

12-1-2009

# On The High

Jarnea L. Boone

*Kennesaw State University*, jarmealboone@hotmail.com

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On the High

By

Jarnea L. Boone

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the Department  
of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

2009

College of Humanities & Social Sciences  
Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia  
Certificate of Approval

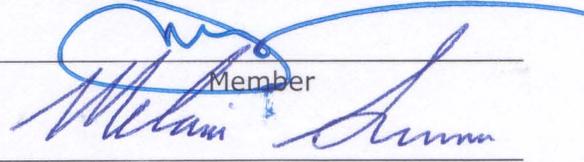
This is to certify that the Capstone Project of  
**Jarnea Boone**

Has been approved by the committee  
for the capstone requirement for

the Master of Arts in Professional Writing  
in the Department of English

At the December 2009 graduation .

Capstone committee:



Member

Member

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Professor Tony Grooms for his words of writing wisdom and for his confidence and encouragement in my work. It is because of him that “On the High” is named so aptly!

I would also like to thank my fiancé, Johnny, for his funny and heartbreaking stories. I’m so blessed that he *is*.

## INTRODUCTION

I didn't always want to write professionally. In fact, I dismissed writing as a respectable career choice for most of my life. As far as I knew, no one could write and make a decent living. I read three to four books at a time, but those authors--RL Stine, Ann M. Martin, Francine Paschal—were like myths to me, robotic machines who created the characters who I followed around and dreamed to be. I did nurse fantasies of being like Ann M. Martin, but feared the broke and unsteady writer's life. I don't know where the idea began, as my parents had always insisted that we could do anything we wanted to do when we grew up. Instead, I wanted to be a doctor, a teacher, a ballerina...anything that wasn't what I now feel I am supposed to be.

Throughout elementary school, I looked forward to my weekly A on Friday morning spelling tests. My mom used to test me on my ten to fifteen words every Thursday night at our dining room table. In middle school, I was constantly selected to speak at or narrate for school assemblies. Even though I remained a timid child, I found that my voice out loud, reading from a script in a dim multipurpose room, sounded amazing, and I longed to do more than just the annual events for MLK Day and Black History Month. In high school, I took advanced English classes and all the creative writing courses my heart could take. I had one teacher three times and she would start every class with 10 new vocabulary words—her way of prepping us for SAT vocabulary. I still credit her with my knowledge of the words “gauche,” “zeitgeist,” and “encomium” today.

I gravitated to a writing life without even knowing it. In my undergraduate years at Spelman College, after a last, half-hearted attempt at “logic” and a brief stint in pre-

medicine, I declared English as my major and writing my minor. I breathed Shakespearean plays and counting beats in sonnets and dissecting hidden meanings in long reading passages. I loved every minute of it. Graduate school was a no-brainer. By this time in May 2006, I recognized a need, a pattern of interest, in my life. Writing came so naturally to me, even if it mostly consisted of academic term papers. I wanted to write papers forever. I threw ideas for stories around in my head and started a secret notebook of poetry. I soaked in Toni Morrison and Richard Wright and Stephen King and Nora Roberts. I studied writing and publishing and fiction across the board and looked at where I could fit in. My fate had been sealed, and I gave into it freely.

The idea for “On the High” was inspired by stories told by my fiancé. In spring 2008, I enrolled in an advanced creative writing course and a creative nonfiction course, simultaneously. For my beginner’s fiction course prior to those, I had been working on several serious ideas for a novel. The results were a satire of Zora Neale Hurston’s short story, “Spunk,” and a manuscript called “Screaming Hums” that could have easily become a novel. Because of my experiences with “Hums,” I knew that I wanted to work on a novel in my advanced fiction class because I all of my past “short” stories had no semblance of “short.” I fell in love with my character, Cori Golden, from “Hums,” and I transferred her to a new, untitled manuscript with no real plot and no then-current plans for life.

Enter my nonfiction writing course. We were assigned to write a few chapters and a proposal for a creative nonfiction manuscript. As I knew that it wouldn’t be much of a personal challenge for me to focus on a memoir, I decided on a biographical sketch of

some of the rough years of my fiancé's life. He gave me anecdotes to add, troubles he and his cousin got into, and flashbacks of the actions that defined him as a man. I planned several scenes for my creative nonfiction final project. At the same time, it sparked that I could fictionalize other scenes of his life and maybe use those scenes as the start of my new novel in my fiction class. And, thus, "On the High" was born. Once I bought the characters Christopher and Nutty together, the possibilities were endless. It became more than a story that had to be told. In essence, it was a story of survival based on the realities my fiancé was thrown into. It became a justification of his truth. There was no turning back once I began.

Like any other beginning fiction writer, I've had my up and down doubts. "On the High" was the first piece of any type I have written with a male, first person narrator. Because I am recounting several years of this boy's life experiences, I had to begin when he was young. I had embarked on the tale of a 14-year-old black boy as a 24-year-old black woman who grew up with no brothers or other younger males. I regretted even starting the piece on some days. Picking up the distinct voice of a young boy in today's time is difficult. I had to consider what type of storytelling authority he had. Was he, in fact, a realistic narrator? Why was his particular story important? Why tell it now? What type of role model was he for people much older than he was? But on other days, the characters were so lucid in my mind, talking nonstop about what they had done that day, almost as if I am their long-distance oldest sister.

I am still constantly at odds about my journey. I struggle with if I should have written the story in a more familiar fashion, or put my adolescent girl, Cori, forward and tell it from her point of view or tell it from the two adult characters, who are also women.

There are hardly any familiarities in my novel and, yet, here I am, chugging along and putting it all down on paper. I have wrestled with my characters and their development. I have changed the points of view and plot about five times since the novel's inception. I have changed names, places, personalities, habits. If I feel I cannot write a detail and love it, I change it. I have no choice since this is a story where I'm simply a vehicle for a truth that I did not personally live. I am the portal through which an entire family— Christopher Richmond, Nutty Shiften, Ms. Gwendolyn Richmond, Ms. Rachel Richmond, Cori Shiften, and a host of other characters—breathe, feel, and just exist. I refuse to let them down.

## CHAPTER 1

There was a time when I didn't think the world had problems. Sure, I found my mom's sporadic sadness a little strange, a little out of place sometimes. But I had accustomed myself to believing that it wasn't because of any particular problem—it was just her personality, or the personality of all girls. My mom and Aunt Rachel would get into their loud, screaming arguments, but it wasn't different from their usual loud, screaming conversations. And my sister, Misty, well...I never looked at Misty as having issues, as she lived with no specific happiness or dismay. But I did learn eventually about problems. Once I realized what they were, they had all crammed into my living room, oozed out of the windows, and pressed me against the door.

On the August Wednesday mom announced that Aunt Rachel, Nutty, and Cori were coming to stay with us for an indefinite period of time, I had a hunch knew that it was because of something personal and financial. A spark of concern jolted me, even above the thrill of having my cousin and best friend back in the neighborhood and in my house. Mom had stopped making decisions based on her heart long after dad went to jail and long before Misty left, and she called the move-in a "logical turn of events" for our family.

I didn't mind the extra company because mom wouldn't let me get a dog. It oftentimes reeked of silence in the house or of hushed tones of "Wheel of Fortune" or "Jeopardy" swimming up the stairs from her room downstairs. Since my niece, Cara, spent equal time with us and with her paternal grandma instead of staying with us permanently, the promise of long-term houseguests almost made me squeal in delight.

Nutty was a lot more fun than my three-year-old niece anyway—more hazardous, ironically, but fun all the same.

Nathaniel “Nutty” Shiften was like my younger brother. He adorned his nickname just through his “nutty” antics as a toddler: he would always try to stand on his head, always try to climb something, and always invoked laughter. My mom keepsakes a picture of everyone giggling hysterically at him some ten Thanksgiving holidays back as Nutty spun around in the middle of Aunt Rachel’s family room and fell down dizzy two minutes later into a half-full clothes hamper nearby. The picture showed Nutty throwing up on himself.

It became his penchant to entertain. Nutty constantly kept up a barrage of gags with anyone, and his comedic prowess landed him the designation of “top” joker,” as he would out-joke anyone on any particular day, anywhere. It was just like him to set up joke battles at school, just so that he could make people laugh and get girls’ phone numbers. He was just my playmate and my confidante, the guy whom I shared homework with and the guy who “stole” my girlfriends. Nutty was the only person who knew the amount of animosity I had for my dad. He knew I wrote love poetry. He knew I sometimes cried about my sister. He knew my biggest fear and knew never to call me out on it. I often laughed at my cousin and best friend and thought he was, well, nuts, but I later looked up to him and learned from him.

I didn’t, however, know what to think about Nutty’s adopted sister, Cori. She took the term “computer geek” to the umpteenth level. She used big words and big philosophies about Nietzsche, rhetoric, the turn of the sun...Nutty and I never understood her and made jabs at her when we could get away with it. Of course, she’d laugh with us,

call us “jerks,” and go on about her merry way, muttering about some creature from those sci-fi books she read, indirectly calling us names of things we didn’t always catch. I must admit, she intrigued me—she was weird, but I imagined and marveled at how much she knew about graphic comics and Scrabble and Windows operating systems. She had so much useless knowledge. I didn’t know a lot about her personal background and never thought to ask before she moved in.

My aunt Rachel was bubbly and lively and used her days to gossip about men and food. To say she was a thick woman was an understatement. Aunt Rachel had plump rolls on her arms, on the backs of her knee caps, on her knuckles...she was just a squeezably soft woman and had been for as long as I could remember. You could talk about her weight all day, but never talk about her hair. Right now, it was auburn and braided all over. Tomorrow, it could be curly blonde or crinkled blue. She had a standing appointment with Ms. Gladys at a hair salon downtown every Saturday at noon, rain, snow, or earthquake. Her shiny cheeks were so fluffy and her eyes sunk into them like opals in brown dough when she smiled, which was quite often, even when she was mad. She loved wearing bright colors and acrylic nails as long and sharp as kitten claws. Her lips were always smothered in some type of tinted gloss. No one could not tell my aunt that she wasn’t attractive at 41.

My mother was her exact opposite: timid in a crowd, introverted, homely, and wore her emotions on her sleeve. She acted much older than her 49 years, mostly due to her inexplicable need to let the past dictate her present. I didn’t think my mom forgave very well...stress plagued her daily. I cared for her much like I could. I combed her short, curly locks when they had gone awry, and I walked around the neighborhood with her

when she was sore or in need of some exercise. She didn't wear make-up, but mom had gorgeous hazel eyes. Her eyes stayed dark now from lack of sleep and worry. I prayed more for her than for myself.

My 15th birthday fell on Labor Day that year and on the Saturday that Aunt Rachel, Nutty, and Cori were moving into the house. I remained outwardly nonchalant about the move but, inside, I felt excited and pleased. We all knew that the economy sat in the toilet, so it made sense for all of us to band together and ride it out, as mom had so eloquently put it. I embraced the pride of seeing Nutty jump out of the front seat of the U-Haul truck at seven in the morning, looking as tired as I did in a grey t-shirt, red mesh basketball shorts, white tube socks, and black slippers. Aunt Rachel jumped down from the driver's side, all perky and ecstatic-looking in khaki shorts that rode up one chunky thigh between her legs and a striped, fuchsia top that made her ample bosom look that much more stretched out. She and my mom hugged and jumped around in the front yard, like they hadn't seen one another just yesterday, while Nutty and I watched on, happy for our moms' display of happiness, but still ready to go back to bed. Cori hopped out from her perch in the middle of the cab and four books fell out of her arms onto the ground. Nutty sighed and went to help his sister retrieve her reading material. "You and all this lit crap!"

The greyness pressed down on us and, even though the birds chirped cheerfully, we had watched the threat of thunderstorms on television last night and knew it was going to rain sometime soon. Aunt Rachel's beloved loveseat was in the back of the U-Haul and was the heaviest item, so, as per my aunt's instruction, Nutty and I had to make a path so that the sofa could come out first. It was a nightmare to shift the mounds of bags

and boxes around to get to the sofa, especially without unloading those items blocking the sofa first and sitting them on the lawn. My mom and Aunt Rachel barked directions from the grass while Nutty and I worked, moving things around in the truck.

“This is not working,” I wheezed out from the back of the truck as I lifted a box of books that was heavier than I had realized. Another box burst open from Nutty’s hands and he stood and watched as tons of magazines slapped to the floor space we had made in the truck. I wanted to laugh at his misfortune at lifting an untapped box, but I couldn’t muster up the strength.

“This is bullshit,” he said loudly, but not before glancing towards Aunt Rachel and my mom to make sure they were out of earshot. The sofa, still buried beneath boxes, was not going to come out of there without taking everything else out first. Aunt Rachel sauntered over after talking to Ms. Debra from across the street.

“Try moving those cartons to the right of your foot to the back...somewhere,” Aunt Rachel demanded from down below. She and mom kept up their conversation with the neighbors. As I looked around to see exactly which of the numerous cartons she was talking about, Nutty jumped down from the truck. It bounced from the sudden weight distribution and I took a quick survey to make sure nothing crashed to the floor.

“What’s up with you wanting that couch out first, ma?” he said, marching up to Aunt Rachel and wiping his brow with his t-shirt. “It doesn’t make any sense. The stuff’s not moving.”

“Because I’m the mom and what I say goes,” Aunt Rachel said. “Besides, we have to put the sofa in the living room so everybody can have somewhere to sit.” I made room on a box and sat down to mop my own forehead with my shirt.

“But, ma. I’m just gonna start taking stuff out. That sofa is not moving.” He took off his t-shirt, exposing a brown A-shirt. “We barely scooted it over. This makes no sense. And Aunt Gwen has a sofa. This stuff is heavy as all outdoors.”

“Oh,” Aunt Rachel said. She snatched the t-shirt out of his hand. “So you lost all those good muscles, huh? Those muscles you were just bragging about. What happened to Mr. Big-and-Bad?” Nutty puffed air from his mouth and jumped back onto the truck.

“The problem is not lifting the boxes,” he called out. “It’s trying to put them somewhere else in this truck. Look.” Nutty started piling boxes to one side quickly and they began to topple with each added weight.

“Stop being funny, Nathan!” Aunt Rachel yelled. “Don’t break none of my stuff!”

“It does look kinda tight in there,” my mom said, coming up to stand beside her sister at the truck’s back. “Who packed this truck?”

“Aunt Rachel?” I said. “Can’t we just take the boxes out of the truck?”

“The moving men did. And, no, because it might rain any second now and I don’t want any of the stuff I bought out here in the weather.”

“We can unload it later, then?” I asked before Nutty blew more air out of his mouth. “I mean, we can take the boxes in the house if it starts raining. Mom made room—”

“Momma, why don’t you come magically push it out, then?” Nutty said, putting his hands on his hips. “I mean, you’re obviously the strong, logical one of the group.”

“Oh my God, no you didn’t go off and say that!” Aunt Rachel’s face turned into a snarl. “Boy, you ‘bout to get a beat-down, talking to me that way!” She climbed up into the truck, a move that required her to roll over and the truck to bounce again, and ran

right for Nutty, fists aiming at his head. I lowered myself into a back corner and laughed as they got into a playful wrestle. The truck bounced up and down with their movements, and I held on.

“Ya’ll gone break something, playing around in that little space,” shouted my mom. “Let’s just get as much as we can out before it rains. Cori, grab that lamp, honey. It’s about to fall out.” Cori walked up to the truck tentatively and almost got hit with Aunt Rachel’s swinging arm. She grabbed the lamp and ran off.

“Rachel Laverne!” my mom said as Nutty screamed. Aunt Rachel had him in a headlock. Thunder sounded in the distance.

“See? I told ya’ll,” Aunt Rachel said, letting Nutty go and making her way off the truck. “Now, hurry up and get those boxes out of there. Whatever ya’ll have to do to move my sofa. But don’t get my shit wet.” Nutty and I stood there and looked at each other.

“So now you see what I’m talking about,” Nutty said.

“Boy, don’t try me,” Aunt Rachel replied. “Ya’ll don’t just stand there!” She clapped her hands and her and mom went towards the house, Cori right behind them.

“What a way to spend your birthday,” I muttered.

“Oh, yeah,” Nutty said, turning to me. “Happy Birthday, my dude.”

“What—you forgot?”

“Yep,” he answered, lifting up a box near his foot. “I ain’t gonna lie.” He glanced at the box. “I wonder what’ll happen if I threw this at Rachel Laverne?” I paused and shook my head at Nutty.

“You love pissing your mom off, don’t you?”

After we had managed to grab several boxes and race the storm before the clouds opened, Aunt Rachel and mom called all of us into the dining room for a family meeting. Nutty and I were in my room, trying to figure out how to plug in his television and Playstation with the room's furniture layout. When we heard Aunt Rachel's unmistakable hollering from the bottom of the stairs, Nutty stood up quickly, like he was being electrocuted.

"Ooo, that woman!" he said. "She get on my last nerve!" I laughed.

"You know you do the same thing!" I said, following him to the stairs.

"Dude, I'm for real. I'm ready to do something else. Get my own place, you know?" Nutty had never expressed that much frustration about his mom before. I had always chalked his complaints up to the fact that he and Aunt Rachel were so much alike and, therefore, always clashing personalities.

"I don't always get along with my mom, either," I said. "But I don't have any place to go if I just peace out." We went downstairs in silence. It seemed as if Nutty was contemplating something that I couldn't quite read yet.

## CHAPTER 2

I cannot say that Nutty necessarily got me into any more trouble than any other healthy child growing up in Portsmouth. He did, however, put me through some painful adventures, sort of rites-of-passage for boys a little too active for human skin to handle. It just so happened that I accidentally returned the favor often. I recalled one particular week in February when we were about eight years old. Winter cold had broken up for a little while upon the groundhog's promise for an early spring, and the city had been blessed with above-normal sixty degree days, which translated for excited boys as a kiss of summer and a break from snowy mundanity, even if temporarily.

Indoor games like Monopoly and Battleship and Grand Theft Auto on my dad's old Playstation were out of the question on such an unseasonably toasty school day. I had completed my spelling, math, and social studies homework in a rush, just to be able to go out and experience the last two hours of fading daylight. My mom was understanding and seemed to be preoccupied anyway, so I was permitted to do all but the three golden rules of playing outside: to stay in or out and not let the screen door bang shut; to not play with fire; and to not leave our street, Mayflower Lane, under any circumstances.

I wanted to walk to the playground at nearby Churchland Academy to tackle the tire swing, but I intuitively knew that Nutty would want to go bike-riding, as he always did. The stipulation, however, with riding our bikes was that our moms wanted us to stay on the sidewalk, which was hazardous for the people walking on it and for us when little kids left rainbow-colored xylophones and plastic big wheels and small trampolines in the way. The sidewalk wasn't the smoothest landing, either, in my neighborhood. In some places, it lifted up at an unusual angle and some of the cracks were larger than others,

enough to swallow running squirrels, so I heard. Width-wise, we could ride side by side, but only if we stayed robot-straight on invisible paths. And it was just plain bad courtesy to ride in other people's lawns and leave bike treads, especially after Nutty got caught riding through and crushing Ms. Perkins's tulips. We both got whipped for that one, even though I hadn't done a thing.

Nutty liked the freedom of riding bicycles to the school and being able to circle the newly-paved parking lot, even if it was technically off of Mayflower Lane, just around the corner and about 200 yards down on Bruin Lane. This meant that I either rode there with Nutty, defied my mom and aunt's orders, and risked a whipping later, or we rode on the sidewalk up and down Mayflower and risked some type of collision. It was an easy decision for me--and I could definitely deal with Nutty's banter of my being a "momma's boy" over my mom's wrath, despite my own desire to play there.

I waited patiently on the living room couch for Nutty and Aunt Rachel to arrive. My mom said I could not go out until they got to the house. I looked directly into the setting sunlight that shone through the window across from me for seven seconds, then closed my eyes tightly and opened them back up. Black dots danced in my sight everywhere I looked. I smiled. The key to my dad's shed burned in my hand, ready to be inserted into the padlock to release my old bicycles.

One bike was a Huffy I received for Christmas two years ago, titanium, royal blue, with reflective spokes, a ten-speed without training wheels. The other was some unnamed Wal-mart knockoff in a jade green with streamers that I had long snatched out of the handlebars so that it created a silver stump on each white, rubbery end. It belonged to Misty long ago. The Wal-mart bike rode smoother, perhaps because I had rode the

Huffy to death...up and down the hills and even in the snow, whenever I got the chance. Either way, Nutty always preferred the Huffy for its “name-brandness,” and I didn’t mind letting him borrow the “better one.” Nutty didn’t have his own bike, but we couldn’t come up with a satisfactory deal between the two of us involving my bikes, so they both lived with me for the time being. Or, rather, lived in dad’s smelly, damp wooden shed.

When the knock on the door came what felt like a million minutes later, I jumped up and let my cousin and aunt into the house. Nutty and I did our customary high-five greeting and Aunt Rachel kissed me on the forehead and asked if my mom was in her bedroom. I told Aunt Rachel we were going outside and she reminded us of the rules, and we agreed and ran out. Nutty and I jumped down the three porch steps and ran around to the back of the house towards the shed.

I could hardly get the key in fast enough. The lasting sun beamed down on the back of my neck, begging for worship. Nutty was talking about Lakita or Lanica or somebody who lived next door to him, and how stupid she was and how she followed him around at school and how his mom told him to stay away from “hot little girls.” I nodded and agreed when appropriate and concentrated on pulling the bikes out of the shed amongst rusted loose tools and molded plastic outdoors chairs and the abandoned, broken lawnmower. I pulled out my unnamed first and passed it to Nutty, who held it up by the handlebars like it was contagiously sticky. As soon as I got the Huffy out, he let go of my unnamed and snatched the handlebars of the Huffy from my hands. The unnamed hit the dirty grass on its side.

Walking his chosen bike towards the front sidewalk, he called out to me, “Last one don’t get a Cadillac!” The saying became an excuse to race after our friend’s older

brother tricked out his dad's old Cadillac and gave us a ride the year before. The experience was life-changing, and Nutty and I made a pact to both buy a Cadillac like that one when we turned eighteen. I pushed the key into my pocket and, leaving the shed door open, I hopped onto the unnamed and raced after Nutty to the sidewalk. Seeing me coming, Nutty jumped up onto the Huffy and started pedaling away. I lost because he had had a head start, and he smiled triumphantly when his front wheel touched the sidewalk first.

I stopped once I got there, but he kept running right into the street. I put my feet down and braced my hands on the bars as I watched him do figure eights in the middle of the street.

"You'd better get out of the street before Aunt Rachel sees you," I called out, looking back towards the house. My mother's bedroom window sat on the front of our split-level and I just knew that, at any second, I was going to make eye contact with Aunt Rachel's dark, smoldering eyes where the sheer cream-colored curtains were.

"You're a sap," Nutty said, coming towards me, then spinning and riding in a different direction. "You mean to tell me that you obey all your mom's rules?"

"Um...yeah!" I said. I glanced back at the house again. "I'm not getting beat tonight." I got off of my bicycle seat and stood on my feet, pausing for his reaction.

"Whatever, man," Nutty said, riding back towards me. His bike jumped up onto the curb with a whack and we sat on the sidewalk on the bike seats.

"You know Aunt Rachel'll beat your butt, too," I said, giggling. "You remember the last time she beat you here?" I threw back my head and started wailing my arms pitifully. "Momma, no! I won't do it again! I'm sorry! I promise!"

“Man, shut up,” Nutty said, pushing me lightly. I laughed. “That’s why I beat you to the sidewalk anyway. That means you gon’ have to buy a Honda.”

“You cheated. You had a head start.” I pulled lint from my long-sleeved, red polo shirt and spun the pedals of my bike around clockwise with my left foot.

“I always beat you. I’d bet I’d beat you if we raced right now,” Nutty said, his smile turned up into a sneer. His challenge was tempting in many ways.

For one, we both knew that I was the race champion, which was why Nutty had been itching to race me in any way possible for the last few weeks. It had just been too cold to play outside all winter. For another, we were just naturally competitive. We fought, we made up minutes later, and we played hard and contended even harder. He could have dared me to race down the busy highway on our bicycles and I would have at least considered it. In many ways, I took Nutty up on his offers as not to look like the chump I sometimes felt inside. He was stronger than me and we both knew it, but I never show inferiority. I always stood up to him, even if he was a couple of inches shorter.

“I bet you’re bluffing,” I said, sneering back.

“What’chu got?” He gripped the handlebars of the Huffy as if revving up the engine on a motorcycle.

“Five bucks.” I cringed once the words were out because it was absolutely all I had left from three weeks’ allowance in my bank. I had planned to go to the grocery store later with my mom to get a pack of Bubbalicious Strawberry Red and a basketball magazine, but the challenge at hand was more important than gum. I just had to re-save for my book. Or, more than likely, I could plan to spend *ten* bucks. Nutty didn’t get an

allowance, so I didn't know where he would get the dough when he lost. It didn't matter. The game was on.

“Five bucks says I dust you like a bunny.” He looked down the sidewalk. “And it'll be on the sidewalk, choir boy, since you're such a good boy.” For a second, I considered recoiling. It was already enough to ride on the sidewalk while worrying about running folks over, but it was quite another to take off at three miles an hour and having to stop suddenly because a three-year-old wants his or her runaway ball that just so happened to bounce out of the sky when we're coming. And it was getting darker by the minute...shadows from the trees blocked some of my view of the sidewalk further down. Nutty knew this. It was tempting...but the doubt wasn't enough. He called me “choir boy.” He knew how much I hated that. He had to pay.

“I hope you got something saved,” I said, turning my bike to sit directly beside him. “From what I know, you're broke as records.” I chuckled.

“We'll see.” He leaned forward. Up ahead on the other side of the street, a little girl was riding a tricycle energetically in our direction with her babysitter following behind her. “Check this out. As soon as that little girl reaches us, that's the cue to go.” I nodded and had a thought as we watched her approach.

“What if she stops before she gets to pass us?” I had my pedal up and locked in place, and I stood at an angle on one foot, ready to take off. Nutty held the same stance.

“Oh, no, she'll pass us in four...three...two...” As soon as the tricycle's wheel touched the crack that lined across to where we sat, Nutty took off with clicks from the bike's gears. It took me a few seconds to react, but I was on his heels shortly.

The cool wind felt great flowing through my red shirt and hugging my brown

skin. When Nutty sped up, I was right on him, and gaining. It occurred to me that he was the only one who could see obstructions in our path since he was riding down the center and preventing me from passing him on either side. We didn't have a plan for sudden stops, but I assumed that he would just hop off of the sidewalk and into the street if something was in the way that we couldn't dodge.

My front wheel was nearly touching his back one and we were coming to the end of Mayflower quickly.

"You're not gonna beat me!" Nutty shouted, turning his head to the right so that his voice carried to me, and he miraculously started pedaling harder. The bike swayed to the left and right with his every hard pedal push. I was sweating under my arms, but I loved every second of the adrenaline. Chuckling at his perseverance, I figured I'd just let him have that one and ask for a rematch down the other direction. I stopped pedaling and started coasting four houses down from the end of the street. Nutty kept going full-speed. I laughed louder at his retreating back.

Suddenly, he hit a hole in the sidewalk where it was not level with the lawn beside it. The front wheel of the Huffly made a sharp turn and stuck in the hole and Nutty flipped quickly over the handlebars. I had zero time to react. I kept going towards him at my speed and mentally braced for impact. My bike hit his with a clang, and I flipped over my own handlebars and crash-landed on my knees and hands. I prayed that my bike wouldn't go airborne and hit me, and it didn't. For a full minute, I sat there out of breath on my butt and checked out my bloody hands. I looked over at Nutty and he laid on the sidewalk on his back beside the Huffly. His eyes were closed. The front spoke of my wheel had hit him in the head and he bled from his ear. I froze instantly all over.

“Nutty!” I called. “Are you okay? Nutty!” I scooted over to him, wiping the blood from my hands onto my shirt and I shook him with so much force that his head wobbled. “Man, are you still alive? Do I need to get Aunt Rachel? Do you hear me?” There were a few kids pointing at us from across the street, but no one came to our rescue. I was ready to scream for an ambulance when Nutty started laughing hysterically. He punched me in the chest.

“I won, now give me my money,” he said. I smacked my lips and tried to will away my shaking.

“Aw, man,” I said. “I thought you were dead. You’re bleeding.” I pulled Nutty up by the hand and he clapped his hand over his ear.

“That damn bike slapped me,” he said. “I should charge you for that.” Our bikes barely made the walk back to the house. Neither one of us was in the mood to ride them at the moment. Nutty had taken off his navy blue windbreaker and tied it around his head and over his ears by the sleeves. The Huffy wasn’t in as nearly bad a shape as my own unnamed where the front wheel and axle had taken most of the brunt of impact. It rode unnaturally as I pushed.

It was after curfew when we got back to my house. We had to explain to Aunt Rachel and my mom what we were doing and how we were doing it after they fussed at us and over us for hours. I was on punishment for a week for the incident and I didn’t get allowance for a month because the shed had been left open. Nutty got stitches in his head. He was enthralled by the stitching and touched it whenever Aunt Rachel wasn’t screaming at him for doing so. When I got off of punishment, the weather had gone back to the 20’s for a high.

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I live on Portsmouth, Virginia earth, below sea-level, which was oftentimes obvious to most visitors with the perpetual flooding and deep potholes that plagued the streets. Summertime is usually the worst time of year, despite having the beach some 45 minutes away and several community pools. Summer meant mosquitoes from hell, overwhelmingly high heat, and the spontaneity of hurricane season. Our coast was slammed by some late-tracked tropical storms every year that were only supposed to have skimmed our coast. After the storms, mosquito spray trucks would come roaring by, the repellent flying out in a smoky, green cloud from a machine on the back. The insects danced like it was a stimulant and bit everyone more because they somehow knew we were unsuccessfully trying to kill them off.

I breathe Portsmouth, Virginia air, which was like inhaling and exhaling a slightly salty secretion of pine tree moss, fresh fried fish, and hot, musty children. The summer meant eighty degree mornings soaked with dewy, newly-cut grass and sticky, fast-rising humidity. The air stuck to your clothes and had a “close” scent, like being inside of a plastic wrap box. What really sucked is when Nutty and I had to ride the school bus to summer classes in that discomfort. Nutty and I would have to get separate seats, and I always managed to get the chocolate brown seat where the window was stuck closed. He would have to come and help me open mine like a helpless female, pushing the window down while I pushed in the white tabs. The window would clack all the way down, making a lot of noise and drawing needless attention.

My area of small-city life was called Churchland, and a lot of kids lived out there. Nutty and I weren't ever the only children up at 7:30 a.m. on summer weekday mornings.

Not only did parents generally make their kids go to summer school, mostly for the free and reduced breakfasts and lunches the schools offered all summer, but our friends were up anyway, doing yard work, taking out garbage, or braiding somebody's cornrows on the porch. If you weren't up to go to school, you were up early doing *something*. Moms and dads all knew each other around there and banded together to make their offspring work during the *break*. In most cases around the city, male children were the individual men of the house, so we had no choice but to assume the position and get to work.

On the outside, the portside city looked pristine, with the sparkling river, towering pine trees, and picturesque seasonal vegetation. The inside culture was, however, heartbreaking and brutal.

Here is what I learned about my city from mom. Most families in the area lived just at the middle class line and far below. With that came the invisible societal pressures to appear as wealthy as possible without really having the means to be so. Our city was half black and half white, but skin color had no determination of money when the city itself was poor. People didn't necessarily move to Churchland, or Portsmouth, for that matter, if they had money. But there were, however, a handful of "upper class" people who lived in an area of huge, ideal homes called Crystal Lake. We used to joke that the kids wearing authentic Ed Hardy and Polo and Iceberg brands had parents who lived in Crystal Lake and who sold drugs to afford that three-story house and those four cars.

I had come to learn a lesson about life. As is often the tendency with human nature in the western part of the world, material possessions, or the appearance of having "stuff," gave people that otherwise false sense of entitlement and ownership. I'm not into much deep psychology, but what I concluded was that this alone was the leading

contribution to the demise of teenagers in Portsmouth. This dictated need to own was powerful: it decided who should have what; when that “what” should be acquired or sought after; where that “what” should be used or placed or given; and how to get it--get money, get an “entitled” life, get something. In our area, it was all over the television: get girls, get cars, get bling. The “how” was always the tricky part, though.

## CHAPTER 3

I remember the last class Nutty and I were in together in the seventh grade. It was right before Nutty and Aunt Rachel moved to the area of the city called Cavalier Manor, some fifteen minutes away from where I lived in Churchland. The neighborhood consisted of lengthy blocks of modest-sized houses and tall pine trees with the biggest pinecones and a middle school, William E. Waters. The pothole-covered Manor Boulevard ran the whole of the area from one end to the other, and ditches divided the two eastbound lanes from the two westbound lanes on the road. City officials were starting to work on filling the ditches, not only because of the aesthetic need, but also because the mud backed up when it rained and caused dangerous problems for drivers who couldn't drive anyway. Or it was dangerous for the silly kids who tried to jump into the ditch. Nevertheless, the mindset of the residents of that area reflected Manor Boulevard itself: They couldn't get to the other side without crossing a deep ditch. Most people didn't make it through the rainy murk, or barely made it fighting. The world was hopeless. At me and Nutty's age, we hadn't quite recognized that yet.

Seventh grade was the time when boys generally got just plain distracted. Puberty was in "full-steam-ahead," girls sprouted boobs and butts, and our hormones grew with the pimples on our faces. Nutty and I were in Mrs. McGlone's language arts class and the white-haired, white-eyed woman (actually, her eyes were gray, but her entire body always seemed so *washed out*) claimed that silent reading developed a child's character and, therefore, frequently encouraged the practice. "Silent reading" in my middle school really meant that the teacher would sit at his or her desk and ignore the students completely, and we would throw spit balls, kiss in class, and pass handwritten notes,

anything that could be produced *silently*. When the teacher looked up, everyone would be attentive to the lesson. I managed to pose as the “class pet” because I always just sat and either looked at everybody’s clowning or just read the assigned page. But no one teased me about it because Nutty, the “class clown,” kept me somewhat protected from cruel, 11-year-old malice.

When we actually did read, the subject matter had to involve violence, drugs, or sex in some way to keep our attention, or had to have been written by Shakespeare, but only because he cursed and used words like “faggot” that we thought were hilariously misquoted. On this day, we were to read a Shakespearean play and it remained quiet in the room for two minutes while everyone was engrossed in a battle scene. Nutty randomly selected every “bad” word in the passage and said it out loud, anything that would crack up the class and get everyone riled up. Every time he would say “heifer” or “wench” or some similar Shakespearean phrase, everyone would giggle or someone in the class would sneeze. Or clear his or her throat. Or throw a book on the floor. And Nutty, the ringleader, laughed until he fell out of his desk. He even chuckled from outside in the hallway when Mrs. McGlone told him to calm down before he returned to class. Nutty never managed to stay in the “time out” spot long, though. Blaming ADD, he was gone by the time Mrs. McGlone reopened the classroom door. We all broke up in fits of laughter as she called security to find Nutty to prevent him from skipping yet another English lesson.

Sometimes I wished I were more like him: outgoing, serendipitous, popular, and admired. Nutty got any number he wanted just by lowering his eyelids into a “seductive” stare and kissing the girl’s hand and telling her to call him Nathan. I would shake my

head and chuckle to myself at the naïveté I saw in those girls. I wasn't as *accepted* as Nutty was in the realms of middle school because I kept to myself. Or, rather, I was a bit too *focused*, as Nutty would say. School had become easy for me, and at 2:15 p.m., I would go home and play basketball and do my homework and watch TV and go to sleep by 10 to do it all again the next school day. On weekends, I helped my mom with groceries or babysat my niece or mowed the lawn or plucked the weeds. Anything spontaneous from me meant that the world was coming to its fiery end.

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I lurched myself from my plaid comforter's warm and dreamy navy custody at 6:17 a.m, seventeen minutes behind my intended rising. My hair follicles were still sleepy. I scratched my scalp and stretched my mouth open wide in a voluntary yawn. I couldn't ever find my glasses in the morning and today, the first day of high school, was no exception. I crawled across the bed to grope on the dresser for my essential set of eyes. They sat next to my forgotten doo-rag and a framed photo of me and my mom when I was about four years old. At that time, I was a carbon copy of my mom: light brown complexion, dimples, and a head full of dark curls. As time progressed, however, my complexion darkened into a reddish shade, my dad's hue. My dimples and hair remained, though, but I preferred a close haircut. The curls made me feel too *adorable* and Nutty would always joke the hell out of me when I grew my hair out.

When I looked at my reflection, I nearly balked. In addition to "bed head" and frizzy eyebrow hair, I had a mass of dried drool on my cheek and circles under my eyes. And I was supposed to go to school looking like that, handsome fresh meat.

In the past, I always met the first day of school with excitement and anxiety. On

the one hand, it was a new school year with promises of new art projects and classes and the even newer possibility of meeting a cute chick to help alleviate certain manly stresses. On the other hand, it was *high school*, something I had never done before. The wonderful land of television presented high school as a period of total angst and regret--wholly pressurized, concentrated teenage-hood in one toppling brick building.

Mom and Aunt Rachel had preached the importance and meaningfulness of high school all summer to Nutty and I, and they had quite a way with some embarrassing topics. "There will be drugs and fights, fast girls and peer pressure, the temptations of sex and the certainties of sin," the Richmond sisters said. They made it sound like we were going into the mob. "But there are also the good things." I had all the time in the world to shape my dreams and cultivate my passions. The "real world" peeped around the corner, and our moms encouraged us to *live* these best days of our lives because, once they were gone, there was no turning back. What we did now affected how we became men. What we did now could cultivate the rest of our lives or ruin them.

I ran to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth, the only things I had time for before I was supposed to catch the bus at 6:30 a.m. I had taken out one of seven pairs of jeans I had saved for and bought for the school year last night, so at least I didn't have to worry about what to wear. I planned to throw on one of the faded vintage t-shirts from the summer until autumn set in an about a month. I had worn flip-flops for most of the summer, so the Nike Air Force Ones Aunt Rachel had bought me at the beginning of summer were in optimal condition to carry over into the school year. I no longer bothered my mom with trivial things like school clothes. She had enough to worry about.

Nutty's cologne floated in the air of the bathroom and it nearly choked me. I held

my breath and brushed my teeth in record time. When I stepped out of the bathroom, Nutty was standing outside the door. I could hear my mom calling me from the bottom of the stairs.

“Do you think you’re sexy enough?” I asked him, taking in the jeans and the sapphire muscle t-shirt and the aviator sunglasses. His *Curve* cologne enveloped my nose again.

“Don’t hate on my swagger,” he said, dusting off his shoulder. “Go on to your room, honey, and put your makeup on. We ‘bout to miss the bus. Oh, and your momma calling you.”

“Yes, ma’am?” I hollered in the direction of the stairs. When there was no answer in ten seconds, I sighed. Mom would kick my butt if I ignored her. Taking off my undershirt and changing my boxer shorts at the same time proved physically challenging, but I managed to do so and grabbed my jeans from the hanger on my closet’s doorknob. “Coming!” I jumped into the denim and threw my shirt over my shoulder as I padded down the hall.

“Huh?” I called out again, to no avail. The rickety stairs that announced every person’s every move squeaked as I ran down them and jumped the last three. Downstairs, mom was sitting on the edge of her bed in her favorite pink satin nightgown with the hole in the fabric at the stomach and her pink night bonnet. She was hunched over and staring at commercials on the 20” television.

For a second, my heart stopped because I thought that she was going through a memory lapse again, one of many side effects of the stroke she suffered. I looked over at the cordless phone on the kitchen counter, in case I had to call Aunt Rachel at work.

“Momma? You called me?” I said, zipping the fly of my jeans and entering her room. Her room had been converted from an extra living room, so it was open and airy. She turned around and smiled brightly at me, her eyes crinkling at the sides.

“You getting ready for school, baby?” she asked as I came over and kissed her good morning on the forehead. “You’re running a little behind this morning.”

“I was up late, for no reason at all. I guess it was just nerves.” I pushed her beige comforter over and sat behind her on the bed. Nutty came down the stairs and fixed his fitted ball cap on his head in the mirror near the front door.

“You’ll be fine. Rachel would be glad to see how good you men look on the first day of high school,” mom said, submitting to my light, mischievous massage. “She’s upset that she had to miss you guys. You know how that job of hers goes. The schedule changes everyday.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said.

“Your baby will be cool, Aunt Gwen,” Nutty said, coming into the room. “I’ll be sure to take good care of him.”

“You do just that, Nutty,” mom said. “Or you’ll have to answer to me.”

“Ooo, auntie,” Nutty said, putting up a fight stance and pretending to block invisible punches in the air.

“On your way home after school, can you guys play these numbers for me?” my mom asked, grabbing a piece of cardboard torn from an old shoe box from her dresser. On it, she had scribbled down five sets of three numbers for the Lotto Pick 3 game. I couldn’t recognize any pattern from the random numbers, but my mom had been playing the lottery for years and followed a strict numbers system that had panned out for

thousands of dollars. This year, though, she had only won few earnings and was entered to win a free car this past March. I knew she believed in the tiniest of blessings and that her system was a blessing of its own, so I played along, even though I wished she would just get blessed with the whole jackpot already.

“Sure,” I said, taking the five-dollar bill she handed to me from her wallet. “Let me put on my shoes so I can get on up out of here and try to make the bus. I won’t be surprised if it’s out there now.” I got up to put on my sneakers that were at the door as Nutty kissed my mom goodbye.

“You all ready?” she called out as I came back for my goodbye. She turned her attention back to the judge show on TV. Nutty went to take watch at the door for the school bus.

“I’m guessing so,” I replied. “High school is high school. What’ll happen will happen.” I wrapped my arms around her back in a hug.

“That’s so optimistic, man.”

“I’m optimistic.” I kissed her cheek. “Take care, momma.”

“Ay, man, I think the bus is coming down the street now,” said Nutty in my direction. I grabbed our backpacks from the sofa and, throwing Nutty his, we both shut and locked the front door behind us.

The high school we went to was called L. Dunbar High School. Built two years ago, it was still relatively new, and it was almost fashionable to be able to use bathrooms whose doors were not riddled with “J.P. was here” and “For good head, call the number below.” Its students had the reputation of being very eccentric, but it was a magnet school, a school for the arts, and artists were generally, well, *kooky*. I made it with my

drawing talents and my excellent academic record. Nutty made it supposedly for his saxophone genius, but he insisted that he didn't give the audition his full attention...just the female judge on the left.

At 7:17 a.m., we pulled up to the school. My heard thumped heavily in my chest and ears at the first-day-of-school jitters caught up with me. But all Nutty could say was how much he looked forward to catching some senior cheerleader's attention.

A few weeks ago, Nutty and I went to Dunbar's open house and new student orientation with our moms. I couldn't get over the fact that it was high school, four years from college. It was surreal to be there. It was easy to learn the school's floor plan, so maneuvering Dunbar's four floors was not going to bother me. On the contrary, getting down those crowded stairs and to my locker in the space of five-minute class changes worried me more because I loathed being late. I didn't even like walking into the room while the bell was ringing. It was something about all of that attention, too, that a person received if they were the last one to come into a room. To me, it was equivalent to getting to church late, after the opening hymn, and having to walk down the church aisle with all of those eyes and having to sit in the front, nearly beside the pastor. Nutty said there I was, being all "focused" again. I vowed to be more easygoing like Nutty because he wouldn't be there in all of my classes like he was in middle school.

We followed the assembly in through the main entrance doors. The hallway was bright, but smaller than we remembered from orientation. The two hundred surrounding laughing, hugging, and chattering students was perhaps the reason for the hallway shrinkage. The air smelled like...*school*, an unidentifiable blend of books, breakfast, mold, and sweat. I wanted to go straight to my first block class, but Nutty wanted to

socialize and “post the wall” for a little while before he went. We agreed to meet beside the drink machines in the cafeteria before our lunch block at 12:30 so we could sit together at lunch. After giving each other a fist bump, I was immediately swarmed into the moving crowd. I reached out and grabbed onto someone’s backpack by mistake; luckily, the guy didn’t notice because he was busy screaming, “What up, nigga?” to a nearby friend.

I changed paths to try to magically weave through the throng towards the staircase. I passed the in-wall trophy cases that housed Dunbar’s sports teams’ various championship trophies, plaques, banners, and medals. Dunbar was known around the state to have the best student athletes, and I had heard that the girl’s basketball team went all the way to nationals last year. Tough-looking security guards stood against the wall across from the glass cases and I nodded acknowledgment at one albino-looking officer whose eye I caught and who wore a white muscle t-shirt and an intimidating frown. The guard smiled, and I didn’t know the smile wasn’t targeted for me until a huge varsity jacket-clad football player came up to the burly guard and started wrestling the guy playfully.

I got stuck between a column and a black girl with a red, and I do mean *red*, weave and a guy wearing a doo-rag. They were tonguing each other down like they needed the air in each other’s mouths. Tuning out the nasty slobber sounds, I blinked and glanced up at the clock. 7:24 a.m. I tried to feign casualty as I looked at my class schedule in my binder to make sure I would not go to the wrong classroom...way worse than just getting to class late. First period, geometry, Dr. Walters, room 302. I jumped

back into the mob to travel again towards the stairs before the warning bell rang and the national zoo gravitated.

In every available space were clear cliques of people. The administrators during orientation failed to mention the bona-fide and, by the looks of it, *successful* “food chain.” I guess they wouldn’t have. I wondered where I would end up versus where Nutty would be. The idea had never bothered me before then.

The football players, historically towards the top of most high schools’ totem poles, were rowdy in the middle of the hall, some wearing their varsity jackets, despite the day’s projected high temperature of 96 degrees. Some held gym bags with the Dunbar school symbol and some were just big and obviously defensive linemen or something like that. The group of girls nearest the players had to be the cheerleaders because of the barely-there denim skirts, excessive make-up, and ribboned ponytails. Every so often, one of the girls would get felt up and ass-tapped by a football player, and the entire group of ladies would squeal loudly and pretend insult.

Next to them were the yearbook and school newspaper squads, furiously scribbling on pads, interviewing the students, and taking paparazzi pictures. A group of “alleyoops” of the extreme ghetto variety wore identical airbrushed “R.I.P. Boobie” shirts to their knees and rolled dice in a corner. There were studious students in shirts and ties who, at first, I thought were a part of the Nation of Islam, but who I came to realize were probably involved with student government. They were collectively staring at an argument that had begun between two chicks wearing the same short sundress across the hallway. The arguing girls pointed their fingers into each other’s faces and cursed with fingernails as long as the fingers that held them. Blasts of “You ain’t gon’ do shit!” and

“Fuck you, bitch!” pierced the air and the hallway miraculously silenced off and listened in. The couple who had been kissing, or, rather, breathing in each other’s carbon dioxide, stomped over to the scene, and the red weave girl started fussing at a girl with blue and brown hair styled in like a rooster. I wondered where Nutty was about this time, but the hallway was too full of bodies moving in towards the fight that there was no way I could go back to find him.

Above the shrill arguing on the second floor, there were a group of guys with the school colors, maroon and baby blue, painted on their faces. I could just imagine them at football games, bare-chested in the cold and shouting at every play, the more school-spirited bunch. They were hanging banners and dropping paper clips off the balcony, targeting teachers’ coffee cups, and laughing hysterically.

I had seen enough. I finally got enough space to squeeze behind a column to round the corner to the stairwell. A group of four students, all of a “foreign” ethnicity, stood back away from everybody. They huddled almost behind another column, seemingly nervous of the “hood rat” spectacle, and I didn’t blame them. Five gothic kids stood on the bottom stair and glared at me in menace as I muttered, “Excuse me” to get past them. In the hall, somebody shouted, “Oh, shit, they fighting!” and I heard security guard whistles and shouts of “Everybody go to class!” as I jogged up the stairs, away from the chaotic clamor.

## CHAPTER 4 No Easy Stairs

During the summer before sixth grade, Nutty and I were going through an “I’m-bored-everyday” phase that had to have driven our mothers crazy. They chose to ignore our complaints because they were getting ready for a state-wide gospel choir concert in Roanoke in September. My mom and Aunt Rachel were together often, practicing at our house, their operatic mezzo-soprano voices floating out to the garage and the backyard where Nutty and I aimlessly played.

Nothing kept our attention for long. There weren’t any other kids our age outside to compete with. Everyone had either gone to the beach or the pool or to HarborFest that particular July day, the annual food and drink maritime festival Norfolk holds to celebrate what Aunt Rachel says is the celebration of black folk from Africa to build the world. It was not exactly her or my mom’s cup of tea.

Not even racing could quench our boredom because it was too hot, and the juice with light sugar that my mom loved to buy hardly deposited enough energy into our pubescent bloodstreams. Our mothers didn’t want to hear about our not being able to find something to do and threatened us with sitting in church all day if we kept moaning and groaning about everything. Nutty and I decided to chill in the garage with some cherry popsicles, out of the sun and away from the songbirds.

We dribbled the soccer ball that we had found in my dad’s shed as we played a game of one-on-one with my makeshift basket, constructed from a plank of wood, a big nail, and an old basket that previously held my mom’s bathroom magazines. The soccer ball hit the garage floor with a thud because it was going flat and we had to dribble extra hard, which took up more-than-necessary energy. Nutty kept throwing air balls and it

would bounce out into the backyard, into the sun and the heat.

Once he hit the last air ball, I stopped chasing it and we both just collapsed onto the cool garage floor on our backs.

“You musty,” Nutty told me, licking his arm.

“Your breath stinks. And that’s disgusting, you bastard,” I replied, sitting up and taking a swig of juice from a maroon water bottle.

“I taste like salt,” Nutty replied, his red mouth even redder from the popsicle. He looked over at me. “Lemme have some more of that. I’m thirsty.”

“You already drunk the last bottle straight down,” I said, but passed the bottle to him anyway. I listened as a muffled Aunt Rachel hit a high note, the vibrato beautiful, but...*loud*. Nutty finished off the bottle and stood up.

“I got an idea to try,” he said. He walked over to a corner of the garage and pulled out the long, thick, linked dog chain that we had kept for Minks, my mom’s chow, before she ran away when I was six. Or, at least, my mom had said Minks ran away. I think she had just died and somebody had gotten rid of the carcass before I had come home from kindergarten. I don’t know why my mom didn’t think I understood how death worked.

“What’chu gonna do with that chain?” I stood up as Nutty came over, the chain stretched out taut behind his back as he held each end out. He kicked the water bottle into a corner near the steps.

“You remember that game we played at Relay Day last year?” he said. “To see how high you could jump over the moving rope?”

“Um, yeah,” I said, trying to grab the chain from around his back. He ducked me playfully and moved backwards.

“Well, let’s do it. It’s my idea, so I get to turn. You get to jump.”

“I don’t feel like it,” I said. “It’s too hot. You drunk up my juice and my mom said I couldn’t have anymore today. Why don’t *you* jump first? And...that’s a *dog chain*. It’s too heavy.”

“We’ll do it in the garage, duh. You scared, huh?” Nutty replied. “You already musty, so it doesn’t matter.” I chuckled and pushed him in the shoulder.

“Punk. I bet I’d jump higher than you, anyway.” I took my stance, ready to jump, as he unraveled the chain. He took an end of it and laid it out across the floor.

“I’m gonna take you down,” Nutty said. “Ready?”

“Who’s keeping time?” I replied.

“Me. Five minutes.”

Before I could react, Nutty started swirling the dog chain in a circle right above the floor and I easily jumped over it before the chain touched my feet. He spun twice more at that height and moved up a few inches.

“Don’t cheat,” I breathed out. “Don’t get dizzy. Don’t pass out.”

“Don’t touch the chain, punk,” Nutty called back. I cleared the next swoosh under my feet and the next. Nutty lifted the chain yet again and I was jumping higher and higher.

“I’m gonna beat you!” I yelled out. Nutty was standing nearly at full height and speeding up, and I began barely to get over the chain when it passed under me. “Slow down! You cheating!” Nutty laughed as he spun faster.

My foot clipped the chain when I jumped the last time and I landed on the side of my sneaker, which brought me down to the ground. It took three seconds for the spinning

links to come back to me. I screamed as the chain slapped me in the head and began wrapping around me like it was unraveling. It wrapped and wrapped out of Nutty's hand until the last end that he was holding snatched away and gave a final twack against my forehead.

I sat there in a daze with the chain all around my head and shoulders, and Nutty was laughing so hard, he was in a stooped position on the floor and trying not to fall over.

"Help me, man," I said, trying to untangle myself and holding back hurt tears. "I might be bleeding. My head hurts. God, this hurts."

"Oh, that was *so* crazy how it did that!" Nutty said, coming over to me and pulling the chain from around my head.

I made seizing noises with my teeth as I put my hand up to my forehead and looked for blood. I was okay, but my head throbbed. "I could have brain damage. I feel like I'm bleeding. Ooo. Am I turning pink?"

"Oh, I'm bleeding, help me," Nutty mimicked in a high-pitched voice.

"Somebody call the doctor. I've lost my brain!"

"Shut up, you asshole," I said. "You're lucky I don't beat you up for that right now. You cheated!"

"I did not," Nutty said laughingly. "You just lost!"

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Cara's pudgy face nearly kissed mine when I peeled my eyes open and yawned in the dimly-lit room. The distinct morning breath from her gaping mouth encircled my nose, and I wrenched my head back away from her.

"Mmm," came her high-pitched, muffled moan of complaint. She swallowed and

her mouth fell back open on the pillow with a vocal release of bitter air.

“God, Cara,” I said. My voice was deeper in the morning and the words struck the ceiling of the otherwise silent room like a sonic boom. “How long have you been in this bed?” She didn’t respond and I pushed her lightly on her forehead. Cara did her annoying squealy kid-moan again, apparently to tell me to shut up. I lifted my head up from my pillow to glance over at the bedside clock: 8:07 a.m. The early autumn rays glared in through the window, blasting past my open curtains and oozing in between the cracks in my blinds. My room was going to warm up pretty soon. Because it sat on the backside of the house, the ventilation wasn’t the best and my bedroom was often hotter than the rest of the house.

I sank back to my flat pillow when I remembered that it was Saturday, but realized just as quickly that I had given Ms. Perkins my word last Wednesday that I would mow her lawn this morning. There was no way to go back to sleep, but I felt reluctant to leave the bed. For one, I knew that my mom and Aunt Rachel would be wide awake, with the help of Folgers coffee, and talking...about...*everything*. For another, I knew that they were going to be doing the weekly household budget. I still had not found a way to get a job outside of the junkyard without mentioning my age, and doing little chores like mowing lawns and gardening and washing cars had only netted me a mere \$20 this week.

It was getting harder and harder. No one wanted to give up their hard-earned money, and some of my normal “clients” didn’t even have a job themselves to hire me for mindless work. They did their chores themselves, leaving me out of money. It had become nearly impossible to convince strangers that I was sincere in what I did. People

had become so skeptical and untrusting and *cold* in the recession. And begging for work felt too poor to me. I wasn't homeless--just going broke. That reminder was what I tried to avoid every Saturday because we seemingly had less and less every week to spread amongst bills and food for everybody. It was a disturbing feeling.

My second week in high school had been beyond rough. This past Monday, I had my first test in earth science class. I understood it to focus on rocks or whatnot, but I had completely underestimated little old Mrs. Brown and her intensity. Not only did she include information on the test from four assigned chapters, and not just the three that I had studied for, but she also incorporated essay questions with tricky, borderline-subjective answers based on the boring discussions from day one of class that no one participated in but Mrs. Brown and Dexter Rose, Mr. I'm-valedictorian-of-the-ninth-grade. Nutty told me to ignore him, but something about that guy irked me. I may have viewed him as a challenge, someone to run up against my straight-A average.

On Tuesday, I got bit by a swarm of late-season mosquitoes while coming out of class and loading the bus after school. I spent the evening soaking cotton balls with isopropyl alcohol and rubbing them onto my arms vigorously with my fingernails. I woke up with welts from my fingernails.

On Wednesday, I had a better day, but the lunchroom food just disappointed me. High school was a wonder to me in that we were served lukewarm French fries in white fry packaging and spicy chicken patty sandwiches in foil every single day. Even though I only got five minutes to cough the food down after standing in the lunch line for 15 minutes because I got skipped by all of the seniors in my lunch block, eating fries every day was cool. My mom insisted on choosing amongst the overcooked or reheated

vegetable of the day, but what she didn't know couldn't hurt her. But by the time I reached the food choices, the lunch lady announced that they were all out of fries and chicken sandwiches for the day, but had a tasty tuna casserole dish or a ham soufflé surprise. That night, Nutty gave me a black eye with his elbow while we wrestled playfully on the floor and Aunt Rachel had to give me some of her prescription painkillers to alleviate the soreness.

The pills knocked me out and caused me to wake up too late on Thursday. Nutty insisted that he shook me numerous times to get me up, but that I kept telling him to go away. I missed the school bus and had to take the city bus downtown, which took up the entire first block. Because I was a fanatic about punctuality, my coming into homeroom with ten minutes to spare until the end of it, with a black eye at that, made me feel like crap for the rest of the day.

After school on Thursday, I got a whiff of how much financial trouble we all were dipped in. I eavesdropped on my mom and Aunt Rachel at the kitchen table in the morning talking in hushed tones about the hundreds of dollar increase in the power bill because of the increase in energy and people in the house and heat because of the cool weather. Aunt Rachel hissed a lecture to my mother about accepting collect calls from my dad. My mom always made it a point to conveniently let me know how he was faring in jail when I could give a rat's ass if he dissolved into the cell block floor. I kept those thoughts to myself, though, just to keep my mom from getting upset and/or hitting me. I knew that we were already stretched to capacity with the bills and the mortgage, so there was no way that an increase in *anything* could keep us in the green. To ward off the panic I started to feel, I had a tea party with Cara.

On Friday, I almost literally got thrown into a locker. Nutty was macking to some chick after school and told me he'd catch up with me at the house. We always walked together to the buses, just because of the power in numbers and because he had the muscle mass and strength that I so apparently genetically lacked. The hallways existed in their usual everyone-walk-sideways-to-move crowdedness at the end of the day. To make the space that much smaller, a wide receiver named Joseph Communion was in the middle of the hall with a couple of his football-playing buddies, passing out flyers to vote him Homecoming King, which was actually still a month away. Joseph was a sophomore-junior who drunk way too many Red Bulls in a day and must have had a personal point to prove after he had been allegedly bullied throughout middle school and took it out through football by making the varsity squad in his first year in high school. Rumor mill said he could really run, which actually made the bully story more credible.

As I squeezed past him and his friends in the hall, Joseph pushed a flyer into my face, giving me no choice but to grab it so that I could have my full vision back as I walked.

“Vote for me, nigga,” Joseph called out to my back. I nodded, just in case he was talking to me, and kept maneuvering towards Hall D where my locker stood. When I reached the top of the hallway, I balled up the yellow flyer and nonchalantly tossed it in because I had enough paper to keep up with as it was. Everyone else was just letting the flyer fall from their hands to the floor, but I had enough home training to at least throw the paper in the trash.

When I touched my locker, I looked to my left and saw Joseph stomping down the hall, his black eyes directly on me and his lips turned up in a snarl. My muscles

immediately tightened up in my legs and I almost patiently waited for him to walk up and punch me. A tiny glimmer of hope in me knew that it wasn't me he was after, that his eyes had just gotten stuck on me on his way to beat up another defenseless young man near me. Besides, I didn't know that Joseph just went around punching people out of nowhere. I looked around drastically for Nutty...or for that other young man. The hallway was busy with moving kids, but the moving kids did notice Joseph and looked at me in amusement or pity or alarm as they moved away, but not too far away to miss a front row seat to an unscheduled fight.

As a last-minute instinct, I planted my feet and turned to face my locker fully instead of facing Joseph head-on, so that he could clock the side and not my whole face. I didn't want my mom to have to take me to the hospital for a bruised or broken nose. I didn't want that type of pain. Wincing as he shoved another flyer into my face, I nearly dove out of my skin when I heard his voice spew into my ear.

“Why you throw dis away, nigga?” he asked. I didn't want to look right at him in defiance, but I didn't want him to think I was intentionally disrespecting him by not acknowledging his presence, either. I settled for somewhere in between glancing quickly in his general direction and looking down at my feet. In my peripheral vision, I saw that Joseph had bad forehead acne and a fat vein jumping out of his neck. I didn't know *what* that meant, but the thing was pretty unsightly. His face was actually shaped like a bulldog's, but what made me almost laugh out loud was that his voice had a surprising tone like that of Chris Tucker, the funny actor from the three “Rush Hour” movie installments.

“I’m...uh...saving the earth?” I answered. It came out more like a question out of my nervousness.

“Don’t be funny,” Joseph said. “You should keep dis.” He shook the flyer that still dangled in front of my face. I wiped away sweat that had formed on my upper lip and took the flyer in my hand. Joseph still held onto it in a death grip.

“I don’t need a flyer to tell me that you’re the best candidate for the position,” I said with a swallow. A couple of people around me booed, either at my attempts to suck-up or at the lack of fighting.

“Hold still.” He sat the flyer on top of my head, like it was a balance beam, and I stood very still amidst the surrounding laughter, slightly afraid that Joseph would punch me if it slid to the floor. I became quite aware of all of the freshmen horror stories I had been fed over the years and the freshman bully movies I turned away from on HBO. I prayed that this incident wouldn’t turn into an ongoing feud with me as the victim and having to learn “defensive yet peaceful” martial arts from an Asian fellow who could hardly speak English. If Nutty saw me in that state of oppression, we would have both been suspended, him for sticking up for me, and me for defacing school property when I jumped into my locker myself to hide from Joseph and from my mother’s fury when she heard about everything. “You know I can kick the shit outta you, right?” He sneered.

“Yep,” I said, my neck feeling cramped from holding the air-light paper in balance on my head. Several kids walked by close to us and snickered. Joseph pushed me in the shoulder as people normally did while joking: only this one stung. The flyer flipped to the floor.

“Get outta hea, lil smart-ass nigga. I ain’t missing the bus for dis shit. I’m just

playing wit yo scary ass.” I watched as he strolled back down the hallway, slapping a girl on the butt on the way to the bus ramps. She scoffed.

My face burned in humiliation as I struggled to do the combination to open the locker that I would not have been able to fit into anyway. I was slim, but not skinny. The small crowd that had anticipated a fight between me and Joseph began to fizzle up. A couple of people laughed and jeered in my direction and ran through such choice phrases as “punk-ass nigga,” “pussy,” “bitch,” and “damn-Joe-almost-choked-lil-dude-out-but-it-wouldn’t-have-been-me.” I ran through the possibilities. Joseph performed for his audience as a tactic to establish dominance. Like a dog. Because I understood that philosophy, I felt bad for the guy. Unfortunately, the people around me weren’t that smart because they laughed at me, not at Joseph. I got my locker open after two rounds of the combination and thought some more about what Joseph had called me. “Smart-ass” had two positive connotations, as far as I was concerned. I knew that he didn’t just try to insult me here. I *was* a smart guy.

Convincing myself that I had, indeed, gotten the best of Joseph, I chuckled, despite my embarrassment, and hurried to make it to the bus. Before leaving my locker, I reached down and picked up the flyer from the floor. “All this for a piece of paper,” I muttered to myself. It had a black and white print of Joseph on the sidelines of the football field, signing some cheerleaders’ autographs. Or, that’s what it was supposed to portray. The three cheerleaders practically hung off of Joseph’s broad shoulders as he grinned like he was signing his check after winning the lottery, ink pen posed in mid-air. Above the picture was the headline “Vote Joseph Communion HOMECOMMING KING.” Under the photo was the sub-headline “The King is Back!” which confused the

hell out of me. Joseph was calling himself “The King?” I wondered where had he *gone*, exactly, besides juvy at some point or another. It would have made more sense for him to be dubbed “The Pastor” or “The Preacher” or something, looking at his last name.

I shook my head and set my mouth in a firm line. I would proudly be a “smart-ass” to a guy who spelled “homecoming” with two “M’s.” I passed a teacher as I ran towards the bus ramps. He stood in the doorway to his classroom with crossed arms and had obviously seen the entire confrontation because he followed me in concern with his head and steadily frowned. I shrugged a shaky indifference in passing. Later, I felt strong anger at the shame I received from this grown man who did not help me, didn’t even blink, when I needed him. I recognized that anger as similar to that I felt for my dad.

“Cara, you’re gonna stop sneaking in here at night,” I said to my niece and sitting up in the bed. “Hey.” I put my hand on her side and shook her awake. “Get back in your bed.” Inwardly, I was relieved that Cara was sleeping soundly through the entire night. She usually had nighttime fits and slept wildly, oftentimes ending up in shock on the floor, even after we bunched pillows around her petite body. Mom was upset because she knows Misty smoked and everything else while pregnant with Cara, and she blamed Misty for the baby’s sleep routine.

“Noo,” she said, grabbing at the comforter and attempting to pull it over her head.

“Cara,” I said in my no-nonsense tone. She sat up, ponytails frizzy and barrettes missing. I pointed at my closed door. “To your room.” She nodded and climbed down from the bed to the wooden floor. Cara seized a pillow and let it drop to the floor in her loose grasp. She balled her face up like she was getting ready to cry, but she pried open

my door anyway. I put my head up against the wall behind the headboard. “That’s what you get for clubbing all late last night.”

“None-uh,” Cara said softly. “You was clubbing.”

“I wish,” I returned, hopping up and helping her with the door. “Go on back to bed with that dragon breath.”

“You a dragon,” she said as I shut the door behind her and sighed. I rolled over in the bed onto my right side and onto the pillow that Cara was lying on. My face touched a batch of fresh saliva and I jerked my head up, wiping the side of my face furiously with my hand.

“Thank you, Ms. Cara.” I laid there with my eyes closed for a few minutes and sat up again. I padded over to the window and closed my white curtains since the warmth was making me hotter than was comfortable. I figured that I had better get ready to go to Ms. Perkins’ place.

When I came back from mowing the lawn with the most stubborn grass ever, I met my mom at the mailbox. She smiled at me, but her eyes were drafted and something terribly sad in them, blocking her normal brown’s incredibly tender sparkle. I kissed her cheek and bent my neck to catch her eyes in my own.

“What’s wrong, young lady?” I asked her in a teasing, exaggerated Southern accent. I caught a glimpse of the single envelope that she pulled from the mailbox, a bill with red lettering stamped across it. She tucked it into her well-worn apron pocket before I could read exactly what the lettering spelled. Making a mental note to check for that later, I tucked the twenty dollar bill Ms. Perkins gave me for doing her lawn into my

mom's pocket with the bill and gave her my arm to walk with me back up the driveway to the porch.

"Thanks, baby," she said, forcing a smile, her mouth curled up just at the corners, her cheekbones plump and golden like biscuits. As we walked towards the porch, Cara came running out at top speed down the stairs.

"Chrrrrissss!" she screamed with a grin that was both endearing and genuine, but bewildering and scary at the same time. At three, Cara's baby mouth was too big for her face. Her smile reached nearly back to her ears, resembling a cartoon shark. I couldn't help but laugh at her and knew I would miss that grin when she grew in her permanent teeth. Cara dropped her doll on the walkway and slammed her body into my thighs. She wrapped her little hands around my knees and smashed her head into my legs. I had to purposefully plant my feet to the ground to keep from falling backwards from her weight.

"Cara," I said in between laughs. "I stink. You might wanna take two steps back."

"Ooo," she said, "you smell like poopie." She giggled loudly and got a look from my mom.

"Cara!" mom said. "What did I tell you about those ugly words?"

"Sorry, grandmomma," she said with a sheepish grin. She ran back over to her abandoned doll and cuddled her. I smiled. My sister didn't know what she was missing.

I walked my mom through the tan-colored wooden door into the house after Cara jumped up the porch steps and into the house.

"I'm gonna go shower right quick and come back to play," I told my niece. I patted her head. My mom followed me through the kitchen and Cara reached up to sit in her lap.

“Boy, you need more meat,” my mom joked, poking me in the side of my stomach as I walked by.

“Gee, thanks, mother,” I said, mock-sarcastically. I gave her a big grin and pulled a lottery receipt out of my pocket. I held the block of numbers in the air above her head. “Maybe I should eat these winning lotto numbers, then? Will I gain weight then?” She grabbed the receipt paper from me and laughed. Cara giggled and braided mom’s hair.

“Thanks, baby,” she said, folding the receipt and putting it in another pocket of her apron. I pointed to her pocket where the bill sat.

“What’s that?” I asked. Cara jumped down from my mom’s lap and ran the steps. I pushed her juice cup further up on the table to prevent my hand from knocking it over.

“What’chu talking about?” she asked, scanning the lottery numbers, but ever so slightly shifting in her seat so that the pocket was out of my reach under the table. I slid out of my t-shirt and laid it over the back of a chair.

“Momma,” I said, sitting down adjacent to her at the table and propping my chin up on the heel of my hand. I looked at her in silence, but she found that receipt so interesting.

“It’s just the mail,” she answered, looking away towards the stairs where Cara was playing. “Cara! Get off them stairs!”

“Momma,” I said in a sigh, grasping her nearest hand and squeezing it. “You didn’t raise me to be observant and careful for me to feel like you think I’m stupid right now.” I forced a smile and she half-grinned back. He waved a fly that had come in through the open window away from her face.

“It’s the mortgage, that’s all,” she said, reluctantly pulling her hand away. Her smile was replaced by a lippy frown, her eyes downcast, that twinkle gone again. She simultaneously gripped the tabletop and back of the chair and pushed herself up to her feet. “Gotta get some juice. I feel a little funny.”

I stood up with her slow movements and stretched. “What was written in red on that bill?” I blurted out, folding my arms in a soft defiance.

“What was...*red*?” she replied slowly, opening the fridge and peering in.

“Momma!” I said, slapping the fridge handle out of her hand. It closed with a slam. I reached around her hip and snatched the bill out of her pocket before she could object. Moving away so that she wouldn’t hit me, I sat on the countertop and unfolded the paper. “How do you expect me to be a man and not...” I started, then paused. The bill from the bank read a scarlet-colored overdue balance from last month of \$702.40, in addition to a late fee and October’s due mortgage payment. My mom strolled back over to the table and leaned her head over it in prayer.

“Ohmigod,” came my voice from my mouth. I stared at the paper and read all of the print, and I had to blink to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. It had my mom’s name on it and our address, so it didn’t belong to the neighbor’s, as my heart hoped. I looked at mom who had moved back to hanging on the fridge door handle and staring at the tiled floor.

“Momma, what happened?” I jumped down and stood beside her hunched figure. She shook her head in dismissal. “I thought we agreed we would work out finances together? Isn’t that why Aunt Rachel moved in? So we wouldn’t struggle?” I put my fingers up to my lips as I read some more of the fine print. “I, uh, I’m not sure...I...I

thought we paid the mortgage last month?” I racked my brain for a memory of mom writing the check and I suddenly felt a headache coming on.

Vividly seeing that morning when mom, Aunt Rachel, and I congregated in our normal positions at the table with the bill caddy and bill book open between us, it had become our routine since mom started getting sick last year. Even when Aunt Rachel, Nutty, and Cori wasn't living with us, Aunt Rach still came over weekly and helped mom with the bills and made dinner when mom wasn't feeling the best. The mortgage, gas, cable, power, and medical invoices were usually paid at the beginning of the month. I remembered giving mom all of the money I had earned at the junkyard and doing chores for people to go towards the mortgage and she wrote out the check in front of me. Aunt Rachel came by that next day and she and mom went to pay the bills and shop for groceries. And mom came back with bags of groceries...but the bank said the mortgage wasn't paid.

“I gave some to Misty,” mom said quietly. She sat in a chair with a thump and seemed to slump down to Cara's height. I heard her, but didn't hear anything but all of the air and the entire world's sounds suck out of the room. The oxygen felt like it had been cut off and I started coughing.

“Eww,” Cara shouted from the stairs.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said, struggling to take deep breaths and shaking and scratching my head. “You saw Misty? When did you see Misty?” I wasn't sure if I should have felt excitement at mom and Misty's reunion or still pissed about the mortgage. I decided to go for an emotion somewhere in between the two extremes. “Did ya'll talk?

It's...it's been a long time. I mean, I..." I stopped short when I noticed mom shaking her head.

"I haven't seen Misty," she said, clasping her hands together on the tabletop. She sighed loudly, like she didn't want to tell me, but knew she had to. "I sent the money it to the house." I felt my eyes widen and I grabbed the closest countertop. A buzz roared in my ears like the ringing din of an idle computer. The room did one revolution and screeched to a stop. My feet went numb in my socks, an invisible feeling like I was disappearing from feet up and now standing on my ankles.

"Momma..." I said sternly, then stopped to breathe. I opened an overhead cabinet, took out a cup, and pushed the cabinet door a smidgen, just so it could shut itself with a loud clap. I slapped the cup down on the counter and turned to mom, summoning a calm approach. "You sent all of the mortgage to..."

"Not *all* of it," she interrupted, looking up at me angrily. "Just three hundred."

"Ohmigod, ma," I said. I crouched down in front of her and took both of her hands in mine. She looked everywhere but straight at me. "Momma. You sent *three hundred* dollars...to...a...*crack house*? Was it cash or a check?" I blinked and tried to stare into her eyes with intent, hoping against hope that she was joking. She kept shifting her gaze.

"I made the envelope out to Misty," she said defensively. "It shouldn't have mattered if it was cash or not. Cara needs shoes and was crying the other day about her jacket that the little girl down the street ripped. I knew their momma didn't have the money."

“Neither do we!” I screamed, standing up. “Cara lives with *us*! Why didn’t you tell me this before now? Before this bill came in here all late!” Cara looked around from the stairs into the kitchen in alarm, the tea cup she had posed in midair, her shirt wet from the water she was playing in. I closed my eyes and lowered my voice. “You’re not wrapping your brain around this concept, ma! Misty lives with *eight other* people. Anybody could’ve taken that money and run. It’s a crack house! You just helped *them* hit the lottery.” I looked pleadingly into her eyes.

“It’s not a crack house,” she said, looking away from me. Her voice was breaking.

“Momma, don’t play dumb,” I said quietly. “Think about it. *You* know about Misty’s habits. You knew before I did.” Her eyes filled with tears as Cara crawled into the kitchen like a baby.

“It’s starting to rain outside,” Cara said softly while still holding a concerned gaze in our direction.

“We’re supposed to be in this together, mom,” I said low to her, then addressed Cara. “Little lady. Go and watch cartoons in the den until I take a shower. We’ll make dinner after that, okay?”

“You’re still stinky,” Cara asked, her bushy eyebrows jiggling up and down.

“You stink, too,” I said, leading her to the den and turning to the Disney channel. “Just because you’re a kid.” When I went back into the kitchen, my mom sat at the table stoically. I poured orange juice into a cup, put it on the table in front of her, and kissed her on the forehead. I dropped the twenty bucks I earned earlier on the table, nearly in her lap. I jumped the first three stairs and walked up the rest, all energy zapped from my entire body. I prayed that my shower could cleanse me and help me think.

Mom had always had the best intentions, which was a gift and a curse. But ever since the stroke, she had been doing some weird things. Not only was wearing her clothes inside-out a problem, but she easily forgot the boiling water on the stove for tea and she became jumpy, scared at the slightest sound or sudden touch, as if someone popped the bubble around her. I feared leaving her alone with the notion that she would fall asleep while cooking and burn down the house. Or worse, she would suffer a drop in blood sugar and fall into a coma. Or even worse...I didn't like thinking about what could happen in my absence, especially with Cara in her care. In my absence, she did suffer a stroke, after all, and I still felt incredibly guilty about that. I promised to never to let something like that happen to mom again and I did all I could to protect her.

Her sending the money with Cara would have been wiser than mailing money to the house. There was no telephone there to reach Misty, and I felt enraged at the idea that three hundred bucks was getting smoked up or shot up into some random person who had just stopped through for a *visit* at that very moment. Our three hundred dollars, the money I could have used for a winter coat and groceries and whatever Cara needed. I punched the wall of the shower over and over with the heel of my hand as the water drowned my ears. I didn't know what to think. Nutty would say I was overreacting. But I didn't know if I could trust in giving my mom money anymore. It was a hard thought to consider, but I didn't know what else she was not paying. And I could only hope that she held onto the other four hundred due towards the mortgage. Or paid it, like she was supposed to. The fact was, that could be gone, too. I made a mental note to ask.

The bills would continue to arrive in the normal monthly, steady, predictable flow. I knew I had to make a way *yesterday*. I should have seen it all coming. Mom's

fixed income only covered almost the amount of two months' worth of mortgage payments. There was no cushion. We had to struggle just to feed more mouths for the rest of the month and handle the other bills. And with Aunt Rachel losing her job, it got that harder. The reminder made my hands tremble and I dropped the bar soap on the shower's wet floor.

I watched the miniscule soap bubbles float and get pushed into the drain, fragments of a large mass, interrupted in their otherwise sedentary position. I yearned to go with them. Putting my head against the wall under the showerhead, the warm water blasted the back of my neck, but released no tension. I closed my eyes and took deep breaths. I just had to *think*.

One answer was to go over to the house and find out if, indeed, Misty received the money. I didn't want to because of the atmosphere, but I had to have that reassurance. Maybe I could bargain some type of deal where she could pay us back because I just knew that, if she did get it, the money was gone by now, brought away for temporary pleasures that blackened lungs and scrambled minds. I could definitely get more aggressive in my search for a job. If I got one, maybe I could get two jobs, and skip some days at school. I could make flyers to advertise my versatile skills with planting and mowing and babysitting and putting up tile and hanging curtains...*anything* to offer a service and get someone's attention. Or his or her sympathy. I knew there was money out there for us.

Coming up with viable options made me feel a little less angry at my mom and I no longer wanted to drown myself in the stream of water that was starting to make my

skin feel waterlogged and heavy. I finished showering, wrapped a towel around my waist, and padded to my room, wet footprints tracking behind me, an imaginary man.

I heard giggles before I reached my room and I stopped at the door and heard Cara noisily rustling my sheets. I waited a few seconds until she became quiet, then threw the door open and, putting my hand on top of the covers, screamed, “Rrrah!” Cara flipped the covers down from over her head and gave a hysterical yell of horror, then burst into loud sobs with no tears.

“Oh, you punk,” I said, laughing at Cara despite my frustrations. She reached up for me to pick her up. “I can’t hug you right now. I’m all wet. Why are you up here and not downstairs watching television, like you were supposed to?”

“Grandma sleep,” she said between whimpers. “She said it was okay.”

“Was she cooking before she laid down?” I asked quickly, sniffing the air and tightening the towel around me in case I had to race downstairs. She shook her head.

“Hungry,” she said, plugging her thumb into her mouth.

“Stop that,” I said, slapping her hand away from her mouth. “You don’t suck your thumb. Where did you learn that?” She laughed and wiped her moist thumb on the pillow behind her head, much to my inward cringe. I had stashed a particular men’s magazine under the pillow where her little face now smiled up at me. This past August’s issue of *Black Tail* lived there with the “Forty Best Bikini Bodies,” thanks to Nutty—something too mature for even my eyes, let alone Cara’s.

“Okay, up, up,” I instructed, pulling back the covers away from her. She screeched and covered up her little body with her arms like she was naked. The magazine

came into view and I scooted it slightly back under my pillow without alerting Cara to its place. She giggled, covering her mouth bashfully.

“Let me get dressed so I can come down and feed you, please.” I pointed to the door.

“Aw, man,” she said, jumping down from the bed and slowly filing out of the room. I shut and locked the bedroom door behind her, even though I was well aware that the lock on the door didn’t catch most of the time.

“God, do we even have anything to eat?” I asked myself out loud as I rummaged in my drawer for boxer shorts. There was Hamburger Helper, but the possibility of no hamburger meat. I considered if it could be made without meat, then I thought of the hot dogs I saw earlier. There were no buns, but there was a loaf of white bread in the breadbox.

“We had hot dogs yesterday,” I mumbled, drying off and slipping on boxers, basketball shorts, and an A-shirt. Suddenly, panic gripped me when I thought about Cara running up and down those loose steps and them collapsing under her, sending her small frame falling into the basement or into an unseen hole under the house. She was too small to hop those last three into the kitchen. I yanked open my bedroom door.

“Cara?” I called out loudly in the direction of the stairs. There was silence and I made my way down the hallway. A skittish gust of giggles traveled from the bathroom when I walked by. I sighed.

I knew I had to find a way to get those stairs fixed, too. The idea of my niece getting hurt on them enforced my headache and I grabbed a bottle of pain medicine from

the cabinet and put them in the back pocket of my shorts. I picked Cara up and she talked a mile a minute about spaghetti and breadsticks as we went down the stairs together.

## CHAPTER 5 Sunday Gospel

It seemed like sitting at the table meant we were in trouble. Only then, while trying to squeeze in beside Aunt Rachel's hip and Cori's leg, did I realize the lack of table space indicated that our family had, indeed, grown in size instantly. Nutty slid the ripped, maroon armchair behind momma's seat at the table that she had declared trash a month ago and had never taken to the sidewalk for the garbage men to pick up. Cara sat on momma's lap and looked like she was angled oddly towards the table because of momma's round stomach and chest. I slumped down in my chair between my aunt and cousin and exchanged middle fingers and fists with Nutty behind Aunt Rachel's back. Cara started giggling at Cori's funny faces—they had become close quickly and I felt a twinge of...jealousy? Defense? I couldn't name the emotion, but I shrugged it off. In the middle of her talking to momma, Aunt Rachel caught me using my middle finger to dig up my nose in Nutty's direction and slapped my hand with so much force that my hand crashed to the table.

“Dag!” I said, and Nutty burst out laughing.

“Boy, don't make me slap you!” she said, but she had some humor in the tone.

“I'm so glad ya'll here,” momma said softly, like she had been thinking it and said it out loud by mistake.

“Me too, big sister,” Aunt Rachel said, taking momma's hand across the table. It was a sentimental sight. Mom looked so lonely with her sister's hand in hers and a look on her face that was something of relief and content. I wasn't sure why, at that moment, I felt like running over to mom and holding her tightly. I shared a smile with Aunt Rachel

and a warm wad of wet paper wacked me in the ear. I started scratching at my ear wildly and holding my eyes closed while everyone stared at me like I had gone crazy.

“Nutty!” I hollered.

“Yes, Chris?” Nutty replied with forced innocence.

“What the heck is wrong with you, man?” my mom asked while Cara and Cori started laughing. Aunt Rachel spun in her chair to face Nutty.

“He wadded a spitball at me!” I said, pointing my finger at Nutty. I immediately felt immature and childish because I ruined the tender family moment.

“What! How dare you accuse me of something so disgusting!” Nutty lashed out.

“Ya’ll obviously cannot sit still long enough for us to enjoy one another’s company,” Aunt Rachel said, “so let’s establish some house rules, shall we?”

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We were having a guest over to dinner tonight, sort of like a celebratory event of the familial merging. Aunt Rachel’s longtime boyfriend, Joseph Green, agreed to come over and help prepare the food. A lone daughter who we didn’t even know he had, Cece, was coming along.

I didn’t know much about Joseph, except that we didn’t see him very much, and for good reason, says mom. Joseph carried himself in the way that the world owed him big-time, that his mere existence on earth gave him permission to complain about anything that didn’t revolve around him. The last time I saw him, which was about last summer at Aunt Rachel’s Memorial Day cook-out, he ranted on and on about the white man at the head of the executive table at the Waltney meat factory where he worked, and how the white man looked down on all of the predominately black and Hispanic factory

workers every day through the blinds in his office and sneered and talked bad about them. It seemed like paranoia BS to me. Aunt Rachel always laughed off his tall tales and encouraged him to eat. Momma just rolled her eyes at his ridiculous assertions. We all tried to ignore him at all costs, especially when he insisted that the young kids called him “Uncle Joe.” Nutty would shoot murder out of his eyes at being referred to as a “young kid.”

Everyone took Aunt Rachel’s invitation extension to Joseph differently. When she announced it happily after the first family meeting, we all just frowned and sat looking at one another. No one said a word except Nutty, who cleared his throat almost politely. Even momma seemed quietly disturbed, but didn’t want to show it on her face, so she just smiled and said a forced, “Great! What’s on the menu?” I just figured it was that one time per year when we were forced to be exposed to the oral poison. It didn’t occur to me until I showered for dinner that, now that Aunt Rachel and her children had moved in, all of her heavy baggage made the big move, too.

Joseph took a seat at the head of the table, like this was his house and he were paying the bills. I instantly felt uncomfortable because my dad took that beloved stance, even as he brought his gambling and woman issues to our house. Joseph’s perceived stature was that of a knighted king; his actions were usually that of court jester. Nutty and I sat side-by-side to his right. Cece and Cori sat across from us, and momma and Aunt Rachel shared the top of the table closest to the oven so that they could watch the sweet potato pies they were baking.

Cori managed to get the chair with the one short leg, and she bobbed her head with her body’s rocking motion to the tapping noise of the metal connecting with the faux

tiled linoleum floor. Momma liked to move the chairs around late at night to prevent the conflict of who would sit where at the table and to subject eventually everyone to the punishment of the crippled chair. Aunt Rachel had begged her, in this case, to spare Joseph and Cece from the particular discomfort, just for tonight. Nutty had volunteered to sit beside Joseph and closest to his imminent spew of folly, just so that he could knock him out, I found out later. His mom just thought it was sweet that he was trying to get to know Joseph. Cori and I exchanged glances across the table. We made a silent pact to watch Nutty for the next hour.

Joseph lit the dual candles that stood on gold candleholders in the center of the table, the sickening, rare sentiment promoting Cece to stare at him in disbelief. As if the Christmas tree patterned tie and blue button-down shirt he wore were not enough, Joseph had also scrubbed his fingernails clean and made sure to let everyone who was interested check them out.

“Candles are sensual. Did you know they were invented by a black man?” Joseph said. He stroked his ill-trimmed goatee and rested the lighter next to his plate. “*We* know brainpower and romance.” Cece blinked, and Cori stared down at her beige floral-printed plate that had just come straight out of the Dollar Tree box set of twenty dinnerware and flatware pieces. I wondered if the plates had even been rinsed out before being deceptively presented on the cheap, lacey tablecloth that Aunt Rachel had run out to buy this morning, probably also from the Dollar Tree. The phoniness of it all amused me, and I contemplated slamming my plate to the ground to see if it would magically crackle into 171 pieces.

“Candles weren’t invented by a black man, dad,” Cece said, leaning her head to the side and looking up at the ceiling, as if asking, “Why God?”

“Yes’hun! You don’t know, girl,” he said in the booming tone he adopted when he was forced to defend his more “intelligent” position. Cori and I shared a knowing look, and Cori propped her chin up with her fists. “You can’t talk about what you don’t know. Now, I *would* go into the proof I know of, as an *experienced, black man*, of black candle makers back in the 1800’s, but—he said quickly—“I don’t want to show off too much yet. It’s still early in the evening.” Cece laughed.

“How long you gon’ be here?” Nutty asked Joseph.

“Where did you read about black candle makers?” encouraged Aunt Rachel, and Nutty turned sharp eyes in her direction.

“So you’re admitting it? You just love showing off, don’t you?” Cori said to her dad.

“Oh girl, hush,” he said, waving a dismissive hand in her general direction. “You too young and naïve. Talking and don’t know nothing.” Cori stared at the exchange and shook her head. Aunt Rachel smiled and found great interest in her mashed potatoes. Momma had not uttered one word since we started eating and kept checking on the pies. Nutty face was flushed and looked like he was going to blow.

“Are you going to turn off the lights, Uncle Joe?” Cori asked. “Since the candles are lit?”

“No need, little lady” he said. “We gotta be able to see each other. It’s been such a while. Ya’ll youngins sure enough done grown up quick.” Joseph moved his eyebrows up and down and grinned like a crazy person. Cori glanced at Aunt Rachel and gave her a

straight-lipped smile. Cece took out her cell phone and started texting under her dad's disapproving stare down. The hot wax was running down the sides of the candles at warp speed, as if the inside of the candles had melted into pure fluid and would burst out like a volcano at any second.

Cece sat her cell phone in her lap, the vibration of received messages audible in that familiar "whirring" note. Joseph grabbed the meatloaf dish that was one of his "specialties" from the kitchen counter and put it on the table next to his plate. His belief was that the cook was always served first and was entitled to the most.

I looked at Aunt Rachel and wondered where her head was. I thought back to Joseph's prayer before the food was served.

"May I say the blessing everyone?" he had asked. Both Cece and Cori's heads snapped to him at his end of the table. Even Nutty looked a bit shocked. Momma and I hadn't heard Joseph pray, but I could imagine how the prayer to "Black Jesus" would go. Aunt Rachel, Nutty, Cori, and Cece were usually forced to pray through one of Joseph's highly dramatic monologues of thanks for the trees, various celebrity women, and lima beans, all of which could last up to five minutes long, depending on which season of the month it was, who was on the latest *National Enquirer* hit list of magazine covers, and who cooked the pot.

Everyone joined hands. Nutty visibly winced as he took Uncle Joe's hand. He *performed* the dinner prayer as if it had been rehearsed. Nutty and I watched as Cece didn't close her eyes and, instead, watched Cori's eyelids shake as she struggled to keep her eyes closed, Aunt Rachel mouthing "Yessah" to her man's words, and momma, nodding and thanking God and looking so intensely *into* it. Together. All spiritual and

religious and God-fearing, *together*. In between “Thank you for this food we are about to receive” and “In your name, we pray,” I recognized something of feelings of abhorrence towards Joseph Green. I didn’t like him. He smelled funny, and not in the physical way.

Once everyone had passed around the irresistibly salivate-inspiring “meat-and-taters” dish and dalloped a good size onto their plates, the shallow dinner conversation lagged off and everyone stuffed their faces. But, once the convo started back up, it didn’t get better.

“Tell everyone about your new job, honey,” said Aunt Rachel to Joseph.

“Oh, you know. Handling business. The way a black man should. Making that doe.” Nutty rolled his eyes.

“What kind of business are you involved in?” my mom asked, alarm coming into her voice. I knew what she was thinking: Joseph was involved in drugs. And that just didn’t fly near my mom. Dealing drugs were the closest thing to admitting you worshipped the devil.

“Oh, I’m an entrepreneur,” he answered. “I got a line of businesses downtown.” Cori looked like she was holding in a laugh. Noticing the puzzled look on momma’s face, Aunt Rachel tried to clear up the confusion.

“Joseph is going to have his own restaurant here one day,” she said. “He can cook, as you all can see.” She gestured to the food. I looked up at the ceiling.

“It ain’t all about that, neither,” Joseph said. Oblivious to the eyes on him, he cut up his third helping of meatloaf and continued. “The Man gon’ get you one way or the damn other. Might as well get as much of his money while I can.”

“Daddy.” Cece called out a warning.

“I’m just saying,” Joseph replied. “He gone be coming to my restaurant with that good money and spending it on my greens and my chicken and cornbread. And I’m gone take it and smile in his damn face. But don’t get me wrong. Ain’t no way in hell I’m gone *cater* to him. Best believe that one.” Cece stared so hard into her plate that I thought she was trying to pick it up with mind control.

“For all intents and purposes, your definition of ‘The Man,’ and forgive me for my ignorance, you are referring to the white race, correct?” momma said out the blue, glancing over at Joseph. She took a bite of food from her fork.

“He calls everyone ‘The Man,’ even black people,” Cece said. She rolled her eyes.

“Black people, we ain’t nothing but victims,” Joseph said. He chewed the food in his mouth with nasty cow laziness. “I know you done seen it. Ain’t nothing like the power the whites got over us, back from slavery and when they came and took over Mother Africa. Our asses just here for some color, some chocolate variety in the sugar cookie box.” Cece slammed her fork down on the cheap plate and it made a strange, melodic *clang* sound. She followed it up with a scrap and slap on the floor as she scooted her chair back and stood up. Her cell phone clattered to the floor from her lap.

“That is so *ugh*, Joseph,” Cece said to her dad. All forks were poised in mid-air, waiting for the spectacle to explode. The candlelight flickered. “Why do you say such vile, stupid things, all the damn time? Especially to these people who don’t know you and don’t care to know you and your dumb ideals about everything.” Joseph grabbed for Cece’s arm with a “Commere, girl!” but she backed up and away from the table. I shifted my eyes around the table in concern. Momma wiped her mouth and looked down at her

lap. Cori's eyebrows were up into her forehead and her lips were parted. Nutty looked like he was about to burst out laughing, just as Aunt Rachel looked like she was about to burst into tears. Cece was expressing the frustration that we could all understand she felt about Uncle Joe's racist crap. I could tell she was glad, but seemed scared at the same.

"I can't believe you still haven't learned," Cece said. "Ran my momma off with that mess and still yapping off." She glanced over at Aunt Rachel quickly and looked down. "Excuse me, Ms. Richmond," she said and left the room with her cell phone.

"That girl is damn out of control," Joseph said, shoving forkfuls of food into his mouth so fast that I thought the fork would break off his front teeth. "She lucky I don't kick her little fast ass out." Food flew out of his mouth as he spoke. Cori frowned and covered her plate with her hand. "I told her I ain't paying for no damn college. That's what this shit's all about. She don't even go to no school now. Some school all up north where she can run her hot ass wild and free on my money. Hell naw." He talked more to himself than to his silent, stunned audience. "She gon' help me pay some bills and that damn hot water heater, that's what she gon' do."

I closed my eyes tightly, praying to God to either float me away from the table or wake me up.

"May I be excused?" I asked. Momma nodded, and I picked up my plate and glass from the table, sat them in the sink, and went upstairs. Joseph kept right on eating and mumbling to himself about all the food that was going to waste.

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It hit me that I lived in a house of women when I stared down at the pasted remnants of someone's late night trip to the toilet when I relieved myself in the morning.

I knew it wasn't Nutty's doing because he had left the house last night via the back door and had just come in an hour ago from handling his "business." I loved my cousin, but his so-called "business" interested me like counting books in a library would stimulate me.

I had taken an extra ten minutes to roll around under the quilt momma sewed some years back after Misty had stolen my comforter as her own. The aging mattress groaned under my shifting weight and the loose headboard tapped the wall when I plopped onto my hip. My blue plaid boxers pulled tight around one thigh and slack around the other, and the cool air in the house blasted against my exposed back. I sighed and grabbed at the cover, attempting to pull it over my head. Curling into the same fetal position I held all night, since any other position revealed my feet to the air, it occurred to me that I should go ahead and get my shower for the day. Aunt Rachel promised she rolled out of bed by six every morning and would use up the hot water washing her hair and grooming, making the rest of us wait for hours for the heater to re-warm. Whenever someone turned on the faucet downstairs in the kitchen, the water automatically ran cold, which meant that momma's coffee craving could kick in at any second, including those seconds when I'm basking in the warmth of the shower water. So, waking up at 5:55 a.m., before the rest of the house, felt necessary.

Unfortunately, the only warmth outside of the quilt tepid from my body was heat produced from a hot shower. Getting to the shower meant more minutes of discomfort as I had to dash to the bathroom and wait for the pipes to warm.

I bounced out of bed in a rush to the bathroom, throwing the quilt behind me. As soon as my feet touched the wooden floor, cruddy with dust, I cringed at the shocking

coolness that shot through me. I stuck my fingers into the crack at the door and yanked it open. Once my feet hit the cracked linoleum bathroom floor, I wrung the plastic shower curtain liner aside and turned the hot water on full blast. The hair on my arms and neck stood up as I listened to the water clap in the tub.

When I lifted the toilet seat, I saw the remnants. It disgusted me, not just because mom, Cara, and I had gone from three in the house to six with their own habits, likenesses, beliefs, and personalities, but because no one thought to clean it. I always cleaned up after myself because mom couldn't with her limited mobility and Cara couldn't because of her stature. It had become second nature to act as mom's hands and legs in order to shield Cara from the harm that remained all around our quickly-aging house.

Slapping open the cabinet beneath the sink, I found an old sock that had turned gray from soaking up water from the drippy pipe. I also saw a half-empty liter of bleach, a pink poof, a weathered pack of Q-Tips, a never-opened bottle of alcohol, a stick of gum, two hoop earrings, a long pack of black hair, a bar of Ivory, and bowl cleaner with the pointed top missing, more clues to my women-filled existence. I picked up the bowl cleaner, located the bowl brush behind the commode, and, after dumping what little remained in the bottle along the sides of the toilet bowl, I scrubbed with the brush and flushed. I then rinsed the brush and wiped the seat with toilet tissue. I guess I couldn't expect anyone else to clean yet, but I made a mental note to bring it up to Cori later.

The shower was unusually slippery, so when I stepped in, I had to grab the shower curtain to keep from skidding into the faucet or falling completely out of the tub. I remembered how Misty used to put baby oil in her bath to keep her skin soft, or some

crap like that, and I figured that one of these new women in the house must have employed the same method that they could accomplish just by drinking eight cups of water a day. I located a possible culprit: some expensive-looking jar of oil floating on brown crystals sat on the shower caddy. I wanted to dump it into the toilet since it almost killed me, but if it belonged to Aunt Rachel, she would hang me from a tree.

As I lathered soap onto a washcloth that had tattered edges, I noticed that the crack along the shower wall by the faucet had gotten thicker. Worrying about it was useless. The crack matched the branches in the wall in the downstairs bathroom behind the toilet, the jags coming through behind mom's cheap, oak curio cabinet in the living room, and the holes in the floor tile under the dining room table. The house was becoming a standing minefield. At any rate, anyone could fall through any "sturdy" wall, flooring, or stair. I just didn't want that "anyone" to be my 3-year-old niece.

The house's condition was Christopher Richmond, Sr.'s fault. Somehow he had talked my mom into this fixer-upper five years ago that failed to get fixed after he got himself arrested. Mom's income could not cover the rent of an apartment for the three of us since the price of renting was higher than the mortgage of the house, so we stayed put. I hated the house and contemplated arson on numerous occasions, just so that we'd have a chance to earn the insurance money. After Misty almost nearly burned down the house last year, those thoughts ended and I tolerated the house as it was and repaired what I could.

Inspecting myself in the foggy mirror after stepping out of the shower, I noticed three new hairs on my chin. My facial hair took its time coming in and I watched for its sprouting daily. Nutty thought it was ridiculous of me to wish for facial hair, but he

already had a mustache coming, so I usually ignored his banter. It was my face, and a goatee would look good on me. I picked up the razor that I had hidden in the medicine cabinet behind the cup that held mom's teeth and swiped at my new hairs. Mom always told me that her hair grew back faster after she shaved it, and I figured the same applied for all body hair, male and female. So far, it was effective, as I mapped my weekly hair growth in my notebook under my mattress.

I discerned noise downstairs in the kitchen after I found a t-shirt and clean boxers in my drawer. It was only a little after six, so I figured it had to be Aunt Rachel staying true to her word. It was too early for breakfast, but no one could resist the flavor of maple sausages and buttermilk pancakes once it floated through the air and into our rooms.

Stepping halfway down the stairs, I watched Aunt Rachel from the landing. Something told me she just needed that solitude, that sweet moment before the day began. Darkness still smoothed through momma's cream-colored living room drapes and through the bent and split kitchen window blinds, almost as a theatrical backdrop to Aunt Rachel's performance. She hummed a tune I didn't recognize and pressed buttons on the stove in musical harmony to bring the oven to heat. I sat on the bottom stair, trying to make the least amount of squeak possible, but the wood groaned under my weight. Aunt Rachel danced and a smile threatened to take over my mouth. Her wiggling, heart-shaped bottom swooshed through the air from side to side as she bent over to slide premade cinnamon buns into the oven. When she stood up, her butt stayed up in place, sitting in mid-air above two thick tree stumps of thighs. I held in a laugh that choked my throat and closed my eyes in concentration on not revealing myself.

My eyes shot open when her hums went up another decibel and she pumped her elbows up and down hip-length. She strutted to the refrigerator and her hands emerged holding a cardboard carton of eggs to her mountainous bosom. Her boobs sat, stagnant and cone-shaped, ignorant of the rest of her happy, jiggling body. A violet roller fell from her cascade of multi-colored, rolled-up hair and tapped across the floor near her fat, bare foot. I identified the hums as “Superfreak” by Rick James once she got to the chorus lines and it almost made me give up my hiding spot. She put her hands on her hips and rocked them front and back in a catchy rhythm to the song. Her blush-colored nightgown hardly made its way around her ample hips and hugged her belly and shoulders. The neckline was the only loose part of the gown, and the lacey material hung away from her body in desperation to get away and get air.

She spotted me on the way to retrieve the lost roller and yelped out when we connected eyes. I stepped down from the landing into the light, in case she thought I was a thief and konked me upside the head with an iron pan.

I couldn't hold in my laugh any longer and gripped the fridge for balance as fits of chuckles exploded from my chest. Aunt Rachel covered up her chest with her arms and threw the roller in my direction, missing by a mile. She joined in my laughter thirty seconds later and clutched her face to keep it from cracking, I suppose. I heard the creak of a stair behind me and Cori gawked at me like I had lost my marbles.

“What the heck are you laughing at?” she asked as she squeezed past me into the kitchen. Cori stopped and looked at Aunt Rachel leaning against a counter with the carton of eggs in one hand and her other hand holding her heart. “Ma?”

“Oh, chile,” she cried out. “Chris done scared the sillies out of me!” Her gown swayed against her chubby kneecaps with her body’s thrusts of laughter. We laughed with her until she sighed and turned back to the stove.

Cori turned to me and smiled. It was the first time she had actually smiled at me without malice behind it. It was different. The smile made the hair on my arms stand to attention. Her face was soft, gentle, and gave me the craziest feeling in the pit of my stomach. It felt like dread and...joy. I liked it. But the feeling swept out of the room as like a cold wind.

“That’s the hardest I’ve heard her laugh in a long time,” Cori said, her voice low just so that I could hear. She picked out an apple from the blue bowl on the table and washed it at the sink.

“She was jamming,” I said, and hoped that it didn’t sound weird. Cori’s hair looked worth touching. Silky. As Aunt Rachel smashed eggs open into a plastic microwave bowl with her back to us, I took a short step towards Cori. I wanted to put my arms around her waist and pull her close to me. She turned around and her teeth crunched into the apple. Her face was blank and her eyes were sleepy. I didn’t know what to think, what to feel, what to do. I reached out to her when my momma screamed from her bedroom. Aunt Rachel’s head jerked up at the same time Cori and I whirled towards momma’s room and jogged around the corner to her.

Momma was sitting up in the bed, mopping her brow. Her hair was awry atop her head. Her pink comforter had been thrown aside.

“Momma! What happened?” I said in unison with Cori’s “Aunt Gwen! Are you okay?”

“Just a bad dream, just a bad dream, just a bad dream,” she repeated. I rubbed her leg as Aunt Rachel rushed into the room and put her arms around her older sister. Momma didn’t look strange. She appeared a bit sweaty, as if she had, indeed, woken up from a dream in a deep sleep, but I didn’t know if she acted in this way out of a need for attention. There have been past experiences when mom excited everyone to have something to do, and we all knew it.

“Tell me what you need,” Aunt Rachel said to momma as Cori and I exchanged glances. In the middle of my concern for mom, I noticed that Cori’s shoulder touched my own as we sat on our knees on the edge of the bed. I wanted to slide my arm to feel the warmth of hers, to wrap my arm around hers, to crawl my hand up her shoulder. I shifted my legs and caught myself stuck in mom’s blanket. I hit the floor on my left thigh with a thump. Everyone, including mom, turned their gazes to me like I was drunk. Aunt Rachel ordered me to get mom some water in between her struggles to keep from laughing at me. I mumbled a “sure” and adjusted my growing package in the kitchen while mentally berating myself for thinking about my cousin in that way.

I had to stay away from Nutty’s girl magazines—they were starting to thwart my mind. Every time I thought about Cori now, it was in a sexual way, especially after she took her braids out, got that wire in her mouth taken out, and brought contacts. She was a different girl who was making me feel like a different guy. I figured it would be best to keep my thoughts to myself and keep my urges to the confines of the shower.

Cara stomped down the stairs slowly, fear on her face and tears drying with the white spit lines on her cheeks. I abandoned mom’s water and went over to Cara, lifting her into my arms and asking her if everything was okay. She put her head on my

shoulder, her barrette sticking into my collar bone, but I didn't mind. She whimpered as I rubbed her back and inspected the stairs.

Aunt Rachel walked into the kitchen and yelled, "Uh, hello, Chris! Your mother is overheating in here!"

"Sorry, Aunt Rach," I said, coming into her view. "Cara was coming down here, crying, and..." Before I could finish, Aunt Rachel had taken the glass and the water filter from the refrigerator and stomped back towards my mom's room, dropping a red roller along the way. I sighed and shifted Cara's body on my numbing arm.

Cori came into the kitchen and, seeing me with Cara, walked up to us and touched Cara's cheek. "Wanna come with cousin Cori?" she asked Cori. That word, "cousin," made my lust freeze solid. I felt like a pervert. I had to find a girlfriend.

Cara automatically reached for Cori, and they stepped up the stairs, talking about a tea party at noon. When I came back to my mom, both she and Aunt Rachel were lying in the bed. Aunt Rachel gave me a stern look that said, "Don't say a word," and she rubbed my mom's head. I felt a little out of place and unhelpful, so I went back into the kitchen and stood in the middle of the floor. The scent in the air was smoky.

I went to the oven to rescue burning cinnamon buns. A billow of smoke escaped with the pan and I waved at it. The oven was set at "broil" and I switched it off just as the alarm started a high-pitched, sopranic blaring. Cara screamed "Fire!" from upstairs as Aunt Rachel screamed my name in agitation. The blend sounded like a moved gospel choir. I hoped that every Sunday wasn't as noisy as this one.

## CHAPTER 6

Mom and I didn't get much done in terms of budgeting this past weekend because her blood sugar rose suddenly and I had demanded that she remain in the bed and relax. Any excitement could have granted her a trip to the emergency room, and no one had emergency room money. Aunt Rachel had been out all day on Sunday, trying to find a second job since her position as a medical billing specialist at Sentara Hospital was in jeopardy due to state-wide budget cuts. Cara had been "braiding" Cori's hair, and Nutty was at the basketball court all day. My initial thought was that she had done it on purpose to get out of another verbal lashing about the mortgage money that we would have had, but as soon as the thought had hit me, I felt the sting of regret at thinking so poorly of my mom's character. It was a fact. When she was stressed, her blood sugar suffered, positively or negatively.

Aunt Rachel's debt added to the family pot of distress. Here we were, owing two months' mortgage, Virginia Power, and the gas, water, and phone bills. At the beginning of next month, mom's medical bills and Aunt Rachel's three credit card invoices would be coming in. There was no way two mortgage payments were going to get paid, no matter how much me, Nutty, and Aunt Rachel worked—we just didn't make that much. They were already behind. Virginia Power could wait, but for how long? The phone had been cut off three times in the past and mom complained so badly about the dangers of having Cara here and her medical spontaneities and no phone to dial out for help, if need be. Late credit cards built interest and penalties, and I had overheard Aunt Rachel talking to mom and telling her that she already felt like she had been paying nothing but interest on those for the past year. I knew my bank account balance: \$214.21, which was actually

more money in the bank than some kids I knew. But some kids I knew didn't have bills to pay. I felt like I was getting no help. Everyone was running away when we needed them, but came right back when it was time to eat and sleep.

The bank account amount rang in my ears and colorfully danced behind my eyelids. I popped them open them widely. I recalled the conversation with Mr. Ments, my boss, last week about increasing my hours at the store, but he couldn't afford to pay me any more in the hurting economy. No one was hiring, not even McDonalds, as I had put in twenty-six applications for all types of work around the city. Everyone had their doors closed and locked. No one needed a babysitter or a dog walker. No one needed their lawns mowed because the grass was brown anyway from the past summer's drought. I didn't even own anything of value that I could pawn. Mom wore no jewelry. I didn't even have a television in my room that was sellable.

I took a few deep breaths to try to calm my heartbeat that was roaring like a speeding train in my chest. I mentally ran through different scenarios. In another month without paying the mortgage, the bank would be demanding all of the unpaid mortgage due, and we would all be on the street. Or not in the street--living at the crack house with Misty and Mark on rock bottom.

The power could go out, but it was chilly at night. It was already near freezing in the morning as it was. Momma had been coughing a lot lately. Cara had thrown up twice on Wednesday. It *was* flu season. So owing Georgia Power was out of the question.

There could be no water, but that was stupid, for obvious reasons. The phone would definitely get turned off. It was at the bottom of the totem pole. Mom would just have to be mad...we would have to come up with a system for emergencies with the

neighbors of some type. Everyone had to eat everyday. We needed lunches or lunch money, even though I had been going without lunch since the start of school. But Aunt Rachel and mom needed gas money to go to the grocery store to buy lunches. Cara needed some new shoes--the soles on her Keds were starting to peel. And winter was coming up. We all needed coats and sweaters, myself included.

I grabbed a pillow tightly as the room spun. My head hammered like freak bass. The junk mobile my deadbeat dad had left in “my name” needed a tune-up and motor mounts and a battery, and mom was still driving it like it couldn’t break down at any second. Everyone would need breakfast in another hour or so. The fridge was...empty. \$214.21.

I felt like a giant ball of vomit was going to come up from my throat, so I dove out of the bed and ran over to my trashcan under the window and bent over it on my knees. Instead, a sob burst from my chest so hard that it must have been building up and finally overflowing. I had never heard myself make a sound like that before, even in the heartbreak after Misty left and during the period of mom’s stroke. I covered my mouth to be sure that my crying didn’t wake up Cara and especially Nutty. I didn’t have the strength to tell them that we were in the fast lane to completely broke.

The tears burned down my face. It wasn’t fair *at all*. I’m a *child*. Aunt Rachel and mom have lived their lives...why weren’t they the ones constantly worried about money? Why am I the “chosen one?” My aunt came and went as she pleased with nothing harsh on her shoulders. And Nutty acted like his outside business was so much more important than helping me fix things around the house. At least Cori asked about what was going on, but I felt as if she could do nothing, as she lived in a fantasy world of fog most of the

time anyway. Did anybody care about me? My wellbeing and mental capacity? But, when I thought about my dad, that man that shunned his duties as a husband, as a father, and as a man... What the hell was I complaining about? I *had to* do something. It was my duty as the man of the house. There was *no one else*. The sun shone on me like an intrusive spotlight, bright white light so hot and freezing cold, as if I were on a stage at the pinnacle of the climatic minute. But I was on stage--I was a man.

“Aw, fuck me,” I said softly, whisking tears away from my eyes. “What the hell am I going to do?” I sat there for minutes on my knees, in the corner of my room, trying to come to a reality. I knew that I had to go and find some money. I was the man of the house, sitting on the floor and crying like a bitch. That’s what Nutty would say if he came in on me at that moment and I would never hear the end of it.

I looked up slowly and glanced at the clock. I wondered if Ray’s number was around the house. Ray was the only person I knew that I could borrow a lump sum of money from and pay it off. I didn’t know an exact game plan, but I jumped up to shower.

I didn’t remember how long it had been since I talked to Cousin Ray. Momma had left her brother’s son alone once Ray had had Uncle Gerry’s house raided back when Ray was in twelfth grade. Back then, drugs were the worst thing in the world in my eyes, next to cleaning my room, washing the dishes, girls, and broccoli. I had always only received hearsay when it came to Ray because I had been so young when all of the real drama was happening. But nothing I heard was ever good: Ray had gotten arrested again; Ray got some floosy “knocked up;” Ray was a big-time drug dealer; Ray bought a condo in Virginia Beach. The last one wasn’t too bad to me because I had always nursed dreams of moving to the beach, but, according to mom, Ray had cut the family from his life,

bought that condo with cash, and had strung-out people living with him and had them in and out of his place all the time.

Once I showered and got dressed in some old grey sweatpants and a white t-shirt, I went downstairs to search for the number. It was already almost ten and I had no time to lose. The house would be getting up soon and everyone was going to be hungry, so I still had to run to the store and produce something to cook.

I rummaged through the junk drawer and located my mom's black book. But the closest I could find to Ray was Uncle Gerry's number. I figured that I would just go out there and leave a note on the door if my cousin wasn't at home. It was a risk. Even though I recalled the directions to Ray's condo that I got from Misty some years back, Ray could do anything to me before I even got the chance to identify myself. I slid on my sneakers anyway when thoughts of being out of the street with my niece crawled slowly towards my mind. I scrawled on the dry-erase board on the fridge that I would be back with breakfast food and put on my Washington Wizards baseball cap and went out, shutting the front door quietly behind me.

There was light traffic on highway 264, but not enough to drive me too crazy. Sometimes we had the worst traffic, especially traveling towards the beach right out of the tunnel. It didn't take me too long to get off the exit towards Ray's place. I soon panicked at the traffic light off the exit. What if my cousin had moved? It was enough that he may not even be home, but it was another thing to have wasted gas, the car's wellbeing, and running the risk of getting thrown in jail for driving without a learner's permit or license at 15. The tiny glimmer of hope that Ray could help us in some way

would go out completely, and I feared I would become a black Hamlet, a depressed madman.

What if Ray didn't remember who I was? I had always heard that smoking weed burned up your brain cells. What if he remembered and didn't want to help? It had been...five years since I had last seen him? I didn't completely eliminate the possibility of begging my cousin for help, or even asking for a job, even though I didn't believe in his "product."

My brain screamed, "I can't do this," as I gripped the steering wheel as the traffic light turned green. I pulled up to the guest gate of the complex and stared at the steel callbox.

"Ugh" came out of my mouth. "What is his last name?" I mentally shot myself for being so stupid. I pushed the "Z" button and the up arrow to get to "Vixton." That was Uncle Gerry's last name, so I naturally hoped that his son had kept it. And there it was: "Raymond Vixton, 365." I gawked at the name with my finger posed in midair. A car behind me suddenly honked its horn loudly and I nearly jumped through the ceiling. I waved a "sorry" out the window and punched in 3-6-5. It rang once...twice...and made a long ring sound, designating admittance. The gate started to slide open with the force of a little old lady. I rolled up to the gate and put my head on the steering wheel.

The steel gate creaked as it rolled open, and the plastic gate arm lifted after a minute, allowing me entry into the complex.

"1550," I said under my breath, following the arrow that directed my way to the south building, home to condominium numbers 1000-2000. The condominium complex was beautiful in that unique and well-known Virginia Beach architectural way. The

triplet building structures were ice blue in color with glass that glinted in the morning sunlight, and I had to squint and look up and up in the dashboard window to see the tops of the buildings. I rolled around towards Cousin Ray's place and took a parking space after a Navigator had backed out of one. I sat in the parking space for a moment without killing the engine to think. I closed my eyes and laid my head back on the headrest. The "Check Engine Soon" light burned on the gauge like a divine warning, and I wanted to punch it out.

"Do you know what you're doing?" I asked myself out loud. I then opened my eyes and looked around, making sure that there was no one around who could see me talking to myself in the busted car.

I had rehearsed what I wanted to say to my cousin during the 20 minute ride there. I wanted to talk to Ray about Misty, and how she had left me and my mom to raise Cara alone; how I couldn't get any more hours at the junkyard because of the recession; how we all needed food and clothes and that my mom needed medicine and that bills were piled up. I wouldn't mention the money that mom had tossed, or any of the bad stuff I had heard about Ray through mom...it would be silly to criticize him when I needed his help. I wanted to see if Ray would let me borrow something...*anything*...and would take a payment plan to pay him back, even though it would be a long time before my debt was clear. I didn't know how much was too much to ask for from a cousin whom I hadn't seen since I was wearing Osh Kosh.

I looked down at the warning light in the car and sighed. I cut off the car and it shook a bit before it died. I remembered how honest and playful Cousin Ray was when he had been around the family the last time. Ray was always the "cool" cousin...he

would talk to me, Misty, and our other cousins about the birds and the bees, much to all the adults' dismay. Cousin Ray always gave out \$5 bills, like a much older uncle, and even then, I knew that, at age twenty-six, Cousin Ray had money and must have been "good" at his job in "sales." Misty had explained the position to me and, at the time, I had just accepted it as true, even though the news of Ray's real job had been circulating the family grapevine for a decade. Ray's favorite quote was, "But you didn't get that from me, ya heard me?" He wore Iceberg and Coogi and Timberlands and had designs cut into the back of his head and had a wallet with different girls' pictures in it. I used to love flipping through it and laughing at the girls with their boobies and butts hanging out. "My hoes," he had explained to a younger me and laughed like it was the funniest joke in the world.

I thought that it was unlikely that Ray would not know who I was at first glance. I bared a strong resemblance to Uncle Gerry, with my lanky posture and expressive brown eyes underneath my glasses. Ray had skin the color of cocoa nuts and I lie on the more cinnamon-colored side of the family, but we had both inherited the Vixton-Richmond family teeth, sparkling white and always complimented on. I wondered if Cousin Ray had grown hard and violent in jail. I wondered if I would be interrupting anything important or walking in on anything, and if Ray would come to the door and start shooting.

But, then again, Cousin Ray did open the gate for me to drive in, so he couldn't have been all that exclusive. He had to have been expecting someone, else he would have talked over the callbox and inquired as to the identity of the visitor. I wished I knew what kind of car Ray drove and if it was there in the expanse of half-full parking lot. Then I

remembered what momma had always said about him having people in and out all the time. My nerves fused fire through the air of the car, and I started feeling suffocated.

I pulled the keys from the ignition and got out, closing the driver's side door behind me. I couldn't help but to take a look around at the cars. There was a brand-new, red-orange Charger parked beside a champagne-hued Lexus. There was a BMW on black rims beside a very mini sports car whose vanity plates yelled, "OFFKILT." "The Deuce," with its nicks and rusting and scrapes, did not belong in this crowd.

I glanced up at the building in front of me and shook my head at the real estate sign on a billboard overhead, advertising the complex: Homes starting at \$400,000 to \$2 million. Owned by Browden and Company." That Browden guy must be the Bill Gates of real estate. A million bucks for a condo, and you didn't even get a yard? Come on! I suddenly felt paranoid at the opaque shininess of the building and got a creepy feeling that someone was watching me. The person could see me, but I couldn't see him or her. It was like Big Brother out there, and I stopped looking up at the mirrored glass and tried to appear nonchalant. I couldn't even tell where windows were.

I squared my shoulders and walked towards the door. I looked at the callbox on the beige brick alongside the wall of the foyer area and pressed "365" again to be buzzed in. The door beeped and I walked in, holding the door behind me for a woman and her rat-sized dog on a lease to walk out. She didn't say thank you for holding the door, and I wanted to let the door go on her heels.

Instead, I imagined that walking into the Sistine Chapel was just as miraculous and amazing as walking into the south building. The ceiling was rose-colored and gold and had Mediterranean-style etchings along the door frames and windows. The lobby

area was massive and the burgundy carpeting on the stairs and down the halls looked like genuine suede. In the center of the lobby was a cherry table where flower arrangements sat and candles burned and floated in water, and it smelled so...*good* in there, not like potpourri or Glade spray, but just naturally sweet, floral *scented air*. The lighting was dim, despite the sunny day threatening to gleam in behind curtains. I tried to keep my mouth from flapping open. So this was why Cousin Ray never came by our house anymore. Hell, I wouldn't either if I lived in heaven!

I saw a bank of gold elevators down a hall, and I got into an empty one whose doors had just opened. There were buttons for each floor, but I didn't know what Ray's house number was. He had just assumed that "1550" was enough. I got out of the elevator and went over to the concierge podium.

"May I help you, sir?" said the man at the desk after hanging up a phone call. He had alarmingly chalky skin and a bushy mustache that looked like it could crawl off of his face. His lips were pursed, as if he didn't have time for nonsense.

"Yes, sir," I said, taking off my ball cap. "I'm coming to visit my cousin, Raymond Vixton, who lives in this building. He didn't tell me his house number, though, so I'm not sure--"

"Are you sure he lives here?" the man interrupted with a slight attitude in his voice. He typed something on his computer screen.

I ignored the minor annoyance of being talked over. "Yes. He buzzed me in at the gate."

"And you don't know where he lives? Do you have an ID?" the man asked, still typing away on the computer keyboard. I sighed and dug into my raggedy wallet, fishing

out my driver's license. I handed it over to the man who peered at it closely like it was a fake. He even turned it over to look at the back. "Please hold one minute, Mr. Richmond." The man picked up his phone, said some muted words into the receiver, and hung up. "Security will escort you to Mr. Vixton's floor." He dangled my ID from his fingers, and I intentionally grabbed it from him roughly.

"And what floor is that on?" I asked, sliding my ID back into my wallet. When I looked down at the lobby floor, I saw the gleam of my black sneakers reflecting light. I glanced up for the answer and smirked.

"Follow the security guard," the man said, pursing his lips even farther. The guard was standing near the elevator bank, so I muttered a "thanks" to the lippy man and walked on over.

"Going to Mr. Vixton's place?" the security officer asked in a Barry White voice. I felt my face frown at the depth of his tone, but straightened up quickly. He had on a navy blazer, but I could see that the officer's biceps under that blazer were bigger than his face.

"Yessir," I said, walking into an open elevator behind the officer. I tried to catch a glimpse at the number that the burly man pushed, but his body was huge and blocking the panel. I didn't want to try too hard because, frankly, I could definitely fear the man. I looked for numbers to light up, indicating the floor we were passing, but the elevator was like a golden spaceship...there were no numbers on the panel, just the "ding" as we moved through each floor! I couldn't even tell that the elevator was even moving. I gave up and watched myself in the reflection of the glass inside the elevator. My face was

flushed and my eyes looked glossed over. No wonder I looked so suspect to the concierge. *Jerk*, I mentally berated myself. *Mom's gonna whup your ass.*

When the elevator arrived at the floor, stopping its smooth swoosh abruptly, I stepped off tentatively, wondering if the security officer was going to give me anymore instruction. The officer stood in the elevator door as I got off, and I started baby-stepping down the hallway. *Maybe I should knock on some doors?* I asked myself, just as the officer called out “Last one on the right, number 10.”

I was relieved. “Thanks so much for--” I started as I spun around to face the man, but the officer had already gotten back into the elevator and the door was closing.

“Oookay,” I said, walking towards door number 10. I was surprised at the narrowness of the hallway and found that the plush jade green hallway runner was a little too much because my sneakers sank into the carpeting with my movements. *Who cleaned this thick thing?* I asked myself. There were only four rooms, equally spaced out, on each side of the hall, and Cousin Ray’s door was the last one on that end, spotlighted by a hallway window that showed the Deuce *way down there*. I was at least twenty stories up.

I stood at the door for a couple of minutes, hoping that my cousin didn’t have some type of camera system that was watching me or that Ray wasn’t staring at me from out of the peephole with a gun barrel. My heart beat out of my chest and I slowly went through the organization of my “speech.” *Re-introduce myself first*, I thought, *before I launch in. If he asks about mom, tell him the truth. Don’t look all desperate, but explain. Be mature. Don’t tear up.*

I knocked on the door softly and waited. My hands felt muggy. I glanced at the wall color and noticed the gold flecks in the neutral beige paint. The flecks sparkled in

the hallway sunlight. Estimating the customary one minute, I knocked again...harder. I didn't have time to just stand outside the door because everyone at the house was surely awake and wondering when I'd be back. No sooner had the knock left my knuckles that the door flew open. Cousin Ray stood there with a thick, brown blunt in his mouth, wearing a white t-shirt, red basketball shorts, and Adidas slides with black ankle socks.

"What you need?" he said. He looked just like I remembered and I inwardly cheered at my luck. Ray's face had matured, of course, but his eyes still sparkled in that teasing way and his voice had not changed.

"Cousin Ray!" I said, but regretted the exclamation as soon as it came out of my too-eager mouth. *Be cool*, my brain said. *You jeeeeerk*.

"Say what?" Ray replied, blowing the sweet-smelling smoke into my face. I winced at the smoke and tried to hold my breath so that I wouldn't breathe it in.

"I'm...uh...your cousin," I started, sweat forming around my hairline. The sun from the hall started to feel stifling. "I don't know if you remember me...Christopher? Um...lil' Chris? Gwendolyn's son?" I wrung my hands in front of me as Ray just stared with no indication that he knew who I was. My heart beat a mile a minute in my ears.

"How'd you find me?" Ray asked. He scratched under his armpit and, coming out into the hallway, shut the door to the house behind him.

"Misty told me where you lived." I answered honestly, but I suddenly wasn't sure if I should have or not. "You buzzed me in...I mean, I hope it was you."

"I didn't do *shit*," Ray said. "My gurl might've done it, but I didn't do shit." He took a puff of his blunt and the smoke curled into the hair as he spoke. "So, you's my lil' cuz, huh?" Ray took a step towards me. "How I know you ain't lying?"

“Yeah,” I said, backing up towards the wall. “You haven’t seen me since I was eight. I think it was Thanksgiving that year? At my mom’s? Before you moved here?” I hated how everything was coming out as a question, but I couldn’t help it. My voice tone went higher and higher, and I felt like I was going to pass out from fear and smoke.

“Uh huh.” He stepped forward again and his eyes narrowed as he exhaled. I had to cough, but I put my fist up to my mouth to muffle it.

“You used to give us kids five dollar bills?” I choked out in the smoke. I felt like I should take off running back towards the elevator, but I was against the wall at that point. I considered how hard I would bounce on the concrete below if I had to throw my body through the glass out of the window. But Ray lit into a big grin. That smile wasn’t as white as it used to be.

“Oh, shit, my nigga! My lil’ cuz, C-Note!” He grabbed me in an awkward hug and pounded me on the back. “Damn, dude! You got skinny as hell!”

“Yeah,” I said with a nervous laugh. “I get that a lot.” Cousin Ray was pretty slim, too, but I didn’t want to say anything that could get me potentially hurt. I didn’t know what his mentality was like.

“Well, shit, fam-lay,” Ray said. “Come on in. Welcome to da crib.” He turned to open up the door and let me walk in first. I inwardly gasped. The whole place was wide open, like a loft, with leather furniture and crystal tables strategically placed in sections. There was a full bar to my left with neon lights on the wall in the shape of cocktail drinks and strippers on poles. There were floor-to-ceiling windows straight ahead, and I could see several buildings on the boulevard. Ray had African artwork covering another wall and some shots of people in various sexual poses. “Wow” was all I could say.

A tall, dark-skinned man in a grey hoodie stood in a corner like a mannequin with his hand behind his back, I supposed on his holster.

“It’s cool, Blue,” Ray said. “It’s my fam-lay! For real! How old is you now, boy?” Blue walked back to the room he had come from. Sounds of a video game blared out into the room.

“Fifteen,” I said. I waved my hand around. “Awesome place.”

“Thanks, my dude,” Ray said, putting his arm around my shoulders like we were old friends. The smell of his strong cologne and the smoke encircled us and nearly made me cough again. I remembered how I had only come to Ray’s waist in height long ago, but now I was up to my cousin’s ear. “Time’s sure gone by. I know er’body gotta be all big now.” A woman came sauntering into the living area, wearing nothing but a black garter skirt with no garters. She was petite and had long hair and was...*gorgeous*, with Asian features and caramel skin. I didn’t think that she even cared that her boobs were exposed and perky because she made no move to cover up. Blood rushed to my *manhood* and I swallowed, trying to look at everything but her attractive rack bouncing towards me.

“I need a towel, baby,” she said, putting her hands on her small bare waist.

“Damn, girl, put some clothes on in front of my peoples!” Ray said. “Didn’t I tell you about that?” He pulled away from me and took her upper arm in a grasp. He shook her a little bit and her boobs shook. I almost passed out. “And what did I tell you about touching that gate button without telling me you letting folks up in here? I’m gone have to take yo ass back to Bad News. You costing me money already.”

“Don’t do that,” she said, stroking his face. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it anymore. I didn’t know not to touch it.”

“Yo lying ass,” Ray said.

“I’m not lying.” She turned to me. “Who’s this cutie?”

“My lil’ cuz,” Ray said, putting his arm around her waist. “C-Note.”

“Hey, C-Note,” she said, walking to me and extending a hand for me to shake.

“I’m Heather.”

“Hey-he-he-hea-” My throat felt constricted and dry, and she and Ray both burst out laughing at my blundering. My face had to have gone into full-fledged blush because I felt sweaty all over.

“Damn, dude, tighten that shit up,” Ray said. “You ain’t never seen pretty titties before?” Ray plucked one of her boobs. I gave a nervous laugh that came out too loud and high-pitched and tried to will my hardened manhood away from my zipper. Heather grabbed Ray’s face and whispered something in his ear, and I stared at the floor.

“In the second linen closet,” Ray said as she pulled away and walked towards the bathroom. The garter skirt was lifted in the back from her ample behind, and I couldn’t help watching her walk away with Ray, her hips swaying as she went. *That just did not help*, I thought. I felt so hard, I didn’t want to walk.

“Sit wit yo boy,” Ray said, gesturing towards one of the leather sofas. I took the nearest one and sat down carefully. I tried to focus on what I was going to tell Ray.

“What brings ya to my neck of the woods?”

“Well, um, I’m not doing too good,” I started, then wanted to take it back. It was so forced and too obvious. I grabbed the arms of the chair and it squeaked slightly with the pressure.

“You need some heat?” Ray asked. “You know I got’chu if somebody messing with you.” He pulled a gun out from under the sofa he was sitting on for emphasis. I grew nervous about the possibility that I was sitting on a loaded weapon, so I gingerly scooted forward in my seat in an effort to look serious and emphatic.

“It’s not that,” I said. “Um, it’s basically...see my mom and I got Misty’s daughter, right, and...”

“The little baby? What’s her name?” Ray reached over to a side table and lit up another blunt.

“Cara,” I supplied. “She’s my heart.”

“Damn, Misty shole didn’t play around,” Ray said, inhaling.

“No, she didn’t.” The words started rushing out of me. “And money is just so tight right now. With my dad in jail and all.” I hated saying the words “my dad,” as if I were owning the deadbeat.

“So, what’chu need, man? What you need? A job?” Ray exhaled, throwing his head back and forming smoke rings in the air.

“A job?” I asked. Ray looked at me suspiciously through the smoke.

“Yeah, nigga, what’chu need?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. The frustration I had inside from that morning started to steam up and threatened to spew out. Ray exhaled another cloud of smoke and gave a harsh “smoker’s laugh” that made him sound like a 100-year-old man.

“Look, I ain’t no mind reader. You had to have come all the way up here with an agenda. Am I right?” Ray mouth was set in a tight line, mildly amused but serious at the same time.

“I need...um...help?” I felt teary and it thoroughly embarrassed me. *Don’t you dare cry*, I screamed to myself. I wanted to say everything but that I needed money, but it *was* the main reason I was there. I had hoped that Ray would just volunteer to keep me from facing the words.

“You tryna be funny? What the fuck that even mean?” Ray answered. He stood up from his place on the adjacent sofa. “I’m getting ready to go out. If you need something, you need to spit it out in 30 seconds, C-Note. Otherwise, I’m gonna have to escort you out my crib.” Ray put out the blunt in a nearby glass ash tray on the coffee table.

“I need some...money!” I said. The admission actually shamed me once it was out in the universe, and it choked me up. I closed his eyes to keep the tears from rolling down, and they pooled and burned behind my lids. If Ray noticed, he didn’t say anything.

“How much you need?” Ray asked after a moment of allowing me to get it together. I wiped away the tears quickly and looked up at him, feeling resigned and suddenly quite tired. I lifted my shoulders and dropped them lazily in a half-hearted shrug.

“Whatever I can get at this point. I’m at a...loss. I’m desperate.” I took a deep breath to steady my voice. “I have to pay the mortgage. There’s so much to do, but I can work out anything you can lend me. I will pay you back, I promise. I give you my word.”

I hoped that the begging was helping my case, but Ray just paced the area in front of the leather sectional with his eyes trailing the floor. He had a thoughtful look on his face.

“You got a job?” Ray asked me. I sniffed. The man in the grey hoodie came back into the room, spoke into Ray’s ear, and walked back out. I didn’t even look at the guy because he had a *gun*. Ray picked up a Blackberry cell phone and started texting with one thumb. I didn’t believe it was his phone.

“At the junkyard, twice a week after school,” I said, “But my hours were cut.”

“The junkyard?” Ray walked to the bar and opened up a black book that was sitting on the countertop. “What the hell you do out there? Pick up shitty diapers? Now that’s a dirty gig.” I wasn’t sure where Ray was leading to, and his inattention and movements made me lean on edge. Ray looked up and narrowed his eyes. “You real clean-cut, my nigga. Never been in trouble at school, never mind the law.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“I’ve had my share of detentions,” I said. Ray laughed and shook his head.

“You real funny. You a good, pure dude. I admire that. I used to be the same way.” Ray picked up the black book and walked back over to his place on the sofa. He dropped the book on the coffee table with a slap. “I’m gonna tell you the truth, lil’ cuz. When I started this business, being ‘good’ got me in a lot of trouble. What they call ‘em? Downfalls of a job? Risks, or some shit?” He glanced at me for help.

“Occupational hazard?” I supplied with question in my voice.

“That’s it,” Ray said, pointing at me. “Occu-mutha-fuckin-pational hazard. ‘Too nice’ almost got me killed.” He sat back on the sofa. The leather jingled a soft swoosh sound to his weight. “But, nowadays, the game done changed. Po-po look for hard-ass

niggas like myself. They hunting our asses down. The nice ones the ones that make all the paper. I keep up with shit like that. I do my research.” He grinned, and I gave him a shaky smile back.

“Well, um...” I didn’t know what to say and my heart still drummed in my ears. Something made a loud booming noise on the video game in the next room and I heard the guy in the grey hoodie mumble expletives.

After a minute of silence, Ray said, “I can lend you some money.” I jumped up from my chair, despite myself, and grabbed a hold of Ray’s hand, pumping it up and down eagerly.

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” I said. Ray shook his head with a smile and stood up.

“You liked to scared me, lil’ cuz. I like you, and I don’t wanna get you in trouble with yo moms. You got your whole life ahead of you.” I smiled and let go of Ray’s hand. He confused me. “Besides, you probably too soft for this business. Too...girly. No offense.” My smile waned, but, inwardly, Ray was right. There was nothing on me that could spell out “drug dealer” in the least, and I didn’t want to do it.

Ray pulled some denim jeans out from under the sofa and dug out two bills. Before handing them to me, he gripped my shoulder. I tried not to wince at the contact with the soreness from Joseph’s earlier threat that week to dislodge my shoulder bone from my neck bone.

“I’m...uh...very grateful,” I said, afraid that Ray was going to hurt me before giving me the money.

“I know,” Ray said, shaking my shoulder lightly. “This is for my fam-lay.” He revealed two \$500 bills. “You didn’t tell me what you wanted. Speak up! I don’t just give

out money, but I am, only this time. If you want more, we need a deal. Life is run on the barter system, lil' cuz. Nothing is free." He stuffed the two bills into my pocket. "You good, but we do what we gotta do to survive. We animals that way, predators." Ray let my shoulder go and patted me on the back. "And you need to eat more. Pump some iron. Yo shoulder is like a female's." I wanted to rub it, but opted to keep the speckle of dignity I had left while I could. Ray had a way of making me feel small, but it was because I wasn't used to someone giving the reality of *everything* all the time.

"Lemme give you a clue, lil' nigga," Ray went on wistfully. He picked up his book from the coffee table and held it against his face. "I'm paid. I'm hardworking. And I won't get you in trouble. You need money, I need business. Simple as that. You can run as long as you want and stop when you got enough. I don't expect you to run too long." I remained stoic and stood as still as I could. Ray walked around the space and talked. "I take care of my fam-lay. When you join this fam-lay, you got protection. And yo bills be paid. And you get bitches, too." Ray indicated over his shoulder to where Heather had gone to shower. "It's not what it look like on TV, I promise you that. I got yo back. You good peoples. How else you gone get what you need? That's my clue." Ray seemed to wait in expectation.

"Can I...think about it?" I said after a long pause. "Joining the family, I mean?" I had gotten sweaty under my t-shirt, and my tongue had dried itself to the top of my mouth so that I sounded like my mouth was full of food. Ray grinned.

"I gotta handle some business now, lil' cuz," Ray said, taking off his t-shirt to reveal strong pectoral and abdominal muscles. "I'm getting in the shower. You gotta bounce."

“Oh, of course,” I said, walking towards the door. “I will let myself out. Thanks again. You don’t know how much this means to me.” I touched my pocket, partly to make sure that I wasn’t dreaming about the money there. Ray had walked over to his pants and was stroking a fist full of cash, as if he wasn’t even listening to me. I paused on my way out of the door at Ray’s authoritative voice.

“If you wanna run, come by tomorrow after ten,” Ray said, speaking more to his money than to me. “I’m going to church in the morning.” Ray stopped counting and winked at him. “I gotta save you from that fucking pig dirt job.”

I was curious and thought that I could be honest while Ray was distracted and while I was at the door. “Why are you interested in *me*?” I said. “You said that I’m too soft.” Ray clipped his money and walked over to me. Again, I thought about taking off.

“I also said the game done changed, lil’ nigga. You was listening. I called you ‘soft’ in affection. You also have certain connections I need.” Ray grabbed my hand and shook it. “You can think about it and be sure. Shit, it’s America.” I nodded and started down the hall

“Hey,” Ray said. I turned around and glanced at him. Ray held up the money clip of folded bills. “I know what it’s like to take care of fam-lay. Hold that pride. See how far that money can get you. Only special folk get special treatment.”

“Yessir,” I said. “Thanks again, Cousin Ray.” I shuffled through the thick hallway runner towards the bank of elevators. After hitting the elevator “down” button, I took deep breaths. My body felt like it had been soaked in a sauna for hours.

I thought about the \$1,000 I had received from Ray. Where would it go to? My brain started going into overdrive. *In the pool to the mortgage? But that’s just like putting*

*money into an overdrawn bank account--it just disappears. Should I buy Cara some shoes? Should I spend it to stock the house up with groceries? What about Georgia Power?* I felt the stress beginning to overwhelm me again. It was supposed to be better with money in my pocket. But what happened when the money was gone, which wasn't going to be very long from now? The elevator beeped, indicating that it had arrived, but I stayed put in the hall.

"I'm soft," I told the empty elevator car. "Everybody says I'm 'soft.'" *But you don't have to prove yourself to anybody,* my mind replied. *You're smart and will make an awesome graphic artist. Don't you think people called Bill Gates 'soft?'* "Ray is right. Where will the money come from once this is gone in a week?" I didn't care that I was talking to myself. The elevator doors started closing, but I hit the "down" button again and the doors popped open.

I looked back at Ray's door in the light of the hallway window. *What is a "job?"* my mind continued. *He said it could be temporary. But what's the cost? What's involved? Is it even what I think it is? It could be legit.* I was mad that I didn't inquire for specifics from Ray and considered stomping back down to his door and demanding more explanation.

The elevator "tinged" again, ready to go. I looked into the goldenness of the car and immediately noticed a smudge shaped like an upside-down heart up against the right wall of the elevator, probably from someone's shoe. It stuck out so obvious in the otherwise flawless glow. A random stain in the perfection of aesthetics.

Ray was the familial "black sheep." *What would the family think of me if I get so involved with Cousin Ray?* I thought. I was "that one" who was going to get out of

Portsmouth and make it to Atlanta someday to go to school for graphic design. I had always believed that goal to be reachable, but now I faltered. *How can I afford to move to Atlanta to be on my own when I can't even feed my family while I'm here?* I reasoned. My niece would be dejected if I just up and left. Momma would be next to helpless. I tried to remember who had instilled in me the desire to travel to another state, alone, for college. For as long as I could recollect, the idea was just innate in my brain. It was Morehouse, and that was it. But the idea made me angry now. I resented the absurdity of it and was livid with the unknown person who gave me false dreams.

“I can't believe this,” I said out loud. “I'm losing my mind.”

My memories were on a never-ending turntable, and I considered the words I had received when I was almost twelve. I had gone into a grocery store as mom sat waiting in the car. My strict instructions were to get Poplar's brand name soda crackers for her soup and a Sprite. I had been adamant about behaving and doing whatever momma said because Christmas was around the corner and I really wanted a Playstation. I remembered a white man, a store employee, who was stocking up in the cookie/cracker/greeting card aisle. Upon asking where the soda crackers were located, the man hurriedly handed me the Kroger brand and went back to his stocking.

“Um, sir, I need Poplar's,” I had explained shyly.

“Those are cheaper,” the man said in agitation.

“But, my mom...they're for my mom...” I said and waited. The man stomped over to me and, out of nowhere, hissed very close to my face, “These ain't no better. You take what I give you. Just because you're picky don't make you any better than these other niggers.” I was so shocked at the “N word” from a white person that I paid for the

grocery store brand crackers and forgot her soda. I acted like I was so tired when I got to the car, just so that she wouldn't make me go back into the store. She fussed all the way home. And I didn't get a Playstation that Christmas.

I wasn't the risky type. But there were some things I had done over the years that mom would never know about. This could be one of those small things. "What am I thinking?" I said. Mom would find out *eventually*--Portsmouth wasn't *that* big. If she didn't find out, Aunt Rachel would...she talked a lot. Nutty definitely would know, just by the way I acted. And what would Cori think?

Just the mental mention of Cori's name made up my mind. Cori would wipe the earth with my head. She would simultaneously make me feel like the scumbag of the earth while never leaving me alone about it. I would feel so bad that I would have to jump off of a bridge to escape the guilt and condemnation. But it would still be less than what my mom would force me to do. Deeply disappointing her was my biggest fear, and dealing with Ray could take me there. It was all so heartbreaking and confusing. *We gotta do what we gotta do to survive. We're animals that way--predators.* Ray's words were haunting.

I was standing at a crossroads, the pinnacle of decisions, the need for money versus the need for morals. It could be worse. It could be worse next week. *If I leave right now, I reasoned, I'm walking away from possibilities for a better life for my mom and my niece.* I quickly threw my hand between the closing doors before they shut. They bumped back open and made a loud, irritated noise. *But I will not sell drugs.*

## CHAPTER 7

I tossed the trig textbook behind me on the bed that I had only been staring at for the last ten minutes. I put too much force on the toss and the book slapped the floor under the bed as it connected with the old, rough, stained wood. Across the street, I could see streaks of white tees, black mesh, and black sneakers as players ran around and laid up shots on the basketball court. No matter that it was thundering outside, the deep rumble reminded me that there was a power larger than my slim frame. And I feared that power or, actually, it was the lightening that I was scared of, so I decided to just chill out in the house and attempt to do some early homework. I flipped onto my back and traced patterns with my eyes in the ceiling. Swirls. Shooting stars. Cyclic texture.

Nothing bothered me more at that moment than getting caught. My stomach rumbled with what felt like a heartbeat, and I sung doubts in my mind. *What if I get robbed?* I thought. *Arrested? What if I hurt someone? What if this need takes over? What if I can't quit?*

I had always been sure with all of my choices, but I couldn't help but wonder what Cori would say if she knew I had marijuana in the house with the pretty sure probability to sell. I remembered when Cori had found a vintage t-shirt in my backpack as we walked through Wal-mart last year. We had been talking about the irony of that shirt only minutes before our mutual prankster friend, Marcus, threw it into my bag as a joke when I wasn't looking, as if I had told him to help me steal it. Cori had freaked out and slapped both me and Marcus clean in the middle of the store. I was pissed, mostly because of the transfer of emotions from Marcus, who was ready to murder her, but I felt so responsible for her disappointment in me once I got home that night. It took two

*Snickers* bars, some \$14.99 red roses, and a detailed picture of her that I had spent two days drawing for Cori to forgive me and to get her to vow not to tell my mom, even though it wasn't even my fault.

As a child, I had always been adamant against drugs, no question, even though almost everyone I knew smoked *something*. In D.A.R.E. class in the fifth grade, I had composed a picture of Teddy Ruxpin getting a gold trophy because he had said "NO" to smoking to a tough-looking, anonymous "friend." I had that impressive sketch somewhere in the house for sentiment because, from then on, I knew I wanted to sketch for a living through advertising or graphic design.

Fast forward seven years, and I had might as well lit the picture on fire and smoked it. *Hypocrite*, I thought. *What would momma say if she knew?*

I knew what Gwendolyn Richmond would say. She knew that I worked four hours at the junkyard everyday after school and after my tutorial sessions, and that I tried to help the household stay afloat and positive. She knew that random money I made per week, her fixed-income disability check and anything Aunt Rachel could scrape up from her cleaning job didn't even dent some of the pharmacist's totals for her insulin and her dementia medication. There was almost always no money for the medicines *and* life expenses, too, so something usually had to suffer every couple of weeks. Currently, it was the water bill again, and I just knew that the water will be off one morning soon when I woke up to take a shower. Still, mom tried to put money under my pillow at night as I slept, probably to make up for giving it away, and I usually had to berate her about it and reassure her that everything always turned out alright.

I jumped up at the clipped sound of the downstairs doorbell. I knew that mom was still sleeping, and I didn't want her to try to get up, follow me to the door, and open it to who knew who. It would have been awkward if mom saw Misty at the door when she hadn't been home to see her mom in about six months, especially in what I assumed to be quite a strung-out state. Aunt Rachel had worked overnight and wouldn't be off for another two hours.

I jogged down the stairs, through the kitchen, dodged two chairs, and looked out of the window that overlooked the front porch. It was Mark—Misty's longtime boyfriend. I let him in.

"What's up, what's up?" Mark greeted as I moved aside so that he could stroll into the living room. "Dang, ya'll air conditioning is *cold*."

"What's up, Mark?" I said, giving him a pat on the back. "Long time, no see." I noticed that Mark's eyes were low, as if he had just gotten out of bed or had just gotten high.

"Yeah, well, you know how it is," Mark said. He took off his Atlanta Falcons baseball cap, sat it on the nearby dining table, and rubbed his hair in a forward motion. "House full of women, man." I chuckled in understanding.

Misty had been anti-children as we grew up. When I was 11 and she was almost 17, she told anybody who would listen her plans to wait for sex until after marriage and that "mom had better be prepared for no grandchildren this way." When she got pregnant one year later and made me a young uncle, baby Cara was the love of her life. Misty adored dressing Cara like a doll and brushing the feathery, brown curls. Misty handled the "terrible twos" like a pro. But one bad hit sent Misty into a frenzy, in and out of jail,

and she left our house forever to stay with Mark. Supposedly, Mark's mom and sister stayed at their house with him and Misty.

"Where's Ms. Gwendolyn?" Mark asked, looking around towards the kitchen.

"In her room, supposedly still asleep," I answered, following Mark's gaze. I leaned against a chair, its hard, peeling, plastic backing conveniently stabbing me in the butt. "How's my sister? I haven't seen her in a while."

"Herself. You know Misty," he said. We both paused. Mark pushed his hands deep into his denim pockets. I picked at a velvet flower from the table's centerpiece.

"So, yeah," Mark said, giving me a pointed look. He lowered his voice to a half-whisper. "You got something?"

"Um. Oh. Yeah." I dug into the back pocket of my black jeans and produced a corner.

"Gimme two."

"I got 'cha." My voice was barely above a whisper and I kept looking around, expecting Cori or Aunt Rachel or even Cara walk in at any moment. I pressed the weed into Mark's right hand while Mark passed me a twenty dollar bill in the left. I looked down at the bill quickly to make sure it was the correct amount.

"Thanks," Mark said in his whisper. Then, a little louder, "Alright, man. I'll see you sometimes." Back down in his whisper, he added, "I'll hit you up at the first of the month."

"Alright." I nodded. I let Mark out and sat on the porch, flipping the twenty dollar bill over and over in my hands. It was *too* easy. I sighed. *No wonder so many people sold weed and made a dirty killing.*

*But now I'm a dealer, my brain wailed.*

“Aah!” I said, shaking my head. I looked out at the kids riding bicycles down the street, the little girls jumping rope in the Johnson driveway, the toddlers on big wheels next door. This world was cruel and all those kids were so innocent—just as I had been what felt like another life ago. A light breeze made me close my eyes and breathe in the scent of pine and honeysuckle. I remembered the weed I still had in my pocket and I shot up into the air, eager to get it off of me and back into the shoe box in the wall in my closet.

I went back into the house and walked right into mom rummaging in the fridge.

“Momma, what’chu looking for?” I asked. I swallowed and pushed the drugs as deep into my back pocket as they would go without the plastic sandwich bag making a crinkling sound.

“My blood sugar is low,” she said slowly. “I’m getting some orange juice.”

“Let me get that, momma. You sit down.” I led her over to a seat at the table, then went back to the fridge. There was enough orange juice in the carton for half a cup.

“Momma, drink this,” I said, pouring the last bit into a glass and handing it to her. “I’m running to the store to get some more juice.”

“Alright, baby. You’re such a good son,” she said. I smiled at her.

“When you’re finished, you lay back down,” I instructed, “and let your blood sugar return to somewhat normal. I’ll bring back more juice.” She nodded and I raced up the steps.

In my room, I pulled out the twenty and the few bags of weed and looked at them together. One yielded the other and vice versa.

“Dammit!” I said. *If not for me*, a voice in my head said, *just sell it for momma. Only for a little while. It won’t control you.*

I stuffed the money into my front pocket and wrapped the marijuana bags in a bandanna and stuck that into my back pocket. *I gotta do what’s right, even if it’s not right*, I thought, walking out my bedroom door. *I’ll have time to clean up later.*

“During the Rapture”

I knew that the bullet was going to hit me when the gun went off. The sound was nothing I had ever heard before—a cross between crackling thunder in those twenty-minute summer storms and a dynamite eruption to implode a building. The second her finger pulled back the trigger, my blood lit on fire in my veins. My heart gave one loud, ear-splitting gasp in my chest and I felt truly terrified, worse than the worst sensation that has ever gripped me. I trembled all over, even before the bullet started spiraling and crushing through the air atoms in its path. It was as if I could see it coming towards me in slow motion, yet, I could not move.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nutty dive face-first to the cold, ash gray garage floor. Jeep fell into the green plastic garbage can next to the stairs in an attempt to jump behind it. The trashcan shook with his sudden weighted movement and it slapped the floor on its side, exposing a horrified Jeep with his arms covering his head. I still could not move, even though demands of action, any action, shrieked in my head.

My toes curled in my new sneakers as if they could help clench me to the floor. I stood straight and tall, almost proudly, like the Martin Luther King, Jr. statue outside of the chapel on the campus of Morehouse College in Atlanta. I remembered the inscription on the base of that statue well from an Internet search on the college I wanted to attend in four years: “From Morehouse College he launched his humanitarian pilgrimage to create the beloved community and for that purpose he moved out from the classroom and his pulpit to march his way into immortality.” I thought that *immortality* was a funny word to dwell on at that moment, but I couldn’t help but to think how mortal I had suddenly become. *Another young black kid was murdered in Portsmouth today, another mother*

*has to bury her only son*, the news would report later as my mom and aunt made tearful plans to bury me in the cemetery beside grandma. My back had jerked me erect and the tension ached with my head. I tasted blood on my bottom lip and knew I had split it with my teeth when I flinched.

Those all-too-familiar eyes of my potential murderer trailed on me and words spewed from her lipstick mouth. The only thing was, I could never read lips, and the gun bang had converted the world's sounds around me into a high-ranged ring. I was aware of the irony of the scene and mentally stepped away to watch, all the while being painfully involved.

I heard a crash outside, metal scrapping against metal, like a car hitting a mailbox. She snarled more unheard words in my direction. I blinked and a name imprinted itself across my eyesight: Cecelia "Cece" Golden. The gunwoman was Nutty and Cori's cousin. Usually quiet and shy, we all knew Cece was having so many problems in her personal life that here, right here at this moment, had to be the culmination of all that grief, isolation and pain. Nutty, Jeep, and I were her targets, the victims in her scheme to heal and reconcile with her demons. Or to join them.

A guy who didn't look too much older than us ran towards the money and weed lying in the middle of the dice game on the floor and started snatching it up and throwing it all into a plastic grocery bag that he pulled from his jeans. I couldn't see his face because he was wearing a black winter facemask, but his thick lips protruded from the hole and he smiled wickedly the entire time he robbed us. Him and Cece were robbing us of our hard-earned profit that, minutes ago, had Nutty and Jeep viciously gambling against one another like veterans at blackjack in a Vegas club.

I looked down at Nutty's face and had never seen such sheer fear and confusion in his eyes. He kept mouthing "Get down!" but I had sweat solid to my spot. My knees didn't so much as buckle, even as I mentally begged them to do so. I had become a robotic me, doomed to my fate at age 15. Cece spun the gun to me and my brain screamed, "Move!" My shoes unsnapped from the floor and I hurriedly stepped backwards. The twenty-pound free weight that I had been joking reminded me of the back of Jeep's neck clipped the heel of my foot. I floated backwards in a stream of haze. Right before my head slammed into the cinder block garage wall, I saw black tears streak down Cece's face behind the gun. *Jesus, don't let me die.*

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They seemed darker than black, darker than void. My emotions were drenched with seething, smoking black. I didn't feel the need to move. I didn't feel my pulse sliding as the black encased my thoughts. My heart didn't beat—it just vibrated with one intense hum. It was numbing because he lay there, here but not quite here, somewhere between time and breath, held together by the resounding beep from a machine that tabulated heartbeats. It was a helpless sound, a concerning, life-altering counting. I recognized his body, but I did not recognize the look on his face. I could almost hear him laughing at my tears. I could touch that smile of peace on his face, but I was afraid he would be too cold. I shook because he could never wake up. A bullet lived in the back of his head—a real-life scrap of metal plunged through my best friend's head, the head that housed dreams and loves and passions.

The mouth was cracked and grey. I frowned and blamed myself. He could have run faster if I would not have fallen, if I would have gotten to the floor as was demanded

of me. He could have gotten away if I had not thrown that alley-oop pass last summer that I knew he would have gone for. He did, and came down on his knee that snapped out loud. We made a pact not to tell my mom or Aunt Rachel because that meant surgery. We were supposed to be doing homework then anyway. Nutty's knee was never the same, but he still played basketball, snapping his knee every few games. His ultimate dream was to become a track star, the fastest black man in the land, like record-breaking sprinter Usain Bolt.

Now I watched him in a hospital bed, his frame strangely petite under those starchy white covers, with that cracky smile. I wonder what he was doing behind his lids, if his spirit was standing beside me, watching me watching him in the bed, if he was wondering why no one has given him Chap-Stick, if he's touching the back of his head and feeling the hole and hating me.

But I knew he didn't believe in that. Nutty believed that people were either inside of their bodies, listening attentively, all the time, or outside of their bodies when the person died and the spirit was sharply ejected, mute as a mannequin, trying to read lips. There was no in-between.

It was hard to believe it was only four days ago when we were invincible, when Nutty, Jeep, and I lived like kings. On Friday nights, the plan was school, a game of basketball after school at the Y, then meeting up at Jeep's house on Lawry Hill in the evening to go to home football games. When the team was away, we went to the SkateTowne or hung out and watched movies. It got easy and natural to do what we had to do and have fun. It got easy and natural to do what we had to do and move on.

But that one Friday night after the homecoming game, Halloween night, we may have gotten a little too loose and a little too sloppy. I cannot say Jeep's apathy got us into trouble, nor Nutty's initiative or my desperation. It was all out of a lack of reality. We got too high.

That morning, my mom and I had gotten into another timeless discussion about our family's financial struggles. She always keeps her sights on the "goodness" of the Lord as the source of our blessings when I felt like I deserved a little bit of the credit myself.

"Did you ever see me cry when Misty walked out that door?" she asked me when I expressed misgivings at "the word."

"No, ma'am," I had answered, putting a foot into a sneaker and watching a Hot Pocket in the microwave intently to make sure it didn't burn up.

"Do I cry over your father's absence?" she said. "Do I cry about late bills? Do you hear me complaining?" Even though I knew she cried all the time about all of the above, I was not going to risk her getting upset and start swinging at me.

"I understand your point, mamma." I walked over to the table and kissed her moist forehead.

"Do you, Christopher?" Mom, the only person who could call me by my whole name and get an answer, had the tone of that stereotypical schoolteacher who everyone said was evil, but who always turned out pretty cool. I guess it came with the territory since my mom was a retired fifth grade teacher. I took out the cooked Hot Pocket and sat it on the countertop on a paper towel.

“You, *we*, don’t cry over anything because God always makes things alright,” I said to the sink window as I watched our neighbor, Mr. Bowen, water the plants on his porch. When he went into his house, I took a dish cloth from a drawer and wet it under the spicket.

“That’s right,” she said to my back. “We don’t have to cry, *ever*. Jesus did enough of that for us. And don’t you forget it. When he comes back on that fiery chariot, we all go back home in that glorious strike of lightning.”

“During the rapture, right?” I said. I placed the cool, damp cloth on her forehead. I picked up her hand from the table, kissed the back of it, and placed her hand on the dish cloth to her overheated forehead. I scooped up my nearby backpack. “I know.” She smiled and nodded.

“Go catch the bus now. Rachel and I are taking Cara trick-or-treating at the mall later, so we may not be home when you boys come back. Remember your curfew. Be good.”

If my mom knew that there was going to be a gun aimed at my head later that night, she would have had a heart attack sitting right there at the table.

It was hard to believe that Nutty and I was in high school. With the vast memories of us as children still vivid in my head, it was as if time had imagined that past life for me, or as if I was just now waking up and realized that 15 years had gone by and I was now supposed to get ready for college and for a career. I felt like I hadn’t had quite enough time to be a kid.

And watching Nutty in the bed, clinging to life itself, I knew I had to be right.

## JARMEA L. BOONE

6640 Akers Mill Road Apt. 1338 • Atlanta, Georgia 30339 • (757) 339-0036 •  
jarmealboone@hotmail.com

**OBJECTIVE** To obtain an apprenticeship position in the writing/editorial arena of a public relations or publishing company.

### EXPERIENCE

Kennesaw State University's College of the Arts, Kennesaw, Georgia

*Editorial Assistant*

*January 2009-present*

- Acted as executive editorial assistant to the director of public relations of the College of the Arts Perform first edits on all web stories; press releases; and faculty, student, alumni, and donor profiles for media release and draft unassigned pieces, as needed, based on leads and interviews
- Updated and edited COTA e-news and headlines pages; press release and web story archives; and events pages weekly during the academic year and biweekly during the summer break
- In charge of maintaining writer and photographer intern assignment spreadsheets and supervising the delegation of stories to writing interns
- Managed draft circulation and production for print or online publications

Kennesaw State University's College of the Arts, Kennesaw, Georgia

*Features Writer, "Flourish" magazine*

*January 2008-present*

- Collected research and performed personal interviews on a strict deadline
- Wrote five pieces, including "Arts and the Economy: Seeking stability amidst losses," "Atlanta Ballet & KSU Dance marry arts and education," and "More than Skin Deep: The College of the Arts embraces broader ideas about diversity" for the Fall 2009 issue of "Flourish"

Kennesaw State University's College of the Arts, Kennesaw, Georgia

*Public Relations Intern*

*January 2008-August 2008*

- Composed 33+ weekly press releases; student, donor, and alumni profiles; and specialty pieces for the KSU College of the Arts website and other COTA media
- Performed interviews and surveys and attended COTA events and support functions

### EDUCATION

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia

Candidate for Master's Degree in Professional Writing, December 2009

Concentration: Creative Writing/Composition and Rhetoric

Golden Key International Honor Society, Cumulative GPA: 3.7

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia

Master's Certificate, December 2007

Concentration: Fiction Writing

Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia

Bachelor of Arts Degree, May 2006

Concentration: English/Creative Writing

**SKILLS**

GENERAL: detail-oriented, outgoing, organized, imaginative, hardworking, positive attitude

LANGUAGE: excellent writing/typing skills, proficient in AP and MLA styles, conversational Spanish

COMPUTER: Microsoft Word, Powerpoint, Excel, Access, Contribute webpage interface program, Outlook, Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari, Adobe, Lexis/Nexis

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

AWP Annual Conference and Book Fair 2007, Atlanta, Georgia