafy, middle-class neighborhood of Wynnefield. Times have changed, sure, but the world's still a brutal place – especially for a young Black man like her son. He has to go to college. That's her truth. But Will's grades have started to slip. And that, he assumes, explains the look on her face. A while back, Will's cousin introduced him to hip-hop. He's been rapping ever since – hippity-hopping around, as his Mom says. Right now, he's teamed up with a disk-jockey named Jeff Townes. They call themselves Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, and they've been making waves – first in Philly, then in New York. Hip-hop's still new, but everyone in the scene knows it's the next big thing. And they're riding the wave. There's even talk of a record deal. But hip-hop, Mom says, isn't a career. It's a hobby. He can rap but he can't be a rapper. That's when Will says it – the thing that'll break her heart. He doesn't want to go to college. It's a stalemate. Neither Mom nor son backs down. Enter Daddio. For Mom, it's education that matters. For her husband, it's hard work. They're different like that. She chooses words with care, speaking with academic finesse. Daddio, though, is a poet of profanity. Will remembers how he once called a man – and please excuse his French – “dirty rat, cocksuckin', low-down, mangy pig fucker.” On hip-hop, though, they see eye to eye: college is a safer bet than a music career. But there's an artist underneath the hard exterior of Daddio. Thing

is, this cussing old soldier didn't dream of owning the ice-packing business that puts food on the Smiths' table. He wanted to be a photographer. But his parents made him sell his camera. Art, they said, wasn't "practical." So Daddio agrees. Will can pursue his music career - with one condition: if Will doesn't succeed in a year, he's going to college.

The Fresh Prince Rises

Hip-hop has its roots in New York street parties. Disk jockeys - DJs - played records, looping the most danceable parts of popular tracks. Eventually, DJs started using two turntables so they could keep these beats going longer. Since they were busy managing two records playing at the same time, they couldn't interact with the crowd. That's where the "master of ceremonies" - the MC - comes in. They talked to the audience, bragging about the DJ and generally hyping people up. The most creative MCs then started talking in rhymes that matched the rhythm of the DJ's beats. Jamaican immigrants called that "rapping." And that's how hip-hop was born. In the '80s, hip-hop was still new and underground. As folks said back then, it was "fresh." That's what Will's stage name meant. It was a boast. He was fresh because he was the tip of the spear of this revolutionary new music. And he was a prince because he was the best at what he did - rapping. Boasting was all the rage in early hip-hop. Crowds would gather to listen to two rappers trading barbs over beats. Usually, they'd play up their toughness, acting gangster, bragging about money and women. Will was different. In high school, there were plenty of guys who had better voices. Some were just better poets. But no one could make a crowd laugh like him. He had an eye for comic details. If he saw someone's pants were sitting just a little too far above their shoes, he'd use it: Look at you, pretendin' you all fly / looks like your shoes went to a party and your pants got high. It doesn't matter how tough the other guy's acting. If the crowd laughs at the line, it's game over. If you're funny, you're untouchable. Will made it look easy. But the truth was that the Fresh Prince had been molded by the unrelenting work ethic of his father. While other kids with talent were cutting class and smoking weed, he filled notebook after notebook with rhymes, practicing verses and punchlines in front of a mirror. You don't have to be a gangster when you're relentless. Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince's debut single, "Girls Ain't Nothing but Trouble," was released in 1986. The album that followed in '87, *Rock the House*, sold more than 500,000 copies. That was just the start. He's the DJ, I'm the Rapper, the follow-up album, was released in early 1988. It sold more than three million copies and won the duo a Grammy. Will had barely hit his 20s and he had it all - fame, wealth, adoration. He was invincible. Or so he thought.

The Miserable Millionaire

He felt numb. Empty. Sick. Directionless. There was no script. And so he picked up a poker from the fireplace, went to the front door and smashed every glass panel. And then he left. Will had just learned that his childhood sweetheart had cheated on him. Fame, money, the new house he'd bought for them - none of it meant anything without Melanie Parker. They'd been together since they were 16. Will's idea of himself was bound up with Melanie's opinion. It hung on her approval. If she cheated on him, it was because of his own deficiency. If he'd been a better man, she wouldn't have done it. That idea bought him a one-way ticket to misery. That was 1988 - and the start of the Fresh Prince's downfall. He tried to fill the emptiness. He bought another house and

three luxury cars to park in the driveway. His dad was not impressed. We've all got one ass, he said - what's anyone need three cars for? But there were people in Philly whom it did impress. Will started partying with gangsters. They gambled on everything - including those flashy cars. He bought a motorbike and crashed it. He slept with dozens of women, but that only made him feel worse. He also developed a mean streak, just like his dad. Wherever he went, he got into fights. When you don't have money, sex, and success, those things start looking like answers. If you had them, you tell yourself, you'd feel great. But you can be rich, famous, successful - and still feel miserable. That's when a terrifying thought kicks in: maybe the problem is you. Will dismissed that thought. No, he just needed more money. More women. More Grammys. But things were falling apart just as quickly as they'd come together. Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince's next record, *And in This Corner*, was released in '89. They spent \$300,000 hiring a recording studio in Jamaica, but they barely stepped foot in it. There was too much rum punch to be drunk in the Caribbean sun. The partying took its toll. Will wasn't putting in the hours, and it showed. The record was a flop. And then Uncle Sam came knocking. Will hadn't paid a cent of income tax. The IRS took everything - the money, the house, the cars. He was broke. Worse, the FBI was closing in on his gangster friends.

There was nothing to keep him in Philly. In 1989, he decided to get out. He borrowed enough money for a deposit on an apartment and a plane ticket. Destination: Los Angeles.

The Turnaround

Benny Medina is the real-life Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. He wasn't born and raised in West Philadelphia, but in Watts, Los Angeles, a Black and Hispanic neighborhood that's also one of the city's poorest. After his mother's death, he ended up living with a wealthy white family in Bel-Air. He went into showbiz and became one of LA's best-known TV producers. When Will met him in '89, Benny was working on a script based on his own life story. He just needed a lead. And so he asked Will a life-changing question: "Can you act?" Technically, the answer was no - he'd never had formal training or been cast in any role. But performing in front of an audience and eliciting passions? Playing the role people want you to play, rather than who you actually are? Sure Will could act. He said yes. Benny figured he could and promised to be in touch. In Philly, "Being Hollywood" is the definition of insincerity, and that's how Will thought Benny was. It was just one of those LA moments. He wrote it off and moved on. Fast forward a couple of months. Benny calls. Quincy Jones, the producer of Michael Jackson's albums, is celebrating his birthday. It's a rare chance to meet this music-industry legend. When Will shakes his hand, Quincy gives him a look. The kind of look you give someone when you've heard a lot about them but haven't made up your own mind yet.

He's in a good mood, though, and they hit it off. Then Will tells him he's from West Philadelphia. Quincy says that's where Will's character is going to be from before he goes to Bel-Air. You know, on the show Benny's been talking about. Quincy isn't messing around, either. He claps his hands. The room's cleared of furniture, creating an impromptu stage. Guests fall silent. An audience forms.

He presses a script into Will's hands. Everyone who needs to sign off on this is in the room, he says, and that doesn't happen often. It's now or never. He gives Will ten minutes to prepare for the first audition of his life. What happens next is a blurry collage of punch lines and laughs. The applause jolts Will back to consciousness. The room rises. There's an ovation. Then there's Quincy, shouting about analysis causing paralysis. He orders lawyers to draw up contracts and producers to sign them; he tells

Will where to put his own name. By the end of the evening, the show was a done deal. That was March 14, 1990. The writing, the auditions, and the final casting was done by the end of April. Shooting started in mid-May. On September 10, 1990, the first episode of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* aired on NBC. Will had arrived in Hollywood.

Foundations

Will's manager handed him the phone. It was Steven Spielberg. He wanted to meet. An hour later, Will was in a helicopter headed east out of New York City. He had just turned down a script titled *Men in Black*. Now he was flying out to an estate in the Hamptons to explain why a movie produced by the great director wasn't good enough for Will Smith.

It was a nervy ride. He had to tell Spielberg that he loved the idea – that was true – while also persuading him that the timing wasn't right. Without burning his bridges. Will had just starred in his biggest role yet – US Marine Captain Steven Hiller, a man who overcomes adversity, saves the earth, and gets the girl. It's hard to overstate the success of *Independence Day*, the second-highest-grossing film of all time back in 1996. But *Independence Day* was about aliens. So was *Men in Black*. It's easy to get pigeonholed in Hollywood. Will didn't want to be “the alien guy.” The helicopter touched down. And there was Spielberg, dressed in an old T-shirt and jeans and looking like he didn't know he was Spielberg, legendary director of *Indiana Jones*, *Jurassic Park*, *Jaws*, *Schindler's List*, and *E.T.* They chatted over lemonade. He saw Will's point, Spielberg said, but he also thought he was looking at it all wrong. *Men in Black* wasn't really about aliens – it was about a hero's journey. That's one of the oldest narratives in the world, common to every culture that's ever told stories. A hero receives a “call to adventure” – something happens in their world that forces them to undertake a dangerous journey of discovery. It culminates in the “supreme ordeal” – a life-and-death struggle. If they're wise enough to overcome their traumas, they find the strength to prevail. Victorious, they return home with their hard-won wisdom – their “treasure.” That's what allows them to live a life worth living. So many great movies follow that arc. It doesn't matter if there are aliens or sharks or Nazis seeking the Holy Grail. What draws us in is that these stories penetrate. They move us. They make us laugh and cry and gasp. That, Spielberg concluded, was the thing to look for in a script or a pitch. Steven Spielberg didn't just convince Will to take the *Men in Black* role that day. He also unlocked the key to Will Smith's formula for cinematic success.

Father and Son

Will's second son, Jaden, was born in 1998. He followed his father into movies when he was 12, starring in *The Karate Kid* alongside Jackie Chan. Will produced the movie, and he was a relentless taskmaster. Everything had to be just right – especially with his son's performances. Jaden's scenes were endlessly reshot. And just when it looked like the project was reaching its conclusion, Will extended filming in China by three months. So father and son clashed. Will claimed to be acting in his son's interests, but Jaden saw it differently. Will had made his life hell because he was terrified of failure. That fear came from Daddio. A soldier succeeds when he's single-minded. When he sacrifices everything for the sake of the mission. Ninety-nine percent is as good as zero. Those were his truths. And they became Will's, too. You focus on the mission and you block everything else out. You can worry about what those around you are thinking and feeling, or you can win. It's hard to live with a man like that. Will knew that better than

most, but here he was, a father to his own children, repeating Daddio's mistakes. He saw his youngest son, Jaden, pulling away from him. In 2012, Will watched "I Shouldn't Be Alive," a TV show featuring harrowing tales of near-death experiences. One of the stories is about a father and son who get lost in the wilderness. When the father is badly injured, the teenage son has to go on a dangerous journey by himself to find help. It was the perfect premise for a Will Smith movie. It was also an opportunity to repair Will and Jaden's relationship. Shortly after that, they started shooting *After Earth*. It tells the story of a father and son who crash-land on Earth in the distant future, after the planet has become uninhabitable. Jaden's character travels across this wasteland to save his father, played by Will. *After Earth* wasn't like the *Karate Kid*. This time, Will took a back seat. He was there to support Jaden, not to push him. And Jaden noticed that. One day, a coordinator asked Jaden to perform an action move he wasn't comfortable with. He stood his ground, but the coordinator wouldn't take no for an answer. Will wasn't on set, but he saw what happened next on a monitor. Jaden said he didn't think the move was realistic. The coordinator insisted on getting a few takes anyway. Jaden turned to the rest of the crew and asked someone to get his father. That was one of Will's proudest moments as a father. The movie flopped. It didn't matter - shooting it was the real prize. Will wasn't the enemy anymore. He was someone Jaden trusted. Someone he could turn to for help and support.

Saying Goodbye

One of the most important ideas in filmmaking is that it's easier to craft compelling narratives when you start at the end. In other words, you've got to know your ending. It's like the punchline to a joke. If you know the conclusion, you also know what kind of details and clues you need to plant along the way. Everything serves a purpose; everything leads somewhere. Life isn't the movies, which is probably what makes us love them in the first place. Cinema is neater. In reality, we don't know the ending until we get there and the audience either laughs or boos. The audience's reaction plays a key role in the wisdom about death in many cultures. Tibetan Buddhist texts, for example, teach that a dying person must be shown unconditional love in their last moments. This releases them from all expectations, allowing them to pass more peacefully. For five months, Will dug into this wisdom. It was preparation for his role in *Collateral Beauty*, a 2016 movie about a father struggling to come to terms with his daughter's death. That's when he learned that Daddio was dying. Daddio had already had a few brushes with death. For starters, he survived two heart attacks when Will was a kid. When he had his second attack, he knew what was coming when his left arm went limp. He drove himself to the hospital using only his right. But this really was the end. Years of chain smoking and hard drinking had caught up with him. Doctors gave him six weeks.

His relationship with his father had always been difficult, to say the least. He'd beat Will's mom, been verbally abusive. As a child, Will swore revenge against his father. In one of his darkest moments, he even contemplated pushing his father down a flight of stairs. But with his father's end so close, revenge left Will's mind. He wanted to make his passing easier. To look beyond his many faults. To give him a conclusion worthy of his many achievements. One night, he sat next to his father's bed and told him he'd done good with his life. His father wasn't expecting that. He kept his gaze on the TV set and took a drag on his cigarette. He'd led a good life, Will repeated. It was OK to let go when he was ready. Will was going to take care of everyone he'd loved. His father nodded, his eyes welling, his gaze still fixed on the TV screen. He passed two weeks later.

Final summary

So what is it that made Will Smith's life so special? The easy answer is: Look at his career, the Grammys, movies, the luxury cars he owned at age 20. Rags to riches at its best – we love this sort of story. It projects strength, relentlessness, a work-hard mentality.

But that's not the full picture. As you can probably tell by now, Will Smith's life was not all peaches and cream. He had his fair share of pain: financial screw-ups, broken relationships, a dysfunctional family. But what made Will Smith the person he is today is how he dealt with it: head on. What is inspiring about his life is not the amount of money in his bank account, but his willingness to face his inner demons. I mean, he even wrote a book about it!