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The sick ones.

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THE SICK ONES

By

Christian Loriel Lucas
B.S., Murray State University, 2007

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts
in English

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University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

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A Thesis Approved on

November 16, 2020

by the following Thesis Committee:

Thesis Director

Ian Stansel, PhD.

Second Committee Member

David Anderson, PhD.

Third Committee Member

Stephanie Boone, PhD.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my children

Marian and Terron

For their willingness to share me with the world
and to love me unconditionally.

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This journey took a lot of patience, long nights, cranky children, and lots of caffeine. I thank my husband of twelve years, Noah Lucas, for being supportive of me. I am especially grateful to Dr. Ian Stansel for agreeing to take on the task of directing this thesis. He has been a terrific mentor from the very start. I also thank the Creative Writing professors at the University of Louisville who have helped to mold me into a more mindful and fearless writer: Paul Griner, Dr. Kristi Maxwell, and Sarah Strickley. I'm so lucky that I got to sit in each of their classrooms. Also, thanks to Kiki Petrosino for her guidance and advice.

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ABSTRACT

THE SICK ONES

Christian L. Lucas

November 16, 2020

This thesis consists of a collection of linked short stories, connected at the intersections of medicine, public health, race, gender, and socioeconomics. *The Sick Ones* was completed during a time of social unrest and the emergence of the Covid-19 virus. Inspired by medicine's history of exploiting sick, poor, and racialized bodies, *The Sick Ones* explores the treatment of illness and societal woes in a near-speculative future. Each story is plot-driven, but complimented by a protagonist who keeps the narrative grounded, as they attempt to survive unprecedented circumstances. Some of the protagonists are complicit in their own medical exploitations, while others unwittingly participate as casualties of a flawed institution. And still for others, the goal is to hold tight to their personal autonomies, even if it means death for themselves, and possibly the ones they love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	vi
THE INCURABLE.....	1
A WASTE.....	19
IF YOU LIVE IN MARION HEIGHTS.....	34
THE SICK ONES.....	50
CURRICULUM VITA.....	71

THE INCURABLE

July

Jennette had a really bad urge to scratch the lesion forming on her ankle. It was only a small patch of pinkness, but wanted to be touched, just the same. Luckily, the letter distracted her enough to leave the mark alone, no matter how much it tingled and burned. She stood in her kitchen, at the breakfast nook, where she usually liked to read her mail. The letter boasted about an opportunity to advance medicine. *Jennette, you can help advance medicine!* An entire year, the letter said. New drug trials. Private biomedical research company. Fifty participants chosen from the confidential state database. *You are one of the chosen.* The address is confidential. *Read the requirements carefully.* Photo ID. Official letter of diagnosis. List of any and all medications. Fully staffed with two doctors, five nurses, and security. *You will be assigned to a group.* Then at the very bottom of the letter, in thicker, all-capped words: THIS DRUG IS NOT A CURE.

Jennette took her foot—the one without lesions—and rubbed her ankle, finally. She rubbed until blood ran down in a thin, warm stream. That would always happen, the bleeding. The lesions would beg to be touched, even though they could not handle the traumatic friction. She grabbed a paper towel and put heavy-handed pressure on the area, a neat trick to ease the itching, while soaking up the blood at the same time. Once the bleeding ended, she sat down to read the letter again. She had a GED tutoring session at

three o'clock, but afterwards, she read the letter again. Then she read it once more, over homemade tacos in the living room. By the time she went to bed, she had decided to go on and volunteer her body to the drug trial. Part of her didn't think there was any sense in participating if she could not be cured. But that part of her, she quieted down. She quieted down and considered texting "goodnight," to a friend she missed.

August

Every morning, KeShaun P. was the first person Jennette encountered at the warehouse. She stood arms out, as he searched her for a cellphone. He had her put her arms back down, while he read all of the rules from a laminated card. Use first names only. No smoking. No sharing of IV lines—something Jennette didn't know was a thing. A confidentiality agreement had to be signed at the beginning of each visit. Then it was time to go inside and check in with one of the nurses, who'd lead her into a room where a doctor—usually the woman—would have her undress. By now, there were two lesions on her buttocks, there was the one on her ankle, a few smaller ones on her lower back, one on her thigh, and there was one below her right armpit. Again, she stood with her arms out, as the doctor measured all of her wounds with a floppy ruler. Then, came the tape, which the doctor pressed against one of the lesions and attached the tape to a microscope slide for later. Jennette would then go urinate. And she would be read the rules all over again.

The nurses were less stiff in their handling of the participants. They smiled liked all nurses tend to smile. They called everybody "Hun." They made Jennette feel less

nervous about the catheters. The nurses popped them into her vein so fast, Jennette hardly had time to look away. They attached the catheter to a tube, which was attached to a bag of pink fluid. The blanket they gave her was to help keep her warm as the chilled fluid shot through her body.

“We want you to be comfortable, Hun.”

They had to be there for five hours straight, confined in the windowless warehouse with remnants of “Watch for Forklifts” signs high up on the walls. The first time was unpleasant. Jennette and the other participants had stared at each other and tried not to stare at each other. She’d left that day without knowing anyone’s first name. But a random day came when someone made a terrible joke.

“What if they’re euthanizing us?”

Jennette laughed because other people laughed. She hadn’t really thought the joke was very funny; she’d only meant to be polite, to show that she was not threatening. Jennette was familiar with this sort-of tragic, social scene. For six months, Jennette had taken her mother to chemo treatments. She would speak to every single person in the chemo room. Before she died, she’d learned all of their names. She learned things about their children, their pets, their mothers, their neighbors, their husbands, their nephews, their pastors. One woman had confided in her that she’d been having a decade’s long affair with her brother-in-law. She wanted to confess to her husband. But Jennette’s mother waved the idea away with her weakening hand.

“Too late to change things now,” she said. “Let your husband grieve without having to hate you.”

But in the place where Jennette was getting her own round of drugs up the arm, the people around her didn't talk about their secrets. Jennette knew what they had done to get infected. But she would never ask them what they'd done. And if they asked her what she'd done, she would tell them as little as possible, at least for now. They sat in chairs, like the kind at the dentist office, in a wide circle. They each had their own skinny pole, which held their own personal bag of pink juice. Skylar T. was the person who'd made the terrible joke about being euthanized. He worked at an animal shelter.

"We dye the euthanasia pink," he said, "Just so everyone knows to be careful. It's like a flashing caution sign. You wouldn't want to stick yourself and put yourself down." He was twenty-one, the youngest in their group. He figured he'd had the virus for only a year. He'd just recently started seeing blood in the toilet. His lesions were very small, and he didn't have many. The doctors were hopeful that Skylar T.'s results would be the "most promising," since he was only at Stage I. He could even move on to their next trial, if he lasted long enough.

The nurses had to keep a close eye on Mr. Harold and his body temperature. His wrinkles and spots suggested to Jennette that he was at least in his late seventies. Of course, the virus might have aged his skin more than time. His plum-colored lesions hinted that he was already at Stage III. Anyway, Jennette thought that Mr. Harold was nice. She felt bad about the oxygen tank he had to carry around with him. He called it his "best-buddy," though Jennette assumed he had to be more miserable than he was content.

Mr. Harold talked often about baseball and the little league teams he coached over a span of thirty-eight years. Bobby W., the advertising guy, liked to talk politics with Devin Q., who once owned a barbershop before he got infected. In their divorce, his ex-

wife had won the business and the children—of course, the children. He ended up working for an uncle promoting parties in fancy downtown venues. There was also Grace K., the flight attendant. How relieved Jennette was to have an ally, another woman, in their special predicament. She smiled a lot at Grace, even during mundane moments, like whenever they both pulled into adjacent parking spaces at the same time, or if they happened to both need to use the women’s restroom at the same time. Jennette usually waited for Grace to get up first. When Jennette stood to follow her, Mr. Harold always quipped, “Time for the ladies to powder their noses.” Grace didn’t seem to find Mr. Harold funny. She rolled her eyes a lot, Jennette noticed. Jennette need her to loosen up, at least for the sake of “girl talk.” So Jennette kept tugging, kept following her to the restroom. She hastily planted herself beside Grace whenever it was time for the drug to be administered to them. That was always a good time to ask Grace questions. Finally, Grace relented and began telling Jennette about all the places she’d been, Tokyo being her favorite. She opened up about wearing long-sleeve shirts to hide her lesions from curious eyes. It was still legal in the state of Georgia to fire employees with lesions and Grace needed to keep flying.

“It’s my way of escaping,” she once said, from the other side of Jennette’s toilet stall. “What about you? What type of work do you do?”

“I was a teacher.” Jennette decided against saying which grade. She hoped Grace wanted to know all about her, but things were still too new between them. “Maybe we can go to Starbucks sometime?” Jennette patiently waited for a response, as Grace flushed her toilet.

“Maybe,” Grace answered.

October

Walmart had ceramic jack-o-lanterns for \$10.99. Each was big enough to hold at least three pounds of candy. Jennette wasn't allowed to buy candy, of course. She grabbed three jack-o-lanterns, anyway. Then she went to the baking goods aisle and pondered over baking cookies for her group. Cookies shaped like little jack-o-lanterns. She could even add chocolate sprinkles to them. She knew that Devin Q. was allergic to gluten, so she'd have to make a separate batch, one that wouldn't cause his stomach to erupt. She hoped she could put wide smiles on everyone's faces. Fall treats had always worked on children. And all adults were once children, Jennette concurred. She imagined that Grace and the others would go bug-eyed at the sight of homemade sweets, just as her sixth graders had done. Homemade candied apples. Peanut butter fudge. She would buy totes full of candy. And in the spirit of Halloween, she'd give them gummy skulls and toes with gooey, sweet blood staining the severed ends. Jennette would say, "Now, you each get one piece for every correct math problem," or "You get five pieces for any extra reading you do." In Jenette's experience, some children needed more motivation than others.

Aidan always did good work, whether or not candy was involved. But there was no joy inside him. Just the thought of poor Aidan made Jennette scoff out loud, as she reached for milk in one of the tall coolers. She still blamed Aidan's mother for his broken spirit. From what Aidan had told her, his mother was hardly around, except for when she had no boyfriend to chase after. Most weeks, Aidan had to live with his grandmother. The old woman couldn't provide Aidan with the attention he deserved. All boys deserved

attention and Aidan needed to know that he was worthy of Jennette's. She would make sure she had a special bag of candy, just for him.

Heading for the registers, Jennette walked past rows of candy, bound together in value-sized bags to "fit your Trick-Or-Treating budget!" It made the veins of her heart twist a little, knowing that she could never pick up a bag, much less take a bag home. It had been her rule, not theirs. She'd set this boundary for her own good.

Why buy candy if you can't even give it away at Halloween?

It would have been too difficult to not be able to place candy in the hands of a child on Halloween. Again, she scoffed out loud. The noise caused a stranger's eyes to look her way. She could feel those eyes. She looked to her left and saw a little girl, one who—along with her mother—seemed to come from nowhere at all. The little girl looked interested and confused about Jennette's wrist. Her eyes were locked on the naked skin that crept out from Jennette's sleeve. Her mother saw the wrist, too. She saw the patch of damp-looking flesh bordered by a rim of blackened, calloused skin, which itched like crazy. The mother pulled her little girl far, far away, eyes kept low to the floor.

December

Jennette paid for her own latte, Grace's blackberry scone and her latte, and then found a table by a window. The spot was perfect for snow watching. Soft flakes fell onto the Starbucks' parking lot, disappearing as soon as they touched the warm, black pavement. A group of teenage boys playfully shoved each other around near a pick-up truck. Their laughter and rowdy voices distracted Jennette from sipping her coffee. She

continued to watch them until they all piled into the pick-up, a couple of them climbing into the bed. She finally took a sip once they drove out of the lot. Jennette looked across at Grace, to see if she, too, had been watching the boys. She hadn't. Her scone was nothing more than crumbs on her napkin now.

"I guess you were really hungry," Jennette said.

"It's the drug. And it's gotta be the smoking, too." Grace looked worried. "Now that I've quit, I'm always hungry. I just want something sweet all the time." She paused to sip her latte. And then she shook her head in shame. "And bread."

"How about I bake you more cookies?"

"You don't have to do that."

"I don't mind. I miss having people to bake for. Can't bake for my kiddos."

"What kiddos?"

"My students." Jennette was a bit surprised at Grace. "You know I miss my students. I miss being in the classroom. Giving them up was the hardest decision I ever had to make."

Grace took a long sip of her latte, before she sat it down and leaned in so close, Jennette could smell the caffeine on her lips. "But isn't that how you got sick? Your students?"

Wow. This was the very first time Jennette had been asked so specifically. Even the doctors didn't know the source of her infection. "Don't ask, don't tell"—that was the arrangement written into each of their contracts. But as Jennette searched for the words,

the lesion on her ankle—two sizes bigger now—began to itch underneath her sweat pants. She hunched her body over and gave her ankle a nice scratch with the tips of her finger nails, careful not to lift her pant leg.

“That’s sort-of how it happened,” Jennette tried to explain.

“Do you think it’s a good idea for you to talk about kids?”

“My students? Why not? They were my students.”

“What if someone sees one of your lesions? If they hear you talking about sixth graders, they may think the worst, you know?”

With the itch soothed and satisfied, Jennette sat up. She used a napkin to dig out blood and scab from underneath her finger nails. Grace was mistaken. Grace had the wrong idea about her.

“I’m not a monster, Grace.”

“I know you’re not a monster.”

“Why are you asking me about all this?”

“I’m your friend, Jennette. I just think you should be careful about how you remember your life before you got infected. Gotta be careful with that, okay? Nobody will give you time to explain. They’ll see your lesions and they’ll assume.”

By now, her lesion wanted her to scratch it again. But she ignored it until she made it to the privacy of her car. She tried calling her friend, but she was met with a voicemail instead of a real-live voice.

February

Jennette vomited gooey fluid, with specks of pink, on her mother's couch. She had been on her way to the bathroom, but the vomit couldn't wait that long. The doctors had recently upped her dosage on the test drug and had warned her of "possible nausea." She spent the next morning scrubbing the couch cushion until her hands hurt from gripping the wash cloth so tightly. Her mother had left her the couch when she died. Sometimes, Jennette could still smell her mother on the fabric. And every once in a while, a cat hair would appear, held hostage by the blue, crushed velvet. The cat had run away the week after her mother's cremation. He was the type of cat that looked like he was wearing a glossy tuxedo, white only from lips to belly. Her mother had loved that thing.

One time, two years back, the cat rested at the foot of the kitchen table while Jennette and her mother watched the news. Her mother was mostly watching; Jennette mostly graded papers. She had put Aidan's paper aside for a closer read later. She had spotted multiple misspelled words at first glance and wanted more time to think about how to best handle him and his errors. She knew she had to be gentle. Her breathing stopped once the reporter mentioned the virus. Her fingers stiffened around her red ink pen as she held it above the next paper in line. Infected people wouldn't have to go jail unless someone reported them—that's what the reporter said. Being infected was not a crime. "A victim has to come forward first."

Jennette tried to appear disinterested, but silently thanked God she would be spared. She glanced at Aidan's name, written sloppily at the top of his paper. His mother hadn't spent any time helping the poor boy with his handwriting. The grandmother could

barely read herself. It was all up to Jennette. She'd teach him. She'd spend more time with him—after school, in the library, or at her house—just as she'd done before.

As the news reporter switched to another headline, Jennette's mother crossed her legs, disrupting the cat's peace. He scurried into the living room towards one of his toys.

“Just like the AIDS,” her mother said.

Again, Jennette stopped breathing. She hadn't told her mother about her diagnosis. She blamed her lesions on spider bites. Burns from the stove. Clumsiness. She said whatever her mother was too sick from chemo to question.

“No, this virus is different than AIDS, Mom.”

“AIDS was the punishment for the gays. This one is for all of the perverts. It's the Lord's will.”

Then what was cancer a punishment for? She knew better than to ask her mother that and felt guilty for even saying it in the privacy of her head. Meanwhile, a tiny bell jingled helplessly atop the carpet in the living room. The cat pounced on the soft mouse toy, a fury in his claws. Jennette scribbled a note on the paper in front of her. *Don't forget to punctuate.* See! Jennette was not a pervert. She was a damn good teacher.

Late February

One of the doctors—the male one—sat across from Jennette in the consultation room. It looked to be an old office. The ghosts of picture frames blackened the walls, one wide enough to have been a college degree, or a giant family photo.

“So, you vomited?”

“Three days straight.”

“But no more than that?”

“No.”

“That’s good news. A little vomiting is normal with this dosage. And you’ve lost three lesions?”

“No, just two.”

He wrote that down. He showed her microscopic images of her white blood cells. Funny circles, with pink in the middle. There were enough of them in her blood to keep fighting the virus. Her kidneys looked good. No bloody stool. No blood in her urine. The drug was working, but not well enough to get her past three brief years.

“I’ll be dead in three years?”

“Give or take,” he answered. “The drug is proving to buy people more time, long enough for a few vacations, backpacking in Italy. Some of our participants have retired early. You were a teacher, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you tutor now?”

“Just adults—of course.”

“One of the other participants is worried that you spend too much time talking about them, your students.”

“I guess I do complain about them.” Trying to teach grown men—unmotivated, tired, and set in their ways—the importance of complete sentences had proven to be frustrating.

“No, I mean the children. You taught sixth graders, is that right?” Jennette began to caress the lesion on her wrist. It was healing. The itching was less severe, and a full recovery to normal, clean-looking skin was on the horizon. The doctor did not give her much time to lie, or even to fail to answer his question at all. He went on: “Talking about children here may make some folks uncomfortable.”

“You make it sound like I’m a monster.”

“No—we only care about treating the virus.”

“Mr. Harold talks about his little leaguers all the time.”

“And he’s been warned.”

“Did the same person who turned me in, turn him in?”

“Several people, actually.”

Jennette stuffed her hands down between her thighs. “I miss my kids. What’s wrong with saying that I miss them, because I do.”

“You can miss your students, Jennette. But if you want us to help you with your symptoms, then you can’t miss them out loud. Does that make sense?”

Then he asked her to meet with him again in four weeks. She walked back into the main room of the warehouse. Grace was in a chair, an IV line in her arm. She tried to get Jennette’s attention and wave goodbye, but Jennette pretended not to notice.

May

One morning, Jennette arrived at the warehouse to find three security guards. Neither of them was KeShaun P. He was gone. Mr. Harold was gone, too. Since Jennette was speaking to Grace again, after weeks of dodging her eyes and her text messages, Jennette went right up to her. Grace stood at the water cooler whispering with Bobby W, the ad guy.

“What happened?”

“KeShaun took a picture of Mr. Harold,” said Bobby W. “It’s on the internet. One of his former little leaguers saw it and found out where Mr. Harold lives. Only he’s not so little anymore. He beat Harold with his own damn oxygen tank.”

“Are you serious?”

“He’s on life support, handcuffed to his hospital bed. Can you believe they handcuffed him?”

“How could he hurt that old man?”

Grace scoffed at Jennette. “He’s a pedophile, Jennette. Or do you not know what that is?”

When the nurses began to herd everyone towards the consultation room, Jennette figured they would tell them about Mr. Harold, that he was a pedophile, like Grace had said. Instead, the doctors brought them into the room individually. They didn’t talk about Mr. Harold. They talked about the drug trial and how things would keep going. The new security guards would protect them, except for when the facility was closed. It was

suggested that they all get pepper spray for when they were out in public. Grace was so distraught that she lit a cigarette right there, in the consultation room. This put her into a yelling match with a nurse.

“Just let her smoke it,” said one of the doctors—the woman. The nurse fled the room in tears, the other nurses flocking behind to console her.

Jennette and Grace were alike. When Grace went to smoke in the restroom, Jennette followed her. She was there to stand in the smoke Grace puffed into the air.

“We’re all going to be exposed.”

“KeShaun doesn’t have pictures of you, Grace. Me, neither.”

“How do you know? Are you a physic now?”

Jennette did not believe in physic powers. “KeShaun knew we were different. We aren’t like Mr. Harold. We didn’t hurt any children. We’re not pedophile monsters.” Her chuckle at the end may have been too much, too arrogant. Grace stared at her for a frigid five seconds, the cigarette sandwiched between her top and bottom lips.

“Why do you keep saying ‘we?’”

“We,” Jennette repeated for the sake of clarification. “I mean me and you.”

“Nuh-uh. I’m nothing like you. My kid wasn’t a kid-kid. He was six-feet tall. He had a mustache. He had a car, a job, and a bank account, for your information. And he flirted with me. He told me he was nineteen. Why couldn’t I sleep with a nineteen-year-old? Five weeks later, they’re telling me I’m infected with the Pedophile Virus. He’s not my victim; I’m his victim.”

“How old was he...really?”

“How old was *Aidan*?”

This was not about Jennette and Aidan—how dare she say his name like that? It had leapt out of Grace, propelled by a disgust Jennette could taste on the walls of her throat. She swallowed it down. *How dare she?* All boys were not the same.

“Aidan was different.”

Grace pressed her lip down hard on her cigarette and smacked Jennette. She couldn't smack her very hard, because of the raw-looking lesion on her palm. Still, hard enough to cause Jennette to grab her burning cheek. She imagined that her eyes glistened with water now, but the truth was that “dry eyes” was another side effect of the drug. She couldn't cry if she wanted to.

“I think it's the cigarettes,” said Grace, seemingly regretful. “I'm anxious. Look at my hands. They never shake like this. I really want to hit you again.”

Before she could, Jennette ran out of the women's restroom, sideswiping a guard on his way in to Grace. The nurse was still livid about the cigarette and had quietly begged the guard for support. Jennette grabbed her belongings from her chair, just as screams rang out. They were dragging Grace out of the women's restroom. And one of the doctors was calling for Jennette to sit down in her chair. She needed her dose for the day, but she would never go back there again.

June

At her breakfast nook, Jennette scrolled through the trail of the recent texts she had sent Aidan. Only her texts were there to read; he never, ever sent one back to her. He was mad. No, that didn't make sense. He was confused and maybe even scared about the whole virus thing. He wasn't sick—of course. The virus was not a virus when it was in a child. It only existed in the form of secretions, activated by stress, by joy, by fear. Only children fifteen and under could produce the secretions. Aidan had been twelve. The secretion was there when a baby was born, after the stress of a long journey, although their mothers couldn't contract the virus. It was there when a child was being tickled, or during the excitement of unwrapping gifts on Christmas morning. It was there especially when a child was terrified, when he wanted his mother to come out of the shadows and save him from the monsters. Their bodies had somehow learned to fight back against monsters. Aidan hadn't fought back, per say. He'd allowed Jennette to groom him into a smart and confident young man. He'd allowed her to love on him. He'd never had sex before, but Jennette had been there to show him how. She'd even held him afterwards on her bosom. But why did Jennette get the virus? Had Aidan been as afraid of her, as Harold's victims had probably been of him?

Of course not, she thought as she rubbed the outer flesh of the new lesion forming on her elbow. She had given him love. And he had yet to report her for what they'd done—no one knew about what they'd done. But just in case, she quit teaching the very day she got her test results back. That was the same day Aidan had changed. He no longer wanted to meet with her, or come by her house. He no longer sent back silly emojis when she texted him jokes. He started being short with her. *I'm at band practice. I can't. I'm not supposed to. I'm too busy. I dunno. I don't think I can. I dunno.* Eventually,

he sent back nothing except silence. He was an eighth grader, by now. She hoped that another teacher had noticed him, the lonely boy glaring out of the window, way in the back of class. The lonely boy who could use some attention. Surely, she was giving him his own special bag of candy. But when Jennette's new lesion began to leak, she put her cellphone away and tended to it. Her body was giving up faster now that she'd stopped participating in the drug trial. What was the use of fighting to prolong things? All she needed to do was get by, day by day. Go out early enough to avoid other people. Wear long sleeves, long socks. Keep her neck covered with a scarf of some kind. Keep a full stock of bandaging material. Tutor online for as long as she could stomach staring at her screen and into the faces of strangers who were miles away, a waste basket for vomiting at her side. But no going back to the drug trial. Someone might see her amongst all the others: she wouldn't want to give them the wrong idea.

A WASTE

The rabbit in room A3 can talk, but no one knows it yet. Maybe “talk” is an exaggeration of his abilities: it can really only speak one word, which its tongue and throat squeeze out in a dissonant, squeaky howl; it performs this act only in the dark, when the lights go out and only if there are no other bodies in the room. It is better this way. The first time it spoke, the room was filled with other rabbits, the albino strain with pale red eyes. They had never heard such a strange sound, certainly not from the mouth of one of their own. It was even worse than the humans parading daily outside the door, with their loud keys, their whistles, their heavy feet, and their squealing carts. The rabbit spoke that night and the room erupted, their long, quick feet slamming against the metallic walls of their cages. This is how they said “We’re afraid of you.” This is how they warned this strange creature, who looked like them, and who’s urine carried the same male stench, to keep away. His feet stumped back and he hid underneath the plastic shelf attached inside his cage. He’s never spoken in the presence of another rabbit since that night.

Once, he did speak to a rat, which showed up in a plastic cage, after all of the other rabbits had been carried away, one by one. Though rats are usually intelligent creatures, this particular rat did not appear to understand the rabbit’s language. Its body froze in the middle of sipping water when it heard the rabbit’s noise. Then it carried on,

eventually tending to the tidying up of its nest of coiled paper shreds. Perhaps its human did not inject liquid into its brain. But the rabbit's human had: stem cells mistakenly injected into Broca's area of its brain, performed weekly for one whole year. It wasn't the doctor's goal to make a rabbit speak—that would have been absurd. He would've been thought of as an insane man, not as a serious, respected neurologist. Still, somehow his needles kept penetrating the part of the rabbit's brain that controlled speech. The doctor was off target.

And then one morning, after he heard what sounded like the word “out” emerge from the throat of the rabbit, he stared at it for the longest time. And when the rabbit said “out” once more, the word clearly emerging from his mouth, the doctor fell to the floor of his lab, dead. Heart attack, which his colleagues figured was appropriate, given that the man was nearly eighty-years old. There was not a tremendous amount of concern placed on the future of his rabbit. Should it be euthanized? Should it be moved to a different study? That would have called for too much paper work, too many changes to protocols. “Rabbits tend to only live for two years, anyway,” one human reminded the others. “We could just care for it until...you know.” The decision was made by the end of the doctor's tragic week. The rabbit would stay caged and fed until it died.

The girl who feeds him smells sweet. Her lavender fragrance stems from her wrists and her neck, while her breath is fruity from chewing gum. Her ear bangles are loud and large. She never talks. She instead chooses to sing along to the muffled music inside her ear buds. She's intelligent, but forgetful. Every day, it seems, she has to return to the room because she's forgotten to leave the rabbit a toy, or a hand full of hay. She

does remember to rub its nose apologetically and then she leaves, carrying her singing into the hallway.

There are two other humans who visit every Wednesday and Friday, promptly at two o' clock. They quietly enter, but never arrive together. It's always the man, who arrives first, his scent being that of coffee and sweat. He paces for a moment, checks his watch. When she finally arrives, doused in an overwhelming concoction of roses, their conversation is at first awkward.

“How's your day going?”

“Same-o, same-o.”

“Someone ate my sandwich again. It was Ron this time, I think. Should I say something? I'm pretty sure it was Ron.”

“Uh-huh.”

“No, you're right. I should definitely say something.”

She often shushes him. Then, it is she who clears off the long, metal table, ridding it of the clean cages the singing girl will use for the rabbit all week. The man stands back, biting his nails and the skin at his cuticles. She pulls down her pants. Then she climbs up onto the table and waits. She doesn't like the waiting. He's not as fast as she when it comes to his pants. She often yells at him in a whisper, until the man is finally on top of her. Then she becomes silent. He makes all of the noises, while she stares blankly at the rabbit, the only time it's noticed during their visit. The table inches slowly across the floor. Its legs, padded at the bottoms with deteriorating rubber, scuff the floor, the story

of their rendezvous told in the black marks left behind. Once, the rabbit watched them both fall from that table. The woman had blamed the man, as she'd clenched the broken skin on her elbow.

“How am I going to explain this?”

They always have to move the table back to where it started. And then they leave, but never together. The rabbit is left to hours of peace. The lights go out in the evening, and he sleeps until the system turns them on again and the humans begin scurrying about, outside the door.

~*~

Lee is new, there. He comes at nighttime, when the building is dark and all the other humans have gone home, pushing his mop bucket down the hallways from end to end. He mops every room from the first floor, to the third; the other floors are assigned to a woman he sees at the start of their shift, when they gather their carts from the large closet allotted them. She speaks to him with a subtle, “hey,” then she goes on her way. She's younger, so she moves faster than his body can manage. Her cart is always back inside the closet first, there to mock him when he finally returns. His aging body is not entirely to blame. He will admit if asked that he likes watching the animals, like the rats in B32. They are there only to breed and to create more rats.

“Did you know,” he'd once asked his wife, Deidra, “rats are born pink? Red pink! You can even see their insides. You can see the breastmilk in their stomachs.” She'd scoffed at him then, as they'd been in the middle of breakfast, their usual routine before she'd head to work and him to bed.

“Lee, I don’t want to hear about nasty rats and breastmilk.”

“But they’re pink!”

Deidra never liked any of his stories from his new job. The stories about the mice were especially horrifying for her. He would describe the way they played, they ways their limber bodies flipped and climbed over the toys placed inside their cages. Her shoulders would squirm uncontrollably as she envisioned their movements. To her, mice were no different than hairy spiders crawling on walls. But he often reminded her that *she* was the scary one.

“They’re more afraid of you than you are of them.”

But, when Lee realized he was conversing alone and that his wife was fighting her exhaustion from the workday before, he’d pretend to be more tired than he really was and announce that he was going to bed. He spared his own feelings this way. Still, he found that the animals were more interesting to talk about than his mundane tasks of mopping tiled floors and his battle with the gum stuck underneath some scientist’s desk. He couldn’t talk about the woman he worked with—there wasn’t much to say about her. Every now and then, if his wife was in a pleasant mood when he got home, if she smiled more than she yawned, and if she stared at him more than she stared out into the sunless morning she was due to face, he’d bring up the rabbit in A3.

“Something about him.”

“Hmm. What’s that?”

“I swear he looks at me, like he can understand me.”

“It’s just a rabbit, baby.”

“But remember: this is a ‘science’ rabbit. He’s scientific, or whatever you call it. He’s not your average rabbit. He’s big, too. About the size of a puppy.”

“Hmm.” And then after a brief daze, she said, “My grandpop used to hunt rabbits. I ever tell you that? My mama’s daddy. He would take my brothers, too. He wanted to take me one time, but I cried and ran in the house. I didn’t want anything to do with any nasty animals.”

“This rabbit didn’t come from the woods.”

“Lee, I know that. You wanted to talk about rabbits, so I’m talking. We’re talking.”

“Well, I’m glad we are.”

“How do you know it’s a boy rabbit? Did you pick it up and look for yourself?”

“No. Rules at the top of the list: no taking pictures and no touching the animals. ‘Just clean and lock back up.’”

The conversation took a turn, then, as Deidra decided it was time for another reminder to Lee: “We need this job.”

“Baby—”

“Make sure you follow whatever rules they have.”

“I am, Deidra.”

“I just don’t want anything to happen. We need this job, Lee. You don’t wanna have to go looking for another one, do you? Look at how long it took to get this one. Those scientists, or whoever they are, sound like they take things very serious there.”

“Deidra, stop! I know what I’m doing, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I ain’t a fool.”

“Okay.”

Lee stood, assuming this was the right moment for them to part ways and let things simmer down until the next morning.

“Well, how do you know?”

“What?”

“How do you know the rabbit is a ‘he’ and not a ‘she’?”

Lee grinned. “I told you: it’s the way he looks at me, like one man looking at another man. Man-to-man. We understand each other.”

“Oh, please.”

“I’m serious.”

“This job’s got you talking crazy. I’ll see you in the morning, love.”

Deidra worked two jobs: the grocery store until two o’clock, then in the pick-and-pack department at a distribution company from three-thirty until midnight. She liked her second job more, since there were no customers to appease, to wait on hand-and-foot as

she absorbed their petty and irritating abuses like “You scanned that twice,” or “I thought that was on sale. What did you do? Did you press the wrong key?” At her second job, she could be left alone. She could smoke her cigarettes inside when she wanted to do so, even as she packed boxes to ship to Guam, or someplace that sounded less interesting. Her floor manager stayed inside the office most of the time, so no worries there. Her co-workers, a handful of college kids, paid no attention to her cigarettes, nor the smell. They were too busy vaping their much sweeter tobacco. And their earbuds kept them lost in whatever dimension their music or podcasts had created for them. It was either that, or they simply didn’t care that the older lady smoked.

When midnight came around, she punched out, walked to her car, and headed home, never uttering a parting word to anyone. (The college kids wouldn’t have been able to hear her speak anyway). She went home to a house that was lifeless, except the TV her husband would forget to turn off. She ate whatever she felt like cooking, she showered, and she was in bed by one-thirty in the morning. She slept until the sun started poking around through her blinds. Lee usually made it home by then. They took turns making breakfast for one another, but Deidra was the only one allowed to make the coffee; Lee’s coffee was always too weak.

“How did your day go?” he asked. Deidra was welcomed to share her stories first, which usually amounted to annoying customers and the places her packages were headed. But one morning, Lee didn’t allow her to go first.

“Something about that rabbit.”

“That boy rabbit?”

“Yeah. He wouldn’t stop staring at me when I went in there.”

“Well, you said they more scared of us then we are of them. He probably was watching you, worried you were going to hurt him.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s like he wants to talk to me.”

“‘Talk’ to you?”

“He was sitting up, just staring at me, like he was waiting on me to say something.”

“You know how crazy that sounds, right?”

“I know. But anything’s possible with these scientific rabbits—I told ya!”

“Why don’t you ask him if he thinks you’re crazy?”

“Okay—I see you’re not taking me seriously.”

Deidra went to Lee and hugged his long waist. “I’m messing with you.” She kissed his cheek and went back to the coffee pot. But the idea of talking to the rabbit lingered in Lee’s thoughts, even as he got undressed, even as he showered and went to bed. When the time came for him to clock in at the facility, he didn’t waste a moment of it speaking to the girl that cleans the other floors. He got his supplies and he went to work. He hurried through his mopping. He skipped scraping the gum from underneath the one researcher’s desk, choosing only to tend to his waste basket. Then he took the elevator to the third floor. He entered the dim hall slowly. He left his supply cart in the elevator, not wanting to disrupt the quiet with its squeaky wheels and screws that rattled. When he unlocked the door of room A3, he peeped his head inside first. The rabbit was

already looking his way. He could see the pale red eyes through the black of the room. He flipped on the light.

Lee had never talked to a rabbit before. He hadn't met a person who had and so, he didn't know where or how to start. For over fifteen minutes, he stared at the rabbit. He felt stupid, like the very fool Deidra had made him out to be that morning. And he also felt like a man on the verge of a discovery. He felt no distance between himself and the scientists he cleaned behind every night. There was something about the rabbit! And if Lee could figure out exactly what that *something* was, the scientists would make him one of their own. What would Deidra think of him then?

“Not sure what to say to you,” he began. “I’m Lee.” He scratched the back of his head. “Maybe I should’ve brought some carrots, or something?” He laughed at his own joke and the rabbit only stared. “Do you know tricks? I guess rabbits can learn tricks, just like a dog.” Over the next hour, Lee performed his own tricks, recalled from his younger years. He made a quarter disappear. He juggled some wadded paper towels. He talked, as well. He told the rabbit about Deidra and how her grandfather used to hunt rabbits. “But those were wild rabbits, different from you.” He told the rabbit about his last five jobs, how this was the first job he’d had in months. Lee walked closer to the cage, sticking his finger out for the rabbit to sniff. “Deidra says she’ll leave me if I lose another job.” With that, the wave of excitement and wonder had subsided. There was nothing special about the rabbit after all. Though Deidra hadn’t said it, she was right: Lee was a fool. And he, himself, had caused Deidra’s distrust. Lee turned off the light and closed the door behind him. When he heard the rabbit speak, he at first couldn’t bring himself to open the door

again, afraid of what he might find behind it. But the rabbit kept repeating the word louder each time. It was an awful screech, a siren-like call in a never-ending loop.

“I knew it,” Lee said, out of breath from the mere shock. His trembling hands wrestled with the keys. He could not get the door opened quickly enough.

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Lee got home early and woke Deidra an hour before she was due to rise. With a sweaty hand, he shook her. It took her a moment to make out his face in the dark.

“Lee?”

“I’ve got to show you something.”

“What happened?”

He hurried out, maneuvering around the question and darting down the hallway. She followed—once the fuzziness had left her eyes—and she stopped at the entrance of their living room. A rabbit, the rabbit from room A3, was seated on her couch watching the humans closely. For the first time in its entire life, it had no cage around it.

“He can talk,” Lee said. “I’m taking him back tomorrow and they are going to pay me. There gonna have to give me something.” His wide grin only set the hairs of her body on fire.

“You brought home a rabbit?”

“Yeah. It can talk.”

“What is wrong with you? That thing could have rabies.” Her hands were wringing so, the skin on them began to turn red. “You know I don’t want animals in my house.”

“It can talk.” He turned to the rabbit. “Say ‘out’!” He whistled at it. He snapped his fingers. “Say ‘out’ for her.”

“They are going to fire you, Lee. “

“No, baby. They are going to pay me.” He spat out the list he’d come up with during his drive home. “I’m gonna ask for a big check. I’m gonna get us a lawyer. I’m gonna call the news station, first thing.”

“Why are you doing this? We need this job, Lee.”

“Baby, it’s fine.” To the rabbit: “Say ‘out.’ Come on!”

“You’d better take that thing right back to where you go it. I’m not letting you lose another job. I’m done with you.”

“No, you’re wrong. He doesn’t have rabies. This is a scientific rabbit. All of their animals are clean.”

“Lee, what’s wrong with you?” Her tears were not visible in the dim light projecting from a corner lamp, but he could tell; he could hear the fragility that was now in her throat. She had gotten like this many times before, especially when the bills began to pile beside the counter-top microwave, and after his last job had fired him because he could not keep up on the assembly line. And before that job, he was let go from another, due to the factory industry’s push to hire bodies younger than thirty, all part of the

country's "We Owe Them" campaign, after the discovery of the molestation virus and the subsequent lawsuits and protests.

But a talking rabbit meant something better was coming for Lee and Deidra. She was being dramatic and this only encouraged Lee to try a different strategy. Lee picked up the rabbit, each hand squeezing the area under its shoulder blades. This was not the correct way to hold a rabbit, with its feet and tail bone dangling, gravity tugging on the weight of its oversized body. Even as the rabbit thrust its large feet and squealed in fear, Lee stretched out his arms and aimed the rabbit at his wife. He had to yell in order for her to hear him.

"Hold him. He's not scary."

But she clamped her ears with her palms and ran back into their bedroom. Lee didn't hear the click of the lock over the rabbit's cries. Lowering the rabbit, he figured Deidra would not be coming out of the bedroom. So, when she did return, he had a smile of relief on his face. She came towards him. She never stopped coming towards him. She bit her lip and snatched the screaming rabbit out of his hands.

"I'm taking it back myself."

Lee pleaded for her to reconsider. He stood there, as his wife struggled to open the front door. Clenching the fur on the back of the rabbit's neck with one hand seemed like the better idea. She tried it. But once she was able to get the door opened, the rabbit wiggled around, just far enough to be able to reach two of her fingers with its teeth. Deidra let go and the rabbit ran once its feet touched earth.

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Later that morning, when the singing girl went into Room A3, she did notice that the rabbit, her only ward in the room, was gone, its cage left opened, its food and water left behind. She paused, even removing her ear buds. She looked around for an answer of sorts. She rummaged through a thin binder of paperwork on the metal table, glancing over at the empty cage at times. Her supervisor came up to the room and looked around, too, just to see for himself. She poked out her lips as she waited for him to offer a logical conclusion, or to at least make an attempt.

“Maybe the lab came and got him?” he said finally.

“Nobody ever comes and gets him. Nothing has been done to this rabbit since the P.I. died.”

“Somebody must have. A research student, maybe.”

“The doctor didn’t have any students on his protocol. And he’s dead, so…”

“Somebody came and got the rabbit. I don’t know what you’re wanting me to say.”

“This is why we need cameras. Who knows what’s going on in this room? Did you know there’s a rumor going around that somebody’s having sex in here?”

“Who told you that?”

“People can hear them. They hear the table knocking and moving across the floor.”

“Jesus! Is Ron saying this?”

“No. The people in the rooms next to this one.”

“I’m just saying: if it’s Ron, he’d fucking better not be telling people it’s me.”

“I just told you it wasn’t Ron. And why would he say that about you?”

“I don’t know. But we don’t need cameras.”

“What about the rabbit?”

The supervisor left flustered, unable to focus on the issue at hand. There was nothing the girl could do except remove the empty cage. She dumped the bedding and food in a black bag and sealed it. She emptied the water bottle into the sink and stored all of the items on the table. After three years, this place had finally gotten to her. The lore of caring for animals was no longer there to anchor her to the job. It had all been a myth. No one cared for these animals, not like her. And no one ever listened when others had something to say. She might as well go work at a factory, or at shipping company, where she heard communication was not a necessity. People at those places kept their heads down and did their part of the job.

She replaced her earbuds, rolling her eyes. She grabbed what remained of the rabbit she would never see again. Not having to talk to anyone: it did sound like a good idea.

IF YOU LIVE IN MARION HEIGHTS

She will sit on the toilet, hunched over. You'll have a woman on the phone, trying to explain to you what a "chemical hysterectomy" is and how she's trying to save Black people from cycles, from slavery's stain on our wombs. Your shouting won't help the situation; the woman will shout back, "You should've watched the video. She'll be fine, but you should've the watched the video." You'll eventually hang up the phone, because after a while, the moaning coming from the bathroom will make it harder to hear the woman. Besides, there will be nothing she can do for you. You'll be on your hands and knees, soaking up red-yellow-brown fluids with wash cloths, drying towels, and even those decorative towels that match the shower curtain. The girl will call for Jesus sometimes, but most of the time, for her mama—your mama. She will scream. She will cuss and cry. She will beg for another towel. Another this and that. Her snot will be thick and clear. It's gonna stream down from both nostrils, and hitch a ride with salty sweat on the way to her lips. The heavy makeup will be ruined. Her womanhood? I mean the insides of her—all of that stuff that makes and carries a baby—will ooze out into the toilet bowl, in clotted blood chunks that'll slap the surface of the toilet water. She'll wipe between her legs. She'll show you what's on the towel: more blood. The clots will keep dropping. You'll say, "I'm killing her. I've killed her." She'll say, "Bring me another towel."

This will only happen if you live in Marion Heights, because if you live in Marion Heights, at the corner of Vincent and Tenth, a doctor will send her people to find you. They'll want to talk to you. It won't be on a Monday, though. They'll know that nobody wants to be bothered on a Monday. The weekend's still tugging at the brain on Monday. Monday is the first day back at the grind, picking up where you left off, seeing the same faces jump in your line for salads and burgers. And Mondays are the first days of yelling at Folks to get dressed for school. Folks don't like school. Folks don't like you. Folks have been known to roll their eyes at you on Mondays, wearing all that thick, charcoal eyeliner. She don't talk to you while you walk together to the bus stop; she don't talk to you during the bus ride from 9th Street to Highland, even if you say "goodbye." Folks have been known to get so upset on Mondays that you often wanna smack the upset off their cherry-glossed lips.

Why are you so mad? You're in love again? Third time this year. Oh! You're in love with a girl this time? So, when did that happen?

Don't you remember saying that last part out loud?

"I can never talk to you about anything!"

"Well, folks around here need to find somebody who cares."

You said that because you didn't care, not right then. Anyway, that's what Mondays are like. But the doctor will send her people on a Tuesday. They'll come to your projects after six o' clock, when most people are trudging up the path to various entrances of the complex, having faced a better day than Monday. Tuesday will shed from their backs and fall somewhere onto the sidewalk, next to a curse word some kid

scribbled in chalk to impress some other kid. They doctor's people will walk behind those residents who move too slowly, catch them before they make it inside. Others will go floor by floor, traveling up and down the halls, stopping at each door. The women will come wearing fitted pants that stop at the ankles, heels, and blouses that don't look cheap. The men will wear the look of men headed to court, or to office meetings in skyscrapers. And their faces will come in all shades of black. When you open your door for one of the women, your eyes will wander into the hallway and you'll catch sight of a man with locs down to his hips. You'll see another guy at the door closest to the stair case. You'll say under your breath, "What's going on?"

Meanwhile, the woman at your door will be as black as you, but with prettier bone-white teeth. Her hair will be drawn into one giant afro-puff. And very softly, as if she feels sorry about everything bad that has ever happened to you, she will call you "boo."

"Hey, boo. Can I talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Okay."

"Where do you work? I don't think I've ever seen your kind of uniform."

"At the hospital," you'll say. You'll even look down at your sky-blue polo shirt and black pants.

"Oh! My aunt's a nurse, as well. Do you know Connie Woodson?"

"No," you will say. "I just work in the cafeteria."

"Well, that sounds nice."

“Are you all selling something, or you—”

“Is it just you living here?”

“No.”

“Any kids?”

“I don’t have any kids.”

“Well, I’m Alyssa. And what we are offering to the residents of Marion Heights is empowerment. We want to empower you. We want to encourage you to be the best you can be, without any unnecessary obstacles.”

This whole time, Folks will be listening from your mama’s old couch, just near the front door. Her backpack will be right where she leaves it every day, on the floor and in the way of your feet. She’ll be on her back with her knees up, one arm dangling over the edge of the couch, the other holding the phone that you pay for. The TV will be on. And when the lady at your door says her spiel about being “the best you can be,” Folks will laugh loud enough to be heard.

“Is that your daughter,” the woman will ask, peeping over your shoulder for a better look.

“I told you I don’t have kids. That’s just my little sister.”

“Awwwww,” the woman will smile and say, as if you’d said “puppy” and not “sister.” “How old is she?”

“So, you’re not selling anything?”

“I told you, boo. This is about one sister helping out another sister.” Her brown eyes will look past you, up at your dull ceiling, and behind you at the paint-peeling walls. You won’t know if she notices the nicer things. Your mother’s picture is large and encased in an oval frame above the TV. In the corner of the living room, there’s the cabinet with her China set, snow globes, loose pictures, unopened mail, and the first tooth you lost as a child, kept in a small jewelry box. Alyssa will stare behind and above you until she says, “My mama’s from these projects, too. She used to live on the seventh floor. Is Mr. Franklin still living up there?” She won’t give you much time to shrug your shoulders before she blurts out, “Have you heard of McCloud Labs?”

Maybe you have, on the news one night, when somebody said something about a new company moving in. Third Street. Black-owned. Black-staffed. Black doctor. But you won’t remember much else.

“McCloud Labs is all about empowering us, *our* people. We’re all about the betterment of Black lives. You know, we were never meant to do better in this country. They don’t want us living beside them. They don’t want us in their schools. They don’t want us in their White House. And they think we’re all crackheads. And they think all we know how to do is make babies. We’ve got baby daddies all over the place. It’s all bullshit, isn’t it?”

Before you know it, Folks gets up and on her way to the kitchen, yells out, “I know a girl with four kids and five baby daddies.”

“Shut up!” you’ll holler back. Then you’ll mumble to Alyssa, “Folks around here think they’re funny.”

“What’s your name, boo?”

“Trinity.”

“Trinity, do you know what a generational cycle is?”

“I guess.”

“Studies have found that poverty is this never-ending cycle. If your grandmother was poor, and your mother was poor, then you’ll be poor, too. And it’ll happen to your daughter, if you have one. But then again, you don’t have to have a kid.” She’ll begin digging things out of a large, leather bag hanging from her shoulder. “I have a video I want you to watch.”

“No, I’m not buying anything.”

“No, Trinity. I’m gonna pay *you*.” She’ll find and rapidly flip through a wad of cash. “Two hundred and fifty-dollars. All you have to do is watch our video. And if you make an appointment with Dr. McCloud, you’ll get five hundred more dollars.”

You won’t take the money right away. “Y’all pay people to watch a video?”

“And you have to meet with Dr. McCloud. That’s very important. No appointment. No more money.” She’ll keep her hand out until you take the cash and the card, which will have her personal phone number, the number for Dr. McCloud’s office, and the link to the video, all printed on the back. “So, you’ll need a computer to watch the video. I know a lot of you don’t have access to computers. But definitely try the library.”

“I do have a computer.”

She'll grin really big. "Well, good for you, boo." Then she'll go on, "You'll see that Dr. McCloud is amazing. You know, my mother did move out of this hood, but she still didn't know a better way. She moved us into another trap. Drug dealers. Girls always wanting to fight you. I thought I'd never leave until I met Dr. McCloud. And then, I broke my family's cycle."

"So, this isn't a scam, right?" So many scammers come to Marion Heights, trying to push satellite dishes the landlord won't even let you put up on the roof. They come selling used computers, miracle drugs for arthritis, security systems, insurance. Or they tell you that there's a warrant out for your arrest, or your son's arrest, or your granddaughter's arrest, and you need to pay them \$1,000 to wipe the slate clean. So, you'll peep over Alyssa's shoulder. The dude with the locs will be shaking hands with Mrs. Riley's adult grandson, three doors down from you. You'll see him count bills into her grandson's palm.

"No scam, Trinity. Dr. McCloud specializes in reproductive health for men and women. But we like to call what she does 'empowerment.'"

Mrs. Riley's grandson will give you a couple of nods before closing the door. The guy with the locs will then head to another apartment. Alyssa will watch you watching him, and she'll smile.

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First thing the next morning is when you'll call the number on the back of the card, the one for Dr. McCloud's office, while Folks take their sweet time getting in and out of the small bathroom that divides your two separate universes. The woman on the

phone will sound like another Alyssa, energized and floaty, like she's high up in her own atmosphere.

“What did you think of the video, Trinity?”

You'll lie and say you liked it, though you never watched it on the old computer sitting on your crowded dresser. It still works and the city gives your entire building free internet. But you didn't bother with it, not after you and Folks argued. You'd fallen asleep to the TV, crying because Folks finally told you the truth: she hates you. You'd always known that she did. Yet, hearing it for the first time in your eardrum had loosened something inside you.

“So, I'll get five hundred just for talking to the doctor lady?”

“Yes, ma'am. It'll be a consultation to see if you qualify for the E-Pill. If you do qualify, then Dr. McCloud will give you more details from there, okay?”

Alyssa never said anything about a pill. You'll make a plan to watch the video after work. But work won't go so well. Your boss will yell because a medical resident on his lunch break will yell about how much the vegan burgers cost. The resident will somehow think you control the prices.

“Does it look like I control the prices, sir?”

Your boss will remind you that you shouldn't talk that way to the customers. She'll say that you should've just given him another discount, on top of the discount he already gets since he's a resident of the hospital. She'll say, “No need to be ghetto.” Your boss doesn't live in Marion Heights. She's from out east, where the projects aren't

allowed. When the city acts like it wants to build some projects out east, people like your boss set up meetings and protest all over the news. They don't mind working with you. But they'll do everything they can to keep from living near you. Before you leave work, you'll let your boss know that you have an appointment tomorrow and will have to leave work early. She won't respond with words, though her head will shake and she'll walk away with her hands on her hips. It'll feel weird when your mama pops up, inside your head. You won't like it when that happens. You'll hate your boss, even though she's tall and wide-hipped like your mama once was. You'll still love your mama, though.

Remembering her will be easy. You'll go home and look into the mirror and you'll see Gwen looking back at you. You'll remember how she looked at thirty, the same age you'll be now. You'll remember when you were too little for school, yet already smarter than a "book,"—that's what she used to tell her friends during their card games. They'd all lived there, in Marion Heights, from the first floor all the way up into what you used to think was the sky. They'd been there since it was built by the city. Your mama's apartment had been declared the "spades place," perfect because it had no lazy man hanging around it. And it had only one kid.

"My baby's smarter than a book," she used to tell them. She would ask you to spit out your numbers, letters, shapes, all so the other ladies could stick their cigarettes back in between their lips and free up both hands to clap for you. Nobody seemed to mind living in a ghetto back then. You'll walk up on Marion Heights and wonder when and how it all changed. You'll have to step over the latest cuss words drawn in chalk in order to enter the complex. The staircase will creak. Some parts of the railing will wobble, though Mrs. Riley swears she's being complaining to the landlord about "that darn rail"

for months. You won't remember them creaking when you were a kid, running up and down them when it was too cold or rainy to play outside. You'll have your mind on that memory, and briefly on the video, when you walk into your apartment to find Folks kissing on a girl.

The girl, pretty with the same amount of makeup as Folks, will become this crying, scared mess. She'll run out before you even have time to blink. But Folks won't move. She'll rest backwards on the couch, arms folded like she's ready for a battle and like she knows she'll be the one to win it.

"I guess folks around here really think they're gay."

"I am gay."

"You don't know what you are. One minute you're liking boys. Next minute, you're kissing on girls. You're all confused. I guess at least I don't have to worry about you getting pregnant, now."

"I wish you were the one that died, and not mama."

"Her having you is what killed her. She was too old."

"Babies don't give their mamas cancer."

"If she hadn't had to take care of you, the cancer wouldn't have been that bad on her. She couldn't even eat, having to feed you. The doctors said she needed rest. But because of you, she had to get up all hours of the night."

"It wasn't my fault."

"Folks around here sure love blaming other people, don't they?"

You won't get to the video. Instead, you'll choose to soak in the bath tub for over an hour. At one point, it'll sound like Folks are crying on the other side of the wall. You'll allow your words—the ones you'd said to her—to haunt you. You'll agree that those weren't the right words to say to your little sister.

By the time you think about Alyssa's card and the video link, your blood will be so hot, that you'll reach into a baggie of melatonin pills to help relax you. You'll declare in silence that you deserve something like an easy five hundred dollars. *That's a bill. That's a purse. Down payment on a car?* You'll picture yourself in a car that can jet past all the people waiting on the bus. All you'll have to do is talk to a doctor to get you a car. Easy.

~*~

“Alyssa sent me.”

“I know. Alyssa is my favorite. She's worked with us for many years.”

“She seems really happy about what she does.”

“Happiness is what you make it, Trinity. Did you know that?”

The office won't look like a doctor's office, just a boring room with jazz music playing and white walls all around. Dr. McCloud's little office won't look any different. A framed degree, proving she's a real doctor, will sit above her head. Her shoulders will be draped by long, silver strands of hair. Her wrinkles will be few-and-far-in-between across her skin. Still, she'll let you know that she's over seventy-years old.

“I wasn’t always happy. I grew up in not so good times. It definitely wasn’t a good time to be a child. And my parents didn’t have that much. I was one of the lucky ones. Got into med school on a full scholarship.” Her grin will be wide. It will send warmth through the hairs of your arms, even after she stops smiling to tell you why she’s smiling. “I had written an essay about being angry and fed up. I was going to change medicine for the ‘good of my people.’ I’m sure I scared the scholarship board. Lucky for me, a brother was on the board. Dr. Ellis—I’ll never forget that man. He fought for me—I know it. We have to do that for one another, you know?” She’ll pause and you’ll wonder if you’re not talking enough.

“So, this is all about a pill?”

“After years of trial and error, yes.” She’ll sit a yellow, square-shaped pill on her desk. “Have we convinced you to try it? I hope the video was helpful.”

“Yes ma’am, it was.”

“The process won’t be hard on a woman you’re age. We do have a version that’s gentler on a younger body. And I mean younger like a teenager, or pre-teen. We are beginning to test that drug now. Many people have been taking our pills home to their kids.”

“I don’t have any kids.”

“The world has enough babies, we think. In the African-American community, people are having babies at alarming rates. There’s nothing wrong with having a family; that’s not what our lab is insinuating. But when you’re Black, poor, drug-addicted, and uneducated, we’ve got to break the cycle. Was your mother educated?”

“She’s dead,” will come out first. “She finished high school, but she’s dead now.”

“My condolences. You, yourself, only have a G.E.D. according to your paperwork. No plans for something more?”

“Not really, no.”

“So, what will you do? Work in the hospital cafeteria until you’re in your sixties? Will you have babies? Will you spend the rest of your life taking care of them and then taking care of their babies? This pill will help you take a better path, Trinity. I guarantee it.”

“I don’t understand how a little pill can do all of that.”

“It can, Trinity, if you are willing to change. Every now and then, someone will take the E-Pill and go right back to their old neighborhoods and to their old ways. Of course, the pill still helps to solve the baby problem.”

“What problem?”

She’ll make a face that will sting a little. “Trinity, didn’t you watch the video?”

“I did. I just can’t remember that part of it.”

“That part is the most important part.”

You’ll have to come up with something fast, something that’ll keep your charade going. “So, it’s a birth control pill?” you’ll ask. “The video made it sound like it’s a birth control pill.”

“Something like that.”

“And you said it’s for men, too?”

“Mm-hm.”

“That’s pretty cool. Never heard of a birth control pill for a man. I’m surprised you’re not famous, yet.”

“Trinity, you will get paid. This isn’t a scam. I always have to remind people that this isn’t a scam.”

“I know.”

“Good. You are free to take the pill with you. I believe you qualify, but please go back and watch the video. It’s essential that you do that before you take this medication.”

But the pill won’t matter to you much. Still you’ll want to be nice. You’ll want to show Dr. McCloud that women from the ghetto are nice. Having signed both a waiver and a non-disclosure form, having received the cash, and having put the pill, which will be bound inside a tiny sealed bag, into your pocket, Dr. McCloud will ask about your sister.

“Alyssa, told me about her. She could be a good candidate for our teenage pill. We’re reaching out to girls in her demographic. Again, the dose is lower, not nearly as strong as the dose you have.”

“I’ll ask her. But I probably won’t get very far. We don’t get along, really.”

“I understand. Black teenagers are especially vulnerable and sensitive. They think they have everything figured out. But they soon discover that they know nothing. That’s why we want to help them before they have a chance to make mistakes.”

“Well, I don’t have to worry about her making a mistake. She doesn’t like boys anymore.”

~*~

The extra money will be crisp. It will smell like something you deserve—you, the one with the G.E.D. At least you were smart enough to come up on some cash. You’ll think about adding it to your checking account. And cars! You won’t forget about cars. You’ll consider rent, but for only a moment—*I could pay a month ahead*. You’ll even think about finding Folks’ daddy. His name was Jamison Partee—you’ll remember that, at least. All you’ll have to do is a little digging, ask your mama’s old friends, and boom! Find him and drop her off at his door. One less whiny mouth to feed.

She’ll ignore you when you walk inside the apartment. There she’ll be, on the couch like always, talking on the phone you pay for, to a girlfriend she thinks she has. You’ll empty your pockets there, onto the coffee table. You’ll leave the pill there, for now, until you plan to throw it away. You’ll keep the wallet of cash inside your purse. You’ll catch Folks glancing at the pills.

“Where have you been?” she’ll ask.

“I’m going to the car lot tomorrow.”

“When did you get some money for a car?”

You’ll go take a shower and go straight to bed. You’ll forget that you were supposed to throw the pill away. The living room chatter will erupt into a teenager’s love giggles. You’ll yell out for her to quiet down. She’ll take her phone into her bedroom,

purposely slamming the door to get out of you whatever you'll mutter into your pillow.

You won't hear the unsealing of the pill bag, not over the love giggles.

THE SICK ONES

Last night's smoke greeted the sun before most of the city's people did, or could. It had been another long night. Clint had heard the sirens in his sleep, and upon awakening, he scrolled through his phone to make sure that the chaos had been real. Yep: a Molotov cocktail to the two-story yoga studio on 5th and Brooks, only a short walk from the ghetto of shotgun houses he and his family called home. No looters this time, though. Nothing worth taking at a yoga studio that would satisfy dudes looking for a brief come-up. He giggled, imagining street dudes in yoga pants, selling mats on the corner for the low. Nah—someone just need to see a yoga studio go up in glowing flames. The sky was so clear last night, that it must have made sense to messy it with smoke.

Plus, cops shot that little girl last night when she wouldn't step back behind the barrier meant to protect them from her. People didn't like that. So, they burned something down.

Clint nodded to himself, not in approval of their actions—whoever was responsible. He had nodded in approval of their lack of empathy towards a building none of them—whoever was responsible—had ever been invited, or welcomed to enter. He lit up his blunt and puffed out his own gray clouds, as the police chief was quoted as saying, “Violence from protestors will not be tolerated.” The curfew would be pushed up to seven o' clock. Clint shook his head. A curfew meant nothing to him, nor to the folks on

his street, nor to the folks the next street over, and the next street over. All of them were boxed in by cinder blocks, by army trucks, and by barbed-wire fences placed at the openings of their streets. His hood was at Level Four. His hood was, in a word, sick. And sick people could not leave.

Clint didn't feel sick. Still, he'd asked his aunt if he could smoke for the nausea. Aunt Tammy folded easily for him. "Keep it in your room" was her only stipulation. How cool was that? Other sixteen-year-old dudes were probably still having to smoke in their parents' backyard, or in the bathroom with the vent sucking up the smell. He felt bad about lying: he wasn't nauseous. The worst symptom he'd had thus far was the sweating at night. But not now, not as he lay back in his bed, the chill from the window unit tinkering with the hairs of his legs and arms. Another boring-ass day of basketball shorts and a solid colored-tee. (Baby blue this time). Another day of waiting to get meals delivered to their stoop. Another day of Cee-cee likely crying about the baby, how her back hurts, how her ribs hurt like they were being pried open by a crowbar. She wanted this to be over. Which part—the pregnancy, or the virus —Clint wasn't sure.

Who would've thought they'd all get Ebola? Old Heads on his street used to sit around a stoop—anybody's stoop—and call it the "Africa virus." Uncle Hill had been one of them. They'd share their conspiracy notions, then take their shared data home to their families. African doctor brought it over in a tube. It was the African man's payback for slavery. A monkey—from Africa—had it at a zoo in Texas, and when it escaped, it bit a lady, who gave it to her husband, who gave it to his girlfriend, who gave it to everybody else; Clint thought that notion was the funniest. But the theory that stuck with him the most was the one about the "big plan"—Uncle Hill had mapped it all out for

them. Government wanted to kill Black folks and quickly. What was faster than a virus that could spread like wildfire in the ghetto? He'd asked Clint to count the number of white people that had the virus. How many of *them* were sick in the suburbs? When Clint couldn't count them and didn't know where to start, Uncle Hill nodded like a grandmother seated on the first pew, inside a hot, crowded church. It was genocide, a word Clint had learned the year after the city voted to add diversity to their curriculum and his World History teacher spent one week on Rwanda. *Is that what they're trying to do to us*, he'd wondered after talking with Uncle Hill. *Kill our whole race?* Sounded like something real. It would be no different than what that doctor lady was supposedly doing up north: handing out strange pills that caused Black women to shed their wombs.

And when the Health Department started knocking on doors to test everyone on Clint's street, Uncle Hill had chased them off his stoop with an old, chipped baseball bat. Rumor had it, by way of the Old Heads, that the virus was in the test kits. Because not all their neighbors listened to the rumors, people started testing positive. Whole houses were shuttered while National Guardsmen watched their front doors and their back doors for escape attempts. It got crazy really, really fast. The Health Department eventually came back to test Uncle Hill; he died from Ebola three months later.

Clint's phone buzzed away the memory of Uncle Hill and all of the memories the thought of him had ignited. It was a text from Ta'Neka. Ta'Neka Halbert? His Ta'Neka? No, not *his* Ta'Neka—he shouldn't think of her that way. Just because he'd been puppy-eyed over her since fourth grade, did not make her *his*.

Beale Avenue. @ 7. Miss you.

She missed him? As in for real missed him? His panic over such an out-of-the-blue revelation jolted him up into the sitting position. His blunt, half gone by now, fell from his mouth and he had to hurry to retrieve it before he could set his bed on fire, and Aunt Tammy could murder him. He smashed the tip of the blunt into his nightstand. *Ta’Neka misses me?* The truth of it was he hadn’t seen his friends for a few months. Ta’Neka and Greg lived on different streets, in different hoods. They’d been brought together over the years by the small cluster of schools in the area. One elementary, one middle school, and one high school, all of which managed to squeeze a shit load of bodies into small classrooms while their teachers did the best they could do. Last time he saw Ta’Neka—oh, and Greg—was after the National Guard marched in. They’d tried to go to the mall, but had to settle for hanging in the parking lot, watching the troops board up the two-story teenage oasis. Then went their schools. Then went their streets. The city urged suburban people to stay away. “Your lives depend on it,” they said. And city people could not go into the suburbs. “You will be arrested,” they said. Greg and Clint laughed at the white hype over the “Africa virus.” When Clint shared that story about the Ebola monkey, Greg damn-near chocked on his soda. But Ta’Neka didn’t seem to like their jokes.

They’re caging us in so we can die here.

She’d texted that the day he’d told her about Uncle Hill dying in the living room.

You don’t have it, do you?

Clint was quick to respond. *Hell no!*

And she still didn't know he was sick, now. And he figured she didn't know about his hood being at Level Four. *Why else would she think I could leave the house and go to Beale Avenue?*

He put in an emoji with shrugged arms and she didn't text back. So, he lay down again. Yes, he wanted to go and see her. *She misses me.* But how could he escape his house, let alone his barricaded neighborhood? Aunt Tammy wouldn't go for that. Plus, he could be shot, actually shot, like the troops had done that little girl. He twirled around one of his locs, one of the ones needing to be reworked, the one dangling above his right temple. It had become a favorite of his fingers this week. Once the virus had entered the states and started to spread, his fingers mostly toyed with the locs in the back of his head. Cee-cee told him to cut it out, that his fingers were too aggressive and her trained eyes could tell his hair was thinning in the back. She was too sick then to sit and re-twist for him, in the gentle, patient way only she could. And now, she was too exhausted and emotional to focus on his hair while people were being carried away in red bags on the TV, and sometimes right outside their house. It was especially difficult when her baby was threatening to snap her ribs in half.

"That baby knows something ain't right," Aunt Tammy often said. "That's why she's moving around like that."

"Their food is nasty."

"Well, what else you gon eat, Cee?"

"Can we please send Clint to the store?"

Clint sat up quickly. Cee-cee had made that request a day, or two ago—he remembered it now. Aunt Tammy had shushed her immediately, scolding her for trying to put her baby brother in danger for “real” food. But if danger meant getting to see a girl who admittedly missed him, whom he secretly missed and thought of daily, then it would be worth the risk.

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When the doorbell rang, Clint left his bedroom. The food box had arrived. He went straight into the kitchen, where yellow drapes hung and where images of lemons were on every place mat, oven mitten, and decorative towel. It was the brightest room in the house, and probably on the entire street. Aunt Tammy kept the kitchen just as bleach-clean, and lemon-scented as she did before Ebola arrived. Clint didn’t understand it. She had it looking way too nice, as if she was expecting guests to come over. But no guests—just the National Guard guys assigned to deliver their meals. Aunt Tammy was unpacking the box of perishable and non-perishable things when Clint decided to say something odd, something that could swing things in his favor. He picked up one item from the box—a can of tomato soup—and said, “This is gonna taste good.”

“No, it’s not.” Cee-cee moaned this from the kitchen table. She was slumped over, forehead resting on the cool surface of the table, shaking her feet, as if the baby—or vomit—was about to come out of her at any minute.

“What else you gon eat, Cee?” came the common refrain from his aunt.

“I can’t do the powdered eggs.”

“I could go and get her some real eggs,” he said to his aunt, embracing the opportunity. He spoke clearly, loud enough to grab their attention. But Aunt Tammy stuck her hands inside the food box.

“Don’t y’all forget to take your anti-viral pills. Looks like they gave us more.”

“You hear me, Aunt Tammy?”

“Clint, you know you can’t go to no store.”

“How come he can’t?”

“Just gotta sneak out when it gets dark.”

“Nobody’s gonna see him.”

“I’ll go through the hole in the fence.”

“Have y’all lost your minds?” It was the question that had often rendered them motionless when they were children, running through the house and bumping into her furniture. But this wasn’t about Aunt Tammy’s dining table, the one her grandmother had left her from God-knows-when. “You’re sick,” she said to him.

He hesitated, at first. “I’m not that sick.”

“You’re Uncle wasn’t that sick either. Now, we all got it.”

Clint saw Cee-cee grab a hold of her belly, as if her hand had the power to shield her baby from harm. Her hand didn’t have any power like that. That’s why Cee-cee’s eyes started welling up with water, Clint figured.

“My baby’s not sick,” she declared. Aunt Tammy looked right at Cee-cee’s round stomach, only to start unpacking the food. No one said another word, not even when Aunt Tammy took her breakfast back to her bedroom and left her niece and nephew alone in the kitchen. Clint and Cee-cee exchanged looks that only a big sister and baby brother could share. It was an unspoken agreement, one that honored the code of sibling loyalty his big sister had smacked into his brain early on in his life, when she had a habit of eating candy before dinner and watching movies not meant for kids. Clint’s sister wanted eggs and she wasn’t going to say a single word about him leaving to go and get them. He figured she already had a whole, big lie concocted in that head of hers if Aunt Tammy did end up realizing he was gone. Hitting up the store for Cee-Cee would be a brief detour, but nothing too risky for his need to see Ta’Neka. Getting cussed at by Aunt Tammy would be painful, but he was willing to stomach her rage for a chance to hear Ta’Neka say his name out loud, in that soft, sassy way she always did.

But the dudes patrolling his hood in their army uniforms, with their rifles and tasers; the ones who’d shot the little girl because her eyes were gushing out blood, even though she was reaching for them and begging for help?

Clint kept his cool—trying not to think about the soldiers—as he quietly peeled back the flap of fence Uncle Hill had never gotten around to fixing. The moonlight was more than enough to brighten the edge of the backyard. He could see that the alleyway was empty, except for the usual trash cans. At both ends of the alleyway, military trucks rested while a soldier leaned against his respective vehicle. They watched the street and not the alley. Clint thanked the Lord for that. He put on his face mask while he mapped out his path in his head: run across the alley, cut through Miss Jennings’ yard, and see

what her street looks like on the other side. If he was quick enough, he could hurry across to the Pines' yard, who lived across from Miss Jennings. And if all went well, he'd hop the fence into the Pines' backyard, get to their alleyway, and figure out his next move from there. As he began his route, the thought hit him suddenly: *forgot to check my eyes.*

Ebola eyes were easier to notice when the rest of the face was hidden beneath a mask. But Clint didn't give another thought about it. He hurried on towards Beale Avenue, wondering why Ta'Neka had invited him there, at that specific spot. But as he got closer to the location, and as droves of hooded and masked teens began to trickle into the shadows with him, the reason for Ta'Neka's impromptu invitation began to become clear. That little girl's name was spray-painted everywhere, even on the backs of the houses and the buildings he passed, as he kept away from the streets where the soldiers stood watch over the city. Some of the teens had signs. Some had cans of spray paint, which they would occasionally shake before quickly tagging a dumpster, or the backdoor of a business. One kid had an empty beer bottle, with a rag inside. Clint made eye contact with the kid, who couldn't have been no older than fourteen. Everyone was headed in one direction. The waves took hold of Clint and he allowed his body to fall in line with the others. Their march to Beale Avenue mostly sounded like a soft rumble of sneakers against pavement. If some of them talked, they didn't talk loudly, and they only talked to the person beside them, or in front of them. Every now and then, a couple or trio of soldiers would step into the shadows, flooding the spaces with man-made light. Everyone would scatter then. Sometimes a kid would yell out something classic, like "Suck my dick!" Other kids would laugh, but most would haul ass. The fences always slowed them down. Clint had to help several younger kids—maybe eleven, or twelve-years-old—

climb over safely when a fence proved to be too tough. The soldiers arrested who they could grab, although they never managed to get the kids who were doing all of the yelling.

The closer Clint got to Beale, the clearer he could hear chaos blaring over multiple megaphones. He soon made it to the final block. A tall bank stood there, casting a nice shadow in which Clint and the others could hide. On one side, lines of cops and soldiers gathered in the light, stretching from the bank to the government building across the street. They were quiet, besides the voices on the other side of their walkies. But across from them was the sound of rage. Across from them were restless bodies, a swollen wall of angry water threatening to burst past and through flimsy metal barricades. The protestors were packed in tightly. Clint rummaged through them, as best as he could. He was in search of a familiar pair of brown eyes, attached to a tall girl likely wearing box braids or bantu knots—whichever style she was into these days. Ta’Neka had to be in there. Lucky for him, at one point he heard his name yelled in between repeated calls for the “pigs” to go “home.” There was Ta’Neka, beckoning him with one hand, grasping a wide piece of cardboard with the other. She hugged him, her hand gracing the back of his neck. Her palm was so warm.

“We haven’t seen you in a minute.” Greg said that; he was there, too, and with his own cardboard sign, which was strange for Clint to see. Greg never got political, unless they were talking rappers, football, or DC versus Marvel.

“What are you doing here?” Clint really wanted to know.

“Didn’t wanna miss out,” Greg answered, clasping hands with his best friend. “What about you? I’m sure you’re just here for Ta’Neka.” Greg laughed. Ta’Neka smacked Greg on his shoulder for saying that, even called him “stupid.”

“Naw,” said Clint, trying not to panic. “I’m here for the protest, too.”

“They keep saying they’ll spray us if we don’t leave.” Ta’Neka was focused on the soldiers and cops, now.

“You mean with tear gas?”

“Once they get to spraying,” said Greg, “We should hit-up the stores then. That’ll be the best time.”

Now it all made sense.

“You trying to loot?” asked Clint. Greg just winked at him.

“I ain’t leaving,” Ta’Neka said, “Not ‘till I hit somebody.” She removed a water bottle from the small backpack hanging off one of her skinny shoulders. The water was a clear yellow. Clint couldn’t decide whether to be grossed out, or in awe.

“Is that your pee in there?”

“You think I would be holding a bottle of someone else’s piss?”

“Your eyes are a little red.” Greg was now staring at Clint with a seriousness that caused Clint’s throat to go immediately dry.

“Yeah, they are,” said Ta’Neka. “What level is your street on?”

“Only Level Two,” Clint lied.

“You should get your temp checked.”

“I feel good.”

“Nobody said anything about your eyes?” asked Greg.

“They’re not that red, are they?”

“Maybe he’s tired,” Ta’Neka suggested. “Are you tired, Clint?”

“I was smoking earlier.”

“Naw, they don’t look like weed eyes,” said Greg. But Ta’Neka had long ago taken lead over their trio, way back in the early days of their childhood innocence. She was always the mature one, Clint remembered. She would settle this.

“No,” she said, “He’s good. Those are weed eyes.” Then she turned to face the police, like everyone else on their side of the block. The boys followed her instinctively. When a voice on a megaphone shouted, “Protect Black Girls,” Ta’Neka held her sign over her head, banged the cardboard against the wall of night air, and joined in as the crowd repeated the words. Greg began chanting too, but not Clint. The noise, he’d allowed to escape him. Ta’Neka was this beautiful, confident, wild thing, flapping about gracefully, flipping off the entire police and military forces with her long, middle finger, a lemonade-colored nail at the tip.

“STOP KILLING US! STOP KILLING US!”

“Yeah!” Ta’Neka added. “She was a fucking little girl!”

Clint felt an elbow bone jab into his side. Greg gave him a “c’mon” nod. Clint had revealed to Greg his feelings about Ta’Neka years ago. Maybe Greg was trying to help him out, get him some attention? So, Clint chanted along.

“STOP KILLING US!”

Lucky for him, Ta’Neka looked his way, just as he started shouting out the words. And she smiled beneath her mask, her eyes spread wide and her cheeks lifted above the border of the fabric. When she chanted louder, Clint got louder. Then, when someone on their side threw something, Ta’Neka pulled out her bottle of urine and launched it. All three friends kept eyes on the bottle. They maneuvered around heads and taller bodies as the bottle began to descend. Where would it go? Who would be unlucky enough to get hit with Ta’Neka’s pee? Ah! The baby-faced cop in the second row. *Bitch ass boy*, Clint thought. The bottle bounced from his helmet and tumbled off his shoulder into the void between his and the cop’s body beside him. Ta’Neka lifted her arms in the air as if she’d just shot a three-pointer.

“It didn’t bust open, though,” Greg said in disappointment. “You should’ve thrown it harder.” Ta’Neka didn’t appear to mind. She was looking at the ground for something else to throw. Clint looked down as well. Sneakers, flip-flops, and some boots covered the pavement as feet stomped around, or paced, or stood frozen. Still, in between a pair of flip-flops and Nikes, Clint found an empty bottle of what used to be Gatorade. He tried to hand it off to her.

“No, you do it,” she said.

Clint tossed the bottle around, as he revved up his nerves.

“Don’t throw like no girl,” she teased. She was at her cutest when she teased him. He even thought about flopping on purpose and throwing the bottle too short just to get a rise out of her. But as he reared back, preparing to launch his own missile, loud pops came. The trio looked above their heads at the capsules of tear gas zooming through the sky. The bodies all around them scrambled, zig zagged, and collided at times. Greg grabbed hold of Clint’s elbow. Clint grabbed hold of Ta’Neka’s hand, causing her to let go of her cardboard sign. Greg led them towards the shadows of the tall bank, as man-made fog swallowed the block.

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The phone store a couple of blocks away was alive, though it had been closed since sunset. Those who’d fled the tear gas—some of them—had converged there. After a few taps to the store windows with hammers, bodies went in and boxes came out, clutched inside armpits. Greg and Clint worked side-by-side as they snatched up chargers, phone cases, and three phones each. In his life, Clint had only stolen unremarkable things: candy, soda, condoms he had yet to use, chips, and one can of beer, which he poured out promptly upon realizing beer was disgusting. Phones were a smarter steal, according to Greg, who went on and on about how much he’d made selling phones to folks in his neighborhood. As Greg boasted on, Clint looked behind them at Ta’Neka, who stood by a sale sign, scrolling through the phone with which she’d arrived. Others hurried around her.

“Damn! They’ve arrested fifteen people, already.”

“From where we were just at?” asked Clint.

“I wonder if they’ll talk about my pee?”

“Yeah,” said Greg. “They got your DNA, now. They coming for you.”

“I ain’t scared to go to jail.”

Then someone yelled, “cops.” And again Greg, Clint, and Ta’Neka found themselves running. After two blocks, they detoured into an alley and paused for air. Each panted like overly-excited young dogs.

“Damn,” said Greg. “I wanted to grab one more. Just one more.”

Clint was astonished. “How many times have y’all looted?”

“Tonight makes three?” Ta’Neka could not say for certain.

“Ta’Neka Halbert? I thought you were a good girl.”

“What? You don’t like me no more?”

This could have been the most beautiful, amazing moment in his life. It should have been.

She came over to where he stood, put her back against the brick wall of whatever shuttered building housed this alley. Ta’Neka pulled down her mask. Her lips glistened with sweat and lip gloss, which smelled like cherries. She pulled his mask down, too. His lips were dry. Weeks of smoking had caused dark spots to clutter the center of his bottom lip; he licked it now, out of shame. He hadn’t expected the bottom half of his face to be seen tonight. Hadn’t expected her to lean in, her eyes closed, her lips parting.

Wait! Oh shit!

He pulled away from her, like a kid trying to avoid nasty cough syrup. That was a mistake he at once regretted. He was the disgusting Ebola cough syrup, not her. He didn't want to get her sick and, in that moment, he wished he could've made her understand. But he watched her face go from wanting him, to wanting to run away from him. He'd embarrassed her, he knew it. She put her mask back on and went to the mouth of the alley. She started scrolling through her phone again. If there was a news alert, she didn't share it with them.

"Where to next?" Greg asked as some point. Thank the Lord he hadn't seen shit. Too busy fooling with the phones he'd looted.

"Still gotta get eggs for my sister."

"The store on Clover okay?"

Clint gave a nod. Ta'Neka didn't answer at all. Greg had to call out her name just to get her to look up from her phone. When she did, she gave a weak nod and headed out without them.

The grocery store was already being ransacked by folks wheeling shopping carts in and out. Clint picked up his pace and climbed inside the locked, but shattered glass entrance door. For a moment, he kept up with Ta'Neka, following her to the medicine aisle. He watched her stuff her backpack with pill bottles. He thought of lies girls would believe. *I was nervous. I ate a spicy burrito earlier—that's why I couldn't kiss you. I wanna kiss you bad as hell. I've always wanted to kiss you.*

"I'm sorry about what I did," he said instead, which was not a lie at all.

She shrugged. “Don’t forget your sister’s eggs.” And she hurried off towards the next aisle.

Clint did want to forget the eggs. He wanted to forget the entire, stupid night. To make matters worse, there was only one carton of eggs left. Another carton was on the floor surrounded by egg yolk and shells. Clint stepped over the mess and grabbed his only option. When he turned around, a woman stood by a display of water bottles, blocking his path towards the front. She wore a mask over her face. In her hands were a mix-matched batch of items. A can of lighter fluid. A six-pack of soap bars. A small bag of diapers. A can of cat food. Her headscarf seemed to have suffered some terrible fight: it was barely on. Strands of her hair were plastered to her forehead by sweat. Other strands defied gravity, sticking upward, instead of downward.

“Please,” she said in a language Clint could not decipher. When the boy only stared, she repeated her plea in English. “This is my store. My father’s store. Please.”

“I just want the eggs. I ain’t gonna take anything else. I swear.”

“Please.”

“It’s cool. Look, I’m leaving right now.”

He stepped to the left and she moved in the same direction. She let the items in her arms drop to the floor.

“You’re not taking my eggs.”

“It’s just one carton.”

She lunged. She grabbed the carton, but Clint didn't let go. She pulled and he pulled. He pulled so, he slipped in the egg yolk on the floor, falling to his back. Now she was on top of him. She put her hands around his throat. He let go of the egg carton, grasped a chunk of her hair. During this fight, somehow both of their masks slid off their faces. Clint overpowered her hands and pulled them away from his throat. He rolled her and now he was on top.

“Stop it! Just one thing of eggs. That's it!”

At first, Clint thought his left eye was crying, which didn't make much sense to him. But he watched the woman stiffen her body as a drop of his eye blood fell onto her lips, and in between her lips. It had hit her with perfect precision. Clint saw what his eyes had done and he quickly got to his feet. He wiped his eye. He collected his sister's eggs. (He grabbed that pack of diapers, too). The woman, meanwhile, began to tremble. She wiped her lips. Then again with her shirt sleeve. Then again with her hands, as her face went pale.

“I'm sorry,” Clint murmured. By then, she had picked up a water bottle from the display and began dousing her face, as she tilted her head downward. He could hear her gasping and praying in a language Clint could not decipher. There was nothing he could do for her.

Ta'Neka and Greg were waiting for Clint beneath a light pole in the store's parking lot. His mask was back on. His eyes were good; he had wiped them both multiple times.

“That’s all you grabbed?” laughed Greg. He had a garbage bag full of whatever he’d grabbed. And Ta’Neka’s backpack was fatter than earlier. Clint didn’t have much time to say anything. Sirens howled now and were becoming louder. The trio ran for the third time that night.

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They ran until they made it to a small park, too small for anything more than a basketball court and a tire swing. Beyond the park, they could see army vehicles rolling towards the noise they’d just fled. Because they were close to Greg’s street, and since Ta’Neka’s street wasn’t much further away, they agreed to all part ways there, before they could be seen by the wrong sets of eyes. Greg saluted his friends and carried his heavy load off, promising to text them both sooner than later. He cut across the basketball court, into the space between some houses. Ta’Neka—she didn’t seem to be in a hurry to leave. She leaned back against the stem of one of the basketball goals, the one without a net.

“I might come out again tomorrow night,” she said. “Want me to text you if I do?”

Clint readjusted his grips on the diapers and the eggs. His body shifted to one side. “I probably won’t able to come out again.”

“Because you have the virus?”

He almost dropped the pack of diapers; he had to clamp down on it with his arm. “I ain’t sick.”

“Then why you acting so funny?”

To not kiss a girl who clearly wanted to be kissed meant he was acting “funny.” Peculiar. Weird. Stupid—very stupid. Again, he repeated, “I ain’t sick.”

“Your street’s on Level Four. I know somebody that lives there and she posted about it tonight. All of y’all must have the virus. You’re not even supposed to be out right now. You lied to me and Greg.”

The diapers dropped. He retrieved them quickly. “Just wanted to get out the house.”

“And?”

“And I wanted to see you.”

Ta’Neka looked around the court, as if to see if anyone was watching them. She was also trying to hide the grin blooming on her lips, which Clint could see. She looked at him again and said, “I read something yesterday. It said that there’s only a forty percent chance you can give the virus to someone else. This lady my mama knows had it, but she didn’t get anybody else sick. She’s still living, too.”

“Where did you read that? The ‘forty percent’ thing?”

“The internet,” she said, shrugging. And for a little while, neither of them said a thing. The diapers were beginning to slide down Clint’s side again. Ta’Neka must’ve noticed.

“I guess you should get those to your sister.”

When she turned her back on him and headed off, Clint's skin began to dampen. He felt like he could stop breathing at any moment. If there was a forty-percent chance that something bad could happen, then there was a sixty-percent chance that something good could happen. A sixty-percent chance of not doing harm to the girl he'd always liked. Everything that told his body to keep still, to keep his lips behind his mask and go home, he ignored this time around. The city hemorrhaged disfunction in the distance. Meanwhile, Clint kissed a girl in the moonlight. His girl.

CURRICULUM VITA

NAME: Christian Loriel Lucas

ADDRESS: 6807 Downs Branch Rd.
Louisville, KY 40228
christianloriel@gmail.com

DOB: Memphis, Tennessee - February 6, 1985

EDUCATION & TRAINING:

B.S., Agriculture
Murray State University
2003-2007

Non-Degreed, Arts and Sciences
University of Louisville
2017-2018

Non-Degreed, NY State Summer Writers Institute
Skidmore College
Summer 2018

M.A., English
University of Louisville
2018-2020

AWARDS: Sarah-jean McDowell Award
University of Louisville, 2019

PUBLICATIONS: "Toni Morrison," *Searchable Sea Literature.com*, 2020

"Ilium, Ischium, and Pubis," *Midnight & Indigo*, 2019

"Let it Be Me," *Midnight & Indigo*, 2018

Funky, Self-published, 2012

NATIONAL MEETINGS

PRESENTATIONS:

“Ilium Ischium and Pubis”

Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture

Since 1900, 2020

PROFESSIONAL

EXPERIENCE:

Veterinary Assistant/Laboratory Animal Technologist

(2009 - present)

Comparative Medical Research Unit

University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Creative Writing Workshop Instructor (2020)

The Butterfly School, Louisville, KY

Interview Transcriber (2019 – 2020)

The Louisville Story Program, Louisville, KY