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Blue Skin, Yellow Flesh

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BLUE SKIN, YELLOW FLESH

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Candace G. Wiley
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Accepted by:
Dr. Keith Morris, Committee Chair
Dr. Rhondda Thomas
Dr. Brian McGrath

ABSTRACT

Set in November 2009 in the United States South, *Blue Skin, Yellow Flesh* will eventually cover eleven days and will be separated into two parts—before and after Thecla’s funeral. It begins the Tuesday after Thecla dies and ends the day after Thanksgiving. The major conflict involves Thecla’s death, how it affects her family, and how the family deals with the concept of family. Other important conflicts are Tam and Lynn’s marriage, JoJo’s sexual orientation, Lynn’s affect on her children, and Julius’s trek toward death. This novel excerpt consists of seven chapters, submitted in partial fulfillment of Clemson University’s Master of Arts degree in English Literature.

DEDICATION

For my grandparents, whom I hope this novel excerpt honors,
for the rest of my family (biological and adopted),
for Angelica, my sister who put me on a fast, which started the first chapter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

John Warner, thank you very much for your guidance, encouragement, and honesty and for giving me an extraordinary first fiction workshop experience. Your workshop instilled in me a high expectation for my writing and taught me the commandments of a workshop experience—respect for both art and artist.

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Finally, thanks to the Scarf Club—Nick M., Mari R., John B., John S., Russell H., and Kelly N. Our own little Bloomsbury without the sex . . . and the mermaids.

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INTRODUCTION

Form

As I built this narrative, form was a major concern. In the early writing stages, I considered structuring the work similarly to Winesburg, Ohio and Cane. Each chapter would present the perspective of a different character and the only common links among the stories would be time, place, relation, and theme. However, I decided that a more closely structured narrative would most benefit my story.

In Gloria Naylor's Bailey's Café and Women of Brewster Place, the close relationship that the characters have with each other and the slightly more explicit narrative arc appealed to me. Women of Brewster Place was Gloria Naylor's first novel and at the time, she said that she could not see herself writing a whole novel, so she would write one character's story at a time. Each character was given his or her own chapter. I shared these sentiments and intended to start in this vein, but my first chapter broke the mold immediately. I can only say that Blue Skin, Yellow Flesh is inspired by that format even though Action, Sleep Over, and Coffee House do not strictly adhere to Naylor's structural rules because they contain more than one perspective.

The Blues

Throughout the stories, I experiment with a blue motif, by associating the color with contrasting images and foil-like characters. For example, Roadog's blue tongue in Chris's ruined dream balances Emma's blue sequins in Tam's dream deferred; the blue sky that prevents Lynn from reaching God counters with the shattering blue cell phone light which brings Tam back to the reality of his basement and his damaged marriage and

counters with the blue police lights JoJo sees downtown, which bring out her insecurities and encourage her to draw comfort from Jamie; Lynn as a blue nose and mouth, which indicates that the drug is in control at that moment and shows that her lack of control brings a lack of wholeness, balance, and humanity, contrasts with Thecla's blue Sunday outfit, since Thecla is associated with careful thinking, responsible behavior, and family guidance, and also contrasts JoJo's blue dress in her A Honor Roll picture, which reinforces the idea of family and self-improvement. Linking the color with such differing images and circumstances lends itself to a multiplicity of readings of the complexity of the motif. The meaning of the color in one instance is transformed in another. Like the improvisational nature of Blues music, the color blue in this novel excerpt keeps changing and reinventing itself; but also like the music, the subsequent uses or meanings associated with the color do not antiquate the previous uses or meanings. Thus, each blue image works with the others to create a whole picture of the blues.

Even in the title, *blue surfaces. Blue Skin, Yellow Flesh* refers to blue plums, which unites my blue motif and my epigraph. It is also a signification of Black Skin, White Masks, but rather than discussing the assimilation attempts of the parts of the African Diaspora that suffer from internalized racism and marginality, my book attempts to explore behavior that is caused by the human condition: the circumstances in the story are not limited to a particular race. So while the blue in *Blue Skin* could mean blue-black, it could also mean blue blood. And blue blood has differing meanings—light skinned black people or a person of noble birth. Thus, in the title, the reader should see that the concern of the stories is not simply skin pigmentation, but also flesh—humanity.

Continuing in this way, race is not the central concern of the novel as it has been in previous black arts movements. *Blue Skin, Yellow Flesh* is about race at times, but it is not always about race. I like to believe that a matriarch of any ethnicity could have a conversation about President Obama as Thecla does. I chose to hope that any young child can empathize with an enslaved person like Pentel does. Race is not the simple cause of any situations or motivations in my text. Although there are racial concerns in the excerpt and a key concern of mine is the function of my art, it is not limited to or by race. In fact, the narrator does not assign race until the last story, *Chemistry Lesson*.

Past in Present

Blue Skin, Yellow Flesh is an excerpt in which I hope all readers will be able to see remnants or possibilities of their own personal histories. When I say personal history, I mean it in terms of Salman Rushdie's use of the concept in *Midnight's Children*. One's personal history goes back generations and trickles down through progeny regardless of intent or relation. Thus, by considering the older generation, I can use a family and community's history to implicitly show the influence of past events on current states of affair.

With this in mind, I became interested in signifying the spanking scene in *Action* as a remnant of U.S. enslavement. I prepare the reader for this with the line, "Taking a page from U.S. history, she would rather break all their spirits at once, than deal with each tiny rebel individually" (20). Although this line differs from the rest of the narrative of voice, I would rather lapse in voice than compromise in vision. It is more important to me that the reader understands my purpose for writing this chapter and this line explains

a good deal of it.

Also, Pentel's vision works toward this end, since it connects Lynn spanking Ivory with a slave being whipped during the latter years of U.S. slavery. In his vision, Pentel stands in the perspective of an unknown man who whips a naked pregnant woman. The perspective, which is given in tunnel-vision, separates the Caucasian American men on horseback from the African Americans who are enslaved. This separation is also intended to make the reader question to which group the tunnel-vision perspective belongs.

Although the perspective seems to be distinguished in some manner from both the African Americans and the Caucasian Americans, he is deeply sympathetic towards the beaten woman. The race of the perspective is never hinted to in the text, but one could wonder whether the scene is an indictment of the African American community perpetuating oppression and abuse and persisting the Willie Lynch theory within the community, especially since in the African American community, this type of punishment is not called a spanking, it is called a whupping, which is derived from the word whipping. If the perspective is African American, this would be the case. If the perspective is Caucasian American, the reader sees a visceral empathetic reaction from a representative of the Caucasian American community towards cruel slave control tactics and the wretchedness of African Americans. The reader may also wonder what compels this perspective to commit this atrocious violence.

Most notably, Pentel's character is the embodiment of the past existing in and influencing the present, similar in some ways to Morrison's *Beloved*. He is a character

who may appear unrecognized in many families. The old folks say these types of children have “been here before” and have an “old soul.” I give these ideas a very literal interpretation, so that Pentel represents the looseness of time and the existence of spiritual presence and personal spiritual power found in texts like Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day. Pentel brings elements of magical realism to my writing by confronting the idea that time is static, by asserting an ineffable and unscientific supernatural power, and by intertwining Western values with African American, old with new. He is a typical All American boy from a normal broken family, who can tap into his own spiritual past, which is recognized by “old folks” (20); thus, he accesses his community’s past and gains useful knowledge for the present. Because Pentel has some awareness of his own past lives, he has an inexplicable wisdom that his youth prevents him from fully understanding and articulating.

In the third flashback of *Coffee House* the aim was to document the relationship between Martin Luther King, Jr.’s past and Barack Obama’s present, through an almost familial rite of passing of knowledge from one generation to another. I use the patting of the dough balls to show how integrated these two characters are with each other, specifically emphasizing imagery, alliteration, rhythm, and repetition. “Their hands worked autonomously. “Muscle memory wound in the sinews of each hand, rolled and patted, rolled and patted, each dollop of dough the same shape and size, regardless of the molder” (63). Throughout this flashback, Thecla and JoJo share knowledge and opinions with each other. They even seem to be friends. JoJo learns how to cook homemade biscuits and preserves. Thecla uses a juicer, which shows she remains current with

technology and she introduces new technology into her age-old cooking practices. In addition to this, they each freely share their opinions and experiences with each other, as it relates to the current events of the flashback.

This flashback resembles Jean Toomer in its constant consideration of the old and new generation. Cane in particular establishes heavy opposition between the older African American culture and the newer one. He pits the older pastoral communities against the newer industrialized ones and mourns the loss of the folksy life and the plasticity of young urban life. However, in my writing, these generations are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the older generation informs the status of the current generation. The last two stanzas of Toomer's "Song of the Son," from which my epigraph is taken, says it best:

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes

An everlasting song, a singing tree,
Caroling softly souls of slavery,
What they were, and what they are to me,
Caroling softly souls of slavery. (16-24)

Before the older generation (Thecla and Julius) passes away, members of the younger generation (JoJo and Pentel) are gifted the old stories and knowledge, which are the

seeds. These older people are the fruits that survived and they pass on their seeds to their grandchildren, so that the songs, the experiences, of the grandparents become the songs of the grandchildren, or “Song[s] of the Son.” Even though the “old tree” (18) is stripped bare, the surviving seeds make it possible for a new tree. The saving of the seed, the practices and wisdom of the old generation, benefits the future generations. However, it is my belief that the practices and knowledge of the younger generations must be shared equally with the older generations for their gain, as well.

African American Males

Influenced by George C. Wolfe’s The Colored Museum, I write against the literary figure of the abusive or absent African American male family figure. In the “Symbiosis” section of his play, Wolfe shows a man struggling to reconcile his childhood Black Pride ideas with his adult life in Corporate America. The man tries to reject his first Afro-comb, his autographed picture of Stokely Carmichael, his Jimi Hendrix album, and other such items that represent the 1960’s Black Pride Movement. He also has to replace his copy of Soul on Ice by Eldridge Cleaver with Alice Walker’s The Color Purple. This intimates that there is a common tendency of female African American writers to be so fanatically feminist or womanist or black feminist that they portray African American males as impotent, worthless, dangerous, damaging, ignorant, visionless, amoral, etc. with a stark lack of concern for family. Thus, Wolfe asserts a concern with the self-deprecating representation of black males in black literature.

Not only is The Color Purple a great example of this demeaning representation of African American males, but Walker’s The Third Life of Grange Copeland is an even

better instance of this self-loathing caricature. However, in other slightly more moderate novels, female African American writers generally exclude major male characters of any race from the novel and the minor characters are usually antagonistic toward the female characters. It almost seems as if masculinity is the antithesis of their definitions of feminism or womanism, as it is represented in books like The Women of Brewster Place and Mama Day. It is as if the strength of black women only truly exists in the absence of males.

In *Blue Skin, Yellow Flesh*, I work within the tradition of the African American matriarch, while still representing and honoring the vast majority of African American males that I know. It is plain, if nothing else, that Tam and Julius are family men. Unlike the aforementioned female African American writers, characters of both sexes in *Blue Skin, Yellow Flesh* work with each other (as the village that raises the child) for the benefit of the family. Lynn is an example of what could happen when one of the cogs in this operation attempts to work independent of the rest. In addition, because Action taints Lynn as an evil character and Tam by default becomes the shining knight, I have to consciously alter the perception of these characters as the excerpt continues. In this way, Tam will gradually be seen as a flawed character and Lynn as a sympathetic one. My first stride toward this end is *Sleep Over*, which gives me the opportunity to show that Tam is a good father, but an inattentive husband.

Institutionalized Religion

As I work to give an accurate representation of, not only black males, but also the black community, I also question the business of religion and blind faith in general. In the

Breath of Life flashback, Thecla struggles to decide whether to take medication to treat her diabetes or trust in faith as her pastor advises. Although institutionalized religion has benefited people in many ways, particularly the African American community through encoded Negro Spirituals, unification of the community, and Civil Rights Movement organization and leadership, it also has its roots as a means for subjugating and controlling people. My purpose is not to say that religion is wrong, but I do intend to question the institution, which oftentimes relies on traditions more than doctrines and on emotions more than logic and is corruptible merely by the power it wields. Thus, Thecla represents the practice of relying on flawed religious figures and ancient holy texts, rather than listening to her Gift, “her intuition” (30), the Holy Spirit.

Identity

Although JoJo is raised by Julius and Thecla, who seem to have a strong sense of self, JoJo questions her identity. Chemistry Lesson shows a real struggle with the way JoJo feels she was created versus the way she was raised. Her battle is against sudden unprompted and unwanted overflows of attraction to certain females and lack of interest in males. JoJo’s story will be a search for identity, as is indicated by her reading Invisible Man in Coffee House. Although Invisible Man is about race, JoJo’s identity struggle is based on her sexual predisposition and how others view homosexuality. Prejudices warp the personality of the homosexual so that the homosexual might feel a tendency towards one of two extremes: flamboyant with a false disregard of others reactions and invisibility or what may be called the closet. By being invisible, the homosexual doesn’t exist as him/herself but as an imitation of a heterosexual instead. So in essence, this invisibility is

similar to Ellison's narrator's struggle with being African in American, homosexual in a heterosexual world. Though JoJo will explore these feelings, her hiding her Bible and picture of her family foreshadows that she will make detrimental decisions concerning her sexuality, her family, and her religion.

Music

Stemming from the African American Oral Tradition, I also use music to enhance the reading of the text; however, instead of using the Blues, I use other genres of music, including Rhythm and Blues, a daughter of the Blues, and country music, a near cousin. This is a very prominent composition tactic in *Chemistry Lesson*. In the car and club, JoJo hears music that supports her urge to do what she wants. T.I.'s song says that whatever she wants, she can have; John Legend tells her that regular people make mistakes, so the best anyone can do is "take it slow"; Stevie Wonder discourages superstition. When JoJo is alone in her shower, the chorus of Noel Gordin's "The River" reminds JoJo of the image of her grandparents, the concept of a cleansing baptism, the notion of romantic love, and the idea of returning home. As she is in her shower, she has the option of baptizing herself like the Apocrypha character Thecla, but she decides against this when Rihanna and T.I.'s song says "Live Your Life."

Overall, *Blue Skin, Yellow Flesh* is the story of a family and how they deal with hardships as individuals and as a unit. It is the beginning of a novel that will add to the discourse on broken and whole families, the persistence of the colonialist and the slave mindset, the immanent presence of the past, the representation of African Americans in

literature, the detriments of institutionalizing religion, and the question of identity. These are some of the themes and motifs that I would like to continue as I work toward finishing my novel in University of South Carolina's Master of Fine Arts program.

“ . . .before they stripped the old tree bare,

one plum was saved for me . . .”

—Cane

BLUE SKIN, YELLOW FLESH

Action

That nagging pain on her insides suddenly slips away. Lynn takes another deep breath and lowers her plastic grocery bag, the bottom of which is covered with blue spray paint, then she lifts up from her garage. Flying. The first thing she wants to do is find God and interrogate Him. She wants to know so many things like why black people have white hands and feet, but white people don't have black hands and feet and whether or not Elvis and Tupac are actually dead. But primarily, she wants to know why her chains are so heavy and why she has chains at all.

Breathe deep. All that would come later. Right now, she flies, pirouetting, arabesquing, and poissoning en l'air. She feels the wind in her face, forcing her eyelids down and pelting her cheeks with dirt and bugs, but nothing can spoil her mood. Diving, freefalling, looping, weightlessness becomes a part of her DNA. She can't see them, but she feels them—phantom wings. They're huge, she knows, but she doesn't know what they look like. Lynn imagines the wings of doves or swans extending from her trap and lat muscles. Long graceful feathers trailing past her calves like a beautiful lacey Marie Taglioni tutu, each feather shimmering splendidly in the sunlight. She reaches out and back to touch them but only feels the stickiness of smog. She leans over a stream of air, over a still harbor to catch their reflection but only sees lesioned fish that suffer from the runoff of some local plants.

Breathe deeper. That's just the nature of phantom appendages. You feel them until you actually reach to touch them and catch glimpses of them until you actually go to

look at them. You know they are there until they vanish when you try to use them. They existed at some point in the past but have since been removed for one reason or another. And now the phantom is the only remaining evidence that the appendages ever existed. They are the itches and twitches that lead her away from the sullen lake, toward the sun, to come face to face with God.

Suuucckk. At once Lynn strikes up to the blue ocean, diving through the puffy white waves, following the only highway she knows of that leads to heaven, ascending above the heights of the clouds, to confront the Most High. *Suuck haaarrdder*. Hours become minutes and minutes indiscernible hours as she travels to a place with crashing clouds, absent of organic life, and filled with an indelible blue that seems to squeeze her throat ever so slightly at first, then increasingly as she continues; to freeze the droplets of sweat on her forehead, arms, and back before they get the chance to seep out of her skin.

When she reaches the point at which she sees the bottom tip of a glorious ladder and wonders why winged angels need a ladder, the blue comes to life, swarming and yanking her around. As she struggles to fly against the celestial riptide, she thinks of how she'll never know the Truth. In one deafening suck and swallow, the blue flings her back to the earth.

Although Lynn has just been shot out of a cannon, hundreds of thousands of feet away, back to earth, she feels nothing at all. Only her wings are affected. Writhing against the spasms that convulse her phantom wings, nausea grips her from the shock of the impact. *How art thou fallen from heaven! How art thou cut down to the ground, to the sides of the pit!* Forgetting the disappearance of the pain on her insides, she only thinks of

the chafing that the too-tight shackles have caused. She offers a pathetic yelp to heaven, or really in a general upwards direction, right before she bows down to vomit her remaining energy onto the garage floor.

In a huffing haze, Lynn clutches her paint can in one hand and her plastic bag in the other and wonders why God repeatedly refuses to talk to her. She traveled so long a distance and put forth so much of an effort. Her body will not completely recover from the journey for another thirty minutes. She'll wait a few weeks before she attempts to meet God again and get Him to talk to her. "Just like a man," she slurs collapsing dizzily back onto an extended lawn chair, "never making time to talk."

* * *

Ivory and Pentel are sitting on the leather and Nepal Barrington ottoman reading Jane Jerrard's *Treasury of Bedtime Stories*. Pentel is the baby and Ivory's last chance to do it right. The others had been discovered, but Ivory was young when she tried to hide them. Now, she is older, wiser, the oldest child. Three children in between, then Pentel, the one born of love, the one prayed to life. Since the others had been exposed, her relationship with them has become slightly laborious. Their eyes, shifty little itchy scabs.

Like when Tam, the father, and Lynn, the mother, argue. At the first sign of confrontation, Ivory makes Pentel disappear without saying a word. She can't bear for him to be overly aware of the disrespect and anger as Lynn screams and Tam ignores; to hear his concerned questions, the same questions the other children had asked. And when

Lynn occasionally floats in, high off of spray paint, and levitates over the couch, Pentel is gone before Lynn even recognizes who he is.

To Pentel, it's a game. That's the way Ivory learned to teach it. Words are too conspicuous, so she lifts her thumb, forefinger, and pinky in the I Love You sign and holds her hand down at her side or behind her back or behind a piece of furniture or around a corner—somewhere that he can see—and she occasionally slips him an eye. When Pentel sees the sign, he knows it means I Love You and associates it with hugs and kisses, so he runs and hides somewhere in his room to escape from Ivory's amorous attack.

The other kids are good kids and still need protecting, but their scabs have made them callous. They guard themselves more than Ivory could ever guard them. Their eyes are just as open as Ivory's are; however, Ivory's eyes are the only ones that flicker with disgust and meditated hatred. Though none of them can verbalize it, they see the adult world for what it is—full of big kids with bigger problems and much bigger tantrums.

Brianna, the next oldest child, calls Ivory to set the table. The blue and green plastic plates clatter as they land on the large hand carved African Mahogany and Black Cedar dining room table, which stands on Brazilian Walnut floors. Pot holders go down for the fried chicken and Kraft macaroni and cheese. Ivory calls the other kids away from *Fairly Odd Parents* on the flat panel to get their cups and come to the stainless steel Kenmore. There isn't enough juice left for the three younger kids to share, so they will all drink water filtered through the softly humming sentinel. Each gets his or her cup of crushed or cubed ice and cold water, then waits impatiently at the table for Grace.

Grace has a special bladder that is timed to release at the most inconvenient moments. Her excuse this time is that hearing the water shooting into her cup reminds her that she needs to go. Her older brother, Christopher, rationalizes that if she can be reminded, then she knew she had to go all along and should've gone earlier. Then he accuses Grace of being a baby—a hot button for them both but for very different reasons.

Finally, all are seated at the table. Each child serves him or herself except Pentel, whom Ivory serves. It is Christopher's turn to pray and, being such an eleven year old and such a boy, his prayer lasts about one point five seconds. This is another area of contention he and Grace have. Grace normally takes the time to thank God for every person she has ever met by name. Christopher, on the other hand, only thanks God for the food. He says that God invented grace for food, not for people, and that you're supposed to pray for people before bed. Grace, however, believes grace holds more purpose than that; however, before she can fully frumple her little face in protest, as Christopher peers knowingly at her out of the corners of his eyes, holding back a self-satisfied smirk with every ounce of energy he owns, the curious lack of tension in the atmosphere and savory smell of the food appeases all flaring tempers.

As everyone starts eating, Ivory sits back to enjoy the sights, sounds, and smells of the dinner table. Dinner is so much better when their parents aren't home. Laughter trickles up from the table like bubbles and tinkles on the dangly Strass Swarovski crystal pendant chandelier. She can tell that the kids are peeking from behind their scabs at each other and wanting to open up completely to love and affection, but they are right not to

reveal too much because of the surprises that always stalk them. Today in particular, what is usually a whirlwind is now a tornado, lying behind a door, regaining its strength.

* * *

The swoop of a wand in the lock of the side door magically transforms the little muscles into stone. Miniature statues frozen in place. The bubbles of laughter immediately turn to ashen spheres of salt and fall, cracking and breaking in the silence, on the table and the floor. The kids close their hearts and dive back behind their scabs, all but Pentel who is yet unscathed. Eyes shift down to the food on the green and blue plastic plates and ears strain around the corner to the opening door, anxious to discover the person behind it and more importantly the mood.

A friendly enough greeting, “Mmmm...Smells good in here. Brianna did you cook? How was school today?” Their mother, Lynn, is still in her Cookie Monster bedroom slippers, grey sweatpants, and one of Tam’s old lacrosse T-shirts. One would wonder where such a meticulous dresser would go in an outfit such as this, until one lifts his eyes to her face. As she bends to give each of them a chilly March hug, they notice the blue circle around her nose and mouth and smell the paint fumes on her breath. To Ivory and Brianna, it is clear that their mother had been asleep in the garage after getting high on paint. Both are thankful that she stayed in the garage all this time, so that they could avoid the creepy random phrases, the lethargy, the glaring half closed eyes, and leering wide-stretched eyes.

“School was fine,” Ivory ventures into the stillness as Lynn grabs some Waterford fine bone china and Siren crystal stemware for Tam and herself.

“You should go clean up for dinner, Mom,” Ivory suggests, eyeing the blue circle under two smaller dark baggy ones.

“Oh, honey, I’m fine.” Lynn smiles a blue toothy grin as she fixes her plate. Her red eyes are still partly closed. “Plus the food smells so good.”

“Mom, go get yourself together. We know what you’ve been doing.”

All eyes dart from the floating blue mouth to Ivory, surprised at her newly found voice and steely eyes.

“Ivory, you’d better be careful. Don’t disrespect me,” Lynn warns.

Crossing defiant little arms just under her newly blossomed chest, Ivory replies, “Disrespect is all I have for you.”

“I am your mother and you will honor me. Honoring me honors God.”

“You can’t be my mother. You’re a druggie.”

Lynn’s stemware clashes against the table and her china smashes to the floor. In a blink, she is around the table wringing Ivory’s upper arms in her fists. She glares in her daughter’s face and sees no fear, as Ivory tilts her head and cocks her eyebrow, then secretly fighting the slicing pain in her arms, and dares to ask, “Are you done?”

Lynn feels the points of four other sets of beady little eyes poking at her, waiting for her reaction. Somewhere inside her head, something that was the last of its kind snaps. All is loose.

“I will not tolerate this sassiness from my own child. Go get my belt!” Lynn lashes in the general direction of the table. No one moves. “Get my belt or you’re all gonna get it!” As Chris runs to get a belt, Ivory flashes the I Love You sign to Pentel, but

he won't move. He has never witnessed such anger from his mother. Lynn is not one for the angry touch. She doesn't do beatings: she's a screamer, a loud incessant annoyance.

Chris returns with the smallest belt he could find in a hurry, which isn't small enough to lessen the effect. Lynn lines all the children up in the living room. Taking a page from US history, she would rather break all their spirits at once, than deal with each tiny rebel individually. "I am your mother and you will respect me," she hisses at the chain of insurgents. Then she turns to young Joan of Arc, young Tubman at center stage and commands her to strip.

Ivory's developing fourteen-year-old body, exposed for all her siblings to see—breasts and thighs flying, with nothing to hide her but divinely placed, thick, curly pubic hair. Watching his big sister suffer brings back painful forgotten, unexplainable memories for Pentel. His old soul knows things most six-year-olds don't know. He has a wisdom that amazes old folks and confuses everyone else. Seeing the welts that appear stripe by stripe on Ivory's back and legs, Pentel is pushed back in time.

It's like looking at everything through a hazy twelve-inch pipe. There's a small group of people standing in a circle around him. Three men have rifles and are mounted atop horses. He throws the last bit of dirt to the side of a shallow hole, which is about 12 to 18 inches deep, then looks at one of those horsemen. This horseman is clean-shaven and has stern eyes. His gray single-breasted civilian jacket has tails that hang to either side of his horse and his freshly cut hair lies obediently underneath his gray top hat. This man takes out his pocket watch and says something to the other two men. One wears a

beaver hat and has gray hairs peeking out of his jaws and the other has a full beard and mustache. They glare off in one direction.

As the tunnel of vision pans left, the rest of the group stare sullenly at the ground, all except the small children, who give frightened doe-eyed glances to adults who won't respond. The tunnel looks back at the horsemen. Two of them have dismounted and walk behind their horses. A woman is tied to the back of one of these horses. Because of the men and horses, all he can see through this tunnel is her beautiful face, but he already knows she's pregnant. She has the same frightened doe eyes as the children. The two men untie some ropes from the horses and push her into the circle. She's completely naked and covered with sticky dust. She tries to stand tall and proud, but the panic in her eyes betrays her poise.

The tunnel scans up to the night sky and when his eyes lower again, a group of women bend over the unconscious pregnant woman, as she lays face down on the ground, with her belly in the shallow hole. His hands and ankles are rattling. The long patchwork dresses that the women wear block the unconscious woman from view, but when he catches a peek of the bloody mass of flesh to which she had been reduced, it makes him retch. As he doubles over to the ground on all fours and spews up the whole of his insides, his entire body quakes with a strange angst. He braces against the earth and heaves and heaves and even when there is nothing left in his stomach, he still heaves. During a greatly needed break, he lifts his eyes as much as he can, because his neck has become too weak to lift his head, and sees that one of his hands, which grips the earth so

desperately, also holds a bloody whip, with glass shards and rocks attached. Then he heaves again.

When Pentel's mind returns to the scene, his ears are attacked by a cacophony of screams. He sees the blue mouth flogging his sister and hears it screeching a sermon. Feeling the anguish of that unnamed beautiful woman and of his sister, he releases a deep-down adult wail.

He looks at the great blue snorting nose and the great blue screaming mouth. "Open your eyes! Stop crying! This will teach you to sass me! When you disrespect me, you disrespect God!" the mouth preaches, swinging aimlessly at its first-born. Ivory, welted and bruised on her back and legs, curls her lips into her mouth and bites down on them to stifle her screams.

Before Lynn's arm tires, Tam drives up the driveway and sees the chaotic film flicking frame by frame in the living room's large bay window. He rushes into the house and his presence alone pauses the action center stage. Lynn stares at him, motion interrupted, mouth agape and mouthing nonexistent words, naked child gripped in one hand, belt in the other. Not the overturned furniture or the baby tears or the naked child does he see: all he sees now is the silent, struggling blue nose and mouth.

So he grabs that mouth and slaps it, twice, as hard as he can, as if he is literally able to knock the blue off of the skin or the soundless words out of the mouth. When he lets it go, the mouth scurries, wet, salty, and mucousy, up the stairs.

* * *

The house is still again. The five are alone in the kitchen, Tam in the basement with a plate of food, Lynn upstairs curled in the empty whirlpool of the master bath, trying to scrub away her shame with a wet washcloth. Each child stares at a random space as they crawl further behind their eyes. Another episode of *Fairly Odd Parents* is just ending on the living room TV. Christopher holds his throbbing hands and plans tonight's punishment. Grace just cries silent, grown up tears. Brianna gets popsicles for everyone. Pentel tastes the dried salt tracks down his cheeks. Ivory, standing at the island, too sore to sit down, eyes in her plate, slowly eats.

Breath of Life

Julius rests his huge hands on the arms of the beige Lazyboy recliner. Judge Judy is yelling at somebody's baby's mother on the TV, but Julius pays no attention to the screen. He lays his head back on the chair and closes his eyes for a few minutes. The sound of the clock on the wall has gotten louder since his wife's death. Everything has gotten louder. The tune that plays every hour seems to blast as if someone had pimped his clock. He has always wanted to take it down, but Thecla loved it. The air conditioner makes a muffled hum, underscoring the constantly clicking clock. After a while, it will sigh and take a break, but for now it hums. The refrigerator is the most pompous of the appliances. It gurgles and chuckles unapologetically, competing for its share of the attention. Occasionally, the mid-morning November winds hit the house at the perfect angle to create a deep hoot similar to blowing on the rim of a Coca Cola bottle, only much louder.

The oven and stovetop are unnaturally cold. Even the linoleum floor feels colder. The air, which is normally heavy with the smell of something baking, is empty and arid. Her smell still lingers, as if she is still there, sitting to his left in her recliner. Tempted to look, he squeezes his eyes tighter, wrinkling his eyelids. One smell that is missing is his own musk. Today is the second day he hasn't dabbed it on his neck in the morning. One sound he doesn't hear is the shuffling of her small feet as her satin slippers slide across the floor.

The clanking phone leaps aggressively into the chorus of noises. Julius jumps. His eyes fly open. He glances at the empty chair, then waits for the DVR Caller ID to appear

on the TV screen. Even though it was over fifty years ago that he learned to read just well enough to pass a driver's license test, he still recognizes the few letters: T-A-M.

"Hello?" Julius answers the phone.

"Hey, Pop. How you doing?" Tam asks his father.

"I'm making it. The Lord is good and his mercy endureth forever. I'm blessed and highly favored in the Lord." Julius eyes the small stack of mail that has piled up for the last few days. "How're things over there?" he asks.

"I called everyone and let them know. And the arrangements are almost final. I mean, done. Do you want to come down to the funeral home and make sure the funeral is what Mom would have wanted?"

"No. I trust you. How're the kids?"

"They're coping. We had to explain what death meant to the younger ones, but I think they understand."

Julius takes a deep breath before asking, "How's Lynn?"

After a few moments of silence, Tam said, "She's working really hard to be my friend."

"That's good," Julius lays his head back on the recliner.

"I want you to come stay with us for a few weeks."

"No." Julius snaps his head back up. "A few weeks? Naw, son. I got to keep track of things around here."

"Like what?"

"I got to keep the house running."

“Like what, Pop?” Tam asks again.

Julius sits up in his chair. “Tam, y’all got too much activity down there for me to handle.”

“It’s only a forty-minute drive. You can go back in the mornings. Plus, the kids miss you. Pentel wants to hang out with you.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think there is enough room.”

“You don’t have to stay a few weeks. You can stay as long or as short as you want.”

“No. No, Son. I’ll be fine right here.”

“Are you sure, Dad.”

“Yes.”

“Alright. Well, I’ll check in with you later.”

Julius reaches out the phone as he always does and stares at the TV, then he remembers that no one is there to grab it from him. He gets out of his chair, grunting as his bones creak and pop like an old cabin in a thunderstorm. Then he struts across the room, keeping his feet close to the floor and only inches apart.

The bed in his bedroom is made, but the covers are slightly lopsided. Under the faded blue flower-strewn comforter, the mattress seems to have two permanent indents. The matching homemade blue flowery curtains still aren’t drawn, even at this hour. A pair of her tiny shoes sits next to his giant ones in a corner of the room. Some prescription bottles stand on one end of the dresser. A couple of his gold-looking pocket watches lay in an open box on the other end. He intends to give one of them to his

daughter's baby girl, JoJo, the next time she comes home. He and Thecla had raised JoJo after the accident. Next to this box, Thecla's blue feathery Sunday hat sits on the dresser.

* * *

Every Sunday, in the same part of the same pew—right section, five rows back, on the left end—the whole family sat showing mixed levels of attentiveness.

Thecla Patterson, the matriarch of the Patterson family and Mother of the church, had long coarse grey hair, unusually long for an older woman, a surprisingly unwrinkled face that sagged at the chin and jowls, and quick hazel eyes behind bifocals perched atop a slow moving head. There in a powder blue Sunday dress with matching shoes, purse, and feathered hat, Grandma Thecla concentrated on each word that slipped from each ministerial mouth. Most people were swept away by the music or waited on the Lord to move or tried to feel the Holy Ghost, but Grandma Thecla watched very carefully each word that flew into the air, trying to decide which ones she thought were worth their substance.

Her husband, Julius, perched tall on the deacons' pew, at the front right corner of the church, in a gray pinstriped three-piece suit. His full head of white hair was uncovered and his hat rested on his knee. He focused on each speaker as they stood in the pulpit: his goal was always to memorize what he could not read. Next to him, his grandson, Pentel, imitated him. Pentel's little left hand pushed on the top of his thigh, fingers turned inward to the right and elbow turned out to the left. His little back leaned forward at an angle, straight as an arrow. This grandson inwardly hoped that the amening and shouting would start soon, so that he could participate.

Tam sat between his mother, Thecla, and his wife, with one arm calmly draped behind his mother on the pew and one hand holding his wife's. Lynn tangled her fingers with Tam's and rested them on top of her hymnal. She was one of the parishioners who was waiting, waiting for a cadence, a chord, a solo, a rhythmic phrase. Grace sat next to her, trying to be still for God but failing miserably. Following her was Christopher, who had his hands folded in his lap and eyes closed, sending up earnest prayers for dismissal to children's church. And finally there were Brianna and Ivory, eyes laden with lead from watching late, late night TV the night before and going to bed at four a.m.

The organ groaned to life, humming as if it were previously trapped in a long, painful, and nearly permanent sleep, and introduced the audience to the first song, as the choir stood. "What a friend we have in Jesus . . ." A grating high pitched voice from a few pews behind jumped in too early and realized this too late. Old Mr. Childress joined in with the purest, deepest, mellowest bass that ever blessed that church. His booming voice detached from his body and flew out of barely parted lips that always moved as if they murmured some deep down secret. Granddaddy Julius stood and sang along with the choir in a rough baritone, a combination of Ray Charles and Louis Armstrong. Of course, Pentel hopped up beside him and joined in. Tam and Lynn added their lovely tenor and soprano to the hymn, voices that had the power to make anyone cry on command. The choir was a cacophony of voices, each having a distinct sound—Sam Cooke, Diana Ross, Mary J. Blige, along with some who sounded as if their throats had rusted over during the week and one lady whose throat seemed to have a perma-hellium effect, almost like T-Pain. Many of them tried to lead the song in his or her own way, running scales and

adlibbing throughout the song. A few of them looked like they were seconds from diving under the choir stand to wait for the retreat of what must have seemed to them a daunting congregation.

Old Clementine Armstrong, who was only a few breaths away from becoming the new Mother of the church and whom everyone called Aunt Clem, rocked side to side with the music, in the front center of the set of pews on the left side of the church, waiting to hand out peppermint candies to the children after service. A toddler several rows behind Aunt Clem pressed her hands over her ears and shook her head at all of the noise, as her father held her in his arms. In the row behind, a lady in her twenties, as she rocked and clapped with the music, intermittently tugged at her skirt and blouse, trying to put her goodies on display while keeping them on the shelf. One man in the back mumbled the words of the song through a minuscule opening between his lips in an attempt to subdue the smell of alcohol on his breath.

The preacher was the image of tranquility as he sat in the pulpit, in his sweeping burgundy and gold robe, singing along with the choir. He was middle aged and had a large nose, which hung over an equally large black mustache. Everything else about him was average—his height, his weight, his intelligence, his preaching. He was working on soul saving as a business and pictured his church as a soul factory. So for the past month, his sermons were about witnessing and inviting people to church. However, after speaking with Mother Thecla earlier in the week, Reverend Levi Michelson decided to preach a sermon on faith, as substance and evidence. Faith, hope, works, deeds, belief . . .

“Sometimes we believe in God, until times get hard.

But I've come here, on today,
to tell you, on this morning,
that you've got to have mustard seed faith
that God will do
what he said he would do."

The sermon began like a train, slowly building the emotion of the congregation, gradually manufacturing the ethereal feeling of transformation. Half of the way through the sermon, the pastor was sweaty and short-winded, but the congregation was still calm. Mother Thecla was in the process of choosing whether to believe in the pastor's description of faith or follow her intuition when Reverend Michelson stopped and said,

"Your Amening
does not validate
my preaching!"

which transferred part of his job to the congregation. So the congregation became the conductor of the train, at first feeding off of the energy of the pastor, then feeding off of each other, becoming increasingly excited and slightly intoxicated.

"Your everyday faith
is the evidence of your everyday belief
in Gawd!
Your everyday faith
is your deed!
It is your work!

It is not an option:

it is a requirement!”

Mother Thecla had been diagnosed with diabetes a year before. Under the advisement of the Reverend Michelson, she refused to take any medication or otherwise treat her diabetes with anything other than the use of prayer, the laying of hands, and the anointing with oil. Her faith, he argued, could move mountains, so it could also “re-move” a little diabetes. Despite the protests of her family, she refused medication; however, the disease only worsened. For the first time in her life, she had to wear prescription glasses. The doctors could see that the disease was attacking her heart and kidneys, but the preacher reminded her that faith is the evidence of things not seen. Without Works, her Faith was dead. God heals! To Reverend Michelson, Mother Thecla was building her testimony for heaven. In his binary viewpoint, such a righteous and God-fearing woman could only be facing a Job-like test from God.

Thecla looked down at her legs. Her eyes flew wide open. She could see Tam’s hand patting her knee, but she couldn’t feel it. She had told the Reverend earlier that week that because of her untreated diabetes, she had developed heart disease and her kidneys were damaged. He said that it was all a part of God’s plan, that she could have a powerful testimony like Job if she stuck to God’s plan, and that God would be well pleased with her sacrifice. It had only partly convinced her then, but now watching her son’s hand on her knee and barely feeling a thing, she prayed that her legs would at least work right now.

There in the midst of the Reverend's sermon and in the heat of the congregation's excitement, she pulled herself to her feet. She stood for several seconds, fighting the tingling in her legs and the sudden dizziness. When she was ready, she held her head high and slowly shuffled out of the sanctuary. She no longer heard the preacher or the congregation; she only heard her own internal voice telling her to eat the bread and drink the wine, but leave the poison. Just leave the poison.

The protest was small, but effective. Because Grandma Thecla was so taken aback by the lack of feeling in her legs, she had stopped listening to the sermon. She was unaware that she stood up and walked out just as Reverend Michelson was relaying her story as a modern day example of Biblical proportions. Her unintentionally cinematic exit hushed everyone in the sanctuary as they watched her small proud powder blue frame shuffle slowly down the aisle to the exit. When she pulled open one of the double doors, bright sunlight spilled into the dim church, blinding everyone and engulfing Grandma Thecla.

Julius told Pentel to go with Tam and he chased, nearly ran, after his wife. Tam hurriedly gathered his family and followed her, too. All eyes turned on the preacher. The preacher, wide-eyed and unprepared, tried to adlib the best way that he knew how: he avoided their questioning glares, quoted a verse, then broke into song:

“What a fellowship, What a joy divine . . .”

* * *

Julius smiles lovingly at the hat. His wife of fifty-two years, his friend of fifty-four. He grabs the hat and sits down in her indent in the bed. Thecla had started the

treatment process too far into the progression of the disease. All the doctors could really do was “keep her comfortable.” Julius leans over toward a nightstand and presses play on a tape player. The voice is a preacher from Atlanta: the tape is about fifteen years old. After several seconds of garbled recording, Julius snatches the cassette from the player and tosses it across the room to the garbage basket, narrowly missing.

He had watched his wife die in a hospital bed. The last couple of weeks, she was in a coma, “as comfortable as possible,” hooked to every tube imaginable. Julius thought that if he held her, touched her, she wouldn’t leave him. He held her hand all day long everyday—while eating, while sleeping, while doing everything except using the bathroom. But, she still slipped out of his grasp. During her last breath, he heard the death rattle. He had never heard one before then, but he knew it when he heard it.

He quickly leaned over her and tried to catch that last breath in his mouth. It was the only thing he thought to do in the moment. After he sucked it into his mouth, he pressed his lips to hers and gave the air back to her. She let it out again, so he gave it back. She kept releasing the air, so he kept blowing. A nurse had rushed into the room when Thecla flatlined, but she didn’t bother him. She just told another nurse to call the son and stood vigilantly at the door. Julius kept giving Thecla breath, but she wouldn’t keep it.

A hand touched his shoulder. “Mr. Patterson, I think she’s gone.”

Julius breathed into her, then lifted up to look at his wife’s face as she let go of his air. “I think she’s been gone.”

The whirring of the ceiling fan and tapping of the balls on the end of the chains brings Julius back. Soon after, the toilet in the adjacent bathroom begins to run. Julius rocks to one side and hears the creak of the old mattress springs under the poorly made bed. He hops from the bed to his feet, returns the feathered hat to the dresser, accidentally knocking over the medicine bottles, and hurriedly packs a few things. He carries the half-filled suitcase to the living room, grabs the phone, then pauses.

He presses the left number on the second row, then the left number on the top row and stuffs the stack of mail in his suitcase as he listens.

“Son, you wanna drop the kids off tomorrow after school? Call me back. Love you.”

Julius drops the suitcase, turns the TV off, and walks out to the front porch.

Our Kids

“Peppermints: the breakfast of champions.” JoJo grabs the two peppermints that sit in her ashtray and hops out of the car. She tries to speedwalk from the parking lot toward the polychromatic line of cars that drop their Mini-Me’s off for school, but her load throws off her balance. This causes her legs to twist around each other as if she hadn’t urinated in forty-eight hours.

JoJo carries three bags on her shoulders: One large blue bag, which advertises for the National Education Association, is stuffed with things the administration and the parents won’t provide for her or her students: books, paper, pencils, tissues, stapler, etc. The second bag is weighted heavily with things for her new bulletin board. The third is a huge, burnt orange purse from Ross, which houses anything she may ever need at anytime: her wallet, keys, lunch, Band-Aids, Neosporin, a deck of playing cards, a pair of panties, box of chocolate chip cookies, half a pack of feminine napkins, a flash drive, Sweet Pea lotion, two oranges, toothbrush and toothpaste, matches, a comb, a plastic bag, a Gatorade, tissue, a phone charger, needle and thread, and so on because “You never know.”

While banging on the glass side entrance of the school, JoJo glances down at her watch and sees the little contortionist, Mickey Mouse, awkwardly stretching his left hand to the eight and his right hand to the five. By the time one of the other second grade teachers comes out of a classroom to investigate the noise, JoJo’s bags have slipped down her arms.

“Good morning, Josephine.” The teacher lifts up her nose and grins. “Running late?”

JoJo nods and brushes past.

Right as she drops her bags behind her desk at the front of the classroom, the bell rings signaling the kids to head to their classes from the cafeteria. She jets to the bathroom in the corner of the room, with the miniature sink and toilet, and stoops to check herself in the mirror.

She knows from experience that God makes kids way more observant than He should. Once, while in a reading circle, a little boy had been lovingly stroking her calf for five minutes before he finally announced, “Missus Patterson, you got *hairy* legs.”

Another time, she’d worn the wrong bra with the wrong shirt in the wrong weather, so one of her girls asked her if she was wearing a cone bra “like the singing lady on TV.”

A couple of the voices from the chorus in the hallway drift into her classroom.

“She knew he was my man. She wrong fo’ that,” the first second grader said.

“Forget him, girl. He’s stupid,” the other little girl responded. “We oughta sue him on Judge Maybelline. She’ll tell him how stupid he is.”

JoJo sticks her head out of the bathroom and sees the first girl shaking her head.

“Uh-uh. If my daddy sees me on TV, he gon’ be mad.”

“What you need with a boy?” JoJo interrupts with her hands on her hips. The girls jump and turn around to face her, giggling. “Boys are trouble. You don’t need one until you’re thirty years old.”

One of the laughing girls slaps her hand to her forehead and the other girl follows suit. “Miss Patterson, I cain’t be no old woman looking for a boyfriend.”

A little boy’s voice enters the room, “It’s ‘cause cowboys are the rich rednecks.” A small group of boys nod in affirmation of his sage wisdom as they head to their cubbyholes.

JoJo sings a welcoming “Good Morning” to the students as they begin class. Standing at the front of the brightly colored room, JoJo counts the kids: 23. She is missing two.

The day rolls by as usual. During snack time and lunch LeBrandon rarely has any food or money, so JoJo secretly shares with him. Sometimes, while the other kids are at their cubbies, she jabs her thumbs straight through an orange, peel and all, splits it into quarters and puts it on his desk along with three or four cookies. Sometimes she complains about being full or about not liking a sandwich or about having more than she can eat and asks if anyone wants it. LeBrandon always puts his little forefinger up.

“Thanks, Mizz Patterson.”

JoJo lightly punches him on his cheek. “You’re welcome, Lil’ Bit. Now, eat your food.”

She takes turns sitting with her students at snack time and lunch, so that each week each kid gets to talk to her in a small group at least once. For this snack time, she sits with the Azul Group, Brett, Eliza Skye, Donisha, and Javier. She knows she doesn’t have to say anything to get the kids to talk, but she still says, “Howas your weekend?”

Brett jumps on the invitation, “I don’t like cops. They put cuffs on my big brother and pushed him on the ground. And my step-daddy ran out of the house, but the cops made him wait. And they took my brother to jail.”

“Wow. Okay.” JoJo looks at Javier, who is sucking on a Capri Sun. “How ‘bout your weekend?”

“Umm . . . I went to I went to a a basketball game with me and-umm my papa and my cousin and my best friend and papa’s friend and and and the Eagles won! and and we got we got we got ice cream and fudge-chocolate and whip cream and banana splits and they put they put cookies on mine and then my sister cried because she didn’t get to come because she’s a girl.” He snickers and smashes a chocolate cupcake into his mouth. “She didn’t get no ice cream.”

Brett laughs along with Javier and the girls cut their eyes at the boys.

“Don’t even worry about them,” Donisha waves her hand disregarding the boys. She has the gummies in her Fruit Snack pack lined up in red and blue pairs and has split a sandwich quarter with Eliza Skye. Where Donisha’s little fingerprints are, there is red and purple jam oozing out of the sandwich.

“What did you do this weekend, Donisha?”

“Nothing.”

“You didn’t do anything?”

“Not anything fun. I always have to go to church on Saturdays and Sundays. I don’t ever get to do anything.” The other kids shake their heads.

“Well, my parents don’t make me go to church if I don’t want to,” says Eliza Sky. I get to ride four wheelers all weekend. You should come to my paw-paw’s house.”

That afternoon, instead of having English class, JoJo has prepared a creative activity. As the students push their desks against the wall, she grabs a box from the closet. It is full of make shift instruments. As a class, they choose an inanimate topic. Since they had been learning about the Artic, that’s what they choose.

“Okay,” JoJo says. “What does the Artic sound like?”

“It’s windy, whoosh whoosh,” one students volunteers.

“And cold,” another kids says.

JoJo puts her palms up and shrugs her shoulders, “What does cold sound like?”

“Brrrrr. Bbbrrrrr,” a girl in the front says.

And the discussion continues until it is clear what the task is: Take the spoons or paper plates or rubber band over a shoe box or what have you, and make the sound of the wind or cold or penguins or polar bears.

After a few tries, the students decide that the song has a plot: two seals are playing on an iceberg, then two big scary polar bears come and scare the seals away, then a big ship comes and scares the polar bears away.

JoJo stands in the middle of the circle of students, all crisscross-applesauced on the carpet. “Okay, let’s try it one last time before school is over.” She joins her thumb and forefinger and raises them like a drum major, but a little hand goes up in the corner of her eye. “Yes, Megan Kate?”

Megan Kate is a very friendly girl but very shy. She covers her mouth when she smiles or laughs because her front four top teeth have black circles on them where her cavities were filled. Today, she is wearing one of her five oversized t-shirts. Each is a different color and every week she rotates and wears them. Some of the kids call her names like Dirt Mouth and High Water.

“I know a song that would go perfect with our music.” Some of the kids in the circle start to snicker. Megan Kate’s eyes shift between JoJo and her hands, but her facial expression doesn’t waiver—large chocolate oval shaped eyes behind larger thick pink glasses, full of seriousness and earnestness.

“Okay, little lady. What’s the song?”

Megan Kate shuffles to her feet and stands in the middle of the circle. By this time, the classroom has erupted with chatter and laughter. Her little toes hang over the front of her pink sandals. She brushes her frizzy brown hair out of her face, stands tall, and looks at the top of the back wall.

“*Dancing bears, Painted wings,*” she sings soft and proud. The kids quickly hush. “*Things I almost remember. And a song, Someone sings, Once upon a December.*” The class explodes with surprise and JoJo pulses her arms for them to be quiet. Megan Kate continues her song, nuancing each note so that one would believe her first cry, as a newborn, had been an aria. Even in her seven-year-old body, she holds the vibrato and tremor of a young woman.

As she sings, with her chest out, her hands outspread, and her mouth wide open, JoJo glances at some of the students. One little girl, Bria, who gives Megan Kate hell

every day, sits wide-eyed with her jaw hanging. The cute boy in class, who all the girls chase, rests his chin on his fists and watches intently. Then he takes in a long breath and, as he releases it, a small grin grows across his mouth. Even the little boy who had been home-schooled all his life and believed that on the fifth day God created the GOP, even he perks up and looks deep into Megan Kate's eyes as she sings her devilish worldly music.

When the little frizzy-haired, oddly dressed girl reaches the last phrase of the song, everyone instinctively holds his or her breath. JoJo bites her lower lip and blinks at the ceiling.

"And a song," she builds her volume. *"Someone sings,"* she holds the high note long and strong. *"Once,"* she's softer now. *"Upon a Dec-em-ber."* Everyone releases. Some of the kids jump up and cheer. Some don't really know what to do so they just clap. Right as Megan Kate ends her note, the bell rings.

JoJo gives Megan Kate a big hug and the kids pack up and file out of the room. When JoJo sees Bria lagging behind everyone else, she says, "What did you think about Megan Kate's song?"

Bria sucks her teeth and rolls her eyes. "She aight," she says and tosses her book bag over her shoulder, "but she still cain't dress." Then she switches her little hips down the hall as she walks away.

Sleep Over

Christopher yanks the ribbon off of the big red and green wrapped box with his name on it. His sisters and little brother are all playing with their great gifts. And even Grace is playing sock puppets with the dirty pair of red striped tube socks she'd gotten for Christmas. He pulls the lid from the box and sees something move.

"A puppy!" he squeals. All the other kids get excited, but the new rule in the house is that nobody ever has to share if they don't want to. Christopher will have all of forever to play with his very own puppy.

Tam gives him a Wrestlemania-boa constrictor hug, then Lynn presses his head into her bosom, and everyone watches from the sidelines as he slowly tips the box towards himself.

"Come on." He quietly tries to coax the yellow Labrador out of the box. Oh, how he hopes that this dog can secretly talk. As he pats his lap and clicks his teeth, the dog approaches him and smells him.

"The Dog Whisperer says you got ta let him get to know you first," Chris informs the onlooking crowd. "See, his ears are back and his tail is down." Chris holds his hands still. "Don't be scared. I'm your best friend."

The dog creeps back a little and looks around the room. Next to the couch, Grace has put her pair of socks down and is waving a piece of pancake from breakfast at the dog.

“Let’s call him Popcorn or Chocolate.” Grace wades a few inches through a stack of dolls and doll-sized clubbing outfits that everyone is allowed to play with except her and waves the bit of pancake more vigorously.

“No,” Christopher whispers. The puppy approaches him for the second time and this time he puts his paw on Christopher’s knee. “His name is Roadog, ‘cause he’s my road dog.”

“Chris,” Pentel says, “you gotta share.”

“I will in a second. You can sit by me if you promise not to move.”

Pentel lays the Xbox 360 on the floor and sits half an inch away from Christopher.

The dog licks Christopher’s hands and then his face. Noticing that his parents haven’t disapproved of this nasty behavior, Christopher welcomes Roadog’s sloppy kisses. The tongue drags across his cheeks and nose and mouth and his parents don’t say a word, but he hears Pentel gasp.

“Chris.” Pentel eyes are wide and hurt. “Chris. That’s a bad dog.” He goes back to his toys in front of one of the chairs.

Christopher runs his fingers through Roadog’s warm fur. “Why would you say that, Pentel?”

He looks at his sisters. Grace climbs on top of the couch, clutching her socks in both hands, and stands there staring at her big brother. Brianna runs to get a broom. Ivory looks at him and says, “You aren’t my brother anymore,” then lies down on the couch to take a nap.

“Why, Ivy? Whad I do?” Christopher looks for his parents, but they are no longer in the room. “Whad I do?”

Without turning her head, Ivory points at his face. Christopher pushes the panting dog away and sees that Roadog’s tongue is blue. He jumps up, away from the dog, and catches his reflection in the black TV screen. His mouth and nose and cheeks are all blue.

A warm sensation spreads all over him and intermingles with panic. In the dark, Christopher feels his face, which is dry, but his hands are wet. The warmth quickly turns cold, as he looks over at Pentel in the other bed sound asleep. The wet sheets wrap through and around Christopher’s legs, but instead of getting up, he makes himself lay there. *You know better than that. You’re ten*, he tells himself. His fist is already a sledge, hammering on his cheekbones. *Stop being such a baby*. He repeats this over and over in rhythm with the blows.

* * *

It’s so dark in the basement, Tam doesn’t know whether or not his eyes are closed. He just feels his body expanding and connecting with the universe. As his mind shuffles through his life, the dark seeps into his pores.

His high school prom date was Emma Trethmore. At the last reunion, she shimmered against all of the black cocktail attire, looking as if she’d hired a team to glue tiny blue sequins to her body. “Damn,” was all Tam could think. When she walked into the room, when she whispered her drink order into the waiter’s ear, when she lifted her foot up to check the bottom of her stiletto, when she greeted him and his wife, when she asked for a dance, “Damn” was the only thing that would come to Tam’s mind.

“Like I’m going to let that heifer dance with my husband.” He can still hear Lynn’s reaction. “Let her give syphilis to someone else’s family.”

“Yeah, I’m looking for another firm.” Emma swiveled a little straw in her vodka and cran. “After all this time and energy, I’m still just an associate at Kirkland and Ellis. Maybe that’s my sign that I should just settle down and have a bunch of babies.” Emma’s whole body rippled and sparkled when she laughed at this.

Tam thinks he is smiling, but because of the intense darkness, he isn’t even sure he still has a body. She was never his girlfriend, but she would’ve let him hit it if he’d tried. But he didn’t try, not in high school, not on breaks during college, not when she called him after the reunion. She was a good girl and didn’t deserve to be the other woman.

He looks up or maybe sideways. He’s not certain if up is still up. He feels like he is floating in space, like an astronaut. Or like that time when his big sister, Rachelle, was teaching him how to swim.

“Just trust me.” She was eight years his senior, so she was practically an adult when he was five years old. And she was rich. She used to buy him ice cream from McDonald’s. Tam’s fingernails dug into Rachelle’s shoulders.

“Give me a hug.” They were at the pool that was no longer officially the colored pool, but removing a sign hadn’t changed anything. “I love you, sweetie pie. I won’t let anything bad happen to you.” Then she laid Tam back down on the water.

Tam had never seen clouds in such a rush to get somewhere. His stomach and arms were tired from straining to hold himself on top of the water. Some kid jumped into the water and tried to drown him in the splash of a cannonball.

His cell phone vibrates, shattering the darkness with a bold blue light. His body returns to the basement. The chair, the floors, the ceiling exist once more. “R u coming 2 bd.” He closes the message. 2:18 a.m. Why is Lynn still up? The phone plays a little song as it powers down.

Tam closes his eyes and knows that they are closed. There is a dull noise repeating, repeating, over and over. He tries to think about something, but that noise tap-tap-taps the inside of his brain. So he starts from his toes and thinks relaxation and deep breathing. Works to his feet, relaxation and deep breathing, up his legs, through his torso, to his shoulders, down his arms, to his hands, and finds that the noise comes from his fingers drumming against the chair. After calming his fingers, he imagines a miniature Tam flipping a light switch in his head to the off position.

He hears Ivory and Brianna’s screams and laughter. He had one flung over each of his shoulder and was spinning around in a circle. After a few seconds he would toss each of them onto the bed. Brianna, recently in big girl panties like her big sister, learned to hold on tight to Tam’s arm, so much so that he couldn’t really throw her. He just plopped her on the bed. Ivory, in her Oshkosh, wanted to fly, so she would spread her arms wide and wait for the launch. She knew her daddy wouldn’t drop her.

A trail of light shoots across the room. “Aww, hell,” Tam mumbles. At the top of the basement steps, bright light outlines the doorway until it overtakes the whole door,

but there's no figure on the threshold and no voice calling down to bother him about coming to bed. Instead, a little shadow peers into the dark.

Tam wonders if Lynn had the gall to wake one of the kids and send them down to get him. He would come, but that would be the start of a whole new fight.

The small shadow stands for a while at the first step, then finally begins the descent. After each step, the shadow looks at the ceiling, at the stairs, and at all the space between as if he is wary of something. Tam can make out the shadow's close haircut, but since he is holding something that blocks his body, he can't tell whether the child is Christopher or Pentel.

After five steps, he finally reaches the light switch and blinds Tam, who closes his eyes and hears the footsteps patter down the rest of the stairs. When Tam opens his eyes, he sees Christopher standing on top of the washing machine, grabbing the box of Tide from one of the high shelves. Tam waits for him to get back down, before saying, "Hey, big Chris."

Christopher jumps and hits the machine, causing a loud echo as he spins around. "Oh." He straightens up and sticks his chest out. "You just surprised me. That's all."

Tam looks at the stained sheets piled at Christopher's feet and the wet clothes clinging to his body.

"I'm sorry, Dad." Christopher folds his hands together in front of himself like a fig leaf. "I had a bad dream." His light pajamas stand in contrast to the dark machines. He shifts his weight and props one foot on top of the other and then switches.

"You want to sleep down here with me for the rest of the night?" Tam asks.

Christopher nods.

“Okay, go ahead and wash your clothes and take a shower. I’ll wait for you.”

Everything in Tam’s man-cave is wood or metal and the fabrics are chiefly leather, burlap, and cotton. There is a wall of shelves, which hold the only other TV in the house, a 36-inch Panasonic he brought from his and Lynn’s last apartment. There is also a DVD/VHS player, some books, including Cornel West’s *Race Matters* and Robert Kiyosaki’s *Cashflow Quadrant*, CDs and DVDs, videotapes, and an old stereo with some classic cassette tapes—Coolio, Dr. Dre, Ice T, etc. The only other thing in the room is the couch and throw rug, which he also brought from his last apartment, a medium sized desk and chair, which holds his laptop and a stack of papers from work, a mini-fridge, and the washer and dryer.

When Christopher returns to the basement with fresh pajamas, Tam says, “Chris, this is a secret. If you tell your mother, we’ll get in trouble, since you have school tomorrow.” The boy nods, red-eyed. He still has mucus in the corners of his eyes.

“Tonight, we’re going to have a sleepover.” He pulls out *Star Wars: the Phantom Menace*. “Alright!” Christopher says and struts around in a circle. Tam wraps a blanket around him, gives him a pillow, and turns off the lights. Before the previews are over, Chris is fast asleep.

Tam turns off the TV and sits in his office chair in the dark. He focuses on Christopher’s breathing. Even though his breathing is quiet, the house is quieter. The hum of the washer and the breaths begin to lull him to sleep. Tam feels his body rocking back and forth. His mother had tiny breaths before she died. She had always been a little

woman, but when she became ill and was confined to a sterile room with sterile sheets, she looked even tinier. Thecla had to have tubes in her nose to help those tiny breaths and the air reeked with antiseptic and sickness. She said that for the past month or so, she had been seeing the spirits of her family and old friends, people who had died years ago. She saw them at home in her yard and then she saw them in her hospital room. So she knew that she was going to die soon. She didn't know much about the personal part of Lynn and Tam's marriage, but she saw enough signs to know that Tam and Lynn were cancerous as a couple.

"Tam, you better be careful," Thecla said.

"I will, Ma."

"You need ta lead your family right. God cain't help you if you don't wont it."

"Okay."

"Your love for that woman is gonna be the death of your family. You remember that. Hear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Christopher coughs.

Tam switches on a lamp, just in case Christopher needs to get back up, and lays him on the rug, so that he won't roll off of the couch. Then he sits down on the couch and watches Christopher sleeping.

Coffee House

It goes a long way back, some twenty years. JoJo reads at a coffee house. The sound of the Starbucks' employees landing planes, or whatever they do behind the counter, fades into the background. *All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was.* JoJo would be heading home this weekend and probably bunking with Ivory and Brianna. Those little girls used to want to be just like her. Now, they're too cool for their own skin. She'd probably take all the girls for manicures at the mall, then maybe she could load them and the boys up in Lynn's van and take them to the drive-in to get their minds off of Grandma Thecla.

At least she has good memories of her grandmother. JoJo's parents died when she was five, so she doesn't remember much. She remembers dad's office number, 706-3434. She remembers lying with mom on the living room floor, coloring in a giant coloring book that was just as big as her. She remembers working the windshield wipers for dad and doing mom's hair. She remembers playing some weird game with dad where she and he chased mom around the house trying to lick her. Mom would dive under the bedcovers and Dad and JoJo would pile on top, pulling at the sheets, tongues at the ready. She only remembers how they look because of pictures her grandparents showed her.

"Eat your food, Josie." Grandma Thecla whispered for the umpteenth time to five-year-old JoJo. She wasn't usually the type to repeat herself. Each of the three plates on the table was filled with cold, untouched food. The mashed potatoes had stiffened into various concrete shapes. The fried pork chops had been mutilated but not eaten. The snap

peas had just been shuffled a little. Granddaddy Julius had prayed a very long prayer and released some very long tears at the start of that dinner. His voice, whether a whisper or a shout, had filled the room during the prayer, but now the only noise was the occasional tap of a metal fork on a stoneware plate and the persistent scratch on the table leg.

Young JoJo stared into her plate, with one hand in her lap and the other gnawing on the table leg with a fork. Her clean, little mouth pooched just a little into the shape of a heart—dark brown on the outside, deep pink on the inside. She looked just like her mother, but her skin and her lips, those were her dad's.

“Baby, eat your food.” Thecla shattered the silence again with a raspy whisper as she continued filleting her pork chop.

Julius rocked. He was usually an Old Negro Spiritual just waiting to happen, but filled with sadness at the loss of his daughter, Rachelle, and son-in-law, LaMonte, he just rocked.

After what seemed like hours, Julius grabbed JoJo's hand and took her to her new room. Her little pink Beauty and the Beast suitcase was graffitied with stickers and marker drawings of Ninja Turtles, Bugs Bunny, and Mickey and Minnie. It sat next to a large, overstuffed burgundy suitcase and a long dresser, which was covered with glass knick-knacks and a couple of perfume and cologne bottles.

“Baby Girl, get dressed and I'll be back to tell you a bedtime story.”

JoJo fumbled through the sparse contents of her little pink bag—a teddy, two books, a little Scooby Doo frame holding a family picture, one of her mom's headscarves, and one of her dad's watches. She opened the big burgundy suitcase and

shuffled through all of the winter clothes Thecla had packed for her earlier that day until she found her pajamas.

When Julius returned to the room, JoJo was sitting straight up on top of the covers in the middle of the bed. Her yellow Care Bears nightgown was wrapped around her knees so that she could sit Indian-style. Her mother's beige and red flowered scarf was poorly tied and drooping off her head. She held her father's watch in one hand and the teddy bear in the other arm.

"Once upon a time," Julius looked up at the ceiling and began. JoJo didn't hear the rest of the story. As she sat on her grandfather's lap, she leaned her head against his chest and listened to how different his voice sounded when it was still inside of his body. The soft, muffled boom of inflection. His heartbeat. His growling stomach.

"Now, sing this after me. *Precious Lord . . .*"

"Precious Lord."

"Take my hand . . ."

"Take my hand."

"Lead me on . . ."

"I lent her my MP3 player and she never gave it back, but I decided to give her a second chance." A couple of customers walk past her. A small coterie had just walked in.

"It's too warm here. Back home, we'd half a foot of snow by now."

They were heading to a corner booth. A couple of girls pause in front of JoJo with their backs to her before joining the rest of their party. “I don’t know. I just think. If Daniel had crabs he would have told me. It must be Rodriguez.”

A Rascal Flats song supports the creamy caffeinated symphony. JoJo pushes a button on her sidekick. She’s been here for an hour already and has only gotten through the prologue. She starts again at the beginning. *It goes a long way back, some twenty years.*

It was a bright December night when JoJo’s parents died. There was a smiling crescent moon with two extra bright dots below it that made the moon look like he was tap dancing and those bright dots were his tap shoes. Tam was babysitting his niece JoJo at his apartment. Her parents had had dinner at Red Lobster and saw *The Color Purple* afterward. JoJo was going to spend that night at her Uncle Tam’s bachelor pad and they would all meet at Mount Sinai Baptist the next morning.

LaMonte was driving. He was such a careful man. He didn’t have any wine at dinner because he thought it was irresponsible. “One sip of wine plus an erring human driving a 5,000 pound weapon will kill someone. The only question is when.” LaMonte had one hand on the steering wheel and one on Rachelle’s thigh. Rachelle was Julius and Thecla’s first-born child. She had met LaMonte during their junior years at Winston Salem State University. He graduated a year early and waited for her to finish. Then after one year “in the real world,” they got married.

It was beautiful. The men wore traditional black and white and the women wore yellow. Three bride's maids, a flower girl, and the maid of honor, Rachelle's best friend from college, stood on one side of the preacher, smiling and teary eyed. On the other side were the best man, three stiff groomsmen, and the ring bearer, tugging at his bowtie, whose smile seemed to be more of a growl.

Although he looked very genteel in his tux, Rachelle avoided making eye contact with Tam, one of the groomsmen. He had vowed to make her laugh during the service and she knew that he could very well accomplish such a task.

So she steadily watched the groom, whose face had stiffened into a flat smile and whose hands were tightly locked into place in front of him, but as Rachelle walked down the aisle, with her dad, Julius, at her side, LaMonte's smile became genuine and his hands dropped to his side.

All faces in the packed congregation were turned on her. Her hair was high in a bun with curls hanging to frame her face. Lace worked its way all the way up her arms to her neck, allowing her skin, the color of naked oak, to peek through. Today was the first time many of them had seen her in make up.

While walking up the aisle, she heard two snaps and felt that she'd squeezed the life out of two of the camellias in her bouquet. By the time she'd reached the front pew, where Julius would soon kneel and silently pray throughout the ceremony, her hands had zapped the coolness from the water-filled stems.

It was such a pleasantly cool June day that the potluck reception was held in the churchyard opposite the gravesite. Every woman cooked the dish she thought she was

famous for and stalked it to see how much people were eating. One of Julius's brothers brought a truck full of sweet-sweet homegrown watermelons and cantaloupes for dessert. Ladies sat on folding chairs with a plastic plate in one hand and punch in the other. The men sat on top of tree stumps and cars that were hand washed every Saturday.

The bride and groom were eating what little they could between the well wishing and gift giving, in two high-backed, solid wood, red upholstered chairs from the sanctuary. The eighteen-inch cake on top of which towered a twenty-inch tall flowery outline of a heart sat on a table behind them.

"All of these people really love us," LaMonte said to Rachelle. "Most of them I've never even met before and they really love me."

Rachelle rubbed his shoulder. "It's nice being home, isn't it?"

Tonight was their monthly Date Night. In September, they had gone to a Redskins game. For October, they had taken JoJo to Winston Salem's homecoming, like they did every year. In November, they'd gone Salsa dancing. Tonight was a simple dinner and movie. LaMonte had already placed candles around the living room and a mixed tape in the boom box. The first song that would play would be Whitney Houston's "Saving All My Love for You." Rachelle liked Whitney because she was so sweet and classy, not like those other stars. There was a bouquet of Easter Lilies in a vase on the coffee table. Each month that it was LaMonte's turn to plan date night, he bought her a different type of flower.

This night, he planned to keep the lights off as they both passed through the living room to the bedroom to put on their PJ's, then he would pretend to want some water and

leave Rachelle to change clothes alone. The matches were already waiting on the mantel. Even though Rachelle thinks she would be changing into her PJ's, she would actually be putting on the purple lingerie that he had bought and laid on the bed for her. Of their friends, LaMonte was the only one who knew his wife's bra and panty size. He thought it was essential information, like a social security number or phone number, 36-B, 6/L.

They had left the city and were heading to their suburban home, located in the county among little town lines and trees. Rachelle felt LaMonte's hand rubbing her thigh and knew what that meant. She loved his hands. They were so big and strong and warm. Each finger had a balance of thickness and knuckle that made them so sexy. In the wintertime when her face got cold, sometimes Rachelle would wrap one of his arms around her and cover her face with one of his warm hands.

Leaning over the middle console, she hugged his right arm and laid her head on his shoulder. The only sound was the hum of the Volvo's engine and the occasional passing car. They had just gotten off of the lighted highway and were on a dark four-lane county highway, about fifteen minutes away from home. Rachelle casually dropped her hand to LaMonte's thigh. She knew it never took much to get him going: a too-long hug would do the trick. When he stopped at a red light, she unbuckled and started kissing his neck. Then those hands that she loved went wild, but in a focused manner like they'd talked about. The glow from the traffic light painted their skins a reddish hue. As they were kissing, she felt a little tension growing in his lips and said, "No, Baby. Like eating a donut, not a steak." He immediately grabbed her tight and tucked her into his chest.

There was no sound of screeching brakes, only scraping, ripping metal and shattering glass and the feeling of being snatched around in a circle.

“Rachelle, are you okay?” LaMonte was still holding on to her.

“Yeah, I think so.” She got back into her seat.

“Thank God.”

The interior of the car and the pavement surrounding it glittered red and green under the lights. One of JoJo’s baby dolls had flown from the back and cracked the windshield. Behind them, there was little evidence of a backseat. They had spun into the intersection in a 270 degree circle. Screeching tires pierced the air as a big green pick-up with a dented front end jumped a median and swerved past them into the night.

“Can you believe that?” LaMonte punched the horn. “Did you get his plates?”

“It started with HV and ended with 4.”

“And it’s a Bronco.” LaMonte punched the horn again. “Idiot! We’ve got to move this thing. How about you go stand on that corner, while I try to crank Lolita up.” Before Rachelle had time to respond, a deep, barge-like horn sounded and bright lights blinded both of them.

A middle age man is leaning over JoJo. “That’s just rude. That’s just rude.”

JoJo snaps up from her book. He is staring directly at her with a hand gripping the back of the olive crushed suede chair next to her.

“You pretend to ignore me, just so you don’t have to sit next to me? You don’t own this chair.”

“Oh.”

“You probably don’t even own that book.”

“Wait. Don’t go. I really didn’t hear you. You can sit here. Of course, you can sit here.”

The man stops, bows his head, and shakes it slowly. Then he turns back toward her. “It’s just that all the other seats are taken and it’s too cold to sit outside.”

“No. No. Sit down. I was in my own world. Sit.”

The man cracks open his laptop and just stares at the screen. It’s gotten dark outside and the prattle of the after-dinner crowd rivals all other sounds in the coffee shop. JoJo reaches for her coffee but hesitates, knowing that cold, grainy liquid awaits her. Instead, she pulls off another bite of blondie.

The man’s fingers lightly tap the keyboard but no words appear on the screen. “I hope I’m not bothering you.”

JoJo smiles. “Not at all.” He has silver hair on his temples and sideburns and wears thin black rectangular glasses.

She’s still on the first page of the first chapter when he says, “That book looks interesting.”

JoJo waits a moment before looking up. “It is.” She flips to the end of the book. Five hundred pages to go.

“And I’m sure you own that book.”

She flips back to chapter one. “Huh?”

“I mean, I didn’t mean what I said.”

“Oh. No worries. All is forgotten.” JoJo runs her finger over the page looking for the last sentence she’d read.

“It’s just . . .” He kicks off his shoes and folds his legs up in the seat. “For it to only be Wednesday, this week has been pretty rough for me.” Then he stares at her, waiting.

“Well, things will look up.”

“And right before I came in here, that girl stole my parking spot.”

JoJo holds her eyes on the page a little longer this time, before looking in the direction of his nod. Then she pulls the book closer to her nose.

“Ah, Ellison.” The man peers up into the ceiling. “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of many minds.”

JoJo peeks over her book. “Pardon?”

“A foolish consistency is a hobgoblin of other minds.”

“Okay.” JoJo smiles with only half of her face.

“I knew it was going to be, I mean, I just knew it was going to be a bad week when one of my co-workers, this fella from the Bronx, at least that’s where he grew up, he’s really from the Vatican, or at least that’s what he tells everyone. Personally, I mean really, how many people do you think live in the Vatican?” He waits for JoJo to look up. “The Pope. That’s who lives in the Vatican. So he comes up and has the audacity to send out a mass e-mail . . .”

“Chai Latte with a shot of Hazelnut.”

“Oh, that’s me.”

JoJo slaps her hand on her face. She glances around the shop for someone she knows and then thinks she should say something crazy. Tell him that Jesus is coming tomorrow to kill all the Jews, gays, and people who wear short pants. Then she hears her grandmother: “Don’t burn no bridges. You don’t know where they lead.” Quickly, she sets the alarm on her cell phone for two minutes from now. No three minutes. No two. The man comes rushing back, hunched over and walking heel-to-toe so that he doesn’t spill his drink.

“So anyway, this guy, who knows that nobody in the office . . .”

“I’m sorry,” JoJo interrupts. “I have to tell you. I’m at a really great part in this book and I would really like to finish it.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t mean to be rude. I just need to finish this book soon and as you can see, I’ve just started.”

“Oh. Okay.” The man sits still for a few minutes, watching the room. A few people are standing around the counter waiting for chairs to become available. Her phone rings. She cancels the alarm and sees a two-day-old text message from Lynn. “Can u tlk? Fam is falling apart.” She didn’t call because Brianna had already told her what happened between Lynn and Ivory. JoJo promised Brianna she’d be home on Friday, for the funeral on Saturday, and through Thanksgiving next week.

The man next to her fidgets in the corner of her eye, so she puts her phone away.

It goes a long way back, some twenty years. All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was.

Last year, JoJo had come to visit her grandparents for the weekend. The anniversary of the day her parents were killed by a drunk driver was the following Monday. They normally spent this time together and each year, it gets a bit easier to talk about. The next day, during Sunday dinner, LaMonte's family would come over and they'd all take out photo albums and certificates and report cards and trophies and tell stories all afternoon.

On that Saturday, one year ago, Grandma Thecla grabbed the usual amount of baking powder with her fingers, but before throwing it in the mixture, she paused to put it in a teaspoon. "Looking back, we had no idea what Promised Land he was talking about." JoJo, at twenty-four-years-old, leaned a full nine inches above Thecla with a notebook and pen recording the measurements.

"We thought that when Dr. King saw the Promised Land, he was talking about the new laws that were being passed and actually enforced. We thought he was talking about integration and education. And after he passed and old governments passed, we knew there was more work to be done and we kind of knew what, but we had no idea that . . . Sift all that powder again. Don't be careful with it. Just put it through."

JoJo curled over the counter and cranked the handle on the sifter. Thecla lifted her new medium-sized stainless steel juicer from the cabinet. Her slippers shushed the octagons on the basil-colored vinyl as she moved three feet away to the small round wooden table. Thecla brought the bright centerpiece of apples and oranges back to the countertop and began slicing them into big chunks.

“Watch this, Josie.” JoJo stopped sifting and watched the machine’s blades grate against each other, drowning out the staccato of Julius’s axe in the backyard. Without peeling them, Thecla dropped the fruit-quarters into the juicer and watched them flow out of the spout as bright pulpless liquid, and then she clasped her hands together against her chest and grinned.

“That’s cool, Grandma.”

“No, Suga. That’s off a chain.”

JoJo laughed. “Alright now, Grandma. Don’t let me catch you in public talking like that. I won’t claim you.”

Thecla feigned offense and giggled through the next few fruits.

“Think about how proud we were in those days. If you notice in those documentaries we watched each January, everybody sounded like somebody.” Thecla poured some milk into a separate bowl and JoJo measured it. “Sounded like we cared and our parents cared. Sounded knowledgeable. Even the people who had never been to school knew enough to talk right when it wasn’t just us, especially if there was cameras around.” JoJo beat the flour and milk with a fork and Thecla juiced the last apple. Short flour trails crossed JoJo’s forehead and cheek, surrounded by hints of perspiration. “Just like they knew to talk wrong around people who might get angry at a good talking colored person.

“All it takes is a few.” Thecla pounded her finger on the counter to emphasize “takes” and “few.” “I see those few of our kids in public now and it embarrasses me. But

to be truthful, I'm more embarrassed that the parents let those few kids get this way. Integration was supposed to help us. Now, mix all that together."

JoJo's whole torso rocked as she beat the batter. "Grandma, you should come to my class sometime as a guest speaker. If you listened to the kinds of stories those second graders tell, you'd be amazed." A little flour streaked her short-sleeved t-shirt in places she'd yanked with her fingers to billow air into her shirt and fan herself. Thecla opened the kitchen window, then turned off the thermostat in the living room. "I think that people your age and the generation after you raised a group of children who were bad parents. So then the grandparents had to raise the grandkids because the parents either didn't want to or couldn't do it right and the grandparents did an equally poor job the second time around. Now, your generation is unhappy with the results and blames the kids."

"You might be right, Josie." Thecla grabbed JoJo's spoon and pulled it through the dough. "Look at that. Feel that. That's good tension right there. Alls I know is a few hooligans make the whole generation look bad. They make the news and get put on reality TV programs. So that it surprises people, black and white, when they see a normal young black person or a normal black family. Like it's a abnormality."

The two sat down at the table to pat the dough into balls. Their hands worked autonomously. Muscle memory wound in the sinews of each hand, rolled and patted, rolled and patted, each dollop of dough the same shape and size, regardless of the molder. As Thecla put the dough into the oven, JoJo fingered those nicks on her side of the table.

The Westminster chime sounded from the mantel clock in the living room. Nine. Thecla placed the pulp from the oranges and apples, some pectin, and a pound of sugar

near the stove. Her housedress was light blue with a small yellow curly pattern that ran across the hem. Following nearly two decades of routine, JoJo went to mix the preserves over the stovetop while Thecla poured the ingredients into the pan. She took her notebook to the stove, too.

The beat of the ax, against the large wooden drum of a trunk outside, stopped, but the ladies didn't notice the absence right away. Then Julius appeared in the doorway, sweat dripping off his chin into his thin button-down shirt and onto the floor.

“Whew! I got a good pile going out there.” The activity around the stove stopped. Thecla slowly put down her pectin and inched away from her granddaughter. JoJo carefully moved the pan off of the heat and began to creep away from the stove.

“Now, all Granddaddy needs,” Julius announced mischievously, “is some good food and some good HUGS!” Thecla and JoJo screamed and scattered in different directions, edging around the small kitchen, each hoping that Julius would follow the other. But Julius stood six feet two inches tall, with a comparable wingspan. Thecla grabbed one of the kitchen towels for protection. JoJo mistakenly thought her youth and speed would help her evade her grandfather. As he squeezed them together in a sweaty hug, Julius rubbed his hard gray stubble against their soft cheeks and foreheads, which heightened the screams.

Finally, Thecla pushed away, “Jul-yus. Jul-yus! Stop all that playing. Let that girl go! We're trying ta cook.” Julius lunged at Thecla, just to make her scream, then left the kitchen. “Breakfast'll be ready in ten minutes,” Thecla called after him.

Blueberry preserves from a previous season, biscuits, scrambled eggs, and bacon were spooned onto each plate. JoJo placed the notebook of recipes on the kitchen counter and smeared homemade jam onto her biscuit. When she was a child, she loved jam. She would lick it off her biscuit at breakfast, getting the jelly all around her mouth. Then she would smear more jam onto her bread and lick it clean again. It was her favorite. Julius and Thecla never stopped her. It was when she had been licking jam off her bread that she first smiled again, just looked at Thecla and Julius, with big brown baby doll eyes, and smiled.

“So Grandma,” JoJo looked across the table as she painted a second serving of jam onto her biscuit, “when MLK gave his Mountaintop speech, what did you think the Promised Land was?”

Thecla had only taken a few bites of egg, but she laid her fork on her napkin and leaned away from the table. “I thought the Promised Land was obvious, integration and education, equality and all those things that we specifically marched for. But we weren’t there yet. Dr. King had been to the mountaintop and we were all marching in the wilderness, but we had no clue.”

Julius fixed himself a second plate of food with extra bacon.

“We made it out of Egypt and across the Red Sea and through wilderness, but near the end we mistook the wilderness around the Promise Land for the Promised Land, and some even mistook the mountain for the Promised Land.”

JoJo carefully licked her bread.

“I don’t think I really know what the Promised Land is, but I know you had a good taste of some milk and honey, so we’re close.”

Julius chimes in, “I cain’t wait to go vote for Obama. It just makes me feel good. Like I know somebody gon’ do rightly by me and my child and my grands.”

Thecla leans back toward her food. “I didn’t think there would ever be another moment in my lifetime that was as big as those old times. Then Obama came, full of spirit and wisdom.”

When JoJo comes to, the man is gone and the coffee shop is half empty. She stands up and shakes out her legs and stretches her back. All she has left on her mother’s side are her Granddaddy and Uncle. She is now the matriarch of the Pattersons. She’s in charge of taking care of everyone, making sure the family stays together, keeping Uncle Tam and his kids sane, making sure Granddaddy Julius can . . .

“How’s the book comin’, sweetie?” a lady behind the counter asks.

“Whoever said ‘slow and steady wins the race’ never ran a race before.”

“Well, if it don’t have people kissin’ on the front, I don’t need to read it.” The lady places a drink on the countertop. “Have a good night.”

Profile

That afternoon, a few little fingers perch around the threshold and peck peck peck at the doorbell. Lynn is playing online Scrabble Blast on Tam's laptop. Tam is sprawled on the couch watching the Cowboys. At the first bell, Lynn jogs through the house to the front door. Even as Julius, Ivory, and Brianna stroll into the foyer, Chris, Grace, and Pentel still poke the doorbell.

"My babies!" Lynn squeals, giving everyone hugs.

"We didn't go to school today!" Pentel says. Brianna pushes the side of his head.

"You didn't?" Lynn turns and looks at Tam.

Brianna and Ivory try to mosey past their father just saying hi. "Oh. Are y'all too grown for hugs? Alright." Tam puts out his hand, as if to give them a handshake, then he pulls them into a hug.

"Dude!" Ivory says.

"Ya mama," he replies. "Hey, hey, hey!" Tam looks at the kids through the front door. "Who's making all that noise?"

The three little kids collapse into giggles and Lynn pulls them into the house by their shirt collars. "Are you hungry?"

The chorus responds in a resounding "Nooo."

"What did you eat?" Lynn asks.

"Ice cream!" the kids shout and divulge the flavors and toppings.

"They ate ice cream, Tam. Is that all you had?"

"And pork n rin'es," Grace adds.

“Is that it? What did you have for dinner?” The smiles fade into looks of concentration.

“Ummm . . . We had that green stuff,” Chris ventures.

Grace stamps her foot and puts her hands on her hips, “Na-uh, Chris. Na-uh. We didn’t have no green stuff.”

“Yes, we did, Grace. Ma, yes we did.” Chris stretches his wide spread fingers palm up in front of him and stretches his neck out toward them.

“Rice and gravy, baked chicken, and canned collit greens.” Julius, over by the right branch of the grand staircase, interjects. “from my own garden. Bri helped me cook.”

“Ooooh. Told ya!” Chris sticks his face in Grace’s face. “That’s why yo’ head so big, ya ole liar.”

“Mama, I forgot.” Grace’s voice is high pitched and her lips shrivel downward.

“It’s okay, sweetie. Whew! Y’all stink. Come on. Let’s take our baths.”

Pentel runs up to Tam. “Look what I got from Grandma!” He gingerly cups a fake bird that was formerly poised on a fake tree.

Christopher pouts. “Granddaddy wouldn’t let me have her teeth or the Alkaselter, so I got this trowel instead. It’s too small to be a sword.”

“Look at me, Daddy.” Grace models her beaded bracelet for him.

“Wow!” Tam admires the goods. “Grandma gave you all that? That’s cool. You have to pray and ask God to tell Grandma thank you.”

“Alright,” Lynn says. “Let’s go take baths.”

“Ivy, Bri, whad y’all get?” Tam asks.

Ivory rolls her head in a circle stretching her neck. “I got her mother’s butter churn, but I left it at Granddad’s because it might get cracked here.”

Brianna pulls a box from her purse. “I got jewelry.”

Tam looks at the dark raindrop shaped stones surrounded by diamonds. “That’s beautiful.”

“Is anyone listening to me?” Lynn puts her fists on her hips. “It’s late. Go upstairs and wash up.”

“Dad, watch this.” Chris staggers dramatically up the stairs and belts out, “Noooo! Not water. I’ll melt. I’m melting. I’m melting.” Like his big brother, Pentel also throws his hands to the sky and falls up the stairs screeching, “What a wonderful world.”

Upstairs, Brianna is already showering in the girls’ bathroom, so Lynn sends Grace to her room and takes the boys to their bathroom. She plugs the drain and tosses them both into the shower. After closing the curtain and leaving the door open, she hears, “It’s raining! It’s raining! It’s gon’ rain on yo’ head,” bouncing off the light green and light blue tile.

Just as Grace is climbing onto Lynn’s burgundy bed, Lynn grabs her, “Not so fast, stinky booty.”

Grace cracks up, “Stinky booty?!”

“Bath or shower?”

“Bath.” Grace answered. “Pink bubble bath.”

“March.”

“Jets?”

“No jets.”

In the master bathroom, Lynn puts Grace into the octagonal tub, turns on the water, and pours in the Cheetah Girls bubble bath. She places the bottle in a high cabinet and checks on the boys. Pentel had dripped out of the tub and over to the toilet. He sits daydreaming, his wet little feet swinging, his eyes wandering over the ceiling and walls. However, every once and a while his brow would furrow, his eyes would squint, his lips would purse, and his neck would contract into his torso. Then just as suddenly he would go back to daydreaming. Chris’s voice floats through the open door, “You ain’t got-ta be rich to be my girl. You aingottabe cool to rule my world. Ain’t no o-ran-gu-mu-tang I can paddleball with . . .”

“Hey, girls.” Lynn knocks on Ivory’s door and slides in. Brianna, in navy velour sweats, riffles through Ivory’s drawers looking for cute clothes that Lynn buys Ivory but she never wears. Ivory always dresses in Tam’s clothes or her sweats and windbreakers.

“How was your day?”

“Fine.” Brianna responds.

Ivory walks in from the bathroom, which connects the two girls’ rooms. She is wrapped in a towel and still has soap on her neck.

“How was it?” Lynn eases into her desk chair.

“Straight.” Ivory reaches over Brianna into her drawer for a pair of basketball shorts and a t-shirt.

“No school, huh?”

“Nope.” Ivory tosses a shirt on Brianna’s head. “Can you braid my hair?”

“When?” Brianna asks.

“Whenever.”

“How ‘bout tonight?”

“Alright.”

Ivory walks back into the bathroom and gets dressed. When she reenters her bedroom, Lynn asks, “So what did y’all do?”

“Nothing,” they said in unison.

“Ivy, do you think this shirt will go with my bohemian skirt?” Brianna asks.

“Yeah, if you’re going for the recession look.”

“The recession look?”

“If you want to look homeless,” Ivory said.

“Y’all are silly.” Lynn jumps in. Ivory plops on her bed. “How was school yesterday?”

“Good,” Ivory said.

“How ‘bout if I wear this shirt as a head wrap to match my Princess shirt?”
Brianna asked.

“With some jeans?” Ivory said.

“Yeah, and big hoops and bangles.”

“Straight.”

Lynn approaches the chest of drawers. “That would look good with those flats I bought you.”

Ivory and Brianna cut their eyes at each other and smirk. “I’ll think about it,” Brianna replies.

Lynn sits ramrod straight in her sons’ bedroom looking at the window, which she had pulled a little desk chair up to. Her fingers curl on the sill. The darkness of the room hides the blue, green, and red decorations in shades of gray.

Pentel walks into the dim room. “Mom? What you doing?”

She sits frozen, focused on the window. “Thinking.”

Pentel stops near the door and stares at the back of his mother’s head, then he nonchalantly strolls around the periphery of the room, watching her.

“I need to cut those hedges,” Lynn’s voice eases through a small crack in her mouth. “Come sit on my lap.”

Pentel trudges across the carpet in mud-caked shoes. Lynn absently runs her hand over the wet oval on the back of his sweatshirt when he stands at her side. He smells like outdoors and sweat.

Even though the whole room is in shadows, Lynn’s eyes are bright as they study the window. Her blonde highlights perch neatly in a high ponytail and the darker portion hangs over her shoulders.

“Ma, you want me to open the blinds?”

Lynn breaks her concentration and smiles at Pentel. “Sure.”

Pulling back the curtains casts a beige glow into the room. Sunset colors pierce the thickness of the room with each tug of the blinds. Each movement highlights spectral pathways of dust, which float down and away from the glass. Some of this dust floats to Lynn's lap, which holds a spiral-bound book. Christopher and Pentel's bedroom overlooks the backyard, but the window where Lynn sits stares at the dark brick of a neighboring house.

Lynn rocks Pentel in her lap, pressing his head into her bosom. His legs hang over hers, reaching to the floor. One of his hands pats her shoulder while the other just hangs.

“What you thinking 'bout?”

“You want to see something very old that my mother did?” Lynn lets him sit up.

“You don't get to see her very often. Do you remember Grandma Stanton?”

“She makes me red cupcakes.”

“Wow, you have good memory. I found an old journal, a diary. And inside the diary, I found this. A To Do List that Grandma Stanton wrote when I was little. Look at that. That handwriting looks just like mine, doesn't it.” Pentel nods. “How did I end up writing like my mom?”

“Is Grandma Stanton coming for Thanksgiving?”

“No, honey. She's not well. She has this thing that makes her very controlling and mean.”

“She's nice to me.”

“Yes, she pretended to be nice. Do you want to know what I read in her diary?”

“You read Grandma's diary?”

“Yeah. Sometimes when people get older, sometimes they, you have to monitor what they read and write, so I had to take Grandma Stanton’s diary to make sure her mind is still healthy. She’s not well.”

“Oh.”

“Look. Here she talks about all the conversations she and your dad have. Your dad’s been talking to my mother behind my back. Does he take y’all to see her?”

Pentel slowly shakes his head, keeping his eyes trained on her.

“You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

He shakes his head again. “Can I go play?”

“You don’t want to stay here with me?”

“I want to go play.”

“Okay, I’ll come with you.”

“No. You don’t like football.” Pentel drags the mud back across the room.

“You all just took baths. You’re dirty again.”

“No, Mom. It’s okay. We’ll wash again.”

Lynn opens the other window in the room and sees Julius and Tam playing football with Christopher and Pentel. Julius is the quarterback and Christopher and Pentel try to guard Tam. Julius throws a wounded duck and Christopher almost intercepts it.

Grace and Brianna walk out and sit on the deck with lemonades for everyone and a napkin for Pentel, which he pretends is his handkerchief. Ivory runs into the game to help her brothers. Lynn grabs a house phone and returns to the window.

“He’s trying to steal my kids from me.”

A friend from church is on the line. “He’s terrible. What happened?”

“The kids are becoming more and more disrespectful and he doesn’t even care.”

“Whaaat?”

“They don’t listen to me and when I try to discipline them, he steps in like the hero. He plays with them past their bedtime, knowing that he doesn’t have to get them up for school in the morning. And today, he let them miss school because their grandmother died on Monday. I told him that if they miss school and bury themselves in grief instead of being busy, they could slip into depression. They have to learn to cope. They can’t take time off every time something bad happens.”

“Exactly.”

“But he’s more worried about being their friend and making me look like the enemy. He’s got them so hypnotized that they won’t talk to me anymore and Pentel doesn’t want me to play with him. I’m so tired of this. Y’know, I think he’s been taking my kids to see my mother behind my back. That woman always has to have her way. What am I supposed to do? He doesn’t listen when I talk to him anymore.”

Tam, Christopher, Pentel, and Ivory have just finished taking a break. Grace had been twirling a baton in the backyard for the halftime show. As Tam runs out on the yard, he waves for Brianna to join them. Julius stays on the deck drinking another glass of lemonade.

“Honey, you gotta take control. Can’t you control him from the bedroom?”

“I think he’s cheating on me. Every time I try to turn him on, he just goes to his little basement.”

“You gonna cheat on him? I know a guy who’s perfect for you.”

“No. I don’t want to stoop to his level. We can’t both be wrong.”

“Well, you gotta let him know that you run the house and you will not be ignored. You’re worth more than that and if he doesn’t realize it, you might just need to leave, so that he can realize it.”

“Tam,” Lynn yells through the open window, “can you come here? We need to talk.”

“We’ll talk later.” He yells up to her.

“We need to talk now.”

“We’ll talk later.”

“Tam.” Lynn appears behind Julius on the deck. “Tam.” She appears in the yard. “Tam.” She appears at his side. “I’m talking to you. I asked you to come, so that we can talk.” Her voice bounces off of the bricks and trees.

“Yes, and I said that we’d talk later.”

“Yes, but I . . .”

“Lynn, please! Go upstairs.”

“Don’t take that tone with me.”

“Lower your voice.”

“You don’t tell me what to do. You ask. Nicely. Now, ask again. Nicely.”

“Lynn. I’m telling you. Lower your voice.”

“No. You ask me. Nicely.”

“Lynn. Would you, please. Go upstairs. Now.”

“Don’t take that tone with me. Don’t disrespect me in front of our kids.”

“I’m not having any conversation with you right now.”

“See, that’s our problem. We don’t communicate. We need to open the lines of communication and . . .”

“Lynn, listen to what I’m communicating to you. Not. Now.”

“I understand that this is your attempt to control . . .”

“Not. Now.”

“But we have to get beyond that . . .”

“Not.”

“And since money is the power structure of our . . .”

“Now.”

“You feel this need to control things . . .”

“Lynn!” Tam finally yells. “Look around.” The kids stand off to one side of them in an interrupted running pattern. Pentel stands behind Ivory who stands wide-legged and cross-armed. Grace stands with her hands behind her back, looking at her shoes, right next to Tam, ready for a handoff. Christopher and Brianna are near the end zone looking right back at Lynn. Julius is standing at the ready on the deck in front of his discarded chair and lemonade.

“Now ask yourself, Lynn: Is now the time?”

Chemistry Lesson

JoJo just stands there and lets the water run down her face, from her eyes all the way to the drain. She bends forward through the stream from the showerhead, lifts her forearm and rests it on the acrylic wall, then rests her head on her forearm and lets the water run down her back. She looks down at her feet and notices that it has been weeks since she cleaned the tub, and thinks even with the dirt ring and tacky green glass shower doors, this shower is a comfort.

The picture that used to be on her nightstand resonates in her memory. Eight-year-old JoJo proudly holds the bottom edges of an A Honor Roll certificate while her grandmother holds the top edges and her grandfather towers over them both. This was her first ever A Honor Roll. Grandma Thecla had sat her down at the beginning of the year and told her how happy she would be and how important it was for her to make better grades.

She lifts her face into the hot water and it leaks into her mouth as she smiles at the thought of her outfit—black patent leather Mary Poppins shoes, white stockings, a short sleeved navy blue dress edged with frilly white lace, and her hair was in two big afro puffs on the top of either side of her head. She loved Mickey Mouse, so she liked her hair to look like mouse ears.

Her grandparents were so proud that day. Her grandmother normally had a slight bend in her back, but that day she stood straight up and poked her collarbones to the fluorescent lights. This posture placed her butter-colored face a couple of inches above JoJo's. She was the only black kid in her class, so all of her friends expected her

Grandmother to look like her—chocolate, mocha, peanut, almond, toffee, caramel, molasses, or any other food designation that people use to describe the color of brown skin. So when a butter-colored woman hugged her, JoJo got a few confused glances from her classmates.

Having gone through segregation, Grandma Thecla never fully trusted integration. However, after helping JoJo learn simple math and reading skills, there wasn't much else that she could teach, so she taught what she knew: "They expect the worst out of you, so you have to be the best and you have to be the leader."

JoJo's radio blasts her new favorite song over the sound of the rushing water, Noel Gordin's "The River." She dips her face back in the rain from the showerhead and holds her washcloth to her eyes just before the tears return.

Home's just not home anymore. She was mostly raised by Granddaddy Julius and Grandma Thecla. Even if she wanted to go back, there would probably be no one there now. She had gotten the call early Monday morning that the diabetes finally won and her grandmother's funeral would be Saturday. Her Uncle Tam said that he'd try to get Julius out of that empty house for a while. She could picture the house. It would smell the same, like old people, but something would be missing—the smell of something cooking. It would look the same. The Family Bible would be perched on the coffee table and opened to Psalms 23; it would have a light layer of dust on it since no one was allowed to use that Bible; but it would be waiting for a new date to be written beside her grandmother's entry.

“He restoreth my soul,” she thinks. “He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” JoJo knows that her grandmother is in heaven now. After last night, she has to repent, but she knows it is useless to repent a sin that she wants to commit again.

Even at the very beginning of the night, she knew how everything would devolve. She knew that she would sprout new feelings and the fairly new friendship would become complicated. She knew that hard decisions would have to be made about a way of life, even though that night wouldn’t be the official start of that life. But even though she knew all these things, she chose to put everything in motion anyway.

The several hours earlier, JoJo sat alone on her couch watching the commercial where the pretty black mother takes her daughter to McDonald’s. “What goes on the tummy’s not as important as what goes in the tummy,” the mother said. JoJo squinched her nose. “So you feed her crap?” she asked the TV.

The episode of *What Not to Wear* came back on and the lady on the show was fanning her face with her hand as she hugged Stacy and Clinton, thanking them for her makeover. Then they showed the lady’s grandmother talking. The mere sight of an old lady reminded JoJo of her grandmother—the person she loved most, the last person she wanted to disappoint.

She felt the air in the living room stifling her. It crowded her nose and pinched her eyes so hard that tears formed under her eyelids. She jabbed at the power button a few times before the weak batteries in the remote finally convinced the television to power

down, then she spilled out of her condo into the open air, with only her cell phone, keys, and wallet. She didn't know where to go or what to do. She wanted to drive. Standing next to her car, she felt the air dry those nearly-shed tears a little. She paused before opening the door, and thought about inviting Jamie but decided against it.

“We need the separation,” she mumbled.

However, as soon as JoJo got set—seat belt fastened, windows down, moon roof back, radio blasting T.I.'s “You Can Have Whatever You Like”—she felt her pocket vibrate. The message read, “*Fresh Prince* marathon 2night?—Jamie.”

That settled it. JoJo immediately called.

“Hey.”

“What's up?”

“Nothing.”

“You busy?”

“Nah.”

“Wanna ride with me?”

“Where?”

“Does it matter?”

“When?”

“Now.”

“Alright.”

“Um-K. See ya in a few seconds.”

JoJo shifted the car into reverse and backed out of the parking space. Driving the few fifty yards of her condo complex driveway to the road helped clear more of that nasty stifling air away from her head. She pulled into the street and drove directly across it into another set of condos.

Jamie came out of her door in blue jeans and a fleece jacket over a t-shirt. When she got in the car, after immediately turning the music down to a normal decibel level, she saw JoJo's black pinstriped vest and short sleeved button up and raised an eyebrow.

"The British-orphan-chimneysweep look?"

JoJo laughed, "Oh, you got jokes."

"Should I go change?"

"No. You're good."

"Where are we going again?" Jamie asked.

"Nowhere. I just had to get out of the house."

"Oh. Who's there?"

"No one."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. There was just something weird in the air," JoJo explained.

"Something weird like fairy dust?"

"I mean . . . it was stuffy."

"Well, if you want," Jamie offered, "you can hang at my place."

"I want to drive," JoJo declined.

They rolled through some fairly empty streets. The chilly November winds seemed to have been laying in wait today, which left large patches of warm, still air over the roads. The conversation meandered as the car did: the painting JoJo painted, the report that Jamie had to do for her boss, the name of JoJo's future horse, Jamie's habit of pulling ponytails as a child.

"Let's get a drink," Jamie suggested.

JoJo hesitated. "Okay. Where?"

"Up here on the right. Margaritaville."

Most of the little shops and restaurants on the perimeter of town were already closed by ten o'clock, especially on weekdays, and the clock on the gray dashboard glowed 10:42 in orange digits. They did a drive by at Margaritaville, but true to form, a CLOSED sign taunted them from inside the glass door. So JoJo wheeled the little blue car back the way they came.

"How 'bout downtown?"

"Ummm . . ." JoJo glanced over at Jamie, whose hair was cut in a short punky rock star style. The Trinidadian necklace she always wore hugged her neck, but she looked more Indian than anything, especially when a streetlight momentarily brightened up the car. JoJo imagined herself as the star in a scary movie. The organ played dramatic flair after dramatic flair and the audience screamed, "Don't do it, girl! Don't go with her!" Jamie flashed that friendly trusting smile and JoJo conceded. "Okay, let's go."

The Civic met the first bit of traffic for the night downtown. Bar after bar blasted music through its doors, each fanning its plumage like a peacock, vying for the affection of young urban sophisticates. The ladies luckily found a parking spot on the street, near the action, and avoided paying for parking. As JoJo walked around the car to the sidewalk, she noticed that the car behind her flaunted a Confederate flag as its front tag.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jamie assured her, putting her hand on the small of her back and guiding her off of the street. “They like to see two girls.” Jamie ushered JoJo to an inside position on the sidewalk, away from traffic. They were looking for a quiet place to talk, but one bar, Heartbeat, was showcasing a live band that had a horn section. The crooners sang some smooth jazzy, R & B type, John Legendy music and the horns shot their opinions into the score. The bait lured them in.

Jamie went and got drinks as JoJo found a table. The bar was still pretty empty since it was only eleven o’clock. There were a few people dancing. Most were near the bar. The large room would have been painted with a smoky haze at this time a year or so ago, but now that the new law had been passed, all bars were smoke free.

JoJo watched Jamie over at the bar. Normally, JoJo would be in the middle of the floor with her girls. Two of them would find a guy who wasn’t dancing and double-team him. Then one of his friends usually would slide himself somewhere into the equation, trying to share in the wealth. Tonight, though, she planned to glue herself to her seat. She pictured herself dressed in a Velcro suit and running and jumping into her chair butt first.

Jamie sipped on a Long Island Ice Tea and watched the Red Sox earn an extraordinary come-from-behind victory in the ninth inning; JoJo watched the band

perform “We’re Just Ordinary People”; the band was so loud that it gave them a valid excuse to be closer to each other. Their table sat four people, but instead of sitting across from each other, they sat beside one another—right beside one another, sharing the same side of the table.

Jamie leaned in a little to ask, “How’s your drink?”

JoJo leaned in a little more to say, “Great! How ‘bout yours?”

Jamie leaned in even more. “Terrible. Tastes like Rum and Coke.”

Pretty soon JoJo’s hair was brushing against Jamie’s face, Jamie’s leg was brushing against JoJo’s leg, and they had to touch each other when they talked—a knee, an elbow, a wrist, a shoulder blade.

The dance floor was starting to fill. Jamie saw JoJo grooving to the ending of Stevie Wonder’s “Superstition.” She leaned in, slid JoJo’s hair back, and yelled in her ear, “You look like you wanna dance.”

JoJo sat straight up and locked her Tropical Sunrise in her hands. “No!” she yelled, just as the song had ended. The emptiness of the air exposed the panic in her voice, so to recover she lowered her voice and said, “Just wanna watch other people dance.” She imagined that the applause the dancers gave for the band was for her. In her mind, she was in a long golden evening gown, up for the award for Best Recovery from an Awkward and Potentially Embarrassing Moment. “And the award goes to . . . Josephine Turner!”

“Okay,” Jamie said as JoJo stared off into space, clutching her nearly empty cup. “Would you like another drink?” she smiled.

“Huh? Oh. Sure. I mean, thanks.” She ended up giving a sort of lopsided smirk.

While Jamie was at the bar, some of the Heartbeat employees came by and collected all of the chairs and tables because the floor would soon be standing room only. Now that JoJo was standing on a large dance floor, in a packed bar, with a live band that had a horn section, it was inevitable that she would start dancing. She could already feel the rhythm weaving into her muscles.

“Let’s go for a ride” is how they ended up together that night.

“Let’s get a drink” is what landed them in a bar.

“Come on. I want to say hey to some friends” is how they made their way to the front of the dance floor.

They started out dancing side by side with a group of acquaintances. Then the acquaintances gradually disappeared. Jamie eased behind JoJo. And they moved together, keeping just enough space for a penny to fall between them. JoJo waited for Jamie to make her move, but she didn’t. It was as if Jamie were asking her permission. So JoJo gave it to her. JoJo pushed back, just a little, to close the gap. Jamie met her push equally in return.

The intensity of the connection completely caught JoJo off guard. She gasped. She wasn’t sure because the music was so loud, but she may have just moaned. “That’s ridiculous, Jo!” she whispered. But it was really everything that romance movies are made of. It was everything that JoJo was convinced didn’t exist outside of movies and trashy novels. When they finally connected, it was electric, chemical, and new. The touch felt so good. JoJo’s heart leapt into hyper speed, her stomach started to twirl, and that

place in the very bottom of her stomach began to tingle. It was as if Jamie had activated a switch somewhere inside of JoJo. No matter how hard she tried, JoJo could not find the switch to turn it off. She pressed her hands to her heart, trying to slow it down, and pretended to be tired from dancing. But she didn't want to stop. Jamie moved so well with her.

She was so respectful. She kept her hands on either side of JoJo and waited for permission to touch JoJo's waist. JoJo let her know she had the green light by moving into her hands. Then Jamie waited for permission to hold her close. When JoJo moved into her, she grabbed her tight and held on. At one point, one of the many times JoJo lifted her hair off of her neck to cool off, Jamie unexpectedly blew on it. Wide-eyed, JoJo looked back at Jamie. They both froze for a second. Then they giggled.

For the first time, JoJo turned to dance face to face with Jamie. As their arms swung at their sides, Jamie put her fingertips on hers, asking to hold her hands. Jamie's fingers were shaking just a little bit. When nothing happened, she put her hands back on JoJo's waist. When JoJo swung her arms over Jamie's shoulders and felt the small shoulder bones through the thin fleece, Jamie pulled JoJo against herself and held her. JoJo closed her eyes and exhaled onto her neck.

She lifts her face out of the stream of water and lets out a big sigh. JoJo still feels pleasure from the memory of the night and guilt from feeling the pleasure and sadness from the guilt, which drives her to want to think happy thoughts, so she thinks about Jamie and the spiral continues downward. Thus, she focuses her thoughts on her Word.

She can see the multi-colored highlights on the ultra-thin gold-edged pages of her leather-bound Bible. The red letters bleed straight through the yellow highlight: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Granddaddy Julius and Grandma Thecla had given JoJo this Bible years ago, right before she went off for her freshman year of college. There is a note written on one of the pages at the beginning. It is from both of them, although her grandmother had to write it all.

“Josie,” she knew this was her grandmother’s influence. Her grandfather called her JoJo after Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber. When JoJo was a toddler, a little boy took one of her toys, so she smacked him up and made him cry. Her grandfather made sure the nickname stuck.

“We’re so proud of you.” That was from both of them. “Keep on doing what you are doing. You are a good girl.” That was from her grandfather. “May God be with you and bless you. Keep on praying. Keep on believe. And keep your faith.” That was from her grandmother. “We know you can do it. We love you and we are so very proud of you.” That was from both of them. “With Love, Granddad and Grandma Patterson.” Her grandfather had slipped a ten-dollar bill in front of the note, which she still keeps as a place marker.

She fills the washcloth with hot water and covers her face with it. She can feel the steam in her nose and mouth as she breathes. Rihanna’s and TI’s voices fill the air. She bends to sit down in the tub, but remembers the brown ring and stands back up.

They left the bar about an hour before it closed. Jamie ushered JoJo out of the doors with her hand just above the small of her back and right below the strap of her bra.

“Let’s walk a little,” JoJo suggested.

The pair sauntered down the sidewalk—Jamie on the outside of the sidewalk, JoJo on the inside—past the bar district into the business district. They stopped at a nearby fountain. It was built into the ground and looked like a pond. One jet in the center of the pond spewed water in a fan shape into the air. They walked around the fountain on the brick surround, passing all types foliage and wading through their heady aromas. There was still a steady trickle of people passing by on the road, but that was about fifty yards away. Mood lighting was built into the brick pavement and lit up a five-foot circle every fifteen feet.

“Let’s sit down here. These heels are starting to hurt.”

The pair walked over to a bench. The dim lighting barely illuminated the black metal curves of the seat. Jamie sat down on one side of the bench, then JoJo plopped down on the other side. She removed her shoes and dress socks, felt the air caressing her feet, stretched out her legs, threw back her head and let out a sigh of relief.

“I’m not putting these back on.” She looked up. The stars were bright. The moon was almost full but dirty. She peeked over at Jamie, who was looking at the water.

“Are you going home for Thanksgiving?” Jamie asked, keeping her eyes on the water.

“Yeah. I’m leaving tomorrow after school and taking sick days Monday and Tuesday.”

They sat watching the stars float by and the water ripples ricochet across the pond.

“Because if you can’t get home, my dad’s house is only a couple of hours away. I’m driving up.”

JoJo glanced at Jamie out the corner of her eyes a couple of times, but kept her face to the sky. As she struggled to end the silence, she saw Jamie fidget with her hands and occasionally peak in her direction.

“Oh. Okay. That’s cool, James. Thanks.”

On the way back to the car, they walked past what looked to be a drug bust, dogs and all. From far away, they saw two guys with shaggy haircuts, wearing khakis, real Polos, and flip-flops standing outside of a white Range Rover. A female police officer approached the Range Rover with a K-9 on a leash. As they got closer to the scene, the blue swirling lights got brighter and the white lights seemed to flash quicker. Jamie kept her eyes straight ahead and maintained long confident strides. JoJo glanced back and forth between the scene and the sidewalk in front of her. When they passed the cars and were still close to the scene but no longer had a view of it, JoJo wrapped her arm through Jamie’s arm and slumped into her ribcage a little. But even when the ladies were a safe distance away from the incident, she still held Jamie’s arm.

They drove back to Jamie’s place for a nightcap. As they sat on her 3-foot by 3-foot patio and drank hot chocolate, JoJo shivered. She reached into her purse, pulled out a scarf, and wrapped it around her head and ears and tied it under her chin.

“Hah! You look like someone who’s just fled their country!”

JoJo laughed, then wrapped her scarf tighter and tried her best to look downtrodden and oppressed.

“Here’s my jacket.”

JoJo donned Jamie’s fleece. As they talked, Jamie used her head to block the beam from the streetlight that shined directly into JoJo’s eyes.

When JoJo left at 5:30 in the morning, Jamie told her to text when she got home. JoJo turned sideways and extended her arm at her side. Jamie did the same. They met in the middle and gave each other a one-armed squeeze—shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, side by side. Then Jamie watched her drive out of the complex into the one across the street.

When JoJo walked back into her condo, she found that the air had thinned out a little. In her bedroom, she slipped out of her clothes to take a shower, but before going to the bathroom, she took her Bible and the picture of her and her grandparents off of the bookshelf and slipped them into a drawer. Then she turned up the radio, got into the shower, and cried.

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