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## Per Capita

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Per Capita

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Fiction

by

Kristina Kay Robinson

B.A. Xavier University, 2009

May, 2015

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For Us...

## Table of Contents

The Zealot.....	1
For Our Humanity and Nothing Else.....	23
Black Virgin.....	34
1994: A Cake Bake.....	45
Stars Over Mississippi.....	64
Drive Slow.....	81
Per Capita.....	93

Desert creates the conditions for mi'raj

## THE ZEALOT

### **Ben Gurion Airport**

Now that the search in the backroom is over and she has been allowed to put back on her clothes, Tara feels the familiar rush of excitement as she readies to board her flight. For Tara there is no better place than the airport. Tara first pin-points this feeling some years earlier; the first time she leaves one country for another; neither of them being her home. Tara becomes aware, then that she has no immediate plans to return to the States. Tara discovers that for the first time in her life, she is now quite unstuck. For Tara the airport means a new story. Tara believes that by leaping borders, she is done with the stories that took place before she accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior—washed herself anew with his blood.

Christ has given Tara wings; the ability to see the places she circled on maps, and looked up in dusty books in the public library. Young Tara had copied the factoids and anecdotes that interested her about Ethiopia, Egypt, Greece, Malaysia, Libya, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire and many many others in a little notebook, she carried in her schoolbag. It was an assurance of sorts. One day, the notebook told her, one day, you will fly.

Tara remembers in Ben Gurion that this practice of hers interested her father. When his friends gathered and smoked up their house's living room, he would sometimes call her in.

“Bring your globe, T. Come show these niggas what you know.”

Tara would oblige and set the globe she begged for on the card table. Sitting it like a trophy between the tumblers of whiskey, ashtrays, and on top dominoes.

“Alright, Tee.” Daddy would give the globe a spin. “My little girl...this one... knows evvverythang. Find...Djibouti....Myanmar....Burkina Faso....Eritrea...”

His requests would go on and on. Tara could tell from his smile that he and his friends were amazed by her ability to find all said countries and list their capitals.

“Too bad your paw is so bad at this game we playing. He might could buy you a ticket somewhere.” My father’s friend, Marcellus, laughed.

Tara is not as impressed by the knowledge of simple geography; then or now. But these requests are the things Tara can point to that make her say, yes, her daddy taught her a lot.

“Don’t worry about me. Tee a smart girl,” he says. “She gonna get wherever she need to go in life. Wherever. Believe that.”

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It turns out that the renewed excitement Tara thought she felt was actually just the adrenaline rush of the search’s conclusion. Ben Gurion Airport is a different sort of place. It makes Tara think of the way in which borders and airports serve the same function. All the official ins and outs. In Ben Gurion, Tara is aware of being on the other side of the looking glass, of

being watched through another kind of a prism. Ben Gurion is a far off dimension where everything is obscured. Its ways are unfamiliar. Tara did not grow up knowing what it meant to move around. Until she knew the Christ of The Ministry, Tara had worn chains. Tara thinks of her friends. The ones she is leaving there. Aisha. Omar. That day on the water, listening to Omar describe his life before The Ministry.

“Ten years, I had not seen the sea. No water,” he had said. “In Filisteen! How can that be? Ten years, but Christ has brought me here.”

In Ben Gurion, a sick feeling returns to the pit of Tara’s stomach. Tara remembers then how very much at home she felt with Omar and his gratitude for the monster’s favor. Tara told Omar and Aisha a story that day on the boat:

On a beach in California, Emad, my first love, told me too much. Dope is a death game, he said. Some, prefer to slit a throat than to pump bullets. And Allah watches it all and is decider of who is just. I asked him to tell me what he had done, what he had witnessed, and what had happened to him. He did. And I vomited and learned my lesson. Later that night, I dreamed of a place called Majar in Afghanistan. About poppies. I dreamt of fields and fields of split open bulbs. All gushing raw milk—the black gum people killed for.

Supply and demand is the simple principle of capitalism. I came to better understand fully the more I read about it; economics, ancient and modern political thought, the history of the Enlightenment. It contextualized a lot for me. Some people want, no matter what. And some people have to pay for the damage. The people who pay are



the “Bronze” ones Plato spoke of; the other from the East of Herodotus’ creation. It gets nastier as you go along—progress. People put in caves and loaded onto ships to be sold into perpetuity. Sugar is brown before it is *refined* and dope comes tan to white. Capital is born on those beaches; the idea of the shadow. That is why you have not been allowed to see the sea. Allahu Akbar.

We praise the Lord for his mercy, says Aisha.

\*\*\*

How many years ago did Tara play the country game with her father? Fifteen? Twenty? How long since that conversation with Emad? How many years, ten? Since she left the city? Six, seven? Eight? Nine? Who really is counting? In the airport, Tara names all the things, if not for a certain kind of cowardice, she would have said before leaving. Aisha...Omar...she imagines she would begin. I am the bearer of a corrupted faith, and I am leaving it behind. I am after much searching, an American after all and still not even. I cannot trust you; nor you me. I who brought you these lies have condemned you to die to with your own kind. I am leaving here, going back to America to do the same.

Tara is headed home. Though she has written no letters and made infrequent phone calls, she has kept up with the happenings since Katrina came and took all she knew with it out to sea. Tara pictures standing in the blank acre that had been Immaculate Conception school and church. Tara still remembers the address of the NOI masjid in her old

neighborhood and the smell of the room where she and Emad blasphemously had their first kiss in high school. Tara's heart beats harder still when she remembers her friend Koi. Koi who knew what finally sent her flying; the absurdity of it all. And harder still when she wonders what of themselves had survived the water.

Tara is headed home unsure of what she will find. Whatever it is she must steel herself. On her last morning in the Holy Land, there is snow on the ground. A once in a lifetime storm she is a witness to. Then Tara is in a cab in Tel-Aviv headed to the airport to take flight again. It is all so easy. Grossly. The inside of the cab that Omar cannot take to see the sea is stifling no matter the drivers repeated attempts to blast the AC. It occurs to Tara upon entering Ben Gurion that this free movement over land she has experienced for the last years has come to an end. It is always bars in and bars out of this place. But she is not sorry. Tara is going home to stay. So just like before to leave it behind, she leaps to return, and feels again— those eagle wings— the breath of dawn the hymn promised.

### **Filisteen**

Crossing the Sea of Galilee, Koi is the name on Tara's heart. Tara remembers Koi as the Word itself. Koi, once her closest friend, is the one who gives Tara her testimony after Tara shows her the bite marks all over her arms, torso, and thighs. Koi tells her that Jesus came to her during a bad acid trip and brought her back from something bad. He showed me everything I've done in my life. All the things I did because I didn't really know love or right

from wrong. I saw it all, and I was just like wow. Enough. Jesus is enough. That night, Koi shaves the permed hair off her head. The limp greased golden strands fall on the tile and Koi smiles. The hair is the crown, but it should grow in as God intends it to, she says. Koi explains how much energy she has spent frying and dyeing her hair, so she could resemble her mother. I don't even like my mother! But the Lord has helped me to forgive her.

Tara has left the school and clinic near the Rafah border and come way up to the Golan to celebrate The Ministry's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the Holy Land. The day trip on the fancy boat is but one activity and Tara's service qualifies her to attend. The thought now makes her grimace. There a few trusted others on board. It amazes Tara how fast papers can be made or made unnecessary to enter and leave countries when it is in the Lord's name. Out on the water, Tara decides to go home. She knows her eyes are flashing at the thought. Tara fixes her face quickly before someone on the boat notices and she spends the day trip locked in a small room being re-testified to. Pastor Boyd is standing just steps away with Aisha and Omar, his most beloved and star converts. Tara recognizes the eagerness in their voices; the fervor of a fresh desire to serve the Lord.

It was not so long ago that she sounded this way herself. Tara laughs even though there is nothing to laugh about. She is careful with the smile on her face; careful it does not linger too long and bringing with it the same fate as a prolonged frown or eager flashing eyes. Jesus appeared to me in a dream, Omar says, talking loudly for the benefit of everyone else on deck. I could not resist him. Aisha nods eagerly. It happened the same way for me, she adds. *Let the Lord fill you* is Pastor Boyd's response and his refrain. He chuckles. *May the Lord fill you, both, and at once. May he fill you entirely and completely.* Tara begins to

sweat. She stares up at the entangled American and Israeli flags hoisted up the mast till her eyes cross. When her vision aligns again, things she usually dares not consider, creep their way into her knowing. These are the thoughts that direct her to go home as quickly as she can and tell no one of her plan. No one. Certainly not Omar or even Aisha. Tara's face makes an expression no one could identify.

Tara! Would you like to join us? Pastor Boyd's voice booms into the daylight. It is a friendly boom or so it sounds. It is part of Pastor Boyd's gift, the friendly authority he projects. Tara does not respond quickly enough. Mind still miles away on Koi and home. Aisha, why don't you and Tara go down to the kitchen, Pastor Boyd says. Better to get started on dinner. It is barely lunch time. This means they will miss it. Aisha understands that she is to lock the door and speak of Scripture singly in this time. Strike if necessary. Experience teaches this to Pastor Boyd's flock. To affirm that idle minds were the work of the devil, there must be physical evidence that he had been chased away. Within the Ministry, the purpose of this is lost on no one.

Below deck, Tara can tell that Aisha is frightened. Tara tells her not to worry. Do what she must. Hit me twice hard. I bruise easy. Aisha tells Tara that she cannot hurt her; to please not tell the Pastor. Ok then I'll burn myself quickly on stove. Tara feels heat and sees light. A bridge that is open to all from the Sea of Galilee to the Gulf of Mexico. As the flame sears her skin pink, Tara comforts Aisha and tells her to close her eyes and anticipate sleep where her memories would become visions, remade in the image of Christ.

## New Orleans

Koi grows up out near the Lake. She has a white mother, though you “can’t tell”. This is her parent’s first disappointment, Koi sometimes jokes. Tara and Koi know each other from Olive Grove. The Grove is Koi’s father’s old neighborhood and the one where Tara and Emad live. By the summer after high school graduation, Koi is meeting men during the week, sometime white ones, and sleeping in their hotels before they got on planes back home to their wives. It is Koi’s idea one day to buy traditional dresses from the Greek vendor in the Riverwalk and turn up in them at the Hellenic church’s annual Greek Fest. Black girls wearing this shit? Those old fuckers are going to go gaga. Where do you want to eat tonight? Let’s decide ahead of time. They’re going to ask, no need to be open mouthed or uncertain. Fix your face Tara. No one is going to talk to us if you have a boot in your mouth. It is true. The most Tara is ever offered is dinner.

Koi gets gifts big and small. A car, its payments, rent. Koi is happy to leave home. The training her mother has given her comes in handy. Koi knows how to play the role they want. One that obliges the assumptions they make about her body. I do it because they disgust me, Koi tells Tara. All of them, even my Mama. Neither one of my parents love me, she says, wrapped in a floor-length mink. Koi’s new apartment is in the Warehouse District. It is not big but it is very very nice. Try this on. Koi tosses a mustard yellow leather jacket at her. It has a skirt that goes with it. Let me find it, Koi rummages through the pile of new things on her bed. Nope, neither of them, she continues. Ain’t that some shit? Seems, I grew up to be a Black woman. Surprise, surprise. No, the yellow isn’t right on you. Try the red

leather. Yes that's better. See, this is why the white ones like me and not you. You're fucking snow white. We both laugh. It's not the same for them. If you ever decide to smile and make some money, remember this, Indians and Arabs. Those are the ones for you. That same summer Emad returns home to Jordan to be with his father.

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One of the men Koi is seeing leaves a book on her nightstand before catching a flight to Ankara. He leaves a note on the inside with his phone number and a message: *you have a friend in Jesus and the key to peace in the Middle East*. After Koi reads the book, she gives it to Tara. The book's thesis is strange to Tara but she keeps going anyway all the way to the end. The notion of Jesus revealing himself in dreams to Muslims all around the world is a far off to her. Not something she takes seriously. Tara has her own religion. A mash up of Immaculate Conception, the masjid, and those secret things passed through the generations. She runs her fingers wistfully, however, over the high gloss photos at the back. Sue, from Milwaukee, Dan from Alabama, Omar from Nablus. Under each photo is a short testimonial and their current location. Petra, Rafah, Gaza City. All places Tara wants desperately to see with her own eyes. At the back of the book is an English-Arabic dictionary of common phrases. Tara practices making the throaty sounds the pronunciation guide tries to explain.

Tara has met someone. His father is a diplomat and Faysal is in New Orleans having fun. Tara has a good accent, she thinks. And a strong, versatile tongue. There are many glossy photos of Amman in the book Koi gave her. One picture is taped to the back of Tara's

headboard with the hope, one day, to draw Emad back to her. In the meantime, Faysal takes her all the way to the top of the building he lives in on Canal St.

The heat inside the massive penthouse is oppressive. Faysal's father always pays but isn't always timely with the utilities. Faysal wipes away the sweat beads forming between Tara's brows. The back of the house is cooler, don't worry. We will be very comfortable. Come sit out on the terrace. Tara walks through what feels like a mile of open space filled with carpets and sofas, and silk partitions. They are all piled high with dust and clothes and sheets, fabric, and books. There is a restaurant sized kitchen and massive paintings propped up along the walls. The space cornered off as a bedroom, amidst the spread chaos, is near the terrace exit. The terrace is a charming alcove a few steps below the rooftop. They eat chill yogurt and mint. Tara thinks she could get used to this minus the heat. She is too young to question it.

Faysal's sheets have perfume on them and Tara foolishly believes this is a pre-planned occurrence. Faysal kisses her and bites her lip—too hard. He tells her somehow while doing this that he is married but she lives away. She is in Britain and will come when school is done. He is sorry he didn't say, but it is hard to explain marriage to a stranger to a stranger. As he nips at her neck and breasts, Tara winces, but is unsure what to say. When she closes her eyes, the faces she sees are Emad and his Mama, Laylah. Laylah is a Black American woman. She is NOI and Emad's father Sunni. Tara misses Laylah too. Laylah, who had been her mother's friend, before and after her and Tara's father's trials. Tara will write her. She tries to imagine Emad's hands and mouth but it is Faysal biting her. Tara feels arrested. You are snow white for an abeed, Faysal says. The word interrupts her reverie with the truth of how she has made it to the top of the building.

**Ben Gurion Airport  
Security**

Are you a Muslim?

What is your religion?

What is your father's name?

What is the origin of that last name?

Explain that again?

Do you know many Palestinians?

Jews?

How is that you know Palestinians and Jews?

Why are you smiling?

What is there to be so happy about?

Which languages do you speak?

Why Arabic and not Hebrew?

Where have you been staying?



How do you support yourself?

Dial the last three numbers in your call log.

Unpack your bag.

Open your email.

Take off your clothes.

## The Ministry

Aisha finds it rather interesting when Tara tells her that she is Black. Aisha is also Black. She finds it funny that Tara refers to herself as such, but does not belabor that point. In the ministry, a sister is a sister. Aisha's family is from Beersheba for as far back as she can remember, before they were expelled to Rafah. Except! Aisha is excited to share a story with Tara. Her grandfather was married to a woman who passed away. She was from Omdurman. They had a daughter together and somehow the child got caught up in an Israeli orphanage when Aisha's grandfather was briefly jailed. They say she was sent to America; the girl-child. She is a legend in Aisha's family. Aisha is wowed to meet Tara, a woman whose people in America are all like that girl-child. Lost and legendary children. We are destined, sister.

Aisha does not find it strange that Tara is so far away from her family. The only thing about her own family she misses (now that she has chosen Christ and The Ministry to replace them) is the roasted watermelon rind her grandmother prepared. Most of Aisha's family is dead. Cast Lead. None of the few left can prepare the watermelon properly. This is why she leaves them behind and follows Christ. Maybe it is the same for Tara, Aisha thinks. Tara explains to Aisha why she left home and how it has flooded and been drained since she has been gone. I was not there to see it. I had already abandoned everyone, says Tara. They hold hands and something passes between them. Something only a person, who understands the choice between death and evil, could feel.

Tara tells Aisha about Emad. I was thinking when I got to Jordan, I would look for him. But I could not find him. Tara is not sure why but she tells Aisha about Faysal too. And how that acid trip lead Koi to wanting “more”. She and Koi attended Pastor Boyd’s appearance in New Orleans at the Lakefront Arena. I was thoroughly changed, Tara says bitterly to Aisha. Ironically, the last thing Tara had attended in the arena was a speech given by the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan. She had attended with Emad and Laylah. Tara tells Aisha that being so moved by both speeches is what led her to be locked deep below the deck of this boat with her. They laugh.

Aisha also has a story about Pastor Boyd. It happened the day we met, Aisha tells her. Remember? I don’t even know why I came, Aisha’s face seems to register the sinister absurdity. My family was dead. My home was a pile of boulders. I just needed somewhere to go. Some lady said Americans were giving away glasses if you needed them. Only thing I could actually *do* about anything was check my eyes. So I did. All the women with trouble should be sent to Pastor Boyd’s tent. Tara remembers Omar’s instructions. It was a brutal conversion, Aisha admits. A very brutal one. *Let the Lord Fill You, fully and completely.*

### **Ben Gurion Airport**

Tara is exhausted when it is all over. She asks if she will at least be allowed to redress in private, now that they have seen every inch of her together. The female agents sneer and no one acknowledges that she has asked this question. They stamp her passport with a number five. Tara’s eyes widen, but she is happy it is at least done with. Airport is security is nothing compared to what it has taken to escape her room in The Ministry House. The first thing it

has required is betrayal. Aisha will probably be beaten, at the least, for losing track of her cellmate. Tara wonders if Koi has forgiven her, as Aisha surely never will. Tara is headed in the opposite direction of one life and toward another. Though she cannot be sure of her motivations or their consequences; it occurs to Tara that it does not matter at all what she thinks. What is to become of her life is beyond any ability to predict.

\*\*\*

*December 25, 2015  
New Orleans, Louisiana*

*Dear Sister Laylah,*

*Asalamu Alaikum.*

*Do you remember me? It's Tara; Rob and V's daughter. Remember they went to prison, the year you took Emad and I to see the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan speak at the Lakefront Arena? The year was 1995 when they were sentenced, ten years, and you dressed me in the all white. How is Emad? I looked for him all over Amman. Has he returned to New Orleans since Katrina? Yourself?*

*Sister, I have been in the clutches of a terrible faith, led by an awful man. I believed in him and it, wholeheartedly, because I was seduced by all the things I felt like life at home denied me. Movement, protection, entering and exiting at will. Now I mostly burn with rage at their cruelty and my own stupidity. I don't know how to explain what that has to do with where I am now. But I know you do. I have been gone a long time. In fact, I am writing to you in a jet cruising at 30-something thousand feet in the air. I am headed home for the first time in a long time. I am going to see my grandmother and my aunt. I know my parents are out. Have you spoken to them? I know they are free by now, and maybe I will look them up when I am home. Ten years. Both of them. Both of them. I will never forget how it felt when they told me that was how long. I remember were reading about Harriet Tubman in school and how her master knocked her out with an iron weight when she was a girl. It was similar*

*to that. I have always been alone since then. Thanks to me it has been a much longer sentence.*

*I am grateful at least my parents knew who to trust me with. You and the nuns at Immaculate Conception, and The Muslim Program are the only things that has kept me sane. And if not, sane, Sister, so be it. At least I am alive. And I can speak. I have nightmares about a man named, Elam. They make Elam out to be a terrorist sympathizer and me too in the dream. The poppy fields are destroyed. Meanwhile these same flowers are thriving in the American engineered fields of Eastern Europe, making drug companies rich. All the extra white people they say have mowed New Orleans down, snort powder to party, and my Mama went to jail for having bricks in her car (really they were my Daddy's but that's another long story) , and Emad and you were lost to me, and then I get so angry.*

*The truth is also this: I have done some wrong things while I have been gone.*

*-I have abandoned my cause (or have I found it?).*

*-I have left behind a sister, Aisha, to return to another. Koi, did you know her? Her father was from The Grove.*

*I have spread a lying gospel for:*

*-Airfare*

*-Beds in others' homes*

*-A chance to speak a language other than my own.*

*I am being strip searched. Ben Gurion is the location of part of this nightmare. My clothing is filled with thorns. At least the wounds on my body made the soldiers jump in surprise. Slight fear. Sister there is no proper way to end this letter. Except to say that I need your help and your mercy. I am returning from my journey with more questions than answers. Which point on the globe, Sister? Where is home?*

*With Love and Respect,*

*Tara Bagneris*



National Representative of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad  
And the Nation of Islam

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IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE BENEFICENT, THE MERCIFUL.  
I BEAR WITNESS THAT THERE IS NO GOD BUT ALLAH  
AND I BEAR WITNESS THAT MUHAMMAD IS HIS MESSENGER

*Maryam Mosque #5  
Chicago, Illinois  
January 1, 2016*

*Dear Kaloneeka,*

*Wa Salaikum salaam. Peace and blessings to you. OF COURSE I REMEMBER YOU. And Koi, of course I knew Koi... She anticipates your return.*

*The first thing you need to know is that no matter how far you wander, wherever there are Black women, you are home. Know one thing on this earth, if you know nothing else; we will never forsake you. You have lost and gained threefold in your life and you are not done young Sister, so you must be brave and strong and vigilant. There is no formula for the recreation of a new home, yet there is no other option if you wish to live. All human beings require shelter. I will also tell you that the masjid is still standing. Go to Maryam #14 on Jourdan Rd, 70126. The one I took you to. It looks almost identical down to sign as before the water touched it. The one your mother knew would take care of you in her absence. Your parents are wise people. You might on occasion see them there.*

*Of Emad: in 2001, my son went to stay with his father in Amman. I was against it. But my son was born there and his fatherland called him home, how could I stand in the way? My son and a couple of his friends took a road trip. We have not heard his voice since. Emad is in prison outside the country; held without charge and being force-fed. This is all that can be written. Go to where I am pointing you. They can say more...*

*I will tell you a story. You call to mind my own mother, Nyandang. She is or was a slave, a woman that ran away from her master and married for love. My father was jailed on several occasions because it was theft to marry her. But this happened in another country, in Sudan. Maybe the Israelis or Americans lied to explain what proceeded my birth, how I came to be with them. It was probably something probably more plain than the love that conquers all. All that to say, I understand the confusion you know, what you have been running from. These forces of desire that compel our families to splinter are always the same old new thing. To be free from the white man's bondage, which our bodies' have been in so long, we must learn to love again. We must forgive ourselves the damage. This is the mark of a true radical.*

*Intent will not save your life, Sister, only discernment. I have wondered who exactly I am for the better part of 55 years now and have come to no definite conclusion yet. Though it was only four years, the ones I spent as my mother's child are my most beloved. Try to forgive your parents. They tried so very hard to love you. Sister, I know you have needed a break, a respite. And that this necessary rest will take on odd and sometimes incongruous formations for you. This is why you have found yourself in the hands of the beasts. But now that you have escaped their deceit and regained your fire, what waits for you with your family at Maryam is liberation. I know that decision for you will be difficult and cannot happen overnight. There some things you have to see for yourself. When you are ready, your brothers have built a house for you. It will not be easy and will be barely beautiful on its best day. But it will be life, and it will sustain you. You will persist in Faith and Struggle. Because it is your duty, and Allah's promise of jihad.*

*Tima Usrah, Through the Fire Comes the Family,*

*Love,*

*Servant to the Lost-Found  
Nation of Islam in the West,*

*Sister Nur Laylah bint Abdullah*

*Laylah X*

*Write me.*

## **New Orleans**

The X-Express is still open; old and undisturbed in the madness of erasure. It is skilled at survival. Tara walks into the store and it is dusty and hot as always. Still pig lips on the counter. Tara's mouth waters despite herself. This is Emad's uncle's store, but she does not know the fidgety young man at the counter. Ay, close the freezer! He shouts to the set of three children leisurely pondering the rows and rows and multiple flavors of Big Shot Soda. Don't talk to my fucking kids like that, a man, too young to be their father, shouts back at the cashier. They're not your kids, the cashier says. They somebody fucking kids, the young man answers. Why don't you mind your business in my store, ok? Mind my business? Fuck you. Matter fact...

Tara watches from the aisle filled with hot fries and instant boxes of macaroni and cheese. The young guy grabs four bottles of Big Shot from the freezer and runs out the door. The children sprint behind him squealing. Tara says a quick prayer and the cashier leaps over the counter, cordless phone in hand. He is sweating and running out of the door dialing. Tara walks out onto the street leaving what she had gone in there for on the counter. Tara is heading up the street to see if Koi's aunt still lives in the green and white house a couple blocks down. Of course she does. The rest of the city is a jumble of old places with new names, yet the Grove seems mostly the place she remembers. Tara is come home and she



forgets what time it is. Then it is lights on. Lights off. And flashing. Cars speeding down the block of X-Express. They slow and stop in front of the house diagonal to the store.

Tara knows she should keep walking. A man on a loudspeaker says everybody on the porch and in the yard get on their knees. Tara can no longer put one foot in front of the other. You in the blue shirt, the megaphone amplifies. The attention put on him makes Tara realize that it is Mookie. They went to elementary school together? She doesn't think she's seen him in fifteen years. Mookie freezes then tries to run into the alley alongside the house. Put your hands up! Tara watches everything slow down and speed up. She watches Mookie's arms go up then a bottle of Nestea, his body. He hits the ground with a thud. Tara screams, as people file into the street yelling.

Out of the green and white house comes Koi. They shot Mookie! Someone shouts at her face full of confusion. Her locs are twisted into golden ropes that fall nearly to her waist. She is wearing a mid-drift and a colorful sarong; a thick gold herring bone on her neck and a few anklets. Also around her neck many thin multicolored beaded necklaces. Tara runs to her. Mookie's dead. I know, Koi answers. Tara recalls the clouds above Galilee that day on the boat. They bled and Tara had seen the gelatinous residue under the nails of her brothers and sisters in The Ministry. She saw doom around Omar and Aisha, but knew she could not help them. And now she saw fire from above raining on their heads.

I knew you be back, Koi says and moves close. Koi is now close enough to hold Tara in her arms and she does. The street breaks around them. Tara remembers the beach with Emad. I'm strong like a motherfucker, baby, but I'm not greedy. I'm sorry for three things. Three things, he said and confessed them to her. So, is it the Lord's work you come home to do then? Koi asks with her hands in Tara's hair. Tara nods her head and looks out over Koi's

shoulder into the sea standing before her. Capitalism requires a savage. So does love. This she knows for sure. Tara breathes deeply, with fear and anticipation of the plans she and Koi will make. It will begin by stepping out of the silence of their separation. After all, this is a story no one can tell but they, who have survived it. But first: What came after tomorrow?

Selah.



## FOR OUR HUMANITY AND NOTHING ELSE

The beating on the heavy wooden door was intense for a couple of seconds and then the door came down and the police were everywhere. They took me out the bedroom, cuffed, and made me kneel down in the living room. Corey was in the kitchen. I could see him from where I knelt, his face pressed into the tile. The officers stood around him, one with his foot placed squarely in Corey's back.

"Do you want to be pepper-sprayed or shot motherfucker?" the officer asked with his shoe in Corey's back. "We just gonna have a look around. Before we take you out of here. Keep still or we see how tough you are with your brains on the carpet."

"What was she doing in there?" the blonde, blue-eyed cop asked.

"What's it look like?" replied the one standing over me. He smirked, scratched his curly head. "Waiting to get fucked."

The cop shined his bright ass light on my face, on my chest, my legs, and thighs. The light was *everywhere*. My throat and chest burned but I was still. So was Corey. Be still. They can kill you. And if they do, they will get away with it. Be still. They took Corey out the door. I kept my head down; tears in my throat. I didn't know why they were there. Be still. There were no lights or sirens in the pre-dawn shadow. Be still, Kalo. Be still, I said to myself.

"Alright Pocahontas. I need to see your ID," the curly -head policeman said, flicking one of my two braids behind my shoulder. "Kaloneeka Bagneris," the officer read my name aloud.

They didn't ask me much beyond that and let me go. Lucky for me they did not realize I lived there. The blonde one offered me a ride, his light still on my ass. I declined.

When the sun came up, I caught the bus over to Habibti's. The store had been a part of my morning for years before I moved; wake-up, cross the street and get coffee and a biscuit before school. I always had a little crush on Fadi, whose uncle owned the store. But when Corey opened a tattoo shop on top of it, whatever mild flirtations had taken place between us were put to an end.

Corey and I had moved to be away from it all. Besides the tattoo shop on top of Habibti's, he also co-owned a barbershop and a rim-shop. Corey was doing well, which meant if he wanted to stay both alive and free, he had to be low-key. The apartment we found was cut from a generous portion of an antebellum home, a block off St. Charles Avenue. The house's massive construction made us feel like giants. Corey was rarely there during the day and it was right up the street from my university. We watched birds for hours from the balcony on the gallery side of the apartment. Just the day before the police arrived, a red bird, a yellow bird and a blue bird lined up on a branch. Corey said it was unusual, almost unbelievable, that they got so close to each other. *Birds of feather flock...*

Fadi was standing outside smoking a cigarette when I approached. His curly black hair was wild around his head like a halo; his beard so shiny it glittered. He was gorgeous in the sunlight.

"What's up, Kalo?" Fadi said in his heavy voice.

"The entire world, I don't know. Fadi, what the fuck? You know what happened last night?"

“Course, Kalo. Me and the entire city, baby, when they wake up. Look at this shit.”

Fadi pointed to the copy of The Times Picayune, resting on top a vending machine full of the papers.

Corey and Xavier’s pictures were plastered across the front page. “The Two Most Dangerous Men in New Orleans” the headline read. My breath was gone. Fadi tossed his cigarette on the ground.

“They got Corey as the shooter, Kalo. Seventeen-shots. They say Xavier was driving.”

*Xavier St. Martin pumped seventeen bullets into the victim, Kenneth James “Lil Merc” Mercadel at close range. It is believed his accomplice, is longtime associate, Corey Samson Jameson. Jameson and St. Martin are also accused of running a violent drug organization spanning Uptown and Downtown New Orleans.*

I picked up the paper again. There were several other articles on the front page discussing other aspects of the case besides the headline article I had read at Habibti’s. They were digging up all of Xavier and Corey’s family history. The reporter on television spoke of the long-standing ties between the St. Martins and the Jamesons. There was also a story on the local news about Cheryl Jameson, one of Corey’s second or third cousins. She was going on trial for bank fraud. The Jameson’s were a huge family and they barely knew Cheryl.

“What do they mean, how did Cheryl post a 50,000 dollar bond?” I asked Fadi.

“You know how they do, Kalo. They try to connect all the dots. And the ones they can’t they make it up.”

“I think I’m going to be sick, Fadi. I don’t have anywhere to go. I can’t go back to that apartment.”

“Don’t trip, you know you can stay with me. But, brace yourself, Kalo. You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

\*\*\*

Xavier had been like a big brother to all of us. He helped Corey leave chopping it up alone. Put him on his feet for real. Corey had moved in with Xavier and Xavier’s uncle and it all went up from there. Then one night while he slept in the old spot downtown, Xavier pulled a gun on Corey. Corey took his dope and split. What wasn’t certain on either side was the hows and whys of what had occurred. Xavier said he was rolling and it had been a practical joke. Corey thought the joke was on Xavier and that the coolness of the steel and light sleeping saved his life. I swear, Kalo, he said, I opened my eyes because I thought that coolness was your lips. But I knew you weren’t there. That’s the only reason I’m here.

Xavier and Corey were hit with first-degree murder charges together. Nothing made sense. What we all, including the police, did know was that Lil’ Merc had recently killed Xavier’s cousin, Roy St. Martin. So the way it turned out for Lil’ Merc wasn’t a surprise to anyone. Nor was it a surprise, the epic showdown between the underworld and the heroic police department it had already become in the media. The reporters and the police did not hide their alliance. People were killed every day in New Orleans; rarely did someone pay for it. But Corey and Xavier had done the unforgivable. They decided they weren’t kicking back what the powers that be had demanded. They would not be extorted to that degree.

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“Child...that boy loves you.” Jazz, Xavier’s sister, said one night the summer before. We were at Mike’s, our favorite bar.

“Love, Jazz? That nigga is fucking everything moving.”

“Be that as it may, he’s still in love with you. Mark my words.”

All the girls were crazy behind Corey, even before we officially became a couple, I knew this. One of the strippers, Panda, in particular. There was also the doctor’s wife, who had a coke problem and a craving for young men.

“She always tries to give me money; it’s crazy,” he said. “I’m always like boo, I don’t need your money. But I take it though. She insists.”

“Would that make you a prostitute? Excuse me, gigolo, they give y’all a nicer word, I forgot.”

“Call me what you want, but if you take what I earn, baby girl, what does that make you?” Corey took his two fingers kissed them and placed them on my cheek. “A pimp,” he said. “I got to go holler at these fools.” He got up, gesturing to two guys just walking in the bar.

It was true. Corey gave me money all the time. Just because. We had always been cool and I was a good girl, he said. Always working, trying to take care of myself. He didn’t mind helping me out. It was small stuff, like my cell phone bill, or a few hundred dollars here and there. He never expected anything in return for it, never even asked me out.



Jazz and I decided to pop a couple pills and soon we were rolling. I remember watching Corey move about the club. Everybody had something to say to him, and the dudes who didn't like him, knew better than to make it known. Mike, the owner of the bar, was a Jameson too. Every time I caught Corey's eye that night, he smiled at me. I felt beautiful and wild. There was a vibe in the room. It felt like being in the center of everything that was real. The center where the darkest aspects of life are always present, right below the surface, and ready to blow. Jazz and I moved away from the bar because the ecstasy was working and we felt like getting into the crowd.

We weren't quite fucked up but feeling good. I was sitting on a bench smoking. Jazz stood next to me and there was another girl sitting on the back of the bench, her feet resting on the seat next to me. The beat was going hard.

"Nah, I don't like that." Jazz said. "Come on. Let's move."

I saw them as soon as Jazz said it. Two or three dudes with bandannas tied on the lower half of their faces. Everything slowed a little. I saw the orange flame then I heard them. Shots. Back to back to back. It sounded like two or three every half second. I froze. The girl sitting on top the backrest fell backwards onto the floor. People ran everywhere. I fell on the ground and crawled under a table. The shooting quieted and those remaining in the bar bolted to the exits. I made it into the parking lot and found a distraught Jazz standing out front. As soon as she saw me, she began to scream.

"What?" I yelled at her.

"Your legs, Kalo."

I looked down. They were covered in blood. It was all between my toes.

"That girl. She got shot," I said.

\*\*\*

They denied Corey and Xavier bond. I didn't sleep much while they were locked up. I had too much on my mind. Corey? He loved Roy, Xavier's cousin, like a brother. That was true. And Lil Merc had banged Roy on some hoe shit, standing outside of his house, washing his car with his brother. The masked gunmen shot him in front of his kids. They had been playing inside the car. Everybody knew Roy's people would punish Lil' Merc for doing what he did, how he did it. After all, who else would seek any justice for him? So, I knew Corey and Xavier had done it, some way or somehow. Whether Corey was the shooter, the driver, or the police had it all wrong, which was likely, and they hadn't been there at all and simply sent the hit instead.

I decided to call Jazz. She was the only person who could understand what I was feeling. There was a lead weight in my stomach. Corey and Xavier could go away for a long time. More people could get killed if that happened. Who knew how far they were going to take it, maybe I or Jazz would too. The police would dig some shit up from years ago and make it part of a decade long conspiracy. Jazz and I hadn't talked much in months. Not since Corey and Xavier fell out. She wanted to go eat beignets, get some air. It was a good idea. Sitting in Café du Monde felt nostalgic. Like so many nights after school dances, football games, then bars and clubs when we got older. Somehow the scenery made the blow of what she had to tell me softer.

“They have a witness, Kalo.”

“Who is it Jazz?”

“George, girl.”

“Who?”

“George, the man that owns Bottoms and Tops. You know it happened in the parking lot. They saying that he saw Xavier hit Roy with the car and that Corey got out and shot him. Did you hear about the tape?”

“Tape!?”

“Lower your voice, Kalo. Believe, they watching and listening. Xavier’s lawyers showed it to me. You can’t tell who it is shooting. It’s just a tall dude in a hoodie and jeans. Doesn’t look like Corey to me, to be honest.”

“This is a bunch of bullshit, Jazz.”

“You ain’t gotta tell me Kalo. These fuckers don’t give a fuck about Roy being dead. They want a RICO case. All I know is you get what’s coming to you, so I’m trying to chill.”

“What are they saying to Xavier? I haven’t talked to Corey, just through the lawyer.”

“They offered Xavier twenty-five years.”

“What did he say to that?”

“What you think Xavier Orlando St. Martin said? He said suck his dick, we going to trial. They’re going to spend their money if they want to lock my brother up. Crooked motherfuckers.”

“You think they did it, Jazz?”

I stared at Jazz, trying to figure out if she was going to level with me. I had gone to bed early that night. Asleep when Corey came home. Late. Jazz’s china-white skin shown in the moonlight, her hair the color of blood. She had been dyeing it that way for years.

“Doesn’t matter, Kalo. All I know is that this is a fucked up world and what goes around comes around. Fucking 5-0, Roy, Lil’ Merc, my brother, Corey. Who’s guilty? The last man standing?”

\*\*\*

They were to go to trial separately. Corey would be first. Not what the state had wanted but what Mr. Levin, Corey’s attorney, had fought for and won. The Picayune had already leaked George’s identity and his expected testimony. Turns out he was supposed to be one-hundred percent certain he had seen Xavier sitting at the intersection of Willow and Claiborne. Certain he had seen him strike Lil’ Merc with his car. When it came to Corey, he was “almost certain”. He hadn’t positively identified him in a police line-up. It was the dreads he couldn’t remember for sure. The shooter had been wearing a hoodie. The witness was telling police he was too shocked by what he had seen to notice hair.

Jazz gave me the rundown in her kitchen. Corey’s lawyer, had set up a meeting with Xavier’s attorney. Corey was the victim of mistaken identity. He wasn’t the one in the car that night. He and Xavier were estranged at the time; plenty people could attest to that. There was no physical evidence linking him to the crime, plus Corey’s hair was to his *waist*. You would have been able to see that on the tape. But a lot had played out in the media already, and now thanks to that, upon entering the courthouse, Corey and Xavier’s reputations preceded them. The key to Corey’s freedom was that he had an alibi. Panda. That was the part, Jazz didn’t want to say. But she had to.

I felt sick and out of pocket. Another night without sleeping. I tried to accept that I would probably never sleep through the night again. Lil' Merc kept me up. Twelve to the body, and four to face, after getting hit by a car. Nobody deserved to die that way—no matter what they had done. I thought about the girl, whose blood had covered my legs that night in Mike's. She lived. I had tried to talk to Corey about it the night it happened.

“Stop crying, Kalo. You barely knew her.”

“It could have been me you know? They didn't mean to shoot her either.”

“But it wasn't, Kalo. It wasn't. You're okay.”

“Is that the way you look at things now?”

“Not solely, but you can't survive out here being crazy, Kalo. Some shit, you just have to let it go.”

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The next morning the mayor of New Orleans, the District Attorney, and the Chief of Police held an impromptu press conference carried on all the local channels. George Gilyot, the prosecution's star witness, their only witness, had been murdered the night before. He had taken twenty-one of the fifty bullets fired to the body. George had disobeyed police orders not to go around his place of business. Why they did not protect him there was another question. It was a brazen crime, the Chief said, and it was most definitely linked to the upcoming trial of Corey Jameson. The entire Jameson family and their associates could expect intense scrutiny in the days that were to come. They vowed to the public to

aggressively pursue bringing to trial Corey Jameson and Xavier St. Martin for both the killings of George Gilyot and Kenneth James Mercadel.

But with no witness, the state had no case. And there was Corey's alibi to deal with. Really it was just a matter of days before both Xavier and Corey would be out. Proving that either or both of them had ordered the hit on George Gilyot was a long shot. Anybody could have done it. A lot of people's lives would change with one or both of them behind bars. One thing we all knew, in front that mic or behind it, was nothing went deeper than blood or love in this city. There was also money. Police had it to make as well. Not everyone was ready for the well to run dry. So, just like that as crazy it had all been, it was over. That's how it was in New Orleans. Murder was the easiest crime to get away with. Xavier and Corey came home.

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Corey and I moved to a different apartment; this one in the Quarter. We were both acutely aware of being watched. Some nights we talked or argued when we could not avoid it.

"Kalo, don't worry about her. She's...come on...she thought she would help me out."

"Yeah, why? Help you out...so you *weren't* with her that night?"

"I was in the bed with you that night, remember?"

"It was late when you came in."

"It was." Corey conceded. "Do you believe in redemption, Kalo?"

"I try to."

"Well...I got a lot to do before I die," Corey said into the darkness between us.

We were quiet again and watched a documentary about the Panthers, COINTELPRO, and how once the drugs pumped in, and the freedom fighters were exiled, neutralized, or dead; capitalism killed the revolution. A lot of people died before it was their time, had their potentiality stolen. There could be no way to know what this world had in store for you, but mostly the people I loved died young. After the movie, the local news droned on in the soft glow of the bedroom. I was barely awake, but heard the weather girl through my shut eyes. There was a storm brewing out in the Gulf. A big one. Corey kissed me on my eyelids, like he always did before bed. Grateful for his return, and eager to forget what had brought him back to me— I wrapped my arms around his solid mass, and dreamt that Corey would live to be an old man.

## BLACK VIRGIN

“Taking care of me tonight, Co?” A man’s voice cut into the dark.

“Come on,” I said and lead him and the woman he had with him, around the back of Habibti’s. The woman was young and quiet, too fucking quiet. She was wearing a pair of men’s jean shorts and a sports bra. Not fat, but her middle was loose and fleshy. She had this wide-eyed look like she was surprised. I gave them what they needed, and tried not to look her in the face.

Inside the store, there was a girl talking on a battered cell phone. Talking, fussing, about shoe insoles and washing powder. She slammed the flip-phone hard and hung up on whoever she was talking to. I watched the way the black and white stripes of her leggings moved across her legs, as she walked around the store all lazy-like, picking shit up, looking at it a long time, then putting it down. She’s stared at two boxes of Jiffy cornbread mix like it made a difference.

I went inside to holler at Fadi for a second.

“You know her?” I asked and motioned in the girl’s direction.

“Who? Panda? Yeah. She works across the street at the club. You never seen her in there?”

I glanced in her direction. Her eyes were red. I figured she had been smoking, but she could have been crying or both.

“How much?” she asked Fadi, holding up a toilet scrubber.

Fadi made a motion that suggested she look at the sticker.



“It’s not marked, must be free,” Panda said and sucked her teeth.

She walked up to the counter with a basket full of miscellaneous things. Flour, ten boxes of cornbread mix, white candles, detergent, a pack of sponge rollers, Lysol, and hand sanitizer.

“How’s it going over there?” Fadi nodded his head in the direction of the club across the street.

“Not too bad. Hopefully, I make some money tonight.”

“You work over at Bottoms?” I asked. “How come I never seen you in there? I would have remembered if I did.”

“I’m only there a couple nights. But I know this one.” Panda pointed at Fadi. “But I don’t know you. What’s your name?”

“Corey. You can call me Co.”

“Is that right? Panda said. “Well, even if your friend stays home, you come see me tonight, okay?”

“Why? Look like I got money or something?”

Panda giggled.

“No, but I think you’re a cutie-pie.” Panda gave a few of my dreads a light tug.

I should have said something back. Anything. Like, *I’m liking what I’m seeing too*. Squeezed the side of her waist. She would have liked that. Instead, I just stood there. My eyes followed her out the door.

“I’m not going to lie, man...she is what she is, but I like lil’ one’s style.”

“Slow your roll, Co. You know Peanutt? That’s her sister. I’m telling you, nigga. Them girls are trouble.”

I could tell he meant it.

“That’s exactly what I’m looking for.”

I meant that too.

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Inside, the power was out. My daddy was out of town, and forgot to pay the light bill. I had tried to call my mama earlier, but she wasn’t answering my calls. I had the money to turn the lights back on, but fuck it. I was about to cop an apartment and some real work of my own. I could sleep without lights for a couple days. I lit all the candles I kept on my drawing table. Each candle was a different scent. That was okay, I smelled like outside. Like a puppy dog, my mama would have said if she could smell me.

Once in the shower, the sweat started to pour. I had to sit down to keep from passing out. The water rushed over my head and Peanutt popped up in my mind when I closed my eyes. She worked at Bottoms from time to time and always needed two things when she saw me. That shit to get her up, before work, and that shit to get her back down, once she was home. I didn’t know she had a sister. But I was gonna pretend like I still didn’t. I had messed around with Peanutt a few times before I realized how bad off she was. Then there was Kalo. My baby girl. All I could do was lie to her about it all.

My paw was trying to wait me out, make me pay the bill, probably, but whatever. He had been doing this shit since I was ten years old. Leaving and returning with little warning. I called Fadi to see if he was done at Habibti’s, and felt like dipping through Bottoms. I was

really trying to see that girl. When he pulled up, I was happier for the air conditioner than the blunt he passed to me.

“Damn, you smell baby fresh for a man that’s been trapped inside a sweat lodge.”

“It’s just soap, man. Dusty ass,” I laughed and exhaled. “Xavier back from Miami yet?”

“Yep,” Fadi said. “I talked to him earlier. He said tomorrow and we’ll be all good.”

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Inside Bottoms, we saw each other at the same time. Panda was leaning up against the bar talking into the side of this man’s neck. She stood in place, but moved all the loose flesh on her body, which was just enough for a good show. The man slid money in the little bag she wore around her waist. She looked past him, straight at me. Her hair was all hanging down looking like falling water. She wore a snow white top and bottom. It was slashed all over the place, nipples poked out the holes in her top, and her ass cheeks were exposed. I was impressed by how much like a bride she looked. I wished I had flowers for her. When the song ended, Panda patted the guy’s shoulders, gave him a kiss on the cheek, and headed in my direction.

When Panda made it over, I reached out to put my hand around her waist and pull her toward me a little. Not too hard, but just affectionately, to show her I wanted her.

“I think I’m good for the night. These clowns are being generous.”

“Oh yeah? Lucky you.”

“Yep, lucky me. I’m ready to leave. Want to go chill somewhere? We can have some

real drinks instead of this watered down shit.”

Of course I did, and Panda was making it even better for me by doing all the work.

“Yeah, let’s go. But I don’t have a ride right now. You?”

“Guess we're flying United. It’s all good,” Panda laughed. “We got all night to play.”

Panda grinned at me. She looked like a naughty little girl. Not really bad, but having a time doing something she wasn’t supposed to. I could relate. Out of her money bag she pulled out this black roll of cloth. Unwound, it was a real thin black dress that reached almost to the floor.

The United cab came quick. Panda said she was a regular customer.

“You talk real cute, you know that? Where you from?” I asked her, as we got into the backseat.

“Here, but I left when I was like eight. I just came back to New Orleans like six months ago.”

“From where?”

“New York. I was in Barbados before that,” she answered.

“Panda’s your real name?”

“By real, if you mean the one I answer to, yes.”

“What about real by the one your mama gave you in the hospital?”

“My Mama is dead and I was born in a house, so there you have it.”

“Where you all going again?” the driver asked.

“The Goose. Sheffield Drive,” Panda responded.

“What you know about The Goose, Barbados?”

“I know where I live, Corey.” Panda gave my dreads a tug. “If that’s your real name.”

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We pulled up to the fourplex Panda stayed in and I tipped the driver an extra ten. By the time we made it up the three rickety flights of stairs, the entire front of my body was lit up. From the weed definitely, but from her mostly. She was so damn beautiful. And still as nice as her face was, I couldn't keep my eyes off of the back of her.

“Damn, man. You're fine as hell,” I said to her, as she twisted her keys in the door. She smiled real big, looking over her shoulder at me. Panda unlocked the screen door, and then the two locks on the wooden door.

“It's a little messy. Don't judge.”

“Why would I start now?”

Panda's apartment wasn't messy, so much as, there was a lot going on. It was a studio with a real big screened- porch connected to it. Her bed was out there. Plugged up, she had 5 box fans and three space heaters. There was a desk with stacks of magazines, adhesive, glue sticks, and pieces of scrap wood stacked on top of it. She had several racks of clothes, like in a department store. A clothesline ran from somewhere on her porch to the hook on the back of her front door. There were a few half-finished projects going on, mostly involving wood, paint, and pictures cut from magazines. One work in progress was a picture of a little- girl Panda, plastered on a background of Jiffy cornbread boxes.

The piece that was complete, she had hanging on the wall. It was a mix of painting and collage. Almost floor to ceiling, it was the body of a big booty, big breasted girl, in an outfit like Panda danced in, except this girl had the head of the Virgin Mary. All around her

were other girls, or just their breasts or their butts. There were guns, and jewelry, and angels. All of that was framed by a tangle of tree branches.

“I told you.”

“It’s cool, ma. I’ve seen way worse, believe me. You’re an artist?”

“You could say that.”

“Me too.”

I looked around the room and onto the porch and noticed she didn’t have a TV. Panda clicked on the stereo system that was plugged up to a splitter, whose chord ran the length of the apartment and patio. She shut off her overhead lights, clicked another button, and the room was bathed in soft blue. Glow and the dark moons and stars shined in the dim of the house.

“This makes the mess a little better, don’t you think?” she asked. “I’ma fix us some drinks. Sit down. Get comfortable. Every spot in here is soft.”

“Steel Pulse? This shit reminds me of my Mama.”

She turned the music up.

I took a seat on the makeshift sofa, two child -size box springs, with a few mattress pads stacked on top one another, and covered by Bob Marley sheets. The box spring rested against the wall and was bookended by two mismatched end-tables. It was comfortable. The kind of sofa you never wanted to leave. Panda opened up a closet door, which turned out to be a small galley style kitchen. I listened to her clink around behind my back.

When she was done, she came and stood in front me with a tray in her hands.

“Want some?” she asked, nodding down at the tray, and handing me my glass. The Hennessy smelled sweet and strong. I could see the perfect, parallel, white lines on it. I tried

to keep the cocaine to a minimum but...

“I didn’t know you fucked around,” I said to her.

“Just socially. You here, so this is social.”

“More like getting high off my own supply.”

“Well, this isn’t yours, it’s mine.” Panda grinned.

“You bought it in Bottoms? Then it’s mine.”

Panda cut the lines in half again. Tangy-sour, like a sweet tart in my throat. The drip was the best part. I gestured to the tray on my lap.

“You fuck with that diesel too?”

“Nah. That’s never-never land, right? I can help you,” Panda said, her pupils sharp as razors.

“What can you do for me, Panda-bear?”

She stretched her body across the sofa, rested her feet in my lap. She was cat-like in the blue light of her apartment.

“I can cook for you.”

“I did that myself,” I answered. “But I’m off that hard. I really be mostly chilling at Habibti’s.”

Panda was quiet a few moments.

“They gonna do you. You and the A-rab,” she blurted.

“Who?”

“Doogie, Xavier, and them lil’ boys.”

The wheels in my head started turning. What the fuck was she talking about? I didn’t really know who the fuck this girl was or how she knew who I dealt with, or what she was

getting at. People in the game threw crosses all the time to make you vulnerable. I thought about Fadi's warning, looked at the door, and halfway expected somebody to kick it in. I had done the same thing myself.

"How do you know Doogie?"

"It's kind of a crazy story...I just do, but..."

"Come on with it then..." I cut her off. I didn't have time for ambiguity; I needed it straight.

"He took me and Peanutt out. You know my sister? Brought us around his friends and shit. You know how some men are just loose at the mouth. They were talking how they were going to get it out you and the A-rab when y'all go pick-up. I knew it was you when you told me your name at the store."

"So why are you telling me?"

"I don't know. I couldn't not tell you."

It didn't make any sense. I didn't know whether I believed what she was saying or not. The only thing I knew about Panda for sure was that I had fucked her sister. But when she sat on top me, I couldn't think of much else. I knew we were going all in. All the way and too much. The truth would have to wait.

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The next morning, wrapped in her hair, I couldn't move. It was midafternoon. Panda was right about her bedroom on the porch. With the right combination of the window unit from inside, the box fans, and the one space heater she had turned on low, under her sheets was the



perfect temperature. Panda woke up and asked me to stay for breakfast. She opened up her little closet kitchen, and put oranges, cheese, and French bread on the tray from last night. Then Panda went in the bathroom, ran some water, and did another bump or two. I could hear her and tried to ignore that. She could do what she wanted, but she was right on the edge of where her recreation was turning into work. She came back out with a blunt rolled.

“You should’ve rolled up last night,” I said.

“I didn’t know if I was going to let you stay.” Panda laughed.

“Well, I thank you,” I said to her. “The dudes you normally fuck with too lame for the privilege?”

“Mostly. After you take a man’s bill money in the club, the spell is usually broken, you know?”

“I do. That piece is amazing,” I said fixing my eyes on the scantily clad Madonna. I noticed in the daylight she was holding a child’s hand. A child, who had the body of a skinny dog.

“Do you? Thank you. I think most men worship the woman on my wall, and don’t even know it.”

“I think you’re right,” I answered.

Fadi had called my phone a million times. We were supposed to meet up with Xavier and Doogie to pick up our shit that morning. I had to hit Fadi up, soon to let him know that the plan had gone sour. But, at least, I knew he would not go without me. Kalo and my Dad had called over and over again too. I couldn’t talk to her or him until things had calmed just a bit. If the shit Panda said was true, me and Fadi were going to have to deal with Xavier, Doogie, and them the sure way. But first, I would need to take some time. Chill out here.

We smoked two fat cigars of it back to back, till Panda was able to lie back down. I tossed her ass around. She liked it. She said fucking me was like ballet dancing and tackle football. I bit her on the earlobes and squeezed her on her thighs. Back under her covers, Panda's bed felt like a place, I could figure some things out. I had so many questions to ask before I could go outside and deal with what was waiting for me. I cupped her ass in my hands and she curled into a fetal position. I brought my hands back up to circle her waist and waited for some words to fall out of my mouth.

“What do you do if it rains in the middle of the night?” I asked into her neck.

Panda sighed and pressed herself into me.

“Nothing,” she said. “I just lie here, and let it hit me.”

## 1994: A CAKE BAKE

“Check this out, Tee,” Daddy announces into the muggy afternoon, “don’t ever trust no man that writes love songs, ya hear? Especially if he tells you he wrote it for you. Now, you want to hear what I been working on?”

“Is this a private party or can I join?” Joney asks from behind the fence that separates our backyard from the rest of The Azalea Garden and the service road that runs behind it. She wiggles through one of the gaps in the fence and makes her way through the yard. We have a big one with three huge banana trees, and all kinds of things growing. Through the slats in the fence, we can both see all of The Garden’s brick buildings rising a short distance away.

“Shit, ain’t no party at all, girl. Just out here clowning with, Tee. Where my wife?”

“Vionne is still at the YMCA with her class. I just decided to wait for her to get home. Do you mind if I stay?”

“A little too late if I did, hanh?” Daddy teases. “I got a show tonight, she tell you?”

“Yeah, but Vionne said, I’m not to go to The Bullet until she’s off and can come with me. She says it won’t be the same without her.”

“She ain’t lying about that. But, you better not let my wife boss you around. She won’t ever stop, trust me.”

I make a whipping motion with my hands and Daddy cracks up.

“You are such a cutie-pie!” Joney exclaims. She acts like this is the funniest thing she’s ever seen or heard in her life and squeezes me to her.

“Come on inside, Tee.” Tante Fille opens the door, pauses, looking like there is a question caught in her mouth. She doesn’t ask. “I got something on the table for you. You eating?” she asks Daddy.

He shakes his head no.

*Bullshit.* I think, I hear Tante Fille humph. I walk in behind her, leaving Joney and my Daddy alone. In the kitchen, Tante Fille and Maw Maw whisper loudly between them.

“That is *my* nephew, which makes Vionne *my* niece,” Tante Fille said. “That girl, she is an interloper.”

“Lord...ain’t that what they used to say about you before your husband was your husband? God rest the dead?” Maw Maw laughed and pushed Tante Fille playfully.

“You can sleep on her if you want, but you better watch it. Or your son is going to be in this fucking house by his lonesome.”

“Watch your mouth, Fille. In front the child,” Maw Maw scolds Tante Fille.

“Aw please. A little fucking never hurt nobody and if it did, they did it wrong.”

I can’t help but laugh.

“She some nosy, her!” Tante Fille grabs me, covering my cheek with her kisses when she notices that I am listening.

Tante Fille stands near the screen door to the backyard watching. My eyes follow her gaze out to the back to the porch, where I had left my Daddy with Joney.

“Outta all the people, Vionne brings that girl home.” Maw Maw chuckles.

“Vionne have them ways from her mama. Picking up strays. Wherever the breeze blows type people,” Tante Fille says.

I watch Joney pop the tops off two bottles of beer with her keychain. I don’t get it at first. What the big deal is. When I look through the screen door again, I see Joney laughing with her head back. She is reaching out to pat my Daddy’s shoulders. My stomach tightens, and flips twice over itself.

\*\*\*

That evening while we are setting the tablecloth and the dishes down, Tante Fille pulls Mama on the side. They pass a few quick words back and forth. Most of which I can’t make out, but I do hear:

*“Well, it don’t take a lioness honey, only one feral cat.”*

They hush when Daddy comes in the kitchen. He is just waking up from a nap, still bleary-eyed from the night before. We all sit down to eat together because this is something that Maw Maw insists on. Her motto is before you go out and get drunk off your ass, you entertain your family’s bullshit.

“I’m playing again tonight, Ma,” Daddy says, sitting down. “Guess who’s coming out?”

“Who, baby?”

“Marcellus. He’s out that place, finally.”

“For now,” Maw Maw answers. “Talk about don’t know when to stop...”

“However long, I’m happy to see my man,” Daddy laughs. “And it’s the night before my birthday? We gonna tear that stage up!”

“Better watch out, me and Tee might be in that thing tonight too!” Mama interjects.

“Girl, you better not bring my sweet little girl through that place!” Daddy almost yells. It is hard to tell if he is playing or serious.

“They won’t mind. That’s my people’s spot! Shit, first time my mama brought me up in The Bullet. I was barely *eight*. Shit, Tee has two years on that.”

“Shit was different then, Vionne,” Daddy says, eyeing Mama across the table. “You gonna get their place shut down.”

“Oh I’m going to shut it down, alright. Just watch what I’m gonna come through there wearing!”

“Check her out!” Tante Fille hoots.

Mama smiles and pokes her tongue out at Daddy.

By night time, I think Mama has forgotten about what she said. Me and her are curled up together in she and Daddy’s bed watching TV while he gets ready. Daddy gives Mama a slow kiss and closes the bedroom door behind him. She watches his car pull out the driveway from the window. As soon as it has rounded the corner, she sits up in bed and calls Joney.

“Yeah we’ll be ready in like fifteen minutes. Girl, I’m not worrying about, what he has to say. I do what I want.”

Mama laughs and hangs the phone up with a flourish. Whips my hair into a ponytail and slides a yellow dress over my head. She smooths her own body-hugging emerald green dress down, and puts large copper hoops in her ears. Mama scoops her purse off the bed and

leads me by the hand down the hall. Maw Maw and Tante Fille are watching Perry Mason reruns in the den.

“Nah, don’t y’all come back here fussing and carrying on, Vionne,” Tante Fille warns. “I’m not in that mess, hear?” Maw Maw adds.

“I’m not worried about your nephew, Fille. Or your son, Ma.” Mama kisses each of them on the cheek and we walk out the front door to the car where Joney is waiting.

“Rob thinks he’s slick, but he’s messing with the wrong girl,” Mama says to Joney when we get into the car. The laughter is gone.

Joney stares through the rearview at me. I stare back at her, knowing Daddy is in trouble, and there is no way to warn him.

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The Bullet is smoky and filled with people. The doorman doesn’t give us any trouble. Just like Mama said, he lets us right in. I feel nervous and excited when we take a table in the center but toward the back. There is nobody on the stage yet, but the instruments and equipment are set up.

“Look who we got here! My big cousin, Vionne, *and* my baby cousin in the building! Look at all this hair!” Neesh, our waitress, grabs my long fat ponytail. She plunks down a tub of boiled potatoes and corn in the middle of our table. “Whatchall drinking tonight?”

“Bottle of Maker’s for us and a Shirley Temple for Tee. This is my friend, Joney. We work together at the Y.”

“Where you from?” Neesh asks Joney, kind of staring at her wild blonde hair, and the colorful tattoos on her left arm.

“In another life, California,” Joney answers.

“Well welcome then...Whiskey, hanh?”

“Yeah, girl, it’s that kind of night,” Mama replies. “I’m telling you now, might be some drama because Rob doesn’t know I’m in here.”

“Well, drink up, but try to chill. I ain’t got no bail money. Be right back with y’all drinks. Nice to meet you, boo,” Neesh says patting Joney on the shoulder.

She returns quickly with the bottle of whiskey, glasses, my drink, and a whole extra bowl of cherries. She and Mama clink their glasses together, a little of the brown liquid spilling onto the table. A group of three women take the table right in front of us. All of their dresses look too small to me. There is body busting out everywhere. One lady has on a royal blue dress that is way tighter than Mama’s. Mama’s dress makes you stare at the perfect curve of her hip and behind. The green is great against her brown skin and red hair. But these women’s dresses are so tight; I can see the dimples in the lady in the blue’s butt. Her two friends in lime green and the other in fuchsia are no better. The one in the blue is also wearing Daddy’s hat on her head. Mama tenses up immediately. I can see the rage flashing behind her eyes.

The woman in the blue stands to her feet when Daddy and his band walk out. When he picks up his sax, the blue lady makes a big show out of clapping and calling out his name. She makes a complete three-sixty, trying to pump up the crowd, before resting her eyes on Mama for a second. She looks like she wants to say something. She isn’t able to. Mama is already on her feet, and Joney is trying to get between Mama and the lady in blue. Mama



moves Joney out of the way by the shoulder, easily, with just her index and middle finger. Daddy barely has a chance to hop off the stage into the crowd, before Mama with one motion strikes, and pins the blue dress lady to the floor. Mama's hands are on her neck and her fuchsia and lime clad friends jump on top of Mama. Without thinking, I leap into the brawl, and ride the magenta and lime ladies backs, beating my fists and feet into them, until I feel Daddy's strong hands lift me high.

“Take my daughter to my Mama,” he yells at Joney.

She grips me by the wrist tight. The last thing I see, as we leave, is Mama smack Daddy so hard in the face; I'm sure he saw a galaxy.

\*\*\*

The next morning is Daddy's birthday. He is sleeping with cool towels on his bruised face and aloe vera on his scratches. Even though he played late into the night, usually Daddy would get up in the morning, at least for a little, and talk with Mama before she went to the Y. They would smoke a joint in the bathroom together, come out slack-faced and giggly. But this morning is different. Everything has changed. I am ten and too old to still sleep with my parents but I do. Sitting in their bed, while Daddy is snoring, I tell Mama that I'm sorry for causing trouble by jumping in the fight.

“Shit, Tee...don’t tell nobody I told ya, but thanks. Good girl...” Mama smiles, but I’m not sure it’s real. “It’s my own damn fault, should have listened to my Mama. Know what she says? She says, the *best* man is no damn good, and she’s right.”

Mama walks into the bathroom and turns the hot water in the shower on. Soon the whole room is steamy, the walls are sweating, and Daddy is sitting up in bed with his face screwed up. Mama is standing in the mirror of the vanity, wrapping a scarf around her curls to stop them from expanding in the humid air. Daddy hugs me to him, gets out of bed, and walks up behind her.

“How can you stand in something that hot?” he asks her, trying to wrap his arms around her waist.

Mama shrugs him off and turns to face him.

“You need to start practicing,” she snaps and steps into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

“Your mama is something else,” Daddy says, shaking his head and covering his face with a pillow.

Mama stays in the shower a long time. When she comes out, Daddy is sleeping again, and I can’t tell if her face is red from tears or the steam.

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Later that evening, Maw Maw is in the kitchen, making Daddy a birthday cake. Maw Maw is making Daddy’s favorite, chocolate with cheesecake icing.

“Just a little salt to bring the flavor out,” she explains while sprinkling. “Stir this up for me. I need to use the bathroom,”

I don’t really know how to feel except that I’m mad. And even though I wanted to tell him we were coming, I’m mad about that lady in the blue dress too. I’m mad the fuchsia and lime ladies jumped on my Mama like that. Two on one is coward fun, Daddy says, but his friends did exactly that. Eyeing the salt shaker, I twist off the top and dump it all in.

Daddy gets the first bite. His face puckers, sinks in, and my secret is out. Daddy thinks Mama did it and storms out onto the porch. We hear Mama cursing. I get a rare pop from Tante Fille and Daddy leaves the house mad. Mama comes back in the house alone with her first real smile since the one she gave me on the way to The Bullet.

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Joney shows up the next afternoon with all her stuff. Mama explains that she told her she could stay a few weeks while she looks for a place. Even though she isn’t pleased, Tante Fille helps Mama and Joney bring her things into the small room attached to the back porch, which is really just a large closet. Joney looks a little nervous to me. I wonder if Joney will like it here.

“It may leak in here if it rains. Knock on the door, no matter the time, we’ll let you in. My nephew, he play his horn all times of the day and night, so it’s gonna be loud,” Tante Fille advises. “It may not be what you’re used to, but we usually cook every day.”

Mama and Joney disappear into the room and work on arranging the mattress and small dresser. Daddy and his friend, Marcellus are sitting on crates under the banana tree, smoking their weed because Maw Maw doesn't allow it when she is sitting on her porch.

"All Vionne was wearing when I met her was a scarf," Daddy cracks up laughing and takes a drink out of his plastic cup.

"And you wonder about the trouble you got on your hands?" asks Mr. Marcellus.

"She had it tied up some kind of way with these little shorts on underneath. Those are the things that matter to a real young cat, ya dig?"

"Oh, I do..." Mr. Marcellus laughs.

"I had taken some mushrooms earlier, and I swear to God the little ladies I saw dancing on my kitchen counter looked just like her. That's how I knew it was meant to be."

"You crazy as a motherfucker, Rob."

"I fucked up. I know I did. I been thinking though, if I get her a house. Get out of my Mama's, she be happy with me again. Vionne gonna see, I meant everything I said to her."

"How you think she feel about you playing with that dirt?" he asks.

Marcellus shoots me a look, to see if I am listening. I always am.

"Man, Vionne Daddy was a hustler. She know it ain't gonna happen working for what they paying out here. You remember Curtis from out The Olive Grove? Yea that's her pops..."

Daddy and I catch eyes and he gets quiet. He knows how much I pay attention.

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Daddy takes Mama out a few nights in a row. He buys new pots for Maw Maw and Tante Fille, like they use in the restaurant, and a very nice set of encyclopedia. Then Daddy buys new bedroom stuff for everybody. He fixes up the broken fence to where you can't see the rest The Garden or the service road from our backyard. He gets a new trumpet for performing and a guitar that he plays, but not in public.

Daddy gives Joney a pair of shoes while Mama is at the store. I'm sitting out back on the porch with Tante Fille and Joney has the thin temporary door to her room open. We see him walk out with the bag and watch as he stands under her doorsill. The smile that passes between them lasts longer than it should. I look at Tante Fille for answers. She shakes her head and turns her face from mine.

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The next day Daddy pulls up in a new car. Me, Maw Maw, Tante Fille, Mama, and Joney stare in disbelief at the cream colored sedan and its peanut-butter colored interior. Marcellus is in the passenger seat, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"Shit has gotten serious, I suppose," Mama says to Joney.

I circle the car to get a better look, excited about the prospect of leaving sweltering bus stops in the past.

"Get them kids together," Marcellus calls out across the street to our neighbors. His daughter Iema and her Big Mama live over there now. "We fin' to start barbequing."

Marcellus starts unloading sacks of charcoal and packs of raw meat from the trunk. Underneath the meat, I see guns. Two that you can hold in your hand.

“What kind of fool stuff you two into now?” Maw Maw comes to the front door asking.

“Nothing, Mama just a party. Shit it’s Friday right?” Daddy smiles at her.

“It is,” she frowns. “You better have Coors in their too!” she says, eyeing the cases of beer Marcellus is unloading.

“You already know, Ms. Glo. Can’t forget about you.” Marcellus pops open one and passes it to Daddy to hand to Maw Maw.

Pretty soon the grill is fired up and Daddy has music blasting from our new stereo system. I feel like everyone from all fifty buildings of The Gardens, and all the houses on the green tract that surround it, are in our front yard. I don’t know how, but there is enough food for everybody, and enough drink. Nobody is complaining. Daddy says he will pay me and Marcellus’ daughter, Iema to show people how we know all the dances better than the adults.

“Where they at? Look for ‘em!” Daddy shouts at us, tears nearly streaming down his face from laughter, as me and Iema follow his command to do the dance he calls out. He pays us our dollars, which we pin to our shirts.

“It ain’t y’all birthday! Hustlers...but who am I to judge?” Daddy says to us, walking away with Mr. Marcellus when he approaches.

I watch them head over to the edge of the yard beyond Maw Maw’s mini garden and the banana trees. Behind the trees is the door to our fence. It leads to the small alleyway, which leads to the rest of the neighborhood. The alleyway is a secret, almost, because you don’t notice it from the street. As Daddy, and Mr. Marcellus head over there, I notice that on the opposite side of the yard that Joney stands up. She meets Daddy and Mr. Marcellus at the gate. I follow them, Iema behind me.

Behind the gate, there is laughing and talking that I can't make out because of the music and the people. Me and Iema put our faces to the slats. Through the slim openings, I can see Daddy, Joney, and Marcellus, plus a small card table set up and one chair. Each person is taking turns sitting at it, hovering their face close to the table like they are licking it. We stand there watching them for a few minutes without speaking.

"They snorting powder," Iema's says quietly.

"I know," I manage to answer, trying to sound casual, not having any more words for the way I feel.

\*\*\*

Iema tells me late the next evening that she seen our daddies do what they were doing at the party before. Daddy and Marcellus are out somewhere together as usual. Iema drops this news on me on my front porch, as she is sectioning off my hair and plaiting it. Iema laughs, inhales sharply and makes a couple of pig noises.

"But the young boys," she says, "they turn it into little rocks. That's just the small money. My brother told me all about it. Showed me it."

"What and the hell are you all out here talking about?" Tante Fille asks sharply through the screen door.

I can see her face all twisted up.

"Nothing," we answer in unison.

"Better be nothing. Look, Tee, you know me and Maw Maw are heading out on the bus-ride in a few minutes; soon as your Mama gets here. Stay out of grown folks way while we gone, hear?"

Tante Fille's voice kind of shakes.

"You too, Iema."

We nod silently. A long gray car pulls up in front the house, Mama and Joney get out the backseat. The same person is giving MawMaw and Tante Fille a lift. Me and Iema help drag their bags to the car.

"We be back Monday morning. Leaving tonight so we get a full Sunday in." Maw Maw gives me a kiss on the cheek before getting in the car.

"Bring me some money back from that casino!" Mama waves, as they drive off. Joney goes to lie down in her room, and Mama stays on the front porch with me and Iema.

"What's going on with y'all?" she asks.

"Talking about how people be doing that powder and that rock stuff..." Iema answers too quickly.

My hands go up over my mouth.

"Who is *people*?" Mama asks.

"People around here that's all," Iema answers, trying to fix it.

"Well it ain't a good idea to gossip. Run on home. I'm about to go to sleep, and I don't want y'all sitting out here by yourselves."

Iema sucks her teeth, hops off the porch, and scurries across the street to her house.

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The whirl of the ceiling fan feels good on my skin, still damp from the muggy night air. Mama is snoring. I close my eyes and try to sleep, but I can't. I hear the sound of Daddy's



voice on the back porch. I decide to go bother him. Maybe he will play me a song or tell me one of them crazy stories about him and Mama before I was born. With Maw Maw and Tante Fille gone, the house is so silent. The photographs and statuettes that line the hallway to the backdoor are scary in the dark. A shiver runs up my spine, causing my shoulders to shake. I feel afraid before I open the door to the porch, but I do it anyway. I don't see anyone immediately, and then I hear rustling from behind Joney's thin, half-open door. I creep up behind it and peer in.

Joney is sitting on her bed with just a long orange skirt on and no shirt. Daddy's hands are partly covering Joney's nipples and his mouth is on her lips. I bite down hard to keep from yelling out at them. My teeth starting to come through the skin of my bottom lip, I back away slowly from the door. Once I am back inside the house, I pick up the pace, and barrel down the hallway, leaping back in the bed with Mama. All the motion makes her stir and sit up in bed. Hair standing up everywhere, she smiles at me, and looks at the blank space in the bed next to her.

"Now where in the hell is he? Still out?" Mama mutters.

Quickly without thinking, I say the wrong thing.

"He practicing his horn."

"Oh," Mama says. "I'll be right back."

"No! I'm scared. Mama, please don't leave me," I try.

"Come on then, what's wrong with you?"

I trip in the hall to slow us down. When we make it to the back door, I pray that when we open it, it will be over, and Daddy will have his trumpet to his lips. Mama looks around, and notices the soft light coming from Joney's room.

“What you doing up so late, friend?” Mama is already talking, as she pushes open the door.

It’s too late for Daddy and Joney to clean things up. Even though he doesn’t have hands or lips on her anymore, Joney still doesn’t have a shirt on. She is sitting on her bed and Daddy is next to her holding a cigarette lighter, lighting one end of a glass tube, the other of which is in Joney’s mouth.

“What the fuck!” Mama shouts.

“I’m sorry,” Joney says immediately.

“Get the fuck out right now. Take your keys and get the fuck out!” Mama screams.

“What about my stuff, Vionne?”

“That’s the last thing you need to be worried about right now,” Mama says through gritted teeth. Joney looks scared to move.

“Get up now, bitch, and go. I’m not going to hit you. I can’t promise that for too much longer.”

Joney grabs a t-shirt and her keys and damn near sprints past Mama, still topless. I hear her bare feet hitting the wooden floorboards inside hard and then the front door slams. Her car makes a screeching sound that hurts my ears, as it peels off. I look at Daddy, who is sitting on the bed with his face in his hands. Now that it is just the three of us, Mama erupts, leaping at him. Daddy fights her off, and pushes her down onto the bed.

“Fuck, Vionne, shit!” he screams. “Man, Tee get out of here....fuck!”

“So you a fiend plus a fuck around, now?” I hear her shout from my spot just behind the back door.

“I don’t do no rocks, Vionne. Come on,” he answers.

“I bet. At least, I know why her broke ass was taking so long to move into her own shit. My friend, Rob? My friend?”

Mama begins to cry.

“Wasn’t no friend, Vionne.”

“I’m going to need you to get the fuck out too.”

“You putting me out my own Mama house?” Daddy almost laughs.

“You sleep here tonight... You may not wake-up, motherfucker. So that’s on you.”

“Get in the goddamn bed, Tee,” he says, and walks past me to the front door.

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In the morning, Mama brings out two box fans and a bowl of navel oranges to the back porch and asks me to come with her. Our rockers are near where the temporary door used to be. Joney’s room looks like a big hole now.

“Ugh do you smell that? How the hell was she sleeping in there?”

Mama gestures to a bucket of rotten water near the mattress. A mildewing mop sticks out of the bucket.

“All my ass saw was red. I couldn’t smell shit last night.” Mama laughs then turns serious. “Look Tee, I don’t ever want you to mess with drugs you hear me? What you saw last night, something you shouldn’t have ever had to see, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Mama. You don’t have to worry.” I try to reassure her.

“I’m gonna go out for the day, hear? You gonna spend a night at Iema’s tonight till Maw Maw and Fille get back, okay? I just need to cool off.”

“Is Daddy on that stuff?” I ask her, already knowing the answer.

We go inside and Mama and I get dressed. She packs a small bag. Mama goes into the closet and opens Daddy’s big black safe. She tries to block my vision with her body, but I see her take two square bricks wrapped in brown paper out of it, and zip it up into her bag.

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We walk across the street and up on our neighbor’s porch. Mama knocks on their door. Iema and her Big Mama come outside. Iema looks at me shaking her head and reaches out to give me a play hug.

“I heard your Daddy got in trouble.”

I jerk away from her and suck my teeth.

“And yours about to, when he make it home...”

Iema laughs.

“I’m about to go, okay?” Mama says. “I called a cab. I got to meet my ride. Tomorrow, my baby,” she hugs me tight. She gives me one last squeeze and then the cab is here. Me, Iema and her Big Mama watch the yellow and black -checkered car drive off.

“You know what I feel like eating?” Iema says.

She is just about to speak when I spot Daddy’s car coming up the way. He makes the right turn at the corner to pull up into our driveway. Iema stays up on the porch and I walk down the steps. Daddy is standing outside of his car with his hands behind his head. Working the nerve up to put his key in the door, I figure.

“My Daddy’s home!” I shout out like a little bitty girl, before I remember that there is no one inside. More cars round the corner, sirens on, and then there is nothing but light and sound.

## STARS OVER MISSISSIPPI

There was a powwow in Natchez, Mississippi on Friday and Big Mama had to be there. It wasn't one of the good ones, too many tourists and white people, but still we were going. It was just one city bus to the Greyhound station, making a complicated thing real simple, she said. If we left on the dawn bus, we'd be in Mississippi by late afternoon, right on time for the opening dance. As we made our way up the street to the bus-stop with our pillowcase luggage, Papo was in full protest mode.

“This, this is not good at all. Not good. I would like to go to school.”

“School!?” Big Mama exclaimed. “What kinda child complains about missing a day of school?”

I didn't mind missing at all actually. Maybe Papo's second grade was more fascinating than my eighth-grade. Probably so, just cause Papo and his huge brain was there.

“Education, Big Mama, is essential,” Papo replied seriously.

“Education, my ass,” Big Mama scoffed. “That Ms. Thomas is a dingbat.”

Big Mama had never forgiven Ms. Thomas for asking that she draw something *regular* on the hand painted decks of cards and homemade candles that Big Mama planned on selling at the school fair. Ms. Thomas had stumbled on Big Mama's Kama Sutra deck, while browsing her wares at a street festival and thought it a fair request. Big Mama wasn't keen on reprimands, especially requests that were really ill-disguised commands.

“You better tell him to get happy like you, Iema,” Big Mama said to me. “We off!” she laughed, ruffling Papo's curls as he scowled.

Papo was an excellent card player. His sour attitude would fade as the trip went on. Soon he would be all about the cards. Big Mama's decks of cards did more than just entertain us; they entertained other people too. They were perfect for livening up a dull station or silent bus ride.

"A card game is an excellent ice breaker. Good for getting to know people." Big Mama taught us.

Not to mention a great way to make pocket change. Big Mama's games always involved a wager if she could help it. We had to fund our travelling somehow and three bus tickets to whatever town we were headed to were expensive. Besides, Big Mama also believed in the fundamental rights of people to eat and sleep for free. Thousands of years it had occurred with human beings never exchanging a dollar for it. Big Mama intended to continue that tradition. So, playing cards was our currency.

"We actually lose money sometimes, Big Mama or our opponent does. It isn't free. It's not," Papo pointed out when Big Mama first explained her philosophy to us.

Big Mama didn't consider what she won "earned" money, so it didn't hurt much to lose it. Besides, while Big Mama would hit the road to sell her wares, without so much as a thought to what else might need doing, she wasn't much for games of chance. It didn't hurt to lose because mostly Big Mama won. It was the tiniest detail on the deck of cards she used to play with strangers. All one hundred and four cards had a simple white background. Same Isis, one knee on the ground, one raised, arms open, gaze forward. Except on some cards Isis wore a nose ring. The tiniest fleck of iridescence and tiny pin-prick drop of gold paint. The amateur eye would not discern the difference in the cards, but the trained eye, as we were, knew what to look for. Big Mama created subtle differences on all of her cards. Sometimes,

if she really liked the person she sold them to, she would tell them. We used the marked cards for blackjack, our biggest money-making game. Big Mama made sure we could tell the difference between high and low.

“Cheating!” Papo declared when Big Mama first showed us the deck and the trick of it. He had the strong moral resistance to dishonesty that up until that point Big Mama had raised us to have. “It isn’t very nice, Big Mama. It isn’t.” Papo shook his worried head from side to side.

Silently, I had agreed.

“Cheating? What kind of little Indians are you? My Daddy was cheated out of a whole hell of a lot. You been cheated outta citizenship in your own nation. Do you know the phrase ‘blood quantum’?”

“Actually, Big Mama, I do.”

“Then tell me, what’s cheating got to do with rent or the price of lunch, Papo?”

I laughed. It was true. I liked when Big Mama called us little Indians. She had her card from the Mississippi Band, so she hadn’t got cheated, just her generations, she liked to say. For all of his protests at the outset, Papo was the best at Big Mama’s scheme of subtly marked cards. He had a hawk-eye and even better memory. He was fiercely competitive and committed to winning. I liked to talk a bit too much, developed too much empathy for my opponent, which made it harder to just take their money. Big Mama said that would make me a good fortune teller, so don’t worry, I could hustle cards of another sort. Papo was made for the game. He and Big Mama couldn’t win all the time, but they damn sure knew when to hit, when to stand and when to double-down.



“And that right there is the key to all this shit,” Big Mama said with an accomplished humph, the first time Papo successfully scammed a lady on the way to a zydeco fest in Lafayette. “It’s called beating them at their own game. Don’t ever be sorry. You don’t owe anybody shit. Least of all an apology.”

But not even Papo was better than Big Mama herself. She had this instinct that couldn’t be matched of how to pick a mark, when to keep going, how to stop, just before her opponent pulled out a deck of their own. She knew just how far to push against the borders of luck and when to accept defeat.

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I was excited to get to Mississippi. When we got on the bus, it was packed full of white people in highlighter yellow t-shirts. All of t-shirts had a picture of a tipi on the front and a back that said, “Christ’s mission” in purple and pink bubble- letters. They were young and middle-aged, dingy and yellowed. A lot of people stared. Because of them we were the only brown things on board. Big Mama said not to let the staring bother us. They no better than you, catching the bus too. No, don’t bat an eyelash, she said. Big Mama had something else up her sleeve, and we knew it.

Papo spotted our mark.

“Are you a pilot, sir? Papo asked earnestly. “I love planes as well,” he said, gesturing to the illustrations in the thick, old, book the man held.

I could see from where I sat pictures of old looking planes.

“A P-51. One of World War II’s most popular aircraft,” Papo continued.

At that the man could not help but smile, eyes wide. Papo’s mind was incredible.

“How *does* that lil’ boy know all that shit?” Big Mama laughed and slapped her knees.

“A smart little rascal isn’t he?” the man remarked to Big Mama, handing the book to Papo for closer inspection.

“Yep. A real smart little boy,” Big Mama answered.

“Where y’all headed?” he asked.

“Up to Jackson to see some family.” Big Mama fibbed. “I’m some awful bored. Can I interest you in a game or two?” Big Mama asked, patting the deck of cards in her lap and batting her long eyelashes.

Big Mama was a pretty lady. I knew the man would agree. At fifty-one, Big Mama could look half her age, depending on her mood or day of the week. Lots of times people could hardly believe she was our grandmother. She looked best when we were on the road and this trip was no exception. That man was no match for Big Mama.

“Well, I think I might just take you up on that,” the man replied, patting Big Mama’s wrist, making the dozen silver and stone bracelets she wore rattle and clang against one another. Big Mama shuffled the deck quickly. The man, staring more at Big Mama’s ornate jewelry, the rings she wore on every finger, than the cards themselves.

“Blackjack?” she asked with a grin. “Are you a betting man, Mr....?”

“Smith. Mr. Charles Tate Smith,” he responded.

“Can I call you Charlie?”

“Mr. Smith, but let’s get this game started.”

Big Mama took his slight without missing a beat. He would pay the price for that crack. Big Mama would show no mercy. Truly nice people we did not scam. They didn’t

deserve it. Regular folks only enough for lunch, they had to figure they were going to lose *something* when they decided to gamble. But people like Charles Tate Smith, she'd clean their clock if they were stupid enough to let her. He was so arrogant; we'd eat for a week off his certainty.

Big Mama won over and over and over again. She lost hands in between. It wasn't designed to be a sure thing. But nevertheless she beat him. Breakfast. Lunch. And dinner. He was a very unlucky man.

"I don't know, missy, but you are beating me square away," he huffed.

*Missy*, I didn't like the sounds of that, so I knew Big Mama didn't either.

"Least I can say a pretty squaw is the one took all my money. Shit, if I didn't know better I'd say you were cheating me..."

His chuckle sounded kind of nasty to me.

Big Mama took her braid, which hung over her left shoulder, grazing the cards in front of them, and whipped it back. She picked up all fifty-two cards with the other hand and demanded we get up and follow her to the front. Tall, curvy, and solid, she led the way. I hoped they had seats or it would be an embarrassing walk back and an uncomfortable few hours left to go, sitting so close to Mr. Smith. There were only two seats, but Big Mama said not to worry, just sit on my lap, Papo. We'd be getting off soon.

I was confused. We were still in Louisiana, not even to Mississippi yet. I didn't know what we were doing. The bus pulled into the Baton Rouge station, and we got off, leaving Mr. Smith and his red face behind.

"What are we doing here, Big Mama? This isn't part of the plan," Papo questioned.

“No, baby it isn’t. But that Charles Tate Smith didn’t mean us any good. But I did him one better, believe that.”

“So what are we going to do now?” I asked.

“Thinking on it, but I have an idea.”

Big Mama made her way to a pay phone and made a few calls. Papo and I played cards on our own. There were no differences in the pictures on our Isis deck, so Big Mama said. Ours were her most special deck and Papo’s hawk eyes were never able to prove her wrong. We didn’t pay any attention to her lively chitter-chatter of English mixed with the choppy words we didn’t know. Big Mama seemed to know people everywhere. That accounted for our free sleeping when travelling. We usually couldn’t afford hotels. Big Mama did not typically con that much money from people. Greedy people were sorry people, she liked to say.

A ride came.

“This is Mr. Freddy. One of my best friends. Matter fact, I almost married him,” Big Mama laughed and slapped his shoulders.

“Yes, she did. Can y’all believe it?”

We shook our heads. Mr. Freddy squatted down on his haunches to get eye-level with Papo.

“So, these are Kimmy’s babies?” he said almost in wonder. “Haven’t seen y’all since....”

I stared at his wrinkled, yet handsome face, trying to remember him. Mr. Freddy’s eyes were a funny color green-brown that stood out like lights on his brown skin. His coarse hair was long and black, streaked with gray. He wore it plaited in two braids with yellow and

red rubber bands around each. I decided I liked him. He knew my mother. I didn't hear her name much. Papo could barely remember her.

“Yep, these are hers. Can you believe it's been this long?”

“Nah, I can't. It's past time for this reunion. Come on, load up!”

We climbed in Mr. Freddy's reddish pickup truck and lined up four across the front seat. He switched the music in the tape-deck between blues and the drum music Big Mama listened to sometimes. Mr. Freddy said he was Choctaw too, more than Big Mama. She laughed and hit him on his shoulder. Mr. Freddy grew up in Philadelphia with her. Mr. Freddy said he had a full-blood wife and grown kids out there.

It was a good ride.

Papo kept himself entertained counting the exit signs and chiming in their conversation whenever he felt like it. I kept my eyes closed, letting the earthy smell of the road hit my face. I liked how the happy sound of Big Mama's voice filled the cabin of the truck. We rode a little ways before we saw a big green sign that said, “St. Gabriel.”

“She will be so happy to you,” Big Mama said, fluffing my tight curls and making them poke out everywhere.

*She will be so happy to see me?* I let the words roll silently over my tongue.

“Almost there,” Mr. Freddy said.

Papo read the sign aloud when it first became visible. “Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women.” He paused. “Big Mama is this a prison?”

He had never been. And Big Mama had forbid me to mention it to him ever. To save him his obsession. Instead she had told him Mama was away at college.

“Yeah. Yes it is. Y’all mama is here. I should have told you a better way. But here we are.”

Tears came to my eyes from some far off place. Mama had been gone a long time. At least three birthdays of mine that I could remember without her. The last one she was at, she was wearing a yellow dress. She danced with me, I think. Papo was still not talking then and everyone was worried that he might be slow.

“Big Mama,” Papo said, “is my father a criminal too?”

“Of a sort,” Mr. Freddy chuckled.

Big Mama patted Papo’s head. “My daughter is crazy about him, whatever the case, baby. Still is. He comes up here to see her.”

This seems to satisfy Papo, but I felt something bubbling inside me I never had before.

“Well I don’t want to see her!” I shouted suddenly before deciding to.

“Yes you do, baby. Even if you don’t know it,” Mr. Freddy said, trying to pat my back. I jerked my body away and turned to Big Mama.

“And why didn’t *you* tell me we were coming here?” I screamed. My chest burned with a bit of fear at my emotion. I had never yelled or even been angry with Big Mama before.

“Don’t be disrespectful to your grandmama, now. I won’t have that kind of mess,” Mr. Henry admonished.

“So, my mother is a criminal...interesting. This explains so many things. What did she do wrong?” Papo asked hands clasped.

“Sold something she wasn’t supposed to,” Big Mama answered. “And if she would have listened to me...she damn sure wouldn’t be sitting in here. And I didn’t tell you because hell, wasn’t no good way to spring this on you. I wasn’t thinking straight. I just wanted to see my child...”

“Big Mama,” Papo interrupted.

“Yes?” she always obliged his questions.

“It isn’t nice to lie.”

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We waited for Mama in a big, open room. When she walked out, I ran to her, the same way I had cried for her earlier, the same way I had screamed at Big Mama, before knowing that I would or why. She smelled like lemon and tobacco. I remembered that. She squeezed me so tight, I thought I would pop, but I didn’t mind. Papo stood back a bit, she had to pull him to her, but he relented easily.

I missed her.

She kissed Big Mama and they hugged and stepped apart.

Big Mama stepped outside to smoke a cigarette, leaving us alone with her. I stared at her face. She was a nutty brown with a mass of curls, weaving themselves into one another around her shoulders.

“So you can draw too, right?” she said to me. “That’s good. I can’t. She was always mad with me for that,” Mama laughed. “Do she make you help with her shit too?”

“Of course,” I couldn’t help giggling. “And we better not mess up!”

“Big Mama is a perfectionist,” Papo chimed in.

Mama laughed, then hiccupped, and sniffed back her tears.

She had wings tattooed across her wrists. One on each, so when she clapped her hands, they flapped. She did this over and over again for Papo.

“I’m sorry you have to see me like this. And I’m sorry she just showed up. A lot of shit my mama do don’t make sense.”

“It is perfectly understandable,” Papo replied, resting his head on one of her shoulders and patting the other. “You don’t have a choice.”

When Big Mama came back into the visiting room, we knew it was almost time to go. To say she had planned this whole trip, she barely said a word to Mama really.

“How long will you be here?” I ask her.

“You will be seventeen and Papo will be fourteen,” Mama says without pause. She bent over for a moment hair on her knees.

No more lies.

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Mr. Freddy had been nice enough to wait for us that whole time. When we got back in his truck, I didn’t know which way we were headed, Mississippi or home. I stared at Mr. Freddy’s lined but still handsome face while he talked. I wondered why exactly Big Mama didn’t marry him. My Mama occurred to me, but I didn’t know what to do with the thought.

“I think I’m going to ride out to Philadelphia.”



“See Rita and them boys?”

“Men now. But yeah, even if they don’t want to see me. I’m going to get y’all to Natchez first. I been gone long time, ain’t no use rushing now.”

Papo sat real silent, which was unusual. Mr. Freddy put on some music, and I resolved to be a wild woman like my Big Mama, who made men come pick us up and drive us way to Mississippi. The song’s raunchy lyrics did the trick and made Papo laugh and Big Mama squeal. The smell of my Mama had faded from my skin by the chorus’ end and I felt light. I let her leave me again. Big Mama handed me a container filled with beads to string into bracelets and necklaces and anklets. Papo bagged the decks of cards into the tiny hand sewn and decorated sacks. We traveled light in terms of things to sell. Like Big Mama said, it wasn’t about the result. It was about the work, and if your work was beauty, you alright.

We got to Natchez in what felt like no time. The earth rolled up all around us and the smell of the river hit me. We got out by the mounds.

“Emerald Mound,” Big Mama said tapping the earth. This is where you come from, baby.”

She walked off on her own, ducked behind one of the larger hills and emerged with a fresh pair of jeans on and a new white t-shirt. Her brown hair hung loose and plumed out around her. We lined up and Mr. Freddy took pictures of us, I thought we looked good standing all brown against those big green mounds.

“Got damn, you look damn good,” Mr. Freddy shouted out from behind the lens.

“Ain’t nothing changed,” Big Mama replied back with a sly grin.

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Driving into the campgrounds the first thing I noticed was how many white people were there.

“Everyone here is white!” Papo shouted, reading my mind.

“The trip part of it is... a lot of them is Indian,” Mr. Freddy laughed shaking his head.

“We definitely the brownest things in town, besides the lady that’s cooking the fry bread,” Big Mama agreed, surveying the camp ground.

“It’s a little bit different in Philadelphia to be black, but just a little,” Mr. Freddy explained to us. “More people like us out where we grew up.”

People like us. Us.

I liked that word.

Mr. Freddy parked his truck on the grass and said he was going to stay awhile and enjoy the day before he got on the road to Philadelphia. We took off running across the camp ground. I chased Papo across the big field with my mouth open, catching all the bits of dust and debris in it. I was going so fast, I crashed smack into the back of a white man and his son, nearly knocking them over. Papo spotted me and ran in my direction.

“My sister apologizes. She is very excited to be here,” he said, before I could speak.

I saw the look I was used to seeing people have the first time they heard Papo speak, so clearly like an adult man.

“Not a problem at all, young man,” he smiled. His accent was so heavy like the Southern accents you heard on television.

“Those were little Indians,” I heard him tell his son like we were rare finds at a thrift store.

Not quite, but yes, I thought to myself.

We spotted Mr. Freddy across the field and ran in his direction.

“Wrecking shop already!” Mr. Freddy yelled out scooping Papo up in his arms and raising him up above his head.

“It was my sister. It was Iema!” he gave me up quick.

“You supposed to take the fall for her!” Mr. Freddy exclaimed.

Papo looked up at him in confusion. For Papo there was nothing outside of the truth.

“Where is Big Mama?” I asked.

“Somewhere causing more trouble than y’all, no doubt,” Mr. Freddy replied. “Let’s go find her.”

We followed Mr. Freddy across the field and spotted her. She was walking from booth to booth talking with the merchants. We didn’t sign-up to sell officially, but that wasn’t going to stop Big Mama, she would yield something for her efforts. She did. In exchange for some of her decks, candles and jewelry, and charms, she bartered for a treasure of gifts. A big blanket, two clay pots, two baskets, one jingle skirt, three books. One novel, a speller, and dictionary all in Choctaw for Papo.

“Damn woman, you cleaned up proper!” Mr. Freddy kissed Big Mama’s cheek. I changed into my skirt, liking the way the sound made me feel, when I walked. We all made our way to a big pecan tree and spread one of the blankets underneath it. Big Mama rested her back against it, closed her eyes and breathed in deep.

“See, this what I call chilling out,” she said. “Pretty please, Freddy, go get us some frybread? I can’t move. Think I found a new home under this tree.”

Mr. Henry obliged and started off in the direction of the frybread stand. Papo followed alongside.

“So are you happy, Iema? Happy to live with Big Mama?”

“Yeah, Big Mama,” I answered truthfully.

“So, you would come with me if I came out to live here, again?”

“Yes! I want to come with you!” I shouted. “Please, Big Mama. Please don’t ever leave me.”

“Never baby, never,” Big Mama said, opening her eyes. “I was just asking.”

Mr. Freddy and Papo returned with huge Frisbee -sized pieces of frybread and three cokes. Mr. Freddy took another picture of us and asked a passerby to snap one of all four of us together. The day turned to dusk before our eyes. The pink, orange and coral of the evening was suddenly everywhere, enveloping us, and the tree in it. I never remembered feeling better. The dancing was starting, but first more drumming and singing.

A man on a microphone called out each of the drummer’s names.

The one called Adam Bridges stood out to me because his skin was darker than all four of ours and even though his hair was straight as any other drummer; I knew he was one of *our* people, like Mr. Freddy said. The man on the microphone encouraged everyone in the audience to be generous and make sure to leave something on the drummers’ blanket to help with the trip back home. Mr. Freddy and Big Mama encouraged us to get up and get a spot in front because everyone would be gathering soon to watch the dancers. Papo and I listened, walking hand in hand away from the tree. We got a good spot by jimmying our way through Indians, and white people, white Indians, and tourists, who made way for us because of Papo’s sweet and reasonable little demands.

“We are much smaller, please, make room in the front. Please, be kind. Yes, it would be proper to let us pass, sir.”

The dancers came out in a single file line, patting quick two steps with each foot, as they walked. Then the music intensified, they separated, and spread their arms out like wings. Darkness fell over the grounds. The voice on the microphone returned while we waited for the men to come out.

“Be generous, be generous, it is a long way home for some folk,” the emcee said.

Adam Bridges smiled. I spotted Big Mama again for the first time since the dancing began. I didn't see Mr. Freddy anywhere. I asked Papo to scan the crowd and his eagle eyes, found Mr. Freddy sitting with a group of men. I turned my attention back to Big Mama and saw her pulling a wad of cash out of a thick, brown, leather wallet. There were lights stuck in the ground on poles round the drummers.

“Papo, where Big Mama got all that money from?”

He paused.

“Big Mama is a thief!” he whispered to me. “That's Charles Tate Smith's wallet!”

Charles Tate Smith, Big Mama had said, don't worry about him. She was his two-bits- change and she was right.

“A good thief, like Robin Hood and his merry men,” he added and smiled.

We watched Big Mama drop the cash onto the blanket. I watched her feet. Blue moon on one slipper and yellow sun on the other, skipping lightly and stepping. I looked up once at the stars out there in the big field, but I was scared to keep doing it. If I looked up long enough, I'd tire of waiting on my mother. Tire of earth altogether. I hooked my toes into the

dirt for dear life and kept my eyes on Big Mama. Skipping and stepping, on her own time,  
outside of the circle.

## DRIVE SLOW

Sigrid said she was five minutes away, but that was three cigarettes ago. I didn't have anything to wear and so, every extra minute of waiting to get the night started was killing me. I pushed my feet into tan cowboy boots and fought the jabbing in my stomach that made me want to cry. Maybe Sigrid was having the same problem. Most of her clothes were in New York— mine underwater in New Orleans. Outside on the porch, I waited. Stared down at the houses located lower in the hills than my father's apartment. The distinct feeling of being perched rather than tucked down deep made me shiver. Georgia was cold in the winter. Cold and no water.

I hadn't ashed the butt or put it out, before I had another cigarette lit. I liked to blame Roxie, for my almost pack a day habit. One after another, I had sucked them back out in front of Motel 6 in Houston. Watching more and more people, show up and leave, show-up and leave. Roxie had all the info. Who was giving away what where. Which places had short lines; where if you went, you would punch some white person's teeth out, so don't go. She left the motel after a week with a voucher from a church and headed to an apartment complex. She wasn't wasting no time. Roxie knew it all. Corey died in Texas before the month was out. I wondered if she knew that.

The Volvo's silver doors vibrated on the red road. I smiled at the sight of Sigrid, as she pulled up the hill. Sigrid was pretty. Her eyes were green like Christmas holly and her cherry- red hair hung in loose mermaid- waves almost to her waist. Bank\$ invited us out and

there was no way we weren't going; clothes or no clothes. Sigrid drove down to Georgia after breaking up with her boyfriend with a pair of black over the knee boots and couple dresses and not much else. The boots, however, did the trick on even the most basic things she had acquired. I got in the car and huffed; still not happy with my outfit. My jeans were cheap and too short and cuffed uncomfortably into my boots. My denim jacket was beat up. They were all things I had dug through donation piles for. Sigrid could tell I was feeling pissy and wouldn't have it.

“You look beautiful. Like a blonde Princess Jasmine with a booty! Now, loosen up, Kaloneeka. Like really.” Sigrid reached her hand down the back of my shirt and unhooked my strapless bra, pulled it quickly out from under my arm, and through my shirt sleeve with one motion. “Now that's better,” she said, looking me up and down in the passenger seat. Sigrid pulled down the overhead mirror and made sure the V of her white t-shirt was as low as it could go, and tied the bottom into a knot tightly under her ribs. “Now you look like you're going to have some fun.”

We met outside the mall in Coburn, the actual town, not Atlanta (like my father said) that he was living in. Sigrid needed a lighter and even with just such a short exchange, we were both acutely aware of the other. Anyone, who looked like they were from somewhere other than Coburn, Georgia. Georgia was not a place I had ever wanted to be. It was only disaster that brought me here. It was a disaster of a kind for Sigrid too; an ex-boyfriend, who kept sex-tapes in his safe. Now she was here. So, Sigrid and I were also alike in that no matter how sad we were, we liked to have fun. We weren't exactly chasing it, but we wouldn't turn it down either. What else was there to do out here?



“Girl, this is some fucked up shit, right?” Roxie said one afternoon in Houston. “It’s just starting to sink in that we’re not going back home. Least no time soon.” Roxie shook her head. “Girl, these evil motherfuckers. Those bitches were trying to send my sister and them way to motherfucking Utah. You know we cut up. Then they threaten to put cuffs on me. Like the nerve of us not to want to go separate from one another. How the fuck that go?”

Roxie reached in her bag and gave me two cartons of Kools. I asked her what she wanted in return. The night before that, I had traded packs of socks for cans of green beans and box jambalaya. Before that I traded a dude down the hall from me laundry detergent, razors, coconut oil, and shampoo for some of the tennis shoes he was selling. Roxie didn’t want anything back from me. She said her son had a whole trunk full of cigarettes. Take them. One less thing to worry about for a while.

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Atlanta was huge and spread out. Its sprawling nature wasn’t something Sigrid or I was used to. The absence of water made it hard for us both to find our bearings. The studio was in Bankhead or was it Buckhead? And where the fuck were the SWATs? Buckhead kind of reminded me of the Garden District, but not really.

We got lost all the time. It didn’t help that we were usually loaded on our excursions to the city. We met Bank\$ at a gas station while we were asking for directions to the Lennox Mall. Sigrid’s wanted to go shopping before her ex-boyfriend cancelled her credit card.

Bank\$' Mercedes with its black, on black, on black, tint, paint, and rims pulled in behind us. I liked the way it sat there amongst the old money that surrounded it. When Bank\$ stepped out of the car, I smiled, like I knew him. His was one of the few familiar faces I had seen in Atlanta.

I had all four of Bank\$' albums, from when he was still independent to his latest, which was the soundtrack to the new movie he was starring in. It felt like a big deal to just see him out pumping gas, and regular all at the same time. He smiled back. First at Sigrid. Then at me. He was tall and slim and muscular. His teeth and his Caesar- haircut were fucking perfect.

“Where y'all from, shorty?” he said to me. “Not here, right?”

“That easy to tell?”

“Yeah, real easy. Hungry? Me and my boy going to Benihana. Just park your car. The white folks won't bother it.” Bank\$ winked at Sigrid and she had to laugh.

This would make Pooch way angrier than a credit card bill, she whispered once we were getting in the car with Bank\$. The inside of his car smelled sharp and new. Sigrid sat in the backseat and made small talk with Bank\$' friend. Bank\$ was close enough to smell. So was his friend. Like kush, orange-peelings and Black and Milds.

I inhaled. Nothing made sense and I didn't try to force it. Home was awash. Corey was dead and I was riding through Georgia with a rapper, I listened to everyday for the last ten years. On the restaurant floor our waiter threw the shrimp high into the air and caught it

with a flourish. Bank\$' friend, Mikhel seemed amazed by Sigrid's accent and her breasts and she was happy to oblige him. Meanwhile, Bank\$ and I talked.

“I never thought I'd see the day some shit like that happen in America...”

“Really? Seems par for the course, don't you think?”

“I guess you right. I shouldn't be surprised. I'm just mad they left y'all out there like that.”

“Me too.”

“You two gonna come back out tonight, right?” Bank\$ asked, as he ordered more food and sake. “Don't worry about gas, you feel me. Come chill at the studio.”

I wasn't driving, but I didn't even have to ask to say yes.

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Royal Hustle's entryway was guarded by a big dude named Head. He smiled rose-gold at us and held the door open. Inside, it was all red, gold, black and white. Bank\$ led us down the labyrinth of hallways to the master recording studio.

“Here, hit this,” Mikhel said, and passed the blunt to me. It was good. The wrap sweet and natural.

Soon Bank\$ was behind the glass.

“So, how come girls from New Orleans are so mean?” Mikhel asked Sigrid, while rolling up another cigar.

“I’m not from New Orleans. I’m from New York.” Sigrid fake flipped her hair over her shoulder.

“Y’all mean too, but you,” Mikhel pointed at me, “y’all some muh’fucking trouble makers that’s for sure. Turned this city out. Y’all both mean but I like it...”

Mikhel hit a switch on the wall and the lights dimmed down all the way. The sound of Bank\$’ voice from the glassed in booth filled the room. I stood up and did a little dance for them. Fake it till you make it, she mouthed.

“Man, I woulda told KeeKee and them to come, but Bryan said he was recording.”

A new voice broke in the dark. The new voice sucked his teeth. Then another voice answered.

“Man, that’s cold. Them lil’ chicks was tryna come through so bad too.”

“Don’t mind my little brother and his people.” Mikhel turned up the lights.

“What you laughing at? And why you have them shoes on?” the young one laughed and pointed at my feet.

“I’m from New Orleans. This is all I got, fam.”

The young one sucked his teeth and I sneered at him, bit down hard not to cry. I felt that jabbing way down low in my belly, every time I put these shoes on. I remembered digging them out of a heap of beat up things. 7.5, 9, 9.5; finally an 8.

Bank\$ told the engineer to cut the recording off.

“Nigga, you lucky, I ain’t really working. Let’s get outta here. Y’all wanna go to Magic City? These lil’ niggas not even old enough to get in.” Bank\$ threw his hat at the one who had said something about my shoes.

“I’m a man though. Got bodies on me already,” the boy answered.

Bank\$ just shook his head and we walked out Royal Hustle into the night.

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The DJ announced Three the Hard Way was coming up. Magic City was packed. Bank\$ had his own section in the strip club. The four of us sat on sofas, not too close, but with a perfect view of the stage. We had our own private platform and pole. The lights went lower and the music louder. The crowd whooped its enthusiasm and three girls came out onto the stage. One girl had her hair dyed the color of red, yellow, and orange-blue flames. I knew the other two of them, Panda and Peanutt, from home. Panda’s ass and her breasts had gotten bigger, but her hair was all gone. She was almost bald and what was left was bleach blonde. Peanutt, wore a blood -blue Farrah Fawcett wig and put two snakebites under her bottom lip, and a Marilyn Monroe piercing above her top one.

The three of them were doing this trick where Panda positioned herself onto the pole flipped upside down; her feet serving as a base for Peanut to appear to be lying flat out like a table top across them. Peanutt playing table, gripped the pole with the inside of her thighs, while the fire -haired girl stood atop her and made the fringe on her outfit, and her ass

cheeks, and the meat on them move in all different directions. Strippers are strong people. They called that shit the spinning top.

“I know them,” I said.

“Who?” Bank\$ asked.

“The bald one. And the blue- haired one with the piercings.” I watched as they exited the stage and collected their roses, while the floor man collected their trash-bags full of dollars.

“Oh yeah? From where?”

“Home. The bald tatted one, she used to fuck with my dude.”

“Nigga, won’t tip that one then,” Bank\$ rested his weight on my back for a second and I leaned into it.

“Nah, it’s cool. He’s dead now,” I said.

Bank\$ cupped my shoulders in his palms and massaged.

I motioned in Panda’s direction. She saw me and Bank\$ and a big smile spread across her face. She was cute with those two little golds. We were still here. No one could say we didn’t still exist. That we hadn’t landed on our feet, at least for the night. She bounced as she headed over to our section. I picked up a stack of Bank\$’ ones and flicked them playfully at her. Mikhel gave Sigrid some more bills and Sigrid laid them out in a heart shape around our pole. Panda hopped up on the platform, swung once around and squatted right down in the middle of the heart. She popped a little, then stood up and put her ass right in my face. I

smacked it—hard. The DJ played one of Bank\$’ songs and the dollar bills began to fall from the sky.

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We dropped Mikhel off at home to his wife. Then the three of us pulled up in front of a huge white, antebellum-style mansion in Buckhead. The long winding driveway almost made my stomach sick. Sigrid sort of tripped through the massive double -doors. Inside, floor- to- ceiling paintings, from Disney animation to Marvel superheroes hung on the graffiti-muraled walls. There was also one Basquiat, not a print. I paused in front of it.

“Yeah, my people got that long money. I wanna show y’all the extended trailer for the movie. Y’all gonna like it.”

“We better,” Sigrid said.

Bank\$ led us through the huge first floor to an elevator and then up into an in-home theatre. We settled onto the red velvet sofa. He hit the lights and clicked a button and a projection screen slinked down the wall and the trailer started for “ATLast”. Maybe because I was so high, it took a moment for the light tugging on my hair to register. When it did, I saw that it was Bank\$’ hand in it. His left hand rested palm down on Sigrid’s thigh, and he was playfully winding his fingers in and out of my curls with his right one. I looked around the room at its over the top opulence. There were mirrors and gold-leafing everywhere. I was long way from where I had been. The water had come and bottomed me out. There was nothing like the way death surprised. One day I would move his body home. I told Sigrid the

story that first day we met. I found Corey face down on the floor in Motel 6; in Houston. The official story was cardiac arrest, but it was that water killed him. I know it did.

Bank\$' hand moved from my curls to the back of my neck. I was nervous, also comfortable, and buzzed. It was excitement that had the hairs on my neck standing up. Sigrid shifted in her seat, and passed the blunt on the other side of Bank\$.

“How you skip me?”

“I'm not skipping you,” Sigrid kind of slurred.

Bank\$ did not move his hand from my neck. His grip grew a little tighter and he pulled me to him. Sigrid moved closer to the two of us and rested her gold-ringed hands on my shoulder. She placed the other one on Bank\$' chest.

“Yes. Yes,” she said. “I just want my friend to be happy.”

“Who you?” Bank\$ looked at me. “You? Kaloneeka. The mean one from New Orleans? You ain't mean. Nah, not that mean at all...”

He was right.

It was warm and wet everywhere. Everywhere there were hands or a mouth. Something for each one. Hard and soft. I moved between them like the three of us had always been together. Bank\$' broad shoulders felt like a shield; something with some with some real weight behind it. *You –look- so- damn –good.* Bank\$ said into my ear. *Just-like-that.* In front of me were Sigrid's open arms, spread like a crown. Afterward, Sigrid passed out and Bank\$ and I were still slick from sweat.



“You are kind of amazing me right now. And I’ve done it all.”

“Me too,” I told him. It was true. We talked the whole time as we moved in and out of each other again. Who wanted to leave this earth with a thirst?

“You know you some familiar for somebody I never met before.”

“Am I?” I squeezed my legs around him.

“I don’t know. Yes. No...Goddamn...Do that again.”

In the morning, Sigrid snored under the matte gold sheets. Bank\$ brought my shoes up from the theatre. He sang as he fingered the battered leather and placed the shoes next to the bed table. I had dug the cowboy boots out of a heap of beat-up things at a fire-station in Texas.

“I almost didn’t come out behind these ugly ass shoes.”

Banks laughed out loud at that, and Sigrid stirred but remained asleep.

“How long you think you gonna be in Atlanta, Kalo-nee-ka?”

“I don’t know.” I answered him right away. What else could I say?

Banks stood in front me and I put my chin in the cradle he made out of his hands.

“I know one thing. Nigga can’t never forget you.”

I hoped in the end, I could say the same. I knew I would spend the next years in a fugue trying to name what I had lost, trying to arrange and rearrange the debris of bones. But

for now, between sight of Bank\$' bare chest and the light coming through and reflecting off the back of Sigrid's red -head, for a second, it was almost like I was home.

## PER CAPITA

### *Indian Red. 2013.*

The first man Kalo ever loved was a hustler—a killer too. In that way she was blessed. He taught her two things, more, but this is what she will share: all you got in this life is your balls and your word. Play your hand close to your chest. The city Kalo grew up in changes infinitely and infinitesimally by the square foot. Dead men, ghosts, babies, slave ships, and the drums, and jewelry, who knows how they got it on board. All these things crowd the sidewalks, and jam up all the doorways, which are filled with bullet holes.

### *Eli Whitney Invented the Cotton Gin. 1967.*

When Kalo's Daddy was ten years old, Wharlest Jackson got a promotion in Natchez, Mississippi. And then some white men put a bomb under his car. Blew him to bits. Just like that. Then a white a man shot Kalo's uncle in broad daylight for allegedly fucking his daughter when everybody knew Kalo's uncle didn't even like white girls. Plus he was gay, but nobody knew that, or maybe they did. But Kalo never knew him because he died in Mississippi.

Kalo's grandma's daddy, Papa, used to pass for white. Town to town. He was a baker. He made all the fancy cakes and shit for weddings and birthdays and funerals all over Louisiana.

When his mama died, one very satisfied bride inquired with the postman on how to send a flower arrangement. He couldn't figure who she was talking about then it clicked. Oh you mean *those* Pochés, he grinned. Them *colored* people?

Flowers and a posse came. Kalo's Tante Mochine says the fire those men set is what made her grandma's face twist up with the palsy. However, there are still miracles. Just one year later, Kalo's grandma graduated from eighth grade and confirmed her soul at Our Lady of Grace with a straight face.

*One Nigger in Ten Thousand.* 2012.

We free, but still stuck in a slave mentality, or so they say, or who knows, until its black history month, and why isn't there white history month anyway?

*Aubade.* 1996.

Kalo takes a shortcut through an alleyway, so she can get to the bus stop faster. It is three buses to the high school she attends. When Kalo leaves in the morning, the sun is never shining. It is always just barely dawn when she walks out the door. It wasn't Kalo's idea to go to this school or her parents' either, but when she took the test and won the money, they all buckled under other people's expectations. *Think how nice it would be for people to see a girl from The Gardens going to that school.* Mostly it was okay, or rather, she just dealt with it. Today, Kalo wasn't sure she'd make it all the way there. Today was a day when she might

get off that second bus and just hang in the park.

They shot Kalo's cousin last night. He lived three doors down from her. Pulled him into the middle of the courtyard, banged up, and left him there. A little kid knocked on Kalo's door when the shooting stopped and said Joseph had a hole in his head. Kalo thinks about all this and nothing about how this English teacher of hers keeps giving her C's, no matter what she writes. As Kalo walks to the bus stop she stops to stare into the windows of several abandoned houses thinking about the smell of rotten wood.

“K-k!”

Someone yells out from inside one of them. It's Corey. He and Kalo both grew up in The Gardens, but don't go to school together anymore. He'd been in the stinking house all night, probably would be there through the afternoon.

“I'm sorry about your cousin,” he says. “J was a real ass nigga. Everybody is gonna miss him. Stay and chill for a lil bit?”

Kalo wants to. She tells him about a kind of poem where lovers part at dawn. Corey tells her that he loves her for the kinds of things she says to him. By now, the sun is just poking its head out a bit. In the infant light, Corey's red dreads and ruddy skin look like they are on fire. Kalo wants to stay, badly, but she has to go. Full of flame, Kalo runs the rest of the way to her stop and takes the bus all the way to school.

*Most Young Kings Get Their Heads Cut Off.* 2010.

Kalo needed a job and it looked like the blonde lady had one for her. The saccharine niceness of the white woman's voice and demeanor in the interview screamed, bitch, probably racist, in neon multi-colored lights. But the negative balance Kalo had just checked was louder and brighter than anything else at the moment.

“Do you have any experience in restaurant sales, event planning?” the blonde asked.  
“I'm Allison Fine, by the way.”

Kalo had, so she showed her teeth, and extended her hand.

“Kalo. And yes, I have five years' experience in timeshare sales, restaurants, and tourism.”

Kalo had done that too.

Allison sat straight up, excited. “Then you must know ‘Springtime in the Old South.’ They bring so much money in. It's our most popular tour group that comes to the restaurant.”

“Do I? They were real moneymakers in timeshare too.”

“It's supposed to be a great tour. Maybe we can do that one together.” Allison gave Kalo another saccharine smile that made Kalo want to slap her.

“Springtime in the Old South” sounded like a pretty fucking scary place, but since the white lady let it pretty much slip that she had gotten the job, Kalo laughed.

“Sure thing,” she said. “That way we can check out the menus at the other places on

the tour-guides take the customers to eat.”

“Perfect, I like you already.” Allison patted her shoulder.

Kalo smiled again, this time it was a real one. They always think they’re playing you.

*We Want to Read About Ourselves. 1997.*

It begins with mismatched papers and it never stops. Every time it happens, the clock restarts, and you forget you’ve been here before. Maybe you get mad, curse somebody out, fuck them up if the situation permits. Probably, you choke on it, not knowing what to say. You just hang out there, hyper-visible, but apparently barely there. Searching for your humanity in the midst of the constant humiliation and adjudication of it.

“Oh, I know it’s one of the three of you,” says your high school English teacher.

You, Dana, and Angela, couldn’t look more different; it was just as well that you all be triplets. And that never stops, or gets old, or easier. The erasing grates across your skin every time. But you know what?

Black doesn’t crack.

*Natives Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites, on Safari.* 1982

White people are always showing Kalo pictures of mixed babies with such pride. Why? If they knew shit, they'd know she's hard to please.

*Nobody Knows You Better Than Your Dealer.* 1998.

Kalo's sophomore year in high school her homeroom had a classroom Christmas Party. This is also the year, her name shortens from Kaloneeka to how she will be known from here on out. Mrs. Sharp decided Kalo would bring the "cocktail napkins." *Cocktail napkins*, she repeated the phrase to herself.

"I can bring some too," said another student.

"Okay, so that's Todd and Kalo for the cocktail napkins," Mrs. Sharp reiterated.

Kalo had no idea what they were talking about. She tried to play along. Were they special napkins only white people used? At lunchtime, Kalo went and looked up the words on the internet in the library. Small and square and plain white paper- napkins, like Kalo's seen and used all the time. Kalo decides then to try to know everything. Everything. All the shit they've never heard of. See you have to know so much to survive. You will spend your lifetime in recovery.



*I'ma Let You Finish, but Beyoncé... 2010.*

When Allison's in-vitro failed for the third time, she cried in the office. It was just the two of them and she needed a tampon. Kalo looked up from her computer, Allison's face red as the light from her flickering flash drive. When she came back from the bathroom and sat down at her desk, Kalo held her hand for a second and told her she'd be okay. Kalo tried to resist the soundtrack that played in my mind. *You is kind, you is smart, you is important.* Allison had suggested that she read *The Help* awhile back. *All I need is a kerchief*, Kalo wrote in an email to herself. Kalo had buried a new lover and two friends in two months' time. No condolences necessary.

*Don't Make Me Have to Go in Your Pocket. 2010.*

"Kalo, before you leave in the evening, do you think you could empty the trash? I mean there's really no reason for John to come back upstairs when..."

Allison stopped talking. She knew she had made a mistake. Like why send a nigger up the stairs when there was already one upstairs! Since when did being a sales manager not include custodial work?

"Oh don't worry," Kalo said, never taking my eyes off her computer screen. "John will do anything for *me*."

Allison must have felt the edge of a straight razor in Kalo's voice, because she didn't need to look to feel Allison's eyes burning into her back, or to know that her face was bright red. It was Allison's Dad's restaurant that they were marketing to the tour groups in the first place. Still, Allison would be hard pressed for someone to tell her 'bless you' when she sneezed.

Look-up-jobs-on-craigslist, Kalo typed in her Outlook Task Manager.

*Pretty black girls for white men. Upscale clientele.* Kalo read silently to herself and laughed out loud. Allison slammed her pen down and stormed out for a cigarette. You damn right. Kalo laughed some more. I'd certainly fuck her husband for a check, before I cleaned up behind his wife, she thought. Who wants to fuck somebody that smells like bleach? That's what Kalo's grandpa said one day to her grandma. The meanest thing he ever said, she said.

*SAMO for the So Called Avant Garde. 1985.*

"You only need one color, one color, one color," Mrs. Spear repeated over and over, as she walked up and down the rows of seated kindergarteners.

They all sat in their matching uniforms, same houndstooth jumper or khaki trouser, same white socks, saddle oxfords, unstained and clean.

"These pictures will be hung from colorful strings in the breezeway. Pictures of the Blessed Mother are our grade's contribution to this year's May Crowning. Please make them

neat and beautiful.”

Mrs. Spear hummed the tune to “Hail Holy Queen,” and placed a crisp sheet of freshly mimeographed paper in front of each pupil. A purplish color outline of a Virgin Mary with slits for eyes stared back at them.

“Please pull your blue crayon from your package of eight crayons. Your crayons should be in order. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, brown, and black. Black is always the last color. That’s an easy one to remember,” Mrs. Spear chuckled.

The children all stared back at her. She took them all into account. *Quite a few Vietnamese this time, and Kalo. Whatever you call that.*

“Okay, now we will carefully begin to color Mary’s gown blue. Everything else should be white.”

*Bomb on the Bus: The Ghost of Wharlest Jackson. 1999.*

The first man Kalo loved taught her to cock, aim, and shoot: a .38, a shot gun, and even a Desert Eagle. After these valuable life lessons, she graduated high school, and college was next. He gave her a warning. Nobody is gonna tell you what they expect. Everybody will lie to you. They will feed you a myth of excellence and then despise you for preforming. Also: in addition to being handy with the steel, in order to go the university, you have to learn to read and write like a white man. You have to leave your head at home before entering the building. No one will say it out right, they will drive you crazy with denial, but take it with

you and see what happens.

*Boom for Real: Point Coupee. 1795.*

It all comes down to the drum, my grandma said. For whatever reason, out of all their mother's colonies, they let us beat it here like we always did. So we did, and it does. And that's exactly where they fucked up at.

*Niggertown. 1492.*

When white people come, they change the names of places.

*Late Work. 2010.*

When Allison found out Kalo was a student, she couldn't decide whether to hate her more or less than she had before. *Lazy nigger. Uppity nigger.* Who could decide? Kalo wondered if Allison had ever considered that she might write about her one day.

*NEW NOLA, 2015*

There is a long line in Royal Grinds. Ten people deep, all tourists, all ordering the fanciest, multiple-step preparation coffee on the menu. All Kalo wants is a medium of whatever roast is ready now; she settles in for the wait. To draft proposals and come up with prices to put on tradition, book restaurant space, plan weddings, and show new waiters how to feed tourists (the old white people in Canada, or Kentucky, or Europeans, or Asians, or Arabs here to see what was left of the city) was exhausting work. A cup of coffee and a cigarette in the courtyard are a necessary and inextricable part of her morning routine.

While Kalo waits, she notices, next to the calcified pralines that the tourists still buy, the postcards on display. There is Ol' Man River Cane Syrup, ShoNuff Molasses, Old Mammy's Yams. The skin is black and our eyes are bright. Lips so red. Kalo is staring at the post cards so intently that Allison's hand on her shoulder nearly makes her jump out of her skin. Allison doesn't notice. Getting some caffeine in ya this morning, *girl?* Allison asks. Kalo cringes at her manager's folksy affectations all up in her fifteen-minute hideaway.

There is a customer behind Kalo and in front of Allison in line. She is a typical tourist white- lady in a straw hat and camera bag. She reaches over to the display and picks up a postcard that is advertising something edible by placing black men's faces at the center of sunflowers. Kalo wonders if she will buy it and why. Instead the woman does what all tourists do in the first six blocks of the Quarter, she turns to Allison and Kalo and asks a

question. She expects answers to half a millennia of controversy plus directions. *Which direction is Jackson Brewery from here and how do people feel about these kinds of post cards?*

Allison responds quickly and emphatically, which surprises Kalo. She has never previously known her to have much to articulate besides the power of being the boss's daughter. *They are a part of our history*, Allison says. As you can see this is all pretty retro, people collect them. It's a part of our history. Our history, No one takes offense. At that the tourist woman bristles; more quizzical than contrary. *Really?* she asks. They just seem so, so, *offensive*. Correct, Kalo interjects. Most people I know think they're racist, Kalo continues. The wait for this coffee has gone on too long. All Kalo wishes for now is fire and shattered glass.

*We've Read the Classics Too. 2012.*

Kalo's lover used to draw pictures. Kalo made them stories by putting captions and sticking a few sentences underneath each one. People would be amazed at the places Kalo and her lover have been. White people are never friendlier than when they think you have coke. They can spot you anywhere. It's a look you never lose. Or maybe it's a look you were born with. In high school Kalo took a class called Humanities that was all about teaching white kids to look smart at dinner parties. Kalo is pleased with that experience. That's why she always gets the references. Can spot a fiend anywhere, give a wry chuckle, and indicate her knowing

better than most.

*Good Money in Savages: From 1811 with Love.* 2013.

The day Kalo handed in her resignation, Mr. Fine, Allison's father, couldn't decide if her "attitude" was "natural" or if he was sorry to see her go. Corey had taught Kalo well. They'd miss the sales she brought in. When is this effective? Mr. Fine asked. Today, she replied. Kalo's mouth a straight line. It's just going to end badly between me and Ally if I finish the two weeks. Kalo didn't try to stop the redness from coming to her face or her eyes. She was human, goddamnit. Kalo made note of the floor-to-ceiling map of Louisiana's plantations in 1853. Kalo shook Allison's dad's hand, told him she had learned a lot, and cleaned the hard drive on her computer before she left that place.

*Mark Them With Your Living: King Cotton.* 1996.

By the time Kalo gets back home from school most evenings, it's already dark. Kalo walks mostly main streets, but this evening, she cuts back down the alleyway. Kalo wants to see if Corey is out. He is. Standing on a porch that is barely holding onto the house it's attached to. A yellow, black, and red bandanna holds his hair back, and his locks stick out around his head like a crown. He will be out here all night. Still here in the morning when Kalo is heading out to school again. Corey won't move off the spot till all of it is gone. Every last

rock.

“You going home?” he asks.

“Yeah,”

“Wait here a second. I’ma walk you back.”

Corey comes back out the house with a freshly rolled cigar, sparks it. Kalo inhales deep, and exhales slow. Her knees disappear for a second. Kalo is struck with knowing that no one will ever know the story of The Garden the way they do. As she and Corey head to her house at the very edge of the neighborhood, Kalo tells him; no matter where it is, I want to go with you. Corey agrees to this plan and takes her hand. There is no way of knowing what is next for either of them. But they will go together, the path leading forward, toward power or fire— whichever one came first.



## VITA

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