



2019

ALL THAT YOU SAY IS BEAUTIFUL: STORIES

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Digital Object Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.13023/etd.2019.167>

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Recommended Citation

Pratt, Omaria Sanchez, "ALL THAT YOU SAY IS BEAUTIFUL: STORIES" (2019). *Theses and Dissertations--English*. 92.

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ALL THAT YOU SAY IS BEAUTIFUL: STORIES

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

ALL THAT YOU SAY IS BEAUTIFUL: STORIES

From the city of High Point to New York City, this collection portrays a certain black experience. Through a sociological lens, the stories in *All That You Say is Beautiful* study intersections of class, race, family, and sexuality by bending forms, expectations, and seeks to understand what it means to be human when your experience is not that of mainstream American culture.

KEYWORDS: African-American, queer, girlhood, race, class, sexuality

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04/09/2019

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Blood Sisters on the Ghost Train

That day I met my sister for the second time, me and my best friend Whitney sneaked outside early in the morning to play up the street on the train tracks. We wasn't worried cause everybody else in JC Morgan was sleeping and my mama don't care what I do in the summer time as long as I stay close and don't get into trouble. We liked to bring about the ghost train. Our favorite train. We sat on the grass and tossed rocks across the tracks until we felt wind. And once we'd feel it coming about, Whitney got up and spun around and I spun too and then we spread out our arms in the breeze while our shirts flapped back like we was flying. It picked us up and carried us out to some far place. That ghost train had taken us to China, to Hawaii, and to San Diego. Even been to Disney World four times.

Whitney always chose where we went cause I was never sure on where to go. And when I did pick, she'd slap the back of my neck cause I'd say something like *City Lake* or *Sir Pizza* which are places we already

been to in real life since they right here in this little city. She was thinking outside the box like our fourth-grade teacher said and now that we was both ten, we was wondering more and more what it was like to not live here. I'd ask Whitney some stupid question like, "What you think the ocean smell like out there in the Outer Banks?" She'd slap me on the back of my neck.

"You know it smell like it does out there in Myrtle Beach. It's all the same." I hated how much smarter she was than me, but at the same time I admired it. When they ask me to write down who inspires me on that piece of construction paper so they can hang it up on the classroom wall, I always wanted to write, *Whitney Underwood, Sunny's best friend and number one amiga*. I would wish at night to wake up and have her as my real sister, 'stead of having Avery as a real brother. We was blood related up on those tracks, though. It was one of our rules: *blood sisters on the ghost train*. We had been running on the ghost train since we was five and now that we both attend different middle schools and I have Tania to look after on the weekends, I can't think about nothing but that summer.

We could see from down the hill since Anaheim St. in JC Morgan was flat and all the apartments was one level, connected two by two. Whitney's Grandma lived right beside us. Our bedrooms shared a wall

and Whitney always said she could hear Avery snoring at night. Avery's bike was on the porch and cars were still in the driveway. Nobody was riding around in they cars yet, since it was a Saturday and too early to be up and about, except this blue taxi that passed us coming down the hill and pulled up to the front of my yard. A woman got out of it carrying a child on her hip, half asleep. They was nobody I knew and certainly wasn't family. I told Whitney I'd meet her after breakfast and we'd ride our bikes to the park before I ran off down the hill up to the porch where these two strangers were standing with they bags all on the ground. They didn't even knock on our door. The woman just yelled out for Mama.

"Delores!" she said all loud, waking up half the neighborhood I figured.

"She still sleeping," I said from behind. The woman looked at me and her eyes lit up.

"Sunny, girl, that you?" She said. And I nodded cause of course it was *me*. Who else would I be? "Come her and give Miss Terry a hug with yo big self." She reached out her arms. I could see her pit stains. The palest woman I ever saw too, and I couldn't tell if she was black or something else. But I gave her a hug. She smelt like Pine Sol and cigarettes and

something else too that was familiar. The little girl beside her was dark skinned but they had the same long jet-black hair. She sucked her thumb and her eyes was all big and wet like she'd been crying all morning. "You don't remember me do you?" I had to break free from her hug cause she was squeezing so tight my arms was getting numb.

I shook my head and squinted real hard like I was trying to remember.

"You was young, about Tania's age."

"Who's Tania?" I asked, knowing good and well it was the little girl beside me. But sometimes you gotta ask dumb questions to get surprising answers. I think Mama said that was from Oprah or Ricki Lake or one of her talk shows she always watched.

"*Lil' Bit* right here. She look just like you, don't she?" I twisted up my face when she said that, and I must've looked so foul cause Miss Terry stopped smiling then. I opened the door and Mama had just walked out of her room in her night gown, all sleepy-faced. She still had her rollers in and was wiping the sleep from her eyes.

"Terry, that you," Mama said. She jumped like she do when she get surprised or the holy ghost run through her. "Look at you. My god look at

Tania." Mama bent down and gave the little girl a hug first. Tania looked 'bout as shocked as me. She had on a little purple backpack and her glittery sandals were unbuckled and halfway off her feet.

"I'm sorry to come to ya'll like this." Miss Terry said. Mama took Terry's hands between hers and they just hugged right in the middle of the front room for the longest time. I heard sniffing and wasn't sure who was crying until they pulled apart and both their eyes were red.

"Sunny, take they bags to ya'lls room. And wash your face. I can see the dirt all on you." I did what I was told. Avery was still sleeping on his bed on the other side of the room when I opened the door. He smelled like feet and was getting more stinky the older he got. Now that he was twelve, he slept on the couch most nights cause he hated sharing a room with his baby sister. I tossed they bags onto his side which made him wake up all surprised. He saw me and threw a pillow. I ran out the room and into the bathroom. I hoped Miss Terry and Tania had to slept in his stinky bed and not mine.

Mama made a big weekend breakfast that she hadn't made in the longest time since she got that new job out there at the Mall. Grits, eggs, Pillsbury biscuits, and sausage patties. She played old songs on the stereo and

danced around the kitchen, talking sweet to little Tania. It was funny seeing mama sing to *The Temptations*, all out tune. Miss Terry just sat at the table with a cup of tea studying me and Avery. Repeating to Mama every five seconds, "they look just like Junebug." I started to ask how she know my daddy, but I kept it to myself. Didn't want Mama to stop what she was doing and smack me on my neck, yelling at me to stay out of grown folks' business, even though my daddy was my business and I hadn't seen him since he left when I was little.

Soon as all of us was ready to eat and we sat around the table, Mama and Terry started talking like there was no kids in the room.

"Swear, it's the last time they'll lock up that man," Miss Terry said. She covered her mouth. "They know?" I knew she was talking about us, but I didn't want to say nothing.

Mama shook her head. "You know they find out eventually." Terry was quiet for a minute.

"You remember my sister up there in Black Mountain? She done moved south to Georgia and I'm trying to find my way down there. Says I could get a job with her in the warehouse and stay at a hotel until I find a

permanent place to stay." Mama was listening with eyes all squinty and nodded.

"Ya'll welcome to stay as long as you want," Mama said. Avery cleared his throat trying to be all manly-like.

"Where they gonna sleep at?" I said, butting in. Sure enough, Mama darted her eyes at me so hard, I nearly choked on my eggs.

"I need a favor, Delores." And Miss Terry got quiet for a second.

"Ya'll three hurry up and eat. It'll be 2041 by the time you finish your grits."

"We'll be out the projects before then," Avery said. All confident. "Except Sunny. She gonna stay and live with her real family in the dog house."

"You a dog and your dumb butt ain't never leaving this place," I said. And then Mama *shushed* me. *Me*. Avery was the one who started it.

"Don't talk foul around this child." Mama brushed her hand into Tania's hair. "Such a pretty child, like you was Babygirl."

"Was?" I said. Avery laughed.

"*Are*. You too smart for your own good."

Tania was quiet and sat there on my chair swinging her legs. We was sharing a chair cause we only had four and this kitchen ain't seen this many people in it for the longest time.

"She talk?" I asked Miss Terry.

"Yeah, she just a little mad right now. We had to wake up early to leave Black Mountain. I told her she was going to meet her big sister."

"Who that is?" I got to stop asking dumb questions. I told myself I would be quiet after that. Avery, with his big cold hand, slapped my neck good and hard.

"Sunny, you remember. Your daddy lived up there in the mountains. You and Avery both was taken to see Tania when she was just born. You was her age, around four."

Nobody believe me when I say I don't remember when I was four. I don't remember what my daddy look like, and I sure as hell don't remember no Black Mountain or where ever they was from.

"She don't look like me," I said.

"I remember her. She was tiny, Miss Terry, and you let me hold her," Avery said. He sat up straight, looked at me and grinned. I kicked him under the table. He took his fork and flicked a piece of sausage at me.

"Ya'll stop it now," Mama said. I stuck my tongue out at Avery. Mama made us collect our plates, put them in the sink, and go outside. "I'm locking the door." I started to run behind Avery, but Mama stopped me. Fast. "You take Tania with you."

"How am I supposed to ride my bike?"

"Don't ride it."

Well duh, I wanted to say but didn't want to tick mama's last nerve. Instead, I said, "But me and Whitney supposed to go to Five Points."

"You can go another day. Right now, you watch after Tania. Show her some fun."

Fun. Nobody can't have fun when a sticky faced little girl got to follow behind you. Avery came storming back in then and grabbed my arm.

"Where my bike at, stupid!" He yelled and was squeezing my arm so tight, Mama had to pull him off it.

"I didn't take nothing. Your bike was on the porch this morning." I rubbed the throbbing spot on my arm and thought about crying before seeing that little girl up under me nearly crying herself.

"Boy, get," Mama said. "And find that bike." Avery rushed out blowing steam out his nostrils. "I said, take her outside." Mama gave that one last warning before she closed the door behind both of our butts.

"I hate this porch. I hate JC. I hate Avery. And I hate being a big sister." We had already knocked at Whitney's Grandma's door before she came out of the house with snuff in her mouth and a spit cup talking 'bout Whitney was already up the street playing at the shelter without me.

"Who's the pretty little thing beside you," she asked before we left.

"Mama's friend visiting from Black Mountain," I said. I wasn't about to tell her and anybody else that she was my *real* sister.

"She look just like you."

I scuffed back to my porch and we sat on the rails. I wanted to bite down and taste the chipped paint. Everything on that porch I tasted: the big black door that was like licking metal, the brick outside that tasted like one of my scabs.

“Don’t tell nobody I’m your sister, ok,” I said to Tania. She shook her head and swung her legs just like me. “When you gonna talk?”

She shrugged.

“Well, if you gonna replace my blood sister, Whitney, then I’m gonna need you to say words.”

She pointed up the hill to where the big playground was. It was brand new that summer after mama and some other folks from the neighborhood got together and petitioned the housing authorities to have something for the kids of JC Morgan. Mama said it took them three years before the big trucks came with the playground parts and mulch. We was so excited. All of us kids watched them build it every day after school.

“We’ll be up there. Just waiting for Whitney.” Soon enough, after what seemed like forever, Whitney came speeding down the hill on her bike. Both legs spread out.

“You gonna fall and bust yo head!” I yelled. She rode over to our yard on her new bike, a ten speed with white tires. When she came up on the porch, I shoved her a little cause I was mad.

“Sunny, when you get a twin?” She asked.

“She not my twin, dummy. When you start going outside without me?”

Whitney took out a bag of penny candy from her pocket. “Ya’ll was taking too long with breakfast. Got us some goodies from Mrs. Cellar’s, though.” I forgave her after she gave me half the bag. I can’t stay mad at Slick Whit for long.

“This Tania. She showed up on my porch this morning.”

“Like Oliver Twist,” Whitney said. And I laughed cause I didn’t know what that was then, but I knew it was from one of those books she was always reading. That girl stay reading all the time.

“Naw, silly. Her mama from the Mountains. She talk all country like too,” I said.

“Well, she look just like you. Those skinny ashy legs.” Whitney punched me in the arm. “Punch buggy, no punch back.” I looked, but there was no VW Bug around. That girl know ain’t nobody in JC Morgan drive a VW. “Does she talk?”

“I think so. Her mama said she got a worm in her throat.” I stuck my tongue out at the little girl to get her riled up to say something. She stuck her tongue right back out at me.

“She got some attitude. Hope she don’t ask no dumb questions,” Whitney said and I smacked her neck this time. “Let’s ride to the park. You take her on the back of your bike”.

I wasn’t supposed to do this but since Mama locked us out, she wasn’t ‘bout to find out anyways. I went around the yard to fetch my bike up under the back porch where it always be. It was gone. And I knew it was big headed Avery who took it. I came stomping back up to Whitney and Tania.

“I hate him,” I said. “I really do. Wish I can zap him away.”

“You think he went far?” Whitney asked.

“No telling where he went.” I bent down to Tania. “I ain’t got no brother no more, only a enemy. You can tell everybody that.” And she shook her head. I swear, her eyes looked like she would believe anything I said.

“Let’s go find ‘em. He probably up there at the shelter with all the other kids.”

The three of us walked up the hill to the other side of the neighborhood. I held Tania’s hand tight cause I couldn’t stand to lose that child on her first day here. We had a sheltered area with a couple of grills

and picnic tables for when the whole neighborhood came together for parties in the Summer. There were kids hanging around the tables waiting for the Free Lunch van to come and bring bologna sandwiches, bags of chips, fruit cocktails, and ice pops for anyone who needed it. We didn't see Avery or any of his friends around. The shade under the shelter felt good though. It was so hot that summer and it hardly rained. By the end of it, I had spent so much time outside that mama called me 'chocolate baby'.

This kid named Vic was rolling around the new playground just over to the side of the shelter. He was rolling on Avery's bike.

"Look at Vic," I said.

"Why he take everything, though?" Whitney said. We knew Vic as the kid who'd been kicked out of Mrs. Cellar's because he was caught stealing three times. We called him the village idiot cause he was twelve years old and still in me and Whitney's grade. Mama say he have no home training and if one of her kids ever turn out to be like Vic (*ahem*, Avery), she'd correct us with the switch, quick.

Me, Whitney, and Tania went up to Vic. We stood right there on the mulch beside the swing set.

"I'm counting to ten, Vic, and on ten you better had put Avery's bike down and run on home," I said. All confident. He was shorter than me anyway.

"Get yo busted head out of my way," he said. Vic got off the bike and got in my face. Whitney stood in between us.

"Give the bike back, Vic. It ain't yours." Whitney had her arms spread out, while my hands was balled up. I was ready to fight.

"Ya'll girls ain't going to do nothing no how," He said. And I shoved him. He started to come for me when I felt a tug at my shirt. It was Tania.

"How am I supposed to fight ya'll with a baby around," Vic said and then he laughed. Whitney was all up on him, all serious.

"What you want Tania?" I asked.

"Can we go to yo house? I'm thirsty," she said. I couldn't believe she sounded just like her mama with that country accent.

"Not yet. We can't go home until Mama unlock the door," I said.

"I wanna go now." Tania stomped her feet. Whitney was chasing after Vic, trying to put him in a headlock. The boy was still laughing and

carrying on and I looked around to see who was paying attention to us. Nobody was though. The neighborhood was just carrying on as normal. Neighbors down the street was blasting they car radio all loud in the driveway. Kids was in every corner riding bikes, playing jump rope, hollering at each other from across the road. Everybody wanted to be outside on beautiful days like that day when the sky was blue, and the grass was the greenest, and if you squint you could swear up and down that JC Morgan was Disney World.

That was when a fist hit my face. I fell, hard. I came to as Avery and the Carson boys tossed Vic to the ground. They was mad and Vic wasn't laughing when Avery punched him in the gut and kicked him while he was down. He kept yelling, "you touch my sister, I kill you!" Then, Avery swung so hard I think I heard his fist connect to Vic's jaw. The boy fell out cold. Whitney picked me up from off the ground and the three of us ran all the way back down the street to the house. We got into my yard and huffed our breaths. Miss Terry was out on the porch then, smoking a cigarette. She looked as us good and long.

"What ya'll three up to?" She asked.

“Nothing.” We all said this at the same time. I brushed the mulch out of my hair and felt my face. Nothing was bleeding. Vic’s small hands didn’t even break skin. My face was still a little throbby though.

“Well let me find out ya’ll getting into trouble,” Terry said. She was sitting on the top of the steps barefoot. Her pants legs was rolled up and her duffle bag was beside her. She fanned herself with a book in one hand and held the cigarette in the other.

“You leaving, Miss Terry?” I asked.

“For a bit,” she said. The three of us climbed onto the porch and sat in between the rails.

“How long you know my daddy?” I asked.

“You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?” She looked at Tania after saying this. “We was together for a while.”

“You know he locked up,” I said.

“He’ll be out soon. He says that he misses you.” Terry flicked a piece of ash off her cigarette into the yard. The red eye of it still burned in the grass. A line of smoke rose up into the sky. I wanted the grass to catch fire then. To burn up the whole front yard so the fire trucks could come

and bring so much water that it would flood the entire neighborhood and we would have to build rafts out of doors and float through JC Morgan waiting in the water until someone would come rescue us. But then, who would rescue us?

“I don’t miss him,” I said. “He don’t call to tell me nothing anyhow and nobody tell me I had a sister.” If mama was out there and heard me say these things, she’d smack me straight in the mouth. I didn’t care.

“Ain’t nothing to fuss over, Sunny. That’s grown folks’ business,” said Miss Terry. I gave her a look.

“Ain’t nothing grown about keeping secrets.” Whitney nudged my arm. I was waiting for the smack. For someone to shut me up and tell me to stay out of it. But that didn’t come so I kept running my mouth. “When I grow up, I’m gonna tell the world everything. Nothing secret about me.” Whenever I get mad, I start to cry like I’m hurt. Maybe I was. That little girl did look just like me and I was supposed to just shut up and go along like ain’t nothing weird.

“Aw Sunny, come on now,” Miss Terry said. “You a big sister now. Big girls don’t cry. Ain’t that right Whitney?”

“You got *two* sisters now, Sunny,” Whitney said. She was smiling, trying to cheer me up “Another passenger on our ghost train.” I wanted to feel what she was feeling but I couldn’t get myself there yet.

“They not staying here forever,” I said. “So, what’s Tania to me when she gone?”

Terry let out what was left of her cigarette on the porch. She stood up, slid on her sandals, and picked up her duffle bag.

“Don’t you worry, Sunny. You too young to be worrying.” She picked up Tania, gave her a kiss on the cheek and a tight hug. “Take care of her for a bit, you hear?” Terry looked at Whitney and me for the longest time, waiting for us to answer. I shook my head cause I didn’t know what else to say. Terry looked so serious, like she was going to disappear right there on that porch. Poof. “Your mama’s in the house cleaning and she don’t won’t any of ya’ll to come in until she’s finished.” Terry walked out of the yard and up the street towards the bus stop. We watched until the bus came and carried her away. Us girls was quiet for a time after that. Tania didn’t even cry for her mama. Like all the crying she had done early that morning had run her dry. We just swung our legs on the porch waiting for something to happen. It was so hot, I went around to the back

to grab the water hose and spray myself down. Whitney and Tania followed right behind me, wanting to play in the water too. We made it look like it was raining. I knew mama would fuss at me, *especially me*, after we came inside soaking wet from head to toe.

Avery and his big-headed friends had beat us into the house and mama was standing over the three of them, heated.

“What happened to you boy?” she asked. His face was all sweaty and kinda red and the boys had mulch all in they afros. I could see the blood stains on his shirt. Mama looked at me but two seconds before she grabbed hold of me.

“You got your sister into this too?” She sat me down on the couch right alongside the boys.

“Naw Mama, she ain’t have nothing to do with it,” Avery said, all pouty and sad. I looked at him and he stared at me wide-eyed, like he was saying *don’t say nothing else*. I kept quiet.

“I had to hear about this from Mr. Charles up the street. What have I told you about fighting?”

“Vic took my bike, Mama,” Avery whined. His voice cracked.

"I don't care. No children of mine is going to be fighting and carrying on like they have no home training. None of you."

"I'm tired of people taking stuff from me Ma." Avery started to cry. Ugly cry. This boy hadn't cried since he was smaller than me. He stomped back to our room and slammed the door.

"You two, get out and go home." The Carson boys ran out the house. Mama sat on the couch and looked at us girls. We was as still and silent, not wanting her to notice how soak and wet we were.

"Ya'll have fun today?" She asked. Mama cupped my face with her hand. "You not supposed to be the one fighting. You smarter than these boys."

"I'm sorry," I said. More polite than usual.

"You know, you two, *you three* are sisters and that means you have to take care of each other real good, you hear?" Mama waited for us to answer. We only nodded.

"Miss Terry'll be back?" I asked. Whitney gave me a look. I could feel the invisible slap on my neck.

“Tania’s gonna stay with us for a while. Wouldn’t you like that *Lil’ Bit?*”

Tania sat on the couch next to me and looked up. “I gonna play with Sunny all the time.” This must’ve got to mama because she got up and went into the back room and shut the door. I looked at Tania. Remembered she was thirsty. We got cups of water from the kitchen and after I drank mine, I just sank to the floor and laid right in the middle of the front room. Tania and Whitney got up and stood over me.

“You can’t nap Sunny, we gotta sail to the ocean.” Tania *arrgghed* like a pirate and I didn’t know whether I should have punched her in the arm then or played along with her.

“Pretend we stranded on an island,” Whitney said. “We surround by water and what we have to do is swim our way to the other side.” The two of them began swimming on the bare floor on each side of me, with they arms out failing and they cheeks puffed out like they was under water. This made me laugh so hard, mama came out from the back room. It looked like she had been crying cause her eyes and nose was red.

“Why in the world are ya’ll wet?” Mama asked. The three of us laughed hard.

“We stranded pirates Mama.” I got on my belly and swam around the floor too. Mama just laughed at us. “You and Whitney, I swear. Never grow up.”

Mama let me bring Tania to the train tracks the next morning. She made me promise that if I was to cause that girl to get hit by a train, I’d be banished from every spot in JC Morgan. *Pinky promise*, she said. I told Tania the rules, that the ghost train could take us anywhere and that up on them tracks, we was all blood related. All sisters. And now that she was gonna stay with us for a little while, Whitney would have to make some changes to our travelling.

“We’ll go wherever Tania wants to go,” I said and Whitney just eye rolled like I was saying nonsense. And when the wind picked up and a big heavy breeze pushed us forward on the tracks, I asked Tania where we were headed with our arms spread out wide.

“To yo house!” She said. Me and Whitney fell out laughing. Then we picked ourselves up and flew down the hill headed towards our front yard.

Sand Hill, '96

I met a child named Tulip my first month at Sand Hill Elementary. I was still settling into my office as Principal when she was escorted in by her third-grade teacher, Mrs. Butterball (I kid you not, the most *obvious-you're-a-teacher* name). Tulip was a quiet chubby thing with yellow beads coating the ends of her braids. Beautiful name, I thought. She would not look up at me.

“This one hasn’t done her homework all week, Principal Brooks,” Butterball had said. She talked with exasperation, always tired and red-faced. I remember her as the teacher running down the corridor that led from the trailers to the main school building chasing a wild child who had escaped from her classroom. It was her first month at Sand Hill as well. Her first year as a primary teacher.

“What am I supposed to do about that?” I was in the middle of signing contracts, reading up on the rezoning efforts, and looking over permission slips. It was no longer my job to take care of a single child. I oversaw three hundred, plus twenty-five teachers, and a full staff of administrators. I think – and I’m remembering a teacher telling me this

some years later – that I was intimidating my first year at Sand Hill.

However, Mrs. Butterball did not seem to budge in that moment.

“It’s recess hour and her playtime has been revoked.”

“You want her to stay here?”

“Yes, for the hour.” She nudged Tulip towards the chair opposite my desk. The little girl hopped up, her feet dangled from the end, and with her head still down, she placed her elbow on the armrest and leaned over. “She’s a shy one but needs to be taught a lesson.” As soon as Butterball closed the door, Tulip snapped her head up and looked at me.

“Am I in trouble?” she asked. She talked softly, yet clear and her accent reminded me of the kids I grew up with on Myrtle Street. There was that low southern cadence.

“Well, yes, for now. You should do your homework.”

She shrugged and bounced off the chair, began looking at every framed photograph I had hanging on the walls: the one with President Clinton at the white house, the one with my father and I fishing at City Lake, and the one of Calvin, my son.

“You want to know a secret,” I said as she stared at the picture of the President.

She nodded.

“President Clinton didn’t do his homework either.”

“He goes to school like me?” Tulip asked.

“Not anymore. But he did. And you know what? He got in trouble just like you and started doing his homework.” I thought maybe she would fill in the rest of the story, but Tulip just looked at me blankly.

“You know, you could be President one day.”

Tulip scrunched up her face. “Eww.” She saw my bluff. Caught me in a lie.

“You don’t want to be President?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“Then, what are you going to be?”

She shrugged.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“JC Morgan.” She said, proudly. And then pointed out past the farm and the fields and the long road that connected this town to the main highway.

I pondered the idea of teaching her about responsibility and consequences, particularly when it came to black people like us - southern black folks who grew up not too far from the plantations our enslaved ancestors toiled. Maybe that was too much for a third grader? I held back and just watched her look at the framed photographs from the corner of my eye for the rest of that hour.

Sand Hill sat across the road from a large dairy farm which made the area always smell of cow manure. The school had a sizable plot of land, its middle and high school were beside it, and each one was separated by a line of trees. Most of the kids who went to school in that area were from the suburbs surrounding it. Their parents were doctors, politicians, and police officers. Mostly white, at the time. There were four buses who brought in children from farther away, from the neighboring city of High Point. A city I grew up in and rode similar buses out of town to neighboring schools after 1968. The kids like Tulip were from the housing

projects. Mostly black. I was given this information when I first arrived at Sand Hill, back to the South, after spending five years in Los Angeles as head of a magnet school in Long Beach. I had gotten used to hearing ten different languages spoken in the hallways and seeing brown kids at the top of their class. When I received the news of being hired as Principal of Sand Hill, I called my mom first thing to tell her that I was coming back home and that I was going to make changes here leading a school in North Carolina.

“You were doing *so well* in LA,” is what she said. No congratulations of being a black principal at a majority white school, at that time. A worried tone emanated from her voice. I assured her I would be fine. And then she said, “I’m proud of you, I am, but I don’t want you to get deterred by what hasn’t changed.”

I told her I understood. Growing up, both mama and daddy pushed us to leave. The only reason we were one of ten at an all-white school, having to see the word *nigger* scrawled on our desks, was because they had the resources and, well, fuck segregation. She was in Maryland then, retired there after daddy died. But, after that first phone call from the local news station wanting to interview me about my groundbreaking takeover at Sand Hill, I had forgotten what mama had said. Funny, I still

have that broadcast tape stored somewhere in my basement. The headline that scrolled at the bottom, *For Sand Hill's first, new leader promises change*, is all fuzzy now because of the low quality; the top part of the tape missing.

Those first few months, before winter break, Tulip kept coming into my office twice a week. Mrs. Butterball would nudge her towards the chair. The faint sounds of children playing in the playground outside could be heard. After lunch was a special time for me that had quickly been revoked. The younger kids were in nap time, while the older kids played outside on the mulch ground beneath the jungle gym or on the black top where hula hoops and balls were strewn all over it. The building was silent, and I could focus on all the things I planned to do: my test reports, committee planning, preparing for those long parent/teacher conferences in the cafeteria. However, Tulip came prepared with questions. And it was never about why math homework was so hard for her to do, or why she had to miss out on the only time during the school day that the kids could be *kids*. It was always about me. And about the people in my photos. I admit that I did answer every one of her questions.

"How old are you?"

"37."

"What's your favorite color?"

"Green, I think."

"Is that your husband?"

"No."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"You have a kid?"

"Yes."

"Is he my age?"

"A little older."

"Where is that?"

"Los Angeles."

"Does Los Angeles smell like here?"

"Nothing smells like here."

And it kept going like that. On and on. I was told that this child was shy, and barely spoke three words to Mrs. Butterball. To keep her quiet, I began bringing snacks. Maybe this was not the best strategy to discipline a young child, but a bag of Lays and a fruit rollup kept her quiet. I spoke with Mr. Evans, the head janitor who knew Tulip, when he caught me that first time giving her snacks in my office. He was a tall and serious man and one of the only other black people who worked in the school. Also, a father of one of my buddies back in the sixties and someone that had lived in High Point his whole life. The kids – especially the ones from the projects– loved him. He’d say hello to every child in the hallway.

“You think she’s learning a lesson?” I asked him. Tulip was busy snacking away as she sat on the other side of my desk.

“I don’t know, Principal Brooks. She likes you though.” Mr. Evans would only speak to me when he was in my office, or if I saw him on the weekends at the farmers’ market selling produce. We’d run into each other in the hallways at school and head nod.

“I don’t won’t her to like me. Nobody seems to like me around these parts.” My assistant principal, a former PE coach and darling of

Sand Hill, had an office that was a revolving door of teachers coming to him with their complaints. Never to me. Except, well, for Mrs. Butterball and that Tulip.

“Listen, I’ve been here for thirty years and that first half was rough. And it’s taken this long to get someone like you here. They’ll either grow to like you or move on.” Mr. Evans had a way of holding my gaze, letting me know that every moment I was in that school was a moment for learning. He would show up to the parent assemblies after his shift as one of the only black people in the room. A form of his support. It was an hour every week in the cafeteria of hearing parents complain about rezoning – of more kids from High Point being bused in the following year – and how there being not enough of after school activities, healthy lunches, homework, tutors, library books, teachers. Always not enough of something.

I was doing my best to change the school. Had planned to have more cultural events. Our test scores where some of the best in the state, so I focused outward and on those bused in kids from High Point. My job was to make this transition into a sort of “open door policy” run smoothly. Why I was hired as Principal and why I decided to move three thousand miles back to where it all started for me. One time, during that

recess hour, Tulip wondered in alone with a note from Butterball. She caught me with my head down on the desk.

“Principal Brooks, I don’t think you can nap like we can.” Tulip stood beside me, a note held out.

“I’m not napping, I’m thinking.” I said, my head raised, my eyes barely opened.

“About what?” She asked. I took the note from her.

“This school. You. Did you know that you placed in the top ten on your reading test scores last year?” I had read all her reports and test scores. As well the other ninety children from High Point. Ninety out of three hundred and this rezoning issue was the biggest problem these parents fussed over.

Tulip shrugged. “I like reading,” she said. I handed her the bag of chips and fruit rollup before opening the note to read it out loud.

“Principal Brooks, Tulip is once again banned from recess because she failed to complete her worksheet. -Mrs. Butterball. Any comments you want to add?” I asked.

Tulip thought for a minute. "It's the same stuff we do in class." I said nothing to that because there was some truth to it. Before seventh grade, homework is just busy work for the most part. A formality to make sure kids are staying engaged. And part of the rules of education.

"Try to play along, Tulip. *They* like when you follow the rules." We sat there for the rest of the hour, and I let her ask all the questions she had swirling in her mind.

Sand Hill was in the news, however. We were rezoning – a product of a school board vote before I arrived.

Sometime around September of that year, the letters began.

Dear Miss Tina R. Brooks,

I am a parent of two kids who attend Sand Hill. I, myself, had gone to Sand Hill and grown up in that area. A beautiful place. Full of wonderfully gifted children. I'm afraid the quality of our school, our area, is being compromised due to your plan to expand the number of children. We here in the Sand Hill area are forming our own committee and we vote against the expansion of our school district. We hope that you will not go forth with this plan.

Regards,

Dr. So and So.

I received at least five a week, up until that December, right before break. Our hallways were filled with holiday decorations then. The end of term could be felt as the teachers bounced around the building with an air of almost completing a difficult mission. As we stood outside to greet the children who stepped off the bus or out of cars, some parents looked at me. Some scolded me from afar, or what felt like a silent scolding. I kept the smile on my face. Kept greeting in my sing-songy voice: *good morning, good morning, how are you good morning?* Mrs. Butterball, her face sweaty for some reason up against the cool December air, managed to find me every morning and stand right next to me.

“Tulip’s not getting any better.” she’d say.

“I’m working on it.”

“We might have to hold her back,” she’d say.

“She’s doing well with classwork.”

“Why don’t we have a meeting with her mother?”

“I’ve tried calling. She works during the day.”

“You’re not trying hard enough, Principal Brooks.”

I’m sure any other Principal would not allow such bold statements from their teachers. But, for some reason, Mrs. Butterball established herself as my superior. And that got under my skin. Not *trying hard enough*? If only Butterball would have known that I stayed passed school hours every day. I would get home at seven, pour myself a glass of wine, make a quick bowl of pasta, plant myself at the kitchen table, and respond to letters. Or forgo all that and scream into the walls. Sometimes I would call Calvin. He was twelve then, wrapped up in middle school and sports. He took after his father, so much so that when we divorced Calvin chose to live with him. I brought this up every time we talked, asked him to spend the summer with me in North Carolina, but the kid would say nothing, or get pissed and hand the phone to his dad. I was not bitter or mad, it just ached to hear his voice over the phone. There was always something new, and I felt ten steps behind in his life.

A couple of months after new year’s, when March of ‘96 slowly crawled out of the cloudless sky of winter, I walked to school that morning as it was the first day back. It was one to remember because I ran into a herd of

cows and young calves from the farm being transported into a windowless building. This was the other part of the dairy farm I rarely saw while driving in to school. The slaughterhouse, I assumed. It disturbed me, initially. But I had to ask myself, *what to do when a male calf is born? Or when an adult cow can no longer produce?* There is a way to make normal this kind of absurd brutality. And I figured it was a thing the farm had to do to survive. When I approached Sand Hill, a small group of people were standing outside with signs above their heads. A news crew was parked to the side and as soon as they saw me, I had that urge to turn back and run. Out of town. Back to LA where the weather was warmer, and the white folks were a lot less angry at me.

A microphone or two was placed in front of me as I tried to swing around the crowd.

“Principal Brooks, can you tell us about the backlash to the proposed plan of rezoning?”

“No comment,” I said. An older man pointed at me. He carried a sign. *Secession for Better Education*. I pushed through as the crowd yelled at me. “Miss Brooks, Miss Brooks, my kids depend on this school! Don’t fail our kids!”

And they began to chant this. *Don't fail our kids! Don't fail our kids!*

I barricaded myself inside the school that morning. Mr. Evans and his team had planned to keep the doors locked, just in case the parents outside tried to rush in. To keep the mob from “swarming the kids,” as he stated. The way he said “swarm” brought me back to that time, when me and his own child walked from a bus to the front of a school yard surrounded by angry parents removing their white kids from school grounds because our presence would be some kind of poison.

We rerouted the buses to drop off the children – especially the ones from farther away – in the back of the school, where the third through fifth grade trailers were. Towards the end of the morning, I met with the assistant principal and a few administrators in my office.

“We need to schedule a conference,” I said as they all took notes. My AP sat beside me.

“Should we cancel school?” he asked.

“No, let’s go about the day as normal. Remember, this is all out of our control. We’re just abiding by the school board’s ruling.”

“Yes, but what do *you* think of the ruling, Principal Brooks?” A faculty member, her name escapes me now, had asked this.

“I think every child deserves a fair shot at a good education.” As soon as I said this, Butterball walked through the office door. I wanted to hand her a bottle of water as she huffed in. Out of breath.

“Tulip locked herself in the bathroom,” she said.

I had to walk all the way to the back of the school, outside where the trailers were, to intervene. Mrs. Butterball had Tulip’s backpack turned over and its contents spilled out on the floor. Her little desk was opened, and things strewn about. It was like walking into the middle of a prison sting. A few children were on the ground trying to peek through the crack in the bathroom door. They pointed.

“She stole this child’s pencil box,” Butterball said. A little boy with coke-bottle glasses and a buzzed haircut looked angry. His arms folded across his chest. All she had to do was quietly escort Tulip to my office with her things intact and I would have done the procedure of calling her mother or waiting until school was out to put her on a bus with a note. But this stunt, I knew the little girl must have been embarrassed. I was embarrassed. I felt angry then. At who, I wasn’t sure. At Tulip or fucking Butterball? I tapped on the wood framed door.

“Tulip, it’s Principal Brooks.” I heard sniffing from the other side. “Honey, we need you to come out of the bathroom, ok?” I waited for sounds of movement.

“Come out of the bathroom Tulip!” Butterball yelled this from over my shoulder. Her face was still red. I wanted to punch her right there in the mouth.

“You’re not in trouble ok.” Butterball puffed a sigh so close to my ear I could feel how hot her breath was. “Mrs. Butterball, how about you collect the class and take them to the gym. Wouldn’t you like that class?” The third graders burst with excitement. She lined them up against the wall and filed out behind them with a stomp.

“It’s just you and me now, Tulip. Want to let me in?” I heard movement then. She flushed the toilet. For effect, I gathered. Clever girl. She opened the door and stood and looked up at me. Her eyes were watery, and her cheeks wet. She looked so small then and I felt so big. Like I was consuming her. Out of pure instinct, I stepped back to give her some space. And then I got down on my knee and looked straight into her eyes. “You ok?” I whispered this. She nodded. I wanted her to say that she was framed, and that Butterball and her crew of stringy haired children

set her up, scattered the pencils around the room to make it look like a crime scene. "Did you take that little boy's pencil box?"

She nodded.

"Why?"

"He said I could have it and then took it back." She let out with the tiniest of voices. I was not used to seeing this side of her vulnerability.

"The whole thing?"

"No. Just one." And then she held up the pencil that the boy had given her at first, as a token of friendship perhaps. It was in her pocket. "I didn't want to give it back," she said.

"If he gave you one, why'd you take the others?"

She held her head down. "I was teaching him a lesson."

We walked back to my office and I kept her there for the remainder of the school day. She sat there in the chair, this time it was facing the wall. As punishment. I called her mother and left a voicemail. Every now and then, I watched her from the corner of my eyes. It felt like hours had passed, days of silence, months of Tulip staring at the wall waiting for the bell to ring. I didn't know if there were still protesters outside with their

signs and their judgments, but I had to teach Tulip an important lesson then.

“Tulip. There are things you won’t be able to have in this world. You understand?”

She looked at me. Wiped the snot from her running nose.

“What you did was wrong. You can’t take things, ok? You have to earn them.”

“I know,” she said. Her voice still a little weak.

“We might have to keep you in the third grade an extra year.”

“I promise. I won’t take anything else.”

“What about your homework? You have to do the work, Tulip.”

“But I forget.”

“To do homework?”

She nodded her head.

“I don’t understand. You do so well in class. Why not at home?”

“No one tells me to.”

“Ok. Well, I’m telling you. Sand Hill is telling you. The world is telling you. You understand?”

She looked at me as if she wanted to ask a question. Maybe a serious one this time. Like, *why don’t the world care?* And I could quote Tupac, or some contemporary philosopher. *It’s you against the world, baby.* And those folks who are angry people outside are not just angry at me, they’re angry with the system who allowed someone *like me and you* to be put here in the first place. But, maybe that was too much for a third grader? I waited for her to ask.

“Does this mean I don’t get a snack?”

By that afternoon the school was empty of children and the protesters had left. Mr. Evans was sweeping the halls. A few teachers were scattered about putting up Easter decorations. I went outside and sat on the bench next to the playground in the back. The jungle gym was new as of last year and its big slide wrapped around the entirety of it. The mulch was freshly laid, and the monkey bars stood high next to the footbridge. It had been the sixth month that Tulip had been coming into my office a few times each week. The child had missed out on this most days. So much of

it. Why? I looked around and made sure no one was outside before going over to the monkey bars and giving it a go. I took off my flats and jumped up and grabbed the handlebars. One by one, my legs folded so my feet wouldn't touch the ground. I made it to the end. "I still got it," I said aloud. I had a thought then, on that jungle gym. I would go to her. Travel out to High Point where she lived and talk with her mother. Maybe she knew something I did not.

JC Morgan was a housing project about a half hour away from the school. I remembered when it was just being built in the late sixties when we would ride passed the construction workers. It was just a plot of trees then. An unremarkable piece of land. Before they were completed, I remember mama saying *it's a damn shame. They trying to put us back in cages.* The neighborhood was worn in now after twenty-five years. Each apartment was plain, brick colored, one-story. It was early spring, so the grass was getting its color in. I pulled up along the curb to 303A. Tulip's place. There were a few children hanging out on the porch. Sitting on the rails, joking around. I did recognize most of them from Sand Hill.

"You the Principal lady," one little boy with a shaved head said.

“Ooh Tulip in trouble,” a little girl said. They all laughed. Tulip was not around.

I assured them no one was in trouble. I just wanted to talk to her mother. They laughed even harder then. Perhaps I said the wrong thing. I was let inside to a house with adults scattered about. It was a revolving door of movement, with the back door swung wide open. It was getting warmer and the apartment felt cool with the breeze coming through. Tulip’s mother was tending to something over the sink in the kitchen. A woman wearing a head scarf came through the door and dropped off a bag of groceries.

“That’s the last of it, Nez. You want me to cut up the potatoes?”

“Mr. Evans hasn’t got here yet.” She walked into the living room and greeted me without even a look of surprise that I was there.

“Principal Brooks, I got your message. Gave her a good talking to. Tulip know not to steal. From *nobody*. Especially from that school.”

“It’s ok. Call me Tina. And don’t worry about what happened earlier. She was just scared is all.”

“Well, Miss Tina, she did the wrong thing. I don’t know about you but, I want my children to know that there are consequences.”

I repeated the word *consequences* in my head. Maybe I had failed to teach Tulip what this meant for the past six months she kept being sent to my office. Was Miss Nez aware of this? Then again, Tulip was not my child.

“She’s a bright kid, you know.”

“Don’t I know it. She comes home and repeats to me everything she learned that day.”

“Yes, well. I just came to say that Tulip will have to attend summer school this year.”

“I’ll make sure she does what is needed to move on to fourth grade, Miss Tina. You have my word.”

Tulip sat on the other side of the kitchen table quietly. She was wrapped in a workbook. Possibly doing her times tables. She was doing homework though. She’d finish a page and then quickly turn to the other.

“That girl’s been doing her homework all day since she got home. I barely seen her open up that book all year and now she’s doing every problem.”

I started to ask why she didn't make her do it in the beginning. But, somehow, I knew the answer. I looked around at the house, at all the people carrying on with their conversations, the kids on the porch calling Tulip's name. The smell of what was wrapped up in newspaper – fresh fish from the market. It sat on the edge of the sink ready to be cleaned and gutted and cut up and fried.

“You care to stay for dinner?” Miss Nez asked.

I said I would stay for a little bit longer, if that was alright with them. But, I didn't want to stay for dinner. It was not my place to impede on this already dynamic ecosystem. Something Tulip was a part of. As soon as she finished the last problem in her book, she darted up and joined the kids out on the porch who was calling her name.

“Don't go too far, dinner will be ready soon,” Miss Nez shouted.

“Those children, I tell you, they stay around Tulip all day. Can't pull them away from her.”

Mr. Evans entered carrying a box of local produce. He saw me and raised his eyebrows. Looked surprised. “Principal Brooks, good to see you in these parts.” He placed the box of yams on the kitchen table. “Last of it for the season. Next up, cucumbers.” He waited for reactions from the

children who had followed him in from behind. They scrambled to look inside the box. "I said, CUCUMBERS". And the children all reacted with *yummmms* and *aaahhhs* and tummy patting. One child said, "I hate cucumbers."

I offered a hand to help with dinner, forgoing the letters and glass of wine and screaming at the walls. I wanted to be around them, to see why Tulip neglected all those months of homework. Maybe, and I think this one is the truth, it was because of that moment right there. After school, when all she needed to think about was the people around her. Their laughter and playfulness. No Mrs. Butterball constantly breathing down her back. I just loved watching the way she watched her mother clean the whiting fish in the sink. The heads still attached. Tulip covered her nose and stood up on a chair. Miss Nez took a paring knife and scraped the scales off until the fish was smooth. She cut a slit in the middle of it and pulled out the guts, discarding them in the trash. She cut the heads off and wrapped them in newspaper. The fish were fileted with the tails still attached, seasoned, battered, and placed in a big frying pan with hot oil. What wonder it was to see how much she was learning from these women around her.

I left that evening with a plate wrapped in foil. Miss Nez demanded I take some food. She was not going to let anyone leave her home hungry. It was their Friday night tradition: fish fry, yams, and greens.

At home, on my couch, I plopped myself in front of the television with the plate and a glass of white wine. I couldn't get out of my mind the beauty of it all. How alive Tulip was at home. How the kids swarmed her and tickled her and ran alongside her up and down the street. Their house was full. I ate the fish. I would read letters another day. And the parents of Sand Hill would state their case to keep Sand Hill the same. And the school board would not budge. And the district would change. And the white parents would withdraw their children and enroll them into other schools; private schools. And Sand Hill would become majority black. And I would remain Principal for another ten years and watch Sand Hill lose funds and resources and fall from some kind of grace.

It could all wait. I had a plate of life in front me at that moment, and what I wanted most was to feel that full.

Dead Armadillos

The drive from Georgia was humid and reeked with the smell of skunk that led the way up I-95 to North Carolina. I played a CD on the stereo that I had mixed ten years before on *LimeWire*. Some of the songs skipped. I needed antifreeze for the radiator but wanted to wait until I got to New York to do all of that, so I drove my little green Honda with the a/c off and the windows down. My box of books and laundry basket overflowing with clothes that sat in the back seat was all I possessed. I was only going to be in High Point for a night. Ma and Charles's house was just off the highway exit, passed the *Biscuitville* on Main Street, that turned into Triangle Lake Road. It was a street that had no lake and no sidewalks. It had a sharp steep turn that was the cause of many accidents, some of them I witnessed and some of them left evidence behind: broken pieces of glass along the asphalt, a windshield wiper, a back bumper, shredded tires. Most of this ended up in the ditch that was in front of our house, which sat lower than the other houses around it, as if it were on a sinkhole.

I hadn't eaten anything since I left Atlanta and as I was passing the *Biscuitville*, I thought of the cinnamon biscuits Charles used to bring me after he got off work. The box would still be warm, icing still stuck to the

wax paper. I used to go for it first – licking the paper clean until it shined. It wasn't that I was betraying Ma by stopping by the house, I just wanted to know how he was getting along since Ma left him, for good this time. I slowed up to the house and pulled down into the driveway. It had rained some days before because the front yard looked like a swamp; the water just sat underneath the house with nowhere to go. An old tricycle and abandoned balls of various sizes sat in the dirty water. There were piles of wood and trash bags around the house, along with a trail of debris that led straight through to the backyard. The front steps had one split plank. The screen door had been removed and the front door, which was white, had black thick scratch marks all over it. Yellow paper was scattered on the front porch, with one notice tacked up on the door. I could clearly see that it was from the sanitation department. Charles's gray Oldsmobile sat off to the side of the yard. The curtains were drawn. I had a key, but could not get myself to go in, so instead I blew my horn, hard. Long enough for him to know that someone was there, waiting for him to step outside. But he did not open the door. No one pulled back the curtains. As I backed out and drove away and headed to Tasha's place, I couldn't help but imagine him inside of it, sitting there, rotting.

It was two years since I had been home. My family was still there - besides my mother who had recently moved to the west coast - and I wanted my visit to be a surprise. The last time I had talked to my two sisters was when Ma moved two months before, over the summer, on short notice. She had planned a trip to visit my uncle, rented a storage unit, took all her things out of her and my stepdad's home, and purchased a one-way ticket to Las Vegas. She sent my two sisters and I a snapshot of the tarmac just before take-off. After that, she lived only in our group chat, occasionally sending photos of her travels through the west coast.

I was living with an ex-girlfriend at the time, sleeping on her couch, working doubles at a café to save up enough to move back to New York City. My ex had given me three months to move out, offering a tattered and dusty corner of her one bedroom as a sort of truce. I should not have moved down there in the first place, but we got along for the first year until she found someone else. Someone who was not so *distant* as she described it. That was around the time Ma began calling me and my sisters more and more, just to check-in, or to complain about Charles, or to talk to us for an hour about a movie she'd seen on the Hallmark channel. And when she called a week before she left, her breathing was heavy, and she whispered like she was planning an escape.

“You ok?” asked Tasha.

“Why Vegas?” asked Francis.

“Desi, I’m tired.” I had said nothing in response to the move, but I was thinking the same as Tasha. I pictured Ma crouched in the bathtub, hiding from Charles, afraid to ask her daughters for help. Ma didn’t say much after that. She had already packed the things she needed. It did not matter if Charles knew that she was leaving for good, but I knew that it would be the end of him as some kind of father. And that house was to be left with nothing but the filth surrounding it.

Charles began taking away things from my mother three years ago. First, it was her car she bought in his name, then it was my old bed in my room that the grandkids slept in, and then it was the mortgage; he stopped paying on the house altogether. In retaliation, Ma stopped paying the light bill and the last two months they spent together was in entirely separate rooms in that hot dark house. It was twenty years in the making. Ma’s third marriage. I was ten and had only met Charles just three months before. It happened so fast. The years had flown by and the only memories I held on to were of the house at the bottom of a hill, the ditch filled with trash, the refrigerator stocked with leftover biscuit sandwiches

and stale hash browns; Charles's *Biscuitville* uniform always hanging from a kitchen chair. It was the three of us – Ma, me, Charles – who moved into the house because I was the youngest by a longshot. Tasha had already moved into her own place at the age of eighteen by the time Ma remarried, while Francis lived with us part time, splitting it with her dad's family. In theory, Charles was the closest to a father I would ever have, although I could count on one hand the number of conversations we had in all those years I'd known him. I had never called him dad or anything like that and he had never shown any desire to be a father. I felt relief, first, when Ma left. That house was like a prison to her, to us. His presence was so distant and cold that when he made noise, or fussed, we complied silently, trying to make ourselves small.

It had briefly rained when I arrived at Tasha's place around nine that night. The rain shower cooled the air and the wet gravel crunched and popped beneath my car tires. Francis's old Acura was parked out front. I smelled something cooking on the grill and saw a light coming from her backyard. A few children were playing around a big tree that sat in the middle of the yard, its branches reaching over the roof. They were playing hide and go seek because a little girl with beads in her hair, no more than

six, hid behind the tree and peaked out at the seeker. She looked toward me and smiled as I pulled up, her missing front teeth gleamed in my headlights. It was Kiara. She came over to my car on the passenger side and rested her chin up on the door to look inside. Her tiny fingers rummaged through the opened glove compartment.

“You got candy?” She asked. She didn’t wait for me to answer. She opened the door and hopped inside. “What’s your name?”

“Desi. Your Aunt Desi.” I was looking through the stash of travel snacks I had in the black gas station bag for a packet of spearmint gum I bought earlier. I pulled out a couple of pieces and gave it to her.

“You mama’s sister. I know you live in N-Y-C.” She opened both pieces of gum and smashed them into her mouth. Not soon after that, other little girls that were once playing in the yard surrounded my car. Someone lifted a baby, about one or two years old, and I had to grab her and place her in my lap, or else the tiny hands holding her would have dropped her on the gravel. Her thick black hair grew up out of her head, and was unkempt, like mine. She had large brown eyes and she held onto me as if she’d known me this whole time. Five little faces rested their chins on my car, looking inside on their tippy toes. I passed around the

gum until it ran out. I had none for the baby, but she wasn't begging. She just looked at me and smiled occasionally. Her face mimicked my confused reaction. Francis came out of the house and waved to me.

"Get your ass out of that car," she yelled. She had a cup in her hand. She laughed and told the girls to move. They all ran to the back of the house, without the baby. She was still in my lap, still looking at me with wide eyes; studying this foreign thing holding her, perhaps. We got out of the car and I held her on my hip. "Gibbs," Francis said, stumbling down the steps. "You look just like a Gibbs." She had called me by my last name when we were kids and it didn't make sense until I cut my hair. I looked just like my father. I had his nose, his tall stature, his dark brown skin, his gapped tooth. The three of us looked like our fathers more so than our mother, which is to say we carried different last names like a reminder, or a piece of something broken.

"Drink that." Francis handed me the cup she was holding. It was sweet, like strawberry syrup, and bitter tasting at the end. A chunk of ice got caught in my throat. I coughed it back up. "Punk." Francis slapped my back.

"Surprise," I said.

“How long you here for?” Francis took the cup from me and continued drinking.

“Just for tonight. Thought I’d check in.” The baby on my hip played with the collar of my shirt and tried to pull at my afro. I swatted her hand away. She swatted back.

“You’ve checked. And we’re good.” Francis was standing right in front of the screen door and the only glimpse I got from inside was of people moving about. A faint sound of music. What I could make out was a single verse, something like, *baby, baby, baby*. Some celebration.

“What’s the occasion?” I asked.

“When did you start talking like *that*?” Francis took the baby from me. “This is Sierra. Looks just like you, right?” Tasha was pregnant that last time I came, but no one told me until the baby was born. No one had ever told me much of anything about the family.

“Is Tasha around?” Francis nodded, said she was in the back.

“You hungry, *Skinny*?” We both had lost weight a few years ago, but Francis gained all her weight back after losing the job at the hotel she worked at for fifteen years. I knew this because it was the only time she

had called me for money. The only time one of my sisters needed me for anything.

Francis poked my stomach, pinched my arm, asked me how I kept it off. She had been heavier most her life, all of us had, putting on weight as we grew into adolescence. I hid my body as a teen and wore oversized hoodies and the same two pairs of jeans, one of them with the zipper broken, a shoestring sewn in place of it. Even still, I masked a part of myself into adulthood, and at the age thirty I had finally made a commitment to looking more masculine.

“It smells good.” We didn’t hug. Francis took the baby from me, led me through the house. Tasha had lived in it with her three children for two years, but the place was barely furnished since the last time I saw it. Two leather arm chairs sat in the middle, the material torn and showing the yellow foam underneath, a flat screen sat on the floor, and an old playpen full of toys was tucked behind the chairs. There were about ten people in the house, mostly gathered in the kitchen surrounding the table. Cigarette smoke covered the kitchen, a glassy wall of it thickening the air surrounding the faces, nearly blurring my vision. I knew hardly anyone, though they all seemed to know me. A string of *Hey Desi’s* came out of each pocket of the table: an older man playing his hand in a card game, a

young woman sitting on top of the cooler, a woman with thick coiled hair dyed red popped a tape into the old stereo and said, "look at Babygirl." I blushed. My nephew, tall and dark skinned, appeared through the blur of the smoke, his eyes still smiled at me. "Hey Auntie," Devin said and then handed me a Bud Light. I took it from him and slapped his arm.

"You shouldn't be drinking." He laughed and gave me another hug. Devin was twenty-two then, but in my mind, he would always be twelve; the two of us playing basketball in the driveway. The only friend I had, I witnessed Devin being brought home as a newborn when I was eight. He was the last thing I cherished and missed about High Point. Before I could say anything, he had disappeared somewhere inside the house. I dodged the rest of the familial strangers and found Tasha on her back-deck porch, in front of the grill, flipping flank steaks. Her hair was cut shorter than what I remembered, and she was barefoot standing on the wet deck. Tasha had always liked to go barefoot outside.

"You met Babygirl out front?" Tasha asked without taking her eyes off that fat piece of steak she was flipping over. "Sierra looks just like you." She took her beer that was resting beside the grill and took a long swig. My eldest sister: a bad sleeper and a heavy drinker. Tasha could drink a six pack in one night and be up for a six o'clock shift at the nursing

home with hardly a complaint. The dark circles under her eyes were new.

The concern in her face when she saw me was not.

“What’s the celebration?” I asked.

“No celebration, we’re just hungry.” Tasha looked at me after putting the steaks to rest. She slapped my head. “How long you here for this time?”

“Just for the night.”

“You see your daddy yet?” She laughed at this.

“You know he’s not my daddy.” Tasha grabbed a plate with the cooked pieces of steak on it and told me to hand it to the people inside. I walked over to the sliding glass door, opened it, and let the sounds of laughter and music spill out. For a moment it was like I was on another planet, with an unfamiliar language. I had forgotten how my people sound in celebration.

“I know he’s not your real dad. Your real dad ain’t shit.” My *real* father was barred from our house after he raped both my sisters when they were young girls. He was in and out of prison most of my life. I have one memory of him. One memory of waking up to my *real dad* on top of me. We rarely spoke of this. And I was careful not to mention his name in

their presence. Somehow, I thought I had it easier. I could place that one memory into the back of my mind, hide it underneath the moments when Tasha showed me how to ride a bike, when I first saw the ocean, when Ma gave me a keyboard for Christmas, when I left High Point for college. For Tasha and Francis, the “happy” layers weren’t thick enough for them to hide that pain. Ma was different with them than she was with me. I was the last of her children, but the only one who got to go to Summer camp, take karate classes, and attend a performing arts school. I got a better version of Ma, the one that looked outward even before she knew that Vegas was possible.

“I won’t have time to see that man.” It was the first lie I was to tell that night.

“Where’re you going?”

“I’m dog sitting for a friend in New York. They’re going to Europe for a while.” I’m not sure why I said it. So Tasha could let go of that worry, perhaps. I had lived in three cities in five years. I told my ex the same story just to see the relief on her face. I had no place to stay or a job lined up. A friend I knew from an old café I worked at in Brooklyn had

said there was a couch for me to sleep on when I moved back, and my fingers were crossed that that door was still opened.

“Miss New York,” she said. “I’m trying to make it over to Vegas with Ma. She’s talking about getting a house out there for all of us.” It was a happy thought. Tasha danced to the music faintly playing inside the house, moving her feet from side to side. “You should come out there with us.”

“Let me know when the house is bought.” Ma had little to no savings, this I was sure of. She had two hip replacements and three knee surgeries before the age of sixty. This forced her into early retirement as a school bus driver. Her social security check wasn’t going to be enough for a mortgage.

The little girls were back to playing hide and go seek. Two of them, not Kiara or Sierra, came up onto the deck and hid behind the grill.

“Leave,” Tasha said. She snapped the meat tongs at them. The girls ran off. Tasha dropped a raw piece of steak on the deck. “Shit. Babygirl, why you just standing there? Help out.” I shuffled over to the grill and grabbed the tongs. Tasha had to instruct me on what to do. She sat on one of the deck chairs and pulled a loose cigarette out of her bra. “You should

know how to cook by now." She sighed with the cigarette between her lips.

Francis came out onto the deck. She had been peaking at us through the glass doors the whole time. I caught glimpses of her squinting, possibly wondering what we were saying. She always thought someone was talking about her. Francis: the paranoid one, the one who treated me mostly like dirt when I was young. She nudged my arm and pinched it as I flipped a half-cooked steak.

"Desi's going to ruin that meat," Francis said. I clapped the tongs at her, doing my best Tasha impression. Francis leaned against the porch rail. The three of us didn't talk to each other for a moment. We nodded our heads in unison and rocked, shifting our bodies back and forth like dancing with the wind. This was something we did. Maybe it was a silent prayer. A remembrance. I never knew if we were thinking the same thing until someone spoke.

"We should buy the house back," Tasha said. She had finished her cigarette, her second beer. She was opening another can.

"I don't want that house. Or the man who is up in it. You know he's probably in there dead or something worse," Francis said. She looked at me, waiting for my agreement.

"A friend said that they didn't know the guy that lived above them had been dead for three days until they smelled it and came across a wet spot in the carpet outside his door," I said. Tasha and Francis grimaced at the same time.

"Where do you come from?" Francis asked. This was their inside joke about me. I was the one who was *adopted* or found in a basket or fell from a spaceship. I was convinced for a time as a child that maybe my real family was somewhere else; like Mars, perhaps.

"But, Charles has friends, right?" I thought of his decaying body leaking out onto our green carpet. I knew he didn't know anyone besides Darryl who used to work with him at the furniture plant.

"It's not fair to you though. That was Ma's first house. And now, you damn near orphaned?"

"I can just come stay with you when I visit."

"You don't want to stay with me?" Francis asked.

“When do you ever come to visit,” Tasha said. It was more of a statement. When I did come, for one holiday a year, I stayed with Ma, only stopping by their homes to say hi.

“I didn’t have much money to come see ya’ll, you know that.” And I was never going to stay with Francis. Tasha was more of a mother to me. She helped raise me in between my father being taken out of the family and before Charles came along. I met Francis when I was six. She beat me in the head with her fist in our back pantry when I was eight. She threw an iron at my face. Called me “Dirty Gibbs”. It is true that I have a favorite. But I also hold the guilt of resenting one sister for something that was no fault of hers. Or mines. We all harbor our pain differently. And maybe because we only share half a bloodline, the ways in which we manifest took three different routes. Tasha and Francis meeting somewhere along the way while my route caught fire and burned just about everything that was behind it.

“Miss New York is fine on her own.” It had occurred to me then that I’d forgotten to tell them that I moved down to Atlanta a year ago to be with a girlfriend. And that I was in a relationship. And out of one. I flipped a steak.

“She’s happy now,” Francis said. She was sitting next to Tasha, taking her half-smoked cigarette out of the ashtray. She scrolled through the messages in our groupchat on her cellphone, the plastic chipped on the edges.

“Desi?”

“Ma. Look at her. That glow. Even with her bad hip, she takes pictures in front of the Grand Canyon. How is she doing this?” The three of our phones buzzed.

“She found a dead Armadillo.”

I looked at the picture taken on the side of a highway. It was split in three, the shell like a broken clay pot. She sent another – its guts spilled out onto the asphalt, all four legs sticking straight up towards the sky. *They’re everywhere*, Ma wrote.

“Those alien looking things,” I said.

“It’s your fault. Sending those kids over unannounced. Charles never liked kids,” Francis said. She was still looking through the photos on her phone.

“Don’t start. Who else was going to help me? You? Desi? Ma was there for me, OK.”

“Yeah, but you treated her like a daycare. Listen, Desi, the last day before Ma left town, Tasha had her baby-sitting Sierra and Kiara. For eight hours. Why you think she ran away so fast?”

Devin stepped out with a tray of hotdogs for grilling. He asked if the steaks were ready to eat. People were hungry. Tasha stood up, took the tongs from me and plopped my half burnt, half raw steaks on a plate. Devin stood in front of us for a moment. We said nothing.

“Anything else?” Tasha asked. Devin shook his head. He looked at me and I smiled as if assuring him that everything was OK. He went back inside, shutting in the noise of music and laughter.

“*My fault?*” Tasha continued. “Listen, Desi, Francis borrowed at least five hundred dollars from Ma over the last year because she needed this or that. You thirty-eight years old and still living off your damn mother.”

“I’m paying her back though. *Right*, Desi? You can’t take back the years of her rearing your fucking kids while you go off, have other

babies.” Francis pulled out another cigarette and lit it, leaving what was left of the other one to smolder in the ash tray.

Tasha put the hot dogs on the grill. She looked at me, gave me the tongs, and sat next to Francis once again.

I had no words to say because it was the first time I heard any of this. Even after all these years they still kept secrets from me. And their fights were coded with this secret history. The two of them had the best arguments when I was younger. It would often escalate into fist fights – Tasha and Francis going at it bare knuckled like boxing champs. I would sit on the living room floor and watch them scream at one another not knowing what the cause was behind their rage. To me, they were like real sisters. Something I didn’t know I craved.

I got an urge then, to lie down. To be still. To blend in with the deck. I got on the ground, on my back, and splayed out like a dead thing.

“Desi. Get your ass up.”

“The goddamn food’s burning.”

The grill began to smoke just as the wind picked up. Little specks of raindrops fell onto the deck, one by one until a full-on pour. The three of us ran inside, taking the charred hotdogs off the grill. Tasha held the door

open for the little girls playing in the yard. Each one of them ran in wet, soaked down to their sandals.

“Get towels from the bathroom.” The girls ran to the back, except Kiara. She lingered near me and held my arm. She had yellow beads strung through each braid, her hair like a field of daisies. I wondered if she lost the little black rubber bands that kept them on like I did when I was young. If she shook her head from side to side so hard that the beads flew out and pinged against the wall.

“You taking me to N-Y-C?” she asked. I thought for a moment even though the answer was clear. But, I nodded a *yes* and ran my fingers through her braids, picking out a single twig.

“Get in that bathroom and dry off,” Tasha interrupted.

The family that was gathered in the kitchen began to leave when the rain slowed down. They took sleepy, damp children with them as well as plates of food wrapped in foil, cups, bottles of liquor, cans of beer. The house was silent, except for the television that was tuned to an action film. Some car chase in the middle of a busy highway. The three of us sat in the living room. I was on the floor next to the playpen with Sierra inside, sleeping next to a doll. It wasn't long until I fell asleep, on the cool

ground, next to the chair Tasha sat in. I dreamt of Tasha and Francis driving their car down into the Grand Canyon, like *Thelma and Louise*, their eyes shut tight, while I could not move to save them. Paralyzed, not able to scream. Their car tumbled and crashed and ripped into pieces. What was left of them: a rear-view mirror, a loose cigarette, a severed hand, a single photograph of Tasha's children laying on the rocks.

I left Tasha's house early the next morning. Francis was gone before I woke up, but she left me a text. *Don't forget about us, Sis*, it said. I drove down the road and crossed into the newly named *MLK Drive*. I passed the church we grew up in. Behind it was the cemetery where Grandma was buried and next to it was Apple Tree corner store. The history of that place ran through my bloodline. My Grandparents lived just around the corner from that church. Their parents before that. Roots that ran so deep, I thought I couldn't stay away forever. Like I could turn back and be sucked into its vortex. I could see myself here, ten years from now, playing ball with Devin and Kiara in the parking lot. Laying down more roots, waiting for trees to bloom.

Just before hitting the highway, on the other end of Main Street, I stopped at the *Biscuitville*. I ordered a cinnamon biscuit, with extra icing. Inside the drive thru window, the few people working behind the counter packing to-go boxes and ringing up orders, paid no attention to me. Behind the fryer, I saw Charles standing in his flour stained apron. He rolled out dough for the biscuits. He had gone gray in recent years. Gotten heavier. The window opened. A rushed sound of machinery and cash registers ringing buzzed in my ear. The cashier, young with strands of green in her kinks, said "1.29". Charles saw me then. His eyes remained expressionless. I waved a hand. He nodded. I opened my mouth to say something. All the things I had wanted to say since Ma left.

"She's happy without you, you know. And you're still alive. Stay that way, just a bit longer." Charles cupped his floured hand over his ear, told me to repeat. The cashier rolled her eyes.

"Could I get some extra napkins?" I asked. Defeated.

I left the drive thru, turning onto the highway, with the box in my lap. The wax paper dripped icing onto my jeans, my windows were rolled down, my stereo turned up.

A Eulogy for Kevin Springer

Part I: *highpointdontburyme*

A week after Kevin's murder, his ashes sat in an urn in front of the photo of his face that was placed on the coffee table. It was his driver's license photo that Kim had chosen for the memorial service because it was the one she used for the obituary and the only recent photograph she had of him that looked professional. The rest of him, how he was, was posted on his Facebook profile, still with his street name, *GunnaK*. It was pictures of him and his boys posing in front of old cars, swing sets, and on top of the city's sign on the highway that read *Welcome to High Point*. The last picture he took was of him alone on Kim's porch, crouched down with his shirt off, looking straight at the camera. He posted, *real ones hide behind nothing*. On the day of his death, that photo trended among the High Point community on social media and was used in a brief broadcast on local news about his untimely death.

Kim sat in one of the folding chairs in her living room holding Theresa's hand. Flowers and stuffed animals were placed by his urn as people came into her apartment that morning to pay their respects. They

gathered around the two of them in the available chairs. They both wore their engagement rings. Theresa had proposed to her a few weeks before, and as the *I'm sorry for your loss* sentiments went around, the *congratulations you two* rang out simultaneously.

"Thank you," they both said. And *thank you*.

Each one of Kevin's young friends, no more than eighteen, spoke up and stated their thoughts on who Kim's brother was.

"You was the one who kept my head on straight."

"Kev, Goddamn, you didn't deserve this."

"My dudes up in heaven with his mom now. Love you Cuz."

"I was just with you Kev. You posted up on my porch that night and said you was happy to be out the hood, right?"

"Goddamn, my dude."

Kim tried to listen anyhow. Her thoughts focused on that photo of him not smiling but doing that squinty thing with his eyes she always hated. She had to take the ID up to the CVS a few days before to get it printed on a white foam poster board. There were stares from the employees. Like their eyes were saying, *you want to do what with what?* And Kim, impatient and tired, responded. "Just print the fucking photo of my little brother who was shot in the head two times." She left it on the

counter, walked out, and sat in her car in the parking lot cursing everybody who worked in that store. And after she was called in to pick up the poster board, a manager politely asked her to never return to that CVS again.

At the memorial, they all wore homemade t-shirts of Kevin's face air brushed on the front below the words *Rest in Peace Kev* in swirly lettering. Printed on the back of each shirt was *Anaheim St. kids forever*. A kid named Red sat beside Kim and placed his arm around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry about your Bro. Marian your only Bro left now. Damn, Kim." He sniffed as the tears rolled down his face, freely. His eyes were as red as his name.

"Thanks, Red," she said and held his shaky hand over her shoulder. He had a cigarette tucked behind his ear and he smelled a little like weed. The whole room did. And all the boys' eyes were red from crying and lighting up that morning, that previous day, that entire week. What else was they supposed to do?

The ones in attendance were mostly these boys she had not seen in years. Not since she moved out of the JC Morgan housing projects with her two brothers after their mom died ten years ago. There was not much family of hers left here. When they moved to the East side of town, they

moved away from all the trouble as far as Kim could tell. When Marian was locked up in Juvenile, it became just her and Kevin in this little two-bedroom apartment. And now that Marian was coming home in two months, it felt like there was some twisted exchange happening. As if Kim had to lose one brother to gain another back.

Red took the cigarette from his ear and rolled it between two fingers, got up, and went outside to smoke it on the porch. Kim joined him. She needed to get outside for a bit and away from Theresa's clammy hand and all the drug induced condolences.

"Whatever man, I mean, we know who it did," Red said.

"The police called Marian up there in the detention center. Like he knows who did it. I swear, they not even trying to investigate." The two sat on the steps and looked out into the yard at the stillness of that morning. It was May and the bushes out front were full of berries, a few birds hid inside of it, each of them singing their own songs. Red looked over to Kim after he took a couple of long drags.

"We running our own investigation. Believe me, Cuz, Kevin won't be forgotten." Red looked up to the sky, avoiding Kim's gaze.

"Don't do anything stupid." A helicopter flew above, its buzzing vibrated through the porch rails. A kid across the street chased it and ran

down the sidewalk until it was out of sight. The two remained silent for a moment, watching.

“You think I could have his CD collection?” Red blew out smoke in the other direction, but it blew back around into Kim’s face. She coughed.

“You want what?” She said, all in a daze.

“Just the HY-CITY tracks,” he said. All serious. Kim said nothing, got up, and went back into the house, into Kevin’s room.

On his dusty bookshelf next to a jar of grease and a hairbrush was a stack of CDs labeled with the name of his rap group when he was in high school. Kim had heard his music in the past. The first time he recorded in a studio, he came home with a pizza he had bought with some of the money. The two of them sat in the kitchen with the CD player blasting their songs. The kid was smiling the whole time. Saying, “We about to blow up!” Kim thought the songs were mostly trash, though she liked that one song about the blunts and aces. The rest of it, to her, was just teenage gibberish.

His room still smelled like him – that sour smell of musk, of pine, a hint of weed, and vanilla incense. An ashtray was on his nightstand with a half-smoked cigarette he saved for later. Kevin would say that buying a whole pack was too expensive, so one cigarette every two days was

enough for him. His bed was still not made-up from how he left it and Kim would eventually have to wash his sheets because Marian was coming home and this room, his stuff, would be all his now. Kim wanted to lie down in his bed and fall asleep forever. Maybe when she woke up from that never-ending dream, Kevin would be standing over her with a ping pong paddle about to smack her in the head from sleeping in his bed.

In the living room, Red took the CDs from Kim. He placed one into the little CD player plugged in the corner of the room. A song started playing. *Trap Money King*. Red swayed from side to side and pointed up at the ceiling. "This one's for you Bro." The other young boys bounced their heads.

Theresa, collecting cards from off the table, whispered to Kim. "Should we tell them to stop?"

"I don't know. They seem to be into it." The two of them looked at each other, held back a laugh before Kim straightened her face.

Theresa bounced her head to the rhythm, "Some memorial service."

Before Kim could respond and shut the music off, Red broke down and sobbed. The boys around him lifted him up, sat him down and

huddled over him. Kim took out her phone and snapped a picture. She let it sit for a moment, thinking about what to post. Thinking about how to show these boys like this to the world.

She wrote, *praying for this war to end* and tagged it, *ripkev*, before posting it to her page.

After the morning ended, Kim looked out into the empty living room where Kevin's urn still sat and wondered what it was all for? And if she would ever hear from the police about who did it. And how all those young men in that room earlier knew who killed him, knew it was someone from the Southside that shot Kevin in the head. But, they were never going to tell. And somebody was bound to retaliate. Kim could not understand this feud. She was ten years older than Kevin, nearly thirty, and had grown up in a different High Point, before the feuds between hoods that started nearly five years ago. All she was sure of was that there was a war going on and it did not look like it was going to end until every young man was shot dead.

That night, as she slept holding Theresa, the post she made collected likes and reposts and comments from the kids who knew Kevin or didn't know him but knew of the gangs and the violence. For a while

her page lit up the darkest corners of the night sky with hashtags of *justiceforkev* and *highpointdontburyme*.

Part II: *pop pop like nothing happened*

Marian was finally headed home from the detention center out near the mountains. He sat in the back of a Greyhound with his plastic bag of the things he owned and the letter he had written for Kevin. It was to be placed beneath his urn. Marian spent the last year of his sentence keeping his temper in check in hopes of getting an early release date. It had been three years for him in Juvie, locked up at sixteen for attempted robbery and possession. The last time he saw Kevin was in the visiting room a year ago. They stood face to face, measuring each other. Marian was taller, thinner. Kevin had less acne. They both sounded the same, though Kevin had more hope in his voice.

Marian remembers him saying, "I'm joining *Job Corps*, Bro." Kevin had hashed out a plan to be an auto mechanic because fixing cars was good business. The two of them would open a garage and tinker with old Chevy parts and build their own Hoopties from scratch. By the end of that hour, Marian left Kevin feeling calmer. More focused. Like Kevin's

presence made him forget all the anger he felt being contained behind those walls.

“One more year,” he told Kevin before they hugged. He left his brother standing in the that room watching him return through the gate.

The bus made one stop, three hours in at a gas station. Everyone on board had ten minutes to use the rest room, buy food, or just stand off to the side of the bus to smoke. Marian stayed on. Outside of his window, he watched a woman pump gas into her car while looking at the screen of her phone. He tapped on the window to get her attention, maybe ask for her number if she seemed interested, but she did not look up. The silhouette of Black Mountain behind her was carved into the pale sky. The same sky he had seen each day standing out in the yard with the other boys in their blue jumpsuits, waiting to leave. Waiting to kiss a girl. Hoping to never get transferred to the penitentiary down the road when they aged out of Juvie. Marian slammed his fist against the glass and the woman jumped. She looked at the bus, at him in the window and he ducked his head. He pressed his feet up against the back of the chair in front of him and leaned back, as the woman’s eyes searched for him through the window.

It was around nine o'clock that night when the bus drove into the parking lot of Burger Joe's. Kim was waiting outside and waved him down as he stepped off.

"Sis," he said, and they hugged and for a moment he almost thought he was hugging Kevin.

"They didn't feed you right." Kim said. Marian squinted and laughed, hiding his missing front tooth. Kevin was the one to kick it out on accident when they were young. Kim studied the little bits of hair he had on his face. "New look," she said and they both laughed.

"How's Theresa?" Marian asked.

Kim held up her ring finger. "The wedding's in a few months."

"Congrats, Sis. I'm happy for you." The two of them searched for words to say.

"Let's eat, Sis." Marian patted his stomach, the sound of it so hollow. So much like the nights when he went to bed hungry in solitary.

Marian sat in the booth of Burger Joe's, bit into his cheeseburger and drank a milkshake while Kim received hugs from the employees. They had Kevin's photo hanging up on the wall, since he worked there for a few summers during high school. It was a weird photo of him. All

squinty eyed. He looked like their mom when she was alive; brooding and untrusting of what was in front of him. They both had that large head with the heart-shaped jowl. A *heart-chin*. Kim returned to the booth with her food.

“What you thinking?” Kim asked.

“Of Mom. Of Kev. The chaplain over there in Juvie told me, *they’re together now*. I laughed, Sis. Right in his face.” It had been so long since his mother died that he had forgotten what she sounded like. This would be true of Kevin in a few years’ time.

“How long’s that picture going to be up for?”

“It’s been up for a couple of months. They’ll take it down soon.”

Kim drank a gulp of her cherry soda and picked at a bowl of chili.

“Damn, I hate I missed the memorial and all,” Marian said, his mouth full of chewed up burger. To be honest, Marian had that urge to walk into this city and burn it down for what it did to his brother. Just so he would not be reminded of how much it hurts being home.

“You were on his mind a lot. He even bought you a little something in preparation for your return.” Kim said that she left the box Kevin had ordered under his bed, unopened.

“What am I going to do now?”

“You could get a job here, you know.” She waited for Marian to respond but he kept eating. Kept his eyes on his food. As the two sat in the booth, the rhythm of the restaurant rattled around them – laughter of children playing with their new plastic toys, the ringing of the register, the calling of order numbers, the greetings from the drive-thru window, the opening of the door as a new customer was being greeted by the workers behind the counter.

“There’s Red,” Kim said. Marian’s head snapped up and his demeanor changed. Because him and Kevin were only a little more than a year apart, their friend group was the same. He waved Red over.

“Yo, Red, what up?” Marian bounced up and gave the boy the tightest hug. He kept his word from the letter he sent him a month ago. That he’ll be there as soon as he got out. He was amused for nearly a second, before he smelled Red and saw how low his eyes were.

“You ready, Cuz?” Red said.

“He just got here,” Kim interrupted. She pulled his arm, sat him back down. “Marian, we need to go home. Remember where you just left?”

“It’s ok Kim. We’re going across town,” Red said.

Marian shoved the rest of the burger in his mouth, took the milkshake and gave Kim a hug. "Take my stuff with you, will you? I'll be back in an hour, just going to say hey to the fam." He left out, hugging Kim one more time. When he got into the passenger seat of Red's car a HY-CITY track blasted on the speakers.

"Remember this, Cuz?" Red bounced his head. Mouthed every word. Marian remembered the boys that they rolled with on the Southside, one of them rapping on this track. That same boy accused of turning on Kevin over some dumb shit like turf. That urge to burn something down began to fizzle. Marian thought, *what was all the beef for anyhow?*

"You still want in?" Red said, opening the glove compartment and pulling out a black bag.

Marian looked inside, saw the gun. His skinned tightened, like a cool breeze had just rushed over him. He got scared. "We sure he did it?"

"They talking about cease fire. About bringing us together, but what that going to do to bring Kev back?" Red lit the cigarette that was tucked behind his ear. He offered Marian a drag before remembering that he didn't smoke. "My bad, Cuz, you on that health shit?"

"I'm good." As the car drove off and down the road, Marian watched the city pass by; Main Street and its row of fast food restaurants. The apartment complex Kim lived in behind it. The newly paved streets with black asphalt, glimmering in the moonlight. The stamp of High Point University flags hanging on every streetlamp, letting them know who *really* owns this place. As if the ones spraying bullets are only toy soldiers. Each streetlamp that rolled by flashed those same old lights and Marian knew the city was never going to change for them. He felt his stomach rumble, the milkshake he finished was not sitting well. "Take me home," he said.

"You sure?" Red stopped in front of a home depot. "Listen, Cuz, you know Q. from over that way? He's been popping off about taking out Kevin. We know where he hangs and everything. Just roll by with me. Pop pop, and then we drive off like nothing happened."

Marian took off his seatbelt, opened the car door and threw up. Chunks of burger splattered onto the side of the car.

"Watch the seat." Red turned off the engine.

"I'm sorry." Marian stepped out and ran, leaving Red to yell his name as he turned the corner. He didn't care who would see him, or chase him, or if the police would drive by and make a quick U-turn to catch up

to him. He ran to where the apartments were and caught his breath once he got onto Kim's porch. Inside the window, he could see Kim sitting alone on the couch with her phone out and her eyes closed like she was waiting for someone to call. He knocked on the door.

Part III: *fuck Red, and everybody*

When she got home from Burger Joe's, shouting out every fucking curse word because *damn, Marian*, Kim decided to call Theresa to tell her what happened. Really, she wanted her to come home from work and just be there. To hold her. To kiss her. And to make her forget that she was a Springer, which meant that she could be the only one left in this fucking little city. If Marian would never come back. She called and waited for an answer until the knock on the door.

They hugged, tight. Marian's tears dropping onto the top of Kim's head. The two of them were silent, thinking of all the ways they could rescue a place like this, perhaps. The bodies of High Point - young men barely eighteen, are stacking up and nobody's got the money to bury them, so they're all just burning – are all just a pile of ashes. *Seventeen killed and it is only July*. Marian picked up Kevin's ashes in that urn on the

coffee table and said, "Goddamn Bro, all you had to do was wait one more month."

It was like the urn screamed back, *fuck High Point, fuck this war, fuck Red, and everybody.*

In Kevin's room, Marian lied down and ripped open the letter he made for Kev. There was no writing on the paper. The bulk of the page was a sketched memory of Kevin he kept in his head. The one as they sat in the empty baseball field one summer night when they were young boys. They had stolen bikes that were found left outside of the playground and rode across town just on the other side of the tracks where there were bike lanes, a busy mall, pizza shops, and crowded bars with music blaring inside. They raced along the path up into a stretch of grass and trees and behind a high school where the field was illuminated with lights. The grass was newly wet from the sprinklers, but the boys cartwheeled and flipped along the field. They ran up and down the bleachers and called out each other's names from the opposite ends of the field.

They rested in the grass and looked up at the sky. Kevin laughed which made Marian laugh which made the two of them cackle uncontrollably. A feeling, Marian remembered, came up in him. It was not

like when he missed his mother at night, or when he was handcuffed the first time at sixteen, or when he was expelled from high school, indefinitely. It was something else entirely. Like, peace. Marian's sketch was of this peace – Kevin in laughter, and he fell asleep holding on to that memory.

Part IV: *And I love you...*

Theresa came home late that night. They lied on the floor in Kim's room, smoked a joint, and listened to HY-CITY. "Not bad," Kim admitted. It all felt kind of wrong to know that eighteen-year-old Kev only wanted *money, weed, and bitches*. Something in that made all the sense in the world, except that her brother was gone. Still, forever.

When she made love to Theresa she said over and over until her tongue went numb, *I love you, I love you, I love you*.

The box sat underneath the bed, collecting dust. It was marked with a sticker from Switzerland. Inside was a mic, a mixer, and headphones. Recording equipment. A note typed inside.

Fuck auto mechanics, we doing this or what?

Marian laughed. Kevin was the worst rapper, he thought, to be honest. And he was locked up when the group got together, recorded tracks. They mailed him CDs, and as he would listen to them in the common area on the stereo, the boys around him would toss crackers at the speakers. Marian was not a rapper, but then again, he kept a notebook with pages of his drawings and poems. He held the equipment in his lap and thought *what the hell*. By the end of the next morning, he had filled up the rest of his pages with rhymes.

And All That You Say Is Beautiful. Remember That.

It was the dropped phone calls that rattled Patrice. Her calls with Ari would be interrupted by static and then fade into other intimate conversations between two people. She had no idea what to expect from Ari's reaction to her marriage, but the cold click of the phone disconnecting was like the sharp stinger of a wasp piercing through her ear. The two of them had not lived in the same place for nearly three years and during that time, Patrice had given up on pursuing an acting career, moved back to her hometown and rekindled a relationship with her ex-boyfriend. The marriage, a month ago in a drab courthouse, was a surprise. To her, and now to Ari. It was a marriage of love and convenience, and at that moment Patrice was content with where her life was going. She only thought to tell of the marriage because she hadn't had a full conversation with Ari in months. Not like they used to, when three hours on the phone flew by and it would end with her sitting upside down on the couch soaking up all Ari's secrets. Now, it was as if each phone call was interrupted by static, or interference from another call, or

the receiver jumbled and scattered their voices, allowing Patrice to eavesdrop on different conversations.

Before the click, though, Ari's response was, "I'm happy for you." It felt like an avoidance of conflict. Like Ari was holding back on something. On her balcony, beneath a bed of stars, Patrice slumped in her chair. Her big toe almost knocked over a potted spider plant sitting inches away from her foot.

"Is it ok?" Immediately, Patrice wanted to take back the question. It was possible that she was breaking a silent contract between the two of them that began when they were together. Or maybe she gave Ari the impression that this was not supposed to be the Patrice she once dated – married before thirty and living in a place where, in Patrice's words, dreams go to be strangled to death. All she could do was wait for an answer. On Ari's end, Patrice heard what sounded like dishes clashing against one another in the sink. A voice in the background muttered softly, *Uncle Wade*, it said. *Uncle Wade, that you?*

"Hello, Ari?"

"As long as you're happy," Ari said. The voice stopped after a sound of what Patrice thought was laughter.

“Are you busy? We can talk about this later.” Patrice was watching the parking lot from her balcony. A car would enter or exit ever so often through the broken front gate of their apartment complex. Frank’s white Honda entered and pulled into the same parking space they’d had since moving in a year ago. Patrice waved as he walked out of the car carrying a bag of that night’s dinner.

“It’s ok. Really. *Rogramulated.*” There was static in Ari’s voice. She was fading out.

“I can’t hear, speak up?”

“Congratulations.” It was forced out like the first breath of air after being submerged in a pool. Patrice didn’t want this to be the last phone call they would have. She gripped it in her hand, holding on as if letting go would cause the thing to fall and completely shatter. She loved Ari. And Frank. And if a little marriage certificate was going to end their friendship, then to hell with Ari’s judgments.

“I miss you.” Patrice waited in silence for something. Anything. Static came through.

His name was Kale, like the vegetable. I mean, I had to say yes...

“Kale?” Patrice poked the spider plant with her big toe, its green leaf dipped into its own soil.

“I miss you too. I get it, Patrice.” The last part ended on a sigh. Her voice cracked. Ari’s end was silent for a moment. The static seemed to have cleared. “Is this a goodbye?”

“What? No, you’re still my core. He’s fine with us, you know. I told him about you.” Patrice whispered this. It was an embellished truth. She told Frank she had met a woman and fell in love before moving back home and that they were together for two years. But, she had never said anything about the phone calls, the plans to visit, the dream trips she wanted to take with Ari. The latter two were projections of a fantasy; last minute interruptions invaded their plans to see each other again. It was either a mother was sick, or work called last minute, or Frank had a show, or Ari had to do a thing. Even this call, concealed on her balcony with the glass door closed as Frank set the table in preparation for their dinner, was calculated.

“I’ll come next month to see you, ok? You and me in the city. Let me have you for a day?” There was a tap at the glass door. Frank pulled up his shirt and rubbed his bloated belly, puffed out in exaggeration.

Patrice silently faked a laugh and waved her hand. She mouthed *in a minute*.

“Sure,” Ari replied. A simple, curt ‘sure’. Patrice sunk even lower.

“I mean, don’t worry about me, I *donwangherbossmerkle*.”

Have you seen the video of that baby trying to ask Alexa to play ‘baby shark’? Dude, I died.

“Ari.” Patrice sat up in her chair. “Give me a week. I’ll be there.”

“*Gerwoweiuualgwleeihrmx.*” And then a sting of the wasp. The call dropped. Patrice let out a puff of air through her un-parted lips. She was fed up with the lost signals, failed plans, and secrecy – all of it. She dialed Ari’s number again. A gurgle of static and then another dropped call. She sent a text. *Call me back, please*. A red message appeared back on her screen. *Failed, try again?* Why the question mark? Ari couldn’t have cut her off that fast. Patrice pushed the spider plant with her foot, the contents of it spilled out into a neat pile of dirt on the balcony floor. She walked inside to see Frank sitting in front of rice and hummus with grilled eggplant and mushrooms. His plate was nearly finished as he scraped the last bit of rice onto his spoon.

Patrice tried calling Ari again the next day. A thin sound of white noise only answered back. The texts failed. She had completely dropped off the face of the earth. In the quiet stairwell of a temp job she was working for the week, Patrice balanced her peanut butter sandwich on her knee and dialed Ari's number from a borrowed cell phone. Her excuse was that her phone had died.

Hello.

"Ari, what happened?"

The goddamn heater burst again. Find Gary's number, will ya?

"Who is this?" A click. No answer. No Ari.

She bit into her sandwich. As she chewed, the peanut butter stuck to the roof of her mouth. She looked at the phone she had in her hand. It was Brenda's, her cubicle mate in the office. The case was pink and encrusted with rhinestones. Messages from email, text, and the news flashed across her screen. How many connections were contained in that small shiny device? The phone rang. A familiar number. Ari's.

"That you?"

"Listen, Patrice, I fell for you. Hard. Let me go, please--"

“Are you home? I’m coming.” Patrice sprang up from the steps and sprinted back into the office, out the front door. A collection of eyes from behind cubicle walls followed her. She did not care. She could have run the two thousand miles to Ari at that very moment.

“Don’t come, ok? I need you to delete me. All of it. It’s not how –” Before Ari could finish, the call was interrupted once again. This time a sound of a string instrument played back. A violin, possibly. Its pitch, a high screech. Its tone, a lonely echo. Like someone was sitting in a chair, playing to an empty room. Patrice listened as she stood outside, the Autumn air cool against her skin, the hairs on the back of her neck standing. The playing faded out to nothing but white noise. She looked up at the sky and, fuck, it was like a painting; a true-blue background with wispy white clouds drawn into it. Power lines cut into her sight, the black cords thick and twisted stretching out to the other utility poles. A fleet of poles lined along the interstate. One of the cords had fallen loose and hung from the other lines, swinging back and forth with the wind. Patrice screamed. It was a closed mouth scream, yes. An internal “ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh” that was ended with the click of her tongue. Ari was playing some nasty game, for sure, right? She gathered herself and

walked back inside the gray office building. A buzz from the fluorescent lights turned on with each step, like a thousand bees swarming above.

A month had passed since their last conversation and Patrice, sullen, trudged through each of those days. It was getting colder out, Autumn was ending, and the early mornings were a dark gray when she woke up for work. Frank asked one morning before they left the apartment, “you want to talk about it?” He waited to put on his coat. Patrice could see in his worried brow that maybe he was waiting for her to say a horrible thing about him and about their drab marriage. She put on a smile, fake-jabbed his chin and said that everything was fine. That the change of weather was getting the worst of her. And as soon as he left, she stood in a spot on her floor and imagined herself sinking into the ground like she’d stepped into quick sand.

It was called *auditory hallucination*, as WebMD termed it. Hearing sounds that were not there. Also related to schizophrenia. Patrice was sure none of this was true of her. On the couch one night in their one-bedroom apartment as the TV blared in front of them, Patrice searched possible ways to get rid of the static and reconnect with Ari. Her search terms were

getting more and more desperate – *dropped calls; call interference; Android malfunctions; what does it mean when a past love drowns in sound waves?* The latter was an experiment in internet surrealism. Maybe Ari was truly tangled in the wires and the best thing for her to do was to give up.

An old, defunct message board on the very subject appeared. She skimmed through ancient photos of early memes, and references to landlines. She stopped on a comment from a user. *My cellphone is dropping calls and picking up other conversations. Help!?* The question was specific to Patrice’s situation, but the answer – from someone called *Yanny2387* – was as simple as it was absurd.

You must have MetroPCS. Just hit #49 before dialing the number.

Worked for me and now I can hear every conversation!

Patrice held up her cheap *MetroPCS* phone and laughed. It was guttural and loud, which startled Frank who was asleep on the couch. Drool ran from the crevice of his lip down to his chin. He quickly wiped it away.

“What are you doing?” He asked, picking up the remote and roaming through the channels. He glanced over at Patrice’s computer.

“You sick?” He noticed the WebMD page that was up on her screen.

“Could be schizophrenia. Watch out,” She faked a jab across Frank’s slobbery chin.

“Hmmm, I’ve been with worse.” Frank leaned into her, kissed her nose. “You’ve been distant these past couple of months.”

Patrice stared blankly at Frank for a moment. “I’m right here, Frank. I’m always right here.”

“I know. I see you. But, you’re not there. It’s like you hide from me when you’re on the phone, Patrice. You’re always talking to someone else.” He gestured to her clutching the phone. The whole time she was searching with one hand, the other attached to an expectant call.

Patrice shut the laptop in front of her and got up. “I’m trying to reach someone important to me.” Frank looked up at her, adjusted the pillow she was sitting on. He tilted back on the couch and propped his feet up.

“Is it Ari?” he asked.

Patrice looked towards the bedroom. She thought of all she truly owned: her clothes, the laptop, the big foamy pillow, and her spider plants. This could all fit in the back of her car if Frank decided to end

things. "Yes," she said. "And I love *you*. But she will be in my life for a long time. I can't let her go, Frank."

"That's fine, ok. Just, don't keep secrets from me." He changed the channel to the tonight show. The host, a pale, bumbling gangly thing in a suit, was interviewing a camel. All they could hear was the muffled sound of the laugh track getting louder as Frank increased the volume.

Patrice stepped out onto the balcony and shut the door. She dialed #49 before entering Ari's number. And waited.

Static. On the other end was laughter, like the laugh track on the talk show before fading underneath distinct chatter.

...maybe ice-skating as a hobby doesn't sound so bad...

...what do you think about Starburst, on a pure aesthetic level...

...Love, love, love, love, love the fuzzy rabbit's foot key fob everyone had in '98, remember?

...no, I like you more...

...and they all lived happily ever after, fucking pricks...

...don't forget to bring something green, Danny...

A collage of conversations, single-sided, was fed into Patrice's ear. What strange things people say to each other over the phone. She listened in closely. Everyone's voice was an intimate whisper as if every word was a secret. It was sacred, these phone calls. A far reach for some response on the other end; a validation: *I am here even if you can't see me and I hear you and all that you say is beautiful. Remember that.* Their whispered voices were heavenly. But, Patrice felt guilty. She was intruding on these lives, lived somewhere distant from one another. She ended the call.

Her phone rang. It was Ari – fuck, it was Ari.

"I'm sorry," Patrice let out.

Ari exhaled. Patrice recognized the sigh, a thing that she had gotten used to over the years. She was starting to know the sounds she emitted, more so than she remembered the feel of her lips. The mole between her breasts. The edges of her elbows. And she was ok with that.

"You don't have to rescue me." Ari smacked her lips. "I'm figuring everything out, Patrice. I'll be fine."

"Your voice is all I have left of you."

There was sounds of waves in the background. An ocean interrupting their call. A wall of water swallowing their whispers.

“Are you on a beach?” Just then, the sounds of waves crashing had gotten louder.

“Hear that? It’s our favorite spot on the boardwalk. Hold on.”

Patrice could hear the wind pick up, Ari wrestling with her phone, before the wind cut out and a crisp thin sound, a *wsshhh*, washed over her ear.

“What is that?”

“A seashell.” Ari laughed.

“Nah, it’s you,” Patrice said. They sat in silence for a moment, listening to each other take in what was on the outside. Patrice had forgotten to put on warmer clothes before she stepped out. Her toes were getting numb. The streetlights replaced the glow of the moon – a faint crescent high above. “Next week?”

“Always.”

This was their assurance: they would always be in each other’s ear, not letting one or the other fade into the background of white noise. They hung up and Patrice wobbled out of her chair, she turned to face Frank and prepared to let him in on her secrets.

For What It's Worth

A-side

The last couple of weeks you and I were together before you moved back home to Georgia, I found myself thinking more about what life was like if I didn't move to New York City at all. Not like how much money I could have saved skipping college and traveling around the country, or if I'd be sharing an apartment with my mom somewhere in North Carolina, or if love would have found me and stayed just a little longer. It was more a thought of how else I would have failed. And to be honest, J., I thought so much that I had failed you because I didn't try hard enough to make you feel proud to be gay and to keep you with me. I brushed off the entire three years we had spent together living a one-sided lie. *A, it doesn't hurt so bad*, lie. Like all the times we held each other in bed, or when your palm rubbed the middle of my back, or when I kissed your temple as we walked down countless side streets at night in the city, was nothing but a list of meaningless gestures.

I'm telling you this now because after you left, I hated myself for the longest time. And now that I'm finally packing up the last bit of our apartment - my apartment - after a year of living alone, every corner of

this tiny place we shared must be remembered. Every little black strand of hair and bread crumb dropped between crevices must be worshipped.

1. *Haloumi Sandwiches and Fish Guts.*

I worked as a manager of a sandwich shop on Rivington Street. Once a week, I would make them and bring them home for dinner to our little apartment on Grand, above the fish market. It reeked of dead fish and sometimes we would hook clothespins to our noses when it stunk the most in the late afternoon in summer. You were a flight attendant then, and for two weeks each month I had you at home with me and because there was no living room or a real kitchen, we would spend those weeks cooped up in our bed in between the air conditioner and radiator eating those sandwiches with our legs tangled.

Even in that last week we were together. I said, "If we keep this up, we might swap bodies. Like *Freaky Friday*."

And with a clothespin hooked to your nose and your face all scrunched up, you said, "Well, I'll just have to become you and you me, and then I'll be the one to watch you fly away to Georgia." Because the thing was, we were still in love up until the end and even then, as I would walk home at night, it still felt like the first time we moved in together. My

heart beat faster with each step closer because damn I was lucky. Damn I had J. from Georgia, my Bankhead projects queen.

2. *Family.*

The first year we moved in, there was a mouse in our sink's drain you named Horace. With the leftover bits of bread and cheese as bait, you made a trap out of a toilet paper roll, a penny taped to the end, and a string tied to a shoebox. One night, as we slept, he fell into it and by the next morning you had poked holes into the box and convinced me to keep him it as a pet.

I said to you, "what about the diseases," and you laughed.

"He's our family," you said.

"We could get a cat?"

"But Horace is so much better. Look at him, he chose us, Babe."

And his little mouse nose wiggled as he squeaked inside the box.

I see what you mean by family now. And choice. Really, I think after you moved away, it was a loss of this family I suffered. As for Horace, he died a week after you left, and I buried him in Grand Street park, right next to the squirrel bench.

3. *Headaches.*

Sometimes, before you would take on a two week shift at the airline, we'd spend that last day in bed if I had a day off. I loved the summer the most because we'd listen to the sounds outside our window; the Mister Softee truck, the garbage men, the honking from taxis, skateboarders, the passing conversations, a car or two blasting Reggaeton. So much of life we heard. I would tease you and say something like, "You won't hear *Daddy Yankee* in Denver," or whatever white-bread city you were headed to.

Mostly I was envious that you got to go, while I had to stay and inhale whatever stench the city let out on any given day.

You would complain about having to fly from SLC to LAX to ATL; all in thirty-six hours. And when you returned, I could see the dark circles under your eyes while you dragged that rolling suitcase into Grand Street, apartment 5F, and looked at me before collapsing on the bed.

"I hate this city," you'd say. "Let's move."

"Where?"

"New Mexico."

“I don’t know,” I’d say, “I like it here.” And I’d placed my head on your lower back and felt as you inhaled and exhaled because I knew you hated when I did this.

“Weirdo,” you’d say. “I’m serious, babe, I’m done.” You were. I believed you but, I wasn’t ready to give up that apartment. Or those moments.

“Let’s open up a restaurant in Santa Fe,” I’d sing. Kiss your back. A lie. You’d catch it.

“You give me headaches,” you’d say before rolling over and falling asleep in the middle of the afternoon when the sun was the highest and all that was happening in the world was right below us.

4. *Killing Trees.*

There was always a package in the front of our building for the neighbors on the third floor or just a bundle of *No. 1 China* menus left in between the door. And I always brought in the menus with the package because I’d forget to read the label. When I would walk in, you’d be in the bathroom with all the tabs on – the shower, the sink, the flushing toilet.

“Anything for me?” You’d ask.

“Nah, just the wrong one again. And another bundle.” I would hold up the stack and you’d roll your eyes at me. Throw a wad of toilet paper.

“Stop bringing those in. They’re killing trees.” You’d go back to brushing your teeth with the water running and I’d toss the menus in the trash.

“Look who’s talking,” I’d say before you’d shut the water off. Ask me to repeat. And that’s how it started. Picking silly little fights about big things like recycling. The same arguments on repeat before you would turn on the shower radio, to drown out my voice.

“That’s my jam,” you’d say through spits of toothpaste. And I’d feel bad because you were going out and I was staying in and it all felt like we were doing the wrong dance.

I’d come up behind you and kiss the back of your neck. “Let’s compost,” I’d say.

“J?” I asked one night in May that last year, the radio turned down. “You and me in Colonial Williamsburg next month?” We’d plan a trip

each season and that summer, it felt right to explore early modern colonialism with you.

“I don’t know, Babe. I can’t risk being called into the airline while I’m away.” Your job was new and after five years of being in this city cleaning toilets, wiping tables, making salads, you were finally doing something *worthy*, as you put it. And I understood this, yes, but still I gave you that blank stare.

“It’s only a weekend. A few hours. *We need this*. Let’s get out of this place for a while.”

“*You* need this. Who’s the one who has to be here every day?”

And all I said was, “OK.”

That time, you did not throw a wad of toilet paper. “Something wrong?”

“No.”

You finished getting dressed – slipping on a pair of tight jeans with one of my button downs. You kissed me goodnight, said you’d be out late because friends were in town from Barcelona. As soon as the door shut, the air around me felt thick. I was left with nothing, but the smell of Dove

soap mixed with mint toothpaste, mixed with rotting fish guts. How passive of me to end on a *no*.

5. *All the things I learned about love before I met you*

- It is meant to last forever
- It is one person – a soulmate
- You find your soulmate when you are young, nineteen if you are lucky, and you get married, you have kids, you settle down
- If you do not have any of this before the age of thirty, you are doomed

I am in my thirties now and I am sure I still believe in one or two things on this list. But when I met you, I was lucky to be a woman in love for the first time at twenty-seven. The shame I carried from thinking I was a late bloomer was nothing compared to that first night we kissed in the back of a bar, over a plate of fries and two cold beers next to those men playing pool in dim light. My insides felt raw and mushy, like I was turning inside out. I don't know if that was love I felt then, but it was a feeling I won't allow myself to forget, J., even if you have already erased it from your memory.

6. *Someone like you and me.*

You shared with me that you were not comfortable being gay. That you had only told a few close friends about us. Which is why you would never fly me out to Georgia to meet your family because all of them didn't know that you had fallen for a woman like me. A woman your friend Gina called a "stud", though I never saw myself that way. I was comfortable in ball caps and button downs. And proud.

Something I wish you were. And let's say I kept it all a secret until now. That for three years I chose to ignore how you would not take pictures with me. Or walk hand in hand during the day. Or hear you tell your mom over the phone that I was your roommate. When you were gone for half the month, I would cry at night and think one of these days you'll figure out a way to say to the world that you were proud to fall in love with someone like me.

But that never happened. And I wasn't perfect either. I ended our relationship with a text.

I can't do this J.

7. *I'm scared, Babe.*

It was a Tuesday and I was walking to work on a different path. I walked over an extra block. Tuesdays were the slowest days at the sandwich shop and I was in no rush to get to work. People pushed passed me eager to get home, to get a drink and eat their takeout. I liked this pull of gravity in the late afternoons as everyone rushed in the opposite direction of me, escaping a harsh world-order of work, work, work. It was like being sucked into a void. You let the bubble hang on your phone before replying.

Come home.

It was all you wrote back. I let it sit, unread in my inbox, for the rest of the night.

When I got to work, there was a new server standing in front of my manager nook next to the dishwasher in the kitchen. He was waiting to be trained. I took a quick look at his resume one more time to get a sense of how perky I should be. *Jared Something. About 20 years old. Nebraska born. Worked as a dishwasher, a line cook, cashier, dog walker. White male, clean shaven, no tattoos, etc....* He would be manager the very next year. Fuck. I handed him an apron and gave him the rounds.

“If they ask for house specials, say we have a daily menu that changes week to week.” I told him to show up on time, to say “no” only if it threatens his life, be kind, and always say that it’s great to work here. Within the next three weeks, he would catch me doing none of these things.

You came in on my break wearing pajama pants. You had been crying because your eyes were a little red and puffy. A kid who worked the register called me in from the back.

“What happened?” I asked when you sat in the corner at the counter.

“Are you leaving?”

“You know I can’t do that,” I whispered. There were no customers in the front, so the cashier and that new server just leaned against the counter and listened. I pulled you up and we walked outside.

“It’s your chance now, J.” We were standing in front of the alley where the trash gets dropped at night. A worker from across the street was smoking a cigarette and the air was humid. I started to sweat.

“We can make this work. Just move with me ok, I promise we’ll make this work.” Your eyes shifted, danced away from my gaze. I wanted to believe you.

“When are you going to tell them about us? It’s like we’re hiding. I don’t want to fucking hide you anymore.” I said, heated. “You have no pictures of me in your phone, J.” The worker stumped out his cigarette and just stood there for another moment. “Can I help you?” I said to him. He nodded, laughed, and left.

“I’m scared, Babe.”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know. Over there, there is a right and a wrong.”

“This is *always* right, J.” I took your hand. Entwined it with mine.

“You don’t know *my family*.” I couldn’t hear you anymore. I couldn’t hear you turn me away because I did not feel like *family* to you. It was bullshit.

“You disgust me,” I said and now that I’ve had a chance to process that night, I regret saying this to you. It was not my intention to make you feel less than. You are worthy, and for whatever it’s worth, I was so hurt

that even if I found a way to say something different, it would have come out all wrong.

That night I worked in a fog. You had left me out there in front of the shop, saying *fuck you, fuck you*. When I came home, you were not there. The bed was cold and messy, a pile of your clothes was on top of our pillows. I slept on the floor with a blanket thinking that when you returned, you'd want to sleep alone.

You came back the next morning, dark circles under your eyes. You placed two egg sandwiches from the deli on the counter, one for me. We ate on opposite edges of the bed. I waited for you to say something, anything. I remember now how bare our apartment was. The room was small and all we had was one bookcase and a closet that overflowed with our clothes. Between the both us, it was like we lived in suitcases; unsure of how to settle.

"I'm leaving in a couple of weeks," you finally said.

"I know, the shift. The airline."

"No, Georgia. I'm going back home." You lay down on the bed and rolled over.

“Can I hold you?” Wasn’t I a fucking idiot for asking? But you nodded. And once again, we lay there holding each other as the day passed.

And there would be more of these days until that last day, when we shoved a suitcase full of your books and two more with clothes into the back of an SUV, headed to the airport to send you up and away. At *Departures*, we stood in front of Southwest. The driver unloaded. You hugged me tight, J., and it brought me back to being tangled. To swapping bodies. Thinking, let’s stay together in that stinky place of ours one more time.

You promised to text when you landed.

“Ok,” I said.

“Ok,” you said.

“Be proud.” And I kissed you on the lips and we lingered for a moment before you whispered.

“You’ve never let me down. I’m learning Babe.”

8. *Take Care.*

On the drive home, I sat back in the cool SUV on the highway waiting for the smell of the city to return to me. The garbage. The fish guts.

You texted me from the gate.

Take care of Horace. A wink face emoji.

I thought for a moment of what to text back, deleting and retyping.

The driver was listening to an old Aretha song on his radio. He sang along, out of tune. It went something like this:

With his arms all around me

It was like a fairy tale

Two people so in love

Tell me how could it fail?

I captured a video of him singing this and sent it to you. And for a long moment, I watched the typing bubble fade in and out.

B-side

All the things I know about love after J.:

- ✓ It morphs into something else over time and it is up to us to see the true beauty in that
- ✓ It is ok to love more than one. We are meant to love more than one
- ✓ And when that one is found, it will be brief in its intensity. The real test is in the everyday mundane. Think: *haloumi sandwiches in bed*
- ✓ You can fall in love over and over and over again. Just remember that the pain in between is temporary. *Just breath, push through*

My plane landed in Atlanta in the early afternoon in September. It was hot, hotter than it was in New York as I stepped out with my carry-on looking for the burgundy jeep. J.'s car. It had been four years since we saw each other in the flesh, and in between that time she had met a man – married him and divorced him - and had a child. Pictures of her son, as he grew, filled my text message box. J.'s updates were more frequent in the last year or so. She had called me every week to say hi, to see how things were going in the city.

When she stepped out, we stood there looking at each other for what felt like longer than a minute. J. grabbed me, and we hugged.

“Look at you.” She nearly tried to rub my head because of my new haircut, but she backed her hands away. “I like the hair,” she said.

The booster seat in the back of her car was caked in chip crumbs. She brushed away the crumbs. Clothes spilled out of the back seat as I place my bag inside.

“Sorry about the mess,” she said.

“Still the same.” We laughed.

J. drove on the highway from Atlanta to Marietta listening to the radio. She pointed to landmarks along the way and talked about how she loved it out here, how the amount of rich black people in one area would amaze me. “It’s like Emerald City for black capitalists,” she said.

When we pull into her neighborhood, I said, “Damn, you divorced up, J.” She laughed, nudged my shoulder with her fist. Her street was lined with two story houses. The air smelled of fresh grass and pine. Her lawn was neatly trimmed, and her driveway paved.

“From Grand Street to suburbia,” I said.

“This is nothing,” she said, “not like the big city you come from.”

“Big city?” I was teasing because she had never spoken of New York like this before she moved back, and her southern accent was more pronounced. I looked at her and saw how much more feminine she appeared. She was wearing mascara. Her hair was still natural, though, and kept short. Her small curls as shiny and beautiful as I remembered it.

Inside of J.’s house, the TV was on in the living room. Her son sat on the floor coloring. The babysitter sat on the couch above him and as soon as J. was in sight, she popped up, said her goodbyes and left out.

“Look who’s here.” The boy said hi. Got up. Gave me a hug. Called me “Auntie.” It felt weird at first, with J. being my ex and all and seeing this exact copy of her, pint sized, standing in front of me. I could see he looked like both J. and his father, E.

We sat in the kitchen. She took out a pitcher of Sangria. “It’s Friday,” she said.

“You like it here?” I asked.

“I do. It’s quiet. The people are nice. I’m closer to E.’s family and mine now that we are here. My boy and I, we’re a little family ourselves, you know.”

You know. I did not, though, I nodded and thanked her for letting me stay the weekend.

"I'm sorry –" She started to say, but I stopped her. Told her it was in the past.

"Let's drink to happiness." We clinked our glasses.

"To happiness."

We talk about Grand Street. About Horace, about the neighbor who would not stop screaming at night.

"You woke up one night and opened the window and screamed, *shut the fuck up,*" she said, the wine giving off a buzz as the afternoon slowly faded into night.

"I mean, he stopped. For a minute." We laughed, nearly forgetting that we didn't sleep well that entire year he screamed at night.

"When are you going to finally get out?" J. asked. Of my apartment in Brooklyn? Of my life as a manager of a café? Of my pretending that getting by in New York was all that I cared about?

"One day," I said.

We poured more sangria. The boy came in and out of the kitchen – grabbing gummy fruit snacks, hugging J., asking if he could play in his room.

“Don’t mess anything up” J. said. He skipped off with a gummy hanging from his mouth. The sun was almost setting and through her kitchen window, the colors of the horizon reflect a reddish gold.

“Does E. know about me?”

“I told him about us. He thinks you’re cool and all.”

“Before or after the divorce?” I said. I felt a little bolder now that we had four years of separation. And I was there because a huge part of me has never let go of J. Of Grand Street. Of haloumi sandwiches in bed.

“It’s not like that –” J.’s phone rang. She motioned for me to keep drinking. E. was on the other end. I knew little about him other than that they were co-parenting and he worked in construction. She told E. over the phone that I was there and that if he wanted to, he could meet me before I left.

“Sorry,” she said after hanging up. “I should have asked you if you wanted to meet him.” She brushed a piece of lint from my shirt. Her hand

lingered over my shoulder. We stared at each other. Her eyes glossy. "I just wanted to look at you." J. removed her hand and drank from her cup.

I tried to feel what she meant. I was uneasy, especially in that silence. Like I was going to slip up and kiss her, forgetting that we were no longer together.

"Did you love him?" I asked.

"Yes, at one point." I was relieved when J. changed the subject. "I want to collect wind chimes," she said.

"Those noisy things?"

"Yeah. I mean, for what it's worth, chimes help me sleep at night. It's so quiet here, especially when the little one is with E. I get lonely, you know?"

I said I did know. That I had always felt that way.

"Even with me?" She asked.

"Sometimes. When you were gone those couple of weeks each month, I would sleep on the floor." I hadn't told J. this even after all these years, yet I thought she should know in that moment.

"Weirdo," she said. "I miss you."

J. decided to give me a tour of the house. "Here's our laundry room," she laughed. "I've always wanted to say laundry room." They had an attic where J. kept all the baby clothes. "I can't get rid of them just yet," she said. I tripped on a stair on the way down and J. grabbed my arm to keep me stable. We laughed at my clumsiness. "More wine, your highness," she said.

We made spaghetti and meatballs. We played a game of scrabble and kept it simple, no big words like "postulate" or "megalomania." The boy fell asleep in J.'s arms as she gently rocked him back and forth spelling out words on the board.

"You are so good with him," I said.

"Eh," J. looked at me, "don't get all soft on me just yet." She got up to lie him down. I hoped that I didn't say anything wrong. That my noticing her being a mother is something that I had never imagined J. to be. Certainly not with me.

"So," J. said as she sat back down at the kitchen table "Are you seeing anyone?"

I hesitated. "I was". I let that sit for a moment.

"Was it love?" she asked.

“I haven’t loved anyone since –” *What if*. I thought. I knew it was possible. We were both single now, but this would only reveal why I hadn’t loved since –

“--Me,” J. said.

“Yeah. We were like *this*, you know?” I entwined my fingers. *Tangled*.

“And you can be like that with someone else.”

“J. Why am I here?” I asked.

“I wanted to see you, and to see that you’re ok.”

“Bullshit.” I got up. I wanted to go back to the airport, spend the next night sleeping on a bench. “Am I being used because you are *lonely*?”

She kept her eyes off me and stared down at the scrabble board. “I wanted to feel all the things I felt when we were together. Can we have that?”

“No. Not anymore.” I sank back into the chair.

There was a pause, before J. spoke. “I came out to my mom after I moved back. Told her that I liked women and that I was in love with you.”

“What did she say?” I asked.

“None of the things I told myself years ago. We hugged. She bought me a double cheeseburger.” J. began to laugh, then cry, and I reached to hug her before stopping myself.

“I was in love with you for a long time afterwards,” I said. “And now that I see you, I can only think about what could have been.”

“You made me happy. Just know that.” She placed an “A” on the board. The word *bacteria* was complete.

“I’m proud of you, J.” I said.

Maybe we are meant to love each other from a distance. But, always know, *J. you are worthy. Be proud. You are worthy.*

We ended that night at the kitchen table. My hand in hers and, as stupid as it sounds, we took a selfie. The first selfie I had ever taken with J. I slept on the couch that night. And the next night.

Sunday came, I packed up to head back to New York. E. showed up. He greeted me in the kitchen eating cereal at the table with his son. He hugged me, said that he hoped I enjoyed my stay and that maybe the next time I come, the three of us can explore downtown Atlanta.

“Maybe,” I said.

On the flight home, before takeoff, I sent J. a text.

Hey you, thanks for everything. Be well. You are worthy. Love.

I fell asleep on the plane and dreamt of our tangling on Grand Street.

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VITA

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