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BOYS TO MEN

BY

BRANDON BRADLEY  
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2021

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

Primarily through adolescent narrators, *Boys to Men* is a series of short stories that attempts to identify the lessons, traumas, and joys that offer—and in some cases, withhold—the tools that allow Black boys to become Black men. In “Hard Ball,” an eleven-year-old baseball player on the cusp of entering middle school wants nothing more than to be less sensitive. In “That’s the Way Love Goes,” a fifteen-year-old visiting Florida for the summer faces his first hurricane, alone with only his grandmother and unresolved family turmoil as company. And in “Hallelujah,” a young church-goer publicly challenges a powerful, yet unruly spiritual leader in an endeavor to defend the people he loves. Through the intersections of masculinity, racism, family, and even religion, this collection offers a unique perspective of how these various experiences influence the everchanging manhood of Black boys.

To Black boys all around the world.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am first grateful to God for giving me the passion and gift of writing. Faith is sometimes a difficult space to exist in, but my faith sustains me, and I'm grateful. Thank you to my village that helped get me here. I couldn't have done this alone, and I'm grateful that because of you all, I didn't have to. To my family, my mom and dad especially, thank you for always allowing me to be different. The road here has felt long and hard for me, but more than anything, I am grateful for your acceptance and support, even when you didn't understand me. So many of these stories and characters are inspired by the beautiful and complex people in my life—my siblings, grandparents, best friends, and more. Without all of you, my art couldn't exist. And lastly, I am so grateful for every educator who has poured into my life. My cousin, Tamika, you have been my biggest teacher, mentor, and encourager to love and pursue education throughout my entire life. I also thank every teacher I've encountered along the way—from my fourth-grade teacher, where I fell in love with writing and was celebrated for this art form for the first time, all the way to my thesis director, who has opened new worlds of reading and writing for me. You have all been instrumental in helping me believe that my stories are worth telling.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

HARD BALL.....	1
YOUR ‘LIL BRO, XAVIER.....	16
THAT’S THE WAY LOVE GOES .....	30
HALLELUJAH.....	49
CRANES.....	77
S IS FOR SILENT .....	93
READING LIST.....	106

## HARD BALL

At eleven years old, the most important rule for Rashad to remember on Coach Julien's little league baseball team is *if you cry, you run*, and Rashad's daddy can always tell when he's about to cry. Even from left field, Rashad learned to search for his daddy's eyes across the field anytime he felt himself on the cusps of a breakdown. His daddy waited to make eye contact with him from wherever he stood in the small set of bleachers. For Rashad, these moments were as if his daddy held his mind, body, and soul, and past, present, and future, just between his two eyes. Once he'd secured Rashad's attention, he would scrunch his lips together, narrow his eyes, and ball up both of his fists, like he was saying without saying, *Man up, Rashad*. This was an unspoken language Rashad learned to translate. Rashad ran a lap at least once during twelve of the eighteen practices of their last season. He wasn't counting, but the boys on his team were.

On the bus heading to his team's out of town baseball tournament, Rashad can feel his stomach twisting the way his mama would twist the dishrag to wring out all the water. Neither of his parents could travel the two hours for the weekend. If he felt himself close to crying, he wouldn't be able to look out across the field for his daddy's narrowed eyes, scrunched lips, or balled fists. Rashad's daddy used to tell him that if he didn't stop crying so much, everyone would think he was a sissy by the time he got to sixth grade. Girls didn't like sissies, and his daddy made sure he knew this. His mama told him that crying didn't make him a sissy but only when his daddy wasn't around. If he was around, she stayed quiet and pretended not to hear anything. With sixth grade just a few weeks away, Rashad knows he's short on time.

In the car on the way to Coach Julien's house, where the charter bus was leaving from, his daddy reminds him how important keeping his feelings in check over the course of the weekend would be.



“I think you get all that crying so easily stuff from your Mama. Damn ‘sho didn’t come from me. But that’s beside the point.” He paused, slowing to a stop at a red light, then placed his hand on the back of Rashad’s neck. “Look at me, Rashad. You need to tighten up this weekend, all right? I’m not gonna be there to remind you to stay out of your feelings like I always am. You gotta be tough out there on your own. You got me?”

*I dunno, Daddy*, Rashad wanted to say, but instead, he mumbled, “Yessir. No crying.”

“That’s right, no crying.” He placed both hands on the stirring wheel before merging into the turning lane. “Go out there, have fun. You get to stay in a fancy hotel, man. Your coach even said there was an arcade. What’s there to be so sensitive about?”

Rashad’s daddy was always giving him a lesson on how to be a man, which usually came after Rashad had done something his daddy thought was unmanly. When he’d first signed Rashad up for little league two seasons ago, Rashad scored his first and only homerun, but his daddy wasn’t concerned with celebrating him. In the car on the way home, he offloaded a critique of everything Rashad had done wrong during the game, none of which was related to baseball.

“That homerun was good and all but stop running with your arms flailing every which way. Who the hell you seen runnin’ around like that?” He looked at Rashad through the rearview mirror when Rashad didn’t answer. “Pull your arms in to your side. You’ll run faster like this anyway. And I was watching you in the dugout—stop talking with your hands so much. You starting to look like your mama, waving your hands up and down. You ain’t gotta do all that to make a point.” Rashad’s mama turned her head to the window, as if to excuse herself from the conversation. “Check your walk, too. Men don’t walk like that, Rashad. I want you to start

watching me when I walk, that's the way a man supposed to walk. All that skippin' and dippin' around you was doing makes you look soft, and the last thing my son is, is soft. You got me?"

"Yessir."

"And one last thing, I know losing the game sucks, but you need to make this your last game crying cause y'all lost. You remember what I told you about all that crying, right? Losing the game don't give you a reason, same as everything else." He stared hard at Rashad again through the rearview mirror.

"Yessir."

Rashad didn't know if Coach Julien started the *if you cry, you run* rule because he'd joined his team and was always crying, but so far, he hadn't made Rashad run all summer. While this meant Rashad was getting better and hadn't been crying, he'd come close a couple of times. During their first practice, Coach Julien's son, Cody, threw a baseball at the back of Rashad's neck. Rashad swore he did hit him on purpose, and, to his surprise, Coach Julien made Cody run a lap around the field. Rashad felt the tears coming to his eyes like a ruptured pipe. The ball hadn't hit him hard. The urge to cry was less from the bite of the ball, and more from the embarrassment of his teammates' laughter. He pushed the tears back because he knew that if they'd have trickled down his face, he would've been running with Cody. Coach Julien often reminded his players, "this ain't soft ball."

Rashad almost cried again when the team lost their first scrimmage game of the season. Coach said he didn't want anybody getting upset because the game was for practice and didn't count for anything. Being the only player on the team who didn't get past first base wasn't Rashad's greatest accomplishment. When he got back to the dugout, the boys laughed at him,

saying this always happens, which for Rashad felt true. He wasn't as good as the other boys, and he knew this.

"You'd think that after running all those laps last season he could run faster," one of them joked. Rashad felt the urge to cry heaviest in his throat. He thought this restraint might choke him to death, but he didn't let a tear fall. When he got in the car to go home, a bag of Lays in one hand and a Capri Sun in the other, his daddy told him he was proud of him for finally manning up. This was right after his eleventh birthday. He thought that maybe turning eleven was changing things for him.

Rashad walks to the back of the charter bus, readying himself for his first real test: the weekend's tournament without his father there to tell him to man up or remind him to be hard. There are yellow lights lining both sides of the aisle, and when Rashad sees the blue, velvet chairs of the bus and the small TV screens hanging between every other row, he feels excited for the first time. The bus reminds him of his fourth-grade class trip to St. Augustine. Rashad feels a sense of familiarity. His parents weren't with him then, and he hadn't cried that whole trip. He sees Sammy, the only other Black boy on the team, which inevitably made him Rashad's closest friend, sitting next to the bus bathroom. Rashad smiles, eager to fill the seat next to Sammy.

"Yeah, sit in the back so you can get a tissue in case you start missing mommy," someone snickers as he passes, followed by chuckles from the other boys. Neither of the two chaperones, both of whom have chosen seats at the front of the bus, seem to hear the comment. Rashad takes his seat next to Sammy.

"Did you hear that?" he asks him.

“Yeah,” Sammy says. “They mumbled something when I sat down too, but I couldn’t hear whatever it was.” Maybe this isn’t a tear-worthy jab but being singled-out again with no defense makes Rashad uncomfortable.

“Should we tell someone?” he asks, but Sammy shakes his head.

“Didn’t your daddy ever tell you, *stiches get snitches?*”

Rashad smiles now. “No, but he did tell me *snitches get stiches*. I guess you’re right. Jokes on them, though, cause if we have to pee, it’s a shorter walk for us.”

“Good point,” Sammy says. The boys fix themselves into their seats, placing their backpacks in their laps, as the small, rectangular TVs above their heads flash to life.

#

By the time they arrive at the hotel, Rashad thinks he’s already passed his first test. Instead of paying attention to *Toy Story 3* or napping like most of the other boys, he spends the ride considering that something offensive was said, but he’d managed not to cry. With twelve boys on his baseball team, they are split and assigned four each to one of the two chaperones or Coach Julien. As Coach Julien calls off group assignments in the hotel lobby, Rashad is excited to have Sammy in his group.

“Head up to your rooms with your chaperones, drop off your bags, then get changed for a quick practice. We’re gonna head over to the fields because I want all of you to practice hitting, then we can hit CiCi’s Pizza for dinner.” The boys cheer at the mention of CiCi’s.

When Rashad settles into the hotel room, he realizes he’s enjoying the trip more than he anticipated. Coach Julien booked all three rooms side by side, and each room has four beds, a pull-out couch, and a flat screen TV mounted on the wall. Rashad has never been in a hotel with as many floors as this one, and from the window of their seventeenth-floor room, he can see the

pool and hot tub. He thinks that maybe his daddy was right: he was spending the weekend in a fancy hotel with an arcade. There was nothing to be sensitive about. This was his weekend to hang with the other boys and without the reminders from his daddy of what a man should and shouldn't be doing.

On the practice field, when it's Rashad's turn to practice hitting, he hears his teammates whispering in the dugout. As the whispers get louder, Cody's voice begins a "strike out" chant that several other boys join him in singing like a men's choral group. Rashad turns away from Coach Julien at the pitcher's mound.

"Shut up, Cody!"

"Rashad!" Coach Julien calls. "You're facing the wrong direction, worried about the wrong person, my friend. The ball is over here." Rashad tries to object, ready to spill that Cody is whispering that he'll strike out, even in practice, but Coach Julien won't hear him out. "Doesn't matter. You know better than to take your eyes off the ball."

As the boys in the dugout giggle at Rashad's run in with Coach Julien, Rashad tries to refocus. He centers his eyes on the ball, aligning his feet with his shoulders. Something about this field feels bigger than Rashad is used to, but he knows this is all in his head—added pressure from his teammates taunting him. Coach Julien throws the ball, and Rashad swings but the ball slams into the fence behind him. The giggles from the dugout grow louder, and though the sun has already begun to set, Rashad can feel his face growing hot. He tells himself they can laugh, and he can be upset about them laughing, as long as he doesn't cry. Coach Julien keeps pitching, and Rashad doesn't make contact with the ball until his fourth try. His teammates yell "foul" from the dugout.

“You’re not focusing, Rashad,” Coach Julien tells him. “You’ve been hitting better than this all season.”

“Because they’re laughing at me!”

“If you were focused, you wouldn’t hear them laughing. Come on, one more time.”

Rashad readjusts his grip on his bat, positioning his yellow Nike cleats again in the clay underneath him. When Coach Julien throws the ball this time, Rashad hits over second base. This small victory isn’t enough for Rashad to force a smile.

“There you go!” Coach Julien yells. “Come here for a sec, Rashad.”

Rashad jogs to meet him in the middle of the pitcher’s mound.

“Yes, Coach?”

“You’re a good baseball player, Rashad, but I need you to focus, okay? If they’re laughing at you in the dugout, use that as fuel to hit even harder. Prove them wrong. Understand?”

“Yessir,” is all Rashad gets out. Coach Julien knows as well as Rashad and the other boys on the team that getting Rashad stirred up and crying is never a challenge.

“Next player,” Coach Julien calls. When Rashad returns to the dugout to take a seat, Cody waits to taunt him.

“Did my dad pat you on the back and make you feel better?”

“Cody, you should really shut up some time.”

“Shut doesn’t go up! All I know is that tomorrow if we lose, that ‘L’ will be all your fault because of how bad you suck.”

Rashad thinks maybe he does suck. Baseball had been his daddy's idea. He could still remember sitting at the dining room table with his parents two seasons prior when his daddy first mentioned signing him up.

“Rashad, what do you think about playing baseball? One of my buddies is a referee for a little league. I was thinking about signing you up.”

“No thanks, Daddy.” He was only eight at the time.

“Why not?” his daddy asked him.

Rashad pushed a spoonful of mashed potatoes into his mouth. “I dunno. I just don't want to.”

“Well, I'm signing you up. You need to be doing active 'stead of sitting in the house playing games all the time.”

“What about soccer?” Rashad's mama asked. Rashad didn't think he wanted to play soccer either.

His daddy laughed. “What Black kids you know playing soccer?”

Rashad watched his mama's the brows shift in his daddy's direction, but he didn't know what they meant. Rashad's opinion was as useful then as it was now. His daddy would make him play baseball, and that was final.

“Do I get to put the black lines under my eyes?” Rashad asked.

“Finish your food, boy,” was all his daddy said.

Later that week, Rashad's daddy signed him up for Coach Julien's little league team, and he spent the next three years with the same coach and teammates. Rashad didn't hate baseball, but he didn't love it either. As an only child without cousins who lived in the same city, being a part of a team was exciting because this gave him the opportunity to be around other boys his age

outside of school. He was often on the receiving end of the team's jokes, especially Cody, after they learned how sensitive he was, and their constant picking at him was the thing he hated most about playing on the team. But Rashad thought that if he could be less sensitive, maybe he could enjoy baseball. If he could be less sensitive, he also thought he could avoid being called a sissy like his daddy always warned.

"Rashad, why do you have to cry about everything?" his daddy asked last season. Coach Julien had just finished telling his him about Rashad's crying during practice, which resulted in two laps. On the ride home, Rashad sat in the backseat staring out the window.

"I dunno, Daddy. I think I just have a lot of feelings."

"You need to find another way to deal with your feelings that isn't crying. Do you ever see me crying when I'm feeling sad or disappointed?" he asked him.

"No," Rashad murmured, but he couldn't remember ever having seen his daddy sad or disappointed. If his daddy had ever been sad or disappointed, something Rashad thought might not be possible, he'd never shown those feelings in front of him.

"You better learn to count to ten or something, cause I ain't raising no sissys. You gotta cut that crying out."

After this practice, Rashad's daddy started sitting through every practice and made sure he had a front row seat at every game, ready to give Rashad *the look* if he seemed even close to crying. Rashad thought that by keeping him from crying, his daddy was making him tough. He thought this was how his daddy was making him a man.

On the bus now on their way to CiCi's for dinner, Rashad wishes he had a cellphone to call his daddy and tell him how good he's doing and how much fun he's having. Part of him



wants to rub in Cody's face that he's not afraid of him anymore, a new strength he feels now that he's survived Cody's jokes during practice without coming close to crying.

"What are you gonna get at CiCi's?" Sammy asks next to him. They've returned to their seats at the back of the bus.

Rashad smiles. "I'm gonna get one slice of mac and cheese pizza, then twelve cinnamon rolls."

#

When the team arrives back to the hotel after dinner, Rashad calls first dibs on taking a shower. After he turns off the water, he notices that the hotel room is much quieter than before.

"Where'd everyone go?" he asks his chaperone, Mr. John, stepping out of the bathroom. Mr. John is sitting up on the edge of the pull-out couch, but all four of the other beds are empty. Rashad thinks they must have gone down to the pool. He sits his dirty clothes on his bed, then peers out the window, but his teammates aren't there.

"The guys all went down to the arcade. They said you didn't want to go." This was the first Rashad was hearing of everyone going down to the arcade and of himself not wanting to go. His face must have told on him because Mr. John asked, "Is something wrong, Rashad?"

"No," Rashad says, shaking his head. *Don't cry*, he thinks to himself.

"Well, if you changed your mind, they've only been gone about ten minutes. Do you want me to walk you down there?"

"No," Rashad says, shaking his head again. "I can go by myself."

Rashad pulls on his socks and shoes and heads downstairs. He tells himself not to cry. His teammates hadn't mentioned going to the hotel arcade to him even once, so he couldn't

understand why they told Mr. John that he didn't want to go. Rashad loved Lady Pac-Man as much as the next kid.

When the elevator opens on the tenth floor, a single floor reserved just for the arcade, Rashad squints at the flashing neon lights. He hears chiming and dings and screaming voices from all over the room. There's a foosball table, a wall of basketball hoops, racing games with 3D glasses, and Rashad notices even a small pair of bowling lanes on the opposite side of the room. When he notices the bowling lanes, he realizes his teammates are huddled nearby over a game of table hockey. Cody stands with one arm behind his back, lunging the hockey puck toward Sammy.

*Sammy.*

Rashad hadn't even thought about Sammy. Why would Sammy, of all people, not mention going to the arcade? Rashad always thought of Sammy as his closest friend on the team, and vice versa. He couldn't even reason how the news would've gotten to Sammy and somehow missed him.

The elevator doors close before Rashad can exit. He realizes he's feeling the same discomfort in his stomach he felt earlier that day when his daddy dropped him off at Coach Julien's house. This time, the knots are tighter, like someone had burned their edges to make sure they couldn't loosen. He presses the "open doors" button inside the elevator, and the walk across the arcade to the ice hockey table, just a hundred feet away, feels like the longest walk he's ever taken.

"Hey, guys," he says, his voice shaking.

They all turn to face him, their faces instantly filling with panic and disgust.

“What do you want, Rashad?” Cody asks, lifting his table hockey pusher. Sammy slams the puck through the open pocket on Cody’s end. “Hey, that wasn’t fair! I was distracted...by *Mr. Crybaby* here.”

*Don’t cry, Rashad.*

“How come no one told me about coming to the arcade?”

“That’s typically what happens if someone isn’t invited to something. Come on, guys.” Cody slides his table hockey pusher across the white surface, turning away from Rashad. Like every Disney Channel bully Rashad had ever seen, the team follows Cody to wall of basketball hoops in the opposite corner of the arcade—including Sammy.

“Sammy! What the heck, man?”

Sammy turns to face him. “What do you want me to do, dude? They said I could come.”

“I like arcade games too, ya know.”

Rashad feels the tears coming. His body is growing hot, and he feels like a volcano, knowing that once the eruption starts, the damage will be impossible to contain.

“They invited *me*, Rashad, not you. Don’t be like this.”

“Be like what?”

“I know you’re gonna start crying. This isn’t that big of a deal, dude. Just go back upstairs and watch some movies or something. I’ll hang out with you later.”

Rashad doesn’t know what to say. Maybe he should’ve been in a war of words with Sammy, preparing himself for a good comeback that could sting Sammy as hard as Sammy was stinging him, but in his mind, all he’s thinking is, *don’t cry. Don’t cry. Don’t cry.*

Rashad and Sammy can both see that Cody is still watching, waiting to see what the outcome will be.

“I’ll see you later,” Sammy says walking away from Rashad.

Rashad feels like he has to use this moment to fight back.

“Find somebody else to sit with on the bus tomorrow,” he screams. By now, Sammy has reached the rest of the group. Cody mumbles something to him as Rashad turns to walk back to the elevator. He still hasn’t cried, but he knows he needs to get out of sight as fast as he can before he erupts.

“Hey, Rashad,” Sammy calls, his hands in the air, “stop acting like such a girl all the time.”

Rashad feels as if he’s been tackled by someone twice his size. The word “girl” lands on his shoulders first, pushing down for a moment, then wraps around his torso and legs to finally take him down. This must have been what his daddy meant when he said everyone would think he was a sissy.

“Don’t cry, Rashad,” he tells himself. His back is still turned, but by the time he reaches the elevator, his face is wet: his eyes, his cheeks, even his nose.

He stood up to Cody. He passed that test. Sammy, his only friend, is who broke him down. In the elevator heading back to the seventeenth floor, Rashad pictures his daddy’s face. He sees his scrunched lips, his balled fists, and his narrowed eyes, and he hears his voice, as clear as if he were standing next to him in the elevator.

“Man up, Rashad,” his daddy tells him.

Rashad wipes his eyes profusely, sniffing quickly as the elevator dings at each floor. When he returns to the hotel room, he tells Mr. John he couldn’t find them, then keeps his head low for the rest of the night. When his teammates get back from the arcade, he pulls the covers over his head and pretends to be asleep.

The next morning, Rashad sits alone for breakfast, and on the way to their game, everyone seems to have decided to leave him alone. He doesn't stop to think about why. He's only thinking about the fact that he cried, even if no one saw. He knew he'd cried and let himself and his daddy down. He would have to tell his daddy the truth when he got home later that night. On the bus, Sammy sits toward the middle with Cody and his friends, and even in the dugout, the guys have alienated themselves from Rashad, leaving him on the far, right end of the bench by himself.

The team is wearing their home jerseys for the day's game. Rashad wears the number seven across the back of his jersey. When his team moves to the field, Rashad jogs to take his position as leftfielder.

"You know why my dad puts you in left field, right?" Cody asks. "Because no balls ever go that direction." He looks around to his teammates for someone to laugh but gives up when Rashad won't look at them.

By the sixth inning, Rashad still hasn't gotten past first base, but he almost feels nothing. He isn't sad, he isn't angry, he doesn't even want to cry. He just wants to finish the game so he can go home. When his final turn to hit comes, he's surprised when his teammates are all quiet. He reaches the batter's box and positions his shoulders and feet.

*Strike.*

"That's all right, Rashad," Coach Julien calls. "That was a good swing. You got this."

*Strike.*

Rashad feels the emotions coming now that he's reached his last chance to make a hit. Everything he'd been pushing down since leaving the arcade last night comes forward all at

once. He wants to run or scream. Or cry. He feels moisture come to his eyes, but he blinks this away.

When the ball comes his way again, Rashad swings as hard as he can, and throws his bat, ready to return to the dugout.

“Run!” Coach Julien yells. “Go, Rashad—run!”

Rashad looks up as players on the opposite team chase the ball in the outfield.

First base, done.

Second base, done.

Third base, done.

“Go, Rashad! Go!” The entire dugout comes to life for him, even Sammy. If only his daddy were there to see. As Rashad crosses the home plate, scoring his first homerun of the season, he decides this is the only moment he’ll tell his daddy about. He wants him to feel proud of him for once. Maybe if no one saw him in the elevator, he didn’t actually cry.

## YOUR 'LIL BRO, XAVIER

February 7, 2015

Dear Brian,

Reggie says I need to stop writing you so much. He claims that men writing letters back and forth to each other ain't normal, especially all the letters I been writing you. Ma said we can send you a package once a month, so I promised myself I'd write something every day. That way you don't miss anything. I don't think I've ever mailed anyone a letter before, but writing these letters is the closest I can get to our daily check-ins. I always waited up for you to get home from work so we could talk about our days.

I don't know why Ma keeps Reggie around. She says he helps her with the bills, like you did when you first moved back from college, but that doesn't make up for how rude he always is. He buys name brand cereal, and I guess that counts for something, but I still can't stand him.

I miss you so much, for real. Me and Ma both miss you. I think she's handling you being away a 'lil better now cause she hasn't cried at all this week. Not that I've heard or seen. She cried every day the whole first month. I know I didn't tell you that part when we were mostly talking on the phone but I was only keeping that from you cause I was afraid you would worry about us more than I already know you are. She's been picking up extra shifts at the hospital cause she said she wasn't leaving your future in the hands of an "incompetent" public defender. I'll be honest, I had to Google "incompetent" cause I didn't know what she was talking about. I'm not sure how she's paying for a new lawyer if she still can't pay your bail, but she fired the lady they assigned you and met with a new lawyer this week. Some white lady with hair so blonde it looks white and these scary perfect teeth. She looks about your age, maybe a 'lil older

but she smelled good, and she sounded like she knew what she was talking about. Her name was Sophia something, I can't remember her last name cause Ma just made me call her "Ms. Sophia."

Ma made me leave the room whenever they got started talking serious, but before I left, Ms. Sophia said some wild stuff that got me thinking for real. She said she's dedicated her life's work to helping people like us cause more than half of people in prison or jail in the U.S. are "people of color." I can't remember if she said prison or jail. I never knew there was a difference, to be honest. But she was basically explaining to Ma that she knows how messed up that is. I figured that by "people of color" she meant us Black people. Hearing that was kinda weird cause I thought the whole "colored" thing died after the Civil Rights Movement. You know what I mean by that, right? But aren't Black people still a minority in the U.S.? From what I remember about minorities vs. majorities (we learned about this at the end of sixth grade), the minority is the smaller part. I know math isn't my strongest subject, but I can't make sense of us being a minority and most prisoners still Black.

I gotta head to school now. I got seventh grade class pictures today. Ma finally let me wear the all-white Vans you bought me. She was talking trash that the camera won't see anything past my shoulders, but I told her the entire fit had to be complete. She told me I was acting more and more like you every day. She started scrunching her face up after she said that, like she might cry, so I rushed out the door to the bus. I'll try to write more later, but if I don't, I love you, big bro. I know you didn't do nothing wrong. I got a feeling you'll be home soon.

Sincerely,

Xavier

February 9, 2015

Dear Brian,



Sorry I didn't write yesterday. I had to study for a science test, so, I just didn't get a chance to write anything. But guess what? I started talking to that new girl at school, the one I told you was cute. I guess she not that new anymore, but her name Kierra. I wish you was here to give me advice, but I tried to think about what you would've told me if you were here. Here's what happened: I asked her a dumb question I already knew the answer to in our Civics class, but Mr. Reed told us to stop talking. So, I caught up with her after class and was like 'Hey, we didn't get to finish our conversation earlier.' Ya boy walked to the bus with her number. Ha! I hope you're proud. We been texting nonstop. Imma see if she wants to talk on Snapchat next.

Speaking of Mr. Reed, was he a teacher at Westly when you was here? He's my only Black teacher, and he's kinda been the only person I can talk to about everything since you been gone. I hope you don't mind. I was telling him about how since the first time Ms. Sophia came over, I haven't been able to get the whole "people of color" in jail or prison thing out of my head. He suggested that for my 9-weeks project in Civics, I do a presentation on this thing called the School to Prison Pipeline. You ever heard of that? I went to do some research with him during lunch today, and he was showing me where to find good, real facts. One site said the U.S. has a higher incarceration rate than any other country. I had to look this word up too, but incarceration basically means being in prison. I don't think I ever done this much research in my life. Maybe you already know all this. You usually always know whatever I think I'm making you hip to. I remember learning about third-world countries at the end of elementary school, and since America is a first-world country, I thought we were the best in the world. We got all this food and technology and stuff. But I don't see how that can be true if we throw so many people in prison. It's all real confusing, kinda crazy, even.

If none of this had gone down, I'd text you while you was at work that I needed to talk, and you'd come home and sit on the edge of my bed to tell me anything I needed to know. Same way you always did. I know this stuff ain't easy for you either, but not being able to talk to you like usual is killing me. I won't know what you think about none of this until after you get my letters and hopefully have time to send something back.

The lawyer came over again today, and of course Ma made me leave the room cause she didn't want me to hear whatever Ms. Sophia was about to say, but I'll find out soon. When I do, you'll be the first person I tell. I'm mostly alone all the time now. Ma's always working, you know I don't like Reggie, and even my friends have been acting distant lately. At lunch time, I started going to Mr. Reed's class to work on my project. I just wish you could come home. I know none of this is your fault, but of all the things we've talked about, how come you never mentioned none of this? I'm sorry for pressing this whole thing. I'm not trying to sound upset, cause I'm not. I'm just confused. But I guess being confused don't really matter in the end cause I know the drugs wasn't yours. Ma acts like she's so unsure. I know Reggie is filling her head with all kinds of negativity about you, but I know you, Brian. Reggie doesn't know you. You're smarter than that. I get my smarts from you, like you always told me (except math, I guess). I'll try and write more soon. Love you.

Your lil bro,

Xavier

February 15, 2015

Dear Brian,

Yesterday was Valentine's Day. You probably know that much. I'm assuming they let you have clocks and calendars where you are, right? Anyway, I got too scared to ask Kierra to be my

Valentine, but Ma took me to Walmart, and we got her a teddy bear and one of those 'lil hearts with the different chocolates inside. When I gave her the gift, she was smiling so big. She said this was the best Valentine's Day she ever had. I think she likes me.

After school today, Ma finally told me what the lawyer said. I don't wanna tell you any dark news, but I gotta be honest with you. She said we all hopefully coming to see you at the beginning of next month after your birthday, but I can't wait that long. I want you to hear this from me first. She came into my room and sat on the edge of my bed. Do you remember how she looked when she first told us Dad was sick? She had that same look on her face. I asked her what was wrong, trying to get her to understand that I already knew whatever she was getting ready to say was about you, so she may as well just tell me. She was quiet at first, then she grabbed my hand and goes, 'Sophia isn't sure how much she'll be able to help Brian.' I snatched my hand back and didn't say nothing. I waited for her to continue, but she didn't. I tried to press her, asking her why Sophia was losing confidence in everything all of a sudden. She cried. I didn't know if she was crying cause of me or cause of you, but I felt bad.

Brian, this is getting scary. Sophia told Ma that one of your friends' neighbors has a surveillance video of you smoking with your friends before you all got into the car. But the thing that doesn't make sense to me is that you're the one who's still locked up. The police let your friends walk free. I don't want to be naïve, but I think you being in jail and them being free is cause all your friends are White and you're Black. That must be what Sophia meant when she started rambling about people of color being the ones filling up prisons.

I went to talk to Mr. Reed about all this. It's been kinda hard to focus on just the school to prison pipeline cause one thing always leads to another. I was telling him you didn't get in trouble in school like a lot of the kids who fall into the school to prison pipeline. You graduated

high school, went to college. You got a degree. Mr. Reed has been having me read from all of these different sites like the ACLU and NAACP. This next thing I'm gonna tell you might be one of the wildest things I ever read in my life: Black men are six times more likely to be arrested than White men. And *that's* why you're locked up for a 'lil bit of weed in a car that wasn't even yours, right?

Actually, no, don't answer that. Ma told me I need to be careful what I write cause the people at the jail open and read everything I send you. I think I know the answer to that question now. I guess I'm also old enough to deal with that reality.

Part of me doesn't want to talk to my White friends anymore cause what's happening to you ain't fair. I know that boxing them out wouldn't be right of me and would probably do more harm than good in the long run. I wonder if they've been distant with me cause they heard about what happened to you. Or maybe I'm the one who's been distant without realizing. This is all just so messed up. None of this is right, and there doesn't seem to be a damn thing I can do that make it any different. Sorry for cussing, I know you hate when I do that, but I wish you were here to help me understand this.

You're supposed to be here while I navigate these kinds of things, B. Ma told me that this is just the American judicial system. Mr. Reed pretty much said the same thing. And stupid Reggie adds his two cents that no one asked for, saying that this happens every day, and I need to 'man up, and get over it.' Black people can keep getting locked up every second of every day, and I still don't think I could ever just get over that. There should be more to being a man than accepting a messed-up system.

It's getting late, and I gotta go to bed. I'll write more soon.

Your lil bro,

Xavier

February 21, 2015

Hey Brian,

I know that I'm writing less and less, and I'm sorry. Facing you this way isn't easy, even if all I'm doing is writing on paper. Me and Ma got into a huge fight last night. She said I needed to stay in a child's place. Am I still considered a child in seventh grade? I haven't heard her scream at anyone as loud as she did last night since that time she caught you with that girl in your room. Do you remember that? That was a funny night. I wish everything felt as easy and funny now as back then.

So, here's what happened: Ma was annoyed with me cause I was saying that we should find a different lawyer, but she was so sure a different lawyer wouldn't change things. She thinks she knows everything. She kept going on and on about the video they have of you, that she still wouldn't let me watch for myself. That's when I got kinda loud and was like, 'Ma, if you ain't gonna show me the video or tell me what happens in the video then stop bringing up the stupid video!' She was pissed then. She raised her hand up, and I thought she was gonna slap me. I probably deserved to get slapped. I ain't ever talked to Ma like that. I knew yelling at her, especially in the middle of all of this, was disrespectful, but somebody had to defend you. Instead of hitting me, she ran up the stairs, and when she came back a few minutes later, she threw her phone at my lap. I pressed play on the video she had pulled up.

How come you didn't tell me you smoked weed, Brian? I'm not judging you. I think everybody smokes something these days (I'm not talking about me or my friends), but I see guys with weed at school all the time. I even smell weed in our neighborhood, even though I didn't know for a while that that smell was weed. You still could've told me. In the video, you pulled

the weed out of your backpack. I'm trying to piece this all together, but I think the video is making everybody else think you might've been selling the weed. You know I don't know how this stuff works, but can't you just tell the cops, Sophia, and whoever else, where you got the weed from? This sounds simple to me.

When I got to school this morning, I had a few minutes before class started so I went to talk to Mr. Reed. Ma said she wasn't sending the video through text, so I couldn't let him see for himself. After I explained what happened to him, he showed me this crash course video on YouTube. The video was saying that White people use drugs more often than Black people, but Black people still go to jail way more often than White people do on drug charges. Mr. Reed was telling me how there's states like Colorado and Oregon, way out west, that have made weed legal for "recreational use." At first, I was like 'what the hell kind of logic is that?' I thought recreation was stuff like playing sports or going hiking.

But the more I think about everything, the more everything starts to make sense. This is Civics class, but Mr. Reed said matters like this all come down to statistics, and I feel like they're trying to make you a statistic. Almost like they want you line up with the negative sides. I told him I wanted to change my project topic and do something that didn't make me feel so depressed all the time, like the difference between the branches of government or the history of voting, but he said I couldn't change topics this close to the end of the 9-weeks.

That was the first time Mr. Reed ever made me mad. I don't know who to be mad at now, Ma, Reggie, Mr. Reed, or Sophia. Maybe I should be mad at all of America.

I have to figure something out, and I don't care how young I am or that I'm only the 'lil brother. You always came through for me, so, now I have to step up and come through for you.

You too bright, and you have your whole life ahead of you. I ain't letting these people create a statistic out of you.

Your 'lil bro,

Xavier

February 25, 2015

Dear Brian,

Happy Birthday, big brother! You're twenty-five today, old man. Ma cried again this morning cause it's your birthday, and we don't get to spend it with you. She said being in jail ain't no way to spend your golden birthday. We're gonna call you later, when I'm home from school and Ma is home from work. Sophia says she's going to try to get you the best "deal" possible. If that "deal" doesn't include you walking free with every drug possession charge dropped, I'm not interested, and you and Ma shouldn't be either. You deserve better than a lawyer who can only get you a plea deal. This is why I was trying to convince Ma we should look for a different lawyer, when she almost slapped me. Since I was 'lil, you were always telling me, "Don't ever settle for anything in life, Xavier." You remember that, right? What does any of that mean if this plea deal is the best thing that can be offered to you?

Brian, I hope you not thinking about taking the plea.

My Civics project is due next week, but I'm almost finished. Mr. Reed told me I already had enough sources, but he handed me an article in class today and was like, 'some information is good just to add to your mental bank and be conscious of the world around you.' He uses that word conscious a lot. I think this man wants my head to explode cause the article scared me. I'm still scared. At first the article wasn't that bad, but by the time I got to the end, I wanted to throw up. If things don't change, one in three Black men will go to prison at some point in their lives. I

don't think I'm ever gonna forget that "one in the three" number. Does this mean that I'll end in jail, too? I hope this isn't what Reggie meant when he said to 'man-up.'" Dad was a man, and he'd never been to prison, right? I have dreams, just like you do. Ma is only a CNA, but I used to want to work in a hospital like she does. Maybe be a doctor. Help people. But I think now maybe I should be a lawyer and help our people like Ms. Sophia was saying. Otherwise, this might never end. Maybe that's the point of this all, cause I don't wanna grow up to be a Black man if prison is all I have to look forward to.

Whatever you do, please don't take the plea deal. I'm begging you. Don't let them take you down for something we both know you aren't guilty of. Whatever drug charge they trying to pin on you, I know you aren't that kind of guy. We can fight this. I know we can.

Happy Birthday, again. I love you, Brian. Ma is sending off your package tomorrow. I'll see you soon, I promise.

Your lil' bro,

Xavier

March 12, 2015

Dear Xavier,

Man, do I miss you. I can't believe you've been writing so much, but I'm thankful you have. I think about you and Ma every second of every single day, literally 24/7. I'm so proud of you, X. I can't believe how much you're learning, even without me there. Turning all of this into something you can learn from and research is dope as hell. Mr. Reed was at Westly when I was there, and he's good people. I didn't realize how much you looked up to him until now, but he's a good guy. You can trust him. Nothing he's said to you or shown you has been false. I'm glad he's



been there for you while I can't be, and even if sometimes you don't like the things he says or shares with you, I don't want you to be mad at him.

I have to be honest, X, I feel like I've failed you. You know I'd never keep things from you with the intention to hurt you or keep you in the dark, but I've always told you things on kind of a need-to-know basis. That's what Dad did with me. I thought I had more time, but I bet Dad thought he had more time too. I'll be home soon—sooner than you think, and I promise, I'll tell you everything. I didn't think you needed to know that I smoked a little weed every now and then, not yet, anyways.

Listen, I don't want you to be any more disappointed in me than I know you already are. Even though you're learning and maturing every day, becoming more of man, there's some things you still can't understand. I've thought long and hard about this. I've talked with Ma and Sophia—I even prayed about what decision to make—and I've decided to take the plea deal.

No, the plea deal isn't an ideal arrangement, but accepting the plea means I can get home to you sooner, and I can tell you everything else while we still got time. The reality is that when you're Black, you're always racing against time. Especially if you're a Black man. I'm sorry if I've waited too long to teach you that part about life.

Here's what everything comes down to, 'lil bro: Ma can't afford to keep paying Sophia, and if I decide to plead not-guilty and let this all go to trial, I could end up in prison—not just jail, which I hope you know by now is where I am. Taking that risk means I could potentially be locked up so long that I wouldn't get to watch you grow through your high school years. I couldn't live with myself if that were the outcome. If I take the plea deal, I'm in here another few weeks, and I come home with only a few years of probation and community service. Again, I

know this isn't an ideal arrangement for any of us, but what's more important for me is fixing this as quickly as possible so I can get back home to you and Ma.

I'm sorry, Xavier. You have to believe me when I tell you how sorry I am. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you I smoked weed and that you had to see that video of me. I'm sorry that I never told you how easily Black people get locked up or the way this happens to us more than any other race. And I'm sorry that I put you in a position to have to deal with any of this in the first place. That's what eats away at me every day, the fact that you're hurting because of my mistakes, and I can't sit on the edge of your bed and answer every question you have. This isn't your weight to carry or your problem to fix. I'm sorry if I've made you feel that way.

But let me tell you this: you can still grow up to be a Black man with a future that's different from mine. Damn the statistics, and damn America. You won't end up where I am because you're smarter than me, even if you're only seventh grade. You've always been miles ahead of me, something I've always loved about you. And I don't want you to think that my life is over cause of this. I'll bounce back, just watch.

You're right about a lot of things. Ma shouldn't treat you like you're still a child, but I really don't want you to be mad at her or Mr. Reed or anyone else for that matter. Even though I deserve your anger, as you get older, the anger will only hurt you in the long run, not anybody else. I was mad at the whole world after Dad died. I had to learn this the hard way. The thing about being a Black kid in America is that shit like this robs you of your childhood, and people like Ma and Mr. Reed know this. Maybe Ma is trying to protect you by keeping you out of everything. And since Mr. Reed sounds like he hasn't changed, he's probably just trying to make sure you woke. I'm sorry that my mistake is making you grow up faster. But you still got time, X. You still full of so much light.

I love you so much, kid. I can't wait to hug you again. For now, enjoy being young. You've finished your project, and I'm sure you got a good grade. Let yourself breathe a bit. Being conscious of the world around you comes a cost, and soon, you'll wake up and have to pay that cost every single day. While you still got time, guard your heart. Take a break from all the statistics and trying to understand my mistakes. Spring break is coming up, anyways, right? Go to the movies or the beach with your friends (yes, the White friends, too—ain't no harm in that). Go skating or something with Kierra. Have fun. Don't worry about me, all right?

When I get home, I'm gonna kiss you big and wet on your cheek because I know how much you hate that shit. And then I'll make sure you're prepared for everything else. I'll sit on the edge of your bed, like I always have, and tell you anything you want to know (just make sure those sheets clean). I'll never let you down again. This is my promise you to, Xavier.

I'll see you soon,

Brian

March 27, 2015

Dear Brian,

Thanks for writing back. I didn't know if you would. When Ma told me I had mail, I almost jumped from the top step to grab the envelope out of her hands. After my last letter, I couldn't write for a while. I know you telling me I shouldn't be mad at anyone, but, honestly, I was a 'lil mad at you. Let me explain:

A few days after Ma sent off my last letter, Sophia came over with a card for Ma and gave her this long hug. You know when people hug and give you a rub on the back? They gave each other that type of hug. Then Ma held onto Sophia's hands and just kept thanking her. I was confused cause as far as I knew, Sophia hadn't done much of anything. I was quiet, though,

cause, I didn't want Ma to send me upstairs. When Sophia left, Ma turned to me and says, 'Brian took the plea deal. He's coming home real soon.' I can't understand why you would do that.

You're saying that you think Ma is trying to protect me, which, okay, cool. But how are you gonna leave yourself high and dry? You aren't some kind of drug dealer, Brian. Why would you take the plea deal? I don't know how to make sense of that, and I have to be honest. I'm mad as hell at you for this. To me, you doing this sounds like when I was in fifth grade and someone stole from the treasure box, so my teacher said we couldn't have recess for a week. Then this one girl, who everybody knew was a goody two shoes raised her hand and said she was the one who stole. Even though we all knew she was lying, we let her take the blame because we didn't want to miss recess. What I'm trying to say is the plea deal feels like you taking the blame for something you didn't do.

My seventh-grade year is almost over. I'm going to eighth grade next year, then high school. I'm old enough to handle whatever you're keeping from me. I hope you aren't scared to be honest with me all of a sudden. I know this probably sounds like I think you did something wrong now, but that's what I'm trying to explain. I know you didn't. Why can't we prove that to everyone?

I just want to understand.

See you soon,

Xavier

## THAT'S THE WAY LOVE GOES

Today is Juneteenth-Eve in my Grandma Ethel Robinson's house. At five foot two, Grandma Ethel could cook enough food for an entire village. Considering how she's always feeding her neighbors or people from her church, she comes pretty close. Juneteenth is special in Grandma Ethel's house for several reasons. In the end, her celebrations have little to do with a couple hundred slaves in Texas learning about their freedom. Juneteenth is the anniversary of my Grandpa Eddie's death, an event Grandma Ethel looks forward to retelling every single year at her Juneteenth Barbeque. Mom and I come to Florida every summer to see Grandma Ethel. We usually come just before Juneteenth, then Mom goes back to Atlanta after the barbeque to teach summer school while I stay with Grandma for the rest of the summer. But this year, Mom has chosen the perfect summer to stop coming down with me.

At first, I was excited about traveling alone. I love flying. When Grandma picked me up from the airport Monday night, I realized Mom hadn't even told her she wasn't coming this year, making everything awkward when I had to explain this myself. But then on Wednesday night, a hurricane formed in the Gulf of Mexico out of nowhere. Apparently that sucker is heading straight for Central Florida. This will be my first time experiencing a hurricane. Floridians are acting like this storm is nothing to worry about, which means Grandma Ethel is walking around the house, cooking and humming, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." She hasn't mentioned the hurricane once. Everybody's tweeting about what a category three hurricane getting ready to rip straight across Central Florida means, meanwhile this lady won't stop cooking. There's a National Weather Service in Melbourne, an hour away from Grandma's house. I followed them on Twitter, and they say the storm is expected to make landfall in less than thirty-six hours. I'll

admit I'm afraid of this hurricane. But if this storm hits like all these weather people expect, maybe I won't have to hear about Grandpa Eddie this year.

In the kitchen, my grandma is folding Cracker Barrel shredded cheese into a pan of macaroni noodles. This is the home my mom grew up in. There's no white picket fence, but there are two-thousand square feet of powder blue southern charm, the most I thought any Central Florida home could offer. Grandma lives in this Black neighborhood called Midway, and her house sits on the corner of her street with red-fleshed guava trees lining the yard. I hate the texture of those things, but the juice Grandma makes from them is so sweet that even the smallest sip makes your jaws clench. The juice tasted best right before the end of summer.

Sometimes Grandma's house felt like a real time warp. She still had wood-paneled walls in all the bedrooms that made the house darker, and the den is coated in an off-white wallpaper covered in oranges. But I loved the den, mostly because this is the only place in the house with a family picture of her, Grandpa Eddie, Mom, and Uncle Johnboy all lined up in front of Grandpa Eddie's old car, Blue Velvet. Every room in Grandma Ethel's house has at least one picture of Black Jesus, and the dining room is extra-blessed because there's a painting of Black Jesus and twelve Black disciples. The floors creak with every step we take, like it's asking us where we're going. But there's no plastic on the sofas anymore, and Mom said Grandma had just gotten central air in the late nineties, finally ridding the house of a window-unit for every room. I couldn't imagine spending my summers anywhere else.

"Grandma," I call standing in the kitchen entrance, "Uncle Johnboy just called and said he's dropping by to board up the windows in an hour." The sun is getting ready to go down, and Uncle Johnboy tells me he'd have to board up his own windows in the morning. He wants me to help him, says I should start pulling the plywood out of the shed in the backyard, but I've never

boarded up a window before. I had to use Google just to see what plywood looked like. I leave this detail out; I'm sure Grandma already knows.

“Tell him I said he won't be boarding up nothin' 'til after tomorrow.” She says this with her back turned and her hands working the cheese, and now milk, through the noodles.

“He's not on the ph—” I stop myself. “You do know they say the storm is supposed to make landfall tomorrow evening, right? Under thirty-six hours from now. I don't know if the barbeque is—”

She turns to face me. The eyes on this woman could make Black Jesus rethink his favorite parable. Grandma Ethel is sort of plump and soft looking. There was nothing scary about her—especially with her Shirley Temple roller set—except her eyes when she wants them to be.

“We'll be done and in the bed with the *itis* by the time that storm sets in. I done hosted my Juneteenth Barbeque every year since your granddaddy was murdered. A 'lil rain ain't never stopped me. I reckon we'll be alright.”

*Will we be alright, though?* I want to ask her. At least she was finally acknowledging that the storm was coming. Five different people have already called and asked if she was still having the barbeque, and all five of them told her they were going to shelter in place early, *just in-case*.

“Well, you know, Ethel, the wind and rain always come hours before the real storm get here,” I heard one of them tell her over the phone.

The last ten years of these barbeques that I can remember have taught me they never end on time, the same way they never start on time. But she's still in the kitchen, cooking food. Man, does it smell good, though. She sets the macaroni and cheese to the side, and now she's got seasoned chicken wings sitting on the stove, baked beans waiting to be baked, pasta salad in the fridge, and the corn on the cob she made me shuck. When my mom and I are alone in Atlanta,

she cooks well, but not the way Grandma Ethel does. Mom is spending her weekend in New York visiting an old college friend, but I bet she's missing Grandma Ethel's cooking. I hoped she would change her mind at the last minute, just for a piece of cornbread or a bowl of stewed beef and rice, but nah. She walked me to the security checkpoint like I was twelve, said "I'm sorry you have to go alone this year," then she was gone.

"What happens if you cook all this food, and the power goes out?" I ask Grandma.

"Won't everything go bad?"

"No, 'cause it'll be ate by then."

"Shouldn't we be out getting sandbags or something? That's what everybody's saying on Twitter."

She pauses again, pushes her glasses over the brim of her nose, but leaves enough space over top of the frames to get a good look at me.

"Honey, I don't know nobody named *Twitter*, but we'll be fine. You worry too much, Mr. Kenny."

I just want us to be prepared. I go out to the garage to look for plywood and wait for Uncle Johnboy. I notice Grandma Ethel has three plastic bins in the shed labeled "Hurricane." I don't know what's in them, but I guess this little old lady is more prepared than I think.

#

I been honoring my Eddie almost thirty years now, and ain't nothing changing this year cause Kenny mama, Sheryl, decide she don't wanna be here for her own daddy. I'd cook a spread like this all for myself if I had to.

I see Sheryl less and less every year. Her and Kenny used to come down for all the big holidays and school breaks. Sheryl a high school teacher so I know she get plenty time off. I ain't



seen her since Christmas, and she know better than anybody how much Eddie's Juneteenth Barbeque mean to me. I reckon I deserve having to spend this weekend without her, but her daddy don't. And she could've called, at least gave me a heads up that she wasn't coming before I prepared that extra room for her. At the barbeque tomorrow, me and Kenny will be the ones who got to field questions of when the family might see Sheryl again and them wondering how she's doing or why she's staying away longer and longer. I might give them her phone number and tell them to call and ask her they self. Tell them to message her on that Facebook page they be using. Make her talk to them, since she seem not to wanna talk to me.

Everybody keeps calling to cancel on me. WESH say that storm won't make landfall 'til tomorrow evening, which means we still have time to eat, laugh and tell stories, cry, if we need to, and everybody'll be back home already. Safe. But looks like me and my Kenny might be alone with all this food this year. Lord knows I love that 'lil boy. Somehow, he end up being my only grandchild, and since his mama moved them off to Atlanta so she could finish school, I see him as much as I see her. That was the reason her and Kenny moved. Johnboy, her younger brother and my only son, always try to blame it on me. She got accepted to this big, fancy school, then her and Kenny was gone without so much as a "Goodbye." This 'lil stunt she call herself pulling, not showing for her daddy's Juneteenth barbeque without a heads up, this is intended as a message to me. I know my own child.

I miss Sheryl, Lord knows I do, but Sheryl prideful like her daddy, so I'll never admit this to her. She would eat that right up. But I consider telling her. I consider telling her how much I miss us sitting on the front porch together, swatting mosquitoes while we watch Kenny run after cicadas or try and pick guavas from the trees in my front yard. Or how much I miss us going yard sale-ing the Saturday after Christmas while I sit passenger side and her and Kenny able to

sing along to all the songs on the radio. I even consider telling her that I'm sorry, telling her that what happened all those years ago wasn't nobody's fault.

That last part may be a bit too far.

God bless her 'lil soul back then, but her daddy could have still been here. I know she was scared; any child would've been scared. Hell, I would've been scared. But she just sat there, tucked into the seat, watching while her daddy was beat to death with that wretched music blaring. Now I don't mean I expected her to fight no grown men. But she could've called for help. She could've screamed or something. Anything.

Now I've accepted my part in all of this. The day Eddie was murdered, we was all getting ready for the Juneteenth Barbeque. I needed some more cheese, and in my macaroni and cheese, nothing will do except Cracker Barrel sharp cheddar. I sent Eddie to the Park and Shop down on Sanford Ave., not knowing it would be the last time any of us ever heard his voice. Sheryl, being the daddy's girl she was, went along for the ride. Eddie had just bought this blue 1989 Chevrolet Caprice Station Wagon. He called that thing Blue Velvet. I used to tell him that car was the other woman. Back then, a man black as him in a car like that was red flag enough for the people in this city, especially downtown.

While Eddie went into the store, Sheryl decided to stay in the car. These White men come up to the door of the car, just flirting with her. She was a beautiful girl, but they saw the nice car, asked her what a pretty 'lil brown thing like her was doing sitting all alone in a car like that. That child of mine had a mouth on her, and I reckon she still do. She started cussing at them like she ain't have no good home training, and by the time Eddie made his way out the store, there was about three or four of them standing around the car. 'Course, Eddie jumps in the mix to defend Sheryl, and they beat him to death, right there in the parking lot.

When the trial came, Sheryl froze on the stand, not getting out a single word. I couldn't look at my own child for weeks. She told me what she saw a hundred times before. We even rehearsed what she would say when the lawyers questioned her but none of that mattered when the time came cause Sheryl sat there silent.

I'm in the kitchen, now, getting ready to put this poundcake in the oven. By morning she'll be cooled and ready for her glaze. I hear the hammering stop, which means Kenny and Johnboy done finally left my windows lone. I hear the refrigerator open.

"Grandma, can I drink some of this lemonade?" Kenny asks.

"No, sir, that is for the barbeque tomorrow."

"From what Kenny tells me," Johnboy starts, "doesn't sound like there's gonna be a barbeque."

Kenny start scratching the middle of his afro. He know he done said too much.

"Drink the lemonade, chile, but just a 'lil bit. And make sure you rinse your glass." I turn to face Johnboy. "Are you and Jeanine still coming?"

"No, Mama, I'm sorry. We're driving south to her parents in the morning to try and get outta the storm's path. It's just supposed to be wind and rain there. You and Kenny are welcome to come with us. I talked to Sheryl and—"

"Nope. That's all right. Me and Kenny fine here. Make sure you bring your tail by here when y'all get back to Sanford and take them boards off my windows."

"Mama—" he begins, but I hold my hand up so he know I don't want to hear nothing else. Kenny watching us like he want to say something, but he don't.

Johnboy kisses me on the cheek, hugs his nephew, tells us both that he loves us. I send Kenny to lock the door behind him. This'll be the first year I have to honor my murdered husband with neither of his children present. I hope my Eddie ain't turning over in his grave.

Here go the bottom line: their daddy was good to them. He was good to all us. And life ain't been the same since we lost him. He left us this big house with all these rooms and memories but this house ain't no good empty. Without Eddie or my children, I may as well sell this place. No Sheryl and no Johnboy this year, but at least I got Kenny. I always know Kenny will be here with his ol' granny.

#

When I was seven, my mom sat me down at the end of the summer, told me that she was going back to college, and we were moving to Atlanta. I asked her if Grandma Ethel was coming with us, and she laughed. This was when I first saw that something was weird between her and Grandma, but, at seven years old, I didn't know what questions to ask. By the time I learned the right questions, I fully understood the golden rule of Black families to "stay out of grown folks' business." Uncle Johnboy helped us pack a U-Haul truck, then we were gone within a week. She did go back to school, though. She finished undergrad at Clark Atlanta University and started teaching U.S. history at a high school in Dekalb County. I loved Atlanta from the moment we arrived, but that didn't stop me from loving coming back to Sanford. Mom seems less and less interested in coming the older I get. I wonder if she's always felt this way but doesn't feel the need to pretend anymore.

Before going to bed, I help Grandma decorate the house. We cover the dining room table in a red, black, green, and yellow tablecloth, and hang streamers and lanterns in the same colors across the living and dining rooms. We leave the den empty, thank goodness. The oranges on

those walls keep the room busy enough. Grandma ordered a set of Juneteenth party supplies from Amazon—Juneteenth cups, napkins, forks, and straws—and they’re all covered in the Black empowerment fist you see everywhere whenever a Black person gets killed by the police. I cringe a little when I see this because I’m the one who set her up with a Prime account. I have a feeling this wasn’t a Black vendor. I haven’t shown her how to check for that kind of thing.

“Grandma, can I ask you something?”

“You just did,” she says. She smooths out the tablecloth and adds a piece of Scotch tape to the edge. When I’m quiet, she says, “Gone head.”

“How come you do the Juneteenth barbeque like this every year? Doesn’t all this make you sad just a little?”

“Well, why would I be sad, Kenny?” I can’t tell if she means this question seriously or not.

“Doesn’t the barbeque make you think about Granddaddy Eddie in the worst way possible? Why not celebrate his birthday instead?” She doesn’t look up for a few seconds, and when she does, I avoid her eyes.

“Well, we not celebrating his death, if that’s what you getting at. Me and your granddaddy used to host these barbeques years before he was murdered and taken from me.” In the last few years, I’d noticed how she always said he was taken from her, instead of her, mom, and Uncle Johnboy. “Juneteenth a national holiday. Just doubles as a different holiday now.”

“I guess in my mind, you can’t get over something that hurt you if you never stop going back to the hurt.” Maybe this is more of Mom talking than me.

“Some things I don’t expect you to understand, but I reckon you will one of these days. I’m gonna call it a night—we got a big day tomorrow. I’ll see you in the morning. G’night, baby.”

“Goodnight,” I call after her as she heads down the hallway.

Grandma Ethel didn’t always make sense, but neither did Mom. Maybe this was just the way of the Robinson women. I’d grown up thinking that Grandma’s version of this story was the only version. This was the version I heard every year for the last fifteen years. The whole point of the gathering was to eat, but Grandma didn’t let anybody take a bite until after she’d finished talking about Grandpa Eddie.

Mom and I were at the dining room table a few weeks ago when I heard her version for the first time. She’d just told me she wouldn’t be coming to Florida with me this summer.

“What? You’re missing Grandpa Eddie’s barbeque?” I asked her. We were having our post-church meal. I hadn’t looked up from my meatloaf, I guess in part because I didn’t think she was serious.

“Kendrick, you’ve reached an age where you can go without me. I’ve relived Daddy’s death enough times at this point. I’m gonna go see an old friend in New York while you’re with your grandma.”

“Isn’t that the whole point, though? Y’all honor Grandpa by doing this every year?”

She sat her fork down, resting her chin on her folded hands. “For your grandma, yes. For me, no. It’s never been.” She took a sip of water. “Like I said, Kendrick, you’re old enough now to go without me.”

“Mom, is something wrong?” I asked. I could tell by her tone that something was off, but I couldn’t figure out what exactly.

“You’ve heard this story plenty of times. Me and your granddaddy went to Park and Shop because your grandma needed more cheese to finish the macaroni. This was Juneteenth, 1993. I was planning on going inside with Daddy but as soon as we pulled into the parking lot, Janet Jackson came on the radio.” She sat back in her chair and smiled. “Like a moth ball burned by the fire, my love is blind. Can’t you see my desire?”

She said this like she was reciting a spoken word poem. I’d never heard the song before.

“I loved that song. I loved Janet. I had her posters all over my room. When the song came on, I told Daddy to go ahead without me. I wanted to sit in the car and listen. He left the car running, and I turned the volume all the way up. You know how the rest goes: the White guys came up to the car questioning me, your grandma then looks out at everybody at the barbeque and tells them how flip my mouth was. Then how I sat in the car, didn’t do anything. Didn’t call for help or scream. Kendrick, I’ve never been so afraid in my life. I couldn’t even think in that moment.”

She had never given me these details before. Never once mentioned the Janet Jackson song that made her stay in the car or how scared she was.

“I guess I realize you’re the same age now that I was when they killed Daddy. I hope I’m not throwing too much on you.”

“No, Mom,” I assured her. “I’m...” I searched for the right word, “happy you’re telling me.”

“It’s been, what, thirty years now? I can’t take another year of your grandma looking at me over the brim of her glasses, in front of all of Midway, saying *if only God had given Sheryl the strength to withstand the trial.*” She mimicked Grandma’s voice, and I almost laughed. Mom sounded just like Grandma Ethel. Word for word. “Don’t she think I feel bad that I couldn’t

“speak up for my daddy when it really mattered? I don’t know why I froze the way I did. I was fifteen. I’ll never forgive myself for my silence, but I don’t need her reminding me of that anymore.”

At least now I knew I wasn’t the only person tired of hearing the story of Grandpa Eddie’s death.

When I wake up the next morning, it’s oddly cool outside. I never know if I’m considered a Florida-boy, but I know the weather shouldn’t be 75 degrees and breezy in the middle of June. The cooler air makes me wonder what might be to come of this storm and if me and Grandma should be doing more to prepare. My Google search tells me we need things like flashlights (and batteries), canned food (and I guess a can-opener, too), some kind of water source, and sandbags, in case of flooding. Grandma has plenty of bottled water—mainly for the barbeque—but I saw those bins labeled hurricane in the shed yesterday. I’m wondering if I should check them out to see if Grandma has any of the other items. There’s still time to prepare. The National Weather Service’s Twitter account says we still have approximately six hours until this storm, now named Hurricane Anna.

I can’t remember what time I went to bed last night, but I’m surprised Grandma hadn’t gotten me up earlier. Not that she wouldn’t normally let me sleep in, but on a day like today, when she has so much riding on this barbeque, I expected her to have me up with the chickens—or maybe these are roosters I always hear at the crack of dawn. Sometimes Midway is too country to deal with.

If the barbeque actually happens today, guests are supposed to begin arriving around three p.m., which means the barbeque won’t actually kick off until around five. I step out of Uncle Johnboy’s old bedroom into the hallway, the long, hunter green carpet guiding me to the



infused smells of Clorox bleach and Pine-sol with baked beans and boiled eggs, I assume for the potato salad. When I reach the kitchen, Grandma is pushing a long pan into the oven.

“Good morning, Grandma,” I say.

“Well, the dead has risen,” she laughs. “Morning, baby. You slept too long for breakfast. I had to get these other pots singing.”

“That’s fine,” I assure her. “I’m not hungry, anyways.”

“You not hungry? What ail you?”

I scratch the middle of my ‘fro. “I guess the storm’s got me nervous. Hurricane Anna.”

“Kenny, you know how many hurricanes done came through Florida?” I consider guessing a number, but I can tell that since her back is still turned, in the businesses of tending to her food, she expects me to wait for her answer. “Too many to count. And you know how many of them done hurt me or even scared me?” I wait for her to respond again. “Not a single one. Wilma came through here in ’05, year you was born. I can’t even count how many others. We’ll be fine, baby. This ain’t nothing I ain’t seen a hundred times.”

“Is there anything you need me to do to help get ready for the barbeque?” I ask this, doubting a barbeque is happening today, but I can’t take talking to her about the storm with her attitude.

“Why don’t you line up the tiki-torches in the backyard outside the patio? So that, later, all we’ll have to do is light them to keep the mosquitoes back. They out there in the shed. Your Uncle Johnboy should be by to get the grill set up in a little—”

“Grandma. Uncle Johnboy and Aunt Jeanine are in South Florida already. When he was here last night, he told you he wasn’t coming.”

“Oh, that’s right...” she says. “Well, I’ll set the grill up my own self, then.”

I disappear into the backyard. Had she not heard a word Uncle Johnboy said last night? There's a literal hurricane coming at us, and all she's thinking about is keeping her tradition of this stupid barbeque that everyone except her is tired of going to. Grandma isn't taking this storm seriously. I don't even know why she's having me line up these tiki-torches. I always try to be patient with her, but I can't help feeling annoyed. Mom is still in New York and spent all of her extra money on her own trip. I begged her to let me fly back home as soon as the storm appeared, and she said she couldn't afford another plane ticket in addition to the one she'd already bought for the end of the summer. I would've even settled for the Megabus. I thought Uncle Johnboy would be our way out, but Grandma shut that down quick. As if getting pummeled by this storm won't be torture enough, I'll be stuck with the story of my grandfather's murder as my only source of company.

#

Something is bothering my Kenny, and I reckon it ain't just this storm. He ain't bit more thinking about no Hurricane Anna. I sent him out into the backyard to line up the tiki-torches, and he ain't said a word to me since. I ain't never seen this kind of attitude on Kenny, not toward me, anyways. Today is Juneteenth and the day I lost my Eddie. Kenny used to setting up for the barbeque. His attitude make me wonder if his mama done told him something. Sowing discord between me and my only grandchild. Me and Sheryl like oil and water sometimes but ain't no need to bring Kenny in the middle of that. I knew when she wasn't at the airport when I picked Kenny up that she was up to something.

A little after three o'clock, I'm ready to make my grand entrance down the hall. I've picked out this 'fro, and Angela Davis ain't got nothing on me. I pulled out my red, green, and black fist earrings, and I'm wearing a Juneteenth jumpsuit I found on Amazon with bangles to

match. I can hear Nina Simone singing about how good she's feeling down the hall, but when I reach the living room, all I see is Kenny looking at his cellphone.

"Where everybody at?" I ask him.

"Grandma, do you really think anyone is coming with Hurricane Anna that close?"

Kenny's never used this kind of tone with me. His voice is sharp enough to cut through the wind I can hear picking up outside.

"Well, I reckon they running late. You know our people. We always on C.P.T., never on time for nothing." Kenny starts scratching his afro, and I know for sure something is wrong.

"What's ailing you, Kenny?"

"Nothing," he lies. "Can I eat, or do we have to wait for people to show up?"

"You know we don't eat 'til after I've said my piece about your granddaddy and then said a blessing. Will you just tell me what's going on?"

"We have bigger things to worry about right now, and I'm not in the mood to hear the same story you tell about Grandpa Eddie every year. Fifteen years is enough." I'm quiet when he say this. I don't know if I'm more stunned that he's struck the nerve to speak to me this way or if I'm hurt that he don't want to hear about my Eddie. When I don't say anything, he stands, I assume to walk into the kitchen.

"Okay, Kenny. We can eat. But let me talk to you about your Granddaddy Eddie first. Sit down."

"Grandma, I—"

"Sit down, I say!" I'm raising my voice now, something I ain't ever had to do with Kenny. He never gave me a reason to before today. But he don't sit down. This is surely Sheryl's

child. He heads out the backdoor, walking like he's on a mission. I don't move. I'm not sure what move to make.

When I see him coming up the back porch steps, he's drenched, balancing two plastic bins with "Hurricane" written in permanent marker across them. He brings a trail of water with him through the living room, tracking mud across the carpet. He sits the bins down in the middle of the living room then heads out the backdoor again.

"Kenny, wait, let me help you," I call after him.

"It's fine, Grandma. There's only one more," he yells back.

He returns with the third bin, and Lord knows I ain't got a clue what's in them. I ain't used these bins in years. Ain't had a reason to. We hear something slam into the back of the house, and before long, we realize the tiki-torches have blown all over the yard. I reckon this storm might be a little bit stronger than I thought.

#

Grandma raised her voice, something she's never done, and I know she means what she says. I know that I'm bordering on disrespect, but if she's only going to think about Grandpa Eddie and a barbeque that isn't going to happen, I'll have to deal with being the only one of us to take this storm seriously. I run to the shed in the backyard to pull out the Hurricane bins she has in there. Running through the rain felt like being pressure washed. I've never felt rain so heavy or wind so strong. I thought the wind might my rip my clothes off. By now, all the stores near us are closed. Even if they were open, the wind and rain is too much to drive in. The bins are heavier than I thought they'd be, and I feel hopeful for the first time since my flight landed Monday night.

This hope doesn't last long.

Grandma sits on the couch, like she can't move or speak. I open the first bin, the heaviest of the three, and there's only a deconstructed Christmas tree inside. In the second bin are old bed sheets that smell like moth balls. It takes me several minutes to open the third. Part of me can't believe her, but at the same time, I know I shouldn't be so surprised. The rain is heavier outside now, and the wind pushes it harder against the house, like it's begging to be let inside. I'm on my knees when I open the third bin, as if I'm praying for there to be something we could use inside, but this prayer is useless. Grandma has used this third bin for old crocheting supplies: endless rolls of multicolored yarn, zip-lock bags of needles and hooks, and faded yellow papers that I assume are designs for the things she would've made.

We have nothing.

"Before you say anything, let me explain—" she begins.

"There's nothing to explain, Grandma. I'm not surprised. By any of this."

"Now, you hold on one hot minute! I know you're upset and scared, but I am still your grandmother. You'll mind your tone when you speak to me."

I stop when she says this. She's right. I know that I need to *mind my tone*, but someone has to tell Grandma the truth.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry. But Grandma, can't you see the predicament we're in? All we have is a bunch of food and if the power goes out, it'll be useless. We don't have flashlights or anything." The lights start to flicker when I say this, and Hurricane Anna draws closer, as if my comment about the lights invites her to take the entire house into her body. The wind and rain against the house seem to compete with the thunder. I run to Uncle Johnboy's room.

"Where are you off to now?"

"I need to charge my phone," I yell. "My mom will want to know how we're doing."

When I return to the living room, Grandma says we should eat before we lose power. I can't say that I have much of an appetite at this point, but I follow her into the kitchen anyways.

"You want a 'lil bit of everything?" she asks.

I tell her just macaroni and cheese, baked beans, and a slice of ham. We sit at the table, mocked by her colorful tablecloth, and eat in silence.

"You know, Kenny," she begins, "I wish Eddie could've met you. Boy, would he have loved you."

I don't return her smile.

"Can I tell you something, Grandma?" I ask her, even though I plan to tell her anyways. She sits her fork down and rests her chin on her folded hands. I see a resemblance now between her and Mom that I'd never noticed before. These were the Robinson women, alike in more ways than either of them knew. Grandma doesn't say anything, and I realize from the way she's looking at me over her glasses that she's waiting for me to continue. "Mom didn't come this year because she didn't want to relive Grandpa Eddie's death another year.

"Kenny, I don't want to hear this right now."

"It's important that you know, Grandma. She said that she couldn't take having to listen to you tell everybody again that you wish God had given her the strength to speak at the trial. And I have to be honest." She holds her hand up, telling me to stop, but I know that I can't. "It's like this day makes you blind. You get so focused on honoring Grandpa Eddie that you can't see anything else or any of us right in front of you. It's been thirty years, and you haven't seen Mom's feelings or how you remind her in the most painful way of the one thing she says she'll never be able to forgive herself for. And now this hurricane is here, and you couldn't even prepare the right way. I'm scared, Grandma."

She takes off her glasses and sits them on the table next to her. I want to ask Black Jesus to come down from the painting on the wall and do something, but I don't know if I can be saved from this.

"I have some candles in the closet by the bathroom. In case the power goes out," she says. I push my chair back to go grab the candles. Grandma doesn't say anything when I bring them to the dining room table. These candles aren't much, but they're better than nothing.

It's after six o'clock when we finish eating. I go back to the living room to close the mislabeled bins. I just need something to do, an excuse to leave the table. I'm on my knees, returning the Christmas tree and sheets to the bin, and this is when I feel the water under my knees. By the time I understand what's happening, Grandma is already at the front door with a handful of towels—even her good towels.

"Grandma—"

"I know, Kenny." She hasn't put her glasses back on yet, so when she looks at me, I take her face in fully for the first time all week. There's something in her eyes I've never seen before. I don't know if it's worry or regret or fear, but it almost makes me sick to my stomach. "Grab those sheets. Maybe we can use them to help keep the water out."

I do as she says.

## HALLELUJAH

When the Earth opened her mouth and swallowed Hallelujah Praise Center, I thought God had finally come to avenge His people. Grandma Lucy always went on about how He was a *just God*. I can't say I ever believed her until I saw that church fall. I thought vengeance had come: God was here, and He would make the Bishop pay for all he'd done. But even after the building fell, the church prevailed, making news headlines, drawing in public attention and new members, and what was probably the Bishop's favorite part of all, a fat insurance check rumored to be in the multimillions.

The first Sunday in April, Communion Sunday by nature, was our first Sunday having in-person service after the sinkhole. When we pulled into the parking lot, all you could see was caution tape and dust. The deacons arranged an out-door sanctuary on the large pavilion behind the annex. I walked over behind Mama and Grandma Lucy. Sister Patterson, the usher board chairperson, was holding a faux-gold tray covered in communion kits: a stale wafer sealed into the top of a plastic cup, smaller than a shot glass, filled with grape juice. We didn't drink wine for communion at Hallelujah Praise Center. The Bishop taught that the drinking of any kind of alcohol was a sin, and even though they drank wine in the Bible—*Jesus himself* having turned water into wine—nobody dared question the Bishop about this or anything else.

"Praise the Lord, y'all," Sister Patterson said. With her free white glove, she squeezed the palms of Mama and Grandma.

"Praise the Lord, Sister Patterson," they said. I smiled, insincere, as we all grabbed our communion and headed to find our seats.

I grew up in Hallelujah Praise Center. Before I was there, Mama and Grandma and my Granddaddy Ben worshipped there. Our church was one of the nicest churches in our small



Georgetown neighborhood in Sanford, at least before the sinkhole opened. Whenever people visited our church, they were most impressed by the floor-to-ceiling stained-glass windows depicting Bible stories. Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Daniel in the Lion's Den. Moses in the face of the burning bush. That one was always my favorite. The orange and red of the fire was always most vibrant midway through service. When the sun hit the fire just so that the flames appeared to be roaring, I knew the Bishop was halfway through his three-hour sermon.

There was also the window of Satan being thrown out of Heaven. This image terrified me as a child. I couldn't decide where the serpent began or where the dragon ended, and I never understood why a church would include a depiction of Satan like this. The Bishop knew these mixed hues of blues, greens, and reds, scared most of the children, often telling us to respect our elders or we'd find ourselves cast away like Satan. This idea alone was enough to make any kid bow in submission to the church elders no matter what they said or did.

Our all-Black, Pentecostal church felt like the most southern facet of my life. Even though Florida was the southernmost state on every U.S. map I saw, I never felt southern culture until sitting in church. The church mothers sang songs that felt like Negro Spirituals, the kind that I wasn't a huge fan of but always moved Grandma Lucy to tears. I used to ask Mama why Grandma cried, and she said she was caught up in the Spirit—the same thing she told me was happening when she'd catch a "happy fit," dancing and hollering with her eyes closed and arms thrown out every which way. That was usually when the ushers made me move as they formed a circle around Mama, fanning and trying to keep her contained. Grandma Lucy used to say the deacons prayed Heaven down. I've never felt the Spirit like Mama or Grandma Lucy, but when Deacon Murry prayed, there were times I thought I was coming close. His voice rumbled, like there was an old car in his chest trying to crank up, and I got goosebumps all over my body and

this lightness in my stomach. God might not have heard the rest of us when we prayed, but He heard Deacon Murry for sure.

Grandma led us into the third row of steel folding chairs at the front of the makeshift sanctuary. This was as close as she could get to our unassigned, assigned seats. I sat between her and Mama, so they could “keep an eye on me.” Grandma was dressed in all white since we’d be taking communion, and every time she moved, I dipped my head back so that her hat didn’t scratch the side of my face. The church sent out a message for everyone to dress light for the weather, but Grandma Lucy said she didn’t care because she still wanted to give God her best. All white was a no-go for me but dressing up for church was the one thing I still enjoyed. I opted for plaid black and white khakis with a white button down, hoping the church mothers wouldn’t smear their red lipstick across my collar when they hugged me. The worship team grabbed their mics at the front of the pavilion, just below the stage I assumed would be used as the Bishop’s pulpit.

“Let’s lift up the name of Jesus,” the leader boomed into the mic. Mama and Grandma stood with most of the congregation, hands up, eyes closed. They never struggled to get in the mood for church, but I couldn’t help not wanting to be here. The Bishop preached too long, and my attention would drift. The worship team sang four songs, the last being *There’s a Leak in this Old Building*. They usually sang one older song as a nod to the older members in a church that was continually modernizing. Every time the lyrics changed, Grandma let out a new scream. Her favorite part was when they sang, “I got another building, a building not made by man’s hands.” The deacons collected offering, and before Mama handed me a ten-dollar bill to take to the collection plate, she reminded me to use the bathroom before the Bishop began his sermon. I held my hand out to Grandma to collect her offering.

“Nothing this week, baby,” she said. Grandma wasn’t the type to not have offering money, but I thought maybe she’d forgotten cash or her checkbook.

In the church annex, not far from the pavilion, Jelani, the Bishop’s grandson was in the bathroom sitting on the sink.

“Aiden, my boy,” he said. I reached out my hand to dap him up.

Jelani was two years older than me, and while we weren’t exactly friends, he always said “wassup” to me when he saw me at school. He was one of the coolest guys I knew, mostly because of his confidence and carefree attitude. Both in school and at church, people whispered that Jelani was gay. Anytime I asked Mama, she wouldn’t even look at me, she would only say, “the one who wants to love life and see good days will keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit.” I never knew if the evil and deceit was me asking about Jelani, or Jelani being the way he was.

“You better get outta here before the Bishop sends the ushers after you,” I said.

“Oh, you got jokes, huh?” he said. “Ain’t nobody trying to hear that old mofo ramble about nothing. I turn eighteen at the end of the summer, and I already told my parents I ain’t coming back after that. This ‘lil break we had was nice.” Jelani was the only person who didn’t seem scared to speak ill of the Bishop or challenge him on the false teachings he spewed to the congregation. There was a knock on the door, and we both knew Sister Patterson was coming to clear us out of the annex bathroom. I was only here because Mama sent me.

“Y’all need to get in here for the word. Bishop is getting ready to take to the pulpit.”

There was no pulpit anymore. All that was under the pavilion of this makeshift sanctuary was a stage because the Bishop always needed to look down on his congregation. I went back to being squished between Mama and Grandma. I wished I could sit in the back with Jelani, but

Mama never let me. The Bishop was wearing his white clergy robe, even outside in the Florida heat. There were little paisley designs all over the robe, and the sleeves drooped so much you could barely see his hands, covered in jewelry most of the congregation wouldn't be able to afford in their lifetime. Through tithing and offering, the congregation was who had paid for all of his silver and gold.

The Bishop's sermons never ended where they started. Today, he was preaching out of *First Corinthians, chapter two*, highlighting verse nine specifically: "But as it is written: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.'" His sermon started off kinda good. He was encouraging the congregation that God had good things in store for us all, but after twenty minutes, he was on a tangent about how some of us didn't really love God and would miss out on those blessings.

How could someone tell another person they didn't love God? I thought I loved Him, but I wasn't so sure about the people who called themselves His servants. The thought that the Bishop might be one of these people scared me. Besides Jelani, everybody else sang nothing but his praises. He marched across the stage, whooping and hollering, and all the *Amens* and *Hallelujahs* from the people in the audience gassed him up. Somehow, hundreds of people had fit under the pavilion for today's service.

"Some of y'all too caught up in your sin to really love Him!"

"You better preach, Bishop," someone yelled from the back. There was clapping and cheering across the pavilion. I never thought this was how the love of God really worked, but the Bishop was just warming up.

"Y'all know the verse. *If you love me, keep my commandments*, but y'all ain't keeping no commandments. With him kissing on him." This line made me wonder if the Bishop heard the

whispers about Jelani, too. I wanted to turn to see how he reacted to this, but I knew better. “And she on the corner drunk with legs open to whoever talking a good game.” Grandma threw up her hand, and this silent “Amen” made Mama turn her body the opposite direction, away from the stage—away from Grandma and the Bishop.

That was the first thing lingering in the air between our small family. Mama didn’t know that I knew, but I had a strong feeling she was pregnant. Her pregnancy was more obvious than she thought. Besides the last few months of her telling me she was having dinner with “a friend,” then coming home after she thought I was already asleep, she was suddenly more tired and experiencing what I concluded was morning sickness. I could never ask her about this, though: staying out of grown folks’ business was the motto in our house.

“That ain’t love, and I’ll tell you, I’m gonna get it all, cause God know I love Him. I show Him,” the Bishop continued. I tuned out the rest of the sermon and didn’t come back to reality until I heard the church singing “Come to Jesus.” Two people got saved, and I wondered what they were being saved from. I didn’t know if I wanted to serve the kind of God the Bishop always described. That God seemed abundant in anger, lacking in mercies, and different from the God Grandma Lucy always talked about on her back porch. I was curious of Grandma Lucy’s God, but I feared the Bishop’s.

Mama got saved when she was twenty-three. Even though she’d gone to church her whole life, she told me she hadn’t fully accepted Jesus into her heart until then. She was pregnant with me at that time, and I could never get her to tell me the full story, but in our weekly bathroom chats, Jelani said his mama told him that the Bishop had preached about premarital sex and bastards. Mama seemed so convicted by the message that she was sobbing at the alter with her hands up before he could even finish preaching. I wondered if that was why Mama had

seemed so tense today when the Bishop got to that part of his sermon. I didn't know much about my father, just that he was older than Mama and didn't stick around beyond the first few years of my life. Our family was just me, Mama, and Grandma Lucy.

Grandma Lucy had been saved since she was a little girl, but I didn't know what she was being saved from either. Her life was hard. Mama was her only child because all three of her babies before Mama died. She said Mama was her miracle. And her husband, Granddaddy Ben, died when Mama was only twelve. They only had each other for a while, especially since most of Grandma's family still lived in Athens. But Grandma had the kind of faith I only saw from Loretta Devine in Tyler Perry movies. Nothing shook her. She still served God and Hallelujah Praise Center, faithfully paying her tithes and offering, I guess until this day, and was a member of almost every church auxiliary.

After church, we had Sunday dinner at Grandma Lucy's house, although Sunday dinner was always eaten right after church and never during dinner time. Grandma Lucy usually cooked on Sundays. Sometimes Mama helped, but Mama couldn't cook like her. She served us baked chicken with macaroni and cheese, cabbage, and cornbread. We sat around her small dining room table and bowed our heads so that she could say grace. They were both unusually quiet, especially after a Sunday like today when Grandma seemed so moved by the Spirit. I didn't know at the time, but this would be the last dinner we ever had there. I decided to break the silence.

“Did y'all enjoy church today?”

Mama only nodded, and that's when I noticed she'd barely eaten anything.

Grandma smiled. “Sho'nuff did. Good to be back.”

The dining room was quiet again, and the only thing I could hear was the grandfather clock in the living room and the sound of Grandma slurping cabbage.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

Mama and Grandma’s eyes communicated a language I couldn’t understand.

“Mama, just tell him,” Mama said.

“Well, *which thing* am I telling him?” Mama turned her nose up. I considered telling her that I already knew she was pregnant.

“Aiden,” Mama started, “your grandma’s moving into our apartment with us. She’ll sleep on the pull-out for a ‘lil while. Until she’s back on her feet.”

*Back on her feet?*

“Are you losing your house, Grandma?”

They talked with their eyes again, and even though I couldn’t tell what they were saying, I could read the room. Neither of them were happy with whatever arrangement they’d come to, but I knew to stay out of grown folks’ business.

“Grandma, you can sleep in my room. I’ll sleep on the pull-out couch,” I said.

“Oh, no, baby. I won’t dare put you out your own room. The sofa bed is just fine.”

Mama was quiet.

“Nonsense,” I assured her. “You can sleep in my room. My bed’s more comfortable. Plus, I’ll get to sleep with the big TV.”

Grandma’s shoulders giggled more than any other part of her body.

#

Sleeping on the pull-out couch meant I was the first in the house to wake up. Mama, sleeping more and more, hadn’t been out of her room yet, but when Grandma was up, she walked

past and kissed me on the forehead before heading into the kitchen. I loved having Grandma around, and with her living with us, she'd taken over the kitchen entirely. As tired as Mama had been, I didn't think this bothered her. Less work for her, and Grandma cooked better, anyway.

"Aiden, you want pancakes or waffles?"

"Pancakes," I yelled.

"Boy, you just determined to make me work, ain't you?" I heard her open the fridge and start mixing ingredients. "Gone head to your room and start getting yourself right for church so we can stay out each other's way. I'll call you when the food's done."

"Yes, ma'am." Mama and Grandma still hadn't told me why Grandma lost her house, and I couldn't help wondering and hoping that everything was okay. That was the house Mama grew up in, and until high school, I spent more time there than our apartment. Grandma had a huge yard with orange trees I spent my days climbing, pretending I was a spider monkey. I used to try and make Grandma home-squeezed orange juice that she never drank. I can't say I blame her, I never remembered to wash my hands before I started squeezing. But Grandma and I also talked about everything under the sun on her screened-in porch. She sat in her rocking chair, and I sat on a milkcrate she'd flipped over and added a couch cushion to. I would miss that house.

We'd reached the second Sunday of April, the least special of the month. Since we'd be having service outside again, I decided on a maroon short-sleeved button down with navy khaki shorts and brown Sperry's. The brown belt brought the entire fit together. By the time I was dressed and out of my room so that Grandma could get dressed, she'd finished cooking. We sat at the bar countertop to eat.

"Grandma, these pancakes is the bomb," I told her, and she smiled. Mama was still locked in her room. "What's gonna happen to the house now that you've moved everything out?"



She chewed a while. “Well, I’m just gonna keep chuggin’ along. Probably stay here for a few months, then find a ‘lil place of my own.”

“What really happened though, Grandma?”

“Some things you wouldn’t understand. Things that were set in motion long before you were born, and to be honest with you, Aiden, I can’t afford that mortgage anymore. The house is owned by the bank now. I probably won’t ever see inside again but that might be for the best. After all these years, those walls still remind me too much of your granddaddy.”

I didn’t know much about mortgages or how the bank could just take Grandma’s house but when she wouldn’t look directly at me—something she always got on me about: making eye contact when talking to adults—I felt guilty for asking. Maybe she was better off if I left her losing the house alone.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here with us,” I said. “Especially if I get pancakes on Sunday mornings.”

Arriving to our outside sanctuary wasn’t something I was used to yet. Grandma wore her pink hat with a jeweled trim, one of her favorites. I wondered if this was her way of trying to lift her own spirit about losing the house. The worship team sang “Way Maker” and “Break Every Chain,” then The Clark Sisters’ “Is My Living in Vain?” I never got too deep into the worship part of the service, but when they sang about God being a way maker, I prayed and asked God if He could make a way for Grandma to get her house back. I tried repeating some of the words Deacon Murry said in his prayers. Grandma cried and caught the Holy Ghost to all three songs, and I noticed Mama crying, too. She had been so quiet lately, like there was something so heavy on her mind that if she opened her mouth just a little, everything would come pouring out. I knew her silence had to be from the new life growing inside her, but I wished she would talk to

me. The song “Break Every Chain” was the one that choked her up. She held both her hands up like she was waiting for the Lord to break and pull away whatever chains she was bound by.

When offering time came, Grandma held her head down when she told me she had nothing to give this week either. I wanted to tell her having no money for the church was okay, that God would understand having nothing to give, but the middle of service wasn’t the time or place. Jelani was in the bathroom again when I went on my routine before the sermon visit. Besides getting dressed, I sometimes thought getting to talk to Jelani was the only thing I liked about church.

“Wassup, Aiden?” he asked. We dapped each other up.

“Nothing much, man. You?”

“Hiding, per usual,” he said laughing. “You doing okay? You look a ‘lil shook.”

I definitely felt uneasy.

“I’m good. Thinking about too much, I guess.”

He nodded. “You wanna talk about it?”

“Maybe another time. Sister Patterson probably has her ear to the door right now anyway,” I said laughing.

“Her nosy ass. Ain’t nobody studying her or *her Bishop.*”

“Did you like growing up with somebody like the Bishop so close?” I asked, a question I hadn’t planned a second before I asked. He told me he loved his grandfather and looked up to him most of his life, but he eventually saw him for who he really was.

“What changed,” I asked, “that made you see him for who he really was?”

“I can trust you, right?” he asked, more to himself than me. “About a year ago, I came out to my parents. And eventually they told him, and when they did, he told me straight to my face

that I was a disgrace to our entire family. Then he preached some b.s. about gay teens the next week.”

“I...would’ve never guessed that about you,” I lied. I didn’t know what else to say. I remembered the sermon, I just didn’t know Jelani was the inspiration.

“Oh, so you haven’t heard the rumors like everybody else, huh?” I knew by his tone he wasn’t upset. “It’s fine, I’m only messing with you. My family acted blindsided when I told them, probably because like most people, they have an image in their minds of what a gay person looks and acts like.” I couldn’t help feeling guilty, and I wasn’t sure why. I thought about what Mama used to say when I asked her about Jelani, about tongues, evil, and deceit, but I didn’t know how that applied to this.

“Well, I don’t think you’re a disgrace. I wish I had your kinda confidence.”

“When people around you are nothing but judgmental, you gotta find way to survive. Not be phased by them not being able to see you for you. It’s really all about having your own mind. But trust me, you don’t want these problems, man.”

Before I could respond, Sister Patterson knocked on the bathroom door. Jelani and I dapped each other again before heading out. I felt closer to Jelani, seeing that he’d trusted me this way, but there was something about seeing him for who he really was now and considering how his grandfather had spoken to him that made me feel sick to my stomach. I couldn’t imagine being Jelani and having to sit through his sermons every week. These were things I knew about the Bishop. Him speaking to Jelani this way hadn’t surprised me because even as a child, I witnessed him speak to and about people this way. He didn’t care what someone’s sin or struggle was. Their cross to carry was heavier because of the shame he imposed, and his pulpit was his

worldwide stage. When I returned to my seat, he was wearing his black robe and preaching out of the book of *Malachi* with extra emphasis on the *third chapter and tenth verse*:

“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse,” he read, “that there may be food in My house, and try me now in this, Says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of Heaven and pour out for you such a blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it. Amen.”

The congregation sang “Amen.”

“Turn and look and your neighbor and say, *I want room to receive my blessing.*”

Mama and Grandma repeated this to each other in unison with the rest of the congregation. Black preachers were always making you say this and that to your neighbor, and I didn’t care to participate. They were the ones preaching, not me.

“Can I be real today, Church? I mean *real* real,” he asked.

“Come on, Bishop,” a voice called from the back of the pavilion. There were other words of encouragement, more gas for his already full tank.

“A lot of y’all like to take a scripture like that and only listen to that end part. Y’all just want the blessing. Y’all are looking for that cup to overflow! But what that first part say? Somebody help me.”

“Pay those tithes, Bishop,” Sister Patterson yelled from the back of the church. She was always the Bishop’s biggest hype-woman, even more than the first lady.

“That verse say *what?*” he asked again.

The church became a mass choir. “Pay those tithes.”

“Bring *some* of the tithes into the storehouse...” he teased.

“All!” the congregation boasted back.

“Bring a *few* of the tithes into the storehouse...”

“All!”

“Bring *all* the tithes into the storehouse that there may be food in *my* house!” he yelled.

“Can I be real, church? Y’all said I can be real today.”

“Be real, Bishop!”

“There’s a lot of y’all that can’t get to them blessings because you don’t want to give. Paying for the football game. Paying to keep the nails done and the cut fresh but get amnesia when come time to pay tithe.” There were “Amens” and “Hallelujahs” scattered between every couple of words. Grandma was quiet, flipping through her Bible like she was searching for something. “You know, church, I had a member come to the office the other day in need of some help.” Grandma closed her Bible, leaving only her thumb to save her place. “She sat down in my office, and she say to me, *Bishop*,” he used a mocking, high-pitched voice. “*I need some help. I’m struggling in my finances.* I looked at her and I asked, *well sister, have you been paying your tithes and offerings? God ain’t made no false promises!* Me and the chairman deacon pulled that finances report, and she ain’t gave the church a dime in months, even after Satan tried to take our church away from us! There wasn’t nothing I could do for her. This church ain’t in the business of giving out loans, especially to those who can’t do the simple things God done asked of ‘em.” No more gas from the congregation now. “Oh, I must be getting too real for y’all.”

“That’s alright, Bishop!” Sister Patterson shouted, and the rest of the church joined her with nervous “Amens” and scattered applause, like they were afraid of the consequences otherwise. The Bishop always bashed instead of encouraging. Watching him was like watching the antagonist in the soaps Grandma watched on weekdays. These fictional characters could say and do whatever they wanted, never being challenged. If someone did challenge them, they risked becoming outcasts. TV shows never got these kinds of people right, except for the Bishop.

Mama and I went straight to the car after the benediction. We sat waiting for Grandma. I could feel the heat rising, but this wasn't the Florida heat.

"Oh, y'all are already in the car," Grandma said pulling the door open. "I was standing there talking to Mother Williams, just looking 'round."

"Mama, did you tell Bishop you lost the house?" Mama asked.

Grandma closed the door, pulling her seatbelt across her body. "What?"

"You asked the church for money to help you keep the house, didn't you? Mama, you know how he—"

"Do we have to do this now? In the church parking lot?" Grandma asked.

Mama put the car in reverse, and the whole ride home was silent. Grandma turned her body to the window, like she trying to be as far away from Mama as possible. If someone opened her door, she might've fallen out of the car. When we pulled into the apartment parking lot, I let Grandma get out first.

"So, the Bishop was talking about Grandma, wasn't he?" I watched Mama in the rearview mirror. "The stuff about tithe and the woman in his office?"

"That's not for you to worry about."

"Mama, that's not fair. You literally called Grandma out right in front of me."

"What I told you about being in grown folks' business?"

"Why do we have to keep going back to church when the Bishop treats people the way he does?" I asked. I didn't know what had come over me.

She turned off the car and sat back in her seat.

“Aiden, we don’t go to church for the Bishop. We go to church for our Heavenly Father. And we don’t get to question his authority or the calling on his life, either. That’s just the way this works. Do you understand me?”

I nodded, rushing out of the backseat, because I didn’t understand. I wondered if Mama really believed this, that God wanted people to stay in a church like ours. I considered telling her what he had said about Jelani, his own grandson, but I didn’t want to betray Jelani’s trust.

I’d heard enough to know. Grandma asked the Bishop to help her keep her house, and since turning her down wasn’t enough, he preached about her in front of the entire congregation.

When Mama went to her room to lay down after we finished eating, I was finally able to ask Grandma if she was okay.

“Oh, baby, I’m fine. I been on the wrong end of a sermon before. Ain’t the first time, may not be the last.”

“Do you really believe that stuff the Bishop was saying?”

“Which part?”

“I mean, he basically said that if you don’t give money to the church, you don’t deserve to get help if you’re in need. I’m sure if you stopped paying your tithe you had a good reason. You’ve served in other ways. With your time,” I pleaded.

“The Word is the Word. Don’t matter which translation you read.”

“I guess,” I say. “If that was me, I wouldn’t step foot back in that church.”

“I reckon faith ain’t that simple, Aiden.” She sounded just like Mama. I knew I was wasting my time. “I been there all these years. Old as I am now, where I’m going? I’m gonna go lay down for a bit. Don’t you think too hard ‘bout all this, you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I lied. There were too many strikes against the Bishop for me to stop thinking about this. My mind went back to all the times I’d heard him preach about people my entire childhood. I couldn’t find God in a man like him, elevated by the people, only to spend his life talking down on those same people. I thought the sinkhole would have humbled him.

#

When Grandma came out of my room, I was already sitting up on the couch with the pull-out bed put away. We’d reached Youth Sunday, and this was my Sunday to do the opening scripture and prayer to begin service.

“You up awful early,” Grandma Lucy said. She glanced at her Bible next to me on the couch. “You getting ready to bring the Word?” I let out a nervous chuckle. “What you want for breakfast?”

“I’m not really hungry today.”

“My baby is fasting *before* he brings the Word? Come on now, man of God!”

“Alright now, Miss Lucy.” I knew she was joking, but the truth is I was nervous about today and the scripture I would read. I was preparing for the biggest risk of my fifteen years of life, but if the Bishop could use the Bible to take shots at people, why couldn’t I?

We dressed down on Youth Sundays, so I wore an Aretha Franklin graphic tee, a pair of skinny jeans, and Vans. I hoped the jeans wouldn’t be too much for the heat and humidity. When we arrived at church, Jelani greeted us instead of the usual Sister Patterson. He hugged Mama and Grandma, and I dapped him up, then stood back for a second while Mama and Grandma walked to our seats. I struggled to understand how Grandma still cared to come or be a member here after the way the Bishop singled her out last week—even if only a few people knew his sermon was about her. I’d heard the Bishop preach targeted messages before, but the stakes were



higher after someone so close to me became the target. Everybody else was just like Grandma, though: they let him beat them with his words, and they still came back week after week, like they were addicted to the pain.

“How you feeling?” Jelani asked.

“I’m okay. You?”

“Don’t want to stand here smiling at these saints and ain’ts, but here we are,” he laughed.

I wanted to ask him how he able to keep coming back every week and keep a straight face, but if his parents were anything like Mama and Grandma, he didn’t have a choice.

Sister Patterson rushed over to let me know the service would begin at my cue.

I stood at the podium below the stage, and of all the moments I’d stood before the church and said speeches, read scriptures, prayed, and even sang, none of those moments felt as chilling as this one did.

“Praise the Lord, church,” I said into the microphone.

“Praise the Lord!”

“Please stand for the reading of our opening scripture. Today I will be reading from *Romans chapter twelve, verses seventeen through nineteen*. Please say ‘Amen,’ when you’ve found it.” I waited for a wave of *Amens* to pass over the sanctuary before I began reading. “Verse seventeen begins, *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Give careful thought to do what is honorable in everyone’s eyes. If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Friends, do not avenge yourself; instead, leave room for God’s wrath, because it is written, Vengeance belongs to me, I will repay, says the Lord*. May God add a blessing to the readers, hearers, and doers of His Word. Please bow your heads for prayer.” The Bishop bowed his head with the rest of the ministers. I couldn’t read what he must’ve been thinking. He held his composure perfectly.

His face didn't change, but he didn't close his eyes, and I knew that he knew. I began my prayer without for a second taking my eyes off of him. Just as I rehearsed, like Deacon Murry:

“Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you for this day. Thank you for everyone here and thank you for allowing us to all arrive to your house safely. Lord, today I pray that as your Word says vengeance belongs to you, that you will fight our battles for us. As we ourselves repay no one evil for evil and strive to do only what is honorable, I pray that every person who has wronged and hurt your children—your *real* children, those who truly love and serve you—will feel a wrath that only a God like you can provide.”

I was startled when I heard Grandma Lucy shout, “Jesus!”

“I thank you, God, for all things, and for hearing my prayer to you. In Jesus' mighty name we pray, Amen.” The church bellowed “Amen” and clapped as the music began. I turned away from the Bishop and rushed to my seat, avoiding direct interaction with Mama and Grandma. The Youth Worship Team was my distraction as they sang “Jireh” and “Hallelujah.”

At offering time, Grandma handed me a ten-dollar bill and a tithe envelope to take for her, then reminded me to go to the bathroom on my way back to my seat. I wondered where she'd suddenly gotten money again to pay her tithe if she couldn't afford to keep her house. She should've been saving every penny she had. As I crossed the front of the pavilion to drop off Grandma's offering, I could feel the Bishop watching me, and I couldn't help but consider the consequences I would suffer for what I'd done. Even as the youth pastor, Jelani's dad, preached, I heard none of his sermon. I could only think about the song “Hallelujah.” I replayed the words in my head, repeating over and over to myself that “Hallelujah is the highest praise.” I wondered if the Bishop thought that *he* was the highest praise or, that he was the highest to be praised or,

maybe that he should receive the highest praise. He'd always been unrelenting, saying whatever he pleased, and we all just went along with his antics. No one dared challenge him until I did.

When service ended, I rushed to the car and left Mama and Grandma to hug and talk to everyone. I at least knew that the Bishop wouldn't confront me at the car. He didn't approach anyone, anyway. If he decided he had something to say, I knew he would summon me to him, but I hadn't considered that I might be targeted in his next sermon. If Grandma and Jelani could bare being preached about, I was sure I could, too. I was quiet on the ride home and listened to Mama and Grandma talk about how they thought service went. They talked about the worship team and the sermon, even how good the youth ushers had been doing, but they didn't mention my scripture or prayer. I prayed that they wouldn't.

Grandma cooked ham with lima beans and rice, and this time I was the silent one. I tried to make small comments to avoid drawing attention.

"These lima beans are the bomb, Grandma," I said through a mouthful. Mama didn't say much either. She ate quickly, then hurried to her room to lay down.

When Grandma and I were alone, she said, "I admire what you did today, Aiden. Thank you for that." I could tell she wasn't done, so I waited. "I want you to be careful, though. You shouldn't publicly...challenge the Bishop like that."

"Who says I was challenging him? I read a scripture that could've been about any..." Her expression told me she knew, so I gave up trying. "If he can preach a whole sermon directed at you, I can read one scripture and pray a *sincere* prayer."

"I know you were trying to protect me, but you don't need to fight for me. God'll do the fighting."

“And that’s what I prayed for, Grandma,” I told her. “For God to do the fighting, even if that means fighting the Bishop.”

“Aiden, I told you faith ain’t that simple. With a person like Bishop, everything is different. He’s still called by God.”

“Well maybe today I was called by God, too.”

I didn’t sleep much that night. I thought about what I said to Grandma, about being called by God. I hadn’t considered that I had been called by God to say or do something until I said this to her, and I still didn’t know if I really believed that. What I did know was that I didn’t want to serve the kind of God who would let a woman as pure and sweet as my Grandma Lucy be a punching bag. I didn’t know if this was the Bishop’s God, Grandma’s, or some odd combination of both. I thought of Jelani, too, and what the Bishop said to him. He was still just a man, even sitting as high up as he did on his pulpit, with his expensive suits and fancy cars and big house. If God had answered his prayers, I hoped that he would answer mine.

I texted Jelani around eleven to see if he was still up. He called instead of texting back.

“Hello?”

“Yo, you good?” he asked.

“Yeah, I was just gonna ask something random.”

“Wassup?”

“Did your granddad say anything about me today during y’all’s family dinner?”

“That’s definitely not as random as you think, but nah, nothing that I can remember.”

I was quiet at first, but if Jelani had trusted me, I thought I could trust him. “My scripture and all that was directed at him today.”

“Ha...I thought so.” He got hype off this. “About time somebody played his game with him. What’d he do that set you off?”

“Last week, that whole tithing sermon was about my grandma. That story about a woman asking the church for help? My grandma lost her house, and he wouldn’t help her.”

“Damn,” he said. We both sat quiet for a minute. “Well, no, he didn’t say anything. Good for you for standing up to him, ‘cause I ain’t ever met nobody else with balls enough to do that. But you should be careful, Aiden. If I know my granddaddy, he ain’t the kind to go down without a fight. And he won’t care who gets hurt.”

Before I could fall sleep, Mama walked into the kitchen.

“What you doing still up?” she asked me.

“Hard to sleep when your mind is running the way mine is.”

She walked over, sitting on the edge of the pullout bed. When I thought she was going to say something, she just grabbed my hand and squeezed. I considered telling her I knew about the baby or about everything Jelani told me. I wanted to ask her what she thought of my prayer and tell her how scared I was, but I stayed silent until she seemed ready to speak.

“Thank you...for letting your grandmother have your room.” I could hear all the emotions she’d been hiding from me the last few weeks. I hadn’t stopped to consider the toll this must be taking on her. This was a lot for her to deal with, too: Grandma moving in, having to listen to the Bishop every Sunday, the child growing inside of her. I squeezed her hand back. “I’m proud of you, Aiden.”

I wanted to ask her what she was proud of me for, but I didn’t. I just said, “Love you, Mama. Go get some rest.” She kissed my forehead. I didn’t ask her, but, deep down, I think I

knew why she was proud. I also knew this was far from over, but I had done something Mama and Grandma, and probably Granddaddy, too, had never been able to do. I stood up to the Bishop.

Before I fell asleep, I said that prayer again, but not just to spite the Bishop. When I prayed this time, I tried to mean the words from my heart. I wanted justice for Grandma, Mama, Jelani, and every other person who'd given decades of their lives to Hallelujah Praise Center only to be paid dust.

“God, if you're listening,” I whispered so low I could only feel the vibration of my words, “avenge Grandma Lucy and everybody else who's been done wrong.”

#

By the fourth Sunday, I was grateful for a feeling of normalcy. Grandma made a big pot of oatmeal, and I wore black khaki shorts with black loafers and a white polo shirt.

When we were heading out the door, Mama ran to the kitchen, and I could hear her puking into the sink. Her morning sickness got worse every day.

“There's ginger chews in the pantry,” Grandma said. I sat back watching the whole thing, unable to speak. After a few minutes, Grandma came back to the living room. “You ready to go, Aiden?”

“How long will she be sick like this?” I asked her.

“What?” Mama appeared in the hallway.

“Nothing. I'm gonna wait in the car.”

I headed to car, where Grandma followed me. A few minutes later we saw Mama rushing down the stairs, and when she got in, she seemed embarrassed wouldn't look at me or Grandma the whole ride.

Sister Patterson greeted us when we crossed onto the pavilion. Another too-long service in the Florida heat.

“Praise the Lord, y’all. Mother Sutton, you sure are wearing that hat today!”

“Thank ya, Sister Patterson,” Grandma said.

Me and Mama smiled and slid past her.

“Oh, Aiden,” Sister Patterson called, “Bishop asked if I could send you to his office when you got here this morning.” Mama was already halfway to her seat and didn’t hear, but Grandma turned back to look at me. My moment to face the Bishop had come.

“You need me to come with you?” Grandma asked.

“No, ma’am. I’ll be fine.”

I walked into the annex, where the deacons had converted one of the storage rooms into an office for the Bishop until the construction on the main building was complete. I stood outside of the storage room door, knocked, then waited for him to give the okay to enter. I was impressed by what they’d done to make this storage room an office. He had a picture of a White Jesus hanging behind his desk, and I hoped that wasn’t who I’d been praying to. The Bishop was a different sight in his office—no overflowing clergy robe that made him look bigger than he really was. He wasn’t wearing a suit jacket yet, and behind the brown desk, he didn’t seem as powerful as when he was in the pulpit.

“Praise the Lord, young Brother Aiden.”

“Morning, Bishop. Sister Patterson said you wanted to see me?”

“Indeed, have a seat.” He pulled his glasses off and motioned to the two seats across from his desk. “Do you know why I called you here?”

“I think I have an idea.”

“I imagine you might think I was convicted by that little stunt of yours last week.”

“*Conviction* isn’t necessarily the term I would use,” I said.

“Then what term might you use? Seeing as you seem to have a way with words.” I didn’t respond when he said this. He stood and came around the desk to sit in the seat next to me. I couldn’t tell if he was trying to intimidate me or make me more comfortable, but as he drew closer, I felt anxiety run through my entire body—up from my feet, through my legs, into my stomach, my throat, then settling in my head and clouding my judgement like a brain freeze. I wasn’t sure I knew what I’d gotten myself into. “Son, I don’t have time to play childish games. What you did last week—trying to defy me in my own church—if you ever, and I mean ever—”

“Bishop, are you threatening me for reading a scripture and praying that God avenge his people?” I was panicking, trying to play innocent, as if the scripture and prayer wasn’t directed at him.

“Boy, you can call it what you want. Try some foolishness like that again, and God as my witness, you’ll be praying a different prayer. You crazy as a bed bug if you think you got any place standing in front of my church reading about some damn ‘evil for evil.’ You ain’t seen evil!” He leaned in closer, placing his elbows on his knees, and I could feel his breath on the side of my face. “Let me school you real quick, son: while you worried about me and trying to get God to *take me down*, you should be asking Him to have mercy on that homeless grandmother of yours. And let me not forget that loose mama you got.”

I turned to face him now, and the grin stretched across his face made me nauseous.

“Excuse me?” I stood as I said this. He knew about Mama before Mama had even had a chance to tell me, and to call Grandma Lucy *homeless* was beyond cruel. He was a wicked as I thought he was.



“Sit your ‘lil self down.” I saw no option outside of obedience. I was a vulnerable teenager in the palms of his hands. “All I’m saying is congratulations, you’re going to be a big brother.” He chuckled. “Another bastard in the Sutton family. Lord have mercy.”

Mama wouldn’t have told him she was pregnant, which left Grandma as the only person.

“*Deuteronomy twenty-three and two,*” he continued. “*A bastard shall not enter the congregation of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation.* What a shame. Y’all probably won’t ever get your lives together. Here’s the thing you need to understand, young buck: God don’t play ‘bout me. Devil tried to take this church I built, this empire, and you see what happened? Support come rushing in. Plenty money, more members. Did you really think that ‘lil speech of yours was gonna shake something? Shake *me?*”

“My intention wasn’t to shake you or—”

“Boy, hush. You’ll speak when I tell you to speak. Imagine having the audacity to disrespect me the way you did, then think I called you in here to mumble about your intentions. Damn your intentions! I called you in here to remind you who’s turf you on. *Mine.*” He held his index finger to his chest. “And especially after all I’ve done for your bastard, fatherless self, you should be thanking me. You ought to be glad I let the Sutton family continue coming and serving here after all y’all have done. Don’t get this thing twisted, boy.”

“That is enough!” Grandma forced open the storage room door. “Aiden—out! Now!” She grabbed my wrist, pulling me to the door. Grandma had rescued me, but she wasn’t done. I wasn’t sure how much of the conversation she heard. “And you,” she said, looking at the Bishop. He opened his mouth to speak, and Grandma Lucy held up her index finger to silence him. Her voice was dry, like she’d been yelling. “All these years, Bishop. All these years! My family has been here all these years, making sacrifice after sacrifice! Revivals, Vacation Bible School,

community outreach, selling dinners, planning trips, prayer meetings, organizing baptisms—so that *you* could focus on nothing but preaching God’s word. But I don’t see the God in you no more, Bishop. I let you tear my family down for years, even after my Ben died, but God as my witness, you won’t tear us down no longer. This ends now! Aiden, it’s time for us to go.”

We exited the annex, and I realized I’d been crying. I was sobbing, close to hyperventilating, and I didn’t know why or how long. I turned toward the pavilion, and Grandma Lucy grabbed my wrist again. She had done something none of us had ever seen before. I might’ve read a scripture, prayed a public prayer, trying to beat him at his own game. But Grandma Lucy had read him one for the old and the new. For me. For Granddaddy Ben. For Mama, and, deep down, I hoped for Jelani, too.

I still wish they had been there to hear her.

Years later, we returned to Hallelujah Praise Center one last time. I walk in behind Mama, holding my little sister, Lucia’s hand. She’s seven now. When we reach the front of the sanctuary, Grandma Lucy’s body lies before us. She’s wearing her favorite pink hat, a perfect match for her rose gold casket. I notice the Bishop standing behind the podium in the pulpit. He isn’t the man I remember. He has aged and seems smaller now, even from the pulpit, in his black clergy robe. I can see where the millions of dollars from the sinkhole have gone. He offers me a forward nod, and I grab my little sister’s shoulders, motioning her to our seat on the front row next to Mama.

In the hearse on the way to Grandma’s gravesite, Lucia rests her head on my lap.

“Who was that man in the black dress-thingy?” she asks. She slept most of the funeral.

“The Bishop,” I tell her. “He used to be Grandma’s pastor.”

“He used to be *our* pastor,” Mama corrects. She’s sitting directly across from us, reading the back of Grandma’s obituary.

“He was really loud,” Lucia says. “I’ve never seen a church that big. It looked like when we go to the movies.”

“Yeah, Hallelujah Praise Center is definitely a show,” I tell her. This was the only church big enough to fit all of Grandma Lucy’s family and friends. She was loved by so many. The Bishop’s eulogy of Grandma was fair...sort of. He talked about how great she was and how much she served God. Eventually, the eulogy turned to condemning the unsaved, and I realized not much had changed. I was glad Lucia slept through this eulogy. One day, I’m sure I’ll tell her the story of how that church is a part of our family history. I twirl my finger through her sideburns, and I know this tickles because of the way she giggles. I hold on to this giggle for as long as I can.

## CRANES

Daye's hospital room was dark, the only light a flickering fluorescent bulb in the hallway. He hadn't been awake for long, but no matter how much the flickering made him flinch, he preferred this faint light over a fully lit room. There were tubes running in and out of his body—one to his nose that he assumed was to provide oxygen and another feeding directly into his forearm that he assumed must be an IV. There was machinery and beeping around him that he couldn't understand, aside from the small screen to his left displaying his heart rate. He watched this whenever he didn't know where else to look.

At his bedside, his best friends Malcolm and Adrian sat in peeling, vinyl chairs. Daye's parents were on their way, an hour-long flight from Central Florida to Northern Georgia. The trio knew his parents' arrival meant Daye and his parents would need to be left alone with the doctors and cops. They didn't mind the doctors, but they didn't want to deal with any more cops. Daye still hoped his parents would arrive soon. Malcolm and Adrian were two nineteen-year olds who always had something to say, but they were mostly quiet now, though Daye didn't mind. Aside from the beeping of the machines attached to him, the only sound was the hurried whispers from a nurse's station down the hall about what they thought happened.

"How you feeling?" Malcolm asked.

"How do you think he's feeling?" Adrian answered. "He just got shot."

Daye could tell from Malcolm's fidgeting and the spaced look in his eyes that this was the only thing he could think to ask. Something to fill the uncomfortable silence.

Some of the facts were unclear, but they all knew Daye was shot in the stomach by a cop on campus. Daye remembered lying flat on the gurney, being rushed through the halls of the hospital. According to his doctor, his surgery was quick and successful, but the looks on his

friends' faces scared him. Mourning was the only way he could think to describe their expressions, and even though he was alive and knew that his body would heal, he didn't want to tell them how he felt. The bullet was removed, but this was the least of his worries.

"I'm all right," Daye answered, voice trembling and groggy from the anesthesia.

"Don't try to talk right now. Just rest, like the doctor told you," Adrian said. "This is crazy, man. I can't believe any of this is happening for real."

"I know one thing for sure, campus is gonna be a nightmare after this. That cop better lose his job," Malcolm said.

Daye laid his head back on his pillow and closed his eyes, hoping his silence would encourage his friends to just be quiet too.

"If I'm being honest," Adrian whispered to Malcolm, as though Daye couldn't hear him. "I wish I could say I'm surprised by all this. I had a feeling something bad was gonna happen because of one of those cops. I just didn't think Daye would be the victim."

"Bro, you can't be saying stuff like that," Malcolm said. His voice was low and edgy, and Daye could hear how sleep deprived his friends must've been. He searched the room for a clock.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"4:23."

The darkness outside the small window told Daye this meant a.m., and depending on when he'd gotten shot, which he couldn't remember yet, also meant his friends hadn't slept all night.

"Y'all should go home. Go sleep. I'll have my parents call when they get here."

"Nah, forget that. We ain't leaving 'til they get here," Malcolm assured him. "Adrian, I'm gonna grab something from the vending machine. You want anything?"

Outside of the hospital room, Daye heard the vending machine churn. Even through the grogginess, he could hear Malcolm buy a canned soda. Probably a Coke, his go to source of caffeine.

“We gotta be real about this,” Adrian whispered. His voice sounded heavy to Daye, like he was holding his pain in the back of his throat like mucus. “I told Daye to cut his hair a long time ago. You can’t be on a campus like ours with hair like that and not expect somebody to get the wrong idea. Something wild was bound to happen sooner or later.”

Adrian’s words were like a sucker punch to Daye, and he nearly lost himself trying to consider what Adrian might’ve meant. He’d been growing his locks since his senior year of high school. His parents begged him not to lock his hair, telling him that he’d never be able to get a real job with hair like that. Daye wasn’t interested in the conversation, the same way he was never interested in any conversation that he felt made being Black a spectacle.

“Listen to what I’m telling you, son,” his father said. “Gon’ be real hard for you to be taken seriously in any context if your hair ain’t combed.”

“That’s outdated, Pops,” he told his father. “Nobody cares about that type of stuff anymore. Even White people got dreads now.” Daye took pride in keeping his locks neat—he never missed a retwist appointment—and while he admired free form styles like Basquiat’s, he’d always thought of himself as an exception to the rule because of his neatness.

Daye and Adrian met during freshman orientation, two of only eight Black students in a session of over 100. They made a joke of counting; this fact having started their first conversation.

“I can’t lie,” Daye said. “I’m used to this—being one of the only Black kids around.”

“You and me both.” Adrian extended his fist to Daye. “How long you been growing your dreads, bro?” Adrian’s hair was cut in a low fade with a crisp edge and waves he always joked would make you seasick if you looked too long.

Daye thought about this moment and wondered if his hair was to blame for all of this. His father never mentioned anything about getting shot at because of his hair, but his words still stung twice as hard now.

“A Black man should be able to wear his hair any way he wants without—”

“This is America, Mal,” Adrian interrupted. “And we Black students going to school in the *south*. We got electric cars and all types of AI’s, but this is still the south. So, yes, Black men should be able to do whatever we want, but we can’t. You know that. Daye knows that. I told him to cut his hair.”

Daye heard the door open and pretended to be asleep. He didn’t want to risk having to participate in their conversation.

“So, you think Daye got shot because of his dreads?”

“Don’t try to twist my words, Mal.”

Daye thought that maybe he should interrupt and try to defend himself, but beyond not having the energy to argue, there was nothing he hated more than talking about these kinds of issues—and his friends knew this about him. Adrian pressed his fingers into the corners of his eyes, like he was trying to wipe away eye crust. Malcolm cracked open the Coke, taking a long gulp.

Even while Malcolm and Adrian argued, Daye knew they were the closest things he had to family there. He considered that they could’ve been back at school sleeping the night away—which he preferred—but they were here. For him.

He met Malcolm the same way he met Adrian. They were enrolled in Honors Freshman Composition, and their professor asked students to find a partner. They searched the lecture hall as their classmates scurried between desks. When Daye noticed Malcolm, he offered the nod every Black man spoke. Malcolm nodded back, crossing the room, and took the empty seat behind him. Leaving class, they realized they lived in the same dorm.

“I thought you looked familiar,” Daye said. “What floor you live on?”

“Second, you?”

“Same,” he laughed.

The trio got to know each other through late night gaming and study sessions. Adrian and Malcolm were like Tom and Jerry, always butting heads about the simplest things—from what to eat for dinner or whose team was better. Daye was usually the middleman, the peacemaker. But at a school with so few Black students, having each other’s backs was always more important than whatever pointless beef they had.

“So, are you saying my best friend deserved to get shot?” Malcolm was yelling, his voice higher than normal, rattling the walls of the small room. Their argument was more intense now, and Daye wasn’t sure how much longer he could fake being asleep. “Is that really what you’re trying to say right now?”

Adrian rushed to close the door of the hospital room.

“Will you calm down? You know that’s not what I’m saying! And Daye’s as much my best friend as he is yours. What I’m saying is that every time you saw Daye outside of class, what was he wearing? That black sweatshirt and a durag with his dreads hanging out the back. What is anybody supposed to think?”



“That he’s a student, like the rest of us,” Malcolm pleaded. “The way he looked doesn’t give any cop the right to shoot him.”

“That’s not what I’m saying!” Adrian yelled. He pressed his thumb and index finger into the corners of his eyes again.

“Guys,” Daye called.

“See you what you did with all your yelling?” Adrian asked. “You woke him up.”

“I need to get some air. I’ll be back,” Malcolm charged toward the door.

Daye almost told them he hadn’t been asleep, and he almost called after Malcolm, but he thought that maybe if he let him leave, he’d calm down and they’d stop talking about whether he deserved to get shot, as if he wasn’t lying right in front of them.

“I’m sorry, D…” Adrian said.

By the time Malcolm returned to the hospital room, Daye was actually asleep.

“Yo, I’m sorry for upsetting you, man,” Adrian said. “I’m just trying to make sense of all this.”

“You and me both.”

Adrian was holding his phone, scrolling through his Twitter feed. “Have you checked Twitter?”

“I don’t think I can handle Twitter right now, bro,” Malcolm said.

“Trust me, you need to see this this.” Adrian handed Malcolm his phone.

“*Student/officer crossfire on University of...*” he mumbled as he read. “Crossfire? They trying to lie and say Daye had a gun?”

“Ask me if I’m surprised,” Adrian said. He slouched in his seat. Malcolm sat down next to him.

“We gotta make sure Daye doesn’t get a whiff of this. Where’s his phone?” Malcolm asked.

“With the cops still.”

“Figures.”

Silence filled the room again. Nothing else in their worlds mattered enough to talk about—not the midterms they’d just finished, the new Nikes that had just dropped, or even the girls they were messing around with. They could only think about Daye and what happened to him.

“Are y’all finally done arguing?” Daye asked. He was awake again and fully lucid for the first time since being shot.

“How you feeling, man?” Malcolm asked. “You need anything, some water or something?”

“I’m good.”

“No, you’re not, Daye. You don’t have to lie to us,” Adrian said.

“I don’t know what else you want me to say, Adrian. Y’all know I hate talking about shit like this.”

“Say anything you want; just don’t fake like you’re doing okay. You know you don’t have to do that with us.”

Daye was quiet. He searched the hospital room, but there was no escaping Adrian or Malcolm’s stares. They were desperate for him to say something.

“Adrian, do you remember when you told us you felt like your job was to prove White people wrong?”

Adrian shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I didn’t say prove them wrong, I said show them a different perspective.”

Well,” Daye continued, “I used to think I agreed with you, that I never had to say anything—I could just be. I don’t know about that anymore.”

#

The trio was in Malcolm’s room one night during the spring semester of their freshman year going over an environmental science study guide. Daye was stretched across a beanbag next to Malcolm’s desk, Adrian occupying the empty desk and Malcolm on his bed with his laptop. Adrian had made a joke of how much Daye and Malcolm used the word ‘y’all.’

“*Y’all* are some southern boys, for real,” he laughed.

“Bro, you know what that just reminded me of?” Daye asked. “I remember one time I said the word ‘finna’ in AP Lang, and this White girl nearly lost her mind.”

Daye’s teacher was hidden behind her desk, paying no attention to the conversations around the room. Daye was the only Black kid in his class. His public school had a fair number of Black students, but they weren’t often encouraged to take the honors or AP classes he was in.

“I can’t even remember how I said it,” he continued. “I think I was like, ‘I’m finna go the bathroom,’ or something like that, and she hunched her shoulders back all dramatically and goes, ‘finna?’”

“Yikes…” Malcolm said.

“I didn’t even catch what was happening at first. I was like, ‘huh?’ So, she says, ‘you just said ‘finna.’ What on earth does that mean?’ And everybody is staring dead at me. Probably the most awkward moment of my life.”

“Did you tell her what ‘finna’ meant?” Adrian asked.

“Yeah, I felt like I had to. I was the only Black kid in there. They was looking at me like I talking like a runaway—”

“But see, that’s the thing,” Malcolm interrupted, “on my mom, I wouldn’t have explained shit to them. Google is free.” Malcolm was the only one of the trio who’d gone to predominately Black schools most of his life.

“Don’t you think that sometimes that’s our duty as Black people in White spaces, though?” Adrian asked.

“Hell no!” Malcolm laughed. “Bro, are you crazy?”

Daye was quiet. He knew Adrian was getting ready to take the conversation somewhere he hadn’t intended when he brought up this memory, and he didn’t want to be a part.

“Hear me out,” Adrian said. He pulled out his phone and showed Daye and Adrian a school picture. The students wore green polos with a bird embordered into the left breast and khaki pants. “Y’all see this? This is my entire graduating class. I went to a private school. There was only a hundred and seven of us, and I was the only Black guy. Now, you see this girl right here?” He pointed to a White girl a few rows behind him. “I remember one time after a student government thing she was like, ‘I’ve never met a Black person like you. You’re so different from the rest of them.’” He made his voice high pitched, mimicking the girl in the photo.

“Yeah, cause you’re the *only* Black person she’d ever met,” Malcolm laughed.

“That’s beside the point,” Adrian argued. “So, yeah, I was there on a scholarship, but Black kids where I’m from didn’t get that kind of opportunity often. Seeing me and how great I was changed her mind about Black people. I did that just by being there and existing. Never had to say a word.”

Malcolm and Adrian argued for nearly fifteen minutes. Malcolm was set on convincing Adrian that he wasn't an anomaly because a White girl thought he was different from other Black people. Daye could remember him using the word "problematic" several times, saying the real issue was that she grouped Black people into one category.

"Well, y'all have fun," Daye interrupted. "I'm gonna finish this study guide."

Adrian and Malcolm shook their heads, agreeing to disagree. Daye hadn't considered himself on either side. He just didn't want to hear them argue about explaining things to White people anymore. To Daye, he didn't have to deal with these issues if he didn't talk about them; so, he rarely did, and he wished his friends would do the same.

#

"Do you remember what happened, Daye?" Malcolm asked. He and Adrian were still unsure what led to Daye being shot. "I'm sorry if it's too soon to ask."

"I'd rather not talk about that," he told them.

Daye was wearing a blue and white hospital gown. He looked down at his feet, covered in a yellowing blanket full of lint, then over to his heart monitor. He hadn't fully thought about what happened that he ended up there, and now that he began to, he could see his heart rate increasing. No matter how soon Malcolm asking felt, he didn't think there'd ever be a moment he was ready to talk about being shot. He feared that talking about might mean admitting he only looked suspicious to the cop because he was Black.

"Look, man..." Adrian began. "We don't want to force you to relive that moment, but the cops said they'd be back when you were awake and lucid. They're gonna been all up in your shit asking questions and taking down notes."

“Trying to make this my fault, I bet,” Daye said. “Are people talking about what happened on social media?”

Adrian and Malcolm’s silence was answer enough.

“Whatever they saying, I don’t wanna hear it.”

In two years of friendship, they’d never all been this quiet. There was always something to talk about. Daye ran his fingers across the lines in his palm as if they could’ve given him a reading of what to say.

“I was hungry,” he started. “This wasn’t long after I’d texted y’all that I didn’t wanna go out. Midterms kicked my ass. I was just tired. I was craving those chicken tenders that the campus hub next to the rec center sells.” He sat up. “I had just showered, so, I had on my du-rag, a t-shirt, some sweats, my Birks. I didn’t know the temperature had dropped, so, I was walking kinda fast, tryna get there and back. And when I walked in, everything was normal. The girl who normally works the counter was in there, I smiled at her, then walked over to the counter in the back where they serve the hot food, and the lights were off. A lady in the back saw me and said they stop cooking at eight. I guess I hadn’t been in there that late before.” Daye paused. Malcolm and Adrian could sense that he was nearing the part of the story where everything went south.

“It’s all right, Daye,” Malcolm said. He and Adrian drug their chairs closer to Daye. Adrian squeezed just below Daye’s knee, an unspoken encouragement. “Keep going, bro. We got you.”

“I walk out, and I’m thinking to myself, *okay, Uber eats will do*. Out of nowhere, I hear somebody yelling behind me, ‘are you a student here?’ I turned around, looked over my shoulder, and I’m thinking, *nah, he not talking to me*, even though I knew he was. They always asking for our IDs, assuming we ain’t students here. So, I ignored him at first and started walking faster.”

He tried his best to render himself emotionless. He didn't want to cry yet. "At this point I'm cold, hungry, and tired, and I just wanna get back to my room. Then the voice says, 'you think I'm playing with you? Turn around now with your hands where I can see 'em.' And I'm like *is this fucker really about to try and arrest me for ignoring him?* But I knew better than to play that game. I turned around and said, 'I'm a student, sir. I got my ID right here.' I reached into my pocket to pull out my student-ID, but before I could even get my ID out, I saw he'd pulled his gun. I said, 'officer wait, I'm a student,' and I threw my hands up, like *please don't do this*, but it was too late. The next thing I remember is coming in and out of consciousness in the back of the ambulance."

The only response Daye got was the beeping of the machines around him. He instantly regretted talking and giving his friends the details they asked for. The truth was that they were always being asked to show their student-IDs, to prove they that were students. The cops on campus never cared if they were together or alone. When the trio first moved into their dorms, they thought their faces would've become memorable at some point, especially considering that they were usually wearing university gear. But this never changed, and they were still always asked to show their IDs, especially at night.

"And y'all know what the worst part is?" Daye asked. He didn't wait for them to respond. "This one moment is gonna follow me for the rest of my life."

More silence.

"This is straight up racism," Malcolm said. "These campus rent-a-cops are always on one. We gonna get justice for you, Daye. Don't you even worry, bro."

“I hate to be this guy...but hear me out. This is exactly what I’ve been trying to say all along. We are Black men. We can’t walk around looking a certain way and not expect to be seen as a target. None of us!”

“Adrian, please,” Malcolm begged.

“They have one image of us in their minds,” he continued, “and Daye, bro, you know I love you, and I think this whole thing is fucked, but you walked around looking like the prototype of that image.”

Daye sat back in surrender. Part of him believed that Adrian was right, as much as he didn’t want to admit this.

“There’s no way to excuse this,” Malcolm said. “None of that gives them a right to shoot Daye. Even if he wasn’t a student.”

“Yeah, try telling them that.”

“I’m not about to waste my time arguing with you.” Malcolm backed toward the window. “If you want so badly to be right, then fine. This is absolutely Daye’s fault. He got shot because he’s a Black man walking around on a White campus. Go off, king.”

“I’m not trying to be right. I’m just not gonna pretend I don’t know shit ain’t sweet for us. If we wanna survive out here, we have to move different.” His voice cracked. “Come on, Malcom. You know what I mean. We gotta walk a certain way, talk a certain way, dress a certain way, wear our *hair* a certain way. We can’t give them a reason. I’m only playing by their rules.”

“But *their rules* wouldn’t have stopped Daye from getting shot! He could’ve looked like Barack Obama and that cop would’ve still shot him if he wanted to! Don’t you get that this could’ve easily happened to me and you? Daye could’ve died!”

“I wish I had,” Daye said.



Daye knew he survived the gunshot and that physically, he would be fine. Even though he'd have to clean the wound frequently with maybe a few weeks of physical therapy, his body would bounce back. None of that made being shot real. He knew that the story was trending on social media. He knew that everyone he knew either already knew about what happened to him or would soon find out. And he knew that his only real crime—being Black—would follow him forever: in school, in the grocery store, in his favorite restaurant. For a person like Daye who never even cared to engage in conversations on Black matters, he feared he might become the newest face of police brutality. This thought haunted him.

Adrian turned. “Daye, come on...don’t be saying shit like that.”

“Do you hear the shit *y’all* are saying? Or how badly this is tearing *y’all* a part? *Y’all* mad at the wrong people. I knew better. I know how those cops on campus operate. I knew I should’ve stopped and answered his question the first time. I knew I should’ve looked less...Black. I did this. This one is on me.”

“You can’t really think that,” Malcolm pleaded.

“Wait, Daye,” Adrian said. “That’s not what I meant.”

For Daye, this was exactly what Adrian meant, and maybe he was right.

“What was the word you used, Adrian, *prototype*? You told me to cut my hair, right?”

The responsibility Daye feels settles like weights dropped to the bottom of a pool. No matter how much he thought being shot was his own fault, none of what he’d experienced was real until his friends asked him to tell them what happened. His words made it all real. And now with his friends finally silent, Daye understands how wrong he has been for years prior. He thought that if he never talked about racial issues, police brutality, especially, they couldn’t touch him. They shot him instead, and his silence couldn’t save him. Daye talked, like his friends wanted, and

now there was nothing they could think to say that would offer any real comfort. He wished he could cry or scream, but he didn't think either option would actually relieve him.

"Has anyone seen my phone?" he asked.

"I'm pretty sure the cops have it," Adrian said. "What do you need?"

"I just wanna know where my parents are."

"They should be here soon. Your dad texted us about twenty minutes ago."

Daye was exhausted. From all the arguing, from the surgery, from all the feelings. He just wanted this to all be over.

"I know you said you wish you died, but you get to live to tell your side of the story, and there's a lot of Black people who don't get that chance," Adrian said.

Daye didn't look at Adrian when he said this. Having to tell his side more people felt too heavy a weight.

When Daye's parents arrived, he begged Malcolm and Adrian to go back to their dorm to sleep, promising he'd call in a few hours. His mom crawled into the bed, wrapping her arms around him, and for the first time since everything happened, he sobbed uncontrollably. He didn't know which thing had made him cry—the trauma of being shot, the gratefulness he felt for Malcolm and Adrian, the safety he felt in his mother's arms, or a combination of the three.

When the sun finally came up, Daye noticed metal cranes lingering over the building next to the hospital that he hadn't seen the night before. The cranes reminded him of a song he heard once. Just because he couldn't see the cranes, didn't mean they weren't really there—the same way his refusal to talk about race issues didn't excuse him from dealing with them or make them any less real. He thought about what Adrian said. He had a rare experience. A White police officer shot him, and while he might've meant to, he hadn't killed him—even if for a moment,

Daye wished he had. Daye was alive to tell his side of the story. He wouldn't be just a trending story or hashtag. Things would be different with him. He didn't want to tell this story or be the new face of police brutality, but no matter how much he wanted to be normal, unattached to racial trauma, he knew that his silence hadn't protected him. Maybe his voice could heal him.

## S IS FOR SILENT

In her thirty-plus years of teaching, Marilyn McBride had never encountered a non-verbal student. There were students who didn't talk much, and certainly those who talked too much, but never had her classroom been occupied by a student who didn't speak at all. Elijah Johnson was moved to her class three months into the school year, and she'd sat him in the desk nearest her own at the front of the classroom. Elijah could add, subtract, multiply, and divide with work shown more neatly than almost every student she'd ever taught. There was no word on the spelling test that he couldn't spell. His art projects had been selected by the art teacher to be part of the school's annual art show. But, even when prompted, whether motivated with reward or threatened with punishment, from the time Elijah arrived at school, until the time he stepped off the bus each afternoon, he was a child of no words.

Marilyn stood at the front of her classroom, an Expo marker in one hand, a five-point-six reading workbook in the other. She watched Elijah, noticing the strawberry jelly stains on his pants, still there from the day before. *Poor child*, she thinks. *Mama won't even try to handwash the stains out his clothes.*

"Elijah, can you give us a line of textual evidence to support option C for this question?" Each time she asked Elijah a question, she rendered a new hope that maybe he would respond. Elijah looked up at her, then pointed to a section of the book open in front of him. "Can you tell us the page number and read the sentence aloud for the class to hear, please?" Elijah lowered his head to his chest. Same as always. Several students jumped in their seats, in anticipation, with "I know" and "Ooh, me," echoing across the classroom. "Give him a chance, guys."

"Mrs. McBride, you know he isn't going to say anything," a student called out.

“Are we speaking out of turn, Jenna?” She pressed the cap to the Expo marker, and the classroom chatter fell silent. “Oh, okay. I didn’t think so.” She walked to Elijah’s desk to see where he’d pointed. “Very good, Elijah. If you were on page twelve, citing paragraph four as your evidence, please give yourself a silent cheer.” Marilyn stood over Elijah and read the paragraph aloud, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze as she walked away to offer as much reassurance as she could without drawing attention from the other students.

Marilyn dropped into her boss’s office after taking the class to lunch.

“I just don’t know how to get through to him,” she pleaded. “I’ve tried everything under the sun. The poor child will not talk.”

Albert Massey, the school principal, glared at Marilyn over his glasses. He was a tall, skinny white man, young enough to be Marilyn’s son. She was certain he only had this job because he was the assistant superintendent, Jefferey Massey’s nephew. Albert only ever came to work in black suits, which made his appearance as pale and dull as his personality. Marilyn had often wondered why he chose a career working with children, since he lacked compassion whenever dealing with them.

“Elijah was moved to your class because I’m confident you have what it takes to get the kid talking. Have you tried using your...Southern, African American, Ma’Dear charm on him?” He was looking down at his phone screen now, and, in some ways, Marilyn was grateful, because had he caught the look in her eyes, he might’ve crumbled before her like dust.

“Excuse me, Albert, but that is extremely inappropriate.” He raised his hands the way every offensive white man does, an immediate *let down your guard, don’t take things so seriously*.

“I didn’t mean that whatever way you think I did.” What way was that, then? Marilyn wondered. “All I’m saying is that the students here respect you. The staff respects you. You just have a certain way of conducting your classroom that makes the kids here love you, but with just the right amount of fear. And you’ve been here longer than anybody. Just give Elijah—and yourself—a little more time. I mean, have you tried reaching out to the parents?”

Marilyn massaged a circle into the palm of her left hand using the thumb of her right. She was stunned that he would ask something that seemed so given.

“I have emailed, called, and sent home written notes in his planner. Nothing. You’ve already given me six students on IEPs. What Elijah needs is a therapist or a guidance counselor.”

“Then be his therapist and guidance counselor, Marilyn.” Marilyn held up her index finger, readying herself to straighten her boss. Albert’s office phone rang. “I need to take this. Are we done here?”

“I guess we are,” Marilyn said, exiting the office. “Saved by the damn bell.”

“Marilyn,” he called, holding the phone over his shoulder. “Just play it by the books this time, all right?”

She knew exactly what he meant. Marilyn had once or twice been overtaken by tunnel vision when helping her students. Earlier in her career, she’d gotten in trouble for sending a pair of sisters home on the weekends with sandwiches and small snacks to make sure they always had something to eat outside of the free school lunch. She’d been secretly feeding the sisters for almost three months until she sent home a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and one of them had a small allergic reaction.

Marilyn had spent her entire teaching career at Georgetown Memorial Magnet Elementary School, even back when the school was still called Georgetown Primary School.

Walking through the halls, you couldn't tell now, but this was the school that every Black child in Georgetown attended. There were more Black students back then when Marilyn first started teaching, and even more than that back when she was a student, and her mother was teaching. Her mother had given her life for this school, for this little Black town. Marilyn felt sick when she considered what her mother would think if she could see what the school had become. Were schools gentrified? But the school was still in the heart of Sanford, just off of downtown, the city's real moneymaker, and though things looked different now from the town Marilyn had grown up in, its history as a pioneering town was still as alive as ever.

In three weeks, Elijah had not spoken a single word. She sat at her desk that Wednesday afternoon trying to consider what options she had left. She knew there had to be a way to get through to him. She considered the harsh words of her boss, telling her to be Elijah's therapist and counselor if that was what he needed, and she knew expecting so much from her was unfair. But, as a public-school teacher, that was the life she and many other educators lived. Marilyn thought about her mother, who always came home with stories about students.

At thirteen years old, Marilyn had stood in the kitchen mixing cornbread batter when her mother came through the front door with her school bag in hand. Marilyn turned over her wrist to check the time.

"That boy cut the plum fool in that classroom today," she told Marilyn. "I start to tell him, your mama oughta to whup your behind soon as you walk through that door!"

Marilyn smiled. Her mother was as old school as they came, which meant Marilyn had no choice but to be the same. She knew that for her mother to want to whup somebody, he must've really been something else that day. Marilyn's mother had never raised a hand to do anything but offer praise, whether that was to the Lord or to one of her students.

“What did you do, Mama?”

“You’ll understand this when you have kids of ya own one day, but sometimes a child act out cause they lacking something someplace else. ‘Stead of punishing or beating ‘em, you got to figure out where that lack is. You fill that gap or even make it just a ‘lil bit smaller, you won that child for life.” Her mother opened the oven for Marilyn to push in the pan of cornbread. “I stopped by his house to talk to his parents, saw everything I needed to see then. And he saw that I mean business.”

Marilyn hadn’t visited a student’s home in years. Home-visits wasn’t a thing teachers did in the twenty-first century. She loaded Elijah’s student profile on her computer to check his address.

“Georgetown?” she asked herself. Elijah’s documented address was only a few blocks from school, and before she knew it, Marilyn was packing her bags and grabbing her purse to head to her Honda.

Elijah’s neighborhood was familiar to Marilyn, even though she’d moved out of Georgetown years ago. There were children running barefoot in the street, their smiles as pure as the kind babies offer when her mother would say they were dancing with the angels in their dreams. And there was still a candy-lady on this block—Marilyn could see the sign nailed to her mailbox and was tempted to see if she might have a cherry freeze-cup. Georgetown was home.

When she pulled into the driveway of Elijah’s house, making a few unlucky conclusions wasn’t hard. Most of the grass in the front yard was dead, though the weeds in the cracks of the driveway were overgrown. The wooden steps of the front porch were completely worn on one side, leaning to the left like they might fall along with the rest of the house, if you stepped too far to that side. The pink paint was chipped, there wasn’t a toy in sight, and despite tire tracks across



the grass, there were no cars parked at this house. Marilyn considered that at least her rusted Honda would fit right in. She walked carefully up the driveway, then crossed onto the shabby, green pavement that led to the front porch. She was careful not to walk on the lawn, even though there seemed no real lawn present.

She knocked three times, then stepped back to wait.

“Who is it?” This was a child’s voice. Soft and slightly high pitched, but Marilyn knew the voice belonged to a boy. She felt a lump grow in her throat, like she’d suddenly needed to cough up a blob of mucus. She wondered if this small voice might belong to Elijah, and seconds later, she could see his afro peeking through the front room’s curtain. When she saw his face, she felt delight but the worry in his eyes gave her a sensation of regret that she was invading his space in this way.

“Mrs. McBride,” she answered, trying to sound cheerful. Her throat was in her stomach now. “Is your mother home, sweetie?”

Elijah opened the door slowly, hiding most of his body with it.

“Lijah, who is it? What I told you ‘bout answering that door without telling me who it is?” A young woman appeared from behind a wall, holding a toddler on her hip. “Go sit down and eat.” Elijah’s head hung low, and he hurried into the kitchen before reappearing with a plate of food at the dining room table.

Marilyn was surprised at how nice the house was on the inside. Sure, the wooden floorboards were cracked, and each step one took could be heard across the entire house, but besides the brown stains on the front room’s couch, the house was clean and smelled nice.

“It’s just juice,” Elijah’s mother said when she caught Marilyn’s eye. “I can’t keep nothing clean with these two. You ‘Lijah’s teacher, ain’t you? You wanna come in?”

Marilyn pulled herself from her daze. “Yes. And, yes, please.” Elijah’s mother guided her to the couch. Marilyn smoothed the pleat of her skirt and sat down, crossing one leg over the other. Elijah’s mother placed the little girl in a playpen on the other side of the room.

“You want some water or some to eat? I ain’t cook nothing but some pork and beans and rice, but I cut some sausage up in it like my mama used to. ‘Lijah swears it’s the best thing in the world.”

Marilyn smiled at this. The smell of the house, of the pork and beans, all felt so familiar to her. “No, thank you. Us mamas sure do know how to doctor-up something outta the can, though, don’t we?”

Elijah’s mother nodded. “That’s the only way. What you doing here, anyway, Mrs. McBride? Somethin’ wrong at school?”

“I wanted to talk to you about Elijah. Have you seen any of my emails or gotten any of my phone calls?”

She glared back at the dining room to see if Elijah was listening. He was.

“I had to let my phone get turned off,” she said, her voice low. “So, no, I ain’t got none of your emails or calls. Is he acting out or somethin’?”

“Not exactly...” Marilyn let her voice trail off. Did his mother really not know? “Elijah was moved to my class about three weeks ago, and he’s one of the brightest students I’ve ever encountered. But he hasn’t said a single word in all that time. Does he talk regularly at home?”

“Does he ta—‘Lijah get over here.” Elijah’s chair made a scuffing sound against the floor. “You really playing these games again?”

“No, ma’am,” he answered, shaking his head at his dingy, black socks.

“I know you not finna sit here and lie!”

“Well, wait a minute. This has happened before?” Marilyn didn’t take her eyes off of Elijah.

Elijah’s mother stared at him in a way that told him his only way out was to answer her original question. Marilyn recognized this motherly scowl.

“Mama, it ain’t no game. I just ain’t got nothin’ to say.” Marilyn thought she might fall out of her seat. Hearing him speak in full sentences felt to her like hearing a baby say their first “Da-Da.” His voice was nothing like she’d expected. But it was a voice. His voice.

“But, why, Elijah?” Marilyn asked. “Your voice, even right now, it’s perfectly fine.”

His mother hadn’t taken her eyes off him.

“‘Cause they say I talk like a runaway slave. Say I sound like Jim from Huck Finn.”

Marilyn almost laughed until she realized Elijah was serious.

“Go sit down and finish your food,” his mother grunted through her teeth. “Mrs. McBride, ‘Lijah first did this last year after some boys on his bus had a lot to say ‘bout the way he talk. I don’t know why he at it again.”

“Did you contact the school when this happened?” Marilyn asked.

“Contact the school? For what?” She stood and walked to grab the fussing child from the playpen. “They don’t care nothing ‘bout ‘Lijah. And they wasn’t finna punish no white boys for what they said to him neither. I’m surprised they sent you out here.”

“They didn’t send me anywhere. I came because I care about Elijah’s success.”

“Well, what you want me to do? I beat him, took his games away, made him stay from going outside—nothing I do work. He’ll talk when he get ready.”

Marilyn peeked at Elijah, still at the table eating his beans. “Listen to me,” she said under her breath so that he couldn’t hear her. “A child like Elijah has enough working against him. And

it ain't gone get no easier from here. The least we can do is give him tools that make him confident in the way he speaks. That starts at home.” Marilyn massaged a circle into the palm of her hands again, finding comfort in the warmth this created. “And the least you could do is show up. Be present. I understand times are hard, we all got problems, but I write in Elijah’s planner weekly. Read it. Respond.”

Elijah’s mother wore a look of disapproval, but Marilyn was Marilyn, and her tone always told a person when they should and shouldn’t respond. There seemed to be a lot Elijah’s mother wanted to say, but she kept her comments minimal.

“I’m doing the best I can. Are we done here? I need to feed my daughter.”

The next day in school, Elijah was silent as always, but something about his aura was different. “Elijah, instead of going to specials today, I’d like you to hang back with me for a little while. Is that okay?” Marilyn asked him. He nodded.

“It was nice to hear your voice yesterday.” He was quiet still. “I don’t want you to be ashamed of the way you speak. Even if it’s different than how a lot of the kids in our school speak. What’s cool about the way Black people talk is you always feel it. Words are never just words. Does that make sense to you?” He was silent, but he nodded. “Your language, Elijah—your words and how you say them, they’re a part of your culture. A part of our culture. And I don’t want you to be ashamed of that, okay?”

“Okay,” he said. Marilyn wanted to break into a Baptist fit. Her body felt like the blood might rush to her head.

“There’s a book I want you to read, okay? It’s not for a grade or anything, but when you have free time at home or something like that, I just want you to read it and tell me what you think. You can even write down what you think if you don’t want to talk. Now, this book is a

little advanced for your level, but I think you can handle a challenge. Is that alright with you?"

Marilyn pulled open her desk drawer and handed him Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Marilyn considered that she'd been told to play by the books. She knew the risks in taking her boss's instructions literally and giving Elijah a book outside of school curriculum, but she cared more about the lessons Elijah could learn from Cassie and the Logan family—lessons on language and family and land.

As the next week passed, Elijah still wasn't a child of many words, but Marilyn was slowly able to muster a "Good morning," or a comment of affirmation from him during instruction. And when her colleagues questioned the slow but sudden progress, she was truthful, though limited: the power of showing a child you care and a good book. Elijah was improving, and everything was seemingly great.

Dismissal had just concluded, and Marilyn placed the classroom phone back on its hook. She smoothed the polyester fabric of her skirt, sitting up as straight as she could and arranging the contents of her desk to appear neater before again correcting her posture. Today was a day she wished she had a million parent-teacher conferences or an afterschool faculty training. She heard his knock, and when she looked up, she saw a white button-down shirt that had to have been dry cleaned and starched to a crisp, accompanied by a velvet tie with a tie clip she knew was worth more than her wedding ring. Only his freshly shaved, pointed chin was visible of his face, and though this exceeded comparison of the khakis and off-brand Polos or scruff she'd grown accustomed to seeing of him over the years, there was no doubt in her mind that Jefferey Massey was who stood outside her classroom door. With her left hand still in her lap, she motioned with her right for the towering figure to enter the classroom. The "Growth Mindset" poster on the back wall seemed to mock her now.

*I embrace challenges as a way to grow*, she read silently. She'd added that one to the room for Elijah, but now she was who needed this affirmation most.

Without speaking, he crossed the classroom, his shiny and un-creased shoes making his presence heard on the tile floor, ironically taking Elijah's seat directly across from Marilyn. To her surprise, Albert cowardly trailed behind him like a lost puppy in search of acceptance. Her thumb was hard at work kneading itself into her palm, and finally, she fixed her gaze to meet Jefferey eye to eye.

"Mr. Superintendent. What can I do for you?" she asked.

He grinned a smile so gentle and sincere, Marilyn felt her shoulders lower in surrender. Maybe he wasn't the man he used to be. "I'm just the assistant-superintendent, Marilyn. Besides, we taught together for, what, eleven, twelve years? Dr. Massey will do."

She smiled with her lips before again asking, "What can I do for you?"

"I think you know why I'm here. Let's not waste each other's time." He rested his hands on the desk in front of him, and the Invicta watch on his wrist gleamed against the florescent lightbulb above them. "I know that you are fully aware of how inappropriate your actions were." Marilyn was silent. He stared at her, the way a disappointed parent stares at a child when they catch them in the act of misbehaving, only there was no love here.

"I was told to find a way to get through to my student, and that's what I did. The child is talking more and more in class every day. Why is that a problem?" She looked up to Albert who turned his head to the window, running from her attempt to make eye contact.

Jefferey shifted in his seat. Marilyn was going to make him work for it.

"But...a banned book, Marilyn?"

"Banned according to whom?"

“According to the Florida Department of Education. Don’t play this game with me.”

“You’ve been up there at that district office barley two years, and you already forgot the kinds of students we’re dealing with here? The child refused to speak in a classroom because the kids around him convinced him that his words weren’t good enough. And do you know that it happened before, and nothing was done about it? Maybe the book is a banned book, but that banned book taught him that his language is—I’m not explaining this to you, Jefferey. You know.” She cut her eyes at him before turning her body to the face the classroom window in search of whatever Albert was looking at. “I *know* you know.”

“But, Marilyn,” Albert began. “I told you to play things by the books this time. Do you know his mother reached out to me, pissed off that you showed up to her house, questioning her parenting skills? And then you top all of your broken rules off with this?”

She glared at him as if to place the coward back in his lion suit, and the classroom was quiet again. Marilyn was so still that she thought she could hear every organ in her body. “How long have you been teaching here?” Jeffery asked.

She was silent for a few moments more before she turned to answer him. “This is my thirty-first year. And before I taught here, my mama did.” She smiled at the mention of her mother then forced her face serious again.

“I hate to ask this—”

“Then don’t ask it.” Marilyn’s voice was hard and somehow warm still. There was authority in her voice, and she knew Jefferey felt it.

“Might be a good idea to start thinking about retirement.” Marilyn shook her head, still staring out the window. “I’d hate to have to pass down instruction to Albert to terminate you, effective immediately. Marilyn, I respect you as an educator. And—”

“If you respected me as an educator, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.” She turned to face him, and, for the first time since she’d met him all those years ago, she let him see the fear in her eyes. “I think we’re done here, Dr. Massey. Please leave my classroom.”

Jefferey stood, nodding to himself the entire time. “Make the right decision, Marilyn. This doesn’t have to end badly.” The palm of Marilyn’s hand was tender and red.

She walked to the back of her classroom, pulling a box of paper from a cabinet under the electric pencil sharpener. She emptied the paper onto the counter, then moved back to her desk. She pursed her lips and blew air hard through her nose, one hand on her hip and the box tucked under another.

“I guess this is how you going out, Marilyn McBride,” she whispered to herself. “Hmm.” She grabbed the Mrs. McBride name plate from her desk and dropped herself into the cardboard box.

On her way out of the building, the box under her arm, she saw Elijah sitting along the bus ramp with the book in his lap. The bus must’ve been running late again.

“Mrs. McBride!” he called to her. She was shocked at how loud he was capable of speaking. “This book cool. Cassie family talk like mine do. Her Papa sound just like my Granddaddy.”



## READING LIST

- Benz, Chanelle, *The Man Who Shot My Eye Out Is Dead*
- Burke, Tarana and Brene Brown, *You Are Your Best Thing*
- Butler, Octavia, *Kindred*
- Butler, Octavia, *Parable of the Sower*
- Castillo, Ana, *So Far from God*
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi, *Between the World and Me*
- Crowley, Michael, *Any Other Place*
- Curtis, Christopher Paul, *Bud, Not Buddy*
- Du Bois, W. E. D., *The Souls of Black Folk*
- Dunn, Steven, *Potted Meat*
- Evans, Danielle, *The Office of Historical Corrections*
- Finney, Nikky, *Heartwood*
- Flake, Sharon G., *You Don't Even Know Me*
- Gates Jr., Henry Louis, *Norton's Anthology of American Literature*
- Hampton, Leah, *Fuckface*
- Harper, Hill, *Letters to a Young Brother*
- Hayes, Terrence, *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*
- Hogan, Linda, *Power*
- Hopkinson, Nalo, *Skinfolk: Stories*
- Jemison, N.K., *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*
- Johnson, James Weldon, *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man*
- Johnson, Toni Ann, *Light Skin Gone to Waste*

Laymon, Kiese, *Heavy*

Laymon, Kiese, *Long Division*

Laymon, Kiese, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others In America*

Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider*

Mohabir, Rajiv, *Antiman*

Moniz, Dantiel, *Milk, Blood, Heat*

Moore, Wes, *The Other Wes Moore*

Morrison, Toni, *The Bluest Eye*

Nguyen, Phong, *Bronze Drum*

Packer, ZZ, *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

Philyaw, Deesha, *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*

Rankine, Claudia, *Just Us*

Reynolds, Jason, *All American Boys*

Rhodes, Jewell Parker, *Free Within Ourselves: Fiction Lessons for Black Authors*

Ruffin, Maurice Carlos, *The Ones Who Don't Say They Love You*

Sexton, Margret Wilkerson Sexton, *The Revisioners*

Smith, Clint, *Counting Descent*

Stockett, Katherine, *The Help*

Stone, Nic, *Dear Martin*

Taylor, Mildred D., *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

Thomas, Angie, *Concrete Rose*

Thomas, Angie, *The Hate U Give*

Thomas, Angie, *On the Come Up*

Tretheway, Natasha, *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir*

Ward, Jesymn, *Salvage the Bones*

Whitehead, Colson, *The Nickel Boys*

Wilkinson, Crystal, *The Birds of Opulence*

Yuknavitch, Lidia, *The Small Backs of Children*