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# The Things I Wish I Could Tell You When You Cry The Most: Stories

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**The Things I Wish I Could Tell You  
When You Cry The Most**

*Stories*

Celeste Prince  
Honors Project 2010  
Adviser: Kristin Naca

*For every black girl who couldn't go to the pool party because of her relaxer.*

*For every black boy who wore his skin like armor.*

*For any black person whose friends never let them forget they were black.*

*For MRP, NGP, and ARP for never backing down,  
even when they were the only ones in the room.*

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“With God, all things are possible.” Thank you.

**No one ever talks about the moment you found that you were white.  
Or the moment you found out you were black. That's a profound revelation.  
The minute you find that out, something happens.  
You have to renegotiate everything.**

Toni Morrison



## Miss Clarke's Lesson

Ms. Eileen Pattie, my sixth-grade social studies teacher, had the biggest ass in all of Paulson Elementary School and probably the entire city of Lakewood. I'm exaggerating, but according to my sixty-eight classmates and fellow rulers of the school, she had no rival; not even Principal Kirkwood, who made an elephant look small, could compete. One time on a dare (just to prove it) Sam Mueller held our largest world map across it during a civics lesson while she was writing on the blackboard. We silently acknowledged the spare cheek peeking out on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. "Told you!" Sam mouthed and flipped everyone off. When Ms. Pattie turned around, half of the boys were rolling on the floor laughing, so she made all of us stay after the bell an extra five minutes for interrupting valuable class time.

She tried squeezing into tight black leggings and tying cardigans around her waist to play it down, and I felt for her, but dear god, she couldn't hide an ass like that. It

caused serious damage if you didn't pay enough attention, like when she walked between desks and blindsided a distracted Ashley Owens, knocking her clear out of her chair.

But twelve-year-olds can't tell the difference between "womanly features," in my mother's words, and real roundness. So behind her back, we called her Ms. Fatty during four-square games and swinging competitions. The boys made the nickname easy enough so everyone, even slow Trevor Copeland (who wasn't dumb but didn't talk to anyone so he couldn't prove it), could understand who was the literal butt of the joke.

My mum, dad and I met her and my other teachers on Back to School Night in August. It was two days before summer ended and two months after we'd packed up and left our Afro-Guyanese neighborhood in Brooklyn to elevated, whitewashed Colorado so my dad could start a new big-time engineering job. Mum had encouraged the move, thinking it'd be good to get away from the super-expensive East Coast private schools; the tuition fees made my parents sputter, "Dey nuh know we got t' eat?" Paulson Elementary fit Mum's dream requirements with high rankings, close location, and best of all, public school system affiliation. "I.e., no money from me," she sang when she came home with the paperwork.

As we navigated our way around the cafeteria during the mandatory mingling, clasping lukewarm punch and cookies, our family stood out against the mob of tanned soccer moms and freckled commuter dads. We got a lot of "Oh, you all must be *new* to the neighborhood!" and too-big smiles. Mum and Dad's fresh-off-the-boat Caribbean accents – even after almost twenty years of living in the US – embarrassed me but amused everyone else. Whenever we went to the grocery store, strangers approached us and asked the same question: where are you from? Ms. Pattie was no different.

“Gooley-ana?” Mum had told her “*Guy-ana*” but Ms. Pattie still pronounced it wrong. I had to give the woman credit – she was the only one who seemed to know where/what Guyana was, but she was also a social studies teacher. She clapped her hands together and leaned closer to peer at my features, searching for something South American on my face, I’m sure. I held my breath to keep from breathing in her scent for no particular reason. “That’s so *interesting!* I’ve never met someone from there before. I was going to guess Jamaica.” She beamed at me and I noticed that her grey eyes matched the streaks in her curly hair. “Do you talk like your parents, too, then?”

I could have gotten away with a jerk of the head, but I didn’t understand. Her smell invaded my space when I opened my mouth: milk, fresh laundry, a recent perm.

“Talk like what?” I wasn’t being rude, honestly; the word “accent” only entered my vocabulary after we left New York and we met the Lakewood realtor for our new house who pronounced ev-ver-ry sill-ah-bull in monotone. Dad and Mum mimicked how the woman described the “ga-reen trim and white stuck-oh” for days, and I then realized there was a difference between them and our new neighbors.

But I didn’t talk like my parents because they didn’t want me to answer stupid questions like them, and I didn’t either. “You’re American, darling,” Dad said once. “Dun let no one take dat from you jus cuz dey nuh like how you speak.”

Ms. Pattie waited a moment for a more in-depth response, but I only brushed cookie crumbs off my overalls and looked down at my scuffed Keds.

“Well. Perhaps not.” She frowned and turned back to the adults. “So. Do you all speak English down there?”

Mum was not the least bit amused. “Dis woman s’posed t’ teach *social studies*?” she huffed later as the three of us walked home, Dad’s longer shadow stretching past my mother’s in the setting summer sun. “She dun know Guyana was British colony? What kind of nonsense is dis, she nuh know dat?” She slapped at a mosquito on her forearm with a force meant for something much bigger.

I trailed behind my parents silently, kicking rocks on the sidewalk. My mother’s patois grew thicker the more upset she became: the D’s heavier, the tone higher, agitated.

“You wan send her somewhere else just cuz of one teacher?” Dad sounded tired. He wrapped an arm around her strong shoulders and kissed the twists on the top of her head. “Fine. We gwan an’ find a private school.”

Mum sucked her teeth, equally displeased with that option. “Nah man. Miz Batty jus betta watch that wide batty of hers,” she muttered.

“It’s Ms. *Pattie*, Mummy,” I chimed in.

“Trus’ me, Amber,” Mum said over her shoulder without missing a beat. “She eva go down t’ Guyana? Eh-eh, dey call her Miz Batty, fer sure.” She sucked her teeth again louder and held her arms far apart to illustrate Ms. *Pattie*’s wobbling behind. “Miz *Fat Batty*.”

Two mornings later I officially became a member of the sixth grade class of 1996 at Paulson Elementary. When I met Ms. *Pattie* again for homeroom, she had me stand next to her in front of everyone to introduce myself. Her rear end nearly blocked my four-foot-seven frame.

“Class, this is Amber Hunte,” she announced. “From Gooley-ana.”

“You mean *Gha-na*?” called out a brunette with glasses and a pig nose. I later found out she was Hayley Fletcher, the self-appointed brainiac and class-elected bitch.

“Like *Af-rica*?”

Pink, freckled faces blinked at me expectantly against a background of mountain landscape posters and cartoon cats saying, “Great job!” and I wondered if I should bother. Being African for a few days wouldn’t be too bad. But Ms. Pattie cleared her throat and answered before I could.

“No, no, dear, *Gooley-ana*. As in *South America*.”

“Oh!” Hayley jumped in her seat. “You speak Spanish?”

The other kids stayed away from me during lunch and recess, thinking I didn’t speak any English. I sat and watched them from a bench on the blacktop, my bag lunch in my lap, next to Trevor Copeland, the slow kid. He offered me some of his Cheetos.

“Nice pigtails,” he said. They were the only words he ever said to me, and even though he smelled like ham sandwiches, I couldn’t help staring at him during class for the rest of the quarter, hoping for something more.



It only made sense that Ms. Pattie would both hurt herself and save her life by cause of her magnificent derriere. On the first day back from winter break, Principal Kirkwood waddled in to tell us our teacher managed to fall from the roof of her house straight onto her back after New Years. (She was taking down Christmas lights when a low-flying bird interrupted.) Most people die from something like that, but the extra padding protected her. Ms. Pattie only broke her tailbone and fractured some vertebrae.

“Lord knows how bone broke tru all dat blubber,” Mummy snickered when I gave her the take-home letter detailing everything.

The accident came at a perfect time. The school district had put pressure on Paulson Elementary to hire more teachers who weren't one cough away from catching fatal pneumonia or cashing in on retirement. With Ms. Pattie in a restricting spinal brace, the school had a reason to bring in a new teacher and successfully avoid angry phone calls from the superintendent. So a search went out and Miss Clarke arrived.

After two weeks of substitutes, we found waiting for us a sweating Principal Kirkwood, a downtrodden Ms. Pattie (sitting strapped into a contraption that resembled a robotic claw fused to her back), and a slim young lady who looked like me. The lady had different hair than me: hers lay long and bone-straight, pressed down her back. I had thick braids stuck up in random directions and fastened with bright barrettes. During recess, when girls played with each other's hair, I could only sit and watch, jealous, knowing my mum would spank me if I came home with my braids undone.

The principal waved us into the room and announced that Miss Clarke (the stranger, we guessed) would be assisting Ms. Pattie the rest of the school year, acting for the most part as our head teacher. Miss Clarke smiled, revealing a small gap between her two front teeth; Ms. Pattie attempted a nod of confirmation but her brace stopped her from completing the motion. While they whispered, a few kids glanced back and forth between me and Miss Clarke and squinted. I glared at Bryan Gilroy when he met my eyes and he looked away.

Kirkwood left, murmuring wishes of good luck and adjusting the tie around his trunk neck, and we were left alone. The two teachers stared and twenty-three sixth graders stared back until Miss Clarke spoke.

“Who can tell me what you learned last quarter?”

Her voice sounded funny to me, like it was missing something, but I couldn't figure out what or why. No lilt, no melody, but no extension of letters either. It sounded too grown up to fit her, this black lady who could be my big sister. The other kids got shy, and fiddled with things inside their desks to hide it. When Ms. Pattie cleared her throat loudly, though, a few hands raised and Miss Clarke called on Hayley Fletcher's frantic one.

"The first migration and the Inuits," she answered, a little cocky.

"The Inuit, you mean," corrected Miss Clarke. "It's already plural."

Hayley sunk down in her chair. The boys exchanged knowing smirks.

By the time we switched classes for science and language arts in the afternoon, the new teacher had slowly won my classmates over with a game of geography Jeopardy, showing us her hometown on the map (nobody believed her when she pointed to Berlin until she sang the national anthem), and her disturbing missing sixth finger. This fascinated and horrified all of the boys. She showed us the scar on her right hand where the doctors removed it when she was little, but wouldn't let us touch it; the nerves were still there, she said, and it felt like an electric shock when she accidentally bumped it. I squirmed just thinking about it as I walked home.

When I sat down for dinner, my parents acted unimpressed as always with the happenings of my day at school – until I mentioned Miss Clarke.

"She black?" Mum's fork, piled with rice and curry, hovered above her plate as she looked at me, eyebrows arched into her hairline. "Dey brought a black teacher dere?"

"Uh huh," I said around the potatoes in my mouth. "Sheems nice, I guessh."

"Dun talk wit yo' mout' full, Amber," Dad said. "Black, you say? *Black* black?"

I started to respond again, but Mum smacked the back of my chair to stop me.

“Swallow first, gyal,” she growled.

“You ask her where she from?” Dad pressed.

“Germany,” I said once I moved the food to the pocket of my cheek. He nodded and stroked his beard like he expected that kind of answer.

“She married? Chillun?” demanded Mum.

I mumbled that I didn’t know and carved highways through the mound on my plate with my fork while they mused about my new teacher and the future coffee dates they would finally get to have with a Real Live Black Person. Since the move, they had waved and smiled at anyone who looked black in the grocery store, at Target, at intersections, hoping to connect. Dad made conversation with the one black teenager who worked the register at the Texaco near our house, quizzing him about his family. Mum followed women around at the mall to ask who braided their hair and could they do hers? Their enthusiasm about Miss Clarke was valid – Lakewood lacked color outside of the changing leaves.

“It’s like *To Sir, With Love*,” Mum said. “Forget that *Dangerous Minds* nonsense wit what’s-her-blondie. I never liked that movie, you know. Our turn now. Time for de black person t’ save de white folk from deyselves for a change.”

“Das right!” cried Dad, raising his water glass. “T’ our very own Sidney Poitier!”



A few days later, after Stop, Drop, and Read, I lingered by my desk, pretending to put all of my stuff back into my desk while everyone filed out to music class. When it was just me and Miss Clarke, I sauntered over to her at the board.

“So...do you like the school so far?” I asked, admiring the almost invisible scar of her missing finger.

She glanced down at me but kept cleaning off the chalk. “It’s fine. Shouldn’t you be in music right now?”

“Um, yeah.” I had expected a deeper response, but I forged ahead. “I’m new, too, sorta. We moved here from New York.”

“Yes, Ms. Pattie told me,” she said, reaching up on her tiptoes to get the last remnants at the top of the board. “I’m just new at this school, though. I went to college here, in Colorado.” She brushed the chalk dust off her hands and moved past me to grab a stack of classroom atlases, her steps brisk. I followed, hoping to think of something else to say before the uptight music teacher officially marked me “tardy.”

“Your hair is nice,” I tried. “Really long. Wish I could have mine like that.”

“Hmm.” Miss Clarke grimaced as she scratched at a mysterious dried stain on the front cover of one of the atlases. “Go to class, Amber.”

One of the other sixth grade teachers wandered into the room with two coffee mugs, and Miss Clarke greeted her, smiling. She didn’t look at me again as they started chatting about their book club, so I scooted down the hall to the music room ten seconds before the teacher could close the door in my face.

At lunch, Hayley Fletcher – the braniac bitch – dropped her tray down on the table across from me without warning or invitation. She pushed up her glasses with one hand as the other scooped greasy ravioli into her mouth, all the while gazing at me and my grocery bag lunch of a jelly sandwich and fruit punch Hi-C. The in-between girls (not total losers but not popular either, whose group I was informally pledging) twisted

their lips in disgust at the meat sauce on Hayley's chin. They moved to sit at another table without saying a word, leaving me alone with Lady Pig Nose. Up to that point in the school year I'd avoided being pulled into her toxic social outcast circle by bonding superficially with some in-between girls in my homeroom. We wore the same multicolor shoelaces on our Keds which was enough for a couple lunch dates. When Hayley tried to whisper to me during language arts, where we sat next to each other (because God was punishing me for skipping chores back in New York), I squinted hard like I was trying to pay attention to the teacher's lesson and Hayley's rasping was distracting me.

"I know some Spanish now," she said between forkfuls, not bothering to breathe through her nose. She paused to demonstrate in a forced accent that sounded more like Speedy Gonzalez than a native Mexican: "*Hola, me llamo Hayley. ¿Cómo estás?*"

"Good for you."

"Now it's your turn. Answer."

I shook my head. "I can't speak Spanish. I told you that," I said.

"Yeah, but you could have been lying," she replied, as if that happened to her all the time. I could believe that. She gulped her chocolate milk and wiped off the brown mustache with her palm. "Say something."

"I can't."

"Yes you can. Say 'I'm fine, how are you?'"

"I *can't*."

"I thought people in South America spoke Spanish. We learned that last year."

My knowledge about the continent was no better than Hayley's, so I couldn't outright say she was wrong. But I did know my parents, who spoke nothing outside of fluent Queen's English and "roun-de-corna" patois.

"My mom and dad don't," I said. "And anyway, I'm from Brooklyn."

"My dad says black people are from Africa. He should know. He works at a college. How'd you end up in South America?"

"Ask your dad." My cheeks warmed and I took a bite of my sandwich, crust side, so I wouldn't have to talk anymore. My fingers shook as I held the soggy bread. Hayley was always annoying, but this time, her rambling made my skin itch.

"Is Miss Clarke really your mom?"

"What? She's too young."

"Oh, so she's your sister?"

I stared at her. "Noooo."

"Your aunt?"

"We're not related, Hayley. We don't even look alike."

"Somebody said you guys were and that she's just pretending to be from Germany. That's why she never calls on you, so it doesn't look like you're the favorite."

This was news to me. "Who said that?"

She shrugged and continued packing her cheeks with ravioli and meat sauce.

"Jush some of juh boys."

"Well, they lied." I stabbed the straw into my juice box with more force than I intended. "Not all black people are related."

"Then how come you always call each other brother and sister?" she asked.

I sputtered out my juice and swallowed at the same time in the rush to respond, spilling some on my green turtleneck and burning my sinuses. “That’s ‘cause—”

The lunch aides interrupted me, dismissing us to the playground. Because I didn’t actually know the answer to her question, I got up before Hayley to toss the rest of my lunch into the garbage and rushed outside with the crowd of boys. I hid on the edge of the playing fields, shivering in the February snow and watching kids play tackle football, until the whistle blew and we lined up to go back inside for more class.

After Ms. Pattie clanked home and the sixth grade wing had emptied, I went to talk to Miss Clarke again. She looked tired as I told her about my mom wanting to know where she went to get her hair done. I rolled my eyes in the way I saw my parents do when they bantered about Lakewood together.

“She can’t find a hairdresser,” I said, “‘cause there’s no one here who can do *her* kind of hair. *Our* hair.”

Miss Clarke blinked. Not what I expected again.

“Y’know, ‘cause,” I continued, snickering a little, nervous that I messed up the joke, “there’s nobody like us that live here, y’know?” I laughed harder, hoping it would be contagious. “I mean, some people think we’re, like, all related...”

She didn’t laugh. She sniffed and reached for a tissue in a corner of the desk she shared with Ms. Pattie. “I don’t go to a salon,” she said. “Sorry.” Her voice was muffled behind her hands as she blew her nose. She threw the tissue in the trashcan then waved me out the door, grabbing her coat, purse, and grade book as she did. “I need to go to a faculty meeting, Amber. You should get home.”

Mum hmm-ed when I reported my new information. “Mus be haf-white den,” she supposed to herself as she boiled the water for rice. “Dat make sense. Dem girls dun need the hairdresser; dey hair come out de *womb* straight straight. Lucky gyal.” She motioned for me to set the table while twirling one of her fraying twists. “Stick close to dat teacher, Amber,” she instructed. “She yo’ real life *To Sir, With Love*. She help you.”

“Yes, Mum.” But I wasn’t sure Miss Clarke wanted me as her devoted pupil.



A month into the term, I vacantly watched Ms. Pattie fight with a loose piece of metal from her brace in the back of the room. In the front, Miss Clarke talked about how the United States was a nation of immigrants, except for the Native Americans, and how many of us could trace our relatives to Europe. Before she got further, I raised my hand.

“What about slavery?”

“What *about* slavery?”

I balked then found my voice. “Well, you’re talking about how everyone else got here. What about the black people? Are we gonna talk about them?”

“You learned about slavery in fifth grade, Amber. This year we learn about immigration and family trees.”

I frowned. “But I wasn’t *here* last year.”

“Neither was I.” And she turned away and started pointing out the different countries in Europe where people lived before they came to America. I sat holding my hands inside my desk and swallowed hard to get rid of the sharp pain in my throat so I wouldn’t cry. When I looked up a long time later, everyone’s eyes were on me, including Miss Clarke’s.

“Huh?” I asked. A few of the boys snickered.

“I said,” repeated Miss Clarke, flicking a long, invisible strand of hair behind her ear, “since you lived in New York, Amber, can you tell us about Ellis Island and its connection to immigration?”

It was a tourist trap, “one of de biggest in de entire state,” according to my Auntie Nancy. Weighed down with throw-away cameras, sunscreen and Kleenex, thousands of people oohed and ahhed as they ambled down the halls, telling their sticky-hand kids that this was where their Polish great-great-great-grandfather Maciej Adamicz became Matthew Adams and began the family legacy of a better life outside of the “old country.”

I went once on a field trip. The school shuttled thirty-something black fourth graders out of Manhattan to tour the island and see the Statue of Liberty, a national symbol that meant nothing to our families. Darnell Norwood made a point of this during our tour.

“Ey yo, lady,” he called out while we looked at the immigrant photos wallpapered floor to ceiling. “Where da black folk at?”

Our guide’s smile drooped and she shot a look begging for help to Mrs. Williams, our teacher, who shrugged like, “They your problem now, boo boo.”

All of us were citizens but half had grannies living in the middle of the Caribbean who only visited if tickets were cheap with smuggled guava cheese in their luggage. Our parents told no stories of long boat rides – aside from the obvious one – or how Lady Liberty outstretched her arms in welcome. When my parents came in ’79 to go to school, they had been greeted by an ornery customs agent at JFK.

“De man dem smell like rotten apple juice, not freedom,” Dad used to say bitterly.

I narrowed my eyes. “Ellis Island? It’s alright,” I said. “I mean, it’s really crowded all the time and everyone cries.”

“And?”

“And what?”

Miss Clarke pursed her lips as if she wanted to say more but moved on. I thought she would call me to her desk later for a private conversation but she didn’t look at me when we left for lunch. I kept my hands in my lap during class and didn’t speak after that, unable to get rid of the ache in the back of my throat.



On Friday, the first day of March, while I read about the presidential election candidates (Clinton was the only one I paid any attention to) in the newest issue of *Weekly Reader*, Miss Clarke dropped a bomb: parent-teacher conferences next week. Mandatory. That means you have to be there. Have your parents fill this sheet out, bring it back Monday.

Dad came home early from work to trim his hair in the bathroom and Mum bought a new outfit from Penney’s for the big night when they would finally meet their future Scrabble night buddy. We ate an early dinner of leftover spaghetti and arrived at the school on time, which was saying something – we usually ran on hardcore CP time, leaving the house ten minutes after we were expected, or more often, an hour when our watches were set to Caribbean people time. My parents looked nervous, like they hadn’t studied enough for an important exam as we speed walked to the wing.

“Mr. and Mrs. Hunte, good evening!” Ms. Pattie, still looking like a cyborg, came forward to shake hands when we reached the classroom, her recently downsized back brace still clinking. Mum stiffened until she saw Miss Clarke usher out another

family, and relaxed slightly. The adults greeted each other with a slight acknowledgement in my direction and then disappeared into the classroom. They made me wait in the hall with my homework and a heavy atlas as a makeshift lapboard, but I pressed up close to the door so I could listen.

Once the door closed my parents gushed about how lovely it was to finally meet the new teacher they had heard so much about. They talked loudly over each other until Miss Clarke must have said something because it got quiet for a few seconds. I heard some shuffling papers and a “well, let’s not waste anymore time, shall we?” followed by sounds of agreement from Mum and Dad, much more subdued.

Miss Clarke started by explaining her new position at Paulson, her general thoughts about the sixth grade class (“curious, eager, good kids overall”), and then dived into notes about me. Though my homework put me “in contention” with Hayley and the other brains of my grade, my sudden shyness and lack of participation in class concerned both her and Ms. Pattie, she said. I slid onto the floor to try to listen through the crack under the door, feeling the rush of cooler air on my cheek.

“Well,” Dad began. He spoke slowly, trying hard to mimic Miss Clarke. “Maybe she is have-ing a hard time adjust-ting?”

“That’s a possibility,” agreed Ms. Pattie. I could hear her brace squeak as she nodded vigorously. “Amber is probably used to a more diverse group of students from her old school.”

There was a pause. I wished I could see the looks on my parents’ faces.

“Yes, of course,” Mum said in the same affected voice my father used. “But Amber has all-ways been a qui-et child. She likes to keep to her-self.”

“All that may be true,” Miss Clarke said. She sounded frustrated, like when she quizzed the class about a past lesson and everyone shouted out the wrong answer.

“Nevertheless, I don’t appreciate teaching children apathetic towards interacting with their classmates. Amber’s too old for this kind of behavior. If she wants to succeed in junior high, she needs to learn to make friends—”

“She dun have friends?” Mum’s volume rose on the last syllable.

“Why no one told us earlier?” asked Dad.

“You haven’t noticed?” Miss Clarke replied.

I balled my hands into fists. I knew I wasn’t popular, but she didn’t have to make me sound like a complete loner.

“May I suggest something?” Ms. Pattie, the peacemaker. “Maybe, to help Amber feel more comfortable, Miss Clarke could spend some one-on-one time with her. You know, talking with someone from her, uh, similar background might coax her to —” she paused, probably to make a gesture, judging from the squeaking, “–open right up!”

Mum, Dad and Ms. Pattie all made approving noises and I heard an invitation to dinner at our house for the first session, but Miss Clarke cut everyone off.

“I’m sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Hunte, Eileen, but I really don’t feel that is necessary.”

No one spoke. I heard my dad tap a staccato beat on the floor with his foot.

“Well, I suppose dinner is a bit presumptuous,” started Ms. Pattie. “But after a few meetings, I’m sure it wouldn’t be completely out of the quest—”

“I see what you all are trying to do, but just because Amber is the only black girl in her class does not warrant special treatment. Not from me, not from Ms. Pattie, not from anyone. She will learn the same way as everyone else.”

“Oh, I wasn’t talking about special treatment,” Ms. Pattie explained hurriedly. “I just meant that it could be good—”

“Yes, yes, I see, but I won’t have any of my students feeling more privileged than the others. In fact,” said Miss Clarke, “from my own experience, I’ve found that black students in schools like Paulson benefit *more* when they completely immerse themselves in the environment and don’t try to differentiate from the pack. When I was Amber’s age, I got along just fine and I didn’t have *any* black friends or teachers.”

Ms. Pattie whispered something about Germany and I stifled a giggle.

“But I went to college in Denver and had no problems,” Miss Clarke responded, her tone more defensive. “My parents worked hard so that I would be considered an equal by my own merit, not by extra pushes. If I could do it, why can’t Amber?”

Another pause, longer now.

“I hope you dun tink we asking for special treatment for our chile, miz.” Mum’s voice sounded even but it was impossible not to hear the machete under her tongue. “We wan her to work hard jus like everyone, but she a young gyal still. She need guidance, a role model.”

Dad added an “ahem” of agreement. I pictured the two of them holding hands like defiant upraised fists in their laps.

“I guess we’re going to have to agree to disagree, Mrs. Hunte.”

“What’s your plan, then, Miss Clarke?” asked Ms. Pattie.

“We should bring Amber in to hear it.”

I scrambled up from the floor and arranged myself against the opposite wall, innocent and studious with my vocabulary worksheet, when Ms. Pattie opened the door

and told me to come inside. There, I sat between my parents and across from the teachers, separated by two student desks pushed together. Papers and folders labeled with names of all the sixth graders sprawled over the surface. I spotted mine underneath Miss Clarke's resting elbows.

"So here's the deal, Amber," she said, leaning close. I kept my eyes on her gold bracelets to avoid that throat pain I hated. "I'm having trouble understanding your recent behavior. You don't raise your hand anymore, you don't speak to anyone, and you just seem very unhappy. Maybe you can help me out."

I scratched my arm and made a show of examining a new cut above my elbow. Mum pinched my leg with her long fingernails underneath the cover of the table, so I stopped and forced my eyes to meet Miss Clarke's.

"Are you unhappy in my class, Amber?" she asked.

I wanted to ask her the same thing. "No." I scrunched lower in my chair.

"You sure? Because your other teachers have said that you act perfectly fine in *their* classes, answering questions and volunteering."

I said nothing, concentrating on the sky through the window behind her head.

"Do you not like your classmates in here?"

"I like them."

"Ok then. Is it me, Amber? Do you not like me?"

My eyes jumped back to her face in surprise. I was pretty certain that teachers weren't allowed to ask that kind of question. Was there a right answer? And besides, that wasn't the real issue. *She* was the one who acted like we didn't have the same skin color, as if that didn't matter in this town.

I opened my mouth but could only say, "I don't know."

"Lawd Jesus," my mum sighed. Dad rubbed my back.

"Well," said Miss Clarke, "maybe it would help if we changed things, if we only saw each other once a day instead of how it is right now with homeroom and everything."

"What?" I frowned.

"You mean." Mum stopped then tried again. "You mean, you wan switch Amber t' another classroom, t' another teacher?"

"I think it's for the best. The less contact she has with me will make it easier for her to adjust. Especially if you all decide to stay in Lakewood until she graduates high school..." She trailed off as I stood up. "Something wrong, Amber?"

"What did I do?" I asked. My voice trembled. "What did I do wrong?"

"I'm sorry?" Miss Clarke glanced at Ms. Pattie and then back at my parents for assistance. "What do you mean, what did you do?"

"You're supposed to be my Sidney Poitier," I gasped out as my throat constricted and my eyes smarted. "My *Sir, With Love*. Why...why don't you like me? What did I do so that you don't like me? Is it cause my hair's not straight? Is it 'cause we're from Brooklyn? Or 'cause I'm a kid? Is it...is it..."

The tears fell then and I dropped into my dad's arms but Miss Clarke and I maintained eye contact and I sobbed until she asked to be excused and left the room, face plain as a statue.

## **The Thing Inside: a Nella Larsen Rewrite**

It could not have been much later than eight when Clare Bellew stretched languidly between the sheets. She blinked slowly at the foreign ceiling above her. The space next to her felt cold; John was up and moving, rustling his newspaper in the parlor, talking to the maid. From the tone and lilt of his voice, he sounded in high spirits, despite his frantic busy schedule the past few days. And here she laid, the dutiful and supportive wife, still in bed. She smiled to herself at the irony and prepared to turn over to sleep a few more minutes.

The thing inside her, however, thought it more than necessary to get out of bed. A thickening in Clare's throat and an acrid taste on her tongue forced her to sit up, gulping for air and grabbing for the glass of water strategically placed on the nightstand. After she drank deeply, she touched her forehead: clammy.

"It's too warm in here," she muttered to herself.

The thing inside her disagreed; each hair on her skin suddenly stood at attention, sending a cold chill across her body. Clare yelped and burrowed into the sheets for

protection, then leaped from the bed onto the bedroom floor as if she had been pinched. Clearly the thing inside her refused to be crossed. Still shivering, she wrapped her robe around herself, paying special attention to her sensitive mid-section.

“If you want something, all you have to do is ask,” she scolded. “You don’t have to act like such a child about it.”

The thing responded with a lurch that made Clare double over, gasping, her hands clutching her ankles.

When her heartbeat returned to normal and she could breathe at a normal pace, she glared at her belly. She shuffled over to the windows to gaze at another foggy October day, smog heavy on the horizon. A tepid drizzle of rain splashed the sidewalks and passerby below, contrasting with the bright and cheery descriptions sketched out in the pages of *The Crisis*. Poets like Langston made the vibrant city sound like a wonderland of jazz bands and sophisticates around every corner. New York was what you made it, John said right before the move, and Clare had so far failed to make it anything unique or stimulating or anything like in her magazines, only lonely and muted. She shivered again as she traced outlines of the passing cars in the condensation on the glass, then moved to her vanity table.

In the mirror she glanced at her pale reflection in preparation for the day’s make-up routine, only to be confronted by a pair of dark foreign eyes. For a moment Clare sat shock still, terrified by the stranger. The eyes regarded her calmly, steadily, as if they had every right to be there as she did. Clare’s limbs refused to function, freezing her to her chair, but her thoughts spun quickly inside her head. Who had dared to enter her bedroom? What did they want? Was there more than one? Where was John? How had

they gotten past him and the maid? She swallowed a scream. Nothing could be done until she faced the intruder. If she could only sum up the courage to do so.

She blinked. The spell broke.

The dark eyes were her own. Nothing to fear.

She laughed, though it came out strangled, and applied powder to her cheeks and nose with a shaking hand despite her whispered consolations.

John appeared in the bedroom doorway, leaning against the frame, watching her silently. Clare caught his stare in the mirror briefly, coquettishly, and returned to brushing her light hair. He walked behind her and slid his hands around her tiny waist, leaning his head over her shoulder. She pretended to be frightened and tried to fight him off, giggling, but he only clung to her, kissing her neck delicately.

“You look well this morning,” she murmured.

John gazed at her in the glass, his fair face looking slightly anemic next to her creamier complexion. He smirked. “I swear, you’re getting darker as the days go by.”

Clare bit her lip and refocused her attention on picking the stray brown hairs from her hairbrush. John sensed her slight discomfort and returned to her previous statement. “I have you to thank for that, Nig. Looking well, I mean.” He grazed his lips against the soft skin beneath her chin again.

The thing inside her turned and kicked at the sound of the wretched nickname, tainting the compliment. She closed her eyes, her breathing slowed and shallow.

“Waking up to you every morning,” he continued, the vibrations of his voice tickling her throat, “would make any man happy to be alive.”

Clare giggled to keep from crying out in pain at the movements inside her. “Plans today, darling?”

“Same old things; don’t trouble yourself with my affairs.” He crossed the room to the closet in search of a tie. “But I may be back late tonight, so don’t expect me for dinner. I’ll find something at a place downtown.”

“Of course.”

Clare stood up from the vanity and adjusted her robe, folding her arms over her middle abruptly before John turned towards her, moving to leave. He planted a dry kiss on her cheek as he passed out the door.

“Don’t get too lonely without me here,” he kidded.

She laughed along as she watched his back retreat down the hallway. Once his figure disappeared, a wave pushed at her insides and climbed to the back of her throat, as if it had patiently waited for the opportune moment. Covering her mouth, she rushed to the bathroom.

Moments later she stared curiously at the dark congealed liquid in the bowl. Knees pressed against the cold tile, body sheathed in a fine silken robe, she leaned on the porcelain toilet, propping her chin in her hand to see better. See better? She giggled then gasped suddenly at her amusement. What would friends think, she thought, if they could see her, at this very moment? The great Clare Kendry – or rather Mrs. John Bellew now – sitting at the toilet examining her vomit. Atrocious.

She swallowed and spat, then stood to flush. When she caught herself watching it slip down the drain with the water, she angrily forced herself to rinse her mouth at the sink. The madness needed to stop; she could feel that she was transforming from the

inside out, and it would only be a matter of time before John realized that his little nickname meant more than his original intentions. Exhausted, she sank to the floor. The thing inside her twisted and untwisted itself frantically, not understanding the new position and environment.

“Hush, little one,” she whispered in a detached tone, rubbing the negligible bump in her middle.

How did this happen? Why did she let this happen? Since Margery’s arrival, she had practiced extreme caution, bordering on prude behavior so opposite of her character. At John’s more randy moments, she always managed to either distract him temporarily with some form of entertainment (breaking out a bottle of whatever sort could do the job) or simply assuage his inner desires using different methods – usually a combination of the two. After John’s most recent promotion, after he came home to celebrate, her jaw required three days rest and an icepack before she could chew again.

Clare could not expect to keep John at bay forever. He was a man with manly needs, according to his angry ultimatum one evening after being denied for what seemed the umpteenth time. These needs required fulfillment by someone of the fairer sex, preferably his wife. But, he hinted with an edge, the responsibility could be extended to another woman if the circumstances continued.

An empty threat in all senses, she knew. Before their marriage, in the days when the two felt they could tell each other (almost) everything, John confessed his lack of charisma when it came to women. And Clare only smiled politely and pretended as if that mattered nothing to her, knowing instantly that she had found her ticket to freedom.

So Clare refused to budge, but could come up with no reasonable explanation that made sense to John for why. So much did he love her, he said reverently, that he would even accept a vow of celibacy from Clare. He said this with a note of skepticism, remembering her overwhelming (and somewhat frightening) enthusiasm during their honeymoon that made him question her prior chaste claims.

And of course Clare had nothing of substance to offer to her husband except a silly bashful smile and a helpless shrug of her shoulders. She had hoped that her word (or lack thereof) would be enough for her husband. It had been enough during their courtship, why not now? Her smile faded as he marched towards her and she wondered how she allowed such a simple thing – a band of gold, a wedding ring – to change so many aspects of her entire being simply so she could gain a bit of security.

So he took her, silencing her with rapid justifications. She was just being difficult, he told her, a coy little thing, and though he had enjoyed her game for a little while, today they would implement some new rules. Before he entered, however, she made one last desperate request:

Contraception.

He had frozen, hovering over her body like a vulture about to partake in a carcass. For a moment she wondered if he had suffered a heart attack at the shock of it, but then he laughed. Long and hard, he had laughed, his chest heaving and his arms shaking under his weight.

“A condom?” he finally gasped. “Oh Nig, you are such a *tease*. You know I don’t even buy those.” And he plunged inside, still snickering under his breath, before she could even think speak another word of protest.

He had enjoyed himself immensely, enough so that he paid little attention to Clare's sobs, which she stifled with one of the decorative pillows. She tried clenching her legs in a naïve attempt to create a seal, but it only made him moan and push harder. Too scared to try anything else, she lay quietly, counting the seconds like catechism. Afterwards, while John laid snoring and muttering, satisfied, she had rushed to the bathroom to cleanse herself, fighting back tears in the bath. She scrubbed between her thighs with scalding hot water for what seemed like hours, trying to erase whatever God had placed upon her that gave men the self-righteous presumption that it, like the penis, was also their property and therefore could enter it whenever and however they pleased. She finally collapsed amidst the suds, unwilling to continue battling something she was destined to never beat.

And now here she was, sitting in a similar position, many weeks later, shaking. Faint again, she curled up on the floor, closing her eyes. The tears stung the back of her eyelids before she tasted them on her upper lip and chin. The thing inside twirled, using her stomach as a handhold to hold its balance. Clare winced, gasped, and struggled to stand and look for her cigarette case. Smoking, she learned, tended to subdue the acrobatic tricks.

When she finally found and lit one, she savored it as she sat in the empty bathtub, still robed, feet dangling over the edge. The thing inside her drowsily settled into a corner, preparing for a nap, as she took longer drags. Peace at last.

John knew nothing, of course. Denying its existence wore on her nerves, but Clare realized keeping the secret to herself until she came up with a plan made it – the pregnancy – easier to control. Naturally the thing couldn't alert anyone else to its

presence until she started to show, but that wouldn't be for another month. She was in charge until then.

Except what could she do besides smoke and cry? Clare blew a broken smoke ring. Margery's birth had nearly killed her years ago, and with no women friends to ask for help or advice, Clare wore the guise of having everything together from conception to birth. At the time, she didn't worry until the second trimester. But she hadn't feared the responsibility of motherhood, as John had often joked to colleagues at cocktail parties. No, that meant little to her; it was the fear of the child itself. It was why she had sent Margery to boarding school as soon as possible. Better to not see or think about it, she had told herself at the time.

And what if... no, no, better to not think about it. But she had to think about it; the threat was all too real. If the child did come, and it looked too dark...

She pulled sharply this time, nearly knocking out her breath. She choked for a moment. *If the child looked too dark.* My God. What choices would she face?

A subtle kick came from her womb, almost as if it were having a bad dream. Clare paid it no attention and blew out more smoke. For one solid minute, she wondered what it would be like if she were a glass of water, and whenever she felt so inclined, she could just...tip over and empty out on the floor. Quickly and quietly, without any protest, she would spill across the tiles, creep into the grout, and disappear into the carpet edge at the doorway.

Another kick, a little harder this time, but still not terribly severe. Clare shifted her weight from one buttock to the other and crossed her ankles.

If humans were glasses instead of solid beings made of pumping muscle and blood, she mused. The world would fill them with problems: color, financial woes, sexual obligations, whatever came to be. And when one felt enough was enough, she could simply—

A final kick, softer than ever, and then a rushing sound filled Clare's ears as she watched the quickening flow escape down the sides of her pale thighs. She couldn't remember later if she screamed or laughed, but she awoke with tears on her eyelashes in the hospital.

## American Like That

Arshad met his first American girl on a Friday night, the first Friday of the month, his first Friday night off in what felt like half his life. He'd chauffeured business executives between conferences and hotels in luxury town cars for weeks, and that night he looked forward to lying on his mattress and just being. He'd even gone as far to hide his Riverview Taxi uniform in a gym bag so he wouldn't have to look at it until Saturday, when he had to go back to driving strangers from one glamorous destination to the other. But for Nikhil, his roommate, Friday night in America sent out a telegraph message (he meant telepathic, but he often mixed them up) to every member of the sexes to leave their homes in droves to mate with whomever, wherever. With all of the songs on the radio about lost souls meeting in the club and the offspring generated from these brief encounters, staying inside to watch stolen cable was like smacking God in the face with your unused genitalia. Nikhil's still functioned, as far as he knew, and to demonstrate his

case, he stood in front of the television half-dressed, his tented boxer shorts blocking Arshad's view of Ellen Degeneres.

"I'm getting hard watching a chick in a suit, man!" Nikhil slammed his fist on top of the TV set. The picture wavered. "And she doesn't even *like* guys!"

Arshad, squatting on his mattress, shrugged and tried not to make eye contact with Nikhil's crotch. "I just want to sleep, man. I'm not in the mood to spend twenty bucks on beer."

"I don't give a *fuck*, we're going out tonight. I've stared at equations since...Jesus, eight-thirty? No, no, no, it's over," Nikhil said, shaking his head. "I need to see a woman." He gestured towards his erection in disgust then padded towards the kitchen in their studio apartment. "We all need it."

So they took turns scrubbing grease stains out of their jeans in the bathtub, dried them in the oven, and shared some of Nikhil's new cologne.

"Perfume girl at the mall," – Nikhil paused to cup his hands in front of his bare chest to demonstrate her best asset – "swore it smells just like that shit Usher makes." He sprayed under his armpits and winked at his reflection in the bathroom. "Tonight's my night. I can smell it."

"Smells like you got ripped off." Arshad coughed, inhaling some of the cologne.

"Fuck that, it was only ten dollars. Hurry up, are you going to use it or marry it?"

They caught the light rail to downtown Minneapolis without paying, picking up discarded transfers on the platform ground. Careful to stand a few bodies apart to avoid awkward brushes with one another, they carried on a booming conversation in case anyone got the wrong idea. What that idea would be, they weren't sure. At that hour,

though, only people in suits and shined loafers coming back from the airport and skateboarding teenagers got on and off at the stations. The other passengers grimaced and shifted their gazes whenever the roommates laughed too loud or eyed a young lady too long.

They reached the Warehouse district and the men swaggered over to Aqua on Nikhil's insistence. "The hottest girls in the cities flock there, aching to meet guys like us," he assured Arshad. Guys like us: dark skinned and dark haired, interesting accents that didn't match the elongated O's of the Upper Midwest, billfolds with singles fresh from the treasury. The line of waiting females outside of Aqua, outfitted with platform shoes and string thongs, both impressed and repulsed the two men. The long queue moved too slowly, but the girls, man, too good looking to pass up, might as well wait.

But, Arshad pointed out, what about the heavy makeup covering acne pockmarks? Perhaps the clientele age was closer to the men's shoe size than legality. As soon as a girl asked her friend about math homework due on Monday, Arshad and Nikhil casually stepped out of the line to cross the street and join the older crowds of the Imperial Room. They followed a pair of women who looked like they were photocopied from a Vogue editorial spread, Nikhil spitting game and Arshad playing the "gosh my friend's an idiot, can I buy you a drink for your trouble?" role. Didn't work – the women disappeared into the mass of people once they walked through the door.

Inside, Arshad and Nikhil zigzagged upstairs to the bar and posted on the counter to survey the developing scene. Other men who could pass for their darker cousins nodded and mumbled "excuse me, brother," when they bumped into him at the bar, jostling for similar spots to watch for dance partners.

Technically Nikhil had seen her – Kelsey – first, but his romantic approach towards women involved psychic mind tricks that never worked without a fishing line attached to draw the target in. He stared, wide-eyed, for ten minutes straight, licking his lips like he had seen in old LL Cool J videos whenever she seemed to look in his direction. No luck.

“Forget her,” he grumbled and turned back to the bar. “I see why they call this place the frozen tundra. Nothing but frigid bitches in here.”

Arshad pretended to agree but watched the girl for a half hour longer. She stood apart from her friends, scowling at her phone and ignoring the gaggle of friends who guzzled tequila shots a few steps away from the DJ’s stand. He liked that, he decided. This air of independence even with her clique, a quality she didn’t need to reapply like lipstick. It took two Heinekens and a shot of something brown and spicy before he could wobble across the room to her, now absorbed into the circle of her clique.

“Ya wan dance, gyal?”

He sucked in his paunch as she glanced at him over her shoulder without rotating the rest of her body. Her friends were silent, mouths pinched in surprise. She smiled and put a sugar-pale hand on his shoulder to gently shove him towards the dance floor.

“Show me what you got,” she said. The friends, in a wicked chorus, laughed behind her.

In the middle of the dance floor, she twirling around and throwing her hands in the air, he doing the two-step, Arshad started to make up an alternate life to accompany the moment. Dancing in his last clean dress shirt, toes cramped in his too-small work

shoes, his mind turned and constructed a new identity for this sweet-smelling brown man who he didn't know, and desperately wanted to embody.

I'm not a cab driver, he thought. I have a degree in economics and on especially hard days, when I finish working downtown on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor of that One Fancy Building, I go to happy hour with my colleagues and secretaries, tie loosened and shirt collar opened. The men compliment me on being the youngest executive on the team and admire the way I can sound just like them when I talk. And they say, "Wow, Arshad, do you ever go back home?" And I say, "I am home. This is America, isn't it?" And we all laugh. The ladies exchange sharp banter with me over their cocktails but eye me hungrily, considering their fantasies about taking me home. I have an apartment to myself with access to a gym and Jacuzzi. The fridge is stocked with plenty of domestic beer, cheese and bread, leftover pasta dishes from my last dinner party. If I get lonely in my California King-size bed (with the sheets of 500-thread Egyptian cotton) all I have to do is give a call to this girl, dancing in front of me, and she shimmies her way past the doorman and up the elevator to my side...

But then the other side of Arshad's brain intervened: Hullo, yes, this is all very nice, cute, sure, but aren't we forgetting some things? Like how we don't even know this girl's last name and that you drive a cab and that we are Guyanese. It's right there on our passport. What, you have a fancy license and now think you're special? Think again, man, you put on your pants one at a time just like everybody else.

I am American, he argued.

No, you're not, replied the brain.

Sure, I am. Just look at my clothes.

Yes, just look at them. You're most definitely not American.

Well, *she* doesn't know that.

Not unless she's blind and deaf.

Arshad suddenly grew conscious of his appearance, the way his arms bent away from his body, almost flapping like chicken wings, the small flab roll peeking over his belt. A line of sweat rolled down his spine – could she see it, or the other sweat beads dripping on his good shirt? He checked to see if she'd noticed, but her eyes were closed, lips mutely singing along. She didn't even need him there.

The song changed, the lights shifted, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, hips pushed into his pelvis. He wondered about this girl with curly brown hair and freshly-waxed eyebrows. What did she do when she wasn't at the club? Maybe she was a student at the U, majoring in anthropology and working at the bookstore part-time. She wanted to work abroad after graduation, but her parents wanted her to go to law school. She would tell him about how she planned to join the Peace Corps, helping women in the Amazon. Her parents thought she was going to work on Capital Hill, she'd say, and then smile knowingly because she'd led them to believe that. Arshad could see that earnestness in the lines around her mouth, the humility in her glittery eye make-up.

After ten mashed-up songs she made a drinking motion and pointed to the bar. He walked over with her, thumb threaded through the loop of her jeans, suddenly affectionate for this girl who he only knew by the density of her arms and the smell of her hair. He eagerly put down a damp ten dollar bill on the counter when she fixed him with a look-how-thirsty-I-am gaze. The bartender made change and placed a vodka-cranberry in front of the American girl. The pulsations of her throat fascinated Arshad as she

swallowed: even, tiny, the skin hardly rippling. He ordered another beer and sipped with moderation, trying to appear aloof.

“So what’s your name?” she shouted over a Jay-Z song.

“Arshad!”

“What?” She acted as if he had sneezed in her face.

“Andrew, I mean,” he said, giving her the Anglo middle name his father put on his birth certificate, in case this exact interaction occurred.

“Andrew? That’s a nice name.”

“Thanks! What’s yours?”

“Kelsey!”

“Sexy?”

“No, *Kelsey!* With a Y!”

Arshad nodded, sipped more beer. He spotted his roommate across the room. Nikhil pumped his fist in triumph while two dark-skinned girls wearing Puerto Rican flags as tube tops danced in front of him, bent over with their behinds nearly stapled to his jean zipper. Nikhil held the long ponytail of one of his partners in his fist in a mock attempt to keep her balanced.

Kelsey followed the direction of Arshad’s wave and made a face.

“Friends of yours?”

The disdain in her voice, even over the high volume, came through clear. Confused, Arshad pretended not to hear, unsure if she referred to Nikhil or the young ladies folded between his legs. Maybe she didn’t dance like that with her friends, he thought. That made sense; she was much too respectable for that mess, uninterested in

attracting the wrong kind of attention. After she finished her drink, she pulled him back to the center of the dance floor. Her hand felt slick and firm. He mentally prepared himself to repeat the same two-step for another half hour when the DJ shouted something intelligible into the microphone and a Soca tune blasted through the speakers. The familiar riddims made him forget his current location – Minnesota, not Georgetown – and he spun her around so that they danced like folks back home.

Kelsey melted her backside into his chest without protest but she didn't whoop excitedly like Arshad and the other Caribbean people around them. She quietly submitted, twisting side to side on beat. As he sang along to the classic "Murder She Wrote," winding his hips behind her, she did lean back to ask if the song had "anything to do with that one crime show with the old lady detective?" He said he didn't understand and sang louder.

Another song and they crept closer to each other, breath on neck, hands gripping waists, ignoring the people surging past. Soon, though, Kelsey hollered that she needed to go outside, complaining of the heat, so they went downstairs, fingers laced, to the street level where others stood around in a sectioned-off area, smoking and talking in low voices. With no more room underneath the heat lamps, they shivered as the layers of perspiration on their faces and scalps dried in the night air.

"You must be freezing," she said, taking note of his missing coat.

"Ain't that cold." He shrugged, hands in pockets, hairs on his neck standing up.

She pulled her parka closer to her. "But you're not from here," she said bluntly.

Half of Arshad's mind flared to attention: how dare you, what do you mean I'm not from here, of course I am, 2015 Riverside Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota, that is

my address, what do you mean I am not from here? The other half shushed the protests. Of course she said that, it reasoned. Anyone who listened to him speak could figure that out, you dunce.

“I mean,” she continued, oblivious to the inner argument going on only inches from her, “aren’t you from somewhere much warmer than here? I’d be freezing right now if I were you.” She dug into her pocket for a pack of American Spirits and a lighter. “God, I love your accent,” she mumbled around the cigarette as she lit up. “So much cooler than mine, dontcha know.” She laughed at her joke. “Are you from Jamaica?”

“Guyana.”

“Is that like Jamaica?”

“Depends who you ask. Lemme have one of those.” He didn’t smoke but it distracted him from the wind disrespecting his shirt.

She handed him the package and the lighter. “One left. It’s yours. But only ‘cause you’re cute.”

He fought the urge to spit the taste of tobacco out of his mouth and dropped the empty box onto the sidewalk. A Riverview taxi rolled up to the curb and the driver honked at Arshad in recognition. He waved him away before Kelsey turned to see.

“I never met an Indian from Jamaica.” She blew smoke out of her nostrils.

“That’s ‘cause I’m not from Jamaica, love. Guyana.”

“Oh, sorry. So why Minnesota? It sucks here.”

“I dunno about that. The women seem pretty nice.”

She liked that; she puffed at her cigarette to hide her satisfaction with his answer.

“Gosh, what is it with you new guys up here? Accents make me act like I’m fifteen.”

Arshad smiled. “You havin’ a good time?”

“Definitely. You’re a great dancer. Better than most guys I know. They just fall all over the place. But not you.”

“I try, I try, y’know.”

She flicked the ash and licked her lips. “Have you ever been here before? This club, I mean?”

“First time. You?”

“I used to work here, last year.” Smoke blew out of her nostrils again. “I’m here with my friends tonight for a party, though.”

“Someone’s birthday?”

“Bachelorette.”

“Sounds like fun.” He puffed on the cigarette again, emulating her movements so he looked like he knew what he was doing. “I’m here with my friend, too.”

“Oh, that guy dancing who looked kinda like you?”

“Um...yes, that’s him. Nikhil.”

“You guys brothers or cousins?”

“Just roommates, by accident. We both came here a few months ago on the same day from Guyana. Didn’t know him, though. We met at a hostel.”

“Interesting.” Her expression didn’t look interested. Her eyes roamed.

“Yes, totally random.” Arshad allowed himself to smile a little as he bragged about his friend. “He’s at the U for grad school. Chemistry.”

“Really?” She brightened. “I go there, too. Undergrad, though.”

Aha, he thought. “Studying what?”

“Psychology,” she laughed. “That’s boring, though. Let’s talk about something else. Tell me what we’re gonna do after we get out of here.” She ran a hand up his arm.

Arshad flinched. “What...what do you mean?”

“C’mon, Andrew, we’ve been dirty dancing for an hour. Don’t think I didn’t feel that poke. I’m not totally dumb.”

He cursed to himself. Idiot, he thought. Can’t keep your desires to yourself, huh? Now she’ll think you’re a raving sex maniac, trying to take advantage of her.

But Kelsey grinned and bit her lower lip. “I’ll guess from your silence that you’re thinking the same thing as me.” She leaned near to his face and Arshad smelled her vodka-cranberry-saliva-rum breath. “Can I be straight with you, Andrew? This is the third bar we’ve been to tonight, so I’m kinda drunk. Can you tell?” She giggled. “At least I can still walk. In heels, too!” She lifted one leg to show her shoes.

“Do you want some water?” he asked, careful to shift his weight so she wouldn’t fall as she swayed next to him, hand still clutching his arm. “I could get you some. Maybe you need to sit down?” He looked around for a bench, frantic, unsure of what was happening.

Kelsey laughed again. “See, you’re a nice guy! I’ve never met a nice guy in a club. Not a black guy, at least.” She stopped. “Well, I guess you’re not really black, but whatever. I bet you’re hung like a black guy. You must have a girlfriend.” She shook her head and answered herself. “No, then you wouldn’t be here with me, right? Right.”

“I think we should sit down.”

“No, no, it’s cool.” She stood up straight. “So? Are you going to ask for my number or what?”

Arshad's shoulders tensed. "I'm sorry?"

"Don't you want it?" She bent down to pick up the discarded cigarette box and pulled a pen out of her coat. She scribbled on the inside of the top flap, flattened it, and slipped it into his front pocket. "There," she said. "So you don't have to ask for it when the lights come on."

His hand clutched the box in his pocket, his mind swirling to comprehend. They stood centimeters apart, bodies still, Arshad too afraid to take another puff in case he blew smoke in her face and ruined the moment. This distance emanated another level of intimacy than their dancing, changed now by their simple conversation. He wondered if she could hear the rushing of air in and out of his lungs, if she could see the blood creeping into his earlobes and cheeks underneath his browner skin.

"Cyan I kiss you?" he asked before his mind stopped him. Back home in Guyana, he would have received a searing earful about what kind of girl did he think she was and damn, wasn't it enough that she let him dance with her all night long, he gotta get some tongue action too, and anyway, a man never just wants a kiss, does he? All of this followed by a loud teeth sucking, maybe a shove, and a swift dramatic exit, high heels stomping down the road, dragging his pride like a piece of tossed gum. But his tongue itched to taste something other than the inside of his own cheek or the lip of a bottle.

Kelsey smirked. "You're asking instead of just doing it?" She pushed her icy hands underneath his belt into his pants. The sensitive skin prickled with goose bumps. "You're so strange. You don't ask for my number but you ask for a kiss? Don't you want something more than that?"

Arshad tried to stammer a response but she stepped closer and before he said anything coherent, sticky lip gloss, nicotine and the rosy-pink sensation of a woman filled every cavern of his face. He kissed back, hands pinching the sides of her waist closer to him, afraid she would push away if he didn't hold on.

She let go and he felt dizzy. When she grabbed his hand again and pulled him indoors, he assumed the moment had ended and they were heading back to the dance floor. But she put a finger to her lips and lured him into the empty handicapped stall in the women's bathroom. Alarms rang between his ears.

"I don't want to wait until the end of the night," she breathed, already unhooking her corset. "Let's be spontaneous. You'll never forget tonight." In little time, she stood in front of him bare from the waist up, pale breasts unleashed from her tight top. She forced one nipple into his open mouth – from shock, not anticipation. His pants felt tight then loose as she unclasped his belt. She placed his hands on her waist to hike up her skirt. This is illegal isn't it, his brain asked. Lewd conduct or worse, oh god, what if someone walks in and finds us or hears us? But he didn't say no as his eyes rolled back into his skull. Maybe after spending these past months in a country not his own, sleeping on a dirty twin mattress without the smell of hyacinth outside of his window to lull him to sleep, he needed this to make him believe that he wasn't just a cab driver, that he wasn't failing his own destiny. His voice box refused to turn on to say anything: yes, no, stop, wait, keep going, oh Lord Jesus, keep going.

"Welcome to Minnesota, Andrew," she whispered.

Somehow he stumbled out of the bathroom with his pants not around his ankles but buttoned and zipped. His ear drums vibrated as the music turned off and the DJ

barked the club's farewells. Swarms of people descended the staircase to the exit, pushing Arshad aside. He turned to look for Kelsey but only found a smirking Nikhil, arm slung over one of his Puerto Rican dance partners.

"Don't wait up, man," he said. "I'll see you in the morning."

So Arshad walked alone to the light rail station, then realizing the late hour, turned around and walked up the block to call a cab. One of his Riverside Taxi buddies, passing by, honked and slowed down.

"Ey, man!" he called. "Hop in, but don't tell boss lady, alright? She'll kill me."

Arshad checked to make sure Kelsey or any of her friends weren't nearby before climbing into the front seat. He stroked the frayed edge of the paper box in his pocket as they drove through the dark city streets to his apartment.

In the morning, after he woke up, cheek sticky with drool, he made his first attempt with Kelsey, his American girl. Instead of waiting like Nikhil insisted – "If you ever want to get it wet again, Arshad, my friend, you will not *not* NOT call that gyal 'til next week. For once in your natural born life, be cool, man" – he dialed her number and reached the voicemail. He layered his accent thicker, thanking her for a great night and asking what she was doing later in the week. Maybe she wanted to get a drink or something? Start where they left off? "Lemme know."

Around lunch time he called again, hit voicemail, left another message. Nikhil caught him about to redial before the evening news and dove across the room to knock the phone out of his hand.

"Two messages are pushing it," he warned, "but three missed calls *and* three messages and you get 'super stalker' nailed to your forehead. Fall back, man."

So Arshad went to work, driving dusty cabs for drunken college students who puked Red Bull and vodka on the floor and didn't apologize. He said, "yessir" and "no sir" and "where to?" for hours, all the while smiling to himself, remembering his alter-ego. These people don't know who I am, he repeated as a mantra. I am successful, I am attractive, and I am *wanted*. When his phone rang with Kelsey's number on the caller ID a day later, his stomach tripped over his pancreas and liver. Her voice sounded muffled, like she was talking on the phone during a sermon.

"Did you get my messages?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I can't go out this week though. Friends in town."

"Next week then? I have Tuesday off."

"Hmm, I can't do that either." A male voice in the background called her name.

Arshad took a stab. "Kelsey."

"Yeah?"

"I..." He breathed deep. "I really want to see you again, you know." He exhaled. "I had fun with you, a lot of fun. You're incredible."

"Aw, I had fun, too."

"Maybe...maybe this could turn into something—"

"You're so sweet. Dammit. Why do you have to be such a nice guy?" The voice called her again, louder. He heard her cover the phone with her palm and respond. "I gotta go," she said to Arshad.

"Who's that?"

"Just my boss. No big deal. I'll call you, Andrew," and she hung up.

She didn't call, but Arshad didn't give up hope. He kept his phone charged all the time, even when he was out driving, and checked his voice mail five times a day – what if his signal went out right when she called and the phone failed to tell him he had a message? He bought a pack of American Spirits, just in case they ran into each other. He rehearsed how he would pull them out of his back pocket, like hey, look, isn't it funny how I have these cigarettes that you love, imagine that. He imagined her expression when she saw them, eyes wide and shining. He kept the box with her number inside his wallet, folding it carefully so the ink wouldn't wear away. If his route allowed, he drove past the Imperial Room in the evening, thinking maybe she decided to go out for a nightcap before going to bed. Every white woman with brown hair looked like her, every laugh sounded like hers. Her doubles appeared in the aisles at Cub Foods or at the pumps at the gas station. Arshad peered into women's faces through his rearview mirror as they sat behind him in traffic.

The gap widened from a few days to over a week and the silence almost consumed him, rearranging his memories of that Friday night. Had she drugged him? Had they even spoke? Maybe he had made up the whole thing, his desperation for flesh and connection driving his mind to betray him. But then he found a lipstick stain on the collar of his shirt and he fell into a bigger loop of doubt.

At night, he stared at the darkness of the ceiling, listening to Nikhil's snores, and repeated her name aloud. If he forgot her name, he thought, it was as if it'd never happened, another stupid dream that didn't come true. Just like how he hoped, after graduating from the University of Guyana, that he would move to the States and work on Wall Street, or that he'd be able to travel back home for Easter bringing gifts, bragging

about his brand-new American life. Instead he could barely afford rent and washed his clothes in the sink at night. His framed degree sat on top of the fridge, a film of dust blocking his scripted name. His alter-ego would never come to life if things continued this way, driving more important people around who didn't give a damn about his name or troubles as long as he got them to Point B on time.

But that night in the club had happened, he knew it had, and so he murmured her name like a prayer: Kelsey. Kelsey. American like that. Kelsey.

Another Friday night off came again and Nikhil knew better than to coax his roommate to go out. He busied himself with grading chemistry problem sets at their card table while Arshad lay on his mattress in front of the TV, flipping channels between news and paid programming. He had an early pick-up in the morning with the fancy town car. After a few hours of dull consumption, he eventually fell asleep while a chef whipped up a hollandaise sauce great for any dinner party. When his alarm went off at three, the screen buzzed with images of blenders and knives available for purchase.

The order specified a 4:30 am pick-up, and at 4:29 and thirty seconds according to his wristwatch, Arshad's headlights snaked up Fairlawn Way while his eyes peered at the hidden house numbers. He almost missed the woman standing at the edge of the driveway, flanked by two green suitcases almost bigger than her.

"You're on time" was her cordial greeting when he hopped out, engine idling, to put her luggage in the trunk. He went to open the door for her but she had already crawled into the backseat, dragging her long skirt in behind her, so he returned to the driver's seat. With his foot holding the brake, Arshad checked his clipboard to verify. Single passenger, K. Harrelson; prepaid trip including gratuity, one-way.

“Miss Harrelson?”

“That’s me.”

“Airport today?”

“Yeah. Lindbergh terminal, please.” She kept her head bent towards her Blackberry. “And hurry. I don’t want to be late.” She tossed her brown hair for emphasis, curls bouncing off her forehead, right above her freshly-waxed eyebrows. “I’m meeting my fiancé in Miami and I *cannot* miss my connection.”

He stared and then focused on putting the car into drive and easing down the road without a word. He recognized her. It was her. Her bangs hung a bit lower than the last time he’d seen her, the eyelids sported less glitter. But how could he forget the curve of a woman’s bottom lip, even if he only glimpsed it under disco lights?

Maybe it’s not her, he thought. You’ve been going crazy these days. Sometimes they all look alike. Just don’t go and do something stupid. Drive the car.

But as he merged onto the 100 and stepped on the gas, his mind flew. Had there been a ring on her finger that night? He couldn’t remember. He peeked at it now in the rearview as the woman in the backseat – Kelsey, maybe – folded and unfolded her hands on her lap restlessly. The diamond almost eclipsed the knuckle. Wouldn’t he have noticed a rock that big? Her blue eyes had been less piercing that night, too: a more playful “oh, don’t you want me?” manner. In the car, they seemed to threaten a lawsuit if his slipped beneath her chin to her V-neck shirt. He concentrated on the road instead.

Five minutes and a few miles on the odometer passed, the empty highway punctuated by the occasional like-minded traveler rushing to the airport. The woman – Kelsey, maybe – made no hint towards mild chatter about how sunny the weekend was or

her trip details, the routine Arshad went through with other passengers. She sat silent, watching the trees go by or checking things on her phone. Could she really not recognize him, even now in the light? He could feel his cheeks sagging into his jawbone – a consequence of staying up late watching infomercials.

“Ya wan stop for coffee, miss?” Arshad didn’t drink the stuff, but thought it would push his passenger towards deeper interaction. He spoke louder, in case she recognized his accent.

The woman groaned. “No, I really don’t think there’s any time. Thanks.”

In the club Kelsey hadn’t seemed like someone who could afford to rent such a fancy way to get to the airport. Simple hoop earrings, jeans from the local mall, no Juicy Couture or Prada labels sticking out anywhere. The scarf she wore now looked a little pricey, but besides her phone, everything else looked Target brand. Maybe it was some doing by her fiancé, Arshad thought, an engagement she neglected to mention that night. But maybe she had been there with her future bridesmaids—

Stop. Kelsey had mentioned a bachelorette party.

He resisted banging the steering wheel in anger. Of course, he thought, she was there for a bachelorette party – *hers*. Well, maybe her friends didn’t approve of the groom-to-be and had brought her to the club to find a replacement. Please. He dismissed this hopeful sentiment. Maybe, he thought, he had only seen what he wanted that night: a laughing white girl who didn’t pull away when his darker hand reached for hers.

In the backseat the woman – Kelsey, maybe – sighed softly and Arshad saw her head slump forward. She probably went out last night, a last hurrah with her girls to celebrate the beginning of the summer before flying to meet her man. They probably hit

a few bars, went to Perkins for food, and she got back only a few minutes before Arshad showed up, just enough time to throw her toothbrush into her carry-on, run her fingers through her bangs, and smear on a new coat of lipstick. Probably the same shade she wore the night they met, the same kind that left a heart-shaped mark of it on his collar – Maybelline, Ruby Spell. He had watched her reapply after their tryst in the bathroom.

Arshad waited until a speeding red Honda passed before he switched into the exit lane for MN-62. He swerved slightly to jerk Kelsey – maybe – in the backseat awake. She sprawled sideways into the door and her eyes snapped open, bloodshot.

“Sorry, miss. Crazy drivers out here.”

“Yeah, sure.” She squinted out at the lightening sky. “How much longer?”

“Not long, ten minutes.”

She sighed and gathered her hair off her neck into a pony tail, then let it drop again behind her shoulders. Arshad glimpsed a flesh tone square pasted to her neck, above the scarf and below her ear. A bandage covering a hickey, he thought, so the fiancé doesn’t see she’s been sneaking around.

“Did you hurt yourself?” The words came out before he could stop it.

“Excuse me?”

“That band-aid on your neck there. You hurt yourself?” None of his business, at all, but Arshad’s mental filter had lost its hold. The back and forth game in his head made it difficult to grasp logic.

At least he hadn’t said something like, “You should take off that scarf; it blocks my view of your tits.” That was Nikhil’s method: shock the target then smother the outrage with a smooth cover-up compliment. “With a body like yours, you shouldn’t

hide it behind stuff made for girls with nothing going on.” Nikhil would then slide back to examine the girl, then flex his biceps. “I mean, what’s that scarf doing for you that my arms can’t, babe?” Females swallowed it whole and Nikhil left coffee shops and the Laundromat with numbers written on all of the lines of his palm.

The woman paused, eyebrows narrowed until her hand grazed the edge of the object in question. “Oh! This?” She tapped it with a fingernail. “It’s a nicotine patch. I’m trying to quit smoking.”

“Good for you, miss.”

She readjusted her scarf to cover it. “Justin – my fiancé? – hates that I smoke. Says it’s like kissing an exhaust pipe or something.” She rolled her eyes. “Sometimes I wish he *would* put his mouth on an exhaust pipe.”

Arshad struggled to keep himself from laughing, but still managed to let a single chuckle loose. He coughed to mask it. “Sorry, miss.”

“Oh, it’s cool. I’m the one who said it. Please, laugh.”

They continued down the road quietly for a moment as the sun sent streaks of light over the horizon. Her breathing slowed to a heavier pace, slipping into sleep, until Arshad got an idea.

“If you want to smoke, miss, I won’t tell anyone,” he said.

It took a moment before she laughed. “No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” His throat ached, his tongue dry as he reached into his pants pocket. “I have some right here.” He held the American Spirit package towards her but kept facing the highway.

“Shut up!” She leaned forward and gripped the passenger seat. “Those are my favorite. Well, were,” she edited, remembering. “You’re, like, the best driver I’ve ever had.” She grabbed for the box and flipped open the lid then paused. “Wait,” she said.

“Yes, miss?” He couldn’t block the anticipation from his voice. Yes, he thought. It’s coming back now, right? You recognize the package, recognize my voice, my face, that night in the dark, our kisses, everything. ‘Cause God knows I remember you.

She squeezed a cigarette from the pack. “Are these unfiltered?” she asked. “Or maybe lights? They look different.”

Arshad frowned and turned to her. “Sorry?”

“The paper on these, they must have changed it.” She tossed the box onto the passenger seat and returned to the backseat to light up. Arshad heard the wind whipping into the car as she lowered one of the windows. “Mmm,” she sighed. “Fantastic.”

Arshad adjusted his driver’s cap. “Glad you like it, miss.”

Should have put the new cigarettes into the old box, he grumbled to himself. She’d see her number there on the lid and remember everything, just like in those American movies, where the guy comes to the girl’s house holding her favorite flowers that she only mentioned once along with the exact teddy bear her father gave her before he died that got lost during a move. Yes, that’s what you should have done.

The woman in the backseat – Kelsey, yes – pitched the butt out of the window and tousled her hair. “That was so necessary,” she said. “Hopefully he won’t be able to taste it when I get down there. Thanks a lot.”

“No problem, miss.” Arshad slowed down as he pulled into the airport, rounding the curve up to the passenger drop-off zone. “We’re here.” His palms felt slick on the

gear shift. He got out of the car and pulled the suitcases out of the trunk to put on the curb while Kelsey jumped out and adjusted her long skirt. She reached into her purse.

“Do I owe you anything?” she asked.

“Everything’s taken care of, miss. I just need you to sign.” He opened the passenger door to get his clipboard. When he turned back to her, he noticed her studying his shoes.

“Have we...” She stopped and shook her head. “Never mind.” She signed the receipt quickly. “There. Thanks again.” She walked through the sliding doors and towards the ticketing counters. He reached into his pocket for his phone and dialed. It rang a few times before she stopped walking to pull out her Blackberry.

“Hello?”

“I’m Arshad.” His heart sped up as he watched her crane her head to look back at him through the tinted glass doors. “Well, you know me as Andrew. That’s my middle name. We met. Two weeks ago?”

She said nothing. He talked faster, not sure what he wanted her to say.

“I know it’s you, the girl from the club. Kelsey. You wrote down your number on that cigarette box and I still have it. It’s in my wallet. You never called me back and you never answered when I called and, man, I thought we had a really great time. Right? We had fun? So I’m just confused and I thought if I called, maybe you could help me figure it out.”

Her eyes dropped to the tile. Why didn’t she respond? Maybe just an apology – for letting him wait around like a dunce, for ruining his dress shirt with her lipstick, for

making him believe that he had reached out and connected with a real person for the first time since he'd come to this cursed country. He shoved his fist into his jacket pocket.

“Look, I know I’m probably nothing like your fiancé but I think—”

She laughed.

“Yeah, it’s me,” she said. “We had fun, sure, and you’re cute, but it was a one-time thing. Crazy, spontaneous. That’s what you do when you’re drunk at the club. I mean...” He watched her shoulders shrug. “There’s nothing we can do about it now. I’m getting married. And you’re... a cab driver.” Her eyes narrowed, curious. “Did you really think you’d find love in a club?”

Arshad closed his eyes. “I don’t know what I thought. I don’t know, actually.” He swallowed. “Have a safe flight to Miami, miss.”

She ran her fingers through her hair and sighed into the phone. “It’s Kelsey.”

“Kelsey?”

“Yeah. With a Y.”

Arshad hung up and watched her walk into the crowds of travelers, hauling her suitcases behind her. On the highway back home, he threw the cigarette box out the window. In the rearview mirror he could see the little sticks spilled out on the empty asphalt, rolling into the grass and out of sight.

## **The Things I Wish I Could Tell You When You Cry The Most**

You are just a black boy in an all-white school. Caught in the wrong place all your life, you could say. They – you know who they are – pretend your skin is not the issue, but that your attitude, your manner of speaking, your inability to follow directions cause *concern*.

*Concern?* your mom asked. *How so? What is he doing that is so much more concerning than the other 798 moody teenage students in the school?*

They said this was not about the other 798 kids in the school but about the one, her one, you, who keeps making things difficult.

You are just a black boy in a white school, fighting constantly – but you don't do so to kill a white student, like the administration secretly believes, but you fight to keep from killing yourself. You beat others and pretend every staccato blow hits your own darker skin, instead of the pastier one beneath your palms because suicide is not one of your options. As the product of successful integration, third world immigration, British

colonialism, West Indian values and spankings, you can't be blamed for harboring a little bit of angst.

Each morning you trudge to school, your narrow figure towering over your peers, eclipsing their shadows. You don't go looking for trouble, but it sneaks up on you in the hallways, in the staircases, in between bookcases in the library, outside on the playground. White boys, who claim to be your equal during history class when everyone rehearses the stories of slavery and civil rights, seek you out as you hide in plain sight on the benches in the school yard. They don't act like their Southern ten-times-removed cousins who wore hoods and masks. They know better, they tell themselves. They're so much better than that, actually. Racism and bigotry and discrimination and being mean to people just because they're different from you is wrong. They know that much.

And so if they pick on the black boy at recess, it isn't because he's black, obviously. It's because...*well, he hates white people. Doesn't he, Chad?*

*Yeah, all of 'em hate whites cuz of slavery and stuff. But, I mean, I never owned any slaves, so, like, what's your problem?*

*Yeah, seriously, you guys are the ones killing and stealing and shit. So stupid, you got what you wanted but now you gotta mess it up by killing and gang banging.*

They continue their blind justification, these boys who believe themselves upholders of history, leaning threateningly towards you sitting on the bench, staring at them. You have not yet reached a point in your academic career where you can refute these ignorant statements with facts, figures, color-coded flowcharts, and quotes from esteemed scholars and reputable books to show how they are all bastards. You're only a twelve-year-old boy who gets the Itis after lunch in math class and keeps your hands in

your pockets when teachers call for volunteers. You're only twelve but you already understand how undervalued your opinion and participation are.

So while you watch the white boys jeer at you during recess, mouths twisted with indulgence, you contemplate two things.

First, you reflect on how satisfying it will be when you corner the leader after seventh period in the boys' locker room, naked and alone, ashamed. You smile inwardly at how un-bruised your knuckles will be as you continuously insert punch after punch into the white jelly rolls of the preteen punk. Your toes will curl and flex as you kick the boy's solar plexus until you break through to his spine. You imagine how the coward will plead for you to *stop, please, God, stop, stop, ah, ow, ow, owwww, help, somebody!*

And in between the screams for mercy, you will bend over and tell the boy, *I don't do this because I hate white people; I do this because I hate your lies.*

Yeah, that's what you'll say. Damn, that'll sound good.

Your second thought reaches forward, towards the vague future, because you realize that these stupid foul-mouthed pink boys will grow up to be even stupider foul-mouthed pink men in your graduating class and workplace. You can beat them upside down and sideways from now until they get their diplomas, but it will never take away their dominance of your world. They've been imbibed since birth with the milk of privilege, and no one, especially not one black boy in an all-white school, not you, can change that. In a few years, you will graduate middle school, high school, and go on to college where kids with the same blood alcohol level of self-righteousness will drunkenly tell you about your people, your history, your destiny, all the while smiling in your face.

This clicks by in your head as you sit outside the principal's office for what your mom and the administration hope to be the last time. But you shake your head as you calmly stare down at your dirty sneakers and wonder how long it will be until they realize that it's not you who causes the problems?

The door opens and the secretary says, *They're ready for you now, hun.*

*No they're not,* you mutter, as you shuffle inside.

## Out of Orbit

I know that Tom knows that *everybody* knows he only asked me to be Tamika's server trainer because we're both black. And he knows I know that it's complete bullshit. But did it stop him from cornering me in the kitchen while I made coffee and asking, no, *telling* me that I would train her for serving, only an hour after I met the girl? Nope.

"She knows the menu, but help her learn the table sections and how to use the computers," he said, hitching up his pants in the absence of his belt. "Just, you know, get her on her feet, get her moving."

And stupid me, always ready to point out obvious facts, said, "But I've never trained anyone before."

"Well, Morris, you've worked here long enough. Two years now? I think you know the drill." Then he made one of those half-snort, half-swallow noises like he was clearing his nose and throat at the same time and I thought I might stab his "Quincy's of Colorado Manager" pin through his red nose.

“Why not Julie or Kim?”

And you know what he said? “I think you and Tamika will *relate* better.”

I saw his eyes right then and I knew that he knew that came out sounding bad, but admitting it would look even worse. We both stood there all embarrassed, not sure if we should address it, but then I broke eye contact, giving him an escape.

“Just think about it and let me know before you leave,” he called out as he hurried off to his office. “I know you’ll make the right choice.”

I’d never even met Tamika until she showed up on Monday to fill out her I-9 and watch the videos about sexual harassment and diversity in the workplace. I didn’t see her when she applied either. Tom hired her on the spot Saturday night, the weekend I had off so I could be Hannah’s plus-one at her cousin Marilyn’s wedding – who, by the way, I’d also never met. Soon as we got there I’d wished I’d faked sick. I was the only unmarried guy there who could catch the bride’s garter and then everyone joked about me and Hannah’s “future.” Mad awkward. I’m pretty sure hookup buddies don’t get married except in *When Harry Met Sally*.

So I came in Monday to open and Chris the bartender was smirking behind the bar, stacking glasses. He nodded to the back of the restaurant and said, “Looks like you’re not alone anymore, Morris.” And I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about until I saw Tamika sitting in a booth, skin brown like Coca Cola. Ha ha, real funny, I thought. Except I didn’t know she *worked* at Quincy’s until it was too late, so it wasn’t funny for anyone except Chris.

I shouldn’t even repeat how I made an ass of myself when we *did* meet. I went over to her thinking she was some loitering teenager who got inside by mistake, and I

was like, “Uh, can I help you? Are you lost? We don’t open for another hour so I gotta ask you to leave.”

The way her head swiveled around made my balls shrivel and I knew I’d fucked up. She said, “No, I’m waiting for the *manager*. Can I help *you*?” Then Tom came around the corner lugging the training manual, two black uniform t-shirts, and the little TV set for watching the videos. He got excited when he saw us talking.

“Oh!” he said. “You guys know each other!”

And he grinned like we were best buddies, which we weren’t. Who the hell would want to be friends with me after that sad display of foot-in-mouth disease? She was probably afraid of catching something.

The crazy thing was that I couldn’t get mad at Tom for assuming me and Tamika probably knew each other. Lakewood as a suburb is pretty big, but after living here for twenty-three years, I thought I’d met every black person living here. Seriously. I didn’t go to school with all of them, of course, but I saw them at homecoming games, the mall, when they came in to eat at Quincy’s, whatever. My estimate: no more than a hundred (including my family) but even that was generous. So understand that seeing Tamika in the restaurant knocked me off guard.

Break time came at 3:00 so I grabbed a bowl of chili for lunch and sat at one of the cocktail tables to watch for oncoming customers through the front windows while the on-duty host checked on the bathroom. Outside Tamika stood by herself, waiting for her ride. She leaned on one hip then the other as she talked on her phone, pausing once to adjust her jean mini skirt. I watched a red Chevy drive up and park a few feet from Tamika and Joe and Ray got out, two cowboy-hat wearing regulars who worked at the

used car dealership down the highway from Quincy's. They walked by Tamika on their way inside, and both gave her the elevator gaze. She paid no attention.

"Hey there, kid. Question for ya." One of them stuck a thumb in Tamika's direction. Could have been Joe or Ray; I couldn't tell the difference between them with their wispy facial hair, crooked noses and bulges over the belt. "She a new waitress?"

I nodded. They hooted again.

"Glad y'all getting new girls in here," Ray (maybe) said. "June's the best month to hire 'em, too. They all take out those shorts and dresses."

They always talked like this, Joe and Ray. They wore wedding rings but those didn't keep them from memorizing every female server's name. If they were stuck with a guy waiting on them, they'd grumble all through their meal or tell the hosts they'd wait. Once, Joe brushed against Sarah G's ass "on accident" and she threatened to walk out if the managers made her serve them. Tom ran interference and sheepishly had to comp part of Joe and Ray's meal ticket so they wouldn't think anything was wrong.

Sometimes they brought their wives: fleshy women with mismatched makeup and dried, frizzy hair they hadn't updated since the nineties; they jumped if their server addressed them directly. They liked to order big, colorful drinks like the Mambo Mango Margarita or Lowdown Long Island that looked ridiculous on the table next to their husbands' Bud Lites.

"I just wanna have fun tonight," I once heard Ray's wife drawl to the table when he commented on her drink. "This is supposed to be fun!" But she didn't sound sure.

Everyone would eat a full course dinner and gripe about work, the new covenant-controlled housing going up, and other suburban trials. School board this, blue book

prices that. They'd split a dessert, and when they left, Ray and Joe would hold their wives' hands. If a hostess recognized the men, they played dumb. But then next week at 3:00, they'd roll through with the same old routine.

Quincy's only hired young people, which didn't help matters but also couldn't be changed; no one else could afford to live on our wages. Almost every girl's license said she was barely out of high school. Fresh faces like that attracted a certain crowd, and Joe and Ray were only two disciples of a large flock.

Chris brought over two beers. "Enjoying the day, boys?"

"Just got better." Ray (maybe) took off his hat and set it on the counter. "Sold two cars and checked out your new girl out there. Things are looking up."

Ray and Joe stopped talking immediately, though, when Tamika walked inside, fanning herself with one hand. "Can I use the phone?" she asked me, pointing to the one by the host stand. "My cell just died."

Joe (maybe) pulled his phone from his jeans. "You can use mine if you want."

She smiled her gratitude, grabbed it and walked outside to call. They both watched her go, shaking their heads.

"Can't wait to watch those brown legs go back and forth this summer." Joe made a walking motion with his fingers. "I might never go home."

"Yeah, they're too long for that skirt. What d'ya think she'd do if I dropped my napkin?" Ray whistled. "Wouldn't want something bad to happen."

I tried not to swallow my soup spoon. The two cackled for a minute until Ray caught my eye and remembered that they weren't alone. He shut up and nudged Joe to do the same.

“Hey, hey, be cool.” Ray gestured in my direction and lowered his voice: “She’s probably his sister.” They both quietly sipped their beers, peeking over their shoulders at me for a minute, and then Ray got brave and turned to me. “Is that your sister out there, man?” he ventured, suddenly sympathetic. “Cause we didn’t know...”

If I said yes, I thought, they’d spend the next ten minutes saying they were sorry and then act really jumpy and weird when Tamika came back with the cell phone. A bigger, better-at-being-black guy would have said yes, point blank, then stood up to his full, towering seven-foot-five height, flexed his keg-sized muscles, and asked if they wanted to repeat their “compliments” to his fists? But starting shit was somebody else’s job description, not mine.

“No, it’s cool,” I said. “We’re not related.” They looked relieved.

Tamika breezed back inside and handed the phone to Joe. “Thanks again.”

“Everything alright?” he asked.

“Oh yeah, fine now. Just needed to give directions to my ride.”

“Your boyfriend picking you up?” Joe asked but both of them watched her as she answered. When she said her cousin was coming, they nodded, pleased.

“You new here?” Ray pushed his hat around. “Haven’t seen you before.”

“I started today. You guys must come in here a lot to notice.”

Joe shrugged. “We only notice the girls worth noticing.” He grinned and I rolled my eyes. Couldn’t she see their wedding bands, or better yet, the words “Slime Ball” tattooed on their foreheads?

“I guess I should feel flattered, then.” She balanced herself against one of the cocktail tables, glancing out the windows for signs of her ride.

“Definitely. What’s your name?” Joe shifted on his stool to face her, leaning on his elbows on the counter behind him. She told them, they told her theirs, and everyone said how nice it was to meet each other. I got up to take my bowl to the dish area, hoping that when I returned the conversation would stall or advance to something more intelligent. Not a chance. They were asking if Tamika was a runner because, apparently, she had the body for it, they insisted. Maybe they’d seen her jogging on the mountain trails by their houses? Clearly they didn’t care about her athletic ability, just how great her legs looked in her skirt.

She raised her eyebrows and said no, she didn’t run, and tried to steer the topic towards the baseball game on the TV in the bar. They didn’t hear her, just kept talking about her figure, like she wasn’t there anymore. I’d almost tuned out when Joe stood up and placed his arm against Tamika’s leg. Of all the places, I thought.

“Geezus, Ray, look how pale I am next to this girl,” Joe joked. “Maybe I need to start running outside, too.”

I saw Tamika’s lips tighten and her fingers curl, head cocked to the side as if she wasn’t sure what just happened. My ears warmed and before she could say something, I pulled her outside by the wrist, leaving the guys confused with their beers.

“I’m going to be your trainer,” I told her. “We’ll start tomorrow at 11.”

“But I thought Tom said—”

“Fuck what Tom said. I’ll train you.”

“Ok, fine.”

“And wear jeans.”

“Are you serious? I’m sweating right now!”

“Were you not there just now? Wear some damn jeans.”

Tom looked surprised but played it off like he knew I’d come around when I told him I’d take on the training. “Why’d you change your mind?” he still asked.

And I said it. I fucking said it because I couldn’t get the image out of my head of Tamika innocently bending over to pick up a dropped fork. I already knew how Joe and Ray’s faces would move, the twitch of the pathetic mustaches as their lips curled into evil grins. If I didn’t warn the girl, she wouldn’t survive.

“Because I think we relate to each other better.”



The basics are simple. How to greet a table. How to talk about wine when nobody around here drinks anything except the boxed shit. How to not get yelled at by a customer who wanted a medium-RARE not medium-WELL steak and I asked for semi-mashed potatoes and these are FULLY mashed and my wife’s been waiting for a refill on her Diet Pepsi for like AN HOUR god what the hell is wrong with you guys anyway because your job really isn’t that hard and my nine-year-old could serve better than you. Where to go when tables like that make you reconsider previous views on homicide.

“If you need to cry, there are tissues behind the ketchup in the dry storage closet.”

“Are they really that bad?” Tamika crossed her arms defiantly. “Be real.”

“I am being real. Ask Tyler if I’m lying.”

Tamika turned to Tyler, who was scooping butter into ramekins nearby. He mimed hanging himself along with a shotgun to the head.

“You guys are so overdramatic,” she said. “There are worse things in life.”

“Don’t tease me. Moving on...”

Then there's the staff. How to persuade the hosts to get you great tables who drink and tip heavy. How to suck up to the managers when they start cutting servers, especially on a slow Sunday when everyone's at home watching sports instead of out enjoying a nice steak dinner with their family in your section. How to bum a cigarette if you forgot to buy a new pack before your shift.

"I don't smoke," Tamika said out on the patio when I demonstrated this with Melanie, who sat recovering from a six-top of four kids under the age of five. "It kills."

"Great." I took a drag of Melanie's purple lipstick-coated Camel. "One less thing for you to remember."

She wrote it down anyway, along with everything else I said, in a little notebook. She carried it around the restaurant, following me as I flung out arms to point out all the need-know points. Other servers, rushing by to print out bills, chimed in if I missed an important tip: wear old Nikes so you won't slip on spilled ice, avoid singing the birthday song whenever possible – it embarrasses you, it embarrasses the table and nobody wins. Throughout the day, I introduced her to the staff and briefed her on certain customers. I divided everyone into categories of Awesome vs. Steer Clear. Guys like Luke, the server with bedroom eyes and a pierced tongue, always fell into the last category.

Tamika brushed it off. "Alright, big brother, I'll be careful," she said, as if she only half-heard me, then asked how to split a check on the computer.

After the lunch hour tornado I finished with the favorite sum-up, "Of course, it's not all awful." We sat in a back booth with root beer, a shared plate of French fries and ranch dressing. "Free food, music people can hum along to, non-themed uniforms." I

plucked at the front of my plain black t-shirt. “And they let AARP members eat free on Saturdays. That’s how you get into heaven if you ask me.”

But, I admitted, the pay sucks if your biggest crowd is a bunch of blue-haired folks who only order side dishes. “I’m ok on the expenses front – my divorced parents like to buy my love – unlike other folks, but trying to take Hannah out for dinner hurts the ego if I only make twenty bucks after a double. I’m struggling to pay for Applebee’s and she’s clowning about vacations in Cabo.”

“Glad I don’t have to deal with that,” Tamika snorted.

“Nobody special on your side?”

“No, thank you. Watching other people suffer is enough for me.”

“Well, don’t let anyone hear that. Better if they think you’re taken. They won’t mess with you as much if they think you’ve got a footballer waiting for you at home.”

“Who’s ‘they’?”

“You know who I’m talking about. You know *exactly* who I’m talking about.”

“What, those cowboys at the bar the other day? Ha!” She waved a hand as if she’d already forgotten and reached for more fries. “They’re harmless. And married.”

“Harmless, huh?”

“Of course. Those guys don’t scare me, Morris. I’ve seen much worse. Trust.” Her phone vibrated; her ride was outside. “See you Thursday.” She grabbed her purse and skipped out the front door, hopping into a gold Cadillac.



Wednesday means payday. Missing-in-action servers who hate all things that bear the Q turn up at the restaurant, shifting nervously as they wait for their money. My checks are usually only good for laundry and a six-pack, but Hannah doesn’t even try to

acknowledge this. She knows Wednesday is my payday, too, and right on schedule, she'll text, asking to go out to eat when we get off work. I have to do quick calculations to see how long I can go without clean drawers before I say yes.

Girls like Hannah, though, never worry about shit like that. She's had boys orbiting around her since preschool, buying her lunch, giving her Valentine's candy even when girls still had cooties. She talks about them like they're distant cousins, not guys who tried to climb inside her size-4 jeans. We'll be at Starbucks and as she sips her cappuccino, she'll drop a bomb like, "Oh, Aaron/Jeremy/Zach called yesterday. You remember him? He plays lacrosse/soccer/drums in an indie band and writes poetry/fixes old Mustangs/bench lifts monster trucks? I guess he has ski lift passes and invited me up to his condo next weekend." And I sit there going, oh that sounds cool, have fun, because honestly, I'm no different than Aaron/Jeremy/Zach except I have brown skin. In the end, we're all planets stuck in her gravitational pull. Maybe it's her hazel eyes that make me want to buy a box of Crayolas to recreate the shade. Or the way she can say any word – like "rash" or "infection" – and make it sound like a spoonful of sex. Combine all that with a toss of her paprika hair when she needs something (a plus-one for her cousin's wedding, for example) and it's hard to say no. It all sounds twisted and slightly sick, but no other girl's had this effect on me, thank God, because with Hannah alone, I'm always exhausted and broke.

Day after my first training shift with Tamika and five minutes after Tom handed me my check, she called.

"Can't go out tonight," I told her. "Bank closed early, didn't make it in time." Completely untrue but my check that week wouldn't cover an appetizer and tip.

“No problem,” she said. “I’d rather stay in.”

She showed up at my place with a standard rom-com, I brought out some wine and we got down to all the sloppy touching that happens on a couch between the opening montage and end credits. This was us, pretending we belonged to each other for a few hours to distract from our regular solo schedule. When we met at Red Rocks Community College two years back she explained her policy. “Free spirits,” she said. “Labels confuse things for me,” she said. “Can you get down with that?” Why not, I said, because occasional ass is better than no ass at all.

I didn’t see anyone else besides Hannah, partly because she once threatened to stab me when she caught me talking to a chick from work, and partly because most girls didn’t like the idea of playing second chair to Hannah. Not everyone followed the same rules as her. But I stayed with her mostly because half of me believed she’d eventually get tired of the whole bohemian rhapsody bullshit and chill with me, exclusively. The other half knew, though, that I didn’t make nearly enough money to even afford a *fantasy* about a future with her.

By the time the movie and bottle were finished I had lipstick all over my neck. We sat huddled on the couch together, me rubbing Hannah’s feet, and I told her about Tamika and Ray and Joe’s comments from the other day. She nodded in solidarity.

“Guys hit on me at Gio’s, too,” she sighed. “It sucks but you get over it.” Hannah worked at a shoe boutique in the mall where they paid her to totter around in five-inch heels and dresses that really should’ve been t-shirts. For hours she giggled and convinced guys to buy \$300 loafers. I was pretty sure sexual harassment claims were waived in her contract.

“Do guys talk about how white your legs are?”

“Only if I haven’t tanned.”

“That’s not what I mean. They said that shit ‘cause she’s black.”

That made her upset. I’m not supposed to point out blackness or whiteness around her; if she’s been drinking, she usually gets weepy about slavery and Martin Luther King. Her mom teaches kindergarten so the family mantra’s always been, “Deep down we’re all the same.” Back in the day, my first Sunday School teacher beat that mess out of me real quick when I tried to chase the only little white girl in class. She snatched me up by my belt and whooped my ass with a hymn book, telling me that white folks weren’t afraid to kill another little black boy like me if I gave them a reason to do it. For four Sundays after that, the same little white girl – her name was Caroline, I think – tried to get me to chase her again, but I sat still in my chair, arms crossed, mad that she was trying to trap me. “I ain’t tryna get in trouble!” I hollered. The girl kept saying we were having fun and then tagged me and ran away, giggling like a maniac. But I stood my ground. “There ain’t *nothin’* fun about getting a spanking,” I told her.

But like I said, girls like Hannah don’t think about that shit.

“Oh c’mon, Morris. You don’t know it’s ‘cause she’s—”

“Brown legs? Really?”

“I dunno, maybe she has really great legs. Does she?” She put a hand over my mouth. “Never mind,” she said. “Besides, those guys sound like jerks. We’re women. We put up with this all the time.” She examined her split ends for a second and suddenly forgot the past two minutes. “Hey, do you want Chinese? My treat? I need an eggroll.”

Hannah chatted on the phone about lo mein and wontons to Old China Bistro, laughing with the guy taking her order. She acted like that at work, pulling out tricks from Flirting 101. It helped sell shoes, she said. “People like to feel appreciated when they’re spending money. Nobody wants to buy anything from a dried-up fish.” The girls at the restaurant played the same game to sell steaks, and complained later about guys asking for their phone numbers. But they never stopped playing. Maybe I didn’t need to pull out a Superman cape; maybe girls like Tamika and Hannah didn’t need protection.

“Stop it, you’re too funny,” Hannah said into the receiver, her back to me, as if she wasn’t ordering food for both of us. “If I get the sesame chicken, will you throw in the fried rice for free? Aw, you’re so good to me!”



Tom put Tamika on the full schedule a week later. Her training finished smoothly without any run-ins with crazy perverts. Suddenly we were co-workers; I didn’t have to take care of her anymore. But that didn’t mean anything. Twice she caught me staring as she chatted to a table of baseball players in town for a tournament. Another time I swooped in before Joe and Ray could drop their menus in front of her during happy hour.

She noticed. “Can I go talk to my table now, Big Brother Morris?” she asked later in the kitchen, mocking. “Is that ok with you?”

It didn’t knock her hustle, though; she outsold five veterans in food and drink sales, including me. Tom found me making coffee again when he came to tell me the good news. He shook a bunch of receipts in my face.

“Guess the student has become the teacher, huh, Morris? Look at these bar sales – twenty-two percent! Not bad for her first week.”

“First tables luck,” I explained. “She probably told everyone she’s new.”

“Doesn’t matter. Money is money, Morris.” He punched my arm lightly.  
“‘Haven’t trained anyone before,’ my ass. If you repeat the feat, we can talk about moving you up to shift leader later.”

At the end of the night Tamika came up behind me while I counted out my tips.  
“Wanna go to lunch tomorrow?” she asked, casual.

“With *me*?”

“You trained me, man. Let me feed you. Least I can do.”

In the morning I woke up to a text saying to meet her at Nifty Fifties, a diner in the mall where everyone wore white smocks and paper hats. I found her sitting in a booth waiting for me, wearing a sundress, hair wild around her face, legs tucked together underneath the table. She looked younger outside of the restaurant, like someone who should be carded instead of doing the carding.

She grinned after the server dropped off our Vanilla Cokes. “Don’t you appreciate Quincy’s more here?” she asked. “At least we get to wear jeans and t-shirts.”

“No doubt.” I sipped my drink and got a mouthful of syrup. “A few of my friends worked here in high school. They dance when someone has a birthday.”

“Ew. At least the decorations are authentic.” She paused. “But, if this were a real fifties restaurant...”

“We wouldn’t be able to eat here,” I finished.

“You’ve heard that one before?”

“I think about it a lot.” I once made that joke to Hannah when we came to Nifty Fifties to get ice cream after a movie. She yelled at me about taking things too seriously and how I always ignored how much progress the country’s made and why was

everything racist if she liked it? The manager had to ask us to leave, and she pouted the whole way back to her apartment. It didn't stop us from jumping into bed, though – Hannah had this thing about make-up sex.

One of the straps of Tamika's sundress slipped off her shoulder. Two polo shirts in the booth across the aisle noticed too, and they kept glancing over as she idly played with a straw wrapper. I fought the urge to reach over and put it back in case she bit my hand off.

“Man, two years at Quincy's. You must like working with food.”

“Not even a little bit,” I said. “But it's easy money, working for tips. Living on paychecks alone is too hard.” I took out my wallet and fanned a wad of singles out on the red Formica table. She whistled in appreciation. “You get used to always having cash.” I put the money away when the polo guys turned their attention to me. “Is Quincy's your first serving job? I never asked.”

She shrugged. “I worked the register at Denny's for a few weeks...”

“Oh, cool.”

“...until we got robbed by three dudes wearing George Bush masks.”

“Damn.”

She told me stories all through our cheeseburgers. For only twenty-one, she put my résumé to shame. Makeup artist, perfume girl, amusement park ride operator, gas station attendant, club dancer – she'd seen way too much before high school graduation. Little kids who dared each other to hang upside down from Ferris wheels; people trying to get their motorcycles cleaned at a car wash; hip-hop stars who rapped about popping champagne bottles but only drank mineral water in the VIP section.

“And now,” I said, “you work at Quincy’s. Must seem tame.”

“Not tame...just smaller packages of entertainment.”

Elvis Presley came on the jukebox and a blonde toddler bounced around to the beat in his high chair a few tables away. The server brought over two chocolate malts, courtesy of Tamika’s admirers. They jutted out their chins in greeting and she burst out laughing. “Like this,” she said, pointing to the tin cups. “This is pretty entertaining.”

My phone buzzed and when I answered, Hannah started talking without a hello. “Fucking Bryson bailed on me,” she said.

“Who?”

“Bryson? Bryson, from the gas station by my house? He’s half-Hawaiian, I think. Remember, I told you about him.”

I rolled my eyes. She called me about one of her other planets. “Right.”

“Anyway, he’s sick or something. So I’ve got a few hours until dinner with my mom. Where are you? What are you doing?” She never actually said what she wanted out loud, but she didn’t have to.

“I’m at lunch.”

“Really?” She sounded surprised. “With who?”

I looked over at Tamika, who’d started devouring her malt, forgoing the straw in favor of the spoon. She looked up, a chocolate ice cream mustache dotting her lip.

“What?” she mouthed. I handed her a napkin.

“I gotta go, can I call you later?”

“Wait, so you’re not coming over?”

“I’m at lunch. I’ll come by tonight.”

“It’s a girl, isn’t it? You’re with another girl?”

“I’ll call you later.” I hung up.

Tamika licked her spoon clean. “You know what I was thinking the other day?” She didn’t wait for me to ask. “I was wondering why I haven’t met you until now. Where’ve you been hiding?”

“I should ask you the same thing.”

“Guess we hid from each other. I’ve found you now, so don’t go missing on me.” She smiled then gestured at the second malt. “Are you going to eat that?”

I wondered if this meant we were cool, that she’d forgiven me for my stupid mouth when we first met, but I didn’t ask. It might have been uncool. In between swallows of ice cream she talked: about going back to school after summer, wanting to be a middle school teacher, moving away from Colorado. I listened and hoped the end of lunch didn’t mean the end; that we could be actual friends, that we wouldn’t go back to being just co-workers once the plates were cleared.

But when she paid the check and we walked into the arid heat outside, I could feel her pulling away. I offered to drive her home or wherever she was going next. She said no, she’d take the bus, don’t worry about it. The polo guys were slowly trailing us to the parking lot, and I mumbled something about being careful. She waved me away.

“It’s alright, big brother,” she said.

“I’m just looking out for you, that’s all.”

“Sure, sure.” She patted my arm. “But you don’t need to. I’ve got it.”

What could I do but say, ok see ya tomorrow, and take off? I heard the guys approach Tamika as I walked away, complimenting her dress, asking if she liked the

malts, other useless lines of conversation. I had no real reason to turn around and tell them off – I wasn't Tamika's man, brother or friend. But my fingers didn't unclench until I buckled my seatbelt.



Hannah wasn't mad about being blown off. That's what I thought her body language said, at least, hours later in her apartment, but I should've known better. I found her rocking the sweatpants look, lying on the couch in her living room. Some reality dating show was on the TV and she'd spread nail polish and cotton balls all over the coffee table in front of her rosy toes.

“Wow, you're alone?”

“Don't say it like that,” she said.

“Like what?”

“You know what. Like you're surprised. Bastard.”

“Just observing.” I sat down next to her. “How was dinner with Mummy?”

“Fine,” she sniffed. “How was lunch with your girlfriend?”

“I don't have a girlfriend. And it was fine, too.”

“So you're not going to tell me who it is?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“C'mon, Morris.” Fire flashed behind her green eyes as she picked up a bottle of yellow polish and shook it. “We're not exclusive, ok, but we're open about everything?”

“Sure.”

“I tell you about the other guys.”

“Yeah. And?”

“And it would be nice if you returned the favor, that's all.”

Oh my God, Hannah was jealous. If she saw a woman walk by with a nicer purse, she talked the same way: rhetorical questions, patronizing quips, loud enough so that the other woman could hear the insults. “I’ll bet she bought it on sale,” she’d say. “But what’s the point of having a designer purse if you buy it cheap?” Now she aggressively slapped paint on her toenails, little drops of yellow spraying all over the wooden table. I moved to put some newspaper underneath her perched feet.

“Of course,” I said. “And I’ll tell you about any other girls as soon as they exist.”

I did it on purpose, saying shit like that to piss her off. Telling her the truth – Tamika was just a friend, I saw her as a little sister – could have ended the whole thing, but then I wouldn’t get to see Hannah squirm. She kept pushing, though, asking if it was someone she knew, was she pretty, was she black, I just wanna know, I just wanna know, tell me please, on and on. Tugging at her clothes to move the subject back to the regular game plan only made it worse, so I went outside to smoke until she calmed down.

Two cigarettes later, she called me back inside. It was like we hadn’t seen each other in weeks, her sweatpants dropped to the floor so fast. She hid her face in my chest.

“Lay me down,” she murmured.

In the dark of the living room, the fumes from the polish mixed with the smell of her sweat and potpourri. Her still-wet toes left golden trails across the tan floor. I listened to her breathing, high-pitched and shallow, her gravity pushing the fibers of the carpet into my shoulder blades. My fingers grabbed the backs of her ankles, sought out the soft meat of her butt. Legs seized and twitched, necks rolled side to side. She whispered someone else’s name, so soft I almost didn’t hear anything at all, but then she

called out louder, and I felt my center – my hands, my dick, my whole body – collapse and fall out of orbit.



For the first time since winter, Quincy's was on a wait. Dinner started at five and by six-thirty the hosts had a list of at least twenty couples and families. They all sat sweating in the tiny waiting area, clutching pagers that they suspected were duds. Bus boys barely wiped the seats dry before the host showed up with menus, tailed by a starving party ready to eat the tablecloth.

Tamika winked at me as she swaggered by with a tray full of wine and cocktails. "Keepin' busy, big brother?" she called. "I know I am."

I saw them just as the one of the hosts seated them in Tamika's section. Hannah's red hair could be recognized anywhere and I guessed the platinum-streaked Greek god was one of the many gentlemen in her address book. The blood vessels behind my eyes throbbed. It was fine that she talked about the other guys as long as I didn't have to meet them, but now? The girl lacked class. Tamika greeted them before I could do anything, but I watched from behind a column. They all smiled about some shared joke and Tamika walked away scribbling down their drink orders. I speed walked and caught up to her at the bar.

"Don't worry, Morris, I carded them," she teased. "Hey, they asked about you. Are they friends of yours?"

I had to swallow hard to answer her. "That's Hannah."

"No shit, your girlfriend?" She whipped around to peer over at the table again.

"Not that but something close."

“And she’s here with another guy?” She sucked her teeth. “Well, as much as I’d love to see how that drama will play out, you can’t have them. I already rang in their bar tab.” She skipped away to check her other tables.

I stalked over to Hannah. She smiled and waved when she saw me approaching. “What are you doing here?” I asked without looking at the guy across from her.

“We came for dinner. I go out to eat with friends too.” She reached over and grabbed the guy’s hand, lacing fingers together. “Morris, this is Chase. He teaches rock climbing at my gym. Chase, Morris. Morris works for...well, I’m sure you can tell.”

“How’s it going, dude,” Chase said. He gestured to fist bump. I shook my head.

“Tamika seems nice,” Hannah continued. “Cute, too. You guys enjoy lunch?”

“How’d you –”

“You really shouldn’t leave your phone unattended, Morris.” She craned her neck to look behind me. “I love her skirt. Kinda short but I guess that’s your style, huh?”

“Geezus, Hannah.” I shoved my hands in my serving apron. “It’s not that big of a deal. I trained her. We’re friends.” Chase looked back and forth between us, trying to figure out my significance, only to get distracted by the menu.

“Did I say it was a big deal? I was just asking a question.” She blinked.

“Shouldn’t you get back to work?”

If we’d been anywhere else, the conversation would have reached a really unprofessional level, but I needed the job then more than my dignity. I wheeled around and walked into the kitchen to pick up my orders, ignoring their obnoxious PDA of stroking hands and feeding each other bread across the table whenever I happened to pass

by. I begged Tamika to let me put coffee grounds disguised as ground pepper on their salads. She refused.

“Try to be a grown-up, big brother,” she said, patting my shoulder. “Besides, they’ll know it was you.” She moved past me towards the out door. “No use in jeopardizing my tip just for some non-girlfriend revenge.”

Tom beckoned me back to his office a few minutes later. “Morris,” he said, hands pressed together in concern. “You seem on edge. Do I need to cut you early tonight?”

“I’m fine.”

“Taking deep breaths always helps me on crazy nights like this. In through the nose, out through the mouth.” He sucked in some air and puffed out his stomach. “Do you want to try it with me? Here, let’s try it.”

“I think I need a cigarette, actually.”

Tom frowned. “Alright, just make sure your tables are set before you sneak off. And,” he added, “go out the back so no one sees you. Stay away from the patio, too.”

Outside by the dumpsters, I tried not to choke on the funk as I smoked, the embers glowing as the sun slowly dipped behind the mountains. I moved closer to the patio, staying behind the wall, blowing the smoke away from the tables so Tom wouldn’t yell at me. Halfway through, I overheard two people talking in low voices. Everything sounded fuzzy until I clearly heard Tamika say, “Seriously, how you gonna ask me out when you came in here with some other girl? Ain’t got no shame.” I snickered to myself, figuring she was telling off some too-fresh customer from the same pack as Joe and Ray.

The guy didn’t get the hint, though, and must have moved closer to her because I heard someone back up against the wall of the restaurant and Tamika grunted.

“Hey, be nice,” he said. “Shame is for people with too much time on their hands to think about that shoulda coulda woulda shit. I live in the moment. Like this.”

Four sounds: lips locking, a hand smacking skin, Tamika screaming, “Get the fuck off me! Who do you think you are? Asshole, leave me alone!” and the side door swinging open.

I tossed my still-burning cigarette and ran back inside, only to almost collide with Tamika who was making a bee-line to the dry storage room. Smoke billowed out of her ears and she wouldn’t stop swearing. She managed to get out, “I need a minute,” pushed past me and slammed the door.

I stood guard, not knowing what else to do. My hands shook as I leaned my forehead against the door frame and listened to her dry heaving sobs. “Are you alright?” I finally risked. My voice sounded smaller, weak, not like how a big brother should sound. “Can I grab you some water?” She didn’t say anything. I tried again. “I know what happened, Tamika. Lemme help.” She only groaned and I stopped talking.

Tom stormed around the corner. “Is Tamika in there?” he asked, pointing at the door behind me. His cheeks and nose looked like tomatoes. “She hit a customer. You know what kinda shit I’m gonna have to go through so the guy doesn’t sue?” His fist pounded on the door as he yelled to her. “Tamika! What the hell were you thinking?”

“Tom—”

“Morris, go close out your tables and take care of hers. She’s done for the night.”

“But Tom, I think you should—”

“Go, Morris!”

He was going to fire her, I knew it. Giving the guy a free appetizer wouldn't make him feel better about being turned down *and* decked. It didn't matter that it wasn't Tamika's fault. It never mattered, I realized. She was supposed to know the lines, how far to go and never any further. Head pounding and tongue feeling large in my mouth, I walked out into the dining room and closed my long-forgotten tables. The date-night couples barely acknowledged my half-assed apologies for the late check.

Hannah and Chase stood by the door, arms crossed, heads bent together angrily. I wondered if they were mad about their missing server until I saw Chase had a pinkish-purple handprint on his spray-tanned cheek. My hands started to tremble again.

Hannah saw me walking towards the bar and ran to intercept.

"Nice friend you've got there," she sneered. "Find her on the *Maury* show?"

"Back off, Hannah."

She didn't stop, kept circling around me like a cat stalking an unsuspecting bird. "Chase told me everything. Isn't it funny how your girlfriend tried to hook up with my date? You should tell her that her flirting skills need work."

I put a hand over my eyes. "No..."

"Your boss better hope Chase doesn't bring the news into this. God, he could own Quincy's next month. Would you still work here if they renamed it Chase's?"

My arms shot out and grabbed her shoulders to make her face me. I leaned my face close to hers, twisted now with an ugliness I'd never seen. "Hannah, he hit on *Tamika*. Why would she hit him if it were the other way around? That doesn't make any fucking sense."

She shook her head and tried to wiggle free from my grip. “Of course you’re sticking up for her. Should’ve seen it coming. Pathetic.” Then she reached up and touched my chin. “But it’s kinda cute, like ‘we shall overcome’ or something. I’ve never seen you like this before.”

I turned away from her towards the kitchen and saw Tamika coming out, changed into a sweatshirt, her server apron and uniform t-shirt folded up and tucked underneath her arm. She cried as she clocked out, Tom hovering behind her shoulder. Together they walked past me – Tom’s face stiff like steel, Tamika’s crumpled like paper – to the front of the restaurant where Chase waited. Hannah forgot about me and went to his side, dutifully playing the role of the offended party’s partner.

I watched the scene play, standing still in the middle of the walkway as the other servers swarmed around me holding trays of hot food and iced tea. Tom apologized, putting a hand over his heart, putting a hand on Chase’s shoulder. Tamika sniffled next to him, head bowed towards the floor, as her lips dribbled her own apology. Chase smirked and waved his hand like it was no big deal, Hannah huffed because it was. Tom handed over an envelope of Quincy’s gift certificates. Tamika blew her nose.

And then Chase and Hannah were leaving hand in hand, and Tom shook his head as Tamika cried more, and then she started walking out the doors to wait for her ride.

And then Chase winked at Tamika.

And gravity fell away from my feet.

I walked jogged fucking sprinted through the doors after them and into the dark heat not knowing why I suddenly needed to move when before I’d been fine with sitting still along the wall or in a chair watching everything go down, but right then my hands

itched to grasp for chunks of stringy blow-dried blonde hair and orange-pink-purple skin and veins of cold blood. I leapt and we hit the pavement and I held on, pounding out everything smarmy greasy cocky until it spilled out into the parking lot. Knees bent and doubled into extra fists. My heart stepped up the pace as I flattened and rolled orange tissue out on the sidewalk like dough. Voices jumped in and out but I couldn't stop to listen to them. I kept thinking, hold on, I'll talk to you once I'm done, when I'm done you can fire me and lock me up and tell me how I'm like every other black guy you thought I was, because I don't fucking care anymore, I don't care, I don't care, you can't make me care about that bullshit anymore.

Hannah roared in my ear, "Stop it, Morris, oh my god, stop it, you're going to kill him," and Tom dialed 911 and my hands kept beating a rhythm into the bones and teeth until my vision cleared, my heart slowed down and I picked strands of red-stained blonde hair from underneath my fingernails.

Tamika squatted just beyond the mess. Mouth open and soundless, she stared at me then Chase's mangled face then me. While Hannah wailed somewhere behind me and sirens came closer, she crawled over the sprawled body parts towards me and held my shaking shoulders. She pressed my head into her chest and I thought, as I felt the heat of her skin through her sweatshirt on my forehead, we're cool now.

## Deflated

When Rachel came home from the hospital on Saturday afternoon, after the lunch plates with smears of mustard and ketchup had been put into the sink for washing, we said hello as if she was coming back from summer camp, like she'd been gone for a week instead of eight. We hugged her tight and pretended we couldn't touch the vibrating blood veins snaking underneath her thin copper cream flesh, feel each blood cell as they pushed their way towards the heart. We patted the top of her head, the perm slowly growing out, as we walked down the hall to her bedroom, the bed covered in fresh unmade pistachio sheets, just like she left it. As she pulled off her sweatshirt for a shower, we turned our heads so we couldn't see how the heavy fabric disguised the chop sticks that now stood in place of her arms and legs, or how the outlines of her organs stood out against her t-shirt. At least that's what we imagined we'd see if we watched her undress, but we couldn't even look.

When Rachel coughed, a sound so hollow we felt it scratch the mucus in our own throats, we rushed to the fridge to grab something – water, tea, bourbon, anything that would soothe her, make her forget where she'd been and remember where she was now.

“Here you go, baby,” we said as we fumbled to put warm mugs in between her stringy fingers. “This should make you feel better.” And we stared while not staring as she moved around the house, touching the air but not disturbing the dust of the house, almost like a brown version of Casper the friendly ghost, and when we made that joke to each other we laughed so hard behind our hands in a way we hadn't laughed in weeks.

God, we should have seen it coming. When she said no, thank you, to seconds at dinner on macaroni-and-cheese-with-hot-dog-pieces night, we should have stopped, forks midway to our mouths, and said, “Are you feeling yourself?” When she stopped showing up to dinners all together and spent her evenings in Pilates class at the gym, we should have texted her, “When are you coming home to eat?” When she started measuring two ounces of grapes and three ounces of avocado slices and four ounces of the most flavorless beans in the world into tiny take-away containers as her lunch, we should have snuck a peanut butter sandwich into her backpack.

But we didn't and we didn't and we didn't and when the school called saying Rachel fainted during gym class and wanted to know if she had eaten breakfast that day, we couldn't even respond without hesitating.

At the hospital she smiled and asked us to tape Grey's Anatomy for her, as if she'd be home the next day to watch it. And wasn't it funny that now she's in the hospital but there's no Dr. McDreamy? But what's funny about a thirteen-year-old hooked up to IV drips and feeding tubes because she won't let a spoon near her mouth?

We should have kidnapped her right then, snuck her past the nurses' station and pulled out of the parking lot getaway driver style, taken her home and took her out to the backyard with a hammer and every mirror in the house. We could have handed her the hammer and simply instructed, "Smash away, baby. They can't hurt you any more." And then as she banged with all of her strength and the shards scattered behind her back in every direction, a gospel choir led by Kirk Franklin would come out from behind the neighbors' bushes and sing, "The Storm is Over Now" and we'd all hug and mark the occasion by inhaling three pans of apple cobbler.

But we just sat in those plastic folding chairs in that tiny blue room and held her cold hands and asked her over and over again, "Who did this to you? Who did this to you? Tell us so we can fix this, so we can fix you. We will tear apart every Cosmo magazine you ever laid your eyes on with cheeky bony girls with horse tails for hair who told you from the front cover that making your stomach shrink like a deflated balloon would make you more beautiful. But you have to tell us who did this to you because we can't destroy everything because you destroyed yourself."

When Rachel came home from the hospital, we bought a bucket of chicken and some ice cream to celebrate, like we always did when exciting things happened. But the drumsticks went untouched and we all went to bed with aching stomachs filled with our sobs instead.

## Seven Thousand

Open your eyes and notice that everyone on the plane has stopped speaking English. Wipe the crust from your eyelids and take a minute to simultaneously readjust your seatbelt (off the junk, thank you) and your inner language settings. Hear the switch in your head as it grinds into place, from the smooth *hey, how's it going* to the precise *nǐ hǎo*. Try a test word on your tongue to be sure.

Look across Jared's slumbering figure on your right to peer out the window at the darkened sky. No traces of stars or sunlight. Check your watch – 7:26 – and realize it's still running on California time. Curse when you see the second hand isn't moving. Is it early morning or late evening, time for breakfast or dinner? How long have you slept? Think to ask Jared, but the width and volume of the drool puddle on his jeans indicates his inability to offer a better answer than your own imagination.

Swallow irrational urge to panic. Planes don't disappear over long expanses of ocean anymore. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and you are not Amelia Earhart. Attempt to

catch the attention of the passing flight attendants anyway – just so you can know what’s going on. Can’t hurt to ask. The petite women teeter down the aisle with overloaded carts, offering prepackaged chicken salad sandwiches and hot tea to your fellow passengers. Groan as you consider the inevitable conversation about your vegetarianism in rusty Chinese or even in English.

The youngest attendant glances at you while pouring tea for an elderly couple. Smile to appear friendly, charming even, and prepare for the upcoming interaction. She reddens and smiles back before she can stop herself, revealing uncharacteristic dimples on both sides of her pink mouth. Wonder if she is being nice or actually thinks you’re attractive. Sit up a little straighter, suck in your gut.

Think of Ava and feel guilty. Remember her shirt-soaking sobs at LAX outside of the gate meant to deliver you first to San Francisco and then China while she would fly in the opposite direction back to her home in Denver and then on to school in Chicago. Remember the thick sediment of salt and spit in her last kiss and her inability to choke out *I love you* when you tilted her face towards yours. Remember your cocky grin, your jaunty salute as you sidestepped into the breezeway, feeling like Humphrey Bogart saying goodbye to Ingrid Bergman, like that *baby it’s not goodbye, it’s see you later* Hallmark bullshit that you know she doesn’t believe. Remember how she walked away without looking back.

Chew the inside of your cheek. Wish you could have actually talked to her and heard her voice when you landed in San Francisco and called. Mentally kick yourself for sounding like a tool on her voicemail, like an owner pacifying a rambunctious puppy.

Don’t worry, girl, you said, it’s just another five months, we’ll make it through.

She will seethe for three hours when she hears it and will easily label you as the World's Most Insensitive Boyfriend. Gold medal.

Jared jerks himself awake, half-mumbling expletives. Laugh despite yourself at his tousled blonde hair and bewildered expression. He rubs his eyes with the back of his hands and twists around in his seat to survey the other slumbering passengers. Imagine a language transition like yours in his head and see the cogs rotate.

Dude, he says finally. I dreamt that we found Atlantis by going through a tunnel under our dorm in Nanjing.

Very nice, you say.

When you dream, you see Ava's back disappearing down a long steel hallway, never getting closer no matter how hard you run. When Jared dreams, he sees a long lost underwater metropolitan. Envy his free agent status during his time abroad. He and his girlfriend Madison broke up last year in August, eighteen hours before you and him boarded the plane for the first semester in China. She suggested that they could pick everything up when he came home at Christmas and be a stronger couple. Jared agreed, but then his ass bounced all over the Asian continent, collecting girls like sea shells, and word supplemented by incriminating pictures via email got back to Madison. She didn't answer his calls and Jared didn't give chase. You nodded when he off-handedly mentioned it, like he made the right decision to let it go because hey, it wouldn't have worked anyway, but you wondered if Madison knew long ago what would happen. Maybe the break was just a premeditated escape ploy, a set-up, so that she would end up as the victim when everything not-so-spontaneously combusted. Or maybe Madison really trusted Jared and he completely blew it.

To make sure the same shit wouldn't happen to y'all, Ava demanded substantial proof, evidence that you would keep it in your pants when you went back in January, but in nicer terms. And you told her in just as nice terms that over two years together should be proof enough, *don't you think, baby?* But she was less than interested in your cop-out, and while the two of you strolled down Colorado Boulevard in Old Town Pasadena after New Years, holding hands, she pointed into the store window of a pawn shop.

There's all the proof any girl needs, she said.

And damn it all if you didn't walk into that store and walk out eighty bucks poorer but redeemed in that little firecracker's eyes when she slipped on her slightly-used diamond promise ring. She swore she could see her reflection in it and fluffed her Afro to demonstrate.

It's beautiful like you, you said.

She smacked your arm. Be more original, she said. But I love it. And you.



In Shanghai, before catching the two-hour train back to Nanjing University, track down a hostel and steal their wireless internet to send the obligatory check-in email to loved ones: mom, dad, grandparents, girlfriend, former employers, friends at home and school. Joke about the sketchy street food and the strange colonial architecture. Attach pictures from yesterday of you and Jared horsing around in public. Check your messages and find three from Ava alone.

January 11: I miss you more than I can say, I just wish you were here, I'm so glad we spent time together before you left again, please be careful, let me know when you get there, love you, miss you, XOXO.

January 12: Where are you, I haven't heard anything, are you safe, how am I supposed to know, see this is why I don't trust abroad trips, ha ha, just get back to me, love you, miss you.

Sixteen hours ago: What the *fuck*, Dylan, it's been days and nothing, I know you're busy but could you think of someone besides yourself, I went along with this stupid year-long study away thing for you but I don't deserve to be ignored like this, dammit, let me know that you're ok.

Swallow hard. Chalk the messages up to the five stages of grief. She's probably just reached anger. The same thing happened last semester when you were gone. Don't respond. Go out to a local duty-free shop and buy three scarves to send later for her birthday, right after Cupid's holiday. She likes pretty things. They will make her roll her eyes and half smile in that way she does when she doesn't want to admit you pleased her.

Wait two more days before calling her with a phone card when you get back to the university. Having her yell at you on the phone is better than online. It's almost lunch time for you, bedtime for her. She answers not sounding surprised that it's you.

Hey beautiful, you say. How's my favorite firecracker?

Hey, she says, and doesn't respond to the teasing. You're back then?

Uh huh, got in yesterday. Tired as hell. How are you?

Busy, too busy. *For you*. She doesn't say the last two words, but her tone does.

Let it roll off. Pick your battles. Continue talking in a pleasant tone.

Yeah? With school or what?

Oh, she says, and blows out some air heavily, as if the explanation makes her tired just thinking about it. Just a lot of stuff. But Dylan, I actually have to go.

There is no remorse in her voice as she hastily says goodbye, no sincerity when she says *love you too*, no lingering on the line to hear the click. You think so, at least.

Put the scarves into the mail – express. Hope they arrive by Valentine’s.



Move back into your dorm room and reunite with Chen, your tall and gawky roommate from last semester. He geeks out when you give him the porno magazines you smuggled onto the plane. Watch him page through them on his bed, face bent close to the photos as if he’s looking for birthmarks on the models.

Meet the new students in the program at a group dinner, including a girl from your hometown, Lindsey or Linda or something like that. The coordinator introduces you and Jared as the veterans and everyone claps, impressed. Duck your head like *aw shucks* while Jared smirks at some girls from the University of Washington.

The next morning, pull on the running shoes Ava helped you pick out in the states and go for a jog around the track to clear your head with Jared. Feel bold and sprint ahead of him on the curves. Realize how stupid this is after all of that Christmas candy you inhaled a few weeks ago. On the second lap, let him go in front and slow to a walk.

Think about New Years when Ava visited you in California. She acted so hot and cold throughout the whole trip: rolled over and covered your face with sleepy kisses when she woke up like she wanted to memorize every pore, then shoved you away when you grabbed at her towel playfully after her shower, acting like your hands were covered with toxic slime.

Don’t be so immature, she hollered, and locked herself in the bedroom. Minutes later she reemerged fully clothed, eager to wrap her arms around your waist like nothing

happened ten minutes ago. When you confronted her, wondering if you had done something wrong, she looked at you like you were speaking Chinese.

Condensing five months apart into eleven days of vacation cannot be done well enough to satisfy anyone. Logistically impossible. For example, no amount of sex you all had would come close to how much you missed during the separation. You knew; you did the math.

We'll just have to do it all the time, Ava typed during a chat before she visited. If we aren't sleeping or using the bathroom, you should be on me.

You thought she was kidding until she arrived and unzipped your jeans on the interstate going home from the airport. You almost swerved into a Range Rover but she didn't apologize. According to her, moments not spent in constant physical contact, like hugging, kissing, groping, sucking and so on, whether public or private, were prime moments wasted and would be sorely missed months down the road when both of you lay awake in the middle of the night, running fingers down your thighs like your hands belonged to someone else. You thought about how you glanced at suggestive pictures of Ava during finals and had to bookend studying with cold showers so Chen wouldn't see you tugging at yourself. Oh, your groin remembered that aching. So you pounced once you parked safely in the garage and she let you slide home in the passenger seat of your mom's car.

The girl from home – Lindsey, yeah, that was it – and a few other students in the program walk on the track. They make a show of stretching on the grass, extending muscular limbs in alternating directions before they trot around the course like the marathon man. Lindsey waves and says hi. Tie your shoes when they pass you.

It wasn't all about the sex, obviously. You missed how hard she laughed at television commercials and how she crawled under your sheets, into your arms, after watching a disturbing crime show because she was scared. You missed pinching her ass in public when she stood in line for the cashier or browsed for books at the library. You missed the contrast of her darker skin to your bronze, tasting the smell of cinnamon and Shea butter on the pillowcase during pillow talk, licking the Vaseline petroleum jelly left on your teeth after you kissed.

Stop and bend over to suck in more oxygen. Have Jared drag you back to the dorm and into your bed, forehead hot. Stay for a week with an illness caused by the air pollution that you forgot about over Christmas break. Swear up and down about China and its mother and its legitimacy – son of a bitch, fucking bastard, dammit – every time you take a breath that tastes like you swallowed a dozen smoked cigarettes soaked in dirty bathwater. Wake up in the middle of the night and see Ava sitting on the corner of the bed, shaking her head. Open your eyes and see no one.

When you can manage to sit up, book a hotel, buy tickets, and travel south to Hainan province for a week of tropical relaxation with Jared before classes start. Blink into the sun and see spots after you wake up from noon naps in the sand. Tell Ava on the phone about the natives who wear sweaters in ninety-degree weather and the influx of Russian tourists you and Jared encountered in the hotel lobby. Excitedly discuss your tanned arms and face because taking off your shirt feels blasphemous.

I'm almost as dark as you now, you say. You should see it.

She yawns, says, Sounds like fun. Tomorrow it's supposed to be below zero here.

The connection drops ten seconds later. Suspect she hung up.

Write her an email later and ask if she's alright, if she's still mad at you, hoping it might explain the ice queen act. Say, I know you're lonely and I miss you too, but we got to make the best of it, baby. I mean, what can I do?

One line reply: *You could come home.*

Decide to hide your computer under your hotel bed until vacation ends.

Jared comes into the room in the evening, holding the hand of a sunburned Russian girl and finds you banging your head against the wall. He tells his guest to wait outside for a minute.

Problems with the wife? he asks once the door closes.

Shrug. Admire the indentation your forehead made in the green painted drywall.

Dude, don't worry, he says. She'll calm down. She has to. Give her another week. Then it'll go back to normal.

Wonder what's normal about a seven thousand mile long-distance relationship.



Lindsey looks like every California girl who wouldn't breathe in your direction in high school: slim, blonde, tanned, and laughingly carefree. You never expected to meet someone like her in China. While you scowl at your empty inbox in the dorm lounge, she comes in and sits down next to you. Her clothes exhale the smell of home – coconut tan lotion, smog, the Pacific Ocean – underneath her perfume. She whispers in English that she needs help on an assignment for class. Her eyes dart around, looking for any possible snitches.

I know we're supposed to talk in Chinese until four-thirty, she says, but I don't know what the hell I'm doing. She waves a reading packet at you. I haven't learned half of these characters; Indiana's Chinese department sucks.

She smiles, embarrassed, a lopsided twist of one side of her pink mouth. It's the trademarked strategy of gorgeous girls like her to get what they want from lumpy guys like you. You don't mind it today. Help her look up the words she doesn't know, let her borrow your dictionary. Sound knowledgeable and patient when you pronounce the tones for her over and over again. Don't laugh when she can't say *chicken*.

Ohmygawd, thank you sooooo much, she exclaims when you finish. She squeezes your arm in gratitude. Flex automatically.

No problem, you say to be casual. Anytime. Seriously.

She smiles with teeth this time. I owe you one, she says. Hold me to it. She skitters out of the room, waving as she leaves.

Pull your gaze away from her purple skinny jeans to your computer screen.

Have trouble.

You've got mail from Ava. She wants to know how to get rid of a virus on her computer. No *hello* or *hey baby*. Send to trash. Tell her later you never got it.

Damn Chinese firewall, she says.

Yeah, you say. Fucking annoying.



When Ava stops writing you entirely, write her spontaneous three line messages during the middle of the day like she did last semester: *Ate some street buns for lunch. Now have spicy stomach. Wish you were here.* Talk to her voicemail anyway when she only answers every other one of your phone calls. By St. Patrick's, deduce that her temper tantrum has reached a new level of lunacy. Email mutual friends at school and ask them to check on her. They respond with electronic head shakes of indifference.

She's fine, they say, just really busy with classes. I'm sure she misses you; she's probably trying to stay strong for your sake, creating some distance.

Don't feel satisfied. Stalk her Facebook page. Wonder if she looks happy or buzzed in weekend pictures, if she's trying to tell you something in her status updates using song lyrics. *I'll never be a stepping stone* – that sounds pretty passive aggressive. Harass Caitlin and Erinn, Ava's housemates, until Caitlin discovers something.

She's not wearing that ring anymore, she reports.

Demand why. Delete the answer before you read it.

Someone rings your doorbell but opens the door before you say anything.

Nǐ hǎo, Dylan, Lindsey exclaims, holding a book flagged with several neon post-it notes. Nǐ néng bāngzhù wǒ ma? See, I'm getting so much better at asking for help. She grins but sobers when she sees your ashen face. Something wrong, Dylan? She crosses the room and sits at Chen's desk chair to face you at yours.

Shake your head and close the lid of your laptop. It's nothing, you say in Mandarin. You need help with homework?

Whatever, she says in English, and drops her book on the floor like a bored child. Talk to me, I'm a great listener. It's the least I can do.

She curls her long legs under her and points at a framed picture of you and Ava on your desk, taken the first time she met your family. You both rock goofy smiles, Mickey Mouse ears and sunglasses, posing in front of Cinderella's castle at Disneyland.

Girlfriend? Lindsey asks.

Is that jealousy, maybe surprise in her voice? Stop it.

Her name's Avalon, you say. Ava.

You guys will have super attractive children, she says. How long has it been?

Too long, you say, and rake your fingers through your hair until your scalp burns. She's givin' me hell, you explain. She doesn't like being apart. I thought she'd be better by now.

Lindsey frowns. Is that why you act so depressed all the time?

Raise an eyebrow. I act depressed all the time?

She blushes but maintains her facial expression of solemn concern. You just seem quiet in class for a veteran. Figures it would be about a girl. We can be kinda bitchy sometimes.

Smirk.

Oh good, you smiled. That's better. She shifts in the chair. You miss her?

Don't sound sad as you say, Always...but I don't think she misses me anymore.

Lindsey is horrified. Don't say stuff like that, she cries. I'm sure that's not true.

I guess she just needs space, you say. To think about us.

Right, right, she says. Gotta think positively.

Sure, you say.

You guys deserve a medal for getting this far. She sighs. Me and my boyfriend broke up last week, if it makes you feel any better.

Not at all, you say. Laugh even though there's nothing funny about that.

See, it helps to talk about it, she says, and giggles along with you.

Say, Yeah, it does, thanks. But it doesn't help and you know it.

Nǐ yào yōngbào ma? She stands up from the desk and holds her arms open, beckoning for you to come closer.

Know you shouldn't. Know you will ignite if you touch her. But she's waiting, her shoulders sagging a little, and she's wearing that lopsided smile, so walk into her embrace. She squeezes tight and makes no move to get away. Her bony shoulders tickle your armpits. Clear your throat after the obligatory five seconds.

Shhh, she whispers. Sometimes we just...we just need to be held.

Close your eyes. Yeah, you say, hoarse all of a sudden. Pull her closer, run your hand down her back, press her skin through the thin fabric. Hear her breathe in deeper, exhaling loudly. Feel that familiar pang in your lower core.

It's alright, Dylan, she says. She pulls back to match her green eyes with yours.

Try to say, What's alright, what are you talking about? Play dumb, like you aren't thinking about how open and golden her face is, or how you're not thinking about possible combustion or expectations or how Chen will be back from class soon. Meet her gaze head on and say, Ok, and watch her lips touch yours and catch fire.



Spend three months on a rollercoaster. Flush red when Lindsey knocks on your door once Chen leaves the room. Almost vomit when you catch Ava's photographed eyes when you lean over Lindsey's pear shape, grasping her hips like the guard rail. Eventually put the picture frame away in your desk drawer, and then into a suitcase so you won't accidentally run into it.

Your hand slips when you try to grab a hold of her fine blond hair. If you kiss after foreplay, it's an accident and she apologizes for breaking your concentration. She calls out every known deity, wrinkles her nose and makes yipping noises right before her orgasm. Once you all got so caught up in ripping off clothes that she sat on a sheet of fresh calligraphy with her bare ass while she pulled off her panties. It left several blue-

black ink characters on both cheeks, like reading material for you when you can't bear to see her face.

Never seek her out; she'll come on her own under the guise of homework help. And she always will, whenever the mood strikes. She reads the emails Ava sent you in January and says you deserve some slack for pursuing your goals in China. Believe her. Stop signing into chat for weeks at a time until Ava asks if you're sick again.

Let me know if you're ok, she says in an email. Blink at her concern.

Watch Lindsey from your bed as she tugs on her polo shirts over her head and shimmies back into her Express brand jeans and say played out lines like, Your ex is an idiot for letting an ass like that walk away. Lie so she will let out a tee-hee-hee giggle and give you a goodbye kiss that might turn into another ride if she's not running late for Modern Chinese History.

Try to fan her smell out of the room before Chen gets back from his classes, but on April Fools Day, Lindsey leaves a pair of panties on your pillow as a joke. Struggle to explain in Mandarin accidentally picking up someone else's laundry while Chen giggles and blushes, holding the orange polka-dotted thong towards you with a pencil.

The shit Lindsey wants to try with you comes straight out of a triple-X movie. It's about how many crazy ways you can bend her legs and arms before she comes. With Ava, you savored the closeness, the mutual satisfaction, the slow methodical pushes and pulls, making it last as long as possible. With Lindsey, you thrust as hard as you can to get it over with so you won't have to jerk off later when you get bored doing homework.

Jared never sees you anymore, he complains one day when he comes to find you for lunch seconds after Lindsey disappears down the hall. You never answer your phone

when he calls; the door is always locked when he comes by. What the fuck are you doing with all your time, he wants to know. Dig for answers in your jeans pocket. Find an empty condom wrapper instead.

She asks you to call out her name once while she kneels in front of your erection.

Lindsey, ooohhh, Lindsey, you say, and yank at her hair a little bit.

No, *her* name, she says. Say Ava's name.

Feel yourself go soft.



Ava sounds stressed out in her emails, worrying about the summer and getting an internship, taking the GRE, graduating, getting into grad school, buying a house, getting married, whether to adopt or have her own kids.

We're going to be seniors next year, you say in a chat, not thirty-five.

Shut up, she writes back. Two lines later, she asks if you want to live together over the summer when you get back to the states. Your mutual friend needs to sublet his apartment and he'd rather not have strangers living there. Say yes like it's no big deal.

Great, she replies. It'll be good to see you, baby. We really need to get back to us this summer.

*Us*. It's the first time she's said the word in too long. Start to miss *us* too.

Count down the days until you go home. Study for finals. Chat more with Ava online. Remember how funny the two of you are together.

**me:** we should make a movie

**Ava:** ...make?

**me:** sure

**Ava:** what context are we talking about?

like, "oh let's make a movie and try to pander it"

or "mmm, we should make a movie, giiriirl"

**me:** what's pander mean in that context?

**Ava:** like trying to sell to the coen bros.

**me:** yeah, we could do that. I meant the first one, but both are good options

Ignore the longing between your legs and Lindsey until both nearly knock you over when she surprises you in your room when you come back from class. Tell her you're falling behind and need to focus on your upcoming exams. She purses her lips, arms crossed, and sees that you put the picture frame of you and Ava back on your desk.

Wasn't that good anyway, she says in Mandarin, and leaves.



Read. Write. Speak. Sleep. Pack. Wait. Sit. Fly. Wait. Sit. Fly. Land.

Hang onto Ava like a lifesaver when you get to O'Hare. Forget about the other hundred arrivals bumping their way around the two of you cemented to the floor in the middle of the baggage claim. She scratches your smaller paunch. Kiss her forehead, cheeks, and lips and repeat until she bursts out laughing and makes you go get your suitcase from the carousel.

Tackle and pin her to the wall after the taxi drops you off at the apartment. Don't listen when she protests about her messy clothes and her ashy skin.

I'm not trying to admire your clothes, you say, grinning. Put her left hand on your bare chest underneath your shirt so she can feel your heart beating like a hummingbird's.

Whisper in her ear, This is how much I missed you, Ava.

I missed you too, she says.

Feel the cold smoothness of the promise ring on her finger.

In the morning, while Ava's in the shower, use her laptop to check your email and find a message from Lindsey. She wants to know if you're doing ok and enjoying your

summer in Chicago. She's sorry about not getting to say goodbye before leaving Nanjing, everything was so rushed. She and her boyfriend reunited, she says, but hopes that you two will still be cool. Also, Greg, her boyfriend, can't figure out why there are some faint blue streaks on her ass.

Delete.

Accidentally click on a tab with Ava's personal email. The subjects of the messages catch your attention: hey mama what's good, sexy chocolate lady, ISO freaky girl. There are over a hundred with exchanged attachments of half- and fully nude pictures of Ava and different men. Hear the water turn off in the bathroom. She comes out, wrapped in a towel and picking her Afro out listlessly. She crosses over to you sitting at the kitchen table.

So freaking hot, she sighs. I'm already sweating.

Look at the water droplets slide down her browned arms onto the hardwood floor. Look back at the computer screen. Select every message from a strange man.

Send to trash.

When she's dressed, she sits down with her laptop while you cook eggs for breakfast. She yelps.

Ask, Problem, baby?

She bites her lip. My email, she starts.

You had a lot of spam in your inbox, you say. I got rid of it for you.

She opens her mouth and then closes it, looking at you. She touches her ring.

Oh, she says. I'm glad you're here.