

IT IS IN YOUR HANDS

by

CALAYA MICHELLE REID

(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

It is in Your Hands presents a collection of creative writing in the genres of poetry, nonfiction, short fiction, and novel writing. Written over a two-year period, the pieces highlight sociological issues in the African American community dealing with feminism, racism, and classism. Other topics concerning the psychological effects of depression, poverty, and slavery also arise. Altogether, the works seek to speak to the canon of African American literature, as well as demonstrate an original voice filled with literariness and awareness of the American literary tradition.

INDEX WORDS: African American, Creative writing, Poetry, Nonfiction, Short Fiction, Novel, Literature

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to all of my friends and family that helped make my education possible. Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

It is in Your Hands

Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise. One day the old woman is visited by some young people who are bent on exposing her as a fraud. They enter her house and ask a taunting question. "Old woman," says one of them, "I hold in my hands a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead."

She does not answer. In her blindness she cannot see her visitors, nor what one of them holds in his hands. She only knows their motive. After a long silence that makes her visitors edgy and confused, she finally speaks. "I don't know," she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."

--Unknown

African American writer Toni Morrison began her 1993 Nobel Prize acceptance speech with this story. Morrison, one of the most celebrated writers in the world, became the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature that day. While she was in Stockholm, a long way from her home in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison's speech was steeped in African American history and literary tradition. The opening itself presented a well known story shared in the African American community. As Morrison explains in her speech, it is used in the community to teach responsibility and ownership to listeners. Similar to the closing lines of William Ernest Henley's celebrated poem "Invictus," where the poet writes, "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul," the story is meant to create a sense of self-agency and fortitude. The listener is to understand that the sky is the limit, as long as they are willing to reach for it.

An African American and a writer, I can completely understand why Toni Morrison began her speech with this old story. The lesson behind the story is one that

every person must learn if they are to become successful in life. This lesson is especially true for African Americans who are often faced with adversity when trying to pursue the smallest of endeavors.

I take the lesson behind the story personally because it also illustrates my experience as an African American writer. Similar to the bird in the visitor's hands, ready to fly or fall dead into the earth, my writing is something of great promise and possibility; however, it is up to me—the writer—to decide what I will do with it. Will I allow it to fly, adding another voice to the canon of African American literature? Or will I allow it to wither and die¹, a restless page filled with words folded up and hidden in an attic somewhere²? Either way, it is in my hands.

I thought about this story and its connection to my journey as a writer as I put this collection of creative writing together. I considered what it means, what it really means, for me to be an African American writer, what I plan to contribute to the genre, and lastly how I will develop my true creative voice in the tradition of African American literature. In the end I found that while it was a difficult undertaking, it was extremely rewarding and affirming to me as I take these next steps toward pursuing a career in writing.

As in most areas of life, the title African American holds a multitude of significance and weight. While it suggests membership in one of the richest and most thought-provoking genres in American literature, this association is filled with tribal responsibility and representation. As poet Maya Angelou points out in her poem *Still I*

¹ Allusion to "Harlem" by Langston Hughes

² Connection to the founding of the lost manuscript for *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah

Rise, "Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave." Here Angelou explains the sense of pride and belonging that many African Americans feel in relation to their past and future in the United States. They adopt an understanding of a courageous past that obligates them to achieve great things in the future. In other words, when I see Venus win another title, Halle take home an Oscar, Colin stand before billions with information that will change the world in which we live, I am not just seeing people achieve greatness; I see hope where others wished there would always be despair, triumph and achievement, where others wished there would always be defeat and tears, a nation of people being lifted "up from slavery"³ by the courageous acts of many who dare to take ownership in their tribe⁴. If I am to share my gift of writing, I must take this fact into consideration and set out to achieve my own greatness in the genre.

Many African American writers shy away from this responsibility, complaining that its weight, its pressure is so overwhelming that it stunts creativity. Quotes like "Why can't I just be a writer," "I can't save everybody," and "I'm trying to get out the ghetto, not celebrate it" easily come to mind. In contrast to these sentiments, I am not so quick to turn in my check⁵—if you will. I freely welcome such responsibility. I understand that no gift or talent comes cost free and while I hold a precious gift in my hands, a bird that I am determined will fly, many people before me fought and died for it. An African

³ Connection to *Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington

⁴ Allusion to *Talented Tenth* by WEB DuBois

⁵ Allusion to *I Have A Dream* by Martin Luther King

American writer, I sit on the graves of people whose lives "ain't been no crystal stair."⁶ From Phyllis to Zora, African American writers whose graves went nameless for years⁷, my ancestors sacrificed much so that I could pick up a pen and paper and continue in their legacy.

I am also filled with a desire to contribute to, change, and further develop, a history of African American literature that they started. As my grandmother always says, "I walk where you walk; always walk where you would want me to be." Well, I plan to take them many places. Following in the footsteps of such courageous writers as Richard Wright, Nikki Giovanni, and younger voices like Sapphire and Saul Williams, I am determined to continue with a "future that is wondrously clear."⁸ This is why I write. This is how I write. This is the spirit that the pieces in *It is in Your Hands* were born in.

In addition to speaking to the growing genre of African American literature, I faced another obstacle while writing the pieces in this collection. It was my growing desire to develop my creative voice.

"How do you describe a rose to someone who has never seen one?"

-Unknown

Finding one's creative voice is an obstacle that every writer must overcome. Inexperienced writers often sink into a swelling sea of doubts as they try to develop their craft and utilize words that accurately describe the world through their vulnerable eyes. How do they describe the beauty of their grandmother's hands? How every curve of her

⁶ From "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes

⁷ Allusion to *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* by Alice Walker

⁸ From "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou

skin is flawlessly imperfect? It is a difficult deed; one that a writer (even a good one) often finds hard to surmount.

This obstacle is especially difficult for writers who are forced to explain their experiences in a language that is seldom equipped with words that can truly describe them. What color was the sun the morning Harriet Tubman woke up as a free woman? Words like red, yellow, and even magenta feel weightless and clichéd in comparison to the story that must be told.

This presented a unique aspiration as I began writing the pieces in this collection. I sought to find the "right words" to correctly illustrate images and situations that are as familiar to me as my own fingertips. It was a difficult endeavor, because not only did my words have to be true to my culture, but as I am developing my voice, they also had to be of my own creative device. The idea was not to create new words, but to creatively reinvent old ones in ways that highlighted common features in African American culture. I wanted to rediscover everyday images of color, touch, scent, and emotion. This desire left me with so much to explore artistically. I had to look at the world I live in and attempt to see it in new ways—with new colors, new smells, new ways of feeling and touching. As Toni Morrison explains in *Salon Magazine*, "I'm just trying to look at something without blinking, to see what it is like, or it could have been like, and how that had something to do with the way we live now" (Jaffery). Here Morrison defines the work of the creative writer and the endless search I encountered to see the world as it moves freely and record it in my own voice. This work, this creative work that resonates with anthropological significance, allowed me to explore my writing ability in many different ways.

Altogether, *It is in Your Hands* presents a journey through several genres of creative writing. Presenting short fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and the beginning of my first novel, it might be considered a kind of cornucopia of my creative undertakings over the past two years as I sought to fulfill my goals as an African American writer and creative talent. While I do not support the idea that the collection is representative of all of my creative talents, as I am still growing as a writer and creative spirit, I do believe that overall the voice in the works supports many of the goals of my writing. Each section speaks to my experience in a different way, allowing me to explore and re-explore the images, places, and stories I hold so dear.

Nonfiction

I once heard a man say that he survived his life by writing about his life. While I cannot remember the speaker, I believe this sentiment sums up my experience writing nonfiction. In many ways this genre of writing has served as a form of survival for me throughout my life. As a child I used it to endure the trials of being born to drug addicted parents; as an adult I use it as a tool of self-discovery and growth. From personal essays to journal writing, my journey with nonfiction has provided a way to repaint my realities in a creative way and share them with the people around me.

My first realization that I had a gift for writing nonfiction came in 2001 when a personal essay I wrote was published in a book about black sisterhood. The publication and experience of writing a publishable piece of nonfiction served to further connect me to the form. It exposed me to the nonfiction works of African American writers like Jamaica Kincaid and Maya Angelou. As I read their works and experienced their world

through creative eyes, my understanding of the goal and purpose of the "creative" personal essay and nonfiction grew into a desire to create pictures of my own piece of the world for everyone to see.

While it was hard to explore the reality of my conception in "Fire and Spice" and look at the damage that the media and academy often does to the images that African Americans have of their families in essays like "Primetime at Da Crib" and "Waiting for Mama," the reward for writing and recording my history comes in knowing that it exists. It is quite simple. Seeing my history acknowledges the journey that we all must take in life and confirms that while yesterday might have brought tears so heavy your eyes refused to wake in the morning, tomorrow is waiting.

Poetry

My first semester at the University of Georgia I took a poetry writing seminar with poet, Terry Hummer. While I was nervous about sharing my work with my classmates, as many of them were published and established poets, the workshop proved to be very successful and I grew as a poet and a writer in the class. I was extremely inspired with the direction of the workshop and Terry Hummer's desire to see more culturally inspired pieces. In response, I began to write poems about my life and what it was like for me to grow up as a child in New York. The poems, a collection of courageous voices of anger and oft times celebration, provide a picture of events beginning with my leaving home for graduate school, and closing with my father's death.

I am most proud of "Miss America." In the poem I speak against the diminishing protection and recognition of African American women in the United States. The poem

peaks as I call on the history of these women working to build a country that has turned its back on them as I write, "They toiled this soil that boils, and marked it with my name."

Part of the inspiration for writing "Miss America" and the other poems in the collection came from reading Ntozake Shange's choreopoem/poetry book, *For Colored Girls Considering Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. After reading *For Colored Girls*, and hearing of the pain that many African Americans (women specifically) faced in the United States during the 1970s, I began to ask myself how much had actually changed since Shange wrote the book. The answer was easy to arrive at--while bills had been written, politicians had made many promises, and money had passed in and around the ghetto, not much has changed for African American people, and things have gotten progressively worse for women.

As I completed *For Colored Girls*, the words for "Miss America" came spilling out of me. The history and the struggle of African Americans as a whole has affected my life in countless ways. I tried to depict this in my poems. I wanted to provide a picture of my surroundings; taking into account Shange's work, and how little has changed.

In poems like "Run-Jump-Skip," and "The Song I Know," I attempted to visit the place I know as "home" and depict my journey to Georgia and the struggles I faced in a new land in "A New Beginning." The poems mark my introduction to a world that was at first very odd to me, but over time my new membership in the "town dressed in bulldog red and white" grew to confirm my adoration for the home I left behind. It was only through leaving "home" that I could see home as the beautifully poetic place it is and describe it in artistic terms. While writing "Run-Jump-Skip" and "The Song I Know," I

imagined myself a painter, struggling to provide an accurate picture of my old home and my old friends to my new friends in my new home.

In the future I hope to write more poems about my home in Westbury, New York. I hope to in some way inspire the rest of the world to celebrate their homes too. In the tradition of the anthropologically creative work Zora Neale Huston presents in her writings on Eatonville, Florida, I hope my poems will serve to record, celebrate, and nurture the history of the place where "My heart learned to meringe, My eyes to sing the blues."

Short Fiction

I never considered myself to be a short fiction writer. I found the form limiting and entirely too organized. Novels gave me space to explore, connect and reconnect with characters, break rules, and reinvent the "story." When I thought of writing short fiction all I could see was the old diagram my first creative writing teacher drew on the board on the first day of class—"You need an inciting incident," she said, drawing a straight line with a little pyramid shape attached. "Climax," "falling action," "conclusion." It was a nightmare. I despised the neat set of rules and secretly promised myself that I would focus on being a "novel" writer.

This presents my ideas about writing short fiction until I took my first fiction writing class at the University of Georgia. Professor Judith Ortiz Cofer sat at the front of the class talking about being "storied" and the smart writer's ultimate job of inventing new ways of storytelling. By the time she finished her speech, I was armed with a new enthusiasm for writing short fiction and I had an assignment. "Write microfiction," she

said, handing out a small stack of examples for a new genre of short fiction where the writer must keep stories under a certain number of words. "I challenge you all to master this form by the end of the semester." I was scared, but by the time I finished "The Sky Above" was born and breathing--my first piece of short fiction.

I felt an overwhelming sense of pride after writing and completing my first pieces of short fiction. From "Ms. Cordelia's Chair" to "Nanadear" my journey writing short fiction has allowed me to explore the benefits of using dense language, images, and ideas in new ways. I have found that in writing short fiction the writer must please all of the literary senses of his/her audience in a short amount of space (an even smaller space in microfiction). This can be challenging; however, in the end the "story" is worth the extra work.

Novel In Progress

My most recent project is my first novel, *Stuck*. The book provides a compelling story of survival and self-love on the streets of New York. The characters' experiences depict the ongoing struggles that many young African Americans face trying to survive and live in the world today. The title itself, *Stuck*, is an accurate description of the disposition many of these people feel as they fight, day by day, to escape the often cruel circumstances of their lives.

Part of the inspiration for writing *Stuck* came from reading Ralph Ellison's acclaimed novel, *Invisible Man* last year. A professor proposed that I look at Ellison's unnamed character in the novel as a person void of race and class. While this reading was difficult, as I already had preconceived notions about the race and class of Ellison's

character, the assignment provided me with a better understanding of *Invisible Man*, and the struggle to reveal the bigger picture of survival that all humans face in their lives.

As I completed my reading, I began to ask myself questions about the people around me--the group, the generation of African Americans born in the late 70s to a nation waking up from civil rights, war, and women's rights. A group of which much was expected, but little was often given. For many of us, the drugs of the 80s consumed our parents and we were raised by our grandparents; for others, the effects of a weak education system, low employment rates, denial of healthcare, and a growing drug trade in the ghetto became a problem. As Nathan McCall points out in the title of his book, it made many of us "*want to holler.*" We began to scream in the form of rap music and gang violence in the early 80s, but the world kept turning a deaf ear. The vices we faced in the ghetto became "invisible" and we began to feel stuck in our own predicament. Thinking of all of this after reading *Invisible Man*, I began to realize that I had my own "invisible" story of survival to tell, and it was born in *Stuck*.

I am confident that *Stuck* will grow into a great piece of writing as I continue to develop my voice. Both urban and contemporary, *Stuck* provides a literary read with a commercial edge. It is steeped in the tradition of both American and African American literature; however, *Stuck* also strives to etch out its own unique place in the evolving world of modern literature. As a writer I have been experimenting with a hybrid point of view as a way to fully engage the text in a way that compliments the characters and their experiences.

"She's a writer," I remember hearing my grandmother say the morning before I left for graduate school to "practice my writing" (as she put it). She was kneading cold chopped meat and eggs around in a dented metal bowl, preparing for my going away dinner. She was not talking to me. Her words were meant for my aunt's ears. She was sitting next to her at the kitchen table cutting up potatoes for a salad.

"Um hum. That's right, Julia. UGA?" my aunt replied, looking at me across the table as if I were being interviewed for a job. I didn't saying anything. I just kept snapping cold stringed beans and throwing them into a bowl that sat in my lap.

"Yes, Aunt Ginger. I'm going to school. But I'm not a writer *yet*. I'm just going to see if I *can* write," I wanted to say. But I knew I couldn't. I was just there to snap peas and listen. Seated at the same end of the table I had occupied since I was five years old, I knew better than to interfere with my insecure words. They didn't belong in there—in my grandmother's kitchen. They would have been useless against two old African American women with a lifetime of "gettin' over."⁹ Their words were not questions to be answered—they were appointments, instructions. They meant something very specific--a message that might have been missed by someone who had not grown up in my house. They were telling me that I would be successful. They were telling me that I would achieve, simply by talking about it.

Two years later, my aunt has died and my grandmother is preparing to board a train to come down to Athens, Georgia, for my graduation from the UGA. It has been a long journey for us. So much has changed in our large family since I left; so much has

⁹ Connection to gospel song "How I Got Over"

been lost. However, my graduation, the commencement of a dream that had been discussed by two old women over potatoes and chopped meat, presents new life and growth. The writing I have done over the past two years, pieces that my grandmother has not been shy about reading, has proven the predictions of these women, who might have been called blind women in another place and time. It has all come to pass. I am a writer, and confident enough to say it.

Toni Morrison closed the story at the beginning of this essay by explaining the blind woman's answer:

"Her answer can be taken to mean: If it is dead, you have either found it that way or you have killed it. If it is alive you can still kill it.

Whether it is to stay alive, it is your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility."

Here Morrison's explanation can be read as a charge. Equal to the "instructions" I was given at a kitchen table two years ago, this charge requires that every human set out to decide their passion and illuminate it with the flight of a bird. I am happy that I have decided to be a writer and taken on the responsibility of giving my words flight and new life. I hope to shed a bright light on the future of African American literature.

Considering the words of Toni Morrison and the predictions of my grandmother and aunt, I know it is all in my hands.

CHAPTER 1
NONFICTION

Genesis Somewhere On Long Island

She said she knew him. Had seen him here and there. Watched him from up the street. He was fine. He was liquorices and chocolate pudding. His teeth were big and white. He smiled. Played basketball at the park. She wondered if he could see her. Her yellow skin and bony knees. Her afro--just a little crooked.

She couldn't even say anything. Didn't even say anything. Not until she was 21. And he was married. And she was married. And she a baby--my big sister five years older than me. And he a baby--my big brother four years older than me. But it began. Genesis. A beginning in 1976. Somewhere off on Long Island. Two black people in love. Brown bodies moving close beneath that red light in somebody's basement. Just for a moment. It was love. She swore it. Wrote "Cal" on a little piece of paper and stashed it into her Sergio Valente jeans.

Fire and Spice: Conception

She was making chili that night.

5 lbs. ground beef
 1 lg. canned stewed tomatoes
 1 (8 oz.) can tomato sauce
 2 pkgs. chili con carne seasoning

She didn't know why. He was out again. Went somewhere with uncle Jerry. She was alone.

1 sm. onion, chopped
 1 lg. can red kidney beans
 Salt & pepper to taste
 Garlic powder to taste

Her feet felt heavy. She had to do something. Move her body around.

Brown ground beef
 With chopped onion;
 drain.

I hope my daughter is a dreamer,

That she can see in pink and lavender,

That sweet kisses grace her face,

And all the boys adore her.

She couldn't see me, but she knew me. Had touched me. Dreamed me. Felt me all inside her. She had named me. Standing tall and dark above the pot, she had named me.

She said it in circles. Rolled it off her tongue and willed it into fire and spice.

Add tomatoes
 And sauce.
 Add 8 ounces water,

*I dream she always has nice shoes,
 The best that Macy's every sold,
 That she never walks unless she wants,
 And cardboard never meets her sole.*

Water fell to the floor and I began. Twenty-two, her world had changed tight in the kitchen on the third floor in the second apartment. And she was alone again. She couldn't remember if she ever turned off the fire. She worried. Worried that he would come back and find it all gone. Find it all burnt in fire and spice. And disappear again.

Seasoning packets,
 Salt,
 Pepper,
 Garlic and beans.

*I pray no one ever tells her no,
 That she always has enough,
 And even when she has had her fill,
 She fills another cup.*

I wouldn't stop crying. I came too early. They said I hurt. Had to put me under blue light so my kidneys would develop. She had to sign the papers. Had to name me. Her second daughter. The screaming one she'll never understand. Calaya Michelle Williams. And so I was. And she was alone. Again.

Simmer on low heat
 For 30 minutes.
 Serve with crackers. (*Cooks.com*)

*Oh Lord, make her a princess,
 With a tiara for all the world to see.
 I pray dear God this daughter of mine,
 That she's nothing like me.*

Sometimes I think they hate me-
 The babies who were here before I came,
 The mothers, the fathers
 The husbands, the wives.
 My fire and spice had come and burned them at the stake.
 I'll name them Joan and Peter.
 They were innocent.
 There I was, fire and spice, tearing their world apart.
 Crying from a crib that belonged nowhere.
 In whose house?
 Where do we keep it?
 It is angry.
 It won't stop crying.
 It is not a princess.
 It won't eat, or sleep, or keep shoes on.
 It cries and cries.
 Fire and spice.
 For grandma every day.

Primetime at Da Crib

Claire Huxtable is a mother. No, Claire Huxtable is a lawyer and a mother. She doesn't have two jobs or bosses that let go on birthdays or Christmas Eve. She lives in a house. A big house in Brooklyn. There are stairs there. Stairs that go up and down and down and up. *Click clack, click clack.* Claire is off to work. *Click clack, click clack.* Claire is running up and down the stairs. There are no roaches in her house. No holes in walls. No windows with bars. No mice that fall asleep in Barbie doll houses.

Claire is beautiful. She laughs and dances and moves her arms when she speaks. She wears jewelry and dresses and skirts and scarves with gold in the center. She doesn't shop at Payless or buy things with no tags and buzzers still attached. She sips wine and goes to concerts and hears jazz and sings the blues. She doesn't have dusty mirrors in her living room or ashtrays with strange cigarettes.

Claire's hair is long and pretty. It moves when she talks. "Cliff. Cliff." It is not knotty or nappy. Her children don't have bald spots. They have ponytails and curls and ribbons so red I feel them. Claire is a mother. I see her once a week. She comes on my TV and tears my world apart.

Tina Maria Goes to War

I pretended she was my mother. I'd sit still, real still, and listen and wait for her to say it—the speech I made up for her when I was six. "Michelle adopted you when you were born. I am your real mother," she'd say to me. "I was too young to keep you, so I gave you to my sister. But now I am in high school and I can take care of you." She'd cry and ask me to forgive her. I'd say "ok" and move into her bedroom. We'd watch TV and stay up late and eat cheese doodles from the corner store. I'd be okay. Really. I'd hold tight to her chubby hands and try to swallow her up. I wanted to have her, each part of her, all to myself; her hair and its curl; her voice and its whisper, her legs and their bend--just like mine.

"You bowlegged too," she'd say, looking at my lunchbox pretzel legs.

"Yes, just like you," I'd reply, pushing my legs back further, further until they hurt. I wanted to be like her, just like her--my aunt, Tina Maria. The one everyone adores, just ten years older than me.

She is always happy, always happy and smiling at me. She is not like Mommy—chasing and hitting and screaming. She brings me stuff--candy and lip-gloss and nail polish. She sprays perfume on me. She smiles at me in the mirror. She tells me I am pretty like her.

"Where's Calaya?" I'd hear her ask Nana when she walked into the house.

"Right here! Right here!" I want to say, but I run and hide somewhere deep, deep behind the laundry baskets and Uncle Darren's old crutches from an accident in ROTC. She will come and look for me.

"Calaya? Where is that Calaya?" She will call out looking for her eight-year-old niece. She is near, right in front of me. I can hear her, almost see her, but she is still looking--smiling and happy and looking for me.

* * *

"Tina is leaving," my grandmother said to me one night, greasing my hair.

"Leaving? Going where? Am I going too? Tina always takes me with her to the park."

"No, it's not like that, Calaya." Grandma parts my hair and rubs the thick black grease into my scalp. "She can't take you with her. She is grown up now. She joined the military."

"What is the military?" Grandma is quiet. She is looking away. I try to find something to say. "You mean like Uncle Alfred?" I say, remembering the dusty old picture of Uncle Alfred in the living room at Aunt Ginger's house. He is standing in front of a big tree. He has on a green suit with gold pins on his pockets. They said the picture was from his old army days. They said he went to the war to fight.

"Yes, baby. Like Uncle Alfred." Grandma leaves the room.

* * *

I don't know if it was raining the day Tina left to go to war. I know everybody was quiet. No one was talking. The TV's were off and grandma put me to bed early. Tina came into my bedroom and kissed me goodnight. I still remember her standing in the doorway--her smile, her head tilted to the side. She climbed into the bed with me and said, "Don't cry Calaya. I'll be back soon." She handed me a stuffed satin heart with a rainbow falling from it. "It's yours," she said, folding it into my arms.

"Why are you leaving?" I wanted to say, but I couldn't stop crying. "Why are you leaving *me*?" I wanted to say. I could hear myself crying. I was crying loud. Loud. Tina was wiping my tears with her hands. Grandma was standing in the doorway. Tina kissed me on my forehead.

I started watching *M*A*S*H*¹⁰ shortly after she left. I'd climb up on my mother's bed and lay my head on the pillow. *Tina Maria was going to war* I'd think, watching the man with dark hair dance around in a dress. Tina Maria was going to war to fight with the tiny green men in my brother's toy chest. I imagined her lying on a stretcher, rushed into the little green tent with the man in a dress. She is covered in blood. She is crying. She wants to come home. I want her to come home. I want her to come home and find me in the laundry again.

¹⁰ *M*A*S*H* was the first war series to show blood on television in 1972.

Picking Up Mama

It is winter. I am sitting in my car, parked in a tight space between a pickup truck and an Expedition. The keys are still in the ignition. I am trying to keep warm. I turn up the heat and pull all of the little vents towards my face. I wish I was at my apartment, sitting on my couch with a big cup of hot chocolate, but instead I am sitting at the train station in Gainesville, Georgia, waiting for my grandmother. She'll be on the 7:35am train. It will be on time. I have been here several times before to pick her up, and it is usually on time.

I push my head into the back of the seat, close my eyes, and try to remember why I am at the train station in the first place, why she is even on the train traveling from New York to Georgia alone, again, even after I insisted she fly or not come at all. "You're seventy years old," I remember saying to her over the phone a week ago when she said she was buying a ticket. I was trying to persuade her that it was wrong for her to rush down to Georgia to take care of me--her twenty-six year old granddaughter. But I knew it was no use. This is just how she is. I didn't have a choice: she was coming. Part of me was angry that she was ignoring my suggestions, but another part, the part that still likes to hear her giggle over the phone or see her smile in so many pictures, was happy to know she still cared. "Just be at the station on time," she said quickly. I opened my planner, wrote down the arrival time, and it was a date. Like it or not, it was a date.

I open my eyes to look at the time on my car radio. Five minutes until her train arrives. I jump out of the car and walk towards the station door. I like to be on the platform when the train arrives. I like to be the first person she sees. She'll probably ask

me why I didn't wait in the car. She'll toss her cane down to me from the train steps and say, "I could've just met you at the car. It's too cold for you to be standing out here."

She'll be worried about me.

I step onto the platform and bury my arms in the center of my coat. I wrap them around my body, move back and forth trying to create my own heat. I look in the direction the trains always come from and imagine that her train is pulling in. It hasn't been long since I last saw her, but I am longing to see her face anyway. Between gusts of freezing wind and people pushing along in front of me to get a better look down the tracks, I try to imagine my grandmother, Julia Elizabeth Reid.

My grandmother is a big woman. Big to look at. Not obese or tight in her clothes, but big, big in presence and movement. I remember watching her when I was a little girl. I'd walk behind her, my feet filling each empty space she'd left behind, and I'd try to figure out how I'd ever get that big. I wanted my hips to move happy beneath my skirt, my shoulders to float hard and steady back and forth into the room, and all eyes to fall heavy on my face.

They have a name for her bigness, her presence and movement, the fact anyone and everyone who walks into our house has to listen to her. The name is Mama--not Mommy, or Mom, or Ma. Mama. My father taught it to me in the basement of the house; said she was the one who held the family together; she was the one we could all depend on. Mama. Later I'd go to New York University, sit in a class about black history, and learn that Mama is also the name for the matriarch--the black matriarch to be exact. My professor would tell me that the black matriarch was a bad thing, an old tradition from slavery--the big mama, the caregiver, old auntie, the nanny with the

handkerchief hanging on her head. He would say that the Mama, the black matriarch, was breaking up the black family, castrating the males, keeping them weak and unable to survive without her. I didn't like it--the name. Black matriarch. I didn't like how it felt on my tongue--like some insect, some disease that eats and eats away at people until there is nothing else. It broke my heart. He didn't know her, not my Mama, my black matriarch, not her bigness, her hips, her shoulders, her face that is always there.

She is always there-- sitting and smiling, sometimes yelling and screaming, but always there. Christmas plays, recitals, bad colds, late rent, broken hearts, broken glasses--always there. And so it is no wonder that I am standing here waiting for her train to arrive--she wouldn't have it any other way.

I see the lights from the train making their way down the track. They are moving fuzzy, bouncing back and forth, fighting like two displaced fireflies under Georgia's rising sun. A soft hush goes over the crowd. Our wait will be coming to an end soon. I can't wait to see her.

I can't wait to see her eyes. They have changed over the years. She is not a jazzy woman, she doesn't drink or talk real loud¹¹, but her eyes used to dance. Like Judith Jamison on stage with Alvin Ailey, her eyes used to dance and move like jazz in our house. They'd dance ballets of gettin' over and keepin' faith. I'd feel them on my back on the playground as I tried some new thing; pushing me across the stage at graduation; pulling me home when staying away might have meant my life.

¹¹ Allusion to "Phenomenal Woman" by Maya Angelou

I remember the way her eyes looked the day I graduated from NYU. Almost a picture, an aged reflection of my own. They told me that she was graduating, too. While she couldn't find the words to explain it, her eyes told me that she was wearing the little square hat with the black tassel. She was walking, standing next to Spike Lee, and smiling proud and tall because she had finally done it.

Now her eyes are different. Still big, brown, and beautiful like before, but different. Not old or weary like some old car somebody used to drive-- no, they are not getting rusty; they are getting deeper. I see a worry and a quiet fire in them that I didn't see before. They don't dance anymore. They talk now. They whisper. Even when she is not speaking, they ask if I paid the bills on time, if I put money to the side like she always tells me, if I am keeping God first. Sometimes I am afraid to look at them. I know what the worry means. She wants to make sure I will be ok, that the family will be ok. She is wondering if everything she has held together will stay that way after she is gone. "Calaya, you got to take care of yourself," she says. I look at her eyes and understand fully that this means everything to her.

The train screams like a colic baby as it pulls into the station. I step back and wait for the conductor to open the door. I want to see her, Julia Elizabeth Reid, as soon as she steps off of the train. I feel a light flutter in my chest and blush at my own excitement. "It is just your grandmother. It is just a visit," I say to myself. But I know it is more. She is not just my grandmother. She is so many things Webster has not made words for. She is the word friend with one million syllables following it. Love as a pronoun or adjective. She is the moon with no exact pronunciation or definition. Just beautiful. It is not just a visit. It is my courage and spirit sitting on a train for fourteen hours to get to a

small town our ancestors probably fought hard to get away from a long, long time ago. Her knees are tight in the back of the seat in front of her. I know they hurt, but to her it is worth the trip just *to see me*.

She smiles as soon as she enters the doorway and sees me standing below the train steps on the platform. I will help her down the stairs, take her cane, and tell her to hold onto my arm. I will carry the luggage. I am on time. I am proud that I am here to pick her up, proud to just be here for her.

CHAPTER 2

POETRY

The Song I Know

Through Midtown Tunnel,
 Down old Grand Central,
 And underneath the rickety red bridge
 Where Tito's father killed himself,
 There is a too-tiny town,
 Where my brothers,
 My boldy-black brothers,
 Bebop down Broadway all day,
 And my sisters,
 My sanctimoniously sweet sisters,
 Switch and saunter thick thighs before snake eyes,
 Between Sycamore and Ms. Sarah's Beauty Shop,
 Where old men bicker and buzz about beneath old Buicks
 Between 9 and 5,
 And old women still share quiet secrets,
 And mother love in their soulful eyes.

There,
 Is the bump-bump-bump of basketballs down at the park,
 The hooting and "Get your ass in here,"
 Of mamas to kids still out after dark,
 Chicano, Americano, and Haitians renting dreams door-to-door,
 The "Oochie-coochie mommy" bodegas,
 And black-owned grocery stores.

There,
 Is the *Hallelujah* and *Swing Low*,
 At First Baptist on Sunday morning--
 Pastor's pointy, patent leather shoes,
 Prancing up and down the aisle,
 As he blesses the saints with a word...
 Or two.

There,
 Is the pool,
 The black dot pool,
 At the center of town.
 Where Mr. Sam and old Russell stand guard,
 As beautiful blue-black babies bathe and ash ceremoniously,
 In chlorine beneath the unforgiving summer sun.

There,
Is the roar of the train,
That connects the Rivers-head with the Big Apple.
Shiny white Hamptonian faces,
Peek through clouded windows and accuse us of being nowhere.

But there,
In the too-tiny, *nowhere* town,
There, is the story,
The sound,
The song of the place where my heart learned to meringue,
My eyes to sing the blues.

There is my song,
The one I must sing to remember--
To not forget.
Nana says I must never forget,
Forgetting in the too-tiny town could be dangerous,
Forgetting could be deadly.
Keep the song,
The one I know.
Remember the bridge, the note, and the rhyme,
The beginning, the middle, the end,
Wrap it up in silky red ribbons and tie it to my right thumb.

Run-Jump-Skip

Us girls played by the tracks--
 Four of us, tight,
 Toe to toe,
 North, south, east, west,
 Dusty beneath the orange moon,
 Hanging lazy above the intersection at Urban and Railroad Avenues.

It was there that the silver ship screamed,
 As it pushed along the tracks through the too-tiny town.
 Mothers closed windows,
 Fathers rolled over in their beds,
 And we--the children,
 Raced to greet the fierce storm of vibration
 Beneath our nervous feet.
 As the tiny dot grew into a moving mass of metal and smoky black,
 We ran- We jumped- We skipped,
 Over the railroad track.

Tamika's chubby index finger was the picker.
 It crept like a chocolate grasshopper,
 From shiny red Jelly sandal to smooth pink Puma,
 As we chanted,
 Four witches,
 To find the next jumper:
 "Eenie meanie mynie moe,
 Catch a nigger by the toe,
 If he hollers let him go,
 Eenie meanie mynie moe."

Tiny tar toned arms wrapped with crossed fingers,
 Behind hunched backs,
 Silent prayers and wishes...
 *"Don't get picked,
 Don't get picked,
 I don't want to run-jump-skip!"*

It was a deadly game,
 Deadly enough that we knew not to get caught,
 But we played anyway,
 Each Thursday,
 Out by the tracks,
 After dark.

We hated it:
The run-the jump-the skip
Over the restless tracks,
But we played,
North, south, east, west...
We played because we had to.
Because our big sisters had,
And theirs before them too.

Miss America--Post Pageant

1970- Cheryl Browne of Iowa became the first African American contestant in the Miss America pageant.

It's me,
 Yes, it's me.
 The black woman,
 With bold nose, lips, and thighs,
 As American as Mammy's old apple pie.

1984—Vanessa Williams became the first African American woman to wear the crown.

I am America,
 Her un-throned queen,
 So on the right-bright, bright-right White House,
 There should be a picture of me--
 America's fruit,
 The strange one,
 Born of her twisted root.

1984-- Suzette Charles

See my an-sisters came here first class,
 A majestic arrival it seemed.
 Jewels hung heavy from their necks,
 As they were carried,
 A desired lot,
 Across the sea.

1990-- Debbie Turner

They lifted and churned,
 Planted prosperity's corn,
 Breast bared sweet milk,
 Of which many of you were born.

1991-- Marjorie Vincent

So this is my country,
 The land where they struggled to be free.
 Those cotton queens from where I came,
 They toiled this soil that boils,
 And marked it with my name.

1994- Kimberly Aiken

Give me her crown for her blood in the ground;
Give me her flowers for the forty acres she never got;
Give me her banner and let it read:

"This Nubian sister is the seed of civilization,
cultivation, love, peace and hope.
By a unanimous vote--She is Miss America."

2003- Erika Harold, an African American woman, wears the crown.

And Then She Came

He was the sun on my shoulders,
 The step before I took it,
 The truth on my tongue,
 The answer in my ear.

He was my nightlight,
 My singer of songs,
 My jazz, my Luther, my Miles,
 And "Love Supreme."

He was my father,
 A black knight in light all around him,
 A soldier, a forgiver, a maker of men.

He was my father,
 And he is dead.

When he died I thought there would be no more words-
 Thought that poetry and possibilities
 Would climb up on some great cliff and d

i
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 e.

And then she came-
 Her shoulders in darkness,
 Her step just

a
 little
 off...

And then she came--
 The truth,
 The answer,
 And all.
 At once she became
 My jazz, my Luther, my Miles and "Love Supreme,"
 My sister,
 My father alive again.

A New Beginning

"You're a long way from home, babygirl,"
 Jason says, sliding the key from the ignition.
 We are stopping,
 Stopping here...
 In a small town dressed in bulldog red and white,
 A small town that is supposed to be my new home.

Waffle House,
 Pickup truck,
 Confederate tag,
 "Can I help you Ma'am?"

I wonder if Jason remembers where he put the keys.

When I was thirteen,
 I was graduated from Saint Brigid's Academy to Holy Trinity Diocesan.
 Grandma cornrowed my hair for the occasion.
 They called it, *A New Beginning*.
 White girls skated the halls,
 With soft ocean blue ribbons in their hair
 To match their hiked up skirts.
 And they were nice,
 But I did not want to stay.

Grandma wondered why.

But that was there,
 At my old home,
 Where the sun is not so demanding on flapping hands,
 Where Christmas means snow,
 And dirt is the color of chocolate babies.

"Everyone is so proud of you,"
 I hear Grandma say through the phone,
 But I can't speak.
 I can't breathe here.
 In my new home artificial air replaces open windows.
 I want to open a window;
 I want to get out.
 "I am suffocating,"
 I want to say.
 "I want to come back,"
 I want to say.

But I don't
She will not hear me,
She will wonder why,
Because she is still home.

CHAPTER 3
SHORT FICTION

The Sky Above

When I was six, I fell from the sky. A sweltering summer Sunday, the concrete on 161st street boiled like the sun sat just two feet away. Still in our church clothes and bright white patent leather shoes, we--Keisha, Pam, and me--played Double-Dutch, Simon Says, and Red-Light-Green-Light to keep from sinking into the smoldering skillet tar beneath our feet.

Keisha started it. She always did. Rolled her pretty white girl hair over her shoulders like she was Lena Horne or somebody, and suggested that we do a dance. Pammie looked at me and I looked down at the pretty pink church socks Mama told me not to play in.

"Ok, let's go by Ms. Gracie's so we can dance on our stage," Pammie suggested in her smooth southern drawl. A country girl, she was new to 161st, but she already knew our special place.

There wasn't but one stage in all of St. Albans, Queens that us girls saw fit to perform on. The rusting iron doors that covered the cellar in Ms. Gracie's backyard had been our spot since forever. Just two feet off the ground, it was the perfect place for us to practice the newest dances we'd seen on Soul Train and Solid Gold the week before. Most days our performance ended with Ms. Gracie fussing at us. She'd poke her chocolate pudding face out of the tight back window and say "Ya'll gonna break them doors with that racket," as we raced by like rolling pennies.

Maybe it was the scent of bold begonias in the air, or the dizzying mist of the sun mixing with the blood of Christ in our empty Catholic girl stomachs, but we weren't

afraid that day. We stood in front of the doors knowing we were not allowed and feeling like we should be.

"Who's first?" Keisha demanded. Pammie looked at me and I looked down at my pretty pink church socks.

"You go," I heard Pammie say in my direction. I tried to act like I hadn't heard her. I was okay with all of us dancing and getting in trouble, but I didn't want to get caught on that stage by myself. Ms. Gracie would call my mama.

"Yeah, you go." Keisha pushed a hand into the center of my back, but I didn't have to look to know it was Keisha.

I decided to do my best move, the running man, because neither of them knew how to do it like me. They sang, "Go Tasha, go Tasha," as my feet pushed and pulled me into a running man. Up, up, up I went into the air as my feet banged against the creaking iron. As I came down I felt emptiness beneath my feet where there should have been a thunderous racket. There was nothing there--just a loud clang and fast drop. My body burst through the stage like a bag of nickels. As I tumbled down the concrete steps glimpses of the world left behind melted into a vision of the Holy Ghost. I saw kids and parents screaming, Ms. Gracie running, the sun rolling fast, fast, faster with each tumble. I felt the edges of the thick walls tear into my hands like heated razor blades as I sank further away from the sky above. My body smashed into the bottom of the cellar stairs, and its blackness rushed down my throat like warm milk. I was no longer there, of the sky and Sunday prayers. Covered in darkness, I lay at the bottom of the steps in dirty pink Sunday socks. I heard Mama's calls, "I'm not coming down there to get you," and wished I was dead. I wished the Holy Ghost would come and take the basement

blackness and me. I closed my eyes tight and tried to lie real still. Maybe I could fall deeper from the sky above.

Ms. Cordelia's Chair

Just down Dogwood, before the old church and the taffy factory where Mama and Auntie Trudy work, there is a place that every girl in Still Water, Tennessee, visits before she is truly accepted as a woman in our four-avenue town. Above the full glass door that sits between the penny store and the Laundromat, there is a small red oak sign that proclaims this place Ms. Cordelia's Chair and Beauty Salon. The bright white paint that arches and bends this title into a smooth script, casts a jubilant air over the shop's tiny threshold as Still Water's finest sashay in and out each day. Bump, curl, wave, or cool set, Ms. Cordelia's Chair is the only place to get it done right. From the mayor's mistress to his wife, a weekly visit to this place is met with all of the merriment of Sunday ceremony. Any woman who is a "who" knows this place and makes a weekly visit to Ms. Cordelia's Chair a part of her weekly routine. Appointments are made on a weekly basis, and being knocked from your usual spot in "the book" by Ms. Cordelia more than often means that for some reason or another you have become an "un-who."

Ever since I can remember, my Mama has raced into Ms. Cordelia's Chair at 8am each Saturday morning to make sure this would not become her fate. Like the others, she factors in her chair time like a sacred meeting--a doctor's appointment she cannot miss. Daddy knows, we know, even Mama's boss down at the taffy factory knows that Mama is busy for at least three hours every Saturday morning. It will all have to wait--the children, the problems, and even Daddy's cries.

When I was younger I sat in the small waiting room dressed in my Sundays, wondering why this place was so important to Mama and all of the other women who

walked in and out each Saturday morning. I only knew to be quiet and make sure my baby sister, Corene, didn't act up too bad. "Get off the chair Nee-nee," I'd repeat over and over again as I watched Mama move around the shop. A quick glance, or even an acknowledgement that she knew us, meant that we were embarrassing her. I'd threaten Corene by telling her that Mama was watching. She'd turn around and sit up straight like we were in boot camp. She knew not to show her tail--there anyway.

Mama is not "Mama" at Ms. Cordelia's Chair--not the Mama who plows the driveway with Daddy, chases Corene and me around the yard with switches, and leaves the house at 5am each morning in a worn-out, navy-blue Dickie. No, here she is different. She smiles and blushes, and bats her eyes real hard. She talks slow and low, and listens and laughs. Draped in the salon's capes of red and white, Mama fits in here. She is in on the joke. She is not a leader or a follower. Here, Mama is simply a member of the choir. She is one of them--a woman. Like the others, she knows the secret of Ms. Cordelia's touch. To them, Ms. Cordelia is a cure-all--the answer to the week's difficulties. As I pull Corene from underneath sinks, and from behind the dryers, I can hear them buzzing about in their testimonies of faith. They say things like, "I have to see Ms. Cordelia next week," and, "You should have come to Ms. Cordelia's," in response to any inquiry about anything they feel Ms. Cordelia can cure with a wash and set. Rent late, man missing, children gone mad? A visit to Ms. Cordelia's chair is sure to make it go away--or at least make you look good for the journey. The women from the church, from the supermarket, even my teachers from school march into the salon like mad women and leave glowing like fresh cut diamonds. Newly christened divas dance out of the threshold invaluable, and undeniably beautiful. Poor, black, and rejected, twenty

dollars and a touch of Cordelia's consecrated hands changes everything. The difficult becomes do-able, and while the rent is still late, the man is still missing, and her badass kids are waiting right out front, the women are touched. They insist, persist, and sit in Ms. Cordelia's chair each week, on time, without fail. For three hours on Saturday, Ms. Cordelia, with her hazel eyes, smooth red-bone skin, and wide, juicy hips, is their Calgon, their witchdoctor, their pastor, their white lady spa, their Alpha and Omega.

Today, just three days after my sixteenth birthday, is my day to become a "who." I sit next to Mama watching and waiting for my turn. We left Corene at home with Daddy, and Mama is still holding tight to my hand. Ms. Cathy from the drugstore on Martin Luther King is getting a press and curl, and I am next.

"I don't want to get burnt," I say, watching the sweet Blue Magic smoke rise from Ms. Cathy's silky, long hair. Mama just laughs and speaks into the air.

"Don't you want to look pretty? We must get rid of that nappy mess on your head," she replies, running her fingers through my riotous Afro. I agree in silence and watch Ms. Cordelia slide her happy weight around the big red chair. Ms. Cordelia is intent with each tuck and pull of Ms. Cathy's hair, and by the time her red nails finish dancing with every curl, she hands Ms. Cathy a mirror and suddenly the frumpy old lady from the drugstore looks like Diahann Carroll herself. Even Mama (who never compliments anyone) nods her head in acknowledgement of the transformation. Ms. Cathy's coal-colored cheeks almost blush as she floats out of the chair and over the threshold into the world. With an exaggerated flick of her hand towel, and a quick glance at the white clock on the wall behind Mama and me, Ms. Cordelia sends her signal that it's my turn. Feeling her hazel eyes on me, my Mary Janes pick me up and pull me

towards the chair. I look back at Mama to make sure I'm not confused--to make sure she hasn't changed her mind. Smiling, she hands me a clean twenty-dollar bill and says in the voice she uses with the other women, "Ms. Cordelia's chair is waiting for you."

Nanadear***Lemuel Baptiste: The Betrayal***

With her back to us, Nana-dear said, "Turn it down, Mildred,"—her old southern way of letting my older sister know that it was time to go up to bed. Knowing better than to test her, Mildred promptly disappeared from the front room, punch in hand, leaving me alone with Nana-dear. She turned around and with three quick steps she was across the whitewashed floor and in my face. My grandmother bent over, grabbed me by my chin, looked intently into my green eyes that were a mirror of hers and said, "Lemuel Baptiste," in her stiffest Alabama accent. "No sense-crying, Sylvia, not over this. You remember Lemuel Baptiste," she added moving her small pale hand from my chin and placing it over my heart. "You remember today. Today will only prepare you for tomorrow," she explained lightly pressing her palm against it. She stared at me for a moment; her eyes set on mine, and said his name again.

"Lemuel Baptiste."

Then she rose, dropped her half-smoked cigarette into the punch bowl and left the room. "Lemuel Baptiste," I thought laying my head on the armrest of Nana-dear's pea green jacquard couch as I drifted into a restless sleep still clad in my satin tangerine gown that was supposed to be my prom dress.

I'll never forget the look on Nana-dear's face when we realized he was not coming. After months of patching together my satin tangerine gown with extras from off of the shop floor where Nana-dear worked as a seamstress; days of finding the perfect rouge and lipstick for my wheat complexion and hours of preparing the front room for whatever family saw fit to see me off to the prom; my date was not coming. This sort of

betrayal was a big deal in Mobile, Alabama, in 1960 where high school proms and graduations were entertained with the same merriment as the World Series or even a presidential inauguration. In this small place it was a time when eager boys and girls officially became members of the adult community and were accepted openly. To be stood up for such an occasion was surely unforgivable and embarrassing. However, unlike the tear-soaked faces of Mildred and myself, Nana-dear looked unmoved and damn near dignified in spite of the situation.

Around 9 o'clock as a miserable Mildred and I sat on the front room couch sobbing and sipping on sherbet punch, Nana-dear stood at the front door anxiously taking short pulls on a Marlboro as she peered out of the screen door like she was still waiting for Lemuel Baptiste to show.

225

Lemuel Baptiste is the only thing I can think of to take my mind off of 225.

During my last visit with Nana-dear at Mobile Memorial Hospital she whispered his name just before she drifted off to sleep.

"I'm sorry.... Lemuel Baptiste," she mumbled disjointedly as her vacant sea-green eyes rolled back into her head and then came to a tight close.

It seemed strange to me at the time, hearing my grandmother say his name in that dank hospital room.

Lemuel Baptiste. I had used that name as a crutch at many points in my life. When I had an abortion my freshman year at Howard University; the first time daddy was shot down at the pool hall; when Mildred found that lump in her left breast; I thought of the Louisiana konk-wearing Negro that stood me up for my prom. It was not that his

standing me up was the worst thing that had ever happened to me. But his memory was always there to remind me of how strong I could be. Of how strong I was. In fact, until now, five years later, I thought Nana-dear was right about Lemuel Baptiste, that my yesterday had prepared me for today. But right now, confronted with 225, I know she was wrong. For once in her life—that I know of—Nana-dear was wrong. I can't remember any "yesterday" that has prepared me for today, not for this very moment. Not the abortion, not the breast cancer, not one of daddy's drunken brawls down at the pool hall; not Lemuel Baptiste. Not one thing inside of me had prepared me with the courage I needed to open the door, get out of daddy's rusty Buick and set foot on the makeshift brick path that leads to the big white house at 225 Monroe St.

The Sisters Are Responsible

"This is it," I kept saying to myself, glancing at Mildred through the corner of my right eye. Like me she was looking straight ahead. Eyes focused on the dusty road ahead of the car. We sat mesmerized as if we were waiting for something. Something. Anything. The sight of Uncle Benny's and Tante Claire's baby blue Coup DeVille speeding around the corner to let us know that there had been some kind of mix-up down at the hospital, that all this time they had Nana-dear confused with someone else. But inside we both knew that that or any other something would never come. And that soon the dry Alabama heat would force us out of daddy's un-air-conditioned car. Nothing would come to save us from what we were about to do. Clean out 225, an act that in its finality would surely confirm in our heads that we have lost our Nana-dear. That she is dead.

I don't know how exactly I was nominated to help Mildred clean out Nana-dear's house. Everyone knows that we have not been getting along since I left Mobile for college. After that, for some reason Mildred seems to despise everything about me. Though she is five years my senior, now 30 years old, her actions toward me are usually as petty and inconsistent as a three year old's. Daddy said it's because she missed me when I left Mobile and Nana-dear said it was jealousy because I was the one with enough brains to go to college. Either way it caused many fights in the house when I came home for the holidays, and it is certain to cause one today.

And why did we, Mildred and I, have to clean out the house anyway? 225 belonged to everyone else in the family as much as it did to us. No one's full name was even on the deed--not even Nana-dear's. This was because 225 used to be the big house of the old Monroe plantation. It was bequeathed to Nana-dear's grandfather when the French Monroes left the South after the Civil War. He was a young mulatto slave named Dear, their unfailing house servant who was coincidentally the child of Mistress Monroe's maid, Darling, whose slave quarter Master Monroe visited frequently. Seeing as how Dear could barely spell his first name and had never really adopted a surname, Master Monroe simply put "Dear Family" on the deed to the big house and it had stayed that way ever since. When he died it went to his son David Dear and then onto Nana-dear, whose name was Bay Dear.

Now with Nana-dear dead the rightful owner would be her oldest son, my father. Which would mean that cleaning out 225 is his responsibility. But like most of the things that daddy had to do—other than drinking and messing around at the pool hall—it was now our responsibility.

Early this morning he walked into our small brick house just three blocks north of 225, sick drunk, dressed in the same clothes that he had been wearing since the day Nana-dear passed. He stood in front of the kitchen table where Mildred and I had been sitting eating sugar grits, fumbling around in his pockets and mumbling about cleaning out 225. After finally checking in his right shirt pocket where he always kept his car keys, he pulled them out and said, "Go' on over and clean out your Nana's house." He threw the keys onto the table. Then he staggered down the dark hallway that led to his room, stumbled inside, and slammed the door closed behind him. Having seen displays like this from my father for most of my life I simply picked the car keys up, placed them in my red leather handbag, and went back to eating my sugar grits.

Mildred, who seemed to always feel sorry for daddy's drunken ass, got up from the kitchen table saying she wanted to make some black coffee for him so he could have it when he woke up. I sat watching her in disbelief as she moved around in the kitchen. She was always looking out for him like he was her husband or something. It was funny too because she looked just like our Mama. Unlike my color and features that obviously had been taken more from Daddy and Nana-dear's blood, Mildred was the spit and image of our very dark Mama. Seemingly untouched by Daddy's heavily mixed blood, Mildred's color was a deep brown, what old folks used to call "blue-black." Nana-dear always put globs of lard on her face to try to make it shine but we all knew that no shine was gonna make Mildred appear any lighter.

Mildred also inherited what Nana-dear called Mama's "roundness,"—a clear indication that she was just a bit more African than the rest of us. Everything on Mildred was round—from her thick "southern girl" round hips to her raccoon-like chestnut, round

eyes. I remember Nana-dear jokingly rubbing on Mildred's broad, cherry shaped nose from across the dinner table one night. With her middle finger curled up on one side and her index on the other, she tugged at it and said, "Lord, child, you need to put a clothes pin on that thing! Nose wide just like your Mama's." Everyone at the table began to laugh--everyone except for Daddy. He just looked at Mildred and smiled and said, "just like her," patting Mildred on her plaited head of jet-black nappy hair.

"We better get in there Sylvia. It is getting late and you know Daddy will still be expecting dinner when he gets home from the factory this evening," Mildred said, interrupting me from my thoughts. She was reaching for her purse that was sitting between us on the seat of the car.

"Yes. I suppose," I responded and without realizing it, slipping my hand over the small metal handle to open the car door.

Somewhere Between the Collards and Tomatoes

The house seemed unusually still. It was usually filled with the sound of Nana-dear singing or arguing with Tante Claire over something or another and the smell of the northern wind pulling in the aromatic scent of Nana-dear's roses from the front yard. Now it's hauntingly quiet and the northern wind has been replaced with the barren stench of nothingness.

Both of us began to look around for something that would give us a clue as to where to start on our mission. My eyes ran along the pictures of Uncle Benny and daddy that Nana-dear had haphazardly placed along the wall above the couch. She must have had a picture taken of both Uncle Benny and daddy every year of their lives since birth. Each photo had a single palm leaf resting on top of it. This was Nana-dear's way of

blessing them and also finding something to do with the palms she had been collecting each year from Mount Calvary on Palm Sunday. Nana-dear swore it was a sin to throw a palm away. So like most Christians in Alabama, she had palms resting on anything she felt needed to be kept in a "holy" way.

Next to the couch was Nana-dear's old Victrola. It's one of those huge rectangular mahogany phonographs from the early 20's. Underneath the wooden top hid a record player sitting next to a brass horn. A small window had been cut out of the front of the cabinet where the horn was and a thin lace sheet was placed in front of it. On either side of the record player there was a liquor shelf and a small space to store records.

Nana-dear said she had been in love with the thing since she first laid eyes on it in the showroom at Madame Lucille's parlor downtown where she secretly designed clothes. Every Saturday morning she would sit in the room anxiously eyeing the Victrola as she made extra money tailoring the latest fashions to the voluptuous bodies of the town's coquettes. When Charlie, the police chief's son-in-law, got one of the girls pregnant the place was quickly shut down and Madame Lucille sent the Victrola to Nana-dear. "She knew how much I loved that thing and Lucille owed me!" Nana-dear once said. She explained that she saved Madame Lucille a lot of money over years by designing a pouch she sewed into the small of the back in each of the girl's dresses. The pouch was a safe place for the girls to hide their money and came in handy when robbers passed through the parlor or when angry wives approached them to reclaim their husband's paycheck.

The Victrola was a blessing to our family in many ways. Nana-dear hid money she stole from Uncle Benny and daddy's father in the Victrola when he left for New York

with his wife. "That white heifer may have gotten my man but I had both those crackers' money in that Victrola," Nana-dear said in a rare conversation about their father. And it was true, daddy said that when Nana-dear got word from his father's maid that he was moving his family north, Nana-dear took half of his savings from the safe at the tailor where she worked for him and hid it in the back of the Victrola. Daddy said she knew that was the last place he'd be looking for anything and being a card-carrying member of Alabama's white upper class, he was surely not going to get the police after his longtime quadroon mistress.

The old Victrola looked so handsome with the morning sun dancing across the top of it as it sneaked in through the front window. Nana-dear kept the mahogany polished and made it a point to have Mildred and me dust off the lace in the small window time and again. Looking at it you might think we could get some good money by selling the old thing. But the Victrola had been broken since Thanksgiving in 1947. That year, like most others, Tante Claire had gotten drunk and spilled a bottle of Jack Daniel's right over the record player. I'll never forget how bad Nana-dear cussed Tante Claire out for breaking her record player and for wasting a perfectly good bottle of JD. Nana-dear was a devout Christian woman but she had a mouth that was as dirty as any jazz player and as fast as a bootlicker. Not to mention that night, Nana-dear had more than enough of her share of JD herself, and that mixed with her deep-rooted hate for Tante Claire, Uncle Benny's Haitian wife, meant trouble from the door. By the time Nana-dear finished calling Tante Claire every Black spot, jigga boo and jungle bunny on the planet, both she and Tante Claire were too embarrassed for the evening to go on any further. Tante Claire stormed out the front door without her fake fur coat or Uncle Benny, and Nana-dear

proceeded to kick every last person—including me, daddy and Mildred—out of her house. Daddy refused to visit her for nearly a month, although he sent Mildred and me over everyday to make sure she was okay.

I walked over to the Victrola and ran my hand over the top of it. I don't think Nana-dear had moved the thing since the deliverymen sat it down there long before I was born.

"Make a nice table now," Nana-dear said when I visited her the day after that Thanksgiving. Anyone else would have had someone come in and look at it, but in the 40s most of the electronic repairmen in Alabama were white and Nana-dear refused to let white people in the house. Daddy said that when his father stayed with them, which was most nights, they could not allow anyone white in the house. He was afraid that someone might recognize Nana-dear from the shop, see the boys and put two and two together. Which would not be a hard connection to make, seeing as how everyone said that the only two things the boys got from Nana-dear were her loose curled golden-brown hair and her high cheekbones. Both of them had still gray eyes and skin so white you would swear they came over on the Mayflower. So when the pipes busted or something in the kitchen needed fixing, Nana-dear would send all the way to Montgomery for her cousin, Uncle Bunkey to come on and fix it.

"Rather wait for the next time Bunkey comes," she would say whenever something needed attention around the house. Daddy's father had been long gone by the time that old Victrola broke but Nana-dear was still keeping his dark secret.

Through the tears gathering in the corners of my eyes, I began to look at the pictures Nana-dear had resting on top of the Victrola. Her favorite, which was in the

silver frame I got her last year for her 70th birthday, was in the center of the Victrola on top of an old lace doily. It was of Mildred and me sitting in Nana-dear's old vegetable garden just after Mama died. We were sitting Indian-style right in between the collards and tomatoes feasting on berries we had collected from a nearby tree. We both had berries smeared all over our faces and stains on our dresses. Nana-dear stood at the foot of the garden looking at us as Tante Claire ran into the house to get her camera.

I remembered how sad we were that day. It was just a few days after Mama's funeral and we were both wondering where she was. I was just four years old and Mildred was only nine. Although we had both been told that she was dead we had not yet really understood what "dead" meant.

"Mama's sickness done taken her away from us. She in heaven," daddy said in so many Wild Turkey-filled words. It sounded temporary. Her sickness took her a lot of places, most of which we had gone with her. We went with her to the hospital, to the Wednesday night health revival at the Mount Calvary, and even once to see Madame Duval the herb healer in Birmingham. When mama got real sick she stopped taking us with her and started leaving us with Nana-dear for days at a time.

That day, Nana-dear noticed that we were missing our mama and in an effort to cheer us up she told us to take off our shoes and go out back to pick berries, which was our favorite thing to do. In those days, climbing trees to pick berries was something boys did in Alabama, but we loved to do it, too. I'd sit on top of Mildred's shoulders and hand her the berries I'd pick from the highest branches. It was easy for us to get along back then. We were young and all we had was each other. There was nothing that could come between Mildred and me.

Law School and Empty Spaces

I could feel Mildred behind me. She placed her head in between my head and right shoulder.

"It's hard to let all of this go," she whispered into my ear running her hand along the top of the Victrola. "I can't imagine never seeing this old thing again," she added.

"And to imagine it hasn't worked in years. All its been doing is acting as a table for pictures and a cabinet for Nana-dear's old junk," I said forcing a smile at the thought of watching Nana-dear open the top of the Victrola to stash something in it.

"She was always hiding something in here. That's why we looked here first for the money," Mildred said trailing off toward the end of her sentence.

"Yeah she was... What money?" I disentangled myself from Mildred and turned to face her. "What money?" I asked again, following Mildred as she began to walk away from me and out of the front room. I grabbed her arm and she came swinging around to face me. Mildred pulled her arm from my grasp.

"Damn, Sylvia. That's why I didn't want to tell you. We didn't find it anyway"

"What goddamn money, Mildred?"

"Like two years ago Nana-dear started working again," Mildred muttered pulling a pack of Marlboros from her purse.

"Mildred, what the hell are you talking about? What working? Nana-dear stopped working at the tailor like three years ago," I said, not believing the words coming from Mildred's mouth. Nana-dear worked as a seamstress in the tailor down on Main Street for the past 33 years. She hated working there. She said the white people treated her like dirt and never really appreciated her work. Nana-dear had been designing

dresses and other clothes for people on the side for years yet they never allowed her to sell any of her clothes in the store and after 33 years of service she was still considered a "hired help." Sometimes she cried recalling the things she faced on Main Street. She once told me that she only got the job because she was so light and the other workers, all white, did not mind working beside her. Nana-dear said it hurt because not only did she know that her color got her job but that it also made it impossible for her to ever rise above it.

"After she left the tailor, things just were not adding up around the house. She could not pay the taxes and help you with school. That's what she told me the money was for--so she could send it to you for school," Mildred said.

"But I put myself through my last two years at Howard. There was no reason for her to be working? Daddy and Uncle Benny were supposed to pay the taxes on the house," I said.

"You know what, Sylvia? This is the problem. You don't know anything about her. That's what she told you. And had you bothered to ever come home from your big city life up north you'd know that she refused to take the money from them. She was so hurt that she could not help poor little Sylvia with her education that she started working as a maid for those evil ass white folks across town. She wanted to help you pay back the loans you took out for school so that you could continue and go to law school."

"Look, Mildred. I don't have time for the 'I hate Sylvia' speech shit right now. It just does not make sense. Why would she save money to send me to pay back loans? And if she did, where is the damn money?" I suspected that all of this was a big lie-- Mildred's way of trying to get out of cleaning the house.

"How am I supposed to know why? I never knew why she had to help you. If you were so damn smart why couldn't you put yourself through college in the first place? It doesn't matter now anyway. We couldn't find the money. She told me herself that she was hiding it someplace special so no one could get to it. Daddy and I searched the entire house. We even went to all of the banks to see if she had a secret account. There was nothing. No money," Mildred said despairingly.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" I asked.

"Tell you what, Sylvia? That my grandmother was saving money to send you money to pay off some school loans when I needed it to get the operation on my breast?" Mildred began to cry. She placed her hand over the left side of her chest where the breast had been removed when they found the cancer.

"What operation Mildred?" I asked.

"They got doctors in New York that's starting to try and fix what they did to my breast. To fix the scars and make my breast look better. Not like the hole that's here now," Mildred said with tears streaming down her face. "I told Nana-dear about the operation. That it was not a sure thing but that they was working on it and all I needed was to be in the right place at the right time with the right money for the operation," Mildred said cupping her face in her hands.

"What did she say, Mildred? About the money?"

"She said that the money was for you. It was for your education. For you to pay back the loans so you could go to law school. She said that I didn't have no business leaving Daddy to run off to New York and that there was no sense fixing what had already been fixed."

Mount Calvary

By 6 o'clock Mildred and I had wrapped and stored everything that we wanted, or knew someone else would want, in big boxes that Uncle Benny left for us in the backyard. It all seemed to go by so fast. In just four hours we had emptied the front room, living room, dining room, and kitchen. The only things that remained were furniture and some old jars of pig's feet and pickled eggs Nana-dear made last winter. No one in the family would want those things except for daddy, and Mildred did not want to have that smelly stuff in her kitchen.

"Whew Sylvia, its almost 7 o'clock. We better leave soon so I can cook supper before Daddy gets home," Mildred said wiping her brow and looking at the watch I sent her for Christmas last year.

"But I just want to finish up in here and start on the bedroom," I replied, upset that Mildred wanted to leave so soon when we had not even cleaned upstairs.

"Well I got like three hours before daddy will be home," she hissed, making it clear that she was ready to go.

"Why should he care what time we get back when he was the one who sent us to do this?" I quizzed

"I care," Mildred said. "What about you? Why do you care so much about us finishing? You're going back to DC tomorrow. Then as usual this will all be my problem," she added placing her hands on her hips—a clear indication that if I pushed her any further we would end up in one of our arguments.

"Okay, Mildred. We can leave soon. But I just wanted to do the bedroom before I leave. And if we finish in there it would be good because there would be less for you to

do when I leave." Mildred looked down at the watch again and then back at me frowning. Her almond eyes were as still as a statue's, with a sign of defeat in them that let me know that I was winning this battle. It was the same empty look they had when we argued over things as children. We'd argue over just about anything. From who would sit in the front seat of daddy's car on the way to Sunday school to who would have to clean up the kitchen after dinner. After an eye roll or a quick suck of her teeth, when Nana-dear was not looking, Mildred always gave in. She accepted defeat like a convict accepted a sentence to the chain gang. When we were young I always took it as my manipulating power over her as the baby. But recently I started noticing that I was not the only thing Mildred submitted to. It was most apparent when she called me to tell me about the breast cancer. I was in my college dorm room studying when I heard the phone ringing in the hallway. I thought it was odd--the floor phone ringing in the middle of the afternoon when most students were supposed to be in class. I thought to just let it ring, but after ten rings it was breaking my concentration so I decided to give Chaucer a break and answer it. When I picked up the receiver I did not say anything, hoping the person would just hang up. That's when I heard the voice.

"Sylvia? Sylvia?" the voice said.

"Mildred? That you?" I never got calls from anyone, unless it was Nana-dear calling to see that I was keeping up with my tuition.

"Yes, Sylvia. It's me. Listen Sylvia. The doctor says I have this breast cancer thing. Do you know about that?" she said flatly. My heart sank to the floor. Nana-dear had told me about the lump Mildred found in her breast weeks ago. I had forgotten all about it. I'd heard about breast cancer. I'd heard that it killed women. Older women.

White women. Not my sister. She was only 28 years old. I felt my head tensing up and saw tears gathering at the bottom of my eyes. Was Mildred going to die?

"Sylvia? Are you there? Did you hear me?" Mildred asked like she had not just told me something that was going to affect the rest of her life and mine. I could not believe the tone in her voice. Mildred sounded worse when the four little girls got killed in the bombing at Uncle Bunkey's church in Birmingham.

"Yes, I heard you Mildred. You okay?" I asked trying to conceal the fear in my voice.

"I'm fine. Just wanted to let you know before Nana-dear makes it her business to tell you. I am going into the hospital tomorrow. I'll let you know how things go when I get out," she said like she was going to get a flu shot.

"You want me to come home?" I asked.

"No Sylvia. You're in school. I'll call you and let you know," she said dryly.

I could not believe how she was reacting. I could not bring myself to return to Chaucer or attend any classes for the rest of the week and Mildred was acting like her cancer was some sort of unavoidable occurrence, another sentence she had been given and had to tend to.

In the next few months as Mildred went in and out of the hospital going through some new experimental therapy they were developing for the cancer and then the mastectomy I realized that the only person that was unmoved by my big sister's brush with death was her. It was like she did not care either way. She spoke of the chance of death as if it were an option and not a dreadful downfall of the condition. Like dying would be her final payment on a crime no one knew about.

Private Spaces, Public Problems

The door to Nana-dear's bedroom swung open before I had a chance to place my hand on the small copper knob to open it. The wind came racing in the windows and down the halls of 225 like an infuriated ghost, causing the heavy oak door to make a loud bang as it hit the wall inside of the room. Neither Mildred nor I flinched at the sound, as we were both used to this trick.

Standing at the threshold we peered inside the room as if there was a spaceship levitating in the center of the floor. Both of us had been running in and out of this room for most of our lives, but we had never been allowed to set foot in Nana-dear's bedroom without her personal permission or presence. There was something alluring about the idea of seeing her things without her there. Her bed, closet, vanity, dresser--all looked like little treasures to be explored to us when we were kids. Sometimes Mildred and I would actually try to sneak up here but Nana-dear always caught us. It was like she instinctively knew when we were in her things. Like they were a part of her in some way.

I watched anxiously as Mildred stepped into the room, leaving me alone in the hallway. She walked over to the window and pulled open Nana-dear's eggshell lace curtains. Mildred handled the curtains delicately as if she was stroking a baby's back. We both stared at the sunlight as it quickly fell on the window pane magnifying the dust particles that appeared to be dancing in its advent.

"That's strange! I don't know how that wind came through so fast with this window closed," Mildred said, cracking the window and turning back around to face me. "So this was your idea, Sylvia. Where do you want to start?"

A few hours ago in the car I did not know how to start--let alone where. I just did. It was like my body had been transported out of the car and into the house. I was just moving. It was how I had carried on for most of the day. In the living room, dining room, front room, and kitchen, I was walking around without direction, afraid really to confront reality. Walking around like a ghost--especially after Sylvia told me about the operation.

I looked over the small bedroom to find Nana-dear's things looking back at me. Her slippers next to the bed, her Bible on the nightstand, even her silk head wrap hanging from the headboard, they all seemed to be watching me, waiting for me to make a move.

"We'll I don't know, Mildred. We could start by cleaning out the closet," I said entering the room and walking over to the closet. I placed my hand on top of the crystal doorknob and let it slide through my fingers. When I was little I'd sit and stare at the knob for hours. I'd pretend that it was a real diamond and imagine what it would look like hanging from my ear when I became a big jazz singer. My fans would come from all over to hear me scat and they'd call me "the diamond." I'd wear my pretty earrings for every performance just like Billie Holiday wore that gardenia in her hair. I'd sing in the big jazz clubs up in New York like Smalls and Birdland. That was my dream until I told Nana-dear and she reminded me that I'd been kicked out of the church choir because I could not sing a lick and that I'd look silly with a big old doorknob hanging from my ear.

"Sylvia, you're going to be cleaning that closet forever. Nana-dear never threw anything away. That closet is full of over eighty years of clothes. I wouldn't be surprised if she still had some of her father's things in there," Mildred said wearily. "She

might have some of our stuff in there, too," she added walking over to the closet and standing beside me. "We need to just bag all of it and send it to the Salvation Army."

I looked into the closet, running my eyes across white sequins, brown wool, black silk, and pink tweed. Noticing suits and dresses Nana-dear had worn throughout the years. There was the dress she wore to my high school graduation; the suit she wore to Uncle Benny's wedding.... The shoes were all size five—even though we all knew she should have been wearing a 6 ½. All low pumps in colors only a "good Christian woman" would be seen wearing. Nana-dear always said that only a whore wore shoes in any colors other than black, brown, or white.

Neither Mildred nor I at 11/12 and 7/8 respectively would be able to fit a thing in the closet. Nana-dear's petite frame would prohibit that for sure. The only thing in the closet we'd have to go through was Nana-dear's hatboxes. We'd already decided to give the good ones to the women in the usher group at the church. Nana-dear loved her hat collection. Like most southern women her age she had a different hat to match every one of her church dresses. She had big round ones, small square ones, and even one with fruit hanging from the top. She wore a different one every Sunday and the women in the usher group would rave about them.

"Did you see Dear's hat this morning?" you'd hear them whispering as we all gathered after church in the rectory for supper. Sometimes I thought she wore the hats just to hear their "oh's," and "ah's." At Nana-dear's funeral Miss Ella, the head usher, asked about the hats. That's when we decided to give them to the ushers.

Cleaning Up

Just as Mildred and I finished placing the clothes into the large boxes that were to be sent to the Salvation Army I heard the booming sound of raindrops falling onto the tin roof over the front porch. Like it had when I was a child, the rain fell softly at first and then quickly became a thunderous storm with the tin roof amplifying the vibrations throughout the house.

"Whew! Can you close that window Mildred?" I asked taping up the last box. Seemingly unaffected by the tapping on the roof, Mildred moved slowly to close the window. I watched amazed as she pulled it closed without bothering to lock it—something I had become accustomed to doing at my place in DC.

"Do you remember watching Nana-dear get dressed when we were little?" Mildred asked, taking a seat at Nana-dear's antique vanity next to the window. "We'd lay across the bed and watch her fix her hair and put on make up," she added, turning around to look at herself in the oval shaped mirror attached to the gold-toned vanity.

"Yes," I replied, getting up to throw some unused newspaper into the garbage. "I'd sit there and watch her and wonder what I'd be like when I got older. How I'd wear my hair. And what shade of Chanel I would put on my lips," I added, sitting on the small bench next to Mildred and looking at myself in the mirror, too.

"Yeah. Me too." Mildred said looking from her own reflection to mine. "I thought about you, too. How beautiful you would be. I always wished I was as feminine and pretty as you," she added looking into my eyes in the mirror.

"Really Mildred? I never thought you felt that way. You were always leaving me and running around with those boys down at the park while I was trying to do make-up and other girly stuff. We were like night and day."

"Marlon and Buckey," Mildred chuckled.

"What?" I asked.

"The two boys I used to play with at the park," said Mildred looking back at herself in the mirror. I remembered her sneaking off most afternoons to Community Park to play with these two neighborhood boys that Nana-dear refused to allow either of us to play with. She said they were wild and nothing but trouble. But against Nana-dear's wishes, Mildred always went and played with them anyway.

"You know Buckey got killed in one those marches in Montgomery?" Mildred asked looking back at me.

"Daddy told me. He had a seizure from one of the police spraying him with water or something right?" I asked.

"Yeah. He was always having seizures," she said solemnly with her eyes misting over. "I was so sad when he died. We were all sad. We had all been working so hard at the marches with Dr. King and when Buckey died it was like we lost or something. He was so strong, Sylvia," she added sorrowfully as a tear rolled down her right cheek. "Mr. Miller, my supervisor at the catfish farm, told us all that he was not allowing anyone to go to the funeral of any 'troublemakers' and that he would fire anyone that went. But I couldn't miss his funeral. Marlon and Buckey were the only friends I had when we were little. I had to go."

"What happened, Mil?" I asked.

Mildred got up from the bench and said, "When I got to work the next day Mr. Miller came over to my workstation and said, 'I know where you were yesterday.' I was not even scared. Buckey wasn't scared when they turned that hose on him so why was I

going to be afraid of Mr. Miller?" Mildred picked up Nana-dear's silver hairbrush and held it out in front of her.

"I pointed my gilling knife at Mr. Miller's face," she said forcefully holding the brush out like it was the knife she used to clean the catfish at the farm. "And I said, 'I was sick!' in my meanest voice. We both knew I was lying but he ain't say a word to me after that and I did not lose my job." She burst out laughing. I jumped up from the bench and started laughing, too. We laughed so hard that Mildred fell to the floor and Nana-dear's brush went flying under the bed. Mildred sat up and I went over to the bed to reach underneath it to retrieve the brush. I couldn't feel anything for a second then I felt my hand rub up against a box of some kind.

"What's this?" I said poking my head underneath the bed to see what I was touching. It was a white box. I tried to pull it out with my hand but it would not give so I put my other hand under the bed too to get it out.

When I finally maneuvered the box from under the bed Mildred was sitting beside me on the floor.

"Open it up," Mildred said anxiously reaching over my shoulder and pulling the top off. I could not believe my eyes. All I could see was tangerine and satin, but I knew immediately that it was my prom dress.

"Wow!" I said. I had not seen the dress since the morning after I fell asleep waiting for Lemuel Baptiste on the front room couch. I grabbed the dress, jumped up from the floor, and ran over to the mirror to look at it. "I can't believe she kept it all these years," I said wondering why Nana-dear never told me she had it.

"Me neither," Mildred said. She got up from the floor and sitting on the bed. "Me neither," she repeated. "Well we should finish up in here Sylvia."

"What? Why are you rushing now? Aren't you happy to see this old dress?" I asked holding the dress in front of me and turning to look at Mildred.

"Sylvia if you want to live in the past, you live in the past," Mildred replied.

"What are you talking about, Mil? What's wrong with thinking about the past? About my prom?" I said not believing how remote Mildred had become so suddenly.

"Sylvia, that's what's been wrong with you all of these years. You look at the past the way you want to see it. This house and Nana-dear, it's all how you want to see it. But the truth is you never really saw her for who she was." Mildred said getting up from her seat on the bed.

"She was like a mother to us, Mildred. And I am tired of you acting like she was some kind of awful person. She loved us. That's what I remember. You sound like you are glad she's dead," I said fuming.

"Nana-dear never loved me. She loved you. My black ass was just along for the ride. She couldn't even love herself. She hated the tiny bit of black blood she had inside of her body and anyone who might come in between her getting rid of it in her family. That's the real reason why she treated Tante Claire the way she did, because she was black. That's why she hated Marlon and Buckey, too. Even Mama. And as long as I was my Mother's daughter, black like her, she hated me. I spent my whole life listening to her put me down because of it. Like I was going to ruin her perfect family being void of color. Why do you think she had that white man's kids? Surely she did not love him. He was another woman's husband! She just wanted daddy and Uncle Benny from him.

So she could have the perfect 'white' family and live up here in 225, the old 'Massa's' house. And with all of that Sylvia, I am not glad that she is dead either. But I am not sad. This is my chance to move on. My time to forget what that crazy woman did to me."

"She was not crazy. She may not have been perfect but she gave us all she had. You can at least respect her for that," I said angrily pointing my index finger at Mildred.

"You respect her Sylvia. I was always the one caring for her and cleaning this damn house. I was here all those years while you were off in DC. And what did I get? She'd always loved you more than me. You were the one she gave everything to. The one she would do anything for. You think I did not want to go out in the world and be somebody? I wanted to go to Spelman and be a teacher but she wouldn't let me leave. She wouldn't give me any money for college like she gave you. When I graduated from high school she said I should go on and get a factory job and let you be the one to go off to school. She said it would be easier for you and that I would just fail anyway, that I would be a waste like daddy. That woman suffocated every dream that man ever had because he had the balls to stand up to her by marrying Mama. And you want me to respect her? No. You respect her."

"Mildred I am sorry that you--,"

"Don't be sorry Sylvia, be happy that you have been blind all these years. That you don't know all the evil that woman has done to me, to all of us, to you."

"To me?" I asked. What had Nana-dear done to me? "What are you talking about Mildred?" I cried anxiously.

"Remember when you came running home your freshman year? You were crying your eyes out about how some guy got you pregnant at Howard. I took all of my savings and went with you to pay for the abortion." Mildred said like she was carefully adding up tiny pieces to a jigsaw puzzle.

"So what does that have to do with Nana-dear?" I asked trying to figure out where she was going with all of this.

"Do you remember what the doctor said at the hospital?" Mildred asked. "She said that you were at least five months pregnant. It seemed so strange to me Sylvia. You being five months pregnant by some guy at Howard when it was October and you had only been there for two months."

"Well maybe it was a mistake or something. What is your point? What does this have to do with Nana-dear?" I said.

"Don't play stupid with me Sylvia. We both know whose baby that was. The only man that came sniffing up underneath your skirt was Lemuel Baptiste. That was his baby." Mildred said grabbing my arms and shaking me.

I snatched my arms away and wrapped them tightly around the satin dress and started to cry. I did not want to remember that night. The night I lost my virginity to Lemuel Baptiste down at the lake, the night I got pregnant. It was just two days before the prom. I'd finally talked Nana-dear into allowing Lemuel to escort me. She was hell-bent on Philippe Saint Juste, a Creole I met at the church picnic, taking me but I would not have it. I had been dating Lemuel secretly for the past month and begged Nana-dear to let him take me to the prom. That night Lemuel and I headed to the lake to visit our usual make out spot and to celebrate before the prom. I don't know what came over me.

I had been to the lake so many times before, but that night it seemed especially romantic with the moon glowing on the water. Lemuel's eyes seemed to reflect every smooth wave that passed and his darkskin radiated against the shadow of the moon. That night he touched me so gently and for the first time he told me that he was in love with me. I savored every moment that passed, every kiss and touch we shared. When we made love I realized that I was in love with him too and that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. I did not realize I was pregnant until I got to college. I knew that I had to have an abortion. It was 1960 and I would have been a disgrace to my family if I had come home pregnant and unmarried. I did not see any sense telling Lemuel because he made his feeling clear when he stood me up for the prom.

"It was his baby," I cried sadly. "I wanted to keep it but I was too ashamed of myself. And Lemuel did not want me anyway," I said, wiping the tears that were falling from my eyes with the sleeve of the gown.

"Wrong, Sylvia. Nana-dear chased him away," Mildred said, looking right into my eyes.

"What are you talking about? She did not run him away. He stood me up. He did not want me," I replied.

"That's what you saw, Sylvia. That's what you wanted to see. We both know that Lemuel loved you," Mildred said intently. "A few days after you went back to DC after the abortion I stopped by the pool hall with Buckey looking for daddy. When we walked in Lemuel was sitting at the end of the bar. He was drunk and falling off of the barstool. When he saw Buckey and me he stumbled over and started cussing about Nana-

dear and how she ruined everything. Buckey was about to knock the mess out of him but I wanted to know what he was talking about."

"What did he say Mil?" I asked.

"He said that the night before the prom, the night after you two had sex, he came around to the house to ask Nana-dear if he could ask you for your hand in marriage. Lemuel said he knew he couldn't have you unless she approved. He said he sat right down in the front room and asked her if he could marry you. He told her that he loved you. Nana-dear just laughed at him and said you were too good to marry a 'black ass nigga' like him. That he would ruin your life. She told Lemuel that if he ever came around again that she would get the police after him. That she would say that she saw him stealing from the store on Main Street and have him sent to the chain gang. And that she would hang him herself if he came around to get you for the prom."

I stared into my sister's eyes wishing she would stop. Praying that she would take back every word she had just said.

"Do you expect me to believe this Mildred?" I said when Mildred finished. I felt hot and I could feel my heart pounding throughout my body.

"Actually Sylvia, I don't expect you to believe a word of this and that's why I never told you. But it's the truth. Nana-dear ran Lemuel away because she felt that he was not good enough--the father of your child. I have lived with that for too long and now you can. I am not living in your fake world anymore," Mildred cried.

"I don't believe you," I said looking down at the dress I was holding in my arms and feeling the anger growing inside of my body like a fireball about to erupt.

Mildred grabbed the prom dress out of my hands and held it up in front of me. "Don't believe me Sylvia. But I know that that bitch ruined daddy's life and she tried to ruin mine!" she screamed, and suddenly with all of the force I had in my body I slapped her across her face. I grabbed for the dress but Mildred would not let go. She was screaming like a possessed mad woman, saying that I needed to stop being blind. We struggled back and forth, then the dress gave way and I fell to the ground with it in my hands. I opened my eyes when I hit the floor and like a brisk fall breeze had just passed I could see hundreds of green leaves floating in the air above me. They began to fall and I caught one of the leaves and looked at it to find that it was a twenty-dollar bill. That's when I heard Mildred screaming. I sat up and looked over at her on the floor and realized that I didn't have the entire dress in my hand. It must have split right down the middle because Mildred had the other half in her lap.

"It's the money Sylvia!" Mildred said collecting the money that was falling everywhere. "It's the money!"

I started picking up twenty after twenty as they fell to the floor. Why? I thought. Why the dress? Then I remembered Nana-dear's last words to me at the hospital--"I'm sorry...Lemuel Baptiste."

"She was trying to tell me. Oh my God, Mildred that's what she was trying to tell me at the hospital. About the dress and Lemuel...that she was sorry," I said reaching up into the air to catch more of the bills.

By the time Mildred and I had finished counting the money, we realized that Nana-dear had saved well over two thousand dollars by sewing it into a small pouch in the back of the prom dress.

Mildred and I sat crying and cheering every time we reached another hundred or five hundred. It felt good to know that Nan-dear had been saving all of that money for me. However, I couldn't really feel happy about the money knowing that she had refused to give it to Mildred. With all of her faults I never thought Nana-dear could have been that cold. I followed her wherever she led me and never questioned her. Now I was left with the task of coming to terms with losing her and realizing who she really was. I could no longer ignore my relationships with daddy and Mildred. All we had was each other and together we had just begun to clean out 225.

CHAPTER 4
NOVEL IN PROGRESS

Stuck

You can see her through the grass; the tall grass so high it cuts into her elbows.
She is walking; her grey eyes set on the sun. She is walking fast; faster to somewhere;
anywhere it leads.

Lincoln & Grace Sitting in the Tree

Alabama, May 1979

"Yes, Mama we doing fine. It's just me and Lincoln and a few other fellas from the football team playing some cards in the basement.... No, I don't know why Miss Beulah would say she saw some girls walking in here.... No, Mama we ain't got no girls in here. I swear. It's graduation night. It's just me and the fellas having some fun.... Ok, I'll see you in the morning Mama. You and Daddy have fun out there in Birmingham.... Me too.... Yes, Mama I know you and Daddy proud of me.... Bye."

Bucca Ray hung up the phone and turned around. A group of sweaty seniors from Calm Water High School stood frozen behind him. All eyes were facing him, ready to run, and escape the secrecy of his parent's basement at any moment. Girls held tight to their mama's purses; boys tried to remember where they parked their daddy's cars. An air of excitement and fear wrapped around the entire group as they waited for Bucca Ray to say something. They were nervous, and for good reason, too. While they had all graduated high school, an accomplishment that made them free and virtually grown in the small town of Calm Water, nobody, not none of them, had a bit of business being in Bucca Ray's basement dancing so close beneath those red lights.

"Go on now Bunky, put that their music back on," Bucca Ray said, turning the lights back off. A hush went fell the room as everyone exhaled and turned back around to face their dance partners. "Everybody start dancing now. We having a party, right?"

Bucca Ray slid back into the crowd and wrapped his arms around his cheerleader girlfriend, Naomi.

"You scared us, Bucca. Now what your mother say?" Naomi pushed her thick black curls beneath Bucca Ray's chin.

"Oh Babydoll, its no nevermind to you. Just dance slow with me. I'm a man now." Bucca Ray wrapped his arms tight around Naomi's waist as Bunky, the designated DJ for the night, played "Let's Get it On," by Marvin Gaye. A few other shadows joined them on the small dance floor. By now the boys had talked the girls into forgetting all the things their mamas told them about parties like this. The girls had sweated out their dubbie wraps and their grandmother's pearls felt heavy on their sweaty necks. As they moved back and forth to the love music, legs went between thighs and hands pressed against wet backs. The air was so thick you could see it sitting high in the room, hovering around the red lights that lit up each corner.

Bucca Ray shook his head and grinned at his best friend Lincoln dancing beside him.

"Everything all right partner?" Lincoln said, looking back at him.

"Everything is fine that be fine my brother," Bucca Ray replied. He slapped Lincoln five in the air.

Lincoln smiled and turned his head back around to look at Grace. Her head was facing away from him on his shoulder but he could tell that her eyes were closed. He knew her so well. They'd been dating steady since the fifth grade. He pushed his lips into her damp hair and kissed her scalp.

"You alright , Babygirl?" he said, making small circles with his hand on her back. She liked that. She turned around to face him and there they were...her eyes, bright and grey looking up at him. Lincoln blinked and looked deep into them. He couldn't see

anyone else's eyes in the basement. But hers, like a bobcat's, danced and almost glowed in the dankness. He fell in love with Grace's eyes the first day he saw her sitting in the front pew at his father's church on Sunday morning. He stood in front of her playing the saxophone in the church band, praying that she wouldn't leave before he had a chance to say hello. They were just kids then, but Lincoln, the preacher's son, knew there was something special about Little Grace in the front row. Most people in the church thought she was strange, the black girl with the grey eyes. Who'd ever heard of such a thing? It was spooky. Neither one of her parent's had eyes like that. Grace's skin was the color of hot tar, darker than most people in the plantation-settled town. But her eyes were as clear as shards of ices, as grey as the sky after a storm.

"I'm just thinking is all," Grace said blinking. Her pink linen dress was tucked so tight in Lincoln's arms that she could barely breathe.

"What you thinking about now Grace?"

"What I'm gonna do. You know, now that I'm graduated I should do something else with my schooling." Grace felt Lincoln kiss her on the forehead.

"See that's just like my Babygirl. Now all these other girls in here thinking about getting married and having babies and you standing here in your man's arms thinking about school." Lincoln grinned. "Damn Babygirl. We just graduated this morning. Why you can't leave it alone for just five minutes?"

Grace smiled and put her head back on Lincoln's shoulder.

"Just five minutes Lincoln?" she said, humming along with Marvin.

"Yeah girl. Just five minutes." They both smiled. "Well maybe six or seven," Lincoln added laughing. "Shoot! Just long enough for me to get my dance." They both

laughed. "Actually I was hoping you was thinking." Lincoln paused. "Thinking about some of those things the other girls is." He closed his eyes. He waited so long to do this. He was one of the most handsome boys in all of Calm Water. Lincoln's skin was the color of Mary Jane's, and his hair was thick and curly like a newborn baby. He was the captain of the football team and was voted "Most Likely to Succeed" at the homecoming dance. All of the women in the town, old and young, adored him. "The preacher's son, The preacher's son," they'd whisper behind his back as he walked by in the supermarket or waved to them from his father's big black Cadillac. They all loved him. But he loved Grace. He loved Grace and he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her...in New York.

"Why would you want me to think like that," Grace said, playing with Lincoln's Adam's apple with her pinky.

"Cause I been."

"What? You been thinking about what Lincoln Johnson?" Grace lifted her head off of his chest. "Open your eyes and tell me," she said, staring at his closed eyes. She was afraid this might happen. Her Mama said it would. That morning as she curled Grace's hair in the kitchen she told Grace that if Lincoln was a "respectable Christian man" he'd ask her to marry him after graduation. "Ya'll is grown now. Ya'll gonna be married and he gonna preach down at the church," her mother said, rubbing Dax into Grace's scalp. *Marriage? Marriage?* Grace thought trying to be still. "But when you marry him you promise me you won't leave me Grace. You promise me you won't leave your mama here by herself. I already lost your brother to that wife of his. I can't lose you now," her mother said, staring off at the other side of the kitchen. "You promise me

you won't leave me Grace." She looked at Grace. Grace nodded her head and closed her eyes, agreeing with her mother. She wasn't sure if she wanted to marry Lincoln. While she loved Lincoln, adored him for every touch, every word he said to her, she wasn't sure about marriage. He was the only somebody other than her daddy that dared to love her, but she wasn't ready. She'd thought about it. Lying in her bed at night alone, she rubbed her stomach and wondered what it would be like to be Lincoln's bride. To marry the man everyone was surprised even dated her. To have his babies, to be his wife. It was a pretty picture in her mind. Filled with baby blue and pink, but in the center of the picture, in the center was Grace looking just like her mother. Cooking and feeding and sewing and cleaning and crying and praising God for it all. Grace turned over in her bed and cried for the weight of it all. She didn't want to be like her mother. She didn't know what else there was in the world she could be but she knew what she didn't want to be. And marrying Lincoln would mean just that.

"Tell me what you been thinking, Lincoln," Grace insisted. She stopped dancing and stood still in Lincoln's arms.

"I been thinking that maybe I should just go on and get out of here. Leave Calm Water," Lincoln said, staring into his own darkness with his eyes closed. He never told anyone his plan. A long time ago he decided that he wanted to leave the small town. He'd go up to New York and try to find work playing in one of the jazz clubs he'd heard about from bands passing through Calm Water. He could play the sax, carry the equipment, anything other than staying in Calm Water and preaching in his father's church.

"Leave Calm Water? Where you want to go?"

"I don't know, Babygirl. Maybe up North to New York or something. My Aunt Billie is up there. We could stay with her."

"We?"

"That's what I been trying to say." Lincoln opened his eyes. "I want you to come with me." He could feel Grace's body tightening in front of him.

"Go?" Grace's heart raced so fast she had to open her mouth to breath. She looked to her left and right as if she was learning some new secret, hearing strange news she was not supposed to. "Lincoln you never mentioned this. You never mentioned going anywhere. Not us." She could hear herself speaking. She could hear the anger in her voice. She wished she didn't sound that way. She wished she hadn't grabbed Lincoln's hand and squeezed it so tight. She wanted to leave Calm Water, she was just surprised that Lincoln felt the same way. He was the preacher's, the lead in the church band, he knew more Bible verses than Grace could ever hope to learn. She knew about his flaws--the rumors about his sneaking off to that old jazz club downtown, the drinking with Bucca Ray and the boys, but Lincoln never so much as whispered wanting to leave Calm Water to her. Not late at night in his daddy's car, not at her locker in the morning before class, not even the night they celebrated winning the state finals out by the river.

"I just ain't want to scare you, Grace. I know how much your family means to you, your Mama. I didn't think you would want to leave them. So I guess I figured I'd keep it a secret until I decided if it's exactly what I wanted to do." Lincoln wiped a tear from Grace's eye with his thumb. "Please say something Grace Ann. Please say something."

"Leave Calm Water?" Grace tilted her head to one side. "Leave." The words felt more real to her every time she said them. She'd been looking for something. A reason, a way to escape the one thing that she feared most and suddenly leaving seemed like the only way it would be possible. "My mama," Grace said, looking down at her pearls. "My mama." Lincoln was right, her mother wouldn't hear anything about her leaving Calm Water. She'd already planned Grace's entire life after graduation, got her a job sewing dresses downtown with her. How could she tell her she was leaving? She would curse Grace, read verses to her from John like she did to her brother when he left home.

"Grace it ain't about what she want," Lincoln said, looking into her eyes. "It ain't about what my daddy wants, either. This is about us. What we want. I know I can be somebody. I can make it up there. I can work and buy me my own house and be a better man for you. I ain't got to stay down here and live off of my father like I'm some damn boy. They got opportunity up there, Grace. They got people going to school and doing all kinds of stuff. This is 1979 and here we are in Calm Water living like it's the forties or something. Like we our parents. We can make it Grace. Now what you want?"

"I want to go Lincoln. I want to go with you," Grace said softly.

"Babygirl." Lincoln pulled Grace into his arms and held her tightly. "I love you," he whispered into her ear for the first time.

"I love you, too."

Sam, Lincoln's oldest cousin, sat in his truck in front of the little blue and white house on the Dupree farm. Lincoln asked his cousin if he and Grace could catch a ride with him the next time he drove up North for a delivery. Sam's Meat Packing and Delivery was posted on the side of the six wheeler. It was an old truck. It smelled of rotten meat, but it ran well and it was the cheapest way Lincoln could think of to get up to New York. He had little savings and his father refused to give him any money for the trip.

Grace stood on the side of the truck listening to the soft hum of the engine as her father put the last of her things in the back. She hummed along softly with the engine, fighting not to look up at the window where her mother stood reading verse after verse from the Bible.

"Just get in the car Gracie," Grace's father said, pushing the box into the truck. "You know your mama ain't right in her head sometimes. She don't understand this kind of thing." He looked up at the window and signaled for his wife to leave.

"I curse you. God curses you and your living in sin," Idella called from the window on the second floor of the house. Lincoln looked at his cousin who sat frozen behind the wheel of the truck and frowned.

"Just get in the car," Lincoln said, opening the door for Grace. They had been listening to Mrs. Dupree's curses, her condemnation for their departure for over an hour since they arrived to pick Grace up. "She's having one of her spells. Don't go inside," Mr. Dupree, said meeting the truck out front of the house.

"You got my blessing Gracie, that's all you need. Your mama ain't right. She don't know what she saying right now. She don't mean not a word of it." Grace's father

closed the hatch on the back of the truck. "You kids go on up North and make something of yourself. Go to school and be something. Ain't nothing down here but hard work. Years and years of hard work. I want more for you." Mr. Dupree held Grace's chin in his hands. Grace could feel the years of hard work from being on the farm on each of his fingers. They were calloused and hard. "I'm saving you Gracie. I don't want this for you." Grace saw a tear fall from her father's eye and seep into his mustache. It was the first time she'd ever seen her father cry.

"Talk to her for me Daddy," she said, holding her skirt as she climbed into the truck.

"I will."

"Don't come back. You hear me? Leave and don't come back. I ain't got no daughter," Idella shouted from the window. Grace could feel Lincoln's hand on her back.

"Let's go Grace," Lincoln said.

"You write me once ya'll get to New York. I'll come on and see you. Picture that, a country man in New York," Grace's father said, forcing a smile.

"I will Daddy." Grace smiled uneasily back at him. He closed the door and kissed Grace on the cheek.

"Don't worry Grace, just go," he whispered into her ear.

"I love you Daddy. You and mama. Tell her I love her. Tell her I will always love her."

Mr. Dupree nodded to Lincoln and the truck pulled off. In a cloud of pebbles and dirt Grace escaped her mother's house and everything she thought she did not want to be. She closed her eyes and sat in her own darkness.

1191 Bay Hill

Jamaica, NY 10023

August 17, 1979

Dearest Mama Idella,

How are you? I hope everything is fine with you and everyone by the time you get this letter. Me and Lincoln are fine. We got here to New York just three days ago. It is beautiful here. There are so many people, and so much to see. We're staying in this place called Queens Bridge with his aunt. She came up here from Birmingham. Lincoln has been looking for a band to play with in the city and I'm going to start at a community college in September. Can you believe that Mama? I'm going to college. Tell Daddy that his only daughter is gonna get a degree. Ain't that something? I know you wished I'd listened to you and stayed home with you and Jesse and started working, but Lincoln and me are making things nice up here. We gonna find us our own place right here in Queens and things will be ok.

How is my older brother doing anyway? I know he is driving Mabeline crazy. He always had a way of driving people crazy. Did he stop drinking yet? How is everybody at the church? Did the revival go well? I know Pastor Johnson was happy with whatever the usher board put together. I know I have so many questions Mama, but I just miss everybody so much. I even miss cooking and cleaning the house for you Mama. I'm happy here with Lincoln but sometimes I feel so sad and alone. Lincoln says I'm just homesick. He says maybe we can save up once he finds a band and ride a bus back home for Easter. Or maybe we could just catch a ride with his cousin Louie's trucking business on its next route like we did coming up here. Wouldn't that be nice? Well I'm gonna

stop writing now, but know that I ain't gonna stop loving you. I love you as any Christian daughter should and while I did not abide by your word like it say in the Bible, please know that I'm still your child. Please write me back now Mama. I know your writing ain't good and you real busy making those beautiful dresses for Miss Clara, but I just need to hear something from you Mama. I need some type of blessing. I never did get that from you. You know that song we sing in the choir at church? I think it's called Blessed Assurance. Well just like we sing in that song, this here, what me and Lincoln got going, is my story. It's my song Mama. And what I need from you is blessed assurance. I just need to know that it's OK from you. That's all that matters to me now. I pray that you did not mean the things you said to me before I left. We have had our differences Mama, but the thought of never speaking to you again breaks my heart. I hope you can forgive me someday.

I send love from me and Lincoln. Tell everyone back home that I'm thinking of them daily and praying for them every night in my bed. Tell Pastor Johnson that Lincoln will write him soon. He's still kinda mad about how things ended up. I love you Mama.

Your Daughter,

Grace Dupree

The Soundtrack

You sleep,
 Your eyes closed,
 Your chest heevin;
 Barely breathin'
 Strugglin',
 Snugglin',
 Up tight,
 A baby fist full of fight,
 Eyes ain't seein'
 Body ain't bein'
 Touched
 stuck
 Closed off from the world.
 No dreams for girls,
 Or boys,
 Or husbands,
 Or wives,
 Cause this be black people ghetto life
 Ghetto life,
 Ghetto life,
 Ghetto life
 Street life,
 Thug life,
 Hard life,
 My life,
 Black people love life
 Ride or die life
 Die long
 Hard
 Rough,
 Die tryin
 Die cryin
 Die with empty bellies
 Clutching cellies,
 Callin' on,
 Callin who?
 Callin you
 Callin you stuck,
 You stuck, you stuck, you stuck

Die stuck

Stuck in,
stuck out,
stuck on,
stuck up,
stuck, stuck, stuck, still stuck,
Mama stuck,
daddy stuck,
sister stuck,
brother stuck,
We all stuck,
400 years stuck,
400 tears stuck,
Jesus stuck,
Stuck in the church,
Stuck on the cross,
Can't breath stuck,
Can't leave stuck,
Hang from trees stuck
Blood stuck,
Love Stuck...

You wake up

Part I

Blessed Assurance

Another story begins in the ghetto.

Heat: The Children**New York, March 2002**

"Give me my mother-fucking money!" Malik said, pushing the tiny tree on the heel of his Timberland further into Selah's chest. Six feet tall, he stood over her coiled body, screaming about five dollars that mysteriously disappeared from his coat pocket the night before. "Tell me or I swear I'll kick your fucking heart out!" Hot sweat rolled down his forehead, burning his eyes. The heat made him angry. Mad.

"I already told you, Malik. I ain't got your money. Now get off me before Kessa hears your dumb ass," Selah said, struggling to breathe beneath the 235 pounds above her. Her ponytail had come undone and thick red dreadlocks fell angrily against the wooden floor where she lay. "I swear Malik, I ain't got it," she added, hopelessly grabbing at the boot.

"You a damn lie Selah! I know you got my shit," Malik said, bending down to look into Selah's eyes. *She thinks I'm stupid like one of her cornball ass boyfriends*, he thought, straining to see beyond the heat in his eyes.

Selah used to be able to beat him--get him in the full-nelson and send him crying to their mother. Two years older than Malik, she was always in charge when they were little. She ruled over him. She watched over him. But that was then, when they were younger. Now Malik was a grown man, a grown man full of life's disappointments and pipe dreams from the drug dealers on the corner. Selah's words meant nothing to him. Now, her tiny frame seemed so powerless beneath him. She could pay the bills, stock the refrigerator, and do the laundry, but on hot nights like this, he was in charge.

"I could call the police on you, Malik. I could have them lock your ass up like they did last time," Selah said, cautiously reaching for the old baseball bat she kept beneath her bed in case a crackhead came sneaking in her window one night.

"Who the fuck you gonna call the po-lice on?" Malik mumbled punching at the darkening spots on her arms. "Let them mother-fuckers come up in here! I'll kill all them bastards, and then kill your dumb ass for calling them to my house."

"This ain't your house, you fool. Mama left it to me and Kessa too," Selah cried as tears began to gather in the corners of her eyes. She looked at her baby brother searching for clues--wondering if it would work this time--saying their mama's name. It usually calmed him, made him remember, made him ashamed so he'd go away.

Malik jumped off Selah as if his mother had just walked into the room. He hated it when Selah brought her up—used her like some omnipotent judge over his every move. Their mother had been dead for four years. Her body was buried far away somewhere on Long Island. But Selah kept bringing her back, digging her body up whenever she wanted to control him.

Suddenly the thin walls of his mother's old house began to close in on him. Malik had to get out, get to the street, to the corner where he could breathe.

Loyalty

Saturday is a sacred day in Queens Bridge, NY. Void of Monday work or Sunday service, Saturday feels more like a holiday in the blue-collar community. On Saturday, the rising sun is met with smiling faces and secret prayers of thanks. Like any other people in any other community in America, they use it to clip coupons, cut lawns, fold clothes, and chat on the phone, but Saturday is different in QB. It means freedom, opportunity, and a chance to go and do whatever they want--however they please. In Queens Bridge, Saturday doesn't belong to the boss down at the job or the big boss up in the sky. It belongs to them. It reminds them that while they are stuck in QB, they can still dream and act like there is something else out there.

As the Saturday sun fought the darkness in the tiny window of Grace's old house on 161st street her oldest daughter Selah lay still in the bed wishing it was Monday. She wished it was 7:30 a.m. when she boarded the uptown train to Manhattan. She'd pass the crack heads on the corner, the old drunks in the alley, the welfare mamas, the dealers, the dropouts, the drive-bys, the lost, and the sadly found as she escaped for ten hours to the clean streets of the posh Upper West Side. She loved her job in the city. Not because of the pay or the benefits--she loved it because it gave her an excuse to leave Queens Bridge. She'd often contemplate sleeping through the weekend—leaving Malik and Kessa to fend for themselves. Selah dreamed of one day putting a "Do Not Disturb" sign on her door, and setting her alarm clock for Monday morning.

Buried beneath two pillows, Selah struggled to hold the phone to her ear. She didn't know why she bothered to pick it up...answer on the first ring. Why did she even

mention last night to Deena? It seemed so useless to talk about it. To make plans she'd never follow through. There was nothing to do--nothing she could do about it.

"You know you need to kick his ass out Selah," the red receiver said. "Really, just think about all the shit he's done to you and Kessa. He got to go!"

"I know Deena, but I just can't do that. I can't kick him out. He's my brother," Selah whispered, delivering her usual defense.

"No, he's a damn crack head is what he is, Selah," Deena said like it was cutting edge news.

For a moment Selah considered that maybe her best friend thought she didn't know her 19-year-old brother was a drug user. That she hadn't noticed the weight that seemed to melt off of his large body; the bittersweet smell of burning crack that told the story of addiction as it seeped from beneath his room door. Maybe Deena thought she wasn't smart enough to see the signs--the valuable things like their mother's old pearls and the silver that disappeared from the house.

"Don't you think I know that Deena? But you can't go throwing people out on the street cause they sick. My mama would be rolling over in her grave if I left him to the streets. Then what would that solve?" Selah began to breathe heavily into the phone.

"Not a damn thing! He'd just end up dead or in prison. I can't have that on my heart."

"Ok, you go and be a martyr." Deena could tell Selah was rolling her eyes.

"What the hell is a mar-ter?" Selah asked, rolling over in the bed.

Selah and Deena had been best friends since they met in first grade. They always attended the same schools and had the same teachers, but Deena seemed to be the smarter of the two. She got all A's and B's, and unlike Selah she never got in trouble. After they

both graduated from Cathedral High School, Deena left Selah and Queens Bridge behind to study at City University in Manhattan on a full scholarship.

Afraid she'd miss her mother, Selah didn't bother to apply, but she visited on weekends. She'd arrive at the dorm with her overnight bag, hoping that she'd somehow become a part of Deena's new life. She hoped that she'd meet new people, read new books, and learn new words. But it all stopped when her mother died. After the funeral was over, the guests had left, and the food was running out, Selah realized that she was stuck. A few months shy of eighteen, she'd have to take care of Malik and their five-year-old sister, Kessa. She'd have to pay the bills and play the mama.

It came easy to her at first. She didn't want her family to be broken apart. She got a receptionist job in the city and made sure Kessa washed behind her ears. It was easy--pay the bills on time, keep food in the refrigerator. Everything was okay until Malik got caught up with the drugs, Selah remembered.

"A martyr is someone who dies for their loyalty to God or something...something like that," Deena said, interrupting Selah's thought. "Anyway, you're like a martyr for Malik."

"Please, I ain't dying for nobody," Selah replied, feeling a familiar touch on her shoulder.

"Can I get ten dollars sis?" a voice asked from above her.

"I gotta go," Selah said, opening her eyes to see that the sun had fully risen outside the window.

"Okay guuurl, just remember that I love you. Okay?" Deena purred in her best sistergirl voice.

"What the hell you think I'ma give you ten dollars for, Malik? So you can go and smoke it up?" Selah said, placing the phone on the receiver. This is how Saturdays begin in the yellow and white house on 161st street--the early morning fight for five, ten, or fifteen dollars.

"Selah, it ain't even like that," Malik said sliding into the bed with Selah. He reached for the TV remote and turned to the Saturday morning cartoons. He let out a small giggle as a plump little pig negotiated with a farmer about not eating him for dinner. Selah looked over at him frowning in disbelief. *Grown ass man laid up watching cartoons on a Saturday morning.* With his head propped up against their mother's old headboard, Malik looked so innocent, happy, like he did when they were smaller. His sweet brown eyes glittered as he watched the soft colors on the screen. Selah remembered when they watched cartoons together in that very bed every Saturday morning when they were little. It was so long ago, but looking at Malik, it felt like yesterday.

"What you need it for Malik?"

"They taking applications at the old paper factory uptown, but it costs seven dollars to submit one," he replied without looking away from the television.

"So why you asking for ten?"

"Cause a nigga got to get there, right? Damn. Why you tripping? I mean I was just trying to do something," he said, getting up. "Fuck it," he added. "I'm going back to bed!"

"No...no. I'll give to you." Selah was happy to hear of his plans. She knew that the likelihood of them actually being true was next to nothing, but she reminded herself

that she had to have faith. Other folks had gotten their stuff together, so why couldn't Malik? She had to believe in him. He didn't have anyone else. "I'll put it on your dresser when I get up," Selah added remembering that she started stashing her purse deep in her closet a while ago.

105-05 139th St

Queens, NY 11392

February 21, 1980

Dearest Mama Idella,

God bless you Mama. I hope the Lord is watching over you and everyone as I pray each night in my bed. How are you feeling? Daddy told me last week when he was here that you had a spell that stopped you from coming up for the wedding. I hope you are feeling better by the time you receive these kind words. I sure am sad you missed the wedding. It was beautiful. We had it at a church around the corner from our new place in Queens Bridge. It was just me and Lincoln, Daddy, and Lincoln's aunt, but it was beautiful. The pastor from the church read from First Corinthians and we all sang Lift Him Up. Daddy said I looked beautiful in my dress and Lincoln must have agreed because he started crying as soon as I walked into the church.

Everything has been fine between us Mama. He found him a steady job working in a club in Harlem and now we moved out to our own house. It's nice. I can't believe this is all happening so fast to me Mama. Between taking care of Lincoln and taking care of the house I been so tired. I don't even know how the whole thing happened. Lincoln just came in all happy about his job and when he said marriage I said ok. By the time I was walking down the aisle it all felt like a dream. I felt like I was becoming someone else. Is that how you felt when you married daddy? Like you was leaving yourself?

I went to the college for the first week of classes but I had to stop because Lincoln said we ain't have the money. He said we got to get ahead with the house payments, but he said I could go back as soon as he gets a contract with the club. I sure hope he does

soon because I want to go. Even though I am married now, I can still go to college. A lot of women do that here. Until then I might look for some work taking in laundry or sewing.

I sure hope we can get the money. College is so different from high school Mama. Everybody just sits there, so smart and thinking so hard you can almost see it in the air. And they black too Mama. Black people from everywhere just educating themselves. One girl in my class, her name is Shirley, she says she wants be a lawyer. Ain't that something Mama? Ain't no black lawyers in Calm Water. And a woman?

I feel so important in school Mama. Everybody be asking me questions. They wanna know what I think, how I feel about this and that. And they don't laugh Mama. They don't look at my eyes and they don't call me blackie like Jesse used to. I got to go back to school as soon as I can. I think a part of me will die if I don't. I'm trying to explain that to Lincoln but he ain't never here now that he's working at the club. Between his practicing and playing we see just a little bit of each other. But he says its gonna change when he get his contract. Everything is going to change then.

I still haven't heard anything from you. I know you sick but I miss you. Lincoln is trying to get us a phone soon. Maybe I can call by Ms. Tassie's house one day when you over there. I would love to hear your voice. It's weird, the things you miss when you're away from home. I miss hearing everything. The crickets outside my room window, the sound of your usher shoes down the hallway on Sunday morning, Daddy's truck pulling up in the driveway. Lincoln's voice is the only thing I know for sure here.

Mama please write to me soon. I am sending some pretty paper I found in the store for you to write on, and a few stamps in case Daddy don't take you to the post

office. Please use them. It would mean great joy to me and Lincoln to see a letter from you in the mailbox.

I'm so sad to close this letter now Mama. My words are my comfort while we are apart. I miss you and hope to speak to you soon. Send my love to everyone. Tell Daddy we loved having him up here.

Your Daughter,

Mrs. Lincoln Johnson

Farewell

"Not today... don't be late today," Selah said, looking down Rockaway Boulevard for Kessa's school bus. Consistently late, the 7 a.m. bus to P.S. 113 almost never arrived before 7:15 a.m. Dressed in her favorite navy blue pantsuit, Selah searched frantically, saying a small prayer to herself that the bus would arrive soon so she wouldn't be late for work. She hated walking in late and didn't want to miss her Monday morning appointment with the new supervisor, Tamara Maxwell. Excited about meeting Aaron and Webster's new, African-American Vice-President, Selah was determined to make a good impression on Tamara. She carefully ironed her suit on the bed that morning, so she could look professional for the special meeting. While Selah was only a receptionist at Aaron and Webster, she had plans.

As she carefully creased her pants, she hoped that the new sister would give her some opportunities her old boss wouldn't. Perhaps as they got to know each other, she might even give Selah a promotion to assistant (even though she didn't have the required associate's degree). Ever since she started working at the company she saw other people, with the same education as her, somehow get special promotions.

"Long time coming," Selah said, as the little cheese bus appeared in the race of rush-hour traffic. "Okay Kessa, I'll see you later," she added, as it pulled tight to the corner in front of them. Vaseline-rubbed faces raced by Selah's knees in quick commotion as Mr. Cooper eased the old rusty door open. Selah looked up at the old man--the same one who had picked her up everyday when she was a little girl--and smiled, "Mornin' Mr. Cooper," as she'd heard her mother say so many times.

The handsome, coal-black man whose face was once the talk of many morning mamas' conversations was now swallowed up by an unruly mass of nappy gray.

"Malik will be here to pick you up after school like always. Ok?" she said, looking back down at Kessa, who had eased her tiny matchstick fingers from her grasp. "And if he's late like last time, just wait, he'll get here. I don't want you walking home alone."

"Ok Mommy," Kessa replied, melting into the sea of brown sugar faces.

"Kisses Kessa." Selah tried to keep track of her baby sister's lime green jacket in the giggling waves.

"Kisses mommy."

Selah stood sadly with the other mothers as the bus pulled away. Kessa was already six and in the first grade, but Selah felt an empty strangeness everyday as she watched the back of the bus disappear down Rockaway. Each day, as she headed in the opposite direction to catch her 8 a.m. train to Manhattan, Selah would wonder if Kessa was okay; if the kids were still making fun of her because of her old tennis shoes; if she had stopped hiding behind the chipped red monkey bars on the school yard during lunch time.

"How long that chile been calling you Mommy?" a voice asked from behind her.

"Hi, Ms. Ella." Selah turned to see Ms. Ella Jackson sitting on the whitewashed steps behind the bus stop. For as long as Selah could remember the petite woman with the long salt-and-pepper hair sat in front of her little white house on the corner of 161st street to watch the kids get on and off of the school bus. While no one recalled Ella Jackson ever having children of her own, she had become useful in informing unknowing

mothers of their rowdy children's behavior on the corner each day. She was a reliable source for who started what fight, who stole candy from the store across the street, and who sneaked away from the bus stop to play hooky.

"How long?" the old woman asked, looking into Selah's eyes.

"Excuse me?"

"Chile, I been learnin' you since you was in your mama's belly. You tell me how long that baby been calling you Mommy!" she added without taking a breath or unlocking her wise sea-foam eyes from Selah's.

"I don't know Ms. Jackson. I mean-" Selah paused. "She just does it sometimes."

"Sometimes? Did you birth her sometimes? Cause your mama, far's I know, the only rightful person that can claim to that. I was there for all three of you...you, Malik, and that baby," Ms. Jackson said, counting each of Grace's three children on her sun-speckled fingers.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I know what you are getting at, but it's not like that. I already spoke to her school counselor, and she said it's okay. She said Kessa is just expressing her need to have a mother figure."

"Precious, I hope you convincing yourself with that, cause it sho wasn't meant for Ella Jackson to learn on. You tell me Selah, what the fish those white folks up at that school know about that chile and her needs? I'll tell you what she needs. She needs you to stop acting like you her mama. Her mama's been dead and buried for four years now, bless her soul, and you fools got her youngest baby carrying on like she off somewhere shopping."

"Ms. Ella, she just six. She don't understand death yet," Selah said, remembering her meeting with Ms. Nealy, the school psychologist.

"Jesus read scripture at seven. Don't you tell me what she can or can't understand."

"Ma'am I need to go. I'm going to miss my train," Selah replied, remembering Ms. Ella's age and what her mother would have done to her had she said what she really wanted to.

"Go on and get your train, but you mark my words. That baby needs to know about her real mama." She paused. "And your brother too. That boy is lost something bad. I seen him yesterday, waiting for the school bus with Kessa. He on that stuff, ain't he? "

"Ms. Ella, I have to go now," Selah said, averting her eyes. Miss Ella already knew what was happening with Malik. Everyone on the block knew he was using drugs, but Selah just couldn't bring herself to admit it out loud to the old woman, or anyone else. Deep down inside Selah feared that actually saying the words, hearing them fall from her mouth, would force her to admit to herself that she had failed. It would be a striking blow that would surely send the delicate home Selah had created for herself and her siblings crashing down.

"I have to go and get my train." Selah looked down at her watch.

"You go on and go. And maybe I'll see you in church this Sunday... you and that Deena Robinson. Perhaps you two could rush for the Lord's train sometime, too."

"Bye Ms. Ella."

Opportunities

"Hello, Ms. Maxell. I'm here for my appointment," Selah said, standing in the doorway of Tamara Maxwell's corner office.

"Come in and have a seat. Please, call me Tamara," she replied, stressing each syllable in her name.

"Thank you." Selah walked towards Tamara's huge ivory desk. She sat down in the cozy, white leather seat that sat in front of it. Her eyes danced around the office focusing on Tamara's degrees from NYU and Cornell, the picture of one of the company's founders, Walt Webster, on the desk, the huge assortment of white lilies in the corner....

"My fiancé sent those. Aren't they just lovely?"

"Yes Tamara. They are real pretty," Selah said, remembering that she had only seen flowers like those at funerals.

"Selah, I called you in to tell you about some changes that are going to take place at Aaron and Webster." Tamara sat down behind the desk.

"Is there anything I need to be concerned about?" Selah asked, sliding a pen from her notepad.

"I don't know how else to say this to you, but...well, you know that the numbers weren't so good last year. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, Selah were going to have to let some people go in order to break even this year. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. But what do you need me to do?" Selah said, ready to write down what plans the sister, Tamara, had for her.

"Selah, we're going to have to let you go."

"Me? Let me go? But...what are you...saying?"

"We're laying you off. Actually, we're letting most of the reception staff go."

"What. How could you do that? I mean, I answer the phones, I do the filing."

Selah felt sharp pains in her gut. She didn't have any money in the bank, and she had been living from paycheck to paycheck ever since her mother's insurance money ran out.

"I was here until 7 o'clock every night last week, Ms. Maxwell. I bust my ass around here and you're firing me?"

"No, it's not me. The company just thought that it would be better if we used a temporary staffing service."

"Staffing service? You're gonna replace us with temps?" Selah asked, getting up from her seat.

"That's the plan. We'd only have to pay them \$5.50 an hour; less than half of what we are paying you all. It just makes better business sense," Tamara replied flatly.

Selah grew angry as Tamara's yellow face disappeared inside the hot tears that gathered in her eyes. She couldn't swallow...couldn't breathe...she needed air.

"I can't believe this. I work hard. I work real hard here. You know it yourself. I sit here every night until everyone leaves. I'm the first one here in the morning. Doesn't that mean anything?" she said, searching for compassion in Tamara's face.

"Look Selah, it's not that bad. I mean you could go down and enroll at the temp office. I would put a word in, and you might be placed here anyway."

"Temp office? They ain't got no benefits! I need my benefits for my family. I can't do that."

"Well then why don't you just go back to school or something? Get a degree."

Tamara noticed Shelia, her next appointment, waiting in the hallway.

"School? I work. That's what I do. You should understand that. I mean you may have those degrees on the wall, but I work just as hard as you and sometimes harder," Selah said, slamming her little pink pad on the desk.

"But I'm not getting laid off, sweetie."

"You know what? Fuck you. Fuck you, Tamara. Is there anything else those fucking crackers sent your Tom ass to tell me, sister?"

"I'm sorry you are acting like this, Selah."

"No bitch, you're just sorry," Selah said, with the door, the pin, the little pink pad, Tamara, and her sad white lilies behind her.

Malik's Sirens

Violently wrapped up in faded He-man sheets, Malik eyed the crisp ten-dollar bill on the dresser in front of him and reminded himself of his plans. Like a basketball coach whose job depended on victory, he carefully devised a strategy and coached himself along. He was to get up, pick out his clothes, shower, dress, and leave the house so he could get the 8:30am train uptown to see about the factory job. He'd have to take the long way to the train so he could avoid the corner and his fast friends. It was a simple plan, but he knew that he had to stick to it in order for it to work.

"I can do this... I can do this," Malik's ashy lips reassured the dry empty space in the little blue room. While he was two months short of 19, the intricately decorated model airplanes and wrinkled posters of Run DMC and Public Enemy slapped up on the walls gave the false impression that the room was still the sanctuary of a growing boy. Turning around on the small bed in the corner of the room, Malik pushed his twelve-inch feet from beneath the mess. A quick sigh of relief and consciousness followed as he attempted to unravel himself. Like a newborn baby, Malik emerged from the sheets head first. A thick crown of curly blue-black hair framed a chiseled face that could have been mistaken for a Greek God had it not been for his deep brown eyes and dark skin.

Placing his feet on the thinning carpet, Malik continued to insist upon the fate of his words. He could do it--as he had explained to Selah, he could get up and start his new life. He did not need to go away for six months to rehab like his friend Charlie. He was a man, and all he needed was a chance--a job, so he could get some money and help out around the house.

Pulling the door open, he stood in front of the closet staring at the naked hangers whose clothes laid crumpled and confused on the floor, and thought to take a few minutes to clean up the mess. His older sister would be happy if he cleaned it, he thought, wondering which shirts went with which hangers. Then she would know that he was trying too. Selah would know that he was going to make it work this time.

"It'll only take a little while," Malik reasoned, looking at the red numbers on the beat-up clock next to his bed.

"7:35," he said, thinking that he could spare ten minutes and still have time to leave the house early enough to see about the job. Malik decided that he could hustle and pick up all of the shirts and arrange them neatly on the hangers in color order--as his mother had taught him.

"It makes it easier to find something in the morning," his mother used to say, standing in the closet as he cleaned up the mess. He'd stand behind her pulling deep breaths of the strange fruity scent of Afro Sheen that faithfully clung to each coarse strand of her short Afro.

Malik picked up a wrinkled, acid washed jean jacket with his right thumb and index finger. He pulled it to his nose to see if it would be better placed in the laundry bag on the door behind him. Ever since he was a young boy he had a bad habit of mixing clean clothes with dirty ones. The behavior, which left undesirable odors on his church clothes, was often the cause of many Sunday morning spankings.

With one smooth draw into his nostrils the hypnotizing sweet smell of burning crack shot through his body like contracting floodwater. It seeped into every cell, crack, and empty atom of his being, leaving his entire body in an odd trance of hunger and

erotic desire. Malik began to shake uncontrollably, and like the sailors enticed by sirens in the books he'd read at the city library, he wanted nothing but to answer to the call of the thing he desired most. He believed it all--the myth of men throwing their own bodies off of ships at a chance of dancing with the sea. It was no farce to him. He understood longing and the need to feel that which fills up the emptiness.

Malik felt the green eyes on the ten-dollar bill on the dresser staring willfully at him, and knew what he had to do. Like attending Sunday service, it was a ritual that he had become accustomed to. It was the only way off of the ship. It was the only way he could seep into the numbing waters.

Standing in front of the closet, he put on the defiled jacket, some old jogging pants, and his Timberland boots, and turned to pick up the money. Stashing it into his pocket, Malik forgot every reason he got out of bed that morning. Instead, he fell into the hallway in front of the little blue room, raced roughly through the house, knocking over old picture frames and cheap black figurines, and escaped into the morning streets of Queens Bridge.

The Big Red House

While the streets were silent and the cars from the morning rush hour had come to a slow crawl, Malik knew just where he could go to find what he needed. Just three short corners from his block sat a big red house where he used to play basketball when he was little. Along with the other neighborhood boys, he chose to play at the red house because the two boys who lived there, Dante and his older brother Jayon, always had the best toys. They had a basketball hoop hung directly in front of their house, and they had all of the Atari games the boys liked.

As the boys grew up and innocent ears became privy to adult concerns, Malik learned from his mother, who warned him not to hang out at the house, that Jayon was a known drug dealer. Malik neglected to adhere to his mother's demands; he learned himself, after smoking his first joint in the basement of the house with Dante that the house was good for more than just playing in.

Malik tapped softly at the dirty window. Hoping to avoid the noisy crowds on the boulevard, he wondered if Dante was even home. While Malik knew that Dante didn't have a job, it was not unusual for the eighteen-year-old to disappear for weeks at a time. Malik imagined that he was off in jail or in Maryland refilling his brother's drug supply. Malik often imagined what his life would be like if he were Dante, if he'd had his life and his opportunities. Malik would imagine himself rolling around the neighborhood in Dante's pearl 2002 Lexus Coupe as he bought nice things for his sisters... and his mother.

Malik's light tap turned into a hammering fist as he grew more anxious. While he could see both Dante's car and motorcycle peeking out from behind the house, he grew

convinced that Dante was not home. Just as he turned to escape the side of the newly painted house a face appeared before him.

"What the fuck?" Dante roared, as he forced the window open. Half sleep and dressed in a crisp wife beater and boxers; he looked down at his platinum Rolex as if it was broken. "Nigga, I know it ain't no damn 8:30 in the fucking morning. What the fuck is you doing here? Rollin' up on a playa like you 5-fuckin-0!"

"Hey D," Malik said, holding the ten-dollar bill up in Dante's face so he could see that he had money.

Slapping his hand down, Dante rolled his eyes and stuck his head out of the window to look around the corner.

"Nigga, ain't I tell you to stop coming around here this damn early?"

"I...I know, but you know I don't be like to go up to Linden. They don't be hooking me up," Malik replied, attempting to impress Dante.

"Nigga, you's a crackhead. How the fuck you think you got a choice? Oh." He paused. "I see. Now you think I'm supposed to be hookin' yo punk ass up all the time? Nigga answer me? Yeah that's what you think."

Malik he could see a slim brown body moving around in the bed behind Dante. Watching it slide from underneath the black satin sheets, he could see that it was a woman. Dressed in a see-through, red nightgown with black flowers all over it, the woman, whose honey brown hair gently framed her face, was walking in his direction. As shadows became figures and the body moved closer to the window frame, Malik realized that the woman in the red nightgown was his old love, Simone Thompson. The two had broken up in high school just after his mother died, and he'd gotten the young

girl pregnant. A sophomore, Malik thought he was too young to be a father, and too broke to pay for an abortion. He decided to write Simone a note:

*You a nasty bitch and I know that baby ain't mines so
don't be tellin people that. And don't call my
house either.*

He stuffed it into her locker. He felt bad. He loved Simone, but didn't know what else to do.

"Dante, who out there?" Simone said, cupping her arms around Dante's waist so she could see out of the window.

"Bitch, go back to sleep and mind yo' business," Dante said, almost pushing her to the floor. He looked back at the girl like she was crazy, making sure she obeyed and returned to the bed. "Fuckin bitches. You know how they act!"

"Dante I... I just wanted to know if you got somethin' for me?" Malik begged, remembering his bummy attire. He wondered if Simone had seen him--if she could see him anymore. While he'd heard that she lost the baby after they broke up, he knew she still hated him, and with her new life, and new clothes he felt invisible to her stare.

"Yeah Nigga, you know I got that shit," Dante replied, interrupting Malik's gaze as he pushed his platinum clad hand into his sock. "Here," Dante said, methodically placing the little overstuffed vile of crack in Malik's right-hand while taking the ten dollar bill from his left. It was a move that he learned from his older brother.

"Don't let none of these mother fuckers run off with yo' shit," Jayon explained to Dante one night after he mistakenly placed a nickel bag of weed into a customer's hand before taking his money. The boy, just eleven-years-old, stood before the two holding

the five-dollar bill as Jayon taught his baby brother how to make the switch without losing his money or getting caught by police. While it had occurred to him that he could have run off--as Dante had already placed the bag in his hand--after eleven years on the block he'd already learned better than to run off with Jayon's stuff. The dealer, who single-handedly ran Linden Boulevard from 139th street to 150th street, was known for placing bullets into the backs of anyone who attempted to steal from him.

"Thanks," Malik said, pushing the plastic vile into his pocket.

"No *good* looking, mother-fucker! Don't bring yo' stinkin ass around here this early in the morning no more." Dante looked out of the window. "My neighbors sweating me."

"Aight. One." Malik put his hand up to the screen to say goodbye to his old friend.

"Please, Nigga, I ain't bout to dap yo stanky ass hand. Holla." Dante closed the window and turned his back.

Deena's Hustle

*Fighting for life,
My nigga's makin' it right,
My nigga's struggle everyday to see the god dam light.
I can't take it no more,
I throw myself on the floor,
I feel this pain so fuckin' hard, it makes my body feel sore.*

-MC Ras

Ras's *Get Free* wrestled and hummed through the three-inch speakers nailed to the wall above Deena's bed. The bold hip hop lyrics ricocheted back and forth off of the cinder block walls like bullets, sending deafening vibrations throughout the fifteen floor dorm on the corner of 110th and St. Nicholas.

A senior, Deena received numerous complaints from both residents and staff about her "loud rap music." From all over the dorm, students banged on walls with pots and high-heeled shoes in protest of her music choice and nerve to listen to it quite so loudly. Half in spite, and half because she loved it so much, Deena continued to play the rap music as loud as she liked--often leaving her door open so the lyrics could escape the room and roam the halls freely.

"It's all the ghetto I got up in here," Deena once said, defending her daily broadcast to the resident assistant. Homesick and starving for her grandmother's cooking, she explained that the lyrics alone reminded her of the streets she grew up on in Queens Bridge. Deena explained that the music the other residents found so "disturbing"

was the only way she was going to survive at City University. "Music is how my people get by," Deena said, remembering her grandmother singing *Precious Lord* and *Speak To Me Jesus* in the kitchen each morning as she fixed breakfast. As the resident assistant exited Deena's room, leaving a small write-up on her night stand, Deena, then a freshmen, couldn't understand why anyone was complaining when the other students played Marilyn Manson and Stone Temple Pilots as loud as they pleased. She crumpled the little pink slip up and threw it into the trash.

"All I need is one mic," Deena sang along with Nas as she walked to the door to answer a knock that disturbed her morning concert. "I know one of these motherfuckers ain't got the nerve to come to my door," she snarled, easing the thin tin sheet from over the peephole. A wave of thick red dread locks flooded the frame of the tiny glass circle. With the flick of Selah's right hand the mass parted like the Red Sea exposing Selah's distorted face to Deena.

"Open up, bitch. I hear you breathing," Selah said, moving closer to the peephole.

"Girl, Jodeci must be getting back together." Deena giggled.

"Shut up and open the door."

"I'm serious. You coming around here is like The Commodores getting back together. You know I don't get any company here. Wait. Ain't you supposed to be at-"

"Don't even ask," Selah interrupted. She eased into the tiny dorm room. Deena was correct, Selah rarely visited the dorm, but it was the only place she could bear to go after wandering the streets near her job for nearly two hours.

"Dang girl. Shit is that bad?"

"Please I am far from bad--my shit is tragic!"

"Sit down and tell me all about it." Deena moved some dirty clothes from her desk so Selah could sit down. Balling the pieces of clothing together, Deena simply bent over and stuffed them under the bed. Most of the coeds complained about the small living quarters at Higgins Hall, but Deena loved living in the little singles.

"I get my own room and a bathroom?" she asked the morning she moved into the aging concrete building her sophomore year. To Deena the space was huge because it was hers and hers alone. Ever since she was little, Deena had to sleep with her mother in her grandmother's one bedroom apartment. In the project apartment, Deena rarely had time alone, other than washing up in the bathroom in the morning.

"Why ain't you in school?" asked Selah, reaching over to turn the blaring music down.

"I got class in an hour. Don't sweat me hoe."

"Oh," Selah said.

"Anyway, what's up girl?"

"Nothing. I just lost my job. They fired me. That's it." Selah looked down at her hands and exhaled.

"Oh that's some ol' bullshit. Why they let you go?"

"I don't know girl. Some bullshit about money. All I care about is that they did fire my ass. And worse they sent a sister to do it!"

"Oh hell no. Did you stab the bitch? Get some of her blood under your nails?" Deena jumped off the bed.

"Hell no. You so crazy. I can't go stabbing people. Then I won't ever get another job."

"Well where the bitch live? We can go jump her ass right now!"

"Shut up, silly!" Selah giggled, as she watched her friend pretend to box with Tamara.

"Nah for real! I'll call Pookie and Lil' Ray and we'll roll up on a bitch. You know how we do!" Deena picked up her cell phone.

"You so damn silly, Deena. That's why I'm here. I know I can depend on you to make me smile."

"Girl, things ain't that bad. You just lost your job is all."

"Deena, it's not just the job. It's everything. My family, the damn house, the bills...it's just everything. Sometimes I feel like I'm suffocating. I wish I could just come and live here in the dorm and just go to school like you. And...what the fuck is this?" Selah picked up a thick black book that sat on the desk beside her.

"Oh, that's *The Mis-education of the Negro* by...umm Carter G. Woodson." Deena scratched her head as if she was being quizzed. "We're reading it in my black identity class."

"This shit is big. It looks like a Bible," Selah said leafing through the silky white pages.

"For some people it is like a Bible. This one guy in my class says he doesn't do anything without reading a passage in it first. I mean, it's cool. I don't know about all that, but it's a tight book. It has some real shit in it about black folks and the ghetto. You know the stupid shit we do on a daily basis." Deena paused and looked at her friend.

"Selah, what are you going to do? I mean you can always get another job but what about the long run?"

"What do you mean in the 'long run'?"

"I mean why don't you go back to school or something?" Deena asked.

"School? When? I got bills to pay. Shit, I have to take care of Kessa and Malik's grown ass. I can't go back to school!"

"You can go at night. Iyanla Vanzant did that, and she had like three kids. Plus, I can help with Kessa, and some bills when I graduate in May."

"Who?"

"Just forget it."

"Girl, that's real nice. But school is for you, not for me. I'm not smart enough, anyway," Selah said, easing the book back onto the desk.

"Please, school ain't got nothing to do with brains. It's about that paper and that damn hustle. Don't let these folks fool you. School is just like a big ass ghetto. I figured that out my first week here when I tried to register for class and found out my so-called full scholarship included a two thousand dollar family contribution."

"What's that?"

Deena looked out of the little window next to her bed.

"It means that my broke ass mother was supposed to come up with two thousand dollars so I could register for school."

"But I thought you got the scholarship because you're poor."

"That's what I thought until some fat bitch at the registration office told me different. 'Ms. Robinson,' she said, looking at me like I was a doughnut or something. 'You are aware that it costs thirty thousand dollars a year to attend City University. Surely you don't think it's unreasonable for your family to pay two thousand dollars of

that?" Deena wiped a tear from her eye. "I just sat there crying, trying to explain my situation to her but it was like she couldn't even see me. She kept typing on her little computer, and then she turned to me and said, 'Sorry, Ms. Robinson, but I can't help you. You have forty-eight hours to get the money or you simply can't register.'"

"What did you do? Is that when you started dancing?" Selah averted her eyes. She'd never asked her friend about her dancing.

"Nah, I started hustling--selling oils, tee-shirts, and shit with Muhammad in Harlem. There wasn't nothing else for me to do. See, these other kids here can go and call their mommies and daddies for money, but I ain't got that. All I have is me and all the shit I learned growing up in QB. I didn't start dancing until a while after that. Please!" Deena gasped at her reflection on the window. "These white girls put me on to that. I was walking around here all broke and hungry. I ain't even have subway fare to go home to see my mother," she explained, walking into the small kitchen she shared with her suitemates. "You want some eggs?" she asked Selah. "That's when Alexa, you remember that white girl I used to live with my freshmen year? The one with all the fly clothes? Well, she asked me if I wanted to make some extra money dancing with her. At first I was like 'hell no' but after she explained how she made over a hundred dollars and tips every time she danced at the tittie bar in midtown, I was down. I mean that was definitely gonna be enough to keep me full and off the streets. Plus, I figured that if I didn't like it, I just wouldn't go back." Deena cracked the cold eggs into the frying pan on the two-eye stove. "Anyway, when we got there like all of the girls in the joint were from my damn dorm. All of the dancers were college students! It was crazy. I just got

toasted, put on some of Alexa's hooker clothes and shook my titties for those old ass fat white men."

"Word? What is it like? I mean to have all of those men looking at you?"

"Please, my pockets stay fat. If anything those motherfuckers up in there should feel violated because I definitely be walking out with somebody's damn rent money each night," she chuckled as the heat from the range made the eggs sputter and shake in the pan. "Nah, for real, I'm saying, I know who owns me and God provides where he can."

"I'd like to hear you tell Ms. Ella that," Selah commented, recalling the austere old woman who tormented their childhood.

"Shit, I'd like Ms. Ella to pay my damn tuition!" Deena snapped. "But seriously, this dancing thing is just for now. Until I graduate in May. In two months I'm up out of here and then it's off to law school," she added, dividing the small meal up onto two Styrofoam plates. "And Voila, Mademoiselle breakfast...well lunch is served since it's already 1:30!"

"Thanks, Deena," Selah said. She looked at Deena's liquorices colored hands holding the plate. Selah always adored Deena's complexion and wished her onion complexion were just a tad darker. She loved that Deena always took care of her and stood by her no matter how tough things got. When Selah's mother died Deena moved into the house and helped out for a while until Selah could find a job so Social Services wouldn't put Malik and Kessa into foster care.

Everyone remarked on how nice it was for her to look out for Selah's family. They called the two girls, who looked like complete opposites, "Frick and Frack," as they walked down the street to get the school bus each day. While Selah was not surprised at

Deena's steadfast devotion to her, she was glad to have a friend like Deena. She once feared that Deena might forget about her and Queens Bridge when she left for school, but Deena proved her wrong when she showed up on her doorstep each weekend.

"Maybe I could dance. You know, to make some extra money. When Kessa is sleeping at night I could come out here and dance until I find a job," Selah said.

"Please, that's what you say now. But when that money starts rolling in you won't be looking for a job anymore. I don't know, Selah. I don't think it's for you. I mean you have to be able to protect yourself--knock a mother fucker out if he steps out of line," Deena said, boxing the air above the kitchen table.

"I deal with Malik's ass every day."

"Good point. But that nigga ain't got nothing on an old white man who's mad because he mistakenly slipped you a fifty instead of a five," Deena giggled. "I'll tell you what, I'll hook you up on one condition!"

"And what is that Lil'Kim?"

Deena looked directly into Selah's hazel eyes. "That you apply to school. Just apply to Medgar Evers College or something like that, to get your feet wet and see what it's like. You never know Selah."

"Ok, damn. You just won't stop! I'll apply. Filling out a piece of paper never killed anyone."

"But missing bio did! So, I gotta go so I'm not late for my class," Deena said, realizing that she had five minutes to get to class.

"Dang, I didn't realize it was so late. Um, can I stay here? I just want to get some sleep. I don't feel like going back home just yet and dealing with Malik. I just want to have some peace and--"

"Just close the door when you go," Deena interrupted. She slipped an overstuffed book bag on her shoulder. "And I almost forgot. I'm going to this job fair in the Village tomorrow. Why don't you come? I mean, there will be mostly college grads there, but you never know. There might be something for you too."

"Sounds cool. What time?"

"Around noon. We can meet at Gray's Papaya on 8th Street." Deena slipped through the heavy steal door. "And wear some boss shit...you know that Claire Huxtable shit you be wearing to work so folks know what's happening with you!"

"You crazy!"

"But you love me," Deena said, running down the hall for the elevator.

"I sure do."

105-05 139th St.

Queens, NY 11392

March 5, 1981

Dear Mama,

Praise God! It was so nice to speak to you last week. It's really been two years since I heard your voice. You sounded good and healthy so I guess you have gotten over your sickness. I knew I would catch you over Ms. Tassie's if I called during your weekly usher board meeting. You sounded so surprised when you heard my voice. I'm sorry that I interrupted your meeting and that you had to go so quickly but it was worth it. Perhaps now we can continue to speak and you can even visit me in the spring.

Mama, I never got to tell you why I called. You hung up so quickly. I called to tell you about my baby girl. My first baby girl. I had her on New Years Day! Can you believe that? When the clock hit 12am she came out. Lincoln and me decided to name her Selah. You know like in the bible? It's peace and calm. All that we hope she'll be.

Mama, Selah is so beautiful. Just like Lincoln said she would be. She got my eyes and his color and red hair. Sometimes I just look at her sleeping in the little draw we set beside the bed as her crib and laugh. She look like a little white baby, all pink and round. When the room is chilly in the morning her cheeks be as red as her hair. And Mama, Ms. Anne can eat too! Lord knows my baby can eat. When she came out she was screaming and fussing so bad that you could see her little veins popping out her neck. She had her fists all balled up so tight and red like she was about to hit somebody. And I guess Selah scared the doctor because he handed her to me and said "She hungry." After that Selah just started eating. Seemed like she would never stop. From the time she woke

up 'til the time I'd put her down to bed, she'd be all on me sucking and grunting like one of the baby hogs on the farm. Sometimes she'd be pulling at me so hard, not even stopping to breathe, that I had stop her so she could catch her breath and I could get some rest. My body would just be so tired from her. She wants so much and sometimes I just don't have it. My breasts are so sore and cracked that I have to rub castor oil on them when she sleeping. But as soon as she got up, she'd start fussing and I'd just have to give her some more. One day last week there was nothing there. I don't know what happened. Even the doctor can't explain it, but Mama I ain't making no more milk for Selah. I woke up and tried to feed her and nothing came out. She was pulling so hard and tears started to fall from her eyes. I didn't feel anything. It was like my body just turned off. Then she started. Her face turned red and I could feel her eyes staring right through me. She was screaming so badly and I couldn't do anything. I shook her and rubbed her little back but nothing would work. I could feel a rage racing all through her body. Then Ella, a woman who lives on the corner came knocking on the door. She said she heard Selah from down at her house. I just let her in. Lincoln wasn't home and I was hoping she knew what to do. She went into the kitchen and came out with my turkey bastor filled with Karo syrup and evaporated milk. "This what she eat from now on. You gonna die any other way," Ella told me putting the bastor in Selah's mouth. That's what we're doing from now on. I feed her that and water in the morning. They got this baby milk they sell in the store, but its too much money and Lincoln says we can't afford it.

I've been thinking about getting a job more and more. Lincoln's money just ain't enough around here and it seems like I ain't gonna be going back to school no time soon, so I think it's a good idea. Ella works down at the hospital and she said the money is

good. She said if we get different shifts, then she could care for Selah when I'm working. Ain't that nice Mama? I think Ella and me gonna be real good friends. She's alone. Don't have no husband or anything. Sometimes I feel like I don't have one either. Lincoln ain't never here anymore. Since Selah been born he say he works overtime but the money just don't come in. Besides I'd rather have him here. Things just seem right when he's here. Selah don't cry and I don't feel alone. Sometimes I wish I never left Calm Water. I wish I never left you Mama.

I pray this letter comes to you quickly. I hope to hear from you soon and I pray that you have forgiven me. I will send some pictures of the baby in my next letter.

Your daughter,

Mrs. Lincoln Johnson and baby Selah

Pipe Dreams

The screen door flew open and banged up against the front of the house. Malik didn't turn around. He didn't have to. He just sat back on the step and pulled the chain back off of his bike. He knew it was Selah. She was the only one who let the screen door bang like that. The bottom springs were broken and their father told them not to push on it so hard. But Selah didn't listen. She never listened to anyone, Malik thought.

"Baby girl, if I can get in this here door without making all that noise than so can you," their father said one night after she did it. But that was before their mother changed the locks and kicked him out.

Selah sat down on the stoop behind Malik. She sat right behind him so all he could see was her dirty pink pumas. He hated it when she did that. Breathing all on my neck, waiting for me to notice her, Malik thought. That day she had an ice pop. Malik knew because little red drops kept falling from above him and hitting the ground in front of his bike. It looked like blood. It looked like blood falling from the sky. She wants me to ask for some, Malik thought, pulling at his bike chain. She wants me to say, "Oh please most beautiful Selah! Can you please give me, Malik, one of your precious fuckin' ice pops," so she could just say "no," Malik thought. He just kept fixing his bike. He hoped she would just get up and go back into the house with Kessa.

"I saw Daddy today," Selah said, sliding down the step and sitting next to Malik. She sat close to Malik and whispered it into his ear.

"So," Malik said, looking back at his bike.

"Really Malik. Like for real. But you gotta promise not to tell nobody."

"OK, so I won't," he said snotty. He just wanted her to go away. He wanted her to go inside and take her secrets with her. Why would she care about seeing their father anyway? She hated him. They all did. She probably wants me to say something mean, Malik thought. She probably wants me to call him a bastard, a nigga, a motherfucker, but I won't, he thought looking away from Selah.

Selah pulled his arm away from the bike.

"Malik I'm for real. You can't tell nobody," Selah begged.

"And I said I won't."

"Well don't you care? Don't you even want to know what he looked like?"

"Not really." Malik lied. He did want to know what his father looked like.

Lincoln had been gone since Christmas and he always grew his fade out in the winter. He'd let it get long and just pick it out. "Just like H-Rap, lil' man," he'd say to Malik as he watched him pick it out in the bathroom mirror. He'd bend over and hand Malik his big black pick, the one with the handle like a fist. "Be happy to be nappy, lil' man," he'd say spraying his hair with TCB Oil Sheen.

"You really don't want to know?" Selah asked again.

"Nope. Don't care."

"You so evil Malik. Just like Mama be sayin'. You don't care about nobody but you and your bike."

"Exactly, so why don't you go back in the fuckin' house then?" Malik said sucking his teeth.

"Oooh! You bad! And I'ma call Mama at work and tell her you cursed and sucked your teeth," Selah said jumping up from the stoop. "And she gonna beat yo black ass as soon as she gets home."

Malik hated remembering that day. It was the last time Selah saw their father. He found out later that it was at a grocery store on Supthin Boulevard. Lincoln and Grace had it out right in front of the store. Lil' Ray from up the block told Malik it was a bad scene. He said Grace was throwing stuff at Lincoln and cursing all loud. "Just let me die! Just let me die, Nigga," Lil' Ray said he heard Grace screaming from the corner. Lincoln just kept crying and saying he was sorry.

Malik hated to think about it. He hated wondering what they argued about, why they argued, why he left. But he couldn't stop his thoughts. It was over four years ago, when he was fourteen, but he couldn't stop thinking about it. Especially in the afternoon when the house was quiet and he was all alone except for the voices on the TV. Every time he sat still or closed his eyes he could hear the screen door slamming open again. He could feel Selah behind him. He missed his father. He missed his mother.

It would be easier if I had a job, Malik thought. He could get up, get out of the house with Selah in the morning, and go to work. He could go sit at a desk and chat with white folks all day. A nigga ain't doing shit with this cloudy piss, Malik thought. And until then, when I get better and get a job, the clouds is all a motherfucker got. My dime bag is the only thing that makes it shut up--makes the voices and shit go away. Leaves me alone, by myself.

Malik sat up on the couch and reached for the remote. He turned past the soaps his mother used to watch, the news, the church people station, and stopped on channel seven. Jerry Springer was coming on. "Crazy Family Secrets: Your Father is Gay" went across the screen. *It's funny how Jerry always seems to know what's goin' on with motherfuckers*, Malik thought. *Jerry a pimp for real. Fuck Jigga and JD. Jerry be havin' white bitches with they titties all out and fake as niggas playin baby daddy's on everyday. Sometimes it be so many hoes and niggas runnin around on the stage it look like the damn circus. Shit be so stupid I feel fuckin stupid just for watchin. But it be funny too and Jerry is good to smoke to.*

Malik sat back in the middle of his mother's old couch and pulled his crack pipe off of the table in front of him. He held it in his hand and lit a match underneath it. The clear crystals inside began to pop and sputter. Malik laughed at the cracking. He was so used to it, the routine. He did it almost everyday. Every time Jerry came on Malik lit up. He'd just sit back on the couch and laugh at the people on the show and fall to sleep. He didn't know why, but it all felt like a dream. Jerry, the women, the crack. First Malik would be imagining himself talking to one of Jerry's white girls...asking her why she was so stupid and then he would be somewhere riding his bike. He would be fourteen again, riding fast down a big street where he'd never been. There were no houses, no cars, no people.

Malik took a hit from the pipe and Jerry came on the screen.

"First we have Shane Johnson, a gay man who has been lying to his family about his sexuality. Shane come on out!"

The audience booed as a skinny black man walked onto the stage. Malik laughed. *Now Jerry know this nigga ain't real. It's 2002 and he got on a fuckin Cross Color jacket, Malik thought. Ain't no nigga in his right mind gonna wear that old shit. Bitches don't be havin that shit. Shit is fake already.*

"See Jerry I ain't really gay. I love my wife and my three kids," the man on the television said. He was so skinny. He looked like he was strung out or something. *Jerry's people probably be finding some of these motherfuckers in the crackhouse. Malik laughed. They be like, "Hey there dude, give ya ten dollars if you come on the Jerry Springer Show and make an ass of yourself." Crackhead's dream.*

"But Shane, you sleep with men. That's gay. I mean are you gay or bisexual?" Jerry said to the man.

"I ain't neither one Jerry. I just like sex with men. What I do with them is my private life. And my private life ain't nobody business."

The audience began to boo the man again. Malik began to boo, too.

"Shane aren't you afraid of hurting your family? Your wife? What about diseases Shane? Have you thought about AIDS?" a girl asked from the crowd.

"Ah, no I don't mess with people with that AIDS and stuff. I don't go to no clubs. And I love my wife and my kids," the man said.

"Ok so let's bring them out," Jerry said. "Welcome Ms. Johnson and her two kids Leon and Shanika."

Now this is when shit usually gets real silly and my ass falls asleep, Malik thought. I need to write and ask Jerry why he needs to bring the whole damn family out so they can all look stupid on TV.

"You lying black bastard!" an old looking white woman screamed running to the stage. Two kids came running behind the woman. The woman was crying and trying to get to the man, but Jerry's security guards wouldn't let her get to him.

"Mama stop crying," Malik said reaching for the screen. *I hate it when she cries,* he thought. *I hate it when she cries about him.*

"He ain't mean it. He loves you," Malik said reaching for the woman past the security guards. He couldn't reach her. She was gone, too far for him to reach her.

He started riding his bike again. He went past the big green tree, down the dirt road, into the field. He was alone. He felt the wind on his scalp, under my arms. He looked up at the sky and began to fly.

The Games

"Short term sacrifice for long-term goals equals success."

--old white lady on Oprah

\$400 for the hospital, \$300 for Mama, \$100 for me... Simone added up her bills in her head as she pulled a shirt over her head. *This bill shit is getting crazy. It won't be long until Dante realizes I been stealing extra money out his shoe bank again,* she thought. She really didn't care what he thought. Everybody in Queens feared Dante. But Simone was not afraid of him. While he was one of Queens biggest drug dealers, Simone realized that he was not as big and bad as everyone thought he was.

He would be angry if he found out how much money Simone had been taking from his tiny shoebox under the bed. *What he gonna do? Call up Sha-Sha and get a hit on me for stealing drug money from right up underneath his ass?* Simone thought. She decided that she would start replacing some of the money once she got a better job. She didn't like the idea of using his drug money. However, she no choice but to take it. She had to. There was no other way. *I gots to do it for me,* she thought fixing her shirt. *It's always something. The doctors, the damn heat, the laundry, Mama's ulcers acting up again... Ain't no way I'ma ever catch up.*

"You up?" Dante said sitting up in the bed behind Simone. Wrapped up in the black silk sheets she bought from the big Macy's in the city, he was naked. *Flashing his weak ass muscles like he Wesley Snipes or somebody.* Simone rolled her eyes.

Dante was in love with himself. He was attractive. He had an entire city full of women chasing him to confirm that. Half of the women in Queens wanted Dante. Sometimes Simone wondered how many of them he had actually slept with. She knew about the girl from Springfield last year. She was really young. She called Simone on her my cell phone. She said she loved Dante and was having his baby. Simone laughed and hung up on the girl. She was tempted to tell the girl that she could have him. She could have Dante but she had to send the money to Simone.

"You hear me Simone?" Dante said, stretching in bed. He always woke up just when she was about to escape without saying goodbye. *Always acts surprised that I'm leaving-like I don't have a fuckin' job and I can sit home all day like his drug dealing ass*, Simone thought. She planned to ask him one day. One day Simone would ask Dante if he ever noticed that his mother got up everyday at 6am, put on her nurse's uniform, and headed to the hospital. Simone could hear her walking around every morning and she knew Dante could hear it to. She would ask him why he couldn't just put it all together- she's grown, she gets up everyday, and goes to work...maybe he should do the same thing.

"Yeah baby. You know I got to get to the job. My boss don't play that late shit during the holidays."

"Holiday? What holiday?"

"It's almost Easter and you know black folks stay in the store buying Easter suits."

"Damn Boo. I was hoping you would call in today. You know and act like you got one of them migrants or something," Dante said, reaching for Simone. She hated it

when he tried to be nice to her. *How can he be nice when he is his just an evil person in general? He lies, steals, and cheats people on a daily basis.* She knew it was his life and she chose to be with him, but she still hated it. She didn't understand how he could wake up everyday.

"MIGRANE! M-I-G-R-A-N-E! Motherfucker!" She wanted to say, but she knew that would only lead to an argument. She kept reminding herself that it was about the money. There was no reason for feelings. Like the white lady said on Oprah, "Short-term sacrifice for long-term goals equals success." Simone said the little mantra to herself every morning when she woke up looking at Dante. Every time she had to file the numbers off of a gun, hide some drugs in her mother's apartment, bail one of his friends out of jail, she'd say it over and over again:

Short-term sacrifice for long-term goals equals success. Short-term sacrificefor long-termgoals equalssuccess. Short-termsacrificeforlong-termgoalsequalssuccess.

"It's a migraine, Dante, and no I can't call in. I have to get paid," Simone said, sitting down on the floor in front of the bed. She reached beneath the bed, quiet so Dante couldn't hear here, and pulled out his shoe bank again. It was an old timberland box filled with Dante's drug money. She counted the money every night before Dante got in from "working." He usually had between fifty and seventy-five thousand dollars in it. Simone started taking money for myself after she realized that he wasn't keeping track. He would just come in each night and empty his socks out into the box. She started helping her mother with her bills and got her a new apartment in Jamaica Estates, sent money upstate to the hospital, and cleaned up her credit.

Simone added up the bills in her head again and pulled nine hundreds from the box.

"You in my money again?" Dante's voice called from the bed.

"You know I got to help my mother Dante," Simone said with her voice shaking. *I hate it when my voice shakes--when Dante can tell I'm lying*, Simone thought. Then he usually ended up saying something dumb--something about sex. He really didn't care about the money. Dante sold drugs for power over other niggas, for control of the block. He didn't have any aspirations beyond Queens Bridge. He was going to die in his mother's house. He only used his money to buy his drugs and keep up with his toys--the Lexus, the Escalade, the motorcycle, and the little place in Newark he got in Simone's name.

"See all ya'll hoes is alike. All up in a nigga's money. That's why my brother told me not to trust none of ya'll"

"Oh here we go again with the 'Why Hoes Ain't Shit Sermon' by Dante and Jayon. To bad your co-author is locked up again."

"See that ain't funny Simone. You be playing too much."

"Oh nigga please. You know I love Jayon. Who be sending him stuff up there? Who be reminding your black ass to keep his contacts?"

"You right...and that's why you my boo. Why don't you get your ass back in the bed?" Dante said, trying to pull Simone's pants down. "Damn boo! Those mofo's is tight as hell! What kind of jeans is they? Got a nigga's dick all hard and I can't get them off!" Dante could be funny. They both laughed.

"They Baby Phat. See you tryna make me late. I can't be late again." Simone pulled away.

"Fuck them Arabs. Tell them yo' man got your back! Mother fuckin' 'Dante 'that nigga' Johnson'! Tell them that, Boo, and bring those pretty titties back to bed," he said massaging Simone's breast beneath her shirt. "Come and serve yo' daddy."

"I gotta go baby," Simone said, re-buckling her jeans.

"You my 'ride or die chick' like Ja-Rule say in that song. You Charlie Baltimore and I'm Ja-Rule!"

"Nigga, last week you was Nino Brown and I was that light skinned chick...make up your mind."

"Oh you funny now?" Dante said, standing behind Simone in front of the bed.

"So why don't you invite Malika over tonight?"

"Who?"

"That freak hoe that works with you at the store. Tell her to come by tonight," Dante said, licking his smoke stained lips.

"See I told you I ain't with that. You so nasty," Simone said, remembering Dante's new fascination with threesomes.

"See you hoes always want something for nothing. Took all my money-"

"I ain't no hoe and I ain't take all of shit."

"Don't interrupt me. Like I was saying, ya'll take all the money and don't want to do shit for it. Damn! It's just pussy." He put his lips on her ear. "And you know if you don't do it, then someone else will."

"Fuck you Dante. Now I'm out...cause you trippin. You trippin Dante."

The Tempest

Selah entered the little blue and white house at the center of 139th St. as she did everyday from work. Quickly shutting the door behind her she headed straight towards the kitchen without removing her coat or pausing to take off her shoes. Through the corner of her eye she saw Malik's half-dressed body sprawled out on the living room floor.

"Lazy mother-fucker," she murmured, entering the kitchen. Opening the wooden cabinet above her mother's antique style stove, she extracted a dusty can of Chef Boy-R-Dee Ravioli and placed it on the countertop.

"Ke-Ke!" Selah called, rinsing off a dented aluminum pot in the sink. "Go on and wash your hands."

As the mushy concoction of processed meat and pasta sputtered and popped above the rising flames on the stove, Selah leaned against the counter and closed her eyes. She began to go over bills in her head. She remembered that it was only the 17th and that she had about two weeks until the power and telephone bills would arrive.

"What am I going to do for money until I find a new job? Thank God Mama paid off the house," she said, noticing she hadn't heard a word from Kessa since she entered the house.

The six-year-old usually sat waiting excitedly for her as she opened the front door. She always had some new picture she'd made in school or a letter from her teacher in her hands as she greeted Selah.

"Kessa," Selah said, walking into the living room. "Kessa," down the hall into the little pink bedroom. "Kessa?" under the Barbie sheets, in the closet, in the bathroom... Selah's chest tightened as she ran down the hallway returning to the front of the house. She wasn't scared she assured herself, she was sure that her sister was hiding again, playing one of the games Selah often explained to her wasn't funny. She looked in the kitchen closet, in the dining room, under the table.

"Kessa, this isn't funny now," she called from the front door. Selah looked down at the shoe stand beside the door. She made Kessa put her shoes on it everyday so they could find them in the morning before school. Noticing they weren't there, an unignorable feeling of seclusion forced its way through Selah's body. She felt alone and realized that the little girl wasn't home.

"Malik, where's Kessa?" Selah said, standing above her brother's body in the center of the living room. "Malik, you wake the fuck up! Where is she?" Selah said, frantically shaking her hands above her head.

Malik sat up rubbing his eyes.

"Huh? Wha?" he muttered, straining to see his older sister.

"Where is she?"

"Kessa...Kessa at school," he answered.

"You dumb mother-fucker, it's after 8 o'clock at night," Selah roared. "You ain't picked her up from the bus stop?"

"The bus stop?"

"You high! You fucking high!" Selah said, running out of the house.

Within the minutes Selah spent in the house the wind grew from a gentle embrace to an angry storm. Candy wrappers and empty potato chip bags fought against racing gusts of air as they cut through the houses on 139th St. like a tempest of daggers. It violently raced through Selah's clothes sending stinging chills across her breasts. Barefoot and hysterical she ran down the street screaming for Kessa. She felt the freezing cement as it tore into her feet with each quick step. The houses, the cars, the neighbors gathering in their windows, they all melted into a cloud of white noise as she neared the end of the block. She looked at the bus stop as if the bus would arrive if she focused on the sign hard enough. Selah felt as if her heart was melting with each second that passed. She wanted to scream, call the police, disappear, and die all in the same breath.

She wrapped her arms around her waist and turned away from the corner. In the darkness she could see Miss Ella standing in the doorway of her house.

"She's here, baby," Selah heard Miss Ella call out as she opened her front door beckoning Selah inside.

"Kessa," Selah said, walking into the old house.

"Child, she's sleeping back in my bed."

Tears spilling down her face, Selah turned to look at Miss Ella. She blinked to make sure she was actually awake and standing in Miss Ella's house. It had been over ten years since she last stood in the living room and everything looked the same as it did when she was eleven years old.

"Poor thing, just sit on down on the couch. Let me get you something to drink," Miss Ella said, exiting the room. As the old woman fumbled around in the kitchen Selah

sat drained, looking up at the ceiling. "Yes Lord, I sat out front this afternoon and I saw the baby standing all alone at the bus stop after everyone had left," Selah heard Miss Ella explaining from the other room. "I told her to come and sit with me until Malik came or we saw you walking down the block from work...whichever came first. Then when the sun went down I brought her inside, fed her, and the poor thing just climbed in my bed and went to sleep." Miss Ella stood in front of Selah holding a baby blue teacup. "Here, baby, have some of this. It's fresh chamomile," she said, handing the cup to Selah. "It'll calm you."

"Thanks Miss Ella. I think Malik just fell asleep or something. I don't know."

"It's fine. You know this happens all the time. At least once a month some child ends up left at the bus stop because somebody forgot it was their day to pick 'em up." She paused. "Most folks just come straight knocking on my door. I don't mind. Especially when they is my people. And Grace's babies is definitely my people. I used to get you and Malik all the time. But you probably too old to remember those hard times now."

"Thank you again Miss Ella," Selah forced pretending to drink the syrupy tea.

"You just sit here and get yourself together. No mind to me. Seems like you need it, baby. You OK?"

"I'm fine...I'm just tired."

"Oh? We all get tired sometime," Miss Ella said knowingly taking Selah's hands into hers. Selah looked down at the old woman's velvety hands as they stroked her own and felt hot tears begin to gather in her eyes again. She closed her eyes and tried to remember the last time someone had touched her in that way, without expectation of any return.

"No, it's not just that...I lost my job today," Selah managed, falling into Miss Ella's lap. "And I don't know what I'm going to do. I mean I can find another job but it's just not that easy right now. And I can't ask anybody for anything, and Malik ain't helping, and I can't find my father. I just don't know what to do anymore."

"Oh, baby. Well just give it time and it will come to you," Miss Ella replied, patting Selah on the back.

"That's what I been doing but it seems like time ain't enough anymore. You know? It just gets harder every single day. I just want to get out of here."

"And what's that gonna solve? Getting out of here?"

"I'm saying, ain't nothing for me here. Every time I think I'm getting somewhere something else happens and I feel like I'm stuck here," Selah snapped, jumping to her feet. "I want to just pack me and Kessa up and head down south or something. We could go to Atlanta or someplace like that."

"Baby, life just the same down there. How you think your folks got here?" Miss Ella paused. "They left there cause they felt like they was *stuck*. But when they got here and the same old problems just kept sneaking up on them they just realized that you only stuck somewhere if you believe you are. You can go and be wherever you want, but when you get there, there you are again with the same problems you thought you left behind."

"But why is everything so hard? Why can't things just work?"

"I been here a long time and believe me it gets harder before it gets better. Lord knows I been where you at. But you need to know you can't do it on your own Selah. I see you racing up and down this block everyday like you can run the world all by

yourself, but you can't. You need to keep God first and helping hands second." Miss Ella looked at Selah. "You think being a strong black woman means doing everything for yourself, but no one can do it alone Selah. You'll drive yourself crazy trying."

"Crazy? Crazy trying? Crazy like my mother? Crazy like hanging yourself from a pipe in a basement?"

"Baby, whatever happened, whatever happened in that house the day your mother died, you got to let that go. That ain't your story to hold onto," Miss Ella said pulling Selah to the couch. "Let it go."

"She told me she was gonna do it, but I never believed her. I just thought she was angry, mad about him leaving her alone. But then she just did it. She just tied herself up to the big pipe in the basement and just did it," Selah cried as visions of her mother's limp body hanging from the ceiling in the basement of their house just four years ago played before her eyes. "She just hung herself. I walked into the house from school and Malik was there. It was his birthday. We was supposed to be having a big party. I came home after stopping at the store for some streamers and stuff Mama told me to get and I walked in the door and he was just sitting on the couch crying. I figured he was upset, just mad about something that happened at school, but he couldn't look straight, he couldn't look at me. He opened his hands and all I could see was red burns. They were rope burns. I knew because I could see the braids, the little braids swelling across his fingers," Selah said, examining her own hands as if she could still see the rope burns. "I can't get her down Selah. I can't get her down!" Malik said to me and then he ran towards the basement. I dropped my stuff--my book bag, the streamers, and the red party plates, and I followed him. I followed him and I could see her as soon as I touched the

bottom step...I could see her legs. I looked up and Malik had already gotten to her. He was standing on the ladder beside her trying to loosen the rope... but it just wouldn't come loose-

"Breathe baby," Miss Ella said gently.

"I just stood there. I just stood there looking at her trying to understand it. Trying to understand what I was looking at. We was supposed to be having a party. It was Malik's birthday."

"Oh baby." Miss Ella pulled Selah to her lap. "I know it's bad. I know it's bad baby, but you got to be stronger than what happened. That's the past baby. As bad as it was, it's the past. You got to go and take care of what's happening right now in your house. Your *mother* died that day Selah. She did. But you, and Malik, and that baby in there sleeping, ya'll still alive," she stroked, rocking Selah back and forth. "I want you to get yourself together now. You hear me? Stop crying and go on home and handle what's happening with the living."

105-05 139th St

Queens, NY 11392

March 19, 1983

Dear Mama Idella,

On March 12 I gave birth to my second child. He is a king. His skin is dark brown like mine. He looks like an arch angel sleeping in my arms. I was all alone at the hospital when he was born. I tried to wait for Lincoln but I didn't know when he would be home so I just went alone. The janitor came into the delivery room with me and held my hand. He prayed with me. He held my hand and prayed for me. I needed prayer. I asked him his name. He said Malik. He said it meant Master in Arabic. Master was right. I don't know if it was the drugs or the lights hanging hot above me in the room but he looked like the Master standing next to me. I watched his eyes as I pushed harder and harder for my baby to come. His hair looked like a soft halo. I told him I was gonna name my baby after him. He laughed. He ain't believe me Mama. But when the baby came out. Smiling, with his eyes wide open, big and brown, I just said Malik and handed the baby to the doctor.

If I could write a poem I guess would. If I went to school I guess I could write a poem. I can't. I am not going back to school. I am a mother and a wife. I love my children. I can't go back to school. I will take in work sewing.

Baby Boy

"No one can see their reflection in running water. It is only in still water we can see."

--The Wisdom of the Taoists

"What...what the fuck!" Malik woke up as his head violently bounced over the threshold into the hallway closet. Bewildered, he opened his eyes to see the closet ceiling rolling before him. While he could not move them, he could feel his legs being pulled through the tiny space. Alarmed, Malik raised his head to see Selah's face straining to haul his numbed body. "Let me go Selah. What you doin'?" he said with his arms flailing as he struggled against the rope she had tied his legs together with.

"I'm saving your life," Selah replied dropping his feet to the floor. She turned and quickly exited the closet forcing the door closed behind her.

"Stop playin', Selah! Let me go!" Malik said wondering what his older sister was doing.

"Oh, I ain't playin--not now anyway. I been playin with your black ass for too long and now I ain't playin anymore," Selah answered stiffly.

"What you mean?"

"I mean I'm tired Malik! I'm fuckin' tired of your shit and I'm not gonna watch you kill yourself and this family anymore. I'm gonna leave your ass in here, locked in this closet until you get clean."

"What? Selah you crazy. Why you doin this? Come on, let me out. It's hot in here. I'ma get sick in here."

"Nigga you already sick," Selah said, positioning a little broom beneath the doorknob to secure it. While Malik was still high she knew the drugs would wear off soon and was afraid that the lock on the door would not be enough to hold him.

"Selah, come on. This ain't right. This ain't the way. I know, I know you want me to stop smokin right?"

"Yes, that's it,"

"See, I'ma stop. I ain't gonna use that stuff no more, just let out of here. It's dark in here. Come on Selah I swear I'm gonna stop smokin. I swear on Momma's grave," Malik said tapping his head against the door.

"Don't try that shit Malik, I done heard that before. And Momma's grave ain't got nothing to do with this. This is about you, Malik. It's about you and those damn drugs."

"I know Selah and I want to get help. Let me out so we can work on it together. So we can get me clean. I want to get clean," Malik promised in the virtuous voice he often used when Selah threatened him.

She pushed her full weight against the door so that Malik could not force the broom from holding it shut, Selah decided that Malik's promise to get sober was not enough anymore. She determined that she did not know what could make Malik get himself clean but knew that his empty promises were killing both of them. Saddened by her despairing predicament Selah replied, "No, baby brother."

Selah secured the broom beneath the doorknob Selah backed away from the small closet and leaned up against the wall directly across from it. Her body slid hopelessly down the cold wall as she collapsed exhausted from her work.

A brief silence went by and Selah hoped that Malik had fallen asleep. Just then, as if possessed by some depraved demon Malik roared, "Well fuck you bitch! That's why I fuckin' hate your hoe ass. I swear I'ma kill you when I get out of here! I'ma fuckin' stomp your head in!" As he spoke, Malik struck the closet door with devilish blows that sent stinging shocks through Selah's heart. The thin wooden door shaking in front of her, Selah was afraid that Malik might actually break it down.

"Shut up Malik, you can't hurt me now!" Selah said attempting to convince Malik to stop pounding on the door.

"Fuck you! You think you something' cause you got money and all that, but that don't mean shit here...it don't mean shit when I get out of here and fuck you up. I hate you. I'ma kill you now Selah, kill you as soon as I get the fuck out of here!"

Selah's throat felt as if it were full of sand. She struggled to breathe as Malik's words grew more violent with each outburst. While she had faced his violent side many times before Selah never dared to fight back and was afraid that he, in a fit of drugged rage, would follow through with his promise to kill her. Terrified, she forced her eyes closed and wrapped her arms tight around her stomach. She imagined her mother standing before her in the dark hallway and prayed that she would help her. For a second Selah envisioned her mother as she had seen her for the last time. The day before she died, Selah watched her mother dress for church in the same ushers uniform she wore each Sunday. The image of her mother appeared as real as it had that Sunday morning. As before Grace was dressed in her white uniform with her natural hair pulled back into a tight chignon. She reached out to Selah and said, in the voice of a seraph, "It will be OK,

child." Selah began to sob wearily as the image disappeared into the darkness and she was alone again.

"I'm a baby, Selah. I'm still a baby and my mother's dead." Malik called to Selah from the closet.

"No, Malik you ain't no baby anymore. You grown up...we both grown. We gotta be for each other," Selah replied. "I need you Malik. I can't do this without you."

Gray's Papaya

"I knew I should've stayed my ass home. Where is this girl?" Selah said looking at her watch. Standing beneath the small roofing in front of Gray's Papaya she noted that it was 11:15am--15 minutes after the time she agreed to meet Deena to go to the job fair. "Just like her ass. Always late to some shit. If I knew where this thing was I would leave her trifling ass," she added rolling her eyes. Selah hated going places with Deena, because she almost always managed to be late. Weddings, funerals, even their high school graduation, Deena had an elaborate history of showing up late to important events, and unfortunately she often took Selah along for the ride.

Sweating beneath her tailored red pantsuit, Selah decided to get a fruit shake from Gray's to escape the heat. After dealing with Malik all night and falling asleep in the hallway, Selah was rushing when she got ready that morning and she couldn't recall whether or not she'd taken time out to put on deodorant. She decided that one of Gray's famous fruit shakes would not only quench her thirst, but also stop her from overheating and stinking up her favorite red suit.

The salty smell of hotdogs rushed Selah as she entered New York's only twenty-four hour hot dog stand. While she hated Gray's hot dogs, she had been a long time supporter of their fruit shakes that came in every flavor from strawberry to lemon. Approaching the register, Selah cupped her mouth to avoid the smell and looked up at the menu to decide what kind of shake she wanted.

"What you want?" a thin white girl with matted dreadlocks called out from behind the counter.

Selah looked at the girl, surveying her ringed nose, corked ears, and tattooed arms and frowned. "That's why I couldn't live in the damn village. This bitch looks half crazy...trying to serve me some food. Does she think this shit in her hair looks nice?"

Selah thought. While she enjoyed visiting lower Manhattan to get an eyeful of the latest fashions and eat at the sidewalk restaurants, she thought the "village people," were strange and found it impossible to relax around them. "And they say you can't trust people in the ghetto...look at these motherfuckers! Please, I'll take a crackhead in QB over one of these freaks any day," Selah once said as she debated the subject with Deena. Sitting on the bus across from a drag queen dressed in a pink sundress that was cut high on his sculptured legs, Deena responded, "Girl, you have to be open-minded. Beside some of these 'freaks' look better than both of us put together."

"Um, just a moment," Selah replied to the white girl at the counter. "Banana or mango? Mango or banana? Banana? Mango? Mango and banana?" Selah debated looking up at the menu. She looked over her shoulder to make sure no one was waiting behind her. She noticed a black man enter the restaurant. Dressed in a tan suit, his skin was a deep, dark brown. If Selah didn't know any better she'd say it was black. His hair was neatly cornrowed back into a tight bun and his skin was as smooth as black soap. "Um-hum," Selah thought looking at his fresh-cut beard and hazel eyes. "I bet his ass got a job...and a 401K," she said as he walked over and stood behind her. She could smell his cologne, spicy and strong, and wondered what it was. "I could ask...but that would be too obvious. Shit," she thought turning back around to the menu.

Just then the door opened again and a blast of booming music entered the small restaurant. Selah turned to find a young black man carrying a radio on his shoulder standing in front of the door. Sporting a worn out Phat Farm tee-shirt and denim shorts that were stereotypically way too big for his thin frame, he approached the counter and stood right next to Selah. With the music, an unintelligible mix of reggae and rap, blasting in her ear Selah rolled her eyes and looked back at the white girl who was now visibly aggravated with Selah's indecision.

"OK. I'll just take a large banana shake," Selah said quickly. Looking at the man carrying the radio through the corner of her eye, Selah said a silent prayer:

Dear Lord,

Don't let this nigga start no mess up in here today.

You know I been having a bad day, a bad week...

shit a bad month. I can't take no more. Shit is going

to be bad in Gray's Papaya. Don't let him look at me

and please Lord, don't let him say no dumb shit to me that's

gonna make me wild out in front of this fine ass brother

standing behind me--

As the girl turned around and handed Selah her shake, requesting the \$2.99 to pay for it, Selah closed her prayer by saying, "Amen."

"Ummm, banana! You know I like banana. Can a brother get a taste of that?" the man with the radio said as Selah turned to exit Gray's.

"Don't look at him. Turn away. Don't look. Don't breathe," Selah coached herself as she tried to walk past the man.

"Oh it's like that?" he said, grabbing her elbow.

Selah turned around wildly, swinging her arm with her hand in a tight fist, ready to strike the man. Her hair flew over her shoulder and blood rushed to her face. It was something she picked up in QB fighting Malik and his friends on the block. She was ready to fight, ready to strike back. Just as Selah's arm crossed her shoulder with speed enough to knock the man with the radio to the floor, a tight hand on her wrist stopped her motion.

"Come on man. This is my lady," Selah heard a man's voice say. She turned to see that the hand holding her tightly was that of the brown brother behind her. Her heart

beating so fast she had to remind herself to catch her breath, Selah forced a smile at the man.

"Oh my bad, God," the man with the radio said stepping back from the couple with his hands up. Equally confused and delighted at the brown man's announcement—"my lady,"--Selah exited Gray's with him and purposely wrapped her arm around his.

"Might as well make it look real," Selah thought chuckling as she switched out of the restaurant.

"Thank you. That was nice of you," she said turning to face the man outside.

"It's OK. I'm Max," he replied sticking his hand out.

"Oh, I'm Selah."

"Well Selah I just figured I'd help you. When I saw him grab your arm I knew something bad was going to happen in there," Max said laughing. "I mean you just don't look like the type of woman to mess with."

"Oh so I look like a wrestler or something?" Selah laughed.

"No I mean...see a brother got his foot in his mouth right? Dang. All I'm saying is he was wrong. He was wrong for touching you like that." Max looked into Selah's eyes. "All brothers aren't like that."

"Yeah he was rude. I hate men like that. Can't take no for an answer." Selah smiled trying to show her teeth. She wondered if he thought she was attractive, wondered if he liked 'natural sisters.' Selah didn't consider herself *natural*; she loved pork and thought Rastafarians were dirty. However, because of her locked hair and tendency to wear loose fitting clothing to hide her thick thighs, she was often put in the 'natural sister' category. She found it equally funny and disturbing that black men seemed to fear her because of her hair. While they often stopped and looked at her green eyes and light skin and said things like "damn you got a pretty face, lightskin," and "you fine, redbone," they seldom stopped to ask for her number, and the ones who did felt a

need to call her "sister" and "Nubian queen," and invite her out to poetry readings and nature walks. "Fuck I look like, Alice Walker?" Selah often said hanging up on potential dates that insisted that she accompany them to a vegetarian restaurant or yoga center. "I hope he's different. I hope he just wants me...just Selah," she thought looking at Max.

"Well to be honest, Selah, I can't blame him for approaching you. You're beautiful," Max said moving a loose dreadlock from Selah's face.

Mesmerized by Max's words, Selah looked into his eyes and realized that they were in fact not hazel like she assumed in the restaurant. They were brown, but the contrast between his eyes and his skin made them glow beyond their normal hue.

"Fucking beautiful," she said under her breath.

"Excuse me?" Max asked frowning.

"Oh nothing. Sorry. Thanks for the compliment. I was just thinking about my friend," Selah lied, embarrassed by her slip. "She's late meeting me."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Are you two meeting for lunch or something? I know a great place around the corner."

"No we're actually going to a..." Looking at Max's briefcase, and platinum Omega watch, Selah paused in the middle of her sentence. It was obvious that Max was a very successful man. As "job fair" came to her mouth she thought that Max might not like her if he knew that not only was she not college educated, but also jobless. Deena told her about men like Max--brothers with gold cards, houses in Westchester, summer homes at Hilton Head. She'd spent more than one Saturday morning curled up on her living room couch listening to Deena's elaborate stories about black men who promised her vacations in the islands, ski trips to Sweden, and perfect storybook lives. Selah often dreamed of someday meeting a man like that--someone who smelled spicy and strong, wore suits to work, and carried a briefcase. "Um...we're going to a business meeting," Selah said clumsily.

"Oh, what kind of business are you in?" Max asked reaching into his pocket.

"Oh um...well she's a lawyer," Selah paused. *I'm not really lying*, Selah rationalized to herself. Deena *was* going to law school after she graduated from Columbia, so she *would* be a lawyer *someday*. "And I'm a lawyer too," slipped from Selah's mouth before she could stop it.

"That's great," Max said pulling a thin gold case from his pocket. He reached inside and pulled out a business card:

Maxwell D. Wright, *CFO, CPA*
Mitchell, Farmer, & Wright Finance
1101 Broadway
New York, NY 1101
212-555-1212

"I'm a financial consultant. Perhaps you and your friend could call me some time...you know for advice."

"Oh OK," Selah said, taking that card. "This nigga got business cards!" she thought looking at the textured cream rectangle in her hand.

"I'm joking, of course. I swear I have no rap. I guess it was all that time I spent with those white boys at Wharton," Max laughed.

"Yeah, old *Wharton*," Selah said, laughing too.

"What I'm saying is I'd be honored if you would call me...anytime."

"So you want me to call you?"

"I'd be honored. In fact, do you have a number where I could reach you? A card or something?" Max asked.

"Oh no. I'm all out. I'll call you."

"Hum... I don't know about that. Now you got a brother nervous. Are you really gonna call me Ms. Selah? Don't break my heart."

"Is this nigga joking? Hell yeah I'ma call him!" Selah thought. She smiled at the suggestion that she could break *his* heart. "I'm going to call you Maxwell D. Wright," she said, reading his full name off of the card.

"OK. Well I have to get going. I have a meeting of my own that I'm late for. I was nice to meet you. I look forward to your call." Max put his hand out.

"Nice meeting you too."

As Max turned and headed down Sixth Avenue, Selah watched his body move beneath his suit. His soft linen jacket framed broad shoulders and large muscular arms. Smiling, Selah imagined that he must work out quite often.

"I need to get my fat ass to the gym," she reminded herself taking a sip of the banana shake. As her eyes tempted to move down to his legs she heard a familiar voice calling from behind.

"Dee! Dee!"

Selah turned to find Deena walking toward her. Dressed in a navy blue Armani suit she purchased an hour ago, Deena was a picture of professional perfection. The suit presented the perfect cover for her curvaceous body. Loose fitting in all of the right places and tight in the better ones, the suit, a double breast with shaping pants, gave her an air of intelligence and sexual power. Her smooth brown skin glowed beneath it and everyone she passed couldn't help but stop, stare, and wonder what the beautiful black girl in blue must do. Armed with a black resume folder and Louis Vutton purse, Deena switched unforgiving as a group of men in gathered in front Gray's looked on. She looked past them, almost through them, smiling at her friend.

"Ms. Selah! Oh hell no you didn't!" Leas said laughing as though she wasn't almost an hour late for their meeting. She jokingly stalked around Selah in tight circles

shaking her head as if she were checking her out. "Woo-wee! Girl!" she added whispering into Selah's ear as she stopped behind her.

"Your late heifer," Selah murmured.

"Late but lovely! Don't hate. You know a bitch gotta look good!" Deena popped her collar. "But you! You, Ms. Selah, look at you!" She looked over the brim of her dark Versace glasses. "Baby girl you looking good! Why ain't you tell me to bring the fliers?"

"Oh Lord Deena. Don't start all that," Selah said wondering what her old friend was getting at. "What fliers?"

"The ones I'ma need to hand out to folks to let them know what the hell is about to go down when you walk up in there today bitch!"

Selah couldn't help but blush. Blood rushing to her yellow cheeks she wondered if Deena was just playing.

"Shut up silly. You just trying to make me feel better."

"Nah, I'm for real! I need to walk up in that bitch at least an hour before you just to inform them of the mayhem that's gonna happen when you arrive. Cause you killing them in that damn red suit," Deena said. She walked around Selah and stood grinning in front of her. Selah struggled to be mad at her friend's lateness but Deena's flattery quickly melted away her anger. Selah smiled at her friend. Deena always seemed to bring out the best in her. Even when Selah was angry, Deena's charm, her incessant ability to bring out the bright side of any situation, made it impossible for Selah to revel in her own troubles. Deena had a way about her, an aura of success that overshadowed her past in QB. Selah wondered if she ever thought of the mother and grandmother she left behind when she went to Columbia University. She often looked into Deena's eyes and wondered if she ever got sad remembering the old days when she had to wake her mother up from drug induced comas, but there was nothing there. Deena masked it, hid it

all behind an iron wall of thick books, fine clothes, big smiles, and dreams of the life she would give herself.

"I'm saying you killing folks already. Look around... the niggas already can't stop looking at you!" Deena went on pointing to the crew of homeless men and teenagers standing behind them. "Girl, let me just look at you...can I touch? Can I just feel what it's like to be on fire?" she added pulling at Selah's jacket.

"Lets just go! I swear you crazy," Selah said attempting to cover her smile.

"I'm crazy to walk next to you. Then I ain't never gonna get a man, Ms. Selah. I need to just walk ahead of you screaming "hot pussy!" so folks are at least prepared when you come strolling along," Deena said walking ahead of Selah.

"Stop silly. You making a damn scene." Selah grabbed her arm. "Besides, do you really think I look nice? Do you think red is the right color? It was all I had," Selah asked nervously.

"Girl you look fine. I mean most folks at the job fair gonna be wearing dark colors...but the Shug Knight--Death Row look is in this year after Tupac died!" Deena cracked. Both of the girls began to laugh.

"Oh Lord! I'ma go home and change. I can still meet you up there later."

"Hoe please. You look just fine. You know I would tell you if it looked bad. I got your back Mama. We get down like four flat tires, right? Like in the old days, just me and you Miss Knight," Deena said taking Selah's hand as the two descended into the subway station. "You know we family. I wouldn't lie to you."

"Yeah I know. And...um speaking of lies, do you know what Wharton is?" Selah giggled.

"Wharton? Where did you hear about Wharton?"

A Teenage Love

Ragged malt liquor ads and dusty neon light bulbs overran the front window of *Juan's Mexican/American Bodega*. Blocking any signal of sunlight from the establishment, the ads: filled with skimpily outfitted Spanish women with pulsating red lips; and the light bulbs: half flickering and burnt out hot pink and neon green, cast a dark air over the store. The effect, which was tolerated by the store's patrons, gave *Juan's Mexican/American Bodega* the distinction of easily being identified as any corner store, in any ghetto, in any city, in the United States. And it was, like its sister stores overpriced, outdated, questionable materials were slapped up haphazardly on cheaply made shelves to be sold to option less customers. The floors, half tiled and sticky complimented the ceiling, thick with mildew and over occupied flytrap coils. Each day patrons enter the store on their way to work or off to school to purchase anything from a newspaper to loose cigarettes called "Lucys." They walk cautiously through the aisles, careful not to kick over the cat or move in any way that might make the owner suspicious of their presence--"don't wanna end up like that girl in California." They fight with their senses to block out the deafening sound of Salsa music blasting over the sound system and the foul stench of rotting brown meat in the back freezer. All of this only to spend a couple of dollars on this or that, hard earned money that they slip through a small hole in a murky bullet proof window that Juan claims is to "protect" his store.

As Juan's youngest daughter, Esperanza sat watching *Los Hombres*, her favorite Latin soap opera, on the small color TV Juan installed in front of the store, Malik hung resolutely over the plastic countertop. A bag of Cheese Doodles and a can Old English in his right hand, his eyes, focused on Esperanza's happily developing breasts as they jiggled beneath her red lycra shirt. Watching Esperanza, whose skin was the color of cocoa butter, Malik fought with his desire to try to romance the young girl who was eight

years his junior. "Juan would kick my ass," Malik thought eyeing the inviting impressions of Esperanza's dimpled areolas through her shirt.

"Is you gonna pay for that or not Pappi?" Esperanza said turning away from the television. Her still green eyes, heavily framed with thick black eyeliner, focused on the items in Malik's hand.

"I told you I'd give you the money next week Mammi. I got you," Malik said leaning further over the counter.

"No Pappi! You say las time too."

"Come on Ma! You know I'm good for it."

"You bullshit me las time Malik. No more. My father is going to get mad at me," Esperanza replied putting her hand out for the money.

"Fuck Juan. You know he be actin all funny and shit. I got you Mammi. Who sweeps up for you in the morning when he ain't here? And I do be paying you back...come on Ma!" he paused. "Damn you fine," he added gently taking Esperanza's hand into his and kissing it.

"Stop," Esperanza purred without removing her hand from his grip.

"Come on girl you know you fine. Plus I been meaning to bring you something I got for you at the crib," Malik said playing with her hand.

"What is it Malik?" Esperanza said looking at him.

"Come on Mammi! If I told you then it wouldn't be a surprise when I brought it to you right?" He was bullshitting. "I want to surprise my Puerto Rican Mammi!" he added.

"I'm from Mexico," Esperanza replied pulling away just as Malik bent over to kiss her hand again. The door chime at the front of the store indicated that someone was entering. The two, Malik and Esperanza, embarrassed by their secret intimacy looked anxiously toward the doorway to see who it was.

Dressed in a powder blue Baby Phat velour jumpsuit Simone forced her way into the store. Tripping over a frayed door mat that had it not been for the missing "W" would have spelled out "WELCOME," she stopped to look down at her brand new Reebok Cross Trainers to make sure she had not scuffed them.

"Ghetto ass doormat," Simone said spitting on her index finger so she could wipe away a small black spot that appeared on the front of her sneaker. Noticing Malik and Esperanza's quiet stare as she dissolved the smudge, Simone struggled to remember why she'd entered the store. It had been sometime since she'd seen Malik and her heart was racing so fast that she looked down at her breasts to make sure her spectators couldn't see it beating through her baby tee. "Ya'll got any fabric softener in here?" she said purposely directing her eyes at Esperanza only.

"Yes Mammi in the back," Esperanza smiled nervously.

Malik stood still and silent as Simone walked past him towards the back of the store. He was afraid to move, afraid that he might knock something over make a loud noise that would force Simone to look at him. "Shit is cool. It's cool," he said attempting to convince himself that her presence in the store meant nothing to him. But he couldn't ignore it, her scent, a sweet mix of Johnson & Johnson Baby Powder and strawberry Muslim oils sat still in the air before him and he began to follow her, Simone his ex-girlfriend, his high school sweetheart whose heart he had broken just four years ago, around *Juan's Mexican/American Bodega*. First he stood far behind her as she moved from one aisle to the next, but then Malik suddenly found himself standing behind her in the back corner of the store. Beside the laundry detergent and pampers Malik stood watching Simone rummage through a dusty pile fabric softener boxes.

"You just gonna stand there behind me or you gonna say something?" a voice said interrupting his stare.

Malik looked to his left and then his right to be sure that the voice was speaking to him. Realizing that no one else was there, just him, the dusty fabric softener, and the voice, Malik fought to find something to say. "Am I just gonna stand here?" he thought as a confused "huh?" escaped his lips.

"Huh? I know you heard me," Simone responded turning to face him with a little blue box in her hand. She frowned, slipped past Malik, and headed toward the front counter. "How much?" she said holding her purchase up to Esperanza.

"\$1.75"

"Ok here's a five for the softener and whatever he was trying to get."

"Thank you. Come again. OK Mammi?" Esperanza chuckled stashing the crisp bill into the cash register.

Equally surprised and confused by Simone's generous gesture Malik said goodbye to his Mexican friend and quickly followed Simone out of the store.

"Why did you do that?" he called chasing behind her as she crossed the street.

"Cause."

"Cause what?"

"Cause I did. I don't know. I figured you was hungry or something. Figured that was why you was wrapped on that poor girl in there. Trying to kick the 'Willi Bo-Bo'," Simone replied hoping her joke would ease the tension between them. The truth was she didn't really know why she paid for Malik's stuff. Maybe she wanted to make him feel stupid, prove to him that after all these years she was doing OK, maybe she wanted to hurt him, embarrass him in front of the pretty Mexican girl, maybe she just wanted him to follow her out of the store.

"OK. Real funny," Malik chuckled. "But I was handling it. I ain't need-"

"Didn't look like that to me Malik."

"Well you just didn't have to," Malik said reaching into his pocket for money he knew wasn't there.

"Well," Simone replied gently placing her hand over Malik's. "Then I guess I know for next time." Simone turned and began to walk away.

"You look nice Monie," Malik called out to her before he had the courage to stop himself.

"Thank you," she said turning back to face him. "I would say the same... How you been? Your sisters OK?"

"They fine. Everybody is good."

"I know Kessa must be big too!"

"Big as hell." Malik quickly eyed Simone's body. He noticed her firm legs, freshly manicured fingers, and her navel ring with a tiny sapphire hanging from it.

"Yeah. I know she is."

"Yeah."

"Well OK it was nice seeing you," Simone said nervously. She wanted so bad to ask Malik what he had been doing with himself. She'd heard all about him being "smoked out" from Dante and his boys and while she was still mad at Malik she felt sorry from him. "Malik, tell Selah I said hi. I saw her on the train the other morning. Her dreads are so long now. How did-"

"You Dante's girl now?" Malik interrupted.

"I ain't nobody's girl."

"You know what I mean."

"Well if you asking I suppose you already know the answer," Simone rolled her eyes and whipped a tear of sweat from her neck.

"Simone he is dangerous," Malik said hoping he didn't sound too concerned. He didn't know if she knew it was him at the window that day, if she knew that he heard how Dante spoke to her, how he handled her.

"Yeah and so are most men. Like the ones who walk away from their responsibility and expect bitches to just clean shit up for them. They dangerous too, ain't they Malik?" Simone said angry at Malik's nerve. "You know what, don't answer that. I'm over that shit. Just...just enjoy the chips Malik. Take care of yourself." As Simone turned and walked away, one glowing Reebok Trainer after another, Malik stood watching her. He wondered why she was still so mad at him. It had been over a year ago since they'd broken up. He knew he hurt her but thought for sure that Dante was everything she needed. Dante could give Simone everything she ever wanted. Couldn't he?

African Booty Scratchers

A sea of moving blue suits and white faces confronted Selah as she and Deena entered the job fair at the Jacob Javits Center in midtown Manhattan. Riding on the down escalator towards a maze of tables stacked with company information and sign up sheets, Selah watched as confident students smiled and shook hands, passed along resumes, and handed out business cards. With each new face she found, each transaction she watched, Selah began to feel more and more out of place.

"I shouldn't have come," Selah said stepping off of the escalator behind Deena.

"Girl stop that stuff. I told you it's cool. Just walk around and see if you see something you like. You never know," Deena replied waving at one of her classmates.

"But no one else here has on red. I look ridiculous." Selah looked through the crowd.

"Oh Lord! I swear sometimes you sound fucking crazy." Deena stopped walking and turned to face Selah. "Look, you are fine. Since when did you become concerned with all this?" She paused. "Exactly. You know better than that. Now you have your resume so go and try to find something that works for you. OK?"

"But I-"

"But nothing girl! Your fine," Deena interrupted. "Lets meet up in like thirty minutes. I'm going to the other side where they have the legal positions. I need to find something to do before I start law school," Deena said pointing toward the back of the room.

Selah exhaled. Deena was right. She was overreacting, and since she was already there it didn't make sense to complain about it, she thought.

"OK girl. You right. I guess I'll look on here and try to find something in reception or something like that," Selah said unfolding a small map a woman handed them when they walked in.

"Great. So let's meet up back here in thirty minutes," Deena said, looking at her watch. "That should be enough time for both of us to stakeout the place, pass out a few resumes, and see if there are any cuties up in here."

"You so crazy Deena."

"Shit, girl romance is where you find it! And a new job, and a new man sounds great to me." Deena rolled her eyes and they both started laughing. "For real mama. You cool? You say the word and we out of here."

"I'm fine. I ain't looking for no romance. But I'm fine."

"See you need to open your damn mind. You never know," Deena said, turning away. "Thirty minutes. I'll meet you right back here by the escalator." She disappeared.

"Sure. Thirty minutes. Sounds great," Selah mumbled to herself. She looked down at the map and read the list of employers. There were over one hundred businesses listed. "Where the hell am I supposed to start," she said holding the map up. "All these damn businesses. This is crazy. All these people can't be hiring. I ain't see half of them listed in the paper this morning." As she read over the list of businesses, looking for one she'd at least heard of, she heard a females voice speaking behind her.

"Ok! Been there, gave them my resume, met them, scheduled an interview with them..." the voice said inviting Selah to listen. "I hope this isn't a waste of my time. Oh, God is my hair holding up? If Daddy would just give me that job I wouldn't need to do all this. Fucking evil stepmother."

"White girl," Selah thought noticing how the woman made a point to curl her "r's" and "m's" as she spoke. She'd heard them do that at the water cooler at her old job. She'd practiced in front of the bathroom mirror during her breaks; watching her tongue

hit the back of her teeth as she pronounced words like "mmmercedes" and "rrroyles rroyce."

"OK. Ms. Mathers. Now you only have four more potentials to approach and then it's off to lunch at Saks. Be good Ms. Mathers," the girl said cheerfully.

"Is this bitch talking to herself?" Selah thought attempting to look over her shoulder at the girl. But all she could see was a pair of shiny black patent leather Via Spigas's attached to two white legs. Curious, Selah decided to turn around to get a better look. As she turned she found a petite white girl standing alone behind her. "Crazy," Selah thought looking the girl over. Her hair, fire engine red, soft and perfectly straight, was as bright as Selah's suit. It was smooth and slick and it presented a striking contrast to her nearly transparent white skin. Selah eyed her suit--an immaculate navy blue and black checkered Chanel classic that sat perfectly on her size three frame. The girl was pretty, "White girl pretty," Malik would have described her, and obviously rich. As she continued to talk to herself, making little marks on a legal pad she held in her hand, Selah watched. She was in awe, strangely attracted to the girl. Her thin red lips reminded Selah of the women on the soap operas. Selah watched her mouth moving as she spoke, imagining her sitting beside Erica Kane on the sofa at Wild Wood; fighting Demetrie to stay on life support at General Hospital.

"OK, and we're off again," Ms. Mathers said shaking the hair off of her shoulders. She turned and headed down the aisle.

"Should I follow her?" Selah thought watching her walk away. "Oh, this is crazy I need to focus on getting myself a job, not *Ms. Mathers*," she added rolling her m's where appropriate. She giggled to herself, repeating the name over and over again as she watched the white girl with the fire engine red hair move from table to table. Selah watched her laugh, watched her smile at each person she spoke to. She was young, couldn't have been a day over 21 but her smile was so confident, so assured, that she

appeared as if she was the one interviewing people for jobs. Selah watched her say her name, shake hands firmly, wink her eye, and hand each person a creamy starched resume. She was perfect. They'd be crazy not to hire her on the spot, Selah thought.

"Selah Johnson. And how are you? It's an honor to meet you. Could I leave you my resume, please?" Selah practiced, winking her right eye at no one. "Selah Johnson. And how are you? It's an honor to meet you. Could I leave you my resume, please?" she repeated watching the girl, saying her lines as Ms. Mathers said hers. Selah smiled. She sounded good--almost perfect. The only difference between her and Ms. Mathers was about \$1,500 worth of Chanel and a head of unruly dreadlocks. Confident in her lines, Selah repeated them carefully: "Selah Johnson. And how are you? It's an honor to meet you. Could I leave you my resume, please?" She turned to see the Goldman Sachs table before her and immediately walked over repeating her lines over and over again. She was a winner, a woman from the soap operas.

"Selah Johnson. And how are you? It's an honor to meet you. Could I leave you my resume, please?" Selah said quickly before realizing that she was actually speaking to another person.

"Excuse me?" the old white woman behind the table said looking at Selah curiously.

"Selah Johnson," Selah repeated extending her hand as she watched Ms. Mather's do. "I apologize."

"Oh, don't be nervous. I'm Laura Stevens. I'm a human resources manager at Goldman Sachs. Are you graduating? From what school? NYU or Columbia? What is your major? We have many opportunities for all areas at Goldman Sachs," the woman said smiling.

"Oh, um... And how are you? It's an honor to meet you," Selah said trying to breathe. Why was she so nervous, she kept asking herself? "I mean I'm not a student. I'm just looking for a job." She was messing up the lines.

"Well that's fine. What year are you?"

"Year?" Selah asked confused. "Oh, I never went to college. I'm just looking for a job."

"Oh, I see. Well we don't have many opportunities like that available. You would pretty much need a degree to apply for any of the positions available right now," the woman said shaking her head. "Wait a minute. Someone did mention something about a receptionist leaving before I left this morning. Do you have experience in reception?"

"Yes, I do. I actually just left a job in reception at Aaron and Webster," Selah said smiling. She couldn't believe her ears. Deena was right. She was acting crazy. Now she could get a job at Goldman Sachs... maybe even buy a Chanel suit, she thought.

"Awesome! Do you have a resume?" the woman asked.

Selah opened the resume folder she borrowed from Deena, and reached for her resume. As she pulled on the winter white sheet with her left hand, trying to separate it from the paper clip the woman at copy store put on it, the edge of the paper turned upwards. The woman smiled and helpfully reached across the table to hold the folder in place. As the sheet came a loose the edge grazed the woman's lower lip. Selah let go of the resume and looked at the woman's face. At first there was nothing. A scowl appeared on the woman's face and Selah apologized. But as the woman attempted to smile, cordially accepting Selah's apology blood began to run from her lip. Thick and red, it fell from her lower lip staining the resumes. The woman touched her lip and looked down at her hand. It was almost covered with blood.

"It's just a paper cut," Selah said, nervously watching as the woman's face flushed with fear. She kept looking at her hand as she tried to hold her lip to stop the bleeding. Horrified, Selah asked the woman if she had a tissue but the woman couldn't speak and people were beginning to gather at the table. "Fuck," Selah thought, reaching into her pocket to look for a napkin. "She...she's OK. It's just a little paper cut," Selah said to the small crowd. "Does anyone have a napkin?" Selah asked as the woman covered her face and quickly walked away from the table. Embarrassed, Selah rolled her eyes and looked at the mess on the table before her. Her bloodstained resume was at the center of the table. Quickly looking over her shoulder, Selah picked it up, forced it back into her binder, and walked away from the table.

"I can't do anything right. I can't do anything fucking right," Selah said angrily. "I'm hopeless. Fucking hopeless. No ones gonna hire my ass. No one." She walked towards a table with refreshments on it. "I might as well just stand here and wait for Deena. Why did I come here in the first place?" Selah began to pick over the picked over fruit trays. "Nothing red. That's the last thing I need! Fucking red suit!" Selah said eyeing the strawberries.

"I think the suit is just fine. African people shouldn't be afraid to wear color," a voice said from the other side of the table. Selah looked over to find a short black woman standing across from her.

"Oh I'm sorry. I'm just tired," Selah said looking at the woman. She was so little. She couldn't have been a foot taller than Kessa, Selah thought peeking over the table to see if the woman had heels on.

"Plus it makes your hair look so pretty," the woman added. "Silver Braxton. And you are?"

"I'm Selah Johnson. I'm sorry I was babbling."

"Oh we all have bad days sis. You just gotta keep face. That's all to it. Remember that you're better than half of these people in here. I know that from looking at you. Your black and your a woman right? That gives you at least 50 billion plus points from the door," the woman said smiling.

"Thanks. I needed to hear that," Selah said giggling at her suggestion. "50 billion points sounds good to me."

"Are you here looking for a job?"

"Unfortunately."

"See, there we go with the negative thinking. Positive thoughts. Always positive thoughts," the woman said patting at her short Afro. "Now I'm here to interview these rich little white kids for positions I know half of them are not qualified for. But the woman must do as the boss says...if she wants to get paid." They both laughed. "See now that was easy. You're smiling now."

"Yeah, your funny. Where are you from? I mean what company? I'm just ask--"

"Oh it's nothing," she interrupted. "I'm a junior partner at Lighthouse Pharmaceuticals. It's a small corporation. Only about one thousand employees, but we gross upwards of fifty million a year. Anyway, the CEO, Mr. Whitey, yes, that's his name, thought it would be a good idea to send me down here to look at new recruits for our sales division. I'm the poster black child."

"Wow!" Selah said. She'd never heard of Lighthouse Pharmaceuticals before, but already she could imagine what it must be like to work there. Clean white walls; clear floor to ceiling windows in offices over looking the city; long lunch breaks with Max, no Maxwell, in the cafe on the corner. "That sounds interesting."

"Not as interesting as this here hair of yours darling!" the woman said touching Selah's dreadlocks. "How long have you been growing it?"

"Oh forever. My mother locked it when I was about eight. My hair was so thick when I was young. I cried every time my mother combed it. She hated perms and figured the locks would be best for me."

"Go ahead Mama!"

"No it wasn't that cool. I mean I hated her for it. Everyone had perms," Selah said remembering the first time she went to school with the thick dreadlocks in her hair. Her mother sat up late with her, twisting it with sticky beeswax the night before. "Don't take this out Selah!" her mother warned as Selah cried furiously with her head resting between her thighs. She wanted a perm, a perm like the girls at school. She wanted to see her scalp, feel her hair on her shoulders, and shake it off like the white girl in the *Pert* commercial. When she entered P.S 128 the next day, the other girls looked at her whispering. Selah tried to ignore them, clinching a wrinkled brown paper lunch bag in her hand. She sat down at her desk in the front of the classroom and looked up at the board. She could still hear them behind her, but determined not cry she repeated the words her father said to her that morning as they stood waiting for the school bus in front of Ms. Ella's house. "You're a beautiful African princess, baby girl. Just remember that. You're Daddy's African princess." As Selah repeated it for the fifth time the teacher, Mrs. Brown, got up from her desk and greeted the students. "Good morning third graders," she said with her round face. "Good morning, Mrs. Brown," the class replied in unison. "Well I see little Selah has a new hairstyle," she said looking at Selah hiding behind a copy of *Amelia Bedelia*. "Doesn't she look lovely?" she asked the class. "No," someone called from the back of the classroom. "She looks like a African booty scratcher!" The class laughed. "I hated these damn dreads when my mother put them in." Selah remembered reaching for a piece of fruit on the table.

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that. They're still lovely. Sometimes it's about the journey! It's about hating you, and then learning to love you," the woman said looking at

Selah. "Anyway, duty calls, I must get back to work, and you must get back to looking for work! You know, let me give you my card. You should call me. You never know what positions we might have for a sister like you at Lighthouse. Lord knows we need more of *us* up in there," she said pulling a business card out of her pocket.

"Well I don't have a degree. I mean I never went to college. I'm just here with someone. I mean I need a job, I'm just not qualified and--"

"Call me on Monday...no, better yet, come by the office at 9am on Tuesday. We'll find something." The woman winked at Selah.

"Great. I'll do that. I'll come. Thank you so much," Selah said, taking the card.

"No problem. We lift as we climb sister, us Africans. Remember that."

September 19, 1991

Mama,

Today they both came to dinner with cards. Selah gave me hers first. She handed it to me and then pushed Malik in front of her. I read it.

HAPPY FATHERS DAY.

Selah's had macaroni she stole from the canister in the kitchen pasted in a big heart on the front of it and Malik's had two stick men standing together underneath a big orange sun. I let the cards fall to the table. I told the children to sit down and eat their dinner. I told them that their father was not home. He'd read them in the morning.

Selah started crying first. She turned her eyes down to the table and cried all over my spaghetti and meatballs. Then Malik started. Then I started.

Christmas, Birthdays, Easter, Valentines Day, Fathers Day, and New Years Eve. I counted all of the holidays in the kitchen after dinner. Selah washed the dishes and I sat at the table going over the holidays in my head. I know I don't have them all. Memorial Day, Labor Day. Every time I think about it I can remember another one. People send cards and give gifts and make phone calls on holidays. I spend them crying. With Selah and Malik. My mailbox is empty, the phone has been off since Lincoln got laid off. I remember your birthday. It is in July when the heat in Alabama is so hot the cows sweat and the church has to order a second set of hand fans. Daddy's birthday is on Valentines Day and Jesse's is the first day of December. I was born.

Goodnight Moon

The wind welcomed Selah as she entered 139th St. Happy with the prospects of getting a new job she turned the corner onto the block with a huge smile on her face. The wind quickly wrapped around her body and tickled the hair on the back of her neck. She rolled her head back over her shoulders and took a deep breath, pulling in its familiar scent. The smell, a strong collection of stale cigarette smoke, fresh cut grass, and thick curry from the kitchen of the Jamaican family on the corner, reminded Selah of the hot summer nights she spent playing on the block as a child.

Selah giggled remembering sitting in front of her house for hours, as the heat in the neighborhood grew hotter with each passing night. Too poor to buy an air conditioner or the window fan her mother had been eyeing at the furniture store on Jamaica Avenue, Selah and her family sat outside on the stoop to escape the heat that seemed to seep from the walls in their small two-family house. They were not alone. As June melted into July and July swelled into August the heat grew to make 139th St. look more and more like a block party each night. Old, young, even pets--everyone on the block sat hopelessly in front of their homes until sleep or the rising sun forced them indoors. They all sat, agreeing with nods and waving hands that the heat on 139th St. seemed more hellish than anywhere else on the earth.

Old Mr. Sam sat his black and white 13-inch on a little stand on the sidewalk. All of the men huddled over it each night to watch the Knicks play the Celtics or the Giants take on the Jets. The children, nappy headed little boys dressed in too tight Letigre shirts and chocolate sun-kissed girls in pastel linen tube tops, played *Red Light-Green Light* and *Mother May I* until the sun went down. Miss Ella served up generous portions of homemade Lemonade in bell jars and *red* flavored Kool-Aid ice cubes with toothpicks in them. Some nights Tiny and Lil' Ray, the twins who lived in the blue and white house

next to Selah's, put their radio in their front window and folks would get up and dance to *Atomic Dog*, *Jamaica Funk*, and *Good Times*. Everyone looked on laughing as the older folks showed off dances like The Hustle and The Chicken and teenagers demonstrated The Whop and The Kid-&-Play. Selah and Deena would sit in the empty driveway beside the house licking sticky red juice from the makeshift ice pops off of their fingers. Toe to toe the best friends sat trying to escape the heat by telling tall tales of big blue water pools in white neighborhoods and salty cool beaches they'd never visited on Long Island.

Selah remembered how easy it was to live on 139th St as a child. Everyone on the block knew and looked out for each other. Babysitting, lending money, food, clothes, and sometimes even electricity was an everyday occurrence between the neighbors. Selah recalled walking to Mr. Sam's house each week to take him a plate of her mother's Sunday dinner. "Poor Mr. Sam," Grace would say, placing the same floral china plate in Selah's hands for delivery each Sunday afternoon. His wife, Mildred, had died of heart disease three years earlier, and ever since Grace and all of the other mothers on the block had taken turns washing the old man's laundry and sending him hearty plates of food each night.

Grinning happily at her own recollection, Selah walked swiftly down the street imitating the elegant strides she watched her mother take as she returned home from work each day. "This old block ain't so bad," she said, climbing the steps to her house. As soon as she pushed the door open Kessa came running to greet her.

"Mommmy," the little girl said, wrapping her arms around Selah's waist. Selah bent down, picked her little sister up off of the floor, and hugged her tightly. She lovingly kissed her on the cheek and closed her eyes. Kessa meant everything to her she thought slowly rocking the child back and forth. She was the main reason she stayed

when her mother died, decided not to go to college, sacrificed it all so she could keep her family together.

"My little KeKe," Selah whispered, rubbing her cheek against Kessa's.

"I'm not KeKe," the little girl demanded, pulling away from Selah. She was so cute. Her eyes, deep and clear like her mother's, looked like tiny crystal balls. Whenever someone looked into them, all they could see was their own reflection staring right back at them.

"Oh no, then who are you?" Selah asked surprised at Kessa's declaration.

"I am Kessa! Kessa Nicole Johnson."

"Oh! Really and who taught you that?"

"Lucretia Watson. Her told me—"

"She," Selah interrupted, correcting Kessa's grammar as their mother had done to her.

"Yeah, I mean *she* told me that KeKe is a stupid name and that I'm too old for it."

"Oh really! You mean that big headed girl that lives up the street?" Selah asked, remembering the little girl who all the other kids on the block feared. Ever since Kessa was old enough to go outside and play she had been tormented by Lucretia Watson. Selah had been forced to walk up the street and visit Lucretia's mother on several occasions to complain about the child's behavior. The woman, a single 23 year old with three other children smaller than Lucretia, usually smacked the little girl a couple of times right in front of Selah and assured her that it would never happen again. But it never seemed to do any good. It was almost a guarantee that whenever Kessa ran into the house crying or showed up at the front door with a busted lip or a bruised knee, Lucretia Watson had something to with it. Sometimes Selah felt like whipping Lucretia's butt herself--pulling her over her knee right outside like the other grown ups did when she was young. Things were so different then, people didn't have to call your mother when

you did something wrong. They would just pick you up and spank you as if you were their own child. "And what makes Lucretia Watson so smart?" Selah added.

"She in my class too and she older than everybody else in the first grade. She eight."

"Oh she's eight. Hum...well that's too bad Ms. Kessa Nicole Johnson. Because I don't know what I'm going to do without my KeKe."

"Really?" Kessa looked at Selah confused.

"Yeah, she was my best friend. I'm really going to miss her," Selah said, looking away from Kessa. "I'll miss our special bubble baths, pillow fights, Saturday morning cartoons.... Yeah, I'm going to miss her. But I understand, I mean if Lucretia Watson says-"

"Well maybe you can still call me Ke-Ke," Kessa blurted out at the thought of not being her big sister's best friend.

"Really?"

"Yeah but just you...Nobody else," Kessa said, leading Selah to the kitchen. "And not in front of Lucretia either."

"Ok. Not in front of Lucretia." Selah put her things down on the kitchen table and started looking for something to cook for dinner. "Where's Malik?" she asked, remembering how Kessa had rushed her past Malik's usual resting place in front of the TV in the living room.

"Oh we was in your room watching some cartoons."

"My room?"

"Yeah, him said the TV in the living room blowed out."

"*He* said it *blew* out." Selah corrected her again.

"*Blew* out," Kessa said, sitting down at the table.

"How did the TV blow out?"

"I don't know," Kessa lied. She shrugged her tiny shoulders like Malik taught her. She knew how the television had broken. She sat a big glass of milk on top of the old big screen when she got home from school earlier. As she sang and danced along with her latest Barney tape she accidentally bumped into the television and knocked the glass down. The cold milk seeped into the television and after a flood of flashing lights erupted from the back it shut off. Frightened, Kessa cried and cried until Malik ran into the living room to ask her what was the matter. "I broked it," she said. She pointed at the blank screen. "Oh, damn you spilled the milk on it?" Malik asked, looking at the empty glass on the floor. Kessa burst into tears. "Oh you ain't mean it KeKe. It's ok," he added. "But Selah is gonna be mad at me," Kessa whimpered. "We don't have to tell her KeKe. Let's just say it just broke. It will be our little secret. OK?" The two sealed their secret by locking middle fingers and hugging. Malik told Kessa to just shrug her shoulders, say "I don't know," and change the subject when Selah asked about the broken television. Remembering her last command Kessa blurted, "Can I get a bra?"

"What? Where did that come from?" Selah asked.

"Everyone at school has one."

"I doubt that Ms. Kessa. And first you need to get something to put in a bra," Selah replied. She pulled a box of hamburger helper from the cabinet. Malik walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table beside Kessa. Feeling him behind her as she searched in the freezer for some old chopped meat to go along with their meal, Selah said, "Oh we don't speak in this house anymore?"

"I thought you was still mad at me."

"Well I am still mad. You acted irresponsibly yesterday. Something could have happened to Kessa. Thank God Ms. Ella saw her. You really need to go and thank her personally," Selah said, tossing the small bag of frozen meat into the microwave. "But not tonight. Tonight we are celebrating."

"Celebrating what?" Malik replied. He looked at Selah blankly.

"I think I got a new job today...well actually I'm pretty sure of it," Selah said, doing a happy two-step in front of Malik. He cracked a smile and tried to push Selah out of his way but she kept on dancing.

"You crazy. What kind of job?" he asked.

"I don't yet. But I have an appointment on Tuesday and I'm pretty sure I will get it."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure silly! Now lets celebrate! We'll have a good dinner and then a big slumber party in my room." Selah returned to the stove.

"Yeah! Slumber party! Slumber party! Can we have popcorn too?" Kessa said, jumping out of her seat at the table.

"We sure can, baby. Now go wash your hands for dinner." Kessa ran out of the kitchen to wash her hands. Malik got up and stood behind his older sister at the stove.

"I'm sorry I let you down Selah. I really am. And I'm happy you got your new job." He pushed his hands into his pockets and waited for her to reply. He'd been trying to find a way to say he was sorry all day. He'd really forgotten to pick Kessa up and couldn't blame Selah for being mad at him. He only wished she could forgive him. He'd never really gotten along with Selah, but more and more he was beginning to feel like he needed her to survive. He was sick, he knew it, and the only person that could help him was Selah.

"It's OK Malik. It's squashed," Selah said. She turned to face her brother.

"Thanks for last night too. I mean the whole closet thing. I needed someone to put their foot in my ass. I know I'm fucking up."

"It's not about "fucking up" Malik. It's everything. You need to stop fucking with those drugs. That's it."

"I know Selah. I ain't using ever again. I'm going cold turkey right now. No weed, cigarettes, or nothing. I ain't even going out. And I'm serious this time," Malik said, tapping his fingers on the table with each word. Selah grabbed his hand and held it in hers.

"You serious every time Malik. Why should I believe you now?" she said, squeezing it tightly.

"Cause I want to live, that's why, Selah. Cause I don't want to die in the street like a crack head. Cause I'm you brother, Selah."

"And as my brother, I'm telling you that this ain't the way, Malik." Selah paused and listened for Kessa. "You need help. You need some real help, like a center or something," she whispered. "If we try it this way again I know we gonna fail. You can't just stop using drugs Malik, everybody knows that."

"Don't you think I know that Selah?"

"I know you know it but I don't think you hear me. I'm afraid of what might happen to you," Selah said, thinking of all of the people from the block who died trying to kick without help. Many of them got ill and just died, or they went crazy, used other things around the house to get high and poisoned themselves. A Dominican girl from the corner that she went to high school with drunk a bottle of ammonia one day trying to get high after her family tried to stop her from leaving the house.

"Ain't no reason for you to be afraid Selah," Malik rested his elbows on the counter and looked up at the cabinets. "I'm a man. And if I need to do something then I'm just gonna have to do it. Ain't nothing no center gonna do for me that I can't do myself. Plenty of niggas from the block done went there and came home clean for about three days." He turned and looked back at Selah. "Then they was back out on those streets. I can do that myself." He paused. "I'm a man Selah. I'm a man. I can do this." Selah put her arms around Malik and squeezed him tight.

"I know you're a man, Malik. I'm just worried. That's all. That's all it is. I got your back." She looked up at her baby brother and put her hand out for him to give her five. Malik put his hand out and hit his sister's in the air. "Oh that's how we give dap nowadays?"

"I'm saying you had your hand out all funny like we on MTV or something. I ain't know you was still down." Malik took his hand back and held it up again. Selah wrapped her hand into his, grasped it tight and slid her hand away slowly snapping her fingers against each of his. "That's better. Much better," Malik said, smiling Selah. "The kid is back."

After feasting on hamburger helper and drinking two liters of Sunkist orange soda Selah, Malik, and Kessa put on their night clothes and climbed into their mother's old bed for the slumber party. They watched old reruns of Scooby Doo on the cartoon channel and ate popcorn until their stomachs hurt. They sat up at the head of the bed and snuggled beneath the sheets. It had been a while since they'd had one of their slumber parties and all three of them were happy to be together in their mother's bed again. After Grace died and Selah moved into her room the three slept together in the king-sized bed. Smelling her perfume on the sheets and finding strands of her curly hair in the pillows made them feel close to her and allowed them to pretend, for one moment, that she was still alive. For weeks the trio cuddled together in the center of the bed, imagining their mother smiling down at them. It became a ritual, a way for them to avoid bad nightmares and rest peacefully.

After the midnight cartoon went off Selah sat up in the bed and looked over at Kessa. She wasn't surprised to find the little girl's eyes wide open. Kessa loved cartoons and would stay up all night watching them if she let her.

"Ok Ms. KeKe, time for bed. Lets say our prayers," Selah said pulling Kessa out of the bed. Malik woke up and joined them as they knelt down at the side of the bed as their mother taught them. Kessa pressed her little hands together.

"Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the lord my soul to take.

God bless Selah and Malik, and Ms. Ella, and Uncle Tony, and Ms. Hill, and God Bless Lucretia Watson. Amen."

All three blessed themselves and climbed back into the bed. After trading kisses they took their places in the bed. As usual Selah laid in their mother's old spot on the end near the window, Kessa in the middle, and Malik laid on the end near the door. After Selah turned off the television the room filled with dark silence and they closed their eyes.

"Goodnight Malik," Kessa said, interrupting the silence.

"Goodnight," he replied.

"Goodnight Selah," she added giggling. They all knew where this game was going. Kessa did it almost every night—her last attempt to stay awake.

"Goodnight Kessa," Selah said un-amused.

"Goodnight everybody"

"Goodnight," they all said.

"Goodnight moon."

"Kessa. Go to bed," Selah said firmly.

"Ok. One last one," Kessa begged.

"Go ahead."

"Goodnight Mommy Grace in heaven."

There was silence.

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