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## The Jubilant City Almanac: Stories

Azaria Brown

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The Jubilant City Almanac: Stories

By

Azaria Brown

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

to the Department of English

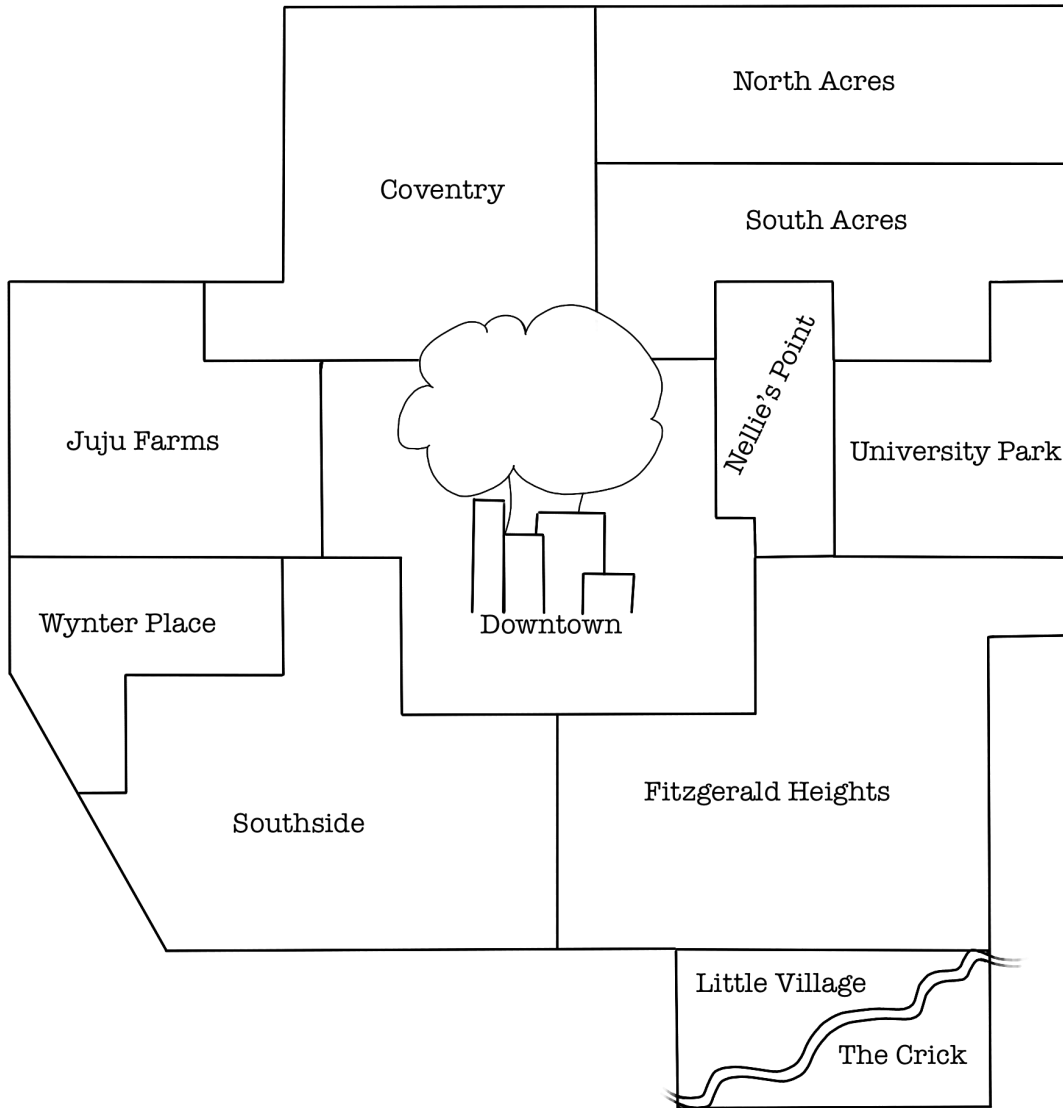
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April 2023

# Table of Contents

<b>Map.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The Tale of Jubilant City.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Jeremiah the Conqueror.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Three Years Later.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Margie and Cab Pt. 1.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Seven Days in West Sidevile.....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Carbon Copy.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Rolling the Dice.....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Margie and Cab Pt. 2.....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Got His Alligator.....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>Margie and Cab Pt. 3.....</b>	<b>137</b>

# Map





## The Tale of Jubilant City

In 1736, Nelly did her best to make room in her body for her mother's soul. Pushed her organs to the walls of her chest cavity, vowed to eat less, dropped a few memories, offered to get rid of a couple of ribs. Still, there wasn't enough space.

Instead, she placed it in the heart of a black willow tree, the trunks braiding tightly around it, roots digging into the ground like a toddler's fingers in the sand. By morning, the tree had doubled in height and again the next day until a comforting shade settled over Nelly.

One day, Mother asked if Nelly could move her over a little. Nelly took a thick rope of jute, looping it once around her arms and twice around the tree with a bend of her legs, Nelly pulled the tree from the ground. "Where?"

"I'll tell you when to stop."

Nelly headed east and walked until her tanned leather shoes fell from her feet and her heels hardened to stone. She walked through marshes and over dry cracked land. Through storms that soaked her through to her spirit and winds that threatened to blow her away.

“Here,” Mother finally said.

Nelly gently settled the tree into the ground and collapsed onto her knees, having long since lost feeling in her feet.

By then, Mother’s limbs had grown and stretched, creating a swath of shade 100 miles long and wide. The grass grew longer, the bushes fuller, all beneath the shade. Women migrated to the shade spot, clearing trees to build homes, fishing fresh water from the creek, catching and roasting squirrels that they’d shot out of Mother’s lowest branches. Those shot out of the highest splattered to the ground like ripe pumpkins, a waste.

More women arrived. Some by horse, some on foot, none knew where they were going until they arrived. Nelly posted a sign in the ground to welcome others to the new settlement they had created. Where the land was fertile and the shade plentiful.

“Should I move?” Mother asked.

“No,” Nelly said. “Stay where you are.”

Nelly the settlement to stay hidden beneath mother’s branches, her leaves spread wide. Nelly wanted people to find it, so that they knew, for sure, what it felt like to stumble upon what they’d been looking for. And when they found it...



## Jeremiah the Conqueror

**"High John de Conquer came to be a man, and a mighty man at that....First off, he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song...The black folks had an irresistible impulse to laugh"-*High John de Conqueror, Zora Neale Hurston***

Jeremiah was on his third lap around the front of his father's farm, the part where grass and dandelions grew in thick and healthy. From the porch to the fence, across to the utility pole and back to the porch. He had to run ten total and then head over to the Clarks to help them plant their soybeans while his father had another friend come over to tell him that he had no idea why his soil looked like shit for the second year in a row. He was on number four.

As he rounded the bend, his body slick with sweat, a police car spluttered up the long dirt road that led to their house, a beautiful white Victorian house his father inherited years before Jeremiah was thought of. Jeremiah slowed to a stop, his chest rising and falling heavily, his stomach dropping to his shoes. Before the clouds of dust settled back onto the road, Jeremiah's father had already pulled the front door open, the strong features of his face pulled into a frown.

Jeremiah flicked away the sweat dripping from his face and began trotting back to the house. Somehow, he knew they'd come for him.

“We’re investigating an abduction and homicide,” the officer said. His stomach hung just below his belt like a server’s apron and Jeremiah couldn’t help but watch it swing as he walked. At least he knew that no matter what he did, he could make a run for it. The officer leaned back on the couch, crossed his legs at the ankle, and faced Jeremiah. “Where have you been this past week?”

“Jeremiah’s on punishment,” his mother said. She leaned on the back of Jeremiah’s chair. He felt that she wanted to be close to him, ready to go to war for him like she always was. She adjusted the scarf on her head that kept the sweat out of her eyes and let one hand fall to his shoulder. “He helps out up the road and stays in the house the rest of the time. Ever since school let out.”

The officer looked bored and clicked his pen against his knee, “Why’s that?”

Jeremiah’s father rolled his eyes, “He gotta repeat the tenth grade. *And* he took my truck for a joyride in the middle of the night. Came back here on three tires and a prayer.”

The officer pulled a pad from his shirt pocket, wrote that down. “Don’t you have another son?”

Tripp was older than Jeremiah by three years, but they looked like twins. Tall and lanky, with auburn hair and even brown skin. Their mother said Jeremiah grew up on Tripp’s hip and that they followed each other like two raccoons. Where Tripp had a quiet confidence, Jeremiah was loud and clumsy. He could never simply exist. Tripp started working out his final year of high school; running, slamming a sledgehammer on old tires in the backyard, all to get ready for the marines. To leave Jeremiah. To make their father proud.



Jeremiah's father shuffled his feet, "Tripp went off to basic last month."

The officer didn't write that down, tucked the pen and pad back in his pocket. "Your classmate, Madeline Buchanan, went missing thirteen days ago."

He'd heard. Madeline was a girl that couldn't keep her hands out of his hair. A girl that refused to believe that he was black. A girl he'd pushed for yanking at his shirt, resulting in a ten-day suspension.

"Her remains were found this morning." For the first time since the officer sat down, he blinked.

It took less than thirty minutes to confirm Jeremiah's alibi with the Clarks. He spent his mornings there, helping on the farm, scrubbing the floors, moving things from here to there and back. Whatever would teach him a lesson and keep him busy and out of his father's hair. But that was only the beginning of his father's plan.

"I can send him along tomorrow, Pearl." Jeremiah's father covered the receiver with his hand, "Go on ahead and tell your momma she's gotta take you to the Greyhound in the morning." He turned his back to Jeremiah, "Just the rest of the summer. We'll come get him before Labor day."

Upstairs, his mother was already packing his suitcase, matching pairs of pants and shirts and rolling them tight until they looked like the cinnamon rolls she cooked on Sunday mornings. His father always slathered them with butter and blamed the after-church gas on Jeremiah. When he got upstairs, Jeremiah wiped the leftover straw from her forearms. She'd been cleaning the chicken coops when the officer pulled up.

Out of the three rooms available in their home when he was born, Jeremiah had been given the smallest, just enough space for a twin bed, a dresser and a desk where he kept his pet rat, Cheebz. He found Cheebz shivering in the corner of the chicken coop after fighting for his life for a night or two. He'd seen rats go after the chickens before, but Cheebz was just a baby and fit right in the palm of his hand. It took a lot of convincing and extra chores to convince his father to let Cheebz stay. "Where does Pearl live?"

His mother answered flatly, "Jubilant City."

"Will you take care of Cheebz for me?"

"He'll eat like a king."

Jeremiah reached his hand into Cheebz' cage and picked the rat up, feeling the little heartbeat on his palm. "I don't know what happened to her." When he turned to face her, her eyes were damp and red.

"God, Jeremiah, you better get yourself together. *Everyday* you prove just how hard your head is. Won't be hard for them to convince a jury of twelve idiots that you know *exactly* what happened to her." She wiped the unshed tears from her eyes. "And don't even let me hear about you giving Pearl a hard time up there. Not that she'd let you get away with it." She'd packed his entire dresser, the suitcase teeming with socks and underwear. "I know you didn't do it."

Jeremiah put Cheebz back in his cage and watched him climb into a hammock Jeremiah had made out of an old dish rag. Cheebz pulled three kernels of corn from the pouch in his cheeks. "Does Pops know?"

His mother remained quiet as she forced the suitcase to close by collapsing on it and zipping it shut. "Bring whatever else you want to take downstairs tonight. We're getting you on the first bus out tomorrow."

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After the two-hour, sweaty ride to the DC Greyhound station, Jeremiah was glad to hear that what people said about Jubilant City was true: the journey there took no time at all. The only catch was that you had to know how to get there. Finding out how to get there meant asking the right people. Usually, it also meant desperation. Jeremiah was the only passenger on the 11 am bus to Jubilant City. The driver, hidden behind a large pair of sunglasses, hummed the entire time. It took less than thirty minutes for him to arrive at the station in the Northwest corner of Jubilant City, where the tall buildings of downtown were merely watercolor washes on the sky.

Jeremiah stretched out on a bench outside the station; the moisture in the air made the skin of his palms damp. He listened to the bubbling sweetness of Jubilant's white noise, lemons scooting by and sputtering exhaust, the almost bird-like squawk of a squirrel perched high in a tree, the scoff of a man's shoes as he came walking up the sidewalk, a cardboard sign that said "Vietnam Vet, God Bless You," hung around his neck.

Jeremiah quickly wrestled out the \$20 bill his mother stuffed in his hand before he hopped on the bus in D.C. Tried not to think of how he hadn't hugged her goodbye, how he'd wiped her kiss from his cheek. Jeremiah slipped the money in the man's hand as he walked by. Jeremiah's father had served in Vietnam and still had nightmares about it every Winter.

A rusty brown pickup rounded the corner, the exhaust pipe damn near asthmatic. It jerked to a stop in front of him, the gear shift groaning loudly as it slid into place, the clutch not far behind. He ducked his head low to see a middle-aged woman in the driver's seat, wearing overalls and a shirt too big for someone twice her size.

"Is that my baby, Jeremiah?"

He had only heard her voice on brief holiday phone calls and rare arguments that she had with his father, who always called her a weird “juju” woman when he hung up. But even upon seeing this woman for the first time, he knew she was family.

“Hop in,” she said. “I bought us some ice cream and it’s melting.”

Aunt Pearl insisted Jeremiah take a couple of days to get used to her small ranch style house and the three acres of land it sat on. He shared her spare room with several filing cabinets, stuck with random bits of tape, a dusty desk and a chair stacked with old encyclopedias and typewriter ribbons. It reminded him of his home in Virginia with its creaking floorboards, long clothes lines, wide open kitchen and patch of dandelions by the door that grew in so thick, the fluffy seeds spread through the air like tufts of stray cotton. If he allowed himself, he’d miss it.

But Jeremiah just couldn’t stay still. Busied himself tidying the spare room, cleaning the kitchen, organizing his clothes in the dresser drawers only to unfold them and start over. Running laps around Aunt Pearl’s farm, even though she insisted she didn’t believe in that “military punishment shit.”

Each morning he helped a girl that introduced herself as “Weldonna Johnson Tate, named after the writer,” load boxes of fresh produce into a box truck. She always wore a “Jubilant City Closet” shirt and shorts that showed her long legs, covered in mosquito bites and scabs, always chomping on a piece of mint gum. But after that, there wasn’t much else to do.

He could hear his father say, “Idle hands, son. Idle hands.” One of his favorite sayings, which he’d made Jeremiah write 1,000 times whenever he complained of boredom. His other favorite saying was, “If the first child’s an angel, the second will be a demon.” It had echoed in his head as his mother drove him to the bus station.

No matter how many times he denied it, his father probably thought he killed that girl. After all, he was the second born.

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Let Monty, Jeremiah's pops, tell it, he had always been a man of God. When he was born he said, "Hallelujah!" As soon as he could stand on two legs, he was praise dancing. He was such a pious child that he offered to baptize the pastor. Then he joined the usher board and by the time Jeremiah was born, he'd landed the title of Bishop and preached every third Sunday. A faithful servant from the womb to the tomb.

But Jeremiah knew better than that. Monty was a patient man. But that was only because a liar will hang himself with his own rope if you give him enough time. And he was big on loving thy neighbor, but mostly because he wanted to buy a few acres from them at half price. And he'd never said it, but Jeremiah knew he'd killed people in Vietnam.

Then there was the night Jeremiah had heard him talking to his momma on the porch late. He smoked a cigarette—his only vice—and he said, "Luna, I get what you sayin', but that woman don't wanna be found. Even if she did, she ain't welcome here."

Luna took a deep breath and said, "I love Tripp like he my own—"

"—because he is—" Monty said.

"—cause he is, but he feel like a piece of him is missin' and we both know why. 'Cause his momma out there traipsin' around, not wanting to be seen. And his daddy...well, look at you."

Monty took a deep breath. Said, "I know Tripp is real as you standing here, but she not. She not real. She somebody else everywhere she go. You remember when I found her in St.

Louis a few years ago? A hairdresser. That's what she was then. But now? Who knows? A teacher or a lawyer, or what?"

"You even hearing me Monty?" Jeremiah imagined his pops was lounging on the porch swing, his momma standing off to the side avoiding the smoke, waving her hand for good measure. "I said you act like your son is not there. And then you take it out on Jeremiah and call it discipline."

"How?"

"Ain't no difference to you between the big stuff he do wrong and the little stuff. You wanna crucify him for it all."

"Crucify? Be careful."

"Don't start with me. You know what I mean."

"Yeah? Well, he gotta learn."

"Learn what? In a world that's against him, he already learned he can't trust you. The one that's supposed to show him the way. Good thing I got 20/20 vision. It'd be the blind leading the blind if we all had to follow you."

Monty sucked his teeth. Said, "If all you gon' do is complain, go in the house."

Right then, Jeremiah thought he was dreaming. The woman that raised him wouldn't let Monty speak to her like that. She did more than her share. She was the kind of woman that grabbed possums by the neck, carried lumber with no gloves and no fear of splinters, scolded Jeremiah in an attempt to save his life. Now Jeremiah had learned that Tripp was his half-brother; and she'd known all that time and was still solid as a rock.

They got quiet then and he thought it was over. Then Luna said, "That woman broke your heart into pieces and I bet you'd go runnin' to her if she walked by. Act like she never left. That's

why you don't wanna see her...hm? Then you'd be a sinner all over again and leave your wife and sons for some woman who stopped carin' about you long time ago." There was some quiet, then she said, "Tripp always got a place in my life. But you? I ain't so sure."

Jeremiah heard the screen door slam as Luna went back inside. Monty said nothing else. What else was there to say?

At times, Monty seemed to forget that Luna was the brains behind his farming business. She negotiated the contracts with their buyers. The first year his soil took a turn, she bought a tree-filled acre for cheap and added lumber to their list of offerings, earning them enough to save for the next year. Jeremiah wasn't sure how Monty fared before his mother, but if he lost her, he wouldn't last long.

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Finally, Pearl told Jeremiah to head out to the farm and find Roland, said he'd be the one leading the prayer. Between two large birch trees that overlooked the rows of cabbage, corn, watermelon and tomatoes, the farm hands were in a straight line, each connected to the next by the palm. As he approached he could hear the soft murmur of their whispered prayers.

"...in the nature of the Lord."

"Amen."

"Amen."

They grabbed their tools and fanned out to different parts of the farm, leaving just Roland and Jeremiah in the splash of shade.

"Pearl say you don't talk much."

Jeremiah had always been naturally curious, questions about the world around him perched on the tip of his tongue, like he'd perched on the roof of the Clark's house when he was

bored the summer before fifth grade, but Monty didn't take to Jeremiah's voice crowding every corner of his house. In other words, talking a lot was something Jeremiah had quickly grown out of.

Jeremiah just shrugged. Paused. Said, "Well, the Bible say—"

Roland chuckled and put a hand up, "I done read the Bible. No need to quote it to me." He handed Jeremiah a pair of gloves, a wooden crate and a clean towel. "Prayer is at seven, lunch is at 12:30, count is at 2:30. You'll get paid every Friday."

"Paid?"

Roland nodded sternly, "We don't do free labor."

Jeremiah worked his way through the section he'd been assigned picking the plump, tight-skinned cherry tomatoes. Every now and then he snuck one and muttered, "Lord forgive me," as the sweet acidity made his lips twist. By lunch time, most of the produce had been harvested. He thought ten farmhands was a lot for Pearl's land.

They crowded beneath the birch trees and ate from two large pots of corn chowder that Pearl had put together. Jeremiah looked out to the farm, most of the crop had been harvested.

"Aren't we overharvesting? If we do all this today, what will we do tomorrow?"

Pearl and Roland laughed like they knew a secret. Roland grabbed Pearl's hands in his own, "Your great aunt Pearl has magical hands—bountiful hands. She can grow anything as fast as you can quote a scripture. Turning sixty-five this year, can you believe that?"

"You don't need to tell everyone my business," she said, her sheen coated cheeks bubbling up red. Something hung between them that Jeremiah couldn't identify. "It'll all grow back by the morning, you just watch."

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When Jeremiah got over to the phone, his father said, "I hope I didn't wake you, son."

Jeremiah had slept in once and missed the bus to school. Monty never let him forget it. "No sir. How are things going?"

Monty took a deep breath, "Not good. Not really."

"What's wrong? Soil still not looking good?" Of course it wasn't, Jeremiah knew the answer to that. Monty had tried replacing the nutrients by letting the land drain and adding manure. He'd tried adding extra mulch between plantings. He'd abandoned herbicide the first summer that things went bad. He prayed. The soil never took to his methods.

"Second year in a row."

Jeremiah felt an itch in his palms, the dirty gloves weighing down his pocket. "I gotta go," he finally said. "I'll pray for you, Pop."

As a child, Jeremiah thought God and the Devil were the same man. Thought he wore a fitted black suit and sat upon his throne above the Earth. God-Devil watched Jeremiah through a large magnifying glass, then whispered in his fathers ear.

When Jeremiah told the kids at school he was half-Indian, God-Devil whispered it to Monty and he had to pray for forgiveness like, "Lord, I love my skin. I'm sorry for lying, Lord." If Jeremiah didn't pray loud enough, Monty took a belt to him and made him start over.

Afterward, he would go to Tripp's room where he'd let him pick one of the candy bars he'd lifted from Max's general store. And Tripp would say, "Pop think he know God, but he don't. Think he God, but he not."

Jeremiah had learned to love God-Devil in the same way that he loved his father: carefully and from a distance.

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Every morning at seven, they joined hands and prayed over the land. “We are grateful for nature and everything she affords us. We wade into her bosom, ready to nurture her as she has nurtured us. We vow to live our lives in the nature of the lord.”

“Amen.”

“Amen.”

Jeremiah went to section two of the cherry tomatoes and picked them quickly and carefully. At lunch time, he ate with the other hands. At the end of the work day he sat between Pearl and Roland; watched their hands sunken into the ground, the heartbeat of the Earth pulsing against their palms. He imagined them praying like, “I am a believer in God, our creator and all that he has created

But at five in the morning, Jeremiah was elbow deep in tomatoes already. His hands had begun to shake as he laid in bed. He quickly pulled on his clothes and headed outside. Picking all four rows of tomatoes before anyone had gathered for prayer.

He didn't know that he'd broken one of the magic's rules. That there was a reason. Roland and Pearl didn't start working until after seven. A brown patch grew into the ground where the tomatoes had been, the earth made barren.

Aunt Pearl wasn't mad, but she looked tired for the first time since he'd arrived. “Send everybody home,” she told Roland. “While we deal with this.”

“Sorry,” Jeremiah mumbled.

She looked up like she'd forgotten he was there. “S'alright, I should've told you.”

Right on time Weldonna Johnson Tate came rumbling up in the box truck. Her skin covered in so much sweat, she glowed in the sunlight.

“Ah shit,” Aunt Pearl said, perching her hands on her hips. “No crop today Weldonna.”

Weldonna looked down at the lurching spot of dead grass, the tomato crops laid wilted over the long cages, their leaves and blossoms completely shriveled. “What happened?”

“Just a mistake.”

“Well, what am I doing today?”

“Take my nephew downtown, he needs to get out for a little while. Come back a little after lunch.”

Weldonna met Jeremiah’s eyes for the first time. He could tell that she wasn’t impressed. “Well come on,” she finally said. “You better wear your seatbelt.”

Downtown Jubilant City had an energy Jeremiah felt fortunate to experience. The streets were crowded, the buildings were piled high, the noise was loud and unrelenting. But everything moved, each thing had its purpose. There was no waiting. Those tall buildings Jeremiah had seen from the Coventry bus station weren’t buildings at all. Right in the center of the bustling town center was the biggest willow tree Jeremiah had ever laid eyes on. Its numerous trunks grew in all different directions, but wound themselves around one another in a strong, thick braid. All of downtown had been bathed in a thin shade.

They stashed the box truck in a little parking garage where Weldonna knew a guy and headed out on foot.

“What you do to get sent away for the summer?”

“They think I killed a white girl.”

Weldonna held her arm across Jeremiah’s chest to keep him from attempting to enter the crosswalk of a busy street. “Did you?”

“No. Why would you ask me that?”

She shrugged and stepped into the crosswalk, just as the light changed from an orange hand to a white man walking without a care. “Don’t nobody think *I* killed a white girl.” Weldonna continued on, “What you wanna do here? You can find whatever you want downtown. You just have to know where to look.”

Jeremiah rang his hands in front of him, “I just wanna stop getting into shit.”

“Then stop.”

Jeremiah sucked his teeth. He’d learned to always be good company. He wondered if Weldonna had been taught the same.

“Let’s just go to the tree. It’s like a Jubilant City rite of passage.” Weldonna led him down a couple of streets and the tree got closer and closer.

Up close, the tree was brooding and mystical. It was intimidating. It looked like a surrealist painting. The roots stretched across the area of the downtown park, initials had been carved into every inch of them.

“You just ask for what you want,” Weldonna said. “You might get it, but maybe not. We think it’s a 50/50 split.”

Jeremiah looked up at the tall trunk. He’d never seen one like it. The branches sprouted from the trunk and hung low, leaves grew orange, red, yellow, purple and green. He bet that if he had a saw big enough and his mother’s strength, he’d open the trunk and find a million rings, all different colors. He gently nudged at one of the roots with his shoe half expecting it to grab his foot and swallow it whole. “How I do it?”

Weldonna sat at the end of a root and wiped dirt off of the “K+DW” carved into it. “It’s like praying. You ever do that?”

“You want me to pray to this tree?”

“You usually pray to a big invisible man, right? What’s the difference?”

Jeremiah had asked his father why they’d never seen God. He got in trouble, but Luna told him that God was everywhere. Everything was a sign of his love. His sacrifice. His mercy. If God *did* exist, surely he’d crafted the tree by hand. Took his time pinching each root at the end and layering the colors of the tree’s trunk like an old artist palette. Jeremiah knelt at the end of a root, clasped his hands together and said, “I need...help.”

When he opened his eyes, a man stood before him, bent at the waist, examining Jeremiah, memorizing every pore of him. The man wore a pristine tuxedo and the largest smile Jeremiah had ever seen. “I’m John,” he said, holding out a large and perfectly manicured hand. “High John.”

Jeremiah took his hand, but shook with caution. “Jeremiah.”

“Jeremiah...Now, where’s that from?”

“The bible. He was a prophet. The mouthpiece of God.”

High John paused, stood straight. Laughed like he was front row at a comedy club. A belly holding, out of breath laugh that echoed and rumbled in Jeremiah’s chest. Then he frowned, “I thought that was Moses.”

“Well, Moses never even made it to the Promised Land. But in the book of Jeremiah, God touches his mouth and Jeremiah speaks to the people of Jerusalem with God’s voice.”

“Whose voice do you speak with?”

Monty’s voice echoed through Jeremiah’s head twenty-four/seven. More than his own thoughts. Sometimes he parroted his father’s words without even thinking.

“I’ve got a nice voice,” High John said. “Why not use mine?”

Jeremiah didn’t know what to say. That wasn’t something he’d ever been asked before.

“Jeremiah?” Weldonna’s voice cut through the haze of his mind. She had scratched over K+DW and wrote WJT in its place. High John left as quickly as he’d come, disappearing into the swell of people.

With John’s laugh still bouncing off the walls of his ribcage, Jeremiah stood firmly, feeling almost as tall as the tree itself. “Let’s go.”

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John’s laugh echoed through the full space between Jeremiah’s ears. Bouncing off of his temples and down his throat, threatening to rip through his teeth. He stared down at the barren patch of land, which looked bigger than it had the day before.

“We’ll have you get the food boxes ready for Weldonna Johnson Tate until we get this fixed.”

“It can be fixed right?”

Aunt Pearl’s baggy shirt flapped over her polyester shorts and knobby knees. “We think so.”

“You won’t tell my dad, right?”

“I didn’t plan on it.” That might have settled Jeremiah’s spirit, if not for the small giggle that escaped Aunt Pearl’s mouth. It bounced through the air around him and expanded, getting bigger and bigger until it rang in his ears, grabbed his neck and wrung it loose, fingers rubbing against the knobs of his vertebrae.

Then there was the soft sound of clapping hands, thumping in line with one another. The farm hands circled around him, with Roland directly in front of him clapping a constant rhythm. They all faded away and High John emerged in their place, his suit starched, his chin high.

“Yes? Jeremiah the Prophet?” His laugh erupted pushing his chin higher into the air.

Jeremiah covered his ears, dug his feet deeper into the ground. "Please go away."

John gaped, "*You called me here.*" The laugh rang through the air again, but John hadn't even opened his mouth. The laugh was coming from Jeremiah.

"Have you let your spirit be broken?"

He'd still heard John loud and clear, "Broken how?"

"The correct answer is 'No,' Prophet."

"Demon's don't have a spirit."

High John walked closer, looming over Jeremiah just like the tree, just like his father, just like God. He looked Jeremiah in his eyes, his stare strong. "You ain't no demon," he said and it confused Jeremiah that a man with such a loud laugh could speak with such tenderness. "He ain't no God. Just a man, Jeremiah." High John's polished leather shoes stepped on the barren patch of grass, the earth bending beneath his weight. Beneath him, grass sprouted again, green and lush. Vines of tomatoes snaked their way across the ground, creating a labyrinth of thin green stalks and plump red fruit.

"If he breaks you, you *lose*. But if you keep going, keep playing the game," he walked around Jeremiah toward the long road where Weldonna Johnson Tate would barrel in any minute. "Then he don't win."

Jeremiah came to on his back, staring up at the clear blue and Roland, waving him with a sweaty towel. "You alright?" Jeremiah stayed quiet, hoping some of the silence would reach his ears. Roland knelt down and gently probed the patch of grass that had once been dead. Rotated a tomato with the tips of his fingers like it was the whole world. "Well, I'll be damned."

Jeremiah sat up slowly, feeling the laugh leave his mind for what he hoped would be the last time.

“Hey.”

Jeremiah cleared his throat, pressing the phone to his ear, “Good morning, Pop.”

Monty let the air hang pregnant and empty between them. “They got a suspect.”

“Really?”

“And a confession.”

“Who did it?”

As Jeremiah waited for his pops to tell him who dun it, he remembered their last dinner before Tripp went to basic. They sat around a spread of food that had become all too blurry. His pops relayed Jeremiah’s his latest transgression: sneaking outside to enjoy the rain.

“You think you can just do what you want? You on *punishment*.” Monty punctuated his words by needlessly scooting his chair forward and tugging his plate closer.

Jeremiah stared at his father and said, “I know.” He couldn’t count the number of times he’d been scolded for looking away from the adult he was talking to.

“Oh, you talk back too?”

“No sir,” he mumbled.

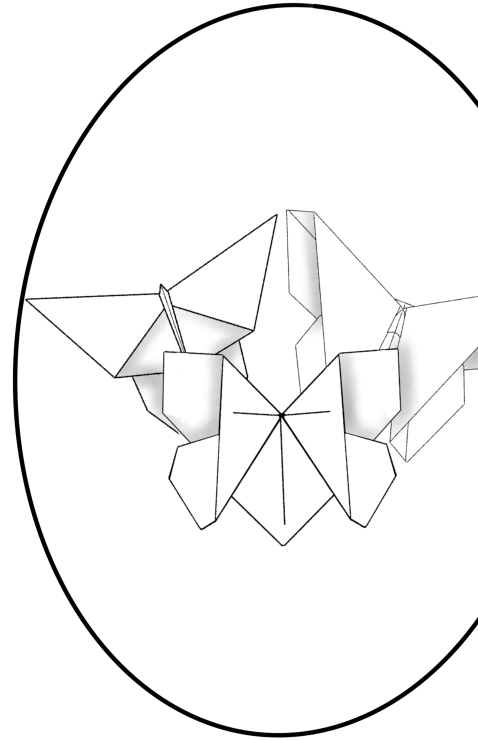
“Good. Lord, the second child... You better be glad I don’t get the belt.”

Jeremiah had always felt that his father took every opportunity to make him look like a fool. Even when Jeremiah did his best to make himself small, Monty had to drag him into the spotlight and point out his shortcomings for all to see. But Jeremiah was finished being the butt of his father’s jokes. Instead he’d beat his father to the punch. Jeremiah would bring up his father’s shitty soil. Would tell everyone he came across that his mother was the reason they’d been able to keep a roof over their heads. Monty would probably threaten to get the belt then, but



Jeremiah wasn't worried. He was only an inch or so shy of his father's height and *much* quicker. He'd run. Fight if he had to. He imagined knocking his head from his shoulders like Monty had threatened time after time. Imagined taking all of the belts out of Virginia. No switches either. He'd rip up the trees. They'd have to weave rope through their belt loops and find another way to take shade on sunny days, but it'd be worth it.

Thinking of his father ashamed, humiliated and wearing a rope around his waist was funny. To think of the man he'd spent so much of his life afraid of, weak and shriveled and powerless brought Jeremiah a joy he'd never felt. One that threatened to push through his lips like a sob. And just as Monty said the name of the man that had abducted and murdered Madeline, High John sent his laugh up Jeremiah's throat and out his mouth.



## Three Years Later

Even in the summers, we all got up at eight in the morning to catch Mommy's daily phone call. Crime didn't take a break and neither did public defenders, so she spent the weeks in Richmond, even when we had nothing to do all day but miss her. We crowded around the off-white wall phone and waited impatiently for our turn to say, "Mommy, guess what?" And she'd still sound interested, no matter how mundane the news.

While it took her three hours to get to Richmond from Jubilant City at the start of the week, it only took 25 minutes to get back. That was part of the city's charm I had come to learn, it was close by if needed. We'd visited her office once: a room made up of four walls, a bulletin board, a desk covered in stacks of too-full folders and more humidity than the deep South. She glowed as she gave us the grand tour, describing everything that she loved so much about her chair, the carpet, the fluorescent lights, the baseboards.

Our family lived on the outskirts of the city in an area called The Crick, for the skinny trail of water that formed a border between our neighborhood and Little Village. Little Village was the oasis and The Crick was the inferno. Little Village took all the heart and fun from downtown JC and painted it pastel, turned down the noise and pointed it's pinky. I had never seen a green lawn in The Crick, but they were all over Little Village. While we lived in shacks and houses, the people of Little Village lived in cabins and bungalows. Commissioned an artist to sculpt their own tree that they placed in the middle of a roundabout. The Crick was the farthest neighborhood from the center tree that gave the city its magic, which meant we got the scraps. The misshapen and defunct magic. Men that claimed to have sucked sap from the tree for the teas and elixirs they sold. Said all we had to do was drink and the city would give us the life we wanted.

But Daddy had none of it. Always said if life was about getting what we want then we'd already have it. He had inherited our house and its three bedrooms from Granny, his momma. When I was young we moved in and Granny taught me how to play the dozens. "Emmanuel and Erica Jr are winning because you don't know better, but I'll teach you." The next time Erica Jr called me a tattletale, I talked right back to her about her halitosis breath and to Emmanuel about his constantly cracking voice that made him sound like a cartoon character, even though he was trying to get Erica Jr off me. After that, Granny taught me about friendly fire.

It was the hottest part of the summer and or the first time since I could remember, my day started with silence. Erica wasn't playing her radio too loud in the bathroom, Moses wasn't rifling through the clean clothes for a pair of underwear. And Emmanuel wasn't doing jumping jacks or the push ups with claps in between. By the time I emerged from our little house, in a rush, my house dress skewed on my body, something didn't feel right. I walked into the sun that

hissed moisture from the asphalt and knelt next to the underspot of our small front porch. The house next to ours was home to a man that played the piano at one of the churches in Little Village. We never saw him leave without dropping every piece of sheet music he needed for the day. Once, Emmanuel had helped gather them, stepped on one to keep it from blowing away. The man ain't like that too much, snatched it from Emmanuel and flipped him the bird. "Y'all see that man lose his music, you let it happen," he told us afterward, Daddy nodding in silence.

On the other side, my classmate, Bianca, stayed with her mom and little sister. Erica Jr. and I were sure that all they did was think of new ways to make us miserable, like pointing out the ash that sometimes touched my kneecaps. Granny always said she felt sorry for her. "Little girl ain't never got her hair done. Always wearing dirty clothes while her Momma got on designer. A damn shame."

I felt my hand around the soft dirt until it landed firmly on a small box. I spread my fingers across the top, feeling for the gentle scudding of wings brushing against it from underneath. I felt nothing.

Emmanuel and Daddy pulled up in the truck and told me that I missed mommy's phone call. They went out every morning and picked up people in The Crick, taking them into JC to work. Most days it was only two or three people, but those two or three people wouldn't be able to get to work any other way. Daddy didn't want anyone else to ruin their back like Granny did. Trekking up the street each morning forced her back into a round curve. She didn't even look comfortable in her coffin.

"Why ain't you wake me up?" I called to them, wiping the dirt from the fox to reveal the delicate leaf pattern embossed into the lid.

"Why wudnt you down here with the rest of us?" Emmanuel had our fathers face and our mother's temperament—and her nose. When she was in Richmond, Emmanuel was our family's steady hand. He'd been out of high school for a couple of years, but stuck around and fixed bikes and air conditioners and refrigerators for people in The Crick while he figured out the rest of his life.

"That just ain't fair. Erica Jr. kept me up all night--"

"Doing what?" Daddy hopped out of the truck, sweat covering his forehead. His head was balding in a straight line down the middle, from his forehead to his crown. When it was cool enough for a hat, he usually went with a cowboy hat my little brother, Moses, and I got him for fathers day.

I zipped my lip because Erica Jr. hadn't given me permission to tell that she snuck a few phone calls on the landline the night before. She always hid behind the couch, just in case Daddy or Emmanuel got up for a drink. Emmanuel looked like someone put my momma's nose on my daddy's face and called that good, while Erica Jr. looked like my momma had made her all by herself. She'd inherited her five foot frame, her halo of kinky hair and the beauty mark she wore on her chin. Like my daddy, Emmanuel was mostly harmless, but I feared Erica Jr.'s wrath like I feared dentist appointments.

Emmanuel sucked his teeth, "On that phone."

"I'ma split that girl's head with a rock," Daddy said. His threats were nothing if not empty; he was never one for spanking. He much preferred making fun of you for attempting to do wrong at all. *Them As you get in school don't mean a thing if you can't learn the most valuable lesson: I can't be fooled.*

"You just need to make sure you up on time Puddin'." Emmanuel pulled a large bag of fish from the back of the cab, the price scribbled lazily on the label. The bag of whiskered fish made me want to gag, all four sets of eyes were pressed against the base of the bag. Each fish was more surprised than the last about where he'd ended up. Emmanuel wiggled his eyebrows, "Dinner." He handed the bag to daddy and headed over to the mailbox at the end of the lawn.

"What about lunch?" Daddy dangled the bag in front of my face and I pushed it away.

"You on your own for lunch. Now go play and don't keep runnin in and out my house."

Daddy went inside and Emmanuel walked to the edge of the yard, looking up and down the street like he was waiting for the bus. I turned my attention back to the box, gently pulling off the lid. Inside, the origami butterflies folded into dangerously thin squares of paper laid dead in the box.

"What's today?" I called to Emmanuel, shaking the box gently as I made my way across the yard.

"The 17th," he said, still turning his head side to side like a rooster wind vane in a dry breeze.

It was July 17th. The butterflies were supposed to come alive on July the 17th just like they had the year before. And the year before. But even though I'd kept them buried and untouched like I was supposed to, they hadn't come back to life.

"You got this Mo!" Emmanuel yelled suddenly through cupped hands. My little brother, Moses, ran as fast as his legs would take him up the street toward the house. He had my bookbag on his back and his own bag on his front, both full of books and making him look twice his size.

When he arrived he yanked off the bags and nearly folded his body in half as he leaned over, huffing and puffing. Beads of sweat raced down his face like raindrops on a window.

“How you feel champ?” Emmanuel bounced on his toes and tossed two play jabs at the empty air above Moses’ head.

“Tired.”

“I know, but while you *flying* to the finish line. Them other kids will be whining about their legs hurting. And you know why that is? Because you did your training.”

Moses shook his head, still breathing too hard to speak. He only had a couple of hours before all the other fifth graders lined up on the corner of Sherman and Washington for The Race. Winner got a bike and Moses knew he wouldn’t get one for Christmas this year, Daddy said it just wasn’t in the Lord’s plan this time around. The house that had held up so well over the years had begun falling apart. Most of Daddy’s time was spent fixing this or that or getting prices for a new something versus just getting a used something and weighing the benefits of having a friend or Emmanuel help him versus just taking care of it himself. “Next Christmas,” he promised. But Moses couldn’t wait for next Christmas. He was almost eleven. By the next Christmas he’d be twelve and too old to learn to ride a bike for the first time. And *that?* That would be the end of the world.

“Y’all seen anybody else practicing?” Moses’ voice was breathy and scant. He wiped his face with the collar of his shirt.

“Nah,” I said. “It’s the 17th.”

Moses’ eyes settled on the box in my hands. He was the only one I’d told about the butterflies because I thought he missed grandma like I did. When she died our mother had simply told him that she’d gone away. He took the time to draw up missing posters with our address and phone number and Emmanuel took him out to hang them. But a box of flying paper butterflies was where he drew the line.

“Stop lying,” he’d said. “You always making stuff up.” Granny’d called it “embellishing,” but made it clear that I needed to grow out of it. Quickly. Three years later and I was still working on it. Most of my family just refused to believe me about anything surprising unless I had a witness.

Emmanuel grabbed the bookbags from the ground, “Get your breath, then take another lap.”

Moses found his voice, “*Another* lap?”

Emmanuel dropped the bags to the floor. He put his hands on his hips and jutted his stomach out like an assistant coach. “When I was in cross country I ran fifteen *keelomeeters* a race. You know how much I had to practice? I had to get up at four in the morning. I ran before school *and* after school. And I don’t even have a bike to show for it. I *thank* you got it easy.”

Moses wiped his face again, “Ew, you sound just like Daddy.”

Emmanuel smirked, “And I’m a go and get him unless you take another lap. I’ll tell him you half assin’ it.”

Good thing for Moses, the only person more competitive than Daddy was up in Richmond for the week.

Moses let out a huff and took off down the street again. Emmanuel turned on his heel and walked in the house. As I watched Moses look over his shoulder before slowing to a trot, the heat rising off the asphalt making him look warped and blurry, I thought of Granny and the stash of lidocaine she kept in the medicine cabinet. Long after my daddy moved out and started his own family, she still trekked to JC to volunteer at the school she’d taught art at for thirty five years. We moved into her house to help before Moses, but after me. The house where she’d raised my daddy and his other siblings.



Me, Erica Jr. and Granny shared the large open bedroom on the ground floor, our beds tucked in opposite corners. We used to crowd around her, keeping a close watch on her every move. Despite her shaking hands, Granny did our hair every morning and made sure that our school clothes were creased in the right places. Rubbed our legs and arms down with petroleum jelly after every bath. Taught us to catch flies out of the air with our bare hands and to make a hair pudding that cleared ringworm, dandruff and anything else that made the scalp itch.

Origami was what me and grandma did together, just the two of us. She dug up pictures of her old work. A paper swan the size of an end table. An elephant three or four inches taller than she was. And a paper boat durable enough to hold her and a two year old version of my daddy on a short sail down the Creek. She knew three ways to fold a butterfly into a sheet of paper and she'd taught me every single one. She'd found a special kind of paper, one that felt and looked more like thin yellow lace. We filled the box with our folds, making sure each crease was perfect. Eventually Grandma resigned to making the larger initial pairs and letting me take care of all of the details.

"I have a surprise for you," she'd said when the box was finally full and safe beneath the porch. "I'll give it to you on my birthday."

When I dug out the box on her birthday, the top rattled, the buzz of wings threatening to rip it in half. When I pulled off the lid, they poured out in a strong storm and then wrapped around me. Then they filed back neatly into the box and fell silent.

Years later my momma would tell me that Granny knew I needed a little extra care. That in a house with so many big personalities, one of us was bound to slip through the cracks.

I missed her.

During the week, while Momma was out, Daddy turned the dining room into his own construction zone. Tools spread across the dining room table, broken car parts and pieces of whatever reserved spots at the table. He brought boxes up from the basement just to dig through them and move on. We usually ate dinner crossed legged on the floor, crowded around the TV set.

“Just sit your little box down and help me clear a spot to fix up this fish.”

“I thought you said it was for dinner.”

“It is. I gotta filet ‘em and debone ‘em and Moses’ race is at noon. C’mon, move this right here.”

I left the box in the safety of the living room and moved a stack of repair manuals onto the floor. Daddy would find a way to hide everything around the house before Momma came back for the weekend.

He pulled the large bag of fish on the table, “I know you can’t hold water.” He ripped open the bag and dumped the family of fish into the large bowl on the table. “But I’ll tell you anyway. Your momma’s pregnant.”

“Pregnant?”

“Mhm.”

“Where’s that baby gonna go? We’re already bustin’ outta here like biscuits, Daddy.”

Daddy smirked, tossing equal parts cornmeal and cornstarch into a large disposable baking pan. “Well, Emmanuel’s on his way out the door damn near. Erica Jr.’s not far behind.”

“Can’t we just enjoy having a house that’s half empty then?”

“Fraid not.”

When the new baby came, I'd be right in the middle. Two on either side of me, like the wheels on the trailer we'd probably be sleeping in if they kept popping them out. "I'm done?" Daddy had begun chopping the heads off of the fish; every now and then a tail would flop and he'd smack it with the flat part of his knife.

"Yeah, get on outta here."

"You better be nice to me, Daddy," I said. "I know your secret."

Daddy picked up one of the fish heads so that it was looking right at me. He pinched its mouth and said, "So? Won't nobody believe you anyway."

Only Erica Jr. remembered when Emmanuel was short and skinny and mean. Me and Moses only knew him as a tall, de facto parent. He sat us all down for dinner on time every night. Took me over to Little Village when he'd heard one of the boys pushed me (Emmanuel held him down while I got my lick back too). We were watching him turn into our father right in front of us, but a few inches taller.

Emmanuel and Moses had completely transformed the big room on the ground floor since me and Erica Jr moved to the smaller one upstairs. They'd pushed both of the beds together, making one large spread where Emmanuel slept spread eagle with his mouth wide open. Moses preferred sleeping on the large cushions from a couch Daddy had thrown out years ago. In one corner of the room Emmanuel had stacked his tools, spare bike parts and shop towels. Moses had a stack of books, a bundle of blankets, underwear, other clean clothes and a stash of empty potato chip bags stuffed beneath his pillow.

“Daddy said what now?” Emmanuel was hunched over an old rusted toolbox where he kept his money. Several bills rolled tight and held together with rubber bands. I had never seen Emmanuel spend a dime.

I took a deep breath, “ To give me fifty cents to get a snack from the store for lunch.”

He looked at me over his shoulder, “You *know* you a lie. Daddy just bought all that fish, he not finna spend no money on snacks for you.” Though he wanted to be upset, he just shook his head and handed me a crumpled dollar bill. “Take this one. I don’t like when they got too many rips anyway. Next time just ask. *Don’t* lie.”

I took the dollar and left the room.

Emmanuel called up the hallway, “And be back by noon!”

I walked outside and past Erica Jr and her friends pretending to be Destiny’s Child on the side of the house and headed to the corner store.

It looked incomplete, sitting right on the corner of two streets with no other buildings. It looked like someone had squeezed a store into a single cube of an ice tray. The shelves were cramped, but organized, with all of the expensive items in the middle, the cheap stuff at the bottom and extra stock up at the top. There was a deep freezer up at the counter that looked just like the one we had at home, packed with ice cream bars, rocket pops and homemade snow cones. It was run by a woman and her husband--sometimes. She sold colorful scarves that she kept behind the counter and burned incense that she stuck between the layers of peeling paint in the front door jamb.

I gave her the crumpled money and plucked a can of soda and a bag of Lays from the display just below the front counter. She took the money in her fist, then she turned it over and opened it to reveal two shiny quarters. She gave me a toothy grin.

I thanked her and hurried outside to the payphone perched just outside of the shade from the store's awning. I wiped the dirt from the smooth cage the phone sat in and carefully sat down the soda, chips and box. I pushed in a quarter and dialed Momma's office number. She'd made sure we memorized it the day she got that job. We couldn't talk to her all the time. "But call and leave a message with my secretary and we'll talk all about it when I come home."

I expected her secretary to pick up, but instead the phone just rang and rang. I passed a look up and down the street, hung up, pushed in the other quarter, dialed again. The tone began to sound like white noise I'd heard it so much. I slammed down the phone, sending the Coke can to the hard sidewalk, where it burst open, spraying all over my legs and the opened box of butterflies that had fallen with it.

Inside the box, dirt turned to mud that soaked the once flawless and delicate butterflies. Dyed the fragile and thin paper a murky brown. I sat cross legged on the ground and attempted to pull them apart from one another, ripping the insect right down the middle. As the paper came away in two, I felt something sink just beneath my sternum.

Once I started crying, I just couldn't make myself stop. Not until my head hurt. But I heard a buzz. Right before my eyes each of the butterflies stood, shook off the mud and took flight. Before long there was a large swarm of golden butterflies gently darting in each and every direction. They packed themselves together like a tight fist and then darted outward, forming a swan and then an elephant and then a paper boat.

They settled in the box, now a near translucent white.

“Puddin’! Hurry up!” Erica Jr. waved at me from her position in the swarm of bodies crowded by the race's starting line. All of the fifth graders lined up on the tape that stretched across the street. I could spot Daddy and his cowboy hat right up front. “It’s about to start!”

I maneuvered through the mob using my elbows, still holding the box to my chest

“Hey,” Emmanuel grabbed me by the forehead and pulled my head back until he was staring me in my eyes. “You was crying? Why?”

“No I wasn’t.” I pulled away and wiped at my face with the back of my hand.

Emmanuel sucked his teeth, “Look at your face, Puddin’.”

“How I’m s’posed to do that?”

Then there was Daddy, bent all over next to me, his face inches from mine. “Your cheeks all red. What happened?”

“I already know,” Erica Jr. said, grabbing me by the chin. “That ugly-butt girl around the corner. What’s her name?”

“Bianca,” Emmanuel said.

“That’s right. Bug faced Bianca, didn't know whether to swat her or stomp her!”

Daddy nudged Erica Jr. out of the way, “Your grandma would turn over in her grave if she knew you were letting some ugly little girl get you all bothered. An *ugly* little girl? You’re beautiful, look at the man that made you!”

As my lips broke into a smile, the referee fired a shot in the air and the fifth graders took off, some slipping on the asphalt immediately, others tripping over their own feet. Moses sent a look to the left, then the right and took off down the street. Daddy grabbed me up quickly and

maneuvered me onto his shoulders. Moses pushed past all of them, first only nosing ahead and then getting a full car length in front of the closest runner.

I balanced myself. Holding the box above Daddy's cowboy hat. I lifted the lid cleanly from the box and one by one, each of the butterflies flew smoothly from the box, riding the gentle breeze that had begun to kick up.



## Margie and Cab Pt. 1

*"Goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. Because for those who love with heart and soul there is no such thing as separation."*

*- Rumi*

**After I discovered** that my late great grandmother and I were attached at the soul, she showed me how she'd met the man in 1927. Her body had been buried months before my birth, but her voice, her soul, sat deep in my gut.

She'd been lugging brown bags full of pasta, potatoes, flour and dented cans of diced tomatoes with her little brother down one of the roads in Coventry, planted in the flat plane of Georgia. A few days shy of twenty, she took care of her younger brothers while her father worked as a Pullman porter up in DC.

While scuffing her shoes with the brown dirt and urging her brother to hurry before the clouds above her tore open and poured hot rain on their heads, a man approached on bicycle a



gust of wind from falling apart. It was fitted with a rickety wagon hitched to the back that carried errant pebbles and a stray ear of corn.

“Want a ride?” He asked, a wet towel draped around his neck, his t-shirt dangling from his back pocket.

“Ain’t room for all of us on that bike,” she said, without stopping. She shimmed the two bags into one arm and grabbed her brother’s hand with the other, nearly yanking him completely off of the street.

“...just take it.”

“Ooh, Margie come on!” Her brother pulled away from her and trotted back to the bike. He grabbed at the basket strapped to the front, the lopsided handlebars. “This ours now?”

“If you want it,” he swung his leg over and tilted the bike in Grandma Margie’s direction.

“We’re doing just fine.” What she really wanted to say was *I don’t know how to ride a bike*.

Her brother dropped his bag in the wagon, “We’ll get caught in the rain!”

“How will you get home?” Grandma Margie had never seen him before. She’d have remembered. She was related to half of Coventry.

The man looked up at her and his smile burned slow, starting with a twitch at the corner of his mouth that spread across the length of his lips. “I’ll fly.”

A warm breeze blew across the flatland around them, pushing the smell of sweat and burned wood off of him.

“What does that mean?”

“Just what I said.”

Lightning cracked above them.

“Margie! Let’s go!”

She felt herself smile then, heard herself say, “Where have you been?” Her mind caught up a few full seconds afterward.

“Looking for you,” he said.

“We have to go.”

“I’ll be back,” he said.

After a couple of hesitant looks, and a bit of uneasiness, she turned to her brother and said, “I’ll race you.” She could run pretty fast without twenty pounds of food in her arms. They took off down the road, the air whipping fast and thick around them.

After putting the groceries away and spraying the mud off of her shoes in the bathtub, Margie marched up to her father’s empty bedroom. She sat on the corner of her father’s bed and looked out of their large picture window.

The rain poured down so hard, that even if he had flown by, she wouldn’t have seen him. And even though Coventry was small and new people stood out, she never saw him again.

**Grandma Margie moved** her family to Jubilant City because she’d heard anything could happen here. Had heard about the group of women who started the city, the man who built the city's founding university by hand and then taught there for twenty years. She never felt at home in Georgia anyway and she figured Jubilant City would be the perfect place to start over, to find the one she'd been looking for. Imagine her joy at finding that one of Jubilant’s neighborhoods shared the name with the city in Georgia she’d grown up in.

Nearly 100 years and three generations later, no one had seen that man, nor had there been stories of one flying through the sky. I was married to a man named Ezekiel and he had an

old soul. He dressed only in collared shirts and slacks with a pair of loafers or boots—weather dependent. Worked at the Jubilant City Herald, spinning stories about the secret corruption of the city's business office or an abnormally successful 5th grade bake sale. It wasn't the investigative journalism he wanted to be doing, but it was as close as he'd gotten in his ten year career. The version of myself he saw was a mechanic or—*auto*—who dreamed of being a set designer between tire changes and transmission flushes. But driving a functioning vehicle never went out of style or worked itself into obsolescence and try as I might, Andrew Masego wasn't hiring me anytime soon.

We'd met in a way that people do, and fed each other small slivers of ourselves until we were made whole again, like shredding a stack of small papers down to a bundle of zigzags and squiggles. Courted one another for the appropriate amount of time. Married. I craved the comfort my parents had in their marriage. The ease of coming home and knowing that they'd be there waiting for me. The freedom to walk by them with my hair undone, my titties hanging lower with every passing day; his slowly receding hairline and increasing “dad noises” even though we didn't have any children.

At night, either after sex that was a strong B+ or a *The Wire* marathon, I assured myself that I could spend forever with Ezekiel. However long that may have been.

**The meeting caught** me off guard and I wouldn't know that I was grateful for it for years to come. When your life is moving along and something stops your momentum, it can feel nearly impossible to embrace it. How dare something come in and ruin my comfort? My way of being? That was how I felt about Cab, standing in the living room, his head nearly brushed the light on the ceiling.

With a wide nose that, no doubt, showed up several times in every family photograph, blessing the faces of siblings and distant cousins. He waved his hands through the air as he flipped through a book of tile samples for Ezekiel, talking about the difference between tile, sheet linoleum and vinyl flooring. Stressing that tile was outdated and hard to keep clean; plus, an alternative allowed for one day installation.

“Who’s this?” I asked, tying my headscarf securely on my head to cover an old blow out that had begun to curl and kink at the ends.

“Baby, this is Cab. He’s telling us what we can do about the bathroom floor.” It hadn’t been sealed properly and Ezekiel didn’t notice before signing a rent-to-own lease agreement. After a shower, water on the floor sunk beneath the boards. After a storm, water seeped in the very same way.

He turned to me. Took a step back. Tilted his head up. “Where do I know you from?”

I could feel realization wash over me, scrubbing me clean until I was nothing but the soul, broken in two. One half in the body I saw every morning, the other standing right in front of me. He always looked different, but exactly the same. It was something about his eyes.

“I don’t think we’ve ever met,” I said, quickly turning away. I kissed Ezekiel on his cheek and grabbed my purse from a waiting hook by the front door. “Bridget’s car started clicking. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

He ignored what I said, flipping back and forth between two vinyl samples. “My wife is the designer of the family, maybe she should choose.”

“Do whatever you want.”

“You sure?”

“Mhm.”

“Well, say bye to Cab.”

I paused at the front door and turned back to Cab, who tipped his head to the side. Probably wondering why I’d lied. I pulled open the door and gave him a wry smile, “Bye.”

**My visits to** see my sister, Bridget, were always long and drawn out. I liked Bridget’s home a lot better than my own. The tapping of her children’s feet running across the floor reminded me of the house we grew up in. She and I were the 5th and 6th girls born out of the eight my mother had. She and her husband, Mo, were three kids in with a fourth on the way and Bridget was almost always exhausted. I came over to lighten her load. To make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, to play in the yard until I wheezed from the stinging feeling in my lungs, to get my hair done by her set of boy-girl twins who had natural talent, to wrestle a new A/C belt on her car.

But Bridget stopped me in my tracks when I entered. Pulled me to the kitchen and put her hands on her hips like a disappointed mother, but her smile told me she had something exciting behind her teeth. “Girl, you in here glowing. You pregnant?”

“Oh, please. No. It’s not time for that yet.”

“Then Big Zeke is hitting that shit like a drum, ain't he?”

“You’re a freak.”

“Fine, don’t share your secrets then.”

I shrugged, but before she left the kitchen I said, “You ever meet a dude named Cab?”

“Cab? That’s Mo’s friend from highschool. He played basketball; I think he went to the Euroleague for a little bit too.” Then she gasped and gave me a hard slap on the ass, “You better not be fucking him! Cab?”

“God, Bridget! I’m not! He was talking to my husband about replacing the toilet or something, Jesus.”

“I’m just saying. You’re glowing. Plus,” she peeked around the corner, checking for kids. “He wouldn’t be a bad choice. He’s fine. Mo and him went to Southside. Said the other team always had to pay their cab fare, which meant he was scoring at least 25 points a game.”

“Then why’s he installing toilets and shit?”

“Life happens.” Bridget rubbed her belly and began walking out of the kitchen. “They used to call him Jetson on the court.”

I scoffed, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, if you gon’ step out on your husband...do it with a man that can fly.”

**But Bridget didn’t** know that Ezekiel had started stepping out on me the week following our honeymoon. For someone so interested in investigative journalism, he left several clues. After he saw her he was always talkative and full of ideas of how to revive the Jubilant City Herald. Sometimes he’d smell like perfume behind his right ear or groan all day about back pain, which only manifested on Monday evenings. He’d gone to see her, whoever she was, while I was at Bridget’s because when I returned he’d planted a white board in the living room. At the top, he’d scribbled, “Andrew Masego: Mogul or Monster?” Everything else was a mash-up of scribbles that I couldn’t read and wasn’t interested in deciphering. Whoever she was, she filled a cavity in him I’d never cared to examine.

“How was your day?”

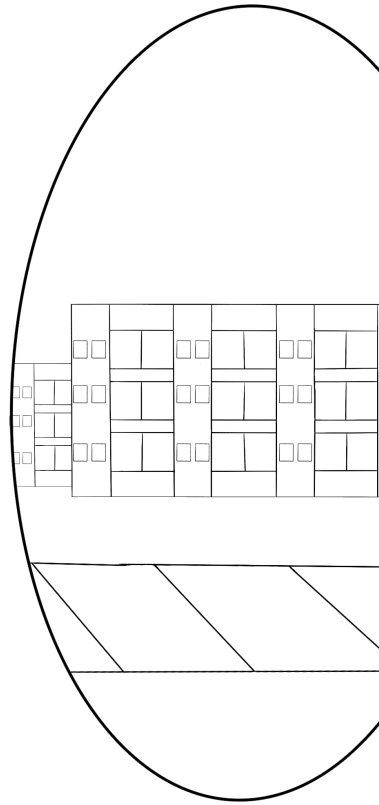
Ezekiel shrugged, “Fine.”

I nodded, “Good.”

“Cab’ll be back tomorrow to start on the bathroom upstairs. You’ll be here, right?”

I toed off my shoes near the front door, “Yeah, I’ll be here.”

Ezekiel knelt in front of his white board and continued to scribble, the television playing an episode of *Girl, Please* loudly behind him. White noise. Unimportant, but constant. After three years of marriage, there had been more white noise than I had the capacity to bare.



## Seven Days in West Sidevile

*For the former residents of The Triangle in Charleston, West Virginia and for Ledger Smith aka  
The Roller Man*

### **Day 1**

The West Side had a few blocks of affordable housing right on Washington between Seventh Ave. and Adams. Fifteen ugly orange brick buildings arranged in rows around a large baptist church. One of the old school ones with bright red cushions on the pews and a ten person choir that always sang in full voice. Numbered one to fifteen, the buildings boasted outdated amenities and studio apartments for just \$450 a month payable by cash, money order, or Section 8 voucher. They were the kind of buildings kids would explore and ghost hunt in when they snuck out at midnight. With small windows and perpetually broken door buzzers and dilapidated garden beds overgrown with dandelions, those buildings were home to hundreds.



They hung tapestries with blu-tack cinder block walls, layered rugs on concrete floors, burned incense and set bowls of potpourri on old carved coffee tables. Kids played ding dong ditch and during the winter, they waited for the school bus in the Building One stairwell, pretending to smoke cigarettes.

At five in the morning the day after a large meeting that none of the tenants had been privy to, the construction vehicles dragged up Washington St. Five men in hard hats ran through each building, slapping a pink slip of paper that read “Order to Vacate” at the top, on each door.

The first tenant to emerge was Jordan. He worked on a crew filling in potholes in the Historic Downtown District, a job he’d had to pull every string to get, and made \$1,250 every month, before taxes. He wore a reflective vest and an old Nas tour shirt he’d gotten in high school that still fit to the surprise of no one. He was just as lanky and smooth as he had been back then. At 26, he was beginning to wonder when he’d gain that grown man weight he’d heard legends of. And if he’d ever grow hair on his chest though he’d managed a thick mustache that he was quite proud of.

Jordan quickly scanned the notice and ran back inside to wake everyone up.

Up in Chicago, Ledger Smith had already risen. He clawed his way out of his coffin, a pair of pristine four top roller skates secured in his hands by the laces. The earth sunk beneath him, bearing the weight of a man more durable than any hero. He looked just like he did in 1963 before his 700 mile trip to see Dr. King; in a pair of khaki pants and a clean collared shirt, he looked formal enough to be important, but not so important that others wouldn’t see themselves reflected in him. They had to know that they too could do the impossible as he skated from one side of their televisions to the other.

This Chicago was a city much different than the one Ledger remembered. The streets were tighter, the high rises rose even higher and the cemetery had the only grass around for miles. But Ledger didn't have time to meet his city all over again. He had just seven days to skate 500 miles to West Virginia.

## Day 2

“How you ain't see it? They're in every building. On every door. They look official, so ain't nobody tearing them down or throwing them out. I tried to get you up yesterday, but...” Jordan shrugged and settled himself on Rory's pull-out couch, his phone on speaker, playing the awful hold music used by the Charleston Legal Aid Society, the city's only nonprofit law firm. They mostly handled Family Law—they'd helped him arrange visitation with his daughter—but every now and then they took criminal and civil rights cases.

Rory chewed on the nail of her thumb as she scanned the notice for the third time. Her latest depressive episode had hit her like a MAC truck with no brakes and she was still recovering, reassuring herself that panicking over an unexpected eviction notice was perfectly rational. She hadn't been outside in a week, but if she told Jordan that he'd worry. He'd ask questions. He cared. She reassured herself of that too.

“And we got *how* long?”

“Seven days, starting yesterday. So six.”

“*Fuck.*” Rory eyed the clothes that spilled over her dresser drawers, the mason jar of weed on her coffee table, the pairs of shoes she lined next to the front door. All of the little things that made the studio her home. She sat on the edge of her bed, took a deep breath. Her hands left sweaty prints on the knees of her jeans. “Where they transferring us?”

“They not. We got seven days to find housing and leave,” Jordan was on his third cigarette and had a fourth tucked behind his ear. He leaned forward on shaking knees.

Rory felt her stomach lurch.

“I’m not letting them kick us out. I left a message with the ACLU yesterday and we got a couple of reporters coming later. If we can get it out there. Postpone the demo.”

“Even if it’s postponed, we still gotta move?”

He rubbed at his chin like he was trying to remove a stain, “Maybe. I don’t know. Let me make some calls.”

Rory walked over to the kitchenette, leaned against her counter and breathed deeply, struggling to remember the techniques her therapist taught her. *Breathe in. Hold for five seconds. Breathe out.* She only heard white noise, like a TV with no antenna playing between her ears. She felt like she was exploding from the inside out. From her kitchen window she could see the yellow CAT vehicles lined up on the other side of the street. Roadblocks laid in wait on street corners. Men in hardhats walked around taking notes on clipboards. Rory paced. Stopped. And pivoted back to the living area.

“I’m gonna to the housing authority, see if I can get a transfer,” Rory grabbed her keys and bus pass and stuck them in her pocket.

“I’m getting a group together to help people pack and move. Should be ready by tonight.”

Rory ran a hand across Jordan’s shoulders, his skin smooth under her calloused hands, “I’ll pack my own shit up.”

Jordan sucked his teeth, shrugged her hand away. “Good, you got too much shit anyway.”

Usually, Rory was neurotic and on edge enough for the both of them. It worked because it kept them grounded. Kept Jordan from imagining a world too fantastical, one where he was an

NBA player and spoke at community events in his spare time. Where she worked some sort of fulfilling job instead of just cleaning four nights a week. Where she wasn't constantly caught between debilitating dark days and mania. Where their relationship brought them both more than the comfort that exists between two friends. Where they pushed down their fear of being something more. But Rory could feel the stress between them building up to a fight that they may not be able to return from.

“What about you?” She pushed aside a stack of books she had yet to read and sat before him on a sturdy coffee table she'd found on the side of the road. “Where you gonna go if this doesn't work?”

Jordan shrugged, “Probably go sleep under the West Side bridge, at least until the cops come and kick me out.

“That's not funny.”

“I'm not joking... You know my pops died under that bridge?”

“I do.” Jordan only brought his pops up to remind her how he died and to talk about how he envied the stocky frame of the once was man. Jordan described him as a real life John Henry, tall, hardworking and dead. “Pops was a *man*,” he'd say. “Got respect in the streets, at work, at home.” She wanted to tell him that none of that made his father a man, it was all in Jordan's head. Tiger, a man in building five, with long matted locs and endless tank tops, would call it a mindset. Jordan was a man because he took care of his mother from his 18th birthday until the day she died. Because he had a little girl an hour away in Louisville that he took a Greyhound to see every two weeks. Because he always came over to building seven after work to check on her, even if she didn't answer the door, and to sometimes lay silently in the bed next to her as she felt herself sink into the floor.

Jordan stood, his knees loudly cracking, “I’ll come by later.” He hadn’t changed since the day before and still wore his reflective vest, even though he’d gotten fired for calling out. “An eviction notice is not an emergency,” his supervisor had said. “You need to make money for a new place anyway.” Jordan told him to go fuck himself.

Rory pushed her curtain of braids over her shoulder, “You promise?”

Jordan kissed her on the forehead, getting soft around the edges again. “Of course.”

### **Day 3**

There were fifteen men and six trucks parked on Washington to help people move, over 150 people scrambling to find housing and at least 200 more pissed that they had to move in the first place. Police barricades were positioned at Barton and Adams, because Jordan and his megaphone had been holding a one-man protest since the night of Day 2. But early on the morning of Day 3, he found at least 20 tenants ready to stand beside him.

Rory lit a cigarette on the front step of building seven and listened to them scream, *1, 2, 3, 4, the government picks on the poor! 5, 6, 7, 8, we won't be bullied by the state!* She’d tried to stand with Jordan, but her voice shook and the sign trembled in her hands. He put her in charge of making the signs instead and she put her all into it. Wrote all her worries on large sheets of poster board. WHERE’S MY 30 DAY NOTICE? WHAT WILL WE DO NOW? WHERE IS YOUR HUMANITY? LORD, HELP US.

Just before seven that night, Jordan rushed into her apartment and clicked over to Channel 10. “We were in the paper yesterday. Should be on the news tonight.”

Rory stood at the fridge, pouring the rest of her milk over her last cup of Crunchberries. When she made her way over to him, Jordan's face was being reflected back to him with the words "Community Organizer" printed beneath.

*Just because other people don't care about us and our projects don't mean we don't care. We ain't got much, some of us ain't got nothing, but that don't mean they can come in and take it.*

"Well, look at that," Rory settled herself on his lap, all fifteen of the soon to be gone buildings showing their broken windows like chipped teeth. "My man's a revolutionary!"

"I *told* you. I *told* you," he said smiling like a child watching his favorite superhero be resurrected. "We just gotta get people talking."

But it was like God was hell bent on proving Jordan wrong. The same reporter appeared on screen, holding a stack of notices printed on bright yellow paper. *It looks like the tenants housed here didn't care for these notices delivered to their doors, put on their doors three weeks ago by city officials.*

Jordan's mouth dropped open. Rory scrambled to cut off the television, her Crunchberries good for nothing but smashing with the back of her spoon.

The silence between them was heavy until Jordan said, "I never seen those notices. *Never.*"

She grabbed his face in her hands as his shoulders slumped forward. "Me neither."

"They just don't give a damn, do they?"

She hugged him close to her, his breath grazing her neck like a fly away, the panic building in her like the tide rushing in. "We should both start looking for a place."

"I guess so."

Outside the protestors continued, *5, 6, 7, 8, we won't be bullied by the state!*

**Day 4**

The Baptist church held service outside along with the rest of the West Side neighborhood, no one loved the Lord like poor folk. Even on the brink of losing their homes and belongings they dug in their pocketbooks and purses and worn vinyl wallets to tithe. They ate the bread and drank the wine and clapped along to every hymn the choir sang.

Rory helped Mrs. Shepherd load the last of her belongings into the raggedy U-Haul she'd rented with the last thirty dollars of her disability check.

"I don't know them," she said, eyeing the group that waited with their trucks in a single-file line on the side of Barton. "I rather do it all myself." Mrs. Shepherd was spry and looked nearly thirty years younger than she was. In the summers, she sold ice pops and snow cones for fifty cents each. She also sold bags of chips, cans of soda and \$1 candy bars. Everyone on the West Side knew her by her long white hair and knobby knuckles.

"Is somebody gonna help you move in?"

"I'm sure I can figure it out."

"You sure you don't wanna stay? I saw on the news this morning that Ledger Smith is coming."

"The roller man? He's gotta be in his 90s now, right?"

"Maybe, but he ain't look a day older than thirty when he got out of his coffin."

"Coffin? Jesus Christ."

The man booking it down I-65 on roller skates was a sight in and of itself. He moved smoothly down the shoulder, his sneakers tied together at the laces and hanging over his shoulders. The cars speeding by were nothing more than white noise. Things only got more

interesting when he explained that he'd just been six feet under and that he'd skated from Chicago to Washington DC in 1963 with the word "FREEDOM" across his chest.

*Why now?* Reporters clamored to ask him as he made his way down US-35 in Dayton, Ohio. They held up traffic slowing their vans to match his speed. Some kept up just behind him on bikes or skateboards, barely balancing their cameras. When Ledger Smith spoke, his voice was deep enough to startle, despite the rush of highway traffic.

*Because someone's praying for these people. Even if it ain't you,* he said. *Someone's praying and someone even bigger is listening.*

Mrs. Shepherd picked up where she left off, "Ain't it sad? We can't even escape this mess in death." Mrs. Shepherd hopped in the cab, the jaws of the truck quickly swallowing her frail frame. "I met Ledger Smith that first time, when he skated to DC. I was just a little girl." She leaned her arms on the steering wheel, the loose skin of her arms forming smooth wings across the polyurethane. "If you ever wanna lose ten pounds, skate for ten hours a day for ten days straight like that man did." She turned the key and the U-Haul rumbled like an old man choking on dip. "I hope he can help y'all. Lord knows I wouldn't die for this building. Ain't no way in hell I would rise from the dead for it."

Rory knew a thing or two about rising from the dead. About laying in bed and wondering if she'd be able to pull herself up before the skin of her back began to fuse into the sheets. Thanks to her Bipolar, her brain sent her to die every two weeks and just when she felt herself again, it sent her spiraling, a bundle of energy so chaotic she welcomed the dark days. At least she thought she did. When she finally cracked the door open, she would find the small things Jordan left, just to assure her that she was on his mind. A handful of roses that had begun to



shrivel. A book filled with photos of soul food for her coffee table. A cape and a note that said, “If you put this on you’ll be Super Depressed.”

“Aurora?”

Rory’s ears pricked and she turned back to the truck, “Ma’am?”

“I got something for you,” she handed over a sealed envelope. “This is where I’ll be. There’s enough space for all of us. If you ever make it to the city, you find me.”

Rory knew the envelope’s contents without even opening it. Her mother had given her the same directions to Jubilant City several years before, she kept them hidden in her pillowcase along with her \$245.68 savings, birth certificate and social security card.

Jubilant City. A place where anyone could thrive, assuming you knew how to get (and stay) there. But the city’s secrets only began with its location. Would the officials there also make it difficult for her to get her medication by closing every pharmacy in the hood? Would they also close the community pools in the summer “for maintenance” only to use them as storage? Would she be forced to live with her mother and aunt forever due to the ridiculous public housing application process? How would it be any different?

Rory waved as Mrs. Shepherd drove away.

## **Day 5**

The new name was West Sideville. The police had shut down the stretch of Seventh Avenue and even some of Washington. People moved out everyday, some getting housing transfers and others choosing to rough it out with family. In their place, the five-tenant council Jordan put together offered up apartments to the people sleeping under the West Side bridge and in long-abandoned houses in exchange for a security shift or a role on the move-out crew or some

time yelling 5, 6, 7, 8 just behind the roadblock. A retired couple in building eight took the food that people donated and made three meals a day that kids handed out door to door. Teenagers offered a summer reading group at noon and again at five. A set of twin sisters from building eleven found a stack of work orders in the office and went around fixing everything they could, by the end of the day, they'd visited thirty-six units and solved issues in thirty-one of them. Tiger led early morning yoga and early evening HIIT and offered group meditation for anyone that needed thirty minutes of silence.

And Jordan oversaw every part of it. He okayed the apartments before they were reassigned, he approved the menu for the day, he kept track of the work orders and he was the only one to make a public statement on behalf of West Sideville.

*I don't care what the news report. I care what I know. I know we ain't get no advance notice. All we got was seven days. Imagine having to pack up and move your whole life in seven days. And some of us ain't got no place to go.*

For once, Rory spent the night at his place. All day, people came and went. Asking Jordan to sign off on this or that. Seeing what he thought about the latest rumor that once the apartments were gone, a prison would go up instead. Seeing if he'd heard any other news from the ACLU.

Rory offered to help him pack, just in case things didn't work out. She'd already gotten rid of most of her belongings and donated most of her canned food to the West Sideville kitchen. But Jordan had yet to pack a thing.

“I ain't goin nowhere. They want my place? They gotta take it.”

“What if we get a studio? Money will be tight, but we'll make it.”

“Like move in together?”

“...Yeah.”

Jordan thought about it. He never knew what it felt like *not* to struggle. Ever since his parents' soul food spot got demoed with the rest of the Triangle District in 1974 to extend Interstates 64 and 77, he and his family had never known peace. His mother was almost always sick and his father lost himself completely, started fading just like all Jordan's good memories. Plus, Rory would be there and she made every day a little easier. She sang in the mornings, when she felt up to it. Made him an anti-itch salve for his mustache. Stopped by the dollar store after work and picked them up some candy, popcorn and the worst movie on the shelf. She loved films by Andrew Masego, a director who produced movies and shows for women that didn't have a single female writer on staff with titles like *Read for Filth* and *Girl, Please*.

“I don't think so.” It was just like Jordan to deny anything good for him.

Rory let his answer hang in the air before she whispered, “Why?”

“Because I can fix this. Ledger Smith is coming, Rory. A man *rose from the damn dead* and he on his way to help us. Ain't that enough?” He quickly pulled on his reflective vest. As good as Ledger's intentions were, he was getting way more attention than West Sideville. There were fitness videos about developing the Smith Stamina. Fashion videos tracking down the shirt and pants he wore. Everyday people laced up their skates and met him on the highway. Not to help West Sideville, but to see just how long they could last. The news of West Sideville wasn't being reported outside of Charleston, but Ledger Smith was international.

Jordan laced his shoes, “I'ma check on everything outside.”

## Day 6

At dinnertime, Jordan delivered the night's meal: beef stew over rice, a can of Coke and a Cosmic Brownie for dessert. He handed one dinner to Rory and gently nudged her chin. "I missed you today."

Rory smirked and opened the styrofoam box, "I saw you this morning."

He smiled, gently closing the door behind him. "I don't think that matters...sometimes I miss you when you're right next to me."

Rory knew that missing Jordan was a feeling she'd just have to get used to. She'd conceded and called her mother, arranging for her stay in Jubilant City for the foreseeable future. It had been nearly six years since Rory had seen her mother. The time apart was purposeful on Rory's end. Too much time around her mother and Rory realized just how much she was turning into her. Remembered just how pathetic she thought her mother was for spending so much time in bed. "I came by earlier, but you weren't there."

Jordan's apartment had become homebase. Where the apartments were assigned, meals were distributed, work order requests turned in. A retired woman from Building Six even offered to be his secretary and monitored the hallway like their own waiting room. Even though Jordan's name was on the lease, she kicked him out when he wasn't there on business. "I'm here now."

They ate cross-legged in the middle of her living room floor. Her clothes sat around them, folded into 32-gallon bags. She'd dumped nearly everything else at the free item exchange in front of Building Twelve in exchange for the old radio playing a Donny Hathaway song on full volume in the corner.

When they finished, they laid on the palette of blankets Rory would stuff into a trash bag the next morning. Jordan tucked his face into the crook of her neck, the scent of chocolate thick between them.

"I'm going to see my momma," Rory said to the ceiling.

"Over in Jubilant City?"

"Mhm."

"They film *Girl, Please* there. I know that's your favorite show."

Rory smiled, but remained silent.

"I'm gonna go to Louisville. Be closer to my daughter," he said, twisting one of her long thin braids around his finger. "*If* this don't work."

"Will you come and visit me?"

"I wanna see you try and stop me." He kissed the bare skin of her shoulder.

"You promise?" Rory wanted to tell him that she'd loved him and even though the life they'd been building wasn't much, she'd loved it too.

"Of course."

She smiled and patted his cheek. As if to say, *we both know the truth*.

## **Day 7**

The moving crew had loaded up Rory's things into the truck she'd dipped into her savings to rent, but Jordan knew that she refused to leave until she saw him meet Ledger Smith. The man was due to arrive at any moment and the CATs on the other side of Seventh Avenue were moving into place, police vehicles began lining up on either side of the barricades. News channels picked several areas to set up shop, capturing as many angles of West Side-ville as possible. She and Jordan had already said their goodbyes, but he wasn't ready for her to leave. Not Yet/

Jordan had two plans:

- A. Ledger Smith arrived and the presence of a dead man along with several others from the NAACP would intimidate the crew and police into going away for fear of turning a peaceful demonstration into chaos.
- B. Ledger Smith didn't arrive/people didn't care about the miracle before them, leading to the beginning of removal and demolition. He would beg for one final hour and would instruct everyone to pack up and go to keep them all safe.

He had two plans and no solutions.

A plain-clothed officer found his way into West Side-ville and asked Jordan to work with him. "We don't have to have anybody get hurt if you all would just move on out." Instead of escorting him out everyone ignored him, pretended not to hear him when he spoke.

*We do not negotiate with terrorists! We do not owe hospitality to intruders!*

Everyone else in West Side-ville had marched outside of the compound, forming a line that encircled all fifteen buildings. They all linked arms, forming one long human chain.

A police officer stepped to the front of the reflective vests, propped his foot on the bottom rung of a barricade. "Residents of West Side...ville. This is your *last* chance. Go inside of your homes, pack your belongings and leave."

Jordan looked back to see Rory still standing by the back of her truck. He nodded at her in what he assumed would be his last goodbye. He wished he could hug her again, to tell her that everything would be fine, though with every passing minute it seemed like the opposite was true. And when she moved, he wouldn't be able to check in on her as much. To protect her. As she finally climbed into the truck he lifted his megaphone and said, "You can have it when I'm dead."

Rory easily maneuvered the truck out of the throughway they'd left open for anyone that changed their mind at the last minute. Rory set her sights on the new city she'd call home, refusing to think of her comfortable studio or the nights when she and Jordan stayed up to watch the police cars creep slowly through the neighborhood. The residents of West Side-ville tightened their links, Jordan calmly looked into the eyes of any construction worker or police officer bold enough to do the same and Ledger Smith, on his two skates, rolled into view.



## Carbon Copy

Wednesday

We had four names for Denzel Washington at our house:

1. **Denzel**
2. **That's Mr. Washington to you**
3. **Denzuhl—my dad saw a video of That's Mr. Washington to You saying that was how his name is *really* pronounced**
4. **The Blueprint**

My dad loved Denzel Washington like he loved his father or his brother or his son, though he only had three girls. He brought him up every now and then to boast about his accomplishments or to show us his new favorite video. To say, “I loved your momma like Denzel loved Pauletta.” Or, “John David turned out to be a nice young man. Denzel raised him well.” Or to say “King



Kong ain't got shit on me," after winning a hand of Spades. Daddy had a Denzel movie for every occasion. Questioning Daddy? *Fences*. Think life is unfair? *Philadelphia*. Questioning God? *The Preacher's Wife*. Denzel was in the room with us no matter where we went.

When I came back to Jubilant City, neither of my sisters wanted to tell me where he'd gone. It had been a full 365 days since I set foot in JC. They looked at me like I was a stranger. They weren't interested in where I'd been or why I'd been gone, it was easier to ignore me.

"I just know you don't think I'm eating Ramen noodles for dinner. Don't make me start cussing in here," my younger sister said. They named her Joyla because she was a ray of sunshine. She was a sous chef in downtown Jubilant City, a promotion from the Prep Cook job she had before I left.

Marigold stirred a large pot of Ramen that she'd mixed with butter and sriracha, disgracing the entire continent of Asia. "Daddy said it was *my* night to cook."

"Putting six packs of noodles in water is *not* cooking." In the year that I'd been gone, Joyla and Marigold hadn't changed at all.

I cut in, "What you getting Daddy for his birthday?"

They both looked up at me, my voice still out of place in the room.

Marigold rifled through the refrigerator, "We got a Rolex the other day. Sammie said I can use my employee discount on it." She worked at a consignment store in the shopping strip that put North Acres Mall out of business—there were several an identical shopping strips in Fitzgerald Heights taking the same toll on the businesses in that neighborhood. She liked working there because her boss let her work on her screenplay when there weren't customers in the store—which was most of the time. She loved to remind us that it was the best thing she'd ever written and it would be the best film ever made when it hit the screen, but only her

professors knew what it was about. Marigold was the youngest, still in college, still letting her dreams take her for a ride.

“I’ll put up half the money,” Joyla said.

“That’s \$100.”

“You said you were getting a discount.”

“Only employees get a discount. Hoes like you pay full price.”

While they argued, I slipped out of the house and dashed across the front lawn to our neighbor, Ezekiel’s house. Ezekiel was a reporter for the Jubilant City Herald and did *not* go by Zeke. He had been our neighbor since I was a little girl and I’d seen my ex-boyfriend, Tay walk into his house through our living room window. I banged on the front door.

Ezekiel answered, his face a mess of hard stoic lines. Marigold said it was a good thing he was just an online reporter and not an onscreen anchor because he had a face for the newspaper. “Hey Dream, welcome back.”

“Is Tay here?”

He nodded and stepped to the side. The floor of the front room had been covered in stacks of discarded papers, all scribbled on with bright red ink. Tay sat in the middle of them, a new stack of paper in his hands. He furiously scribbled over a page and sat it carefully in a pile. Waited. Put it in a new pile and quickly set in on the next one. There was a desk shoved in the corner of the room; the rest was full of bookcases, with the kind of books that remained untouched at the library. Somehow I knew that Ezekiel had read them all and Tay had probably read his fair share too.

Tay gave me a nod and smiled, “What’s up Dream? When did you get back?”

“This morning.”

“Well...it’s good to see you.”

*It’s not good to see you*, I think. I had lied to myself when the wound was still fresh. Told myself that I wanted Tay to move on, to boss up and be better than he ever had. But that wasn’t all of the truth. It wasn’t even half of it.

We quickly lapsed into silence, the air pregnant with our last conversation about my need to get out of the city and his inability to understand. If I thought on it for too long, I’d break into tears all over again.

Tay bailed me out, “What’s up? What you need?”

“You owe me a favor,” I said simply. “I wanna collect.”

It had been a long time since I’d visited the Runaway House. With me and Tay on the outs, it didn’t seem right to stop by when I got back to Jubilant City the day on Tuesday. But as soon as I stepped a foot into the Runaway House, I clued in on everything I’d been missing. Ms. Chisolm had updated the foyer with new furniture and several bookcases that reached up to the ceiling. She’d updated the wallpaper to a plain white that wouldn’t get bleached in the sunlight streaming through the large windows. Right in the middle of the foyer was a large staircase that led to the cozy rooms Ms. Chisolm and her sister, Trudy, set up for anyone that needed a place to stay.

Tay began ascending the large staircase in the middle of the floor, but I stopped at the bottom. “I thought it was in the kitchen?”

“It is,” he said, stopping at the first landing. He was pudgier than I remembered, probably from all of the long nights pouring over his dissertation. He’d started college at fourteen and opted out of the freshman fifteen. “You know you can’t come in here without speaking to my grandmother.”

“I was assuming we could make an exception.” People walked around us, jingling their room keys and rolling their suitcases.

He paused, “How many you owe her?”

“Seven.”

“Damn, you ain’t been here in a year. How’d you swing that?”

**1. I’d been born owing her one**

She’d been the one to tell

**2. Tay**

**3. Marigold**

**4. Joyla and**

**5. my daddy that I had already left for Texas**

**6. A room she graciously allowed me to use before I hopped on a bus to Texas**

**7. A secret that I’d have to confront if I was gonna see my Daddy again**

“She’s probably mad at me,” I mumbled.

He chuckled, “You know she is. It’s been a full year. You used to be over here at least once a week.” The silence landed between us like a stack of bricks. I’d come over weekly to see him. To sneak into an empty room and steal kisses or for him to tutor me in math after a shift at Bailey’s Cafe before while he rubbed my feet with the pads of his thumbs. Though those days were long gone, I still missed them. “You might as well get it over with.” He held out his hand as an offering.

I declined and walked up the stairs on my own.

Ms. Chisolm was the only woman I'd ever known to have a boudoir. She'd set up her vanity off in the corner, saving the rest of the space for vintage furniture and luxury plants. Her wigs sat on assigned wig heads on a high shelf that the short woman could barely reach. She sat at a desk in the back of the room, taking a nip of cognac with a single ice cube, typing notes into a typewriter that Tay would probably digitize for her in no time at all.

"Hey Momma, look who I brought."

Ms. Chisolm looked up and eyed me suspiciously. She had the eyes of a dictator and the heart of an angel. "Hmph. What you want?"

"Just dropping by to say hello, Ms. Chisolm."

"That's Josephine," she said. But it was a trap. If I called her that, she'd have a conniption. She looked up at Tay, "What she want?"

Tay smirked, holding back a laugh. After years of living with Ms. Chisolm, he'd gotten a good gauge on when her harsh tone was to be taken seriously. I hadn't gotten so good at it. "To use the phone," Tay said.

Ms. Chisolm looked at me again, "Ain't I already done you a favor?"

I took a deep breath, "Yes, ma'am."

"Now you want another?"

"...Yes ma'am."

"But you don't call or come visit?"

I knew any response I gave would hit the air shriveled and turned on its side. Cowardice. That was the only reason. She sat tucked away in the back corner of our minds like an almost forgotten memory. We owed her one, Jubilant City had decided. Josephine Chisolm had given everything she had and only got a string of trauma in return. When her second son was born,

she'd learned that her first son, a seven year old, had cancer. Seven months later, he succumbed to the disease. When Tay turned seven months old, his mother and father, Ms. Chisholm's second son, died in a crash. To go through hurt like that was inhumane, one of God's few missteps.

Still, she raised Tay just right. He held doors, said "Good morning," when he walked past elders. While in boarding school across the country with boys twice his size, he memorized the complicated lore of Barnum and Bailey Circus, just because he had the time. He said words like, "flattered" and "supine" and knew what they meant.

The City stepped in when no god would and decided that anyone that had stepped foot in Jubilant City owed her a favor. Double it if you'd stayed in the Runaway House. Getting a call from Ms. Chisolm's phone meant it was time to pay up. Though most people would never pay at all. After all, if a rich woman spends her entire fortune, she's nothing more than a fool.

And Ms. Chisolm didn't want to risk leaving the numbers of everyone in her debt inside the Runaway House; too many people crossed its threshold. So she trusted the numbers to Tay and he remembered them all perfectly. "It's like one big filing cabinet," he'd said. "I put the number in a file with your name on it and put it in the drawer." Tay was barely 25 and he was finishing up his dissertation. He kept Ms. Chisolm's numbers, SAT words, Barnum and Bailey lore, and twelve years of anthropology studies filed carefully in his head.

Ms. Chisolm nodded knowingly. "Who is it?"

"Denzel Washington."

Ms. Chisolm tapped boxy fingers like carpenter pencils against her chin. Her hair was beginning to thin around her hairline, each strand a rich gray. "Whose tab will this go on?"

"Mine, Grandma."

"That makes seven."

Tay glanced at me from the corner of his eye. “We’re tied,” he mumbled.

Ms. Chisolm considered it for a second, “You know the number?”

Tay nodded, “Yes, Grandma.”

“Good, get on outta here.”

The phone was bright yellow and sat in the back of a locked cabinet in the kitchen. Tay pulled a ring of keys from his pocket and unlocked the cabinet, swinging the door open. We both stared up at the phone, unsure who would make the first move.

“When you leave?” It was an old rotary phone, cold in the shadowed cabinet.

“Three days,” I said. The light from the kitchen made the buttons look glossy.

“Would you have come to see me?...If you didn’t need a favor?”

I looked up at him then, but his eyes stared ahead, sweat gathering around his hairline and above his upper lip. “I don’t know.”

“What happened? You never told me. Never told anybody. You just said you couldn’t be here anymore and left.”

“If I wanted you to know, I’d tell you.”

The change in his face was so small that I wouldn’t have noticed if I didn’t have so much experience memorizing his every pore and strand of facial hair. A twitch of the eyebrow, a clench of teeth that barely reached his jaw. Then, he reset. He grabbed the phone from the cabinet and handed me the receiver, the dial tone groaning loud and long.

“Will he answer?”

“He’ll answer,” Tay mumbled. “Wouldn’t you?”

I wiped the sweat off of my hands with the hem of my shirt as he quickly dialed. I tapped my hand on the slick counter top, an old habit that I wanted to die. Hard. But Tay quickly flicked it away, reading my mind. Soon, the phone stopped ringing. I looked up at Tay, “Should we try again?”

He shook his head, “Just wait.”

A voice finally came on the other end, “Hello?”

My voice caught in my throat and I handed the phone off to Tay. He took it quickly, pressed it between his ear and shoulder. “Mr. Washington?...Yes sir, this is Devontay Chisolm, I’m Josephine Chisolm’s grandson...That’s right, Sir.” Tay leaned against the counter, crossed one leg over the other. He covered the speaker and turned to me, “How soon?”

“Friday,” I whispered.

“This Friday, Sir...I’ll meet you at the Runaway House myself...Thank you sir.” he hung up the phone and took a deep breath. “So, what are the other two getting him?”

After my mother’s funeral, my father sat me down and we watched *John Q.*, a movie about a man taking a hospital hostage to get his son a transplant. Joyla and Marigold were too young to pay attention to films unless they were animated and hypercolor. By the end he was sobbing and saying, “Dream, I tried. I just need you to know that I tried.”

“Does he not like *John Q.*?” Tay asked, carefully packing the other forty-nine Denzel movies he bought my father for his birthday in a gift bag and then unpacking them again. He just couldn’t get the tissue paper right.

I hadn't seen *John Q* since Daddy and I watched it together. “If Denzel’s in it, he loves it,” I took the bag from Tay’s hands and packed the DVDs.



Tay's stipend from Jubilant City University was just enough for a small apartment in South Acres, North Acres' ugly twin sister. His apartment was just like Ezekiel's front room, covered in papers and stacks of books he'd likely read cover to cover.

"He doesn't already have those, does he?"

"Not in good condition like this. He'll love it."

Tay scoffed, "I never found him easy to please. But that probably had more to do with you. I was dating his *favorite* daughter."

"Joyla's his favorite. Here," I slid the backpack to Tay. "I gotta go, it's almost time to check-in."

"You don't have to go to a hotel, you know."

"I don't wanna owe your grandma anymore favors."

"Then stay here," he said simply. "I'll take the couch."

I didn't speak to Tay until I'd been away from the city for a month. And when I did I sent a single text: *I'm sorry. I miss you.* "I don't wanna put you out, Tay."

"Don't be ridiculous." Tay's response came free of judgment, like it always did: *I know.*

## **Thursday**

Anytime a special guest came to the Runaway House the Special Suite had to be set up. Hidden in a trap door at the very top of the stairs, the suite stretched across the entire fifth floor of the house. Tay and I suspected that when it wasn't in use, the house divided it into different rooms to be used for other purposes, but Ms. Chisolm would never confirm or deny our theory.

I followed the bound manual Ms. Chisolm gave me to the letter. Washed the sheets by hand with lavender water before pressing, folding and unfolding them. Shook out the curtains

and rubbed each of the flowers with the pads of my thumbs. Placed a bundle of sage and a handful of rose petals beneath the bedside table.

Tay came to check on me just as the sun set. I stopped him at the threshold, pointed at the pillows on the bed. “Fluff them.”

“Why?”

“The manual says so. *Each person that enters must fluff the pillows.*”

Tay looked from me to the pillows and back, “Why?”

“I don’t know. Did I write the damn manual? Ask your grandma.”

Tay grabbed the pillows from the bed and patted them on each side. I began to notice the scruff building in patches on his cheeks. Tay, who always wore a fresh pair of sneakers, had arrived in runover Nike slides and dirty tube socks.

“You alright?” I asked.

He nodded and rubbed at his chin unconsciously, “I look rough?”

“With two F’s.”

He shrugged and sat at the foot of the bed, “Working on my dissertation. Doing a lot of interviews. Finding out half of them are worthless. You know how it goes.”

“How many do you guys do?”

“I do about seven a week. I wish Ezekiel would help more, but he’s working on a big story. Not much of an outside advisor.”

“I know you want to tell me what the topic is, so go ahead.”

He smiled, “Okay, so it’s about the magic of the city and its effect on how people live out their lives here.”

“So, it's about the tree?”

“Kind of. It's about whether or not people that live here actually believe that the city is magic, what people outside of the city think and what actions they take because of their beliefs.” Tay laid back on the bed and crossed his hands on his stomach. “Some people go down to the tree every morning and kneel. Like, worship it. Some think it's religion and some think it's magic.”

“But it *is* magic.”

“I guess I know what side you're on.”

I shook my head, “Where else can you pick up a phone and demand Denzel Washington show up? That man is a Pop Pop, he's not coming out of the woodwork for just anybody.”

Tay crossed his arms, “True, but who's to say that it wasn't luck? Who's to say it wasn't...prayer.”

“Is that what you think?”

“No, I think this is the best city in the world. Didn't stop you from leaving, did it?”

“Guess not.”

Tay watched me move from one side of the room to the other waving an unlit bunch of eucalyptus. His large brown eyes were two big question marks.

I sighed, “Just ask me.”

“I already did,” he said. “I feel like your answer hasn't changed.”

“It hasn't.”

He picked up the manual and quickly flipped through the pages. To anyone else it looked like skimming, but I knew Tay. He was reading it. “Ain't nothing in here about fluffing pillows,” he said.

I smiled, “I know.”

Joyla and Marigold were waiting for me outside of the Runaway House, leaning against the old Honda Accent Daddy made us share. It had belonged to our mother. They were too young to remember the days when she drove it, excited to have a car that was the perfect size for her small frame. Marigold saw me first, rushed right up the steps. “Where the hell have you been this past year?”

“Oh, you ready to talk now? Done pretending I’m not here?” After I visited the Runaway House on Wednesday, I went back to North Acres and got my suitcase. I told my sisters not to spoil the surprise by telling Daddy I was back. They paid me no mind and turned up the episode of *Girl, Please* they were watching.

Marigold shook her head, already frustrated, “Girl, go straight to hell—”

“—with kerosene drawls,” Joyla chimed in.

“Aw,” Tay cooed, his smile wide. “Y’all argue like you never left.”

Joyla put her hand up, “Tay, I like you, but stay in your lane.”

Tay chuckled, “Pipe down J, you don’t scare me.” His humor was his most redeeming quality, but it was also what got on my nerves the most. No one wants to hear laughter when venting about how awful their day was and Tay had given me that treatment more times than I could count. I knew he couldn’t help it, sometimes he just laughed when he didn’t know what to say.

If looks could kill, Joyla would have Tay’s blood on her hands. She turned to Dream and said, “We just came to tell you that Daddy’s on his way here after his appointment. Don’t want you to blow your cover.”

I pressed a thumb to my chin, “After what appointment?”

“He—”

“No,” Marigold stepped in between her sisters. “He’ll tell her himself.”

I scoffed and shook my head, “Just make sure he’s home tomorrow at noon. And keep your mouths shut until then.”

“So you can make demands, but you not gon tell us where you been?”

“Pluto. The moon. What does it matter?” Though I knew I was wrong, I couldn’t help but lash out back at them. They were so busy being angry that they didn’t understand that I needed their understanding. I needed Joyla to back me up. I needed my sisters.

“Whatever,” Marigold said. “I’m ready to go.”

Joyla stayed on the steps and moved closer to me and further from Tay. “We needed you too.”

“J, I’m sorry if you needed a shoulder, but I wouldn’t have been any good.”

“But, why? Why didn’t you talk to us?”

How could I explain everything to Joyla without burdening her, weighing her down like I’d been all those years. “I’m here now. Doesn’t that count?”

Marigold honked the horn and waved, “J, let’s go.”

Tay and I remained on the front steps until the car drove away. I took in a shaky deep breath. Though I could feel the warmth of Tay’s body next to me, he said nothing.

Tay came into his bedroom with a couple of bright knitted throws and sat them on the corner of his bed. “I forgot to give you these yesterday. I could hear your teeth chattering from the couch.” Instead of heading back into the living room, he leaned against the wall. “So, you’re not ready to talk to your sisters yet. Are you ready to talk to me?”

I unfolded each throw and laid them across the bed, "About what?"

"Take your pick."

"I pick nothing."

"C'mon Dream," he settled on the end of the bed.

I sighed, "What do you wanna talk about?"

"Well, you just left me in limbo for the past year. You didn't even break up with me."

"I didn't want to," I mumbled. I thought I'd talk to Tay about everything before I came back. But the more time passed, the more ashamed I felt. The more I felt like things were too far gone. That he wouldn't want to hear from me.

"Why?"

I rubbed my knuckles against my forehead and took a deep breath. "I don't have answers for you Tay and I'm sorry, but I just don't."

"Alright," he got up and ran into the living room. When he came back he held a large binder, flipping through the pages. "Let me interview you."

"For your dissertation?"

"My contact for today dropped out anyway. Ready?"

I sat in his desk chair and nodded, "Go ahead."

"Name?"

"Dream Short."

"Age?"

"I'm 26."

"How long have you lived in Jubilant City?"

"Since I was born."

"Except for the last year."

I nodded.

"What makes this city special?"

"The tree, I guess. That's where all the magic comes from, right?"

"Is it?"

"I don't know what you want me to say."

"I just want you to be real for once, Dream. Don't tell me what you think I wanna hear.

Tell me the truth."

In just a few minutes, I'd exhausted myself. "I don't know what's so special about it. I fucking hate it here and if it was up to me, I wouldn't have come back. For such a magical city there's a lotta bull shit here. *All* the time. If my dad wasn't...if he wasn't here, I wouldn't have come back."

Tay paused his note taking and looked up at me. I'd hurt his feelings. He'd never say it, but it was all over his face. He stopped his tape recorder. Said, "Good to know."

## **Friday**

Word that Denzel Washington had arrived spread around the large city like a heatwave. Ms. Chisolm said he pulled up in an old Bentley Continental around 8am. He went to her office to greet her, like everyone did and then settled into his room without a word. Quite an unglamorous arrival.

"Is this *ensemble* appropriate for meeting an A-lister?" Tay donned a crisp button down shirt and dark wash jeans. He spun once with his hands out. I wasn't the only one that had

problems being real. Instead of telling me that I'd wounded him, he re-emerged with a smile on his face.

“*Very* handsome.”

“Thanks, you are too.”

“Handsome?”

He nodded, “Very.”

When we got to the Runaway House, Denzel was waiting on the front steps, casually sitting with his legs extended and ankles crossed. People stared as they walked by, but no one was brave enough to say a word. Maybe they'd heard about how Denzel would put his elbow in the necks of those that approached him when he was younger. Maybe his *Training Day* was too good. “Hi there Mr. Washington,” I said, shaking his hand and blinking my eyes to clear any Jubilant City juju that could trick me into thinking I was staring at Denzel when I wasn't.

Though his face had been aged by time, his smile was the same: large and sly, with a secret behind the teeth. He nodded at Tay, “Nice shirt.” Denzel clapped his hands together and asked earnestly, “What am I doing here?”

“Well, Mr. Washington, my dad is a big fan of yours. He's always wanted to meet you. And it's his birthday. No telling how many we all got left, you know? And I can't tell you how many times we done watched *Philadelphia*—”

“We coulda met on the phone,” Denzel said, a hearty laugh building at the back of his mouth.

“Yeah. But—well, I ain't been home in a year.”

Tay cut in, “She ain't called either.”

“And I want to make it up to him.”



“Plus,” Tay added. “You won't have any more debt to my grandmother.”

“Son, if your grandmother asked me to smack you in the mouth right now I'd do it. I could never repay the hospitality she showed me.”

Tay nodded and smiled, “Yes sir.”

“Alright,” Denzel said. “Take me over.”

We offered to drive, but Denzel declined and said he'd take us in his BMW instead. When Tay tried to get in the front passenger seat, Denzel smacked him in the back of the head and held the door patiently as I laughed and got in instead. Then he pointed a finger at Tay, "I'll tell your grandmother about that."

Tay sucked his teeth, "I'm grown."

Denzel smiled, "I'll tell her that too."

As Denzel walked around the car, Tay clamored in and leaned between the front seats, "You think he's really gonna tell her?"

I looked at him in the rearview mirror, "Absolutely. It's what my dad would do."

"Shit." Tay sat back and stared up at the BMW's gray ceiling.

We sent Denzel in first, while Tay and I went around to the backyard. That morning, North Acres didn't have any of the noise of Jubilant City's downtown.

Tay and I settled into the old wicker chairs lined up on the back porch.

“I think you should brace yourself,” he said.

“For what?”

His gaze was heavy. “He’s sick, Dream. I know Marigold said he’d tell you himself, but...he’s different now.”

“I already know,” my voice came out a whisper. I was certain he’d kept it a secret as long as he could, only admitting when he couldn’t hide it anymore.

I shifted in the wicker chair, “Daddy was never home before I left. Did you realize that?”

“Yeah. I remember. You were frustrated about it. Worried, maybe.”

“I wouldn’t see him for weeks at a time. He’d just leave. We could take care of ourselves, but...” I shrugged, leaned my head against the shudders of the dining room window. “You remember when we went to that dinner you had in DC? You wore that ugly ass sequin jacket.”

“That jacket is *awesome*.”

“We drove past the House on the way back. My dad was walking out.”

“He needed a favor.”

“Mhm. You know what it was?” My dad owned his home, had a healthy savings, and had three daughters capable of caring for themselves. What favor could he need? “He needed to talk to someone about his cancer.” When I was seven, Joyla three and Marigold two, our mother had been diagnosed with cancer. Stage four. It seemed like she started to fade immediately. Couldn’t keep any food down. It began to feel like I was hugging air. I knew they thought me selfish, but that was a judgment I could live with. They hadn’t been the one to find her cold. Or to be pried away from her. Or to beg Daddy to ask the hospital if we could keep her body for a little while—even though she was no longer in it.

Tay shook his head and mumbled, “Grandma.”

“All the magic in this city, but my daddy’s dying.”

“He’s not giving up though Dream,” Tay lowered his voice to a whisper, his eyes earnest.

“Hey, I’m here with you this time. We’re all here with you this time. *Denzel Washington* is here

with you this time. That's the magic." He paused. "Some shit just isn't fair, I think I know a lot about that, but if you give up, what was it all for?"

The door cracked open and Denzel stepped out, his smile bright. Daddy stepped out after him, drowning in sweat pants and a shirt that used to fit him better. He was almost giddy, laughing at a joke that hadn't hit my ears. His hands moved through the air in a way that could only mean that he was talking about *The Equalizer* and Denzel's close combat scenes.

Denzel shook Daddy's hand firmly, "Mr. Short, you've raised three lovely young women."

Daddy nodded enthusiastically and then paused, "Three?"

Daddy's head swiveled around until his eyes landed on me.



## Rolling the Dice

*Based on a true story.*

Teddy had spent so much time in the bathroom, he'd counted the individual fibers in the mat beneath his feet. He was the second oldest of the ten Williams kids and it was the only place he got any privacy. Their father left for work immediately after waking the six older kids at five in the morning; his wife usually slept an extra hour or two and the four youngest kids watched each other until she rose. As soon as they were old enough to understand the value of a dollar, the Williams kids had to find work—preferably something gentrification-proof—and contribute. That summer, they spread across Jubilant City. Regina worked out of the house, pressing Mrs. Coleman's hair at seven in the morning and then her second appointment would come at nine-thirty. Alberta was a math tutor in University Park and Elvira helped an old lady in The Crick wash her clothes, clean her house and cook her meals. Nelson had a job at a poppy shop deli counter downtown, mostly frying eggs and slipping them onto sub sandwiches slathered

with thick layers of mayonnaise. This morning, Michael and Teddy had slept in, telling their father that they would be helping Mr. Manning pack up the rest of his store and he'd promised them \$100 *each*. That was all their father needed to hear.

Now, around noon, Teddy sat on the toilet seat, trying to tune out the grating cartoon music blaring from the living room. Those four tiny bedrooms weren't meant to house twelve people, even if half of them worked for most of the day. The apartment was overrun with beds and blankets and lonely single socks that they'd match up when they got desperate enough. Three of the littles sat all over each other in the living room; they shared a bowl of dry Frosted Flakes, a Looney Tunes rerun and a large blanket, just like they shared everything else. Usually, Teddy liked to hide in the closet in his parents room; it had more space for his legs, sometimes he even did homework in there. But his mother was on a phone call and had her door closed. Instead, he had the plush bathroom rug beneath his toes to cling to. The bottle of Sadie's eczema lotion to read. Old splatters of toothpaste in the damp mouth of the sink to study.

Michael jiggled the bathroom door handle, "Teddy, let's go. We gotta be on time."

"Right, right." He pulled the door open and shrugged past his little brother. "Take my shoes off."

One year Teddy's junior, Michael had grown muscles no one knew the origin of. When all twelve of them went out together, Michael sat alone. He loved them plenty, but he wouldn't *just* be a Williams all his life and he made sure to tell them so. "*You* said I could wear them."

"That was before I got this job. Those the only good shoes I got. Wear your red ones."

Teddy was officially employed at the Taco Hut, a shack of a restaurant that served warm burritos and scalding nacho cheese. The only parts of the uniform they provided him with were his taco

monogrammed hat and button down, though the payment for both would come out of his first paycheck.

Michael crossed his arms, “I can’t. I walked the bottom out. It's like walking with no shoes on.”

“I’ll get daddy’s shoes then. Just put those back and wear my brown ones.” Teddy trotted down to the end of the hallway where the apartment’s largest room was, ignoring Michael’s mumbled, “I ain’t never heard of *nice* work shoes.” A long coiled phone cord wound beneath the door and into the receiver on the wall just outside it. Teddy could hear the muffled voice of his mother, followed by a cackle that could only mean that she was popping shit about one of her friends.

“Momma!” Teddy knocked on the door, “I need Daddy’s shoes.”

The bedroom door swung open revealing a large bed, a large dresser and a bassinet where Teddy’s youngest sibling slept. When he woke up, he would no doubt be ushered out to the TV too, until Teddy and Michael returned to take the littles outside. Or until Their mother gave in. They needed to air out like a house with a gas leak.

Their mother handed Teddy a pair of clunky black shoes and a \$1 bill.

“15-20-34-76-18-9. 15-20-34-76-18-9. I got a good feeling about these, baby. Say it back to Momma.” The city had its own lottery and the jackpot was just over one million dollars, but their mother had been playing once a month since Teddy was born. Sam, the owner of the gas station on the corner knew all ten of the Williams kids, but their mother made sure he knew Teddy, Regina and Michael by name. “And this one is Michael,” she’d said. “Now when they come in here for a lottery ticket, you know they coming on my behalf.”

Their mother didn't write down her lotto numbers. Bad luck. She just repeated them to Teddy or Regina or Michael until they knew it forward and backward. Teddy could tell she'd dreamt of these numbers from the look in her eyes. Things in her dreams came true, she just didn't know when. They were always rolling the dice. Crossing their fingers. Praying they didn't crap out.

"15-20-34-76-18-9."

"Again."

"15-20-34-76-18-9."

"Again."

"15-20-34-76-18-9."

She frowned, her gaze steady. "Do you need to write it down?"

"No, Momma."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"And they pull the numbers at—"

"Seven."

"But you need to put them in by—"

"Five."

"Say it again."

"15-20-34-76-18-9."

Their mother smiled, "Good boy." Teddy looked for his mother's smile in the faces of everyone he met, but he never saw another one quite like it. It was beautiful and sincere, but it was also a

thinly veiled threat. A threat Teddy never was never on the receiving end of, as he would do whatever his mother asked. She had yet to steer him wrong.

“What’s the number?” Michael asked when Teddy reached the living room.

“15-20-34-76-18-9.”

Michael and Teddy had to herd the littles away from the door like cattle as they stepped out into the cold, dirty hallway of the Hilton. Everything that made their crowded apartment endearing fell away at the threshold in favor of the hallway’s cinder block walls and concrete floors.

The Hilton Houses were in Fitzgerald Heights and like most neighborhoods named after Black legends, it had gone to shit. It had become the kind of neighborhood with old dirty mattresses on street corners and cars propped on cinder blocks. It was the place where all of the flawed people in Jubilant City were banished to. Teddy’s parents had Regina at seventeen and got married at eighteen, so their family fit right in with the patchwork of people that threatened to sully the city’s good name: high school dropouts, ex-cons, those with too many parking tickets, dog breeders, panhandlers. They were left to drown in Fitz Heights, but against the odds they floated. Even if only barely.

The Williamses stayed in the Southeast building, with its dull brown brick and a mural of Ella Fitzgerald by the trash cans. A man named Sylvester had been hanging outside of the Southeast building since the Williamses moved in. He pushed a shopping cart full of whatever he took interest in that day. Old newspapers, random planks of wood, broken portable CD players. Sylvester welcomed everyone with a smile and offered them every item he had if he thought they could use it. They always knew he was outside because they could hear him from their bedroom



window. He wasn't homeless; far from it. His momma lived a few blocks over in one of the other Hiltons. Always said, "If you see my boy, you just send him home. Tell him I'm waiting on him." When she got tired of waiting, she'd walk around the building calling "Sylvester!" No matter if he was in the middle of a sentence, he'd stop what he was doing and run to wherever she was. The boys on the corner laughed at him, but Teddy and Michael never cracked a smile. Whenever their mother called, they did the same.

Michael was always drawn to Sylvester, curious about his cart, spilling with things he'd found. The long scar that cut into his eyebrow. The songs he sang when he sat outside late into the night. Plus, Sylvester beat away a stray dog chasing the six older Williams kids with a stick. Helped them find the couple that broke into their home just before New Years one year. Always lined up with them at the bus stop on Fridays after school to help their mother take the groceries inside. In Michael's mind, Sylvester was the thirteenth Williams.

Sylvester quickly hobbled over to them as soon as he saw them emerge from the dusty entryway, "Mike, you got some gum?" Sylvester tugged at the too short arms of his shirt, blinked his mismatched eyes more than he needed to. Their mother had told them glaucoma was responsible for the gray cloud spreading across his eye. But Teddy thought that was how Sylvester saw God.

"Yeah man," Michael fished around in his pockets—on a pair of shorts Teddy had recently outgrown—and pulled out a stick of gum that had folded over on itself.

Sylvester plucked it from his hand, "Thank you."

"We're heading out. You need anything, you go on up to our place."

"406."

"Right. Or you go home."

He placed a steady hand on Michael's shoulder. "Alright. God talked to me this morning. Said, 'Breathe. It'll be alright.'"

Michael nodded, "I guess you better listen."

A hum lept from Sylvester's throat as he began to sing, carefully holding the piece of gum between his thumb and forefinger. "*God talked to me this morning. Said, 'Breathe. It'll be alright.'*" He settled on a bench next to his cart and crossed his ankles. Once, their father had said God could only hear the rich and the poor and didn't have time for those in the middle. Then said, "If I can't get the rent by the end of the week, we'll be able to call him directly."

Teddy could see whatever was inside Michael. Whatever was drawing him toward Sylvester was present, tugging him over to the bus bench. Michael was rougher than his brother and had served endless detention sentences for talking reckless and making someone cry—teachers included. But he didn't like when people messed with Sylvester and had been in a fight or two in his honor. Teddy placed a gentle hand on his brother's shoulder and nodded toward the bus bench on the corner where Michael would catch the 10. Michael would hop on first, dap up his brother and hand the pass back. Then Teddy would sprint through the alley and catch the bus two blocks over. "C'mon. Can't be late remember?."

Michael waved, "Have a good day Sylvester!"

As they walked to the bus stop, Teddy tried to stop the fidgeting of his hands, the weird way his chest rose and fell as he breathed. Their parents had decided that he, Michael and Regina, were old enough to be clued in on the family finances. While Alberta, Elvira and Nelson simply handed over whatever money they made, the three oldest were finding out exactly where that money was going. The last meeting had put the fear of God in Teddy. The rent ate up  $\frac{2}{3}$  of their father's check. The rest went to the electricity. Collectively, Alberta, Elvira and Nelson

made enough to cover the gas and water bills and half a trip to the grocery store. And the three oldest were responsible for the rest—the other half of the groceries for the month, monthly bus passes and any other extras.

“If I work full time I’ll be able to pay some of the rent. Free up some money. Maybe we can get bikes for Anastasia and Sadie before it gets too cold.”

Michael sucked his teeth, the bus pass they shared in his back pocket. “If I’m working full time, I’m keeping the check. I ain’t gon’ let *your* family kill *me*.”

The 10 dropped them five blocks from Mr. Manning’s Antiques. His store was in the Fitz Market District, five blocks of strip malls in varying states of disrepair. All with cracked parking lots, dull fluorescent signs and at least three consecutive empty storefronts lined up like dominoes. It wouldn’t be long before more large corporations and franchises leased the empty space. Manning was in the Carson Street strip mall, one of the better malls. As they rounded the corner, Michael gently elbowed Teddy and nodded at the bus stop where Janet sat with her head tilted toward the summer sun. Janet had been around ever since Teddy could remember. Their fathers were the kinds of friends that wore their hate for one another like a necklace underneath a shirt. They couldn’t get along because they were much too alike. Greedy, brash, hard headed. But while Teddy’s father had more failed businesses than he cared to remember, Janet’s father owned a laundromat and ran a cleaning service, both highly regarded in Jubilant City. The laundromat was one of the only surviving businesses in the Gateway Street strip mall and the Williamses gathered all of their laundry and washed it there every second and fourth Sunday. Teddy’s father had been a notary, an electronics salesman, a courier, a contracted CPS official, and—Teddy’s favorite—all five in one. They always knew when they had a new sibling on the way, their father would make money appear out of thin air and load every free corner of the crowded apartment

with inventory for the new business. He'd sell some of it, give some away in exchange for erasing his debts, get some of it stolen and whatever was left over would be repurposed or put out on the curb.

“All you gotta do is say something, smooth. *Smooth*, Teddy. Don't you get over there and start talking about karate.”

“She might like karate.”

Michael tapped Teddy's arm like one of the littles. “Say something like, ‘You should take shade.’ Then she'll say, ‘Why?’ Then you'll say, ‘Cause a girl so sweet shouldn't burn in the heat.’”

Teddy nodded, “Wow. I hated that.”

Michael frowned, “I thought it was pretty good.”

“It wasn't. Why did it rhyme?”

“Look, do what you want then. Talk about Bruce Lee and Shaolin versus Wutang. Go ahead over there and get shut down.” He leaned against the building behind him, a boxing gym that went out of business when their father was still a child. “You got two minutes.”

Teddy stuffed his hands in his pockets as he crossed the intersection. He could still hear Michael's voice banging in his head. Janet uncrossed her legs and stood, a sweet smile crossing her lips. Regina had described her face as angelic, her eyes almond shaped and spaced. Her nose small and barely there. Teddy felt heat build on his back. Pause. Sweat on his hands and forehead. A full three seconds after he opened his mouth he finally said, “What's a bun like you doing in the oven?” As soon as he said it, his face dropped. “I meant—because it's hot. What are you doing sitting in the heat? That's what I meant.” He felt the burn pass over his face like the sun moving from behind a cloud.

If Janet noticed, she didn't mention it. "Waiting for the bus to take me to the Jubilant City Closet. I'm volunteering today," she said as she tapped the iron-on logo on the front of her shirt.

"Cool," he nodded. "I just got me a job at Taco Hut."

"What they paying over there?"

"Not much."

"I can get you a job working with my dad. If you want."

"Let me guess, folding granny panties at the laundromat?"

"Sometimes. But I know he pays more than Taco Hut."

Teddy knew better than to accept a job working for Mr. Anderson. Their father cursed that man every chance he got. Teddy thought that was his real motivation to get up every morning, leave and come back home to ten kids. If he abandoned them then Mr. Anderson would be better than him once and for all. He only had one kid, but she was well taken care of.

The large city bus hissed as it rounded the corner, a 15 flashing on the digital marquee. Janet stood and stretched, an inch or two taller than Teddy, even in no shoes at all.

"I'll think about it," he said.

"S up to you," she said, fishing five quarters from her pocket.

Teddy and Michael showed up to Mr. Manning's just after noon and began loading boxes stacked up in the old storefront. The antique store had finally gone out of business. Teddy walked past that store at least twice a week since he was old enough to walk around on his own and he'd never seen anybody set foot in the store, let alone make a purchase. The nail in the coffin was when Antique World opened in the Carson Street strip mall, selling similar trinkets for half the price. All gutted out, Manning's store looked like an old basement.

Teddy and Michael made an assembly line, with Michael grabbing the boxes from the shop floor, bringing them outside and handing them to Teddy who walked them to the very back of the open box truck. Every now and then, they'd see someone walk by with an orange lottery ticket and kiss it like their first born.

Michael handed off a box and asked, "What's the number?"

Teddy sighed, "15-20-34-76-18-9."

"Let's get the ticket before we get on the bus. This gas station has the \$1 gum. I wanna get a pack for Sylvester."

"Bet."

"You tryna talk to that girl Janet? Or just embarrass yourself?"

Teddy sucked his teeth, "I ain't embarrass myself. I'm being careful. Biding my time."

Michael handed over a box that said, "Paintings" and paused outside of the truck, his hands on his hips. He bent at the waist and shook his head, flinging sweat like a wet dog "You gon' die a virgin."

"And you not?"

Michael smirked, "Mine's been gone a while now, *young* man."

Of course, Teddy was coming in second place behind Michael again. Michael was the first to start talking even though Teddy was born a year before him. He was the first to take a step because he was always in a fucking rush. Now he had lost his virginity first. Teddy was almost four inches taller though, a fact that he held close to his heart, and mouth (if he needed a quick comeback).

"Get that last box, I'm tired."

Michael scooped up the last box easily and walked it out, slid it onto the truck himself. Michael bounced on the balls of his feet as if he hadn't done any work at all. "I can feel that \$100 bill weighing down my pocket right now, boy!"

"You know you gotta give that to Daddy." Teddy wiped sweat from his neck, "Let's get the money so I can get Momma's ticket and we can go home."

Mr. Manning sat in the empty and humid office in the back of the store, a small plastic fan blowing on his desk.

Teddy knocked on the door, "All done."

"Good," Manning said. "Don't forget this last one under the desk. He put all of his weight on his right foot as he stood from a rickety folding chair and Michael cradled with box of old Andrew Masego DVDs like it was one of the littles. Masego was a homeless creative, turned councilman, turned screenwriter. Some people were invested in renaming their neighborhood Masego Heights. "Let's head on over to my house so we can get everything unloaded."

Teddy and Michael locked eyes. Teddy nudged Michael to the side, he would do the talking. Michael was too much of a hot head. "Uh, Mr. Manning? You said to help you load *up*."

"You think I'm gonna unload all that on my own?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Michael piped up. "But this ain't what we agreed to."

Manning ignored Michael, "Y'all come on, we can all fit up front."

Michael was doing all the talking now, "Can we at least get our money now?"

"It's on my dresser at the house."

Michael nudged Teddy all the way to the side, "Let's clear this up first. Once we *get there*, we get \$100 *each*, right?"

Mr. Manning sat back in his chair, eyes bouncing from one Williams brother to the next and back.

Michael chuckled, the kind of chuckle that meant he was trying to save you from something much worse. He'd inherited that from their mother. When Teddy thought about it, Michael's smile was a lot like hers. "Old man. You better give me my money. \$100 *each*. Ain't that what he said, Teddy?"

"It's what he said," Teddy mumbled.

"I know your daddy. He ain't gon' be too pleased y'all bailing on work you committed to."

Michael dropped the box on the office floor. "Ooh, Mr. Manning. You a lie! If you knew anything about *my* daddy, you'd know he about his money. He don't believe in *giving* discounts or *getting* delayed payments with no interest."

Mr. Manning jumped up and grabbed for the box, "Be careful with that!"

Teddy didn't have all of the numbers memorized, but he knew if they didn't come back with their share, their father would probably have to take out a payday loan that he wouldn't be able to pay back for months. The alternative was that they had to cut back on food and would have sleep for dinner later in the month.

"You know what? Get on outta here! Before I have my grandson come up here and tear y'all up!"

"Yeah right," Michael spat. He knew that if they got into a fight, it would be a family affair. Their siblings would come out of the trees, the gutters, the sewers to fight alongside their brothers just like they always did. Even the littles would get their licks in. But they left with no money anyway, save the \$1 bill in Teddy's pocket.



Teddy convinced Michael to skip the bus in favor of taking the long way home. Said they'd be able to convince someone more desperate than themselves to hire them for the evening. That someone needed a fifteen and sixteen year old to sweep and mop their floors or cut the grass or put some nails in the wall. They made all the usual stops in the Carson Street and Gateway Street malls. "Next week," some said. Others thanked them, but denied. As they walked home, Michael's eyes trained on the collection of ugly Hilton Houses, they started playing Problem/Solution, a game their father made them play that was really more like one big word problem. They went back and forth restating the problem in a new way and coming up with a new solution. Their father always told them they didn't have time to pout about their problems because most solutions were time sensitive.

It was Teddy's turn to start. "Problem?"

Michael sighed, "We didn't get paid."

"Solution?"

Michael thought for a minute before rubbing the sweat from his forehead, "Ask Mr. Anderson."

"Be serious."

"I am." Michael turned around to face Teddy and walked down the sidewalk backwards.

"We know he got it. Plus, he stay up the street. Won't take no time at all."

"What we do when Daddy find out?"

"Daddy don't hate Mr. Anderson—"

"The hell he don't!"

"You go then. Problem?"

Teddy shrugged, “We didn’t make enough today.”

“Solution?”

“Get it from Sylvester.”

Michael stopped, “Get *what* from Sylvester?”

“You *know* he got money. People drop it in his cart all day. They think he begging. He never uses it. He won’t care.”

Michael shook his head, “Think of something else.”

“This is a *good* idea. Since he’s *not* begging—”

“*We* begging, Teddy.” Michael stopped moving down the sidewalk and looked around at their neighborhood, falling apart at the seams. The abandoned houses, the knocked over street signs, the bus stops with the ripped up benches. “I’m tired of begging to feed some kids I didn’t have. I wanted to go swimming today, but instead I gotta deal with this.”

“So? Me too, you’re not special.”

“Ain’t none of us special! That’s why we struggling—the Williamses. The most common name in the world.”

It took everything Teddy had not to roll his eyes. There was nothing to be gained from feeling sorry for themselves or being angry about what they didn’t have, it didn’t mean that they’d get it any faster. Or at all. Teddy thought he and Michael were on the same page about that, they both saw the cards they were dealt and just decided to play the best hand they could. He was wrong. “Don’t worry about *us* Williamses then. I’ll make sure we’re straight.” Teddy scanned the street outside of the Hilton Houses ahead and spied Sylvester placing a yard sign that said, “Andrew Masego for President!” in his cart. Teddy cupped his hands around his mouth, “Sylvester!”

Michael jumped in front of Teddy, blocking the sidewalk. "Leave him alone."

Teddy broke a cardinal rule of the Williams household and pushed Michael. In-fighting wasn't allowed. Their mother was the one of eight girls and refused to watch her children fight like she and her sisters. And though he barely moved, the shove surprised Michael. He and Teddy got along the best out of all of the Williams kids. They were always together; when you saw one, the other usually wasn't far behind. Michael pushed back with all the strength he had and floored Teddy. It wasn't long before they were rolling on the sidewalk, struggling to do more harm than the other. A small crowd of four or five gathered and called for them to stop, but no one stepped in to stop Michael's fist from slamming into Teddy's ribcage. Or to loose Michael's neck from Teddy's arm. Not until Regina dropped a pack of cigarettes on the ground to free her hands and ripped them apart. "I know y'all not out here embarrassing us like this," she whispered, pulling them both to the side by the collar.

Michael yanked away, "He shouldn't be putting his hands on me!"

Regina didn't move, just stared until Michael collected himself. She asked, "What happened?"

Teddy explained, but Michael made sure he didn't leave a thing out.

Regina bit her thumb, "I saved up a little and opened a bank account. I have a little over \$100. Let's go get it before the bank closes."

"That's not fair to you," Teddy said.

"It's fine. Ain't none of this fair." She snatched her cigarettes from the ground and slipped them into her bra. She looked at Teddy, "Apologize."

"I'm sorry."

Michael shrugged, said, “It’s whatever,” like it wasn’t *really* whatever. Teddy understood, Michael needed a minute. And Teddy wasn’t proud of himself for what he’d done, Michael was his best friend.

Regina sucked her teeth, “It’s Saturday. The bank closed at six.”

Teddy frowned, “Six? What time is it?”

“It was 6:45 when I came out here.”

Teddy sighed, “Shit.”

“What?”

Michael shook his head, “He forgot to play Momma’s number.”

“You better tell her before they—”

A bundle of yells erupted from the fourth floor of the Southeast Hilton House. The three oldest Williams children traded glances and then sprinted for the front door. When they got to the apartment, his mother’s numbers were on the TV screen. The room erupted in noise, dinnerware shaking in the cabinets. Christian and Daniel didn’t understand what was going on, but they were joyous all the same. Over the heads of others, Michael and Teddy locked eyes, Michael shook his head, a smirk curling at the edge of his mouth. Teddy had never screwed up this bad. There had never been \$1,000,000 on the line. He’d be working at the Taco Hut for eternity trying to make up for it. He didn’t expect it, but at some point between their collective realization and his father’s keys jingling in the door, he began to cry.

After a silent dinner, the air in the kitchen was cold on Teddy’s shoulders. He, his mother and father, Regina and Michael sat in front of small bowls of off brand vanilla ice cream, a luxury they allowed, but couldn’t afford. The \$1 bill, crumpled and worn, lay in the middle of them.

Their father was on the phone listening to the fourth person tell him they'd won the lottery. Their father had seen people clamoring into gas stations and poppy shops to claim their prize: one million dollars. Or so they thought. Daddy counted at least ten winners on the bus ride home with him. At least sixty were outside of the gas station on the corner on the walk from the bus stop. The nine o'clock news confirmed that at least one thousand people had hit the lottery, which would leave them with about \$1,000 each. But they predicted more people would come forward with their winning tickets in the coming days.

"Welp," their father took his time sitting down. Years of eighty hour work weeks had begun to take a toll on his body. Even though he was still in his early thirties, he was moving half as fast as he used to. "Even though we didn't win the lottery, I think we can use this to our advantage." He pointed at Teddy and Michael, "You two will offer to play numbers for people. Sam at the corner store already knows you. We'll charge a fifty cent fee to hook 'em, seventy-five after the first ticket."

Regina shook her head, "From one hustle to another."

Their father nodded, "That's right. That's how we keep our heads above water."

Regina eyed their father like she wanted to smack him across the face.

"Speak your mind Regina," their mother said. She hadn't spoken since Teddy told her through tears that he hadn't gotten the lottery ticket. That he had let her down for the first time, let all of them down, and he'd never forgive himself. "Before your face gets you in trouble."

"You know your sons were fighting in the street today? Over \$100?"

Their mother looked shocked, "Fighting?"

"Shut up Regina," Teddy gritted.

“Yeah. Putting their fists in each other’s eye because they couldn’t help *you* make the rent.”

Michael stood up and slammed his hand on the table, “Regina smoke cigarettes!” An overcorrection. In trying to take the heat off of he and Teddy, he threw Regina right under the bus.

“Regina!” That was their father.

“Got to! Unless you want me to die from stress at seventeen.” Regina’s words sat heavily between them and she decided to add to the load. “Is that why y’all had these kids? To make a sweatshop?”

The silence stayed between them until Michael chuckled, all of the anger disappearing from his face, and plopped back into his chair, “That is kind of what it feel like.”

From the hallway, “How he know what a sweatshop feel like?”

Their father perked up in his chair, “Nelson, go to bed.”

Regina wasn’t finished, “If all I wanted to do was provide for some kids, I’d go have some.”

“Watch yourself,” their father said, his voice deeper than before.

Regina stood, a snarl on the edge of ripping from her throat. She quickly left the kitchen.

Their mother stood next and eyed Teddy and Michael, “Hug.”

Teddy sucked his teeth, “C’mon Mo—”

“You wanna make it a kiss?” She’d do it. She’d done it before. Made them kiss right on the lips in front of their junior varsity basketball team right before the second half when she found out they’d been arguing about points.

“Ew.”

Their mother craned her neck toward the hallway, “Nelson, go to bed *now*.”

They stood and hugged lazily. They still slept head to toe in the same bed. There was no way they’d stay mad at each other. Their mother pulled Teddy into a hug next.

“I’m sorry I forgot,” Teddy mumbled.

“S’alright. I shoulda stuck with my own numbers.” She hugged Michael next, “Everybody in this damn city watches *Girl, Please*.” Their mother had played the numbers from the winning lottery ticket on the show’s previous episode and everyone else in Jubilant City had the same idea. She said, “Nelson, I see *and* hear you,” before walking down the hallway.

“Y’all don’t worry about Manning. He’ll pay us. I’ll take care of Regina too. But *you*,” he set his eyes on Teddy. “I know you start work next week, so I got something for you.” He reached beneath the table and pulled out a pair of rugged work boots. “They nice, huh? They used, but in good shape. You won’t need new shoes for years. Make sure you clean them after work. You don’t want that grease smell on them. It’ll stink up your whole room. Now we got you working, Michael is next. That’ll make things better. A lot better.”

Hard as Teddy tried, he didn’t believe their father. Better for how long? Better at what cost? Better for *who*?

Teddy sat on the front stoop, carefully eyeing the corner. It was empty, the streets barren, but if those boys posted up there, he’d have to go in. He knocked his boots together, wished Michael had come outside with him.

Sylvester rose from the bus stop bench, where he’d been since Teddy and Michael got back earlier. “I talk to God everyday,” Sylvester said to no one in particular. His face was pointed toward the sky.

Teddy ignored him, eyed the work boots that had swallowed his feet whole.

“He talks to me everyday. Ain’t I right about it? Everyday,” he set his eyes on Teddy and began limping toward him. “Talks to me about *you*.”

Teddy had never felt intimidated by Sylvester before. Thought there was nothing to be afraid of. Now he wasn’t so sure. Felt the shaking come back to his hands, his ankles knocking around the mouth of his work boots. “Me?”

Sylvester eyed Teddy as if he was seeing him for the first time. He bent at the waist, “Oh yeah. You.” His gray eye began to clear, “You wanna know what he said?”

But Teddy’s fear of Sylvester didn’t compare to his fear of what the next day would bring. To the pause he took every morning when he woke up to Michael’s feet and asked what miracle would need to happen for the Williamses to make it through. To the worry he had that one day they’d leave struggle behind and learn what it felt like to sink.

If he acted quickly, Teddy could push Sylvester and take the money from his cart. He could pay the \$100 he owed his father and start a bank account with the rest like Regina had. He could begin building his own nest egg. Michael was right, Teddy was tired of begging.

Just as Teddy stood, a yell came from the back of the Hilton Houses, arcing over the collection of buildings like a rainbow, “Sylvester!”

Sylvester perked up, swiveled his head back and forth. “Coming!” He trotted back over to his cart and began pushing it down the sidewalk.





## Margie and Cab Pt. 2

*“A soulmate is an ongoing connection with another individual that the soul picks up again in various times and places over lifetimes.” — Edgar Cayce*

**My father’s farm** is where I remember gaining consciousness, but only because his selling all seven of our goats was something I’d never forget. I clung to the neck of my favorite goat, Ricardo, as my father hustled the others into the back of his truck. Ricardo was the reason that my first word had been *cabwit*—goat in Haitian Creole—which led to my father calling me Cab. Ricardo was mostly brown with white spots on his belly and beneath his belly, and had at least ten pounds on every other goat we owned. On weekends when we drove to Petion-Ville to sell produce, Ricardo rode in the truck bed. We stood on our own to the side of my father’s tent and for 150G, I would say “speak” and Ricardo would bleat as loud as he could until the customer walked away. It wasn’t rare for us to find one or two of the goats up in the branches of a tree, bleating as if to say “Look at me! Look where I am!” But Ricardo never climbed. He’d stand at

the base of the tree and look until one of us came and got the goat down. Then he'd nudge them with his horns and strut away.

*"Papa, non! Mwen vle l 'rete!" I want him to stay.* Ricardo was obedient as my father looped a rope around his neck. *"Mwen renmen'w,"* I whispered to Ricardo. *I love you.* Again and again as my father tied the rope so that it wasn't biting into Ricardo's flesh. He didn't say a word as he pried my arms from around Ricardo's neck. He was ashamed. He'd gambled the goats away and our home would soon follow along with every ounce of land he owned. Ricardo trotted along next to my father for a moment, until he noticed his friends herded into the truck bed. Ricardo had at least fifteen pounds on the other goats and when he planted his hooves into the ground, my father's force wasn't enough to move him. He turned and headbutted my father and ran for the long road that we took into town.

*"Awe, Ricardo! Go!"* I shouted through cupped hands. And Ricardo went.

The farm in Calffebe, Haiti, was where I remembered gaining consciousness, but it wasn't my first memory or my second or even my third. I had years worth of memories of the lives I'd lived. Steering ships in frothy waters, putting on a uniform and marching out to war, riding a bike down a road half an hour outside of Athens, Georgia. By the time I woke up in Calffebe, I had no need for an imagination because I had an encyclopedia of memories to refer to. None of this was surprising to my father. As we packed two suitcases, all we could take to the States with us, I told him of my life as a soldier.

"I believe you," he said, pushing three more pairs of socks in my suitcase's front pocket.

"You do?" I expected my father's eyes to go wide and for him to call it my imagination.

"I'm not raising a liar. *Dwa?* So you must be telling the truth." He zipped each of the bags and sat on my bed. "Wanna see where we're going?" He pulled a large encyclopedia from

my dresser, one of the few books he kept in my room. Along with the encyclopedia, I had a Bible (already packed), a United States Almanac and board book meant for teaching kids the alphabet, all meant to help me perfect and maintain my English.

He opened the encyclopedia to a marked page. “This is Jubilant City. And all this,” he drew circles with his finger over a small portion of the map, “is fertile farmland.”

“Fertile?”

“Yes. *Fètil*. It means the land ‘can produce in abundance.’ We’ll be able to start farming again soon.”

“And get goats?”

“If you promise to watch over them.”

“I promise.”

**My father had** overestimated his usefulness to Jubilant City. There were plenty of farmers that had already claimed the most fertile land and even more willing to work the land until they could save up enough to buy their own. He got a bit of work pulling tomatoes out of the ground in a farm on JC’s northwest side, but it was a long bus ride away and he barely made enough to keep the rent paid. He also hadn’t been able to curb his gambling. Sometimes he picked the right team and we ate like kings for two weeks straight. My father had grown to love t-bone steak and griot made with the most expensive chiles he could find in the city. Other times I felt my stomach touching my back until I got to school and begged for an extra serving at breakfast and lunch.

By the time I was thirteen, I had a few inches on my father and he decided to spend his last \$10 on a basketball. He took me down a few streets over to a half court with its hoop

removed. He pushed the ball into my chest and looked up at me, his face stern. “You will be a basketball player.”

I took the ball into my hands. I’d been roped into a few pickup games before, people always thought I’d be good because I was tall. They were sorely disappointed. “I don’t like basketball.”

My father smacked my face and grabbed the back of my neck, “*Kisa mwen te di?*” *What did I say?* His eyes were wild, larger than I’d ever seen them. Every vein in his neck had gone varicose and threatened to burst through the skin. “Everyday when you get home from school, we will run drills until you get them right.” He backed away from me and crossed his arms. “Get on the three point line and shoot. Don’t stop until you make 20. Consecutively.”

“*Papa-*”

“*Kòmanse!*”

I bent my knees and sent the ball arching through the air. It fell just short of the net. My father grabbed it and pushed it back at me. “Less arch. More power.”

When I made the varsity team my sophomore year of high school, my father started betting on our games. \$150 that we’d win. \$65 that I would score at least twenty-five points. Cab fare, he called it. If he lost, I wouldn’t have any dinner after practice. I’d get a tongue lashing harsh enough to make me wonder if he loved me at all. “*Ayayay!* How many times do I need to tell you? Tuck your elbow. *Tuck* your elbow.

“*Kite mele m, Papa!* It’s just a game! Who cares that we lost one game?”

My father smacked the back of my head with a flat palm, “*Jezi Mari Jozèf!*” He put his hands on his hips. “If you don’t win games, we don’t eat.”

I sucked my teeth and pulled my long legs onto the twin size bed I'd been sleeping on since we got to Jubilant City.

"You think I am joking?"

*"Non, Papa."*

"Do you want to starve?"

*"Non, Papa."*

He stared sternly, "I want you up early. Practicing. Because you need it. *Dwa?*"

*"Oui, Papa."*

I wondered how this life measured up to the others I'd lived. I didn't have any details, just blurry visions that I often confused with my own dreams. But they were in hypercolor. Too rugged and guttural to be anything but real life. And in some cases, too painful.

All of those lives made it difficult for me not to daydream. Not to think of everything else I could be doing aside from playing basketball, sleeping and eating. But those things wouldn't make my father happy.

**I met Neela** while visiting my father's grave after two years in the Euroleague and a long flight back to the U.S. My father had passed in a hospital bed all by himself, too stubborn to even tell me that he'd taken a fall that he couldn't come back from. Even called and made his own burial arrangements and brought a notary to the hospital to sign off on his will.

I finally found his gravesite tucked between two large headstones that cast shadows on his own. I wanted to curse him for all of the time we'd lost. For his gambling and selfishness. For the goats we'd never bought. Instead, I said, "*Rete anpe.*" *Rest in peace.*

In the same cemetery, Neela was mourning her mother, a Haitian woman she lovingly described as “a headache and a half.” She quickly became a close friend. We were both weary from the kind of exhaustion that only grief can bring. The kind that sits with you quietly and just when you think it's gone, it taps you on the shoulder and makes itself known again. We went on hikes together in Nellie's Point on weekends when she could make the time. Her corporate career was much busier than my time post-Euroleague. Sometimes she skipped hikes because she was in Texas for the week while my calendar was always clear.

We were lacing our shoes and double checking our playlist at the bottom of Nellie's Point when Neela turned to me and said, “Cab, I wanna have a baby.”

“Good luck,” I said, gently rolling my right ankle and then my left. I double checked that my windbreaker was in my bookbag.

“...are you gonna make me ask?”

“Ask what?”

“Let's have a baby.”

“*Kisa vle di?*” The nice way of asking, *The fuck are you talking about?*

“You're a well-adjusted person, good looking, friendly—”

“Neela,” I chuckled. “This is not what you want.”

Aside from my weekly hikes with Neela and attempting to sell and install bathroom upgrades for a company that glossed over the details necessary to get the bonuses they promised, I didn't do much else. I couldn't look at a basketball, let alone dribble one. I had stopped visiting my father's grave because I had nothing to tell him, nothing to hold up for him to be proud of. He probably felt that way about himself too. The only time we'd visited my grandfather's grave was

right before we moved to the States. My father didn't say anything. Just held his hands out. Empty.

“Okay, how about—”

“I'm not ready to be somebody's dad.”

Neela put her finger in my chest, her eyes large and wild. “I know it's a lot to ask and I know I just dropped it on you, but I'm begging you.”

**The second time** I saw Margie, I was ripping the tub out of her guest bathroom, repeatedly taking a sledgehammer to the cast iron shell until it broke into pieces. I had to take the pieces down to the branded remodeling van one at a time, tracking dirt all over Margie and Ezekiel's floors.

She wandered into the hallway, a fleece wrapped around her shoulders.

“Hey,” I said standing up straight, wiping flakes of paint from my hands and pants.

Instead of returning the greeting, she said, “I thought you were replacing the floor.”

“The floor is an add-on to a tub remodel.” It looked like it was the first she'd heard of this. “And I won't be done until Thursday at the earliest.”

“Where am I supposed to wash my ass?”

I smirked, it had been centuries and her sense of humor was still the same. “Bird bath it out, I guess.” I grabbed the next piece of the tub, a large chunk of the rim, and took it down to the van. When I walked back inside, she was waiting for me at the top of the stairs.

“Sometimes I start talking and it's not me, you know what I mean?”

I nodded, “Got memories that ain't yours.”

“Where do you know me from?”

I begin to smile, though I'm not sure why. "From before."

"Like, high school?"

"More like 1927. 1853 before that."

"How do you know that?"

I shrugged, "I don't know. I just do. Just like I know it was you, even though you look different. Even though I look different." It always felt the same too. Like meeting up with an old friend. Like coming home.

"Where have you been?"

"Looking for you," I said. "I know the timing's not right. It's never right. You're married."

"Yeah."

"In love?"

She shrugged.

"I'm having a baby in a couple of months. A little girl." Things happened fairly quickly with Neela and I. We were expecting just a few months after deciding to have a baby.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks."

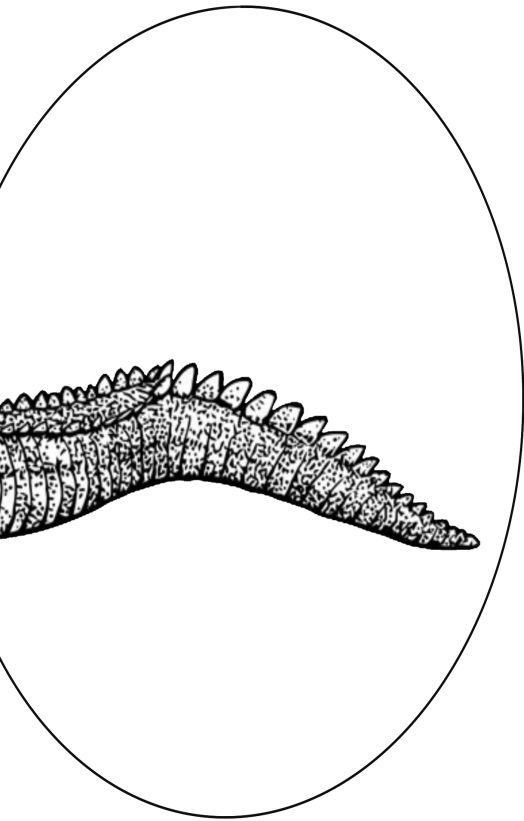
"What do we do?"

"Well, I have to finish this, so you'll have somewhere to wash your ass."

We didn't say anything else. She went back to her bedroom and I finished cleaning up the pieces of cast iron all over her bathroom floor. I didn't say goodbye to Margie when I finished for the day, I knew I'd see her soon. Fate would make it so.



**But the point** of fate is that you can't predict it. It just happens. And Neela gave birth the next day, two months early. The birth itself was blurry, a lot of screaming from Neela—and myself. Neela shivered like the rooms as ten below zero as they laid the baby on her chest. The baby was tiny and coated in a white film, her face scrunched into one giant wrinkle. But her eyes were wide open and staring right at me. Later, Neela would tell me that newborns only see in vague grayscale shapes, but she didn't see the way Zoie, our baby, looked at me. Like she'd seen me before. She didn't see her smile either.



## Got His Alligator

Going to The Yard used to be Cricket's favorite thing to do on Wednesday nights. Usually, she was the only one navigating through the rolls of fabric stacked high as the ceiling. They specialized in upholstery and quilting materials. Thick, lush pieces of cloth that made good blazers and scarves if you knew how to finesse it. But every now and then they'd have something new and strange. A shimmery cotton-based fabric with good stretch. Reflective silver fabric taught and stuff as burlap. But thanks to Pond's Retirement Home, her Wednesday nights were spent doing rounds every hour on the hour. It was Cricket's job to pop each door open and check that the resident was breathing.

Every night around 2AM, Cricket stopped checking, but still stood in each room for at least thirty seconds just in case Admin was watching the cameras—he had been brought in to replace the last girl caught slacking by the cameras. Cricket figured that the residents were supposed to die just like the rest of us and if she accidentally overlooked a gasping 90 year old, it

wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. Plus, Pond's marketing team had a waiting list of old people waiting to die in one of their overpriced rooms.

In the morning, Cricket waited for the day shift to file in, so that she could hand deliver fitted scrubs with different colorways and blocking, or custom sets made with fabric in bright green or dull red, to make the constant death easier to handle. It started when she patched a hole in her scrubs with a piece of cheetah print fabric and scalloped the neckline. After the other CNAs found out that she knew her way around a sewing machine, they showed up with links to Forever21 blog posts that they kept bookmarked. Said things like, "Can you do something like this?" while showing her a picture of a fitted loungewear set. Ms. Retha at the front desk even ordered an abaya and matching hijab in one of the crazy patterns Cricket found at The Yard. Before she clocked in at night, Cricket treated the sixth floor laundry room like her office. Took measurements, served invoices, presented fabric swatches, said, "Okay, but if you buy this set, you'll get the next one half off."

As Cricket handed off her last delivery, Ky signed in to see room 606. He was the best dressed person to walk in Pond's since Cricket had killed the interview in pencil pants, a pinstripe blazer and knock off Louboutins from Citi Trends. Ky wore a simple sweatsuit a bit darker than his skin tone. And a pair of crisp Air Force Ones that he kept clean by, no doubt, ruining several toothbrushes. The outfit looked familiar to Cricket. His hands fidgeted as he scribbled his name down, the point of the pen moved along the paper in jagged movements that he couldn't fully control. When he looked up his eyes flitted to hers and then away as he headed for the elevator.

Cricket hurried quickly behind him, tapping his shoulder.

He flinched, hard. Up close, he looked more exhausted than Cricket herself. And sad, but Cricket had him beat there. Ky scanned Cricket up and down, “Yo, you good?”

She nodded and silently tapped her nose.

He let out a small gasp and wiped the ring of powder from around his left nostril with the back of his hand. He scurried into the open elevator and faced the wall until the doors closed.

As she walked out to her car, Cricket spotted the man selling alligators for the first time outside of the liquor store on Greenland and Strand. He kept them in a large, shallow plastic bin that he set on a six foot fold away table. A small canopy tent gave him a pool of shade as he leaned his sign against one of the table legs: Alligators \$10. A city bus stopped at the corner to pick up a woman with one of those large plaid laundry bags that could fit a household of clean clothes and still have extra space. The driver swung the bus doors open and greeted the woman and her laundry. Another woman shouldering several grocery bags gripped a toddler’s arm in one hand and a baby alligator in another. Cricket could hear the strange Atari sounds coming from the animal, its closed mouth resembling a smile.

“Ma’am. No.” The bus driver looked like Cricket’s aunties in her Shake and Go wig with a peekaboo highlight. She probably had a warm spirit with a mean wrath.

“What? I can’t get on this bus just ‘cause I got a alligator?”

“...Yes? Ma’am, step back.”

“*Wooooow*,” the woman said, still cradling the alligator at her side. The bus driver closed the doors and turned to stare ahead. As the traffic light turned green, the woman turned to the man and exchanged a crisp \$10 bill for another alligator that she threw into one of her bags before walking down the sidewalk.

Ky was in the brightest spot in the dull Pond's lobby when Cricket clocked in the next day, wearing the same sweatsuit and Nikes. In the ray of bright light, Cricket could make out the roundness of his nose and mouth. She could see how the sweatshirt didn't fit his neck quite right. He probably needed to let it out a little. He rubbed his hands together to keep them from shaking as he walked up to her. He passed a look around the lobby and said, "I don't do cocaine."

It hadn't even occurred to her that the powder on his nose was something she needed to remember. Cricket had paid more attention to the cuffs of his shirt and pants. The thin gold chain just beneath his collar. The spotless shoes on his feet.

He amended his sentence, "At least not really."

Cricket nodded at his suit, her eyes tracing the path of the snakes on his wrists, "Where'd you get the fit?"

He pulled at his collar and shrugged deeper into the sweatshirt, "A consignment store."

"Where? Salem?"

"...Yeah."

"Hm."

"Why?"

"It took me two weeks to embroider those snakes for my brother." Cricket had finally learned why her brother, Hasan, never wore the sweatsuit, though knowing that Cricket had made it herself was probably reason enough. He was supportive in theory. Loved saying "good luck" and "I believe in you" but didn't love meaning it. Didn't like showing up.

He rubbed at the raised thread with his thumb, "By hand?"

Cricket nodded and glanced at the time on the clock, imagining the line of CNAs waiting to hand over a set of plain scrubs for transformation.

“And you tricked out your scrubs right?”

“Yeah.”

“And the other nurses too?”

If Cricket liked playing twenty questions, she would have been on day shift. “I gotta start working.”

“Look, I’m a wardrobe stylist on *Girl, Please*. If you float me a few, I’ll make sure they get put in rotation.”

*Girl, Please*. The sitcom on JCTV45 written by play and television writing mogul Andrew Masego, starring a handful of church mothers that thought ghetto was the worst thing you could be. Their last episode was about a church bake sale to raise funds for the construction of a youth center, but the pastor was planning to take the money and flee. It was vapid and obvious, but it’s costuming had been nominated for an Emmy two years in a row, rightfully losing to *RuPaul’s Drag Race* both times. “Why? Because I saw you do coke?”

He frowned, “I *don’t* do coke. And I don’t want you mentioning it to my grandmother.”

606 was in the East wing and Cricket worked in the West. She’d probably never even seen his grandmother. But if putting her scrubs in rotation meant she might have her clothes on *Girl, Please* and nominated for Emmys, she’d pretend. “I won’t mention it to her. How many you want?”

“A small, two mediums and two larges.”

“I need measurements or they won’t fit right.”

“I can do the alterations myself.” He looked desperate. Scared.

“You can pick them up on Friday morning.”

“I’ll send my assistant.”

When Hasan called, Cricket was chasing her third shot of Tito’s with a Smirnoff wine cooler, a rocks glass of cranberry juice sat untouched before her. She’d just finished packing two sets of scrubs for a girl that worked in the West wing and began working on the sets for *Girl, Please*.

“What’s up, Cricket?”

“Nothing.”

“Your momma said she ain’t heard from you in awhile.” When their mother acted up they traded custody back and forth.

“I ain’t heard from her either.” Cricket made her next shot a double. Her mother always seemed to forget that she had the capability to call first, that was why Cricket kept her phone bill paid. It began with paying this bill or that bill when she was short on cash and quickly snowballed into one check going to her mother's bills and the other going to her own. But Hasan added a few bucks to her Amazon gift card balance every once in a while. That’s what really mattered.

Apathy. That’s what Cricket deemed that her mother felt toward her. Cricket tried her best to please her mother when she was growing up. Got good grades, joined a dance troupe, won awards when she submitted her sketches to art competitions. It only resulted in her mother calling her arrogant while she praised Hasan for passing Algebra II on his third try.

Cricket dug through her bag of fabric, looking for the reflective silver stuff she had been saving for something special. It wasn’t practical for scrubs, but *Girl, Please* wasn’t a practical show. On the most recent episode, a member of the congregation had been arrested for murder

and the church mothers prayed her out of 25 to life. *Girl, Please* wasn't trying to be award winning, it always rang the same bell, but Ky and the others in Wardrobe always did their job well. Cricket had to be at her best.

“Just call her.”

“I don't think I will.” The silver fabric was in a compressed ball and needed to be steamed first. Cricket shook it out and began digging for the steamer she'd thrifted a few months before.

“If you don't, she'll keep bugging me.”

“Block her.” Cricket untangled her steamer's cord from the other swatches of fabric and quickly downed the double and skipped the chaser.

“Stop waiting for her to change. It won't happen.”

“I'm just done enabling bad behavior” Cricket quickly changed the topic. “You ever seen *Girl, Please?*”

Hasan scoffed, “No, but I heard it's ass. Another Andrew Masego classic. Why?”

Cricket shrugged, “I just saw a commercial for it. But I work third shift now, I'm on my way to bed.”

“Alright, call Mom though. Please?”

“...I'll think about it.”

Orders for custom scrubs were starting to slow as winter began. There were always less CNAs job hopping in the winter, plus they were starting to save for Christmas and the mandatory broke period from January to tax time. Cricket watched *Girl, Please* for a month straight hoping to see her reflective scrubs on her 24-inch TV. Instead, Cricket saw deep purple pant suits, burnt orange



pashminas, hip hugging jeans and large bouncing earrings. Putting them in rotation didn't guarantee that they'd be on the show, but Cricket had given Ky's assistant her number. He could have called.

On her lunch break, Cricket walked over to 606. The night nurse over there was Sholanda. She had blue and purple highlights weaved into her fishtail braids. "How often does 606 have visitors?"

"Her grandson comes every once in a while and spends a couple days with her."

"Like every month?"

"More like twice a year. He puts some money in her hand and they watch movies together. Then she brags on him for a few months." So Ky likely wouldn't be back, at least not while Cricket was still employed at Pond's Retirement home—she hoped to be out by the end of the year.

Cricket decided to get her clothes on *Girl, Please* on her own. And when she brought the dress or pants suit or pair of scrubs to set and she inevitably saw Ky, she'd smile and hug him right before she smacked the shit out of him. She broke out her old issues of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazar*, even dug out a few old copies of *Details*. Started drawing like she used to, exaggerated bell sleeves and gold embellishments and close tapered pants. Dresses with large ballroom skirts that would be great for an angel in a Christmas pageant or for when the first lady of the church just wanted to treat herself. She started asking the CNAs that *did* order if she could take more liberties with their scrubs. "Are you sure you don't want balloon sleeves? I think it would be cute. I could even sew an extra piece of fabric in so that they're like extra pockets."

The next time Cricket saw Ky, she had just barged into a gender neutral bathroom and yanked her pants down, bladder full of Tito's, soda and lemon juice. Cricket plopped on the toilet and looked up to see Ky seal a small bag and unroll a dollar bill. He wiped at his nose with the back of his hand and rearranged the clothing on his body as if he hadn't noticed her at all.

Cricket tipped her head to the side and scanned his silver top. She decided to skip the pleasantries, "You got my shit on?"

He met her eyes finally. His frame was a shriveled and malnourished version of what it once was. Cricket could tell he was wearing one of the mediums, when he would have needed a large a month before. He rubbed his hands down the side of the shirt.

Cricket stood up and shimmied back into her pants. "What happened to putting it in rotation?"

"I got fired."

"...because you do coke?"

He sucked his teeth and turned away from her, staring at himself in the mirror. "I don't *really* do coke."

"Tuh. What does that even mean?"

His eyes shifted to hers, but they didn't leave the mirror. "I smelled liquor on you that day. You an alcoholic?"

"No," Cricket snapped. *Not really*. "I want my scrubs."

"They're at my house."

"Alright, let's go." Cricket pulled her keys from her pocket and they jingled loudly at her side.

"...You been drinking."

Cricket bit back the “So?” that was fighting to get out. The three shots she had at the bar were enough to make her stumble, but she knew she had another shot or two before she’d be too far gone to drive. Nevertheless, they took an Uber to Ky’s apartment, one of those over priced shoe boxes housed in a Jenga tower. The furniture in his living room held stacks of magazines, mood boards, different fabric swatches, paper patterns and knitted throws. There were boxes of clothing rolled in sloppy piles, and pairs of Nikes ripped apart at the seams and stitched together again in new patterns.

“Why are you wearing that? You got all this custom shit.”

“Because this is fly. You really did your thing. I had to change up the collar, but--”

“You changed it? *My* design?” Cricket craned her neck to see that Ky had added a scoop neck made from white fabric that wasn't nearly as reflective, but added a nice accent to the top. Under the dim lights of the bar bathroom, it hadn't looked any different.

“I can’t just walk around in scrubs.”

Ky could have texted if he wanted to modify the top. When he mentioned alterations, Cricket assumed he ment hemming the pants, not modifying a design she’d made with the one of a kind fabric she was sure she’d never find again. “Now I see. Now I get it. You got fired because you just do whatever the hell you want.”

“I got kicked out of the city. Can’t style shit if I can’t get to set.”

Cricket had heard of people having trouble getting into Jubilant City, but never about them getting kicked out. She had never attempted entry herself, no reason to. Some people thought that JC had all the answers. All the opportunity. The way Cricket saw it, they were all wasting away. What good is opportunity when you're dying? She found it better to try to be

happy how she could; flipping through issues of *Vogue*, operating her sewing machine and drinking herself sick were her methods of choice.

“I modified this so maybe I could put it on one of the guys or something since there were no hospital storylines coming up.” He dug through the box at his feet and pulled out a large top and two pairs of medium pants. “I probably left the rest on set.”

Cricket snatched the mis-matched scrubs from him, “I want the shirt you got on too.”

He quickly slipped out of the shirt and tossed it to her.

“And you should probably visit your grandmother more often.”

“Cause ain’t no family members you ignoring, right?”

Cricket ignored his quip and headed for the door. At the last second, she turned around.

“Why’d you get kicked out of JC?”

“Oh shit,” he scurried to the kitchen and came back out with a couple of croaker and a blue crab in a clear plastic bag. He scurried down the hallway and came back. “I have an alligator.”

“Nice of you to call,” her mother said and Cricket began to contemplate hanging up and texting “butt dial.”

Instead, Cricket pulled out a bottle of Svedka and poured it in a rocks glass with a splash of lime juice and said, “How was your day?” On the trip back to the bar to pick up her car, she felt sobriety pushing its way into her mind. By the time she got back home, things were crystal clear and Cricket hated what she saw.

“Good. I’m gonna pick up some stuff from my Amazon locker tomorrow. Then I’m getting my nails done. Go ahead and upgrade my WiFi. Netflix is laggy. And next time you talk to Hasan, tell him to slow down with all the Amazon gift cards. I know it’s getting expensive.”

All the money Cricket made tailoring scrubs was immediately sucked out of her account to pay half of her mother's rent and all of her phone bill, wifi, electricity and for the five streaming services she “needed” but didn’t use. Her mother never asked how much it cost her or how Cricket made due on the scraps. “I’ll tell him...I’m tryna get some of my clothes on *Girl, Please.*”

“Oh really?” Her mother sounded uninterested, inconvenienced even. It reminded Cricket of when she told her mother she was terrified of learning to swim. She’d said, “Oh really?” in exactly the same way before she pushed Cricket into the deep end and watched her flail until Hasan swam over and carried her to the shallow end. All he said was, “You should be more careful.” Cricket never learned to swim.

“Yeah, I got a few designs I’m gonna try to pitch to Andrew Masego.”

“Hm,” her mother grunted. “Well, I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later.”

Cricket hung up the phone quickly, hoping that she beat her mother to the punch. She downed the glass of Svedka, grabbed her sketchbook and hopped back into her car. After a few turns, Cricket was back at Ky’s Jenga tower, banging on the door like he owed her money. He was mellow when he opened the door, the smell of cigarette smoke pushing its way across the threshold. She noticed how his collar bones pushed at his skin like a needle threatening to push through fabric. There was no way for her to know if they’d looked that way before, but she knew they would only get worse with time. “How you get that job anyway?”

Ky sniffled, “I knew somebody. That’s how everybody on that show got hired.”

“How can I get on?”

Ky narrowed his eyes, unsure about Cricket’s end goal. “First, you gotta design more than scrubs.”

“I can,” she shoved the sketchbook into his chest.

He flipped through the book quickly and then tucked it under his arm. “I know a costume designer that works in the theater strip in downtown Jubilant City. She might be able to get it to Masego. I was gonna tell you that before, but you were in a rush.” He stepped back and let Cricket into the apartment. “It has to be perfect.”

“It will be...wanna see the alligator.”

He took her to a bedroom even messier than the living room. The floor was covered in discarded clothing, Fruit Roll Up wrappers, old Coke bottles and IPA cans. Just beneath the unmade memory foam mattress there was a pair of lurking yellow eyes. The alligator was just as long as the bed and half as wide. Its tail curled into a lazy loop on its side.

"Why you keep it there?"

Ky shrugged, "That's where it likes to be. I can't sleep in the bed but it's out the way so I don't mind."

“You just...feed it?”

“Mhm.” Ky sniffled.

“And then what?”

“You live your life or...try to.”

It didn’t take long for Cricket to move into Ky’s place. He was always simultaneously a good host and good company. He fawned over anything Cricket drew. Hoodies with pleated sleeves

and built in shoulder pads. Dresses with intricate skirts and hats inspired by the first ladies in *Girl, Please*. He loved them all. Swore he'd put them all in rotation if he could, but insisted they needed more work before she tried to pitch them. Every time he left the apartment he came back with something new for her to play with. Fabric he got from an upscale store in Vinton, a pair of leather pants he thought she could work wonders with, a stack of graphic tees they would make into a quilt together. Cricket even took him to The Yard, where he bought an entire rack of fabric. He did a lot of coke too, but only a little at a time. Only when he was sure she wasn't looking.

Cricket offered to give him the money left over after she paid her momma's bills, but he told her not to worry. "Save up for when you move to Jubilant City."

The only caveat was that she couldn't try to help him wane his drug use. Ky didn't want to be pitied, nor did he want to be helped. He figured Cricket was the perfect friend because she didn't want to be helped either. They sat on the same sofa as they partook and didn't judge. Ky said he was figuring everything out. He'd always wanted to be a wardrobe stylist, but maybe he was wrong. Maybe his calling was something else. But Cricket didn't see it that way. She thought Ky was a genius. She'd seen the notebooks he'd tried to stash away in the kitchen cabinets. The sketches leagues ahead of anything she'd seen in *Harper's Bazaar* or *Vogue*. Drinking helped her cope with life, but coke held Ky back and she couldn't help but notice it every time she looked at him.

They kissed sometimes, but they didn't enjoy it. Not really. They didn't enjoy the sex either. It was the best after an hour or two of being not-sober. They usually hadn't started feeling sorry for themselves yet. They felt almost normal and Cricket reveled in the sound of their flesh slapping together, in the feeling that he'd opened her up, unfolded her and pressed all of the

creases out. But after a while it felt like a waste and they'd decide to just stop in favor of laughing and talking and started another *Girl, Please* marathon.

When Ky said, "You know what? Maybe I'll just give up." Cricket knew they had made it to the second part of the night. To the part where they wondered if imagining a future was even worth it.

"Don't tell me you got an alligator." Hasan's voice was muffled on the phone, he usually only talked to Cricket when he was busy doing something else.

"Did you call me just to be nosey? Or is there something I can help you with?"

"Call your mother."

They only had a day or two of food left for the alligator. They'd have to go to the store soon, a trip that neither Ky nor Cricket wanted to make. Cricket grabbed three whole tilapia out of the chest freezer they'd insulated with extra foam. "I called her a month ago. She seemed in a rush."

"She said you didn't wanna talk."

Cricket hurried down the hallway, fish water dripping across the floor. She considered telling Hasan about her plan with Ky, but she knew he'd just ruin it. "What else she say?"

"She's gonna visit you."

By the time Cricket pushed the bedroom door open, the alligator had its mouth wide open, lifting the side of the bed. For the first time, she could see the rough peaks and grooves that make up its skin. Cricket tossed the fish and it landed solid at the back of its tongue. The alligator's jaws snapped shut and the bed fell comfortably to the floor.

"Hasan, that woman can't come here."



“Then you better call her. She already bought her ticket.”

Ky was happy that Cricket’s mother was coming to visit. So happy that he rubbed a bit of extra powder on his gums when he thought she wasn't looking. He offered to check her into a nice hotel or even to rent an AirBnB that they could pretend was their home. He wrapped himself in a blanket and wore his winter coat: he was counting the days until Spring since he'd wasted away to nearly nothing. Cricket offered to turn up the thermostat, but he said it was already on 79 degrees. Sometimes when he closed his eyes, showing the purple and green veins in his eyelids, Cricket could see a stiff ass suit on him. His grandmother probably couldn't even afford David's Bridal for the funeral. He deserved a tailored suit with Basquiat's "Riding with Death" embroidered on the lapels in gold thread. She'd make it herself. She'd use wool so that he didn't have to worry about being cold. Prada loafers, carefully scuffed so that they looked vintage, but well preserved. A couple of gold rings and a cuban link chain like Raekwon. Plus shoulder pads that would help him fill out the coffin a little better.

“I wanna be cremated,” Ky said, staring at his reflection in the glass coffee table, running his fingers over the bags beneath his eyes. His body had become so angular and jagged that it looked like his skin hurt.

“Why would you say that?”

“...I do coke,” he said for what was probably the first time. His eyes cleared up as he probed at his cheeks that had nearly gone hollow. Pulled down his bottom lip, showing his lower teeth that were quickly turning yellow. “And it's gonna kill me. And when it does, I can't be buried in JC, but you can spread my ashes in the lake.” Lake Salem separated them from Jubilant

City. It was entirely, untouched, fishing, canoeing and other water activities weren't allowed. He squeezed her hand and nodded urgently, "Right? You'd do that for me, right?"

"You don't have to. Ky. You can live, both of us can." Cricket had never considered giving up drinking until Ky started to waste away right before her eyes. Until she saw that he got sick when he went sober for a few hours; started coughing and shaking and snapping at her about the carpet or a DVD he couldn't find. When Cricket was sober for more than a couple of hours, time stopped and everything was miserable, but that was no different than the usual. Drinking had stopped helping her long ago.

Ky sucked his teeth and dropped her hand just as a low hiss spread through the department like fog. Ky's eyes got large and he sat up straighter on the couch. "Did you feed the alligator?"

"I thought you did this morning."

"Cricket...I woke up at 3."

"Shit."

They both darted from the couch. Cricket grabbed three blue crabs and an arm full of trout, soaking the sleeves of her shirt. When she got to the bedroom, Ky was face to face with the alligator. It had crawled from beneath the bed, mouth open wide, eyes yellow.

"Throw it."

Cricket tossed the food, but the alligator stood its ground. Didn't move, not a flinch. Ky took a small step forward and the alligator reacted quickly, jumping forward, snapping its jaws at the same time and catching the left side of Ky's body.

The only time Cricket signed in to see 606, her body was still splattered with Ky's blood. She left deep red prints on the front desk, clipboard and pen. The other CNAs still wore her scrubs while she wore a long sleeved shirt and sweats that stunk of fish and death. Cricket still fit right in.

Shalonda let Cricket into 606 after letting Ky's grandma know she'd come to see her. Told me to call her Ms. Jackie, She'd answer to nothing else. She was just happy to have a visitor. She offered me a slice of cake, some apple juice and her TV remote before she'd even learned her name. Or noticed the blood on her clothes.

It wasn't rare for Cricket to find a dead resident. Her record was three in a month. They were always still, laid in the middle of the bed, couch or bathroom floor. Like they had never had life before. But Ky had been all blood. All jitters and shakes. Cricket told him to focus, count to ten, name the fifty states. All he could do was moan and grip at the shag area rug. All he could do was die.

606 looked a lot like Ky's apartment, nearly hoarded to hell. Clothes were in stacks on her floor and recliner. Old newspapers and couch cushions were stacked on her island and dining room table.

"Your grandson, Ky, is one of my closest friends. I only met him a few months ago, but he's made a good impact on me."

She smiled, proud. "Took him a little while to find his way, but he turned out alright. The only one of my grandkids to visit me. But I guess that's my fault for getting kicked out of Jubilant City."

"Why'd you get kicked out Ms. Jackie?"

Her eyes got wide, just like Ky's and she pushed herself off of the couch. She shuffled to the small kitchenette and pulled a container of the cafeteria's leftover seafood salad. Pink had spread to her cheeks, "I have an alligator."

Cricket decided to leave 606 without telling Ms. Jackie about Ky. That alligator wouldn't last long on the seafood salad and haddock sandwiches she'd been able to save from the already small meals residents received in the cafeteria. They'd find Ms. Jackie soon after her death and she'd see Ky when she got to where she was going. When Cricket stopped at the front desk to sign out, Cricket took a piece of paper from Ms. Retha and scribbled her resignation.

Cricket told her mother that Ky died and she needed to plan a funeral. At the mention of Ky's name, his siblings hung up, his mother too. Cricket held an IPA can, all out of vodka, and laid on the couch. She'd left a couple of messages with some of his contacts, but most of them had no interest in anything Ky was doing. Not even his death.

"Ohh," she said, unimpressed. "Was he your boyfriend?"

"Not really."

"Well, I'll reschedule my flight. You can't entertain company if you're sad."

But Cricket wasn't sad. Not really. Not any sadder than she'd already been. Than she'd always been. Sometimes Cricket was grateful that she had never had a good mother. She had no clue what she was missing. "Hasan's gonna come to the funeral."

"Is he?" He had no plans that weekend and likely had his own motives, but Cricket was happy that he'd be there, even if she'd never tell him so. "Maybe I should make an appearance. When is it?"

“Eh, we're keeping it small. Ky didn't want it to be a big deal.”

“So, you *don't* want me to be there?”

Cricket sighed and began thinking of how she could get her mother off of the phone without making things worse. She was hoping to also tell her mother that she couldn't afford to pay her bills anymore and she'd have to start looking for work again. But that would have to wait.

“If you don't want me there, I won't come.”

Cricket swallowed the rest of her beer and let out a burp that signified a change of heart of some sort. “Good.” Cricket ended the call and blocked her mother's number before she changed her mind. She rifled through the documents she'd found buried in one of Ky's kitchen drawers. His insurance paperwork still listed the contact information for Masego Studios and his former supervisor. Cricket dialed her number and tapped her fingers against the coffee table as the phone rang.

“Masego Studios, Wardrobe Design.”

Cricket sat up straight, “Hi, I'm a friend of Ky's—Ron Mitchell—”

“Well you tell Ky I'm sorry he got fired, but he can't keep sending sketches,” the woman said. “I tell the mailroom to shred anything from him and he sends it under a different name. It's getting ridiculous. Management is thinking of pursuing harassment charges.”

“Well, he's dead. So you don't have to worry about that.” For the first time, announcing Ky's death wounded Cricket. She'd told Hasan and left messages for Ky's friends with no problem, but it was starting to get to her. The finality of it.

“...I'm sorry to hear that.” The words sounded forced. Cricket was impressed that the woman had been able to push them out at all.

Cricket took a deep breath, “I wanted to invite you and Mr. Andrew Masego to the funeral. I’m sure you know Ky was kicked out of the city?”

“I do.”

“So, it’ll be here in Roanoke.”

There was a long pause before the woman said, “Email me the details. I can’t promise he’ll be there, but I’ll make him aware.”

“And will you be there?”

“...I’ll check my schedule.”

After the funeral, Hasan and Cricket went to a bar. He nursed a random cocktail he ordered while Cricket told the bartender for the third time, “Vodka tonic. On the rocks. But not too many, just two or three. Twist of lemon. Splash of soda. Half a salt rim. I’ll take a shot while I wait.”

Hasan stared at the flat screen in the corner of the ceiling, playing college football on mute. He tugged his tie from his neck and finally asked, “Why would you keep the alligator under the bed?”

He had never owned an alligator. Cricket would be able to tell even if they hadn’t shared baths with lavender-scented bubbles as children. Hadn’t been her best friend until the age of seven when their mother told Cricket that she’d never made friends if she kept clinging to him.

“That’s just where we kept it.” Outside, the sun is just beginning to put its head down.

Hasan pressed his lips together to keep from saying, “That’s why he’s dead.”

They had a morning funeral. His ashes in a black box urn, in front of a photo of him at seven years old, missing both front teeth. The pews at the funeral home void of any others that knew anything about the man he’d become. Of the life he’d dreamed of living. Or his affinity for

worn shoes that he could Frankenstein into a new kind of footwear. The only attendees had been Cricket, Hasan and a reporter from the Jubilant City Herald who had never met Ky, but they'd shared common acquaintances. She'd been disappointed when no one from *Girl, Please* came, but not surprised. Not really.

Cricket quickly sipped up the vodka tonic through two stirrer straws and raised her hand for another. Hasan was silent next to her. Their mother had reminded Cricket that it takes nothing for Hasan to be grateful. He would need to teach her since nothing was all Cricket had.

“You want help packing his stuff?”

“Nah,” Cricket said. She was planning to leave everything as it was. His clothes in the hamper in their shared closet, smelling of knock off Georgio Armani, cigarette smoke and his drink of choice: cognac with a drop of vanilla extract. His favorite blanket to wrap himself in tucked beneath the coffee table. Like a museum dedicated to him and all he'd never gotten the chance to accomplish. The alligator would stay beneath the bed.

“...You still got that alligator, don't you?”

Cricket crossed her ankles beneath the bar top, “It was his. I can't just get rid of it.”

Hasan sucked his teeth, shook his head, “Cricket, it'll kill you.”

Cricket raised her hand again. The bartender had finally gotten the hang of things and sat another drink before her. Salt gathered on the side of the glass like snow clinging to the side of the street after a plow, or to the edge of the credit cards Ky used to use. Cricket stood too quickly and stumbled, the liquor already changing the world around her. Hasan reached for her and she flinched away. “I'm going to the bathroom,” she said.

She headed to the bathroom but made a turn out of the back door and headed to her car. The urn sat on the passenger seat, a seat belt strapped snugly across it. Cricket climbed into the

car and quickly pulled out of the lot before Hasan could glance out of the window. The freshwater lake was a short drive from the bar. When you stand on the bridge you can see the lights, the leaves of the black willow. The magic of the city flowed through the water in waves, dying it purple and pink along with the wildlife in it.

Cricket had never met anyone besides Ky who had actually had permission to arrive in JC. When they began biking or driving without permission, they found themselves turned right back around. Traveling right back the way they'd come. After tying herself to Ky, Cricket was sure she wasn't welcome.

She climbed onto the ledge and sat, letting her feet dangle. Below the water was lazy, pulsing with stripes of rainbow that hid the lake floor. It was likely that she wouldn't get out of the water alive, but if she did she'd find her way to Masego Studios. Instead of trying to pitch to them, she'd carry Ky's ashes under her arm and demand to see Masego. Demand to know why he'd left Ky out to dry. Then she'd find a place to bury his ashes down by the center tree.

Cricket closed her eyes and jumped feet first into the water, holding the urn close to her chest. The water wrapped around her like a hug. It held her like Ky used to. She bobbed to the top and sucked in a mouthful of air just before sinking beneath again. This was when Cricket realized that this wasn't a hug, but a mugging. A robbery. The water has its arm around her neck, its hands in her pockets. Rather, it was a murder and Cricket was fighting for her life. Swinging her legs and her arms., but she was quickly growing tired when she saw eyes glow yellow, a smile and baring teeth. It was an alligator.

She used the last of her strength to push up and forward. Always forward. Never back. Forward to Jubilant City. Forward to life. When Cricket reached the shore, her hands were empty. She coughed the water from her lungs and the bile from her stomach, standing on hands



and knees. Cricket turned over and collapsed on her back, staring up at the sky. Wiping the water from her mouth with already wet hands.

“Cricket. You did it, girl,” she said to herself, laughing in disbelief. She propped herself up on her elbows to look back at her car parked on the bridge. To say goodbye to her former home. But Jubilant City smiled back at her from across the lake, folded her arms and patiently waited to thwart her next move. Cricket turned around to look at the bridge behind her. Hasan waited there. Patiently.

“You followed me,” Cricket said after Hasan had unchained her car from the hitch on the back of his truck. They sat in front of the Jenga tower; Cricket can see the light in the living room.

“Nah. Didn’t have to.” He leans back in his seat. “You always worry about the wrong shit. You worry about the impossible instead of what you can change. Ain't no way you getting into to Jubilant City, so of course that's where you'd try to go.”

Cricket sucked her teeth, “Ky got there. I could do it one day.”

“You think they want someone like you there? In their perfect little city?”

“The fuck that's supposed to mean?”

“Your dumbass boyfriend got fucked up by his own alligator. And you get drunk, drive and almost drown in the lake. That's what it mean. You wanna die next?”

Cricket picked dirt from beneath her nails and crossed her legs so that her upper shins rub against the glove compartment. “He wasn’t my boyfriend.” Not really.

Hasan just stared, face blank. He was done talking. “You need help getting upstairs?” Hasan tuned her out the way he used to when they were kids and it was his turn to watch TV. The question was an empty offer. A way to give something while giving nothing at all.

Cricket got out of the truck quickly, but took her time getting upstairs. She knew exactly what was waiting for her. Beneath the bed, the discarded IPA cans and the empty liquor handles, was the alligator. Waiting to be fed. Waiting to munch, crunch and swallow. Ready to bite her next.



### Margie and Cab Pt. 3

*“Important encounters are planned by the souls long before the bodies see each other.” — Paulo Coelho*

**It felt to Margie** that Bridget had invited half of Jubilant City to her fifth baby shower, but Margie quickly realized that there were only a handful of people there that weren't related to her by blood. All of her sisters had shown up and carried all of their little ones in tow. There were enough people for them to have their own million man march. The family resemblance was strong. Some of her nieces even looked like Margie had made them herself. She hadn't seen many of them since they'd helped Ezekiel, her ex-husband, with his story on Andrew Masego by joining the Anti-Thrill protest. Despite their history and her once in a lifetime opportunity to tour the *Girl, Please* offices being taken, Margie had shown up.

Margie held one of Bridget's babies as she wrestled with a breast pump. She'd helped transform the backyard with intricate balloon archways, tables with center pieces made from

wicker baskets and stuffed plushies. She'd even taken a cake decorating class so that she could make the three tier ganache cake that Bridget requested herself. It had gone so well, she was considering event planning.

Margie lifted the baby onto her shoulder and patted his back, "I can't babysit *and* run the shower, Bridget."

"Well, if I don't pump, my tits will explode and if you put him down, he'll wake up and be grumpy for the rest of the day." Bridget plopped into a chair and fastened the pump to her chest.

"Guess who Mo ran into last week?"

"Who?"

"Cab."

"Hm." Margie had seen Cab a couple of times since he'd left her upstairs bathroom in shambles, but only from a distance. He was in the crowd at the Masego protest, \_\_\_\_\_, she'd even caught a glimpse of him while shopping for Bridget's shower. But they hadn't made contact again, they'd agreed to let fate take care of things.

"He'll be here today."

Margie felt her back straighten; her sisters didn't know about Grandma Margie or that she spoke through her or about 1927. She didn't think they'd understand.

"I figured Zeke—"

"Ezekiel."

"—is *way* in the past now. Time to move on Margie."

Margie sighed and laid her nephew on her knees. "I *am* moving on. I already moved out—"

“You sleep on my couch.”

“Okay, but that still counts as ‘out.’ There’s more to life than a dick appointment, Bridget.”

“Yes, but all life *begins* with a dick appointment.”

“Alright, I’m disgusted. Can you take your child so I can go back to running *your* shower?”

Bridget folded her breast pump into its carrying case and took the baby in exchange for the two bottles of warm milk she’d just pumped. Margie put both bottles in the refrigerator and paused at Bridget’s back door.

Right on cue, Cab walked into the backyard.

**It took a lot** of convincing for Zoie to agree to leave the goats at home. Cab had only bought two of them and they stayed in a sizable pen in his backyard. They were incredibly gently with Zoie; she rode them and gently patted their heads. At Neela’s she played with dolls and little stuffed plushies, but at Cab’s house her only concern was the goats. But Cab didn’t want her to get as close to them as he had. If he ever fell on hard times, he’d have to rehome them and Mo’s invitation came right on time. He was working on his fifth kid and though Cab hadn’t spoken to him since high school, he knew Mo was a decent person and was likely raising decent kids. Kids that Zoie could be friends with.

“Party?” Zoie said everything with a question mark at the end, whether in English, Creole or her two-year old gibberish. And then she listened closely to the answer.

“Yes, party.” Cab switched her to his right hip and scanned Mo’s backyard. The smaller kids were sequestered in a small patch of grass with an inflatable bounce house.

“Cab!” Mo jogged over, sweat already collecting on his forehead.

Cab sat Zoie on her feet and dapped up Mo. “I see you ain’t grown.”

“And you ain’t shrunk.” The greeting they’d been using since they became friends in high school.

“Where you been all this time?”

Deja vu. Cab could hear Margie’s voice echoing through his head. “After the Euroleague, I’ve just been tryna get myself together.”

“I hear that. By the way, I’m sorry I ain’t reach out when your dad died.”

Cab shook his head, “Don’t worry about it.”

Zoie pulled at Cab’s pants leg, politely requesting his attention. He knelt down in front of her, “Yes, *mon cherie*?”

She turned away from Mo and pointed at the bounce house. She lowered her voice to a whisper, “*Mwen ka jwe?*” *Can I play?*

“Yes! Go ahead. I’m right behind you.”

**Before Margie could** make her way into the backyard, two of her sisters, Erica and Wynn, pushed their way into the kitchen and forced her into a chair at the dining room table.

“Why am I the last one to find out that you got divorced?” Erica asked. She held a plate of baby shower meatballs, her pregnant stomach big enough to hold the plate with no extra assistance. Margie couldn’t recall a single year without at least one of her sisters falling pregnant. This time, Erica was carrying for a woman she’d met while working in Richmond for an amount of money that would allow her to take some time off to be with her own kids.

“Because you’re always at work,” Margie said.

“And me?” That was Wynn, the youngest of the eight sisters. More often than not she fit in better with their sisters’ kids.

“I called you. You didn’t answer.”

“Oh...did you leave a message?”

“Yes I did.”

“Oh...shoulda called again.”

Margie stood up again, “I apologize and I’ll do better.” She wasn’t sure what she was apologizing for, but she knew it was the best way to dead the conversation.

“What are you doing now? Aside from living with Bridget.” Erica carefully lowered herself into one of the dining room chairs and sighed, out of breath.

Margie sat down again, giving up on making her way back outside. “I don’t really know. I’m just...letting things happen.”

“Depending on fate,” Wynn said.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

**When Cab was younger**, he’d scared his father half to death after taking a fall on the farm. He was fine, aside from a cut that ran up the side of his calf, but he ran back inside their home crying bloody murder.

*“Kisa ki mal? Ou anfom?”* What’s wrong? Are you okay? His father hopped from his chair.

The fall had scared Cab and knocked the wind from him. All he could do was cry. His father, flustered and uncertain, grabbed a knife from the kitchen and rushed onto the porch.

“Who’s out here? What did you do to my son?”

Cab had never understood why his father reacted that way, but that was because he'd never heard his child come screaming and crying without knowing what had taken place. Until Bridget's baby shower.

Cab nearly broke his neck looking back and forth for Zoie, when he heard her scream. Dropped the conversation he was having with Mo and dashed over to the bounce house. Zoie climbed out of the house's front opening, holding her right hand tightly in her left. "What's wrong?"

Zoie said nothing, just held up her right hand to reveal one of her nails ripped from the nail bed. Blood had begun to bead around her cuticle and she reached for Cab, her cries unrelentless.

"Aw, Zoie," Cab lifted her into his arms and turned back to Mo. "Is there somewhere I can wash her hands and get a band aid?"

Mo nodded and led Cab to the back door of his house, which led directly into the kitchen. Cab hadn't even seen the circle of women in the kitchen, just sat Zoie on the counter and stuck her finger under the running faucet. "Does it hurt?"

Zoie nodded, her cries shrinking down to sniffles.

"What happened?"

Zoie wiped her eyes and opened her mouth to answer, but quickly closed it as she focused on someone behind Cab. Then she waved her free hand, "Hi."

"Hi."

Cab turned to see Margie, holding a bandage and an individually wrapped peroxide wipe. She offered them both to him without a word.

Cab stood up straight and accepted the bandage and wipe. "Thanks."



“You’re welcome.”

Cab carefully sterilized Zoie’s finger and wrapped the bandage around it. “Does that feel better?”

Zoie nodded and reached up until Cab pulled her into his arms and kissed her forehead. When he turned back around, the kitchen had cleared and Margie waited patiently, her hands folded before her. Cab’s lips curled at the sides, “Where have you been?”