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From Far Gone, Back

By
Courtney Causey

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
to the Department of English
at Butler University.

May 2023

“A Crater on Jupiter”

So—I’m sitting up in my car garage halfway through my third Schiltz and fourth game of Solitaire when Rainey pull-up. I eye his old hot box Chevy from my garage, cards stuck to my finger sweat, knees pinned together in a wishbone. I hear him creak up the emergency break, loose the keys from the ignition, the engine, clunking and tinkering into quiet calm. And then like Rainey do, he just sit there. Lanky arm hooked out the front window in an ‘L’.

Rainey would spend the night in that truck, knowing him. Let Georgia’s late summer humidity soak him right through to the bone. He’d wake up the next morning and do it all again, just to prove a point. I could let him, but I know the one thing Rainey count on more than his pride is me. So after a minute or so I put my cards on the table, and go on over to see about him.

“You come here just to take up space in my new driveway?” I say, caving my back to see him through the downed window, my beer cool and wet against my thigh.

Rainey pull his lips across the bottom half of his face, smiling, the teeth that ain’t blot out in gold shining white against the car’s dark interior. I remember Rainey’s first gold tooth. How proud he was that he could afford not only the extraction of what was there first, but the replacement with what he thought was something better. Didn’t put us back anything either. But let Rainey tell it, I was the one bad with money.

“How you been, Tree?” He say.

“Just fine. Who told you where I was, hm? Lyle? Pulley?”

Rainey chuckles, “I’m doing alright too, thank you. You look good.”

“How would you know, you ain’t looked up at me one time yet.”

“I don’t *got* to look at you to know you look good, Tree. You looking good is what they call *a priori*.”

He laughs again, makes me think of sandpaper smoothing out limestone. Rainey got one of them laughs that make other people wanna know what’s funny. And he know if he can get you laughing, or at least wondering about the laughing, he can get you doing a whole lot else.

“Why are you here, Rainey?” I say, wishing I was less drunk. I pinch the rippled skin at my elbows calling to memory what Aya, my goddaughter, says about my chakras. Every Saturday morning Aya’ll come for tea and yoga: hair big and curly, in her cute little sports bra and leggings, telling me *Auntie, you can’t let anything invade your homeostasis. The peace within your bones. Now downward dog.*

Rainey’s ring taps against the truck door’s aluminum, bringing me back to the moment. He slides his long arm inside the car and digs through the dash for cigarettes. I look past him, stay my eyes on the live oak that was already full grown when I bought the place.

“Pulley told me Tree done gone off and bought herself a big ol’ house in the suburbs. I said, naw. Not Tree. She not like that to go searching after material things. She’s a feeling person. Would give a stranger the clothes off her back.” He pull out a crumpled pack of Newport’s and gives me his eyes for the first time, “You got a light?”

I tap my front and back pockets, then scurry into the garage after my matches. When I get back, Rainey’s already blowing out smoke, shaking a match free of its fire.

“Found one,” he say, then he starts that laughing again. “Like I was saying though, Tree. I wouldn’t’ve took you to be the one to do this. I gotta give it to you,” he ashes, “the place is nice. I just ain’t think of no two church-columned type of place for you. Them sprinklers automatic or you get somebody to turn ‘em on for you?”

Rainey finish off his cigarette and fingers the pack for another. Curses when he finds he's all out.

Across the street, my neighbor's door opens. Charlotte whisks down the bricked steps, dressed like Laura Ingalls though I know her clothes cost more than anything I've got in my closet. She's got the boy twin hanging off her hip, and Ryan, her fifteen year old son with purple hair and braces, holds the girl. She's clapping, and snapping, saying how they just can not be late again. I catch her frazzled eyes and smile, nod. She waves, but I can tell by the way her arm lingers there, she's wondering about the truck. What it's doing here and if I'm okay.

"You know that woman, Tree?" Rainey ask.

And I tell him no, even though I do.

What I know or don't know ain't none of Rainey's business. What would it be to him, hearing her boy sometimes wears the prettiest dresses, or that those chubby orange haired twins are already in therapy. They got to be almost two now, but I remember when she couldn't get pregnant, when I was brand new to the neighborhood and she came flying into my garage scaring hell out of me, sobbing and shaking from her third miscarriage. "You must think I'm crazy coming to you like this," she said, "I just don't have anybody else to talk to. And the babies. They just keep leaving." I gave her something to drink and let her sit in with me for a while, tuning up a cry when she needed and talking in between. Her husband was set to leave her given the circumstances. They had Ryan but...he'd wanted some of his own.

I think shortly after that, Charlotte ended up doing in vitro. It was a long time before we talked again, then one day we bumped buggies checking out at the grocery store. She'd told me about it then. How the two embryos had taken to her, and that she was about four months now,

and nervous as hell. Things had gotten better between her and her man too, and I'd assumed he'd decided to stick it out. To stay by her, and see how things would go.

"You a trip, Tree," Rainey laughs. I can see the sweat beads forming around his temples, leaving wet lines like rain against a window right around his thick cheekbones. And I know he won't be able to stand that truck's humid insides for much longer.

I watch Charlotte deliver the baby into his carseat, then notice Rainey again. "Hm?"

"You heard me. You leave home where everybody know you out to this white ass neighborhood in this big ol' house. Why you feel the need to move all the way out here? What you trying to prove?"

Charlotte's car door shuts.

"So what are you saying? I ain't allowed to live where I want?"

"You can live in a crater on Jupiter if that's what you want. Wouldn't make no better sense than this."

A crater on Jupiter. My God.

Slowly, Charlotte pulls out of the driveway, watching out for me the way we've learned to do for each other. I smile at her, fuller this time so she'll know I'm really alright. Honking, waving, the car gets small with the distance. When I look back at Rainey, he's wiggling a finger in the empty pack of cigarettes. He huffs and curses. Throws the pack to the passenger seat then rubs the settled grays shining like silver fish swimming at the back of his neck. In the light of the setting sun, I can see the time along his eyes crinkle and soften, and I start remembering when those crinkles weren't there at all. When my elbows were straighter and cheek bones tighter and we had a swear jar on top of the fridge, the top layer of a cake freezing with time on the inside.

We'd skipped out on the honeymoon to try and save money. And Rainey had the mouth of a sailor back then, so the swear jar would start the week empty and by Friday the quarters and dimes and nickels could add up anywhere between five to ten dollars. We figured we'd save up for some real furniture to someday fit in our new house in the suburbs. Catalog furniture. Nothing like the odds-and-ends side tables and loveseats we'd collected from great-aunts who had it to spare, who were excited just to help us young people get started. Sometimes I'd swipe a few coins from the jar prematurely. Drive to the corner store for something special for Rainey. Cherry cloves or a stainless steel money clip; something he could use and feel good about. Once I came home with a pair of 'R' engraved cufflinks that sent Rainey through the roof! I can still remember his lips pinching tight around his top teeth, holding captive a big grin, his hands, gripping around my waist, the warmth from his mouth against my jawline then my ear, saying: *Good grief Tree! Ain't enough swear words in the world to fix you taking every day. How we supposed to buy a house at this rate, huh? Start a family...*

I lay my hand on the truck's window seal, "Why don't you come on inside?"

"Why? You miss me?"

"I just thought you might like to get out this heat. See the house."

Rainey sucks his teeth, "Naw. I just came by for a quick visit. To lay my own two eyes on the truth."

And I guess because I don't know how *not* to...I say, "Well, you ain't got to come in then. Just have a drink with me out in the garage."

So Rainey pulls on the door handle mumbling how he *could* use a Schiltz. I scoot out his way, watch Rainey's two very polished loafers slide onto the smooth pavement and can't help but to laugh.

“Where you get them church shoes?” I say. And Rainey just smiles. I tell him they’re nice. The type of shoes I always imagined for him.

Then Rainey’s inside, hovering over my table and my beer cans and my cards. A plume of his cologne comes against my face and I’m back in our old apartment, in the dips of our old couch, nose nuzzled against Rainey’s neck while we watch something boring, something neither of us care much for. It was never about the things for us back then, the stuff. Hell, I *could’ve* lived in a crater on Jupiter, as long as it was with him. I wipe sweat from behind my neck, lift my hair hoping for a breeze.

“Got this big house and you still want to hang out in the garage. Country girl.”

I grab a Schlitz for him out the little fridgedaire I keep against the wall near the entryway.

Rainey picks up one of my first cans and shakes to see what’s left of it. Puts it back down when he feels it’s empty. Spreads my cards across the table like a Chinese fan, says, “What you was in here playing? Solitaire?”

“That’s right.” I get his can open and pass it off.

“Cheers.” Rainey say.

“To what?”

He smiles, “To the new place.”

We tap cans.

Rainey takes a drink, keeps it in his cheeks a split second before swallowing. He’s looking down at the cards again, swiping them open so he can see every suit. “You still playing Solitaire with hand cards.”

“Aya bought me a tablet but I like the cards better.”

“Aya. Hmph. How old is Aya now?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Gah-lee!”

“I know, huh? I remember changing her diapers, now she’s teaching me something new every other day,” I laugh. “She bought me a sage stick.”

A drop of beer trickles from his mouth, “A what?”

“A sti-well, a *bundle* of sage. She says I’m supposed to light it...wave it around the house. It's supposed to clear out the bad energy or something like that.”

It gets quiet.

“I don’t like Solitaire,” Rainey finally say, sitting down. “Pick something we can both play.”

I unfold another chair from the corner and scoot it up to the table, “Gin Rummy?”

“Naw.”

“Go fish?”

“No go.”

“B-S?”

“Nope.”

“Well hell. You think of something.”

Rainey pours the beer into his mouth, so I do the same. His fingers start dancing across the jumbled deck of cards. So mine do too. Then Rainey’s lining up about seven or eight of them, about the width of the vinyl fold-up table we play on, and without talking it over, I start making little triangles on top of the bottom cards. And Rainey makes some too. Then it’s another flat layer on top. And I look at our hands, his with a ring, mine without. Dancing. Bopping. Weaving.

Careful. We just keep moving. Stacking. Silent. Drinking. Till the last cards are up. And before I know it, we've built a house.

"What you wanna fill the rooms with?" Rainey say.

Thinking, I poke a finger into the smallest triangle right in the center, "Books. This is my reading room."

"You want a whole room just for reading?"

I don't tell him I've already got a whole room just for reading.

"What about you?" I ask him.

Through the geometry of the cards, I watch Rainey think of something. Shifting in his seat. Checking over each corner of the house.

"You see this whole floor right here?" he say.

"Yes," I say.

"This my studio."

"Studio? You don't play 'nan instrument, last time I checked."

"Well if I had a studio I could pick one up."

"Fair enough. Which instrument?"

"Trumpet."

"We'd hear it all over the house."

"Wouldn't hear it way up here," he say. "What this room look like to you?"

"The top room?"

"Yeah."

"It looks like a sunroom to me."

"Naw," he say, "that ain't a sunroom, that's the baby's room."

All I can do is look at him.

“Aw hell, Tree I’m sorry.”

I put up a hand.

“That was a dumb thing for me to say.”

I want to take the house apart.

“Really Tree, I wasn’t thinking.”

Snatch each card down from top to bottom. Or maybe just one from the foundation...you know that’s all it takes for a house to fall apart...for a marriage or anything really to fall apart...just one small piece missing...even if you build years and years and years on top of it, without that one little piece you better know it's bound to fall. Rainey reaches for his cigarettes again.

“Sheila and the kids doing alright?” I say.

“We don’t got to go into that—”

“How your grandkids then?”

“I didn’t come here to get into that, Tree.”

I want to knock the house over. Watch it cave in on itself, splatter and bleed across the table.

Rainey thumbs his gold band. Sips his beer in puny increments. When he’s done, his mouth parts and the gold teeth shine like new pennies in a sewer. I wonder if he takes his golds out at night like he used to. Tongues the open black spaces where just plain old teeth used to be, missing them.

“I should probably head out, “ he stands, “I just came to see how you’re living. To see you’re alright.”

“You get a good enough look?”

Rainey fix his mouth like he’s ready to laugh. Part of me wishes he would. Just a small tuft of air escapes his nostrils, fans his long graying nose hairs then disappears into the thick. I know he’s thinking of something to say that might cover it all. That could fill up all the empty that has ever spread between us. That exhale echoes through the house til it’s stained the walls, browned the tiles, brandished the doorknobs, and I know—sage or no sage—I’ll live here with it forever in some way.

“Take care, Tree,” Rainey says. And only after he’s back in the Chevy, mirrors adjusted, engine roaring, pulling off, can I slip an Eight of Clubs from the bottom row of cards, watch each layer of the house relent into the next, falling smooth, domino delicate and peaceful, almost, as if, that’s how it was always supposed to be.

Back inside, I turn on the TV. Scroll a few channels. Turn it right back off. Aya’ll be here early tomorrow morning, so I wash a couple of dishes. Swiffer half the kitchen. When a car door closes, I run to the window, look past the oak, at Charlotte and her first born son lit bright by the safety lights hung from the front porch. He’s holding the girl twin as she holds the boy, babies both comatose, drool and pendulum limbs sweeping against their backs. And I’m grateful to see the new babies smoothing into the curve of my neighbor’s body.

I see them inside, then walk through my big ol’ house in the suburbs, turning down lights, locking doors, touching doorposts. My home, where every sound is heard twice, and I try hard not to mind.

I think it might rain.

My first spring here it rained so much I didn’t think the big oak outside would make it. But every time I checked it out, it seemed another bud had formed at the end of the branches,

small at first...but now its tree-branch fingers stretch far past the phone lines, my roof, chimney,
and up to something only it knows is there.

(edited by Ashleigh Bryant Phillips for Joyland)

“Bodies”

Now, it was very possible that between deshelling a mouthful of BBQ sunflower seeds, steering the truck down the darkening, unfamiliar highway carrying them from the fight, over Biloxi Bay Bridge to a smattering of oyster houses and casinos, Twanny had not noticed the deer.

But the deer was hit.

The two of them, Twanny and Day, stood in the middle of US route 90, peering down at the animal; its black wet eyes, marblelike: delicate and glossy on the outside, and on the inside, deep, thin pupils, fixed stately upon the distance.

Day almost didn't want to know, “Is it dead?”

Twanny sniffed deeply and hurled a shell away from the body. He nudged a stiff hoof with the toe of his boot, cocked his head when the body refused to give. He said, “The hell you think?”

Day looked up at Twanny. Her eye was swollen near shut from the fight, but she glared at him anyways, the unaffected curl of his lip, the impatient crook of his eyebrows, the full length and weight of the deer's brown body, lying silent in the cold space between them. She could see it all so clearly now, even beneath the night's waning indigo, she could see it.

Twanny left the deer's side, kicked at the U-Haul's tires, making sure nothing had burst so nothing would get in his way of the casino. Making sure they could leave that thing there and keep right on going.

“Come on, Day,” Twanny said, the gravel relenting beneath each boot as he pulled into the driver's side of the U-Haul truck, “Let's go.”

Day looked down at the deer's soft white belly, as innocent and exposed as a child's first secret. She kneeled down, one gauzed hand hovering above the velvety white diamond between its pricked ears. She wanted to touch it, feel it, and almost did.

Then, she saw it blink.

They are in West Savannah, where the phone lines on every street corner sag as deep and low as the dirty-South accents Day has heard echoing all day from outside the motel's barred windows. She's sitting criss-crossed on coily-brown carpet, her back against the bed, close enough to the boxy television set to— let the old folks tell it— go blind.

It hardly matters. Day is not watching TV. She's counting the money she and Twanny won from last night's fight. Fifties, twenties, tens, and fives are swiftly thumbed into four neat rows, while Day keeps a steady count in her head, using the trick her third grade teacher taught her years ago about math: *add the tens place first baby-heart, she'd said, then the residuals. You'll get two numbers, then you add them together too and there go your answer.*

Beneath the television's quiet buzz, Day hears a muffled version of Twanny's get-shit-done voice. He's locked himself inside of the bathroom, his big boot, probably, propped on the edge of the dusky rose-colored tub. Day imagines his sweaty cellphone pressed into his jaw while he talks his slick talk to some other girl's twice as eager half as savvy manager. That's how Twanny procures all of Day's fights: with slick talk and big boots.

Day swipes free a twenty-dollar bill from their winnings and holds it, wondering how long it would take Twanny to notice if she were to slip that plus more from their piles and into her bra. She knew she couldn't take all of it— that would be too obvious, too easy for Twanny to pick up on— but maybe she could fudge the numbers on the Betting Sheet. Tell Twanny she was

going to the downstairs vending machine for a soda, then bolt. She was fast. Faster than most girls her age which had served her tremendously inside of the ring.

She wondered if it would serve her just as well on the outside.

Day circles the fabric bill between two pinched fingertips, then places it back into the pile. Where would she go anyways? She knew her way around the road like a baby knew its way around algebra. Had never gone for her license, never been behind the wheel of a car— much less Twanny’s truck— even though she’d been old enough for over a year now. Without warning, the bathroom door swings open, and for a split second, it's just Twanny in the doorway, tall, hovering, wild in the eyes, “Get up!” he barks, grinning, moving, “get packed! We gotta go!”

Without question, Day sweeps the money into her lap, feels around the floor for the faded red duffle bag they’ve always kept it in. She studies Twanny, “Go where?” she says. Twanny stomps past her, head swiveling from side to side like a large searchlight. “Where’s the suitcase?” He claps. “Why are you still on the floor? I said pack this shit up. Let’s go!” Day finds the red bag behind the dust ruffle. Shovels the money inside its mouth and zips it quick. Before Twanny can spot the suitcase and grab their clothes from the motel’s drawers, Day is already by the door, ankling into her shoes. She shoulders the duffle anticipating Twanny’s next move. And in the small breath of time between him closing the bag and them hitting the staircase, Day knows. Twanny got *That Big Bitch*.

That Big Bitch, with nothing but forty seconds and a straight backhand, could knock the blood, sweat, and spit from her opponent, acrylic nails like claws shining victoriously in the bright flash of some superfan’s iPhone. Quietly, Day had followed every last one of TBB’s fights. And hard as Day tried, she couldn’t ignore the whispers from their small, underground fighting ring: TBB was good-good, and might finally be the one to whup her.

Day pauses at the top of the motel's iron railing, looking down at Twanny, face open, jaw loosened, "You got her, didn't you?" she says.

Twanny shoots her a brief, knowing grin. He grabs her wrist, high kneeling down the staircase towards the U-Haul parked in the free lot across the way. Day trails behind him closely, "You got TBB, didn't you?"

They cross the street and slip into the front of the U-Haul, tossing their bags into the flat space behind them, facing each other in the hot dust of the truck. There's a moment of heavy breathing, the both of them desperately refilling their lungs. Day steadies herself against the dash, pleading at Twanny with her eyes. She'd never expressed her interest in fighting TBB to Twanny— she'd done things like that in the past with little to no avail, trusted that Twanny knew best who to match her with and who not. Their livelihood depended on it. She assumed they'd stay away from TBB for her own good, for other reasons that had to do with the business side of things, the things Twanny handled and kept her far away from. But the quiet, intense urge Day had to knock *That Big Bitch* on her ass never left. She asks him one more time, "Just tell me you got her."

Then Twanny smiles, says, "Hell yeah I got her."

"Shit, you got her?"

"I'm telling you I got her!"

Day covers her face with both palms and screams.

Then Twanny shuts the door. Cranks the engine and drives.

It will take them eight hours and some change to get from Savannah, Georgia to Biloxi, but it was happening. After hours in the bathroom negotiating, Twanny got her. *That Big Bitch* had agreed to his terms and was now primed to give Day the business just as soon as she and

Twanny reached Mississippi. And all before the season took its usual fall to spring hiatus. Whether Day won or not, this would be her last fight of the season. Whoever *did* win would spend their winter eating cheese biscuits and lobster.

Weeks prior, every pistol-toting manager from hell to Houston had blown up Twanny's phone, wanting their final shot at Day, whose fighting reputation had swept the Southeast not unlike a hurricane. For this reason Twanny'd had a meeting with his business partner Alan Briggs down in Chatham county. Briggs had taken him to a little hole in the wall fish joint somewhere deep in West Savannah where even the gentrifiers didn't know to go. He'd pulled out Twanny's chair, sat in his own, then talked Twanny's ear clean off. More about the young girls he'd found while scouting up in Macon. "Yeah," he'd said about them, "they rough around the edges but more or less they ready to fight."

Twanny undid the first few buttons on each shirt sleeve then rolled them up slowly, "You lookin' to match one with Day?" He said.

Briggs stared at him beneath a stiff pair of salt-and-pepper eyebrows, "I said they'as ready to fight. Not die."

Twanny's underground fighting ring was attractive to people like Briggs. It was attractive to people like Briggs because people like Briggs enjoyed the under-the-table way Twanny did things. The girls fought in the back of a giant U-Haul truck. Rigged to open up from the sides and the rear, creating the illusion of a stage wherever it went. The U-Haul truck drove away after each fight. Every bet was made on sight with cash or Crypto and there was never a shortage of bored, Southern people willing to feel special for keeping the secret.

Twanny ran things mostly. Managed one girl at a time, found locations and made money taking a percentage of all bets (and of course his manager's fee from Day). Briggs acted as a quiet promoter along with his own brand of management. Both men distrusted government, big business, white folks, largely, so they moved on the fringes of society like fat mice in the night. Collecting what crumbs people left behind. Making them into feasts.

Now, the two men leaned back in their chairs waiting for their ticket to be called, to get their mouths around the crunch of a perfectly fried catfish. A ceiling fan tick-tick-ticked above them. Behind the counter the pretty-faced cashier turned up a song Twanny liked on the radio. A woman with chocolate chip moles all over called out their number and soon enough the two men were hunched over plates, "Pass me the mustard, will you?" Briggs said. They ate their fish and wiped away the grease. Then Briggs cleared his throat, took a quick sip of his sweet tea and said, "I been watching TBB."

"*That Big Bitch?*" Twanny said.

"Mhm. What you think of her?"

Twanny sucked his teeth, "Don't think much of her at all."

"You seen her fight?"

"I have."

"Then what's the issue?"

Twanny flagged down the cashier for a toothpick. When it was in his mouth he said, "I don't like how she do things. She too visible. Too easy to find."

"They'd have to know what they was looking for to find it."

"Yeah," Twanny said, "you right. But TBB makes a big thing about managing herself. She's heavy on social media. Where exactly would *we* come in?"

Briggs had set his mouth to answer when a girl in a pair of jean shorts pushed her hips through the double doors, distracting him. She made her way to the front counter wearing his eyes. When she felt them on her, she'd tugged at her short cuffs from behind, ordered something small and emphasized *to-go*.

Briggs looked back at Twanny, "I don't want to manage *That Big Bitch*. I want to match her with Day."

"My Day?" Twanny said.

"That's right. I want to set things up for a season finale," Briggs looked again. "We'll make it big. Play Day up as the favorite with everything to lose. Inflate the bets. They'll draw the crowd off clout alone. And Day is fast but she small. *That Big Bitch'll* win."

Twanny picked his teeth.

"What?" Briggs said, "You disagree?"

Twanny didn't agree or disagree. Not yet.

"I'll put it to you like this," Briggs said, "You'll get more than enough to last you the off season. Crowd size alone will pay you that," Briggs leaned his elbows on the tabletop and clasped his fingers, "But if I know you, I know enough ain't never enough. So you'll want to bet against your girl Day too. Trust me on that." He licked his lips, looked back at the front counter, but the girl had gone.

Usually, Briggs made good money for himself. Plucking up younger girls from neighborhood corners, some of them— quietly as it was kept— still middle school aged. He'd promise their tired parents a payday, train the girls to hell, turning them into brawlers. He'd set up fights and most times profit regardless of who won.

Twanny had done something similar with Day.

He didn't make a habit of it, and that was the difference between him and Briggs.

They're on their way to the fight.

Day sits in the passenger seat swiping through *That Big Bitch's* Instagram. Chin resting in the thick of her free palm, Adidas slides pigeon toed on the dash. Dead armadillo and burnt Mississippi waft in through the U-Haul's downed window. And Twanny steers the truck with his knees, one hand gripping a bag of BBQ sunflower seeds while the other cups Day's bare thigh, "You ready?" he keeps asking.

Day says. "Listen to this:

'A bright, relentless city on the water Biloxi is. Otherwise known as The Playground of the South. Katrina entered her ring but seventeen years prior, gulf waters fusing and swirling, rising and falling like God Almighty's powerful fist. It'd left the land a swollen and beaten womb from which That Big Bitch was birthed. A vicious, resilient child of storm and land....Now fuck wit me if you want to,'

That's her insta-bio." She looks at Twanny, who is fixed on the road, and smiles. "You heard me?...Twanny."

"You know how I feel about all that insta-tweet-tok bullshit."

"I know but-

"Especially when it comes to this."

"I'd never post about the fights."

"You shouldn't be posting period. You need to be focused on training, fighting, getting this money. Fuck you need an instagram for?"

Day nods, though her eyes stay fixed on her phone screen. On *That Big Bitch*, who poses with her long, tight fingers pulled at the bottom half of her mouth. Her black acrylic nails– the shape of knives– carve into the wet, pink flesh almost tenderly. She has TBB tattooed across her inner lip, a diamond grill crowning the bottom K9’s like spikes. Day wrestles the urge to double tap, imagines putting her fist through TBB’s grill instead.

She tosses her phone onto the sun-faded dashboard, watches tree after tree pull across her window in blurred smudges of ochre and green. It looks somewhere between puke and pretty, and Day searches the leaves for red. Some clear indication that the world is spinning, seasons moving the way they’re intended.

“Think I’m a pull off the road soon,” Twanny says, “get the truck ready for the fight. Get you in a practice beforehand.”

While still facing the window she says, “I saw a sign for a Flying J’s in a couple miles.”

Twanny nods, chews. He’s seen it too.

The first thing Twanny had ever hit on the road was a skunk. The body popped beneath his front left tire like a fat water balloon against summer hot sidewalks. After that there was an armadillo. A family of too-slow raccoons, waddling across I95 like chubby babies, crawling to their mother’s knees. All of those Day hated, but she’d drawn a line at the rabbit. Not that the rabbit was special, just the straw that’d broken the camel’s back. Day drew back her fist and punched Twanny in the side of the head, so hard he’d had a difficult time deciding if he was pissed off or proud. Either way, he’d pulled the truck over and cut the engine.

When they looked down there was only flattened gray fur. Two small bunny feet that had remained somehow intact. Twanny said, “Well. What you want me to do? It’s dead now.” Day

punched him again, screamed that he could've let it pass, that he never does. She'd stomped back to the U-Haul and did her best to slam the heavy door behind her.

Twanny looked to see if any cars were coming- they'd been in the middle of the road after all- and when all was clear he slid his swiss army knife from his pocket, pulled up his pants legs and knelt down beside the animal. The next morning Day woke up with it nestled in her palm: that slender rabbit's foot, warm and hairy as something still living, a cool metal keychain, fastened into it. She wasn't sure if the cursive inside her belly spelled terrified or in-love. If there was much difference between the two. Regardless, it was then she knew what kind of man Twanny was: a crazy one, albeit one that spun gold from heaps of shit.

Now, Day props one foot on the gate encircling the Flying J's, hands swung over the other side where the overgrown kudzu needles through the metal like intricate patchwork. It reminds her of being little, of seeing that blanket hanging from her father's dingy bedroom wall. He claimed Cherokee on his mother's side, most Black people in Georgia did. But Day had the blanket to prove it.

Twanny tongues the shells off his sunflower seeds and spits them from the side of his mouth. He's parked the truck a ways off from the filling station and the flip-flopped people going in and out with Big Gulps and hot dogs. Somebody grills hot links and ribs nearby and they smell good to Twanny, though he knows he can't eat. He never eats before Day fights. He's fixing himself to hose out the back of the U-Haul and once he does, he buffs it and marks it, while Day lazes around the hood of the truck chain smoking menthols, half-assed swatting at the early fall gnats.

She's thinking of *That Big Bitch* when Twanny brings her up.

“I’m tellin’ you,” Twanny says. He hops out the back of the truck wiping dirt from his hands onto a soggy red rag. “This girl is big. Bigger than anybody you ever fought.”

Day rolls off the truck’s nose, chucks her cigarette into a nearby patch of beige grass. She almost wishes Twanny would start back smoking if it meant he’d stop wringing her neck. “What,” she says. “You don’t think I can whup her?”

Twanny tucks the rag into the back of his jeans like a small animal’s tail, “Yeah,” he says, “You might could.” He pours sunflower seeds in his mouth and chews them, says, “Still. TBB talks herself up real big. Says she beat Kizzy and Dana and that broad who almost broke your leg up near Nashville. You remember that? That broad who almost broke your leg?”

Day remembers.

She watches Twanny shuffle around the outside of the truck, wiping here, and there, fidgeting with himself the way he always does before her fights. She needs to know, “You place any bets?”

Twanny keeps wiping, takes his time with an answer. “Would it make a difference to you if I did?”

“I know you talked to Briggs,” Day glances at him, “did he say something, you know, push you in any one direction?”

Twanny grabs Day’s hand from rubbing her scalp and holds it, “You think Briggs could convince me to bet against *you*?” he says.

“I don’t know,” Day says, “you never tell me about that part.”

“Cause you don’t need to worry about that part,” he looks at her, “You know I think you could whup just about anybody, don’t you?”

Day smiles back, “Even TBB?”

“Especially TBB. I’ve seen you pull wins from thin air like a magician with a rabbit’s ass.”

They chuckle, sway against each other real close.

“You got your lucky rabbit’s foot don’t you?” Twanny says.

“Yeah,” Day fingers the rabbit’s foot in her pocket, “I got it.”

“And you sure you ready?”

“Twanny.”

“Alright, alright,” Twanny says. “Get in. We can get you one last practice.”

Before Twanny, before the fighting, the U-Haul and the traveling, Day lived on the WestSide of Atlanta with her perpetually out-of-work father: a happy, all-day drinker, loose with his tongue and money, but he hugged her liberally, told her he loved her often. All the hugging and loving in the world couldn’t make up for their empty kitchen cabinets. A girl from Day’s apartment complex thought she knew something about it, mixed up her substances and went around the ninth grade calling Day a crack baby. Day let it go on all year long, the girl laughing with her butter-faced friends, calling her crack baby behind her back whenever she walked by. Day waited for the last day of school, then followed the girl from their emptying hallways, past the bus lane, across the street to the Shell gas station that sold red and blue slush-pups at half-price. Through the tall, glass window, she watched the girl and two of her friends, folding over each other, laughing, talking. She crooped down by a newspaper dispensary, waited for the two others to say their goodbyes, dispersing in the varying directions of their homes. As soon as the girl was alone, Day popped out from behind, hooked her forearm around her neck, a *hyuck* sound just barely escaping her throat, her slushy slipping head first onto the concrete. Day backwalked her behind

the Shell store where a U-Haul truck stood out amongst the large dumpsters and empty crates. She'd jerked the girl loose, launching her almost to her knees, said, "You been running your mouth about me all year you dumb hoe, now post up."

Twanny had just needed gas. But he perked up in the driver's seat upon seeing Day, ducking, jabbing, twisting the girl's braids around her fist and getting her good that way. She was small, but quick. Fierce but gracious. She'd let the girl go. Watched her limp off just at the point she could've really finished her. Twanny had leapt from the U-Haul by then. Leaned against the nose and said, "People get paid for fighting like that where I'm from."

Ultimately Day decided to leave with him, mostly because she was fourteen and bored with it all, because she liked the way Twanny bit his lower lip when he smiled.

During the season, Twanny and Day practically lived in that truck. And depending on how well she'd done, hotels or motels during the off-season. There were Red Bulls and beef jerky, Hot Fries and long rides. Up and down the Georgia-Florida coast, on their way to a fight or to scout alongside Briggs. They'd listen to OutKast on full volume and Day would push her arm into the sticky wind and the two of them would laugh, steal glances at each other and smile like a secret. Soon enough, the packets of bubblegum in Day's pockets turned to cigarettes and Twanny told her she needed a look, that all underground fighters her age had one. She'd propped herself onto a Motel's countertop, her feet planted in the sink basin while Twanny did his best with an electric razor, an at home hair dye kit. Then, again with a pink Schick, shaving a skull and crossbone into the side of her bleached head. When he was finished they faced each other, nose to nose where a drumming went off in Twanny's gut. Without hair, he'd realized Day had eyes, lashes, a prominent nose that opened between a pair of sharp cheekbones, dark lips pillowing out beneath them. She'd asked him how she looked in a voice two octaves richer than how she

normally sounded, or had he imagined that part? Good, he'd said, real good. He'd heeled away from her, rubbing the back of his neck, then left the motel room for a long, long time. Day cleaned the hair, showered and threw on an oversized, white t-shirt that reached just the middle of her thighs. Sprayed enough Sweet Pea body mist for three girls then waited.

Twanny barrelled into the motel room late, drunk and a little beat up. He'd muttered out something about losing a bet, about him losing a *real* big bet and them being broke. He'd kicked off his shoes with a drunk's precision, and collapsed onto the mattress, belly-up, the malty stale of cheap beer and well liquor radiating off his dark brown skin. Day waited on the edge of her bed until his breathing stalled. Then, she crept beside him, lowered her hips quietly into the mattress, cradled his head in her lap. Using the soft tip of her pointer she'd traced the lines of his face, up and down his nose bridge, across the feathery spread of his eyebrows.

Twanny had felt brotherly towards her, until that night. Until he'd felt Day's lips press into his with not an ounce of coercion on his part. She hadn't known he was conscious, but her kiss had been a silent, felt permission which quickly altered every small and big thing about their relationship. Two-bed hotel rooms turned to one. Twanny's protectiveness veered into the lane of ownership. Day had always been beautiful to him in the ring. Now, she was beautiful outside of it and in a way that'd made him deeply uneasy.

Because of it, every once in a while he'd match her with somebody outside of her threshold. Not because he liked to see Day lose, he didn't, but to remind her that she could.

That she'd need him there piecing things together, whenever she did.

They pull onto the site. A small circular clearing, a gauntlet of sorts amongst many, large looming trees. Day thinks this is the kind of place you can only get to if you've been before.

Crop circles of murky gray water press out all across the tall, beige grass and Twanny rolls right through one, maneuvering the U-Haul between a set of cones Briggs must've set up for them earlier. He eats his seeds and cranks the giant brake switch. "Shit is crazy ain't it?" he says.

There are already people. Clapping people. Betting people. Whoop-whooping people. It looks like a family reunion save the music and meat smoker. Instead, there are gold chains and grills. Lawn chairs and coolers. Canned beers and big tupperware containers full of Grandmothers' home cooked food. It's louder than Twanny likes it- but that was to be expected for the last match of the season. There are poster boards painted TBB. A child much too old to be wearing a diaper, wearing a diaper, clutching a cut-out of TBB's mouth in his chubby brown hands. Day recognizes it as the instagram photo she'd almost liked earlier. Twanny says, "Folks came out the woodworks for this bitch, huh?" And though Day sees an even amount of people there for her, screaming for her, betting on her, the support for TBB makes her pick skin from her nail beds. "Why you lookin' like that?" Twanny teases. "You not scared is you?"

There is Briggs. In the same spot he seems to find no matter where they go: the corner of the clearing, his foldable table splayed out before him where men and women alike slap down their money-filled palms, however much on Day's win.

"You ready?" Twanny says.

"Quit asking me that," Day says. She spots TBB by the blockade of orange traffic cones keeping the trees separate from all else. She's practice-punching holes into thick, pink air, weaving, bobbing, ducking. Jabbing a barren space Day will soon possess.

She tells Twanny she'll be back, then leaves the truck. Shoulders through the crowd, eyes steady on TBB.

TBB's six-foot-one frame makes Day look no bigger than a rag doll. Day knows it, but that doesn't stop her from tapping at TBB's shoulder, staring her square in the face. "You ain't that big," she says. A flash of respect edges out across TBB's curved mouth and this makes Day's shoulder's sink a bit lower. "You know," TBB cocks her head, "I been waiting a minute to whup yo lil' ass."

Day smiles, "Guess you'd better get used to waiting."

Watching Day move through the crowd from the rearview mirror, Twanny turns the keys. He makes sure she is nowhere near Briggs, then eases out himself, a splash of old, muddy rain water coming up on his boots. People greet him out of respect. They toss their heads in his direction, offer fist bumps and daps as he shoulders by them, keeping his head as low as he can reasonably have it. Twanny thumps his nose with his thumb, Briggs, now in clear view. When he gets to the table he leans in close to Briggs' ear, and when he pulls back Briggs smiles an alligator smile, "See?" he says, wagging his finger. "Now I *know* you a smart man."

"Write it down," Twanny says.

"I had my suspicions you was one of the smart ones, but now I know."

"Write it down, Briggs."

"I will. I will. I'm just saying. You making the right choice."

"It's a business choice," Twanny says. "That's all it is, Briggs. Nothing more, nothing less."

Briggs gets his hands on the betting sheet, "I hear you, man," he says. That's how we got to look at this thing. As a business. The difference between a life of canned tuna and five star

sushi. The sooner these girls understand that, the better. Now how much you want on *That Big Bitch's* win?"

Twanny felt nauseous, reaching into his inner coat pocket for a band. He decided then he wouldn't watch the fight. He'd hide away, wait for things to be over in the twiny brush beyond the circling of orange traffic cones and flare lights Briggs would set on fire just as soon as the sun began to set, which in a mere matter of minutes, it would. Day would fight TBB as planned, look out into the crowd, see the empty space right outside the U-Haul where Twanny should be, and she would know. However she'd need to feel about it, Twanny would let her.

All would be soothed— for him— by the money soon enough.

Briggs' voice is big and robust in the loudspeaker. It fills the entire space of the clearing, deep and grumbling, echoing and igniting. He stands from the table and announces from his gut, it's *tiiiiiiiime* to fight! Beneath the heat of a single strobe light, *That Big Bitch* owns her end of the U-Haul. Her arms cross tight at her chest, unamused, unshaken, while Day's half of the crowd commences to boo. They hurl glass bottles and balled up trash towards TBB's side of the truck, breaking and smashing against the U-Haul's hollow tin. TBB shoots up a knife of a middle finger, "Fuck! Y'all! Mother! Fuckers!" she screams. And the crowd returns the favor. The energy is a pocket of deep water; it swells, gripping a mass of people, tossing them against one another, crashing ships on a choppy wave. Somebody steps on somebody else's sneaker, one elbows the tender place between the shoulder blades of a TBB fan. A woman with a paw print tattooed up her décolletage takes her palm and rams it into some man's head. Nobody takes it personally, here. This lucid aggression, the need they all have to put it somewhere outside of themselves. They understand this is what the fight is for.

Red road flares encircle the clearing, and this married with the humid, Biloxi heat creates something of an inferno. It feels like hell to Day as Briggs screams her arrival, as she forces her body through the thick, thick crowd. Bodies suddenly and hurriedly impress upon her, sticky-cold with sweat, limbs loose with liquor. Hands reach out all across Day's stomach and chest, her back and shoulders. They swallow her pathway as she leaves them, following behind her until she steps upwards into the truck. Day stands before the crowd, her chest, heaving, eyes squinted, searching each and every face for Twanny.

He'd always been there for this part. Leading her up to the U-Haul. Roughing her muscles with heavy palms until they were relaxed and ready. He'd rest his hands on her shoulders, press his mouth to Day's ear where she'd close her eyes, shutting the world out, anticipating some of the only times Twanny spoke the words *I love you*. Day convinced herself it was this part of the fight that kept her winning. Twanny telling her he loves her, then loosening the lucky rabbit's foot from her grip and into his own for safe keeping.

Day bounces on the balls of her feet, convincing herself that Twanny is there watching. Somewhere. He had to be. She wets herself with a water bottle. Shakes up her body by rubbing her palms across it. She looks at TBB, who has her fingers laced above her head, near to the roof, stretching her neck to one side then the other, shaking out her giant leg muscles before her. She nods at Day, eyes direct and steady, and a feeling greater than respect fills Day up. She understands what it means for TBB to do it all herself. Day nods back.

A bell sounds. The crowd screams. And the fight is happening.

TBB wastes no time. She charges Day with a quick bounce right and swing left. Day ducks, dodging the punch, then pushes forward from her toes, jabbing TBB's ribs. TBB bends without stumbling, then comes again even harder, this time with the right. She slams her fist into

Day's face, knocking her hard to the ground. The crowd *oooohs*; the same paw-print woman screams, *It's alright baby! Get up! Get up!* Briggs slips through the crowd collecting sweaty bills as last minute bets. His fists are tight at his sides, eyes wide and jutting from the crowd before him to the fight above him. Day scrambles to her feet and swipes at TBB's neck, but TBB catches her by the wrist. Day swings again with the free hand, but TBB catches that wrist too. She spins Day around by the arms and pins her against the truck's side, a wet thud sounding out into the crowd. A crescendoing *oop* rises from the audience. Day curses, kicking a heel into TBB'S shin. One of Briggs' girls, barely thirteen, watches, stupefied as Day launches an elbow into TBB's stomach. "Get! Off! Me!" she grunts and TBB does. She shifts her body one second and in the next slams Day into the hard floor beneath them. She puts her knee into Day's small back and presses her whole weight into it.

Day's face is neon red from the battery of road flares blazing in at her from the crowd. She looks towards the space Twanny always stands during her fights, watching her, willing her to win against whatever odds. There's nothing but empty, a quiet gap in the air where his body should be and this speaks louder than words for Day. She lifts onto her palms, straining beneath TBB's impossible weight. Then she can't anymore and she sees nothing but blurred, unfamiliar faces, screaming, cheering, chanting TBB like a prayer. The crowd counts down. *Five! Four!* Sweat burns in the corners of her eyes. *Three! Two!* She closes them. *One!* Collapses to the ground.

Then, mercifully almost, apologetically, TBB lifts off of her.

The crowd is impossible. Day opens her eyes. TBB towers before her, looking down upon her, eyebrows asking, *Are you good?* All at once Briggs grins like a fat street cat, announcing TBB the winner, over and over, his wide, ecstatic arms commandeering the crowd

from the truck to his corner of the clearing, the table, the money. TBB hesitates briefly, then faces the crowd, chin lifted up, arms raised victoriously. She leaps from the back of the truck. And this time, the crowd parts for her.

Day does her best to roll onto her back. To breathe. To assess the damage both inside and out. She has already begun folding inside of herself when Twanny steps up into the back of the truck. “Don’t talk to me,” she says.

“Why not?” Twanny says.

Day struggles onto her elbows and Twanny lurches forward to help. “Don’t touch me! Don’t talk to me and don’t touch me! You’re full of shit.”

Twanny steps back and watches Day inch slowly, painfully onto her knees. “How I’m full of shit?” he says, “Because I want to take care of you? Want to see you eat? Because that’s the type of nigga I am. I take care of mine. Nobody can’t tell me I don’t.”

There’s silence while Day eases onto her feet.

“You set me up,” she says.

“It’s the business part, Day.”

“You set up a fight you knew I couldn’t win! Then you disappeared!”

“How you think we’re supposed to eat off-season? I didn’t set you up. I got us a fight I could profit from. I did it for you- Hey! Come’ere!”

Twanny grips Day’s wrist and pulls her in. There is a tussle. And a relent. A quiet sink on Day’s part into Twanny’s heaving chest. He palms her chin and lifts it upward. “This is the business part,” he says, “the part you can’t handle. So I do.”

He hopes he sounds convincing, holding her chin, staring down her bloodshot eyes, one just beginning to puff and darken underneath. Truth be told, Twanny doesn't know which is the business part and which is not.

He hasn't known that for years.

Driving to the casino, Twanny'd been digging his tongue into his seeds package not looking at the road ahead.

So of course they hit a deer.

There's a loud thump; hard muscle against harder steel. Day stifles a scream and grabs hold of Twanny's right arm. The U-Haul screeches its bearings, swerves off the road then regains its composure in the dusty off ramp brush. Things go ghostly quiet. Then Day pulls the door handle, forearm it open and jumps out.

Day sees the deer blink.

Twanny hoists himself into the truck and honks at Day to hurry up. Licking his thumb, he counts money straight from the red duffle bag. He isn't thinking about that deer right outside or the fight, he is thinking about the casino, doubling their winnings, five star sushi. "Damn Day, come on!" Twanny hollers from inside of the truck. This is how he hopes things will go: back inside, Day will stick her feet up on the dash, bare legs bruised but smooth and brown as unwrapped Tootsie Rolls, and that'll be enough to keep him thinking from that deer or TBB or much else, to be honest. He'll cup a big bear paw around her knee, squeeze it, because he feels good about the fight and the casino they'll go to and the hotel they'll sleep in that night and maybe the night after (they have the money after all). And he'll think the squeezing might help Day feel good too. It won't, but since Day won't tell him otherwise, he'll keep it up. And come

to think of it, Day doesn't tell him much of anything. Not that she's sick of his beef-stew smelling truck. That he's got a cavity in his back right molar she can taste when they big kiss.

Earlier, over by the blockade and the wet Mississippi brush where two of Briggs' girls dug their tennis shoe heels into red dirt, sucking on popsicles, Day and TBB talked, the way strangers do once they've realized they've grown up in the same hood, ate at the same drive throughs, shopped in the same stores. They talked about how it felt, fighting against other girls exactly like them, but mostly against whatever small feeling life and circumstance had bullied into them. Day knew her situation with Twanny wasn't as bad as some of the others— he'd taught her how to pivot, how to fight and get paid for it, took care of everything, including her father. Took care of her. It'd been a recent interest of hers, why she never got to hold onto the money. Why he and Briggs chose cities and opponents behind closed doors.

TBB listened, a pained grimace took up in her face, "I don't think I could let somebody control me like that. My money, neither."

Day looked over at Briggs' girls, said, "Ain't that just what managers do?"

"I wouldn't know. I do it all myself."

"All of it?"

"All of it."

"The promoting part? The getting fights part?"

TBB leaned into Day, "All of it."

Day watched the girls use the blockade chain as a jump rope, pausing only to slurp their popsicles and laugh. "Damn," she said. "You better than me."

TBB said, "It ain't that hard, baby girl."

Day wasn't convinced. "I don't know," she shrugged. "Twanny keeps that part underwraps. I can't say I know shit about it."

"That's 'cause if you knew how to manage yourself Twanny would be out of a job. And beaucoup money."

Day tried to imagine Twanny that way. "Naw," she decided. "Twanny started this whole thing. He been doing this stuff for years. Since I was like," Day nodded towards the blockade, "their age." TBB noticed the girls then too. One was a baby flamingo, her small white tennis shoe balanced cutely upon her calf. The other was a chick, her wrists pressed into her hips. They had red lips, sucking popsicle juice from the near empty plastic of their fun pops. Briggs' girls. Twelve, thirteen years old tops, already learning their bodies, not as their own, but by the many ways others may use them.

"We could go legit, you know," TBB said. "We could play up a rivalry between just you and me. Split the money down the middle. No manager fees, no nothing." She eyed Day intensely. "I got enough social media currency to make something shake. And I already been getting offers. Trust me, Day. A network would pick us up."

Day wanted to give TBB an answer right then and there. The right answer. But the silence grew long, then longer. Then long enough to become an answer. Then came time to fight.

The deer blinks.

And Day begins to imagine what it could look like.

"You coming?" Twanny hollers again.

But Day does not move. She sees the deer flick its right hoof. Shake its deer head. It is so dark. But she is sure of it.

Back in the truck, Day and Twanny pull onto the road. Day keeps her feet on the floor and when Twanny's hand comes for her thigh she whacks it. In the rearview mirror, she sees the deer erect itself. Stand on two, then four feet. It's crooked at first, wobbly.

Then not.

“A Visitor”

Last night God came down to visit my cousin Mike.

Mike was out sitting in his '99 Chevy Impala— minding his own business, he says— when a tall Spanish Swamp let loose of its roots, came barreling through kudzu and phone lines, right on top of his rusted old car hood. He says he saw it happen like a slow-motion action sequence. Said he wanted to run, but his legs wouldn't move.

I'd been sitting on my feet listening real hard to Mike's story.

“Why not?” I'd said, “Why you couldn't move?”

All Mike could tell us was that the bigness of it all was just too much for him. And then, God showed up.

Right before the tree hit, God came down to see Mike, the same way he did for John at the beginning of Revelation. You know, to show John the End Times.

“Mhm. And what'd God show *you*?” Myesha said.

Uncle Gap wrapped the cut on Mike's arm with a roll of white gauze. He grinned to himself and wrapped while the rest of us, Auntie Caroline, me and Myesha, all sat around the kitchen table waiting to hear. Then Mike got this look on his face. Something ancient and at peace like a monk's.

“Everything,” he said. “God showed me everything.”

I didn't believe it at first. That God showed Mike everything. I didn't believe it because Mike is always saying things like that. The first night Momma left me at Uncle Gap's and Auntie Caroline's house, I was too sad to talk. I sat with my tennis shoes and jacket on at the front room

window, my mouth smooshed quiet inside of my palm. Mike sat down beside me. Told me it was okay that I didn't want to talk to anybody because he could read minds anyways. I smiled and shook my head, and Mike told me to just watch. Then he closed his eyes, put his pointers to the sides of his face and when he was done making all those *ohhuhhm* sounds, he told me I was thinking we should order pizza for dinner. I *was* actually thinking about food, but that's just because I'm always kinda sorta thinking about food. Mike told me we could order whatever I wanted, but only if I told him my favorite toppings.

I know Mike was just trying to make me feel better that time. That not him or anybody else on the face of the Earth can read minds. This time feels different though, mostly because it's God. I learned in Children's Church how God works in mysterious ways, and I can't help but wonder if God telling Mike everything is just one of those ways. Then there's what happened today right before breakfast. Auntie Caroline was boiling salt water for grits at the stove when out of nowhere Mike looked up from his phone, stared out the window, pointed and said, *Rain*. And right after that the window got white and foggy and small droplets of water came plunking across the glass like dice skidding across a board. Then, when Auntie Caroline went into the pantry to pull out the grits for breakfast, Mike said, *Nah. No grits*. Even though his back was towards her. Even though he couldn't see. Auntie Caroline paused, her arm suspended at the top shelf, *What was that, now?* she said. *For breakfast today*, said Mike, *God showed me pancakes. Not grits*. Mike turned towards her, raised his wrapped arm reminding her of his visitation. *Ah, boy!* said Auntie Caroline, chuckling. But she reached the grits right back into the pantry. Pulled down a box of Krusteez pancake mix and a cast iron skillet.

After breakfast, Myesha and me cleaned the kitchen. I licked remnants of syrup from the corners of my mouth. Slid sticky forks and knives into the sink where Myesha twirled a wash wand in and out of a glass, annoyed.

“You believe him now, My?” I said.

“Hell no,” Myesha said.

“But the rain happened,” I said.

“So? It’s summer. It rains all the time.”

“What about the pancakes?” I said.

“Please. Momma was just getting in on the joke. Was just happy Mike ain’t get squished.” Myesha threw the glass into the dishwasher. Said, “Mike don’t know shit,” then kicked it closed and left me with the rest.

Mike has been this way all day. Saying things that end up happening, things he shouldn’t know but does. He knew the knock on the door was their neighbor Miss Sharon stopping by to complain about moving the tree. He knew Aaron from down the street would ride his skateboard by our house three times before hitting a bump and eating dirt. It happened too. I counted. I’m secretly starting to believe that God really showed Mike everything. And if not everything, maybe some things. Maybe my mother.

The last time I saw my mother she was packing us up into her little, black Pontiac, the silver cigarette holders burning at my elbow skin. We ate and slept in that car for the three days it took to get from Houston to Atlanta. To Uncle Gap’s and Auntie Caroline’s house. I remember pulling up to the driveway, a nice orange glow warming me from their front windows, seven windows, the same as my age. *Stay put*, Momma told me. She slammed the car door and looked

back once, stomped through the high grass, dandelion dust licking at her bare ankles with each step, to the back of the house where Uncle Gap works on broken cars. I don't know how long she was gone, but when she came back Uncle Gap was with her, rubbing the fork-shaped stress lines between his brows, a hand resting painfully on one hip. Momma pointed into the car, right at me. Her hand moving like a knife on a cutting board, her palms wide and bright against the darkening sky. I couldn't hear her words. Just the pop-rock panic in the back of her throat, sounds exploding out against green earth. Then she stopped talking. Folded into Uncle Gap's shoulder, shaking, exhausted. He held her and even though I couldn't hear anything, I knew that when she left I wouldn't be going with her.

That was almost eight months ago. And no matter how much Windex Auntie Caroline uses, I'm not sure she'll ever get my smudgy handprints off the front room window.

I'm doing flips on the bottom bunk bed bars, watching Myesha get ready for a date when she decides she hates my tennis shoes. "Those gotta go," she says.

I land hard on the mattress, "No!" I say, "why?"

"They stink!" Myesha grabs my shoes and tosses them outside her bedroom door. "You know my rules," she says. "Whatever you and Auntie Rae did at *yall's* house was one thing. But in this room? We keep things clean and smellin' good." She walks over to her closet and rakes through all the clothes that make Auntie Caroline call her fast-tailed. Myesha doesn't care about what Auntie Caroline calls her. She only cares about Jabari, who shows up outside of the house in a car with windows so dark I can barely see the wiggly shape of his locs.

Myesha puts on a halter top that shows her belly button and the bubblegum pink ring her friend stuck into it a couple weekends ago at a kickback she wasn't supposed to go to. I'm not supposed to say anything about that but I'm so angry about Myesha throwing my shoes out, I stomp into the living room where Mike and one of his friends play Call of Duty. Stand right in front of the TV and cross my arms.

"Tell your cousin to move, man," his friend says, keeping focus on the war zone behind me. But Mike pauses the game and smiles anyway. "Chill," he says. "What's good Tadpole?"

"Did God tell you about Myesha's belly ring?"

Myesha knocks over a perfume bottle when she sees me with Mike in the doorway.

"What's this I hear about you having a belly ring?" he says. He crosses his arms.

Myesha looks like she wants to kill me.

"Why did you tell *him*?" she says, picking up the bottle. She sprays some on her wrists and rubs behind her ears.

"She ain't have to tell me," Mike says, "God told me."

"Shut up, Mike! It's not funny anymore and everybody knows you're lying."

"Oh, I'm lying?"

"Yes. You're lying. You're a liar. Now move."

Myesha pushes past Mike to the vanity where she keeps all her makeup. Then Mike leans against the post of our bunk bed, Myesha's bed on bottom and mine on top. Uncle Gap moved Mike's and Myesha's old bunk bed back into her room after Momma had been gone a little over a month. And she's been mad ever since.

Mike says, "Yeah. You *would* know about liars."

He smirks in a way that makes Myesha pause from smearing in lip gloss.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she says.

Mike scoops a stuffed turtle off my bed and tosses it around like a basketball, “Ask Jabari,” he says. “He’ll know.”

Myesha pretends she doesn’t care what Mike is saying. But I can tell by the choppy way she moves that she does. She says, “Why? What did you hear?”

“It ain’t about me hearing anything,” he says. “It’s about what I saw. I told you, God showed me things, even things about your lil’ boyfriend and a certain someone. Just know you better watch out.” Mike rolls out the room then shouts down the hallway, “Everything!” And I think by the quick, harsh way Myesha pumps her mascara brush in and out of the tube, she might believe him now too.

She shakes the thought from her head, then shoots me daggers for eyes. “Snitch,” she says. She throws her mascara into her drawer and pushes up to leave. I follow her from our room, down the hallway, “It wasn’t me it was God!” I say, and when she opens the door and slams it closed I go to the window to watch her leave. Jabari is outside, leaned against his too-dark car, scrolling through his phone, waiting. He shoves his phone into his pocket when Myesha comes out, pulls her by the hips into his. I’m back at the window now. Watching Myesha the way I’m used to watching for Momma. And I’ve gotta keep my eyes on everything because watching is what keeps things safe. Keeps things here.

With Myesha gone, there is nothing to do but sit around and think. And I can’t help but to think about Momma. There are things about her I miss a lot. The earth-rain smell of her skin. The way she’d let me crawl into her lap to sleep, even though I’m over half her size. There are

things about Momma I don't miss at all. Her pencil-led sharpness towards me whenever things weren't going our way. How we never got to go through the checkout lanes with all the candy, even though we'd leave the store with my backpack full of most things we needed. When I can't think of anything else to miss or not miss, I go looking for Uncle Gap to see if I can play games on his phone. He never says no like Myesha. Uncle Gap and Mike are out in the front yard, huddled over Mike's broken car like I used to do over my broken toys. Uncle Gap has an oily rag tossed over his shoulder and a cigarette hangs in the curve of his ear for later. Mike stands just like him, rubbing at his chin, even though he doesn't have any hair. The tree drapes over the hood down across the car's sides and trunk, its body like a big, hard boot crushing a soda can. The tree got everywhere besides the driver's seat.

“Still cain't believe you got outta there with just a scratch,” says Uncle Gap, “I ain't never seen anything like that.”

He's laughing and shaking his head. But I know that's only to hide something else. To mask what he'd be feeling if things turned out different with Mike.

“Can you fix it?” I ask, pulling at his arm for attention. Uncle Gap twirls me like a top, and pulls me in for a hug. He smells like gasoline, cigarettes and soap. He says, “Nah I cain't do nothing with this, Tadpole. I'll call Philip. See if he cain't get a tow truck out here by tomorrow.”

Uncle Gap lets me go and reaches into his pocket for his cellphone. “Y'all be careful around these wet roots,” he warns, “and Mike watch out for Tadpole around that glass.”

Then it's just me and Mike. And I feel jelly in my stomach because I know now's the time to ask him what I've been thinking about all day. Even if I'm scared of what he'll tell me. Mike's car looks about as sad as he does. He walks towards the trunk, starts pulling at the rain-wet branches loose enough to clear away.

“Did God really show you everything?” I say.

Mike breaks off a flimsy piece of bark and tosses it over his shoulder, “Huhn?”

“When the tree came yesterday and you said God showed you everything. Myesha said you were lying. Were you?”

Mike pulls at a branch that won’t give, the curve in his back coming out against his sweaty gray t-shirt. “Myesha should worry about herself,” he says. “And yes. God showed me everything.”

“God *really* showed you *everything*?” I say.

“Everything,” Mike says.

“So you saw Momma?”

The branch gives then. Snaps off the tree’s body and sends Mike stumbling backwards, the rest of the branches buoying themselves back to stillness. He holds the branch with the one hand. Rubs the back of his head with the other.

“It’s okay if you didn’t,” I offer. “I was just thinking about it and wanted to know that she was okay.”

Mike snaps the branch in two and throws the pieces into the yard. “I saw her, Tadpole,” he says.

“You saw her?”

“She’s working now. Back in Houston. She got a job at a restaurant. She’s working and saving up to come get you. Looking for a house for you guys too.”

I can’t help but know, “What kind of house?”

“What kind of house you want?”

“A *big* one.”

“Then that’s what she’s looking for.”

I start pulling at the branches on top of the car then too.

“A big house with a swimming pool in the backyard,” I say.

“Swimming pool and a hot tub.”

I know that sometimes Momma calls Uncle Gap at night after I’m supposed to be in bed.

I know that she tells him things that nobody thinks I’m old enough to know. I know too that Uncle Gap tells Auntie Caroline everything, and Auntie Caroline tells Mike and Myesha everything. And maybe this is God like Mike says. But maybe it’s just Mike. Letting me in on the secret everybody else already knows. I help Mike clear all that we can from the top of his car. And when we’re done and back inside, he lets me play his video games. Even though I really stink at it.

Later, I’m back outside, sitting on the porch playing with Uncle Gap’s phone. I smell Auntie Caroline’s taco casserole cooking from inside. See the tip of the sun’s pink head just beyond the row of pines brushing uphill like water paints. The neighbor’s lights come on automatically and like on cue the cicadas start their nighttime singing to each other. Then, Jabari’s car pulls up fast. Jerking and skirting, splitting the peace of the night wide open.

It stops but a small way from where I sit, so even with the dark windows I can see him inside of the car. He’s bobbing around like crazy. The brightness of a phone screen goes from his side to Myesha’s, then back and forth again. I can hear Myesha yelling from here. See him make the motions people do when they’re so mad they could hit something. I put Uncle Gap’s phone on the brick step beside me and jump up. I’m not sure why I do this, just that I’ve got a feeling.

One that makes my gut go tight, a pausing at the top of a roller coaster, looking down to where I'll soon be.

I felt this way all the time with Momma. Whenever she found a new nice person to be with. Whenever she'd move us in with them. Let them hurt her. Get kicked out or leave them. Myesha's hand flies to his side of the car, and my stomach drops. Then Jabari shoves Myesha up against her window and she shrinks. Jabari doesn't stop pushing. And she is a caught fish in a too-small tank. Trapped and flailing. Hard, dense muscles against glass that won't give. I want to run. I want to save her. But I can't move. And I think maybe this is the bigness Mike talked about yesterday. Jabari's door opens and he leaps out. He dashes past the car's nose, the headlights blotting with each of his swift movements. He whips Myesha's door open and grabs her by the soft part of her bare arm, yanking her from the car, slinging her to the edge of the yard. Her body is twisted and hot. Her hips and palms spread onto gravel. She screams that she is sorry, but Jabari is already gone. He slams the car door, the engine revs and smokes, the tires scream against the pavement. Then, he is gone.

Myesha lies on the ground, sniffing and wiping at her nose. And I don't know when I get beside her, just that I am there, reaching down for her.

"You didn't see that, did you?" She says.

"No. I mean, I didn't mean to. Are you okay?"

Myesha pulls her knees into her chest while I look for ways to make my body into something she can use. She waves me away, straightening her back and tucking her hair. "So I guess you're gonna go snitch about this too then, huh?" She says. And I remember the time I sat next to Momma on the kitchen sink while she toweled red from her open lip. She told me that

what I saw between her and Mr. Jimmy was to stay between us. That sometimes secrets were okay because they could keep you with the people you loved most.

“Never,” I tell Myesha. “I promise.”

“Yeah right! You promised about the belly ring too and look how that turned out.”

I lower myself next to Myesha, the sharp gravel beneath my knees, my palms, my thighs is almost as stinging as she is. She smells like baby powder and summer-wet grass. Kinda like Momma. And I want to be mad at her the way I am at Momma. But I just pull at the frayed ends of my shoelaces, thinking of something to say instead. Auntie Caroline bought me new shoes just one week after I got here, but I won't wear them. She bought me new everything: glittery, butterfly t-shirts and jean skirts and pretty church dresses and a big person toothbrush. She bagged up everything I came with, and I let her. Only said no when she reached for my shoes.

I didn't mean to snitch on Myesha. I just needed something to remember what was before, even if it's caked shoe dirt from the playgrounds Momma took me to back home.

“You won't have to worry about me much longer, My,” I say. “Getting in your stuff and telling on you and making your room stink.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Mike told me my Momma's coming back for me soon. She got us a big house in Houston so I won't have to be here in *yours*.”

Myesha rolls her eyes. “Tadpole. Is this about all that God stuff Mike was talking?”

And I don't know what to say because I don't know if it is or isn't.

“God doesn't work that way, Tadpole,” she says. “And you can't believe everything Mike tells you.” She looks off somewhere. Rubs her nose again with the back of her hand. “You can't believe what anybody tells you.”

Myesha stands up, so I do too. And we are quiet as secrets walking back to the house. And when I reach out to hold Myesha's hand, she lets me.

I see Uncle Gap first. Back inside. He leans forward in his Lazy Boy, his eyes fixed on the television, his hands clasped tightly beneath his chin. I wonder if his beard is scratchy. If his hands have somehow gotten used to the roughness. He's watching the news. So is Auntie Caroline, still as a statue on the sofa's arm. She curves into herself, her hands cup over her worried mouth. Mike is on the floor holding his knees, and I can see the red and blue lights from the TV screen flash brightly across him. Myesha runs next to him and watches too. I linger beside Uncle Gap. I want him to scoop me up. To hold all the unknowable sadness away, the way he did for Momma before she left. Hold me, until things snap into place and feel right again.

"What did he do?" Myesha says.

"Are you serious?" Mike says. "Nothing. They never do anything."

We watch the news in silence for a little while. And when a commercial break comes, Myesha looks down at Mike. She crooks her neck, "hmpf." And we all turn her way. "Bet you didn't see that coming."

"What did you say?" Mike says.

"If God showed you everything, why you ain't see this coming? Why you didn't go to stop it, Superman?"

Mike stands up and gets in her face, "Myesha shut the *fuck* up. This ain't a joke."

"Don't use that language in this house," Auntie Caroline's standing now too.

"If it ain't a joke," Myesha says, "tell Tadpole you been lying. Cause she been walking around here thinking her momma's coming back to get her and we *all* know that's a lie."

Mike shoves her. Only this time Myesha doesn't shrink back like she did with Jabari. She leaps onto Mike's head and starts scratching. Mike gets her by the wrists, yanking her off, then Myesha bites his wrapped arm until he screams and Uncle Gap has to separate them. He says, "There's enough going on in the world without the two of you acting a damn fool."

One by one, quietly, everybody leaves. Everyone, to their own corners of the house, feeling things that are maybe too big to share. I realize I don't have a corner for myself. And if what Myesha said was true, that Momma's never coming back, that Mike's just a liar, then maybe I never will. I curl up in Uncle Gap's Lazy Boy and watch other people cry on TV for their lost family, while I cry for mine.

And I know how things like this happen suddenly. The same way mothers drop off their babies and leave them, and how trees let go of the ground and squish things. No thought for who might be beside them, just trying to stand. Just trying to catch shade.

Later that night, I catch Mike outside bouncing a basketball between his knees. There's no moon but the floodlights are bright enough to see him. His car is covered by a thin white sheet and I imagine it's sleeping real good under there. I hope it is.

"I don't think you really saw God," I say.

Mike stops dribbling.

"And I don't think Momma's coming back, either."

"Hey," he says. He gets down on the tips of his sneakers so that they open up around the tongue, like little frowning mouths, hungry for something. I look there the whole time he speaks. He says, "God didn't tell me she's coming back Tadpole. But I know that she is. I don't know when, but I know it's gonna be soon. You just gotta be patient. Okay?"

Mike looks me in the eyes and nods. Grown-ups make sure to look you in the eyes when they're telling you something they need you to believe, something they need to believe themselves. Their eyes get real big too. They nod their heads. Smile. Make you repeat what they've said like a prayer. So I tell Mike I believe him. And his eyes get a little less big.

He lets go of the ball and hugs me tight. And it bounces into a quiet stutter, rolling slowly at first, down the driveway hill, then faster, across the concrete pebbles until it disappears somewhere in a crown of cattails, cotton-soft. And I can't see it.

“멀리서 ; Mo Lee So”

They lived in a neighborhood most other people didn't care about. Until they did. That's when the cranes appeared. Condos. A stadium, Porsches and Teslas. Some of the neighborhood boys took in the newness and saw their opportunity to enterprise. Surveyed the block on old bikes elder siblings no longer used, then bought five dollar 24-packs of Nestle Pure Life. Sold them for a dollar-fifty to hot, thirsty fans leaving United games.

Andre sits beside his great-grandfather in the sun-soaked backseat of the pickup. Bored, sweaty, watching the boys dip between lines of slow-inching traffic like pinballs in a machine. They bang their palms on tinted windows, wait for the window to come down, shove in cold water bottles then extract wet dollar bills down into their pockets. Andre wonders if the possibility of being side swept down Northside Dr. ever occurs to them the way it does him, then his mother gives words to his anxieties.

“Just watch,” she says. “Somebody's child will end up on the side of 85 one of these days.” Mahalia maneuvers the truck through post-game traffic, eying the boys, then eying her own from the rearview mirror. He'd been quieter today. Sullen in the way most early teenage boys became once their bodies started speaking in languages to them they did not yet understand. She could feel it happening, herself losing him to the outside, though the transformation was not yet fully complete. Somewhere, under the bad attitude and sprigs of sandy brown hair above his lip, her baby boy was still inside.

Mahalia floors the break. Andre and Petey Pratt Sr. lurch forward in their seatbelts. One of the smaller boys, two water bottles in one hand, barely tippy-toes past the truck's nose, his back arched high. “See?” Mahalia hollers. “See that, Dre?” All the other cars have begun to

switch lanes, to move on. Mahalia's sandal stays heavy on the pedal. She turns her body completely so as to look Andre square in the face, "I bet' not ever catch you doing some mess like this."

"Calm down," he says. "You won't." And she drives on. Then Petey Pratt Sr. grunts, "Shoot him up his ass!" Though neither Andre nor Mahalia know which *him* he is referring to. Appropriate or not— shooting people up the ass is the one thing Petey Pratt Sr.'s 85-year old self remembers how to communicate, if not proceed to do.

They are who's left of the Atlanta Pratts. Andre— though technically he is a Smith— his mother, Mahalia Pratt, and his great-grandfather, Petey Pratt Sr.; the lone Pratts *not* forever resting in metal urns, behind a glass plate window, or just plain disinterested in sticking around the South for the sole sake of family. Being some of few left, in the family, in their neighborhood, the three of them cling tight to one another. And like the last Sugar Babies at the bottom of the candy carton, they will not be moved.

Mahalia turns right into the Publix parking lot on Ponce, because she likes the deli there better than anywhere else. The neighborhood boys like the *people* who like the deli. They are easy, busy people, who do not remember faces, so the boys commandeer the parking lot with poster board signs and buckets. Today, they go around from entrance to exit, collecting donations for eighth grade basketball teams they do not play on because they do not actually exist.

From the truck, Andre sees a blonde-haired woman in running shoes. She exits the store where the boys see her too. They swarm around her and push their signs in her face and she reads them, and smiles. She flashes a pointer, walking towards the Presto ATM, digging around her

purse for a wallet. Andre steps from the truck, heat chafing his eyes, “You not gon’ warn her, ma?” he says. He grins and points. The boys, some of whom Mahalia recognizes from her many years in APS, reach out their palms, filling their buckets with cash pulled forth from the ATM; enough to buy whatever their own parents and finances habitually refuse them.

Mahalia jerks loose a buggy from the cart return. “Hmph,” she reasons. “If these people took the time to learn the neighborhood, they’d know there wasn’t any *Alexander Grand Bell Hornets*.” She pushes the empty buggy past the woman in running shoes. Past the young, enterprising boys, ignoring their pleas to help fund new uniforms. After shopping, she pushes a full buggy past them and says loud enough for each of them to hear, “Now y’all *know* you ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Out here scammin’ these folks like this.” She is down the parking lot aisle a good ways when Andre and Petey Pratt Sr.— trailing behind her, both sluggish, both discombobulated by the reimmersion into thick, Atlanta heat— hear it.

Be quiet, bitch, the boy has said.

Andre whips around to meet the boy’s eyes. To size him up, to see what’s good. He is much bigger than the boy. Much taller too. His broadening shoulders begin where the boy’s smallish head ends. His hand, now curling to a ball, looks about the size of the boy’s left cheek. Andre plans to find out whether or not it is, but looking at the boy, he sees something hard and immovable in his stare, something he himself does not have, and that somehow makes up the difference. Andre pauses then, and the boy, just for a moment, looks confused. He steps forward on his heels. Pulls his pants upon his tiny waist, “What’s up, fuck nigga?” he says, harsher than what Andre feels the moment calls for. He swallows the spit in his mouth. Loosens his hand.

Lowers his chin and gazes downward. He keeps it moving, his loosened laces worming behind him all the way down the blacktop, until he's back at the truck, where Petey Pratt Sr. stares down at him, eyes slant, head shaking, mouth puckered and folded to a frown.

He does not understand his great-grandson. Can not understand his great-grandson; by his age, he'd left the teeth of grown men on sidewalks. And for far, *far* less.

Ponce de Leon to John Lewis Freedom. Ralph McGill to Parkway Dr.. Jackson to Edgewood, William Holmes to Tanner. A right on Hilliard, then home: a forest green two story shot-gun house with windows long and lean and cased in dark brown shutters. The sun bleached wooden rails circling the front porch could use a fresh coat of paint. The grass is tall. Dying Henbit and Creeping Charlies creep around the mailbox and the walkway up to the gray stone foundation, keeping the house nice and upright. The branches that can sometimes hang low over the phone lines, usurping the signal, have not been trimmed since the end of last summer, and through them, through a gathering of slim-trunked trees, to the back right of the house you can perfectly make out a brand new, whitestoned condominium. Looking up, you can see the backside balconies, hammocks and boxes turned towers of Monday Night, pink yoga mats rolled up and resting on the iron rails, and boxed Mass Cane's with deflated, brown leaves. BLM and rainbow flags hang off the sides, and on some nights, the kids who live there, mostly State and Tech kids, do not sleep. So the Pratts do not sleep.

Mahalia pulls into the driveway and lets out a tired breath. "Bring these groceries inside for me, Dre," she says. She's got dinner to get on the stove. Papers to grade. Tomatoes growing in the side yard bathtub that need to be pruned.

Andre slams the car door. Lowers the trunk and in one trip attempts carrying the entirety of the groceries into the house. This has become a test of strength for him, how much he can

carry before his fingers go cold numb with the weight. Inside, Andre drops the bags at the foot of the kitchen and calls Kia. A Black girl named after a Korean car company. Kia lives two streets over and she is his friend. Maybe his only real one.

“Hello?” she says. She does her best to sound disinterested.

“What’s up?”

“Oh. Hi, Dre...Are you calling me to apologize?”

Andre goes into the fridge and pulls out a near empty bottle of Orange Fanta. “For what?” he says, although he knows exactly for what. “Wanna hear something funny that just happened to me?”

“Alright.”

“I beat this kid’s ass outside of Publix.”

“You *what*?”

“He disrespected my mother. So I beat his ass.”

He goes inside the dishwasher for a clean cup.

Kia rolls her eyes, “Sure you did,” she says.

“I did! He called my mother a name so I dropped him. Kicked him in his nuts then punched him in his face.”

“You’re such a liar, Dre.”

“Pshh. Be quiet, bitch.”

“Bye, Dre.”

“No, Kia! Wait!”

Andre calls her back twice. And when she does not answer, he pours himself a cup of flat Fanta and goes into the living room to stare at the mantle. Somehow, his mother had found a way

to fit the last three generations of men and all they'd accomplished upon the short length of their front room mantle. And while Andre's father's presence was largely absent— he'd almost had Mahalia put the house up for his bail for some wrong he'd done or hadn't done and been blamed for, Andre had never heard the full story, though whatever it was, he was still serving time for it, Andre thinks, *not everybody can wear a cape*— he figured his urn would be up on the mantle just the same. Whenever the time called for it. Among all else that'd made it up there, his great-grandfather's dog tag is what he can not help but eye, everytime, feeling that it is staring back. Peter Pratt. Before there was any junior, house, mantle. When there was just his nineteen year old self, buttoned into a uniform, facing an army of men he had no reason to fight. Andre wondered if in those times of battle, his great-grandfather had ever faced a moment he could not find in himself to meet. If eyes ever pierced down into him, demanding things he did not have inside to give.

Outside, Petey Pratt Sr. lingers in the back seat of the pick-up. He watches his granddaughter bend down over tomato stems and thinks up a time when he still had his original right knee. When he'd run that nosy real estate developer with his pen and clipboard off his property with the sharp end of an old bayonet. *Shoot you up yo' ass next time*, he'd said, ascending the three steps to the front porch, where he stood with his gun, still as a Foot Guard. This was back when the purchase offers first started coming. Then, purchase offers wouldn't stop coming, flooding his mailbox. Regularly. Then relentlessly. Then, more than offers. Something closer to harassment, to threats.

The developers couldn't get to the Pratts. But they could get to everything around them. So that's what they'd been doing. Buying out every corner store, strip mall and apartment complex. Flipping them, raising the property value which for those just riding past the capital,

could look like a good thing. Look like an improvement. But along with the increased property value came the increase in property taxes. And many of those who'd settled in Atlanta with the hopes of stability and prosperity could not keep up. Left further South in search of new land. Mahalia, even on the higher end of a school teacher's salary, had been dipping into Andre's already meager college fund, and for necessities, so they knew what was coming and their idea of ownership grew that much smaller.

Mahalia had bought clawfoot bathtubs. She and Andre drug them from the back of Petey Pratt Sr.'s old pickup into the side yard beneath the Magnolia tree and cable lines. Filled them high with loam soil, then planted carrots and cabbage in one, and tomatoes and in the other one, tulip bulbs that never bloomed.

When the time came, they could take the tubs with them.

To lift his spirits, Mahalia bought Petey Pratt Sr. a Bonsai tree to tend. Molding clay to forge worlds of his own. Petey Pratt Sr. had been forced to leave school at age nine, so she'd bring home the old textbooks and workbooks from the storage closet at the elementary school, starting where he'd left off, with third grade English, leaving them in his favorite armchair by the fireplace for him to find on his own, without the rigmarole of acknowledging how he needed them in the first place. Petey Pratt Sr. would drag an old, bent finger beneath lines of simple text, mouth, mincing, eyes focused, softened but studious. He'd fill all the blanks on the glossy pages of sixth grade Earth Science books. And seventh grade Geography and eighth grade Civics. Mahalia was proud. She'd get home from teaching her own students, pour herself a glass of red wine and check his work too.

Soon enough, Petey Pratt Sr. had made it to the ninth grade. The same grade as Andre. He'd borrow Andre's text books and sit in his favorite chair completing the assignments in the back.

"Why can't he do that in his *own* room?" Andre would scream to Mahalia, face scrunched and embarrassed, his friends, Kia and Greg walking in the house behind him to binge watch a new anime. "It's weird, ma! Look at him. He looks like an old, crazy person!"

Petey Pratt's eyes wouldn't leave his books, "'Shoot you up yo' ass keep talking,'" he'd say.

"Nobody's talking to you, old nigga!"

"Dre!" Kia would touch his shoulder. Eyes wide. Shaking her head.

Petey Pratt Sr. would look from his great-grandson to his granddaughter in these moments, though a lot of the time she was very, very tired and did not have it in her to do much about him. He worried about them both.

Mahalia knocks on the car window, startling him back to the present. She's holding a fistful of tomato leaf stems. "Don't tell me you've been baking in here this whole time."

Later, Mahalia stands over a hot pan, browning beef for stuffed peppers while Andre sits at the kitchen table two chairs over from Petey Pratt Sr., a history book opened, a notebook folded beneath his pen. Mahalia pokes Andre in the back with her spatula, tossing her head towards Petey Pratt Sr.. So Andre moves beside him and scoots his textbook far enough over for the two of them to share, although he doesn't want to. Although he hates it. Petey Pratt Sr. haunches over

the book as Andre watches him. "I've got a lesson for you, pops," he says. He flips the pages a few times. Pauses where the heading reads *United States Involvement in the Korean War*.

Petey Pratt Sr. settles in. Reads one page, then another, the veins in his fists tightening from paragraph to paragraph. Andre keeps watching. At the end of the second page, Petey Pratt Sr. pushes the book away. "Now *that's* a day-umn lie." He leaps straight upward, the crook in his back railed high like a flag on a pole. The opened book is flung to the ground. Andre stands up too, looks to his mother. "I was there," Petey Pratt says from the strong end of his throat. "I was *there* and *this...this* is a lie."

Petey Pratt Sr. *was* there. And every so often he finds himself there again. The mantle and the chevron rug, the sidebar and oak coffee table, slipping to disarray before him, like falling pieces of a broken mirror, exposing the black paste behind it. The black paste oozes onto the hardwood floors until it is soil, covered in snow, and he is stepping through it in frozen, wet combat boots towards the sinking sun and the snow capped Sobuk-san mountains. A Daewoo K2 appears in his hands. Coffered ceilings open to pattering fighter planes. The muscles in his calves tighten and catch and he is running and smelling flesh burning, watching bodies burst to red and fall down all around him. Then, a cold touch comes to his cheek, turning him from war to green pastures. To Daemyung lake and her. He feels their bodies against one another, he and her. And he places his hand on her dark, olive cheek, the soft heat of her gentle breath in his palm. The other hand forms upon the growing belly between them, touching new life he will never in this lifetime know.

Pops! She says and he blinks. *Pops!* And it isn't any of that, but Mahalia. In the kitchen. In front of him. Holding both sides of his face. Patting his cheek, coaxing him back home. Dark, secret shadows speaking out through the coarse lines of his face.

He lets her calm him, nodding, avoiding her eyes. It is his way of apologizing for forgetting himself, for whatever he'd done to them, said to them while he was gone.

Andre stands behind the kitchen chair, silent. Watching.

“Get Pops some water, Dre,” Mahalia says.

He looks off towards the kitchen sink, and tries to make sense of his great-grandfather's old man gibberish. Always, they are a jumble of sounds that boom through their home, thunderish and intense. He isn't speaking to Andre in those moments. Andre knows that. He isn't speaking to his mother, either. He is speaking to memories, to ghosts. And sometimes those ghosts get the better of him and at an hour Mahalia is not awake to reason him down. Andre renders it all proof of the life his great-grandfather must've lived before the one made of molding clay and bonsai trees he lived now. Back in '53, maybe. When his grandfather, Petey Pratt Jr. was just barely chewing forth his bottom set of teeth upon his great-grandmother's pinky finger. When Petey Pratt Sr. bought their house in blood.

He was fresh out of Korea with nothing but the skin on his bones, a new family and a promise of compensation. In the VA's office, a woman whose bright red nail polish matched her lipstick slid him back his release papers and told him *no, no, no*. That he'd misunderstood the terms of his enlistment and regardless of what he thought, he was owed nothing. Everyday, Petey Pratt Sr. drove the twenty-five miles from his apartment unit to the VA's office, demanding what he knew belonged to him. And everyday he was turned away and most times with excessive force. He'd loaded up his gun. Lottie dropped the baby. Blocked the door to keep him from using it. Gossip had been circulating in the neighborhood. Black Veterans in Southern States were organizing. Planning to do something about this, the way most Black people had been planning to do something about it all. Sometimes talk was enough. And the VA, too preoccupied with real

issues to entertain the noise, reluctantly signed over his money. Then Petey Pratt Sr. signed it over for a plot of real estate on Auburn Avenue. Land was the greatest thing a man could own, but land on Sweet Auburn Ave.? He thought the fight to get the money was the beginning of the end. And for a while, it'd felt that way. On several occasions, Petey Pratt Sr. walked out of his home, turned left and found himself involved in war. The other men who lived beside and across from him would be there too. Dogs spat and growled. Smoke confused the air. Police had their knees in the soft backs of Black teenagers. Afterwards, they'd congregate around Petey Pratt Sr.'s kitchen table. Pop the tops off beer bottles and lean back, while Lottie and the other wives reassured them that they were men. Good men. Dabbed away the blood from their wounds. Some smothered their rage in pork chops at the stove, cooked down mustards into boiling pans of potlikker. So. 1965, and Petey Pratt Sr. had seen war both foreign and domestic. His blood coursed the streets of Korea the same way it did the streets of Atlanta, Birmingham, Selma. So there was that, but mostly, there was life. Children losing baby teeth. Church revivals with Mary Don't You Weep and key lime pie afterwards. A little league group for Petey Pratt Jr., ballet and jazz lessons for their daughters, Lisa and Vanessa. There was a radio station that played Smokey and Aretha, and a newspaper that talked of them only. An insurance company, doctors, dentists and restaurateurs. Sweet Auburn Ave. That's what she was for. Then, his son, Petey Pratt Jr. spat in the face of his efforts when in 1971 at the age of eighteen, he joined Atlanta's single chapter of the Black Panther Party. Petey Pratt Sr. fought tooth and nail against the wiles of socialism, of communism, and his son had snuck them in through the back door with pamphlets. With big hair and a bigger attitude. He'd packed up his baseball glove and there was a clenched fist hiding inside. Then he filled the hallways of their home with separatist rhetoric, speaking of places where Black people could thrive with and by themselves only, which made Petey Pratt Sr. palm

the keloid scar on the back of his head. When the chapter fell to the pressures of maintaining it, Petey Pratt Jr. cut his hair a little shorter and took up with a white girl. Had a mixed baby and called her Mahalia. It didn't last too long. Petey Pratt Jr. was arrested for his involvement with The Party. Then the mother disappeared into a crowded Volkswagen, leaving Mahalia in the home with whoever happened to be there at the time, which was Nessa and Lisa. They'd pushed their homework aside, carried the weeping child to Lottie, who couldn't make any more sense of her son and his choices than she could the sandy, too-soft texture of her granddaughter's hair. But Petey Pratt Sr. liked his granddaughter, who softened him and loved him. And as time moved on she clung to the culture and traditions of her father's side of the family more than anyone, and it was hard to see her as anything besides their fourth child. A highway was built. 75/85 split Sweet Auburn down the middle. That's when most people who began there, left there. They didn't like the housing projects they'd thrown up around the freeways, undermining their original vision for Sweet Auburn Ave. Nessa moved to Chicago. Lisa, LA. Mahalia went to college then fell in love with a man who knew more about the correct positioning of bass traps than being any kind of a family. The '96 Olympics came and went, and Lottie passed away at the turn of the millennium. Then, in 2003, after Mahalia felt for the first time her baby kick a small baby foot in the tender space below her bellybutton, she cleared away the candles and vases from their front room mantle in favor of a family history lesson. Petey Pratt Sr.'s accomplishments had long since been resigned to boxes in the back room closet, along with his uniform which hung in plastic perpetuity on the always opened door frame. She'd had the uniform pressed and framed, dogtags, shined and buffed and hung beside the uniform from a nail in the drywall. Caps, medals, and badges. Photographs with MLK, Ralph David Abernathy, Joseph Lowry and Petey Pratt Jr. with Bobby Seale, and Petey Pratt Jrs.'s urn eventually. Once Andre came, Mahalia would hold him

up to that mantle, *You see these empty spaces up there, baby? Those are for you.* Andre's hands would reach out to them, stretched, hungry fingers. *You come from a long line of great men,* she would say to him. *Don't you ever forget it.*

Andre hears the door hinges creak first. Feels the weight fall upon the edge of his bed before quiet hands creep up around his throat, and squeeze. "Oh, I got you now." Petey Pratt Sr. whispers. "You thought you could sleep in peace, huh? You thought wasn't nobody gon' come for you in your dreams, huh? Well here I am—"

"Pops—"

"—Here I am. Jesus said the truth will set you free. Now here I am. The truth!"

"Pops. Please."

His hands don't loosen. "Tell them! Tell them about the lake in Gyeonggi-do."

"Just... let me..."

"Tell them about the eyes that never close."

"Get...mom..."

His great-grandfather had never choked him before. Gasping for air in the dead black of his bedroom, Andre figures there is a first time for everything. There had been a first time for this. When Petey Pratt Sr. came into Andre's bedroom before the sun, demanding answers from him he did not have. "You think you're a man, don't you?"

"Pops?"

He'd kneed into him in the dark room, pinning him down. "What do you know about making a man's choice? About life or death? About it being you or me?"

“Pops. Please.”

Spit landed cold and heavy on Andre’s face then and humiliated him. And after it was done and Petey Pratt Sr. was gone, Andre pulled the comforter over his head and huffed and puffed angry air into his cheeks, ashamed of himself for letting something like this happen to him. Was his great-grandfather wrong? He knew nothing about *the struggle*, which is what Andre imagined his great-grandfather to be speaking on whenever it happened. His biggest adversaries weren’t war or the FBI, or the fucked up legal system that’d kept his father imprisoned long past retribution, but the pretty girls at school who looked him up and down and found it appropriate to snarl. Four neighborhood boys whose parents couldn’t be bothered to grant them real names for names: Ray, Freddy, Travvie, Lil’ Greg who thought it their civil duty to give him hell just for leaving the house in *them shoes*. Or with *that* line-up. They followed him down the hallways at school, tripping him up by his laces, pulling the strings on his backpack so tight it rode up near to his neck. Andre couldn’t beat them up because they were big, or, seemed big. There were a lot of them. And he couldn’t roast them either, because, despite practicing the roasts in his bathroom mirror everyday before and after school, he was always too nervous to perform them and was terrible at it anyways. *Ol’ Lima bean face ass*, he’d say. *No, no. I’ll say... Ol’ got-damn-rotisserie-chicken-lookin’-boy*. His mother would hear him doing this. Press an ear and a palm to the door, while rubbing the raised mole on her collar bone raw. Andre had practiced roasting so much that it’d rewired his brain; all of his responses, some calculated rendition of making someone’s head shape into food.

Eventually Mahalia would grow weary of eavesdropping, knock twice before opening the door anyways, *Quit fooling around in here, Dre, and go do the dishes for me, please? Like I said*. She’d walk away, still listening. *YOU do the dishes, old microwave-oven-head-ass-girl!* And

she'd stop in her tracks, say, *What did you say to me, boy?* And Andre would say, *I said yes ma'am! Here I come!*

She worried about him.

Petey Pratt Sr. lets go of Andre's throat. And Andre's hands fly to the hot, dry skin around his neck. He watches his great-grandfather hobble from his room into the even darker hallway. "That's what I thought," he says. "Shoot you up yo ass." And when Andre finishes coughing, "Ol'-third-grade-reading-level.. P-T-S-D-having...I'll fuck you up. I'll choke *you* out in *your* sleep. I'll...I'll.." The worst part was knowing he was all talk. That he wasn't going to do anything to or about his great-grandfather. He'd just have to take it. He'd just have to take it. And his great-grandfather, chances were, would remember none of it come morning.

The tomatoes do not need a ton of space to grow tall. Only support and a strong root system. They are resilient. Mahalia gets an early start on them on Saturdays, slipping into her gardening boots, leaving quietly from the back screen door. She runs the hose from the rear of the house to the side where the bathtubs sprout vines of Cherokee Purple. The seedlings from one of these tomatoes are enough to produce generations of them. They are heirlooms, whatever the original fruit's susceptibilities, so its seed will have.

Above her are two pairs of pale feet, crossed and perched atop the balcony railing. Old school hip hop wafts down in booms of heavy bass and tender hi-hats from the opened patio door, and immediately, Mahalia is reminded of her Spelman days. Of gelling down already soft edges with an old toothbrush, Freaknik and Dennis. Dim basement studios on the West Side, old, dank sofas she'd stretch out on, watching Dennis, one headphone behind an ear, one cupped

over, motioning into a microphone behind a makeshift wall of plexiglas. That felt like ages ago, and now Dennis was behind a different set of glass windows, the kind she'd never felt comfortable bringing Andre to see, though she herself would still go whenever the mood struck.

Mahalia pulls her sunhat down around her shoulders. She wipes sweat from her brow with the back of her hand and when she looks up onto the balcony, two white boys look down. It is early for beer, but they tip their cans to her and nod. And Mahalia gets back to work. Picking tomatoes.

Wriggling free from her muddy boots outside the back screen door, a small bucket of tomatoes on her hip, Mahalia sees it for the first time. He is not rouging her boy up. Not exactly. The best she can describe it is the way her cousins used to treat Pearl whenever they came down for the summer. Pearl was Mahalia's house cat. Lottie had had her declawed to preserve their furniture, and so rendered Pearl defenseless against everything from the taunting hummingbirds at the front room window to those rowdy Chicago cousins. Usually there was no threat, just her and Mahalia, curled up, watching *The Facts of Life* or *Soul Train*, the world in perfect peace. But those rowdy Chicago cousins. They didn't like Pearl from the jump- why should a cat live better than they were living? They'd stomp at her and watch as Pearl curled her back into a corner, trapped, hissing. They'd wash their hands for dinner, then look over to Pearl with sly smirks. Pretend they had food for her in their palms, until she'd get close, nose sniffing, where they'd flick the leftover water in her face 'til her neck scrunched and scrunched, and she'd run for cover underneath the nearest bed. Mahalia had caught them in the act. Flicking on a lighter, putting it against the tip of Pearl's tail fur. *Calm down, red*, they'd said in the midst of her panic, *it's just the hair*.

Mahalia puts down the bucket. She takes the keys to the pickup. Dips into Andre's college fund once again and buys him his own cover to take.

"A *bike*?" Andre says. He is sitting at the kitchen table. Reading a manga, blowing cool into a bowl of Top Ramen soup.

Mahalia looks down at her new purchase and tries not to feel too absurd. "Yeah!"

"But...I didn't ask for a bike."

"Hush, boy and just ride it. It'll be fun."

"*Fun*?"

"Well...a reason to get out of this stuffy house."

Mahalia leans the bike against the table and pours herself a glass of ice water. Andre shoves the last of his Top Ramen down his throat while Petey Pratt Sr. rustles himself awake in the next room over. Slowly, they both look his way.

"You gon' go?" Mahalia says. She puts the cool part of the glass on her forehead then cheek.

"I have to ride it *now*?"

"Why not? It's a nice day for a bike ride."

"Where am *I* supposed to go?"

He was starting to get on her nerves. "So let me get this straight. You want me to buy the bike *and* tell you what to do with it? Boy, take this thing outside and damn figure it out."

Andre shrugs and stands up. "Fine," he says. He has a belly full of Top Ramen and is very bored anyway. So he slurps down the chicken-flavored water from his bowl and places it into the sink. Then takes the bike, deciding he'll ride it down to Kia's house and maybe tell her sorry. Although he is still convinced he has nothing to be sorry for.

It is a good bike. Electric green with all the specs. Andre stands and pedals and the bike picks up speed easily. He rides up and down the hilly sidewalk, trying his best for a jump, then a track stand. Then, paused on the side curb, heavy breathing, shoe immersed in grass, he tries his best to set flame to the spark of a memory tapping at the edge of his body to catch. There is the smell of wood chips here, honeysuckles and wood rot. And a bike too. Smaller. Red. A heavy pair of thick hands that have just unscrewed the training wheels, now atop his own, atop the handle bars, guiding, guiding then not guiding at all. Then letting go, rickety wheels snaking until there's no control, until he's palms to concrete, and Mahalia is scooping him into her arms, calling the pair of hands, *Daddy*. So it is not his own father in this memory. But Petey Pratt Jr., who'd show up *every blue moon* to the house for dinner and whatever Mahalia had in the sidebar to drink. In a black beret. In an army fatigue jacket. Tobacco and Whiskey smelling. *Boy*, Petey Pratt Sr. would say, *You dressed like a soldier and ain't seen a bit'a war a day in your sad life*. Petey Pratt Jr. would put the bottle down. Sniff. Rub on his nose. *Well, pop*, he'd say. He'd get up to leave. *You already know. It don't take the army to find war in every day*.

Andre turns left.

A giant stick flies towards him from the side, wedging between the bike's rims, catching up the chain. The tires skip and tread without hopes of moving forward. Travvie, Freddy, Ray and Lil' Greg circle the area, while Andre tries to get away, cartoonishly peddling, back high and curved, legs pumping and pumping until he's lost his balance. He lands chin first to the ground. Like smoke, a puff of Red Georgia Clay rises all around them. The bike falls somewhere off to the side.

"Ha!" Travvie yells. "*Got 'eem!*"

Freddy comes in quick, “I see ya mama finally got sick of seeing *yo* bum-ass around the house.” Trap, Freddy’s red nose Pit bends her neck, her fat head low between two veiny, brown legs, the same color as Freddy’s. She growls and spits at Andre’s shoes until he scrambles to his feet and Freddy has to pull up on the leash.

Lil’ Greg goes to put the chain back in its place, “Ol’ Scooby-doo lookin’ ahh’ boy!” he says. And everybody laughs.

Andre has bit his tongue on the way down and tastes metal. Swallows it, before eying Lil’ Greg, who is his best friend whenever the other boys aren't around. When that is the case, he is just Greg, and they sit shoulder-to-shoulder in the school cafeteria, sketching pictures of Gohan and Vegeta and pictures of Bulma with breasts that would give any living woman scoliosis. Andre thinks it his greatest betrayal to date, Greg playing both sides of the fence. Like they are not one in the same. Like he doesn’t come over on Tuesday nights with Kia to rewatch the best parts of Naruto and One Piece. Like he isn’t terrified of them too. What Greg understands more than loyalty is survival. So he picks up his best friend’s bike and hands it up the pecking order: first to Travvie, who hands it to Freddy, who hands it to Ray. “This shit kinda fire,” Ray says. “What kind of bike this is?”

Andre tries not to rub the cold blood from his chin, lest he get roasted for that too. “It’s uh. Um. A DMX.”

“A *DMX*?” Freddy says.

Travvie elbows Ray, “Nigga’s bike can rap.”

Already, Ray has swung a leg over the bike seat. He sits. Bounces. Clutches at the brakes.

“*What these bitches want from a nigga?*” Travvie sings.

Freddy calls Andre a dumbass. Or maybe he was speaking to Travvie.

Ray looks at Andre, lifts his chin, "I'ma ride it around the block right quick," he says.

"No!" Andre says, much louder than intended.

"No?" Ray says. "Why not? Ain't like you got somewhere to be."

They all look to Andre. Andre looks to the side, lips sealed shut, then looks down.

"Oh," Travvie says. He points a finger, grinning, "This nigga got somewhere to be!"

"I know where," Greg offers.

They're all interested now.

"Where?"

Andre tightens his mouth.

Greg shifts in his shoes, "He's going to Kia's house."

"Kia?" Ray looks around himself, confused, "Who's Kia?"

"Weird girl up the street with the snaggletooth," Freddy wags a hand over his face, "all them crazy face piercings."

Ray takes a second to think, then snaps. "That's right," he says. "Kia. *Kia, Kia, Kia*. I heard about *Kia*."

"Yeah? So?"

Ray smiles. "So...Y'all smashin'?"

Andre says nothing.

"Oh shit!" Travvie says, "Dre's smashin' Kia!"

"Fuck outta here," Freddy says, "I'll believe it when I see it."

Trap nods.

Lil' Greg taps Andre's arm lightly, says, "You smashin' for real, Dre?"

"You want a video or something?"

“Or something.” Ray kicks up on the wheels and rides in small circles around Andre.
“Kia,” he says, “*Kia, Kia, Kia. Head doctor Kia.* I ain’t think you had it in you, boy!”

Andre doesn’t know how to address what Ray has just said, so he addresses the easier problem. “Ray, come on. My mom just bought me that bike.”

Ray brakes. “Okay? And?”

The four of them sway on their feet, waiting for the word.

Heat runs up the back of Andre’s neck, “And...so...give it back.”

Travvie elbows Ray, laughing, “He said *give it back.*”

Ray goes back to circling. Decides he’s feeling diplomatic. “How about this,” he says. “You prove you smashin’ ol’ girl with the weird-ass piercings and you can have your lil’ bike back.” Then he shrugs, smiles, “It’s Kia. Should be easy, right?” And that’s the end of it. Ray stands on the pedals. Rides all the way up the hill towards the old train tracks, half of them extracted from the earth, making way for the new, bricked path leading out towards the Beltline. Freddy and Travvie follow close behind him, but Greg stalls until they’re small dots and lines upon the road. Out of earshot, he steps in closer to Andre, “Are you and Kia really...*you know?*”

“What do *you* think?”

“Right,” he nods. “Right.” They stand together in the middle of the road, quiet. Trap’s bark but a small, deep echo from far, far off. “So what are you gonna do?”

Andre watches Ray ride his bike over the horizon, then back down again. Wipes the blood from his chin and looks at it. “I guess I’ll have to figure that out, now won’t I?”

“Yeah. I guess.” Lil’ Greg notices the others getting too far gone. “Hey, I’m a see you tomorrow, Dre, alright?”

Andre has already begun to walk off.

“Alright?” Greg yells.

“Yeah. Alright.”

Greg nods, skipping after the others. Calling out for them to wait for him too.

Andre walks on the tips of his sneakers, his chin against his chest, quiet. He thinks of what he is going to do. What his great-grandfather would do. *Shoot ‘em up they ass*, he’d say. So it was that or smashing Kia.

Were those his only options?

Two streets over, the homes aren’t gentrified as much as they are *renovated. Reimagined*. New rooms built onto the backs and sides of old homes, splintered oak and plaster peeking out behind pretty, new shiplap. Kia lives in one of them with her mother and step-father of five years, the pair of them having endured hell with her actual father before finding the new one and clinging on tight. He clung to them even tighter for reasons neither of them fully understood, but accepted; maybe some people were just good. *I’m not a stepfather*, he’d said to them, *I’m the father who stepped up*. He’d asked Kia if it was okay to marry her mother before proposing; they’d had a father-daughter dance at the reception to which both of them cried. He’d bought them the house they still lived in. Told her mother she wouldn’t have to work another day in her life, if that’s what she wanted. She didn’t want it. But it was great. It was great. It was great. And it was also salve, only salve. Because in the first eight months of the marriage, when Kia still had nothing but a marathon of Barbie playing before her, she saw a piece of the shiplap crack. Her stepfather was supposed to be at work. So was her mother. But she’d heard the noises upstairs. Heard the front door knob twist and catch, then her Step-father was there. Mounting two steps at a time, heeling down the hallway towards the closed door of their shared bedroom. She hadn’t

realized she'd been following him. Not until the bedroom door swung open, when all she could see behind her step-father's large body were the whites of her mother's feet, tangled up in sheets and somebody else. Later in the night, Kia heard them talking. Her mother spoke calmly, matter-of-factly. No ounce of apology edging her words. No remorse. Her step-father sounded more exhausted than angry, said, *I don't care about him. I care about you. About Kia.* He'd asked her to keep it to herself. To make sure he didn't have to see it. He'd said *please*, and a lifetime of shame hinged onto the word, onto the crooked-moon way her step-father let it leave his mouth, break apart at her mother's feet.

By then, Kia had already learned the complicated act of needing to do away with herself. Of hating her skin. Of wanting out of it. She looked for escape in all things around her. Found it in the feel of a sewing needle, piercing through tender cartilage. Found it in *Just For Me* perming kits, in slathering the ammonia mixture into any slight sign of a coil or kink. She'd found it one day in *Seo in Guk*. In *Big Bang* and *J Park*, and in the K-dramas YouTube had for free. Always the K-dramas were about unrequited turned requited love, or children who'd deviated from their parents' impossible wishes to find the lives they'd always imagined themselves living, waiting on the other side. There was something about the manufactured drama, the simple fixes and predictable happy endings that put her at ease. She'd wanted more. Had been teaching herself Korean by typing English words into Google Translate, then copying the phrases into a composition notebook. Today, she'd been bingeing *Scarlet Heart Ryeo*, a Korean drama about a time-traveling woman in love with two very different men.

Kia lies under her purple bed sheets, one leg hanging out bare over the mattress, her notebook face down on her thigh, twisting the new ring in her belly free from a scab. The bell

rings twice before she gets up to see about it. “Oh, God,” she says. “What happened to your face?”

“Your parents home?” Andre says.

He looks anxious. Disheveled.

“What happened, ‘Dre?”

“Are they home or nah?”

“It's Saturday. They're running errands or whatever.”

“Cool. Let's go to *your* room.”

Kia looks behind Andre both ways, then shrugs. “A'ight.” She leans her back against the door, letting him and some of the heat from the outside in. “Take your shoes off though,” she says, hurrying up the steps towards the bathroom. She hollers behind herself, “We just had the carpet steamed!”

In the upstairs bathroom, Kia pushes through her mother's toiletries in search of the peroxide. She finds it behind a bottle of Palmers at the back of the bathroom sink, along with an unopened pack of cotton balls. When catching a quick glimpse of herself in the mirror she shrinks. She's wearing one of her stepfather's old, wrinkled T-shirts as a nightgown. Does not like the stringiness of her hair today, nor the remnants of dark blue lipstick hanging on from a failed makeup tutorial. The way the wing of her eye-liner leaves swaths of uncovered skin in the crease disappoints her more than it should. Downstairs, Andre kicks his shoes to the side. Looking up he notices the chandelier like a thousand paper cranes hanging from the foyer's ceiling. “Dang,” he says. He wants to touch it before they take flight. “I ain't know y'all was living like this.”

Kia watches Andre from the top of the stairs. “For now,” she says. “For now we are.” She takes one step at a time until she’s ground level, not even an arm’s length away from where Andre stands. She can smell the wet grassiness lift from his muddied t-shirt; how up close, a deep slit of dark red runs the edge of his jawline. Bruising, it looks like to her, the shape of long fingers, darkening his neck. She cradles the peroxide and bag of cotton balls close to her chest. “You should let me clean that up.”

“Okay.”

They settle on the ottoman of a long sectional. Andre sits with his hands clasped between his knees while Kia leans her body over him, pressing the opened bottle into a single, soft cotton ball. Andre stares up at her briefly, a hint of pomegranate soap from last night’s shower taking him over. He notices the mantle behind her: a slick, black square beneath one long slab of oak. There aren’t any plaques or medals or urns or tags. Just photographs to mark the passing of time. Kia in baby overalls and hot pink Keds, soft at the bottom. Kia in jellies and jean shorts, arms crossed playfully, hip popped to the side. Kia, slouched before a washed out amber backdrop, without the piercings, a limp smile barely creasing her cheeks.

“You used to look a lot more like your mom,” Andre says. He’s eying a photograph of them from the wedding. Two round, sable faces, cheek to cheek, haloed in white chiffon and hope. One perfect, square smile emphasizes the youthful awkwardness of the other. Their noses look as if someone pinched only the tips.

Kia dabs away at the blood. “I look nothing like my mother.”

“Are you blind? You look exactly like her,” Andre pauses. “Well, used to. Without all the weird shit in your face.”

Kia took a lot off of Andre, and spent large swaths of time questioning herself why. Because whenever she slid her gaze to the ground and brought him up to her small circle of school friends, they would roll their eyes and make harsh sounds from the backs of their throats. She knew they could barely stand to see him coming and what's worse, that the things they said about him were actually true. He *was* musty. And he never brushed his hair. And even though he was cute, *in an off type of way* (they were sure to emphasize), he didn't know as much about anime as he thought he did and he made jokes that weren't funny. And he'd keep making them until somebody, usually, no, *always* Kia, would giggle, covering her mouth where her snaggletooth liked to peak out sometimes, the same snaggletooth that Andre had made a joke of last Friday at lunch when he'd made sure everybody was watching him, then snapped off a piece of his plastic fork, shoved it awkwardly in the crux of his lip and asked, *Who am I?* He still hadn't apologized. But it was the look in his eyes after each joke left his mouth that got her. Because there was something behind it all. Kia recognized it very well. Andre needed to do away with himself too. And she understood him for it. And liked him enough to take his shit. To dress his wound, to put down the cotton ball and lead him downstairs to the finished basement turned bedroom, and though finished, where the original wooden panels still covered every inch of drywall not draped in ivy, or posters or LED lights.

Kia kicks a pile of dirty laundry underneath the bed. Turns the main light down, so that the LEDs shine go-green on every surface. She pulls her comforter over the sheets, "We can sit here."

"Okay."

Cautiously, Andre leans into a plushie, crossing and uncrossing his hands, lying them over his chest, then his stomach, then on each side of his stiff body. He tries to focus on the screen, “What is this?”

“It’s a K-drama.”

“Booo!”

“It’s actually really good if you get into it.”

The space between them could fit two whole other people. Kia closes it in. She angles her knees towards Andre and relaxes her cheek into her palm, keeping her eyes on the screen.

Andre sniffs the air for any hint of pomegranate. “Put the subs on.”

Kia reaches for the remote on her nightstand and hands it over to Andre. Her eyes can’t help but linger on the dark blue places around his neck. “Are you gonna tell me what happened?” she says.

Andre takes the remote and shrugs, “Already did.”

“You did not,” Kia says.

“I did. You just ain’t wanna believe me.”

“When?”

“When I called you yesterday and you hung up on me. Remember that?”

“Oh, right,” Kia says. She smiles. “It’s just...I thought you said you beat *his* ass at the Publix. Not the other way around.”

Andre leans over and flicks the tip of Kia’s nose. Shocked, she lets out an *agh!* Then smiles. Reaches over and punches his arm. He flicks her again. This time on the cheek. And Kia rolls closer to him. They are grabbing arms and legs. And laughing. They pinch the bare skin under their t-shirts. Smack. Flick. Laughing. The remote falls to the floor. And they’re tussling

now. Wrinkling the comforter. Wrestling now and tangling up limbs. Kia straddles Andre's waist, "Ha!" Holds him down by the shoulders, until he slips from her grip and in one slick move, is on top of her, and nobody could have planned the positioning, but Kia is arms up beneath him, and both of Andre's palms are perfectly cupped over each of her breasts. Then they are very, very still. And quiet. But breathing. Andre's voice sounds foreign. Both older and younger, "Is this...is this okay?"

Kia had her own curiosities. "Yeah."

"You sure?"

About how it might feel. "Yes."

Andre still does not move. Kia cranes her neck and kisses him. Andre closes his eyes. Kisses her back, slips his hand underneath her shirt. And just for a little while, they disappear into each other. And there were languages between the two of them that neither of them understood, but both needed to belong to.

In Korea, the Black GI's found small ways to survive. Found deposits of peace and comfort in the women who hung around the camps, reminding them of their own women back home. Thick legged and heavy hipped. Beautiful, black hair, silk-like, tied up behind sweat-soaked bandanas. There was an understanding between the women and the Black GI's. Neither of them had any skin in this game. Had never known respect in their own countries for reasons that felt nothing short of ridiculous in the context of war, of the contingency of death. They had vested interests: survival. So the men trusted these women in a way that they hardly trusted anyone else. They confessed to them in languages they didn't understand. Deep secrets, guaranteed forever safety.

Kia knew something about it. And covered in purple sheets, she forgets she has a face she doesn't like and stringy hair and goes on and on about the Black Korean kids she'd recently read about. Leftovers from GI's, who, at the end of the war, had gone back to their own country, own families. The kids had lived on. Created culture from their marginalization. They had nobody there to teach them who they were. And still, somehow, they'd managed to be.

"It's really beautiful over there," Kia says. "Like really beautiful. That's why I'm learning the language. I'm gonna go someday. *We* should go someday."

"Yeah. We should." Andre lifts up on his elbows. "Wanna hear something crazy?"

"Okay."

"I think my pops might've murdered somebody over there."

Kia lifts up too, "In the war?"

"Yeah. But I don't think it was a war thing. I think it just happened."

"Oh."

Andre thinks about it. But all he can conjure up is the feeling of his great-grandfather's cold as death hands around his throat. "He talks about it sometimes at night. In his sleep."

"What does he say?"

"Just stuff. He comes into my room at night and...I don't know. I think he thinks I'm somebody else. The guy he hurt. Or maybe he thinks I'm him."

Kia nods. She notices Andre rubbing the marks around his neck. She leans into his chest and lies down. "You can always sneak over here at night. He can't get you if you're here with me."

"Yeah. I guess." He notices something balled up in the sheets, "Can I take these with me?"

Kia thinks of that scene from that movie and giggles. That boy, holding some girl's panties over his head, a flag of victory from conquered land. Her friends hated movies like that. All they could see were the ways things were wrong. But her friends hated Andre too.

Kia gets up and goes to her top drawer. Pulls out a new pair and tosses them at him, "Here, weirdo."

"Why can't I have these ones?"

"Take 'em or leave 'em, Dre. This is all you get."

On the stoop, Andre lingers, while Kia keeps half her body inside the house, the other half, the other leg and foot, tapping on the concrete of the outside. They wait for somebody to take the moment, to infuse some wisdom into it. Validate or punish them. But nobody is there but them, and neither have the exact words to cement anything, to declare how they'd move come Monday.

Maybe they didn't need to.

"Alright then," Andre says. "I'll see you at school, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Bye, Kia. Sorry."

"Bye, Dre."

Andre takes the longer route home. Partly because he feels the urge to walk, to feel the weight of his legs beneath him, and partly to stumble upon Ray. He imagines himself presenting the proof in turn for his property. The laughter. The jabs. The head doctor jokes that make him want to slam their teeth into brick walls and maybe now, after it all, he could do it. Something about the moment feels too sacred for them to have. It wasn't for them. And this inspires the

opposite in Andre. He walks the faded crosswalk lines towards the closer route home. Decides nobody else will touch this but him and Kia. Not Ray or Travvie or Freddy. Or even Greg. Bike be damned. Mahalia would live.

On Auburn Ave, some of the original buildings have been torn down completely. New spaces were being built from the ground up. *Weaker wood*, Andre remembers his great-grandfather saying. *Old house 'll stand you 'til the end of the time if you let it*. Andre had responded under his breath, *Just 'cause it can don't mean it should*. He liked the buildings that held onto both; original bones, but with newness in and around where needed. Andre wonders how anyone decides which bones are worth keeping. Which ones you just had to knock down.

At home, Andre goes to the mantle. To the dog tag that had a habit of calling his name from time-to-time. A blood type, a number and a religion, serrated around the edges, stamped in metal, something you could never rub off but that you could survive.

Andre is holding the dog tag in his hand when Mahalia comes in from the back door. "Oh! Hey, son," she says. "I didn't know you were home." She dusts herself off. Removes her gardening gloves and slips them under an arm. "I didn't see your bike out there." She walks into the kitchen to wash her hands. Andre presses his thumb deep into the tag, until the letters show up on him too. He puts it around his neck first, and when that feels too heavy, he reaches it into his pocket, remembering then there is already something else there. Still, he does not put it back where it is supposed to be. On the wall. On the nail. He lays it upon the mantle. In the empty space. Where quiet dust liked to sometimes settle.

“Some Kind of Fool” (in progress)

Colandria’s threshold in dealing with all things Margot has shrunk smaller than Margot’s new waistline. Not that her good friend takes any notice. “Thirty pounds in sixty-one days!” she announces for the thousandth time, the flounce in her slenderized hips emphasizing the claim while she twerks.

Margot is twerking.

All throughout Colandria’s kitchen. Margot is twerking.

All over her baker’s rack, her pots, her pans, her serving spoons and mixing bowls. All over the dish of snapped peas on the counter by the stove top, and the cornish game hens Colandria has spent the better half of her morning defeathering and brining in pickle juice. Then slathering with homemade whipped butter, garlic and the fresh thyme she’s grown in her small apartment’s large window sill, all herself.

That window had been the apartment’s selling point upon her move from Atlanta to Philadelphia, where Margot’s grandfather owned her building and several others around their West Philly neighborhood. As the economy had stolen the possibility of anyone younger than sixty-five owning a home (and the yard outside of it), she’d taken the out of unit wash-room, the leaky yellow ceiling and that beautifully west facing window with preening gratitude. Decorated it gratuitously with everything from fresh chives to lemon balm.

“Thirty pounds in *sixty-one-days!*” Margot claps to every syllable. “Whew chile! Let me tell you. It wasn’t easy. God *knows* it wasn’t. But I did it! And I’ll be damned if it wasn’t worth it.” Margot’s got her arms up in the air like *ta-da*, though Colandria makes every effort not to look. She pulls the oven open, shielding her eyes from the 425 degree heat and recalls the

sixty-one days before, back when fatty skin still hammocked over her good friend's pantyline in the same way it currently did over hers.

Colandria had meal-prepped for Margot then, several nights out of her busy week. Dulled out pea sized measurements of avocado oil and sauteed squash and zucchini with a literal pinch of pink salt. She'd carefully measured and boiled half cups of brown rice. Deskinned and baked four meals worth of chicken legs. She packaged the food in her own tupperware, glass. Walked it down to Margot's side of the building and left it in a neat bundle at her door, and, despite her mother's good teachings about cleaning and returning another woman's cookware, she never expected the tupperware back.

Margot twerks. And Colandria puts the cornish game hens inside of the oven. Massages olive oil into a bowl of kale a smidge more aggressively than need be, then whips the stove on high where half a dozen slices of bacon lie in a cast iron skillet, waiting to brown till they pop, then curl.

Margot lands her palms on Colandria's countertop, side-eying the meat. "You not...you not putting bacon fat in my veggies are you?" She says. "'Cause you *know* I don't do pork in my veggies."

Colandria shuts her eyes so tight she can see tiny sparks of red. Her voice comes through a heavy, deep bark. "Are you going to sit here and police *everything* I cook for y'all? Or shut up and let me do me?" She bangs around a few seasoning jars pretending to search for something she isn't really searching for at all. But she needs something in which to hinge her focus.

Something to do besides sit directly in the mess.

Margot chuckles anyway. “Aw pooh-bear!” She sings. “*Best frenn!*” She smiles in a frowny kind of way, her tone treading the territory of baby talk. “You know I didn’t mean it like that! Come here! Let me love you.” Colandria’s hands fly into the air while she hurries from Margot’s reach. “Don’t!” she asserts, but Margot chases her down, the way one does a loose, naked baby, locking her in a hug from behind. Colandria tells Margot to get off her. But like so many of her past friendships, her anger— no matter how serious, how pointed— is but an invitation for pandering. For more *poor babies* followed with a familiar yet undesired affection, always aimed towards the same body they’d felt entitled to criticize.

Colandria remembered high school where being “big” was really just to be ten or so pounds over the mean weight of the entire friend group. And this one time, her friend group had been all day at the neighborhood swimming pool. Upon arriving, each girl had shimmied from their sun-dresses, their hip huggers. Pulled tube tops over microbraids and naturals, revealing stomachs so flat you could see the curvature of their lower ribs. They’d offered one or two of their own bodily insecurities in attempts to coax Colandria into the same, to come free from the oversized band tee she’d worn to purposely keep herself hidden.

Their splashing and gossiping had soon become aimless, so the girls puddled in three ft., waiting for any of them to concoct a plan to pull their pruning bodies from the water and into something new, hopefully this time involving boys. Amber, who was Bay-Area-born, half Black half Filipinx and the most desired of their crew, had climbed onto Colandria’s back in the interim. Her spaghetti arms wrapped lazily about Colandria’s neck from behind, her spindly legs around her waist, a head of loose curls rested on the back of Colandria’s wet t-shirt. Colandria had almost felt honored, Amber choosing to coast away from the group with her and only her. They’d waded into four then five feet, Colandria doing her best to keep Amber laughing, Amber

entertained, Amber happy. But once just barely out of earshot from the others, Amber had picked up on their earlier conversation, “You know Coco,” she’d said, eyes closed, relaxing. “You don’t have to keep this soggy wet shirt on. It ain’t like you really even *that* big.”

Colandria’s body had gone stiff beneath Amber’s. That sick feeling settled deep into her chest. Oftentimes it was the suddenness for her; the way her body lived in the minds of others, could be brought to the forefront of any conversation at any moment, subjected to the kind of picking one usually relayed towards a scab. She’d shouldered Amber from her back and took to doggy paddling away, but Amber grabbed hold of her ankle, cutting her escape short. “Come on Coco!” She’d laughed. “You know I ain’t mean it like that.” She’d caught up to Colandria, rearranging herself onto her back, then closing her eyes once again. She went on, “Besides, these niggies don’t even like skinny girls in the South. I’m the one you need to be feeling sorry for. I’m ninety pounds soaking wet.”

Colandria said goodbye eventually. Walked the long way to her subdivision and crept inside her mother’s house quietly, into the thick, salted-pork smell of all-day-on-the-back-burner black eyed peas. Her eyes were red from crying just as much as from the chlorine. So she’d tried to move her body in silence, lest her mother find her, grab her by the chin and demand to know what happened. What would she say, then? That her friend hurt her *feelings*? “Your *feelings*?” she imagined her mother saying. “This lil’ girl ain’t even put her hands on you and you have the nerve to walk up in my house upset about some *feelings*?!” She’d pricked her mother’s ears after dropping her bag in the stairwell by mistake, “Coco?” she’d said. “Baby? That you?”

Colandria's face is sandwiched in Margot's palms, while Margot's back is towards the window and the bright green garnishings surrounding it. The sun has just turned pink in its attempt to set, so right beyond Margot's head and into the building directly across from hers, Colandria can see David. He's wearing his plaid shirt, has a table set up in the middle of the living room he's draped with a white tablecloth. Or is it a sheet? Either way, he's tucking chairs underneath it. Setting candles in a perfect line down the middle.

Margot grins. Squeezes Colandria's cheeks in her hands, "You know I appreciate you cooking for us, Coco," she says.

"I know," Colandria says.

"And not just this...but for all the prep meals the last couple months too."

"Mhm."

"Honestly Coco. I'd still be big as a house if it wasn't for you cooking for me."

"You were never big as a house."

"You know what I mean."

Colandria wiggles from Margot's grip and goes back to massaging the kale, this time with far less aggression. She's thinking of David now. On a particular part of his body she can focus on missing.

"Are y'all just having dinner?" She asks.

Margot has begun scrolling through her phone. "Hmm?"

"You two just having dinner tonight? No other plans?"

"We're starting with dinner. Going out after that."

"Where?" says Colandria, a little too quick for her own liking.

Margot pauses. "I wish I knew. He said he's picking the place. So only God knows."

Colandria feels the coarseness of the kale release between her fingers. The olive oil, vinegar and Himalayan salt, slick up her hands real smooth. It'd been lockdown during her times with David, so there'd been nowhere for the two of them to go. Nowhere besides the three rooms in the two homes between them. That had been enough. Colandria flips the bacon, decides she'll miss how happy her food had made David back then. The unabashed way he'd hover over plates of her horseradish mashed potatoes, chorizo meatloaf. Snapped peas carmelized in thick, thick bacon fat. How he'd slip his fingers around the puckered button of his Chino's, snapping them loose, unleashing a belly full and satisfied. She missed sucking the residual taste of her food from his lips. How that alone had been enough to satisfy her too.

Margot lifts herself from Colandria's bar stool, "Alright, girl! Guess I'd better go get myself together." She grabs her purse. "I'll be back to pick up the food as soon as I'm ready. Try to have it finished by seven, okay, Coco?" Margot twerks one last time. Then leaves without bothering to see if Colandria agrees.

"What kind of a fool moves in the middle of a doggone pandemic?" her mother fussed, kneeling a box labeled BATHROOM into a sturdier grip between her hands.

It was late May, and the pair of them had spent the entire morning packing Colandria's things into the forest green Honda Accord she'd had since undergrad. Another object of her mother's fussing, as she had no faith in what she called the putt-putt-car's ability to make a twelve hour drive. Then whatever came after. And in *this* climate. But what was another thousand miles on a car they'd purchased for its timeless reliability, on a one way trip from Atlanta to Philadelphia, for a job opportunity Colandria had interviewed her ass off to get. And

deserved. It was the Brewpub that'd found her LinkedIn. Colandria had built a reputation around every southern city from Jacksonville to Nashville, catering lavish events she'd otherwise never be invited to attend. Her specialty was Southern Cuisine, or, what she'd come to recognize as rebranded Soul Food. This rebranded Soul Food had taken off in cities beyond the Mason-Dixon line, and with people who knew nothing of its origins. Still, the Brewpub offered Colandria precisely what she wanted: stability. Money. And by way of a very organic, very self-motivated position. She'd liaison between the small plates kitchen and the microbrewery which shared a storefront downtown, cultivate flavor profiles between the beer and the food that would complement one another, while staying unique to the restaurant's *new* brand. The brewpub had agreed to pay her relocation fees even in a Pandemic, as nobody expected to work from home forever, and as soon as the shelter-in-place sanction was lifted, she'd be in-person needed.

Her mother slammed the trunk of the car.

"You ain't in-person needed *yet*," she reminded her. "And you don't know if you'll ever be in-person needed again. Putting yourself out there like this! Woof! I don't know *what* to say." She lifted her palms into the air, releasing her only daughter to Lord-Jesus, Colandria figured. Then the side of her mouth went up. And she hugged her deeply. "You ain't coming back to live with me if the bottom falls out," she'd said. But Colandria swore she'd heard the smallest of cracks in her mother's voice.

Colandria drove through North Georgia, both Carolina's and part of Virginia before pulling over to rest. Ate a meal of smothered oxtails, white rice and gravy her mother had prepared beforehand and packed in tupperware to keep her daughter from any unnecessary stops. She drove through DC— a ghost town compared to the bustling, heavily-peopled DC she'd grown up visiting, back when her father was alive and practicing law and living a bachelor's lifestyle

that would eventually get him wrapped up in somebody else's woman, then killed over it later. Colandria had missed two months of school over that. Reemerged in grade twelve ten pounds thicker, and with the type of edge one only achieved from prematurely burying a parent. No matter how absent the parent may've been in their waking life.

In Philly, Colandria could pinpoint at least five variations between the apartment before her and the one she'd chosen sitting five states south, on her laptop, at her mother's kitchen table, all on the faith of a virtual tour and twelve Google reviews that had stalled at a solid 2.7 stars out of five. For starters, the refrigerator was white. There were no shiny new marble countertops to cook on. Carpet covered the bedroom floors in place of wood. It made sense. The building was one of few left of its kind, built before 1970, now completely swallowed by a sea of those silly looking lofts, the types that pimped every city gentrifiers had staked their annoying claim. Those apartments looked like a child's first attempt at legos to Colandria, awkwardly colored, haphazardly stacked. The price of her small slice of bricked independence— regardless of the differences— just couldn't be beat. It was quaint. It had character. Most importantly it was hers.

Easily, Colandria unpacked. Everything she owned now had a fresh, new space to fit into. Not like after undergrad, when in a haze of undiagnosed depression, she'd moved back home with her mother, and it'd been a slow, arduous battle ever since. Reclaiming the spaces that once were hers. Colandria mixed water, bleach and baking soda, wiped down walls, railings, cabinets and doorposts, then for good measure, went over them again with disinfectant wipes. She hung cheap prints of Matisse and Basquiat on plain white walls. Hung her summer wardrobe and stored her winter clothes, noting how she'd need *actual* winter clothes when the time came (assuming the world's reopen would happen by then). When it was time to arrange her spice cabinet, her laptop pinged.

Colandria hopped from the kitchen counter, danced into the living room. She enlarged her email then read line by line how she'd been terminated; the Brewpub that'd promised her an opportunity of a lifetime (and moved her five states North for it), closed, finished. She fell atop her futon, the news threatening a renaissance of panic attacks she hadn't experienced in years. According to the email, the Brewpub had already been experiencing financial hardship. Lockdown only solidified it.

Colandria's instinct had been to call her mother. To confess, cry, inquire if her bedroom had already been re-repurposed. She couldn't bring herself to do it, nor could she admit to herself that her mother may have been right. That she had made a mistake only fools of her caliber were capable of making. Moving across the country in the middle of a doggone pandemic. Yeah...what *was* she thinking?

In the midst of it all, Colandria noticed the window. The mint she'd hung from a macrame plant holder had begun to wilt. She filled a mug with faucet water. Went over to the window. Grabbed hold of the clay pot, and then, there he was. She could see into his home clear as a blue day. Colandria released the plant and held the mug against her chest like it was full of hot peppermint tea. She watched him, sitting upon his sofa, some large roll of paper spread open on his coffee table. A pencil gliding smooth by the ease of his hand. Even with the distance Colandria could feel his intensity. Marking it here, marking it there. He rubbed his chin then sketched larger shapes somewhere around the center. How down bad was she, she thought, envying a piece of paper. He looked like an artist, or maybe an architect, if she watched any longer she'd be able to tell. Colandria had never been one for voyeurism, even the casual kind, but she had to accept there was something about this one. Watching him not only feel justified but very, very necessary. Colandria looked down and if she wasn't mistaken, the man looked up.

And the distance between them seemed insurmountable. It only took half a week before they bumped into each other at the grocery store. They recognized who was who immediately and hadn't even bothered standing six ft. apart.

Their entry point was sex. Because sex was always easiest to strike up between two attractive, willing adults. Colandria imagined what her mother would have to say: *What kind of a fool gets involved with a man in the middle of a damn pandemic?* In fact, her mother would inquire what kind of a fool got involved with a man in the middle of anything.

It was good, though. Explorative, lots of openness. Amusing hiccups and easy laughter about them. Colandria noted instantly how sex felt different with David than it had with any other partner. The way he handled her body made her forget her body; he drew out its existence in only the places he kissed. Whenever they'd finish, Colandria would smooth her locs, situate the sheets over her body, anticipating his excuse for leaving. An impending Zoom call. Or maybe he'd be creative, conjure up an imaginary pet who'd need his undivided attention to pee. Most times he just stayed, pulling her into his chest, satisfied and lazy like a stuffed bear. He'd breathe her in. Hold her. Kiss her forehead. She'd trace over his brand with the cool tips of her fingers. There was never any pressure to talk in these moments or for Colandria to be unnaturally entertaining. When they fell into deep discussions, they'd go on until they talked themselves sleepy or until the quiet blue tapped outside the windowpane, "Dang. Morning already?" "It can't be."

This preclusion of performance was so unexpected that Colandria had grown suspicious.

"I can't read him," she'd told Margot, who'd become a fast friend once granting her the rent moratorium. "I can't tell if he's actually this great, or if I'm some kind of a fool and he's playing me." Colandria shuttered with each word she felt leave her mouth. She'd stopped by the

front office to pick up a package. Margot had lured her into a conversation about nothing and now here she was, sounding just like her mother.

Margot chuckled behind a bedazzled face mask. She pushed away from the desktop so that Colandria was perfectly in view. “Those be the ones you gotta look out for, Coco,” she said. “The *good* ones. He knows he couldn’t get you if he started out a creep.”

“He certainly doesn’t give creep vibes.”

“I bet he’s got a girlfriend quarantined in Houston. No wait. I bet he’s a secret feeder. I bet he keeps powdered donuts in his pillowcases.”

Colandria hadn’t thought about the Texas thing. “*In* the pillowcases? Really, Margot?”

“You know I can always find out for you. Donuts or Hoe-nuts. I’ve got the keys to his apartment, bitch. You just say the word.” Margot’s grandfather had a grandchild put up in every property he owned, and Margot had called him directly after hearing about Colandria’s situation. She’d been on double duty since her cousin was quarantined back home in Ghana. He was stuck there now. And Margot was stuck managing both buildings: theirs and David’s.

Colandria stood six feet away, or at least what she thought was six feet away. “What is a hoe-nut?” she said.

“Don’t play with me.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “It doesn’t feel fake to me, Margot. Most of the time we’re just...ourselves. It’s hard to explain. But it's good.”

Margot looked Colandria up and down. “Well, creep or no creep. He’ll change up once he’s got more options. We’re in the middle of a pandemic sis, and pickin’s is *real* slim. Even for the niggas.”

It'd been easy to fall into a dynamic with Margot; friendship in adulthood was hard to come by. Nevermind during a time when nobody could leave the house.

But David kept coming around, and for reasons outside of sex. They started bingeing shows they promised never to watch without the other. She'd done a double take the day she noticed his sonicare standing beside her soap dish. So he must have wanted her. And her body was included in that want, though not central to it. She wondered if that's how it was supposed to be, or if that too was in some way insufficient. If she should want him to want her body especially, because it'd been so easy for some to reject.

She thought about his hoe-nuts in Houston. The land where bad bitches flowed like milk and honey, then David looked up suddenly, and made a big production out of sniffing.

"What?" Colandria said. He kept sniffing, lifting his nose into the air like a search dog. She put her arms down. Shot up from her throw pillows. "What is it?" Why was she panicking?

"Nah, nah. My fault," he smiled at her. "Was just smelling the smoke coming out ya ears."

Colandria rolled her eyes and kicked him playfully. He'd held on to her ankle and pulled her legs across his lap and they laughed. The TV was on but Colandria could sense his eyes lingering, "So you wanna talk about it?" He said.

"Talk about what?"

"What's on your mind."

The moment hadn't felt serious, but when she looked, David's eyes were very intense.

"How are you so sure there's anything on my mind?" Colandria said.

“Because you’re more obvious than you think.”

She shifted her body. She didn’t want to believe that.

“Look,” he chuckled, “You go just like this...” he showed her, “Like you’re chewing on yourself.”

“Yeah well, that’s what it feels like sometimes.”

David nodded, slowly. He made a noise. Something like a laugh. “It.” He’d said. And that was a full sentence.

So they talked with each other about the harder stuff and she told him what life had been like living with her mother in Atlanta. How leaving had been one of the most difficult and most necessary things she could’ve done for herself. When he asked her about her father, she didn’t sugarcoat. He’d messed with the wrong guy’s girl and as a result, got shot up in the kitchen of his apartment. Plain and simple. The refrigerator door was still open when they’d found him. Since he didn’t have anybody else, it’d been Colandria and her mother summoned to Maryland to identify the body. It was weird, the things she remembered about that trip. Primarily the child on the flight up. How she’d stared at Colandria the entire time, low, solicitous eyes, unremarkable from other percipient children (Colandria had been one herself). But there was this ropy mass of skin connecting her nose and upper lip: scars from an amended cleft palate. Colandria had stared back. At those unassuming pink leggings, baggy and loose on her willowy legs; the innocent velcro shoes, one strap disevenly pressed into its place, the other undone completely. She’d wanted to put the strap down. But mostly she’d looked at the scar, which had done its best to heal, or to at least blend in with the unaffected skin around it. When they landed and the girl’s mother pulled her away, Colandria had the inescapable urge to scream.

David just listened. His empathetic gaze never slid into the category of pity the way she knew people had the potential to do whenever she *opened up*. She told him about the panic attacks and David told her about the ADHD. “You know our parents,” he’d said, “They just smack you around until you shut up and sit down or go away. My Uncle was the only one who actually explained the shit to me.”

“Are you close with your parents?” She asked him.

“We’re straight now. I mean, there’s no bad blood or nothing like that. But I’m closer to my Uncle.” He’d told her how the drugs affected him, like going through life saran wrapped. How he wound up giving them away mostly. To friends who felt it their adolescent right to experiment before college. He’d sold them to bored housewives over facebook.

Eventually the conversation stalled into an intimate silence. They watched TV. Colandria laid across David’s heaving chest. “I don’t want us to be one of those couples that hide their shit,” he said. Colandria feared that if she spoke the moment would dissolve before her, feathery paper in water. So she nodded, feeling every soft fiber of his t-shirt against her skin. What she knew was this: The world had completely closed, and somehow, hers had opened.

Their bubble was euphoric. Colandria was on employment. David was a freelance graphic designer now working completely from home. They never left each other and never hinted towards wanting to. They bought and named new plants. They baked bread and David found out Colandria could cook. They brewed their own beer. Drank it all. Played Uno and got mad at each other. Argued themselves into sex. They saw a man asphyxiated for nine minutes on a TV screen. Cried themselves to sleep that night inside each other's arms. When the protest passed in wavy summer heat beneath Colandria’s window, they looked on. David’s arm, tight and meaningful around Colandria’s waist. Colandria hanging onto his shoulder equally as tight.

She'd felt filled up and dutiful, "Should we go?" But David kept watching. Then he grabbed her hand and together they'd waded through the crowd to his apartment across the street. They whooshed a large white sheet over his small kitchen table. Pushed sofa cushions between the legs. Colandria smiled. They put every pillow David owned inside of their fort. Blankets and string lights. Notebooks. Colored pencils. Crayons and Jenga. They brought flashlights and candy and weed and Lays potato chips. Caring for each other, protecting each other felt just as revolutionary. Then Colandria drew a sign in middle school bubble letters: Fuck Off! It said, and for a while, the whole world listened.

Then, the world reopened, and slowly, like rehab after breaking a leg, things crept painfully to a place of new normalcy. Colandria's unemployment dried up. As did the moratorium on rent. Margot said she'd try to talk to her grandfather about it, though at that point she wasn't sure how much more she could do. David resolved to paying rent for her, however long she'd need him to. The night they had the conversation, Colandria plated his dinner and carried it to the pair of TV trays they always ate from. "Matter fact," he'd said, chewing then swallowing a mouthful of shrimp etouffee. "I've been thinking why we don't just pick a place? Move in together officially?" But their show had returned from an ad break and by the next, the conversation turned. Colandria made sure of it.

Eventually she had no choice but to reembark upon the demoralizing process of applying for a job. She'd upload her resume, fill out the application, click send, hear back, interview, receive a thank you but no thank you or nothing at all. This same pattern went on for weeks. David had started bringing up her old catering business. "Why don't you just start back up with it?" Because it was that easy. "All you have to do is put yourself out there. I know hundreds of people who would kill for one of your plates. I can even play around with some logos for you."

The pandemic had done that to people. After so much uncertainty, after so much violence and loss, most had leapt at the idea of control. Of ownership. Everybody had a small business or an idea for one. But they'd been late to the game. And Colandria didn't know the answer for Capitalism, or for being killed by cops, but she knew she felt tired and self employment, for her, wasn't it. Then she got a callback from the GM of a small Bed & Breakfast a few miles over from where she lived. The idea was to provide local residents a respite from the homes that had in recent years become offices, classrooms, battlefields and jail cells; a staycation of sorts while the possibility of traveling abroad was still in limbo. It was a gimmick, mostly. Part historical submersion part money making scheme, though Colandria couldn't help but feel it was a reaction to the recent influx of social justice brouhaha that had gripped the Nation in its moment of nescient vulnerability. The Bed & Breakfast called itself returning to a *simpler time*. What time? The Colonial era. And they'd wanted Colandria to oversee the kitchen.

The upside was that she'd create the menu. Configure a modernized take on Colonial era home cooking. Cheddar grits (instead of porridge), duck confit and succotash to garnish. But the uniforms. Petticoats under long skirts, bonnets and long white linen aprons over it all. Most employees had fallen somewhere between *The British are Coming* and *Little House on the Prairie*, but on Colandria...she couldn't be sure some ancestor of hers hadn't been forced to darken similar corridors, looking the exact same.

"Be honest with me," she'd said to David, emerging from the bedroom where she'd put on the uniform in its totality. "Is it giving Aunt Jemima? The Blackface era?"

David muted the TV, removed his glasses and looked. Then he smiled, "It's giving a lil' bit of Mammy Ruth, yeah."

"Oh. So it's giving I just won a historic Oscar and I ain't even allowed in the building?"

“It's giving *I don't know nothin 'bout birthin no babies!*”

Colandria lifted her petticoat and straddled his waist, “You know Mammy’s character wasn’t even the one to say that right?”

“To be honest I ain’t never seen that regressive ass movie a day in my life.”

David engulfed her then. Slid his fingers into the thick roots of her hair, massaging her scalp, rolling her neck until the bones and joints relaxed one-by-one into his palms. “You’ll be a’ight, babe,” he spoke into her neck, then started kissing it.

Colandria whined, “This is not what I had planned when I came up here.”

Kiss kiss, “I know.”

“And I don’t wanna be Mammy Ruth.”

Kiss, “I know.” *kiss*.

She brought his chin up, looked him in the eyes, “What am I gonna do?”

David exhaled deeply, “You're gonna make them white folks eat chitlins and gizzards, like they used to do us. Then you and me will figure out the rest when the time comes.” And that sounded good. And Colandria tried her best to believe it.

Things altered quickly, though. Between the managing, the cooking, the late nights and earlier mornings. David had begun a project with a problematic client and had grown moody from the stress. On top of that his uncle was sick. Then *really* sick. And Colandria could hardly make time for all of it.

During the moments she could uninterruptedly spend with him, there was always some weirdness brewing. Something unspoken but very much in the way of them fully connecting. Most nights David would stretch out on the sofa alone, scrolling through social media, the shows they’d begun together inconsequentially on but not watched. Colandria stayed in the kitchen.

Like a chemist she'd haunch over the stove, locs tied back, glasses sliding down her nose sweat. Colanders and pots and measuring cups strewn about every counter and sink. She would conduct any number of culinary experiments until the proportions, flavors and mouth feels were perfect. David would come behind her some nights. Press his nose into her neck, needing her, and Colandria would shoulder him off, focused on her food and completely exhausted of touch.

Then David's uncle was taken off the respirators. And they had a funeral in DC to attend.

Every night leading up to it, Colandria would cradle him against her chest while he released. They'd lie in bed beneath the soft lights of the city, an episode of Seinfeld just low enough in volume to both comfort and ignore. They'd solidified their plans to leave for DC the morning of the funeral. It was only a two hour drive, and David had wanted to get there early. "You'll finally get to meet everybody," he said. "My brothers, cousins. Guess that's one good thing to come out of this."

Colandria tried on a smile. Nodded quickly in agreement. Being in lockdown had pushed those sorts of relational milestones far out of her reach; so far out of her reach she could hardly imagine a time they'd be *in* her reach. Meeting David's family. Hanging out with David's family. Explaining to David's family what they'd been doing the past year and how their futures were beginning to shape because of it. He seemed so certain about things while she hadn't begun to imagine a day when David and her own mother would meet.

The night before the funeral, David fell asleep easily, leaving Colandria to begin the incessant googling that usually accompanied her insomnia. *AITA for not wanting to meet my man's family? AITA if I skip his favorite Uncle's funeral?* She scrolled and read and when she got a text from the GM at the B&B imploring her to come in the next day on behalf of an absent chef, she couldn't tell which feeling was stronger: guilt or relief.

The next morning, Colandria awoke much earlier than David. She'd crept silently from her side of the bed to get dressed. She'd done everything with a thief's quietness. Brushed her teeth, washed her face, set up the ironing board. Showered. It was the hiss of the heating iron that woke him. He breathed deeply, abruptly, then ran a hand up and down his face. Colandria stood at the ironing board, her stiffened back towards him, the light from her cellphone's flashlight made her feel helicopter caught.

David flipped off the covers, stretched, flicked up the lightswitch. "You could've turned on the lights, babe," he said. Then he paused. "Why are you ironing your uniform?"

Colandria palmed her petticoat straight, "Our head chef is out."

"Okay?"

"And they called me in."

The silence lasted very long. "Are you serious?" David said. "Colandria, tell them no."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because they need me."

"And I don't? My uncle just died."

She didn't mean to say it. "Yeah? Well try losing a dad then come talk to me." Colandria snatched her petticoat off the ironing board, walked to the bathroom and slammed the door.

When she came out David was on the edge of the bed. His prayer hands held his mouth until he no longer could. "So we're doing this?" He stood up then. "Today? Right now?"

Colandria walked past him towards her vanity. "Doing what?" Her hands were so shaky she could barely push in her earring backs. But David didn't let up this time. And they argued

about all of it. How Colandria refused to move in together officially (and for no good reason, he'd pointed out, as they were basically already doing it). How she'd started extra shifts at the B&B which felt avoidant of him more than anything else. So what was really going on? She'd fired back. David had been impossible lately. Moody and mean. Silently judging her for taking the position at the B&B, working for people who didn't give a shit about her instead of working for herself.

You're the one who said you hated working there!

I never said I hated it!

You said you didn't want to! What's the difference?

You don't think I'm capable of making these decisions on my own!

Couldn't she understand how he just wanted her at her best? Couldn't David understand how that implied she was something inferior? This went on for a while. Then David said, "None of this matters right now, babe. I'm burying my uncle today. What are we doing?"

They'd struck up a compromise. Colandria would start the day in Philly. Go to work, get her staff in gear. It was a mid-day funeral anyways and if Colandria left for the train station by noon, she could make it. But she'd stayed in Philly past the time they'd agreed upon her leaving. Then far past the time she should've been on the train. Past the time she should have arrived. Gone to the funeral. Had dinner with the family. David had called too many times to count. Left messages asking if she was okay. To forget everything else. Forget the funeral. Just let him know she was okay. Four, six, then eight o'clock came and went with the sun. She'd stayed late to help clean and lock up and when she finally did get home, it was midnight and there was David on the sofa, his tie loosened, head bowed, his clasped hands suspended between his knees. Colandria took the keys from the lock and let the door slam by the heaviness of its own weight. Then he

looked up, and she looked down. And suddenly the distance between them seemed insurmountable.

It started with his disappearing shoes. His gaming system. She'd noticed the date on his Oat Milk had come and gone. His Xanax and Adderall. By the time Colandria had noticed the absence of his toothbrush, there was nothing left of him there at all. It spiraled her into a fetal, paralytic kind of sobbing. One that came not only from David's absence but from the absence of everything she'd ever known to want, to miss. Silent as a grave, but felt just the same as something living. She caved and quaked and she knew then how much she'd loved David.

She couldn't help but think about her mother. She'd grown up witnessing the fickle ways of her mother with men. How the men would be there one minute, giddy and grinning and eager to gain approval, then gone the next.

What happened to Mr. Walter, momma? Colandria would ask.

Who?

Mr. Walter. Your boyfriend.

Child, I had to let ol' Walter go. He was doing too much, always hugging and kissing and loving. Oof. Who needs all that when I got thangs to do.

Colandria would just shake her head. Her mother had been living isolated far before any pandemic, comfortable without intimacy, the love it so often became. Maybe she was that way too. Was that why she did what she did to David? Intimacy, love was a thing messier than a restaurant's kitchen. Only she knew how to run a kitchen.