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But They Mean to Do Right: Stories on African American Male Teachers

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But They Mean to Do Right: Stories on African American Male Teachers

K. Jahi Adisa, PhD

University of Connecticut, [2014]

This collection of interrelated stories seeks to disrupt the prevailing narratives of African American men. These narratives are social constructions that categorizes African American men as either respectable (good) or unrespectable (bad). In these stories, I attempt to expand these narrow categories and explore other possibilities of African American manhood. Through my research and creative endeavors, I have sketched out male-spaces of dad, brother, and son as being fruitful areas where my characters and where actual male identity form. The Critical Preface analyzes the historical and current trends of African American identity formation in general and African American men's in particular. Additionally, the preface situates my fiction within the broader context of African American male writers writing about African American men and others. Chiefly, I place my work among James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," Ernest J. Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* and *In My Father's House*, and Percival Everett's *Damned If I Do*. In this work, I show the relationship between my fiction and theirs, while at the same demonstrating how each of us resists the stereotypical categories of African American men, writers, and fiction.

But They Mean to Do Right: Stories on African American Male Teachers

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Table of Contents

Critical Preface	1
Strawberries and Tequila	44
Here's to the Bad Guys	76
The Last Cigarette	97
Nats versus Braves	121
Hidden Wells	142
But They Mean To Do Right	166
Square	214
A Good Caretaker	245

But They Mean to Do Right: Stories of African American Males Teachers

Disrupting the myth of our “narrow limits of tradition.”

When I started writing these stories about African American male teachers, I had to contend with two myths, two prevailing perceptions of African Americans: the docile, happy “Negro” and the brute, violent “Negro.” These mythological perceptions existed in the contours of the antebellum mind and in the structures of white supremacists’ world, where whites were perpetually superior to others, especially Africans. I also had to contend with the politics of respectability that began in the late-nineteenth century, where Postbellum African Americans viewed the behavior of poorer African Americans as unacceptable. These codified identity-markers have shaped the ways in which African American men are viewed; either we are seemingly content with playing music, entertaining people, or earning a place at the table, or we are aggressive, agitated, angry because the world hasn’t give us enough or anything, so we have to exhibit our frustration through physical force manifested in violence on ourselves, on our families, or on our communities. These identity-markers continue to follow African Americans even when their utility appears antiquated.

For instance, if one examines how President Barack Obama is discussed in the news one would be confused by the Janus-face caricature shown. At once, he is viewed as “weak” or “slow to act” and at the same time “a dictator” or “a tyrant.” Though most of these comments come from the political right, these and worse terms have been used by the progressive left¹. Another example: in a recent *The New York Times* article, television critic Alessandra Stanley suggested

¹ Cornell West and Tavis Smiley, for instance, have criticized the president as creating a plantation mentality, especially about African American journalists in general and MSNBC, specifically.

that “When Shonda Rhimes writes her autobiography, it should be called, ‘How to Get Away With Being an Angry Black Woman’” (par. 1). Stanley’s joke was a poor attempt at a pun on Rhimes’ latest television show, “How to Get Away With Murder”².

A final example comes from First Lady Michelle Obama. In her 2013 commencement address to Bowie State graduates, Obama used the history of the university and the history of African Americans’ quest for education during and after slavery and through Jim Crow segregation to demark a schism within the community. She said:

But today, more than 150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, more than 50 years after the end of Separate but Equal, when it comes to getting an education, too many of our young people... just can’t be bothered. Today, instead of walking miles every day to school, they’re sitting on couches for hours playing video games, watching TV. Instead of dreaming of being a teacher, a lawyer, or a business leader, they’re fantasizing about being a baller or a rapper.³

In her critique, the First Lady points to the real problem that exists within the country and particularly within the African American community. Yet, in this sense, her rhetoric makes being educated within a college or university system “acceptable,” whereas, to aspire to be “a baller” or “a rapper” is deemed unacceptable, an affront to the historical legacy of African Americans of the past who struggled to found schools to teach African Americans how to teach others in our communities. Moreover, this part of her address accentuates the roles of “a teacher, a lawyer, or a business leader” over the roles of “a baller or a rapper” with little regard for the difficulties and challenges inherent in all of these professions. In contextualizing the importance of education in

² Rhimes, the creator of *Gray’s Anatomy* and *Scandal*, has been successful with television series that offer a diverse cast; *Scandal* and *How to Get Away With Murder* feature African American women in leading roles and are often the objects of affections of white men.

³First Lady Obama goes on to cite statistics regarding dropout rates of African Americans and the economic differences of having a B.A. over a high school diploma. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqLpX1QPNNc>

African American communities, Obama misrepresents the *baller/rapper* meme as being one of uselessness, unattainability, and “fantasy.” Worse, by choosing two professions that are predominately African American and male, she implies/appears to be saying that those who fantasize about becoming athletes (the colloquial expression is baller) or rappers are lazy, unacceptable black men.

Like with many other commentators, the politics of respectability has had an equally long history, especially when discussing African American men⁴. Yet, First Lady Obama did not invent this meme. Nor did Stanley create the phrase “angry black woman.” These identity-markers of acceptability and unacceptability have existed alongside the dichotomy of docility and brutishness. Since the auction block, Africans and their descendants have been categorized and essentialized. In Query 14 in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson attempts to differentiate the nature and physiology of Africans from those of Indians and whites.⁵ Jefferson’s thoughts on Africans are presented as scientific observation, but in reality are completely racist imaginings. He writes, “A black, after a hard labour through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of morning” and compares enslaved Africans to animals when they are “disposed to sleep” (266).

Being categorized as “inferior” in the late-seventeenth and early- eighteenth centuries, and being shown as caricatures during the 19th and early 20th centuries, undoubtedly distorted the lives of formally enslaved men and women while creating within the broader white American-

⁴ Ta-Nehisi Coates’ “Charles Barkley and the Plague of ‘Unintelligent’ Blacks” traces this respectability politics to the Postbellum Era in the South when lynching was seen as a way of punishing those African Americans deemed as undesirable by other middle class African Americans.

⁵ In this section of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson posits what to do with enslaved Africans should they be emancipated; his conclusion is that “blacks... are inferior to whites in endowments of both body and mind” (271); thus, they must remain in bondage, as act of “natural history.”

psyche a feeling of unapproachable superiority⁶. Highlighting the effects of this distorted view on African American men, Susan Booker Morris suggests, “these misrepresentations served to disseminate the view of black men as well suited to slavery. These images offered nostalgic revisions of slavery times, protecting the idea that slavery was not harmful. But with emancipation, so the cultural narrative claimed, came the responsibility of whites to keep black men in the mindless docility that best suited them” (77). As a result of keeping African Americans, and in particular African American men, confined to their designated spaces of either acceptable docility or unacceptable brutishness, the narrative of what it meant to be an African American man became easily reducible. In essence, being an African American man means having to exhibit on a daily basis either “acceptable” mores, which are quickly though wrongly racialized as “white,” or “unacceptable” mores, which are pathologically deemed “black.”

Thus, the questions for me were how to create stories that would show the complexity of African American men without falling into this tradition? Could I ignore the realities of the historical identity-makers that came from outside my community but have been accepted by my community? Were there spaces where African American men could exist without being rendered sexist or homophobic?

In this critical preface, I will show the in-between spaces where I reimagine the lives and experiences of African American men. By first defining how “manhood” has been framed for African American men, I will explore male-spaces of dad, brother, and son, a trinity of maleness with its own set of complex realities. I will map out these spaces of normative African American identity formations. By focusing on the meaning of dad, brother, and son for African American males, I shall hopefully widen the scope of our possibilities in depicting African American

⁶ Mark S. Weiner’s *Black Trials* argues how the laws and racially based legislation altered the ways whites and Africans related to one another in purely master-slave roles (31-32).

characters. In other words, I will attempt to answer the call James Weldon Johnson puts forth in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*: "...to give the country something new and unknown, in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggles, and the passions of those... who are striving to break the narrow limits of traditions" (123).

Plotting the course for African American male-spaces

"Manhood" in general doesn't have a fixed definition, though historically white heterosexual men tried in earnest to establish a clear one that placed them at the focal point. What *manhood* typically connotes is a variety of male-associated *performances*⁷. Most of these activities signal physical and mental strength, dominance over things and other people, and power to *control* the outcomes or destinies of others. Either in military, in athletics, or in business, these become hegemonic structures, insulating and isolating men from broader "collection of meanings that we construct through our relationships with" other people (Kimmel 5). More important, when outposts are integrated by persons of color or "feminized" by women's presence in them, these spaces become disrupted and seem to lose their artificial validity and become less authentic symbols of manhood. Within the American context, there persists an idealized idea of "manhood," which privileges a specific *kind* of man in this role⁸. Because heterosexual white men of physical strength and sexual potency have become normative, their defense of and support for fixed definitions of manhood illustrates their fears and insecurities within themselves (Kimmel 9).

⁷ In *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men, Understanding the Critical Years Between 16 and 26*, Michael Kimmel posed a series of questions to young men in their early-to-mid twenties to discover where they got their ideas of masculinity and *unmasculinity*; and, not surprising they got them from the men in their lives (47).

⁸ Sociologist Erving Goffman suggested that the "ideal" American man was "young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sport" (129.)

Most of what we believe manhood means has been socially constructed and mythologized as authentic locations of masculinity. Terms such as “self-made man,” “man cave,” or “guy code” attempt to demarcate new masculine spaces that are off-limits to those of the opposite sex. These spaces are where *real* manhood and bonding occur, and they demonstrate individualism, homosocial grouping, and rules and attitudes that symbolize masculinity. In *Manhood in America*, Michael Kimmel explains these locations as controlling influences over men’s body and gender: “Self-making required self-control, and self-control required emotional control. So, for example, emotional outbursts of passion or jealousy, which had been associated with manhood in the eighteenth century, were now associated with lack of manhood” (128). In *Guyland*, Kimmel states that “guy code,” is “the collection of attitudes, values, and traits” that serves as “the criteria that will be used to evaluate whether any particular guy measures up” (45).

Measuring up is especially significant in locating African American manhood. The difficulty is that most of what African American manhood derives from comes with similar tropes, mores, and attitudes that prevail in white American heterosexual male spaces. Though manhood means different things in different cultures (Kimmel 9), for African Americans during and post-Reconstruction era, manhood was synonymous with community responsibility and protection. Part of this reason was that many formally enslaved men who had fought in the Civil War came back to the South to establish themselves. Once the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, these men found themselves in an unforgiving South but with new political agency. They went from being unacceptable brutes to being veterans, heroes, and literate men. Historian Heather Andrea Williams chronicles how “[a]s African Americans carved out provisional spaces of freedom during the chaos of war, literacy ranked high among their priorities” (31). Specifically, William focuses on how brothers and Sergeants Elijah and Henry Marrs shaped

their communities into self-functioning landscapes, equipped with their own “grocery stores, coffee-houses, and rooming houses for black travelers” in Shelbyville, Kentucky (67). Many freed people began constructing their own narratives of personhood. Yet, these narratives remained localized, in a sense, hidden from the dominant hegemonic view. Thus, active literacy and commitment to community and family were not seen as ideal forms of African American manhood.

Roughly around the time the Marrs brothers and clergymen were creating schools and small political agencies, an invented notion of African American manhood began to circulate. *Harper's* illustrator Thomas Nast created an image of a respectable African American family that was “Emancipated” and now able to enjoy a seemingly middle-class lifestyle⁹. One of the fundamental aspects of Reconstruction and onward has been the ability to vote. For African American men voting meant access to a power dynamic exclusively held for the privileged white male. Voting and literacy also assigned African American men a position within community and, by extension, family. African American men, and their families, could become noble and acceptable citizens.

Nobility is especially important to this newly constructed African American man. For in his previous dealings in the white supremacist South, he had no dignity, no respectability, and no purpose that wasn't oppressively forced upon him. Any construction of an African male identity was “essentially removed... through the process of enslavement. [...] The protective function of the African males suffered as they were helpless to defend wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters from sexual abuse at the whim of White captors” (Pierre et al. 23). Chattel slavery created a myth of Africans as animals to be tamed and beaten and killed. Though Nast and many other

⁹ Historian Fiona Deans Halloran argues that Nast's illustrations and sympathy for the newly freed people in his work was a signal for the nation to recognize African American men within the same American context of manhood.

Northern white and black people tried to dispel and disrupt this myth, the struggle to remove its stigma continued. Moreover, this marker morphed into a politics of respectability for middle class African Americans; hence creating within the African American community a double criticism where on the one hand, racist stereotypes continue to shape perceptions of African American men; and on the other hand, African Americans critically distance themselves from black men and women they deem irresponsible (Coates par. 6).

When I was writing *But They Mean to Do Right*, I thought about how to disrupt or rather reimagine these versions of African American manhood. With each story in the collection, I tried to reveal the malleability of African American men. To achieve this, I relied heavily on contemporary African American and American fiction written by men. In most cases, masculinity as a concept isn't explicitly discussed in their stories. Instead, men's experiences and choices become central themes and places of locating their humanity and commonality. Three African American male writers in particular seem to challenge the prevailing view of "black masculinity" in the African American community. James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and Percival Everett, in their fiction, demonstrated how African American men resist being categorized in order to conform to the way our society views us.

My reasons for focusing on "dad," "brother," and "son" as creative male-spaces are to further interrogate and explore where these spaces overlap; to show how the experiences lead my characters to certain choices; and to locate their essential humanity. Indeed, from "Strawberries and Tequila" to "A Good Caretaker" the men of the stories exist in one or all three spaces. In these spaces, as with Gaines, Baldwin, and Everett, I attempt to disrupt the commonly held opinions or perceptions of African American men.

Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* wrestles with the historical, reductive value of African American men in the country. His novel explores the meaning of manhood, justice, and redemption. Through this exploration, the reader finds his central character, Grant Wiggins, an agnostic schoolteacher. The novel is set in the late 1940s in fictional parish of Bayonne, Louisiana. Grant Wiggins narrates the story of how Jefferson, the godson of his aunt's best friend, has been labeled a "hog" and sentenced to die for a murder he did not commit. In the course of the novel, Grant Wiggins learns how to navigate the pitfalls of being an educated black people in the oppressive Louisiana parish. Jefferson also learns. He initially internalizes the label "hog" (Gaines 4), but after receiving a notebook from Wiggins, Jefferson begins to write down his thoughts and feelings, thus removing himself from the category. He is able to die with dignity (244). Through his own narrative, Jefferson elevates himself from an animal to a man (226-244). By valuing both Wiggins and Jefferson, Gaines's novel not only broadens the story of African American men, but he allows for these two men to transcend the stereotypes, or the dichotomy of a studious (good) versus brutish (bad) male.

Though my stories are set in the contemporary Washington, DC area, I, too, attempt to show African American men as transcending stereotypes and dichotomous labels. The setting distinction matters in that for Gaines the proximity of white and black social mores are in a constant battle. Within my stories, I try especially *not* to place African Americans in black-white dichotomous relationships. I didn't want their social mores to be based solely on their reactions to whites or white people's reactions to them. I wanted my characters experiences to be based on their insular relationships with their African American families and friends. Though myopic, centralizing them within an African American space enabled me to give them a fuller range of emotions, passions, and pitfall outside the context of racism, discrimination, or white

supremacist ideology. My characters are not, at least not consciously, constructed to represent an authentic black masculinity; however, by virtue of them being men of color, their manliness or masculinity and the meaning of it is displayed. This “showing” of black masculinity happens in spaces where my characters occupy the roles of dad, brother, or son. Similar to Grant Wiggins, the fictionalized men of *But They Mean to Do Right* undercut previously held myths about African American men and masculinity. The way in which they achieve this undercutting is by choosing to be more than what is expected of them.

This idea of being more than what is expected is heightened in James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues. In “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin examines a duality of roles. Indirectly, he also challenges the politics of respectability. In the story, the narrator and Sonny are brothers, but the narrator represents the family patriarch. He has a stable career as a math teacher and respectability as a veteran; however, Sonny when he’s first introduced seems only to be a heroin addict (Baldwin 103). Later in the story, the reader learns that Sonny is pianist who didn’t finish high school. In fact, when the narrator argues with Sonny about his education, he takes a parental tone: “Sonny, [...] if you don’t finish school now, you’re going to be sorry later that you didn’t” (123). Within this father/brother-son/young brother matrix, Baldwin gives the reader another way of examining African American men, their shortcomings, and their empathy. In this light, Sonny ceases to be marginalized as a stereotypical junkie-blues man, and the narrator ceases to be a disappointed parent. Blues music transports the narrator into Sonny’s world while it frees Sonny from the many torments (137). The story shows the tense relationship older and younger brothers can have. It also exemplifies how brothers can work through their differences and find some common ground. We don’t know if Sonny ever changes, but we do know the narrator has. And it is this change of opinion or idea that strikes me the most. In my work, I try to

show African American men living through their choices and decisions and outcomes as individuals and as people. As teachers, these men learn as the narrator does in “Sonny’s Blues” that their lives have more possibilities than the categories they assign to themselves or are assigned by others.

In my story, “Here’s to the Bad Guys,” the protagonist, William Proctor, struggles with his decision to turn in his two former students with whom he had an altercation in Adams Morgan, D.C. When William confronts Rasheed and Jamal, who were hooking schools, they refused to return to school with him, and Jamal stabs William in the shoulder (Adisa 78). To William, Rasheed and Jamal could have been more than just “dumb kids,” he wanted them to Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton or Guitar and Milkman or the Deacons of Defense (87). As with *A Lesson Before Dying*, the protagonist learns something more about himself than about the people he thought he was saving. William has already suspected his girlfriend helped her brother, Rasheed and Jamal elude the law (Adisa 88); what becomes a surprise for him is discovering that his colleague and friend Bobby Bethel may have helped them, too (92-93). William’s learning of the possibility of change for Rasheed and Jamal enables him to understand the importance of family and community just as Wiggins learns how Jefferson’s change from animal to human being broadens his understanding of his community. Likewise, the experience the narrator of “Sonny’s Blues” has with seeing his brother play enables him to recognize Sonny has transcended the unacceptable junkie label and has melded into the music (Baldwin 140).

By representing African American male teachers and their lives, my goal is to offer another way of seeing African American men, other than through the lens of pathology and social upheaval. Percival Everett’s *Damned If I Do*, my third example, bends and alters the ways in which writing about African Americans ceases to be about *being* African American and is

more about an individual *being* in a particular situation at a particular time. Everett's story collection isn't necessarily about the lives of African Americans. In his twelve stories, Everett uses various landscapes, from the Rio Grande to Washington, DC, and various *types* of characters, Latinos, Caucasians, and African Americans, broadening the terrain of creative possibilities. The one constant in his collection is that the protagonists are mainly men. All of these men learn something through their actions. For my collection, I utilize this sense of "trying to do something" or "meaning to do something" as an exploratory tool into why these men behave the way they do.

In his story, "Alluvial Deposits," Everett focuses on how Mr. Hawk, a contract worker for the Utah Department of Agriculture and the Fish and Game Commission, attempts to get the signature of an elderly racist white woman, Emma Bickers. Her signature is needed on form so that he can inspect the creeks across her property. After Bickers calls him a "nigger" (Everett 42) and shoots at him the following day when he visits her house (47), all Hawks wants is to make her sign the form. Hawks relentless pursuit for her signature demonstrates his pursuit for dignity and acceptance; yet, it also represents his attempt to disempower her racist. Nevertheless, he has to rely on assistance of the white Deputy Harvey to secure her signature and her pistol (58). Even with the success of getting Bickers to compel, Hawks realizes he "felt sorry the woman, alone in this cold house, scared of noises, scared of me. Then I felt stupid for giving a damn" (58). In this sense in attempting to do something right, Hawks learns that his quest to get Bickers' signature was meaningless in the grand scheme of things. Racism, as with the sediment deposits, still persisted and would require a lot of work to remove.

For all three authors, the scope of meaning for African American men, their lives, their experiences, and their relationships among other men widens. Though Everett does not

necessarily anchor his characters within clear familial relations as Gaines and Baldwin's do, his fiction offers my collection solid models in terms of enlarging the ways in which African American men's lives can be told and shown, other than historical upheavals, disillusionment, or abject failure.

Finding a contemporary "black male identity"

One point should be clear: historically, the identity of African American men has been fundamentally shaped by social and religious constraints placed on them. African American men have "to be" and have "to act" as responsible and respectable men while at the same time overlook the disparity that they face as African American men. So whatever "privileges" African American men have due to their gender, they still don't have the power or ability to change the conditions they find themselves. Because they are not truly part of the power elite, their "act" only carries but so much weight. And usually that weight is shown within the domestic space. However, if in *that* space they are feckless or impotent, if they cannot "prove" their manhood by virtue of being the breadwinner or the "head," African American men are powerless at home, too. Thus, the pathology of the absent black father becomes part of their identity even when they don't abandon their families. African American men *must* live up to an idealized version of themselves, one where being respectable in spite of the "inequalities in earning potential and employment and little access to educational opportunities" (Pierre et al. 25) can transcend them from "brutes" to "men."

However, this idealized African American man becomes a blackfaced version of the idealized white man (Summers 290). In her "Profeminist Approach" to reading African American male characters in African American male fiction, Janice Cools explains that because

“[m]any African American men’s masculinities are not affirmed” or even considered as distinct in men’s or literary studies, African American male characters are discussed in general or universal terms (34). In essence, any distinctions among African American male characters have, whether historically or culturally, been erased, or, to my way of thinking, reduced to implicit racialized poles. Thus, if their masculinity becomes generalized in the face of the complexity of their lives, then their identity, whatever makes them *identifiably* different, other than skin-color and manner of speaking, becomes meaningless (38).

For my part, I believe that my collection attempts to give meaning to these African American men; seeing beyond mere reductive roles, I allow their voices to express their complicated relationships that go farther than racial, social, and biological themes. That is not to say these themes do not exist in the collection; nor am I saying that roles of dad, brother, and son are not reductive. Similar to Jefferson’s explanation of himself in the penultimate chapter to *A Lesson Before Dying*, all of my protagonists show “a willingness to begin an earnest examination of” themselves (Brown 28). Jefferson internalizes the racist external forces that categorize him as an animal; thus his identity in the first half of the novel is that of a hog. In my stories, the characters do not have such forces shaping their identity. However, what they internalize is the decisions and outcomes of their experiences.

These experiences are shaped from what they learn as men and as teachers. One of the last comparable aspects of Gaines and Baldwin’s stories is the role of the teacher. Each character, as with Wiggins and Sonny’s brother, gains a greater understanding of themselves. They resist and undermine particular stereotypical labels of manhood or, more specifically, black manhood. They are not necessarily concerned with imitating white norms, even within

homosocial groups. Their fraternity is not only based on their racial background but also their profession. The stories are my attempts at widening the discussion of African American fiction.

Nevertheless, removing racial-signifiers as identity-makers may have not been completely achieved in *But They Mean to Do Right*. After all, I am African American and nearly all of my characters are African American, so the temptation to read the stories from a racialized perspective exists. Part of this reason is the fact that racialization in popular and academic discursive communities illuminate the complex relationships between African Americans and non-African Americans. Another part of the reason is that more attention is being paid to young African American men. Their plight has dominated the news media, popular culture, and the political arena. So to create fiction where the primary characters are African American men lends itself to be read in a particular way. One of the writers who rails against such readings of his fiction is Percival Everett. In his essay, "Signing to the Blind," Everett rightly argues:

[African American writers] are at the economic mercy of a market which seeks to affirm its beliefs about African Americans. An army of liberal book-readers marches into stores and feeds on fad and trend and reads, but not too deeply, and so does to our work what the movies seek to do. I do not believe that the works we produce need to be any different; the failing is not in what we show but in how it is seen. And it is just not white readers, but African American readers as well who seek to fit our stories to an existent model. It is not seeing with "white" eyes, it is seeing with "American" eyes, with brainwashed, automatic, comfortable, and "safe" perceptions of reality. (Everett 10).

Everett points to the problematic nature of *being* African American, male, and a writer. Almost without choice, the nature of things experienced by African American men has to be within the

context of racial-social-economic constraints. Little space is given to self-expressions that do not conform or affirm predominant ideas of African Americans. In his interview with Anthony Stewart, Everett contends that African Americans are exoticized. Everett says:

Being black in America, you're exotic in certain places and certain times. You're exotic if you're in New York and you're brown and you happen to be a Cheyenne Indian. But if you're black, "you're not exotic, we're used to you." You're exotic in that awful way if you show up at a fancy party and you're the only black person there. [...] And the same would be true of white Americans who wander into a party full of black people. But they're not exotic. They're simply out of place. (Stewart 299).

Because African Americans may be seen through a myopic lens, their work, especially their fiction, more than likely experiences a similar viewing. To wrestle with such a perspective my story collection attempts to show the complexity of African American men's lives. The roles of dad, brother, and son may seem reductive in a sense; however, these spaces allow for greater story exploration. None of the stories are answers to why there are absent black fathers or why young African American men kill one another. Instead, the goal is to represent the life these men live at a particular moment and a particular time (Stewart 296).

Still critical scholarship on "black male identity" focuses on the historical and socio-economic challenges to the duality of docility/acceptable or brutishness/ unacceptable. From the subversive nature of feigning ignorance to systemic disempowerment of African American men as root cause for internal violence, critics posit competing theories as to why these notions continue. Most of the recent criticism responds to the late former senator of New York, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. In his report, Moynihan

contextualizes how African Americans in poor urban areas faltered as a resilient African American middle-class progressed; he reasoned the cause for such a disparity was the absence of African American fathers in the home ¹⁰. In his reading of the report, Marlon B. Ross's analysis is that "the Moynihan discourse of paternal absence and matriarchal overkill latched on to the idea of Black male genocide... [His] assessment of Black men's behavior as reproductive disorder, combined with the assassination of the most visible and powerful Black men during the 1960s, proffered an ideology of Black male extinction" (603-604). Put in another way, by rendering African American fathers as absence, or their space within the home as invisible, Moynihan's report establishes an unacceptable narrative of the life of African American men, which becomes "The Case for National Action."

This "case" falls within the paternalistic role of the white-master over the docile, simple slave. Though Moynihan drew heavily from E. Franklin Frazier's scholarship, his use of the African American sociologist's work served to buttress the fatherly role Moynihan performed in constructing his report. Moreover, by arguing for "the nation," specifically to white Americans, to establish an understanding of the causation of lower-income African American strife, Moynihan concludes that:

the efforts towards the problems of Negro Americans must be directed towards the question of family structure. The object should be to strengthen the Negro family so as to enable it to raise and support its members as do other families. After that, how this group of Americans chooses to run its affairs, take advantage of its opportunities, or fail to do so, in none of the nation's business. ("Chapter V: The Case for National Action," par. 7).

¹⁰ Written in 1965, Moynihan examines how the breakdown of the African American family in poor, urban areas led to economic and social strife, high mortality rates, and single-parented homes, where the mother is abandoned by the child's father.

Almost in parental terms, Moynihan is suggesting that the nation model for those wayward African American fathers how to be responsible, acceptable men. And after presenting this model, should African Americans still not “take advantage” of the opportunities “or fail” then the nation has done all it could.

Malinda Elaine Lindquist links Moynihan’s report with Louis Farrakhan’s 1995 Million Man March. She writes: “Both the Moynihan Report and the march drew generously, if imperfectly, upon the scholarship of African American intellectuals... Notwithstanding their attempts to start a national conversation and set a broad agenda, the Moynihan Report’s and Million Man March’s emphasis on black boys’ needs for strong black fathers as male role models are most useful for what they reveal about the social scientific assumptions of the sixties and their cooption by black nationalists in the nineties” (221). The perception that African American sons “need” strong African American fathers isn’t anachronistic. Certainly there exist large pockets of young men and women whose fathers are gone from the home. In more cases than not, in African American households, mothers tend to be not only the primary breadwinner but also the primary parent. Still, what the report, and even what the Million Man March, missed are those systemic problems that cannot be so easily solved with a father in the home. This notion of a “strong black man” is meant to transcend the institutional and social racism he and his children may experience. As Lindquist rightly states, “As a nation, we remain of two minds on the matter, certain that biology binds father and child and simultaneously confident that social forces, policies, and commentators can and must strengthen these potentially tenuous natural bonds” (223). What seems most important here is that African American fathers are viewed from the outside, either by African American social scientists or by a predominate white viewing audience.

In *The Truly Disadvantage: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, William Julius Wilson sides with Moynihan in that he sees the stratification of poor African Americans as being endemic of the failures of public policies¹¹. “Social dislocation,” as Wilson argues, restricts the African American families living in “the ghetto” from ever finding a way out. Although Wilson acknowledges the presence of racial discrimination as a factor for this social dislocation, he also stresses that “the weight of the evidence on the relationship between the unemployment status of men, and family life and married life suggests that the increasing rate of joblessness among black men merits serious consideration as a major underlying factor in the rise of black single mothers and female-headed households” (83). Indeed, if the mythological, ideal man is one who can provide for his family as the primary breadwinner, then the African American man who cannot achieve this ideal doubts his very being; therefore, he leaves or ceases to be a responsible strong male role model that younger generations need, as Moynihan’s report suggests.

In my story, “Square” I imagine a space where this social dislocation doesn’t necessarily mean what Wilson states and Moynihan implies. The protagonist, Osei, lives in a single-father household. His father, Zackary, supports the household as a freelance public relations consultant. Having taken a buyout from *The Post*, his marriage shortly ends; however, it is the mother’s decision “not to split up” Osei and Zackary (Adisa 215). The father’s role, as similar to the mother’s role, is to comfort Osei after his friend lies on him. It isn’t that Osei needs his father to be a strong role model; however, it is necessary for Osei’s identity formation to see different versions of strength and courage. His father and his teacher, Mr. Fitzgerald, become examples of these differences. They were fearful when in the face of danger and were rendered helpless by

¹¹ Wilson primarily examines how welfare policies contribute to the breakdown of African American families as well as perpetual joblessness among African American men. These systemic problems exist largely in inner cities that have experienced stagnate wage increases and limited educational opportunities (63).

armed-robbers, whereas their friends either became hypermasculine or were killed. Osei thus learns that an overreliance to live up being brave and strong in the face of adversity can have dire consequences. He is also able to forgive his friend for lying on him (244). Wilson's notion of social dislocation can seem like a truism for African American families in "the ghetto;" however, this notion ought not to be. African American families can, and indeed do, find their way out of perpetual hardship. They also find their way out of these narrowly or rigidly defined roles of black identity.

Still, being "strong," "the breadwinner," and the defender against or scapegoat for white supremacist ideology can create another kind of dichotomous narrative within the African American community. The messianic black man and the demonic black man are versions of African American male identity. Each limits the space in which African American men can operate. Ronald B. Neal shows the pitfalls of these constructions in "Savior of the Race: The Messianic Burdens of Black Masculinity." For the messianic African American man, one of the major traps is that he cannot maintain or function for very long in this identity-marker. As part of a Black Christian Nationalistic construction, this ideal form of African American masculinity with its "revolutionary understanding of Jesus" became viable mainly for "elite black men" (Neal 52). Having an economic social status brings the discussion back to those without such an elevated status: poor African American men. Though the efforts of black theology are wrapped in the cloak of uplifting "the race," this lifting up requires herculean strength to maintain. For poor African American men, their entrance into the race depends largely on their acceptance of religious doctrine. But merely accepting the faith doesn't necessarily transport them into an uplifted space (Neal 56). In fact, in poor communities of color, young men are suspicious of

these messianic men because they see their level of hypocrisy and censure as just another form of hierarchal oppression.

In my story, “Hidden Wells,” the parents of the protagonist, Farouk Keftter, can be seen as these messianic figures in that they represent elevated members of their poor community. “Hidden Wells” is about Farouk’s attempts at rehabilitation. He goes to this facility, Hidden Wells, to appease his wife, who has threatened to divorce him if he doesn’t sober up. During his sessions, Farouk works out with his therapist, Bomani, who tasks him to describe the saddest moment of his life as a way to discover the root cause of his alcoholism (Adisa 142). Through flashback, Farouk recounts not only the saddest moment of his life, but he reflects on being different from the various poor people his family encounters. In these communities, his parents became de facto leaders, trusted to solve its members’ daily problems:

Most of the people in these neighborhoods respected my parents, our family. Even if they didn’t agree with my folks’ pro-black lifestyle, they at least knew my parents were harmless, possibly even helpful. If something went wrong at their jobs, or if social workers treated them unfairly, neighbors would come knocking on our door, asking what can be done, how can someone mistreat them this way, or was it possible for one of my parents to speak for them? My folks never said no. (144-145).

Having the community’s trust is a byproduct of the paradoxical nature of messianic manhood. On the one hand men such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Andrew Young, and John Lewis exemplified and became standard-bearers of an idealized black middle-class male who transcended the barriers of race; on the other hand, such men and those who attempted to imitate their lives became constrained by this kind of identity-marker (Neal 62). In short, the heights at

which messianic men found themselves was nearly impossible for them to maintain, and any mistake or shortcoming was magnified intensely. However, for Farouk's parents, their placement within the inner city of Washington, D.C. negates such a public scrutiny, and the physical discipline Farouk receives can be seen as a contradiction to this messianic idealized father. When Farouk remembers his father slapping him for calling another student "stupid," his father's momentary lapse of judgment seems to have altered their relationship (Adisa 147). However, Farouk, as with Osei, learns to forgive and move past his feelings of hurt (159). He doesn't see his father as brute, nor does he see himself as a victim. Farouk recognizes his drinking wasn't a problem; it was his decision-making (164).

Moving beyond hurt feelings and frustrations are essential parts of the African American male identity in my story collection. The men of the stories do not necessarily struggle with their identities, however. They understand themselves existentially and make choices based on the options available for them. To some degree, they are similar to the protagonists in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Instead of journeying to the south or to the north in search of themselves, my characters bungle through their lives and experiences while learning something of themselves and others around them. Their identity, thus, is a formation of relationships inside and outside of their male-spaces. Whether those spaces are "alternative forms masculinity," as Janice Cools might see them as, my characters "enjoy some of the privileges of being male" (Cools 37).

Reimagining traditional dads and single parenthood

One of the primary relationships within the male-space is that between a dad and his child. In urban and rural areas around the country, the narrative seems to be that African

American fathers are absent from their children's life. There is truth to this narrative. My father wasn't in my life, and many of my friends grew up without fathers in theirs. Single-mother households *do* exist in the United States, especially in large proportions of Latino and African American communities¹². Even President Obama's "My Brother's Keeper" initiative uses statistics to paint a dismal picture for "boys and young men of color who are having a particularly tough time" (par. 24). Little attention is given to the households where dads have full custodial rights of their child.

Roberta Coles, however, explores the relationships single fathers have with their children. One of the obstacles in their relationships is the balancing of parental duties with work responsibilities. Coles's essay, "African American Single Full-time Fathers: How Are They Doing?" surveys several full-time single African American fathers with custodial rights over their children. In this essay many of the men express the pitfalls and fault-lines with rearing their children alone. They feel conflicted with working overtime, taking off work when their child was ill, or having to bring their child to work with them (68). In chapter 3 of *The Best Kept Secret: Single Black Fathers*, Coles reveals how parenting their child becomes distinct from *fathering* their child. The role of being a provider is pivotal in the fathering roles, which both married and unmarried couples believe is a man's responsibility (38). However, when a dad has sole custody of a child, his "parenting identity" must accommodate multiple roles that include "nurturer," "friend," "authority figure," "teacher," and "disciplinarian" (43). These additional identities for single African American men varied and most within the survey maintained the traditional provider/nurturer role (60).

¹² According to the 2012 "America's Families and Living Arrangement" report, African American children are 55 percent likely to live in a single-parent home. In 2011, the report shows that only 44 percent of African American households are held by married couples. The total number of single-female households was 15.1 million; of that number, African American single-mothers represented 29.4%, Latina led households represented 23.1 %.

In “Square,” there are two single fathers who are within Coles’s taxonomy of identities. Zackary and Oscar are similar to the two fathers in Cole’s book: Lanny and Tracey. They are long-time friends who live in close proximity to one another and whose children interact with each other (Coles 40-41). In the case of my fictional characters, Zackary plays the provider/nurturer role but can also be seen as an authority figure and disciplinarian. When Osei, the protagonist and narrator, comes home early from hooking school, he is surprised to see his father, a public relations consultant, at the dinner table and feels obliged to tell his dad why he is home sooner than expected (Adisa 218-219). As this authority figure and disciplinarian, Zackary, through his gestures and facial expressions, communicates his disappointment in and fears for Osei after learning that he had stood up to a man with a gun (217).

In stark contrast to Zackary, Oscar has a closer, friendlier relationship with his son, Kelvin. Both fathers worry about how their sons responded to the threat of nearly being robbed, and possibly killed; however, Oscar feels that his son’s reaction fits a stereotypically brave male-space. Oscar says to Zackary: “You know I’ve taught Kelvin how to box. I mean, I’m not saying your son is soft. Let’s get that straight. I’m not saying that. All I’m saying is what’s more likely? My son standing up for himself? Or your son panicking?” (224). Oscar implies that because Zackary hasn’t taught his son, Osei, to box, Osei doesn’t measure up in the male pecking order (Kimmel 81). In this sense, through his teaching of physical self-defense, Oscar privileges and values his son more than reporting the would-be crime. The hypermasculine role of being able to fight or defend himself quashes the need for police involvement. Oscar concludes his argument by saying: “Jesus, Zackary, what you think? The guy is still hanging around?” (Adisa 225). Oscar’s basic message is that nothing serious happened; however, for Zackary, the whole ordeal is serious.

These two dads are the only single-fathers with full custodial rights over their sons in my collection. My goal in writing this story was to explore the outer spaces of bravery and male camaraderie. I also imagined a space where being a dad was more essential than being a mere father or simply a man. Zackary and Oscar are essentially different from the other men of the collection. For one, they are subordinate to the protagonist, Osei; nevertheless, as adult African American men, leave an imprint on the identities of their sons. Being fictionalized single-working-fathers, they demonstrate some of the pitfalls that *real* single-fathers and two-parent families have to contend with when raising their children.

Percival Everett's "The Appropriation of Cultures" was a great influence to my writing of "Square." In his story, the protagonist, Daniel, a somewhat independently wealthy African American man, decides he will "take" the Rebel Flag as his own by purchasing a pickup truck with a Confederate Flag decal on the back windshield. When the wife of the truck seller asks why should he want the flag on the window, Daniel's response is "Why shouldn't I want it" (Everett 99)? When Daniel is accosted by two white men, he calls them "brothers" and holds up his "black power" fists to young African American men, advising them to "Get a flag and fly it proudly" (101). This action is one of "appropriating" the meaning of the Confederate Flag, and, at the start of the story, "Dixie" represents defiance and blurs the lines of racial signifiers. By using the Rebel flag to signify "black power," Everett plays with the signification of racial symbolism. Though I am not signifying, as Henry Louis Gates might term it, I am appropriating another American symbol and icon: Ernest Hemingway. His story, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," has themes of marital disappointment and of cowardice and bravery in the face of certain danger; my use of Hemingway is an attempt to play with these themes and to reward cowardice by rationalizing that it is normal to be scared (Adisa 223).

In “Nats versus Braves,” I attempt to reimagine the traditional dad-space. To do this, I reread Ernest J. Gaines’s *In My Father’s House*. As with many of his other work, Gaines’s use of religion, the church especially, anchors his characters within a traditional framework “in the African American freedom struggle” (Martin 254). Within this framework, the “black church” represents not only a place of salvation for African Americans, but it has also been the launching pad for many African American male Civil Rights leaders. Yet, inside these religious sanctuaries the moral codification of manhood has complicated their relationship to younger secular African American men (Neal 55). The black church has also been a restrictive place for African American women¹³. Gaines’s novel unravels two competing themes: the valorization African American Civil Rights leaders and parental abandonment among African American fathers. In the story, Philip Martin is St. Adrienne’s reverend and Civil Rights leader. Undoubtedly his name is a signifier for A. Philip Randolph and Martin Luther King, Jr., both of whom hold a prominent space within African American’s historical freedom struggle.

The Rev. Martin is haunted by his past, which is embodied by Robert X, the new stranger to town who is there for “a black man’s conference” (Gaines 6). What the reader quickly discerns is that conference will be held between Rev. Martin and Robert X. As with Everett’s “Appropriation of Cultures,” Gaines’s use of symbolic racial signifiers alters the ways in which the character internalized them and accepted them as representatives of a greater culture meaning. The meeting alludes to the meeting between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; however, unlike this famous, though single, meeting, the Rev. Martin and Robert X’s meeting is contentious.

¹³ Julius Bailey’s “Masculinizing the Pulpit” chronicles how the AME church changed from the early-nineteenth century to the mid-to-late nineteenth century into a place “synonymous” with manhood. During Reconstruction, African American men’s ascension to power, illuminated for AME leadership a newer, attainable, version of manhood, one based on individual enterprise and competitive success (82-83).

After Robert X is arrested for being on the wrong side of town, Rev. Martin attempts to pay his bail, but in order to free Robert X, Rev. Martin confesses to the white sheriff that Robert X is his son (Gaines 86). He had had three children before became a reverend, and when the mother left the parish, he paid her three dollars. In order to gain his son's release, Martin has to sacrifice the African American community's Civil Right's protest for fair pay (92). Once released, Martin learns that his other children had died (98) and that Robert was there for "revenge... for destroying me. For making me the eunuch I am. For destroying my family: my mama, my brother, my sister" (99). In this scene, Gaines reveals the tension between the past transgressions of the Rev. Martin and the current societal problems within St. Adrienne. Martin's willingness to abandon the pending protest of a local white business is similar to his willingness to abandon his former children. The valor and reverence Martin has earned is undermined by his pride and selfishness. Thus, Robert's statement about being a "eunuch" represents the impotency of their father-son bond, and the impotency of Martin's quest to be the next great Civil Rights leader. Martin is powerless to the "law" and social norms of the South (103). The novel as a whole deals with the fragility of ambition and the overreliance of traditional norms of fatherhood and manhood. Both can lead to the destruction of family, community, and self. Gaines's novel is tragic in that his past alters the good that Rev. Martin has done as a Civil Right's leader.

There are, of course other institutions within the African American community that continues to serve as meeting grounds for men and women to create bonds. These, too, also have their share of power dynamics that conflict with their social goals with their chauvinistic beliefs. Organizations, such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), for example, privileged men who possessed the qualities of honesty, straightforwardness, and interest in Pan-

Africanism over women with those same qualities¹⁴. Sports represent yet another space where traditional male normative structures are formed.

So, in my story “Nats Versus Braves,” traditional norms of fatherhood are signified by attending a baseball game, wearing particular jerseys to show support, and being among other fans of the game. Baseball as a team sport is as significant to the Civil Rights era as boxing and the theater, and not only because of Jackie Robinson’s breaking the color-line. Negro league teams would often dominate semi-pro white teams and they earned their respect on the field of play¹⁵. For Jebediah Rosedale, the protagonist of the story, baseball is a traditionally male normative space, in which a father takes his son to his first game (Adisa 132). What I attempt to show is the problem of these traditional male normative spaces. Where Gaines uses the church and the Civil Rights movement to problematize traditional male normative spaces, I play with the history of baseball, especially African American men’s involvement with the sport, to widen the scope of Jebediah to include or reinvent a new tradition with his daughter, Porsche.

As the patriarch of the Rosedale family, the founder of an innovative school, which bears his name, and the employer of both his son and daughter, at his school and law firm respectively, Jebediah attempts to be the ideal American father. Through his play as a pitcher, Jebediah’s sense of family legacy is tied to baseball and order. When he comes into Porsche’s studio, Jebediah looks at a new drawing she has been working on:

On the canvas was pinned a photo of Jeb throwing a baseball. He looked away
from the photo to the light penciled drawing of the same image. He looked down

¹⁴Martin Summers argues in *Manliness and Its Discontents* that Marcus Garvey’s movement, as with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and NAACP, utilized Anglo-American and European notions of masculinity to reconstruct a purer, African American masculine identity.

¹⁵One of the definitive books on the history of the Negro League is Robert Peterson’s *Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams*. In his book, Peterson uses the news clippings and living former players to reveal and recount the history of the league and its impact on Major League Baseball.

at his daughter, snoring comfortably on the floor. Jeb never made the majors, but the scholarship got him through college, which got him to law school, which got him playing on a firm's softball team, which got him popular, which got him farther than any other Rosedale before him. (138).

For the first time, Jebediah is seeing himself the way his daughter, from whom he feels disconnected, sees him. This scene comes after learning that his son, Jefferson, and daughter-in-law are having extramarital affairs and that his grandson, Winston, doesn't want to go to the game (137). Jebediah has behaved more as a provider to Porsche than a nurturer¹⁶. He doesn't actually try to understand her. When they are leaving his office earlier in the story, he looks at her with her big headphones over her ears and thinks: "When I was her age, I had already traveled to Birmingham, Jackson, Mississippi, and Chicago. I had registered voters and performed sit-ins, had taken my share of beatings. What is she involved in" (122)? By critically assessing Porsche's worth in the context of the legacy of African American struggle and even within his own family's legacy, Jebediah sees her as a misfit and appraises her paintings "as weird" and "abstract" (123). But suddenly seeing himself through her eyes has a different effect on him than the one Robert X's confession had on Rev. Martin. Jebediah sees the possibilities of a newer tradition ensuring that his legacy will go on. However it will be altered because Porsche isn't Jefferson nor is she Jebediah. The fact that she will continue to love baseball doesn't necessarily mean that baseball as a traditional male normative space has changed. What I am attempting to show is that African American dads can nurture a bond with their daughters in a similar manner they tend to do with their sons.

¹⁶ Roberta Coles suggests that fathers tend to exhibit "provider" roles to daughters and "nurturer" roles to sons (68-69).

Brothers and Sons

Brotherhood and homosocial bonds among African American men offer dual modes of identity-formation. Stephanie M. McClure argues that these “fraternal” networks of brotherhood amalgamate both a European-American male model and an Afrocentric ideality of manhood (62). Within such a construction, African American homosocial groupings, especially African American fraternities, represent a “collective nature... of a racial masculine identity that points to the need of peer relationships and support” (60). Peer relationships and support are as essential as familial relationship and support. In “Strawberries and Tequila” and “But They Mean to Do Right,” I explore the lines between friends and brothers. Both stories have biological brothers in them. Both protagonists, Kojo and Joe, are the younger brothers. Both men experience a level of disorientation in the course of the narration. And, in the end, both are supported by their friends in the case of “But They Mean to Do Right” this role is played by Celeste, Joe’s love interest.

Another key point is that Kojo and Joe have parental responsibilities. In Kojo’s case, his child is soon to come; in Joe’s case, his children are his parents. As with *In My Father’s House* and “Nats versus Braves” the familial past is meant to illuminate current crises. However, in this case the crisis isn’t presented solely from the parent’s standpoint. Memory serves as a location device for Kojo in “Strawberries and Tequila;” however, for Joe in “But They Mean to Do Right,” memory causes melancholy and conjures up feelings of displacement and dislocation.

James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” uses memory and blues music to locate the familial bond between the narrator and Sonny. When we first meet the narrator, he remembers Sonny as being as “wild” as some of his algebra students, yet he wonders what he might look like as an adult (Baldwin 103). As the story progresses, we learn, along with the narrator, what Sonny has

been up to and what has caused his demise. Through the blues music, the narrator is able to find his younger brother; yet, it is also this music that dislocates Sonny from the rest of the family and Harlem and the world. Robert P. McParland writes that the narrator “experiences the communal emotions” of the blues (132), which “captures this [romantic] repetition, reliving, and transformation of pain” (133). Although the narrator supports his brother’s artistic pursuit, he also seems powerless in helping Sonny to find his way through the music. He says:

I just watched Sonny’s face. His face was troubled, he was working hard, but he wasn’t with it. And I had the feeling that, in a way, everyone on the bandstand was waiting for him, both waiting for him and pushing him along. But as I began to watch Creole, I realized that it was Creole who held them all back. He had them on a short rein. Up there, keeping the beat with his whole body, wailing on the fiddle, with his eyes half closed, he was listening to everything, but he was listening to Sonny. He was having a dialogue with Sonny. He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for the deep water. He was Sonny’s witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing— he had been there, and he knew. (Baldwin 137-38).

In this scene, the narrator comes to recognize that bandleader, Creole, has more control over Sonny than he. And through watching Creole’s “dialogue” with Sonny, the narrator is essentially listening to a foreign language that he had no idea Sonny could speak. His “leap into the unknown, where a musical structure shifts and one has to find one’s way” does not invite his brother to journey with him, only Creole, his witness, can be the guide (McParland 137). The narrator has to accept that Sonny is lost in the music; he, too, becomes a witness to be Sonny’s blues and has Creole as his guide.

Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness. (Baldwin 139).

This suffering and delight, this light in the darkness is what Houston Baker calls a "blues matrix" (10). In this pattern, the "tale" being "told" becomes for the narrator a way of locating what is inside Sonny. Besides drugs and disappointments, Sonny is filled with a music that requires his surrender, requires him to meld into the fabric of the band, the melody, and the song. He is neither free nor trapped by the boundaries of the outside world. Sonny is, as the blues, limitless as light and darkness (Sherard 691). The point here is that without Creole as the guide, the narrator would not be able to *see* his brother or *hear* what Sonny was playing (Baldwin 141).

In this dynamic, friends, such as Creole, are more than witnesses and guides. They become stand-ins for the biological brother. They do not necessarily replace the familial bond; they do, however, expand and cross the boundaries of such bonds. Creole's "boys," of whom Sonny is one, is another homosocial grouping. This fraternity of musicians relies on one another and supports one another. Similarly, in my story "Strawberries and Tequila," Kojo's "new" friends come to his aid. Though his older brother Ato is part of the story, he is like Baldwin's unnamed narrator, seemingly critical of Kojo (Adisa 46). Both older brothers live a somewhat safe, conservative life. In "Sonny's Blues," the narrator is a mathematics teacher, a veteran, a husband, and a mourning father (Baldwin 109). In "Strawberries and Tequila," Ato isn't shown *per se*; his character is revealed through Kojo's thoughts and memories, which represent an

authoritative figure who scrutinizes every decision Kojo makes. When Kojo believes his wallet has been stolen, he feels lost at what to do:

Calling Ayanna wasn't an option, and he wouldn't dare call Ato. He could hear his brother now: You're such a gullible fool. You think everyone is your friend. Well, they're not. They see you coming because you're green. You may be book smart, but you're not *real* smart. They just gonna keep take, take, take, taking from you because your hands are always out (Adisa 53).

For Kojo, Ato's criticism, though indirectly stated, is something repetitive. He has been scolded by Ato before, for Ato represents a hyper "moral reasoning and moral judgment" (Wood and Hilton 15).

Yet, through his burgeoning friendship with Bobby, who initially dismissed Kojo and constantly mispronounced his name, and his other male colleagues from Rosedale, Kojo makes a decision of his own. One of the men, Steve Fitzgerald, explains to Kojo that he has to choose "either to play the victim or be the hero" (Adisa 67). This choice is really between being honest with his wife, Ayanna, about how he got beat up, or to make something up, as Bobby suggests (59). The rest of the men agree, explaining to Kojo that to admit the truth (that a woman at the bar may have reached into his pants and stole his wallet) would be the worst thing for his marriage. The men's guidance and shared experience give Kojo a sense of brotherhood and bond that was lacking in his relationship with his biological brother, Ato. Throughout the story, the moral character of Ato weighs heavily on Kojo. Within Kojo's internal struggle to make a choice, I attempt to contrast what is morally right with what is socially acceptable. What is missing from here, of course, is Ato's recognition of Kojo's choice. In the penultimate scene, it isn't Ato's voice that Kojo hears in his head. Instead, he thinks back to what his father once told

him: “Honesty is a man’s only true source of integrity” (73). Both men’s attention to morality has been dislocated by Kojo’s experience. In essence, there are some things morality cannot account for, so when Kojo finally answers Ayanna, his words, like Sonny’s internal music, are not actually heard by the reader. Instead the reader is told that “his integrity slowly” leaves their bedroom (74). The reader can also see the power homosocial groups can have over an individual, broadening the male-space of brotherhood, and by extension, his family.

Family and their bonds are salient in “But They Mean to Do Right.” The title story shows the dislocation and disorientation of Joe after his parents move in to his home. For most of Joe’s life, the reader soon discovers, he has been distant, literally and figuratively, from his parents and siblings. Raised by his paternal grandmother during his preteen years, Joe is reared in a suburban landscape that shapes him. In the context of his adult suburban life, his parents are intruders; yet he accepts them, almost out of guilt, and allows them to take over his master bedroom, while retreating to dwell in the basement. Thus, even in his house, Joe is away from his parents. Moreover, Joe’s financial and career stability contrasts with his parents’ financial and job instability. Within their newly-established household, Joe is the breadwinner and his parents are his dependents. As with Kojo, Joe experiences an internal struggle. He wants to do right by his parents, but he is extremely annoyed with their intrusion in his male-space. Luke J. Wood and Adriel A. Hilton¹⁷ might call this Joe’s “moral experimental stage” and his “moral consequence stage” in that on the one hand he “engages his actions” of allowing his parents to live with him while on the other hand he is “evaluating the consequences” of his decision (Wood and Hilton 24). At play also is his fragmented relationship with his sisters, Carol and Terese, and his

¹⁷ Wood and Hilton outline in “Moral Choices: Towards a conceptual Model of Black Male Moral Development” five stages of African American male identity construction, which are, moral externality, moral experiment, moral consequence, moral negation, and moral internality (22).

brother, Calvin. Through his attempts to reconnect with his siblings and beg them to help take care of their parents, Joe realizes how far he has drifted from his brother and sisters

Similarly, when the narrator of “Sonny’s Blues” and Sonny are in the cab, the narrator realizes that part of his life has been “amputated.” Baldwin writes:

...as the cab moved uptown through the streets which seemed, with a rush, to darken with dark people, and as I covertly studied Sonny’s face, it came to me that what we both were seeking through our separate cab windows was that part of ourselves which had been left behind. It’s always at the hour of trouble and confrontation that the missing member aches. (Baldwin 112).

In the same way, Joe’s bonds with his siblings (Carol, Terese, and Calvin) were amputated. So when he meets them, it is as if meeting a long discarded part of himself. It is dizzying for him, to stand in Terese’s home and absorb the chaos of her life; he is overwhelmed by Carol’s transformation; and he is shocked by Calvin’s occupation and appearance.

Furthermore, when Calvin explains to Joe that for their parents “being clever and cunning mattered more than anything,” Joe’s response indicates that he doesn’t understand their attempts at providing a pathway for him to leave (Adisa 192). For Joe’s parents, “[u]prightness and honesty were nice traits, but they didn’t pay any bills” (193). Here I am alluding Kojo’s father’s advice and, subsequently arguing against Wood and Hilton’s “Black male moral development” model. Joe’s choices, like those of his parents, don’t come from some debased set of morals but from a sense of duty. Similarly, his parents, though more bunglers than burglars, felt a sense of responsibility to their children. Joe doesn’t necessarily see this; partly it is why he regrets being so dutiful. The other part is that Joe cannot admit that he still aches for that missing part of

himself. It isn't until he has a bout of vertigo that he finds himself longing for his parents and wishes they would come and get him (207).

Being disoriented either by vertigo or marijuana, Joe finds a way to reconcile his choice to allow his parents to stay with him. He also finds a way to express his feelings toward Celeste, feelings that up until then have been stifled. There are no great moral dilemmas in "But They Mean to Do Right;" what exist are moments of reconciliation and acceptance. Joe's parents, as well as his siblings, are the people they are. Joe learns this as Grant learns how to reconcile being Jefferson's teacher in *A Lesson Before Dying* and Sonny's brother accept his blues.

Conclusion

Situating my work among Baldwin, Everett, and Gaines isn't easy. In many ways, Baldwin and Gaines operate out of a known African American literary tradition. Their work speaks to broader social and racial issues, which my fiction limits. Gaines, especially, relies heavily on the Southern tradition; he plays with racial symbolism and social constructions of African American male identity. So too does James Baldwin. It is possible to read *But They Mean to Do Right* within the same literary tradition, though I would encourage the reader not to. As with Percival Everett's fiction, I attempt to be "uncategorizable," as might Anthony Stewart suggest. I attempt to expand the borders beyond the dichotomous acceptable (good) or unacceptable (bad) category. In connecting with Everett's ideas on African American fiction and subjectivity, moreover, I see his resistance to categories as refreshing and instrumental in developing a new discourse on "black" fiction. As a model, his short fiction offers varying perspectives. For instance, "House" is a story about Harry, a patient suffering from schizophrenia, and his plot to escape from a mental institution. Harry's ethnicity is never

described, leaving us to focus on him and his story. In “Age Would Be That Does,” the story centers around two elderly Latinos, Rosendo and Mauricio, and their bungled quest to kill mountain lion; the point of the story isn’t their heritage as it is their nearsightedness (Rosendo) and farsightedness (Mauricio) (Everett 80). In their attempts at killing the lion, but fail to see the animal, even when it sits beside Rosendo (88). The act of seeing beyond what close and farther than what’s near is vital to Everett’s overly message of *Damned If I Do*.

In *But They Mean to Do Right*, it is in the *meaning*, the ability to define the space to see farther than what’s near and to go beyond other definitions of manhood that my stories explore. The lives of these African American male teachers are so much more than being codified, dichotomous stereotypes. If these stories have any significance, if they attempt anything whatsoever, if they show or illuminate any of the male-spaces of dad, brother, son, then they are achieving what is *right*, they are mapping out a trajectory that goes beyond *narrow limits of tradition*.

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Strawberries and Tequila

If Kojo had been diligent and double-checked himself, or at least thought more carefully at the entrance of the Hove, a local sports bar near the Key Bridge in Georgetown, he would have A) never gone inside and B) turned around and driven back to Bowie, explaining to the guys the following Monday how his pregnant wife wanted him to stay home.

Instead, Kojo stood surveying the crowd.

A large greenish board mounted dangerously low over the hostess' head advertised:

MARCH SPEACIALS--- \$5 TEQUILA MADNESS.

Kojo figured out his best path through the dim maze of people. Bumping into the mixture of lights and darks and others, he scanned for his colleagues. More than once he had to dodge a whoohooing fan's fist-pump or sidestep a bubbly woman's overflowing drink. Various regional basketball games haloed the faces and heads of these professionally dressed drunkards. Muted flatscreens hovered at every corner and over the bar. The loudness of the people, coupled with thump of Euro-hip-hop, banged against Kojo's sensibilities. This wasn't like Applebee's or T.G.I. Fridays.

Now on his tiptoes, Kojo inched his neck up to see beyond a brown-skinned woman twerking in tight dark pants and a red-nosed bald man proclaiming his shit-facedness. Kojo started believing this wasn't a place for him. He rubbed and scratched the top of his head, wishing he could find anyone he knew. But there were only strange, moist faces. His brother, Ato's voice was in Kojo's head. He could almost hear his sermon about the worldly women and backsliding men.

This was a mistake, Kojo thought. He stood turning around as if lost in a maze of happy drunk bodies and faces. I should have told William, no.

For weeks, perhaps months, William had been asking Kojo to hang out with the fellas from Rosedale. William was Kojo's mentor, so to speak. Each new teacher was assigned a seasoned veteran to guide him through the pitfalls of being a first-time teacher at the charter high school. Kojo wanted someone who taught mathematics, like him, but got William, who taught U. S. History and Government and, judging by the students' complaints, seemed pretty lousy at it.

But William was nicer than most of the other teachers. He at least acknowledged Kojo whenever they passed in the halls. Others would look at their phones or completely ignore Kojo. Ato had said he would have ignored him, too. Because, as he explained, men don't need to say hi every time they see your face. William did, however, say "Hi" each time. He went out of his way to give advice or listen. None of the women teachers said more than a few words; usually they asked to borrow his stapler or dry-eraser or copy paper. He normally had to go to them and ask for the items back.

Before leaving the Department of Agriculture where he was a statistician, Kojo felt alone and hidden by his cubicle. Every now and again a head would peep over, say a friendly word or two, then dip back down behind the partition. Daily, he would wander from his desk and try to engage his coworkers. He would see them busy on the phone or typing reports or reading and editing something. They waved or nodded but were hardly the kinds of people who would hang out at a place like the Hove. His former colleagues were sleepy, bedroom men and women. Whenever Kojo rallied them to go to Happy Hour, they only wanted to go to Applebee's or a T.G.I. Fridays.

The money was good at the USDA, but there was hardly anything challenging about the work for him. Worse, Kojo didn't feel he was making a difference. Ato had told him that to make a difference, Kojo would have to go to church, praise the Holy Father, and give himself to

Christ. But even that didn't seem real to Kojo. His parents taught him to follow his heart. His father had retired from teaching math in Montgomery County. His mother had retired from the Library of Congress. Kojo knew they were proud of him and Ato, but the day he landed the statistician gig, they seemed mostly proud of him.

Then, one day while surfing the Net, he saw an ad about Montgomery Community College. He went to the college's webpage and search for available positions in the mathematics department. And to his surprise, there were several adjunct positions. He applied to two and got them. For four semesters after work, he caught the train from DC to Silver Spring and taught evening college math and applied mathematics.

His students seemed to like him as their professor. Most of them told him, even the ones who failed, they wished he had been their teacher in high school. After constant student and faculty praise, Kojo decided to apply to several high school vacancies in Silver Spring, Bethesda, and his old neighborhood of Gaithersburg. He quickly soon learned, however, that he needed certification, which he didn't have and at first wasn't in the mood to obtain. Having spent much of his life in some kind of school or summer enrichment or tutorial, Kojo was done with sitting through another class. Unless it was training on a new stats program, which he liked, Kojo wasn't about to become a student again.

But when his father became ill, Kojo reconsidered. He wanted so much to follow in his father's footsteps. He had seen enough at the college to know his services were needed, so he enrolled in Trinity. Ayanna supported him and drilled him on sample praxis exams during their Sunday morning Denny's brunch; she was a mean tester and wouldn't give him hints that the online version offered. The week of his graduation, his father passed. It would have been tough to walk across the stage knowing his father was there, cheering for him. He had been there when

Kojo graduated from Georgetown Prep and Brown, but not this time. So Kojo didn't bother with pomp and circumstance. He set out to apply for any teaching jobs in the county. None were available.

With his savings running low and with the poor pay of adjuncts, Kojo looked toward DC, which his mom, Ato, Ayanna, and damn near everyone he knew told him not to do. However, he found Rosedale and he felt it was the perfect place for him. His mock student lesson went well and some of the students seem pretty bright. When he was hired he went to his father's grave and told him the good news. So here he was now, a charter school teacher in DC.

Kojo continued to push through the bar, apologizing as he squeezed passed more drunken faces. If Ayanna saw what he was seeing now, he thought, she would not have been so insistent that he hang out with these teachers. She had told him that he should give it a chance, reminding him that he used to complain about his old colleagues who never wanted to be one of the guys.

"Don't be rude," she said. "If the guy wants you to hang out, you should. What else we're going to do? Play fantasy baseball and sit at home? Go, have fun. The baby and I will be fine." Her hands rested on her stomach. He kissed her forehead and left.

Now searching for his new colleagues, who might make him like one of the guys, Kojo felt lost. His hand landed and rested warmly on the bareback of a curly haired light-skinned woman. She wore what appeared to be a black T-shirt turned blouse. Its sleeves and tail knotted around her mid-back and waist. The knots were like knuckles. Her wet skin glittered under flash of the screens.

Kojo followed her. She seemed to going in the direction he wanted to go: forward, and closer to the bar where he hoped his colleagues were. She zombie-walked, then turned her bouncy face, showing red-stained teeth. Kojo's eyes widened. He smiled at the lipstick stains. He

could see the front of her shirt-blouse was low and had a picture of a woman with a large Afro. The woman patted the lump in his pants and wrapped an arm around his neck, blowing her tequila-and-lime breath in his ear.

“What’s up, cutie?” she said, moving her hand into his pocket.

“Uh, hey...”

“You’re mine for the night, baby. Is that okay?”

“Um, my wife may not approve,” Kojo said, waving his left hand and pulling her hand from out of his pants.

“Aw, baby, is she here?” The woman’s neck craned and her soft bloodshot eyes fluttered. “What she gonna do, baby?”

Kojo’s mind wandered. He started to speak but only a yelp came out as she pinched his butt.

“You got big kissable lips,” she said. Then she attempted to bite them, which caused Kojo to jerk his head back so quickly that his head smacked the back of some guy’s head.

“Shit,” the guy said, turning bloodshot eyes on Kojo. He stood evenly with Kojo but was much wider and darker and angrier. “What the hell, bruh?” He, too, smelled like tequila but with lemon.

“Sorry,” Kojo said.

“Damn,” the guy said, rubbing his head. He checked his hand as if blood or grease was on it. He squinted at Kojo. He pointed his index finger at Kojo. “Don’t I know you?”

Kojo cocked his head back. He turned and saw his molester giggling through the crowd, waving slowly, rhythmically at him. He looked at the guy and started to say, No. But there was something familiar about him.

“Word up, B?” someone said.

“Nigga’s head hit mine,” the guy said, loosening his already loosened dark tie.

“Yo, Kojo, what’s up, bro?” It was William. He slapped five with him and grabbed Kojo’s shoulder. “Aiyo,” he said, “this here’s the new math teacher I was telling you about, Bobby.”

“Oh yeah,” Bobby said. “You got hard-ass head.”

Kojo didn’t thank him but he shook hands with him.

“I’m really sorry about that,” he said, leaning close to Bobby.

“No prob. Just buy the next round.”

William’s head moved left and right. “The guys are over there.”

At the corner-end of the center bar, several men stood eyeing the screens. William and Bobby looked up, too. Kojo tried, but he had never been interested in college basketball. All he knew was that Duke was losing and that seemed like a good thing.

When a commercial came on, William grabbed Kojo’s shoulder and pointed out the other men: “The one who looks like a browner al-Qaeda is Farouk. He ain’t Muslim but he likes for people to think he is. The chubby guy’s Junior, a real smart math dude you should know, a good dude, though he’s getting a divorce. The kat with the baby locks is Steve, from Chi-town but grew up in Northeast. The preppy guy’s Joe. He’s cool but smokes a lot. And the tall dude’s the school’s computer guy, Clarence. He’s a pensive ass but harmless. Sometimes, we call him the Stone.”

“We need to find somewhere to sit down,” Bobby interrupted.

William hugged Kojo around the neck: “Bobby teaches health and fitness and is kind of, well, you’ll see.”

Kojo smiled and nodded as William released him. The men looked around. From what Kojo could tell the Hove was packed. If there were booths, they all were taken. And judging by the number of people standing or pinned together, he just knew they were in a fire hazard zone.

“Well,” Bobby said, “I guess it’s time to put on our black face.”

“Yeah,” replied William. He waved the men to follow him toward a large table full of young white men. Kojo couldn’t tell if they were leaving or had just sat down.

“Ay,” William said to them. “You leavin’?”

From their expressions the answer appeared to be “No.” However, with seven dark drunken men looming over them, they merely stood and walked away from their table. William thanked them and they nodded nervously. Kojo had never seen such a thing and felt bad for those young men. He crammed into the vacant seat. The other men pushed the empty glasses in front of Kojo and began beckoning a server, any server, to assist them.

“You okay, Kojo?” William asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “sure.”

“What you drinkin’?” Bobby asked, leaning close enough that Kojo could see the stubbles on his face.

“I’ll just have a Blue Moon.”

“Bruh,” Bobby said, “drink a drink.” Even the spiky hair server seemed aghast by the Blue Moon order. “He’ll have what we’re having.” Bobby said.

“That’s eight tequila and lemons.”

“Right.”

Bobby smirked at Kojo, which gave him the impression that he didn’t like sitting next to him. “So,” Bobby said over his shoulder, “how come you don’t come out more often?”

“My wife and I are expecting our first child.”

“So?”

“So, I think I should be there.”

“I see,” Bobby said and muttered something, but Kojo didn’t hear him. “Where you from, again?”

“Ghana.”

“No,” Bobby said. “I mean where were you raised?”

“Gaithersburg.”

“Mar’land?”

“Yes.”

“Figures.”

Everyone’s attention was on the screens. Even William seemed preoccupied. Outbursts suggested one thing or another. Victory or defeat: They were all getting shit-faced.

Kojo wasn’t sure what to say next. “Where are you from?”

Bobby turned and gave Kojo an up-down look. “Jupiter,” he said. “And this planet sucks.”

Kojo eased back in his chair.

He felt a tap on his shoulder. “Don’t worry about Bobby,” William said. “He’s just being a dick.” William explained that soon he and the rest of the guys were going to ditch Bobby, and for Kojo to look for the signal. William smiled and winked at Kojo. His smile reminded him of Ato’s. They were the same height and the same complexion, a mud brown not found in a Crayola box. Pretty soon, William continued, they were going over to the Stadium.

Confused, Kojo asked, “The Stadium Armory?”

William laughed, shook his head, and leaned back into the cushioned wall. The spiky-haired server arrived with their drinks. Each man raised his glass and said some inaudible toast. Kojo could feel William's eyes on him. Part of him wanted to tell him how much he reminded him of his brother, while another part wanted William to stop staring.

"Hey, baby." It was the shirt-blouse woman again. She was kneeling between Bobby and Kojo. She reached into her cleavage and pulled out a laminated business card. "Call me," she said, then kissed the top of Kojo's forehead. "I mean it. Call me."

The card felt slick in his hand. Her wet lip print aroused him. But before he could get hold of his senses and return the card, she wiggled away, blowing kisses back at him. All of the male teachers nodded their approval.

"Well, well, well," Bobby said. "I guess I'll buy *you* the next round."

Four rounds later, Kojo's mind was spinning. He had never been a solid drinker. But the guys were happy for him. They kept the tequila coming. The last time Kojo had had this much to drink, he'd tried to kiss Ato's wife. Ato didn't speak to him for several weeks and used three Sundays to lecture on the perils of coveting another's possessions.

"Where'd you go to college, bruh?" Bobby reeked more, causing Kojo to turn his head.

"I went to Brown and Trinity," he said, moving his head back from Bobby's breath.

"Brown?" Bobby scoffed. "Aw, man, that school sucks."

"No, it doesn't."

"Yeah, they do. They don't even have a good basketball team, so they suck."

William tapped Kojo's shoulder. The other men were standing, moving, except Bobby and him.

“Hey,” Bobby said. “Where you guys go’n?”

“It’s getting late,” Farouk said. “And I have to drive Junior home.”

“Who’s gonna take me home?” Bobby asked. He held the check in his hand and seemed to be figuring out his portion.

Kojo caught William’s head jerking toward the door. So this was what he meant by ditching Bobby? It seemed cruel. Kojo reached into his pocket for his wallet. It wasn’t there. He stood up and reached into his back-pocket. Keys, cellphone, but no wallet. Bobby’s wet eyes were smiling up at him.

“You’re not gonna hit me with that on, are you?”

“That woman—”

Bobby laughed. “With the titties?”

“Yes.”

“She got you for your paper?” Bobby’s laugh was liquid.

Kojo sat back down. He saw William’s head disappear into the crowd. Now he was ditched, too.

“You gonna make a report?” Bobby asked, leaning almost in Kojo’s lap.

“No,” Kojo said. “I don’t know.”

“Then we might as well go get some pancakes.”

Bobby stood and pushed his way to the bar. People pushed at his wide back but he seemed oblivious to them. Kojo wasn’t sure what he should do. Calling Ayanna wasn’t an option, and he wouldn’t dare call Ato. He could hear his brother now: You’re such a gullible fool. You think everyone is your friend. Well, they’re not. They see you coming because you’re

green. You may be book smart, but you're not *real* smart. They just gonna keep take, take, take, taking from you because your hands are always out.

"What's eating you?" Bobby said.

"I don't know what to do."

"Let's get out of here," Bobby said, drinking a glass of water. "I need some air."

While Bobby was busy ralping beside Kojo's Jeep, Kojo kept watch around the brightly lit parking lot. The blinking Hove sign kept time with the changing stoplights. Cars slowed, occupants shook their heads at Bobby's spastic and violent jerks. Kojo wanted this night to be over. He was glad that they were outside, but wished he had his wallet. Bobby vomited again. He was calling Jesus and God. Kojo tried to find the positivity in all of this. At least Bobby wasn't throwing up inside the Jeep. Ayanna would die if she smelled stale tequila, lemon, and nachos. Kojo resumed counting the beats of the sign when he spotted the woman with the T-shirt blouse leaving the bar with three other women in florescent T-shirt blouses.

"There she is," he said, pointing at the group of women.

Bobby wobbled upright. His sweaty face glistened under the lamps. "Go get her, Cujo," he said, dropping his head down, hands firmly on his thighs, upchucking the last of his night.

"I'll be all right, bruh... I'm okay.... I'm okay."

Kojo sprinted toward the women, turning his head as if Bobby's vomit was chasing him. "Hey," he panted. "Hey, you!"

The woman smiled. "Hey, baby," she said. "You didn't lose my card, did you?"

The other women were drunkenly smiling, too.

"I think you took my wallet," Kojo said.

“What?”

“My wallet. You took it. I need it back.” He extended his hand. “C’mon. My friend is throwing up and may have to go—”

“Look, baby, I didn’t steal shit from you. I got my own money.”

“Sure do,” said one of her friends. Her shirt-blouse was a neon-green and yellow. Her neck and head were rhythmically dancing along with her snapping fingers. “We don’t need no nigga’s money. Let’s go, Tamera.”

“Sorry, sweetie.”

Kojo sighed.

What would Ato do?

“Look lady,” Kojo said. “I will call the police.” He held up his cellphone, fingering the keypad, noticing a message from William’s number.

“Call ‘em,” another woman said, wearing a tie-died T-shirt blouse. “I want you to.”

Kojo felt people gathering. A tall white man with a neck-tattoo of a star and crescent stood near him. Another menacing man, broad-shouldered, with bulging arms, and darker than midnight skin, gave Kojo a look. None of the other faces appeared friendly or familiar.

“I just want my wallet,” Kojo said. “Just give me back my wallet, and I won’t press charges.”

Tamera crossed her arms and shook her head. “You must be drunk, dude. I told you, I don’t have your wallet.”

“Listen, bro,” said the tatted guy. “The lady said she doesn’t have your wallet. Maybe you left it somewhere, I dunno. But I suggest you leave these ladies alone. Okay? Just walk away.”

“But she shoved her hand in my pocket.”

“Nigga,” said the strong-looking man, “get the fuck outta here.”

Kojo stepped back. He turned and looked pleading at the woman. She shook her head and mouthed something. He wasn't sure what it was. He suddenly felt the knuckles of the strong-man slam against his face. Kojo's knees buckled. He was down on his hands. His cellphone cracked on the black wet ground in front of him. He reached for it and saw a black boot kick it under a car. He tried to stand, but another fist struck him. Then another. And a series of fists and shoes clobbered his body. When it was over, Kojo lay in the fetal position. He heard cars drive off and voices, but everything seemed distant.

“Shit, bruh,” he heard Bobby say. He felt his body going up and over Bobby's shoulder.

“Where's your keys, Cujo?”

Kojo felt his body bounce as Bobby staggered toward the Jeep. He lowered his head and hands and tried not to cry. Bobby stood him up, bracing him on the driver's side door. He patted Kojo's pockets. He dug in and pulled out the remote key chain.

“Get in, bruh.”

Kojo slid into the driver's seat.

Bobby opened his side. “Ey,” he said, “can you pull out a bit? I don't wanna track vomit into your joint, bruh.”

Kojo started the jeep and slowly reversed it.

“That's good,” Bobby said. He hopped in. “Shit,” he sighed. “Sorry you caught a beating, bruh.”

“I shouldn't be driving,” Kojo said. His mouth was full of blood. He turned on the interior lights and looked in the mirror. His right eye throbbed and had started to swell. Crusted

mucus and blood lined his nose, and, just as he thought, one of his canines was missing. His split lip oozed, blood spilled over his chin and down onto his shirt. “I should go to the hospital.”

“For what?” Bobby said. “You caught a beating. Hell, let’s go get some pancakes and you’ll be fine.”

“Look at me.”

“I see you, bruh. But if you go to the hospital— man, I’m just saying— you might get in way too deep. You caught a beating.” Bobby shook his head. “It happens.”

“Not to me.”

“It happens to everyone, once. Sometimes, twice. Bruh, let’s just get something to eat. My dude, I need some food and some water.”

Kojo put the Jeep in drive.

He didn’t say anything for several minutes. The humming from the Jeep’s engine settled his mind. He didn’t know what to do. He had never been attacked like that. Even when he fought Ato, it was always fair.

“What am I going to tell my wife?” Kojo said. “What can I say?”

“Well,” Bobby sighed, “tell her you were in a bar fight. Chicks dig that kind of shit, man.”

“Not my wife,” Kojo said. “Ayanna abhors violence.”

“Bruh,” Bobby said, “you can’t tell her you got your ass-kicked. She’ll really abhor *you*.”

Kojo turned and looked at Bobby.

He chuckled.

Kojo? wiped his wet face and smiled. “Where do you want to get pancakes?”

“There’s an IHOP on Bladensburg Road. You know how to get there?”

Kojo nodded. He decided he would text Ayanna when they arrived. Exactly what he would text her was still up in the air. The idea of pancakes suddenly made him hungry.

“I’ve never eaten at an IHOP,” Kojo said.

“You shittin me?”

“No. We only ate at Denny’s.”

After washing his face in the pee-stained IHOP restroom, Kojo managed to wad enough tissue to fill the space of his missing tooth. He took inventory of his eye, nose, and lips. The swelling wasn’t so bad, he told himself. His palms were scuffed and his button-up had been popped in several places. Otherwise, maybe his brown skin could mask some of the bruises. He pulled up his shirt and touched the puffy purple marks around his ribs and back and stomach. They didn’t hurt if he didn’t push too hard. He looked at his wrist, but his watch-face was cracked and the time seemed to be stuck on 11:15. Kojo shook his head and sighed. He washed his face again, scrubbing the lip-print away again, and he allowed the water run down his chin. He stared at himself and wondered: What am I going to tell Ayanna?

Bobby was cutting his pancakes when Kojo sat down across from him. He gave Kojo a once over. “You don’t look that bad, for real,” he said. He shoved a forkful of syrupy cakes in his mouth.

“Thanks,” Kojo said. “You know what time it is?”

Bobby checked. “It’s a little after 12.”

“Damnit.”

“What, you about to turn into a pumpkin?”

“No,” Kojo said. “I have to drop you off and get home. And I still don’t know what I’m going to say to my wife.”

“Make something up,” Bobby said, shrugging. “Just, you know, make it sound good, plausible.”

“I can’t lie to her,” Kojo said. He played with his cheesy eggs. He was suddenly nauseated by their yellowy-whiteness.

“Ey man,” Bobby said, chewing, “You tell your wife that some chick snatched your wallet, and you’ll have more shit on you than in your ass. My advice: make something up.”

“Like what?”

“I dunno,” Bobby said, laying the fork down and pyramiding his fingers up to his face. He nodded pensively as if working some masterful idea over and over. Then, smirking, he forked the eggs from Kojo’s plate, gathered bits of pancakes with a butter knife and chewed thoughtfully, as syrup and runny cheesy-eggs moistened his lips. “Some good pancakes, bruh.”

Kojo blinked at Bobby.

“I think,” Bobby said then sucked something off his thumb, “I really think you should use the whole bar fight thing.”

“It doesn’t sound like me,” Kojo said. “I don’t go bar-fighting. Ayanna would see right through that.”

“Bruh, you see your face? She ain’t gonna think anything except what you say. Now the real story is, how it all happened? You gotta think about how all this went down. You don’t wanna have too many details, at first. I mean, shit, too many details are hard to remember. Keep shit simple. Hell, make it like this guy kept staring at you, and called you a nigger or something.”

“You mean like a hate-crime?”

“Nah, nigga, I ain’t tryin to have you march on nobody. Just tryin to say you have some honor or something.”

“Oh.” Kojo pulled the wad from his mouth. A bloody string of spit looped down onto his wrist. He took a sip of water with lemon, making certain not to allow the water to enter that spot. What Bobby proposed still seemed like a lie, and he just couldn’t bring himself to lie to Ayanna. The truth would always be out there. When Ayanna found out about his attempt to kiss his brother’s wife, she lost it, didn’t speak to him for nearly a year. Why venture down that highway again?

“Listen,” Bobby said, “say your name again.”

“Kojo,” he said.

“Okay, got it, Kojo. Listen. All I’m saying is you can’t be like: There was this girl who stuck her hand in my pants and took my wallet. If your wife’s anything like the women I know, she’s gonna stop you right there and ask you a million fucking questions before you can explain how you were pick-pocketed.”

“I wouldn’t say it like that,” Kojo said.

“Doesn’t matter how you say it,” Bobby said, leaning forward. “When a woman, especially a pregnant woman, hears about another woman touching her man, and at a bar where drinks are flying around... Bruh, you gotta come up with something better than the truth.”

Bobby’s cell vibrated. He thumbed the keypad and looked up at Kojo. The server came to their table, and she asked if Kojo would like more eggs or water. He smiled at her and told her no. Bobby winked at him.

“You know, my man here fought like two dudes,” Bobby said, “trying to defend this young lady’s honor.”

“Oh my,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“It was brutal,” Bobby said, sincerely.

“What did you do?”

“I was throwing up.”

The server rolled her eyes at Bobby, which made Kojo smile.

“Here’s your check,” she said, and patted Kojo’s shoulder.

“You see that,” Bobby said. “See what a little story will do?”

“She’s not Ayanna.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Bobby said, thumbing his phone. “You saw how she looked at me when I told her about me? Shit, bruh, I might as well said I sat watching you get your ass-kicked. Chicks don’t wanna hear the truth. They want to hear a good story.”

“Who are you texting?”

“William.”

“Why? I told you—”

“Calm down, Kojo. When you were cleaning yourself up, I sent him and the guys a message.”

“You told them?”

“Hell yeah. I mean, they should feel some level of guilt, right?”

Kojo thought about it. They did leave him and Bobby. And Bobby, for all his asshole ways, was the only one giving Kojo some brotherly advice and moral support. So Kojo felt compelled to return the favor. He told Bobby that William and the guys had planned to ditch

him, that he was willing to go along with them, but was glad he hadn't. Bobby finished his food and Kojo's.

"Man, that ain't shit."

"But—"

"Look, bruh, we do that to each other all the time. Last month, we got Steve; a month before that, we got Farouk. It just the thing we do. It's fun: stickin a cat with a bill. I mean, you and your boys don't do things like that?"

"No." Kojo thought for several moments. Most of his friends were into fantasy baseball and football. Some even played poker and Warcraft online. But none would leave another behind as some kind of joke. In fact, once when one of his friends got stranded during a serious winter storm in Providence, three of them, included Kojo, piled into his jeep and drove to help him. Sure it was funny that his old car broke down, but he needed them. "And we just had each other's back."

"Huh? Well," Bobby said. "Different strokes for different folks. Let's bloom, bruh."

"I should be heading home," Kojo said, half-heartedly. "It's late."

Bobby squeezed Kojo's shoulder. "We're not too far from where the guys are. Let 'em have a look at you. Maybe they'll give you better advice. C'mon."

"Where are they?" Kojo asked when they got outside.

"They're at the Stadium."

"The Armory?"

Bobby chuckled. "You really are green, aren't you?"

The Stadium wasn't the first strip club Kojo had ever gone to. It was, however, the first where he actually felt as if he had walked into a rap music video, equipped with platinum-chain-wearing black men, provocatively dressed women of color on stage and on the floor, where piles of money was thrown by seedy men and hard-faced women. These vibrant women could be among the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Kojo and Ayanna had just seen a performance of them last weekend when they took a day trip to New York. He couldn't help but feel some sense of embarrassment for them and himself. He saw William, Steve, and Joe smiling up at this one woman. Steve threw a few dollars at her spiky heels, and Joe raised his glass, blowing a kiss before he drank. Kojo made his way to the bar when he spotted Farouk and Junior sitting there with amusement on their faces. Farouk was bobbing his head to the music playing. He frowned when he saw Kojo.

"Damn," he said. "You *really* did get fucked up. Where's B?"

Kojo looked around, he spotted Bobby with the others. He also could tell people were looking at him. The guy at the door, who knew Bobby, was now inside staring in Kojo's direction. William and the others were coming through the crowd of women, who mouthed Thank Yous. One grabbed Kojo's arm and kissed his swollen eye, motherly. She gave him a hug. She smelled like strawberries.

"You're a good man," she said in his ear.

Kojo tried to suppress an erection. She was exotic in the face: not really black but not really not black: A kind of hybrid Asian, Mediterranean or something with a prominent African ancestry coming through her nose, lips, and eyes. Kojo cleared his throat and thanked her. His eyes dropped and found a tattoo vine wrapping its way up from her foot to her calf to her thigh over her waist up her sternum and blooming into large rose petal over her coco-cover breasts.

“Kennedy,” Bobby said to the woman, “we’re gonna have to call it a night.”

She gently cupped Kojo’s face again and kissed him softly on the cheek. “You take care,” she whispered. She smiled like a mother or an older sister. “Y’all niggas be safe, aw’ight,” she added, slapping five with Farouk, Junior, Steve, and Joe. She gave William a deep hug, and patted Clarence on his shoulder. As she walked away, Kojo saw another large tattoo on her back. He couldn’t make out what it was. She wasn’t like Ayanna, who was his dream. She was more like the kind of woman he had fantasized about but never thought he’d meet. Women like Kennedy passed him by all his life. They didn’t speak to him usually. And when they did, it was only when they needed tutoring in mathematics. Otherwise, he was a nobody to them. He was invisible. Now, however, this woman, Kennedy, saw him. Even if it was in a sympathetic way, being seen at all by a woman such as her was good enough for him.

“Let’s roll,” Steve said. “We’re starting to get a lot of stares.”

Outside the March morning air stung the place where Kennedy had kissed Kojo. There were still people lined up, waiting to get inside The Stadium. Kojo kind of wanted to stay.

“How old are you, kid?” Joe asked.

“Twenty-seven,” Kojo answered. “Why?”

“Bobby said you were a bit green,” Steve replied. “We just tryin to figure out how green.”

“I’m not that green.”

“You got robbed, right?” Joe lit a cigarette and passed the pack to Junior who passed it to Farouk. When it came to Kojo, he handed it to Steve, who refused it. He tried to give the pack back to Joe, but Joe also refused it.

“What do you want me to do with this?”

“Just throw it away,” Joe said.

“But,” Kojo looked around the street. “That would be littering.”

“So?”

Kojo shook his head and shoved the cigarettes in his pocket.

“What the hell, Kojo,” William said. “You can’t just throw them away? Give ‘em here.”

William shoved them in Joe’s chest. “This is dumb.”

“Ey bruh,” Bobby said. “He ain’t tryin to be a litter-bug, maybe Kojo’s an environmentalist.” He blew smoke away from the circle of guys. “So looked, man, what’re you gonna do?”

“Drop you off and—”

“He means about your wife?” Joe said turning away from William. “How you gonna handle this?”

Kojo shrugged. “I can’t lie.”

“You can’t litter either,” Junior added softly.

“Don’t think of it as lying,” Farouk said. “Think of it as not getting in trouble.”

“That’s the way I’d think of it,” William said. “Your wife’s pregnant right? You don’t want her worried that you’re out here fuckin around on her.”

“Don’t want that,” Junior said, emphatically shaking his head. “You really don’t want that.”

None of the guys looked at Junior, but Kojo could see something in his face. Here was a man who knew what getting in trouble meant.

“It’s just,” Kojo said to Junior, “every time I lie I get caught.”

“Then you need a crash course in story-telling,” Farouk said. “Let’s walk.” They stood in front of Kojo’s Jeep, which was parked close to their cars in the residential side of Bladensburg, blocks away from the nightclub. “Here’s the deal,” Farouk said, “you gotta make the story believable.”

“I told him, bar-fight,” Bobby said. “It’s close to being true, and you can add shit as you go along.”

“That’s a good one,” William said. “It’s random enough that you’re bound to forget all the details.”

“Yeah,” said Bobby. “And you don’t want too many details, either.”

“Don’t make it sound bigger than you are,” said William.

“And whatever you do,” Bobby said, flicking the butt into someone’s front yard, “don’t mention the girl or the wallet.”

“Nah,” William said, shaking his head, “that’s one detail you need to leave out. Then when you go look for it, that’s how you can add that tidbit.”

Kojo wished he had his phone to type up all these ideas. “How would I say the fight started?” He asked. “Ayanna knows I’m not an aggressive person. She knows that.”

“Well tell her some jackoff was giving someone the business, and you stepped in,” Bobby said. “It’s not like a complete lie. Those guys *were* jackoffs.”

“So how did you get fucked up?” Joe asked.

Kojo explained everything as he remembered: Bobby vomiting, the women with the shirt-blouses, the guy with the neck-tattoo, and the muscular guy who hit him, his wallet being the most important thing because it belonged to his dad, who had given it to Kojo as present and who had died years ago. He explained how his older brother, Ato, would be critical of any and

everything he would possibly say; how Ayanna would question the integrity of all the teachers at Rosedale; how she may even sniff his clothes, because Ato's wife sniffs his clothes when *he* comes home. When Kojo was done explaining, he started to cry.

Junior put his large arm around him. "It okay, Kojo," he said, chubby fingers squeezing his shoulder. "It's okay."

"We're all broken," Farouk added. He gripped Kojo's shoulder blade and patted his head. "We're just really trying to help you not fuck up your relationship."

The other guys stood watching. Kojo wasn't sure of their thoughts but their faces seemed sympathetic and uneasy. Ato had once told him about African American men and their inability to show emotions. Unlike Ghanaian men, he had said, whose strength was in their hearts, African American men's strength was in their heads. They imagined themselves as strong, emotionless, when in fact they were weak and pathetic.

"Ey bruh," Bobby said. "You can tell your wife and brother the truth. If you think that's best, but like Farouk said, we don't want you to fuck your shit up."

"Boils down to this, really," Steve said. "You can tell the truth and see what happens, you can lie and hope none of them find out, or you can take our advice and be straight."

Kojo thought about it. "What time is it?"

"Almost two," Joe said.

"How will I remember everything?"

"That's just it," Steve said. "You just have to make a choice: either play the victim or be the hero."

"Women love heroes," Junior said, softly, hugging his shoulder.

"Got a lot of sympathy pussy that way," Bobby added. "Just saying..."

“Steve’s right,” William said. “You really only have those two choices. If you play the victim, it sounds like your peoples will want you to file charges. But—”

“The hero,” Junior whispered. “There’s where your life will begin.”

“And here’s the thing,” Bobby said, smiling at Kojo. “It’s kind of truthful.”

“Yeah,” Farouk said. “How do you know those guys weren’t trying to hurt those women? You don’t, do you?”

“That’s right,” William said. “How you know you didn’t save them from being abducted by two perverts?”

“Bruh, you may have saved them from a snuff-film,” Bobby said.

“Or even a life of prostitution?” added William.

“Ever see *Taken*?” Junior whispered. “It may be a movie, but things like that happened every day.”

“DC has a human-trafficking epidemic,” Steve said. “So when you think of it that way, man, you saved those bitches’ lives.”

The more Kojo listened the more he believed. There he was, helping a sick friend, Bobby, when these women were being pursued. They wobbled down the parking lot, presumably drunk, and unaware of these large men following them, these two tall leather-jacket wearing men from Europe (no, how would you know their nationality?), or European-looking, slick hair and everything (no, too stereotypical; they’ll be the same guys: one white, one black, and the women are just walking) when suddenly one of the guys grabbed one of the girl’s arms. She started yelling. The other women were scared. There was no one else around. I thought about our baby. Something made me yell and run after them. I wasn’t thinking, really, I just saw what was happening and I reacted. I ran and said something. I think I might have said Ayanna. I was

thinking about you. Remember *Taken*? I just couldn't see these black women abducted, with DC's issues... I just reacted. I should've thought, I know. I should've called the police. But, these girls could'n't've been more than 21 (too much detail, just make them college-aged). They were young-looking (better), and the next thing I knew (good transition) I was fighting two guys, well trying to fight them. The one girl broke free and the others piled in the car. I'm sure they got away. But as for me...

"Awesome," Bobby said. "That shit sounds pretty good."

"Hmm," Farouk seemed unconvinced. "Where were we?"

Kojo didn't think about them. "You had to take Junior home, and the other guys had left."

"What did Bobby do?" Steve asked.

"He was sick, vomiting everywhere."

"Why do you smell like strawberries?" Junior asked.

Kojo didn't know. He said, "I must've brushed up against someone with strawberry perfume on?"

The guys shook their heads.

"One of the women hugged me?"

"Don't say that," Farouk said. He stepped closer and took a whiff. "Yeah, you smell like Kennedy."

The other guys took turns smelling him.

"Give me a cigarette," Kojo said to Joe.

"Now you're thinking," Junior whispered. "Make the scents."

“You ever throw a punch,” Clarence said. He had been standing there frowning the whole time in silence. “I mean ever?”

The guys back away from Kojo.

“Ato and I have fought, but I don’t like fighting.”

“That’s what I thought.” Clarence walked up to him. “Try to hit me.”

“No,” Kojo said. His hand shook as he lit the cigarette.

“C’mon,” Clarence said. “I’m sure I can take it.”

Kojo inhaled and coughed. He tried inhaling again, but the coughing hurt his already bruised ribs.

Clarence pushed him. “Hit me, pussy.”

Shocked, Kojo gathered his balance. “No,” he said. His hands still shook. The cigarette was in the grass.

“Pussy-boy, hit me.”

“You gotta hit him,” Junior said. “It’s the only way.”

“I’m not fighting you.”

“You’re a pussy,” Clarence said. “A got-damn African pussy.”

He kept pushing Kojo and pushing him. The guys backed away. No one was stopping Clarence.

“I bet I can skull-fuck your wife.”

Kojo balled his fist and swung with all his might.

He missed.

He kept swinging at Clarence. He heard the guys cheering as Clarence dodged every punch.

Hit ‘im they yelled, hit ‘im!

But Clarence was too fast.

Kojo’s face and body ached already. But he couldn’t allow this to go unpunished. His wife was pregnant for god’s sake.

William grabbed Kojo. He was laughing.

“Calm down, bro. Calm down. Clarence didn’t mean it.”

“I didn’t,” Clarence said. He placed two fingers on his neck and checked his watch. “I don’t even know your wife, Kojo.”

“Don’t you ever say anything like that to me again!”

“Jesus, Kojo,” Farouk said. “Pipe down. You wanna wake the neighborhood?”

“Every story needs an ounce of truth,” Junior said. “Just an ounce.” He gripped Kojo’s shoulder again. “Just an ounce.”

“All what you’re feeling right now,” Bobby said, patting Kojo’s head, “is good for the story.”

Clarence extended his hand. “I’m sorry, Kojo—”

Kojo broke free and punched Clarence, dropping him to one knee. “Don’t you ever disrespect my wife.”

Clarence chuckled as he rose. He wiped his mouth. “That was a pretty good punch, Kojo.”

“Shit, Clarence, you all right?”

“I’m fine, Joe. I’m fine.

Kojo suddenly felt extremely embarrassed.

“Oh god,” said William to Kojo, “please don’t tear up, bro. Clarence’s fine, right?”

Clarence nodded. He kneed Kojo in the stomach. “Now I’m perfect.”

“How do you know that woman from the club?” Kojo asked Bobby as he pulled in front of Bobby’s apartment building.

Bobby sighed. “Bruh, some stories aren’t meant to be shared.”

“What does that mean?”

“You gotta ask William about Kennedy. That’s his situation. Not for me to say.”

“So they are like together?”

Bobby opened his door. “Like I said, bruh, that’s William’s situation.”

“Okay. I understand,” Kojo said, though he really didn’t understand. “Um, Bobby?”

“Yeah.”

“How do I know you guys will not tell Ayanna the truth?”

Bobby smiled. “Man, we can’t snitch on a bruh,” he said. “That shit would be unethical.”

Kojo pressed the garage-opener and backed the Jeep into his spot.

It was 3:15.

No doubt Ayanna would have checked her phone and stayed up waiting for him. He even expected her to be at their bedroom window looking out or at the door leading into to their home with a tapping foot and folded arms. Only the hum of the engine disturbed the silence.

He switched off the car and flipped down the visor.

His face was still a mess. He stomach smarted from Clarence’s knee, though not as bad as his ribs from those men’s stomping. He suddenly thought about Kennedy and wondered about

William. His mind drifted to his problem. He had to fight the urge to go in and call the police on that Tamera woman.

He reached in his back pocket and stared at her name, all glittery, announcing she was a party-planner for high-end clientele. He crumpled the card and opened his door. What would he tell his wife, his brother, his friends. He shook his head and stepped out of the jeep. Then he saw it. Lodged between the driver's seat and its railing was his brown leather wallet.

He opened it.

There was his license.

Credit cards.

Cash.

And the picture of his mother and father and Ato and him, standing so many years ago at the Ghanaian Embassy in DC like the Jackson Four.

Kojo thought of his father, how proud he was of him, how proud he would be to know Kojo was taking responsibility, how proud he would to know Kojo was a high school mathematics teacher, too. His father was so celebrated by men and woman of varying nationalities or varying incomes when he retired after 40 years of teaching. His father, Mr. Emmanuel Akufo, loved Gaithersburg despite some of his issues with Americans and black parents in particular. His father didn't have to pay someone in Maryland to get ahead. He had a real shot here, more than he ever did in Accra. He taught Ato and Kojo mathematics. He taught them to honor their heritage and themselves, their land and their culture. He showed them that they could be something more so long as they remained honorable. It means more than being clever or wealthy, he had said. Honesty is a man's only true source of integrity. Americans have little honesty and even less integrity.

Kojo slipped the wallet into his pants. He entered his home. Ayanna was asleep. He woke her by turning on the ceiling fan lights. Her eyes instantly widened at his face.

“Oh my god, Kojo... what happened?”

Kojo opened his mouth.

“What happened to your tooth?”

He closed his mouth.

He could be the hero or he could be the victim.

He didn't know how to choose.

Ayanna hugged him, kissed his eye, softly, just like Kennedy, only Ayanna smelled like black soap and Shea Butter. He took in her scent. He whispered that he loved her, that he was so sorry to worry her, that he wished he never left last night.

“Oh, Kojo, what happened? You smell so awful”

Her face caught lights and glimmered softly. Her brown eyes, tearing and begging, made Kojo turn away.

“I got into a fight,” he said, closing his eyes. “And I'm ashamed.”

Ayanna didn't respond. He could feel her staring disbelievingly at him. Then he faced her. She was so sad.

“Kojo,” she said, “I don't want you hanging out with those people ever again.”

“Ayanna—”

“I mean it. They are no good.”

“You don't understand.”

“Who were you fighting?” Ayanna rubbed her protruding belly as she adjusted the pillows behind her. “One of those guys you went out with? Was it one them?”

“No,” Kojo said. “It wasn’t any of them.”

“Then who?”

Somehow Kennedy and Tamera’s faces were in his eyes. He didn’t want them there, but he could smell strawberries and tequila. His mouth was agape. Many thoughts rushed and swirled as if being blown by an easterly wind. His eyes danced around, seeing Kennedy lips pressing against his eye, feeling Tamera’s hand in his pants. He uttered something, which caused Ayanna to squint. He shook his head as if coming out of dream and stared at his wife, exhaling and allowing all of his integrity to slowly walk out of their room.

Here's to the Bad Guys

1

William thought it was him.

He pulled over into the BP gas station on New York Avenue. He snatched his keys and got out of his car. He quickly crossed Mount Olivet Road, keeping his eyes on the young disheveled man on the median strip.

He couldn't be sure, but the young man looked a lot like Rasheed, his former student and his girl's little brother. It had been five years or so. Rasheed had dropped out of Rosedale and out of his and Kennedy's life, it seemed. Now William wondered was this young man the same kid, once so full of promise, begging for money from strangers at a red light?

"Yo, dude," William called. "My man, c'mere."

The young man looked behind him and then side-to-side. He shook his bushy head, inching along the strip with a small cardboard sign.

William frowned at him and started to jaywalk, but cars came quickly and seemed unwilling to stop for a pedestrian. Then, a family in a gray SUV slowed at the light. It blocked his view of the young man. And as more cars came to a stop, crossing seemed foolish to William. He didn't want to chance scaring any driver or the young dude. After all, if it wasn't Rasheed, things could get heated between them. Even the junkies weren't afraid to fight in DC.

Bobbing his head as if ducking punches, William tried to see through the SUV's windows. Frustrated, he looked in the back passenger seat. A blonde little girl held up her middle finger.

William looked side-to-side, then flipped the girl off.

The light changed, the SUV sped off toward Maryland, and the young man was way across New York Avenue, running as if being chased. The sign floated in the breeze.

Fuck, William muttered. Pursuing him would be dumb and pointless. By the time he turned his car around, dude would be over the bridge to parts unknown. So William walked back to his car and made a plan. Tomorrow when he was on his way to Kennedy's house, he would turn off onto Florida Avenue, ride up 6th Street, and then jump onto New York Avenue heading west. If he saw the dude, again, William planned on parking and sneaking up on him to get a better look. If he turned out to be Rasheed, then William figured he would convince him to come back to his house or at least to Kennedy's. If it weren't, he would give the guy a ten spot for the trouble.

Driving, William played back the last time he had seen Rasheed. He was on his way to see Kennedy. She had just graduated from culinary arts school and landed a part-time sous chef gig at a new restaurant in Adams Morgan. Rasheed and his friend Jamal were have lunch alfresco style on a café's patio. Like William, they were playing hooky from school. Where Kennedy worked was two blocks up from where William had found parking. But seeing Rasheed and Jamal laughing and having a good ol' time angered William. He walked up on them and could hear them philosophizing. Jamal was 18, a senior, and Rasheed should have been a senior but he had been retained in elementary and middle school.

"Problem with people is they hope for shit they ain't ever gonna get," Rasheed was saying. Then, looking up, his eyes widened.

Jamal turned and jump out his chair at the sight of William standing behind him.

William shook his head and told Rasheed he was going to have to call his mother. Then Rasheed flipped out. He started cursing and calling William all kinds of sacks of shit. Said just

because he was fucking his sister that didn't mean he was his daddy. Rasheed ended his tirade by giving two middle fingers to William. All the while, William stood there, surprised and feeling so many eyes roam over him.

"Rasheed," William hissed, "either the two of you come with me, or I'm reporting you both to the principal." He knew how petty and bitchy that had sounded but he didn't know what else to say.

"Man, get out my face," Rasheed said. He stood as if ready to swing.

William looked at Jamal. His fist was tight around a four-inch Bowie knife. "And what're you gonna do with that?" William asked.

People were whispering and pointing. Some were on their phones.

"Let's go, boys." William went grab Rasheed's arm but he pulled away. He reached for Jamal, but Jamal jumped back then lunged forward, stabbing William in the shoulder.

2

He decided not to mention to Kennedy that he thought he'd seen Rasheed. He didn't want to upset her. Instead, when he got to her house, he went down to her basement and watched her practice her routine. "My Forbidden Lover" reverberated throughout her house. And Kennedy gyrated around and rubbed her body against a long silver pole. She wore a pair of navy boy-shorts and sports bra. She was barefoot and sweaty, and her vine tattoo, from her foot to her chest, glistened under the flashing red, yellow, and blue lights. She danced slowly, passionately about the stage.

William had installed the hardwood stage, the surround sound, and pole over a year ago. Though he fussed about the work at the time, now, standing there, he felt he had done a good job. His eyes smiled, following Kennedy's every movement.

She slowly snaked her body upward, and then, arching her back and arms, almost in a suspended handstand, with one leg dangling along the pole, the other wrapped athletically around it, she slid down easily, black hair falling into a pile on the floor.

Yes, he thought, he had done a really good job.

Her legs scissored up and then down into Halasana. She grabbed the pole in her fists and turned and winked at him. She placed her hands on her lower back and rolled her spine and butt down. She spun on her butt toward the edge of the stage. She tapped the remote and the music halted.

"You're early," she said, grabbing a pair of glasses from the floor.

"Yeah," William said. "I just wanted to see you before you went to work."

Kennedy stood up. She signaled off the flashing light and raised the basement's track lighting. She plaited her hair into a long braid.

William smiled. "You should strip wearing those," he said, pointing to her glasses.

"Boy please! I don't want to look like some dude's high school librarian."

"I seriously doubt anyone's ever had a librarian like you."

He went to kiss her, but Kennedy backed away. "I'm smelly, William. And I need to brush my teeth." She offered him her cheek.

William followed her up the stairs. He was tempted to smack her bouncy butt; instead he said, "You have a bouncy butt."

"Thanks," Kennedy said. "My boyfriend tells me that a lot."

“Dude is one lucky fella.”

Kennedy turned, smiled then farted. “How’s that for luck.”

Dating a woman like Kennedy wasn’t what William had in mind initially. He was certain she would be a hit-it-and-quit-it type chick. After all, he had been with several strippers before, though he’d paid for the pleasure. But Kennedy was different.

William had met her when she came to a parent/teacher conference at Rosedale seven years ago. As she went around the large meeting room where the conference was held, William’s eyes tracked her. He eavesdropped on her conversation with the nearest teacher. She explained that she was Rasheed’s older sister and that their mother was ill. When she came to his table, William stood and offered his hand. He waited for her to sit, then he started telling her how smart Rasheed was, how he could do the work but was choosing not to.

“So what can we do, Mr. Proctor?”

Her voice and almond-shaped eyes had mesmerized him. William scratched the top of his head and said: “I don’t know, ma’am. I guess—” He had stopped to breathe in her scent. “I guess *we’re* just gonna have to stay on him.”

She smiled. Her brown eyes seemed to pierce William’s heart right then and there. “Then I guess we will.”

He stared with a goofy grin over his face. He asked her out for coffee. She giggled but said sure. Months later, she would tell him how she thought he was the corniest man she’d met; but, she would say, You just seem honest. She invited him over for a gourmet meal. He watched her prepare sautéed quail with fall greens and huckleberries. He’d never had anything so tasty

and so delicately made. That night, she told him she danced at the Stadium nightclub. He sipped his pinot noir and thought he hit the Jackpot.

Seeing her at the Stadium was a turn on. Of the many beautifully made up women, Kennedy was the only one who didn't dance to rap music. She preferred up-tempo 80s R&B. Depending on the Deejay, she usually got the songs she requested. Otherwise, it was regular southern rap music. But the crowd of men and women enjoyed watching her. They threw money and hooped and hollered, though never slapped her ass as they did other women. And William liked how she commanded their respect even though...

Several months into their romance, William took his friend, Bobby, to the club. Bobby was one of the teachers she had spoken with at the parent-teacher conference, but he seemed shocked when he saw her and William together, snuggling just before her performance.

"Aren't you worried about some of these guys?" Bobby asked. "I mean, don't you feel weird knowing, you know, they're seeing what you're getting?"

William shook his head and said: "That's just it, Bobby. They're only seeing what *she* wants them to see."

What he meant was that Kennedy's performance was hypnotic. Her movements caused men to move. She was like an expensive timepiece their eyes couldn't stop following. She never spoke or blew kisses as the other women did. She smiled and looked down at them in a manner that controlled their hands and their wallets.

He said to Bobby that night: "Kennedy's the kind of woman you savor. Like a single malt scotch: you just can't gulp her down. You have to sip her. You have to take your time with her."

Bobby said: "Man, you trippin. She just a booty-shakin' stripper."

"Nah, brah," William said. "She's more than that. Believe me. She's more than that."

3

When Jamal had stabbed William, the idea of calling the police was the farthest thing from William's mind. It wasn't that he didn't trust them. In fact, his older brother was a cop and so was his uncle on his mom's side. On his dad's side, there were two aunts who were corporate lawyers.

What he didn't want for Rasheed, or for Jamal, was the stigma of a criminal record. He had read enough on the history of the criminal justice system and was a fan of Michelle Alexander's; he had learned that once a teen was in criminal justice system his life was basically ruined.

Plus, in some ways, William had felt it was his fault that all of this happened. So he drove to the hospital in his bloody blazer and dress shirt.

When the admitting nurse asked what had happened to his shoulder, William said he didn't know. She raised her eyebrows and gave him a sideways look.

William had some confidence that the nurse wouldn't call the police. After all, he was wearing a suit. But when an older Latino officer came in to the exam room, asking about his shoulder, William's confidence faded. He told the officer that he was embarrassed to say. But the officer pressed him, smiling at William as if he knew something.

"Well, sir," William began, "I'm in a fraternity, and, uh, well, one of my little brothers thought—"

"Say no more," the officer said. "My younger brother is in one of those things. We all do stupid shit." Again he smiled and hooked his thumbs into his belt. "Just don't get caught doing any more stupid shit. Okay?"

William laughed and nodded his head. He listened to some of the things the officer's colleagues had done to new recruits. Hazing, the officer explained, was just part of building a brotherhood, family. William agreed, though, he wasn't sure if eating spicy mustard was similar to being stabbed.

The officer waited with William, asking him about his fraternity, how long he had been an Alpha, what he thought was the difference between black and white fraternities, did he date AKAs?

William had ad-libbed his way through the interrogation. True, he was in a fraternity, but it was an academic one. There was no hazing whatsoever. What he knew about black Greeks was what he had heard on NPR and from a few friends who were in them. It seemed to work. But when the doctor came to stitch him up, he seemed also intrigued and asked which chapter of the Alphas William was in. The officer waited, still with his thumbs in his belt. The only chapter William knew of was the one Bobby was a part of, Epsilon. The doctor listened, then asked questions about some person or another. He smiled and nodded a lot to what William said.

"Those dudes are crazy," the doctor said, laughing. "I'll tell my bro that I met you."

The officer left, giving William a two-finger salute. Then the doctor told him that the nurse would come with his discharge papers. He gave William a look, as if to say, I know you were lying, but he didn't say anything more.

William left and was determined to have it out with Rasheed.

But when William had gotten to Rasheed's mother's house, he wasn't there. He wasn't over Kennedy's either. So William went home. When he arrived to his townhouse in Bowie, to his surprise, there was a black unmarked car with DC tags in his spot. Two men got out. They

identified themselves as detectives. They wanted to ask him some questions, pertaining to the young men from the coffee shop in Adams Morgan.

William had hesitated not sure if inviting them in would be wise. The previous night, he had had friends over for poker. The smell of cigars, weed, and liquor undoubtedly lingered. But he realized if he didn't invite them in, his nosey neighbors would eye him and the detectives from their windows.

So the three of them went into his townhouse.

"Excuse the place," William said. "Had poker night."

"It's okay," said one of the detectives. He was tall, brown-skinned with freckles. His hair was gray, though his goatee wasn't.

His partner was roughly the same height, darker and much wider. His head bobbed up and down, his eyes roamed over the walls, the furniture, and William.

William offered them coffee.

They declined.

He offered them cold bottles of water.

They shrugged and accepted them.

They flanked William, sitting at his circular poker table. He had thought it would have been nice if they wanted to play a few hands. But the men seemed determined to get to business. The freckle-faced detective nodded at William's shirt and asked him about his shoulder.

William cleared his throat. He licked his lips, then asked why he wanted to know?

The detectives looked at each other, then at him.

“We understand you were in an altercation in Adams Morgan,” the dark detective said. “Earlier today.” His eyes were brown and tired. He reached in his shirt pocket and popped something in his mouth, washing it down and waiting for William’s reply.

William didn’t speak. At first he had thought about the fraternity lie he had told at the hospital. That wouldn’t work with these two, though. So he decided not to speak at all. This was his house, his poker table; if they were looking for a tell, he wasn’t going to give them one.

“Sir,” freckle-face said, “are you okay?”

No need to reply, William thought. I’m going to sit this one out.

The men looked at each other, confused.

“If you’re not going to speak to us here,” the tired one began, “would you prefer taking a ride back down to the city?” The dark one was definitely not bluffing. Those eyes seemed to have seen plenty of poker nights, plenty of men who thought they could out-slick him, plenty of men who lost their bets.

“I teach history,” William said suddenly. He wasn’t sure where he was going but he kept talking. “I focus primarily on African America history, and the stories that people don’t know or think about. One thing that history has taught me, and what I try to teach *our* kids, is connectivity. Every historical moment isn’t really singular but continuous. One thing constantly leads to another thing. You take the Civil Rights Movement. It’s seen as a thing that happened at a particular time when in fact it had been a continuous cause for human rights since *we* got here.”

William took a sip of water and watched the detectives watch him. “You two are officers of the city,” William continued, “a city that was largely built by slaves and former slaves. And we’re here, in Bowie, which at one time had farmers and white people; now it has half-million dollar homes and few whites and fewer farms. But this change, like you two being detectives, is

part of a constant, too. There's nothing in human history, especially in African American history, where change doesn't occur."

"And what doesn't this have to do with the altercation?" the freckle-faced detective asked. He was tapping his fingers on the table.

If that was a tell, William wasn't sure what it meant. "Well, all altercations are constant," William said, confusing himself at his meaning. "You see, those young men thought I was someone who I wasn't." Finally, William thought, something to hold on to. "So, you see, they responded the way young people respond when they feel threatened or accosted."

"So you approached them?"

"No different than I would any young person," William replied. "I always greet young people. It's my way of, you know, showing I'm not a threat. But some don't always take to kindness."

The detective had stopped tapping and gave his partner a hard look. The other detective was writing, taking glances away from the pad to see something in William's face.

"Look, Mr. Proctor," the tired detective said, still holding his pen over his pad. "We know you were stabbed by one of the guys. We have several eyewitnesses who said you spoke to them about hooking school. So this crap about history and whatnot, you can save." He folded the notepad shut and took a gulp of water. "All we want are their names. If you want to be a victim, fine. I for one don't care if you don't want to press charges, but the one who stabbed you, we believe he's been involved in a series of assaults and robberies. And his buddy may be an accomplice. Now, if history *has* taught you anything"—he stood and his partner suddenly stood, too -- "I hope it's that cooperation with an ongoing investigation is best for you."

"I think I should speak to a lawyer," William said.

“Why?” the freckle-faced detective asked. “We’re not arresting you.”

“I just think it’s best,” William said.

The detectives thanked him for the water and left their cards for him to use. William immediately called his brother, explained everything to him, and asked his advice. His brother told him to cooperate, give up Rasheed and Jamal; after all, if they were hurting people, they needed to be off the streets before they seriously hurt someone or seriously got hurt.

“I can’t do it,” said William. “It’s kind of my fault. I know I taught Rasheed’s class about the Deacons of Defense, the Black Panther Party, and we compared both groups to the Seven Days in *Song of Solomon*. I wanted them to see continuity, but I don’t think that’s what they saw. I think he and Jamal are trying to be revolutionaries. They’re trying to take something back from people they believe took something from them.”

But as William explained what he thought was the problem, he could hear in his own voice the absurdity of his class and of his lessons. It felt like a cold, wet rag smacked him across his face. History wasn’t a continuous thing with actors replaying a part again and again. History was a set of moments, written down or told. That was all. Teachers and scholars looked for connections and continuity because it validated what they wanted to believe, what he wanted to believe. It seemed simple to pass these continuous ideas down, simple because people wanted to believe in connections. They wanted to see in every human story a certainty of previous stories. The idea of things being random was far more frightening than most would admit. So the idea of connections, continuity, sameness became palpable. Even if there weren’t any connections to be found. And it pained William to realize this. Rasheed was not Bobby Seale. Nor was he Milkman. Jamal wasn’t Huey P. Newton. Nor was he Guitar. And he couldn’t imagine them as those unsung black men protecting Civil Rights activists. They were dumb kids. Dumb kids

doing dumb things. Even though William understood what Michelle Alexander meant by the “New Jim Crow,” the reality of it all was that Jamal stabbed him for no damn reason.

“I told them to get ghost,” Kennedy told him later that evening. She was sitting in her mother’s red armchair. She looked beautiful in her chef’s jacket and those baggy black pants.

“So you’re aiding and abetting potential felons?”

“No, William,” she said. “Rasheed’s my brother. And Jamal’s his friend. I just can’t see another group of black boys go down that road.”

“But Kennedy, I got stabbed. And they’re already on that road. Why help them?”

“Shh,” Kennedy placed her finger to her red painted lips. “My mother doesn’t know. She’s sleeping. And I already told you, William.”

“Jesus,” William slapped his forehead. “I’ve called my brother, Kennedy. *He* knows. What, you don’t think that cops talk across city-lines?”

Kennedy shook her head. She wouldn’t look at him. “I told them to get ghost,” she repeated. “I’m sorry, William. I have to protect my family. You know what happens once they get labeled. You know.”

“Yes,” William said. “I know. But...” he couldn’t think of what to say next. He had been stabbed after all, wasn’t he entitled to *some* justice, too? “Kennedy,” he said, “I have to do the right thing. I have to. I mean...”

Kennedy didn’t look at him. She only shook her head.

“What would you have me do?” he asked.

“Whatever you’re going to do, William,” she said, “whatever’s gonna make things right for you. All I know is, I gotta help my family.”

William said okay and called the detectives in front of Kennedy. He told them their names. But he didn't tell them they were in the wind. He just gave them their names and addresses.

Kennedy finally raised her head. There weren't tears in her eyes. But there was pain, and possibly, disappointment. William wasn't sure if their relationship would hold after that night. He loved Kennedy and knew she loved him. But Rasheed was the barrier between them. She could never allow him to falter. Even when he did, she tried her best to help him. Excusing his absences through phony doctor's notes, lying to school administrators about their mother's health, buying Rasheed expensive shoes, watches, an iPhone, and an Xbox 360. He knew Kennedy had to assume more responsibilities because her mom, mentally, hadn't been right in years. But her spoiling Rasheed annoyed him.

"So what now?" He asked her.

"I don't know," Kennedy replied. "Are you hungry?"

William shook his head and left. He phoned the police, but didn't say anything about what Kennedy had done. The detective thanked him and asked him to keep in touch in case he heard from either boy. William agreed, though in his stomach he felt sick for doing so.

4

William lay staring up at the ceiling fan. Soon it would be time for Kennedy to go to the club. Her bag was packed with all her skimpy costumes and various stilettos. William kissed Kennedy goodbye as he left her house for his. She asked him if he was coming by tonight. He said he wasn't. He had quizzes to grade and the school was about to go in test-prep mode, so he wanted to chill out a bit before the test-season rush.

“Okay,” Kennedy said, hanging on the edge of her front door. She smiled softly at him.

“Are you all right? You seem, distracted.”

“It’s just work, sweetie.” He kissed her again. “Have fun.”

The sun was closing its eye as William headed east. He thought about Rasheed and Jamal, wondering how for weeks, months, and now years, they eluded the police. They were ghosts all right. He’d always suspected that Kennedy kept in touch with Rasheed, either through text or email. She had to know where he was. Though she was repeatedly questioned, followed, and undoubtedly tapped, she never led them to her brother.

William touched the spot where Jamal had stabbed him. The incident still bothered him, he still flinched at nothing, still woke up at night grabbing his shoulder. His car was quiet and he knew his home would be even quieter. He decided to call Bobby and ask him if he could swing by.

“No prob,” Bobby said. “I was just about to crack open this Jameson.”

When William got there, Bobby was still in his dress shirt and slacks, though his shirt was half out and his bright blue tie was loose around his collar. Though Bobby was the physical education and health teacher, he often wore suits and kept a whistle in his pocket. Bobby’s condo smelled like sex and fluoride. It made William wonder what he had been doing moments before.

“Take a seat,” Bobby said, clearing a pile of papers from a chair. “What’s good, brah?”

“Chillin,” William said.

“How’s your girl?”

“Kennedy’s cool. She got a gig tonight.”

Bobby poured two double shots of whiskey. He handed a glass to William and raised his own. “To love,” Bobby said.

William smirked and took a sip. “Aiyo, did I ever tell you the time I punched Rasheed in the mouth?”

“Yeah,” Bobby said, pouring himself another shot. “That and how the cops shook you down.”

“Well I wouldn’t say that.”

“I would.” Bobby sipped his shot and looked over at him. “You gave them boys up, William. I mean I don’t blame you. They both were kind of shitheads. But still... don’t know if I could’ve done that. I mean,” he downed his shot, “it was the right thing and all. But, still.”

William nodded rhythmically, thinking perhaps he did make a mistake. “You know, I thought I saw Rasheed today,” he said.

“Oh yeah, where?”

“New York Avenue.”

Bobby pulled on his chin hairs as if lint or wisdom was there. “You know, I’ve thought I’ve seen a lot of our old students. Especially the little shits. Man, you drive down the street and see all these depressed faces... ‘nough to make you quit teaching.”

William finished his drink and reached for the bottle. “You’ve thought about quitting?”

“Man, I think about that shit e’ery day.”

“What keeps you from doing it?” William didn’t mean to ask. He looked at Bobby, who seemed to be thinking of an answer.

Eventually he shrugged. “I guess I like what I do. Even on the shit-days, I really like what I do.”

William laughed. “So why think about quitting?”

Bobby laughed, too. “I don’t know. Why you give up on Rasheed?”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“No,” Bobby said, giving William the strangest look. “No, it’s not.”

“I did what I did because it was the right thing to do.”

“I can understand.”

“You know Kennedy told them ‘to get ghost?’”

“That’s family for you.”

“I can’t believe the police never caught them.”

Bobby was silent for several minutes. He pulled on his hairs and William fidgeted in his chair.

“You know what happened to Jamal?” Bobby finally said.

“I don’t know. He got ghost.”

“I don’t think so. He sent me an email about a year ago.” Bobby lifted the screen of his laptop. He began typing and then turned the computer around. “See, I think he’s in college. Or *was* in college.”

“He didn’t graduate, did he?”

“Somebody lied for him.” Bobby turned his laptop back around. “You know, those two were thick as thieves. If Jamal is in,” he looked at the screen, “Michigan, then I bet fifty so is Rasheed.”

William wanted Bobby to forward the email, but felt uncomfortable asking. “How’d they get all the way over to Michigan?”

“How do roaches get into refrigerators?” Bobby replied. “Hell if I know. I’m sure if there’s a will there’s a way.”

“You think the police should know?”

Bobby squinted then downed another shot. "Let them boys live," Bobby said. "If shit goes south for 'em, let them find out the hard way."

"You didn't helped them, did you?"

Bobby didn't say anything at first. He poured himself another double. "We all do what we think is right, William. That's why we're teachers. Niggas fuck up e'ery day and no one looks out for 'em." He threw his shot back. "Sometimes," he said, "I just want the bad guys to win."

William smiled to himself. He filled his glass and Bobby's. "Yeah," he said, raising a toast, "maybe that's our connection. To them."

The next day, William called in. He was partly hung over but mainly he wanted to be alone with himself. People could change, he knew that, but he also knew that Rasheed and Jamal got over. And that upset him. It seemed unfair but then again, as he thought, what was ever fair for Rasheed. Rasheed was being raised by a stripper, even though Kennedy was more than that, to the outside world, she was only that. Their mom was mentally not well; their dad, in the wind. No matter what, Kennedy was all he had, and to some extent, he was all she had. He drove to Kennedy's. His plan was to apologize and explain that he got it; he understood why she helped them. William opened her front door. He started to yell upstairs, but saw she was on the couch, curled up under a brown blanket.

As he came closer, William could see the dry streaks of her makeup. Her nose had blood crusted over its bridge. Her left eye was puffy and the right side of her mouth was swollen. He closed his hands around hers. Then William slightly pulled the blanket away from her shoulders. There were scuffmarks and scratches over her chest and around her neck. William brushed

strands of Kennedy's hair away from her face. In their seven years together, he had never seen her so fragile, so vulnerable. She was like a rare exotic bird with a broken wing.

"What do you need me to do?" he asked softly.

Kennedy pushed a tissue to her runny nose. She sniffed and coughed. "Nothing," she said. "I'm so fuckin mad, William."

"What happened?"

"I caught this bitch stealing my money." Kennedy wiped her nose and combed her hair back with her fingers. "I wasn't trying to fight, William. Honestly. I would've shared what I had with her, but she lied. I saw her go in my purse, and her ass lied."

Kennedy pulled three tissues from its box. "And the thing is," she continued. She blew her nose, inspected the contents, and shook her head. "She's supposed to be my girl."

William knew some of the girls at the Stadium. They all seemed friendly enough. But he knew for some of them it was all an act. William sat beside her. He rubbed her feet and ankles. He listened to her story. She had gotten into an argument with the woman; other girls corroborated what she said she saw: the thief went inside Kennedy's purse. Still, the girl lied and wouldn't give Kennedy her money back. And when the manager came at closing, he sided with the thief. He allowed her to leave with Kennedy's money, telling Kennedy she needed to watch her tone and attitude. Kennedy didn't bother dressing. She ran after the thief. She snatched her bag. All her shit fell out, and they started fighting.

"Like fucking animals," Kennedy said. "I felt so embarrassed and dumb and...hurt."

William stroked her calf. There was a bruise on it, and he tried not to apply too much pressure.

Kennedy was silent, sniffing.

“I took off today,” William said.

“Me too,” she said with a soft chuckle, “can’t be in a kitchen like this.”

“Do you need some money, Kennedy?”

Kennedy turned her head. She rose and looked at him. She touched the side of William’s face. “That’s so sweet, honey,” she said. “No, I’m okay. I got most of it.”

William patted Kennedy’s leg. “Yesterday,” he said, “I thought I saw Rasheed. On New York Avenue. Panhandling.”

Kennedy blinked vacantly. Even with the streaks on her cocoa cheeks, she suddenly seemed aware of something between them. “Was it him?” she asked drily.

“Don’t know. You know what happened to Jamal?”

She shook her head. “No, and I don’t care, William. I doubt that was Rasheed, panhandling. I don’t know what he’s doing, but I know he’s not panhandling.”

Kennedy swung her feet from William’s lap. They sat beside each other. Silent. Staring at the furniture in her front room. The sun crept through the blinds and brightened the hardwood floor, the throw rug, and the photos of Rasheed, Kennedy, and their mom. William turned and looked at Kennedy. She was indeed a beautiful woman, even battered. And perhaps it was this level of weakness that he hadn’t ever seen. Perhaps it was this fierceness for which she fought so hard, so determined to keep. Perhaps it was being independent, the reason she never broached the subject of marriage or even living together. Perhaps it was the love she had for her brother, such a deep passionate love for her young, idiot brother. Perhaps it was all the above that made her attractive. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder. He pulled her close and kissed her lips, softly licking the top and bottom, the way she had taught him. He kissed her neck, smelled the

strawberry fragrance, and took small nibbles of her earlobe. She held his face then rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry,” she said, gently crying. “I’m so sorry, William.”

The Last Cigarette

The window was down enough for Junior to let out the ash and smoke from his cigarette. He reread on his phone the email Lorraine had sent Sunday.

It was Friday.

In part, she'd written, she didn't want to send him an email, but she couldn't bring herself to call, and she didn't want Tony to say anything. She wanted to be the one. She had been dating someone, "Thaddeus," for nearly a year, and he had proposed and she had said yes. They were to marry at the end of September, the week of Tony's birthday. She wanted Junior to come to the wedding but would understand if he didn't.

Since the first time he read till now, Junior hadn't called his son, Tony, or Lorraine. He wanted to, though he didn't know how to feel about this new situation. Lorraine was a beautiful woman; certainly others noticed her. She was intelligent, caring, a wonderful cook, and a great mom. So finding love, finding someone else, it couldn't have been difficult, especially in Atlanta. A city like that, he imagined, was full of loyal men who sought the affections of an honest woman. Junior wanted to be happy for her. They had been divorced for three years now. But he couldn't bring himself to it. He kept thinking about their life, before his mistake. The Sunday dinners, the trips to Luray Caverns, Harper's Ferry, the Great Blacks Wax Museum, the long walks with Tony when his was younger, and the many times they would all go out on the Chesapeake and fish together, like a rustic African American family.

Junior cleared his throat. He put the cigarette back to his lips. He looked around his smoky car.

An urge to cry and smash his smartphone came over him. He began heaving and sweating. He rolled down the window more to let in fresh air. He looked down at his hand. The

email with its tiny print was still on his phone. He regained control of his breathing. He closed his eyes and thought: get it together, Junior, get it together. Atlanta's not that far away. The cigarette still burned in his other hand. He took a puff then chucked it out of the window.

He hoisted himself from his car, feeling old Buick rock and settle from under him. He was early to work and roughly three blocks away from Rosedale. He went to the passenger-side, yanked up his satchel, slammed the door shut, and gave door his routine hip-bump assuring it caught. He admired his American car. Though it needed some work, Junior was certain his baby could make the Atlanta trip.

Walking up to the school gave Junior time to settle his mind. Lorraine had every right to remarry. And so do I, he thought. But he bit the bottom of his lip. This feeling of hurt and frustration kept gnawing him. Why didn't she have the decency to call? Was that too difficult? He would've called, if he found someone. And why involve Tony? He's *his* son, not this Thaddeus guy's kid. And what kind of name is Thaddeus anyway? How old was he? Junior stopped to catch his breath. C'mon, c'mon, why I'm so upset? He continued walking and stretching his back. My god, he thought, she could've told me about Thaddeus a year ago. What the hell? He bit his lip again. I can't believe she told me over an email. That's so goddamn impersonal. I would have never done that her.

Around Nebraska Avenue, the nicely manicured homes took Junior's mind off the email. Junior used to want to live over here. At one time, he had pointed out to Lorraine a home up for sale. They even went in and looked around. The price was a bit much, but still. It was nice. Passing the house, Junior wondered if they could have afforded it, would they have gotten divorced? Probably, he answered. Plus, it would have been a bitch to take care of as house all by yourself, he thought.

Junior patted his tweed blazer for the pack of cigarettes. It was smashed from the hip-bump. There was one crooked cigarette left. He paused to give it fire and resumed his walk.

Friday mornings in DC could be good and quiet. Even the inaudible April wind made the ash trees speak in hushes. Junior's heavy feet answered back loudly.

Periodically women would jog passed him, waving as their bouncy ponytails hurried by. Junior nodded but didn't speak. He was a big guy and he knew that any slight movement could have him pepper-sprayed. Besides, he preferred to look at them, now more than ever. It was safer, less problematic.

He scanned around the neighborhood as he walked. There was no sign of the old Hispanic couple that normally took their Pomeranian out for its morning pee. Junior liked practicing his Spanish with them. They didn't seem to mind. Even the dog was kind of nice. Junior hoped nothing bad happened to them or their dog. It seemed awfully old and tired and underused.

Junior stopped across from Rosedale finishing his cigarette. The building was a tribute to the school's founder, an old-time K-Street lawyer with a lot of connections and a lot of money, who wanted something to be remembered by. Junior had worked here for nearly eight years now. He would have liked for Tony to have gone here and graduated, but he and Lorraine started having problems.

Three years into working at Rosedale, Junior was promoted. He had been heralded as a veteran/master teacher. His previous teaching experience came from the mathematics department at Howard. And when his Farouk told him about this opportunity at the high school, he jumped at the chance to impart his algebraic mind to students. And for the first years, things went well. Test scores were good, and the students liked him. As the head math teacher, the principal

assigned him an assistant, a graduate student from George Washington, a young vivacious woman named, Bria. She was cuter and smart and had a good rapport with his students. She would tutor those Junior didn't feel like being bothered with and would encourage him to be nicer. Bria also had a flirtatious side to her. And Junior liked the attention. When he was at his desk, she came and hovered over his shoulder, placing her chest near his head. On more than one occasion, Junior turned and found her cleavage staring back at him. At first, he never said anything to the principal or to Lorraine. The guys thought she was harmless, though Bobby told him to be careful.

“Girls like that,” he said one poker night, “are bound to have shit with them.”

And he was right.

But Junior didn't know or chose to ignore her shit. He would lie to Lorraine, saying he was hanging out with the guys, and go to Happy Hour with Bria after work. Several times she had invited him to her apartment. Her roommate was always out of town and she always wanted company. He rebuffed her advances the way a coy woman would, smiling, batting his eyes, and saying that he was married. She would pout and buy another round. Then, after an argument with Lorraine over a gambling loss to Farouk, Junior walked out his house. He drove to one of his favorite watering holes. He didn't intend to call Bria when he left. But sitting at the bar drinking a Scotch and soda made him think about her. He knew she would take his mind off his debt and Lorraine's haranguing him.

When she came to the bar, he grabbed her around the waist and kissed her neck. He thanked her for being a friend. He explained to her what had happened. He said he needed company. Not long after, they had sex in her apartment. Her roommate wasn't home.

Junior had said things to Bria that he'd only had said to Lorraine. He was never sure if he'd meant any of it. He had had a moment with a young woman. That was all. Surely, he figured, Bria would desire men closer to her age. She didn't. She started sending him e-cards for no apparent reason. She texted him photos of her body. She would wink at him as he taught. At no point in their brief affair did Junior ever let on that he wanted her more than Lorraine. But Bria made no bones about it: they were a couple. And Junior had to break it off.

It took four months to do so. He told her that she should date other guys, reminding her of his marriage. He told her that she was too much for him, pointing at the sixteen-year difference. He told her that she was being childish and to leave him alone, stating that her unprofessionalism was impacting the learning environment. That's when he noticed the shit that was with her. She started calling his house number. Every time Lorraine or Tony answered, the person hung up. But when Junior answered, Bria would be on the other end, crying or yelling. Lorraine was no fool. She could see the caller id just like Tony. And by the end of that fourth month, Junior had confessed. Junior had gotten rid of Bria, and in the process he had broken Lorraine's heart.

"Money and bills can ruin a marriage," Bobby said to him afterwards on one drinking night, "but cheating, cheating always destroys it."

"Humph," Junior grunted at his thoughts.

He plucked the cigarette into the street and crossed Rosedale Way.

The building had a few early birds loitering about. Margo, one of the school's front office secretaries, was sitting at the circular receptionist's desk. Normally some younger woman would be sitting there greeting students and teachers with her bubbly light brown face. Though Margo had a decent face and personality, she wasn't *her*.

"Hey," Junior said. "Where's—"

Margo's finger shot to her lips. She shook her head quickly and darted her eyes at some of the students.

"Oh," Junior said. "Well, good morning to you."

"Good morning, Dr. Vince," she replied smiling.

Junior went to the right of the receptionist's desk. He tried to use his badge to enter the main office but the light on the glass door didn't turn green. He could see someone was in there. He could hear the copier going. He knocked, hurting his knuckles a bit. The vice-principal, David, stuck his diminutive head out of his office. He had that annoyed look people get when their concentration had been interrupted.

"Is something wrong with your badge?" David said, allowing Junior to bump pass him.

"Yeah," Junior replied. "It's not working. Which is why I knocked."

David shook his head and sighed back to his office.

Junior went to his mailbox. There were several catalogues offering new algebra games and lesson plans and worksheets. There were four check stubs from two months back crammed between the magazines. Junior shoved them all into his satchel.

He stopped in front of David's doorway. David was frantically typing then reading then typing some more on his laptop.

"Hey David? What happened to the young lady who's normally at the desk?"

David didn't look up but said: "She's been fired."

"Oh. What she do?"

David's eyes came up. "I can't tell you that, Junior."

"Well, it's not like I'll say anything to anyone."

David shook his head and resumed typing.

Upstairs in his room, Junior tried to remember the receptionist's name. Was it Hilary or Mallory or Marjorie? It had a "re" in it. That much he was certain of.

Junior powered-on his desktop, and his OpenDoor learning portal popped up. Its calendar and messenger displayed a reminder: Meeting today. School is out half-day. Junior smiled. He almost forgot about that. Now he could get home earlier and pack and be on the road before rush hour really got going. That is, if the meeting didn't take too long. He perused the rest of the reminder. There was a note for all the teachers to check their Inboxes and bring their laptops to the conference room.

"Shit," Junior. It was one of those damn data chats. Rosedale's son, Jefferson, usually led those and Junior, along with the rest of the teachers, hated being in those boring inane chats. "I gotta get out of this," he said, shaking his head.

He stroked his goatee and contemplated how he would do that. He could say Tony was hit by a car and was in serious condition. His ex-wife was beside herself and wanted him there. How could anyone object to that? A father needs to be with his injured son, right?

But knowing Jefferson, Junior figured, he would want to charter a plane, perhaps his father's, and even come down with him. Junior could hear Jefferson now: We're all Rosedale family. When one falls, we all fall.

Junior would have to think of something else.

He sat in his ergonomic chair and unpacked his breakfast: a scrambled egg white with cheese on whole grain toast. The bread had gone a bit soggy but at least it was healthy. He wiped his mouth as he chewed. He poured a mug full of black coffee from his thermos. He could feign sickness, but the school nurse might have pain medicine or something. He could say he had to

see a doctor, but Junior used that one last time. And Jefferson seemed a bit hurt that Junior didn't want to reschedule his appointment.

For some reason, and Junior wasn't sure why, Jefferson really liked him. They talked a lot about football and baseball. Both sports they had played in college. He even invited Junior and Tony to Nats Park. Said his father had season tickets, great seats, the Lexus seats, and you could see the entire field behind home plate. Junior turned him down and that hurt look came over Jefferson's face. Okay, he said, maybe next time.

But there was never going to be a next time, Junior thought. And he couldn't quite figure out why Jefferson wanted to be *his* friend. And come to think of it, Junior wasn't sure why he didn't want to be his. He chalked it up to Jefferson and David being admin. Junior had little trust or patience for them.

He sipped more coffee, then started loading up algebraic equations into OpenDoor. Since it was a half-day, he knew he'd only see three of his six classes. His first class today would be the okay-class. They weren't terrible students. They just weren't good at math. His other two were problem classes. They had so much going on in their worlds that mathematics was the last thing on their minds. Often he would have to send one or two or three of them to see David or the school's counselor; or he would stop class and call a parent, who fussed at the child but never did much else. Junior wished he had his three afternoon classes instead. He liked them. They could manage the work and even more. No doubt that *these* were the ninth graders who were going far.

There was a knock at Junior's door. He leaned his head away from the desktop and saw William Proctor, the history teacher, standing there. Junior eased himself out of his ergonomic chair. He tapped the power button on the classroom plasma as he passed it.

“Howdy, William.”

“Hey man.”

Junior allowed William in. “What’s going on?”

“Have you heard about Aubrey?”

That’s her name. “No,” Junior said. “Other than she was fired.”

“Yeah, man, she *was* fired, but you know why?”

“Nope.”

“She and Jefferson were caught fucking.”

Junior’s head tilted forward and his mouth hung open.

“Yeah,” William continued. “David caught them. In the conference room.”

“No wonder he was typing so fast,” Junior said.

“Here’s the craziest part—” William sat at one of the computer tables. With his schoolboy face, glasses, and his semi-causal dress, he looked like a college freshman. “Aubrey’s *been* Jefferson’s side piece. I mean like that’s why she was hired.”

“Where’d you get this?” Junior asked, pulling his chair around from his desk.

“Well, I’m not supposed to say,” William said. “But I will say, have you talked to Farouk lately?”

Junior frowned and then said: “I haven’t today. But I will later.”

“Cool,” William said, smiling as if he felt the message had been delivered successfully.

“So you know, everybody’s gonna be at the meeting today. I mean, ev-ery-bo-dy. Shits gonna be off the chain.”

Junior and William slapped five, and Junior thanked him for the heads up. He walked with William to the class door. “I’m not sure I’ll be there, at the meeting,” Junior said.

William cocked his head back. “Why?”

“Well, William, I’m going to Atlanta. I gotta win Lorraine back.”

“Oh shit,” William said, slapping Junior’s hand, again. “What you mean, win her back?”

“Just that,” Junior said. He felt right saying this but wasn’t exactly sure how to explain it further.

“Go on then, bro. Go win your woman back.”

“Let’s just keep this between us,” Junior whispered. “I’m gonna try to dip outta here.”

“I gotchu,” William replied.

“I’ll probably let Farouk know.”

“That’s cool.”

“So,” Junior said, turning to see students crowding the hall, “maybe we’ll get up some time next week.”

“No doubt.” William gave Junior an encouraging-look then nodded. “Half-day, ladies and gentlemen,” he said loudly as he walked down the hall. “Let’s get all your materials for your first three periods.”

Junior stood by his door, giving students a friendly good morning. But he wondered about Jefferson and Aubrey. Wasn’t she just out of college? Wasn’t Jefferson’s wife on the school’s board of directors? Man, Junior thought, both of them are really cute, too. Must be nice. He smiled: he and I aren’t so different after all.

First and second periods had gone better than Junior expected. For some reason, both classes had questions about previous assignments and seemed especially astute about solving polynomials. Junior loaded up more algebra games and divided his classes into teams. Several problems, such

as $6x^2 - 47x + 77 = 0$, had to be solved and graphed in under two minutes and others, such as $7x^2 - 15xy + 63y = 0$, had to be solved graphed in under one minute. The classes enjoyed the challenge, especially working without a calculator. Junior felt as if he were Mac McGarry. Although none finished under the time allotted, Junior gave them credit. With his last class, though, things went worse than he thought.

There had been an altercation between the Arrington twins, Mika and Makini, just before Junior's class. What he gathered from Makini was that Mika had taken her favorite purple pen and wouldn't give it back, so in retaliation Makini took Mika's calculator and threw it hard to the ground. Breaking it, she said, into a million exponents. Now, Mika was threatening to kill Makini after school, and Makini wanted the principal and the police to be called.

"I know my rights," Makini said. "She can't just steal from me and then threaten to kill me. She can't do that."

Junior tried calling their father, but, as their father said, they were gonna have to work things out themselves. He was tired of coming down there to break up their fights. He had a job, too.

"But Mr. Arrington," Junior pleaded, "your daughters are making it difficult for me to teach."

"Sorry, Dr. Vince, but I can't leave work again. Not for this, man. I mean, can't *you* handle it?"

"Okay," Junior said, softly into his phone. "I'll send them to the counselor."

But he didn't.

Instead he placed Mika on one side of the class and Makini on the other. He tried doing "It's Academic" with this class, but they were unmotivated. They seemed more interested in the

clock and the pending fight. The Arrington girls fought and argued like complete strangers. They didn't like wearing matching clothes or shoes. Nothing other than their narrow brown faces, almond eyes, and their sandy brown dreadlocks made them identical. When the bell rang, the class quickly gathered their belongings and crowded the hall. Junior held Mika and Makini back in his room.

"Look," he said, "you two ought to be ashamed carrying on the way you are. You're sisters, for Christ's sake. Your father is busting his butt trying to keep you two here and this is how you repay him? Acting like heathens?"

"She a heathen," said Makini.

"Yo mutha," replied Mika.

"She was your mother, too. Idiot!"

"Jesus," Junior said. "Did you both wake up on the stupid side of the pillow? Can't you just stop yourselves?"

"I don't want her in my class no more," Mika said. "I want to be in another class."

"Me, too."

Junior shook his head. "You can't be in another class; it's almost the fourth quarter." He checked his watch. "Look, I know you love your sister," he said to Makini.

She shook her head, No.

"Well, I know you love Makini, right?"

Mika only rolled her eyes.

"Good Lord, help me." Junior closed his eyes and held up his hands. He heard one of them snicker. "Oh, that's funny?"

"Mr. Proctor said we have a separation of Church and State," Mika said.

“He’s right,” Junior said. “But I wasn’t really praying.”

“I like praying,” Makini added.

“Is that right?” Junior felt some relief.

Makini said praying had helped her after their mother’s death. She and Mika continued going to church even though their father had stopped. Mika added that all he did was work. He missed a lot of their cheering competitions and tennis matches. She said he didn’t have time for the Lord anymore or, it seemed, for them.

“Being a single dad is hard,” Junior explained. “Hell, being a single parent is hard. I’m sure your dad loves you.”

The girls shrugged.

Makini asked: “You have any children, Dr. Vince?”

Junior had learned a long time ago to never to share his personal life with students. Though he’d heard of pedagogical studies that said students related more to teachers who did share such things, Junior didn’t believe in that. He had seen too many well-intentioned teachers get fired or worse for being personal with students, especially high school girls. He calculated for every teacher he knew who shared something personal an average of 10 students used that information to their advantage. But he was having a breakthrough of sorts with the Arrington twins. He decided to tell them he had a child, a son.

“Is he big like you?” Makini asked.

“No,” Junior said. “He’s small and frail like his mother.”

“You gotta picture?” Mika asked, smiling at Makini.

Junior sighed, checked his watch, and went to his desktop. He clicked on the folder that had images of him, Lorraine, and Tony. The first image that popped up was Tony hitting a heavy bag that Junior held against his body.

“Ooo, he cute, Dr.Vince.” Makini said, leaning close enough for Junior to smell the peppermint on her breath. “What’s his name?”

“Tony,” Junior said dryly.

“He aw’ight,” Mika said. She stood behind him. “He live wit you?”

“No,” Junior said, closing the screen. “He lives in Atlanta. I’m going to see him, tonight, hopefully.”

“He got a girlfriend?” Makini asked.

“Yes,” Junior said. “I suppose.”

“You don’t know?” Mika asked.

“Y’all don’t talk?” said Makini

“Yes,” Junior said, “of course, and what a father and son talk about is between them.

Now—”

“Can we see another picture?” Mika asked.

“No,” Junior said.

“Please,” they both said, holding their palms prayerfully together.

Junior opened another image. It was of Lorraine and Tony, standing happily at Tony’s high school graduation.

“That’s his mom?” Makini asked.

“Yes, Makini, that’s my...” Junior hesitated. “My wife.” He smiled.

“She’s really pretty,” Makini said.

“I didn’t know you were married,” Mika said.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me. Now head on home.”

He started to leave along with the Arrington twins, but he wanted to see Farouk. He rushed up the stairs to see if he was in his room. He was, but so was Jefferson. Junior knocked on the glass door, and Farouk waved him in. Jefferson was smiling.

“Junior,” Jefferson said. “What’s going on? How’re things?”

“Not well,” Junior said. “I was looking for you.”

“Oh?”

“I’m not sure if I can stay for the data chat.”

“Mm-hm, I see.” Jefferson turned and gave Farouk an obvious wink. “Well, we’re gonna miss you, buddy. Since it is mandatory for all teachers to be here, I’m going have to let you go.”

“Ha!” Farouk laughed. “That’s funny.”

“Aw, it’s okay, Junior,” Jefferson said, playfully punching Junior’s shoulder. “I wasn’t doing the data chat, anyway. David was going over the plan for the end of the year test.”

“Huh, I see.” Junior wouldn’t bother with an excuse for David. He’d just tell him he had to leave and that would suffice. “Well, good seeing you, Jefferson.”

“Yeah. And hey,” Jefferson stopped at Farouk’s door, “maybe we can catch a Nats game during the summer?”

“Sure,” Junior said, knowing he wouldn’t ever go.

When Jefferson was gone, Junior started in on the Aubrey thing.

“Christ,” Farouk said, “William can hold water for nothing.”

“Oh, was this private?”

“Nah,” Farouk said, reaching down into his desk. “I would’ve told you anyway, but you know, I ran into William at the Stadium and it had all just happened.” Farouk uncapped a bottle of Teacher’s. “Wanna sniff?”

“No,” Junior said. “I’m fine.” He pulled one of the student chairs over to Farouk’s desk. Junior watched him pour a large amount of whiskey into a red plastic cup. “I see you’re getting ready for the weekend.”

“I am. Wife’s gone out of town with the kids. I got the entire house to myself. Probably won’t even shower the whole weekend.”

Junior laughed. “Well, I’m on my way to Atlanta.”

“No shit. Why?”

For a moment, Junior was scared to say. Of all the guys at Rosedale, Farouk was the one who knew him and Lorraine the longest. Lorraine had even introduced Farouk to his now-wife. “I’m going to get Lorraine back,” Junior said.

Farouk held the cup to his lips and shook his head a bit. “I’m not sure I follow, Junior? I mean, haven’t you two been divorced for a while now?”

“Yes,” he said. “But, you see, I gotta try to make things right. At first I didn’t think I could. I didn’t think she would want me to try.”

“So she wants you to try now?”

“Well, no. I mean. She’s planning on marrying some guy. Get this: his name’s Thaddeus.”

Farouk’s head jerked back. “Hm. He a brother?”

Junior thought for a moment. “You know, I’m not sure. But it doesn’t matter. I need to tell Lorraine we need to try again. We need to make this work. She can’t marry him.”

“Does she know that’s how you feel, Junior?”

“That’s why I’m heading down there. Their wedding is at the end of September, so that gives me a little time to, you know, make things right with us.”

Farouk took a sip. He nodded to the silence of the room. “Thing is, Junior, it’s April. What are you going to do for income? What if Lorraine isn’t interested in getting back together? You’ll have lost your job.”

Junior wasn’t interested in his opinion anymore; he wanted to know about Aubrey and Jefferson.

“I’ll figure something out. Maybe I’ll talk with Jefferson.”

Farouk chuckled. “You and Jefferson have a lot in common,” he said.

Junior eyed his friend.

“Both of you fucked around on your wives. You both have a son. And you both work here. Maybe you ought to go to a Nationals game with him. Trade stories.”

“You trying to be funny?”

“A little,” Farouk said, sipping from his cup.

“There’s a big difference between him and me,” Junior said. “I fessed up. I paid the price. And I’m going to drive down there and prove I still love her.”

Farouk put the cup down hard. Drops of whiskey splattered on his hand and the desk. First, he told Junior that driving that Buick, would be the dumbest thing he’d ever done, even dumber than sleeping with Bria. Second, he ought to think about what this all would mean for Tony, seeing his father all out of sorts, trying to beg his ex-wife not to marry a guy. And last, he asked Junior wasn’t Lorraine entitled to move on? Shouldn’t he just be happy for her?

Junior didn't have an answer. He looked down at the floor, then at Farouk. They had been friends since high school. That was twenty-eight years. They were solid friends. But right now, Junior wasn't interested in hearing anymore.

"Look," he said. "I've made up my mind." Junior stood and extended his hand.

Farouk rose from his seat. "Well," he said, gripping Junior's hand, "I'm not going to stop you. Just don't drive. Take a plane. Hell, Jefferson's daddy might let him send you down in style. You never know."

"I'm not going to ask. Then I'll have to commit to a Nats game with him."

"Couldn't be all that bad, if you win Lorraine back."

Junior thought about it as he left Farouk to his drink. Catching a plane would definitely make things simpler. But no, Junior liked long distance driving. He could pop in a CD or listen to his satellite radio, though the reception on it was shoddy at times. Maybe when he got down there, Tony would reinstall the radio or show him how to do it. A real son/father moment. Maybe they could even go catfishing for old-time sake?

When Junior got to his class, he found Jefferson standing in his room, examining the algebra game.

"Hey, Jefferson, is everything all right?"

"Yeah, sure." Jefferson's face was frozen in a smile. He was a tall, cool-looking man. The kind of man the sun refused to burn. "I just wanted to ask you for some advice. You know, like from one colleague to another."

Junior felt an itch for a cigarette. He started biting at his lips. "Sure," he said, sitting at one of the computer desks. "What's up?"

“I don’t know if you heard...” Jefferson pulled a chair in front of Junior. As he sat, he kept his eyes on Junior. “Have you heard?”

“Heard what?”

Jefferson cleared his throat. “Well, David and I have had a bit of a falling out. He sent this email to my father. I mean, Mr. Rosedale, and some of the board members. It was all internal stuff, you see.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And well, I responded in a not-too-professional manner. Things got ugly.”

“When did this happen?”

Jefferson’s eyes went down and he started picking phantom lint from his pants. “I guess last night. Really late last night. And this morning. And part of today.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You see,” Jefferson said, looking up but not at Junior, “sometimes people think they see things or know things that they really don’t know or understand. I mean, how should I say this? People, well intentioned, think they know what I’m about. They don’t. They know who my father is, Mr. Rosedale, and they know how I got this job, through my experience in marketing and data-mining.” He glanced over at Junior whose leg bounced under the table.

“I mean,” Jefferson continued, “it’s not like I don’t answer to anyone, you see. I do. I answer to the board. And so, when David thought he saw something and went out on limb, well, I kind of blew up at him.”

Junior nodded; he checked his watch. “Hey look, Jefferson, David can be an ass, but he’s a good guy. He cares about these kids, so unless you did something to these kids—”

“Oh no, Junior, never. I abhor the thought—”

“Well, here’s what I would say, Fuck it.”

Jefferson laughed. “Fuck it?”

“Let me level with you,” Junior said. “I fucked up with my ex-wife a long time ago and now she’s about to marry some guy named Thaddeus. I don’t know who Thaddeus is. She never mentioned him before. Not before sending me this email this past Sunday. I mean, we talked weekly, sometimes daily, and not one mention of Thaddeus. Neither did my son say anything. Which I don’t understand. I mean I talk with him all the time. So it really pisses me off because, you know, if your son doesn’t have your back, I mean who really does?”

Junior stared at Jefferson as if waiting for his response.

“Well, anyway,” Junior continued, “now I’m going down there to get Lorraine back. I mean it. I’ve never stopped loving her, even when I fucked up. I never stopped. I didn’t bitch or complain about the divorce or when she moved back to Atlanta. Okay, I did complain about that. But that was because we had this weekly thing we did. We’d have Sunday dinner: either at my new condo or at our old house. And we did it because we wanted Tony to know we still loved him. That what happened between us wasn’t his fault. And it wasn’t his fault. It was my fault. I fucked up. I realized that then. And I realize it now. I realize that I lost everything when she divorced me. So...” he paused as if he suddenly saw a ghost. “You see,” he said to Jefferson. “You have to say fuck it. You have to go with what feels right. Even if you make a fool of yourself, you have to say, Fuck it! I gotta try!”

Jefferson sat wide-eyed. “I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say,” Junior said, standing from his seat. “I gotta go, Jefferson. If whatever happened with you and David can’t be resolved, then fuck it.”

“It’s not that easy for me,” Jefferson said. He stood and smoothed down his blazer and pants. “I think I’ve made a mistake that I can’t say ‘fuck it’ to.”

Junior gathered his belongings. He looked at screen. Lorraine and Tony were smiling at him. He downed the remaining bit of coffee and closed the image. “Then ask yourself what’s important,” he said passing Jefferson and tapping the plasma button off. “Ask yourself what is it that you want? And make the decision from there.”

“I want Aubrey reinstated,” Jefferson said.

Junior turned and paused at his door. “Do you love her?”

Jefferson looked ready to cry. “Yes,” he said. “I do.”

“Then fuck it, divorce your wife and be happy.”

When he got outside, he saw Margo, Mika, and Makini on the school’s steps. All three were smoking. Jesus, Margo, he thought. If David catches you out here—

“Hey Dr. Vince,” Makini said, blowing smoke away from her sister and Margo.

“Why are you two smoking?”

“Because we wanted a cigarette?” Mika said.

“Are you too young?”

“No,” Mika said. “Our dad smokes. He knows we smoke. So...”

“Don’t you smoke, Dr. Vince?” Makini asked. “You sure smell like cigarettes.”

Fuck it, Junior thought. “Let me get one from one of you, ladies.”

Margo gave him the pack. “It’s my last one,” she said. “I was just telling the girls I’m quitting today.”

“Good for you,” Junior said. He looked at the pack as he waved goodbye to them. It was his brand, but the itch for a cigarette would be over soon. He heard one of them say that she

would see him next week. But Junior didn't reply. He wasn't sure if he would see them or the school next week or next month. He needed to get home and pack quickly. He'd prolonged his stay at Rosedale enough. He figured he would take, as much time he needed to convince Lorraine how terrible a thing it would be to marrying Thaddeus, whose name conjured up a lithe Southern Shyster. He imagined how he would explain that he never stopped loving her and how his infidelity *was* a sign of weakness, but he was strong now. Stronger than he'd ever been. The years apart, especially with her and Tony being in Atlanta, had made him better, more sensitive. He'd share how he'd help the Arrington girls and even helped Jefferson. Well, maybe not Jefferson. Too soon for that. But he *was* getting better, becoming nicer, becoming his old wonderful self again.

How long it would take him to convince Lorraine, he couldn't say. He would stay in Atlanta until she was convinced. He would quit Rosedale. He'd find another job. He could see his car. He patted his pockets for his keys. He knew he had enough money in the bank if push came to shove. It's going to work, he thought, it has to work....

Junior had his key in his hand when his phone vibrated. He started not to answer it, but fished out his phone from his pants. He smiled. It was Tony.

"Aw," Junior said. "Just the man I wanted to hear from."

"Dad," Tony said. "Mom's dead."

Junior's satchel and cigarette fell to the ground. He leaned his heavy body on an oak tree in front of his would-be house. He listened to Tony explain how Lorraine and Thaddeus were on their way from a conference, how a drunk driver came racing off the ramp, how his car slammed them into jersey wall on the opposite shoulder of I-285. The drunk driver, a teenager, was in the

hospital but Mom and Thaddeus didn't make it. As his son sobbed, Junior told him he was on his way. That he would be there as soon as possible.

Junior staggered back to Rosedale. He dragged his satchel behind him, the weight of it he couldn't handle. He didn't see Mika or Makini walking toward him. He didn't hear Mika ask him what was wrong; he didn't feel Makini take up his bag. He was holding his phone tightly, but felt a hand on his.

"Dr. Vince..." Makini was speaking, but he didn't want to hear her.

Junior shook his head. He muttered: "Lorraine, Lorraine, Lorraine."

The girls shrugged and followed him back to Rosedale.

Jefferson was standing the steps. He smiled and waved at Junior. Aubrey's car quickly pulled around and Jefferson got in. She looked over at Junior and waved. He didn't know what to do.

"Hey," Jefferson said, leaning over Aubrey. "I thought you were heading to Atlanta."

"I, I am," he said. "I am, but I need a, I need a favor."

"Something's wrong," Mika said, sadly.

Jefferson got out of the car. "What's going on, Junior? What do you need?"

But before Junior could say anything, his feet and thighs tingled. They couldn't hold any longer. He went down on his knees.

Aubrey said, "Oh my God."

Jefferson and the girls tried to pull Junior up. Aubrey got out and started phoning 9-1-1. Her car's door chime was pulsating, echoing in Junior head.

Jefferson and Mika eased Junior to the steps.

Junior heard Farouk and William's familiar laughs.

They stood over him, asking him what happened.

Aubrey came and asked: "Have you taken anything? Are you on any medications?"

"No," Junior said softly.

She repeated his claim in her phone.

He looked out and saw the old Hispanic couple, holding hands, the husband with the dog leash. They paused and seemed equally saddened. Junior wanted to wave to them. But then the Arrington girls were talking, crying to William. They looked so sad. Their brown faces streaking with tears. Junior wanted to say something to them. But he just couldn't utter a word.

"Talk to me, buddy," Farouk said. "What happened?"

"It's too late," Junior whispered. "I was too late."

"Too late for what?" Farouk's hand was on Junior's shoulder. He was kneeling in front of Junior.

Junior touched Farouk's face. "Lorraine always liked your beard, Farouk. She said it made you look like Pharaoh Saunders."

Farouk faintly smiled. "Well, maybe a younger version, but... Oh, no, man..."

"Lorraine's dead," Junior cried. "She's gone, Farouk. She's gone."

Jefferson sat down beside Junior; William did the same. They both rubbed his bulky back. Aubrey said "Never mind" into her phone. The Arrington twins squatted in front of the men. Aubrey whispered the Lord's Prayer. The wind started picking up. Aubrey held her skirt down. But no one spoke. They only listened to Junior's cries and the small barks of a Pomeranian.

Nats versus Braves

Jeb stood looking out the large tinted window in his office. Traffic was inching its way from the city across to northern Virginia. Soon, he figured, they would be home, getting ready for the long Memorial Day weekend. He should be getting ready, too. Though, right now, he wasn't sure why. He'd planned for several weeks to take his grandson, Winston, to the Nats and Braves game. It was a tradition in the Rosedale family. All the men took their sons or grandsons to their first baseball game. But when Jeb called his son, Jefferson, he was told that Winston wouldn't be able to go.

"Why?" Jeb asked.

"Because dad," Jefferson said, sighing in his normal annoying way, "he's, he just hasn't been doing well in school. He's been acting up and playing pranks."

"That's no reason—"

"Dad, he's not going. It's been decided. I'm sorry."

So Jeb watched the cars slowly trudge away from the city. He lean his arm and body on the glass. It felt ridiculous to him. Why deny tradition over a pranks and gags? God, was I ever that hard on *him*?

"Excuse me, Mr. Rosedale, is there anything else you need from me?"

Jeb turned and shook his head at his assistant. "No, Anne, you can kick off."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Well," she said, smiling politely, "have a good one. Oh, and I think Porsche's waiting for you."

Jeb rolled his eyes. "Porsche," he said. "How's she doing?"

“Fine. I think she’s catching on nicely.”

Jeb nodded mechanically. “Good,” he said. “You hear anyone say anything about Porsche? About her working here now?” He turned and looked at his assistant. “You can tell me, Anne. It’ll be our secret.”

She opened her mouth then looked behind her.

“Well?” Jeb narrowed his eyes at her.

“The only one who has said something has been... Porsche.”

Jeb asked her to explain. What she told him was that Porsche had complained that the only reason she was working there was to appease him.

“Figures,” he said, rubbing the top of his thinning hair. “I can’t win for losing.”

He saw Porsche waiting at the elevator. For a twenty-four year old, he thought, Porsche still seemed like a child. She wore large red headphones over her ears. Her foot tapped and her head bobbed to the muffled sounds emanating from those earmuffs. Porsche seemed completely unaware of the world, of the life Jeb was trying to give her and her brother. When I was her age, I had already traveled to Birmingham, Jackson, Mississippi, and Chicago. I had registered voters and performed sit-ins, had taken his share of beatings. What is she involved in? he wondered.

Jeb pressed the down button. He gave Porsche a glance. She smiled but continued listening to her music. On the elevator, Jeb tightened his fist around his briefcase. He hoped the Nats would win tonight. It would be a good start. And if he could convince Jefferson to let Winston come to his house and spend some time with his grandparents, that would be even better.

Then Porsche started singing, off-key, some song.

In the car, he asked: “Can’t you turn that off?”

“What?” Porsche said, pulling the headphones away from her ears. “You say something?”

“Yes,” he said. “Can’t you turn that down?”

“Sorry.” She appeared to adjust the volume.

“No, wait,” Jeb said, “can’t we talk? How was your day?”

He exited out of the parking space and headed toward northern Virginia.

“It was fine,” Porsche said, shutting off the music. “I’m starting to really like the office-work thing.”

“Huh, is that right?” Jeb said.

“Yeah,” she said, “But I still think painting is my life.”

Jeb grimaced. He gave Porsche a quick look, but she resumed listening to music. It wasn’t that she was a terrible artist; in fact Porsche was quite good. It was just that he never thought she could be famous. Her paintings were weird, abstract. He didn’t get her overuse of pink and yellow, or her overreliance on geometrical shapes, floating aimlessly in the air. When he and Inga went to a showing at Busboys and Poets several months back, all of her friends were complementing her, telling her she was a real talent, but none bought a single damn painting. Inga forced him to buy the most expensive one, a wooden rectangular window with a pink and yellow runny eye staring out. It now hung in his home office, next to the one she did of him holding *The Washington Post*, smoking a pipe and wearing a pink and yellow trimmed robe. God, he hated coming down to the office and seeing those things there. But he loved her and wanted to seem at least supportive. Now that he had convinced her to learn some office skills, he’d hoped once she started making a little bit of money, she would forget painting. At least for a

while. She could always pick it back up later after some years of life. So far all her money went to art supplies and music downloads. As Jeb sat in traffic, he sighed at the thought that he was now financing his daughter's bohemian lifestyle.

"When are you going to grow up?" he said.

Porsche continued bobbing her head.

"I guess, never," he said.

Inga, was in the kitchen when they came in. The front room smelled of garlic and onions. Jeb figured Inga was cooking spinach, potatoes and steak. Porsche went into the den, which was now her studio and began singing an unfamiliar song. Inga turned, saw him, and waved. He waved too, but then leaned over to see what Porsche was doing. He couldn't see her but that song of hers was getting louder.

"Can't you pipe down?"

"Jeb?"

"I'm talking to Porsche, honey. She's making a bunch of racket." Jeb tossed his briefcase onto the brown leather sofa. He shook his head and walked into the kitchen, picking up mail off the island. "How was your day, darling?" he asked, followed by a cheek kiss. "Mine was awful." He looked at Inga working a large wooden spoon. "What do you have there?"

"Oh, I thought I'd try some stir fry," Inga said. "Sorry about your day. You and Porsche having a moment?"

"Stir-fry?"

"Yes. Stir-fry."

"I had my heart set on steak, Inga."

“Well, sometimes it’s good to switch things up. And if it’s any consolation, it’s steak stir-fry.”

Jeb grimaced. “That’s not the same.”

“Oh, honey, you have to embrace change.”

Jeb kissed Inga’s cheek again and took the back stairs to their room. He undid his cufflinks and tie. He slipped off his shoes. He put the tie in the dry-cleaners’ bag, he placed the cufflinks neatly in their stand, and he slid his shoes into a shoetree. He went to his side of the bed where the remote was resting on the nightstand. He turned on ESPN and watched the scroll. No updates about the game. He switched to MASN, but there was one of those commercials on that took up the screen and didn’t reveal the scroll. He searched his phone, clicking on Bleacher Reports Game Center. The Nats were down 2 runs; score was 3-1 Braves. It was bottom of the fifth.

“Damnit, damnit, damnit,” he yelled.

“Jeb?” Inga called. “Is everything all right?”

“No,” he yelled. “The Nats are losing.”

“What’d’ya say?”

“The Nats are losing, Inga. To the Braves.”

“We’ll get ‘em next time sweetie.”

“Augh!” Jeb slammed the remote on their bed. He slumped down in the armchair and watched the game muted. He didn’t want to hear anything from the commentators. He had his own analysis of what was the matter with the Nationals.

“Hey dad?” Porsche called. “Are you eating with us?”

Jeb closed his eyes after Jayson Werth flailed at a curveball. He shook his head and said: “I’m not hungry.”

When he opened his eyes, Adam LeRoche hit a double but outfielder muffed the ball and LeRoche was now making a play for third. Jeb stood up. “Slide, slide, slide!” LeRoche slid and was safe at third. Jeb clapped his hands. “Hot damn!”

He didn’t see Porsche standing inside his room.

“That was a nice play,” she said.

Jeb, startled, fell into his chair. “Don’t sneak up on me, girl.”

“I didn’t. I was checking to see—”

“Oh look at this, look at this...” Atlanta’s manager was questioning the ruling. Had the outfielder muffed the ball? There was going to be a review. “What the hell?”

“Why review *that*?” Jeb asked, pointing both hands to the large HD television on the wall.

“It looked good to me,” Porsche said.

Jeb shot a quick look at her. He started to ask, Why are you still here, but he didn’t. She was right. It was a good play. And it turned out that the umps believed so, too. But when Ryan Zimmerman struck out and Ian Desmond was one strike away, Jeb sat frustrated, head leaning into palm. Desmond battled Minor, keeping the count at 0-2, fouling out to the first base side, third base side, and behind home plate. Jeb had a feeling that Desmond was going to chase something he shouldn’t, and he did. But the ball landed just over the shortstop’s reaching glove. LeRoche headed home. And Desmond beat the throw to first. Jeb jumped up with a fist-pump. He started to high-five Porsche, but she was fiddling with her phone.

“Jeb? Porsche? I’m waiting...”

“You better go down,” Jeb said.

“Just a minute, ma.”

Danny Espinosa struck out.

The inning was over.

Jeb was in his chair, rolling off his socks.

“That was pretty exciting,” Porsche said, leaning on the oak armoire near him.

“Yeah,” Jeb said, “down only a run now.” He looked over at Porsche. “You like baseball?”

She frowned at him. “Yeah, Dad. I like a lot of sports.”

“Huh? I guess I didn’t know that.”

The Nats lost 3-2. Jeb showered, having sweated through his dress-shirt and boxers. Refreshed, he dressed in his lucky silk blue pajamas, thinking, the Nats had a good showing. Maybe tomorrow’s game would be better?

Inga was in the family room, Porsche in her studio. The house had a quiet that Jeb liked. The food and the sauce-stained wooden spoon were still in the wok. Warm. And the food was not bad either. He ate at the kitchen table, alone.

How am I going to get Winston to the game? He chewed his food, thinking of arguments and appeals he could use to convince Jefferson to allow him time with Winston. The boy is eleven, he would say, and it’s a Rosedale tradition. Why would you want to break tradition? And you never liked watching the game, he would remind him. So who’s going to carry this on? Who will teach Winston about the baseball the way my dad did for me? Who would explain its history and *our* place in it? Who will transfer all this history and culture and love to Winston?

Jeb went to kegerator, got a glass, and pulled on the dispenser's stainless-steel handle. He took a thoughtful sip. He looked out into his backyard. The deck lights were on, illuminating the covered pool and hot tub. Does Winston even know how to swim? he wondered. Maybe that's how I can do it? He could say to Jefferson that he wants to teach Winston how to swim. If that worked, he would take his grandson to Nats Park and show him how to swim later.

"You look deep in thought, honey."

"Oh, I'm just thinking: maybe Winston should come over and learn to swim."

Inga gave a familiar look. "Isn't Winston being punished for acting up in school?"

"Aah, school," Jeb said. "Where he is, the boy's not being challenged. That's why he's acting out."

"I'm not sure urinating in your teacher's coffee is evidence of not being challenged."

Jeb laughed. "He's a practical joker. Hell, I pulled a lot of stunts when I was his age."

"Well." Inga kissed Jeb's cheek. "I'd rather let Jefferson discipline Winston the way he sees fit."

Jeb considered Inga for a moment then returned to staring at their backyard. "I don't think he realizes he's being ineffective. You can't take away things from kids. There's a lot of parenting research on that. You just can't take things away."

"But sweetie—"

"I know, I know. Winston has to learn. But I really want him to learn how to swim."

"Jeb," Inga said from the back stairs, "you *really* want him to go to the game with you."

Jeb didn't look at her. He could feel those green eyes on him. "Good night, Inga."

"I'll be waiting for you sweetie," she said. "Night."

In the silence of the kitchen, Jeb continued staring out his window, sipping his beer, thinking about letting the idea go. After all: Winston's actions needed punishing. Jeb imagined having a client with a similar situation: student peeing in his coffee. What a case! Surely Jeb would force a settlement. No one wants to go to court with that hanging over a child's head. Bullying and pranks can get so easily turned around these days. He sipped his beer. What would he do if Jefferson weren't his son, but the defendant? Oh, he'd give it to Jefferson. He'd have his legal team pull up all kinds of research on the dangers of drinking pee, on the psychological effects of being called a pee-drinker (because children would undoubtedly know the teacher was a pee-drinker), and on the stigma of having to leave the teaching profession, a profession the pee-drinker surely loved before being tricked into drinking pee. Jefferson would settle. Like Inga, he wasn't into confrontations. Maybe that's why he didn't like Wall Street. He didn't have it in him. The fight. Jeb sipped from his glass mug. Baseball teaches you to fight. To never give up. To play the game to the very end. He shook his head and finished his beer.

Sighing, he loaded the dishwasher. He cleaned the wok, placing the remaining steak stir-fry in plastic containers. He hung the wok over the island and stored the plastic containers in the fridge. Jeb looked around the kitchen. The floor needed mopping but other than that it was orderly. He switched off the light and yelled Goodnight to Porsche.

She didn't respond.

Jeb walked over to her studio. The lights were dim and she wasn't in there. He grunted. And took a long look up the front stairs. He listened then he stepped out to see if there was any sign of movement upstairs. There wasn't. He went inside the studio. He picked up some of the sketches torn out of Porsche's sketchpad. There was one of a flower, colored in with a purple pencil. The reeds and stem were black but the buds were purple. Another sketch was a self-

portrait. The paper was flimsy and it gave Jeb the impression that it was older. She looked so young in the drawing. He looked some more. He had helped her move most of her artwork in there. And he would occasionally go in to call her for dinner. But Jeb always had the feeling that there was something personal about Porsche's studio and her work. He wanted to understand it, but there was this wall between them. He knew it was there, and he imagined she knew it was there, too.

He knew Inga would be angry with him: going through their daughter's art was tantamount to going through her diary. But Jeb was finding some of these drawings to be better than her paintings. In fact, all her sketches were light-years ahead of those pink and yellow geometric things. Even some of the sculptures looked thoughtful, creative, marketable. He'd loved to have one of these... Was this Medusa?

"Dad?"

Jeb jumped around. "For Christ's sake!"

"What are you doing?"

"I, I was, Jesus Porsche, you almost gave me a heart attack."

"Sorry."

Jeb hands shook. He made fists out of them to relax. "Couldn't you have knocked?"

"Uh... you were in my space."

"Forget it. Just forget it." Jeb needed a deep breath. "I just came to say goodnight." He brushed passed Porsche, patting her shoulder. He started to complement her drawings but didn't want her to think he was snooping. Besides, he now needed some cold water. God, he thought, she could have really scared the death out of me.

The next morning, Jeb dressed in a Homestead Grays jersey and cap, blue jeans and sneaker. It was throwback Saturday at Nats Park, homage to the Negro League. Jeb took a junior-sized Strasburg jersey from its hanger. He wondered if Winston had a Nationals cap. If not, he could buy one at the stadium. Inga sat reading a magazine in her chair, her feet dangling over the ottoman.

“Jeb,” she called. “Why are you taking that?” She pointed with the magazine at the jersey he was folding.

“I’m going over to talk to Jefferson, Inga. I just think he’s being too hard on the boy.”

“Just like that,” she snapped. “You came up with that decision.”

“Inga.” Jeb sighed. “I’m the boy’s grandfather. Shouldn’t I have some say?”

“No.”

“Well, I disagree.”

“Of course you would.”

Jeb started to say something nasty. But his fighting before a game would bring bad luck. Besides, Inga had never liked baseball. Even when they drove to Camden Yards to see the Orioles, she preferred the Waterfront and dining at some bar. And boy, did she dine. And, jeez, did Jefferson whine and complain about wanting to go with Mommy. AUGH!

“All I will say, Inga, is we had this scheduled. Taking his time away from me is taking my time away from him.”

Inga continued reading, but said: “Jeb, I wouldn’t interfere if I were you. There will be plenty more games.” Then looking at him. “My God, aren’t there like 200 more?” She shook her head and went back to the magazine. “Just let it go.”

“You want me to let go of tradition?”

“I got an idea, why not take Porsche?”

Jeb guffawed. “Are you serious?”

“You never took her to a game. And she obviously wants to go.”

“That’s not how it works, Inga. Rosedale men take Rosedale boys to their first game. My father did that with me, my uncles did that with my cousins, I did that with Jefferson.”

“How’d that turn out?”

“You—” Jeb stormed down stairs. He would pick up something to eat on his way to Jefferson’s. He couldn’t believe Inga. She was so, so, nontraditional. Her family cared little for anything. He civilized her. He took her away, across the oceans, everywhere. But that Old Kelly spirit was still in her. Still fighting its backward Appalachian fight: within itself and her. Jeb threw the jersey down on the passenger’s seat. He slammed the car door shut and slammed his door. He gripped the stirring wheel, heaving and tightening his lips. He wasn’t a cussing man, but damnit, Inga pissed him off. *How’d that turn out?* Oh, funny you should ask, he thought. Our son acted like a goddamn baby! Couldn’t make it out of the first damn inning, that’s how. And even when Jefferson started playing, earning a scholarship, just like Jeb, he didn’t have it in him. And boy, ol’ boy wasn’t that a hoot? Wasn’t that the highlight of my alumni meetings? God!

Jeb grabbed his forehead.

No, no, no, he thought. Can’t leave like this. Positive thoughts: The Nats will beat the Braves. They’ll win the series. They’ll be a game or two up in the NL East.

He started the car. Positive thoughts.

He opened his garage. Positive thoughts.

He drove away. Positive thoughts.

Jefferson lived in a modest house in Bethesda. He remembered helping Jefferson and his wife, Morgan, find this place. It was a bungalow hidden by large pine trees and spruces. The front yard was large enough for twenty or thirty people; the backyard maybe could hold seventy. Morgan really liked the Spanish tile roofs, but Jefferson wanted a colonial like the one Jeb had. He explained to his son such a house would be out of his price range. Morgan agreed; she was practical. Jefferson begrudgingly relented, though Jeb always felt he held that against him. That he and Morgan had ganged up on him. There wasn't much street parking in his neighborhood, so Jeb found turned into his son's driveway. Normally, two cars crowded the small space. But there was only one car: the Jeep.

Hmm. Jeb had Siri call Porsche.

"Hey Dad."

"Hi, Porsche, can you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Call Jefferson."

"We're not talking," she said sternly.

Jeb was caught off guard. "W-what?"

"We're not speaking. Not at this time, at least."

"Why?"

"Long story short: I don't like him. He's a hypocrite."

Jeb was silent for several seconds.

"Hello?"

"I'm here," he said. "Well, I, I guess you're right. Never mind. Ciao."

"Love you," he heard her say.

But Jeb clicked off the car's phone system before replying.

Oh well. He got out of his car and surveyed the front yard. It needed mowing and the windows of the house needed a power-wash. Jeb rang the doorbell. He heard scuffling feet then Morgan's voice yell at the dog.

"Hey Jebediah," Morgan said, hugging him around his neck. "I didn't expect to see you. Come in." She held the Rottweiler who sprang up on its back legs, wanting to play and lick Jeb's face. "Down," she said. "Get the fuck down."

The dog yelped a bit.

Jeb bristled at the language.

"Is Jefferson in?" he said, slouching behind the slouching dog.

"No," Morgan said. "He's out *golfing*."

There was a martini glass and a large silver shaker on the coffee table. Jeb saw the dog look back, as if to say, Yeah, things aren't going well here either.

"Is Winston ready to go?" Jeb said.

"Go where?" Morgan lowered herself into the brown leather sofa.

"To the game," he said. "He turned eleven this week, and, you know, it's a Rosedale tradition to take—"

Morgan paused him with her hand. She lifted her glass and drank the rest of her Martini. It was a little after 10. "Look, Jeb, I don't know what you're talking about. Jefferson and Winston went golfing."

"Golfing?"

"That's what he calls it."

"Calls what?"

“Putt-putt.”

Jeb’s legs suddenly felt weakened. “May I sit?”

“Sure. Wanna a Martini?”

“No.”

Jeb sat in the love seat next to the sofa. He watched Morgan pour to the rim a greenish liquid. She took loud sips and crossed her legs. He hadn’t noticed before, but Morgan was dressed as if she expected someone else at her door. Her slender tanned leg bounced over the other. And the sequined night gown with its thin black straps over her round firm-looking shoulders confirmed something he had thought the day Jefferson brought her to him and Inga: What a seductive creature. Getting his bearings, Jeb realized she was now watching him, sipping loudly again her drink, leaning almost too casually on her hand.

“So,” she said. “What game were you going to take my son to?”

Jeb coughed and cleared his throat. “The Nats and the Braves... are playing... it’s a, um, a three game series. The, uh, Braves, um, they won last night.”

Morgan smiled. “Jefferson told me you’re a big baseball fan.”

“I, uh, I am.”

“My dad loved baseball, too.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.”

“Well, Jeb,” Morgan said, inching forward, “we’ve never talked much about anything. If it wasn’t about your school, then it didn’t seem to matter.”

“I guess you’re right.” Jeb wouldn’t look beyond Morgan’s hazel eyes. But he had the feeling she wanted him to. She wanted him to look beyond everything, her marriage, his marriage, his duty as a father and a man of tradition, principle, family. He wouldn’t succumb. He

had seen many beauties in his day. Young ones and old. My God, he thought, she *is* quite fetching. “How, um, is the, uh, board going... now that you mentioned it?”

Morgan slid back a little. “It’s fine. I take it you and Jefferson haven’t talked.”

“No,” Jeb said. He turned away from her when he saw the dog sleek over to him. “We’ve had a bit of an argument.”

“Really,” Morgan said. “Over?”

She was pulling her hair into a ponytail. And she was staring at Jeb. He thought about reminding her that he was technically her boss. But then he felt an odd sensation that she wouldn’t care and was sort of daring him to try to boss her around.

“Over the little prank Winston pulled at the school the other day.”

“What prank?”

Jeb smiled faintly. Maybe he shouldn’t tell. Obviously a mother scolding her son was much more serious than a father’s. “It was harmless,” Jeb said.

“Then what was it?”

“I don’t think it’s my place to interfere,” Jeb said. “Jefferson was handling it. He, uh, punished him, I guess.”

Morgan laughed. “Are you sure about that, Jeb?”

The dog circled around its bed then plopped itself between the coffee table and dormant fireplace. Its eyes blinked at Jeb. And soon, there was a painful realization.

“Winston didn’t want to go to the game, did he?”

Morgan’s hand was on Jeb’s knee. “I’m sorry, Jeb. I don’t know why Jefferson couldn’t be honest.”

Jeb looked at Morgan. The smell of apples and vermouth scented her. “So Winston didn’t pee in his teacher’s cup of coffee?”

“No,” Morgan said, softly shaking her head. “Winston’s not that kind of kid.”

Jeb cleared his throat. “Well, I, uh, I guess, I, um, should be, uh... yeah.” He stood. And Morgan and the dog stood. “Thanks,” he said. “I think I should leave.”

“Sure,” Morgan said. Her face was angularly beautiful. And there was a strong urge in Jeb to kiss her mouth. But he fought it down. “And I’m sorry. Jefferson isn’t the most honest person,” she said.

“I guess he’s not.”

Jeb sat in his car for several minutes. Morgan stood on her front stoop, sipping more Martini. The Rottweiler played in the yard. Jeb reversed out of the driveway. He slowed to type Home in his navigational system. When he looked up, a car was whipping into the driveway. At first he thought it was Jefferson, but the car wasn’t his. And the man who got out was taller, darker, and sturdier. He wore a brown uniform and seemed quite familiar with the dog. Jeb watched him kiss Morgan’s cheek and speak to her. She never stopped looking at Jeb in his car. And the smile she wore shook him so that he pulled off without thinking about where he wanted to go.

Somehow, he found himself sitting in front of his house.

Jeb didn’t bother to enter through the garage. He walked in and the smell of garlic and onions snapped him from his malaise. Inga came from the kitchen wiping her face then hands on her apron.

“You’re home early.”

“Jefferson...” Jeb stopped to clear his throat. He shook his head. “He and, uh, Winston went, um, to play putt-putt. Or golfing. I’m not sure.”

“So I guess he forgave Winston?”

Jeb nodded.

“Oh, but you wanted to take him. Oh, Jeb. I’m sure he’ll go next time. A little father-son time is important, too.”

“Yeah,” Jeb said. “Is Porsche still here?”

“She’s in there,” Inga said with her head, “probably painting another master piece.”

Jeb knocked on the door. There wasn’t answer, so he turned the knob. Porsche was asleep on the floor. Her studio was arranged differently than last night. The drawings were loosely shoved in sketchpads that were neatly stacked on an end table. The sculptures were rowed and now there was a large easel with a canvas mounted. On the canvas was pinned a photo of Jeb throwing a baseball. He looked away from the photo to the light penciled drawing of the same image. He looked down at his daughter, snoring comfortably on the floor. Jeb never made the majors, but the scholarship got him through college, which got him to law school, which got him playing on a firm’s softball team, which got him popular, which got him farther than any other Rosedale before him.

Jeb stepped out Porsche’s studio. He went into the kitchen.

“Not going to the game?”

“No,” Jeb said. “Not today’s game. Maybe tomorrow’s.” He picked up an onion. “Want me to peel this?”

“Wash your hands,” Inga said, “and sure. I was thinking a chicken stir-fry.”

She had a recipe book opened. “And if you can dice it, that’ll help. Lord, these things got me crying.”

“Yeah,” Jeb said, slowly cutting. “I know what you mean.”

Jeb got out his Homestead Grays jersey and cap. He showered off as much of the smells of today as he could. He turned on the Nationals. They were down seven-zip. He turned off the game. He decided to crawl into his bed. He wanted the day to be over. He would call Jefferson later. He’ll give him a piece of his mind then, but, that man... Morgan... Lord.

“Hey Dad,” Porsche called from the doorway. “I thought you were going to the game.”

“I’m not.”

“Did something happen?” She turned on the lights and came and sat beside him. She had a look as if she were seeing him off to the other world.

Jeb sat up. “No,” he said. “I’m mean,” he sighed. “I guess Jefferson wanted to spend time with Winston and, well, you know... He didn’t know how to tell me.”

“Oh. That sounds like him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Porsche shook her head and laughed. “Dad, do you even know what’s going on with Jefferson?”

“No, but I have an idea what’s going on with his wife.”

“Dad, dad, dad,” Porsche said. “Jefferson’s been having an affair with some of the staff at the school. He got caught a while ago, but he just said, well, fuck it.”

“Excuse me?”

“I guess he said—”

“No, I mean, I heard what you said. But, *he’s* having an affair?”

“They both are. That’s the hypocrisy of it.”

Jeb leaned his head on the brown cushioned headboard. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

Porsche grabbed his hand. “Because they’re afraid, Dad. And scared people don’t talk.”

“Why are they afraid of *me*?”

“I dunno,” Porsche said, patting his hand. “But I think they’re afraid of losing their place in the world. I think Jefferson, especially, likes being seen as someone polished and together. He’s kind of like, well, like you, Dad.”

Jeb turned sharply at Porsche. “He’s nothing like me,” he said.

Porsche smiled. “If you say so.”

“I do say.” Jeb yanked the covers off him. He threw his legs over and held Porsche’s hand tightly. “I’m not a man who does things just for show. I don’t just keep a good face in spite of the realities of the world. I know the hardships of others, of families, of my family. I’m not just some...” he didn’t know what to say next.

Porsche was standing rubbing his shoulder. Even Inga was now standing in their bedroom.

He turned from Inga to Porsche. “I’m a man of substance,” he said, finally. “I’ve never cheated on your mother. Never. I never kept either of you from spending time with my family or your mother’s. Never. And I never lied to my father. Not as an adult. I never did that.”

“But what about Uncle...”

“I’m not talking about my brothers, Porsche. I’m talking about *me*.”

Jeb moved Porsche out of his way. He sat in his chair and turned on the television. The Nats were only two runs down. It was the middle of fourth. “My God,” he said, “we’re coming back.”

Inga shook her head and went back down stairs. Porsche shrugged and started walking away.

“Wait,” Jeb said. “Please. Wait.”

Porsche turned.

“Can we, me and you, watch the game?”

“Sure,” Porsche said, smiling faintly.

“And tomorrow,” Jeb said, muting a commercial. “We’ll get up and make a day of it. Just you and me, okay? A little father-daughter time, how’s that?”

“Yeah, Dad. I’d like that.”

“I’ll teach you everything I know about baseball, Porsche. Everything. It’s really life’s game. And you’ll appreciate that it’s an art form. Just like boxing is the sweet science, well baseball is the life of people. Perseverance. Determination. Hustling. Never-quitting on a play.”

He felt Porsche’s hand wipe his face.

“It’s such a great game,” he said, turning up the volume.

Hidden Wells

I had been driving up to Hidden Wells in Rockville as a way to prove to my wife I could change. But the truth was, I only went there at first to work out. I had gotten out of shape and Hidden Wells was a “treatment” facility for people looking for an alternative method for handling addictions. The people there sought the root causes of addictions through working the mind and body. It wasn’t all serenity prayers and confessions.

And I needed to lose a few pounds. Since my pal Junior’s breakdown, the guys at Rosedale had stopped playing our weekly pick-up games at the Y. So when Ayo came to me, demanding I change, she’d given me Hidden Wells’ brochure. For the past several weeks after school I drove up Connecticut Avenue, got onto the Beltway, and sat in incessant traffic jams. But once I arrived, I felt giddy to be working out again.

My counselor, Bomani, was my workout partner. And he kept asking me questions about my drinking, when it first started, what were my worse experiences, yada, yada, yada.

I would give generic answers. “I dunno” or “I’ll have to think about that.”

Pretty soon Bomani, who was quite the athlete and reminded me of my younger brother Yusef, started to wonder out loud that maybe this program wasn’t working for me.

I assured him it was.

Then this past Wednesday, he asked me the weirdest question. Farouk, he’d said, can you describe for me one of the saddest moments in your life?

I was running on the treadmill and had to lower the levels to catch my breath. I must’ve had an angry expression because Bomani backed away from me. Give me a minute to think, I said. But I couldn’t think of a sad moment in my life. Not then at least.

He said, Well, I’ll give you an example from my life.

And he did. He told me way too much about how his dad had left him and his two brothers over at their aunt's one day and never came back. His aunt wasn't nice. She spanked him and his brothers for everything, peeing in the bed, not washing dishes, and especially if they didn't make their bunk beds or if they ate their cousins' candy. It sounded horrible the way he told it.

But I didn't have that kind of life, really. My siblings and I grew up in a poor neighborhood, and that was about it.

Bomani wasn't convinced. Just try, he said, try and think about something. You have a hidden well inside of you. He pressed his pointer finger into my wet chest.

I showered and dressed.

We walked out to my car, but there wasn't anything in my mind. I wanted to get home and have sex with Ayo, if she let me, which of late she hadn't. I didn't tell Bomani that, though occasionally he'd ask about my marriage, about Ayo. I always said, Things were a work in progress.

He nodded.

I don't know if he believed me those times, but he kept his mouth shut, which I was happy about.

So now I was on my way to Hidden Wells again. Stuck in traffic as usual. There wasn't anything worth listening to on NPR, and I was feeling annoyed with LeVar and Dukes' sports banter. I hadn't had a drink in several days. I wasn't missing it. I didn't drink as much when I worked out to begin with. But after the guys started playing poker as a way to cheer Junior up, drinking

seemed appropriate. I never had more than three Jack and Gingers. Usually, the way some of the guys made them, one was enough.

Anyway, I hadn't been playing poker since this Hidden Wells thing started. The guys gave me some shit, but they also knew Ayo wasn't fooling around. Pretty women tend not to play games for very long. Besides, I was the last one still in a relationship. And I wanted to keep that streak going.

I was just about a block or so away from Hidden Wells. The owners had converted a Gold's Gym into this new-age facility. People on Rockville Pike must've thought the place a newer Sports Complex, what with all the treadmills stationed at windows that overlooked the Pike. Either that or they thought it was a Dotcom place. I could see the grayish white building from where I was at the light. Then an answer for Bomani came to me. I had almost forgotten this moment. I didn't know why it left and suddenly came back. But there it was.

Before my father became the local media's go-to guy for all things black, he was simply Mr. Ibrahim Keftter, a US history teacher and track coach at the neighborhood high school. While he taught in a public school, my mom worked on her doctorate in sociology and taught at a private school that separated boys from girls. That's where my siblings and I went. Belmont. It wasn't too far from Hidden Wells, though I believed the school moved in the 90s. My mom was long gone by then. She had started teaching at Howard. Dad had put his doctorate on hold for several years while my sibling and I were toddlers. He later finished and got lucky and started teaching at American. But before all that, my dad wanted to give back to his community. Teaching in public schools seemed right to him, though clearly his lectures went way over their heads.

As I thought about it, most of the black men my parents knew during the 70s and 80s were demanding, possibly even domineering. They insisted on a lot from their women but delivered little for themselves or anyone else. But that wasn't my dad. He truly supported my mom, and she supported him.

It wasn't perfect though. Money was extremely tight back then. And, I guess, this was also when I discovered we were poor. My parents made most of our clothes except our school uniforms and winter coats, which were all hand-me-downs. They would get free fabric from one of my aunts who owned a shop on U Street. They would spend many nights and the entire weekends taking turns to stitch and sew and blend these colorful shirts and pants. Though the materials weren't from Africa, my parents made their versions of clothes African children would love. But we were Americans. And in our neighborhood, poor black children at that time didn't love those kinds of clothes.

My siblings and I had already been branded as "weird" because of our names: *Farouk*, *Jakara*, *Yusef*. To have to wear these bright loud colors only added to our oddity and got us laughed at. Jakara could jump double-dutch well and always played the role of the cute brown-skinned girl with slanted eyes. Since I was tall for my age and had some basketball skills, I got over that way. Though some called me white Africa, I didn't really mind. But my younger brother, Yusef, he took it the hardest. He was the brownest of us three and hated being called an African-booty scratcher. He usually got into fight with bigger kids, which often meant I had to fight their bigger brothers. That sucked. But that wasn't the thing that saddened me.

Growing up in DC, we moved around a lot, especially when I was smaller. We landed mainly in poor neighborhoods where the people respected my parents, our family. Even if they didn't agree with my folks' pro-black lifestyle, they at least knew my parents were harmless,

possibly even helpful. If something went wrong at their jobs, or if social workers treated them unfairly, neighbors would come knocking on our door, asking what could be done, how could someone mistreat them this way, or was it possible for one of my parents to speak for them? My folks never said no. Even to the parents of those bullies who terrorized my brother. An awkward feeling arose in my siblings and me. We didn't resent our neighbors. We pitied them the way "well-meaning whites" pitied some blacks. In a way, my folks had become to us those good missionaries trying to civilize the poor black savages. And when Jakara, Yusef, and I whispered about it, cramped up in our shared bedroom, we slowly began to understand why some of the kids treated us badly. Their moms or their grandmothers relied on my parents for answers they couldn't provide for themselves. And when the kids saw us, we were a constant reminder of what they didn't have, of what their parents could never give them, and of what in spite of our clothes and names made us appear to be more than they thought of themselves to be. Our pride made them leery of us because whatever history they did know it told them that pride was a dangerous thing for black people to have.

The thing I now remembered had occurred on one late-fall afternoon. I went to my dad's classroom. The high school where he taught was in the last neighborhood we moved into before my siblings and I went off to college. It was one of those communities that had its small share of middle-income people, even a few whites and Latinos. I liked living there because being different didn't matter. Most of my friends' parents were progressive, even back then. At least two couples practiced Buddhism, and several were devout Atheists. But the school: it had students who were bussed from low-income housing. Whenever I went there after school, they seemed perplexed and unprepared. They were not like the kids in the community, nor were they

like the students in Rockville. Traveling there on the bus was like going from light to dark. Even if the sun was out, the school where my dad taught seemed dim.

So it was toward the end of the day, his last class. The halls were rowdy with students. A few of them lived on my block and slapped five with me when they came in my dad's classroom. My dad smiled and whispered: Someday you'll be standing here, taking over for me.

I snickered at the thought. I didn't think at the time I could be as dynamic as my dad. He made history and African Americans' presence in it enjoyable, not boring as my students say my lessons are today. I also knew I couldn't tolerate the shit he tolerated. Some of the boys were especially dickish and talked while he taught that day. He stopped periodically to stare at them. They settled down but would pass notes and hunch over and hold their laughing faces. I tried not to get angry at their disrespect. I shook it off and started my algebra homework. One of my dad's students loaned me her calculator. She was cute, too, and dark, and had a smile that made me smile.

My dad had been talking about Angola and its fight for independence. He made some remark about Western Imperialism that caught my attention. But for some reason, one of the boys in his class wasn't buying it.

He said: Man, that's some bullshit.

The class erupted into "awws" and laughter, but my dad didn't stir.

My dad said: Why do you say that?

The boy answered: Look, history and that you sayin is about dead people or people who nobody knows or care about, you dig? I wanna learn about making money, man. That's what's happened today, man.

The boy held out his hand and another boy slapped it in agreement.

My dad did his usual head shake and sigh thing. How do you expect to make money if you don't know who you are? he asked. Or better, who you are dealing with?

I know I'm broke, the boy said, and that's all I need to know.

A lot of his classmates co-signed and laughed. I looked at my dad who still shook his head.

The boy then added: Besides, Mr. Keftter, you don't want your kids to be bamas for life, do you?

My dad stopped shaking his head. In DC, anything uncool was labeled, bama. I was pretty certain, even with the respect yielded to my parents, they had at one time or another been called bamas. We had, so it only made sense to me then that they had, too. My dad leaned forward on his desk. He nodded and shifted his jaw. My dad was a slender man, but he wasn't skinny. He was quite strong. Even through that homemade African shirt, I could see his muscles tightening as his eyes narrowed on the boy. The class suddenly became silent. The boy cleared his throat and straightened up in his chair.

It was library-quiet in that hot room. My dad didn't move or speak. He only stared. It was the first time I actually saw anger in him. Even his stringy beard that framed his olive cheeks looked blacker, meaner. I didn't know what he was thinking, but for several seconds I thought he would go over and hit that kid.

But something in me spoke. And before I knew what it was, I had said to the boy: You're stupid.

There wasn't any laughter in the boy's face. He seemed as surprised as I was. The girl who loaned me her calculator recoiled. I felt a surge of pride. I puffed out my chest. When I looked over at my dad, he stomped over to me and slapped my face. The bell rang.

Everyone hurried out silently.

“Wow,” Bomani said, after I told him the story. He shook his head, then rubbed the back of it. He put his lips together, licked them, bit the corners. “First, thanks for sharing,” he said, adding, “Maybe that’s what made you start down this path.”

I shrugged and told him I wasn’t sure.

We were about to do squats and then we were to go to the pull-up machine. He spotted me as I dropped down holding 245 on my shoulders. I was on my last set of 10. Bomani counted out softly. When I racked the weights, I explained how awful my dad felt, how he had never lost his cool like that before or since, how it all sort of came back to me while I was at that light.

Bomani did his last set of 10, holding 350 on his shoulders. I didn’t bother counting or spotting him. He went down and popped back up like a professional. I started wondering if all this work was another kind of addiction for him.

“Why do you think it came to you?” he asked, looking at me in the mirror.

“I guess I blocked it out,” I said, which sounded true, but honestly, I wasn’t sure.

“And he never hit you again?”

“Well, he did when I did things wrong. But he always would talk to us. I think we preferred a spanking over a lecture.”

“When was your last... spanking?”

That was just it, I said, I couldn’t remember many more after that. My dad would grab my shirt and start fussing, but that wasn’t exactly spanking. Yusef probably got more spankings, but even that was a guess. My mom disciplined Jakara, but from what I gathered, she, too, was more of a lecturer. Other than that moment, my parents were pretty much hands off.

“And is that why you feel your parents were like missionaries?” Bomani asked.

“No,” I said. “I guess the missionary thing was our way, me and sibs’ way, of dealing with the neighborhood ignorance.”

“But why missionaries?”

I only had a funny thought. “Well,” I said, “they came to Africa with Bibles and left with our resources.”

Bomani had an A-ha expression on. “So,” he said, “you see yourself as having lost something? To religion or authority?”

“No,” I said. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Are you sure?”

He was looking at me as if my reflection told a different tale.

“I’m sure,” I said. “I think missionaries do wonderful things to help people less fortunate.”

Bomani nodded his head. “I see.”

We walked over to the pull-up machine. He started doing his set of 10 pull-ups. When he was done, he clapped his hands loudly. “Whoa!” he yelled. “So how many you think you’re going to do?”

“I dunno,” I said. His enthusiasm startled me. “Maybe five.”

“Go for six,” he said, “go for it!”

I went for seven.

When I was done, Bomani held his hands up as if I had hit a walk-off homerun.

“That’s what I’m talking about, Farouk. Going for an extra. Whoa! That’s it, bro!”

I had to admit I felt proud of my seven pull-ups. The weight on the machine helped balance out my lack of strength, but still. Bomani made me feel excited about this minor thing. We did two more sets. I maintained my seven. Bomani kept cheering me on.

Next and last was the treadmill.

As we walked up the ramp leading to the assorted stair-climbers and elliptical machines, Bomani turned and asked: “Have you talked with your dad about that incident? How it made you *feel*?”

“He knew,” I said. “I cried the whole way home.”

“No, Farouk. I mean, how you feel today? On the inside.”

This was his new thing for me now. Bomani wanted me to have a conversation with my dad. He wanted me to express my internal turmoil.

I wasn’t sure if I had any. Besides, I explained, my dad was in his 70s. This kind of tear-jerking thing wasn’t his bag. He wasn’t insensitive, far from it. My dad just wasn’t the kind of guy to go back over his past misdeeds. He didn’t have many, so why would he need focus on the few.

“There’s a hidden well in all of us, Farouk.” Bomani said. I stood at/on a treadmill and he set it for intervals. “I’ll be back in a little while.”

“You’re not going to run with me?”

He smiled and tilted his head. “I want to leave with your thoughts,” he said with an Aw-shucks grin. “I will return.”

Then he was gone.

And I was in this room alone, on a treadmill set too damn high. I didn’t mind the intervals setting. It mixed in running and hill-climbing and brisk walking. But the running part would

always increase. My chest would burn, but I never stopped. Sweat would be pouring off me. And by the time I was done, my head would be spinning. All through the run I would think: Get me off of this thing. Yet, for some reason, I didn't want to let Bomani down. I continued. Hard-breathing, sweaty, but still going.

He really was a good cheerleader.

After my workout and shower, I didn't see Bomani. I decided not to go looking for him. I was tired. On my way home, I called his office and left him a message, explaining how I would talk with my dad. I figured that would suffice as my "good evening" and "thanks for a workout."

Ayo was going over the kids' lessons when I came in. Having kids run up to you with all their happiness can humble a guy. I loved my kids and Ayo. She smiled and commandeered them back to the table.

"I made seafood salad," Ayo said. "It's in the fridge."

"Thanks, pretty girl." I kissed the side of her head. "Your hair smells good, darling."

"Darling," my son, Olu, repeated. "Darling, darling, darling."

"See what you started?" Ayo said.

My other son, Ali, said, "'Thanks, pretty girl,'" and giggled with Olu.

Little Ayo just laughed and called me "eyeballs."

"I'll leave you four to your work." I went down in our basement. I had exams to grade and wanted to prepare for next week. Sitting in my office, however, made me think of drinking. And thinking of drinking made me think I *did* have a problem. And thinking that I had a problem made me wonder if my dad's smacking me caused my disease? I tried to throw myself into grading those exams, but I couldn't focus. I walked around the basement. I turned on ESPN. I turned off ESPN. I scanned the bookshelves, then the CD, shelves then the DVD shelves. My

eyes kept creeping over to the bar and the bottle of Jack. I went to the bathroom. I couldn't shit or piss. I stared at my reflection. Maybe I should shave, I thought. I had grown this beard for so many years; maybe it was time for a change. I looked just like my mom, only with a long stringy beard. I had her eyes and narrow nose. But my hair was like Dad's, thin and flimsy. Girls used to think I was cute, had good hair, but I never could style it the way all the cool boys did. Every time I got a skinhead look. Sometimes, I wished I were darker, like my mom and Yusef. Or maybe as brown as Jakara. I washed my face when I heard Ayo call me.

"Just a minute," I said. I dried my beard, lips, and nose. I allowed the rest of the water to roll down my forehead and cheeks. Then I dried my face over again.

"Is everything okay?"

I opened the door and saw Ayo holding a bowl of seafood salad. "Yeah," I said, trying to smile, "just had a long session with Bomani. Guess I'm kind of tired."

She handed me the bowl. "Well, me and the kids are heading upstairs if you need the kitchen table."

There was sadness in Ayo's brown eyes.

"I'm okay," I assured her.

"I don't like when you're down here alone," she said. "I'm giving you as much space and opportunity to prove me wrong, Farouk. But I can't take any more of your drinking."

"Is it the drinking or the drunkenness?" I don't know why I asked that. I figured there was a huge difference between drinking and being drunk. And for a moment, the question caused Ayo to reflect on the difference.

Ayo and I had met at party. Junior had been bragging about Lorraine's good friend. He had told me she was time enough for me; so when Lorraine and he threw this Oldies themed party, Ayo was there in hip-hugging bell-bottom jeans. She stood like Moses on Mount Sinai, but instead of Commandments, she held the room. Ayo was "Good God" and "Oh Lord" all in one. Some of the other male teachers from Rosedale were there; some of Junior's frat brothers were there with their wives. Even the pretty female teachers came, but none of them could hold a candle to Ayo. She had the most unusual brown skin, a mix of dark chocolate and honey. Her hair was closely cut as if she were a cancer patient. And her arms and legs were strong like an Alvin Ailey-dancer's. Junior put on "True Fine Mama" and Ayo and I hand-danced all over his and Lorraine's basement. In some DC circles, you're not anything if you can't play bid whist or hand dance. The night we met I could do both.

After that, the dancing, the partying, and the drinking were nonstop. Every weekend was a blast. But when we married and started having kids, I guess the party was sort of over for Ayo. She nursed our kids and stayed home and read to them. I on the other hand still hung out with the guys. She didn't seem to mind at first. After all, we were the goodtime couple of our friends. And occasionally, we got a sitter and she and I rekindled all the fun and fire of our youth. Soon, though, Ayo would poop out. Midway through a dance, she would need water and rest. We started watching people dance and have fun more than we participated in it. I wasn't mad. I still went out and played ball with the guys. A drink here, a drink there, and I was good. I would come home, loud, probably a little obnoxious, but still loving. And I guess Ayo started becoming annoyed. She couldn't hang out with me and I think that bothered her. I know our date-nights were far and few and in between. If her parents or my parents weren't up to watch their

grandkids, then she was in the house. When I thought back about it, I was kind of a bastard for not being there enough for her.

“I don’t know if I’m tired of your drinking or drunkenness,” Ayo said. “I just want you to be better than you’ve been.”

“Okay,” I said, forking some of the salad. “I understand. Bomani thinks it has to do with my dad.”

“Baba Ibrahim?”

“Yeah.”

Ayo shook her head. “I can’t see it. Why does he think that?”

Chewing, I said: “My dad smacked me once.”

“Did he?” Ayo laughed softly. “I bet you had it coming?”

“I dunno.” I swallowed the peppery salad. “You got jalapeños in this?”

“Oh, yeah, be careful.”

Normally, if I ate something with jalapeños, I’d cool the burn down with a beer. My eyes went straight to the kegerator, then back to her.

“You want some water?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

I nodded.

By the time Ayo came back with the water, I had finished the salad and had snuck a sip of beer. I thanked her for the water and took large gulps, knowing I’d have to pee. I wanted to wash away any smell of beer-breath from my mouth. For extra measure, I told her a quick version of what happened when I was younger. She listened but seemed to be paying more attention to the kids playing above our heads.

“Maybe he’s right,” she said finally. “It wouldn’t hurt talking with Baba Ibrahim.” Ayo kissed my forehead. “I still love you, Farouk.”

“I still love you, too.”

She walked over to the stairs, then looked back. “Next time, sweetie,” she said, frowning, “put the beer mug back on the rack.” She went up without looking at me

I felt like shit.

....

Saturday and Sunday were usually our family days. Ayo and I would load up the truck and head over to either her parents’ or my parents’ house. But on this Sunday, I headed to my parents’ house in Brandywine alone. I drove my car and thought of the many possible ways to bring up the incident. Ayo thought I should just come out with it, explain that we were having marital issues and that my counselor believed my drinking stemmed from some sad moment in my life. It sounded good when she said it. But the drive from Kearney Street in DC to Green Oak Estates in Md. made me change my mind. I couldn’t just come out with, “Hey dad, Ayo and I are having issues stemming from when you slapped the shit out of me.” He wouldn’t buy that. He’d ask a shitload of questions; he’d ask me about my own personal choices, my conscious acceptance of drinks, and my refusal to stop; he’d know that slapping me so many years ago, though wrong, wasn’t the reason I drank. And I guess, in a way, I knew this, too. For some reason, I had gotten in my head this notion of doing something about my drinking problem even though I didn’t think I had one. I had made some mistakes when I got too far-gone, but those were outliers. I was a steady drinker. And so was Ayo. She liked her vodka and cranberry occasionally. And when we went out, just the two of us, she could really toss them back. Again, those were outliers.

I shook my head at the double standard and parked in my parents' driveway. My mom came to the door with some coarse fabric in her hands. She kissed my cheek and sat back in her chair near the sewing machine.

"Isn't it our weekend?" she asked. "Where are the kids?"

"Oh, yeah. It is," I said, "but I have to talk to dad about something."

"Oh." My mom started then stopped the sewing machine. She looked me up and down. "What's wrong?"

"Well, I'd rather talk to dad since it involves him. Kind of."

"Farouk?" My mom lowered her head and looked over her glasses. I felt like I was a student in her class who did not answer a question correctly. "Whatever involves your father involves me, too."

"Not this."

"Well, he's sleeping upstairs."

Though my folks had retired to this suburban development, they were far from being ineffectual. My mom's iron levels and eyes were bad, and my dad's diabetes and his knees weren't good, but they still maintained their small clothing business, though it wasn't as thriving as it once was. Their main income came from their pensions as professors. It paid the mortgage on their home and allowed for simple accoutrements: a flat-screen television, a satellite radio, two cellphones and a desktop computer. And they still submitted an occasional article or opinion piece to *The Afro American* newspaper. I smiled at my mom as she worked the machine, sticking her tongue out to the side of her mouth.

I went up to see my dad.

He was coming out of the bathroom, his cane thumping the floor.

“Well, isn’t this a surprise? I didn’t hear the kids.”

“No, they’re not here.”

“Oh.” He looked at the large wall clock. “It’s not our weekend?”

“It is, but, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“About what?” My dad sat in a chair under the clock. He reached in the wooden nightstand to his right and pulled out a long white, rectangular tube of pills. My parents didn’t believe in traditional medicine, well, maybe they did, but modern pills weren’t taken. Instead, they preferred vitamins, herbal supplements, and unproven concoctions they insisted were better for them. There was a half-emptied glass of water under the dimly lit lamp. The curtains were apart, so I wasn’t sure why he even needed the lamp. It was pretty bright in there.

“Dad,” I said, looking for a place to sit. I pulled my mom’s chair around their bed. “You remember—”

My dad held up his hand. “Queenie, you take your vitamins?” he yelled to my mom.

“Taking them now, honey,” she called back.

“You were saying?”

“You remember when you, um, when you—”

“When I what?”

“When you, uh, when you, um, slapped me?”

My dad tilted his head.

“Do you remember when you slapped me?” I asked again, more assertive.

My dad frowned at me. He rubbed his chin, then under his bottom lip. He squinted as if searching for the meaning of this question, its answer. His mouth parted, but he only sighed. He reached for the glass and finished the water. He cleared his throat. He shook his head.

“Farouk,” he said. “I don’t remember that.”

“You don’t?”

“No.”

There was something lost in my dad’s eyes. His beard was much grayer than I remembered. It was still long as mine, but he looked tired, like an Imam after a final prayer service. He searched my face, I assumed, trying to recognize or remember a moment of hitting me.

“I had come to your history class,” I said. “You were discussing the liberation of Angola. Remember?”

He nodded. “I remember lecturing on Angola, but I don’t remember you being there. And I really don’t remember slapping you, Farouk.”

“You don’t remember me calling one of your students stupid?”

“You did that?”

“Yeah.”

My dad shifted his jaw from side to side. “I just can’t see it.”

This was pointless. I rubbed my eyes with my hand.

“Well, if I did, I hope you forgave me by now.” My dad chuckled.

I looked over at him. He was in the pajamas Ayo and I purchased for his birthday. The shirt hung loosely over his slender frame. “Of course, I forgave you dad,” I said. “This was just an exercise in silliness.”

My dad laughed but it seemed he was thinking of some other thing. My mom stood in the doorway. She held two full glasses of water. She handed one to me, and then the other to my dad. He gave her the empty glass, but he still seemed confused. My mom looked down at me.

She didn't say anything. Only her eyes were reproachful. I listened to her feet descend the stairs.

My dad wove his fingers over his stomach. He leaned and shook his head.

"Farouk," he said, looking at me, "are you sure I hit you?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm positive."

"Well, son, that must've been pretty traumatic, if you're bringing it up now." He took a sip and narrowed his eyes at me.

"It was at the time," I said. "But it isn't now."

"So you called a student, stupid, huh?"

"He was being rude."

"Being rude and being stupid aren't synonyms, Farouk."

I laughed. "You're right."

"You don't think your students are stupid, do you?"

"No," I said, defensively. "I don't."

"Teaching is a very personal thing, Farouk. And calling a child stupid is an equally personal thing."

I nodded.

"But, to be fair," he said, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair, "there are students who aren't the brightest bulbs in the lamp. You know what I mean?"

I did. But I never allowed myself to think of them as stupid. I felt bad for my literacy students. I felt most of them had been given an unfair chance, an unfair start at life. Somewhere in their upbringing someone had broken their hearts and ruined them. Somewhere between the second and fourth grades they started hating school and teachers and adults. Somewhere learning for them became a chore they never fully wanted to do. I figured that person or persons had

made learning one transaction after the other. My students were told them they had to test well, learn more, be more, but were never explained what my parents explained to me and my siblings. Life was about experiencing things, seeing the world from various lenses, being able to connect with those who were similar and those who were different. It was in these connections that our humanity thrived. Whether they believed in Maat, Nyame, or the goodness of history and culture, my students struggled every day, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I asked my dad what he was reading this week. He told me Manning Marable's biography of Malcolm X. He liked Marable's writing and found the book fascinating. He strongly recommended I read it. Before long, I helped him rub down his knees with liniment oil and get back in bed. We talked about teaching, the differences between his time and mine, and my sister and brother. He soon fell quiet. I sat a little longer listening to him sleep.

When I went downstairs, my mom was asleep, too. I placed my empty glass in the dishwasher and stared out of the kitchen window. There were children playing in the field behind their home. No doubt some of them were looking for Olu, Ali, and Little Ayo. Maybe next week, I thought, I'll bring them over. Ayo's folks sure wouldn't mind.

Before I left, I pulled one of my mom's netted shawls over her. She stirred and then her eyes opened. She slid her glasses up, wincing at me.

"You know you shouldn't have done that, Farouk."

"I thought you were cold."

"No, I mean stirring your father that way."

I explained to her what I was trying to accomplish. I explained Bomani and working out and how he seemed like such a great cheerleader. The more I talked the more I sounded like a fool to myself.

Mom sighed at intervals but shook her head a lot. “Farouk,” she said, “do you really think you’re an alcoholic?”

Part of any recovery requires some admission of the problem. I decided to unload everything on my mom. There were three incidents that did it. The first had happened when I was hanging out after work. I had gotten pretty torn up and when I got home I just plopped in the bed. Before long, I had to pee. So I got up to pee. Instead of going to the toilet, I went into Ayo’s closet and pissed on her designer pants and the throw rug. She called to me: Farouk, what are you doing? I told her: I’m using the bathroom. She said: You’re in my closet. I had to admit, I was in a fog. As it lifted, I was indeed in her closet. I went to the bathroom and washed my hands. I came to the bed and belly flopped on top of the sheets. I told her: I’ll clean it up in the morning. I wasn’t sure, but I had the feeling she punched my back.

The second incident had happened when I was in the basement. It was late at night, and I was grading student writing. I usually drank to get through their God-awful prose. To read their writing sober was to ask me to fail them. So I was reading and drinking when I saw three spider crickets. They were springing all about the basement. I had *Erasure* in front me since that was the book the kids were writing on. I couldn’t use that. So I grabbed *The Tunnel* and flung it at them. But those things were fast. I grabbed *Infinite Jest*, *Freedom*, and *The Souls of Black Folk*. I kept aiming and missing. Before long, the majority of our library was on the floor. I stood in the middle of booknado. Ayo was at the stairs, yelling: What the hell are you doing? I said: I’m trying to kill spider crickets. I was holding a rock glass in my hand. I took a sip of the remaining Jack and Ginger. Then one unfortunate bastard survived the bookstorm. I threw the glass at it,

smashing it and the bug on the crown molding. Ayo just stood there, mouth agape. Unbelievable, she said. I thought she was impressed by my accuracy. Clearly I was wrong.

The last incident, the one that took the cake, was when I got lost on my way from Happy Hour. I must've blacked out because I didn't know where I was, though I was driving on Route 50. I don't know if I was heading over here, I said to my mom, but I was driving toward Annapolis and I couldn't stop myself. Periodically, cars flashed passed me or maybe I flashed passed them. All I knew was I needed to get somewhere. Where, I wasn't sure. When I finally got home, it was just after dawn. The kids were eating breakfast and came running up to me, happy as ever to see me. But Ayo was mad. No, she was hotter than fish grease. She called me into the den. Told me if I didn't stop drinking, she and the kids were gone. She handed me divorce papers. She was serious, mom. And I didn't know what to do. I could barely stand, but I knew she was serious. She stormed out of the den and I went up to our room and went to sleep. When I got up, she had already filled out her portion of the papers. They were on my side on the nightstand. I went to the bathroom and threw up.

My mom sat quietly after I finished. During my story, she smiled sometimes and she frowned sometimes. But as I recounted the last incident, she only looked concerned.

"Ayo didn't tell me she filled out the papers," she said. "I knew about a couple of those, especially the last one. She was so worried, Farouk. I kept telling her, you're a responsible man. You were just out with your friends. Nothing was the matter. Lord knows, I said, there were times when Ibrahim hung with his brothers until the wee hours. I knew what married women fear when that happens. But I also knew what kind of man we raised you to be. You're not an alcoholic, Farouk. You just need to manager yourself better."

I stood up and looked into my mom's face. She was right. I wasn't an alcoholic. I was drinker, yes; but not an alcoholic. I thanked and kissed her on the cheek. I promised that I would bring the kids over next weekend. She seemed happy about that; said she would make some pie.

I drove away, thinking I should head over to Ayo's parents. But I was kind of hungry. I hadn't eaten much in anticipation of talking with my dad. I had to admit, there really wasn't one sad moment in my life. There were many. I only selected the slapping incident because I wanted to have something to say to Bomani. That was childish. And sad. I still wanted to fit in. At my age, trying to get him, a cool guy, to like me was pathetic. I pulled into Bonefish Grill.

It was crowded at the bar, so I sat at on one side of the community table. People were cheering one of the early NBA conference final games. It was the Wizards and the Hawks. The game was tied and John Wall hit an amazing three-pointer over Al Horford. Then, with time just about over, Kyle Korver sent the game into overtime with an even longer, near half-court, buzzer-beater. Everyone yelled in exhilaration. But there was a certain sound I heard that caused me to stand and look through the crowd. I was sure it was Bomani's voice. And wasn't this the perfect place for us both to hide: the other side of Maryland, far away from prying eyes?

My server came and I ordered the Bang-Bang shrimp and a Jack and Ginger. I settled down but was still trying to see through the gang of people huddled at the bar. I heard someone yell, "Let's go Wizards!" and I knew I was right. My server placed my Jack and Ginger on the table with bread. It was perfect timing. The crowd of men and women in their Wizards jerseys or Hawks hats and tanks parted. Bomani was talking to some guy in a similar long black T-shirt. The backs of their shirts had Hidden Wells in bold white letters. Bomani was leaning close to the guy but talking loud enough for me to hear him. A half-full pitcher of beer stood between them.

The guy's head bounced to Bomani's words, as if he were trying to ignore Bomani's drunkenness.

"Walls gonna, he's gonna take this damn thing over, you watch, he's gonna dish it to Beale and Beale's gonna dish it back and then, you watch, he'd gonna win this thing."

"I gotta pee," Bomani said, "hold my sport. Ha! I mean my spot." He rose uneasily and then the guy looked at him, holding up his hand as if to brace Bomani. "I'm fine," Bomani said. "I've been in worse situations than this."

When he turned he saw me. He smiled. But then he looked at my glass.

"You shouldn't be having one of those," he said.

"I'm okay," I said. "I've been in worse situations, too."

He laughed then saluted me.

I raised my glass. I toasted: to freedom. And I had a good time.

But They Mean to Do Right

Joe hadn't figured it out yet, but he knew he needed to get rid of his parents. Either they could be moved down in his basement or they could move in with one of his siblings. One way or the other they had to leave his space.

His mom had called in June, explaining how the last few years had been difficult for them. First, they had tried to sell their house but found out they were upside down on it. Next, they'd tried to divorce but realized financially they couldn't afford it. Then, they had taken up motorcycling but his dad's back gave out and they ended up losing money to a Bikers' Club. After that, they'd decided to try to walk away from their home. They needed a place to stay. So they called Joe.

"You're our last hope, Joey," his mom had said. "We can't stay at that place anymore. They're going to foreclose on it and we're done being the bank's lackey."

He had asked about his other siblings, but his mother gave him a long drawn out story about them being unfit to live with. And she didn't want to start in on Carol, again. Lord, she had said, that child of mine.

Joe was the youngest of four. His grandmother had taken him to live with her when he was 10. She had convinced Joe's parents that it would be best for him if he attended a private school, arguing that his brightness might dim if he stayed in public school. His grandmother had lived in Potomac and had pulled strings to get him enrolled into Bullis. From there, Joe went to Howard, then to Duke. When it was time for him to leave Durham, his dad and brother, Calvin, came and moved him to a townhouse in Reston. During that trip, they'd laughed and talked about old times, funny moments, and promised to keep in touch. But whenever Joe reached out, Calvin was always busy. Never home. Never available. His sisters were cold, seemingly upset with Joe

about something he couldn't understand. He chalked it up to them being girls. And pretty soon he stopped trying. He threw himself first into his job as a web designer at a mid-sized black-owned development company; then, he threw himself into teaching at Rosedale. In the twelve years since leaving Duke, whenever Joe heard from his mom he knew it was because she and his dad needed something.

"If you turn us away," his mother cautioned, "your dad and I will have to return to a life of crime. And with his back... I mean you can't really expect him to be a drug dealer at 63, can you? I mean can you imagine me robbing a bank with Arthur in my fingers and my knee? How far you think I'd get?"

When Joe was a child, he had believed his parents were a modern-day black Bonnie and Clyde. They always seemed to have things and bragged about how they got over on someone or some institution, which was usually one of the schools Joe and his siblings attended or one of the apartments where they lived. But as he grew, Joe learned his father worked in "facilities" at the Library of Congress and his mother worked there, too, in the stacks of the Jefferson building. Hardly any type of crime lords, his parents were small, petty thieves, prone to being caught, and prone to begging for some forgiveness. Their scams never earned them more than a few hundred bucks, though, back then, that seemed like a really big score to them. It wasn't until Joe was in college when he heard "Harry Hippie" and realized that somehow Bobby Womack had sung a song about his parents.

"Okay," Joe said. "But this has to be temporary."

"Of course," his mother assured him.

When they arrived the following weekend, they were in his father's new, fully loaded green Tahoe. Joe had the feeling he'd been duped.

His father brought in five expensive-looking suitcases and turned his head around the front room admiringly. They hadn't discussed the sleeping arrangements. But Joe thought the basement's pullout sofa and full bath would be nice, private. His mom stood at the top of the stairs of the basement. She said, *steep*. And then his father reminded Joe about his back and her knees, how going up and down those steps wouldn't be wise. Joe suggested the den. But his mother pooh-poohed that idea. She said they needed their privacy. After touring the upstairs rooms, his father unloaded their bags in Joe's Master bedroom. Joe reminded him about going up and down *these* stairs if they stayed in his room. His father agreed but reminded Joe about his back and, touching Joe's California king, his father said he really needed a firm mattress.

Joe's mother kissed his cheek and thanked him and told him how very proud she and his father were of him, how he was their saving grace, how, in no time, they would find a place and be out of his hair.

That was June 8th.

Now it was the end of September.

Drinking a cold beer in the darkness of his family room, Joe wondered why he couldn't just tell them to move to basement or leave. But he knew the reason: they were his parents. Then he wondered why Carol or Terese or Calvin couldn't pitch in. Why was it all on him? He turned the bottle up. He took long gulps, almost finishing the beer. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He tapped the Spotify icon on his iPhone. He adjusted the volume on the earbuds and selected the Mood playlist. Joe trudged down to the basement. He turned the dial for the ceiling lights to come on. This was worse than being home with grandma, he thought. He couldn't invite friends over from work, or his friend, Celeste, to smoke weed or eat bunnies with. He pulled out

the bed from its sofa prison. He thought about his upcoming birthday. He punched the pillows. He hoped they would be gone by then, or at least able enough to live down here.

Joe sat on the edge of the bed. He finished the beer. He looked up at the lights. They were dim enough for him to sleep. But he really didn't want that BG&E bill to rise. Bad enough his parents took long showers and kept the television on all night. He went over to lower the lights. Then, suddenly, his left ear started to ache. Joe snatched the earbud out and fingered the annoyance as best he could. The pain went away. He switched off the lights, making his way through the shadows of the basement furniture, bumping his knee on a chair.

He crawled into the bed. He lay on his back and allowed the coolness of the room to settle over him. Slowly the music lulled him to sleep.

The next morning, Joe decided he was going to get in touch with his siblings. He would try reconnecting with them, again. He hoped one of them would be willing to take their parents off of him. After teaching his content management course to the 11th graders, he phoned his mom.

"Can you give me Carol's number?"

"Sure," she said. He could tell there was some hesitancy. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah. Things are fine. I had to put two of my classes in detention."

"Oh that sounds bad."

"Well, they weren't prepared."

She chuckled, then gave him Carol's number. She thanked him for leaving them some money, too. "We're gonna get you something really nice, Joey. I'm not sure what, but it'll be nice."

He had started leaving money in conspicuous places, figuring if they had it they wouldn't feel tempted to forge his signature on any checks. They hadn't done that, but he didn't want to try them. And from the sound of her voice, his mom sounded inebriated. He hoped she hasn't found his cannabis treats. He'd hid them down in the basement and in the back of the pantry. He started to ask, but he figured she would laugh and deny it.

When he called Carol, she didn't seem too happy to hear from him.

"Why do you want to meet?" she asked. "I mean how long has it been since we talked?"

"It's been a while Carol," Joe said. "That's why I thought having a late lunch would be nice. We can reconnect."

Carol was silent. "You know, it's weird, but I thought I'd hear from you today."

They agreed to have lunch at McHenery's Steakhouse on L Street. She hadn't been there before, she told him, but she had heard the food was great. Joe loved the place, but didn't tell her. He only said it would be his treat.

"Wow," Carol said, "you must want something."

When he saw her standing at the entrance, Joe thought Carol resembled Stevie Nicks. She was dressed in all black, a kind of netted shawl was over her shoulders. It wasn't cold, but she looked cold. Her black eye-makeup, lipstick, and nail polish were especially troubling to Joe. He asked to sit in a booth, but Carol insisted they should sit on the patio.

"It's really nice out," she said. "Don't you like eating outside?"

That was one thing about Carol, Joe remembered from their childhood. She always made a picnic of things. Even when there was snow on the ground, Carol would go outside with a thick blanket and eat lunch.

“All right,” Joe said. There weren’t a lot of people sitting out. So no one, he hoped, would mistake Carol for his lover. “It’s good seeing you, sis,” he said loudly.

Carol frowned then smiled. “It’s good seeing you, brother.”

For several minutes, Joe perused the menu. He would look intermittently at his oldest sibling. She had certainly changed from the pretty girl with the infectious laugh. Some of her vivaciousness had worn off. Her hair used to be a darker brown; now she has it lighted to an ugly red.

Joe was working up the nerve to ask Carol for help when the server came with cucumber water. He took the drink and food orders and vanished into the dim steakhouse.

“So, what’ve you been up to?” he asked.

Carol sipped her water. She dabbed her lips with the cloth napkin. “I’m working on a book of spells,” she said.

“Say what?”

“A book of spells.”

“You mean like abracadabra?”

“No,” Carol chuckled. “I mean a *real* book of spells.” She explained how there were so many different kinds of spells and potions out there. Most of them, she said, were snake oil and bullshit. But what she was doing was actually real. “You remember when I told you I felt I’d hear from you?” she asked. “Well, I’ve been communing with the spirits. They told me I’d hear from you.”

Joe cleared his throat. “Look, Carol, I don’t mean any harm, but I don’t believe in all that.”

Carol nodded with pursed lips. “I know you don’t,” she said. “You’re like mom, a nonbeliever.”

“No, that’s not it.”

Things were going well, he thought. He needed to change the subject. But Carol stood up and said she needed to pee. When she left the table, Joe noticed that her dress had a black train to it. He put his hand over his face. He didn’t want any of the L Street suits and skirts to see him. He shouldn’t have been surprised. Carol always marched to beat of her own drummer. Though he was young when his grandmother took him, he remembered enough of Carol’s quirkiness. Now she was a full-grown weirdo.

“Their bathrooms are really nice,” she said, sliding to her seat.

“Really,” Joe said. “That’s nice to know.”

She smiled and asked him what he had been up to.

Joe gave Carol the rundown of the past few years. He told her about living in Reston and working for Binary, , about the grind of being a content manager and vendor for various hospitals and small nonprofits, about feeling more like a cog and not a member of anything meaningful. “But when I came to Rosedale,” he said, “I was just showcasing this learning module that the company was marketing. It wasn’t even fully developed back then. But the staff and teachers were so interested and seemed so genuinely grateful that once the module got up and running, I just started teaching them how it worked. Then one day, the principal asked would I be interested in teaching students how to do what I do?”

It was a great moment, he told Carol. The students were great.

Carol nodded slowly. She dabbed her lips again. “You know, somehow your being a teacher isn’t that surprising. You always seemed like a little boss when we were kids.”

Joe frowned and tried to chuckle his annoyance away. “I wasn’t a ‘little boss,’” he said.

Carol pulled at a string of small black beads around her neck. She didn’t appear to be listening anymore to Joe. Her head shifted from the people walking on L Street to some of the people behind her. She took a small piece of bread and slathered butter over it. She was in deep thought, Joe figured, perhaps remembering some moment of their childhood that affirmed his bossiness.

“Have you talked with our parents?” she asked. “Have they told you something about me?”

“No,” Joe assured Carol. He reached over to touch her hand, but she pulled away. The server came with their drinks. “Have you told Mom and Dad?”

Carol’s face soured. She dropped her chin into her chest. “I can’t talk to them anymore. They stir my spirits.” She said she and their mom had a huge argument when she got back into DC. She had thought her mother would help her out with finding employment, but she didn’t. “And that’s when I started looking back, Joe, on all our lives, well, on my life. And she wasn’t there for anything. She never believed in me.”

Joe wanted to say something but the food came. The server seemed nice but he also seemed curious about them. Joe waited until he left. “I don’t know if that’s all true, Carol.”

“It is,” she insisted. “But you weren’t there, Joe. Grandma saved you from it all.”

Joe stabbed his steak and curved out a chunk. It was moist and full of salty flavors. He took a long deliberate chew. Carol was dissecting her grilled eggplant salad. Then she put the fork and knife down and said a soft prayer. When she picked up the fork again, she smiled at Joe. Part of him wanted to hear her laugh, just once, but she didn’t. They ate in silence.

When the check came, Joe paid. He asked her if she had Terese's number. She did. She wrote it on a piece of paper from her black note pad.

"Keep this safe," she said. "Don't put it in your phone."

"Why not?"

"Technology isn't all powerful, Joe. Sometimes, the mind is the best computer."

"Well, my mind is cramped with things."

They walked to his car. Joe offered her a ride home, but she refused. She liked catching the train and liked listening to people talk. He asked her was she afraid people would make fun of her or try to hurt her. It was getting late, he reminded her, and DC has some treacherous people.

"They don't bother me, Joe. I think they see me and know I'm one of them: a soul journeying through this realm."

Joe tried not to roll his eyes. He hugged her and said they should hang out more often.

"We won't," she said. "But I appreciate your kindness."

Joe started to object but that pain returned to his ear. He fingered it and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Oh, what's wrong?" Carol asked.

"I don't know," Joe said. "I might have an earache or an infection."

"Here." Carol wiggled her fingers and moved her hands around his eyes and ears. She mumbled several times: *Istah kulub istag kulub*. "There," she concluded, stepping back, "how does your ear feel *now*?"

The annoyance had left after he'd fingered it. He looked around the street, but no one seemed to care. "I'm fine, Carol. I'm... fine."

“The power of these hands, little brother,” Carol said. She leaned forward, again. “That spell was a healing spell.” She settled back. “You’ll probably hear things you’ve never thought possible.”

“I think I already have,” Joe said.

When Joe walked in, he saw his father was sitting in the family room, still in his droopy boxers. He was scratching his chest, the hairs and his nails sounded like Brillo pads over an old stained oven.

“Hey, Dad,” Joe said.

His father shushed him. He was watching the news on the flatscreen over the fireplace. Joe looked for several minutes then walked out on his deck. His parents had always paid close attention to the local news. More than anything, they were obsessed with hearing anything that remotely tied them to any possible crime. Which never happened. Still, it was a house rule: No one talked or played when the 4 o’clock or the 6 o’clock news was on. And when Channel 5 started news at 10, you couldn’t talk or play then either. Joe remembered when he was 9 how his mother came into his 4th grade class just after lunch, ushering him out and explaining that they had to move. Quickly. There had been a news update at noon about a woman dressed similarly to his mother who had robbed a Savings and Loan on Queen Chapel Road.

“I didn’t do it,” she had said as she drove, weaving through the neighborhood traffic.

Her purse however told a different story. There were twenties and fifties stuffed inside. She gave off the air of someone avoiding the law. Yet, years later Joe learned that the money in her purse was supposed to go toward his tuition. She just didn’t want to pay it. Another bill was

due, probably rent, or one of the other school tuitions for one of his siblings. He asked about that day, but his mother said she didn't remember what he was talking about.

Joe sat in one of the tan Adirondack chairs. It was an Indian summer. The sky was a dark, hazy orange-purple. Four deer inched along his yard's perimeter, snacking on bits of leaves and grass. The yard needed mowing. He looked back inside the house. His dad was still looking up at the screen. Joe wondered if he should ask him to help with the yard but figured his answer would involve something about his back. Joe's lips snatched up a cigarette. He took a long pull and exhaled slowly. His grandmother had smoked Kool 100s. She hated when he started. Told him, Boy, if you start, you'll never quit. But Joe had quit, several times. It was only recently, when his mom and dad moved in, that he started again. Otherwise, he was only a casual smoker.

"What's go'n on, son?" His dad stood and stretched barefooted on the deck. "Oo-wee, it's getting cold." He tapped out a cigarette. "Can I get a light, Joe?"

Joe handed him his lighter. "Where's Mom?"

"Oh, she went out," his dad said, sitting at the deck table in one of the other chairs. "Had some errands to run."

"Errands?"

"Yeah, you know, get some stuff for the house, some stuff for her and for me... and for *you*, too."

"So, Dad, I was wondering—"

"I know," his father said. "What we're gonna get you for your birthday, right?"

"Uh, no."

"Oh, is it what we're getting you for Christmas?"

"No."

“Well, I’m lost.”

Joe stared at him. Then from the corner of his eye, Joe saw a large white tail doe walk closer to the deck. Neither Joe nor his father spoke. They watched her chew off the lonely leaves of the shrub by the deck. A little ways off, two fawns ate next to another large doe. Wisps of smoke angled in the light breeze. But animals continued to eat. Joe felt a burp coming and couldn’t suppress it. The deer turned and leapt away toward the woods.

“Why’d you do that?” his dad asked.

“I tried not to,” Joe said, plucking his half-smoked cigarette over the railing.

His father didn’t say anything at first, but then said: “That was a family.” He pointed with his chin at the shrub. “And you scared them off.”

....

Joe’s mom went on a shopping spree. She bought winter blouses; two business suits, one navy, one black; black designer boots; butter pecan low-fat ice cream; new assorted underwear. For his Dad, she bought slacks; dress shirts; shoes; a box of honey glazed doughnuts; razors and shaving cream, the expensive kind; ThermaCare back pads. For Joe: a new electric toothbrush. Joe didn’t know where she got the money. He checked his bank account, fearful that his mom had forged his signature on checks and was living it up on him. But his account was fine. Which only meant one thing: they were scamming again. Joe didn’t know what or how, but he knew he needed them to stop.

“Mom,” he said, standing in his bedroom. “Where did you get the money for all the stuff you’ve been buying?”

His mom was standing in front of a full-length mirror. Her hands were on her hips as she walked back and forth admiring her boots and clothes. She angled the mirror and looked at Joe.

“You notice anything *else* new?”

Joe shook his head.

“I got my hair shortened,” she said. “You can’t tell?”

“No, Mom. I can’t.”

She looked in the mirror and winked at him. “You’re so sweet. Now, I know I should have told you, but I know you don’t like when your father and I gamble—”

“You and Dad went gambling?”

“Well no,” she said, turning from the mirror. She sat in his gray leather armchair and placed one boot on the ottoman. “A couple of days ago, I went up to Live and had a hot streak on blackjack. I must’ve won four or five thousand dollars.”

Joe wasn’t sure if she was lying or not. He briefly wondered why he only got a cheap electric toothbrush. He shook his head. “Whether you went to Maryland Live or won in scratch offs, you owe people money. Don’t you think you have some responsibility to pay them back?”

“No, Joey,” she said, “I don’t. I’m getting older and older. And you and your brother and sisters are getting older, too. I just want to live knowing I can be free of having to care.”

“That’s not right,” Joe said. He couldn’t believe he had said it. His voice echoed and even caused his mom to lean back a bit. “Ma, you and Dad aren’t children.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

“No.”

“Well, I do.” She stood up and went to her purse. She pulled out a small wad of money. She counted out some bills. “Here’s what I owe *you*,” she said, “with interest.”

“I don’t want your money, Mom.”

“Well, I want you to have it!” She folded the bills and pushed them into his pocket square. “I pay my debts, sweetie,” she said and kissed Joe’s cheek. “Now, I need a bath. You’re father’s out doing god knows what. I think I outa relax.”

Joe dropped his head. “Okay, Mom.” He stepped back through the doorway. “I had lunch with Carol the other day. She seems to be doing all right. She’s writing some kind of book.”

His mother unzipped and stood her boots near the door. “I wish I could care, Joey. But Carol has been such a disappointment. You know she had the nerve to call *me* a liar. Can you believe that? A *liar*? All because I didn’t pay some *thing* she thought I should have paid. I mean really. I worked and scratched and did a lot of things for you children.” She paused and seemed to have more to say to Joe but her voice was starting to shake. “Now look what you’ve done, Joey? Look! You’ve gotten me all worked up.” She stared angrily at him then slammed the door.

Joe went down to the basement.

He counted the money. It was six hundred dollars. He could buy some good cannabis with that. He placed a rubber band around the bills. He started to call Celeste, but he was struck by his mother’s anger at Carol. So he called his sister.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Carol,” he said. “What happened between you and Mom?”

She was silent. “Joe, I already told you. Our parents aren’t right in their heads.”

Joe looked at his cellphone. “Yeah. Tell me about it.”

“I’m serious. They are not well.”

“I know Carol; they’ve been living with me for the past few months. I had hoped you or Terese or Calvin would take them off my hands.”

She was silent, again. “Joe, I don’t think that would work. At least not with me. Mom lied to me, Joe. She told me she’d come to my graduation, and she didn’t. She told me she would pay my tuition, and she didn’t. She told me she would help me find a place when I came back to DC; she didn’t. Every time she has told me she would do something for me—from high school to college to my professional life— she has lied. And now we don’t speak.”

“You can’t work it out? You know, through counseling?”

“Sorry, Joe, now it’s your turn to live with them.”

Joe was about to offer a compromise: he’d take them for a year, if she’d take them for the rest of the year. But Carol hung up on him.

“Shit,” he said, tossing his phone across the sofa bed. The ringing in his ear returned. It was piercing like a bee-sting, quick like a shot. “So much for the power of fucking hands,” he said.

....

He had sent Terese a text, wondering if he could come by. She messaged him several days later. She seemed excited to hear from him, saying that it had been “a while.” She also asked if he wouldn’t mind stopping by the grocery store to pick up a few things on his way over. Joe agreed, but when he saw the list, he thought Terese had a different meaning for the word *few*. He also thought, maybe Carol told her that he had money and could afford things she could not. So after teaching his class, instead of going to Wegman’s, Costco, and Giants as her list suggested, Joe purchased three quarters of the items from Safeway. After all, he wasn’t made of money. And he figured she could get the rest later. But when he got to her Hyattsville home, Joe realized Terese needed a lot more.

“Hey, baby brother.” She slung one tattooed arm around Joe’s neck while holding in her other tatted arm a little light-skinned (possibly white) baby. “You can put the stuff in the kitchen,” she said, letting him haul in plastic bags full of food and treats. “Lil Man gots to get changed.”

Joe watched his sister ascend the stairs near the front door. Walking through the vestibule, he took inventory of the house. There was a room with a dark wooden beads hanging, 70s style, over its frame. In front of the door, a hopscotch game had been chalked on the hardwood floor. The living room had his two nephews bare-chested and sitting on a beige (or once white) futon, watching a cracked plasma inside a blue wooden makeshift entertainment unit. The kitchen, just off from the living room, was spacious and country-styled. Three scarred barstools with bits of their insides puffing out surrounded the granite island where silvery pans, suspend on a rack, were in need of rewashing. The oven was on. So was the dishwasher. There was a roast in a dented black pan. Sliced onions and peppers, barely enough to make a decent flavor, decorated the meat. Someone had poked large holes into the meat to make an ugly happy face. He looked around and saw that his nephews were now looking at him from their place on the futon. He grimaced and tried to smile at them. With no reply, he shook his head and unloaded the groceries in the refrigerator and pantry. Joe covered the meat with the pan’s equally dented lid and slipped it into the oven. He figured 375 was best temperature to cook a roast. He wasn’t sure what else to do.

His nephews were dark brown and in Carolina blue basketball shorts. Their names had been stitched in red and purple: **Boogie** and **Bootsie**. He saluted them. They only frowned. Joe eased over, wanting to say more, but didn’t know what to say. They were so small the last time he saw them. Was it five years ago, or was it seven? He couldn’t remember. He wished he could

go out and smoke. He was nervous. This house weighed on him. Their staring dark eyes weighed on him.

“What’re you watching?” Joe finally said. He nodded up at the muted television. A cartoon was on.

The boys looked at each other and shrugged. Bootsie pointed the remote and switched to the local news. He didn’t turn the sound up.

Neo-jazz started emanating from upstairs and soon the footfalls of little feet and the banging of something thundered down. Two brownish girls— one tall, one short —paused at the sight of him. They wore rhinestone tiaras and held long rhinestone scepters and curtsied in their long pink and yellow nylon gowns. The tall one hopscotched over to Joe. She had a green eye-patch over her left eye. She giggled at him. The other girl pulled something behind her. As she came closer, Joe saw it was a child. He couldn’t determine the sex or nationality. Its head was an assortment of braids and it sat in a green plastic sled, happily sucking its thumb.

“You ain’t Santa,” the smaller girl said. “Mama lied again.”

“No,” Joe chuckled. “I’m not Santa. I’m your, uh, uncle.”

“Are you like our last, uncle?” Boogie asked. His voice was smoky like Terese’s, which made him seem older than Joe imagined.

“You mean, Calvin?”

Boogie shook his head. “That wasn’t the name he went by, but yeah, him.”

“Oh. Well. No. I’m not Calvin. You two were pretty young the last time I, uh, the last time we met.” Joe looked up the stairs to see if Terese was coming back. “So what’s your name?” he asked the smaller girl.

“I don’t know you,” she replied. “You a stranger.”

Joe rubbed his face. He *was* a stranger, and so were she and the other ones. He looked at his nephews who appeared hostile and angry.

“So where’s your dad?” Joe asked.

The boys shrugged. Their eyes darkened and narrowed. They sort of had a mixture of his dad’s features: thick eyebrows, high cheekbones, wide nose, and square chins. If their hair was gray and their faces bearded, they would be miniature Dads.

But who were these girls and this other one or the one Terese was holding? Joe started to ask the girl with the green patch, but she seemed even less interested in talking to him. There was no sense trying to convince these kids he was somehow related to them. He had to think about how long it had been since he’d seen Terese. He knew she had kids, but...

“Hey,” Terese said, descending the stairs. She hugged Joe again. She smelled like J&J Baby Powder. “Lil Man loves jazz music.” She rubbed her nose on the baby’s. He cooed. “Yes he does. It calms him, doesn’t it? Calms you right down. Oh,” she smiled at Joe, “you put the roast in?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks, baby brother. Hey y’all this here’s your uncle Joe. Been a while, huh? You remember Boogie and Bootsie? These here are Gayle (eye-patch) and Stella (the suspicious one). And the one on the sled is Dewy...”

“We call him Doe,” Bootsie said. His voice wasn’t as smoky as his brother’s.

“Doe?”

“Yeah, because that’s the only word he knows.”

“That’s not true, Bootsie,” Terese said. “Anyway, and you’ve met Lil Man. His real name’s Emmanuel.” She rubbed nose with Lil Man’s, again. “So,” she said to Joe, “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to see you,” Joe said, nervously. “See how things are going.”

“I’m fine. The kids are fine. We’re living. What’s up with you?”

Joe swallowed his words down. He could see it wouldn’t make sense to impose. “I just wanted to catch up,” he said. “I had lunch with Carol.”

“Yeah, she told me.”

“You two talk regularly?”

Terese bounced Lil Man on her hip. “As much as time allows,” she said. “Sometimes, it’s kind of hard, you know?”

Joe nodded. “You know Mom and Dad are living with me now?”

“Yeah,” Terese laughed. “How’s that going?”

“As expected,” Joe said. He wasn’t sure if he should laugh. He smiled, but it felt forced, and when his nephews gave him the stink-face, he stopped. “Have you talked with them?”

“Not since Dad stole a dub from Boogie’s piggy bank. He bought a crap-load of scratch-offs, too.”

“He *did* pay me back, though,” added Boogie, “with interest.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Terese snapped. “So what’s there to talk with ‘em about?”

Joe shrugged like his nephews. “Yeah. I guess nothing. Say, how can you afford all of this? I mean the house.”

Terese looked askance at Joe. “Child-support. And tattooing. How else you think?”

“I’d... I just... was wondering.”

“Hey, hold your nephew for me. I need to check the midday lottery.”

Joe bounced Lil Man in his arms. He watched his sister sit beside her sons and pull out a laptop that wore some kind of school label on it. He walked around to the den. He couldn’t see in

Lil Man anything that resembled Terese or his parents. On the lavender painted walls there were no family photos. There were black and white framed drawings, similar to Rorschach images. Except these were not butterflies or vaginas. These were snatches of glaring red eyes. Half-clothed Afro'd women with thorny vine-serpents riding up their legs, around their waists, and encircling their arms, fangs affixed in the necks or breasts. Muscular men with dreads or braids or baldheads mounted on dragons or spiders, whose faces all resembled their mom's. Joe's eyes went from drawing to drawing. He was in a gallery of tattoo psychology. He wasn't certain who would want any of those images on their body. He looked around more. There were three stacked crates. A black one had DVDs arranged alphabetically with a label reading BLACK MOVIES and the white crate in the middle had EDUCATIONAL on its label, and the bottom green crate simply read MISCELLANEOUS. As Joe bounced Lil Man around, he didn't notice at first that Stella had been following him, muttering something at him, possibly a spell.

"See now," he said to her. "I'm, we're related." As the words left him, however, he realized there wasn't anything connecting him to Stella or this Lil Man in his arms. He kept wincing and looking over at Terese who seemed lost in the lottery numbers and her tickets.

He saw Stella shrugging and figured that she was dancing to the music from upstairs. Soon Boogie joined her in a silly set of movements.

"How come you never come over before?" he asked Joe, stopping in front of him.

"Well," Joe said, "I've been very busy."

"Mama told us you don't like your family," Stella said. "Is that true?"

"No," Joe said. Even Lil Man seemed unconvinced. "That's not true. I, I just grew up differently. I didn't live with my brother and sisters for some time."

"How come?" Boogie asked.

“I had a chance to go to a really good school. Far away from them. And I lived with your, uh, with my grandmother.”

“Is she dead?” Stella asked.

“Yes,” Joe replied. “She died a long, long time ago.”

“My mom told us that she didn’t love her.”

“Boogie, I don’t think that’s true.”

He shrugged. “Hey, that’s what she said.”

“My grandmother loved all of us.”

“She ain’t know me,” Boogie said. Then he looked over his shoulder, as if something amused him. “You wanna see Doe eat a roach?”

Joe shook his head. “Why would you want your brother to eat a roach?” Joe asked, remembering some of the horrible things Terese and Calvin had tried to make him eat.

“He ain’t related to me,” Boogie said. He started to walk away but paused and said: “And neither are they.” He smiled with darkened eyes. “Later, uh *Uncle Joe*.”

Joe was about to say something, but Lil Man squirmed and Joe shushed him. He looked down as Stella pulled on his pants leg. She waved for him to bend down. She whispered that Boogie and Bootsie were mean to them, especially to Dewy and Lil Man; she told him that her Mama didn’t like leaving her and Gayle around the twins, that Mama whipped the twins every day because they didn’t like the other kids. Mama was only keeping Dewy and Lil Man because their mama smoked drugs a lot. Stella said her mama and Gayle’s mama smoked drugs, too. A lot.

Joe went to hug the little girl, but she pulled away.

“You still a stranger,” Stella said but giggled.

Terese came and took Lil Man away. "You wanna stay for dinner?"

"No," Joe said. "I think I think I ought to leave. You got your hands full."

Terese looked down at Stella and rubbed her hand over the child's head. "Yeah, and I didn't hit today. Maybe tomorrow."

"Maybe," Joe said.

He hugged Terese at the outside door, remembering how she used to make house with the stolen Barbies and G.I. Joes and Star Wars action figures.

"You sure you can't stay for dinner?" she asked.

"I'm sure." Joe said and gave her shoulder a squeeze. "I feel I've missed a large part of everyone's life. Except Mom and Dad's."

Terese patted his cheek. "You have, baby brother, but that's okay. We love you still." She reached up and hugged his neck. "We should really do this, again."

From over her shoulder, Joe saw Boogie pluck Dewy in the forehead. Dewy screamed, and Boogie snatched his hand away.

"Damn it!" Terese said, releasing Joe. "Let me go..." She turned and placed Lil Man in the sled. "What the hell? Dewy why're you cryin...?"

Stella pushed the door closed, waving at Joe as if for the last time. Joe walked to Terese's driveway. He heard yelling and crying. He saw Gayle at the back window. She was looking at him. She smiled and lifted her eye patch. Grafted brown skin replaced an eyelid. Joe's hands shook. Gayle went away. In his car, he barely could light a cigarette. He exhaled and lowered the windows. The shaking in his hands subsided. He reversed the car and said, Good God!

When Joe entered his house, he could hear the moans of passion floating from upstairs. He went down to his basement and kicked off his shoes. There was a note on the sofa bed.

Dear Son,

I know I was a bit risqué with gambling. And I'm sorry for slamming the door on you the other day. Truly sorry. Your dad and I couldn't help but notice you haven't been speaking to us for some days now. He and I feel terrible that you're angry with us. But we also understand why you're angry. You're getting older. You've been working so hard and not having enough time for yourself. It happens, sweetie. Know that we will always be here, if you need us. Also your father said you scared off some deer and that maybe you were sore about that? He said for me to tell you, don't worry. They came back. Anyway, we love you.

Mom.

PS: Can I borrow a thousand dollars? It's a shame I have to ask and that no other mother would probably need to ask, but I know you're kind of in a mood, so I thought asking would be better than just assuming I could take it. After all, taking something from someone you love is a terrible thing.

Love you Oodles!

Joe crumpled the note. He grabbed the sides of his forehead and stroked them, closing his eyes, and he wished his parents would just leave. A momentary thought came: He should call Celeste. But say what? Let me live with you? Since his parents' arrival, he hadn't been over to see her. Hadn't even called in roughly a month. Why call now? He shrugged and tried throwing himself into his work. Work, that's what teaching was becoming. He rubbed his face and powered on his laptop. He stared at emails from some of the guys from Rosedale, checking if he was up for going to the strip club with them. He wasn't. He didn't bother checking OpenDoor.

School and teaching were beyond him now. He thought about Terese and Carol and how their lives were so different from when they were younger. If he'd been asked back then, he'd say Carol would have children and Terese would end up a vagabond. Carol was always being a mom to them in those days. The more Joe thought, the more he had to fight back his sadness. His grandmother took him away from his parents, but she also took him away from his first friends. And that was a difficult thing to get over.

....

It took two weeks to get in touch with Calvin. Terese and Carol had different numbers for him. But when Joe did reach him, he seemed genuinely excited to hear from him. They decided to meet at Ben's Nextdoor, which was one of Joe's favorite spots. Calvin told him that he would be coming from Germantown, but as the time went on, Joe wondered if he hadn't changed his mind.

Then he heard a familiar voice say: "Word up, lil bro?"

Joe was sipping a Kettle One and lime when he heard Calvin. As he looked over from where he sat in the middle of the long wooden bar, he saw a tall man dressed in a half mango and half white polka dot jumpsuit, orange Afro, red spongy nose, and faded white-faced makeup. Joe squinted at the clown, whose scraggly bearded cheeks grinned at him.

"Calvin?"

"Ha! Give me a hug!" Calvin's elongated green shoes slapped rhythmically on the floor. "What's good lil bro?"

His embrace was tight, which caused a honking sound to emanate from his chest, which caused him to release Joe. The people in the half-filled restaurant chuckled and raised their glasses to him and the clown.

“So you *are*... a clown?”

“An entertainer, Joe,” Calvin said, removing a yellow plastic horn from an inner pocket.

“I entertain people. Children. Children, who are people, you know.”

“Yes. Maybe we should grab a seat in the back.”

“Nonsense.” Calvin pulled off his wig, revealing a close-crop bright red Mohawk. His brown ears didn’t contrast well with the fading face paint. Joe wanted to leave. “You know, I’m really happy you called,” Calvin said, placing the wig and horn on the bar. “I’ve been meaning to send you a shout, but business has been picking up.”

“Didn’t you go to college, Calvin?”

“Clown School, Joe. Best decision I ever made.” He yanked one arm out of the jumpsuit, then the other. Padding, colored scarves, and large white rubber gloves fell around him. Calvin gathered these items and shoved them inside a neon green and gray backpack. He sat happily in khaki cargo pants, a dingy white T-shirt and a fresh pair of Jordan’s.

A female bartender came and asked what he was drinking?

“I’ll have what my brother is having. What are you having, by the way?”

“Kettle One and lime juice.”

“Yeah, barkeep, I’ll have that.”

The bartender glared at him, then at Joe. Joe gave her a pleading look, as if to say, *Lady, can’t you see my brother’s a clown?*

“So how goes teaching? You’re a teacher, right?”

“Yeah. How’d you know I wasn’t still at the Binary?”

“The girls told me. Said you might be calling soon.”

“Oh. I see. Well. Teaching is fine.”

“What subject do you teach?”

“Well, it’s a content and Web site development course.”

“Ugh,” Calvin said, “sounds boring.”

“It’s not.”

“I’m sure it’s not to you. But to me, well, all those beep-boop beep—”

“Huh? What?”

“Well the truth is I don’t know much about that kind of stuff. Other than *Weird Science*.

You remember that movie?”

Joe nodded. “Look, I want to ask you a favor.”

“Anything, Joe. You name it.”

“Can Mom and Dad live with you?”

“Oh, no can do, little bro. I mean, I can’t have Dad going through my stuff. And last time Ma stayed with me, she got all freaked out at one of my costumes. She said it gave her nightmares.”

Joe rubbed his face and slowly slid his hand down his chin. “So, I’m stuck with them?”

“Stuck with them? You mean, they live with you?”

“Yeah. Carol and Terese didn’t tell you? They been living with me for some months now.”

“No, they didn’t say that. Or if they did, I wasn’t listening. Well, *stuck* is a relative term, Joe. I mean, they are in their 60s, right?”

“Calvin, every night for the past several nights they’ve been fucking in my bed.”

“Ew! That’s an image I don’t want in my head. You’re gonna need new sheets if one of them dies.”

“Look, can’t you take Dad off my hands?”

“Ask Carol.”

“They don’t like her lifestyle.”

“Oh right, she’s a witch. Well, how about Terese? She could use the help.”

“Dad stole from one of her sons?”

“Ain’t that something else,” Calvin said as the bartender placed his drink in front of him and moved down the bar. “That little philly needs taming.”

“Calvin.”

“What?”

“I’m asking you to help me.”

Calvin gulped his drink, spilling a good deal of it down his chin and shirt. “Man, that’s awesome. You know it’s been like three weeks since I had a drink.”

“No, Calvin. I didn’t know that.”

“I’m not saying I’m an alcoholic. I’m only saying I don’t drink a lot.”

“Great. So are you going to help me?”

“Joe, if you needed cash— by the way, I’m buying— if you need it, I’d certainly loan you some money. I wouldn’t hesitate. If you were moving, as long it wasn’t on the weekend or a Monday or Thursday, because those’re poker nights, I’d help ya. Truly. But look, lil bro, taking Mom or Dad off you... I have to say Ixnay on the Arentspay. Plus, I think you owe them some of your time.”

“How the hell do you figure that?”

Calvin explained. “We are their little Fulanis, traveling and trading throughout the DMV. Everything they did, no matter how wrong was for the good of the tribe.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Let’s have another round.”

By the third round, Joe started to realize what Calvin was trying to say. Their parents were not criminals, in his mind; they were nomads, making their way through a hectic, unforgiving city. Being clever and cunning mattered more than anything, Calvin said. Uprightness and honesty were nice traits, but they didn’t pay any bills. And there were plenty of bills to pay: Bullis, grandma’s house in Potomac, those trips to the doctors, the uniforms, the summer clothes, the summer vacations, the Christmases, the toys... they had done a lot of good, Calvin said, for the tribe. For us. All they needed now was time.

But Joe countered. Calvin was forgetting. How many times did the police break down their door? How many times was Dad nearly arrested? How many times was Mom brought down for questioning?

Still, Calvin said, no charges were ever filed. “It’s like they knew magic,” he said, drifting off somewhere into a stupor. “I mean, they were, we are so fucking lucky nothing bad ever happened to them. Our tribe never got broken.” He swallowed down his watery drink. “Though,” he added, “you *did* abandon us.”

Joe shook his head. “How did I abandon you?”

Calvin didn’t answer. He stared into his glass.

“I didn’t abandon you,” Joe said. “I always called. I always came home. You were never around, Calvin.”

Calvin still stared in his glass.

Joe hugged him. “C’mon,” he said, “I’ll give you a lift home?”

“That’s a’ight,” Calvin said. He reached into his pocket and counted four twenties. “I can walk. I live like four or five blocks up. I’ll be fine.”

Joe patted his brother’s shoulder. “I never abandoned you.”

“Sure,” Calvin said, “maybe we just stopped talking.”

Joe left the bar, bumping through the crowd. Outside, U Street bustled with wannabe Bohemians. He thought he saw one of his students, but it was some other boy playing a harmonica. Joe hurried to his car. He listened to the boy’s playing and tried to think of the song he was playing wrongly. Nothing came to him. Joe wasn’t anyone’s parent. He didn’t shirk his responsibility. He was a son. He did the right thing. Living with his grandmother made him a better person. Why should he feel guilty for having an opportunity to be better? To hell with that, he thought, their parents were the ones who *abandoned* the tribe! Joe reached for the pack of Kools, but it was empty.

“Fuck,” he said, “why did I even bother?”

Joe found his mom asleep on the sofa later that evening. The television was on a video channel. It was muted. Empty containers of his coveted marijuana edibles and bags of corn chips covered the coffee table. Crumbs on her lips and on his old green and gray throwback Cunningham jersey shifted as she turned comfortably in the roomy leather upholstery. A bottle of beer and a can of diet soda stood like sentinels guarding base of the table. The lights were dim so the strange glow of dancing ethnic women and posturing black men angered Joe.

“Wake up, Ma! Where’s Dad?”

“Hm? What? Oh. Hey, sweetie. I must have dosed off.” As she rose, throwing one leg over then the next, the crumbs fell neatly in her lap. She rubbed her forehead and patted the cushions. “You got the remote?”

“No, ma. I don’t. What have you been doing all day?”

His mother turned her head as if lost or in search of something important. “How’s that?” she said.

“All day,” Joe said, “What have you been doing?”

“What I been doing? All day? Well, baby, I really, I really can’t say. Your dad and I was down here earlier. Watching TV. What’s in these oatmeal bars?” She picked up the container. “What *was* in them?”

“Marijuana, Ma.”

“No? Seriously?”

“How many did you eat?”

“How many come in a box?”

“Eight.”

“How many boxes do you have?”

Joe looked over into the kitchen. Both the recycling can and the trashcan were empty. “I had four boxes.”

“Then,” she muttered to herself. “I ate two.”

“Two boxes?”

“Hmm? Maybe three?”

“Jesus!”

“Oh and some woman came by. Her name was Celeste Something-or-Another. I wrote her stuff down somewhere.” She patted the cushions again. She picked up the containers and the empty bags and looked under them. “I know it’s here somewhere.”

“What? You know what’s somewhere?”

“The thing I wrote that Celeste woman’s name on. She made it seem real important.”

“Ma,” Joe said, “I know who Celeste is.”

“Is she your girlfriend? Your father thought she was cute.”

“Where is Dad?”

“Hmm? He left about... maybe an hour or so ago? I’m not sure. You know what time it is?”

“It’s a little late, Ma. But you need to sober up.” He went into his refrigerator. “Where’s the Almond milk?”

“That’s some nasty stuff, Joey. Your father threw it out.”

“Jesus.”

“Joey,” his mother said softly, “are you, are you still upset with us?”

He closed the fridge. He looked at his inebriated mother. “No, Ma. I’m not upset,” he said, thinking, *I’m just disappointed.*

“Are you sure? You haven’t spoke to me in ages.”

“Mom, that’s not true.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking a lot about your grandmother.” His mom stared vacantly at him. “She never liked me, you know. She thought I was trouble. Did I ever tell you what she said to me on my wedding day? She said I stole her son. She hugged me and told me I stole *her* son. And you know what she did?” His mother smiled then laughed. “She stole *you*.”

The front door opened: “Hey baby?” Joe heard his father’s excited voice. “Guess what?” He was carrying a large brown bag. He kneeled down and kissed the top of his wife’s head.

“Ooo, what?” his mom said. “Tell me, tell me.”

“I won seven hundred dollars.”

“Oh, wow, are you serious?” His mother said. “Oh, Joey, did you hear that?”

“Yeah, Ma,” Joe said, wiping his face. “Dad won some money.”

“Hey Joe, I got something for you.” His father reached into the bag, gripping the bottom tightly in his large brown hand. He held a silver Volcano. “Look inside that thing.”

Inside was an ounce of marijuana. “Dad,” Joe said.

“I know, right? A pretty good pre-birthday present, huh?”

“Why’d—”

“That girl of yours came by and I got to thinking. She looks like the kind of girl who smoked. Am I right? And I guess, I put two and two together. Figuring you were all pissed off with us because maybe we were cramping your weed-smoking ways, so you know, I just think, Hell, he’s grown. He can make decisions for himself. And with the money I won... Now don’t get mad. I went and got a couple of scratch-offs and lookie-lookie, pop’s won him some cookies.”

“I love cookies,” his mom said.

“And so,” Joe’s dad continued. “I got to callin around. Some of the fellas I used to be cool wit. And explained what your situation was and my man came through with that thing there. And then he threw in some weed as a favor to me.”

“Oh, Joey, isn’t that the nicest thing?”

They seemed to await his response. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Say,” his dad whispered, looking at his wife. “Those oatmeal bars were laced, weren’t they?”

But before Joe could say anything, his dad elbowed his ribs and laughed.

Joe knew what he was going to do next.

“Wow, Joe, this is a cool vaporizer,” Celeste said with a smirk. She placed a large bud inside and the plastic bag slowly filled with smoke. She put the black mouthpiece to her lips, inhaled, and held her breath. She tightened the cap so nothing escaped from the cloudy bag. She exhaled and passed to Joe. “And the smoke isn’t half bad. It’s kind of real good.”

Joe fastened his mouth around the piece. Tasting some of the residual wetness from Celeste, he inhaled. She was right. Though Joe preferred eating cannabis treats, the pot his father had scored from parts unknown was in fact the good stuff.

“Where’d your father get it from?”

“Don’t know,” Joe replied. He paused and smiled inwardly. His eyes roamed over Celeste’s narrow coppered-face. From large to small, silver hoops climbed her right earlobe. On her left one was an enormous hoop. Her hair, normally in microbraids, was styled in a wild Afro, not unlike the women in Terese’s drawings. He thought: What a cool chick.

They had met three years ago when she came to community meeting concerning where the new Prince George’s Hospital was to be built. There were three sites, Landover, Upper Marlboro, and Mitchellville. Celeste made a compelling argument that having a major hospital would be economically viable to Landover, the poorest of the three. Even though Joe didn’t live in the county any more, he wanted the hospital closer, in Upper Marlboro. They went back and forth. Some of the county officials became annoyed and asked them to leave. Celeste kept to her

guns, as the stood outside the Wayne Curry Sports and Learning Complex. He asked her if she drank. She did. She asked him if he smoked. He did. And they became chill buddies after that. Though he often wondered about her, Joe always kept their friendship above board. He liked her, but didn't want to step out there and be rejected.

"My connect hasn't been as good to me," Celeste said. Her smirk warmed Joe. "He's always tryin to get on and his smoke is pure reggie. But this—" she inhaled again—"is high-grade. Look at its color."

Celeste explained the perfection of good buds: the lime-green mixed with the orange webbing told its quality (this could be Vancouver haze); the honey smell with its hypnotic alluring scent (she compared it to a kind of Siren whose power pulls men and women together and apart); the stickiness when broken into a bowl (she pulled out her ceramic purple and white swirly bong); the slow steady burn -- *its essence a passion, its smoke a spirit from mother earth lifts you, guides you, takes you away, far, far away...*

"I love getting high." Celeste smiled. She pressed her lips into the circular opening of the bong as she flicked her Afro-fist lighter over the pieces of cannabis. Exhaling she pulled the small tubular T and the water bubbled. She said: "It's so liberating."

Joe turned from her and melted into the earth-toned futon. Celeste stood up. She was in a pair of long red and white basketball shorts and a baggy gray shirt with sleeves rolled up to her shoulders. She used to run point for Temple, and the Owl tattoo on her bicep was in a sexy flirty pose. Underneath it, 04/20: her graduation year and her jersey number.

"You know, my folks thought..." he caught himself before finishing that sentence. "I gotta get them outta my house," he said, rubbing the back of his head. "They're driving me freakin crazy."

Celeste lit the longest myrrh stick Joe had ever seen, then, she tapped her laptop. “Want you to hear this? My cousin sent me this audio file of her husband’s band. Shit’s real different.” She plopped down beside Joe, laying her head back. “Parents are what they are. Your folks aren’t that bad.”

Djembe drummers played and Joe’s mind found itself trapped in the echoed thumping of hands on djembes. Celeste relit the bong. With the West African drums and the uncharted smoke, Joe’s mind relaxed and drifted somewhere far. His eyes became heavier as the echoing thumps pounded his head. He stole a final look at Celeste. Her eyes were closed, the bong slid from her hand, her lighter rested in her baggy shorts. He said softly: “You’re a beautiful woman.” She didn’t respond. He closed his eyes.

It was the ringing in his ear and her heaviness that woke him. The living room was dark and for several minutes Joe wasn’t sure where he was. Celeste’s snoring slowly drowned out the ringing. Her head lay under his arm, her hand and arm on his chest and stomach. He tried focusing his eyes. The myrrh stick flickered red, faintly. There was a fuzzy yellowish light coming from Celeste’s bedroom. Joe had never been allowed in there, but he felt uncomfortable in his current position. He sat up. Celeste’s limp head and arm fell into his lap. The rest of her was already horizontal on the futon.

“Celeste,” he said, “I have to leave.”

She mumbled something but mostly groaned.

He could make out the silhouettes of the coffee table in front of him, the small kitchenette ten yards away and the dark opening of the kitchen with its horseshoe granite counter. The yellow light would be his guide.

He slid from under Celeste. He patted his pockets for his keys. Then he looked down at her darkened form. Surely she's slept on her futon before, he imagined. But it seemed rude to just leave her there. He hoisted her up in his arms, surprising himself at his strength. There was a soft thud of the lighter. He didn't bother to pick it up. He kicked the bong under the futon. He bumped his shin on the coffee table, nearly turned his ankle stepping on one of her Hi-Tops. But he managed her. Her arm slung over his shoulder, the other dangling, he felt like Dracula crossing the threshold.

He lowered her into her bed. He pulled the sheets up over her shoulder. He kissed her forehead. He looked at the yellow lava lamp, its bulbous dancing goo floating up and down, changing from a pale bright yellow to a fiery orange-red.

"Good night, Celeste," Joe said.

"Don't go, baby," she said. Her eyes still closed. "Please stay."

"I can't," he said. He tried to think of a reason. Other than her being inebriated and not wanted to take advantage of her, he had no other reason. "My mom and dad will worry," he lied. I...I just don't want them worried."

Celeste didn't respond.

Joe quietly maneuvered through the maze of clothes and shoes on the ground. "I'll call you tomorrow," he said.

"Don't leave," Celeste said, almost whimpering.

Joe figured she must be dreaming of someone, an ex or current lover. Hearing her whimpering, moaning plea, he wondered was *he* starting to feel something deeper, sinister, toward her. No, he thought. She's not like that.

“Joe,” Celeste called. Her head was off the pillow. “You can stay, you know? You really don’t have to leave.”

Joe smiled knowing she couldn’t possibly see him. “I’m all right,” he said. “Like I said, I just don’t want my parents all worried.”

“Okay,” she said, softly. “Lock the bottom lock.” Her head was down again. Joe stood in the doorway of her room listening to her sleep. She let out gentle whistles of breath and he wanted to capture them, roll them up, and put them in a joint and let them lull him away.

He left her room.

He killed the myrrh and contemplated taking the rest of the weed and vaporizer.

Why bother?

It was late. He didn’t want to chance being pulled over. There was a pack of Black&Mild on the table. He snatched one surreptitiously looking back at the yellow light. He locked the bottom lock of her condo and gently closed it behind him.

The night air immediately refreshed him.

He lit the cigar, exhaling under the condo’s floodlights. The drive from Mitchellville to La Plata became whimsical. He allowed the fall air to blow into his sedan. He listened to one of those satellite R&B stations. He imagined Celeste actually liking him. He had never dated a woman quite like her. She was stereotypically earthy but not too bourgeois. And cute. But not overly girly. Celeste was *real*, not an imagined species, but a genuine homegirl that he wouldn’t mind being seen with in public. Many thoughts and fantasies partied in Joe’s mind. The possibilities were there. He just had to figure out what to do with his parents.

...

By November, the joy of teaching started waning. It seemed that the ninth graders and even the eleventh graders couldn't turn in homework or finish class assignments, much less pay much attention to the Drupal lessons they needed to build and manage their Web sites. Some of the parents started complaining about the workload and the practicality of teaching their children content management. The principal, who normally supported Joe, started forwarding emails from parents, expressing their and her concerns. Joe had even begun talking to the school counselor. Mainly the discussions concerned about what to do with his classes, but soon their conversations drifted to what to do with his parents.

“My mom still keeps bugging me about loaning her a thousand dollars.”

“That seems odd,” the counselor said. “Why does she need so much money?”

Joe couldn't say because he didn't know and didn't want to know. “I just want them to leave. Is that so wrong?” The counselor didn't answer.

After that conversation, Joe felt awkward every time they passed each other in the halls.

...

The Tuesday before Thanksgiving Break, during a loud, disorganized morning, Joe opened the lower draw of his desk and ate one of his Cann(dy)bis Treats™. He used to only eat them during lunch but now he was in a what-the-hell-mood. He chewed slowly and deliberately one of the moist bite-sized OatmealRaisin Munchies™, refusing to share when some of the students asked for a piece. The purple and orange package promised to “mellow out any stressful situation.” And sure enough, within three minutes, Joe hadn't a care in the world.

“Look guys,” he said, “why not just chill out for a bit, okay? I wanna show you something.” He powered on the classroom plasma, loosening his blue cotton tie that felt restraining, choking. He logged into the remote desktop system. “Here're some of the things you

can do with Drupal,” he said, opening his shell page. “You can add all kinds of content and whatnot. Who wants to see a video?”

No one responded.

“That’s all right,” Joe said. “I’ll just open this folder and drag this in...”

The students were quiet, not because he was showing them how to move files from folders to this content page, but because he seemed altogether undone. He wasn’t raking his hands over his face or muttering to himself or folding his arms, staring at nothing. He was sweating profusely, immersing himself in this page, rapidly filling these disjointed boxes with images and words. A graffiti of things.

“This is what you guys can do,” Joe said, panting. “And then once you load the page, you’ll need to name it and have a domain name and stuff. You know, once it’s done, your folks might be just surprised at how creative you are. I know my folks are. That’s me and my family.” He moved the mouse, circling the image of his mother, dad, sisters and brother.

“It was taken over at my grandmother’s house. Long ago.” Joe felt the room shifting. He wasn’t sure if he was moving back in time or speeding through it. “She had the nicest back yard. All those trees...” His eyes couldn’t focus on the image. Only the memory stood in his mind, but even it started to tilt.

Some voice asked if he were okay.

“No. I’m fine,” Joe said. He locked his desk. “It’s just the room is spinning.” He opened his eyes. He looked at the blue-tinted plasma. He could make out the photo of his younger self hugging, holding onto his father’s neck. His grandmother was off, blurred, in the distance, and his mom was laughing with Carol in pigtails and Calvin, bushy haired, running away, giddy, and Terese stood nearby, hands on her hips. Joe wondered who took this photo. His hands started

shaking. He couldn't keep his eyes open anymore. The room was a vortex and somehow he was in the middle of it. His stomach turned and bubbled. He vomited down his tie and shirt.

Twenty-two hours. That's how long he'd been waiting for someone to come and get him.

Twenty-two hours after being rushed to the Washington Hospital Center, after having an EKG, a CT scan, and an MRI, which had sounds that resembled the beginnings of "Benny and the Jets," and after being moved from one semi-quiet dark room in the emergency department to the middle of the loud, bright emergency department area with the promise that he would be sent to a spacious private room, Joe had had enough. He knew one of his colleagues had called his house, had spoken to either his mom or his dad. Why hadn't they come?

He reached into his slacks for his cell. He dialed his house.

No answer.

A nurse came with his medicine, saying that it would help him with his dizziness and nausea. He sipped the water and swallowed his pill. He called Carol, next. He explained how he had gotten sick and dizzy at school, how he was taken to the hospital covered in his own vomit, and how he now lay there in an itchy oversized scrub shirt waiting for someone to come for him. No, he didn't have a stroke, he said. No. It wasn't a heart attack. He was suffering from Positional Vertigo. At least that's what one of the ED doctors said to him. He needed a ride home. That's why he was calling.

"Oh my, Joe," Carol said. "I'm so sorry to hear this. I have to rethink my healing spell."

"Carol, that doesn't make sense. Can you at least call my house? Or mom or dad's cell?"

Carol was silent. "I know you're scared, so I am not going to get upset. But my spells work, Joe. I will try something. I'll give Terese a call. Have you thought about catching a cab?"

“From here to La Plata? Are you serious? You know how much that’ll cost?”

“Well, you could catch it to here, and I could work on you.”

“Jesus, Carol, I need a ride, not a fucking spell!”

There was silence on the other end.

“Carol,” Joe said softly. “Please. I just want to go home.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

He hung up, then called Terese.

“Shit, baby brother,” she said. “That sounds horrible. Carol said you sounded pissed.”

“I am, but not at her.”

“I can see if I can get a ride a little later tonight. But with Lil Man and the girls and the boys, I dunno. Have you tried Calvin?”

It was a Wednesday evening, so Calvin should be available, she said.

But much to Joe’s surprised he wasn’t. “Wow, lil bro, sounds like you’ve had quite a night. But, man, I’m out of town. And I don’t think I can get back before tomorrow. I’ll leave right now, but I can’t promise anything.”

“Where’re you coming from?”

Calvin’s phone went in and out.

Joe heard him say something about Youngstown. So he figured Calvin was in Ohio, over some woman’s house. Joe kept saying hello, but soon the line died.

Reluctantly, Joe called Celeste.

He hated to have to ask her. He hadn’t really spoken to her since that night he left. He felt especially awkward knowing the Thanksgiving was soon. She probably was with her folks. Her

phone rang and rang before her voicemail answered. He left a message. Then he texted her. Joe waited, but she didn't reply.

His battery life was fading. He could hardly bear keeping his eyes opened. Every now and again a man to his left would vomit into a throw-up bag. He kept calling for the Lord to help him. An older Hispanic man tossed and periodically cried, Cristo. He reeked of tobacco, and the smell turned Joe's stomach. There was a red-haired woman strapped to her bed across from Joe. Her body thrashed about and she called everyone Assholes, Bitches, Fuckers, and Devil Eaters. That last bit Joe wasn't sure of. He waved a male nurse over.

"Can I get some water, and use the phone?"

The nurse assisted Joe out of the stretcher and pointed to where the phone was. It was in the middle of a sea of nurses, doctors, and angry pathetic patients. He bumped passed them, pardoning himself. They shot annoyed looks at him but said nothing. So many of the patients lining the hallways were old, aching and writhing men and women. Joe would close and open his eyes to refocus. He kept looking to see if one of those men or one of those women was his parent. He braced himself with one hand on the table where the phone was. He dialed nine then his house number. He waited, but no one answered.

He tried again.

He tried his mother's cell.

Then his father's.

No answers.

Now would not be the time for them to die, he thought, or leave.

The nurse handed Joe some water. "Any luck?" he asked.

"I'll have to try later."

Three more hours passed. Joe's cell needed charging. No one had an iPhone charger. He couldn't remember Celeste's number without his phone. He thought about calling one of his colleagues from Rosedale, but all of their numbers were in his dead phone as well. Besides, they had families to tend to. He staggered over to the phone again. An olive-skinned doctor gave him an up-down look. Joe was about to explain his circumstance, but the doctor walked off. Joe called his house again.

No answer.

He called his mother's cell.

Then his father's.

No answer.

Then, for some reason he called his grandmother. Her phone was disconnected.

Joe went back to his stretcher in the hall.

The red-haired woman was sitting up, unstrapped, and eating a turkey dinner. She looked over at Joe. "What you staring at?"

"I'm sorry," Joe said. "I didn't mean to stare."

"Aw, it's all right. What're you in for?"

Joe rubbed his head and face. "Vertigo."

"Ha! I got you beat. I'm in for stabbing a guy who broke my foot." She raised her swollen red foot. "They think I'm liable to strike again."

Joe chuckled. "You don't happen to have an iPhone charger on you, do you?" he asked.

The woman laughed. "No. I'm not that fancy."

Nurses moved from patient to patient, but there seemed to be an overwhelming number of voices and cries of pain. Joe closed his eyes and hoped that Calvin would come sooner. But

the noise was as dizzying as his vertigo. He opened one eye and the red-haired woman was now staring at him. She smiled and waved a beaten cellphone at Joe.

“You can make a call to anywhere,” she said. “Toronto, Ghana, New Zealand, anywhere.”

“I wish I could call my grandmother.”

“Where is she?”

“Gone. Maybe heaven, if there’s such a place.”

“What would you want to say to her, if you could reach her?”

“I don’t know. Why is my family such idiots, for starters?”

“Ha! Families. It’s always families,” the woman said. “Families are what they are. They mean to do right, but sometimes they just can’t. You just have to deal with that. No two ways about it. I love that man who broke my foot. And he loves me. We just ain’t good for each other. We can’t get it right.”

Joe listened and gave what she said some thought. He was about to say something when he heard Terese’s raspy voice. “You okay?” she asked, hugging his head. “You smell like vomit.”

“Thanks,” Joe said, glancing at the red-haired woman. “I thought you had work.” He tried looking up at Terese, but he felt a dizziness coming, so he closed his eyes again.

“I did,” she said. “But I felt bad about you being here. And it being close to Thanksgiving and your birthday. Calvin’s ass was no help either. He kept tryin to guilt me. And believe it or not, so did Carol.” Terese looked down at Joe. He thought she had such sympathy and warmth. “Well,” she continued, “Carol really felt bad for not being able to be here. You won’t believe this, but Mom and Dad are watching the kids.”

“What?”

“Yeah, they got spooked when someone called asking who they were. They didn’t know what to do, so they just drove around.”

“I called their cells.”

“Yeah, but once they’re spooked they go into immediate DEFCON 80.”

Figures, he thought.

“Good thing, though. Dad let me drive his truck to come scoop you. I brought you some fresh clothes, too.”

Joe thanked her, then he shuffled uneasily to the bathroom. He changed and washed his face. He needed a shave and a smoke, and he couldn’t wait to get home to his own bed. He shuffled out, nearly walking right into Celeste.

“My God, Joe,” Celeste said, hugging him. “I got your text so late. I tried hitting you back...” She kissed his cheek and pulled away, as if to look him over. “I was playing ball,” she explained. “I’m so, so sorry I...” She smelled like myrrh and weed.

“It’s okay,” Joe said. “My sister, Terese, came.”

He introduced them. They shook hands. Terese asked if she could draw Celeste’s face, explaining how her eyes and nose and mouth would be perfect for tattoos. Celeste laughed and agreed to one day sit and be drawn. They rubbed Joe’s back.

“Well look, baby brother,” Terese said. “I’mma hit Carol and Calvin and let them know you’re safe. And, since I’ve got Dad’s truck, I think I’mma head to work after all. You’d be surprised how many people get tattoos around the holidays.” She kissed his cheek, just above where Celeste had kissed him. “You got ‘im Celeste?”

Celeste smiled. “Yeah, I got him.”

“Oh, and Happy Birthday, Joe.”

Terese hugged and kissed him again. He thanked her, allowing whatever tears to come. He staggered over to the red-haired woman. She seemed to be calm. From what he was able to see, only scraps of her turkey dinner remained in the black dinner tray.

“Thanks for what you said,” Joe said, squinting at her through slight dizziness.

The woman looked up at him: “Who the fuck are you?”

Joe asked Celeste if she had a cigarette. She did not. He asked her would she roll her windows down. He wanted to feel and smell the night air. You know it is cold out, she said. But she allowed them a quarter-way down. Joe thanked her then told her, despite his best judgment, that she was a beautiful woman.

“Well why haven’t you called me?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Joe said finally able to focus. She was growing her hair out into locks. “I just needed to do something with my parents.”

“So what are you going to do with them?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I guess right now I just want to see them and tell them I’m okay.”

He felt Celeste’s hand on his. He closed his eyes. He listened to sounds of the holiday city. Traffic horns and sirens. Young boys calling at young girls. He smelled the night —fetid and smoky with a scent of cinnamon. He thought about his car, figuring it would be fine in the school’s back parking lot. He took slow deep breaths, occasionally opening an eye, seeing the yellow illumination of the streets and the darkening stretches of the highway. Celeste lit some fine cannabis. Happy Holidays and Birthday, she said, before awkwardly sticking the blunt

between his lips. He took a long drag, exhaling slowly. He heard the windows go up. He heard her turn to a satellite Slow Jams station. It didn't feel like Thanksgiving to him. It felt like Wednesday.

"I have a favor," Joe said.

"Sure," Celeste replied. "What's up?"

"Help me move my parents shit down to the basement."

"Are you serious?"

"I can't do it alone," Joe said.

For the next hour and half, at his house, Celeste helped Joe, still woozy from vertigo, pack up his parents' clothes, sheets and towels (when did they get new sheets and towels?). Everything was shoved into back into those suitcases. He dropped them over the banister to the first floor, and Celeste dropped them down to the basement. Even high Joe felt a sense of victory.

This is love, grandma. His mind could see her placing her warm hands on his cheeks. She was proud of him, he was sure. He was doing the right thing, he wasn't abandoning them, he was relocating them.

He lay in his bed on his side, smoking down a roach, passing to Celeste in his dimly lit bedroom. His Spotify playlist was on. He suddenly wished she'd brought that lava lamp. She laughed. He told her he wondered if the school would want the test results, to see if he was fit to teach.

"What difference would that make?" Celeste said. "Vertigo is pretty common, ain't it?"

"Yeah, but there were traces of weed in my urine," Joe countered. "And I guess tonight there's gonna be a whole lot more." He laughed. Dizziness aside he laughed happily.

"Hey look," Celeste rose, "I gotta head up to Philly in the morning."

“Now look who’s leaving.”

“We need to catch up after the holidays.” Celeste kissed Joe’s forehead. Had he not nearly fallen into his pillow, he would have pulled her to his lips. “I’m glad you called me. Sorry, I’m miss your birthday.”

“Yeah,” Joe said. “It’s okay. I don’t think I will be much good company anyway.”

She kissed his forehead, his nose, and gently his mouth. “I’ll call you,” she said. “I swear.”

“Can you lock the bottom lock?”

“Sure, baby.”

He watched her leave. He heard the soft thuds of her feet. Then he heard the chirp of the door alarm. Then the door closing shut. She left him the roach to finish. As the cannabis took hold, Joe gradually faded, melted, into the spaces where sleep and unconsciousness meet, between the smoke-filled room, between the soft ring-whistle in his ear and the song “Strawberry Letter 23,” his grandmother’s favorite tune, between him saying the right thing to Celeste for the wrong reasons, between the meaning of family and the idea. Soon, his mind would spin out. Soon, he would vomit again. But he was home.

Alone.

In his house.

Finally alone.

Square

“All I know is I had two lives in my hands: mine and my little brother’s.” Mr. Fitzgerald was crouching in front of our class as if ready to pounce. Then the bell rang. “Well,” he said, rising, “we’ll have to pick this up on Monday.”

I sighed and so did others. “Mr. Fitzgerald,” I said, “there’s no school on Monday.”

“That’s right,” he said. “I hope to see all of your folks then.”

Some of us grunted. We loved Mr. Fitzgerald’s Probability class. But most of us struggled on his quizzes and tests. I knew I wasn’t his best student so I often feared what he would tell my parents during their conferences. Mostly he reiterated that I needed to apply myself more. I never had trouble remembering his stories; it was those probability tables and charts and formulas that gave me fits.

“Don’t forget,” he added, stepping into the hallway, “read ‘The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.’ We’re going to have questions about life and death.”

“Will you finish your story?” someone asked.

Mr. Fitzgerald looked up and down the hall. He scratched his bearded face. “I may,” he said, “but we’ll have a lot to cover on Wednesday.”

“Mr. Fitzgerald,” my bubbly Kelvin said, “I think we’re going to have your class on Tuesday.” He pulled out the schedule and Mr. Fitzgerald examined it.

“Hm, I guess you’re right, Kelvin. Make sure everyone knows, Osei. Okay?”

I told him I would.

We were on our way to our last class. On A days, ninth period was Orchestra. On B days, it was a free period, which I usually reserved for solo drum lessons with Mr. Opiotennione. Kelvin had the same schedule. Except on B days, he got tutored in algebra and Spanish. Kelvin

was my homie from way back. Even our dads were old college friends. Both were journalism majors and wrote for their school paper. After graduating, my dad had worked at a lot of smaller papers before landing at The Post. Kelvin's dad had the same luck, except he got into online news sooner than my dad. By the time my dad had figured out newspapers were dying, he had to take a buyout. My mom divorced him shortly thereafter. But luckily, she didn't want to split us up. Kelvin's dad had moved to DC right when the divorce started. Kelvin had already gone through it with his parents, so he was kind of a big help to me. Neither of us had siblings, so he and I became brothers from middle school to high school.

"You think Mr. Fitzgerald was making that stuff up?" he asked.

I shrugged and said: "I dunno. Sounds possible."

We got to Mr. O's room, but he wasn't there and the room was locked. We tried to see inside. No one was in there.

"What'd'ya want to do?" I asked Kelvin.

He looked over his shoulder, then down the hall. "We can leave," he suggested. "No one will be looking for us."

I was a bit hesitant to leave school so early. A while back, one of the teachers had caught a couple of students hanging out in Adams Morgan. Our principal had an assembly afterwards, stressing the school's policy on truancy and absenteeism, and ended with a warning: If any of us were ever caught again, she would expel us. She even sent a letter to all of our parents.

"But those dudes were caught in the middle of the day," Kelvin said. "Man, it's almost time to go anyway."

Leaving 90 minutes early wasn't really "almost time to go," but I really didn't feel like arguing. So I ditched.

We went down the back stairs, which were used for fire drills and for when ninth graders went to lunch. Going straight down led to the cafeteria. A lot of the cooks spoke Spanish, or, as Mr. O told us, some Caribbean version of it. They eyed us as we left through the delivery dock. The ones smoking stumped out their cigs as if we caught them doing wrong. Or maybe they did it because they had finished. Either way, we all wore guilty looks over our faces.

We cut through the back parking lot, and the woods of Rock Creek Park gave us decent cover if someone happened to be looking out the window. I followed Kelvin. He maneuvered through the trail and trees as if guiding me through a jungle. We came out on Connecticut Ave. We saw a tour of high school students near the Zoo. Kelvin gave a couple of white girls the what's up head raise. They giggled and pointed.

Kelvin was pretty good with the ladies. Even some of the senior-class girls at Rosedale talked about his eyes or his smile. For an eleventh grader, Kelvin had a mannish face. His goatee was thin but still more substantial than anything I had. And his eyes with those arched eyebrows gave off a fierce expression. If you didn't know him, you might have gotten the impression that Kelvin was a bully, and I was his flunky.

"Better not let Tammy see you, boy," I said.

"Man, I got Tammy on lock. She knows what time it is."

Tammy was captain of the cheerleaders. She was a senior and was dating Kelvin. No one teased her because they had been dating since we were in the ninth grade. Besides, Tammy got skipped up a grade. And besides that, Tammy was from Southeast. She was known for having hands. Once, at one of our rival school games, when Tammy had just joined the squad, she and some other cheerleader got into it. Tammy managed to bust the girl's nose and stomp her out. From then on, she was known as Lil T from Third World.

Kelvin and I walked farther down to where the subway was. There was a group of boys hanging around. I had seen some of them before. Most of them were cool and didn't bother me. The others would say sly stuff about my school uniform. It didn't bother me, though. It wasn't like I hadn't heard worse. Green, yellow, and white were not the best combination of colors. Especially for brown-skinned people.

We were about to get on the escalator when someone motioned to Kelvin. It was an older dude who I'd never seen before. I don't know why, but Kelvin walked over to him. I followed.

"Yo," he said, "run them Jordans, nigga."

My heart started pounding. I turned to Kelvin. He always wore the latest Jordans. My shoes were nice and clean but not worth \$200. The dude's creased face seemed dirty and oily. His eyes wore heavy bags and darted from Kelvin to me. I could see the handle of a gun sticking out his waistband. My immediate thought was of Mr. Fitzgerald. In his story, he and his little brother were walking behind a neighbor's house. They hadn't seen the Beware of Dog sign and was suddenly fleeing for their lives once the Doberman hopped over the fence. Cornered, Mr. Fitzgerald and his brother had to make a decision. One had to go one way, the other the other way. Faced with a choice, he had said, an animal can only go with instincts. It would chase who it believed was the weakest. I would have to wait until Tuesday to find out what he and his brother did. But right at that moment, I thought Kelvin and I should run. Kelvin, though, was already untying his shoes.

"What you waitin fo' nigga, you run yours, too."

My hands were shaking. Still for some reason, I don't know why, I shook my head. Maybe it was all those probability charts, maybe it was the fact that there were so many people around. I said no.

The dude's eye squinted. "Fuck you say," he said, stepping closer.

"You're gonna have to kill me," I said. My throat was dry, and I had to pee, but I didn't move.

The man must've seen someone over my shoulder. He nodded angrily and quickly walked away. Over his shoulder he yelled, "I'ma catch y'all, again. You can count on it." Then he darted between cars and was gone like summer.

When Kelvin stood up, I could see he had wet himself. I looked down at my pants. I was dry. Kelvin wrapped his sweater around his waist like an apron. Those dark green slacks couldn't hide the smell of piss. We rode in silence, standing on the red line, holding onto the metal rails as the train carried us away.

"Don't tell nobody," Kelvin said when we got to our block.

I nodded.

"Not even your dad, okay? He'll tell my dad, and—"

"I won't," I said. I was about to swear some blood oath when I saw Kelvin's face. He was crying. I had never seen him cry. I thought about putting my arm around him like my dad did sometimes with me when I was upset about my mom. But there were neighborhood boys coming up the street, and Kelvin wiped his face dry.

They spoke and we spoke briefly.

Kelvin went to his row house, and I went in mine.

My dad and I had this deal. It started when I was in third grade and has lasted. I guess I should say the deal was with both my parents. But since I stayed mainly with my dad and occasionally on the weekends with my mom, I felt the deal was strictly between us men. Basically the deal

was when my dad (or my mom) asked me about school I would tell them the truth. Good or bad. As long as I didn't lie or mislead them. Although I made the promise, I broke it a lot when I was in middle school. My dad always found out when I lied. Even when I deleted voice messages from teachers, my dad would still find out that I didn't do something I was supposed to or that I did something I wasn't supposed to do. It took me several whippings to realize my dad checked our home phone messages remotely.

So when I opened the door and saw him sitting at the table with his portfolio case opened, I knew I was in deep shit. My dad frowned and lowered his glasses as if to see me better. Then he did his normal routine of folding his arms and slouching back. He pursed his lips and pushed his glasses back up with his middle finger.

"Need I ask," he said.

I tossed my book bag on the sofa and took my place across from him. I had to meet his eyes. That, too, was part of the deal. My mom had this thing she used to say to me, Look me in the eyes and try to lie. My dad picked it up and continued running with it even when I wasn't lying. The strange thing about being 16 was that lying seemed like telling the truth. I never wanted to hurt anyone's feelings, so embellishing felt right to me. After all, there were plenty of times when my mom asked if I still loved her. I always said yes.

"Kelvin and I went to Mr. O's band room, but he wasn't there."

"And?"

"So we, uh, well..." For some reason, I started scratching my forehead. I checked my fingers to see if something was in my nails, but there wasn't anything, except sweat and dirt. Then I scratched the back of my head and rubbed the back of my neck. "We left school. Early."

My dad snatched off his glasses and dropped them on the table. His eyes were closed and his hand was pinching the bridge of his nose. “What the hell,” he said, opening his eyes. “Are you outta your mind? Suppose you got caught? Huh? What would you’ve said huh? You know the principal would expel your ass. Why would you two do that?”

I felt my shoulders go up, which was a no-no.

Now my dad was standing. “You better answer me,” he demanded.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I didn’t think.”

“No shit.” He suddenly plopped down beside me. “Son, you know that’s not a wise thing to do, don’t you?” My dad shook his head. I could tell he was thinking about what to say next. Usually the truth got me a lecture. Rarely anything worse. But my dad just kept shaking his head. He looked at me and turned away. “You know how important education is? I don’t get it.”

He threw up his hands and went into the kitchen.

“You’re not gonna call Mr. Ramsey, are you?”

“And if I am?” He stuck his head out from the corner of the kitchen.

“Please don’t,” I said. “Something else happened. And I promised Kelvin I wouldn’t say anything.”

He stepped around. My dad had this way of frowning without frowning. It was as if his eyes narrowed and became serious. It was the kind of thing I imagined a hit man would do.

I told my dad the rest of the story.

He sat down. He was silent.

I couldn’t tell if he was proud of me or angry at me. His eyes shifted from me to his portfolio. There were brochures and colorful press releases he had designed for various companies, mostly mid-size hospitals in the area. Since taking the buyout, my dad worked really

hard for these businesses, probably harder than he'd ever worked at a newspaper. The money was so-so, but our house was well kept and we went out for dinner every now and then.

Whenever we hung out, I saw glimpses of pain in him. It wasn't buried, but it wasn't surface level either. He would talk to me about when I was baby, how my mom would tickle me and how I would laugh myself to sleep. One of the things he shared with me was an article he had written about these children suffering with sickle cell anemia. Whenever they were sick, they were in a crisis. Their blood cells were sickle-shaped and flowed throughout the bodies, they experienced an unspeakable pain as early as 6 months and as long as they lived, which was usually over by 30 or 35. He told me how thankful he was that I wasn't born with that. And he said he felt so guilty for feeling so thankful. He even admitted this to my mom and they both cried and watched me sleep. At least now, being a free-lance PR person, he was away from those stories. He never had to worry about me falling ill or suffering in a way that he couldn't solve.

Except now.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "My God, I can't believe you did that." His eyes narrowed. "You could've been killed. Over what? Sneakers?"

"Dad, it's the laws of probability."

"That's what's maddening about this. You don't even recognize how close to death you were." My dad looked at me with an angry sadness.

"The thing is," I said, "it was kind of like what Mr. Fitzgerald was saying."

"Mr. Fitzgerald, huh?"

"Yeah, Mr.—"

“Well, Mr. Fitzgerald is not your father, Osei. And I don’t think he meant for you to do something like that.” He sighed and looked away from me. “Don’t you understand probabilities aren’t something you live by. They’re something you figure out.”

“But that’s what I did.”

“No,” my dad said, rubbing his chin. “You took a chance.”

Later that evening, I was in my room reading “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.” I heard my dad talking to my mom. He was telling her everything, even that he’d promised not to phone Kelvin’s dad. He mumbled something, then said okay, okay. He ended the call and knocked at my door.

“Look, buddy, I don’t want you to think I would betray your trust,” he said. He sat on my bed across from me. “But Oscar needs to know what happened.”

“Dad—”

“Son, your mom gave me this idea: maybe we can convince Kelvin to tell his dad what happened. I mean, when you think of it, a crime occurred. We should really be calling the police.”

“But—”

“I know Kelvin feels a little embarrassed. But if that guy’s hanging around the metro what’s to say he won’t come after Kelvin or you or someone else? Desperate people will do crazy shit, son.”

“Dad,” I said softly. “I gave Kelvin my word.”

“And you broke it. But that was a good thing. You just can’t keep something like that a secret.”

“But dad, I gave you my word, too. And I haven’t broken it. You taught me my word is supposed to mean something.”

“It does,” he said. “And I respect your honesty. That does matter, son. But you gotta keep in mind that if this asshole is robbing other people, we have a responsibility to the public. We just can’t say nothing.” My dad stood up. His hands were in his pockets. He jangled his keys and stared at the poster of Black Moon’s *Enta Da Stage* album cover. “Look,” he said to the poster. “I’m going to invite Kelvin over for pizza. I’m pretty sure Oscar is working, so he won’t mind. When Kelvin comes over, I’ll talk to him. I’ll make up something. Tell him something about integrity and being responsible.” He looked at me quickly and walked out.

I felt like I should have taken an ass-whipping. I didn’t feel like reading the rest of the Hemingway story. Besides, I didn’t see the point. Some dude named Wilson killed a lion that Macomber couldn’t kill. Hell, I would’ve been scared, too.

The pizza arrived, but Kelvin didn’t. Instead, Mr. Ramsey came. He had that concerned-parent-look on his face. You know the one where a father has something awful to admit. His eyes darted from me to my dad. His dark tie was loose and the sleeves of his white shirt were pushed up to his brown elbows.

“Hey, can I talk to you, Zackary,” he said to my dad, “in private?”

My dad handed me the extra-large pizza and wings. I watched him and Mr. Ramsey go into the den. Mr. Ramsey closed the door behind him.

I started to call Kelvin to find out if he had told his dad. But I heard my dad’s voice grow louder. Then Mr. Ramsey was loud, too. I took a slice of chicken and green pepper pizza. I figured Mr. Ramsey objected to the idea of Kelvin going to the police. I mean, I wouldn’t want

my son to go through that. My dad kept saying, Oscar, that's not right. That's not right. And Mr. Ramsey was saying, But Zackary, why would Kelvin say that? His voice was suddenly inaudible. I took my phone out my bag and texted Kelvin.

Yo man, did you tell your dad?

He didn't respond at first. It took like ten minutes before he sent something. And when he finally hit me back, he simply wrote: *talking 2 tammy, now. will hit you later.*

Mr. Ramsey flung open the door.

"Okay, Zackary, let *me* ask him."

"Oscar, I told you what he said."

"I want to hear it myself."

Shit, I thought. It must've been something else bugging Mr. Ramsey. Now my dad had screwed me.

"All right," my dad said, throwing his hands up. "Tell 'im what you told me."

I told Mr. Ramsey. Everything. Even the part where Kelvin said for me not to say anything.

Mr. Ramsey just shook his head. "Look, that's not what Kelvin told me," he said. Mr. Ramsey put his hand on my shoulder and bent down to meet my eyes. "It's all right, kiddo. Your dad understands. Tell him Zackary."

"My son's telling the truth, Oscar."

"Zackary." Mr. Ramsey straightened. "You know I've taught Kelvin how to box. I mean, I'm not saying your son is soft. Let's get that straight. I'm not saying that. All I'm saying is what's more likely? My son standing up for himself? Or your son panicking?" Mr. Ramsey

glanced over at me. He gave me a half-smile. “Hell,” he continued, “for all we know they both could’ve stood up for themselves.”

My dad was rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Oscar, that’s not the point.”

“Well, it’s my point.”

I felt like raising my hand, so I did.

“Do you think I give a shit which one of them did what, Oscar?” My dad’s hands were on his waist; he was eyeing Kelvin’s father as if he were about to whip him. “We should go to the police and fill out a report. Put your hand down, son.”

“Jesus, Zackary, what you think? The guy is still hanging around? You worked the crime and cops beat before. You know how this goes. That guy’s long gone. Probably moved on to Wisconsin Avenue or elsewhere.”

“And?”

Mr. Ramsey shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, this should be a lesson.” He turned to me and wagged his finger at me. “You and Kelvin are lucky nothing serious happened.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Something serious *did* happen.”

“Did Kelvin say I panicked?” I asked.

“You don’t have to yell, Zach. I’m right here. And,” he looked at me, “it happens. It happened to me before. Sometimes you freeze.”

I could tell my dad wanted to punch Mr. Ramsey. He exhaled slowly and sat across from me.

“You need to think this through, Zachary,” Mr. Ramsey said sitting down between us. “Say you go to the police, fill out the report, and it gets back to the school. Remember that letter the principal sent? Remember? Our boys will be expelled. Is that what you want?”

“We don’t have to give them the exact time,” my dad said.

“Oh, now we’re going to embellish the facts. Well, you know how *that* goes, too. You’d be better off calling in an anonymous tip.”

“The truth matters, Oscar. You used to believe that.”

“Oh, please.” Mr. Ramsey peeled off the green peppers and took a slice. “Your father ever tell you the time he and I got robbed?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think so. But I didn’t—”

“Ha!” He held up his hand to halt me. “Figures he wouldn’t. Listen, Osei, your dad and I went to this off-campus party in the worst neighborhood you can imagine. Your dad had just gotten this watch. What kind of watch was it, Zach?”

My dad shrugged. “I dunno, Oscar. It happened so long ago. I know my granddad gave it to me.”

“Yeah. It had sentimental value.” Mr. Ramsey took a hard swallow and began beating his chest. He burped and took another slice. “I had this thick gold rope chain. You know the kind, a real Eric B and Rakim-type shit. Anyway, we get to this house party. Had a ball. I mean there were cuties everywhere.

“We had met a couple of Jamaican honeys, too. You should have seen your dad,” Mr. Ramsey laughed. “He was totally into this short, big-titted Jamaican broad.”

I looked over at my dad. He had never told me this story before. He was smiling, too.

“She *was* cute,” he agreed, folding his arms.

“Yeah, too, cute,” Mr. Ramsey said. “Apparently, she and her girlfriend had older brothers who weren’t the college type, if you know what I mean.” Mr. Ramsey took two big bites

of his slice. He chewed slowly as if it were the best pizza slice he'd ever had. "I tell you, a cold beer would go nice with this."

"We only got water," my dad lied. "And it's room temperature."

Mr. Ramsey picked his teeth with his fingernail and sucked and chewed what was caught. "Water's fine. So we're leaving, right? I had a couple of numbers, and your dad had a couple, too, I think. Then all of a sudden these dreadlock Rasta fucks came outta nowhere and went like, 'Han' ova yur shid, mon.' We couldn't run because we were in this living room and they were blocking the door. So, what did we do? We gave up our shit, man. No fuss, no fight."

"Did they have guns?" I asked.

"No," Mr. Ramsey said. "They had our hearts."

My dad gave him a bottled-water, and Mr. Ramsey laughed about the incident. My dad explained that they went to campus police that night to report what had happen. The police couldn't do anything since it was an off-campus event. So, my dad then went to the city police and filled out a report. He even wrote about it in the campus newspaper. No arrests were made because the girls lied, and no one at the party confirmed the Rastas ever being there. My dad never got his watch back. My great granddad told him he was lucky.

"And that's my point," Mr. Ramsey said. "You two were lucky. Shit happens every day and sometimes folks don't end up lucky. Your dad and I were lucky. But after that, I took up martial arts and boxing." He stopped and looked over at my dad. "Your dad bought a gun."

My dad didn't look at me. "He knows I have a gun, Oscar. I'm registered to carry it, too."

"Well, like I said, there's nothing to be ashamed of. Tell you what," he said to me, "I'll show you some basic hand-to-hand, stuff."

"Oscar, that won't be necessary."

“Well, the boy needs to know how to defend himself.”

“But Mr. Ramsey, I didn’t panic. I was scared, but I—”

Mr. Ramsey held his hand up again. “It’s okay. Whatever. You didn’t freak out. Fine. My point is neither did Kelvin.”

I looked for help from my dad but he was shaking his head. I excused myself and took two slices to my room. I didn’t want any wings anymore.

Mr. Ramsey stayed a little longer. He and my dad talked but I didn’t care. I couldn’t believe Kelvin would lie.

I sent him a text: *Dat’s some bitch shit u did Kelv. Bitch shit!!!!*

I started to tweet it out but I left it as a text. He didn’t respond.

I wanted to call Tammy and tell her how much of a coward Kelvin really was. I wanted to call all our friends and tell them he pissed his pants and was ready to give up his Jordans. I wanted to get my dad’s gun and show Mr. Ramsey the truth.

My dad knocked on my door and opened it.

“Tomorrow we’re going up to Second D and make out a report,” he said.

“Just tell them what happened.” My dad had that sympathetic look on his face. I thought he was going to tell me mom cancelled on me again. “We’ll go over your mom’s afterwards, okay?”

I nodded. Reluctantly.

“For what’s it worth, son, I believe you. Kelvin only lied because he was scared. Probably even embarrassed.”

I didn’t say anything. I just kept looking at the Hemingway story. Reading was beyond me. I listened to my bedroom door close. I finished my pizza and put the book on the nightstand.

I checked my phone. Kelvin hadn't responded. I knew there was a high probability that Kelvin was telling everyone his version of the incident. Having texted him only gave him ammo against me.

It wasn't like Kelvin had never lied on me before. Once when we were taking a test, he held up his fingers for one of the questions. When the teacher caught him, he said I was the one asking for the answer. We both got reprimanded. Then a couple of weeks back, Mr. Fitzgerald had given our class a pop-quiz. Kelvin sat next to me and tried to peep over my hand. When Mr. Fitzgerald took his quiz and tore it up, Kelvin said I was cheating, too.

"I saw you," Mr. Fitzgerald said. "Saw you with these two eyes."

And there were other times. Usually if a girl liked me more than she liked him, he would make up something about me having a girlfriend. We fought several times about his lying. From what I could tell, he wasn't Money Mayweather either. I got in some good punches, too.

The weekend officer on duty was a heavy-set man with a bulbous red nose. He took down what I had to say, blowing his nose periodically, apologizing for his allergies.

"Every time the weather changes, I go through this," he said. His hands were as red as his nose, chapped from overusing hand-sanitizer. "You know someone did this study where they showed that the crime rate goes up and down depending on the weather."

My dad seemed to ponder the possibility.

"You keep track of the weather," the officer said, "and you'll see more crime when it's hot, less crime when it's raining or snowing. But it's not a hard scientific fact, you know. I mean, this happened... at what time a day again?"

I had initially said mid-afternoon. The officer's eyebrow raised a bit as he wrote that down. Now he seemed unconvinced.

"It was around 3:30," I said.

"At the end of the school day," the officer said, smiling. He then blew his nose, tossed the tissue in a wastebasket under his desk, and doused his hands with sanitizer. "Why'n't you say that in the first place?"

I didn't answer and my dad just folded his arms.

The officer was jotting something down then he looked at me. His eyes had that vacantness that the robber's had. He slid a toothpick in his mouth. Then he looked over at my dad. "Is the other guy coming?"

My dad shook his head.

"Well, you did the right thing, Mr. Lawrence. But to be quite honest with you, we hadn't heard of anything. Probably because people don't always report incidents like this. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah," my dad said. "Some people are afraid."

"That and"-- he gave me a hard look -- "well, you know, young people these days? Everyone wants to be a tough. Hard. They all seem to have some score to settle. What school you go to, son?"

"Rosedale," I said.

"Oh yeah, I have a buddy whose daughter goes there. You know Tammy Stewart?"

"Yeah," I said, surprised at hearing her name.

"Well, her dad and I came into the force together. He's a great guy."

"I didn't know Tammy's dad was a cop."

“Been at Sixth D for the longest.”

“But she lives in Third World.”

The officer laughed. His nose started to run, so he did his routine. “No, no, no, buddy; she and her folks live on Branch Avenue, not too far from where Marion Barry used to live.”

My dad and I turned to each other.

“I guess people invent all kinds of things when the weather changes,” he said.

My mom was rubbing my hands as she listened to my dad explain what was to happen next.

Basically, the officer told us that since the incident occurred at the National Zoo’s subway station, it was a Metro Transit matter. He called someone over there and faxed the report to their weekend officer.

“They’ll be in touch,” my dad said, adding, “if something comes up.”

“I’m just so thankful you’re alright.” My mom pulled my head to her lips. She smelled like iodine and I figured she must’ve worked late last night. “Is Kelvin going?”

“No,” my dad said. He was looking around her living room. “You don’t have Kelvin’s mom’s number, do you? Maybe she could talk some sense into Oscar.”

“I haven’t talked to her in years.”

“I thought you two were Facebook friends?”

“We are, but we’re not *friend* friends. Besides, I’m not sure if she wouldn’t feel the same way Oscar feels.”

My dad shook his head then checked his watch. “I have to get back across town,” he said.

“Have fun.” He patted the back of my head and kissed my mom on the cheek.

When he left, my mom asked me, “Would you mind hanging out alone for a couple of hours? I’m so tired.”

“It’s okay. My bike’s still in the garage, right?”

“Of course, where else would it be?”

I didn’t answer. My mom tended to get upset whenever I mention the past. She threw out my bed once because I didn’t want to see her one weekend. I only did that because she had postponed our trip to Six Flags three weekends in a row. Last weekend, I had told her I had to practice with the band for an away game. She got all angry and yelled and called me petty. And I *was* being petty that weekend. I didn’t have practice. I just wanted her to feel what I had been feeling for years.

It was always cool to tell my friends what my parents did. Even at school, when my dad was a reporter, he would drop by for career day and bring these large broad sheets and show us how to lay a page out. My mom, being a radiologist, would come, too, dressed in her scrubs or a lab coat, and explain in the simplest terms what she did for her patients. Whenever my parents were together, whether it was at parent teacher conference or out with me, they gave off the impression that we were happy. And my mom, for reasons I didn’t learn until much later in life, never admitted she had divorced my dad, never stopped wearing her wedding ring, never told people that my dad had disappointed her when he took the buyout and placed the financial burden on her.

I rode around my mom’s neighborhood. She lived in Fairfax. In a nice development where there was a mixture of cultures and people. Most of the teenagers around there knew me. I was the dude from DC. And though none of them knew where LeDroit Park was, they figured it had to be in the toughest part of the city. Some of the boys would talk about having cousins in

Anacostia or Barry Farms or Ivy City. Rough places to live and survive. When they talked, it was like a tourist or a missionary explaining the Safari. I never challenged any of it. Their stories seemed possible to me back then. But as I rode and hung out with these middle-class teens, I began to realize we were all Francis Maccombers, trying to face our lions. We needed to be Wilson or at least give off the impression we were similar to him. We needed our Margots to see us as brave, as men and not as bungling punks. And when we did face down that lion or buffalo or asshole with a gun, like Francis, we met our end.

Except, that didn't happen to me.

....

The rest of the weekend, including Monday, I avoided texting or calling Kelvin. I took time to finish "Francis Macomber" and I even started reading *Hit Man*. My mom had a lot Lawrence Block and Robert Parker books. She also had all these African masks, totems, and fertility dolls. Unlike other lonely compulsive people who might shop incessantly on QVC, my mom purchased her used crime novels from Powells and her "treasures" from an online African Imports store. In my room especially, there were all these wood-carved faces hanging on each wall. One of them had long, straw-like strings sprouting from the sides of its oval-shaped head. Around its slit-eyes, red paint highlighted its black hollowness and the white cowry shells lining the cheekbones around the eyes and down its jaw gave the face a fierce look. The other faces were rounder, some were small, almost spear-shaped, but this one that hung across from my bed near the door scared the fuck out of me.

But I wouldn't take it down. I purposely looked at it before I fell asleep. If it had moved, I would have fought it or thrown books at it or something.

As I read, though, I had another feeling. I didn't believe in my mom's hocus pocus African religion. Even at 16, I was pretty sure I had no religion in me. My dad and I had never gone to church. I had never heard Kelvin or any of the neighborhood boys talk about God or Jesus. I hardly ever heard a parent use those words, unless shouting at one of us to get our G.D. asses in the G.D. house. So my mom's African beliefs were more eccentric than others. Still, that wooden face, its slit eyes and mouth spoke something to me that weekend. I had a feeling that wooden face was meant to guard me. And its protection made reading in my room less comfortable. I didn't like thinking there was some other thing preventing harm to come my way. Like invisible words to an invisible people, the face was saying something, and I didn't want to hear it. I left my room and fell asleep on the couch.

When my mom came home from the parent-teacher conference, she told me she had talked with Mr. Fitzgerald.

"I wanted him to know what you did," she said. "And you know what? He just sat there and nodded. He didn't see anything wrong. He didn't take any responsibility."

"Why would he?"

"Oh, Lord," she said shaking her head frantically, "you only did that because you thought the odds were in your favor."

I sat up from the couch. "Mom, I wasn't playing the lottery or poker. I—"

"What do you know about *poker*?"

"Nothing, what I meant—"

“Is your father gambling now?”

“No, listen.”

She sat on the chaise lounge and glared at me.

“Mom, there were a bunch of people at the station. There was no way that guy was going to shoot me or Kelvin over some shoes.”

“You don’t know that,” she said.

“Well, he didn’t. And you know why, mom? Because *he* was playing the odds. *He* had to figure out what to do. *He* thought we’d be too scared to do anything, say anything. And he was right, mom. I was scared. I was. I wanted to run. I wanted to scream. But I didn’t want to give up my shoes. I didn’t want to give up anything, mom. And I knew, and I can’t tell you how I knew, but I knew, he wasn’t going to do anything, mom. He wasn’t going to do shit!”

“Oh sweetie.” My mom came and wrapped herself around me.

I cried into her shoulder. “I wasn’t playing odds,” I said. “I knew, mom, I knew.”

“Ase,” she whispered. “Ase.”

....

On Tuesday, my mom drove me to Rosedale. She reminded me that she loved me and was proud of me. She said she believed my dad was, too.

“Will you guys ever get back together?” I asked.

She looked at me quickly then turned her head. “No, sweetie. At least, I, I don’t,” she shook her head, sighed, and said, “no. We won’t.”

I kissed my mom’s cheek and got out of the car.

Most students who got dropped off had to wait in the foyer of the school. Usually the principal would take us to the auditorium and dismiss those needing breakfast in the cafeteria. But on that day, it was Mr. Fitzgerald. Having teachers on hall-duty or cafeteria duty wasn't unusual. Still, I had never seen Mr. Fitzgerald there so early. He read from a piece of paper the names of the students to go to the cafeteria. Many of the names were not present; those who were left loudly, almost cheerfully. And soon, there were only twenty of us in the auditorium.

A couple of girls were on their phones. Some of the boys were finishing their homework. I decided to catch some Zs when Mr. Fitzgerald called me to the stage. He was looking down at his phone, then at me, angrily.

"Mr. Opiotennione wants to see you," he said drily.

"Oh. Is it about Friday?"

"What do you think?"

When I got to the band room, Kelvin and Mr. Ramsey were walking out. Kelvin wouldn't look at me, but Mr. Ramsey greeted me and patted my shoulder. I tried to catch Kelvin's eyes but he kept them fastened to the floor.

Mr. O sat on a stool. He had a pencil and a sheet of music. "Sit down," he said without looking at me. He went to his piano and started playing a song I had never heard before. He played for several minutes. The song was melodic and seemed like something you would hear at a funeral.

"You know, I'm going to have to suspend you from band," he said, "just for a week." He stopped playing and turned. Mr. O was sturdy man, clearly a father, and clearly genuine. He explained how Mr. Fitzgerald and he talked the principal out of expelling both me and Kelvin.

I thanked him.

Mr. O started laughing and crossed his arms over his stomach. “Your mom raised a lot of hell yesterday. I felt bad for your dad. He seemed to try to calm her down, but, brother—” he shook his head. “She’s a handful.”

“Yeah,” I said, sort of laughing with him, but then I felt guilty for doing so. “She means well.”

Mr. O nodded. He was quiet for a few minutes. “So, you and Kelvin almost got robbed?”

I said that we almost got robbed.

“But what happened?”

I wasn’t sure what to say. “Did you ask Kelvin?”

“I did,” Mr. O said. “But his dad answered. Kelvin just seemed sick. Like he wasn’t all the way here, you know?”

“Yeah. He’s a liar, Mr. O. He told his dad I panicked. I didn’t panic. I stood up to that dude.”

“Hm, that’s not what Mr. Ramsey said.”

“What did he say?”

“He said you and Kelvin ran, that Kelvin pushed the guy down, and you two took off.”

The bell rang. Mr. O apologized again for having to suspend me. As I went to my locker, I texted my dad what Mr. O had told me. It wouldn’t be until lunchtime before I could use my phone, so I powered it off.

For most of that day I was in a fog. I heard the teachers’ voices and I would perform whatever it was I needed to perform, but my mind was lost. I couldn’t figure out why Mr. Ramsey lied. Or was what he told the version Kelvin told him? After all, the idea of running had been something Mr. Fitzgerald mentioned in his story about the Doberman. Maybe Kelvin

thought about knocking the guy down, but when I said the guy would have to shoot me, he got scared for me? And here I was angry at Kelvin when maybe he wasn't afraid of the guy, but was afraid of me getting shot.

I really felt awful.

At lunch I sat outside on the bleachers. Tammy and her girls were practicing. She must have seen me up there because she started climbing the stairs.

"Hey," she said. "You okay?"

"Mr. O suspended me from band."

"Yeah, he did the same to Kelv."

"I guess things could've been worse."

Tammy didn't respond. "You know, I won't say anything, right?"

"What's to say?"

"Kelv was upset that you were mad at him."

I looked at Tammy.

"My dad and I went to the police," I said. "Met a cop who knows your dad."

Tammy's pretty face sweated. She started pulling on her droopy ponytail. "So what are you going to do?"

"I think I owe Kelvin an apology."

Tammy rubbed my back as if relieved. "He only told me and his dad," she said, reassuringly. "I won't say anything, and I think his dad didn't say anything."

As she rubbed my back, then my shoulder, I got the sense that we weren't talking about the same thing. "Tammy," I said, "what *did* Kelvin tell you?"

Her eyes widened and then relaxed. "I got finish practicing," she replied.

I grabbed her hand. “No, just quickly, what did he say?”

She looked at my hand, then at me. I released her. “He said you started crying and peeing on yourself and that he punched the guy and you both ran.” She went down the stairs, turning to eye me, gathering her girls to cheer.

Kelvin was in my last two classes: Probabilities and Orchestra. Normally we sat beside each other, laughed and joked around. In Mr. Fitzgerald’s class, though, Kelvin sat away from me, with another group of boys. There were few girls in the class of fifteen. And all of them were cheerleaders. I couldn’t shake the feeling that they knew what Tammy had heard. Every snicker seemed aimed at me.

“All right, ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Fitzgerald said, “settle down. We have a lot to do today. But first, I have something special for you.”

Something special was always a quiz in Mr. Fitzgerald’s class. Throughout the weekend, I’d been so preoccupied that I forgot to study for it.

“Hey Mr. Fitz,” Kelvin said, “before our quiz can you finish the story?”

Mr. Fitzgerald held the quizzes in his hand. He looked over his shoulder at the clock.

“Well, I guess we have a little time. Where was I?”

Someone gave him his cue.

“Right, so my little brother and I were being chased. We got to this part of the cul-de-sac where this wall stood. I never knew why there was this huge wall, but there it was. I had to think fast. I pointed and told my brother where to run. But I didn’t run right away. I figured that if the dog saw us run in the same direction, it would keep after us, but if we split up, it would have to make a choice.”

“Did it go after your brother?”

“No,” Mr. Fitzgerald said. He sat on the edge of his desk. “I yelled at it, said something, I don’t know, something that pulled its attention toward me. And it turned to me, too, and started barking and snarling, inching closer and closer. I wasn’t sure how far my brother had gotten, but I took off. And that sucker was no joke. When I took off, it took off, too. Joint was right on my butt.”

“Why didn’t you just run when your brother ran?” I asked.

“I don’t have a simple answer for that, Osei. I thought if I could distract the thing, my brother would be safe.”

“Were you scared?” one of the cheerleaders asked.

“Hell yeah,” Mr. Fitzgerald said.

The girl laughed. “What happened?”

Mr. Fitzgerald raised his pants leg. “It caught me around my ankle and calf.”

All of us rose to see his war wound. Some of the boys said, Damn. A couple of the girls went, Ew. The mark was faint but you could still make out the long tear. Mr. Fitzgerald told us that skin from his butt had to be graphed onto his ankle and calf. The Doberman was put down and the dog-owner tried to sue his family. They didn’t win, but Mr. Fitzgerald’s family won on countersuit.

“Did you pee on yourself?” Kelvin asked.

Everyone laughed except Mr. Fitzgerald and me.

“No,” he said. “I didn’t. But I can tell you about a time I almost did.”

Mr. Fitzgerald sat on his desk again and looked out the classroom. “Before I came to DC, I had been living in Chicago. I didn’t know all the styles, and the music y’all listened to was just

noise to me. Anyway being from a different place can be tough for a child. I got into fights and got into a lot of trouble because I wanted to fit in. My dad worked at Howard University and my mom had just landed a gig at UDC. So they weren't into me having discipline problems or even street problems. I was an A student, most of my life. My little brother, too.

"But moving here force us to change. That's what happens to people in general. You'll see once you go to college. You'll change. My change, however, wasn't good. My dad threatened me with military school, which I didn't want. I had a cousin go through that. And since my aunt sent him there, he was never right with women. So with that looming, I quickly got myself together. Right around that time, I had been hanging out with this dude named Square.

"He had a square-shaped head and a square-shaped jaw, and he wore square-shaped glasses. He was the goofiest-looking guy I'd ever met. But Square was a smart kid. He knew more math than I did at the time. And his family wasn't academics. His dad was a plumber and I think his mom did clerical work. They didn't have much, neither did we. But they worked so hard for Square. He maintained his grades and they got him whatever he wanted. Back then, parents would always say, You should be like this person or that person. So of course my mom and dad were like that. Be more like Square. You don't see Square getting into trouble.

"But he did get into trouble. It was just that he could get himself out of trouble. Teachers liked him and didn't want to see him fail." Mr. Fitzgerald looked at the clock. He stood up and closed the door. His face seemed severe and serious as it was in the morning.

"Square lived three blocks from me. On K Street. In northeast. The hang out spots were limited. We could either go to the Old Post Office Pavilion or Union Station. Most of the time,

we went to Union Station because it had a movie theater there. Plus, he worked at one of those fast-food chains.

“One day we hooked school, something we did often. In those days, if you had a job and were 16 or 17 no one bothered you. I hung out over Square’s house and then we caught a couple of movies. I didn’t have any money, but Square knew people at the theater and they let us slide. I remember having a lot of fun that day. My dad had gotten me this Eddie Bauer coat. It was tannish in color. Square had just gotten one, too. His was the same color. He also had Super-Tims, and had the look of a drug dealer. Neither of us ever did that, but back then, if you were young man in this city, any city really, you wanted to *seem* down, even if you weren’t.”

Mr. Fitzgerald started passing out the quizzes. His hands were shaking. “We were leaving the theater, having seen three of four movies. We walked. When I think about it now, we could’ve caught the D4. It would’ve been so easy. But we always walked home. And nothing was ever wrong with it. We must’ve been on 6th and K when this car slowly wrapped around the curb. I turned and the car was all tinted up. It was still daytime, but rush hour. I didn’t think much of the car because it passed us. Square was talking about something, probably about the movie. But when we got to 7th and K, three blocks from his house, the car was parked with its hazards on.

“It must have been in the 30s, but in those coats you really couldn’t feel the cold. Only on your face, you know.” Mr. Fitzgerald stopped in front of me. He turned toward where Kelvin sat. “This young dude gets out the car, wearing jeans and a dingy white tank top. His hair was half-braided and half out. Looked just like Ol’ Dirty Bastard. And if Wu Tang Clan had been out back then, I think we would have thought that was who this guy was. We kept walking, and as we got closer, I noticed the guy was holding a large silver revolver. I stopped. I had been in this position

before. This was my Doberman again. But before I could say anything, Square looked at the guy. And then he looked at me.

“I’ll never forget what he said. He said, ‘Steve, I ain’t givin’ up my coat.’ And he kept walking. Right toward the guy. I sped up to Square. I whispered for him to put his hands in his pockets. You know, like to imply we had guns too. But he didn’t. The guy wanted our coats. And,” Mr. Fitzgerald stopped. He looked at the door. Then he seemed to survey our quiet faces. “I wanted to run,” he said. “I knew it was rush hour, and there was no way dude would fire at us. But Square said, ‘No.’”

Mr. Fitzgerald went to the white board and marked the time.

“What happened?” I asked.

Mr. Fitzgerald didn’t turn around at first. He seemed to be mesmerized by the whiteness of the board. His head went slightly over his shoulder. “The guy shot Square. Pointed the gun and shot him right in the chest. He jumped in the car. It sped off down K Street. Square died in my arms. I don’t think they ever found that guy.”

For the rest of that day, I didn’t speak to anyone. Kelvin sat quietly beside me in Orchestra. I felt he wanted to say something, but I asked Mr. O if I could be excused from the class. He told me I could. When I packed up, I gave Kelvin one final friendly look. Neither of us were Wilson, that was for sure. But he wasn’t Francis Macomber, either. He was Kelvin Ramsey, a scared boy. And I was who I was, a scared boy.

I knew the remaining months of our junior year would be empty. We served our suspension and continued playing in band: he on the guitar, I on drums. Gradually, however, we started hanging with other people. He and Tammy broke up after her prom. I texted him my

condolences. He replied: Thanks. We still laughed and joked in the few classes we had together but nothing was ever settled.

But that was the last afternoon after I saw beside him in band. When I went outside of Rosedale, the air was crisp and bitter. I remember thinking that it was going to rain. The sky was so gray that it darkened the barren trees. I sat on the steps and called my dad. But his cell went to voicemail. So I called my mom.

“What is it, honey?” she asked.

“Can you come pick me up?”

She sucked her teeth. “Right now?”

“Yes.” I said. “I’m not feeling well. I want to go stay with you.”

“Oh sweetie,” she sighed.

I was waiting for her to tell me that she couldn’t come because she had to work, but then she said: “Okay, Osei, but can you meet me at the subway station?”

I hesitated for a minute. “Sure,” I said, “Which stop?”

A Good Caretaker

Clarence couldn't sleep. He kicked the covers off. He got out of bed and did seven sets of 20 push-ups. He opened his tablet and tried reading Crumley's *The Last Good Kiss*, but the blue-white tint of the screen irritated his eyes. He sat up and adjusted the battery-operated clock radio. It was 2:05.

He wanted to find the classical station. But the storm left all sounds static or weirdly warped. He heard a mix of country and talk and snow. He switched off the radio.

His feet off the queen-sized bed, Clarence stood and opened the blinds. He looked out but he could only see blackness. BG&E had promised that serviced would be restored "within the hour," but that was hours ago. Meanwhile he and his mother were relying on the battery-powered lanterns he had bought two years ago when the last hurricane tore through Annapolis. Back then, his father was alive and had gone fishing on the Chesapeake early that morning. When he got home, he told them the storm would be a doozy.

"Better get out the flashlights," he had warned. "Might be out of power for a long time."

Clarence remembered how nervous his mother got with every crackle of thunder and flash of lightening. She swore the Heavens were opening up to devour the earth. His dad assured her nothing of the sort would happen. And to prove it, he went out and cleared the porch furniture, hauling it with Clarence and Lamont's help. His father waved and told him and his brother to wave at Mom to make her feel safe. They did. But Clarence was frightened. The sky had darkened so quickly; he wanted to get back inside. Lamont on the other hand thought it was a good time to tackle Clarence into a pile of wet leaves.

Lamont. Clarence shook his head. No sense in thinking about him and his antics.

Clarence didn't hate his older brother. Lamont was 48 but behaved as if he were 28. And that annoyed Clarence.

He continued looking out of the window. All this blackness, he thought, and not a lot of lightening. For several seconds, Clarence wondered if he were inside a dream, perhaps a death-dream. The stillness of the house, the vacuity of this "guest room," which used to be his room when he was a child, aroused an ominous feeling in him.. He sat on the bed and rubbed his knees with the palms of his hands. He listened for signs of his mother's snoring, but with his door closed he couldn't hear anything.

What if I am dead? Where's Dad?

This was what happened when Clarence didn't get enough sleep. He had been up all the previous night , reinstalling the Wi-Fi for Rosedale. The school was to administer the first of its several test-preps next week. And the principal wanted him to make sure that nothing crashed like last spring. All the data from last year got scratched because the board and the admin believed the students' results were inconclusive.

Clarence rubbed the back of his neck. He wanted to go to sleep. Jerking off was an option, but he didn't feel like imagining one of the female teachers giving him a BJ. Besides, he would have to clean up in the darkness. Which he hated. Hated it since he was a teenager. His mother caught him once. That was the last time he "played with himself" in her house. But now, here he was, back at home, contemplating pulling out his Johnson and working it until he was fatigued.

Using a lantern, Clarence found a pair of thick gray sweatpants. He unrolled on a blue T-shirt and pulled it over his head, pushing his large brown arms through the tight short sleeves. He

opened his door and listened to the darkness of the house. He thought about texting Lamont to find out when he was coming home.

Since their father's death, Lamont had been living at home, as a way "to help out mama." But all Lamont ever did was chase young women who wanted money and time, neither of which he had. Last night, he had called Clarence for a favor.

"Need you to watch mama, okay?"

"Why?"

"I got work overtime, tonight."

"During a hurricane?"

"Duty calls."

Clarence had stopped by the grocery store- and: bought water, wheat bread, cheese, coffee, various deli meats, and frozen veggie pizza, which his mother loved. She hugged him and acted as if she hadn't seen him in years. Lamont had already left "for work."

Now in the bluish hue of the red plastic lantern, the dining room appeared ghostly. The sudden thunder added to the haunt. He moved the light to the kitchen. Perhaps a late-night snack would bring about sleep. Clarence placed the lantern at the foot of the refrigerator. His mother would have absolutely died if she saw him open the fridge.

He could hear her now: "You're letting out all the cold. The food's gonna to spoil because of you."

A wry smile came across Clarence's lips. His stomach grumbled. He hadn't eaten in several hours. So damned if he shouldn't be able to make a turkey, ham, and pastrami on whole wheat with extra pepper-jack cheese and Dijon mustard. Now if only the toaster operated on batteries. Clarence liked his bread crunchy and warm.

“Clarence? Is that you?”

“Yeah, mama.”

“What you doin’ up?”

“Got a little hungry, making me a sandwich.”

“You always hungry. He heard her shuffling and then the thump of her walker.

“Mama, you shouldn’t be out of bed.”

“And you shouldn’t be eating late. You can have a heart attack.”

“Mama—”

“It’s true,” she said, leaning on her walker. “Dr. Algress said so.”

“Mama, you can’t believe everything you hear on that show.”

“He’s been right before, Clarence. I’m walking much better because of those açai supplements and noni juice he recommends.”

Clarence sighed. He didn’t feel like explaining again how those things were in vegetables and fruits. He regretted the day his ex-girlfriend told her about Dr. Algress’s health and wellness show. She meant to give his mother something to occupy herself with after Dad passed away, but Dr. Algress became a surrogate husband, whose nutritional wisdom and organic-living musings fell out of his mother’s mouth as if Dad had spoken the words. “You want me to make you some green tea?”

“No,” she said. “You shouldn’t be using any appliances.”

“All right, mama.”

“And don’t be using that cellphone,” she insisted. “Lamont told me about this man he knew who got killed by lightening. He was on his phone and got struck dead.”

“I’m sure that didn’t happen,” Clarence said.

“How you know?”

“Lamont said it, that’s how.”

“Lord,” his mother cried. “Did you hear that?”

The echoing sound of a bowling ball reverberated throughout his mother’s house. And then, a white flash lit the sky, causing a momentary brilliance to enter her living room, revealing all the unread magazines on the coffee table, all the dying plants, all the plastic coverings on the sofa, loveseat, and chair. Clarence’s heart skipped. He felt his mother’s hand grip his arm in a kind of panic. One that reminded him of when the doctor told them his father wouldn’t make it past the night. Clarence nearly dropped his sandwich.

“Just a little thunder and lightening,” he said nervously.

“Jesus,” she said, kissing her small silver crucifix. “We need to be in our rooms, Clarence.”

“Okay,” Clarence said. “I’ll take you to your room.”

He guided her back down the hall, holding her hand like a warm poached egg.

“What was that?” She turned. Her walker thudded against the wall. “Clarence?”

“More thunder, mama,” Clarence said.

“No,” she said. “Listen. That!”

Clarence tried to listen to whatever it was his mother heard. A faint knocking came from the front door. “Probably a tree branch, mama.”

“Go check, Clarence.”

He felt her skinny fingers push at his arm. He gave her a side-eyed glance. He put the saucer with his sandwich on the dinner table. He looked through the diamond-shaped glass on

the door. A young man in a cap and soaked jacket held a flashlight and kept looking back across the street. Clarence released the bolt of the top lock, but kept the chain secured.

“Is it Lamont?”

“No,” Clarence said over his shoulder.

“Then why the hell you openin up for strangers, Clarence?”

“Mama, I think it’s one of your neighbors.” Clarence said.

He asked the man what he wanted. The young man explained that his generator had run out of gas and he wondered if Clarence had any.

“Been knockin on e’erybody’s do’r,” the young man added, “either no one’s home or people’s scared.”

Rain and wind slap the back of the young man’s cap and jacket, splashing drops on the door and Clarence.

“We don’t have any gasoline. Sorry.”

“Well,” the young man pushed on the door, “can you at least let my girl come over here?”

Clarence looked over at his mother. She could barely hold her lantern, but he knew she was looking for his daddy’s .38.

“I know how that sounds,” the young man said. “But she’s pregnant and the house is getting colder and she’s getting crankier. Please. I’ll just go up the street to the nearest gas station and get a couple of gallons. Just ‘nough to last through the morning. Swear. I’ll be right back.”

Clarence sighed and agreed.

“Thank you, sir. Thank you.” The young man ran but stopped at the sound of another strike of thunder. A lightening flash seemed to paralyze Clarence. He thought the young man got hit with a bolt. Then darkness. Nearly complete, except for that small light the young man emitted, entering the house across the street.

Now to explain it to his mother.

“Clarence, are you crazy? I don’t know them people.”

“Mama, he’ll be right back.”

“Lord, why did Lamont leave me with you?”

He started to say something about Lamont not having any choice in the matter but decided to leave it alone. Another faint knock came and Clarence opened the door. The girl was pregnant all right. She waddled in and thanked Clarence and his mama for their kindness. She told them her name was Oya; the young man was Cooper. Clarence introduced himself and his mother, Mrs. Mitchell, who didn’t say a word.

“I’m really happy you all are doing this,” Oya said. She turned and kissed Cooper in a way that seemed pornographic to Clarence.

Cooper cupped her face and said: “I’ll be right back, babe.” He nodded at Clarence. “Thanks, bro. ‘Preciate you.” He saluted Clarence’s mother but she just sucked her teeth and turned her head toward the kitchen.

When Cooper left, Clarence asked Oya if she was comfortable, and whether she needed anything.

“No,” she said. Lightening flashed and caused a lamp to flicker. “Oh,” Oya said, pointing at the lamp, “maybe the power’s about to be on?”

“That lamp does that,” Clarence’s mother muttered. “I’m heading to bed.” She stood up and gave Clarence an angry look but she smiled halfway at Oya.

“Did we wake you?” Oya asked Clarence after his mother left.

“No,” Clarence said. “I was making a sandwich.”

“She seems real mad.”

“Mama’s harmless. It’s the storm. You wanna piece?”

Oya’s eyes widened. “What kind is it?”

Clarence pushed the saucer to her.

“Does it have mustard on it?” Oya picked up the sandwich and took a large bite. “I love mustard,” she added, reaching for a napkin.

“So do I.” He watched her eat. She looked too young to be pregnant. Perhaps it was the lantern, but her youth under this light was accentuated. He asked about her and Cooper. They had moved to this part of Annapolis a few months ago, she said. She worked in the governor’s office; Cooper was between jobs.

“Is that some kind of code?” Clarence asked, “between jobs?”

Oya wiped her mouth and shook her head. “No, it’s not. He worked for the post office, but with all the cuts he got laid off. He’s got an interview with FedEx and UPS.”

Clarence smiled and started to ask if she knew for sure Cooper had something lined up. No doubt Lamont could use an extra push in finding a quality gig. But before he could inquire, Oya needed to use the toilet. He led her to the half-bath between Lamont’s and his old bedroom. She took the lantern inside. Clarence had to navigate the darkness. The silence of the house allowed her urination and flatulence to be heard. Clarence found the dinner table and let out a soft chuckle. He listened to the run of the faucet and its squeaky shut-off.

Oya came out and thanked him. “That sandwich was so good.” She sat in the armchair, across from him. She rubbed her belly and hummed. “You got any kids?”

“No,” Clarence said, feeling awkward with his answer.

They were quiet and the storm seemed to be waiting for them.

Oya made blowing noises that almost sounded like whistles. Clarence looked into the darkness of the silent kitchen. “I was married once,” he said, “when I was younger.”

Oya laughed. “Younger than you are now?” she said.

Clarence rubbed his palms over his knees. He bit at his bottom lip and nodded. “Yeah,” he said, thoughtfully. “Much younger than I am now.”

“What happened?”

He looked over and saw Oya adjusting her position in the chair. Even with the lantern’s light, he could tell she was truly interested. He turned to the hallway where the bedrooms were, wondering if his mother was listening.

“Like everything,” Clarence said, “it just didn’t last.”

“Aw,” Oya sighed. “Well me and Cooper are gonna last forever.”

“I hope so,” Clarence said.

“No hope to it,” she said. “We made a blood pack.” She held up her hand, but Clarence didn’t see any scar. “It’s our bond.” She looked at her hand, rubbed the spot with her other thumb, and placed both hands on her stomach. “You’ll find someone else. Love comes again.”

Clarence winced. “Maybe,” he said.

“Then you can have little one’s running around here,” Oya said.

“We tried. But... just wasn’t meant to be.”

“Oh,” Oya said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said. “She and I ended, and she eventually got pregnant.”

“Mm. How’d that make you feel?”

“I was dating this other gal, so I was happy for her.” Clarence couldn’t see Oya’s face, but he imagined that she wasn’t buying it. “Besides, I’m really not *that* good with kids. My brother has five.”

“Wow,” Oya said. She turned and the lantern made a halo around her head. “That’s a lot.”

“Sure is.” Clarence didn’t say anything more. His father had taught him never to discuss other people’s business. And talking about Lamont to a stranger wasn’t right, even if the girl appeared harmless. Lamont would get it together one day. He would make good on being a father.

“I spend enough time with them,” Clarence said. “Five’s a handful.”

“What do you do?”

“IT,” Clarence said, relieved. “At this school in DC. Rosedale. Ever heard of it?”

“No. I’m originally from Omaha. I don’t get down to DC much.”

Clarence grunted. A flash entered the room, illuminating the picture over Oya’s head. His father stood by a large swordfish. One hand rested on the fin, the other was giving a thumb up. Oya looked up and asked about the picture and his father. He told her that his father had retired from the Navy, that he’d loved fishing and had started a new career as a fisherman, taking trips with old military friends to fish in the deepest sea or fishing and crabbing out on the Bay and selling his catches to local restaurants.

“He made a decent living,” Clarence said. “At least for around here.”

“You never thought about going to the military?”

“No,” he said. “My dad really wanted us to follow our own hearts.”

Oya’s head bobbed. She fidgeted in the chair. “I didn’t know my dad,” she said. “He died when I was young. He was a fireman. Cooper’s dad was a fireman, too. Strange, isn’t it? Two people with firemen for fathers?” She let out a nervous chuckle and rubbed her stomach. She told him how Cooper had pursued her when he delivered mail to the governor’s office. He kept asking her out. It was months before she relented. Nebraskan men weren’t that different from Marylanders. She prided herself on knowing the game. “After all,” she added, “my brother did play football.” She went quiet but continued stroking her large belly. “Cooper should be back any minute,” she said.

“Yeah,” Clarence said. He stood and went for the lantern. “I’m gonna make another sandwich. Want me to make you one?”

“Oh no. No thank you. I’m fine.”

Clarence remade the sandwich he had planned to enjoy in his room. When he stepped out, he could see Oya’s head was turned toward the window. He held up the light but the vertical blinds were closed. And the deck windows’ blinds were closed. He wasn’t sure, but he felt as if she were looking for someone outside. He ate at the table. He listened to her hum.

Before long Clarence finally nodded off. The distant rumbling lulled him. And with Oya slowly breathing and softly humming, Clarence’s mind drifted. He heard his older brother Lamont. His voice said something about their dad: he had fallen, and he was in the Cancer Center. Clarence was driving now to Philly and still listening to Lamont’s far off words, tapping in his ears like rain on the windshield.

Clarence opened his eyes. He shook off Lamont and the Cancer Center. He searched the living room. The table lamp was on, and Oya was asleep, slumped over on the plastic-covered armchair. She snored softly, rasping out uneven breaths. Clarence tilted his head. He couldn't tell if it was Oya or his dead father.

He harrumphed but Oya only adjusted her arm under her frizzy long dark hair. Clarence looked at the DVR in the entertainment unit. The clock had four dashes where the time should have been; he went to his old room. His digital watch said 3:48, so did his battery-powered clock. Clarence went into the hall. He listened to his mother's door. Her loud snoring overpowered Oya's. He wanted to knock, just to quiet her down, but he didn't. He stepped into the dining room, then the kitchen. He loaded up the coffee pot and waited for it to brew.

He went into the sitting room, adjacent to the living room, leading to the deck. He opened the blinds slightly and saw how streetlights and porch lights illuminated the ruins of trees. There was a BG&E truck idling in the middle of the street. Clarence couldn't tell if a power-line was down or something else. Finally the beeping pot in the kitchen pulled him away.

He poured himself a cup and entered the living room. He stood near Oya, sipping loudly his warm chocolate-flavored coffee.

Where the hell is her boyfriend, he thought. "Oya," Clarence said. "Power's on."

"Hm?" She stirred, groggily. "What-what you say?"

"The power. It's on."

He watched Oya stretch. From her neck to her arms, you couldn't tell she was pregnant. Only when she stood and brought that belly out and waddled could you tell. She rubbed her eyes.

"How long I've been asleep?"

“Not sure. Not long, though. I made coffee.”

“Can’t drink caffeine when I’m pregnant, but thanks.”

“Got water, if you want some.”

“No.” She looked around as if something was supposed to be there. “Did Cooper come back?”

“Didn’t hear him knock. Might’ve got caught up with finding gas.”

Oya nodded. She crossed her arms and rubbed them as if she were cold.

“You need any help up?” Clarence asked.

She shook her head. “I can manage,” she said. “This chair is pretty comfortable, even with the plastic.” She hoisted herself up. “My grandma has plastic over her furniture, too.”

Clarence looked away. It wasn’t as dark outside with all the lights on now. “Maybe you should give your boyfriend a call,” he suggested. “See where’s he at.”

“My cell isn’t charged. Can I use yours?”

“Sure,” Clarence said. He walked over to his briefcase and opened a side pouch. He powered on his phone. He had 89% battery life. He handed the phone to Oya.

“I should text him,” Oya said. “He probably won’t answer if I call from a strange number.”

He watched her thumb her message then she held the phone out.

“I’m going home,” she said. “I told him that.” She gave Clarence a smile but it wasn’t a happy smile. “He’s probably on his way back.”

“Probably,” Clarence agreed. “Want me to walk you?”

“Oh, no. I can manage.”

“Doesn’t seem right to allow you to leave without an escort. I’ll get my coat.”

The air was light and wet. No doubt there will a lot of cleaning up to do at sunup, Clarence figured. There were pieces of tree branches and bark littering the front yard and the street. Clarence tossed a large armful of branches with budding leaves into the driveway. He held Oya's hand and arm as if leading her down the isle.

"You're a very lucky woman," Clarence said. "I'm sure you and Cooper and the child will have a great life."

Oya didn't respond. She patted his hand and kept her eyes forward.

At her door, Oya pulled her keys from her coat pocket. She opened the house and the chirp from the alarm sounded. She reached into the darkness and switched on the hall lights.

Clarence could see fully inside the house. There were boxes and crates, bottles and red plastic cups loitering around the living room. If there was any furniture, it was somewhere hidden. Clarence took a step back.

"You okay?"

Oya turned and nodded at him. "I'm fine," she said. "Cooper's probably on his way back. I'm all right. Thank you, again. For the sandwich and the company."

"Not a problem. If you need anything—"

A sound of thunder rolled by. Clarence flinched as if something was about to fall on his head.

Oya smiled faintly. "My grandma used to call that the angry man upstairs," she said. "He won't harm you."

Clarence returned a smile but it felt more like a wince to him. "Well," he said, "I better get back over there. My mama may think I've been kidnapped."

She stood and waved at Clarence.

And as he crossed the street, he saw a car slowing down. It was Lamont. Clarence turned but Oya was gone behind the closed door.

“Man, that was some storm,” Lamont said pulling his jacket up over his head. “Where you coming from?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“Whatever. How’s mama?”

“Go in and ask her yourself.”

Lamont rolled his head. “I see you’re in one of your moods.”

Clarence stood outside on the porch listening to the thunder and the rain. Lamont came out and sat on the railing. He sipped coffee in a way that annoyed Clarence.

“Why you out here?” Clarence asked.

“I need a favor.”

“I’m all favored out.”

“It’s not what you think, Clarence. It’s not a money-favor. It’s a mama-favor.”

“What?”

“I’m thinking about moving out.”

Clarence turned and looked Lamont in the face. “Good. You should do that.”

“Well, yeah, you’re right. But I was wondering if mama could live with you? You know, so she can have one of us with her.”

“Live with me?”

“Or you can move back here.”

Clarence turned to Lamont then looked back at Oya’s light. “Why’d I want to move back here?”

“I don’t know,” Lamont said. “I mean, someone should look after mama.”

“Lamont,” Clarence shook his head. “I think mama’s settled here. She’s not trying to leave. You know how many memories she has here. You think she can pack them up and go?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lamont said. “You right. You right.”

No other light was on in Oya’s home. Just that hall light. Its solitary glow made the darkness oppressive. Clarence leaned on the wet post and looked up and down the street. No cars came. He looked at his phone. Cooper hadn’t responded.

“So?” Lamont said, “Who’s gonna look out for mama?”

The first thought Clarence was: I have already been looking out for mama. He looked then turned away from Lamont. There was nothing new. Lamont was who he was. Clarence craned his neck to see if there were any cars coming. Nothing. Nothing new at all. He shook his head and sighed. “Sure, Lamont.” Clarence shrugged. He turned to his brother. “Where are you moving to?”

“I don’t know yet, but I got some things in the works. A couple of real good opportunities in Philly and Baltimore.”

Clarence nodded. “Is that right?”

“Yeah, man. I really think this is it.”

Clarence listened to Lamont’s dream. He kept eying the light in Oya’s home, wondering when she would turn it off, wondering if he should call the police and report Cooper missing. But was he? Lamont continued explaining how one of his friends knew this guy in Baltimore who needed a seasoned landscaper. And there was this other friend who knew this other guy who needed someone to bartend at a high-end club in Old Towne Philly. When Clarence got tired of standing and listening to Lamont, he and Lamont went inside. Their mother was up, drinking a

cup of green tea, whispering to the Lord. Lamont told their mother about his plans. She seemed so excited for him, but not as excited about living with Clarence. He promised her she could watch all the Dr. Algress programs she could tolerate.

“Is that gal all right?” Mrs. Mitchell asked.

“What gal?”

Clarence explained in brief.

Lamont’s eyes shifted over the floor. “Hope everything is all right. It’d be a shame if—”

“Don’t say anything,” their mother said. “It’s hard to find gasoline in a hurricane. Isn’t it, Clarence?”

Clarence hunched his shoulders.

“Maybe he’s been home all along,” Lamont suggested. “A pregnant woman can be a bit much.”

“That’s true,” their mother said. “Lord knows I gave y’alls daddy hell when I had y’all.”

A distant rumble quieted them.

“Perhaps he is home,” Clarence said.

He listened to Lamont and his mother. She had recorded a special Dr. Algress and wanted to show them something about healing power of beets. Clarence caught Lamont’s eye. Lamont stretched his arms and said he was tired. He had a very busy night. Clarence apologized to her and said he needed to get showered and head down to the school. He needed to make sure everything was still operational.

“Go on and leave me,” Mrs. Mitchell said. “You’ll need this one day.”

Clarence looked at his mother. Her hair was nearly all gray but her face was younger. People often thought she was his older sister and not his mother. He sat beside her. “Okay mama. I’ll watch. I’m sure the Wi-Fi is fine.”

“Thank you, Clarence. You’re such a good, boy.”

Clarence took her cup and refilled it with tea. He checked his phone. No response. He went to the front door and looked out. Oya’s light was still on, and the morning silently opened its eye.