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Thunder on Water
by
Anthony André Larry II

A Thesis
Submitted to Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis
December 2018

Dedication

because mama read me

to sleep

because she sang my name

because all her plants grow tall

Acknowledgments

“I Heard Her at the Dollar Store,” *UM Alumni Magazine*, Spring 2016

Abstract

In these fifteen interconnected short stories, Anthony André Larry II uncovers the hidden life of women and men who live or have lived in his native Grenada, Mississippi. Specifically, the collection focuses on the lives of two black women—Brenda and Noelle— whose separate journeys swell throughout the entire Southern town. Both saintly and profane, *Thunder on Water* is inspired by James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, Toni Morrison, and many more.

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THE FLAW

Brenda wanted to get married again. It'd taken a while, but something about Joe made her comfortable enough to drag it out of her subconscious. She put the joint between her lips and sucked. The end of the paper flickered like an old lantern. The joint was the only light in the room. It was a small candle that revealed the wideness of her top lip and nose. She took it with her thumb and index as smoke lifted above her head. *What about my son?* she thought, *He can give me away.* She moved her hand left to right letting the smoke disappear.

Joe pressed his nail into her shoulder. She smiled as she passed the weed. "We're too old for this shit," she said. He hit it. She watched as the smoke escaped the gap between his front teeth. The gap was what she liked most. It was the flaw that made him not an action figure.

She traced her palm down the grooves of his shoulder, making his bicep tighten. They had met a year ago. He fixed Brenda's light fixture in the kitchen ceiling. She wasn't surprised when he asked her on a date. After her divorce, a lot of men in Grenada, Mississippi asked her a lot of things and made promises. Some asked for dates. Some asked if they could open the door. Others asked to pay for her drink at the bar. Joe was different. He had a job. He had hair. He was in shape. Most importantly, there was no ring. The skin on his finger had no discoloration or pinch. She picked him because he was the most unlike her ex-husband. Richard was a man who wore sharply creased slacks and Oxford shirts. Joe asked her out with beads of white paint spotting his dark-brown arm.

"We not too old," Joe said. "This the age we need to start smoking. Hell, we got bills, debt and kids planning to put us away."

"You think they'll put us in a home, Joe?"

"Damn right they will. I don't blame them either. I put my mama in a home."

Brenda showed her teeth and lifted her eyebrows.

"Did you feel guilty?" she said.

"Hell no."

"You ought to be shame."

"It's the truth. I didn't feel guilty at all. I trashed all that shit. All them roach infested clothes, shoes, and junk she was saving, I got rid of it. Me and my boy loaded it all in the truck and put it in the dumpster. It was the best thing I could've done."

Brenda tasted resin in her mouth as she swallowed.

"Are you going to trash my stuff when I move in with you?" she said.

"What you want to keep?"

"I need to get rid of it all."

"Are you going to sell the furniture with the house?"

"The fridge, microwave, washer and dryer are staying. I guess that couch set in the living room can stay. I never liked it. That was his stuff."

Joe pushed more smoke upward from his mouth. The air-dust curled as it reached outward. Brenda saw Richard's face in the smoke.

"Uh oh," Joe said as he rubbed his eyes. "I'm starting to see snakes crawling in the ceiling."

He passed her the joint. She pulled and exhaled again.

"Before I leave, I want to finish that upstairs bedroom. He never finished it while he was here."

"Sounds to me like a whole lot of money wasted."

"It's not a waste. It's an investment. The house will sell more with that finished. You want to hear my idea?"

"Okay, I'm listening."

"You know how on the home channel they build those wooden headboards and attach them to the wall?"

"Yeah," Joe said. "You want to do that?"

"Yes," Brenda said. "It's a cheap little project."

Brenda took one last puff before Joe took the joint out of her mouth.

"I think you had enough of this," he said.

"What?" Brenda said. "What do you mean?"

"Why not just buy a new bed to put up there?"

"Come on. I have this vision and I'm going to really need your help."

Joe put his palms on the mattress and lifted himself. His smile was playful, but he was serious. For some reason, Joe reminded Brenda of Daddy who left when she was three or four. They both had a large presence.

"Brenda, you ain't gone do that."

"What makes you say that?"

"History," Joe said. "You always starting shit you ain't gone finish."

He sounded like Richard. He had said something similar before he left. This was the night she found the cell phone pictures. The girl could've been fifteen or sixteen. Her lipstick left crumbs around the sides of her mouth. One bra strap was tilted away from her shoulder.

This was the night Richard put his hands around Brenda's neck and tried to kill her. When he released her, she got in the car and drove until she saw a yellow sign. Her lights were white dots in its reflection. Tears pricked her tongue. Brenda wanted to call the police but was embarrassed. Richard was the man she'd chosen to marry and have a child with.

That was the plastic Brenda; the woman who never wore pants growing up because her mother knitted all of her dresses. That woman had been peeled away. What was left had moss on it. It was older, dirtier, less concerned with the outward aesthetics. "I'm going to build it," she said.

The yellow tape bent as it tapped Joe's thigh. There were white, wooden specks trapped in the knee of his jeans. The room had webs along the folds meeting the ceiling with the back wall. Little chestnut coated bugs seasoned the floor underneath. Brenda's footsteps sounded as she moved towards him. She looked at her body. Her pink t-shirt bounced against her knees. She liked it. It made her think of the old, plastic Brenda.

She had started walking the treadmill a few months before she met Joe. It wasn't something she planned but instead a habit that formed from the absence of Rick. It was her house and so she set her own schedule. Soon, she had cut out the greasy fried chicken, collard greens, and cornbread that preoccupied most of her diet. With Joe's help she'd moved closer to a plant based diet.

Joe worked out even more than she did. She liked going to the gym with him and watch him lift metal above his head. The sweat would bubble around his nose and fall between the space connecting his neck and collarbone. Now, the same sweat was beginning to collect itself on Joe's face and neck. He looked at the wall as he rolled four fingers across his forehead.

"You got a lot of space up here," he said. "You got more than I thought."

Brenda smiled like she usually did around him. It was a flirting smile. Her eyes would blink in between blinks and her front teeth would show. Brenda knew Joe liked when she did this. It was her teenage smile. It was her mask. He put both hands underneath the back hem of her shirt and kissed her. His lips were rough, but she like it.

"Please, don't take what I'm about to say the wrong way," Joe said.

"Just tell me, Joe?" Brenda said.

Joe's shoulders pulled forward as he sighed.

"The wall's not big enough," he said.

Brenda pressed her finger into the pink corner of her eye. "Okay, well, what can I do?" She said. "What can we do?"

Joe pulled his frames forward polishing them with the bottom of his t-shirt. He looked at the baseboards before squatting. "If you leave the mattress on the ground flat," he said pointing, "I can take out that lining and replace it with a cleat. Whoever sleep in here will be sleeping on the ground but it'll look nice."

Brenda nodded as Joe found his hammer. He stabbed the metal talons at the back of the hammer against the top of the baseboard and pulled forward. The lining began to loosen revealing crooked nails and wooden hair strings. He stood up and kicked it until the plank was completely removed.

Joe scooped the tape out of his pocket and measured again. He found a pencil on the floor and scratched it against the wall.

"I think that'll get it," he said.

Brenda got closer and kissed his rough lips. Joe put his forearms around her neck as they continued.

Joe's smell was bitter like freshly cut grass. Brenda like feeling his muscles tighten as his shirt went down his wrists and off his fingertips.

"You are something else," Joe said.

Brenda's leggings were on the floor and she could feel Joe's fingers tugging at her underwear. She pecked at the curve in his top lip before looking at the rest of his face. The lines in his brow deepened and sweat dripped from his bald head. His eyes were tight under his glasses. In this moment, she realized she loved him.

When he opened his eyes, she saw something. Hunger. He might as well had been alone thrusting his hips forward against the wall. He stopped, lifted his belt, and zipped his pants. His breaths were quick. Brenda imagined him smearing blood across his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Whew," Joe said. "You are something else."

Brenda didn't like confrontation but felt it sizzle against her taste buds. She took air into her body making her chest and abdomen expand. He was standing in the middle of the driveway spraying this large, wooden tic-tac-toe box. As she got closer, she was surprised at how gray the planks were. To her, it looked like a naked face. The grains were long and deep. The freckles were bulbous and brown.

"This wood is so ugly," Brenda said.

Joe released the hose and looked at her.

"What did you say?" Joe said.

"The wood is ugly," Brenda said.

"Oh, that's okay. We can stain it or paint it later on," Joe said.

"You mean like put makeup on it?" Brenda said.

"Something like that," Joe said. "Not quite."

Joe flipped the crate and continued spraying. The water stretched across concrete until it flowed on the grass. To her, it looked like transparent blood filling the driveway. She rolled the words around her teeth and under her tongue not really wanting them to escape. They were like those square candies she use to hold in her mouth when she was young.

He's a man, Brenda thought. *All men are animals during sex*. She turned her face as she chuckled. Joe stopped spraying.

"What you laughing at?" he said.

Brenda wrapped her lips under her teeth feeling the gloss spread.

"Joe, I need to ask you something," Brenda said.

"What?" Joe said. "What's wrong?"

"I know this is going to make me sound like one of those people," Brenda said. "I really hate myself right now, but I'm going to ask it anyway. What are we doing?"

"What you mean?" Joe said.

"I don't know," Brenda said. "Are we just having fun or are we moving towards something serious. I mean, I'm moving in with you soon."

Joe smiled before letting the nozzle fall. Water continued to spit out of the little pimples.

"Uh oh," Joe said. "I knew this was gone happen."

"What?" Brenda said. "I'm just saying—"

"Can we go inside and talk?" Joe said.

Brenda wasn't having it. She crossed her arms.

"No," She said. "We can talk right here. Answer me this. Can you see us ever getting married?"

Joe started rubbing his neck. His eyes were closed.

"Brenda, I'm almost sixty," Joe said. "Marriage ain't in my future."

"Why not?" Brenda said.

"I don't know," Joe said. "It just ain't."

He folded his body forward letting his knees touch his chest. The wood dripped as he lifted it. "I'm going to sit this right here," he said as he lowered it against one of the walls.

Brenda looked at her house. There were pink bricks and a tall roof. A black lizard webbed its body out of a hole in the mortar. This use to be Richard's house. He had hired the contractor and helped dictate the blueprint.

"Thanks for helping me with this," Brenda said to Joe.

Brenda watched Joe wipe his palm over his head. His eyes touched her before looking away.

"Listen, I'll be back tomorrow to help you finish this," Joe said.

Brenda nodded as Joe walked out to his truck.

Why would he leave our house for this place, Brenda thought. It had black mold in the creases under the windowpanes and the triangle in the roof was dented. She had always known the address. She learned it when she hired an investigator to present the divorce papers to Richard. She could see the sun slipping beneath the trees. She took her hands off the steering

wheel and relaxed. She wanted to leave but something Joe said paralyzed her. Marriage wasn't in Joe's future, but Brenda wanted Joe in her future.

She wondered if Richard was her last fairy tale. She was fifty-two with one son who had just turned thirty. She had gotten married to Richard when she was nineteen. She remembered the folded napkins Mama made for Brenda and her bridesmaids to hold as they walked down the aisle. Even fake flowers were too expensive back then.

She opened the car door and walked over the grass spotted with yellow-brown blades. His car was there, but she wondered what she would do if the girl answered. She crushed her fingers into a fist and hit it against the screen door. The bars were stained with scales of red-brown rust. It looked like a painting made of cigarette burns.

A few breaths crawled out of her nostrils as she waited. She thought about leaving again but a squeak was at her toes. The door opened and there was Richard. He was wearing a V-neck shirt and his sharp, black slacks. His jaw was lined with needles of gray hair.

There was a baby on his shoulder. It was a boy. The baby's cheeks were wet from the pacifier. It reminded Brenda of their son, Amir.

"Hey," Brenda said.

"Hey, Brenda," Richard said.

"Do you think we can maybe talk for a few minutes?" Brenda said.

"What's there to talk about?" Richard said.

Brenda exhaled. "Please?"

Richard looked at Brenda then looked at his new baby. Richard looked so tired. Why would he bring another child into the world?

"Hold on," Richard said. "Wait out here."

The screen door touched his back as he reentered the house. He said the girl's name, then mumbled something before coming back outside.

Brenda and Richard walked towards the car. Richard hit a pack of cigarettes against his palm.

"What's the baby's name?" Brenda asked.

"Isaac," Richard said.

"He's cute," Brenda said.

"What did you come here for?" Richard asked.

"I came to say goodbye," Brenda said. "For good."

Richard took a cigarette between his fingers and lit it. Brenda tried to hold her breath, but she could taste the smoke.

It wasn't a lie when she said it was goodbye for good. She'd gotten to the point where she started to understand her worth.

"Do you mind sharing?" Brenda asked.

Richard took one drag then put his cigarette in Brenda's mouth. She inhaled and let the smoke fill her all the way up.

THE SAME MONSTER

There might've been a monster perched on top of Amir's dresser the night Shannon Greene was on the news. It was close to midnight. The roommates were quiet. Amir was stranded under the covers after taking some Valium. He asked the monster what it wanted. The monster crawled down to the bed and told Amir it wanted to scare the shit out of him before he went to sleep. The monster was black, had a snout and smelled like burning.

Amir told the monster he wasn't scared. The monster got closer. The burning got stronger. Amir forced his arms out to touch it. He cut his thumb on the monster's prickly skin. A thin line of blood trickled down Amir's wrist. Seemed like it took a lifetime to travel down his elbow and drip on the sheets.

There was no blood when Amir woke up the next day. He got up, checked both hands and both arms. There wasn't a wound or a sign of anything. He heard on the news Shannon was alive in the hospital after she slashed her instructor's tires and overdosed on pills. Amir drove to the medical center, bought two sympathy cards at the gift shop, then went to visit Shannon's room.

Amir knew her from class but they weren't friends. Shannon's room was filled with gifts when Amir showed up. Her skin was pale and she was bony. He gave her both sympathy cards even though he'd signed one. Shannon smiled at him from her bed hooked up to fluids.

"You're in psych with me," Shannon said. "You're weird."

A woman sat beside Shannon in a chair. She stood, snatched the cards from Shannon and stacked them with the others. Shannon yelled the woman's name, Tiffany.

"Don't have to be so cuntty about it," Tiffany said to Shannon. Tiffany said she was Shannon's big sister and thanked Amir for the visit before she left them alone in the room.

"I'm glad you're not dead," Amir said.

"It sucks," Shannon said. "Near death is way more annoying than living."

"Why?" Amir said.

"What's your name again?" Shannon said.

Amir repeated his name. Shannon pointed at a sketch pad and pencil on the same chair her sister sat in. Amir gave it to Shannon and she started to draw.

"Ever fuck a married man?" Shannon said.

Amir didn't know the teacher Shannon referenced. They didn't show his picture or say his name on the news. Shannon looked up from her sketch and snickered when Amir didn't answer.

"That's why you're so weird," Shannon said. "You're a virgin."

"No," Amir said. "It ain't like that."

"Would you fuck me if I let you?" Shannon said.

Amir was afraid of women when he was younger. He saw his parents fight a lot. Except it was never a fight; Dad would hit Mom in front of Amir.

Mom would say Amir was just like his father, hammer it to him every day. Amir wondered what made Mom keep saying that to him but he internalized it anyway. Amir was convinced he had the same inclination to hurt women he loved—the same monster inside himself.

Tiffany came back with towels and put them on Shannon's bed. Shannon asked Amir again if he'd fuck her.

"Leave the boy alone," Tiffany said.

"Just trying to get him laid," Shannon said.

Amir started to defend himself but felt sick in his stomach. He rushed out of the room then vomited on the flooring in the hall. Some of the nurses tried to stop him but Amir kept walking until he was out of the building. He found his car and drove off.

It was night again when Amir went back to his apartment. He got in bed, popped another Valium. It took a while but the burning smell came. The monster purred in the corner of the room for some time. It was bigger than the night before. Amir asked about all the blood from the other night but the monster didn't respond. It crawled on the bed then stared at Amir until he woke up the next morning in sweat.

Amir loaded rat shot in two small revolvers. The garage door was all the way up. The cars were parked in the front lawn. Amir and his mother would shoot toward the trees miles away from any neighbor. He sat with Mom on the antique wardrobe in her car garage and faced a clothesline of Polaroid pictures.

They slammed three warm beers before they got started. Amir stared at the center photo from his parents' wedding. Dad must've been in his twenties in the photo and Mom was nineteen. Amir had just turned twenty and admitted he looked a lot like the twenty-something version of his father. Amir pointed the gun at the photo, pulled the fucking trigger.

Smack. The picture hit the ground. Amir was surprised he hit the photo. He climbed off the wardrobe and walked to pick it up. He examined the picture for a second, almost spellbound, then clipped it back on the line.

"Bullet went straight through," Amir said.

Amir tore off two more beers from the case and handed one to Mom. She took a sip before she picked up her gun. Amir worked hard to stay friends with her, struggled each day to remember how good a mother she was before Dad fucked everything up.

"Just because you kill it don't make it go away," Mom said.

"Rather kill it first," Amir said. "Sort out the rest after."

"There are things about your daddy worth holding on to," Mom said.

Mom pointed her gun at the one of the photos. She wasn't a good shot. Didn't like guns at all. She lined up her shot, took a breath, then pulled the trigger.

She missed. The bullet ripped through the air and disappeared out in the trees. Mom tugged on one of her ears, said she'd never get use to the ringing.

There was a photo of Dad in the hospital weeping while holding baby Amir. His face was filled with a kind of agony.

Amir pointed his gun at the photo. Felt like his mom was wrong. Felt like killing the past was inevitable. The past held weaknesses, tools to end you if you didn't end them first.

"Is that why you ain't leave him?" Amir said.

Your daddy did some bad shit," Mom said. "But he wasn't always like that."

"But he hurt you," Amir said. "Threatened to kill me."

Amir pulled the trigger and missed. He unloaded his revolver. He was done shooting.

Mom aimed at another photo. This time she hit it. She hopped down from the wardrobe, picked the picture up before the wind carried it off.

"He did some bad shit," Mom said.

"Just bad?" Amir said.

"What you want me to say, boy?" Mom said.

"I want you to not let him off the hook," Amir said.

Mom showed Amir the picture she'd shot down. There were black scuffs on it from the rat shot. The picture showed her propped against an old, shitty car smiling at the camera. It was from before she had Amir, before the wedding. Amir grabbed the picture and examined it. Her young face was starlight. She sparkled like she knew it was her brightest moment, like she saw the dark on the other side. Amir looked at the back of the photo. Dad had penned Mom a love note.

"How's school?" Mom said.

Amir didn't answer Mom right off. He handed the photo back and Mom put it on the clothesline.

"Hey," Mom said. "Everything okay?"

The love note on the back of Mom's photo did show a different side of Dad. What changed him? Was something brought back from his past? Did he feel he had to destroy everything, burn his family to ash? Did he ever actually love them?

"There's this girl. Shannon Greene," Amir said. "All anyone talks about."

"Girl from the news?" Mom said. "These young things will sell they soul."

"Thought she was interesting," Amir said. "Might visit her again."

Amir didn't take any pills before bed. He skipped class and drove to the medical center early the next day then waited for visitors to be allowed in. They'd moved Shannon to a different room. She wasn't hooked up to fluids and wore her normal clothes. Even looked like she'd gained weight. She helped her nurse undress the bed.

"You look good," Amir said.

Shannon smiled when she saw him, dropped everything to give Amir the biggest hug of his life.

"Wait," Amir said. "I'm confused."

"You'll be all right," Shannon said.

"When you getting out of here?" Amir said.

"Leaving right now," Shannon said.

The nurse made up the bed while Shannon packed her things. She filled her backpack with a Nintendo DS, a pack of graphite pencils, and two sketch pads.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," Shannon said.

The nurse walked out of the room and came back with a wheelchair. Shannon sat in it and Amir offered to push her downstairs. Tiffany was in the lobby. Shannon got out of the wheelchair and the three of them walked out of the medical center.

"Where you headed?" Shannon asked Amir.

"Nowhere," Amir said. "Wanted to see you."

"Well," Shannon said. "Look at me."

"You should come with us," Tiffany said to Amir.

They found Tiffany's car in the parking lot. Shannon convinced her sister to drive out to the lake. Shannon was sure she needed to be close to water. Said it would make her better. It wasn't warm enough to be out on the beach but that's where they went. The overcast had choked out the heavy sunlight. They took off their shoes and socks and tip-toed across the sand.

Tiffany cuffed her jeans first then rushed out into the water. Amir followed her. He was sure Shannon wouldn't be far behind them.

Shannon watched them from the shore. Tiffany yelled back at her and called her pussy. Shannon flipped up her middle finger to them. She walked back to Tiffany's car and got one of her sketch pads. She spread her jacket out on the sand, sat on it, and sketched.

Tiffany looked out at the water. She seemed infatuated. "I can never say no to the beach," she said. "My sister knows that." Tiffany wore a crucifix around her neck. She clutched it, whispered a prayer.

"My sister has demons," Tiffany said. "But she's a beautiful person."

"What really happened?" Amir said.

"Won't talk to me about it," Tiffany said. "But I know men can be evil."

"I got demons too," Amir said. "I promise I won't hurt her."

"Don't say that," Tiffany said. "Impossible to keep that kind of promise."

"I know," Amir said.

Tiffany stayed in the water for a while. Amir walked back to Shannon and sat beside her on the sand. Shannon drew with her left hand. She slashed her pencil across the pad. She didn't look up when Amir got close to her.

"You drawing me?" Amir said.

He looked over Shannon's shoulder. She'd drawn the profile of a man, a simple white man. She shaded him dark across his cheek.

Shannon was fixed on the sketch. Seemed like she couldn't look up from it.

"He did things to me," Shannon said. "He was there when I OD'd."

Amir trembled. He tried but couldn't stop himself. He had questions but couldn't bring himself to ask them. He looked at Shannon's sketch again.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You don't have to be," Shannon said.

Dad apologized the first time he hit Mom. He buried his face in his hands like the devil had raised out of him. Amir was too young to protect Mom. Instead, he got familiar with the devil, burned his eyes on it. Amir killed his gods throughout his teens. Satisfied his starved void with drugs and more drugs. One time, he looked in the mirror and realized the devil was in his blood.

Shannon continued to add details to her drawing. She scrubbed the sketch with an eraser then sharpened the man's jaw line. She went over the drawing several times. It was like she wanted to carve the man's face into her world.

"He took things from me," Shannon said. "Thought about killing him."

"Why didn't you?" Amir asked.

"I don't know," Shannon said.

It happened quick but something had bonded Amir and Shannon. He wanted to know Shannon's specific pain. The man in the sketch was the past in monstrous form. The man had the potential to fuck up Shannon and Amir's bond. Amir wanted to kill the man. The impulse gnawed at him.

"I'm scared," Amir said.

Shannon broke from her sketch, looked up. She nodded her head like she understood what Amir meant.

"What are you scared of?" Shannon said.

"I'm scared of what I might do—," Amir said.

"You can't hurt me," Shannon said.

"To him," Amir said.

She dropped her pad, jumped up, then hugged Amir. He held tight to Shannon, hoped to relieve some of his own pain.

Amir and Shannon agreed to stay together for a few days.

Shannon lied when Tiffany asked why Amir had to stay with them. They couldn't afford to send Shannon to rehab. Shannon stayed with Tiffany and helped pay her bills even while in school. Shannon use to work at a fast food place. She quit after she found she made more money selling Adderall on campus. She told Tiffany that Amir could help her stay sober long enough to get a new job. It was clear Tiffany wanted to argue with her sister but kept it to herself.

Tiffany drove to Amir's apartment so he could pack his stuff. Amir put some pills in his backpack. He wasn't sure if he'd need them or not. He stuffed some jeans and underwear in a duffel and headed out.

The drive to Tiffany's house was quiet. A storm threatened them with a low rumble from outside. Amir studied Shannon's drawing. Each time he looked at it, he smelled something burn.

Shannon helped get Amir's things out of Tiffany's car. Their house was small, clean. There wasn't a lot of furniture. A bookshelf, a pleather couch, furnished the living room.

Tiffany didn't trust Amir now. She kept her eyes on him as she brewed black tea on the kitchen stove. She poured herself a cup, sipped it while leaned against one of the walls. She checked on them when Shannon invited Amir into her room.

Shannon put Amir's things in her closet. He was hesitant when Shannon asked him to sit beside her on the bed.

It got late. Tiffany hummed a Jesus tune as she strolled down the hallway with an armful of towels. The shower ran for a while then she came out with her hair wrapped. Her room was across from them. She kept her door open all night.

"Kiss me," Shannon said. "Let her think we might fuck."

"But I'm a virgin, remember?" Amir said.

"You're repressed and angry," Shannon said.

"Can I share something with you?" Amir said.

"I don't know," Shannon said. "Will you try to force your cock down my throat after?"

"No," Amir said. "Just want to tell you about my lucid dream."

"I'm so tired," Shannon said.

"What would you do if there was a monster on your bed every night?" Amir said.

"Not sure," Shannon said. "Ask if they had a name?"

They shut down the house. Shannon built a pallet for Amir to sleep in on the floor beside her bed. Amir took off his shirt and got in the makeshift bed with his jeans on. He asked Shannon to get his backpack out of her closet. She got up, picked up his bag, and tossed it at him. Amir showed his pills to Shannon.

"You cool with me taking some of these?" Amir asked.

Shannon didn't give a shit. Said she was sober for good. Told Amir to make sure her sister didn't find the pills. She slipped off her jeans and climbed into her bed.

"Did you actually love that guy?" Amir said.

"I don't know," Shannon said. "Maybe."

Amir swallowed his pills dry. He locked himself in. Shannon whispered goodnight, pulled the sheets over her head. Amir looked at the ceiling and waited. It took a while but the feeling came and along with the feeling came the burning.

Amir did what Shannon suggested. He asked the monster if it had a name. It sat right in front of him again. Amir inhaled the smoke that curled from its nostrils. When the monster didn't answer he asked again. It stood on its hind legs and changed shape. It looked like a man. No. It looked like Dad.

The monster pressed its new body on top of Amir. The burned smell was gone. Now it smelled like Dad's cologne. Amir forced his hands up around its neck. He choked the monster, squeezed harder than he'd ever squeezed. He wouldn't stop until he killed it. He felt blood expand the monster's throat. Its pulse grew weaker with each moment.

Amir tumbled down into something. For some reason he couldn't let go. He didn't want to let go. He found pleasure in it.

Amir yanked himself awake.

The music was loud. It blasted from the computer Shannon had on her bed. She danced around the room without pants. Her bed was a mess.

Tiffany's room was empty. He found the alarm clock beside Shannon's bed. Tiffany must've got up early and gone to work.

"Wet dream?" Shannon said.

Amir felt himself to make sure he wasn't wet.

"Close enough," Amir said.

"Dream about me?" Shannon said.

"I think I killed—" Amir said.

Shannon stopped dancing. She put on the jeans from the other day then hopped on the bed. She turned off the music and asked Amir to repeat himself.

"Shit," Shannon said. "Killed what?"

"There's this thing, this monster—" Amir said. "Don't know how to explain it."

"The fuck are you talking about," Shannon said. "Should I be worried?"

"When did you know you were going to stay sober?" Amir asked.

"I don't know anything," Shannon said. "It's just not my thing right now."

Amir found his pill case on the floor beside the pallet. He didn't need pills anymore. He was going to get rid of them. He walked out of Shannon's room and found the bathroom. He stood over the toilet with the pills in his hand.

Amir wanted to flush them. He really wanted to fucking flush them. He remembered how much money he spent on the shit. He stuffed the pills deep in his pocket then flushed the toilet.

He walked back into Shannon's room. She stared at him like she knew.

"You're not just weird," Shannon said. "You're a fucking idiot."

Amir stayed with Shannon for the rest of the weekend. Tiffany argued with Shannon all weekend about going back to school. Shannon said she was over school, wanted to get her life started.

Sunday night, Tiffany took Amir to get his car from the parking lot of the medical center. He went back to his apartment and slept without pills.

Monday morning, Amir went back to school. He parked in his usual spot. He recognized a white man smoking a cigarette a few cars down from him. The man sat on the hood of a cherry red convertible.

Amir wished he had his gun. He'd walk up to the man, pull the trigger, walk to class with blood and brain matter all over his face. Amir got out of his car then walked closer to make sure it was Shannon's guy. Amir approached the man like he didn't recognize him.

"Excuse me," Amir said. "Can I borrow your lighter?"

Amir understood the man's appeal. He wore his shirt unbuttoned. His face was shaved clean. Shannon's sketch didn't do the man's hair justice. The wind made it flutter off his face. He almost looked like an angel.

The man took out a lighter from the lapel pocket of his blazer. "Need to bum a cigarette?" he asked Amir.

"It's cool," Amir said. "I don't smoke."

The man looked at Amir like he was concerned. "What do you need to light?" the man asked Amir.

"Fuck it," Amir said. "I'll take a cigarette."

The man found a cigarette and paired it with the lighter. He handed both to Amir.

Amir put the cigarette in his mouth and fumbled with the lighter. It was clear he wasn't a smoker.

"Shitty habit," the man said. "I don't recommend it."

"I'm sort of obsessed with shitty habits," Amir said.

Amir got even closer than he already was. He sparked the lighter and held it against the man's shirt collar. "You remember Shannon?" Amir said. "She had a shitty habit too."

The man trembled. He looked at Amir like he saw the devil. Amir held the flame until the man's collar burned black.

THE POCKET KNIFE

In June, *Boy* wears his school uniform with dirt caking the knee of his khakis. All day he plays under the Pecan Tree at the edge of the street with *Girl* who lives on the good side of town. She wears pink barrettes in her hair and pink sandals on her feet. Boy likes to chase Girl around the tree and feel her softness when he catches her. The thick, black wool of her hair smells sweeter after they roll in the grass.

On Monday, Girl says she's tired of running and wants to play house. Boy thinks about it before going home and telling *Daddy*.

"Can't keep a knife. Can't keep a wife," Daddy says, handing Boy the pocketknife. Daddy says it's the same knife his father gave him when he was the same age as Boy.

The next day, Boy and Girl lie together under the Pecan Tree. The thick branches roof them from the southern heat. Boy wants to show her the knife but he's scared. What if she takes it and runs away? He leans over and pecks Girl's forehead. She hangs her tongue and wipes it off.

Wednesday, Girl says she's tired of laying under the tree. She wants Boy to build a house. He stands, wipes the grass off the seat of his khakis, and tightens his imaginary necktie. He goes to Daddy and asks for help. Daddy wants to know if he still has the knife.

"Can't keep a knife. Can't keep a wife," Daddy says, handing him the folded cardboard box they'd just unpacked the night before. They'd just moved into the neighborhood.

Boy unfolds the box and sets it under the Pecan Tree. He's surprised at how big it is. He steps inside the box, carves two small windows. It takes Boy a minute to get the windows to look

like windows. He remembers how important the house is to Girl. He knows it's right when the sun peaks in.

Girl steps inside and points at the knife. "I want to hold it," she says.

Boy puts it in his pocket and steps inside the cardboard house. "Can't keep a knife. Can't keep a wife," he says.

Girl punches Boy's chest then runs home. Boy fixes his imaginary necktie. He likes playing house. He's winning.

Thursday, he grabs Girl by her wrists and makes her sit in the center of the cardboard house by herself.

"The woman stays in the house," Boy says. "The man brings home the bacon."

Crying, she wipes snot from her nose. "I don't want to play house no more."

Boy thinks about his Daddy. He walks up to Girl and gives her a love tap.

Girl gets quiet. The tears stop.

Boy takes a sip out of an imaginary liquor bottle. "You gone start respecting me, woman," he says, slurring.

He steps into the cardboard house and hugs her. He can't smell the sweet in her hair. He pecks her soft cheek. She pulls away and rips the knife from his pocket.

"You peck me," Girl says. "I peck you," She pushes him down, unfolds the pocket knife, and carves his cheek. Blood runs down his face, dripping off his jaw like he's eaten a plum. She runs home. He knows she won't be back. She won.

The cardboard house collapses. Boy lies in the grass for a moment. He knows what Daddy will say but wonders what it means for the both of them. He runs home, palm patching his cheek.

“Daddy,” Boy says, yelling. “Don’t play house.”

CONVERTED

Richard must've lost his tie on the walk from the church to the old sports bar. It was too hot to come back to Grenada for a funeral. Richard's collar, his entire shirt was sweaty. He took off his jacket then folded it across his lap. He knew the bar well. He sat on the stool, got the bartender, ordered a canned PBR. He talked nonstop after he sat down. He didn't say nothing important, just blabbered loud so anyone could hear. All the folks focused on Richard instead of the game that was on.

Richard made sure he got himself drunk. His monologues got personal. He talked about his oldest son. How he couldn't look at his son's dead body. He talked about his ex-wife. How he'd done a lot of dirt that led to their divorce. The dirtiest thing Richard did was bring home stray women. He fucked them in his ex-wife's bedroom.

"True freedom is not having to look over your shoulder," Richard said, pointed at the bartender. "I'm just fighting to get there."

Richard was an entertainer. Better described, he was a bullshitter. He knew no boundaries when it came to a captive audience. He could've grabbed his crotch right there in front of everyone. He could've told all those folks how hard it was for a black man in Grenada. If possible, Richard would've detached his balls and put them on one of the tables as a demonstration of failure. He couldn't look at his son's body because he blamed himself. Richard did all but pull the trigger.

Richard told the bartender he had a gift for him. Richard took his suit coat, searched the inside pocket. He found the wedding ring from his first marriage, put it on the table. The ring was solid gold. He kept it on him as a reminder never to get married again.

"Can finally let that thing go after all these years," Richard said.

The bartender was cleaning something behind the bar. He picked up the ring and examined it.

"Sell it," Richard said. "Probably can get some good money off it."

The bartender gave Richard back his ring and continued working behind the bar.

"You don't believe me?" Richard said.

Richard stood and tossed the jacket over his shoulder. He dropped the ring in his pants pocket.

"That's all right," Richard said. "Somebody will take it."

A man marched into the bar. Richard fired up a cigarette.

"Sinners," the man said. "Repent, humble yourselves before the Lord."

All the other drunks weren't happy to see him enter. They threw things and cussed at him.

"Get out of here with that shit," the bartender said.

The man was a bald, black man with thick glasses. His short-sleeved shirt was pure white and stiff from heavy starch. He held a Bible high above his head. He quoted a scripture from the Bible:

"For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink, and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother's womb."

The man quoted the scripture like the words belonged to him. The rest of the folks in the sports bar got louder, tried to drown him out.

The bartender took a heavy bottle off the shelf behind the counter. He confronted the man. The bartender seemed prepared to use the bottle as a weapon if he had to.

"I won't say it again," the bartender said.

The man began to leave.

"Let him live," Richard said. "Come here, preacher. I want to ask you something."

The bartender gave them ten minutes before he'd kicked both of them out. The religious man walked up to Richard and took a seat. Richard grabbed his beer. He put the can under the man's nose.

"Want a little taste?" Richard said.

The man shielded his face with the Bible.

"No thank you," the man said.

Richard shrugged and took a sip.

"Let me ask you something, preacher," Richard said.

"I'm no preacher," The religious man said. "My name is Locke Tillison. I'm simply a servant of the Lord."

Richard couldn't help but laugh. He picked up his cigarette, dragged it, then blew the smoke toward Locke.

"I'm a servant of the Lord too," Richard said. "Watch me do his will."

Richard finished his beer, crushed it, then tossed it. Locke seemed to be offended by something. He adjusted his glasses.

"Don't mock the gospel," Locke said.

Richard waited for the beer to settle in his stomach. He put his hand on Locke's shoulder.

"I really want to believe in that stuff," Richard said. "But it don't make no sense when you think about it."

"For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness and—"

Richard grabbed tight to Locke and told him to hush before they got kicked out. Richard realized Locke could've been close to his son's age.

"Don't tell me what the good book say," Richard said. "Tell me what you say."

Locke put the Bible on his lap and stroked the cover. The Bible had a cross design on the cover

Richard leaned forward. He figured he had a strong smell of cigarettes and beer on him.

"How about we make a bet," Richard said.

Locke disagreed with Richard.

"I'm not a gambling man," Locke said.

Richard finished his cigarette. He got his wallet out to pay the bill.

"It ain't like that," Richard said. "Just hear me out,"

Richard signaled the bartender, took out his debit card. He leaned on Locke, got up in his face.

"I'll give you the rest of the day to show me," Richard said.

"Show you what?" Locke said.

"Don't know," Richard said. "Just make me a believer."

Richard told Locke he'd give him his old wedding ring if Locke converted him. Locke considered it all for a moment. He held out his hand.

"Deal," Locke said.

Richard put on his coat as both men walked out of the sports bar. Richard asked if he could ride with Locke.

Locke showed Richard his vehicle. It was a white sedan. When Richard opened the door to the passenger side he looked at the back seat. He saw empty water bottles, three rolls of fishing line, a stack of dry-cleaned shirts identical to the one Locke was wearing, and a group of tubes that looked like they came from a hospital. Locke got in his sedan, cranked it, then rolled down the windows. He kept the Bible between his legs the entire drive.

"You from Grenada?" Richard asked.

"Yes sir," Locke said. "Born and raised over on Sundown."

"You said your name was Tillison?" Richard said. "Who are your people?"

Locke looked off somewhere, distracted. He smiled and gathered Richard's attention.

"You see that over there?" Locke said, pointing. "That'll make you believe."

It took Richard a moment to realize what Locke had said. Richard looked in the direction Locke pointed at and saw two stray mutts hunching back in the bushes beside a dumpster.

Richard smiled. He almost understood what Locke meant. Something about the scene was both carnal and holy. The lively friction of the act had a stench of the divine.

"Look at him taking that bitch," Richard said. "Ain't sure it means nothing but I'll admit it's quite a sight."

They sat there and watched until the dogs were finished. There was a stillness that Richard had never experienced before. He accepted it but was sure it wasn't God.

Locke drove down to the Buckman's car dealership. They'd been in town forever, had a monopoly on car sales. Locke pulled in to the dealership, parked the car, then grabbed a camera from underneath his seat. Locke got out of his van and snapped a few pictures of the cars. Richard got out of the sedan and walked behind Locke.

"The hell does this have to do with our bet?" Richard said.

"God is both love and revenge," Locke said.

A car salesman approached them and introduced himself. It didn't take long for Richard to recognize him. It was one of the Buckman sons.

"Mason Buckman," the man said. "How may I help you two gentlemen?"

Mason was a white man with straight, white teeth. He might've worn a toupee under his cap. He held out his hand to Locke and waited.

Locke continued to snap pictures. He took a picture of Mason.

"You can't help me," Locke said. "You can't even help yourself."

Mason tried to keep his smile but couldn't help but look disturbed.

"What's the problem, sir?" Mason asked.

Locke lowered his camera and confronted Mason. Richard tried to pull Locke back.

“The problem is that you and your family are all sinners,” Locke said. “You make idols out of material things and sell lies to the less fortunate. Know that His judgment penetrates like a sword.”

Richard wrapped his arms around Locke, pulled him back toward the car.

“You give money to false prophets to pay off your sins,” Locke said. “God does not forgive. He sees all and His judgment is imminent.”

Richard pulled Locke to the car. They got in and drove away.

“You are crazy as cat shit,” Richard said.

The car accelerated. Locke gripped the steering wheel and wouldn't let go.

“I'm not crazy,” Locke said. “I'm a servant of the Lord.”

Crazy as cat shit.

Something in Richard liked what had happened.

“You should drive up to city hall if you meant all that stuff,” Richard said. “James is the most powerful of the Buckman boys. He so crooked he can't stand up straight.”

James Buckman was on the city council. He, along with the rest of the board, was successful in running other small businesses out of town. Folks like him kept the town in stasis. Walmart and the heating factory (whose name seemed to change every couple years) were the

only two jobs that would hire black folks and poor folks with little to no education who wanted to stay. Richard didn't understand why anyone would want to stay.

Locke eased up off the gas, took one hand off the steering wheel, then put the hand on Richard's shoulder.

"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them," Locke said.

As they entered the city hall parking lot, Richard imagined his son in the casket. He was supposed to save him, get him out of Grenada. Instead, he saved himself. But why should he have sacrificed himself? He didn't owe the boy shit. Richard gave the boy life. Was that not enough? He promised he wouldn't blame himself for the boy's death anymore. Richard deserved happiness and wasn't going to let anyone make him feel guilty for taking it.

He rolled down the window and spat. Folks were all outside shopping and running other errands. Two teenage white girls walked towards the city hall entrance hair wet and barefoot. A black woman was behind them in her mobility scooter.

"Look at it," Richard said. "Ain't nothing changed."

"The Lord is here with us," Locke said.

He stopped the vehicle in front of city hall, put it in park, grabbed his Bible, then got out. Locke climbed to the roof of the sedan.

Richard got out and slammed his door. He asked Locke what the hell he was doing.

Locke stood atop the sedan. His Bible was high above his head again.

“For the love of money is the root of all evil,” Locke said.

He screamed toward the sky. It was as if Locke were in pain. Something wet dripped down his jeans. People gathered around Locke's vehicle to look at him.

“Children of God,” Locke said, pleaded with the people. “Open your eyes. Can you not see evil coating the very ground upon which you stand?”

Piss continued to flow down his leg onto his shoe.

“Look at it.” Locke said. “Greed simmering underneath your feet.”

Folks pointed and laughed at Locke. Richard screamed at Locke, asked him to climb down before he got hurt or arrested.

A police car pulled behind Locke's sedan. A white officer got out wearing dark shades. He was short and chubby holding his belt as if he needed more room around his waist.

"Alright," the officer said. "Everybody go on about your business."

The officer spoke as if he knew each individual person. Richard recognized him as Nate Tanker's boy, Bubba.

Nate Tanker had been police chief many years ago. Everyone still called him chief. He was a hero in town. In those days Nate was tall, strong, principled. He helped folks no matter who they were.

Bubba got closer to Locke's vehicle and looked at the roof. The hair at the top of Bubba's head was thin for a young man.

Everyone except Richard backed away from Locke's sedan.

"Get on down," Bubba said. "It's too hot to be out here playing."

Richard approached Bubba shaking his head.

"Something just ain't right about him," Richard said. "Something just ain't right."

Locke squatted, pointed his Bible at Bubba.

"You think I'm playing?" Locke said. "This is no joke, officer. This is the word of God. His is the only authority—"

Locke grabbed his hip. Sweat ran from the side of his face down his neck. His Bible slipped out of his hand and fell to the ground first.

Richard ran and hovered over him. Locke reached for his Bible with one hand while holding his crotch with the other.

Bubba approached them. He already had his hand on his gun.

"So you gone shoot him?" Richard said. "I know the chief taught you better than that."

Bubba looked like he could've spit on them.

"There's nothing wrong with him," Bubba said. "Can't even fake right."

Bubba walked up to Locke and nudged him with his foot. "Get up," Bubba said.

"Look at him," Richard said. "He ain't faking. This man is in pain." Richard grabbed on to Locke. "Please, all you have to do is help me get him in the van."

Locke whimpered as Richard walked to the back of the sedan. He opened the trunk to food containers and medical kits stacked in each corner.

Bubba dragged Locke across the ground to where he and Richard lifted him into the van. Locke was propped up against the back seat. His shoes dangled out of the van close to the ground. He brought his knees closer to his chest so Richard could close the trunk.

Locke's hands shifted from his hip to his groin.

"I just need to relieve myself," Locke said, pointed at the stack of medical kits.

Richard got the kit and put it beside Locke. Richard hovered over him, tried to shield Locke as he unfastened his pants and lowered them. Locke revealed a mutilated penis.

Richard's eyes stayed on Locke's wound.

"Lord have mercy," Richard said.

The sight was the ugliest thing Richard had ever seen. It was the worst thing that could happen to a man.

Bubba climbed into the car from the side door. He made room for himself to look down at them over the back seat. Before he was able to see Locke's penis good, he looked away. He was disgusted.

“Son of a bitch,” Bubba said. He wiped sweat off his forehead. “It’s too hot out for all this shit.”

Locke greased the tube and slid it up what was left of his penis. He attached the tube to a bag and strapped it across his thigh. The bag began to fill with urine.

Locke seemed like he finally got some relief.

"What happened to you, son?" Richard said.

"And if your hand offend, cut it off, and cast it from you," Locke said. "For it is more profitable for one of your members to perish than to have your whole body cast into hell."

Richard wanted to tell Locke to stop quoting scripture and talk like a normal person.

"How is this supposed to convert me?" Richard said.

Locke didn't respond. He zipped up his pants and fastened them.

Oak trees swayed along the edges as if they were hiding secrets. Locke said he wasn't ready to let go of the bet. He quoted something about fishers of men. Richard felt the road sink beneath them. They were driving towards the lake at the end of town.

Richard rolled down the window and spat. Grenada still smelled like oil even after all the years he was away.

“Why do people stay here?” Richard asked Locke.

Locke didn’t say nothing. Richard thought maybe Locke was trying to think of a Bible scripture to quote.

In the middle of the road, Richard saw a dead dog being eaten by buzzards. Their beaks pecked at the carcass like a corn cob. It looked like one of the stray dogs Richard and Locke admired earlier. Richard had Locke stop in the middle of the road.

Locke patted Richard on the back. He could've been Richard's son in another life.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” Locke said, “plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Richard shrugged him off, shook his head. He sat his elbow out the car. Half his face was caught in the rearview mirror. He tilted it toward Locke away from his sweaty face.

"Lord ain't got any plans for me," Richard said.

"He has plans for everyone," Locke said.

Richard chuckled to himself. The chuckle grew into laughter and the laugh stretched over a long while. "We failed," he said. "Ya'll ain't men." The laugh was so good it hurt.

He laughed on and off the rest of the day. He didn't know if he saw the glory of God but he was sure he saw His failure. He gave Locke the ring as a consolation prize.

The buzzards scattered as they approached. Richard got out the sedan and walked up to the dog. It was male. The birds had picked pink out of his swollen, black body. There was nothing in the dog's eye socket. He was gone.

"I'm sorry," Richard said. "Wish I could do more." He stared down at the dog for a while before unzipping his pants and peeing on him. Richard didn't care that cars were driving by. He hoped everyone would see him. It was the only thing he had left to give.

A RUSH

The streets simmered like speed. A flock of drug addicts dragged across the church parking lot. There was currency in Melanie being young and white. She sat on the church steps although she'd already been arrested. The steps were a reliable bed. Sunlight threatened to blister Melanie's forehead and the back of her neck. She didn't know what day it was.

The flock was older men. One of them she knew well. The meth had ruined Oscar's teeth. He covered his face when he laughed at one of his guy's jokes. He broke away from the group and sat beside Melanie on the steps. She took her box cutter out of pocket and rested it on the steps between her legs.

Should I play with my food before I eat it?

Melanie and Oscar fucked for the first time on meth. It was a rush no sober person could understand. Melanie had known she was HIV positive since she was eighteen. When she told Oscar, he didn't flinch. He understood she had needs. He found money for condoms and a cheap hotel room. He tarried in her memories after that night, almost killed every racist thought she'd ever had.

Oscar took off his shirt and gave it to Melanie. She used the shirt to shade her forehead and neck. But it was the blueberry of Oscar's skin that turned her on. Melanie rubbed her fingers against his ribcage.

"When's the last time you ate?" Melanie said.

"Depends on what you consider food," Oscar said.

Oscar wasn't Melanie's only lover. She'd do anything for some dope. She reached in her pocket, unfolded her cash. Sweat had dampened the money. Melanie couldn't remember the last meal she ate. Her jeans slid off when she stood. She tightened her belt. Seemed like the cops were always looking for her. She picked up her box cutter, checked the blade, put it back in her pocket.

"That man ain't coming," Oscar said. "We gone have to get our shit from somebody else."

"He'll be here," Melanie said.

They waited a little longer. An old, burgundy van pulled into the church parking lot. It was a young, black man in the driver's seat. He lowered the van's window. He was overweight with a thick, shiny beard. He yelled over the loud engine.

"Waiting on me?" the man said.

The man had to be the new dealer. Melanie nodded and walked toward his van. Oscar stopped her.

"You ain't got enough money," Oscar said. "Thought we both were gone party tonight?"

"Don't worry," Melanie said. "I got you covered."

Oscar stopped Melanie again and tried to reach for her box cutter. She pushed Oscar back and ran to the dealer. She got in the van. It was hotter inside the vehicle than outside. His air conditioner didn't blow cool air. The dealer put the van in park then turned off the engine.

"Got something for me?" the dealer said.

Melanie gave the dealer a twenty. He looked at the money and gave her back a quarter ounce. Melanie examined the tiny, yellowish shards in the baggie.

"The fuck is this shit?" Melanie said.

"Who cares," the dealer said. "Long as it gets you high."

Melanie put the baggie in her pocket. She got out her box cutter and pressed it against the dealer's groin.

"I want another ounce," she said.

"Fuck you," the dealer said. "Who gives a fuck if it's impure. The whole drug is a fucking impurity."

Melanie ripped the front of the dealer's jeans with the box cutter. It was hot enough for her to kill him.

"Chill out," the dealer said. He paused like he didn't want to tell Melanie the truth. "Got some good shit at the crib."

"Better not be far," Melanie said. She realized the dealer saved the best dope for himself.

Melanie told Oscar to get in the back of the van. They checked the dealer's pockets and all the compartments of his vehicle for weapons and more dope. They couldn't find anything. The dealer turned on the engine, swung around, then drove off from the church. Melanie kept the box cutter steady on his balls. He could've been in his early thirties. He tried to wipe sweat before it dripped from his beard. The brim of his Mississippi cap shadowed his small, dark eyes.

"You ain't have to threaten the man's dick," Oscar said behind them. "I ain't trying to go back to prison."

Melanie was close enough to feel the dealer's pulse jump. He kept both his hands locked on the steering wheel. Sweat fell into his eyes but he was afraid to wipe it.

"Is Sweethome too far out?" the dealer said.

Melanie didn't answer. As the dealer drove, Melanie wiped her own sweat with Oscar's shirt. She rolled down her window then looked at her neighborhood. Small, derelict houses and empty church lots went by. Kids zoomed by them on backs of pickup trucks. Men fought for no reason in front of liquor stores. Stray dogs hopped in dumpsters for food.

The dealer cleared his throat. It took a second for Melanie to realize he was trying to get her attention.

"What's your name?" the dealer asked.

Melanie continued to look out the window. She didn't talk. She just wanted her dope. The dealer asked for Oscar's name but he didn't respond either.

"I get it," the dealer said. "I'll leave you two alone."

Melanie didn't mean to laugh. Saliva filled her mouth and slipped through the gap where her bottom tooth had rotted out. She leaned forward and let her greasy, brown hair cover her face.

The dealer was off. He was bold enough to laugh with Melanie.

"What?" the dealer said. "Is it me? I'm funny now?"

I can't explain it, but I think I like this guy.

Melanie pushed hair out of her face. Where the fuck was this dealer from? He was both alien and familiar to Melanie.

"Under pressure you sound like a damn Yankee," Melanie said. "Grandpa use to say nothing worse than a damn Yankee."

Melanie always believed her Grandpa was either in the Klan or at least sympathized with them. When she was little, he'd take her to the courthouse and preach to her the importance of the state flag. Grandpa use to put a switch on her because she wouldn't wear the confederate flag dress her Grandma made.

They stopped at the light. Melanie wiped her nose on the sleeve of her t-shirt.

"Where are you from?" Melanie asked the dealer.

"I was born and raised right here," the dealer said.

Melanie laughed again. She remembered the dealer from high school but couldn't recall his name. She took the box cutter off his balls. He glanced at her then focused back on the road. They drove on when the light changed.

"You don't even recognize me," Melanie said to the dealer. "It's been almost ten years, man."

The dealer looked at Melanie. "Wait," he said. "Make me remember you."

"Dude," Melanie said. "We use to skip horticulture to share blunts."

"Oh shit," he said. "Mel?"

"Yep," Melanie said. "What's your name again?"

The dealer told Melanie his name was Amir. Melanie exhaled then shook her head. She couldn't believe it. Amir took his hand off the steering wheel and reached out to her.

Melanie remembered Amir's large hands. She gave him dap like they used to do in the eleventh grade. His hands had gotten old and dark. Oscar must've gotten jealous. He leaned forward and kissed Melanie. Melanie stared at Oscar, confused.

"Chill," Melanie said to Oscar. "I never fucked him if that's what you think."

Oscar squeezed Amir's shoulder. "No disrespect," Oscar said to Amir. "But I don't trust you."

Amir flinched when Oscar grabbed him. Oscar had a reputation in town. He was quick to fight. He intimidated other men for sport.

The road switched from paved to gravel as they turned on to Sweethome Rd. Geese swam inside the fishing pond. The houses around the pond were tall with pink bricks and white fences. They stopped at the largest house which must've sat on two acres of land. A tiny, beige camper sat on cinderblocks parallel to the long, winding driveway.

Everything was quiet once Amir turned off the engine. Smoke from Amir's van invaded Melanie's nostrils. She got out of the van and spit on the grass. They followed Amir into the camper.

It was filthy inside. Amir's sink was filled with dishes. Clothes were thrown on the couch. He pulled a small baggie of dope out of the crease between the cushions. He held it in front of Melanie's face. The baggie was filled with perfect, clear shards.

"On the house," Amir said. "We good now?"

Melanie was satisfied with this batch. She and Oscar were going to have a special night. Dope had become a necessity in their relationship. It had gotten to where neither she nor Oscar could come without it.

Someone from outside banged on the door. Amir looked up then put the bag back inside the couch. Melanie grabbed hold to her box cutter inside her pocket. There was an older, black woman outside one of the windows. She banged on the door with an open palm. Amir froze like someone had pulled a gun on him.

"Amir," the woman said. "Open up."

The woman was short with gray hair at her temples. Amir said it was his mother. He opened the door and climbed out. Melanie stood still, tried to hear outside.

"You got company?" Amir's mother said. "They're welcome to come in the house."

"That's okay," Amir said. "We're about to leave now."

Amir slammed the door behind him. Oscar ran to the couch, lifted the cushions to try and find the dope Amir hid. Melanie searched the rest of the camper. Amir's trailer was littered with old, burned photographs. Newspaper was spread out across the entire floor.

Amir and his mother talked outside for a while. Melanie didn't find anything extra. Oscar found the dope between the cushions. He sat on the couch and worshipped it. It was like Oscar was enchanted by each individual shard inside the bag. Melanie pushed Amir's clothes off the couch and sat beside Oscar.

"I hate myself for loving this stuff," Oscar said.

Melanie played with Oscar's beard. Put her other hand on his stomach.

"Don't hate yourself," Melanie said. "This town is enough of a hellhole. We all need a little heaven on earth."

Melanie kissed Oscar. He'd done hard time at Parchman. Government took his daughter when she was a baby, forbid him from seeing her.

"Is this shit heaven though?" Oscar said.

There was a slap. Melanie and Oscar stopped kissing and turned toward the door. Amir's mother got loud.

"You got it honest," she said. "You and your daddy."

"I don't need this shit," Amir said. "Just let me live the way I want."

Amir's mother slapped him again.

"Let me in," Amir's mother said. "I want to see it."

"You have to do this now?" Amir said.

"You've forced me to be something I never wanted to be," Amir's mother said. "I'll call the police if I have to."

Oscar put the dope back inside the couch. They fixed the cushions, moved out of the way as the door opened. Both Amir and his mother rushed inside the trailer. When she saw Melanie and Oscar, she stopped and introduced herself. She said her name was Brenda.

Melanie scratched her neck. She introduced herself to Brenda, lied and said she and Oscar were engaged.

Melanie recognized Brenda from somewhere. Brenda searched the camper for something. She mumbled to herself as she searched.

Amir pleaded with Brenda to leave. He gave up after a few minutes then walked to the couch and sat down. He removed his cap which revealed a bald patch at the top of his head.

"How do you two know my son?" Brenda asked Melanie.

"Amir rolled the tightest blunts in high school," Melanie said. "I don't know how he did it with those big ass hands."

Melanie laughed like she wanted her gut to burst. Brenda and Amir chuckled with her. Oscar tried to conceal his meth mouth.

Brenda sat on the couch beside Amir. She took a pair of his jeans off the couch and folded them.

"A crying shame," Brenda said.

Melanie couldn't remember where she knew Brenda from. For some reason, this irritated Melanie. She rummaged through memories of her old life before she met Oscar. She was so young. Hadn't had time to become a person yet. Brenda remembered she wanted to dance, rode horses in the summer. She remembered the boy who gave her HIV. Melanie knew his name but never thought it, never said it. He was always the boy. Melanie was infatuated with the boy back then because he was white and his parents were rich.

Brenda looked at Melanie and Oscar standing in the corner of the room. Melanie found Oscar and held onto him.

"I remember those days," Brenda said, pointed at Melanie and Oscar's embrace. "How long you two been together?"

"Damn near three years," Oscar said.

"It's always beautiful in the beginning," Brenda said. "It always turns into the devil though. Just give it time."

Melanie wasn't sure if she believed in God or the devil as beings anymore. She believed heaven and hell were conditions. She was in hell for a long time after she learned her status. She found heaven the first time she did meth with Oscar.

Brenda looked at Amir after she said that. Both Amir and Brenda let tears run down their faces. Brenda apologized to Melanie and Oscar after she settled down. She wiped her face, stood up, walked toward the door. She paused then looked back at her son.

"Your friends want something to eat?" Brenda said.

Amir asked Melanie and Omar if they wanted food. Melanie was starving.

"I got to take them back home before it gets dark," Amir said.

"That's alright," Melanie said. "We need to get out of here anyway."

Melanie was more than starving. She was dying. It had been over a month since she last took her meds. She couldn't pay for them anymore. She had a good job at the factory. She didn't have to work hard compared to some of the others. All she did was take messages, fax documents. She showed up high one day and got fired.

"Your friends look like they could eat," Brenda said to Amir.

"You know what?" Oscar said. "I been dreaming about a good sandwich."

"That's it then," Brenda said. "Come on in the house."

Brenda walked out of the camper. Amir put back on his cap. He looked defeated. He got the dope from under the cushions and gave it to Oscar. They all followed Brenda inside the house. It was the biggest house Melanie had seen. Wood grain floors welcomed them into the living room. There was an antique piano in the corner. A gold-plated chandelier hung high above them.

They walked into the kitchen. The fine china was stacked on the display, the marble on top of the island was spotless. Brenda opened her bread box and took out a loaf. She cut six perfect slices.

"Don't be strangers," Brenda said. "Go ahead and sit anywhere."

They sat while she made three ham and cheese sandwiches and put them on three separate plates. She went into her pantry and came out with a box of chocolate chip cookies. She ate one cookie then put the box on the island next to the sandwiches.

"Y'all enjoy," Brenda said.

Amir snatched his sandwich off the plate. He dropped crumbs everywhere as he walked around the house eating.

"Ms. Brenda," Melanie said. "Ever work at the clinic?"

"Thirty years," Brenda said. "I think I remember you."

Melanie remembered how the boy would pick her up, drive them out to the woods. They'd smoke weed, fuck on the hood of his dad's Mercedes. Melanie never saw the boy or had the chance to tell him about her status. He'd packed his dad's Mercedes and got out of town right after graduation.

Oscar huffed down his sandwich and half the box of cookies. "Ms. Brenda," he said. "You keep extra condoms?"

Melanie was embarrassed. Oscar gave Melanie a look like he had to ask.

Brenda wasn't fazed by the question. She looked inside a utility drawer in the kitchen and pulled out a pack of condoms. She walked them over to Oscar.

"I'm not very religious," Brenda said. "But I meant what I said earlier about the devil."

"We don't believe in the devil," Oscar said.

"I get it," Brenda said. "It's hard to believe the thing you love could ever turn on you."

Seemed like Amir couldn't get settled in the house. He walked to the living room, found the remote, and turned on the TV.

"Is that what happened to Amir?" Melanie asked. "The devil got in him?"

"Amir just dealing with a lot of pain," Brenda said. "It's my fault. I expected too much from him."

Brenda looked like she wanted to cry. She fixed her face, put Melanie and Oscar's plate in the sink. She walked in the living room and cussed Amir out for dropping crumbs everywhere. Before they left, Brenda made all of them clean the kitchen and living room.

Amir drove them back toward the church where Melanie lived. The van got louder than before. Amir pulled over to the side of the road. It wouldn't crank back up when he tried it. He got out and raised the hood. He pulled out his flip phone and dialed a few numbers. Someone answered and he talked to them for a while about the van.

"Why not take a look?" Melanie said to Oscar.

He was in the back of the van worshipping the ounce of dope.

"Still don't like him," Oscar said. "I'd punch him in his shit if I wasn't scared of jail."

Melanie tossed Oscar's shirt at him, snatched the dope out of his hands. She jumped out of the van then marched up the road. She stopped herself from scratching her forearm. Bad shit was going to happen. Oscar put back on his shirt then ran after her.

"Where you going?" Oscar said. "You leaving me?"

Melanie froze when Oscar grabbed her wrist. She regrouped, yanked back her arm, and spat at him.

"So you can't party with me?" Oscar said.

"Just need to be alone right now," Melanie said. "Won't do nothing without you."

Oscar looked at Melanie like she was pitiful. She got angry at Oscar for looking at her like she was pitiful. She crushed her urge to threaten his dick or call him something racist.

"Fuck you," Melanie said.

"I love you more," Oscar said.

Damn it. I can't be mad at him. Little dick bastard.

Oscar asked to put his arm around her. Melanie let him do it. Somehow he smelled sweet like fresh pine. His scent made Melanie wish she were high.

Amir got off the phone and ran to Melanie and Oscar. Amir grabbed Melanie's wrist. Melanie reached in her pocket and got the box cutter. She put the blade at his throat. She held it tight like she didn't want the blade to slip and cut Amir.

"Don't put your hands on my lady," Oscar said.

Amir apologized, got out of her way. Melanie kept the knife out for the rest of the walk. They walked for a while. There was a graveyard up the street. The guys followed Melanie up the hill to the cemetery. The dirt was soft under Melanie's feet. She found a grave without a

headstone and sat on it. The guys stood around her. The sky turned bright red. Melanie pulled Oscar down to her.

"Let's do it here," Melanie said. "I can't wait any longer."

"Can't," Oscar said. "Too out in the open."

Melanie's hand was shaky. She scratched her arm like her skin wanted a fight. She tried to keep her mind off dope but failed. She reached in her other pocket and pulled out the first bag of meth Amir sold them.

"We'll save the good shit for later," Melanie said. "You bring the pipe?"

Oscar sat beside Melanie on the grave. He went in his own pocket and pulled out his pipe. He'd made it by prying out the guts of a light bulb. He found his lighter and held it to the bottom of the bulb.

"Just hold on," Oscar said. "We'll get you right."

Oscar held the pipe to Melanie's lips. She inhaled. Everything got faster. Oscar took a couple hits then passed the pipe and lighter up to Amir.

Amir stared at the pipe. He put two fingers at his head and pretended they were the barrel of a gun. "Bang," he said, pulled the trigger. He sucked on the pipe while he heated the bottom with the lighter. He pushed smoke out of his mouth.

"So good," Amir said. "Makes you feel superhuman."

Amir might as well had been naked. He got on the ground and spread himself over another grave.

The sky turned black. Melanie felt colossal like she could've gathered all the stars in her mouth. She stood and made her way back down to the sidewalk. Cars sped by in the street as she walked back toward the church. Amir and Oscar were never far behind. She stood at a stop sign and waited for them to get closer. Another car sped by. The headlights blinded Melanie for a second.

The car could've hit her on the sidewalk. Amir was in the middle of the road. He yelled at the cars as they drove toward him. He wanted to get hit.

They made it back to the church. The sliver of moon and the street lights were plenty bright. Melanie still had the box cutter in her hand. She sat at the top of the church steps. Oscar sat beside her. Amir sat below Melanie and Oscar.

"This is where you actually sleep?" Amir said.

"Not every night," Melanie said.

Oscar kissed Melanie on the neck. She put the box cutter aside and kissed Oscar back on the lips.

Amir's phone call killed the mood. He looked at his phone but didn't answer. Melanie combed her sweaty hair out of her eyes.

"Dude," Melanie said to Amir. "You don't have another place to be?"

The glow from Amir's phone revealed his face. He was crying again. He sobbed for a few minutes until he was ready to speak. His voice was soft.

"It's this fucked up town," Amir said. "I can't do it anymore."

Oscar made a low growl. Melanie got close to Amir but not close enough to touch him. Amir was coming down from an epic high. He seemed locked in his thoughts, burning with internal pain.

"I want to help you," Melanie said. "But I can't take your pain away."

"You can help me," Amir said. "Let me borrow your blade."

"I can't do that," Melanie said. "What about Ms. Brenda?"

"She won't care," Amir said.

Melanie pulled the good dope out of her pocket.

"This is what you need," Melanie said.

She turned to Oscar to give her the pipe. Oscar said Amir had it. Amir took the pipe out of his pocket. He put it on the ground and crushed it with his foot. Oscar was ready to fight Amir, probably could've killed him. Melanie held Oscar back.

"You spoiled piece of shit," Melanie said. "Go ahead and do it then."

Amir picked up the sharpest fragment from the pipe. He held it horizontal to the veins in his wrist.

"You'll need something sharper," Melanie said.

"You don't think I'll do it," Amir said. "Let me borrow your blade."

Melanie believed Amir would do it. Melanie pleaded with Oscar to give her the box cutter.

"Here," Melanie said. "Let me help you." Melanie pressed the blade all the way up. "Give me your arm," she said.

She felt down his arm until she made it to his wrist. His hand was closed tight. She put his fist in her lap and waited.

"It's okay," Amir said. "Take your time."

Melanie put the box cutter down. She ran her fingers through Amir's hair like he was her lover. Melanie wiped a falling tear off Amir's face.

"Before I do this," Melanie said. "Make me understand."

"I want to get out of this shitty town," Amir said. "This is the easiest way to do it."

"I understand," Melanie said. "Let me know if they still shit in heaven, okay."

Melanie found Amir's pulse. She picked back up the box cutter. She would've given Amir what he wanted if she thought it'd give her and Oscar the special night they'd yearned for. She imagined Amir's slashed wrist, his eternal scream. She saw his blood like molasses billow out across the church parking lot. Melanie would've taken Oscar and waded through Amir's blood. She'd find a ditch bank, smoke the rest of their dope, and fuck until her heart exploded.

THE PASSENGER SEAT

Brenda couldn't wait on Richard for much longer. She shivered outside Grenada Doctors Clinic where she worked as a secretary. Her watch ticked as it slid down her skinny forearm. The emptiness of the parking lot surrounded her like a tomb. She expected the sky to turn dark at any moment. This was Brenda's first job that didn't involve beef, buns, and French fries. She thought of the typing class she had taken and the young white girls she beat out of the job. She imagined them, honey-haired and mini-skirted, their necks vertical against the chair, nails clacking. Many of them would leave Mississippi with daddy's money and become housewives, lawyers, and businesswomen.

Brenda saw her reflection in the window of Richard's Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight as he drove up. She was wearing purple, paisley scrubs. Her hair was cut short at the back like most working black women in their early thirties. Her wedding ring was silver with a small gem in the middle. Past her reflection, she saw little Amir in the passenger seat, a thumb tapping his Game Boy. She opened the back door and got in.

"Richer," she said. "Why'd you buy him that thing this close to Christmas?"

Richard switched the car to reverse before grabbing the passenger seat headrest and looking over his shoulder. The area underneath his right eye was still purple and swollen. The car traveled through the street. The neighborhood had become quiet. An hour earlier, children climbed down bus steps and went toward their destination. Brenda exhaled waiting on his reply.

"How was your day, love?" Richard said.

Brenda touched her glasses as she looked at the back of Richard's head.

"You should let me drive," Brenda said.

Brenda and Richard's eyes met through the rearview mirror. Brenda leaned forward and kissed Amir on the cheek. He stopped playing the game and wiped his face.

"Yuck," Amir said.

Brenda kissed him again.

"Ain't no yuck," she said. "What happened today at school?"

"We sung The Lion King in music class," Amir said.

She looked down at the seat. There was a cat's face drawn in permanent marker. Brenda smiled before looking at Richard.

"Looks like Simba's gone travel with us everywhere we go," Brenda said.

"Hakuna matata," Richard said.

The sky dimmed and Richard flipped on his lights.

"Stop looking at that game," Brenda said to Amir's back. "Your eyes not gone be no good."

Amir didn't turn around. Brenda slapped his shoulder.

"Give it here," she said, snatching the Game Boy.

"Mama, I was fixing—" Amir said, sulking with his arms folded.

Brenda looked at the game in her hands. It reminded her of the Etch A Sketch she had received as a child. She would outline brick homes sitting on 2,000 square foot lawns. She remembered when her parents bought their house. To her, anything would have been better than the roach shack they lived in before. Her father was a Delta sharecropper whose fingers had atrophied from gripping the wheel of a tractor. He worked hard but wasn't able to buy the house until her mother became the school janitor.

Nintendo. It sounded like a village, rich with mossy hills and livestock.

"How much it cost, Richer?" Brenda said.

Richard stopped the car at the light.

"It's okay," Richard said. "Mr. Jameson bought it and gave it to me before I left."

"Well, that's the least he could do," Brenda said. "How you gone make somebody a manager then a week later try to demote—"

"Let it go, Brenda," Richard said. "We gone make it."

Brenda's purse was still strapped to her shoulder. She put it on the car mat and unzipped it. The game fit between her wallet and lip balm. "You'll get it back when we make it home, Amir," she said.

They merged onto the road that plowed through the center of the city. The local businesses stacked on both sides of them before they reached Kentucky Fried Chicken, Kroger, Burger King, Walmart (where Richard had just been fired), and McDonald's. They drove through the light and entered the part of town filled with hotels, car dealers, and gas stations.

Cavalier Apartments were located behind Wendy's. Two black boys huddled under the streetlight wearing backward baseball caps, sharing a cigarette.

"Look at them," Brenda said. "Ain't nothing but a couple of thugs."

Brenda got out of the parked car, grabbed Amir's hand, and they all walked up to their room on the second floor. Brenda closed her eyes, said a prayer. She heard Richard's key ring jangle. He'd unlocked the door when she opened her eyes.

"Mama," Amir said.

"I'm coming," Brenda said.

The place smelled like urine. Someone had the lights on. Brenda unzipped her purse and gave Amir the game. He ran to the back leaving his sneakers in the common area.

"Boy," Brenda called to her son. "If you don't get back here and get these—"

Paul and Kelly were sitting on the couch. They were a young white couple. Paul had dark hair that was collected into a ponytail. His goatee was thin above his lip and thick on his chin. Kelly had blonde hair. She was examining cotton she plucked from the arm of the couch. Brenda slapped Kelly's hand.

"What are you two doing here?" Brenda said. "How'd you get in here?"

Behind her, Richard rubbed her back.

"It's okay," Richard said. "They're staying with us for a little while."

Brenda chewed on her bottom lip.

"Why?" she said. The couple were both wearing green flannel shirts and ripped jeans. Brenda caught Kelly smelling her fingers after scratching her armpits.

"We won't stay long, Mrs. Harper," Paul said. "Just a few days. We'll even give you some rent." Richard continued to rub Brenda's back. He whispered in her ear.

"Remember?" Richard said. "This the guy I use to work with. Might be able to help me get my job back."

Brenda exhaled through her mouth before taking off her coat.

"Ya'll want a grill cheese sandwich," she said.

"You ain't got to do all that," Richard said.

"Yes, I do," Brenda said.

A single strip of cheese swayed from Richard's bottom lip. Brenda folded her paper towel, leaned over the card table, and wiped his mouth. She had just done the same thing to Amir before putting him to bed. Richard combed his mustache with his fingers before taking another stringy bite. Paul bumped Brenda's right shoulder as he combed his own mustache.

"Let me get that plate for you, Paul," Brenda said.

Paul stood with his own plate in hand.

"That's okay," he said. "I'll wash out my own plate."

Richard grabbed Paul's forearm.

"Just give her the plate, man," Richard said. "You not ready for that fight."

Brenda took Paul's plate. She looked at Kelly on the left side of the table. Kelly was swirling her cup, experimenting.

"You done eating, Kelly?" Brenda said.

Kelly put her index finger in the cup and watched milk drip down her nail.

"Kelly?" Brenda said.

Both Paul and Richard had their elbows on the table. Paul leaned forward and started snapping in Kelly's face.

"Give her your plate," Paul said.

Kelly rubbed her jeans before looking up. She handed Brenda the plate.

"Take Richer's plate and follow me," Brenda said to Kelly.

Kelly got Richard's plate and followed Brenda into the kitchen. The sink was four steps from where they had been sitting. Brenda dropped some dishes into the sink before taking the plate from Kelly.

"Grill cheese was the first thing I learned to make," Brenda said. "I remember my mother shoving me into the kitchen. She would say, 'I'm a learn you to cook.'"

Kelly mumbled something while rubbing her elbow. Brenda lifted her chin, looked at Kelly like she was concerned.

"Say that again?" Brenda said, tugging her earlobe.

"I can't cook," Kelly said.

Brenda squeezed some generic dishwashing liquid over the dishes. "How old are you?" she said, turning on the hot water.

"I'll b-be eighteen next m-m-month," Kelly said. She grabbed her thigh and looked at the ceiling as she stuttered.

"Can Paul cook?" Brenda said.

Kelly nodded before saying, "Spaghetti and meatballs."

"Do you work?" Brenda said.

Kelly pointed towards the wall and said, "Uh huh. I work right there at Wendy's."

Brenda massaged a soapy plate with her fingers. She remembered herself at eighteen, before crossing the threshold of marriage. She wasn't that dusty girl who picked cotton every summer in Greenwood. She smiled at Kelly.

"Let's go on back in here and fight with the men folk," Brenda said.

Paul and Richard were at the table relaxed, laughing.

"Brenda," Richard said. "I was telling Paul about how little man use to hit me when he was a baby."

Brenda laughed like she understood what Richard meant.

"He was so cute," she said. "He would pee all on Richer then laugh."

Everyone, even Kelly, laughed. Paul ran his fingers through his hair.

"Man, that just made me think," Paul said. "Sorry about what happened down there at work. Picked a fine time to get you too."

Richard flipped his hand. "It ain't nothing," He said. "Santa Claus will show up right on schedule."

Brenda didn't have anything to say. She was Santa Claus. She looked at her pruned fingers.

"What happened?" Paul said. "Why'd they get rid of you? Do you mind me asking?"

Brenda shook her head.

"Well," Richard said. "It was—"

"Richer," Brenda said. "Don't—"

"It's okay," Richard said. "I want to answer the man."

Richard folded his sleeves, took the pack of Camels out of his shirt pocket, and starting hitting them against the tabletop. "I have trouble reading," he said, unwrapping the plastic. "I could hide it when I was stocking and working in automotive but not when they made me manager. When Mr. James found out, he was gone demote me, but—should've just taken the damn job."

Richard took out a single cigarette and put it back in the box upside down. Brenda rubbed her tongue against her teeth. The man she chose to marry was a functional illiterate. She'd always known. The letters he would give her in high school always had someone else's handwriting. Richard's eyes were wet. Paul put a hand on Richard's shoulder. Brenda walked away. She heard the flick of a lighter and a deep inhale.

The parade would be on Main Street. Cars were lined along every curb within a two-mile radius. Brenda saw white people waving at each other as they walked along the sidewalk. "I want to drive," she said. Richard made a left on Snider Street. There seemed to be an oak tree between every third or fourth house. They all had small front lawns. Some were sided with imitation bricks, others were clad in wood—tight, little Gardens of Eden sitting on a concrete slab. She looked at Amir in the backseat picking a scab on his forearm. She took her glove off, reached back, and slapped his shin. Richard put the car in park.

"What you think about Paul and Kelly?" Richard said.

"What I'm supposed to think?" Brenda said.

"Paul and Kelly good people," He said.

"Good white people?" Brenda said.

Brenda got out of the car. She noticed a for sale sign on the lawn of the house they had parked in front of. It was at the edge of the street. The blue painted wood had turned gray. The roof was sinking. She loosened her scarf and walked on to the sidewalk. As she stood, people walked around her. She continued to look at the house. There was a short, bricked walk-way leading towards the front door. It had a chimney. Brenda imagined Amir rolling in the grass alongside a terrier named Toto.

"Hurry up," Brenda heard Richard say. "We gone miss the band."

Brenda reached into her pocket and pulled out a knit cap. She gave it to Amir.

"Where are your gloves?" Brenda said.

Amir took a pair of fleece gloves out of his coat pocket and put them on.

Richard palmed Amir's head. "Last one to make it to the stop sign is a rotten egg," He said.

He and Amir began to run. Brenda walked. The cold touched her cheeks.

"Mama a rotten egg," Amir said, laughing and pointing.

Brenda pulled Amir's cap over his eyes. "Keep on," She said. "You gone get a whooping."

Richard lifted his chin and exhaled. "This is a nice area," He said. "Wonder if any black folks live out here."

Brenda grabbed Richard's bare hand. Even with gloves on she could feel his knuckles, rough, rubbing against her palm.

Brenda sat on the couch still wearing her hat and gloves. Richard held a cup of hot chocolate under her nose.

"Want me to cook you something?" Richard said.

Brenda wiped her face. The carpet was coming up beneath the window. Thin, white spider webs dangled from the ceiling. Richard shifted the couch as he sat beside her. He stretched and pulled her close to him.

"What you thinking about," Richard said. She took off her hat and gloves before putting them under her couch cushion.

"I want a house," She said. "We can't stay here no more."

Brenda didn't look at Richard when she said it. He shifted the couch again as he put his cup on the floor. She turned around. He was tapping three fingers against the bruised area under his eye.

"Get them peas out the freezer," Richard said.

Brenda walked into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and got the frozen bag. She sat on his lap and pressed the bag on his eye. He grimaced as she moved it across the side of his face.

"Amir deserves better," Brenda said.

Richard took the peas and threw them to the side.

"You right," Richard said. "He ain't lived longer than shit and I already can tell he gone be somebody. Almost like he ain't even mine."

Brenda pressed against Richard as she stood up. "Richer," she said. "Why would you say that?" She tapped her finger against her temple. "You so damn narrow-minded. That's why you in the situation you in."

Richard stood and the cup spilled spreading dark liquid across the carpet. His hands were closed tight. "That man came up to me in front of everybody and said he had to demote me because I can't read. Do you know how embarrassing that is, Brenda? I was bussing my ass to make that little four dollars as a manager."

Brenda turned towards the kitchen, pushed up her sleeves, and rested her hands on her hips.

Someone knocked on the door. Brenda looked at Richard before opening it. Kelly stood at the door holding a full, tied garbage bag. She was wearing her Wendy's hat and black slacks.

"P-Please," Kelly said. "Let me in."

Brenda pulled her inside and closed the door.

"What happened?" Brenda said.

Kelly dropped her garbage bag. Looked like it was full of clothes.

"I don't want to be m-m-married no more," Kelly said.

Brenda held her wrist as she examined her.

Richard took the garbage bag and put it on the couch. "Are you hurt?" he asked Kelly.

"No," Kelly said. Brenda caught Kelly's tears with her thumbs. "It just ain't fun no more," Kelly said. "I want to go home."

Brenda walked to the kitchen and took Richard's keys off the stove. She held them in front of Richard's face.

"Get her stuff," Brenda said. "I'm driving."

Brenda and Richard put on their coats. They all followed Brenda down the dark stairs into the car. Kelly was in the passenger's seat.

"Paul at home?" Richard said. Kelly turned toward him and shook her head.

"He ain't getting off until way over in the night," Kelly said.

Brenda turned the key. The engine started quiet but got loud.

"Seatbelts," Brenda said, putting the car in reverse.

They got on the road that plowed through the city. Brenda felt something rise in her chest as she drove through the lights. Kelly had her arms wrapped around her bag, hugging it. She told Brenda her parents stayed by the high school.

"You call your folks after you made this decision?" Brenda said.

Kelly shook her head.

"I ain't talked to them in a year," Kelly said.

The town disappeared the closer they got to the school. Kelly guided Brenda to her parents' house. Brenda parked parallel to the front door. It was an old, small house with wood siding like the house Brenda saw at the parade. Two sleepy cats crawled across the yellow porch. A slim, white Christmas tree glowed through the window.

"What you gone do?" Brenda said.

Kelly covered her face before she started crying again.

"I feel so s-stupid," Kelly said.

"Girl, dry them tears," Brenda said. "You gone be fine. You still so young. Tell me this. What you want to be?"

Kelly looked out at the road. "I don't know," She said.

Brenda leaned back in her seat. "I think you do," Brenda said. "I see ambition in them quiet eyes. Go ahead and tell me."

Kelly took off her hat, opened the bag, and stuffed it in. Her face was pale and serious.

"I don't know the name for it, but I want to be like them folks who look at plants," She said.

Brenda looked at her, then nodded. Kelly wobbled out of the vehicle. It took her a minute to walk from the car to the front door. As she knocked, Brenda looked at Richard. He had unhooked his seatbelt and stretched out along the back seat. Both his eyes were heavy.

"I need to show you something," Brenda said.

"Ain't nothing left to show," Richard said.

Someone opened the door Kelly was knocking on.

"Just you wait," Brenda said.

She cranked the car and waited for it to get loud again. They drove until they reached Snider Street. Brenda parked the car in front of the house with the for-sale sign in front. She turned off the headlights and clicked her seatbelt. She looked back at Richard. Shadows swallowed his face.

"What you waiting on," Brenda said. "Get out the car."

Cold entered the car as she opened the door on the driver's side. She stood in the street for a moment and waited on Richard to crawl out of the back. Acorns and leaves had sprinkled from the grass onto the street. Brenda found Richard's hand and led him. Together, they glided along the bricked path.

THE LINES

Brenda and Joe were fishing in the pond--a short walk from Brenda's house inside her small, gated community on Sweethome--when she asked Joe if he'd let her fuck him in the ass. Brenda knew her and Joe's bodies weren't bodies anymore; they were old, eroded sediment surrounded by the Yalobusha River. That morning, Brenda had gone to the department store in town and overheard two white women, both in their 50s like Brenda, discuss the sexual practice while shopping in the socks and hosiery section. They called it pegging.

Brenda got aroused as she listened from behind the display rack. One of the women learned the term from her sixteen-year-old daughter who had been caught mid-thrust behind an older man, her daughter's fake penis attached to a belt. The daughter would record the encounters on her webcam and post them on amateur porn websites. When the woman found out, she sent her daughter to live with the father down in Biloxi.

Brenda had already been educating herself with videos she never imagined she'd see. She was a retired medical secretary so the fluids didn't surprise her. What did surprise her was the way a body receives pleasure. It was mechanical, involuntary.

Sex with Joe was consistent and adequate but didn't settle her deep anger from being sexually dismantled by her ex-husband for thirty years. Joe was a quick, passionless lover. Neither of them worried about the other's feelings. It was all about the release. Brenda wanted to know what it felt like to dominate. She decided it was time to put research into practice.

She sat with Joe on the grass at the start of the pond and tended to her line in the water. Brenda's words punctured through faint geese honks overhead: *Can. I. Fuck. You. In. The. Ass?* Brenda bit her bottom lip and waited on Joe's response.

What made Brenda think she could ask Joe that? Joe was old school like Brenda. Joe--in his early 60s--served as the town handyman after his retirement from general contracting, was a faithful deacon at Breakthrough Baptist and never got sloppy drunk. He was impatient, self-righteous, but he always listened to her, considered Brenda's opinions. She was terrified to ask any other man such a question. She made Joe vulnerable. He smiled then reeled in his fishing line and recast it.

"What you say, woman?" Joe said. "Don't think I heard you right."

"You heard me right," Brenda said. "Just something I been thinking about."

"Hell of a thing to just be thinking about," Joe said. "Where this come from all of a sudden?"

"They say men get a lot of pleasure from that area."

"Who say?"

"You know, folks."

"Just don't sound natural to me."

Something about Joe's grin let Brenda know he'd at least consider it which is all she wanted. She put down her fishing rod, leaned over and nibbled at his neck, rubbed his chest.

"Somebody trying to get something started," Joe said. He dropped his rod to kiss her. They'd dated now on and off for almost two years. Early on, Joe made it clear he didn't want any real commitment as he was also divorced. Brenda didn't think she wanted any commitment either. The adequate sex and simple conversation was enough relationship for her.

"I don't think there's no fish out here, Joe," Brenda said.

"They out here," Joe said. "Just got to be patient."

They sat out for a few more hours until dark. They reeled in their lines and walked back home. Along the gravel road, young women ran in the opposite direction of them. Brenda held tighter to Joe. She nibbled his earlobe as they made it to the front door of her house.

A truck sped by the house and disappeared into the woods. "Lover's lane," Brenda said. The same truck had come down the gravel road once a week all summer long. They were a young, white couple with nothing better to do. Joe followed Brenda underneath the garage where they put their fishing rods away behind an old shelf. Brenda made Joe wait outside as she went in and got a flashlight. When Brenda walked back out, she snickered and asked if Joe wanted to find the car. Joe took the flashlight out of Brenda's hand and laughed.

"Fuck it," Joe said. "But what we gone do when we find them?"

"Nothing," Brenda said. "I just like to see folks panic."

The moon was full and the woods smelled like sex. Joe didn't shine the flashlight until they got close. The kids were in a an old, rusty pickup truck but it took a second to realize there were three instead of two. They were stretched out inside the truck bed. The young woman had her back against the back window and moaned while she crouched over one guy's face. He held her over him and moved his head in circles. Another guy had his head buried between the first guy's legs. When the kids discovered the light, they scrambling to gather their clothes.

"We ain't got no business out here, Brenda," Joe said. "This ain't what we thought."

The waters of Brenda's sexual imagination began to hit shore. She wanted to whip Joe out of his shorts and let him dangle. Brenda took the flashlight from Joe and put it on the girl.

"What's your name?" Brenda said.

The young woman covered her face with her hair and hid behind the guy who was pleasuring her as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"What y'all doing out here so late?" Brenda said. She kept the light on them as they zipped up their muddy, frayed jeans and hopped out of the back of the truck. They were so young. They looked like they wanted to run but instead heaved against the side of the truck.

"Stay right there," Brenda said. "Y'all ain't going nowhere until I get names."

The kids looked at each other and mumbled something before the guy who was pleasuring the young woman said his name was Logan. He was the tallest of the three and had a large tattoo on his chest. The other guy said his name was Colby as he ran his painted fingernails through his hair. The young woman whispered that her name was Avril. She stood on the gravel road barefoot. Brenda gave the flashlight back to Joe then approached Avril.

"What y'all doing out here?" Brenda said.

Avril lifted her head and pushed her hair behind her ear but didn't say nothing. Both guys shielded her from Brenda, tried to move her out of the light.

Avril searched her pockets and pulled out some keys. She gave them to Logan and the kids all tried to get in the truck.

"We're leaving," Avril said. "Just leave us alone."

"Don't be so quick," Brenda said. "Where y'all come from?"

Joe got between Brenda and the kids.

"Stop fucking with them," Joe said. He nudged Brenda back some then turned back to the kids. "We on give two shits about what y'all doing out here."

"I care," Brenda said. "I want to know every detail."

Joe caught Brenda's arm then stopped shining the flashlight. For some reason, he was shaking.

"What's wrong?" Brenda asked him.

"Let's go," Joe said. "Stop fucking with them kids."

Brenda put her hand on Joe's chest. His heart pumped hard.

"Y'all be careful," Joe said to the kids. "It's all types of critters out here."

The kids got in the truck, cranked up and sped away. Brenda didn't say anything to Joe the entire walk back to the house. All she knew was she loved the control she had out there, the fear she induced.

Before she went to bed, she ordered a body massager (\$29), a cloth harness (\$112), and the smallest dildo (\$37) available. She found each item online. Everything showed up in her mailbox a few days later and the first thing she did was pose in the mirror with the black dildo attached to the harness. She gripped it tight like it was a part of her. She practiced her stroke for a few reps and realized how tiresome it was to be a man. She removed the harness and touched herself for the first time in days. She built up to her climax by fantasizing about fucking Joe and how it would change their relationship. She wanted to show Joe a big release like a flood breaking a barricade.

Joe tried to imagine what Brenda had proposed. He saw himself hunched over, hands gripped tight to the sheets. Brenda would be the man and he the woman. Joe let himself think that wouldn't be so bad. He wondered what it would feel like to receive pleasure for a change.

Joe sat in the hotel suite and listened to Ladonna--a professional dominatrix. She gave Joe and Brenda a crash course on consent and used a prosthetic asshole to demonstrate how to stimulate the prostate with her fingers. Ladonna wore a sports bra and leggings. Her head was shaved and she had a small butterfly tattoo on her cheek.

"It'll feel like a little bean," Ladonna said, as her two fingers searched inside the asshole.

Brenda focused on everything Ladonna said. Joe would need to take a blue pill to do anything in front of a stranger.

"Communication is the key to good sex," Ladonna said. "Have you two talked about what's going to happen tonight?"

"We ain't really talk about this at all," Joe said. "You supposed to do this with us or what?"

Ladonna looked at Brenda first then looked back at Joe.

"Would you mind if I stayed and supervised?" Ladonna said. "Since it's the first time for both of you."

Joe got his blue pills from his pocket and swallowed one whole with no water to wash it down. "I'm ready to go," he said.

Brenda stripped out of everything except her lingerie and tied the strap-on around her waist like a belt. Ladonna put on gloves, went into her overnight bag, found some oil, and applied it to the tip of Brenda's dick.

"It's edible," Brenda said. "Get your ass over here and taste it."

Both women smiled at him. He walked over to Brenda and got on his knees. Ladonna was already down there. She shoved the dildo down her throat a few times then moved out of the way for Joe.

"You sure?" he asked Brenda.

She nodded and Joe put his mouth on the dildo. He liked the smoothness of it moving in and out of his mouth. The stuff Ladonna poured on it tasted like sour apple. Something vibrated on Joe's neck. Brenda had the vibrator in her hand. Ladonna made sure that Brenda asked before she used it. Joe agreed, took off his briefs, and went to lie stomach down on the bed.

Ladonna walked Brenda through each step with the vibrator. "We're not ready to insert anything," Ladonna said to Joe. "Try not to tense up."

After Joe relaxed, there was a low rumble throughout his entire body. He filled up like he'd swallowed an entire glass of water in one gulp. Ladonna asked something but Joe couldn't make out the exact question. All he could say was yes. A second rumble pushed through him and all he could do was scream yes. It took him a few pumps to realize he'd been penetrated.

Joe burrowed his head into one of the pillows and screamed yes again. He wasn't ready to come but he did it anyway. Tears rolled down his face. He'd become the woman. He thanked the Lord first then asked for forgiveness.

Brenda ran to the bathtub to take off the harness. Ladonna interviewed Joe after the session was done. She smiled at him and told him how surprised she was by his openness.

"You got me," Joe said. "You turned me out."

Brenda reentered the bedroom, kissed Joe, and told him how much she loved him for what he allowed her to do. Ladonna gave them both her business card and put all her stuff back in the overnight bag. Joe didn't say anything to Brenda on the drive back to her house.

The next morning, Joe stood outside and worked on a bench in front of the local drive-in barbecue joint on Sunset across town next to the car dealership. For some reason, Joe couldn't get the screw tight.

"Got you two fish plates," Ms. Shirley said as she held two, stuffed food trays out the pickup window. "One with slaw, one with corn-on-the-cob."

Joe smelled barbecue sauce and toast. He dropped his Phillips-head, wiped sweat off his nose and went to get his order. "The head on one of them screws is stripped," he said. "You ain't got one of them thick rubber bands, do you?" Ms. Shirley looked around then shook her head.

"I apologize, Ms. Shirley," Joe said. "I'll be back to fix it later after I get my mind right."

"Well, look at you," Ms. Shirley said. "Probably just need to eat something."

Joe went in his wallet and counted some money to hand Ms. Shirley. She smiled and revealed some denture cream along the corners of her mouth. She tried to tell Joe he didn't owe nothing. He grabbed his food and shoved the money in her hand.

"Bless you, brother," Ms. Shirley said. She was one of the mothers at Joe's church. She rooted herself onto the front pew early each Sunday morning. What would Ms. Shirley say if she knew what Brenda had asked him to do, what he'd done and wanted to do again?

Later at Brenda's house, Joe sat on the couch and drank brown liquor straight out the bottle. Some spilled on his lap after each sip. He was numb everywhere except below his zipper. With each taste he grew harder, audacious. It reminded him of who he was at nineteen.

Brenda cackled, sipped wine over the sink. She wore a black negligee and her short hair wig. "You alright over there?" she said.

Joe took another taste of his brown liquor. He realized he resented Brenda in a way. She was the reason Joe sat and drank in a house he couldn't afford even if he wanted to, a house built by another man before him. Joe decided he wouldn't let Brenda break him. "You ain't gone punk me," Joe said.

Brenda asked what he meant. When he didn't answer, she walked over to him then sat on his lap. "Is this about the other night?"

"You ain't gone punk me, woman," Joe said. "I know what you want to do, but you ain't gone do it to me."

Brenda tried to snatch the liquor bottle away from Joe. When she couldn't get it, she stood over him. "Joe, what are you--"

"Ain't gone give you the satisfaction," Joe said. "I'll leave first."

"You done had too much, Joe," Brenda said. "Give it here."

Joe clutched the bottle to his chest. He was stone hard under his zipper. "I'm a man," he said. "Gone always be a man." He didn't know why he felt the need to say what he said. He continued to sip from the bottle and declare his manhood, like he'd lose it if he didn't make it into a mantra. For some reason, tears got in his eyes. He wiped them away and continued to repeat himself.

Brenda stood over him and shook her head. "Are you that afraid of pleasure, Joe?"

Brenda gulped down what wine was left in her glass.

Joe stopped his repetition. He put his liquor on the ground, struggled to his feet.

"I'm leaving," Joe said.

"Wait," Brenda said. "Don't go."

Joe walked out Brenda's front door and kept on down the driveway. Joe walked up the gravel road until he reached the man-made pond. Brenda hadn't followed Joe out. Brenda had accomplished her goal, broke Joe down to nothing. He sat on the grass and looked at the water. His body was no longer his body alone. He'd shared it with Brenda and even Ladonna. He'd accepted all of it right before his eyes got too heavy to hold.

Joe woke up still at the pond. He was wet everywhere. Brenda held an emptied water bottle over Joe's head. The day wasn't hot yet and damp grass stuck to his palms as he stood. His head throbbed and his back muscles were stiff.

Brenda wore a red shirt with rolled-up jeans. She didn't wear makeup and the gray strands in her hair were visible. "Ready to talk?" she said.

Joe didn't want to do nothing but dry himself and treat his hangover.

"Why you ain't come after me?" Joe asked.

"You grown," Brenda said. "Ain't chasing after no grown man."

Joe knew what she meant. Brenda told Joe how she'd chased her ex-husband for years after they separated the first time.

Joe stumbled behind Brenda into the house, took Alka-Seltzer, and then washed himself up. Brenda cooked breakfast: a pan full of scrambled eggs, a small pot of savory grits, salmon croquettes, and French toast.

"Who gone eat all this?" Joe said.

"You ain't got to eat," Brenda said.

They both fixed their own plate and sat outside on Brenda's patio. Joe was still hung over so he picked at his food, looked up at Brenda after every other bite. Joe felt like he didn't know the rules anymore. He wanted to give everything to Brenda but didn't know how.

"I ain't gay, Brenda," Joe said.

"Ain't nobody said otherwise," Brenda said.

"What do you want from me?" Joe asked.

Brenda stood up, took the plates, and walked back in the house. Joe followed her into the kitchen and tried to help her wash the two dishes.

"Be for real," Joe said. "Tell me what you want."

"Joe," Brenda said. "I just want you to be different from other men."

"I want to be different," Joe said. "Let me show you."

Brenda dried her hands and pressed Joe's head against her bosom. Joe was surprised when Brenda said she loved him. They made out like horny teens. Joe remembered the kids from

the other night in the truck. Joe yanked down Brenda's jeans, picked her up, and sat her beside the sink. Brenda giggled like something had been stirred inside her.

TO SHORE

September 12, 1966:

Mama crept across the gravel road in the truck Daddy bought with some of the money he won back when he lived with them. Little Brenda would be five in December and didn't understand everything they talked about on the radio but she could tell Mama did. Brenda knew about the Klan and she knew about Lizzie Horn Elementary--the white school where her sister, Yolanda, was supposed to attend. Mama gave short answers whenever Brenda asked a question. Told her to be quiet and stop showing out or Mama would get her switch when they got home.

Yolanda, who had turned eleven in April, was in the middle of the road with her books hugged up against her. Yolanda stopped when she saw Mama in the truck behind her. Yolanda smoothed out the wrinkles in the back of the new dress Mama made before she climbed into the truck. The dress had green, floral print with a ribbon in the back. The hems weren't ragged like so many of Brenda's dresses but clean like something had guided Mama's hand when she sewed. Yolanda had worn the dress to Sunday school the day before and got to model it in front of the congregation.

"I done told you to watch where you walking, Yolanda," Mama said. "Both you and your sister gone get the switch as soon as we get home."

"But Mama," Yolanda said. "I ain't want to get mud on this dress."

Mama wasn't in the mood for protest. Her lack of patience seemed due to what was on the radio but Brenda wasn't sure. Mama got quiet for a moment then called on the Lord which meant both Yolanda and Brenda could expect to be spanked as soon as they got home. For a child, to call on the Lord meant the game had ended. Something had outmatched Mama's powers and for a child that was incomprehensible.

Brenda fidgeted in between Mama and Yolanda. Brenda wanted to ask Yolanda what happened at her new school that made her act so different. Yolanda held her posture like she was a white girl the entire drive--untouched, regal. She was preoccupied with how she looked in her dress. She adjusted it on her shoulders and smoothed out any wrinkle.

Home was a shack with screen doors and mildewed window panes, the creak of nailed planks that made up the porch. Brenda didn't know what poor meant but she knew death. She and Yolanda fed on peanut butter and whatever game their uncles brought over after a winter stretch out in the woods. They would swing deer off the truck bed onto Mama's yard. Blood would drip from the deer's limp body as they prepared him for the deep freeze. Sometimes it was rabbit or even squirrel meat.

Mama ran in the house and grabbed her switch. She kept it beside the rocking chair in the middle of the living room. She would crack it a few times before she put it on one of the girls. Yolanda must've known she would get it first so she hid. Brenda didn't get it bad, just a couple light licks across her bare legs. She sobbed over in a corner for a moment then tried to help Mama find Yolanda.

The longer Yolanda hid the worse off she would get it. When they caught her under the dinner table, Yolanda pleaded with Mama to let her take off her dress first. Mama let Yolanda take off the dress and got five licks over the panties she wore. Yolanda went to the room she shared with Brenda to hang her new dress, change clothes and cry, but Brenda hadn't given up. She still wanted to understand what happened at Yolanda's school that got Mama so upset.

Mama's greatest power lay in how she could lull a space for herself after turmoil. She got out of her clothes, put on her robe, and wrapped her hair. She sat in the living room more tired than Brenda had ever seen her. Mama called on the Lord some more which made her look more

tired. The way she called on Him sounded so sweet; the saccharine goodness of her song sparked the tiny hairs on Brenda's forearm.

Yolanda came out of the bedroom to hear Mama sing. They hugged each other, then gathered pots and pans to cook in while Brenda cleaned up. A gamey stew seemed to pervade the entire house. Brenda dusted and swept inside the house then climbed a stool outside to put laundry on the clothesline. Before she could go back inside, someone whistled at her from out across the driveway down towards the ditch bank.

A man walked until he was visible in the dead center on Mama's property. "Baby girl," he said. "You don't remember me do you?" Something was different about him but it was Daddy as plain as anything. He must've been at least six feet, 200 pounds. He wore a tucked t-shirt with suspenders and cowboy boots. "Baby girl," he said. "It's alright. I ain't gone hurt you."

Brenda wanted to run to him, hug him but stopped herself. She didn't want Mama to give her another spanking.

"Where your sister at?" Daddy asked. "What about Louise?" He used to call Mama by her first name whenever they had an argument over some woman Daddy had screwed or how he made the money he brought home.

"They in the house fixing something to eat," Brenda said.

"Go get them for me real quick," Daddy said. "It ain't gone take long."

Yolanda had to stay inside and tend to the food which was good because she didn't like Daddy anyway. Brenda stood behind the screen door so she could watch. Mama had walked outside with the cast iron skillet grandma had given her.

"Done told you not to come back out here, Pat," Mama said.

"It ain't like that," Daddy said. "I got something for Yolanda."

"She don't want to see you," Mama said. "We don't want to see you."

"I know it," Daddy said. "But let me give it to her anyway."

Yolanda use to love Daddy when he lived with them. She would sit on his lap and read fairy tales. Sometimes they would make up their own and tell them to Brenda. Daddy always bragged to anyone who would listen about how smart his oldest daughter was, how beautiful she was. Yolanda loved to sit on the couch with him and try to pluck the grays out of his beard; she clipped his toenails and scratched his back whenever he asked.

Everything changed one day last spring when Daddy got drunk before Mama came home from her job as janitor at the white folks school. Brenda found Yolanda in Mama's bed bloody and confused. Daddy had passed out and almost drowned in the bathtub. When Mama found Yolanda, she cried out like Satan himself had entered the house. Mama went to Daddy, woke him up, and asked what happened. When he couldn't answer, Mama ran him out of the house and down the road buck naked for the entire neighborhood to see.

Yolanda was never right after that day. For a while, her voice was always in a whisper and she flinched whenever a boy got close to her. Mama didn't let her play around outside as much. Yolanda wasn't a little girl anymore. Somehow she'd graduated.

Now, Mama looked like she wanted to hurt Daddy. Brenda felt a little flutter inside her chest. She had wet herself but froze because she didn't want to miss what happened outside. Daddy held his hands in front of him, tried to calm Mama down.

"If I could," Mama said, "I would kill you right where you stand."

"Ain't no excuse," Daddy said. "I'm sorry for what I did."

He reached in his pocket and pulled out what looked like an engraved rectangular box. He opened it to show an old fountain pen inside.

"Give this to her," Daddy said.

"Hell no," Mama said. "Put your tail between your legs and crawl back to whatever dirty pit you come from. We won't be accepting nothing else from you ever again."

Daddy threw the box with the fountain pen to the ground.

"Damned if I let you talk to me like that," He said. "I came here because I miss my girls. I know what I did and ain't no excuse, but I'm begging you to let me be a man and fix it."

"You ain't no man, Pat," Mama said. "You ain't even human no more."

"I see," He said.

Brenda had never seen Daddy so defeated. He got quiet then bent down to gather the fountain pen to put back in his pocket. He reached in his other pocket and pulled out a flask. He unscrewed the top and turned it up to his mouth. It was as if he had surrendered to whatever liquid was in the flask. You could see it flow through his body, pump into his veins same as blood.

"How you like that?" he said.

"That's right," Mama said. "I knew the devil wasn't far behind you."

She waited for Daddy to leave before she walked back in the house. When she saw Brenda's soiled dress, Mama slapped Brenda on the hand and told her to get out of the wet things and have Yolanda go with her to take a bath. The house was filled with the gaminess of stewed venison and the warm bouquet of cornbread.

Yolanda gathered water in the biggest pot they had, boiled it, then carried it to the bathroom. After she poured hot water from the pot into the tub, she ran a hand through it to mix with the cold water then let Brenda climb in.

"You gone get in the tub with me, Yolanda?" Brenda asked.

Yolanda said no then scrubbed Brenda's back. Yolanda told Brenda she wasn't a baby anymore, that she would have to grow up because school was for big girls.

"You gone let me have your new dress when I start going to school?" Brenda asked.

"I'll let you have it whenever you get big enough to wear it," Yolanda said.

"You understand what they was talking about on the radio earlier?" Brenda asked. "Did the Klan get somebody at Lizzie Horn?"

"Ain't nothing happen at Lizzie Horn," Yolanda said. "They got somebody at the high school."

"Then why come Mama was so mad at you?" Brenda asked.

"You asking too many questions, little girl," Yolanda said.

"Tell me," Brenda said. "Why come?"

Yolanda got quiet. She finished bathing Brenda then told her to get out of the tub.

Yolanda dried Brenda off, wrapped her in a beach towel, then kissed her little sister on the cheek.

Yolanda bent down to Brenda's level and looked her in the eye.

"Mama scared of white folks," Yolanda said. "She mad because I ain't scared of them."

How could the most powerful person in Brenda's life be afraid of white folks? She went with Yolanda to put on some clothes then they both met Mama at the dinner table. Mama had washed out a few bowls for the stew and squeezed some lemons in the pitcher of lemonade. Brenda sat between Mama and Yolanda at the table. They all said grace then filled their bowls with stew and a side of cornbread.

All the conversation Mama initiated had to do with white folks: Rod Serling, Ed Sullivan, Richard Burton. Even the framed, white Jesus portrait had a place above them against the wall behind the table. Mama was so delighted with whatever she mentioned. Whenever Yolanda

brought up the Klan or anything negative about white folks Mama hushed her, said it was too heavy for dinner conversation.

July 24, 2016:

The twins were tailwind youth in their pink swimwear--unafraid. They kicked off their canvas shoes and rushed towards water. Holding hands and running, their beaded braids clacked like teenage Venus and Serena. The speck of what looked like a canoe slosed out in the distance. Sunday morning was the best time to learn.

It didn't matter that Brenda grew up unable to run free on the beach that was really just a large lake basin covered in sand. In fact, she had never been before this day. She slid out of her own sandals. The bottoms of her feet baked atop hot sand. Her best friend Dotty unrolled the beach towels then stretched out on her side. She'd brought her granddaughters to teach Brenda how to swim.

"Girl, you better go on out there," Dotty said.

She'd turned sixty not too long before. She wore a chiffon shawl over her arms but couldn't hide the wrinkles on her hands and around her neck.

"Zuri and Imani ain't nothing but a couple of fish," She said. "They'll give you a quick lesson."

"Child, I'll go out there in a minute," Brenda said. "Ain't worked up the nerve yet."

Since retirement, Brenda had grown to enjoy Dotty's friendship more. Dotty entertained her with stories from when she served on the city council board. Sometimes they'd even shop together, spa date, recall memories of their youth. It was a certain kind of fellowship between two of the only successful black women in town.

"Don't tell me you scared, Brenda," Dotty said.

"Girl, I'm scared to even be out here on this beach," Brenda said. "You remember back when they wouldn't let us out here?"

"Sure do," Dotty said. "Made us have to pack out that pool across the railroad tracks."

Brenda sat on the towel beside Dotty who looked back at her with a playful, sisterly kind of lust or even jealousy.

"Girl, you know you look good," Dotty said. "Just looking at you make me want to hit the gym."

Brenda untied the wrap from around her waist. She didn't know how to respond. She felt a lot better but still had a long way to go. Her health journey was a daily reminder of how old she'd gotten. Young women smiled with earphones in their ears as they bounced past her on the track each morning. Whenever they lapped her, she just closed her eyes for a moment and delighted herself in the fact that all of them would get old one day.

You could see the twins splash each other in knee-deep water. They looked back out across the sand and waved at both Brenda and Dotty. After a while, they began to yell something.

"They calling for you?" Brenda said.

"No," Dotty said. "They calling for you."

"I can't do it, Dotty," Brenda said. "I'm too old to be out there learning how to swim."

"Child, I don't know what you afraid of," Dotty said. "They ain't gone do nothing but teach you how to doggy paddle."

Dotty stood up and dropped the shawl from over her meaty arms. She kicked off her sandals and walked towards the twins.

"You can either come on or get left," Dotty said.

Brenda threw on her swim cap, made sure all of her hair was covered, then got up and ran behind Dotty. The twins greeted her as she crossed the threshold into the warmth of the lake. She walked behind them until she was wet from the waist down. Zuri got close to Brenda and held her by the hips.

"All bodies of water have rhythm," Zuri said.

Zuri was half an inch taller than Imani who was heavier.

"You should feel it in your core," Zuri said.

Brenda knew what Zuri said was true. The water danced with Brenda once she let go of the land underneath her feet. Zuri led Brenda by hand until the water was just below her breasts. Brenda had to close her eyes, exhale.

"It's okay," Zuri said. "Look at me."

Zuri and Imani held hands and smiled at Brenda. In unison, the twins sank below the water. They stayed down for what felt like fifteen seconds. When they came back up, the twins gasped and swung their beads.

"You're turn." Zuri said.

The twins got close to Brenda and lowered her into the water by the shoulders like a baptism. Brenda popped back up as soon as she went under. Zuri caught Brenda's arm before she could get away.

"I can't do this," Brenda said.

"But you've already been swimming, Ms. Brenda," Zuri said. "We're almost there."

The twins lowered Brenda into the water for a second time. She popped right back up as soon as water went inside her ear. The heart exertions, the increased adrenaline, the thoughts of

inadequacy were comfortable because of their familiarity. She bathed in them, let them take over her body.

"I'm sorry, girls" Brenda said.

She huffed and heaved. Searched for something to hold on to, but there was nothing. Dotty grabbed her and tried to calm her. The attack didn't stop until Brenda realized that Dotty and her granddaughters wouldn't let her go anywhere until she learned.

"This is so embarrassing," Brenda said.

"It's okay, Ms. Brenda," Zuri said.

Imani ran her hands through the water. "Wait," she said. "Let me try something." She disappeared underneath the water for about eight seconds then came up and swung her braids.

"I have an idea," Imani said. "This time take the biggest breath you can. Then, think of someone you haven't seen in a long time while you're under."

Brenda hadn't seen her sister, Yolanda, in over twenty years. Yolanda had stopped the weekly phone calls with Brenda after Daddy's funeral some years ago. If not for social media, Brenda wouldn't have known Yolanda had moved to St. Louis and married some preacher. It was her third husband over a thirty year span.

"You ready?" Imani said. "Okay, take a big breath."

Brenda closed her eyes, inhaled, then sank. She imagined Yolanda held her hand and went in with her. She ignored the comforts fear offered. She focused on Yolanda, clung to the energy even lost sisterhood provided. When Brenda emerged, the twins smiled at her. She waded over and hugged them. She found Dotty and hugged her when they all made it to shore.

It was time to gather their things. Expensive cars pulled up into the beach parking lot. A crowd of white faces and their powdered children stumbled on to the sand. These folks owned

the beach. Brenda was the same little black girl who lived in the shack down from the old elementary school. She carried the little black girl with her everywhere and she would always carry her.

Brenda went home and flushed her anxiety pills down the toilet. She'd made a small victory. Brenda could now say she understood the saccharine sense of uncertainty; the same sensation Mama must've felt when she called on the Lord. Brenda's muscles were less tense and her blood pressure less high. All the pills she had to take because of how she approached life. The many more opportunities she let pass. Brenda sat in her living room later that evening and flowed from inside. Tears flowed from memories and places she'd long forgotten.

July 27, 2016:

The nursing home was too cold even in the summer. Little hints of baby powder floated throughout the hall. Old, listless faces were lined up against the eggshell colored walls. Brenda found a nurse and asked to see Louise Dunn-Harper.

Mama's room had a shelf lined with stuffed animals and old photos of family members. Mama sat in a chair similar to the one she use to sit in back when Brenda was a little girl. Mama sat with her eyes closed. She swung through a medley of old hymns. Her song wasn't as powerful as when Brenda and Yolanda were kids but the rasp still carried enough pain in it to intrigue anyone who heard it.

Brenda tapped Mama on the shoulder. The nurse stood in the door with a handful of towels. She was new, a short black woman who looked to be in her late twenties. She put the

towels on Mama's bed then looked at her watch. Mama closed her eyes and continued to hum her medley.

"Ms. Louise know she can sing," the nurse said.

"She calling on the Lord," Brenda said.

"Well, let's hope he answers," the nurse said.

The nurse strapped Mama up to the blood pressure machine. Mama opened her eyes and relaxed herself. The nurse gave a good report to Brenda who smiled and waited for her to walk out.

"Did that young girl do your makeup?" Brenda asked.

Mama got up and looked at herself in the mirror. Whoever applied her makeup used too light a shade. She went to the bathroom to wash her face.

"I knew she ain't know what she was doing," Mama said.

Brenda walked behind her with her own makeup pouch. She put a darker foundation on Mama's face and redrew her eyebrows.

"Much better," Mama said.

"You keep this with you," Brenda said. "These girls don't care. They'll have you looking white as Joan Crawford if you ain't careful."

Mama said she had a taste for some souse and crackers. Brenda clicked on the TV and flipped through the channels. She found an old western and left it on. Mama just looked at it and didn't say a word.

Brenda sat in Mama's room for another hour then went to the store to pick up the souse. It was in the deli section of the store next to more mainstream cold cuts. The meat was the color of gravy and had white chunks in it. Brenda could've thrown up if not for the memories of how

souse use to feed her and Yolanda when she was little. When she got back to the nursing home, she took the souse out of the plastic bag and presented it to Mama who put a slice of it on a saltine and took a bite.

Mama was still doing good at over eighty years old. She could still get around without much help. All she dealt with was high blood pressure from all the souse she ate. She savored each bite, let it sit in her mouth for as long as possible.

"You alright, Mama," Brenda said.

"What you mean?" Mama said. "Say what you saying, baby girl."

"How would you feel about living with me," Brenda asked.

"No," Mama said. "I ain't going nowhere."

"Mama, just think about it for a second," Brenda said.

"Ain't nothing to think about," Mama said.

"How about for one day?" Brenda asked.

"No" Mama said. "Have everything I need right here."

Mama's implication might've been right. Brenda's lifestyle was far removed from how Mama use to live. The memories were precious but after a number of years couldn't help but feel cramped, even somewhat indecent after all Brenda had accomplished.

Brenda took the souse from Mama and stole a few saltines. When Brenda bit into the souse, she remembered how much of a luxury the food had been in her youth. It was one of the only foods they didn't have to share.

"Finally met Dotty's granddaughters the other day at the beach," Brenda said. "Made me think of how Yolanda use to be when she was young."

"Lord, she kept my blood pressure up," Mama said.

"They found her late over in the night at the lake with that little white boy," Brenda said. "Ain't no telling what they were doing."

"I know what they was doing," Mama said. "The Lord saved her that night. She damn near got a rope tied round her neck."

Brenda stood up and got ready to leave. "I'll be back Sunday," She said. "Think about what I asked you."

Mama didn't let on. She closed her eyes then hummed another medley.

Brenda drove back out to the her gated community, passed the manmade fish pond, parked in her two car garage. She walked inside and felt how empty her house had become. There was no laughter. There was no family. Each step she took echoed throughout the kitchen. Years earlier, the house was a miniature city--music and laughter shook the panes. Brenda wanted to recreate that environment but with a new foundation.

She ran some hot water, waited for the tub to fill. As she undressed, Brenda got pains in her side. She fell to her knees and bellowed, held tight to her stomach.

July 31, 2016:

The lake was empty, calm like the week before. School would start back Wednesday so Zuri and Imani rushed into the water. Brenda held Dotty's hand tight and swung it as they followed the girls. On the drive over, Brenda had complained to Dotty about Mama's decision not to leave the nursing home.

"Ms. Louise use to cuss us out for asking if Yolanda could come outside," Dotty said. "I mean a fierce cussing."

"That sound like Mama," Brenda said. "I bet she would've let ya'll in if you'd been some little white girls."

"I just thought Yolanda didn't like us or something," Dotty said.

"That could've been true too," Brenda said.

Dotty laughed as they crossed the threshold into the water. Brenda remembered Zuri and Imani's swimming lesson. Brenda found the rhythm of the water then closed her eyes. She didn't imagine Yolanda but conjured her this time. She and Yolanda were young again. They'd play Miss Mary Mack triple time, strike out across the lake like thunder on water.

Brenda emerged, had an attack but caught hold of herself. She got embarrassed but reminded herself it was alright. She welcomed air back into her lungs. Dotty grabbed on to Brenda's hand again. They fought through the tide back to shore and sat on the sand like they were children.

Brenda went back to the nursing home like she promised. Mama looked like herself in the face. The nurses got her makeup right, fixed her hair. She sat up in bed and looked through a magazine.

"Will you tell me something, Mama?" Brenda said.

"Depends," Mama said.

"You remember that day Yolanda started going to Lizzie Horn?" Brenda said. "You were so mad at her. You remember why?"

It didn't take Mama too long to remember what Brenda was talking about.

"You know how your sister is," Mama said. "She was so defiant. She got in trouble for getting smart with one of them little white girls."

“That’s all?” Brenda said.

Mama didn’t want to talk about it. She tossed aside her magazine.

“It was bigger than that,” Mama said. “Yolanda ain’t like me. Guess I ain’t really like her either.”

“Why?” Brenda said.

“You know why,” Mama said. “Want me to say it out loud?”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to, Mama,” Brenda said.

“For some reason you just loved ole Pat,” Mama said. “Would’ve stayed with him if I’d a let you.”

“Daddy always treated me good,” Brenda said. “I know all the stories, but—”

Brenda didn’t know how to explain to Mama her feelings for Daddy. Brenda understood the pain both Mama and her sister had endured back then.

“Come live with me, Mama,” Brenda said. “Please.”

August 2, 2016:

It was Zuri and Imani’s last day of freedom.

It took a couple more days, but Brenda convinced Mama to live at home with her. Brenda planned to strike Mama with all the love anyone could take. She’d try her best to wash out all that dirt from the past.

Brenda and Dotty took hands and crossed the threshold again into the water. Brenda held her breath again, went under again. Mama’s hymns echoed young and strong in Brenda’s head. She remembered the shack she grew up in. The mildewed windowpanes, bloody game on the porch. Brenda remembered the stillness Mama brought to the old shack with her song.

Brenda emerged again, opened her eyes. Dotty was still there smiling. Mama's song must've drowned any anxiety Brenda had left.

I HEARD HER AT THE DOLLAR STORE

The old woman pushed the buggy toward my register, where I stood holding the scanner. The rubber on one wheel had ripped, so there was a scraping sound. The old woman kept pushing. She was deaf, or at least I assumed she was. She came in every day to get shortbread cookies, canned cat food, and white bread. It was summer, so sweat gathered along the neckline of her pale blue blouse. There were gray strands in her ponytail she had tried to roll underneath.

After paying for her items, she pulled out a notebook and flipped to a clean page. Her pencil moved across the paper, and she showed me what she'd written.

She had been pulled over under suspicion of drunk driving. She wrote that she had never been arrested in her life or even drank alcohol. "My son use to drink," she wrote. Honestly, I wanted her to take the groceries and leave so I could take my break. But she kept moving her lips and lifting her arms above her head. She had never before been this energetic. After a while, she put her palm in front of my face and walked back into the store. She had forgotten something.

I had been working at the store for ten years, ever since I graduated from high school. I took the job because my dad left, and my mom needed help. She had never stopped needing help, so I stayed. This was around the same time I put down my trumpet. It was still in my apartment, sitting in a corner, dressed in dust. My mother once told me something about putting away childish things. I thought she was talking about my horn.

"Excuse me," someone said. Two girls stood at the register, looking behind me at the case of cigarettes, white girls, smiling and whispering to each other. I knew what was happening. They were either underage, trying to see if they could get away with buying a pack at this store,

or they had just turned eighteen and this was their first legal purchase. I chose to believe the former. There was something about their faces--something new.

I unlocked the glass. They pointed at the Newport, then the Marlboro, asking for a price. They spread their coins on the table and started counting. The good smokes were too expensive. They asked what brand I smoked. "I've never had a cigarette in my life," I said. They seemed disappointed. I wiped sweat from my nose. It was thirty minutes before closing, and I was ready to leave.

They pointed at the cheapest brand, Cheyenne. I told them Cheyenne's were actually cigars, and most customers commented on how disgusting they were. Both girls shrugged. "It don't matter," they said.

That made me think of my life in Grenada. I had never been outside of Mississippi. *It don't matter*. Those were the words of a town caught between imprisonment and freedom. Ninety minutes north, and I could be free. Memphis would take me, dress me, and feed me. Thirty minutes west, and I could be in the Mississippi Delta. Grenada was a wilderness. Being so close to both Memphis and the Delta created a purgatory for most people. I wondered if the girls would make it out.

One girl began to pick up coins off the counter. "Hurry," the other girl said. They laughed and snorted. I remembered being like them. All the young faces I once knew had gotten fat or moved someplace better. I asked again if the girls wanted the cigars before sliding the box across the scanner.

I did not ask for their identification. I typed in my birth date, June 1, 1989. They counted exact change and smiled at each other before walking out with the pack of nasty cigars. I looked

at the clock. The thick arrow was on the nine and the slim arrow was holding the jaw of the eight. It was about twenty minutes until closing.

Mark, the store manager, walked from the back of the store. He was taller than me, and bald except for the few blonde straws gathered above his ears. His top front teeth were missing, and the rest of them had black stains around the gums. I assumed it was because of his smoking. He had been a cop, but quit when his wife got cancer. He thought the management job would be safer.

It had taken awhile, but Mark and I had gotten used to working together. He considered himself a "freight swinger," which meant he was fast at stocking shelves. He did not mind me daydreaming as long as I ignored his constant personal phone calls. "Just don't get caught," he would say.

Mark was marching from the toy aisle. He asked me if anyone was still in the store. I remembered the old woman. "I think there's someone still in here," I said.

Mark looked at his watch. As he inhaled, his shoulders pushed forward. His voice touched every wall. "Fifteen minutes," he called.

I sprayed a paper towel with some clear solution and started wiping the counter. Before we could leave, Mark had to count the money, and I had to mop. Mark and I could not hear anything. No one was pushing a buggy. No one was walking. Mark began to look around the store. I put my elbows on the counter and exhaled.

"Simon," Mark called. "Come here."

I was at the first cash register. It faced the entrance and parts of the food section. People would disappear in the candy aisle. I passed the cigarette case and the other two registers that

were never used. I called them ghost registers because after work there would be alien writing across the monitors--white algebra equations across two black screens.

The gray stuff from the wheels led me toward the candy aisle. Mark was standing next to the old woman. She was sitting in a green lawn chair, holding her notepad. Two tied plastic bags were at her feet. Mark looked at me with his index finger inside his ear. "Is she deaf?" he said.

My shoulders lifted. "I guess so," I said. "What are we going to do?"

Mark looked at her, then leaned forward. His hands were kneepads. "Ma'am, you can't be here."

The old woman pressed her middle finger against the metal bridge connecting the round frames of her glasses. I had assumed she could read lips, but her silent stare made me think she could not.

"Let me try," I said.

"All right. If she's not out of here in five minutes, I'm calling the cops," Mark said.

I pointed at the notepad in the woman's hands and asked for her name. "Ida," she wrote. "Can I use this?" I said. She nodded. I found a blank page and with the pencil wrote my name and that if she did not leave soon, my boss would call the police. She read the note but did not write back. Mark appeared with his cell phone in hand, dialing.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I'm fixing to call the cops now."

"Wait," I said. "She'll communicate with me."

Mark lowered the phone. "I'm won't wait too much longer," he said.

I pointed at the paper, then to myself. She let me take it again. I asked her what was wrong. What she wrote back--at first--was difficult to read. The letters were thin and connected like a black string: "No one hears me."

Ida was looking at me, hoping I understood. I did not understand. All I could think about was the warm, sweet smell of candy filling my nostrils. Hershey's, Snickers, and Junior Mints filled the shelves around us. I wanted to go home and have my midnight meal. I asked her what she meant. Again she wrote, "No one hears me."

"What's she saying?" Mark said.

"I don't understand what she's saying," I said. "Go ahead and make the call."

Mark tapped his thumb over the phone's screen. He said who he was before telling them about Ida. "It's not the store on Commerce," he said. "It's the one on Lakeview." A series of high-pitched sounds came out of the phone. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you very much." He looked at me.

"What did they say?" I said.

"Oh, they're coming. They'll be here any minute," Mark said.

The lights in the building faded. The three of our shadows connected, filling the aisle with darkness. I began to think about what Ida had said. *No one hears me*. I wanted to try and gather her meaning, but it was like oil dripping from cupped palms.

There was light behind the aisle in front of the freezer. I turned Ida's chair, took the pad, and walked into the light. I asked again what she meant. She read the note and gave the same reply. I realized that perhaps the wrong questions were being asked. So, I asked if she would let me hear her. She wrote, "Soon you will hear." Frustrated, I asked about her son. I asked if he could come and take her home. She read but did not reply. Her pencil crossed the knuckle of her middle finger.

The officer who arrived was a black man. He was tall, and his head was shaved. His uniform was tight, which caused him to walk with his shoulders.

"What's the problem?" he said.

"We're supposed to close, but she just won't leave," Mark said. "Simon, what was she writing?"

I looked at Ida. Her eyebrows were low, and her nostrils lifted.

"She's crazy," Mark said.

"No, she's not," I said.

"Oh. I know her," the officer said. "Yeah. We met the other day."

Ida reached up and wrapped her fingers around my wrist. Sounds hung from her lips like cobwebs. She was pointing at him.

"She's still angry because I pulled her over," the officer said. Mark checked his watch again.

"She told me that no one hears her," I said. The officer was holding his belt buckle as he got closer. His eyes were tight like mine when I pretended to care, but something was different about his expression. His face was weak as he looked upon her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was having a bad day. I didn't mean to offend you."

Ida released my wrist, reached up, and started hitting the officer on the chest. His arms were lifted above his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry."

I wrapped my arms around her shoulders. She put her face under my neck. Her body was shaking. "Let me take her home," I said, looking at the officer. Ida's fingers were tugging my sleeve.

My thoughts began to coalesce. I remembered practicing scales. I remembered what it felt like to reach a high C above the staff. Quiet sensations vibrated through my arms. It was the beginnings of what I wanted. Ida had let me hear. I wanted to hear more.

The officer spoke with Mark a few minutes before leaving. I wrote Ida and told her I would take her home. She smiled, nodding in agreement. I helped her stand before getting the bags at her feet. Outside the store, I noticed cigarette butts and empty bottles across the parking lot. Ida lived down the street. "Trailer," she wrote.

The trailer park seemed to burrow down into the earth. The crickets were a symphony. She pointed at the old mobile home. My headlights revealed the blue trim around one of the windows. I helped her take her groceries inside. I put the bags on a table in her kitchen. She seemed to be a clean woman. The china was stacked in an antique cupboard. The linoleum was smooth under my feet. A tawny cat tapped its way toward my leg. Its tail wrapped around my ankle.

Ida snapped her fingers toward the cat and watched it run into the living room. She put her hand on my stomach. I nodded, telling her I was hungry. She walked to the kitchen, giving me time to look around. I noticed she did not have any pictures. There was not much clutter or collections. It was as if her life was beginning. I thought maybe it was a new beginning.

Ida came back with two cans of Chef Boyardee's beef ravioli. It was better than the pack of ramen noodles I had at home. She washed out a pan and set it on her hot stove. I walked to her couch and sat. My uniform shirt was still damp from sweating. "Are you from Grenada?" I said. She was attaching a can opener to one of the cans. I had forgotten she was deaf.

There was no television, so I watched the cat curl against the couch pillow. I imagined the cat speaking to me. Its voice was an echo, a pebble skipping across my eardrums. It spoke of Crayola and Play-Doh, things I once knew. I remembered getting my trumpet. My parents bought it for \$2,100. It was the professional, full silver I always wanted.

Ida scuffed toward me with two bowls of ravioli. I took one bowl, making sure the fork stayed inside. I pushed my lips out and blew before eating. She waited on me before she began.

After a few bites, I put the bowl on the table in front of me. I needed to talk even if Ida did not understand. "I remember riding around with my friends," I said. I dabbed my wrists against my eyes. "We had so much light in our eyes. I guess we thought we had time. We did have time." I wiped tears from my cheeks. "It's this town," I said. "It eats people. That's why Dad left." I did not want the tears.

Ida sat beside me and put her arms around me. She had heard me. Our hug became a mountain. A slurred grace note. "Thank you," I said.

It was time for me to go. It was dark out but clear like the surface of a black marble. I got in the car and turned the ignition. As I drove, I heard a voice. It told me to keep driving north. I listened.

DOTTY'S LITTLE EXPERIMENT

Henry Peacock wanted to be a good high school teacher, fall in love, and lose his virginity. Would it be in that order though? He'd just turned thirty. It had been almost ten years since he walked the halls as a student. He remembered the teenage kisses in front of his locker. He thought the young ladies then were waiting on him to initiate; but truthfully, he was always afraid of himself.

He lived his entire life with fear. He had internalized, as a teenager, the images of his mother and father. He remembered how his mother—with tense eyes—would look at his father. It was if his father was a snouted creature dressed in mud. Henry didn't want any woman to look at him that way. Sex was the scent of catastrophe.

Now, as a history teacher, the fear had calmed and he was ready to reveal himself. He was in the cafeteria eating a breaded, chicken sandwich--prime high school cuisine. The blue table reminded him of the boys and how they used to gavel their fists and slap their pencils creating a jamboree. As he looked up, Mrs. Dotty Greene placed her tray and sat across from him. She was the newest biology teacher and had gathered a reputation among students. She liked to threaten to soak her student's cell phones into hydrochloric acid. Dotty was married with twin daughters. She lived what appeared to be a respectable life.

Henry tried to imagine what she was like in high school. He thought she was the poised, horn-clutched band geek (like himself) or maybe the cheerleading pyromaniac. He settled on a combination of both. She was the theatre geek who slashed tires on the weekends.

"Hey, Dotty," he said. "How'd they do on the first exam?"

She smiled while removing the purse strap from her shoulder. "Would you believe that they all failed?" she said. "I think the highest score was fifty-five."

Henry felt like a child. His shirt was a size too large so he rolled the sleeves. He could feel the short hairs on his face unfolding as if reaching for light. He had forgotten to shave.

"That's why we have the bell curve," Henry said. "I'm sure they'll appreciate that."

"Honestly, I'm just trying to make it through the week," Dotty said.

"You have plans for the weekend?"

"Well, my husband will be gone until Sunday. He drives trucks. Friday, my daughters are going to stay with my mother-in-law. So, I'll have all day Saturday to do whatever I want."

Henry could see Dotty's shoulders loosen. It was not the typical wife and mother relief. Whoever she had become, she did not want to be it. She dropped some salad in her mouth. She was chewing hard as if the lettuce had been masking some sort of gristle. She looked at Henry. He looked away.

Henry tried to renew his observations; but she was looking at him, making observations of her own.

"I've heard about you," Dotty said.

Her eyebrows were lifted. There was a single dot of black pepper on her tooth. Henry did not know what she was talking about. No one knew he was a virgin. Did anyone know?

"What have you heard?" he said.

Dotty continued to look at him. Her head leaned to the right. "All the teachers think you're some sort of recluse," she said. "I've even heard a rumor that you didn't go to senior prom." Her torso was folded forward. She was whispering.

"I went to prom," Henry said. He was lying. Sweat circled the tip of his nose.

"Fine," Dotty said. "However, I do think you're reclusive." Dotty continued eating her salad.

Henry took another bite of his sandwich then sipped from his chocolate milk carton.

"I think we have a mild case of social anxiety," Dotty said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Did I not tell you?" she said. "I minored in psychology."

"Well, isn't that just perfect."

"What? I think I can cure you."

Henry wiped his hand across his unshaven face.

Dotty stood, grabbed her purse, and lifted her tray. "We'll talk later," she said.

For the next two days, Henry had fun discovering Dotty. Dotty revealed she grew up with Henry's aunt, Brenda. Henry learned that Dotty was on the city council. Henry and Dotty were both Mississippians who went off for school and came back. Both were passionate about their students. They talked about the need for more after school activities and less focus on standardized testing. When Dotty invited herself to Henry's apartment, they had settled into an odd friendship.

On Saturday, Henry decided to make fudge brownies. His apartment--on the whole--was an acceptable size, but the kitchen was small. The appliances were there before he moved in. The eyes of the stovetop were rusted and the linoleum was chipped. The brownie mix was smooth. He turned toward the living room to see Dotty on the couch. She was shaking from the cold.

"You aren't going to leave are you?" Henry said.

Dotty looked at him, smiled, then bundled up. "No, I'm not going anywhere," she said. "It's just. You should really invest in a heater."

Henry turned toward the stove and preheated the oven. He was embarrassed. They told him the place had poor insulation when he decided to rent it. Didn't seem important at the time.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Sometimes the just place gets like that."

"I remember when Walter and I lived in an apartment," Dotty said. "One night, I walked into the kitchen and saw a cat-sized rat."

"What did you do?" Henry asked.

"Hell, I screamed," Dotty said.

Henry poured the mix into a silver, butter-bathed pan.

"Here comes Walter trying to shoo it away with a broom," Dotty said. "I think that's what happened."

Henry took his time, slid the pan in the oven.

"My mind could be making the whole thing up," Dotty said. "It's one of those stories I've told so much it's become true."

Henry opened the big, yellow refrigerator. "Would you like anything to drink?" he asked. A box of chow mein blocked a case of Coke cans.

"No thanks," Dotty said.

Henry opened the drink, took a sip, then sat next to Dotty. She was looking at the ceiling. She pointed to an area above the entrance door. The spot hung low as if it were loose skin. He put the Coke on the table in front of them.

"Yeah, it's the rain," Henry said. "I'm getting it fixed soon."

Dotty tried to gulp down Henry's soda. The liquid flowed through her neck.

"You could've asked," Henry said.

Dotty squeezed the can before wiping her mouth with the back of her forearm. "You'll be alright," she said. She stared at him. It was if he were in a clear, glass box. Somehow, he liked being Dotty's little experiment.

"So, how's your class?" Henry asked.

"Everything's beautiful," Dotty said. "We just ate chocolate covered crickets."

"Why?" Henry asked.

"I thought you were a Mississippi boy?" Dotty said. "Crickets are delicious. That's why."

While Dotty talked, Henry stood and walked toward the kitchen. He opened the oven door and looked at the brownies. The center was soft when he cut it. He took another Coke out of the fridge.

"I was thinking about you the other day," Dotty said. "I realized you kind of remind me of a cricket."

Henry walked back to the couch. He pulled the tab on the can.

"Are you drunk or something?" he said.

"Hear me out," Dotty said. "At night, ever notice how loud crickets get?"

Dotty took off her glasses and sucked on the tip. She got closer to Henry. He didn't know where she was going with the comparison.

"See, you hear them but it's easy to ignore," Dotty said. "Crickets are sort of reclusive. They hide in bushes and stuff during the day. But there's something about the night. There's this weird contradiction. The male makes a special chirping sound to attract the female."

Henry admitted to himself that he wanted Dotty. He didn't want to share her with another man.

"It's in their design. They can't escape the impulse to sing. That's you, sir. You've been singing a song ever since I met you."

"It's a stretch," Henry said.

"Yeah, you're probably right."

Dotty placed her cold hands on Henry's face and kissed him. She stopped kissing him then unbuttoned her blouse. He thought he might stop her before it went too far.

"Wait," Henry said. He wanted to tell her he was a virgin. He thought it might save him. She untucked her top and continued to unbutton it.

"It's okay," Dotty said. "I already know."

What exactly did she know?

Henry crossed the line when he had sex with Dotty. He assumed she felt the same way. It was like Henry was Dotty's fantasy. Henry was surprised when Dotty invited him to her house for dinner. She'd said she wanted him to meet her husband and daughter. Henry figured Dotty wanted to torture him one last time but didn't know why.

The Greene residence was as he imagined. It was a large, brick home outside the city limits. The welcome mat had been dusted and the patio was sprayed. The furniture inside was eggshell which suggested to Henry purity. He met Dotty's twin daughters, Zuri and Imani, who looked to be seven or eight-years-old. One of the girls had a tooth shorter than the others still making way into her mouth. They had big, curly hair like their mother.

Zuri and Imani sat on the floor looking at the television. The reds, blues, greens, and yellows blinked off their little faces. Dotty's husband, Walter, was on the couch with Henry. He did not look at Henry but entertained with road stories.

"You'll be surprised," Walter said. "Strange women will come up to you at the truck stop. It's just crazy."

Dotty cut vegetables for the salad. She looked at Walter with tense eyes.

Walter stood and walked to her. He put on music and started to dance. He hugged and kissed Dotty's neck.

"I love you," Walter said.

Dotty wiped her chin on her shoulder. "I love you too," she said.

Henry had to admit he was angry. He wanted the house and Dotty. He made a decision with the wine-filled glass in his hand. He did not know the brand but it had a beautiful, dark-red glow. He put the glass in front of his lips and purposely spilled it. As wine trickled onto the couch, Zuri let out a high-pitched scream.

"What the hell is wrong with you, little girl," Walter said.

Zuri, the one with the growing tooth, stood with the remote in hand. "I'm trying to watch TV," she said.

"You showing out in front of company," Walter said.

Walter stopped the music. He unbuckled his belt and approached Zuri. She ran into another room and Walter followed.

"Sorry about that," Dotty said, half smiling. "Walter knows I don't want him spanking her but he does it anyway."

"Forgive me," Henry said. "Got wine all over this couch. Know it's expensive."

"It's alright," Dotty said. "You're the only thing in this house I don't hate right now."

Henry was at the center of a catastrophe. His aunt, Brenda, was his council. It had been that way since he was a child. As he stood in her garage, he thought about life. More than half was spent in the same, small city. He noticed the cardboard boxes stacked beside the parked riding mower. Brenda hadn't started packing. She was trapped as well.

When he entered the house, Brenda was standing at the kitchen sink holding the lid of a blender.

"You better come in here and have some of my smoothie," Brenda said. He realized she had not changed. He remembered how crisp she cut his kindergarten apple slices. Brenda was immortal to Henry. She poured the mixture into a thermos before drinking some. She walked to him and offered a taste. The smoothie was thick, lumpy, and green. "No thanks," he said.

Brenda put the thermos in the refrigerator and closed it. She walked to the stove and gathered a stack of opened envelopes.

"I'm so tired," Brenda said. "Can't wait to move out of here."

Henry walked to the old tan couch and sat.

"Selling the couch?" Henry asked.

"That couch is older than you," Brenda said. "I remember your mama use to live on that thing."

Henry did not understand why she was smiling. He looked at the ceiling. There was a thin crack that traveled from his old bedroom to the patio door.

"I thought you were going to get Joe to fix that," Henry said, pointing up.

Brenda looked at it but didn't say anything.

"Have you talked to your mama?" she said.

"No, why would I?" he said.

"You should call her."

Henry focused on Dotty for a moment. The guilt from the other night wrapped its arm around his stomach. He wanted to vomit.

"Tell me something," Henry said.

"What's wrong?" Brenda said.

"Do you like my mama?" Henry asked.

Brenda walked towards the couch. The light from above revealed the gray in her hair. She took the cushion and threw it against one of the walls. Some dust crumbs entered the air.

"What are you talking about, boy?" Brenda said.

Henry closed his eyes and shook his head. He could feel the arms around his stomach tighten. The old secrets were hanging from his lips.

"Why did mama leave?" Henry asked.

"Henry?" Brenda said.

"I was so young," Henry said. "It was like she didn't want me."

Seemed like Brenda wanted to cry. Her eyes got misty, regretful. She looked at Henry like she wanted to tell him the truth. Would she have told him the truth if she knew it?

"Don't know why she left you, baby," Brenda said. "I know for a fact she loved you though."

She picked the cushion up and put it back on the couch. She dusted it off with her hands. Henry tried to keep looking at her face but could not. He felt as if she knew about Dotty. Brenda walked back into the kitchen, wiped her eyes.

"And I love your mama," Brenda said. "She just gets on my damn nerves."

Henry looked at Dotty through the glass of her classroom door. She was making checks with her red marker. When Henry walked in, Dotty smiled as if her cheeks were being forced to stay up. She put the marker down and stood in front of her desk. She'd taken off her ring and put it on her desk.

She put her hands under her armpits.

"Henry," Dotty said. "I feel terrible saying this." She walked to the door and closed it. Her voice became familiar. "This past weekend wasn't what you think it was."

Henry didn't know why he was smiling. He enjoyed being Dotty's fantasy. Really, he just wanted to thank her for having him.

"Do you understand what I'm trying to say?" Dotty said. "You and I aren't real."

Henry put his hands in his pockets and looked at his feet. "I figured," he said.

Dotty put her hand on Henry's shoulder. "I'm so sorry," she said.

Henry reached out, took off Dotty's glasses. He folded the frames and put them on her desk. He didn't want anything to get in the way.

"You need to leave," Dotty said. "My planning period is almost over."

Henry hugged her stomach and pressed his head against her bosom.

"Don't do this," Dotty said.

Henry felt Dotty relaxed after a moment.

"Alright," she said. "It's alright."

His tears wet her blouse. Dotty took her time and rubbed his back, babied him. Henry wanted his mother. Didn't know why she left. No one knew. It was time for him to detach from all that. He was grown now.

NAKED NOW

Noelle was bald and skinny with skin like coal. She stood on the side of Saint Vincent Methodist Church in the grass holding an unlit cigarette. She kept tugging at the hem of her pale, yellow sundress before sliding the coral wedges off her feet. The grass was brown and dry. She could hear a multitude of *aye-mens* coming from inside the building. Pastor had dismissed. Noelle picked up her shoes and began walking down the steps toward the parking lot.

"Ellie, I done told you about them cigarettes," someone said. It was Sister Geraldine who was thicker and dark—though not darker than Noelle. Sister Geraldine's lime-green church hat statured atop her head like it was unmovable.

"Ain't like I'm smoking," Noelle said. "Just holding it so I don't scare folks."

Noelle let the cigarette fall and crushed it into the grass. Sister Geraldine touched Noelle's shoulder and made her turn.

"Don't know why you ain't put on no stockings," Sister Geraldine said. "Girl, I'll whoop you. I can see your draws."

Noelle tugged at the butt of her own dress. She must've done a good job on her makeup. She saw Charleeta coming out of the church wearing a light grey pantsuit. As Charleeta walked, she slid a pair of butterfly-shaped sunglasses over her face.

Sister Geraldine must've seen her as well because she took her hand off Noelle's shoulder and mashed her purse against her bosom. Charleeta had stolen from Sister Geraldine before. Charleeta wasn't a thief but liked to take things from Sister Geraldine. It was her strange, chaotic defense of Noelle.

"I'm driving," Charleeta said.

Noelle took the keys out of her shoe and handed them to her.

"You look pretty," Charleeta said, whispered like she tried to hide something from Sister Geraldine. "Maybe one day you'll actually come inside the church." Charleeta rattled the keys as she walked away.

Sister Geraldine gave a big exhale. "What ya'll gone eat?" she said.

"You cooking?" Noelle said as she placed her shoes on the ground.

Sister Geraldine lowered her purse and began digging through it.

"Ya'll ain't about to pack up in my house and eat all my food," Sister Geraldine said.

The metal jangled from inside Sister Geraldine's purse as she looked through it. A thick, folded envelope with *TITHES* written on it peeked out from the clutter.

"We all going to the Sizzler," Sister Geraldine said.

Noelle dipped her feet into her wedges. "Who is we?" she said.

Sister Geraldine pulled the keys out of her purse. "We treating Pastor and First Lady today," she said.

Noelle straightened her posture and smoothed the wrinkles in her dress with her hands.

"Sounds like a place I don't need to be at."

Sister Geraldine sucked her teeth. "That's exactly the place you need to be at."

Noelle walked away from Sister Geraldine. Charleeta sat in the driver's seat of Noelle's red Ford Mustang. Noelle's knees almost buckled as she opened the passenger door. She got in the car and rolled down the window to let more of the breeze in.

"You mind eating at the Sizzler?" Noelle asked Charleeta.

Charleeta smiled like she had waited forever to hear Noelle ask that exact question.

Charleeta pressed play on the CD player. Gospel music pulsated through the car's speakers.

Everything in this boot-shaped town seemed gray and dying: addicts gasped through the streets, houses sunk into the soil. Noelle grabbed Charleeta's knee. They had known each other since they were five. Charleeta took one hand off the wheel searching for Noelle. When their fingers found each other, Noelle began to fidget.

"Relax," Charleeta said. "I'll be beside you the entire time."

They moved through the wilting streets until Charleeta pulled into the restaurant's parking lot.

Sister Geraldine stood at the entrance laughing with Pastor and First Lady. Noelle stopped Charleeta from getting out of the car.

"We gone wait until they go in," Noelle said.

Charleeta unlocked their fingers so she could unfold the mirror above the dashboard. She rubbed her lips together smoothing out the wine-colored lipstick.

"Are you going to tell them?" Charleeta said, took off her butterfly sunglasses.

"Tell them what?" Noelle said.

Noelle pushed her seat back and looked at the tinted sky through the sunroof. She reached her hand trying to grab the clouds.

Charleeta picked her purse off the floor and put her sunglasses in it. She flipped the mirror back up before putting her purse on the dash.

Noelle ran her fingers down her chest where her scars peeked out.

"Listen," Noelle said. "I've been through a lot of hell and I got the scars to prove it. Ain't a little girl no more. If they don't know by now—"

"Wait," Charleeta said, pointed at the entrance. "Saints on the move."

Noelle and Charleeta both grabbed their things and got out of the car. Noelle walked behind Charleeta. Her heels continued to misbehave. She tried stabbing each step into the asphalt. She slipped a little, took off the heels and walked in barefoot.

Noelle paid for two buffets. Pastor, First Lady, and Sister Geraldine were sitting at the table behind a tan, grease-stained curtain. Pastor wore a big, ill-fitting red suit. His breaths were loud and harsh. First Lady wore a hat like Sister Geraldine except it was white with gold trimming.

Noelle sat beside Pastor. Charleeta sat beside Sister Geraldine on the other side of the table. It was expected for Noelle to keep some distance from Charleeta whenever they were out together in public. They had to come off like friends.

"Pastor?" Sister Geraldine said. "You know Noelle? Don't you?"

There were six buttons on Pastor's suit. He took his time and unfastened them from the bottom upward. He patted his thick, black hair.

"I remember her," Pastor said. "She was a little girl when she started coming to the church. She use to have them cute barrettes in her hair and she use to come up and model in front of the whole church. You remember that sweetheart?"

Pastor, First Lady, and Sister Geraldine smiled at Noelle. Pastor described the little girl Sister Geraldine always wanted. Noelle glanced at Charleeta then swallowed.

"Yes sir," Noelle said. "I remember."

First Lady had her elbows on the table, fingers interlocked. She lifted three inches with every word she spoke. "You still work down there at that garage?" she asked Noelle.

Noelle nodded. "Yes ma'am."

"She be underneath them cars more than the men folk," First Lady said.

"She a hard worker," Sister Geraldine said. "I'll give her that."

Sister Geraldine hung her purse strap on the edge of the chair and stood up. The tithes envelope looked like it was ready to fly out of Sister Geraldine's purse.

"Well, I don't know about y'all," Pastor said. "But I'm ready to eat."

Everyone got up from the table and walked to the buffet. Noelle and Charleeta made do with the iceberg lettuce on the salad bar. Pastor, First Lady, and Sister Geraldine filled their plates with fried catfish, collard greens, candied yams. The three of them ate until their plates were clean, then reemerged for desert. Noelle watched as the saints grabbed pre-plated sweet potato pie and red-velvet cake. Noelle and Charleeta would've shared a small bowl of banana pudding if they were alone, maybe even some strawberry ice cream.

First Lady cut a piece of her sweet potato pie with a fork. She put it in her mouth, let it satisfy her, then swallowed. She smiled at Noelle for a long time.

"Sister Geraldine, your daughter is so pretty," First Lady said. "She could be a model or something."

Sister Geraldine took a sip of her water.

"She'd be prettier if she put on some stockings," she said.

First Lady smiled and twisted the ring on her finger.

"When you gone get married, baby?" she said.

It sounded more like a suggestion. Noelle knew Charleeta was mad because she had her arms crossed. Charleeta was the first face Noelle saw after her double mastectomy, the only one who could look at the scars. Noelle didn't want marriage but what she wanted Charleeta had provided since they were kids—acceptance. Noelle couldn't break that connection, that history.

Sister Geraldine began making noise inside her purse. "Now what I do with that money?"

Sister Geraldine took out her wallet and her hairbrush; she unfolded dingy receipts.

Noelle didn't want to be at the restaurant anymore. It was obvious Charleeta stole the envelope to screw with both Noelle and Sister Geraldine. Noelle bent down, took her shoes, and got up, ready to walk out.

Sister Geraldine looked at Charleeta then turned towards Pastor and First Lady.

"Pastor, I had something to give you, but it look like the devil done got a hold of it,"

Sister Geraldine said. She pulled the purse to her shoulder and stood.

Charleeta stayed in her seat, arms still crossed.

"I didn't steal from you, Geraldine," Charleeta said. She pushed a random strand of hair behind her ear. Her face went a kind of pale as the light hit it.

Pastor and First Lady both looked at each other.

"Ain't nobody call your name, child," Sister Geraldine said. "I said the devil done got a hold of it."

Noelle tugged at Charleeta's elbow. She didn't want to hear Charleeta lie further.

Charleeta picked up her purse, put on her sunglasses, and walked out. Noelle followed her through the parking lot into the driver's seat of the car. She turned the key and cranked the car.

The air conditioning blew thin dust particles into her face.

"Fuck is wrong with you, Leeta?" Noelle said. "You really stealing from Sister Geraldine again."

Charleeta looked away then laughed. Noelle leaned over the gear shaft and took the keys out of the car. Charleeta continued to laugh.

"Come on," Charleeta said. "You don't think this whole thing funny?"

"Ain't shit funny," Noelle said.

Noelle remembered Charleeta at her bedside, after the surgery, tracing Noelle's scars with her finger.

Noelle wanted to kiss Charleeta in the parking lot but stopped herself.

"What you do with Sister Geraldine's money?" Noelle said.

Charleeta licked her palm, put her hand between Noelle's legs. Something wonderful, fleeting bloomed inside Noelle. She tried to taper off the sensation.

"We can't do this here," Noelle said.

"You don't think you deserve happiness, Noelle?" Charleeta said.

Noelle let Charleeta continue for a few moments more. Noelle reached out, caressed Charleeta's face. Noelle ran her fingers through Charleeta's braids.

Noelle took Charleeta's hand out from between her legs, thought about Charleeta's words. Noelle didn't owe Sister Geraldine anything. Noelle gave Charleeta back the car keys. Charleeta cranked the car and pulled out of the parking lot.

Noelle didn't like the way she looked. She was wearing dark, oily Dickie's coveralls. She stood in Sister Geraldine's kitchen waiting on her to come out of the back. She had come to apologize. She took a rag out of her pocket and started rubbing her black palms. They were still black when she finished rubbing. She walked over to the sink, poured some liquid detergent into her hand, and lathered them dry. The liquid went white between the creases of her fingers. As she washed them, Sister Geraldine walked in.

"I know you ain't come in my house all filthy," Sister Geraldine said.

She turned off the sink, broke off a paper towel, and handed it to Noelle. "Washing your hand ain't gone cut it. Go outside and take that thing off."

Noelle walked outside and went to the back of the house. She leaned against the air conditioning unit. Through the back gate she saw Charleeta walking down the sidewalk. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. Her braids covered her face. She stopped walking and put her fingers between the metal wires.

"I'm sorry," Charleeta said.

Noelle went up to the gate and touched Charleeta.

"I'm sorry, too," Noelle said.

"You think Geraldine'll ever fully accept you?" Charleeta said.

"No," Noelle said. "I don't."

Charleeta took the envelope out of her pocket and gave it to Noelle who crushed it and dropped the envelope in her shirt. As Charleeta walked on, Noelle felt her eyes get wet. She didn't want to dry them. She unzipped her coveralls and let them fall to the grass. She was left wearing a white tank top and basketball shorts. She stepped back into her boots, put the coveralls on the unit, and went back into the house.

Sister Geraldine had an old, lace nightgown and put it on the stove. Noelle pulled it over her head and walked into Sister Geraldine's bedroom. Framed Bible scriptures and old photographs patched the wall. Noelle exhaled before sitting in the chair at Sister Geraldine's bedside.

Sister Geraldine was sitting up in the bed reading her Bible. She took off her reading glasses.

"You scared?" Sister Geraldine said. "Ain't nothing to be scared of if you saved."

Noelle tightened her eyes. She and Charleeta had saved themselves a long time ago. Sister Geraldine was the one trapped.

"That's the catch," Noelle said. "I ain't saved. Ain't never gone be saved."

Sister Geraldine smiled and shook her head. It was like Sister Geraldine was glad to hear Noelle tell her truth.

"You gone burn in hell talking all that foolishness," Sister Geraldine said.

Sister Geraldine flipped through a couple pages of her Bible.

"Go on," she said. "Say what you gone say so I can finish studying."

Noelle imagined the house burning; Sister Geraldine's Bible shrinking among the flames.

"You gone ever come over and visit me?" Noelle said, leaning forward. "Me and Charleeta live right down the street."

Sister Geraldine's arms were folded on top of her lap. She let out a big laugh. The metal at the back of her mouth showed.

"I wouldn't be caught dead in that den of sin," Sister Geraldine said.

Noelle got out of the chair, snatched the Bible out of Sister Geraldine's hands, and threw it to the floor.

"You the one scared," Noelle said. "You scared of who and what I am."

Noelle took off the gown, then took off her tank top and shorts. A dark cross reached across her chest.

"Look at me," Noelle said. "Look at me."

Noelle was naked now. Sister Geraldine turned away from Noelle like she was sick.

"You the devil," Sister Geraldine said.

She started fanning herself with her hand.

Noelle couldn't stop her tears. She fell to the floor, quivered. "I ain't the devil," she said.

"I ain't the devil."

THE SANCTUARY

Jesus—straight and white—was painted, framed above the pulpit. He was dressed in a white robe with arms lifted.

Jimmy Waters stared at the picture as he followed Evangeline Brown down the navy-blue carpet. He looked to the left and saw a stained glass window. Beside it, a white banner read, *Summer Revival. Greenwood, Ms. 1975*. They turned their bodies and waved their behinds in front of people already seated. Evangeline had a Bible wedged between her arm like it was a weapon. Leather dangled off the Bible's spine. Jimmy sat at the end of the pew. Thought to himself.

Jimmy hadn't been to church much. He was gay, but he loved Evangeline. Jimmy felt she loved him back. They were in love together—tangled up. Evangeline dragged him to this revival. Wanted him to repent before they got engaged.

Jimmy slid the knot of his red tie down his clavicle and unbuttoned the collar. Sweat poured down his neck. Evangeline was fanning herself with a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. stapled to a stick.

“Amen,” Evangeline said. She turned her head and smiled at Jimmy. The stem of a dandelion was lodged in her afro.

Reverend Martin “Book” Wirth stepped off the pulpit into the congregation. The microphone cord followed. As he spoke, the gold on his tooth blinked light like the flash on a camera. He wore an eggshell colored suit and round glasses.

“As always,” Rev. Book said, “the doors of the church are open.”

The sound from the keyboard looped into four chord changes.

“This is just an invitation, amen. Are you a backslider? Are you a sinner? Whatever you need—I assure you—it’s here at the altar. Are you sick in your body? Come now. Get out of your seat. Don’t let the devil stop you from receiving your breakthrough.”

Jimmy put his elbows on his knees and hung his head. His back teeth were clenched together tight. Evangeline rubbed circles into Jimmy’s back.

“I’ll go with you,” Evangeline said.

Jimmy wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He had to do it himself.

“No,” he said, “it’s okay.”

He pressed his lips against her forehead before standing up.

“Praise the Lord,” Rev. Book said. “Y’all put your hands together for Jesus.”

Echoes of hand slapping filled the sanctuary. Jimmy couldn’t stop himself from crying. He hoped the preacher could somehow fix him. He took his tie and dabbed the corner of his eye. A deacon sitting on the front pew unfolded a beach towel, stretched it across his own lap. He took it in both hands, stood up, and wiped the sweat from Rev. Book’s forehead.

Rev. Book wrapped his arm around Jimmy’s neck. “The angels are up in heaven rejoicing, amen,” he said. He lowered the microphone.

“It’s good to see you, young brother.”

Jimmy pressed his face against Rev. Book’s chest.

“You want to be saved, don’t you?”

“Yes sir.”

“The Lord told me he had a plan for you.”

“Yes sir.”

Book raised the microphone.

“Let me tell y’all something. I use to be out on the street pushing dope and gang banging. I was a whoremonger, amen. I tell you if the Lord can save me, he can save anybody. Can I get a witness?”

A collective amen filled the sanctuary.

“Salvation is simple, young brother,” Rev. Book said. “All you have to do is confess with your mouth that you are a sinner. Then believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead. Now, repeat after me.”

Rev. Book dug his finger into Jimmy’s chest.

“I am a sinner,” Rev. Book said.

Jimmy moved his lips. Repeated Rev. Book’s words.

“I accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior.”

Jimmy repeated the words again. Rev. Book seemed pleased.

“It’s done. Brother, you are saved.”

Rev. Book placed his hand on Jimmy’s forehead and mumbled something. Sounded like another language. When Rev. Book got done, Jimmy felt the same.

“Amen. Amen. Amen,” Rev. Book said.

He lifted his arms and leaned his head back.

“Somebody shout for joy in this place,” Rev. Book said.

Jimmy was confused. He swore he didn’t feel anything different. He wanted to plead with the preacher to try it again. Maybe Jimmy didn’t do something right. Maybe deep in his soul Jimmy didn’t want salvation.

SCRAPS

Miss Cotton wanted to cuss. She opened her purse and searched for her checkbook. She found it, took a pen and filled out a check. Miss Cotton had just turned eighty-three a couple months prior. Even with her slight back pain and family issues, she thanked the Lord each day for keeping her in her right mind. Oscar, her son, had been arrested for trespassing and assault on a police officer. Sister Geraldine, from the church, had been the one to report him after he showed up at her house crying for Noelle.

"How much to get him out?" Miss Cotton asked.

"He's not going anywhere," Lt. Hutton said. "Least not today."

Hutton was a white man who looked to be in his forties with a thick, black mustache. Hutton was from somewhere up north. His face was swollen, no doubt her son's work.

"You ain't listening," Miss Cotton said.

Miss Cotton pointed the pen at Hutton. She was going to force him to give her some information.

"How much is it?" Miss Cotton asked.

"Well, you got an extra two thousand dollars lying around?" Hutton said.

Miss Cotton dropped the checkbook then shook her head.

"The devil is a lie," Miss Cotton said. "Who made it be that much?"

Hutton stood up straight and held his belt. He seemed annoyed with Miss Cotton.

"Ma'am, he still got fines from his last visit," Hutton said.

Miss Cotton took out the 500 dollars cash. She put it in front of Hutton's face.

"What if I give you this here?" Miss Cotton said.

“No, ma’am,” Hutton said. “Can’t do it”

“I’ll pay it,” Miss Cotton said. “Take this as the first installment.”

Miss Cotton slapped the money on the desk.

“Ain’t like we gone skip town,” she said. “I’m giving you my word.”

“I’m sorry,” Hutton said. “I truly am.”

Miss Cotton huffed as she stood. She picked up the money and folded it in her hand. Her purse dragged down her forearm as she exited. She looked at her feet in slippers as she shuffled toward her car. They reminded her of how in her youth she would walk to Oscar's school from her job as a waitress to save him from being suspended.

First time they called because he was smoking cigarettes during recess and burning other kids with them. Another time was for shooting at teachers with the BB gun he got for Christmas. Eventually, he quit school to work on cars. He did that for a good while until he went to Parchman for crippling a man who called him bastard. It was true. Miss Cotton didn’t know who his father was.

Miss Cotton put the money in her purse and sat that on the passenger seat. Her hands were shaking as she found the key and started the car. She wanted to stay, sleep there all night until Oscar was released. She let the vehicle warm and she dragged herself back into the building. Miss Cotton got back to Hutton’s desk. Ashamed, she crushed her hand into a fist and pressed it against her breast. Her shoulders were hunched forward.

“Can I at least see him?” Miss Cotton asked Hutton.

Hutton chuckled against the wall. He picked his coffee up off the desk, put the straw to the good corner of his mouth, and took another sip.

“Yes, ma'am," Hutton said. "I'll let you see him.”

Hutton stood and guided Miss Cotton to the holding cell.

The room was cold and white. Oscar had his back to the cold concrete floor, arms propped under his head. He was looking at the ceiling. Gray was along the edges of his scraggly beard. There was no doubt he was her son. They had the same dark brown complexion and wide nose. He wore his faded blue sweats. Small holes punctured the collar of his t-shirt.

"It's how you carry yourself," Miss Cotton said.

Oscar sat up and snarled at Miss Cotton. Anyone else would've thought Oscar wanted to kill her.

Miss Cotton laughed at Oscar.

"Huff and puff at me all you want," Miss Cotton said. "I show ain't put you in here. You in here because of how you carry yourself."

Oscar got on his feet and stared at Hutton in the corner. Oscar grinned, showed his meth mouth.

"You got a cigarette or something, chief?" Oscar asked Hutton.

Hutton flinched like Oscar was going to attack him again. He grabbed hold to his belt.

"Ain't got nothing for you," Hutton said.

Miss Cotton searched her purse. She didn't smoke but bought cigarettes for Oscar. She found an unopened pack of Marlboro 100s and held them up.

"I know you like them there," Miss Cotton said. "Got you a whole case at the house."

Oscar spat on the floor. "I don't want that shit from you," he said.

Miss Cotton threw the cigarettes at Oscar.

"Ungrateful," Miss Cotton said. "What you got to say for yourself, Oscar? What you want?"

Oscar got back down on the floor and stretched out.

"I want my daughter," he said.

Miss Cotton stayed silent. Why now? What Changed? Oscar always blamed Miss Cotton for giving Noelle to Sister Geraldine. He never made a fuss about it before.

"Guess we can't talk about that," Oscar said. "I'm done talking."

Miss Cotton was done herself. She readjusted her purse strap and teetered outside to her warm car. Her drive back home was quiet. When she got there, a mutt sat in the grass waiting for her. Miss Cotton had fed him once so he returned each day. She went into the house, got her plastic bag of scraps, came back out and fed them to him. Afterwards, the dog ran out into the woods.

Miss Cotton went inside and rode her rocking chair facing the front door. She sat there all evening in the dark without eating or saying a word.

It felt like her eyelids were just starting to fall when someone knocked on the door.

"Oscar?" Miss Cotton said.

"Fuck no," a voice said. "It's just me."

Miss Cotton thought for a moment then got up, turned on the lights and opened the door. Noelle was standing there. She would come by the house sometimes for Miss Cotton to feed her and lend her old dresses to wear. Noelle's birth mother gave her away as soon as the baby was born. Sister Geraldine had adopted her. Sister Geraldine was strict and abusive to Noelle. It had been thirty years since then.

Now, a bright red hood peeked from underneath Noelle's dark gray coveralls. An unlit cigarette was on top of her ear.

"You show got a garbage can for a mouth," Miss Cotton said, smiling. "Come on in."

Noelle walked in, removed her hat, and took a seat. Miss Cotton rubbed Noelle's bald head.

"Done told you to get a wig," Miss Cotton said. "Better than a hat." She removed her wig and threw it at Noelle. "Try it."

Noelle examined it good. "Ain't for me." She handed it back to Miss Cotton who dropped the wig on her head backwards before twisting it straight.

"Well, whatever you say," Miss Cotton said. "You look healthy anyhow."

They sat in silence for a little bit. Noelle unzipped the front of her coveralls. Miss Cotton saw the scar coming up from her t-shirt collar.

Noelle had been diagnosed with breast cancer a few years earlier. When she heard, Miss Cotton felt guilty. She had a benign history with breast cancer herself. Miss Cotton would say, "The devil been trying to kill me since the beginning." It wasn't just her either. She had been told her own daddy died of prostate cancer before thirty.

"How they cut you," Miss Cotton asked.

Noelle made a cross with her arms.

"Now I'm a say this and I want you to listen real good," Miss Cotton said. "You need to quit them cigarettes."

Noelle touched the top of her ear.

"Oh, I don't smoke no more," Noelle said. "Just keep it nearby that's all."

Miss Cotton looked at the clock. "Why you over here this late?"

Noelle was rubbing her stomach. "You ain't cook nothing, Etta Faye?"

Miss Cotton pinched Noelle's earlobe. Where'd Noelle learn to call Miss Cotton by her first name. Disrespectful.

"Ouch," Noelle said. The cigarette slipped out so Noelle reached over to put it back.

"Ain't about to stand over no hot stove this late," Miss Cotton said. "Fix yourself a peanut butter jam."

They both walked into the kitchen. Miss Cotton gathered everything and put it on the table.

"Fix it for me, Etta Faye," Noelle said.

Miss Cotton slapped Noelle's hand. "Gone quit talking to me any ole way," she said.

Miss Cotton opened the grape jelly and began spreading it over one slice of bread. "And since you ain't answer the first time," she said, "I'm gone ask again. Why you over here this late?"

Miss Cotton spread peanut butter over another slice, put them together, and cut the sandwich diagonal.

Noelle took half of the sandwich and started eating. Miss Cotton didn't touch the other half. She was satisfied watching Noelle eat.

"I need to ask you something," Noelle said.

Miss Cotton got up, got two glasses and poured milk into each.

"Go head," Miss Cotton said, "Ask me."

Noelle took the cigarette off her ear and examined it between her fingers. "Why you ain't ever tell me?"

The glasses almost slipped out of Miss Cotton's hands. She put them on the table and sat. "What you mean?" she said. "Say what you saying, child."

Noelle gulped her milk down. "I just got back from visiting Oscar," she said.

"What was you doing down there?" Miss Cotton said.

"He called me at work." Noelle said. "Said he had something important to tell me in person."

Miss Cotton thought about cutting Noelle off before she could finish. She didn't have the strength. It was time.

Noelle wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Said he was my father."

Miss Cotton made a fist and put it up against her breast. At that moment, she remembered herself as a young woman and all the men she slept with. She remembered Oscar as a boy asking if he had a daddy. She remembered telling him no. She wasn't ashamed of her past; she was ashamed of bringing another life into a world full of trouble.

Noelle looked at the cigarette between her fingers. "It's true ain't it?"

Miss Cotton couldn't speak. She nodded her head. Noelle mashed the cigarette into the table, relieved.

They sat in silence for a long while. Miss Cotton was surprised at Noelle's reaction. Noelle didn't have hurt or anger in her eyes. She held Miss Cotton's hand as if she understood.

"What you gone do now that you know the truth?" Miss Cotton asked.

Noelle ran a hand across the back of her head. "I-I don't know," she said. "Ain't never thought of myself as someone's daughter."

Miss Cotton wanted to embrace Noelle but didn't know how. She had never done it with Oscar. He had always been on his own.

"Well, one thing for show," Miss Cotton said. "You two are just alike."

Miss Cotton decided to let Noelle stay the night. Early that morning, Miss Cotton convinced Noelle to take her to Sister Geraldine's house. When they got there, Sister Geraldine answered the door wearing reading glasses holding her Bible. A black head scarf tied into a knot

and white nightgown adorned her. It was as if Sister Geraldine wanted to convince herself she was righteous.

Sister Geraldine put down the Bible and glared at Noelle. She started fanning herself.

"Deen, don't do that to this child," Miss Cotton said. "This world already filled with enough trouble as it is. Ain't that what the Word say?"

"All out the blue," Sister Geraldine said, looking at Noelle. "I done told you to call before showing up at this house."

Sister Geraldine pulled some money out of her brassiere. "Here you go."

Noelle counted the dollars then put them in her pocket. "Thank you," she said.

"What you doing over here, Etta Faye?" Sister Geraldine said.

Miss Cotton got closer to Sister Geraldine.

"I'm old and tired," Miss Cotton said. "You the reason my son back in jail."

She stood up straight as she could. "Tell me about the other night."

Miss Cotton remembered Noelle as a child coming to her with whip marks all on her legs and up her back. She understood why Sister Geraldine did it. Noelle was a little black girl bound to a boot-shaped town in Mississippi. Hard times were sure to come.

Sister Geraldine walked off removing her headscarf. Her hair was thin and brittle. "He was outside that door," she said. "Knocking all loud and violent. Like to bust down the door calling for Noelle."

Sister Geraldine picked up a comb off the couch, dusted the seat, and sat. "Told him she don't live here but he kept knocking and yelling," she said.

Sister Geraldine raked through her hair with the comb.

"About drunk," Sister Geraldine said. "I was scared, so I called the police."

"That all?" Miss Cotton said.

"Well, when Hutton got here I stepped outside," Sister Geraldine said. "Couldn't stand to hear all that cussing they was doing. Hutton whispered something I couldn't hear. Oscar got a look in his eye. He tackled Hutton to the ground and--"

"You ain't hear what Hutton said?" Miss Cotton asked.

"Etta Faye, they was saying all kinds of vulgar stuff," Sister Geraldine said.

Miss Cotton went into her purse and retrieved the cash she tried to give Hutton earlier.

"We gone get him out today," Miss Cotton said. "Only need fifteen hundred more dollars."

Sister Geraldine rested a hand on her chest.

"You know better than that, Etta Faye," she said. "Got to bear that cross on your own."

Miss Cotton shook her head. She looked at Noelle and told her she was ready to go. Miss Cotton's posture collapsed as she made her way out the door.

Noelle dropped Miss Cotton off at her house. She promised Miss Cotton she would find some money before they visited Oscar later that evening after she got off work.

Miss Cotton told Noelle not to worry with it. Sister Geraldine was right about it not being anyone else's cross to bear. As Noelle drove off, Miss Cotton noticed garbage all over her front yard. The mutt was in his usual spot gnawing on an empty cigarette pack. She leaned down to snatch it from him.

Drool ran from the dog's mouth as he lunged at her. It was as if he wanted to let her know he had accepted the truth. He was a bastard surrounded by humans with ill intent. His anger helped him survive. It was as if Oscar himself barked at Miss Cotton.

Miss Cotton's thoughts drifted to Noelle. She wanted to assure Noelle that everyone, even Sister Geraldine, loved her.

There was nothing left but silence. The mutt must've ran back into the woods after biting Miss Cotton's ankle. She was face down against the icy, brown grass. Her hip had dislodged but even more painful was the silence and what it meant for the remainder of her life.

MANES

Hair on this side of town grew towards the hot sun—thick, black and passionate. It was a Mississippi, late July heat. Gasoline from primed weed eaters smothered the once clean atmosphere. Sex and sweat leaked from the bodies of unsatisfied youth on every furnished Plum Street porch. Renters celebrated the heat and all its pain because renters knew summer provided for them, produced the most fertile economic soil even among sewage and obscenity. It was a season for supernatural change and growth.

Charleeta preferred the simplicity of painted nails. She posted online makeup tutorials for half a living and worked the other half as a hairdresser. She wore box braids and dressed more sixteen than thirty. She had been an exceptional high school student and could've attained a full scholarship to most state institutions. She chose to live with her auto mechanic lover, Noelle, whom she had befriended at five and cared for since fourteen. Charleeta swore Noelle reciprocated her affections yet somehow a trench lived between the two of them. Noelle was the type to muzzle her yearnings for most things except her old '03 Ford Mustang GT which was the only thing she owned and wouldn't let Charleeta drive.

They would wrestle daily over other women Noelle seemed to show interest in. One day, Charleeta did the laundry and found a small, wrinkled index card in the pocket of Noelle's coveralls. There was a name, Jay, along with a washed-out phone number scribbled across the card. Charleeta put it deep in the pocket of her jean shorts. Did Noelle leave it for Charleeta to find on purpose? Did Noelle want to distance herself from Charleeta and the life they had built together?

Charleeta settled on the porch and waited for Noelle to come back from work. Two men swaggered shirtless down the street atop what Charleeta would later learn to be two Tennessee Walking Horses. The horses were brownish gray with thick, black manes. One mounted man looked older with a muscular frame and gold front teeth. His voice was thick and penetrating. He yelled for the people to come outside and see them.

The other man had long dreadlocks and a slender build. He was younger but his eyes were weary like he had given all his energy to Gold Teeth. Both men could've been and most likely were brothers. Ms. Velma—Noelle and Charleeta's closest neighbor—hollered for the horses to stop in front of her place. Charleeta closed her laptop. The horses were out of place. They belonged in a fable, not on Plum Street.

Ms. Velma's young granddaughter ran out into the street with two of her friends to pet the horses. They each held a carrot in their hand. When the kids asked for a ride Gold Teeth quoted them an impossible price. Seemed like every renter came out and stood on their porch for the occasion.

"Ms. Velma," one of the renters said, "you know these strangers?"

Ms. Velma said they'd come from the ranch outside city limits. Said she'd read about the horses in the newspaper almost five years before. Said they were now old enough to ride.

"Beautiful," Charleeta said.

"You sure are," Gold Teeth said. "I'll let you ride for free."

Charleeta ignored Gold Teeth until he got closer and asked if she had a man.

"Sorry," Charleeta said. "I don't do dick."

Gold Teeth flicked his tongue between his fingers. Charleeta threw Gold Teeth the bird. The younger brother—Dreadlocks—whistled, told his older brother to stop, and led the way for

both of them down the road. Charleeta missed her chance to snap a photo. There would be no proof. The horses wouldn't be back. Something that special didn't happen twice on Plum Street.

Noelle arrived in her loud, monstrous car. She shed her oil drenched uniform, kissed Charleeta on the cheek, and went inside the house. Charleeta followed Noelle to the shower and hollered the events of the day. Noelle stopped washing and snatched back the shower curtain at mention of horses.

"Fuck out of here," Noelle said.

Noelle dripped before Charleeta, beamed at the idea of these near angelic creatures in their small neighborhood. Charleeta wrapped a towel around Noelle's body and extended the story. The horses began to talk and even fly into battle. Noelle accepted it all.

Is that all it took? Charleeta would make up thousands of tales about talking animals if it would get her closer to Noelle. At night in bed, Charleeta kissed Noelle's double mastectomy scars and rubbed Noelle's bald head. Charleeta whispered how much she adored the scars, worshipped them. Noelle lay there in mock, measured slumber as if she and Charleeta's relationship were an act.

The next day, Charleeta researched everything she could about horses and learned she and Noelle didn't have enough money to feed, shoe, or shelter one. Charleeta studied photographs and became fascinated with the horse physique, how efficient it was. Horses had such powerful bodies; their muscles were so defined. Yet, their silhouettes were almost too simple. Gracefulness outlined these creatures.

Charleeta would do better than stories. She had loved to paint and make sketches when she was younger. Charleeta went inside the living room and found a clear wall behind the couch.

This would be a canvas used to cure her relationship ills. She would birth a painting more divine than the frescoes along the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

Charleeta gathered nail polishes, lipsticks, and eye pencils. All her kits littered the floor. She sketched the outline of a horse with mascara then followed with lipstick. Fuchsia, crimson, and violet colors smeared across the wall. When Charleeta reached the nude colors, she ruined her own makeup with tears. She had used a dark, flesh-colored body foundation on an insecure Noelle's scars post-operation. Charleeta adored the scars, worshipped them even back then. She cleaned up and waited for Noelle to come home.

The washer rumbled in the background.

Charleeta had painted two small horses galloping under a large sunset in the desert. Her initials were signed in the bottom right with white nail polish. She had created something wonderful, something she could share with Noelle.

Noelle walked from the kitchen area to the living room—dirty, half naked. "All I want to know is why," Noelle said. "Ain't got nothing better to do than tear up my house."

"Don't you see?" Charleeta said. "Is it not the closest thing to heaven?"

"All I do is work," Noelle said. "Folks sit up here all day long. Ain't done a got damn thing."

"Please, just take a good look," Charleeta said. "Come over here and touch it."

"Not nothing," Noelle said. "Just sit up here all day long. Ain't worth a got damn."

"I'm just trying," Charleeta said. "I'm just trying to make something beautiful."

"Wake the fuck up, Leeta," Noelle said. "We don't even own this house. We can't afford nothing beautiful."

Charleeta didn't cry. She reached in her pocket and got the wrinkled index card with the name and washed out number scribbled on it. She held it out for Noelle to see. "Who's Jay," Charleeta asked. "A man?"

Noelle huffed and walked away. "Got to get this oil off me."

Charleeta took off her clothes and joined Noelle in the shower. Noelle had already scrubbed herself red.

"Get out," Noelle said.

"We both stink," Charleeta said. "Might as well get clean together."

"Don't ask me nothing you ain't gone like the answer to."

"I never... I don't care about no one else."

Charleeta went to kiss Noelle on the lips but Noelle looked away. It was as if Charleeta had never touched Noelle before, loved her before.

"Can't breathe right now," Noelle said. "Just need some air."

Noelle got out of the shower and dried herself off. Charleeta let water fall from the shower head down her body. She let it get in her eyes and merge with her tears. Charleeta told herself she hadn't wasted her time; she thought about her sixteen-year relationship with Noelle and decided the tears would be worthwhile.

Charleeta sat outside on the porch and waited. The sun cooked the back of her neck as she braided Ms. Velma's granddaughter's hair. The girl's hair was smooth enough to run all five fingers through. "Sit still," Charleeta said. "I'm almost done." Charleeta struggled with thoughts of if Noelle would be back, tried to get lost in the braiding.

Charleeta had taught herself how to braid back in fifth grade. She would practice on girls outside at recess. They would sit in the grass as Charleeta unfastened their ponytails. There was something about braiding black girls' hair. There was magic in it. Charleeta found eons and ancestry on top of each scalp she touched. She imagined beautiful, black women—warriors—fighting on horseback in a foreign land.

Back then, Noelle was Charleeta's favorite to practice on. Noelle's hair was strong enough to withstand the tug and pull without breakage. She would sit with her hair and head between Charleeta's legs without a single complaint. No adult questioned Charleeta and Noelle's connection. They were free to search the mystery of each other. Charleeta searched and learned that she and Noelle held the same struggle, the same fight to love themselves. With Noelle, Charleeta decided to search until she found a world filled with other women like her, a place where she could visit ancestors at the ends of each braid and paint nature with her bare hands.

Charleeta got done braiding. Ms. Velma's granddaughter handed Charleeta an envelope with a check for \$100 inside.

"Grandma said wait a few days for you cash it," the granddaughter said.

"Okay, that's fine." Charleeta said. "Tell her to call me."

Ms. Velma's granddaughter ran up the street right as the two shirtless brothers from earlier—Gold Teeth and Dreadlocks—came down on the same horses. Gold Teeth called for everyone to come outside. Dreadlocks dragged behind his brother.

"We ain't got time," Dreadlocks said to Gold Teeth. "We got to get back."

"Is that you, beautiful?" Gold Teeth said to Charleeta. "Ready for that ride?"

Charleeta wiped her hands on her shorts then stomped out into the street.

"Don't look at me like that, baby," Gold Teeth said. "I think deep down you want to try it."

The horses neighed in front of Charleeta which made her whole body vibrate. She had to speak, say everything she wanted to say even if Noelle wasn't there to hear, even if what she said put her in danger. She gathered her words.

"Do I have to beg you?" Charleeta said. "I'm in love with someone already. I'm in love with another woman and she's like my everything. I'm sorry if that bothers you. I'm sorry you haven't found love. But why be disrespectful? What does that do?"

"Ain't said nothing disrespectful yet, baby," Gold Teeth said.

"I'm not your baby," Charleeta said. "If you had sense you'd see that."

"All I see is them thighs," Gold Teeth said.

Gold Teeth licked his lips then climbed off the horse. Dreadlocks looked like he was afraid to follow. He held tight to his reins.

"Leave her alone," Dreadlocks said. "We got to get back for dark."

Gold Teeth ignored Dreadlocks and approached Charleeta. Gold Teeth kissed both his biceps and smiled. "Look at that there," he said to Charleeta. "You mean to tell me that don't turn you on? Not even a little?"

Charleeta studied Gold Teeth for a moment. Charleeta saw scars on his chin and a dent above his eyebrow from homemade stitches. She turned her attention to Dreadlocks still up on the horse. "Who y'all live with?" Charleeta asked him.

"We live out in the country with our grandma," Dreadlocks said. "We got to get back to her or she'll start worrying. We don't mean no harm."

"I know you don't," Charleeta said.

She turned back to Gold Teeth. "I hope you find love, my brother. Please, go home. Check on your grandma."

Gold Teeth cursed at Charleeta.

"You don't know shit about me," Gold Teeth said. "Ain't your brother neither."

Dreadlocks walked his horse between Charleeta and Gold Teeth. "Leave her alone," Dreadlocks said. "We got to go now."

"Say what?" Gold Teeth said to Dreadlocks. "You must gone get down off that horse and be a real man today?"

Dreadlocks climbed off his horse and shoved Gold Teeth.

"Do what you got to do," Dreadlocks said. He shoved Gold Teeth again.

Gold Teeth smiled then tackled Dreadlocks to the ground. They wrestled each other in the street. Gold Teeth got on top of Dreadlocks and mashed his face against the concrete. Gold Teeth stood up, hesitated, and then kicked his brother a few times in the stomach.

"I guess you gone be a real man today," Gold Teeth said to Dreadlocks.

Charleeta screamed for Gold Teeth to stop. The entire neighborhood, who had watched the entire thing, poured into the street. Charleeta was surrounded by good renters with faces the color of sand, mud, and soot—beautiful, honest faces. Ms. Velma was there with her granddaughter pressed against her bosom. Noelle stood among everyone with a container of primer and paint rollers in her arms.

The sun lowered and the street lights came on. Two other men peeled Gold Teeth off Dreadlocks. Gold Teeth dusted himself. He found Charleeta amongst the people and winked at her.

"What you see is what you get, baby," Gold Teeth said to her. "Ain't nothing else to it."

Gold Teeth mounted his horse and went down the street. Dreadlocks was hunched on the floor dusty and motionless. One of his locks had been ripped out from the fight. Charleeta picked up the lock and examined it. She thought of how much care must've gone into the single piece of hair. She held a journey in her hand.

“Is the young man dead?” someone asked. Dreadlocks rolled over and whispered something no one could hear. Charleeta got closer and listened.

“Don't let him leave me,” Dreadlocks said. “We got to go back together.”

He raised himself up, held his stomach as he limped back to his horse. Sweat dripped thick from his face and body. Charleeta helped Dreadlocks get back on his horse and watched him ride away.

Charleeta did wait a few days before cashing Ms. Velma's check. Five twenty dollar bills were stacked on the edge of the kitchen table. Both Noelle and Charleeta sat on opposite sides of the kitchen table splotted with white on their palms and cheeks. They had primed over Charleeta's horse painting which didn't bother Charleeta as much as she thought it would. They both sat and stared at the empty white wall.

“Where do we go from here?” Charleeta asked.

“Ain't nobody going nowhere,” Noelle said.

“Not what I mean,” Charleeta said. “It just feels like we're in two different places.”

“I'm tired, Leeta,” Noelle said. “Can't think on that level right now.”

Charleeta pictured Dreadlocks hunched over in pain. She reached in her shorts and got the wrinkled index card she had convinced herself she didn't care about. She slid it on the table.

“Is Jay a man?” Noelle asked. “Are you fucking some nigga?”

"Leeta," Noelle said. "Don't do this right now."

"No," Charleeta said. "Sick of dusting myself off, limping behind you."

Noelle picked up the card and examined it. She looked like she had lost something. Charleeta didn't want to show Noelle any affection. She waited for an answer.

Noelle sat still and thought for a moment then mumbled something to herself.

"Ain't no man," Noelle said. "Ain't what you think." Noelle tore the card in half. "We need money. I'm selling the Mustang, Leeta."

Charleeta couldn't tell if Noelle told half the truth or a complete lie. All Charleeta could picture was the detached dreadlock she found in the street. Charleeta didn't want to admit it but she had started to plan. Something sparked deep within her subconscious. Charleeta got closer to touch Noelle's face and kissed her at their kitchen table. Noelle held tight to Charleeta's hand. They held onto each other until Charleeta felt her arms get heavy and had to let go.

PEARLS

Those pearl earrings burned like a torch.

Etta Faye Cotton, a couple months from her sixteenth birthday, envied their pinkish hue. She thought they might pawn for a good price once she got where she was going. She hummed Billie Holiday's new rendition of "On the Sunny Side of the Street" and folded miniature dresses for the LeBeau's infant girl. She had heard the song on the radio and replayed it in her mind.

Mrs. LeBeau searched Etta Faye each evening before she left because the last maid before Etta Faye had stolen Mrs. LeBeau's coin pouch. Etta Faye would have to remove the pearls, swallow them, then hide the mounts if she wanted to leave the LeBeau's home without contest. Mrs. LeBeau was modest in her searches. She patted you down over the clothes and glanced inside your bag.

Etta Faye wore a new dress, powder blue with white stripes. The train would hit town in the morning. Etta Faye's ticket was deep inside her purse and her clothes were packed in the suitcase she had at home.

The Negroes in Grenada, Mississippi all adopted Etta Faye. She didn't know her parents. They had died while she was still a baby. Etta Faye lived by herself in a shack built by a group of men who were friends with her father.

She felt smothered in the small town and wanted to leave. She needed to stretch her reality. She imagined herself walking the streets of New York City, looking up at them tall buildings surrounded by them fancy cars. Maybe they'd let her sing jazz like they let Lady Day.

The pearls wouldn't be hard to swallow. They were no bigger than a dime, teardrop shaped. Etta Faye broke one off and put it in her mouth. Tears were in her eyes as she forced the pearl down her throat with a glass of water. She waited to make sure it didn't come back up. The second pearl went down easier. Etta Faye put what was left of the earrings underneath the cradle at the foot of the LeBeau's bed. Mrs. LeBeau wouldn't check in there while her baby was sleeping.

"Etta Faye," Mrs. LeBeau called. "What's taking you so long in there? Come on out, now."

"Ain't nothing," Etta Faye said. "Here I come."

Etta Faye glanced at the baby then walked down the stairs from the bedroom into the living room. Doctor LeBeau sat in his chair smoking a cigar. After each pull, he'd pinch something off his tongue. Before marriage, Doctor LeBeau was known to entertain many young women. Mrs. LeBeau use to be one of them. She sat across from her husband in a silk robe, sipping red wine from a glass.

"Those cabbage greens were surely delightful, Etta Faye," Mrs. LeBeau said.

"Quite delightful," Doctor LeBeau said. "We put the neck bones in the icebox. You can take them with you if you'd like."

"No, sir," Etta Faye said. "Need to get on up the road."

"Damned if we're going to let you leave empty handed," Mrs. LeBeau said. "Let me wrap you up a couple slices of that sweet potato pie."

Mrs. LeBeau had made the pie earlier that week. There was a reason so much of it was left. When Etta Faye made a pie, it was gone before she could get it out the oven good.

Mrs. LeBeau got out of her chair, walked to the kitchen, and cut Etta Faye two thick slices. Mrs. LeBeau wrapped the pie in some foil and gave it to Etta Faye.

"Child, this is going to be some good eating," Mrs. LeBeau said.

For the dirt, Etta Faye thought. She stuffed the food in her purse and walked towards the back door.

"Wait," Mrs. LeBeau said. "Now, you know better than that."

Etta Faye handed Mrs. LeBeau her purse. Mrs. LeBeau took everything out and shook it. The train ticket tumbled out. Mrs. LeBeau picked it up, examined it.

"You leaving us, Etta Faye?" Mrs. LeBeau said.

When Etta Faye didn't answer, Mrs. LeBeau glared at Doctor LeBeau then got closer and began patting Etta Faye down. Mrs. LeBeau put her arms all down Etta Faye's undergarments and ran her fingers up under the hemline. Mrs. LeBeau's hands were cold against Etta Faye's privates.

"What a nice dress," Mrs. LeBeau said. "Ain't it nice, Cecil?"

"Agnes," Doctor LeBeau said.

"Ain't no cheap material either."

"Agnes."

"Go ahead, Etta Faye. Spin around one good time," Mrs. LeBeau said. "Let us get a good look at you."

Etta Faye stood shocked.

Doctor LeBeau was looking at the floor. He took another pull of his cigar, then pinched his tongue.

"What you waiting on, child?" Mrs. LeBeau said. "Stand right here next to me."

"No," Etta Faye said.

"No?" Mrs. LeBeau said.

Etta Faye felt a scream swell inside her.

Doctor LeBeau kept his eyes on the floor. Mrs. LeBeau sat back down in her chair and crossed her legs. The contents of Etta Faye's purse were scattered across the floor. Other than the pie, there was a hair comb, a box of cigarettes, and a book of matches. Etta Faye stepped over her own things and got closer to Mrs. LeBeau.

"I'm coming back," Etta Faye said. "Swear for God."

"You knew about this, Cecil?" Mrs. LeBeau said. "Giving charity to little nigger girls now?"

Doctor LeBeau stood with the cigar stub between his fingers. He was a big man, clean shaven. He got down and put Etta Faye's things back in her purse.

Mrs. LeBeau peered down at Doctor LeBeau. When he got up, Mrs. LeBeau's posture diminished inside her chair.

"Give me the ticket, Agnes," Doctor LeBeau said. His face burned pale underneath the chandelier light. He took the ticket and put it back deep inside Etta Faye's purse. "Ain't no niggers in this house," he said.

Etta Faye took the purse. She wished she wasn't a Negro. If she was white, she would've cussed at Mrs. LeBeau, spat on her. She would've spat at Doctor LeBeau as well. She felt like she was better than all of them.

The night stretched like a long, dark hallway. Etta Faye ran straight from the LeBeau's to the train station. She didn't care nothing about going home to get them clothes. She sat on the

bench outside and continued humming "On the Sunny Side of the Street." It was pitch black except for one street light which flickered across the tracks.

Etta Faye was glad it wasn't cold out even with the wind. Her stomach moaned. She took Mrs. LeBeau's sweet potato pie out of her purse, unwrapped it, and bit into one slice. The crust was gummy, it hadn't been in the oven long enough.

Etta Faye struggled to keep her eyes open. She set Mrs. LeBeau's pie to the side and searched her purse for the train ticket. It wasn't in there. Etta Faye kept calm. Maybe she overlooked it. After dumping everything out on the floor and not seeing it, she grew anxious. She flipped the purse inside out. Nothing. Had she dropped it fleeing the LeBeau's? No, there was no way she could've done that.

Her hands trembled, dropping the purse. She got down, found the matches, and struck one. She held it as close to the ground as she could, searching around the bench.

The match went out, so she struck another one. She hunched down, guarded the flame. Etta Faye looked until she burned the top of her thumb. The match went out before it hit the ground. Doctor LeBeau must've gotten the ticket back somehow.

Etta Faye fell to her knees and sobbed into the palms of her hands. Tears mixed with sweat and salted her tongue. She didn't know what time it was, but it would be hours before the train made it. She dabbed her eyes with the shoulder of her dress, found her purse, and started on to the LeBeau's.

Walking along the sidewalk, Etta Faye couldn't help but imagine herself on stage in a sparkling, black gown smiling and scattin' in front of white folks. They would hear her and it wouldn't matter how old she was or how dark her skin. Their bodies would have to move, sway at the sound of her voice. Her song would be like those pearls she swallowed—ignited, pure.

There were no cars out this late. Etta Faye thought she saw the LeBeau's house at the end of the street. She made sure, then climbed the porch steps. The welcome mat was smooth under her feet. She pounded the door twice then stepped out of the doorway into the bushes.

The porch lights came on. Etta Faye rushed to Doctor LeBeau as he held the door open.

"It's just me," Etta Faye said.

"Figured you'd be back," Doctor LeBeau said.

"You know why I'm here," she said. "This gone be the last favor I ask. Swear for God."

"I can't," he said.

"Why?"

"You're too young to understand. Agnes and I, we have—"

"Let me in," Etta Faye said.

Doctor LeBeau put his pointing finger in front of his lips. "Meet me around back."

Etta Faye tiptoed through the grass around to the shed. She didn't move towards the back door of the house until she heard Doctor LeBeau call for her.

"Hurry up, now," he said. He closed the door after Etta Faye. "We don't have long."

The kitchen was dark except for a small glow through the blinds. Doctor LeBeau's face was silhouetted like a Negro's.

"I really don't understand," Etta Faye said. "Swear I don't."

"Can't have you complicating things any further," Doctor LeBeau said. "You're on your own."

Etta Faye's eyes were wet. Doctor LeBeau was the one who encouraged her to leave town. Whenever they were alone together, Doctor LeBeau would teach her lyrics to old songs he loved to sing as a boy. Etta Faye would giggle and whisper the words back in his ear.

"Are you crying?" Doctor LeBeau asked. "Look, I tried. Swear I tried. It's just..."

Etta Faye wiped her nose. "Thought you was different," she said. "Really thought you was different. But I realize now what you are. You a coward."

"Coward?" Doctor LeBeau said. "Well, I'll say this. I'd rather be a coward than a thief."

Etta Faye's stomach moaned. "I ain't no thief."

"Yes you are," Doctor LeBeau said. "We both know it's true."

"I ain't no thief," Etta Faye said.

Doctor LeBeau laughed. "Well, there it is."

Etta Faye didn't say nothing else. She just left. She walked back to the train station. She decided to wait there the rest of the night to see the train.

The station was still dark and empty. The light across the street had flickered out. She put her purse underneath her head and stretched out on the bench. She couldn't sleep. She had two pure pearls in her belly and nowhere to go. She imagined the train—powerful—cutting through town as the round sun revived the day. People would board and Etta Faye would sing to the train as if it were an audience. The bewilderment of the people staring outside their berths wouldn't matter. Her voice would match the yell of the train's departure until it withered.