

Spring 2018

## Everybody Else

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EVERYBODY ELSE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Patricia Gaglia

May 2018

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

EVERYBODY ELSE

By

Patricia Gaglia

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2018

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## ABSTRACT

### EVERYBODY ELSE

by Patricia Gaglia

*Everybody Else* is a novel that follows the story of the Promise Scholars, a group of math whizzes thrust into the media spotlight after a tech billionaire launches an engineering program at their low-income, predominantly black, high school. The purpose of this novel is to explore contemporary racism in America, the complex relationship between philanthropy and poverty, and the role of technology in instigating social change. Each chapter is a complete story, representing a unique first person perspective as the students navigate the closure of their school, the dissolution of their benefactor's interest, and their enrollment in an affluent neighboring school, which clearly does not want to claim them. While race plays a significant role in the overarching plot of the novel, it never supersedes the individual characters' humanity and the personal challenges they must confront. By constructing multi-dimensional characters with complex inner lives and moral conflicts, strive to provide a nuanced fictional world to investigate the impact of racism on the individual, the family and the community. Further, I have overlaid technology throughout the work as a means to question the role of the internet, social media, and instant global access in the lives of contemporary teens and the adults who support them. At some points, technology negatively disrupts the characters' lives, while at other times it provides opportunities to generate positive change on a scale unimaginable to prior generations.

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## PREFACE

*Everybody Else* is a book-length work of fiction in the tradition of composed novels such as Jennifer Egan's *A Visit by the Goon Squad* and Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*. It is intended for young adult and adult audiences and falls into the category of Contemporary Realism. *Everybody Else* is a work of protest, aiming to inspire readers to self-reflect, question social norms and engage in constructive dialogue. By embedding divisive issues in relevant human stories, I strive to disarm readers and strengthen tendencies toward open-mindedness, empathy and change through action.

Employing a range of first person narratives, each chapter in *Everybody Else* acts as a stand-alone short story, while simultaneously propelling a linearly progressive plot, which spans the entirety of the work. For this purpose, I will refer to individual sections of the novel as chapter-stories.

Through use of common setting, and repeated characters and themes, *Everybody Else* meets the criteria for a short story cycle as defined in Forrest Ingram's work, *Representative Twentieth-Century Short Story Cycles: Studies in a Literary Genre*. By envisioning the work as a complete novel from its inception, it occupies the farthest outpost of Ingram's cycle structure as a composed novel.

I was first introduced to the story-cycle through Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio* and John Steinbeck's *Pastures of Heaven*. Intrigued by the effect of detailing a range of vantage points in a small community, I sought to deconstruct the elements of

Anderson and Steinbeck's work. In both cases I found that the cumulative effect of the work is somehow greater than the sum of its parts. By providing the reader with more information than the characters have of one another--their motivations, desires, struggles and fears--Anderson and Steinbeck create a narrative that embeds the reader as a silent citizen in their fictional communities. I sought to create a similar dynamic in *Everybody Else*, carving out spaces for readers to develop opinions and feelings about the interpersonal dynamics of the characters in the spaces between the stories. I opted for lean dialogue and narrative gaps to make space for the reader to fill as a participant of the text.

I chose the composed novel structure as it offers the most effective vehicle for delivering the central messages of the work, which include the interconnectedness of humanity, the prevalence of misunderstanding in human relationships and the inevitable conflict that results from these misunderstandings.

Each chapter-story offers a unique perspective, shaped by the narrator's race, gender, economic status, age, family structure and life experience. These attributes are implicit to the individual plot line most closely associated with that narrator in an effort to place the humanity of the character over the cultural issues they represent. Though each chapter-story moves the overarching narrative forward, it is also a complete story, separate from the whole, with a beginning, middle and end. In addition, each chapter-story tackles a hot-button issue that is central to the individual narrator, and humanity at large, such as religion, sexuality, illness, death or birth. A



protracted email exchange acts as inter-chapters, further propelling the narrative arc, which spans the entirety of the work.

Combined, the chapters create a palette of varied, often conflicting, perceptions, composed of individual narrators' unique world-views. While the perspective of a single narrator wholly owns his or her particular chapter-story, for the reader each new voice constructs a fresh layer of understanding, adding context to the complete work.

I differentiate each singular chapter-story from those that surround it, through careful implementation of a multiplicity of strong voices. Throughout the process of writing *Everybody Else*, I undertook a concentrated study of the tools that comprise a “voicey” work and strong characterization. *Everybody Else* is a character-driven novel. At the core of each character, I sought a distinctive voice through whom the reader could explore the narrative world. A voicey narrative enables readers to better submerge themselves in the narrative world, maximizing the potential so that readers might shed their perceptions and open their minds to alternative perspectives. One of the most valuable opportunities that a work of fiction affords its readers is the ability to step outside of themselves and consider perspectives they might struggle to understand in the higher-stakes conflicts that permeate our real lives. The outcomes of the fictional world pose no material threat to the reader's life, thus the reader is facilitated into consideration of a wider range of plausible viewpoints and opinions.

*Olive Kitteridge* provided me with a highly refined example of implementing a voicey narrative. Elizabeth Strout's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, is a prime

illustration of an author's deft choice of language and sentence structure to define the personalities of her characters. They are voicey, yet restrained. There is danger in over-writing a character's voice, departing from an individual sense of humanity and leaving a slapstick caricature in place of a complex, relatable individual. Strout's characters are quirky, yet subtle. In order to emulate a similar craft, I often over-wrote the characters in *Everybody Else*, and then carefully peeled away the excess. In practicing this art for each character, I aimed to cultivate not only complex characters, but also a complex community in which they interact.

Divergent views are illuminated as the reader adopts, or rejects, the outlook of each character. I have endeavored to use literary tools that I believe best facilitate the reader's identification with the narrator. Methods such as first person point of view, realistic compressed dialogue and parsing complex desires and motivations to minimalistic statements, both invite the reader into consideration of the character's perspective while also aspiring to leave enough mental space for the reader to reflect on the application to their waking life. Utilizing this structure of storytelling, *Everybody Else*, attempts to bond the reader with each narrator while simultaneously, and ironically, proposing the human desire for a shared experience is an impossible urge to fulfill. By living a moment in another character's shoes, an impossible feat to accomplish in reality, *Everybody Else* begs the questions, "Can we accept the extent of our effects on one another and forgive one another for the misunderstandings inherent to living in human society?"

While I have constructed the novel chronologically, due to the complete nature of each individual chapter-stories, the work can be rearranged for alternate readings. Doing so creates the possibility of varied interpretations as readers accesses information in differing orders and thus may realign which characters they bond with, as well as the truths and opinions readers accepts and those they reject. Jennifer Egan's *A Visit by the Goon Squad* provided the impetus for me to explore this method of construction. Music and the music industry play a central role in *Goon Squad*. Aligning structure with content, Egan released a limited edition digital version of the novel, which allowed readers to shuffle chapters, like a CD. As I reflected on the value of providing an alternate order of reading, I realized that the sequence which we receive information provides the lens through which we intake subsequent information. With this in mind, I set out to create my chapter-stories in such a way that they could be consumed in alternate orders with the theory that this would generate the opportunity for varied interpretation of the characters' motives.

By choosing the composed novel structure from the onset of creating *Everybody Else*, I was able to build the option of rearrangement into the work. This opportunity provides a third central message, which is additionally explored in the chronological resolution of the novel: the value of releasing that which we think we know to discover new truths and strive for better understanding of our world and our brethren. This particular central message became increasingly important to me as a result of our current political climate, the rise of "fake news," extremism and the echo chambers we create through adhering to tightly held beliefs and emotions.

Lastly, I have woven technology throughout the work. This exploration was undertaken as an outgrowth of my professional experience as the Director of Development for the San Jose State University College of Engineering. In my Development role, I am the university's central point of contact with more than forty Silicon Valley executives. As such, I am regularly privy to the concerns of senior leadership from tech giants such as Facebook, Google, Cisco and IBM. Many technical leaders are deeply concerned that technological development is outpacing the evolution of human "morality." In *Everybody Else*, technology acts as both a constructive and destructive force. While I have chosen to elevate the previously mentioned core questions to higher positions of inquiry throughout the work, secondarily, it is my hope that readers will consider the role technology plays in modern culture and perhaps realign the position of technology in their own lives into better accord with their personal values. Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* provided an example of how I might integrate an inquiry into technology's impact on humanity. Written in 1997, Yamashita's work naturally does not have the scope of technology embedded into it as it might if she were to generate the work today. However a cacophony of media and digital waves permeate the work.

Set in a fictional American town, *Everybody Else* follows a group of characters at Jefferson Heights High School, which has been integrated by seventy-two Promise Scholars from neighboring MLK High, a predominantly black school. The MLK Promise Scholars are no strangers to attention. Originally founded by Bryan Canaan, a tech billionaire, the scholars have been attracting media attention since the inception

of their program. After MLK High was shut down due to misappropriation of funds, it's determined that the Promise Scholars will attend Jefferson Heights High School, home of the next closest engineering program. The integration receives national attention as the parents of Jefferson Heights fight to keep the MLK students out. Their attempts to block the Promise Scholars from attending their school are ultimately unsuccessful and the two communities must learn to co-exist.

Under mounting pressure from a powerful PTA, the Principal of Jefferson Heights, Tammy Bower, targets the Scholars in a series of incidents, culminating in Jaycee Spikes, a National Science Scholar and member of his church choir, being expelled for a fight in which he was the victim. The media uncovers evidence that the MLK students have been unfairly targeted for disciplinary action. Looking for her big break, a young reporter sneaks into the school and uncovers more information than she bargains for; she then must decide what to do with her discovery. Students and teachers form friendships and rivalries as they wrestle with questions of race and class, while confronting the daily struggles of their personal lives, determining what they believe, why they believe it and what they are willing to take a stand for.

Prior to working in the College of Engineering, I travelled the US working with more than 100,000 High School students on issues of race, class, gender and social/emotional intelligence. I have appeared as an expert on these topics for both CNN and Fox News and have given interviews for dozens of publications including *USA Today* and *Redbook* magazine. I had two television series about my work with teens: one on MTV (*If You Really Knew Me*) and another in Holland (*Over De*

*Streep*). Students would often begin their stories by saying, “I’ve never told anyone this before, but...” These experiences gave me a unique insight into the complex lives and complicated thoughts of teens and the adults who support them. In the contentious political times in which I composed *Everybody Else*, I have been deeply concerned about the escalating tensions among us and the emotional attachment many Americans have towards political issues and the current direction of humanity. My personal concern is most deeply felt in the effect we are having on our children. It’s for this reason that I chose to include multiple teen narratives. It’s vital that artists speak and engage our communities in constructive reflection and dialogue. It is my hope that *Everybody Else* will play some role in moving the needle towards compassion and decency.

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EVERYBODY ELSE

By Sela Gaglia



*“Faith is taking the first step, even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”*

*--Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

## **Leyza**

Though I haven't totally figured out the whole equation, I know for sure that everything is made of math. Every byte of data, every supernova, every lie, every avalanche, every kiss--it's all one perfectly balanced equation. It's the only possibility, or the whole thing would collapse. You can say you don't believe in God and still be a genius, but only idiots don't believe in math. Even this gym, every butt crammed in a plastic chair, all of the people lining the walls, shushing their toddlers, every cell in each of their bodies, the architecture of the walls, the news cameras pointing at the school board President, while I sit in the crowd, next to my mom, who keeps checking the time on her phone--it all boils down to math.

Math is also what got MLK High shut down, too many test scores dipped below the threshold, too many digits were funneled into Principal Walker's personal bank account. And math is why we're all here, listening to the Jefferson Heights parents complain about the proximity of our houses to their school despite the universe of differences between us.

The lady standing at the mic right now is whining about the strain the MLK kids will have on Jefferson's budget. It's math. X is the fact that all seventy-two of us MLK transfers are poor and black.

I whisper to Mom, "They think we're all drug dealers."

Mom looks at me and says, "Are you?" She's being sarcastic, but her tone comes out wrong and it sounds like an actual question. Usually she's just my mom--the woman who does everything for me--but, in moments like this, I remember she's white. And I'm not. And everybody else sees it all of the time.

It's not Mom's fault, but it still pisses me off. My chest tightens, an angry sequence of feelings figuring its way through me. Mom digs her fingers into my ribs, tickling--like an emoji stuck on the end of a text. *I'm just kidding.*

I told Mom coming to this meeting was a waste of our time and that she should just go to work, but she said, "Make the cowards say it to our faces." Then she called in late for her shift at The Memory Care Manor and drove us straight to the School Board meeting.

Mom can't stand it when we fight. I only have to be slightly more stubborn than her and I win almost every time. It's a constant in the math of our relationship.

A new lady takes the mic. I try to tune out what she's saying, but I still catch *statistic* and *violence* and *incarceration*. Mom leans over and whispers, "I'm just saying, don't let people turn you into what you're not."

I want to laugh right in her face. This has always been about people turning us into what we are not.

Besides being poor, black and from The Flats, we're the Promise Scholars, Bryan Canaan's seventy-two hobbies. Two years ago, when Bryan's giant tech company went public, and he made his first billion dollars on his thirtieth birthday, he donated a chunk to the engineering program at MLK. He called us his Promise Scholars. Pictures of us solving algorithms have been printed on magazine covers. We've cut ribbons and sat on parade floats, given speeches and stood on a baseball field, with our hands on our hearts, singing God Bless America. A few of us were featured on *The Today Show*, while Bryan talked about the value of diversity in tech. He's a pretty cool guy even if he does have a strange habit of announcing that he's one-sixteenth black.

I was selected to go on the *Today Show*, but Mom didn't want me to travel without her. So, while five of my classmates stayed at a fancy hotel, I waited for Mom to come home from her night shifts. Bryan gave the kids on the trip sweatshirts with his company logo and drove them around New York City in a limo. The pictures are all over the internet. I did give a local news interview with Jillian Matthews. Bryan joined us from a remote location and even though he wasn't even really in the room with us, Jillian paid way more attention to him than she did to me.

There was a rumor Bryan was going to show up at the school board meeting, but he sent a letter instead. Mom says he's bored with helping kids and now he wants to save Panamanian turtles. I'd bet my last Skittle the people in Panama aren't telling Bryan, "We drained our 401k to buy that house and now you're throwing the whole neighborhood down the drain." If I was Bryan, I'd stick with the turtles too.

#

“Hi, Sleepyhead,” Mom says when I open my bedroom door. Last night the State Board of Education ruled that Jefferson had to take the Promise Scholars whether they want to or not. We got the news right before Mom left for her shift. Now we have three days until the first bell rings.

The apartment smells like fresh coffee. Mom drinks so much of the stuff, I swear that if you cut her open she will bleed thin brown fluid. I rub the grit from my eyes, squinting in the bright morning sun that floods through the open blinds of our fourth floor apartment. “How long have you been home?”

“Not long.” Mom motions to a bag on the table. “I got you some things.”

I recognize the logo from a store where they sell clothes that fall apart in the wash. Inside is a floral shirt, a couple of tank tops, a cardigan, a scarf.

“Do you like them?”

I want to keep everything so bad it hurts, but I shove it back in the bag. “We can’t afford this.”

Mom cups my face in her hands. “You need to make the right impression,” she says, then she presses her warm lips to my forehead and for a moment I forget everything that scares me about what lies ahead.

#

Even the twins, Nessa and Cici, who are normally obnoxious, stare out the bus windows, silently watching the neighborhoods shift from the Flats, to strip malls and bungalows, then Jefferson's manicured lawns, their gates and their joggers and nannies and dog walkers.

I'm not sure what we expected--maybe, a horde of angry parents picketing the entrance like those clips of the Little Rock nine--but, it's not what we got. As soon as our bus pulls into the drive, the Jefferson Heights cheerleaders start waving their pom-poms and the marching band plays their fight song. Big Jaycee Spikes looks down at me and whispers, "White folks are crazy." Even though the Jefferson crowd is peppered with tan faces, I know what he means.

A short woman with thick thighs, steps out of the crowd. "Welcome! I'm Ms. Chetty." She waves us past the cheerleaders and band, right through the front door and into Jefferson Heights High. We follow her past glass trophies cases, science labs and vending machines without cages, into the cafeteria. The cashier stands are dressed up to mimic storefronts: a fruit stand, a coffee shop, a sushi bar. Giant flat screens play sports and the news. "Is this where the teachers eat?" Cici asks, but Ms. Chetty is busy talking to a bunch of Jefferson kids at a row of cafeteria tables. We stand across the room tight as a herd of antelope.

Ms. Chetty calls us and we shuffle toward her, stopping a few feet away, keeping a natural distance. Ms. Chetty's head swivels between the groups. "We've assigned each

of you an ambassador, to show you around.” Some of the Jefferson kids smile at us nervously. “Your name is on their name tag,” she informs us.

The Jefferson kids stand and we begin to mingle, avoiding eyes. Finally, I see my name on the breezy white shirt of a girl who looks like she’s stepped from a fashion blog. I take a breath and say, “Hi, I’m Leyza.”

Up close, she’s even more beautiful than I thought. “I’m Hannah,” she says. “This is so weird, right?”

“So. Weird,” I say and we’re already friends.

Hannah pulls out a sheet of paper and reads. “Leyza Andersen. Junior. Varsity volleyball. Engineering. Honors English and World History.” She laughs. “You thought it was weird before?”

I blush.

“Don’t worry,” Hannah points to herself. “Hannah Stevenson. Junior. Varsity volleyball. Engineering--not by choice. Honors English and World History. We’re basically twins.”

“Twins,” I repeat.

“I was afraid I was going to get one of those ghetto girls.” She reaches out and touches the flat-ironed ends of my hair. “You’re so pretty. Is your mom white?”

I nod.

“I knew it! I bet your dad is totally hot.”

“He’s dead,” I say, because it’s the truth, but it’s not the kind of news you’re supposed to tell strangers and I’m so embarrassed I want to shrink until I’m invisible.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t--”

“He was hot, though,” I say, cringing at the thought on my dad in this way, but desperate to cancel the awkwardness.

Hannah looks relieved. She says. “I usually go to this coffee shop just off-campus for lunch. It’s all sugar and carbs, but gotta live, right?”

“Gotta live.” I match her tone, wondering what algorithm makes me want to be like her.

“You want to go?”

“I’m on the lunch plan,” I say, then instantly regret it.

“The what?” Hannah’s forehead wrinkles.

I wish the floor would open and swallow me. “The free and reduced lunch plan...my mom works but it’s free...so...zero.”

I wait for Hannah to turn-up her nose, but she says, “Totally. My grandma pays my credit card.” She makes a circle with her finger and thumb and holds it up between us. “Zero.”

“Right,” I say.

“Do they take the plan away if you miss a day?”

“I haven’t missed a day.”

“Not even when you were sick?”

I pretend like I have to think about it, but perfect attendance was one of the reasons I was picked as a Scholar. “I don’t think so.”

“What about mental health days?”



“What days?”

Hannah puts her hands on her hips. “That’s it. You're coming to coffee.”

#

Hannah walks into the coffee shop like she owns the place, introducing me as her new best friend. I notice a girl at a table alone, her long legs kicked into the aisle, hair piled into a messy bun. Her freckled arms are crossed over her chest as she stares at us, like Hannah and I are a reality show she’s trying to decide if she wants to watch. “Who's that?” I ask.

Hannah follows my gaze. “It's some K-name. Kaitlyn or Kiera or something.”

“Why is she staring?”

“She’s weird,” Hannah says.

Then we’re at the front of the line and the cashier is saying, “The usual?” as he scribbles *Hannah* on a cup and circles it in a heart.

When he asks what I want, I tell him, “Small coffee.”

Hannah slaps my arm. “No way! She'll have a large blended mocha with extra whip and a caramel drizzle.”

“Name?”

“Leyza.” He writes *Lisa* on the cup, but I don’t correct him.

While the cashier runs Hannah's credit card she slips a bar of chocolate off the counter and into her purse. I check to see if anyone is looking. Across the room, the K-name girl raises her eyebrows.

My heart is thumping, but Hannah casually walks to the pick-up window, talking about a unicorn meme. And even though I feel like I should do something to stop her from stealing, I just nod like an idiot.

Hannah grabs the cup that says *Lisa*. "They're the same," she says when I point it out.

We stop on the patio so she can find her keys. On the other side of the window, the K-name girl locks eyes with me.

Hannah pulls the chocolate out of her purse. "I got this for you."

"You stole that," I whisper.

"Stealing from the rich and giving to the poor."

I tell myself I misunderstood her, but the air stiffens between us. Hannah holds up her drink. "Because they charge a million dollars for these."

I nod, but the awkwardness is still there. Hannah suddenly throws her arms around me. "You can't be mad at me," she says. "I totally love you and it would break my heart."

#

When I get home, Mom is fixing her coffee. "How was school?" she asks.

“Good.”

“Do you like your teachers?”

“They're fine.”

“Did you meet anyone?”

I nod.

“Could she be a friend?”

“She invited me to spend the night.”

“Get her parent's number and I'll call.”

I groan and flop on the couch.

“You know the rules.”

“I'm sixteen,” I protest.

Mom pauses. The equation has tipped in my favor. “We'll talk about this later,” she says, then she opens the door to leave. “I'll be back before you're up.”

“I know. You'll call on your break. There's food in the fridge. Brush my teeth.” I wave her away without looking. After she's gone, I listen to the sirens and cars outside, watching the shadows on the walls. “There's nothing to worry about,” I say out loud, even though there's no one to hear me.

#

Hannah is leaning against my locker, stroking a boy's muscular arm. She sees me and says, “I want you to meet my bestest boyfriend.”

The boy faces me. He has wide eyes and soft features, a faux hawk and Down's Syndrome. I smile to cover my shock.

“This is Worm.” Hannah lays her head on Worm's shoulder looking up at him as she speaks. “She's hot, right?”

Worm sizes me up, like a girl at the corner store. “Grade A.”

Hannah says, “Now, leave us. I want to give Leyza her present.”

Worm looks disappointed and I feel like I should tell him he can stay, but then he asks Hannah, “When are we going to make-out?”

“Not until we're married.”

“When are we getting married?”

“After college.” Hannah spots one of the Jefferson boys down the hall and says, “There's Egan. You better catch him.”

Worm takes off. When Hannah and I are alone, I ask, “Is he really your boyfriend?”

Hannah shrieks. “No! You must think I'm a freak.”

I shrug.

“This girl took a retarded boy to prom and the video went viral,” Hannah explains.

“So I took Worm to homecoming last year. Now he thinks we're together.”

“Oh,” I say, but it's still odd.

“Did you see his arms?” Hannah asks. “He works out with the football team.”

“But, maybe he has a real crush on you,” I say.

“It’s not like I’m taking advantage of him.”

“Sure,” I say, but I feel like there’s a part Hannah’s not getting and I don’t know how to explain with words. I wish I could draw her an equation, but that would be weird.

As we walk to calculus, she hands me a bag and says, “I got you a present.” I try to peek inside, but Hannah snatches my hand away. “Open it when you’re alone,” she says.

We take our seats as the bell rings. Ms. Hsu, our calculus teacher, tells us to type a web address into our phones. My stomach drops. Even the other MLK kids are doing it. Ms. Hsu asks me, “Is there a problem?”

“I’m out of data,” I lie.

“Use wifi.”

I pretend to type, but Hannah sees my blank screen. “Is it broken?” she asks.

“It’s not a smartphone.”

Hannah hands me a tablet from her purse. The screensaver is a selfie of her and another girl on a beach. “Thank you,” I whisper as I wait for the website to load.

#

It’s clear something happened while we were at the coffee shop. Administrators are huddled by the door while groups of kids stare.

The girl from Hannah’s screensaver comes over. Hannah introduces her as Ava. The girl barely looks at me even when I say, “Hi.”

“What happened?” Hannah asks.

“An MLK kid attacked some freshman,” Ava says.

“Why? “

Ava smirks. “What did they think was going to happen?” I feel like someone punched me in the gut, but Hannah doesn’t seem to notice. Across the lobby, I see the K-name girl watching.

“Do you know who the MLK kid was?” I ask.

Ava acts like it’s exhausting to talk to me. “Small kid with glasses.”

My heart sinks. “Did he have braces?”

“His mouth was bleeding when the cops took him away.”

Hannah puts her hand on my back. “Do you know him?”

“Little James wouldn’t start a fight,” I say.

Ava looks at the cups in our hands, the remainder of whipped cream clinging to the plastic domes. “Really?” she says and I feel like I should say something that will make her like me, but she storms off before I can figure out what those words might be.

“Don’t worry about Ava,” Hannah says while we walk to class.

I try to pay attention to my teachers, but the rumors are distracting. Hannah tries to make me laugh. I smile and thank her, but I can’t stop thinking about Little James and what he must be going through while I’m sitting in my desk. When the last bell rings, Hannah says, “I know you’re sad about your friend, but you can’t let this stuff drag you down.”

“Unless you've been through it...” I say, but I’m not sure how to finish my sentence.

“Not all white people suck,” Hannah jokes. “Some of us are pretty okay.”

#

I sit next to Nessa and Cici on the bus. Me and the twins were close until seventh grade, when my chest started showing and Mom wouldn't let me go over to their house anymore. It felt like an accusation to tell them that my mom didn't like the way their dad looked at young girls, so I let them think I'd gotten uppity. At MLK, we ate lunch together, for the simple fact that there weren't that many girls in the Scholars, but even then we had the tension of things left unsaid.

Cici is giving her sister a lecture when I take my seat. “If someone messes with me, I'm going to tell them what's up.”

Nessa looks at her sister like crazy. “We're in their house.”

Cici chews on her chapped lips. “We have to beat them at their own game.”

“We could start rumors on social media,” Nessa offers.

“You watch the news?” Cici huffs. “I'm not trying to have some little white girl kill herself.” I feel Cici's eyes on me. “You got any ideas?”

I remember a prank video I saw online. “Super glue their PE lockers when they're in the gym,” I suggest.

“Evil genius.” Cici claps.

“How’re we going to know whose lockers are whose?” Nessa asks.

“Tell the MLK girls to turn their locks upside down.” That’s what they did in the prank video I saw.

Cici asks, “Can you get the glue?”

“You know my mom will kill me if I get caught,” I say.

Cici looks at me sideways. “Our mom will kill us if we go down like suckers.”

I’m right back in a hundred fights I’ve had with the twins. Always two against one. “Fine,” I say. “Do it second period and I’ll cause a distraction so you don’t get caught.”

“What about the glue?”

“I don’t have money.” I show them my empty hands.

“I got ten.” Nessa pulls crumpled bills from her pocket and puts them in my hand.

#

Mom’s gone by the time I get home, but the apartment still smells like her coffee. I put the baggie of glue in my backpack and take out the present Hannah gave me--the one I’m supposed to open when I’m alone. Inside, there’s a gauzy shirt, soft as a puff of cream. I catch the tag between my fingers: \$160. I hold the shirt up to the light; a plastic security tag is still attached to the hem. An image of Hannah stealing the chocolate crosses my mind, but I push it away. *They probably forgot to take it off at the store*, I tell myself. *Hannah can take it back with the receipt*. But my gut says there’s no receipt. I sit



at the table, my heart pounding, the sounds of our neighbors--their arguments and laughter--pummeling through our thin walls as the sun sinks below the treetops and leaves me alone in the dark.

In the morning, I stand in front of my bedroom mirror, the shirt slinky against my skin, trying to find a way for the tag not to poke me. I have to tuck the shirt in tighter than looks good, but it will have to do. I throw on a hoodie to hide the shirt until I'm at school.

Mom is on the couch, a cool cloth on her forehead. "Migraine?" I ask.

Her voice is groggy and strained. "Awful."

The thought hits me suddenly and I say it before I have a chance to think or I know I'll stop myself. "I need twenty bucks for a field trip." I force the words out in a gush and swallow the guilt that follows.

Mom says, "I don't think I have twenty, but you can have whatever I've got."

#

"Get the glue?" Cici asks before my butt hits the seat.

I pass her the tubes.

Cici says, "You going to help us?"

"If I leave class, they'll know it was me."

Cici raises her eyebrows. "I guess Leyza's a shot caller."

Nessa puts her back to her sister, a human wall between us. "How many MLK girls in second period?" she asks.

I count on my fingers, then I add one more for Hannah. “Four.”

#

Hannah takes one look at me and says, “We were just talking about what a total hottie you are, right, Worm?”

Worm flexes so that his muscles bulge under his t-shirt. “Gun show,” he says through clenched teeth.

“Are you trying to make Leyza steal you away?”

“She’s hot, but you’re my lady.” Worm tips his cheek for a kiss, but Hannah squeezes his bicep instead.

The bell rings and we say goodbye to Worm and walk to class. I feel the security tag breaking free, but before I can fix it, Hannah reaches behind me and tucks it in.

“Thanks,” I say.

She winks. “No problem.”

When we get to calculus, there are three warm-up problems on the board plus one extra credit. Ms. Hsu says, “You’ve got ten minutes, see how many you can answer.”

I get lost in the beauty of the math, working the differential equations.

“Psst.” Hannah points to my back. The tag has flopped out as I eliminated derivatives. I tuck it in and see that Hannah’s paper is blank, so I slide my work to the edge of my desk so she can copy.

I’m the first to finish and Ms. Hsu says, “Did you do the extra credit?”

“Yes.”

“Check your work.”

It’s easier to check than to argue, so I pretend to look again. When Ms. Hsu calls students to the board, she says, “Leyza, take the extra credit.”

But, when I stand the tag pops out and I know if I lift my hand at the board, it will do it again--in front of everyone. I quickly sit.

“Are you okay?” Ms. Hsu asks.

“I’m sick,” I tell her.

Hannah volunteers to do the problem. Ms. Hsu looks at me like she’s trying to deduce what’s going on as she passes Hannah the dry erase Mikeer. I watch from my chair, Hannah’s silver rings clicking as she copies my work on the board and takes credit.

#

I’m so happy to take off the shirt with the tag that I forgot what Cici and Nessa have planned. Then I see the MLK girls flipping their locks upside down. I position myself between Hannah and her locker as I tie my hair back, chatting. Then I turn, flip her lock upside down and close it. Hannah stares at me like I’m a puzzling numeral in an equation she thought she understood, but she follows me into the gym without asking any question.

Coach Olsen divides us into stations. She blows her whistle and we’re supposed to jog, or do push-ups, or squats. I get the jump rope station first, so I grab a rope, hop

twice and flop to the ground, howling as I hold my ankle. Hannah looks so worried, I wish I could tell her the truth, but I have to play it to the end. Coach Olsen hovers over me, using her walkie to call the nurse. It takes twenty minutes for them to examine me, then Coach is so worried that another girl will get hurt that for the rest of class we sit in the bleachers while she tells us about her time on the professional bowling circuit.

By the time I hobble into the locker room, the Jefferson girls have discovered their locks are glued tight. Meanwhile, the MLK girls are quietly dressing. Hannah tries her lock, a visible wave of relief washing over her as it opens. We dress in our street clothes, listening to the Jefferson girls complain.

A Jefferson girl looks at Hannah and says, “How come yours is fine?”

Hannah adjusts her purple bra and puts on her shirt. “Probably because I'm cool with everybody.”

The girl huffs. “Right, you're Mother Teresa.”

#

Everyone is talking about the lockers. Ava marches up to Hannah and me in the hall, looks at me and says, “Do you know who did it?”

“Of course she doesn't,” Hannah says, but Ava is glaring like she's reducing my integers, getting down to my base numerals. And, of course, over her shoulder the K-name girl is watching. I'm beginning to think she might be following me.

Hannah tries changing the subject. “Did your mom say you can spend the night?”

“Yes,” I lie.

“My parents will be out of town. You’re coming too, right Ava?”

“She hasn’t passed the test,” Ava says.

“What test?” I ask.

Ava looks at Hannah. “You didn’t tell your new bff?”

“She doesn’t have to do it.” Hannah sounds like she might cry. I look back and forth between Hannah and Ava, trying to figure out what they mean.

Ava purses her glossy lips. “You’re probably right. They watch people like her.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hannah says, which is exactly what I’m thinking.

Ava rolls her eyes. “Relax. It’s not like I’m racist.”

“I can hear you,” I say and now I’m the one who sounds like I might cry.

Ava looks down her nose at me. “Oops, I forgot you exist.”

“She’s not doing it,” Hannah says through her teeth.

Ava flicks my sleeve. “But, charity is okay?”

I don’t know what they’re arguing about, but I have a feeling it has to do with the security tag cutting into my back.

Ava looks at me and says, “You want to play on the big field, but you don’t even know the name of the game.”

#

By the time I get home, my bandwidth is jammed with too much information. On top of the fight between Ava and Hannah, Principal Bower made an announcement that the locker incident was “being investigated” and that the culprits would be “prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

Nessa and Cici pretended like they weren't nervous, but I could see through their act. They hype each other up when they get scared and usually it means they'll double-down. I'm so worried about what the twins will do next, that I forget I'm wearing Hannah's shirt, until Mom says, “Give me a hug before I leave,” and by then it's too late to hide it.

I bend at the waist, patting Mom like an old lady. I want to fall into her arms and make my day disappear, but I can't. Mom pulls away and rubs the sleeve of my shirt. “Did I get that shirt for you?”

“Um-hmm,” I say, hoping she can't see the lump in my throat.

“Did you get that girl's number?”

“The sleepover got canceled,” I lie. “But I have volleyball practice Saturday morning. I'll be gone by the time you're home from work.”

Mom put her hand on the door to leave, then she turns and says, “Your dad would be so proud of you.”

I'll cry if I speak, so I barely nod. I know that it seems like I'm being a brat, which makes me want to cry even more for breaking Mom's heart. I lock the door behind her, then I rip off the shirt, blood staining the hem from where the tag cut into my skin, and I hurl it at the wall, but it billows soundlessly to my feet. I want to stomp on it; to tear

it to shred and stuff it in Ava's stupid mouth. I think about putting it in the dumpster, but what if Hannah asks me to wear it again? Instead, I sink it to the bottom of my backpack, under my history and chemistry books.

When I get up in the morning, my head pounds from crying. Mom is asleep on the couch, still in her scrubs, her open purse on the counter. *I just want to see if I can do it, I tell myself. I'll put it back later.*

Mom must have been to the bank because her wallet is stuffed with bills. I fold ninety into my pocket and put back ten. Then I tiptoe out of the apartment.

#

Hannah and Worm are by my locker. Hannah asks, "Are you excited about tonight?"

I tell her I have to go home first, but then I'll come over around six, which is how long it will take me to ride the bus after Mom leaves for work.

"Girl's night," Worm grins. "What time should I be there?"

Hannah leans into him. "We can't always be together."

While they play their game, I open my locker and a card slips out. Hannah picks it up. "It's a gift card for the coffee shop," she says, handing it to me.

"Is this from you?" I ask.

Hannah shakes her head. "Somebody has a secret admirer." Then she turns to Worm. "Are you cheating on me?"

“No way. You're my only lady.”

I put the card in my backpack; a glimpse of the shirt pokes up through my books. When I stand, my eyes lock with the K-name girl. “I’m sick of this,” I say with a force that surprises me.

Hannah says, “You’re sick of what?”

“That girl is watching me again.”

Hannah giggles. “Maybe she has a crush on you.”

“I’m going to go talk to her.”

Hannah tells me to stop, but, I’m already on my way. The K-name girl speaks first, like we’re in the middle of a conversation. “You're never going to be one of them,” she says, then the bell rings and she leaves me standing in the hall alone, kids knocking me with their elbows and laughter.

#

On the bus, Cici says, “We have a surprise.”

Nessa smiles. “Watch the student parking lot.”

I hold my breath as the student lot comes into view. The gate is closed and a line of cars are trapped inside. I spot Hannah leaning against her car. “What did you do?” I ask.

Cici opens her hand and shows me an empty tube of superglue. “We couldn’t let the extra go to waste.”



#

Mom's leaving as I walk in. "Did you borrow cash?" she asks.

"I took twenty." I tell myself I'm not lying, only saying part of the truth.

"I had a hundred for our groceries. Maybe one of the Manor residents took it-- sometimes they do that kind of thing." Mom digs through her purse, like the money might still be in there, then she looks at me and says, "Don't worry. We'll figure it out."

#

There's a security gate with an intercom at the entrance to Hannah's driveway. A woman with an accent says hello, then the gate buzzes and opens. I walk up the long drive, soft yellow lights leading to the biggest house I've ever seen. Hannah is standing on the front steps. "Where's your Mom?" she asks.

"She dropped me off." I can't imagine my Mom's clunker leaving oily spots on Hannah's bricks.

Inside the round foyer, Hannah asks if I'm hungry. "Starving," I say, trying not to stare at the chandelier.

Hannah shouts, "Lupe, can you bring grilled cheese to the media room?"

"I thought you were alone," I say as I follow Hannah up the curved staircase.

"My parents wouldn't leave me overnight. Lupe's always here."

“Who’s Lupe?” I ask.

“She helps around the house.”

*Is she talking about a maid?* I wonder, but I don’t ask.

The media room has swanky velvet furniture, a flatscreen and a mirrored bar.

Hannah flops on the couch and I sit next to her, the big cushions folding us together like a taco. An older woman shuffles in wearing a robe and fuzzy slippers. She sets a tray full of food on the table. “Thank you, Lupe,” Hannah says, then when she’s gone, Hannah hops up and goes to the bar. “You want red or white?” she asks.

“Red or white what?”

“Wine, Silly.”

“Whatever you like best.”

Hannah hands me a plastic tumbler so full of red wine, I have to be careful not to splash on the carpet. “It’s merlot” she says.

I take a sip. It’s bitter, then sweet, the smell shoots up my nose as heat flows into my chest. Hannah says, “Do you like it?”

I take another, bigger, drink.

“What happened to your dad?” Hannah asks.

“Cancer.”

She lays her head on my shoulder. “Do you miss him?”

“I think, but it was so long ago, sometimes I wonder if maybe I’m kind of making it up.”

“Does your mom miss him?”

“A lot.”

“I can’t imagine one of my parents dying,” Hannah says. “My mom would suck at being a single mom.”

“It’s not just missing him. Mom had to drop out of college to take care of him when he was sick, and then, when he died, she was a single mom and she couldn’t go back.”

Hannah leans back and takes a gulp of wine. “Now I’m depressed.”

I look into my cup. “Sorry.”

Hannah suddenly sits up. “I have an idea. Let’s prank Worm.”

“But, he’s totally in love with you.”

“Not really prank him.” Hannah picks up her phone. “Just tell him you have a crush on him and he has to choose between us.”

“I can’t,” I say.

But, Hannah is already on the phone, asking Worm’s mom if he can talk, so I take a big slug of wine. “Are you drunk?” Hannah asks.

“I think so,” I say as the room gently tips.

I hear Worm say, “Hello?”

Hannah pretends to cry. “Leyza and I got in a fight,” she says, then she shoves the phone at me.

“Hi, Worm.”

“Why are you fighting?” he asks.

Hannah stares at me, gleefully waiting. “Because I have a crush on you,” I say.  
Hannah buries her face in a pillow and laughs.

“You know Hannah is my lady.”

“I know,” I tell Worm.

“But if things go south, you could be my side chick.”

“Thanks, Worm,” I tell him. Then we say good night and hang-up. Hannah makes me repeat what Worm said over and over again. She laughs so hard she clutches her sides. “Oh, my God! You're Worm's side chick!” When she stops laughing, she pulls her tangled hair from her mouth. “Seriously, though, you suck at pranks.”

“I guess,” I say.

“There's no way you're the superglue bandit. I don't care what Ava says.”

I pause with the cup to my lips. “Is that why she hates me?”

“Her parents didn't want the MLK kids at Jefferson,” Hannah says matter-of-factly. “She can't hang out with me if you're around.”

It's the kind of thing I thought only happened in movies: *you can't hang out with the black kid*. “You know Little James never came back,” I say.

“He must have done something,” Hannah slurs as she pours me more wine.

“People don't get kicked out for no reason.”

#

I wake-up with a hangover. My head is sludgy and my stomach roils.

“You’ll feel better after a shower,” Hannah says.

I take the longest shower of my life, inspecting Hannah’s fancy shampoos and soaps. Yoga pants and a sweatshirt, two white pills and a bottle of water are waiting for me on the counter. When I’m dressed, I find Hannah in her bedroom holding a big trash bag. “I cleaned out my closet for you.”

“I can’t take all that stuff,” I tell her, wondering how I’d lug it down her drive and all the way to the bus. “I have to ride the bus.”

“I’ll drive you.”

By the time we’re in the car, I feel better. We blast the radio, singing along as the neighborhood transforms. I watch Hannah as the lawns turned to concrete, then boarded up storefronts and crackheads loitering in parks. I direct her into our complex. “Do you want to come in?”

She looks around the lot. A man fills his shopping cart from the dumpster. “I should probably get home.”

“Do you know which way to go?”

“I’ll use my phone.”

“Thanks for everything,” I say and lean over to give her a hug. When I pull away, her eyes are glistening. “Are you okay?” I ask.

“It’s so sad,” she says.

I don’t ask what she means; I don’t want to hear the words come from her mouth. I close the door and stand in the parking lot, the garbage bag at my feet, watching Hannah disappear.

#

Mom is at the table, still in her scrubs, a calculator in front of her. Numbers scribbled on a sheet.

“What are you doing?”

Her eyes are bleary, her skin speckled with veiny red bursts. “I’m going to talk to Florabeth about switching to days.”

“But you’ll make less money.”

“We’ll have to cut corners.” She leans back in her seat. Her joints creak and pop with the wood of the chair. “I’ll bring leftovers home from work and St. Matthew’s pantry gets produce.”

“We don’t have any corners to cut,” I say.

Mom glances at the garbage bag full of Hannah’s clothes, but she doesn’t ask what it is. She sits up straight and says, “I don’t want to miss your whole childhood.”

It’s not the thing a daughter is supposed to say in a moment like this, but it’s the truth of our equation, so I say, “It’s already too late, Mom,” and then I leave her alone at the table.

#

Cici takes one look at my ripped jeans and pretty blouse and says, “You their dress-up doll now?”

Nessa says, “You look nice.”

“Thanks, Ness,” I say as I cram in the seat.

On the other side of Nessa I hear Cici whisper, “Sellout.”

Something in me snaps. I lean over Nessa, my voice rising loud enough to catch the attention of the other MLK kid’s and I say, “Say that to my face?”

Nessa presses herself so hard into the seat it’s like she’s trying to pop out the other side. Cici’s face sets and she turns slowly sideways, the neighborhoods passing behind her in blur as the bus picks up speed. Her chapped lip bends into a snarl that I know she’s been packing away for a long time.

“I said,” she bellows so the whole bus can hear, “you’re a sellout.” Then she turns to look out the window, her back shaking, tears streaking the reflection of her face laid over the trees, and lawns and houses. Nessa pats her sister’s shoulder, but Cici shrugs her off, and the other Scholars watch for a minute, waiting to see what will happen next. But nothing happens, and I know that Cici still loves me, we’re just two lines on a curve trying to find a solution.

#

It’s Hannah and Ava by my locker, but Ava leaves without saying hello. “Did you make up?” I ask, trying to sound like I don’t care.

Hannah says, “I told her everything. About your dad. And where you live. And how your Mom can’t finish college.”

“You told her that?”

“And now she understands.” Hannah steps close. I smell the cucumber scent of her shampoo and I know this is what Mom smelled when I came home from Hannah’s, dressed in her clothes, smelling of her. “Ava’s parents still don’t want her around you, but we can hang out together as long as they don’t find out.”

“I don’t want to hangout with Ava,” I say.

Hannah face crumples as she computes what I’m telling her. “Why not?”

“How would you feel?”

“They’ll change their minds when they get to know you.”

“Exactly!” I shout. Kids stop in the hall, Jefferson and MLK, to watch Hannah and I argue. Their cell phones come out, cameras tuned to film. And I don’t care. “They don’t know me,” I shout, slapping my hands on my thighs. I slam my locker so hard, the door bounces back and swings creakily on its glossy hinge. I scan the crowd, look at each of the cameras, the kids who hold them. “None of you know me,” I say calmly.

Hannah starts to cry, big slow drips streak her makeup and dot her shirt. “I don’t know what to do,” she whispers.

“Neither do I,” I say, but across the hall, I see that K-name girl, propped against a locker, freckled arms over her chest. Our eyes lock and I know she sees through me, to the messy remainders that don’t fit the solution of just becoming a Jefferson kid. I shove past Hannah, through the crowd, right up to the K-name girl. I watch my hand rise like it



belongs to someone else, watch it arc, flat palmed, against the girl's cheek. Watch her lips press into a hard line before impact, her eyes close, her body stiffen and brace.

Her skin is not what I want it to be. It does not cut, or bite, or break me. She is soft.

I lower my hand slowly. The sounds of the MLK and Jefferson kids are a pulsation that might expand infinitely, or maybe collapse and return to a dense clump of matter--either way, we are all of us, just a unit of measure. A person.

And then, there's everybody else.

## **Coach Olsen**

What did they think was going to happen? You can't throw gasoline on a fire and then be surprised when the thing blows up. I'm telling you, if I was one of those MLK mothers, I wouldn't want my kid coming over here anyway. Sure, the building is state-of-the-art--you should see the science labs in this place--but these Jefferson Heights kids can be a real piece of work, if you catch my drift. I taught a couple places before Jefferson--one was even a fancy private school over in the city--this is the only place I've seen where the teachers get treated like we're the help.

Let me ask you this, seem like it's a good idea to treat your kid's teachers like we're worth less than a dried turd (excuse my language, but this stuff really ruffles my feathers)? That right there should tell you the kind of people we're dealing with. And let me be perfectly clear, it's not because they don't care about their kids. You better believe, as far as any Jefferson parent is concerned, their kid is the absolute best, most important, perfect human being that ever walked God's green earth. But these people have their heads so far into their own derrieres that they actually believe they can treat us like peons

and we're still going to do backflips to make sure they get exactly what they want and lickety-split.

Being in the field of Physical Education, I don't have much occasion for parent-teacher meetings, but Back to School Night is a god damn torture chamber. After Principal Bower does her welcome--which is reliably twenty minutes too long--they send the parents around on a mock-schedule. I've got ten minutes to pitch my teaching philosophy while all those royal hinnies sit in my bleachers staring at me like they're the kings and queens of Siam.

I've got my schtick for Back to School Night pretty well down. Except, as long as I can remember, I've had a nervous habit of clapping when people stare at me. Out on the pro bowling circuit, I was known for being real upbeat since I was always cheering my competition on. The cameras loved it. Even when I wasn't in the lane, they'd catch shots of me clapping away for the other guy. Nobody figured I was clapping because of a nervous tic. On the tour that was fine. The bowling crowd might seem tough as nails, especially these younger ones with their pink hair and tattoos, but under the tough exterior, we're a nice group. The Jefferson parents are a whole other enchilada. If there's something to pick you apart over, they're going to find it. On Back to School Night, I try to keep my hands quiet in my pockets but, next thing I know I'm clapping up a storm. By the time I head home to my wife, Colleen, my hands are as raw as hamburger patties.

To be frank, I don't think the parents expect me to have a teaching philosophy. They think kids take PE just to burn off some energy between their real classes. If you asked my two cents, that kind of thinking is a big part of the obesity epidemic we're

facing. You could look at this kind of thinking as being to my disadvantage, but as a competitor I have a finely tuned ability to turn whatever field I'm playing on in my favor. So, on Back to School Night, I bring in a six-foot folding table that I set it up nice with a satin tablecloth, then I got my trophies and a framed poster of my Bowling Journal International cover Colleen had made the year I won the PBA.

I want those parents to know I'm not your average teacher. I'm a highly-skilled competitor and I know what it's like to be under high-pressure stakes. I tell them about learning to dial in on my lane, visualizing the strike, even when the television cameras were burning me up with their lights and I knew a million people were watching on tv. That kind of thing impresses a crowd like Jefferson. Then I let them know that I use my experience as a professional athlete to teach the students the secrets of performing under pressure. I have a great speech I give about how not all of their kids are going to end-up a pro athlete like me, but no matter what line of work they go into, they'll excel if they know how to produce winning results in a high-stakes environment. Last year, one of the dads raised his hand and said, "Excuse me, but did you say you won the PGA Tour?" And I had to correct him, PBA not PGA. I thought he was being genuine, but looking back, I think maybe he was heckling me. I could hear him guffaw way up in the bleachers and then a couple of moms started chuckling behind their hands. I've never been so embarrassed in my life. But, you see, that's what we're dealing with here: people who can make your greatest accomplishments feel like something to be ashamed of. I'd like to see him clear out a seven-ten split.

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't want it to come off like I've got a chip on my shoulder. Not everyone in the Jefferson community is a bad egg. There's a bunch of nice kids, and some great parents, but, like Colleen always says, a few rotten apples will spoil the whole pie. Take, for example, those parents who acted downright despicable trying to keep the MLK Promise Scholars out. We all know we've got some of these sorts in our ranks--I'm sure the PGA dad was one of them, but what surprised me was all the good-hearted people who put their heads down and let it go on without saying a word.

When the media came knocking, us teachers had to consider our employment. That local reporter, Jillian Something-or-other, tried to get me on the record. Colleen and I had a real heart-to-heart about me calling Jillian up and taking a stand. We both wanted to do something about what those MLK kids were going through.

I'm no Bryan Canaan, but I'm a regular contributor to Bowling International and I have a series of tutorials online that tally-up to a few million views. You could say I have a respectable fan base online. But, when Colleen and I took a look at our finances, we just couldn't risk me losing my job. She's finishing up her counseling degree, but right now her job at the call center doesn't bring in much dough. Plus, we decided the school might get a little testy about me talking to Jillian and I could do more good if I was on the inside. That's my excuse, anyway. Maybe I don't have much room to talk, seeing as I didn't speak out either, but I can't help wondering about all those good Jefferson families who never said a word. That Jillian was real persistent with her calls; I imagine she was all over the Jefferson community looking for people to speak their mind and nobody bit. What do you think their excuse was?

I honestly can't wrap my head around what it must be like for the Promise Scholars. First, some billionaire playboy drops out of the sky and waves his magic wand. Next thing you know, Blingly was parading those kids everywhere, talking about "investing in the future," using buzzwords like "exposure" and "equal opportunity." And it worked, because Blingly went from being criticized for their lack of diversity, to that Canaan character giving speeches like he's the Martin Luther King Jr. of the tech world. If you ask me, it wasn't a coincidence he latched onto a school named MLK.

I'm sure some good came of it, but where's Canaan now? Seems like he dropped off the face of the earth right around the time school started. Couldn't even show up at the school board meeting to speak on the kids' behalf. What did he think was going to happen when he dumped a million dollars a year into a single program at a school that was literally falling to pieces? It couldn't have been easy for those kids, even when they were at MLK, what with them living in the lap of luxury while their classmates were chasing roaches.

But hotshots like Bryan Canaan don't give two kitten's patooties about regular people like us. Nobody's heard from that guy for months and he used to be a hound for the spotlight, always standing next to some model or actress. Apparently some lady snapped a picture of him at a sea turtle preserve in Panama. After that showed up on the tabloid sites, Blingly released a statement that Canaan is taking a year off to "unplug and ponder his next big move." I couldn't give a diddling squat about where that man has gone to and what he's pondering. As far as I'm concerned, Panama can keep him. In fact,

I wouldn't pay any mind to Bryan Canaan except his shenanigans are affecting my students and I've got a moral obligation to protect their developing minds.

If we all just took a second to remember what it was like to be sixteen, I think we'd probably handle this a lot different. Under the spotlight one second and next thing you know, your school is shutting down and a bunch of people you never met are fighting to keep you from coming into their neighborhood? How's that supposed to make a kid feel? You take some poor kid, who's never been out of The Flats and you expose them to all this stuff they never had, it's like you're just rubbing their face in how far down the ladder they were born.

I keep telling these kids there's scholarship money in bowling. The Jefferson kids might roll their eyes, but if I can get through to one of those Promise Scholars--get them hooked on the joy of bowling--then maybe I can make a real difference. On occasion people ask why I went into teaching and I know it sounds corny, but it's the truth--if I can change just one kid's life, then I'll feel like it was all worth it. And I know I'm not the only teacher here at Jefferson who feels this way. Not everybody knows how to express it, but we got these kids in our hearts--especially the ones who don't have too many people in their corners already. I guess, when you boil it right down, what I'm trying to say is that I have a soft spot for these MLK kids. Now, I'll be honest, I didn't grow up poor--and, to state the obvious, I'm white--but, I know what it's like to be the underdog and I know what it's like to come from behind and to take the win.

**Bryan Canaan**

**Bryan Canaan** <brycan@Blingly.com>

2:14 AM (7 minutes ago)

To: me

R,

I know I messed up, but I swear those pictures made it look worse than it was. It was just one drink and then the paparazzi showed up. I didn't even take her home. You know how those young Hollywood girls are. She made everything up. I never even kissed her. You're the only one I want. Let me explain. I'll meet you anywhere. Come to Panama. The turtles are beautiful. You would love the turtles. Come see the turtles, Reba. Just one conversation, that's all I'm asking.

Love,

B

...

*"I dip my pen in the blackest ink, because I am not afraid of falling into my inkpot."*

*– Ralph Waldo Emerson*



## Ms. Chetty

“It’s a calling,” I tell Reba as I dip another steak fry into the aioli on our shared plate. It’s the same thing I’ve told her since grad school, back when I was sure I’d be one of those teachers they make movies about.

Reba slides the plate to my side of the table. “Paleo,” she says as she flicks her hand at the three remaining fries. “I get it’s your calling, but are you really going to keep teaching when the baby comes? Isn’t that your calling too?”

“If the IVF works,” I remind her. I don’t mention that Anand can’t survive another year at Blingly. I’m watching his soul wither while his dream of starting his own company gets further and further away. What kind of wife would I be if I quit while he slowly dies at a job he hates?

“And with all those kids who just transferred from that school in The Flats? I don’t care if Bryan Canaan is their fairy godmother. He probably sponsored those kids to get laid. Trust me.”

“Do you know him?”

Reba taps the table with a rigid index finger. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Even though I want to ask her what the scoop is, I know look in her eye and I'm not about to push my luck. "The MLK kids are great," I tell her, and I mean it. When I first heard that MLK High had lost its accreditation, and that the kids in their Promise Scholars program, started by billionaire Bryan Canaan, would be joining us at Jefferson Heights, I was scared I wouldn't know how to relate to the MLK kids. But it turned out I liked them much better than I'd ever liked the students at Jefferson. "It's the adults causing the issues," I tell Reba.

"Drug dealers and prostitutes?" she asks, and I think she must be kidding until I see how earnestly she's looking at me across the table.

"The Jefferson parents," I correct her. "Attorneys and financial advisors."

Reba tucks her sleek bob behind her ears. "Ah, sharks from my pond."

"I suppose," I say and swipe the aioli cup clean with the last fry.

Reba says, "How does Anand's mom feel about you still working?"

"She keeps express mailing us dal. She says it's why Indian girls don't have fertility issues."

"At least you don't have to cook, right?"

"We end up throwing most of it away," I tell her.

"Remember how Anand would toss everything she sent him in Madison? Except those donuts, what are those called?"

"Gulab jamun," I say. I don't add that my mother-in-law sends separate packages labeled for my husband, with homemade sweets and letters in Tamil.

Reba catches the waiter's eye. He's a handsome kid. "Do you want something else?" she asks as he heads to our table.

I want a fresh batch of hot fries, but I say, "Just an espresso."

"You can do coffee?"

"Less than five cups a day."

"IVF," Reba tells the waiter and I cringe. He probably thinks IVF is an intestinal disease. Something that gives me excessive bloating and gas.

Reba says, "They have tiramisu."

The waiter gives her a flirty grin. "Two spoons?"

Reba tells him to pick the biggest slice. When he's gone, I say, "He's cute."

Reba leans across the table and whispers, "He wrote his phone number on my receipt last week when I was here with a client."

"For you or the client?"

Reba grins. "Who knows?" She turns sideways, crossing her slender legs in the aisle. I tug at the crotch of my jeans where the denim has gathered in a tight v. *It's the IVF, I tell myself. You'll lose the weight.*

Then the waiter is at our table with a huge square of tiramisu that Reba refuses to eat. I promise myself that every bite is my last as I lower my spoon for more fluffy cream, until only a dusting of cocoa is left like the chalk outline at the scene of a crime.

The waiter drops the check and Reba nudges the small plastic booklet toward me. "See what it says."

I hold the receipt to the candle. "Good luck getting pregnant," I read.

“Let me see,” Reba says. Even though she’s playing cool, I can tell she’s disappointed. I pass her the check and she slips her card into the sleeve without looking.

“I’ve got half,” I say.

She flips her hand. “It’s going on my expense account.” Then, a slow smile spreads across her face. She slaps the table and laughs. “The ladies in HR are going to have a fit when I turn this in. Good luck getting pregnant! I can almost hear the rumors.”

“Scribble it out,” I tell her.

Reba reaches across the table and touches my arm. “Oh, no, Ms. Chetty,” she says. “Don’t you know that misunderstandings are the spice of life?”

#

I have three imaginary fights with Anand before I get home. *He’s never liked Reba*, I tell myself as I drive toward our condo. But, that’s not true. Anand and Reba were close until we finished grad school.

Back when we all lived in the big, drafty house in Madison, I’d find them in the kitchen giggling over jokes they insisted I wouldn’t appreciate. That was before her trips to Dubai and her selfies at the races--before Reba made more money than Anand and she became a walking reminder that he was tumbling down the other side of thirty and was nowhere close to his dreams.

Sometimes, when I let my mind wander, I think the real reason Anand doesn't like Reba is because she reminds him that he married a high school teacher, not the woman whose opinions sway Mikeets.

I'm regretting the tiramisu. At a stoplight, I unbutton my pants, roll down the window and let the night air into the car. I've been doing well during the day, staying away from the treats in the teacher's lounge--until I can't stand another bite of dal, then I cave.

Reba's right, it has been more stressful since the MLK Scholars joined us. It's no secret that the Jefferson parents fought to keep the MLK kids out. When the state ruled that we had to take the Promise Scholars, it only made the most vocal Jefferson parents more determined to get their way. Our students' families are usually high maintenance, but this year they've been through the roof. The Culinary Arts teachers have been stress baking since school started, delivering hot cookies and chicken-bakes to the teacher's lounge on rolling carts. The whole staff is going to need gastric bypass surgery if this keeps up.

Anand says he likes my widening bottom. Those are the words he uses, "widening bottom," as he cups one cheek or the other. I think he likes the idea that I'm less attractive to other men. Or, maybe that's what Reba would say. I have a quick argument with Anand about that as I pull into the carport.

When I enter the condo, he's leaning so far forward he looks like he might crawl right into our TV. I hear the click-tap-click of the controller and then Anand shouting in

his bastardized Tamil. “Suck that, Molla Mari!” Click-tap-click. “Goyyala, who’s your daddy, huh?” He must be playing one of his cousins in Chennai.

Anand doesn't look up. Not when I close the door. Not after I've hung up my coat, or used the restroom, or let Walter, our geriatric bulldog, out to pee. I plop on the couch next to him. He scoots without looking, blasting rounds into a multi-armed demon that splats purple ooze on the screen. I wave my hand in front of his face. He ducks and talks crap in Tamil to the invisible cousin. I'm a gnat. A fly. White noise.

I heave my widening bottom off the couch, stand in front of the TV and wave my arms. Anand says something into his mic and I don't need to know Tamil to catch his exasperation. He takes off his headset and runs his fingers through his hair. I feel like a cartoon version of a wife. My toe practically tapping on our bamboo floor. “Hi,” he says. “Did you have a nice time?” He holds his breath, waiting to see if I'll pick a fight.

In our early years, in that drafty house in Madison, I would have taken him to the ropes. We would have shouted horrible things that required therapy to forget. These days, I mostly fight Anand in my head. Plus, soon enough, there will be a baby.

“How was work?”

Anand throws his arms across the back of our couch, puts his bare feet on the coffee table. My husband is handsome, if slightly askew, his nose bent from a childhood game of cricket with his cousins.

“We're moving into design review.”

He can't share what he's working on. Bingly's non-disclosure agreement is ironclad. I'm the least technical person on the planet; Anand could show me every circuit,

all the code, and I wouldn't know it from a TV remote. Regardless, we speak as if our condo is bugged. My husband covers our WebCams, puts our phones in closed drawers. I've finally convinced him we'll need a baby monitor, so now he's on the hunt to find the least hackable model. I'm not sure who'd want to watch us make tacos and argue about the dishes.

“How was your day, Ms. Chetty?” he asks.

“Same, same,” I wobble my head, a habit I picked-up from my sister-in-laws.

“How are those kids doing?”

“The Scholars?” He's been practically star struck since MLK High closed and the engineering students transferred to Jefferson Heights.

“Canaan's bots,” he jokes as I lay on the couch, resting my head in his lap.

“They're not robots.” I smack him.

“Rich white guy. Brown kids,” Anand bobbles his head. “Same, same.”

“They're children.”

“I'm not talking about the poor kids. Canaan's the one who thinks he can buy people. Not that I'd mind being him. If we were that rich I'd buy a whole school.”

“Would you?” I ask.

“I'd buy one for you,” Anand says.

“Children are the future,” I parrot. It's the kind of thing I believed until I actually started teaching and discovered the kids were the same assholes they'd been when I was in school--and I hadn't changed either, still an outsider looking in.

“I’d want you to be happy, but it’d be a tough call. Did you know that ocean phytoplankton produce eighty percent of our oxygen?”

“Oxygen is good,” I agree. “And the oceans are a mess.”

Anand strokes my temple. It’s soothing, but repetitive, then it’s just annoying, like he’s gradually drilling a hole in my head. “But really, how are those kids? Any word from Canaan?”

“I read he’s in South America,” I say. “Something to do with saving giant turtles.”

Anand chuckles. “See, it’s all about the oceans.”

I shift onto my side and Anand resettles his hand on my ribs, his fingers draped on my flabby belly. “Can you give me my shot?” I yawn.

“Are you flirting, Ms. Chetty?”

“I invited you to stab me in the stomach with a needle. Is that flirting?”

“Same, same,” Anand says in his most ridiculous accent.

We trudge to our over-bright bathroom. On our fourth round of treatment, we’re more expert at this ritual than we want to be. We haven’t talked about what happens if the treatment fails again. Our insurance won’t cover any more. There’s enough money saved in our accounts to go another two rounds, but it’s the same money we need for Anand to leave Bingly and start his own company. Neither one of us wants to stand at that fork in our road.

I slide a needle into the vial, hand it to Anand. Then, I unbutton my pants. My stomach spills out. I look away from Anand’s eyes as he takes in my body, flaccid, stubbornly refusing to reproduce. I wait for him to swab me, pinch my skin, slip the



needle in. Instead, he's pulling my hips toward him, pressing his crooked nose to the place where he must wound me again and again.

#

There's been trouble over the weekend. The halls of Jefferson buzz with rumors, which hush when I'm near enough to hear. I'm not the cool teacher they run to, but I gather enough to figure out it has something to do with an MLK transfer and a video that's gone viral. While my students work in groups, I stalk the internet, looking for friends of friends who might lead me to the video. No luck.

By lunch, half the break room is trading theories, but no teachers have seen the footage and no student has come forward. I wait for the microwave to nuke my dal. I'm so freaked out that I'll make the whole lounge stink of curry, that I only heat it a few seconds. Then I force down the lentils, tepid and grainy.

"A friend from my credential program texted me on Sunday," the new Media Arts teacher says. "She saw the video on her niece's feed."

It takes me a moment to realize she's talking to me. She's so young she looks like a kid. I can't remember her name and we've met so many times, I'd be embarrassed to ask.

I set my dal on the table and take a seat. "Did you see it?"

"My friend tried to tag me, but her niece took it down."

I stir the dal.

“Is that dal?” the Media teacher asks.

I look at the yellow sludge. “My mother in-law made it.”

“I love Indian food,” the Media teacher says.

“I’ll bring you some dal,” I tell her. “I’ve got buckets of the stuff.”

“That’s sweet,” she says. “But, I mostly like butter chicken and pakoras. I’m not a huge fan of dal.”

“Butter chicken is good,” I agree.

“But not as good as pad thai,” she says.

“That’s not Indian,” I correct her.

She laughs. “I know. I spent a month in Krabi last summer. Have you been?”

“No,” I say. Anand and I had planned to honeymoon in Thailand, but then he landed his job at Blingly--that was back when we thought all the perks were a sign of how much they valued their workers; before we realized the micro-kitchens and dry-cleaning were designed to buy his soul. We still talk about going to Thailand, maybe for our tenth anniversary.

“Is your mother in-law Indian?” the Media teacher asks.

I wobble my head, imitating Anand’s mother. “One hundred and eighty percent.”

“Have you visited India? All that spiritual energy in one place. I just want to meet a sadhu. You know? Look into his eyes.”

“My husband was born in Houston,” I tell her.

“Oh.” She’s clearly disappointed. “So, when are you due?” she points at my belly.

I can't think of a single person at Jefferson who I've told I was trying to get pregnant and I wonder who tipped her off. "I'm not pregnant yet," I say.

She turns red and mumbles, "Your shirt's bunched around your stomach."

I'm mortified as I realize that I've gotten so fat, the Media teacher she thinks I'm pregnant. I want to die on the spot, but I put on a cheery smile and say, "I'm doing IVF," like turning into a whale doesn't bother me at all.

She looks so relieved, I want to take my olive branch back and poke her with it. "My cousin had that. They ended up adopting. Have you thought about foster care?" She's so sincere, I almost feel bad for wanting to hurt her. "There's so many kids who need homes."

"Maybe after IVF," I say.

She looks around the teacher's lounge, leans over and confesses, "I had a miscarriage in college." She pats my arm. "It gets easier with time."

I cram my mouth full of lentils to keep myself from screaming. *You were young and stupid too*, I tell myself.

"It really was a blessing." The Media teacher sighs and stares into the distance. "When it happened, I wanted to kill everyone who told me it was a blessing in disguise, but, now I can't imagine having a kid." She shakes her head. "I mean, it's bad enough being a teacher, can you imagine having to think of somebody else all of the time?"

#

Kandy will tell me. The girl has no filter. I ask her to stay after class.

“What’s yup, Ms. Chetty?” Kandy says as she drips her gangly limbs on my desk. She has one of those faces that is underappreciated in youth, but that will stun as she ages.

“I was hoping you could tell me what happened? What all the kids are talking about?”

“The video of that girl slapping me?” she asks.

This is not what I expected. “Excuse me?”

Kandy picks at her lip with a chewed nail. “An MLK girl slapped me. It’s not a big deal.”

“Why’d she slap you?”

Kandy rolls her eyes. “It didn’t hurt. Besides, it’s not me she wanted to slap.”

“Who did she want to slap?”

Kandy shrugs. “The situation. How everything is going down for the MLK kids.”

“Are they fitting in?” I hope I sound nonchalant.

Kandy plucks the statue of Shiva from my desk and tosses the tiny god of destruction between her hands. “I dunno. I keep to myself. You know how I am.”

“But you hear things.”

She catches the statue and sets it down. “They’re black, Ms. Chetty-- how do you think it’s working out?”

“But, Jefferson’s a diverse school,” I say.

Kandy huffs. “If you’re rich. Those MLK kids are from The Flats.”

“Some of the kids are friends, though, right?”

“Sure,” Kandy says. “Everybody’s got their reasons.”

#

I call Anand as soon as I leave the clinic, but he doesn’t answer. I stare at my phone. I want to hear his voice when I tell him. The sky is bright, and the trees are green, and everything is beautiful. My phone vibrates. It’s Anand: *All good?*

I text: *18mm.*

He sends me an emoji of a trophy. Then a firework. Then a kiss.

I type in the baby emoji. Then erase it. It’s too soon, and there’s no emoji to symbolize that a critical mass of ovarian follicles have reached their optimum size for harvesting my eggs. I press the miniature taco and type *dinner?*

He sends me the thumbs up.

#

The first two rounds of treatment, Anand came with me to every appointment. The third treatment was a complete bust. Maybe I forgot a dose; maybe the drugs didn’t work, either way, my follicles didn’t produce. This time around Anand has a mandatory Blingly Town Hall at the same time as my appointment. I tell him, “It’s just a shot. It’s not like you’re missing the birth.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, but I can tell he’s glad to be off the hook.

“I’ll ask Reba.” It’s a low blow--Reba flaunting her flexible schedule, while Anand is chained to his screen, but we both know I’m not good at doing things like this alone.

Anand bites his tongue and agrees that asking Reba is a great idea. I try to parse the look in his eyes. Is he jealous that Reba will be with me? Or is he jealous that I’ll be with Reba?

Walter grunts, ropy slobber splattering the floor. He glares at us with his rheumy eyes. Our practice baby has become an old man. I remember the day we brought him home, how his skin sagged on his loose puppy bones. I’ve been wondering if he’ll live to meet our real baby, and if he does, how many safety gates we’ll need to keep him from getting too close. Every now and again, I think maybe it’d be best if Walter died before we have to shut him out. What kind of woman hopes her dog will just die already?

Reba rearranges her calendar while we’re on the phone. She says, “Lunch and pedis after the appointment? On Auntie Reba.”

I look at my toenails. They’re in embarrassing shape. “That would be nice.”

In the morning, Anand keeps asking if I want him to go. He says, “They won’t even notice if I’m missing.”

I tell him not to worry, that I’ll be fine. I say, “Reba already changed all her plans.”

Anand suggests we all go together, like old times.

“You’d have to drive separate,” I tell him. “We planned a girl’s day. And the appointment will be quick. There’s really no point in you going.”

Anand gives me the same look as Walter, droopy and judgmental. “I’m biking to work,” he says, then he takes his bike helmet from the hook, slings his laptop bag over his shoulder and slams the door so hard that Walter shoots me a nasty scowl.

Reba arrives sipping a green smoothie through a straw. Halfway to my appointment, Anand texts, *Sorry* and a gif of a fat kid screwing his face into misery again and again.

“Anand?” Reba asks.

“Um hmm.” I toss my phone into my purse without texting him back.

“I’m sure he wants to be with you,” Reba says. “Is it bad that I want you all to myself?”

“Boys are so sensitive,” I joke.

“He’s always been afraid of getting left out.”

Reba drops me at the clinic entrance then goes to park. The appointment is simple: an ultrasound, Dr. Tarm asks if I have questions, a nurse gives me a shot. Then it’s done.

Reba stands when I enter the waiting room. “We’re talking about you.” She motions to the receptionist. “Lily didn’t know you teach at Jefferson. Her nephew is a Promise Scholar.”

“He must be very smart,” I say.

“Mr. Canaan really changed his life.” Lily beams.

Reba harrumphs and I shoot her a look to keep her mouth shut about Bryan Canaan.

Lily leans over and touches my hand. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell my nephew you’re a patient.”

I feel like I’m being accused of having an embarrassing shortcoming, but Reba asks if they validate parking and the conversation moves on. The receptionist stamps the ticket and hands it back. Reba looks at the stub and asks, “Do you have anything that says fertility clinic on it?”

Lily is confused. “We try to maintain the privacy of our clients.”

“Maybe you have a mailing label you could slap on there?”

Lily digs through her desk. “How’s this?” She holds up a sheet of stickers; two hearts entwined in a golden infinity loop followed by, *Jefferson Heights Reproductive Wellness*.

“Perfect.” Reba presses a sticker to the stub. “Expense account,” she says.

“It’s validated,” Lily points out.

Reba turns up her hands. “Oops! I guess I didn’t realize when I turned in my receipts.”

#

When I return to work on Wednesday, more Promise Scholars have been suspended. This time the story is clear. Twin girls named Nessa and Cici were caught



super gluing the lock on the teacher's lounge door. Nobody could prove that the girls were responsible for prior super glue incidents, but everyone assumed it was the twins. "It might not have been a bad idea for us to get locked out of here for a couple of days," the PE teacher says as she loads up on pizza bagels from Culinary Arts.

The kids in my classes are tense. When I ask the students to get into groups, the Scholars gravitate to one huddle, the Jefferson kids make their own. I consider breaking them up, but I worry there are things that I don't understand, and I decide it's best to not meddle.

By the time Anand picks me up for the clinic, I'm hatching a plan. "They just don't know each other," I tell him. "It's like when I first met your family and I was worried we wouldn't have anything in common, but then your sisters and I had so much to talk about."

"But, you guys were trusting me."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Who do the kids trust?"

I stare out the window as we pull into the clinic lot. "I don't know," I admit.

"Could they trust you? I'm sure they sense how much you care about them."

"I'm not so sure," I say as Anand pulls into a parking spot. It's the kind of teacher I wanted to be, but, that's not the way things have turned out.

"Are you ready for this?" Anand asks. We both lean forward, craning our necks to look at the high-rise that houses the clinic.

My stomach grumbles.

Anand reaches across the console and pats my belly. “Don’t worry, Little Tummy, I’ll feed you,” he says.

I put my hand over his. “I don’t deserve you. You’re too good.”

Anand bobbles his head. “Ms. Chetty, it’s sounds like you’ve been speaking with my mother.”

“Don’t do that,” I say.

His smile falls. I don’t want to fight. “When the baby is born,” I explain. “I don’t want them thinking their culture is a joke.”

Anand relaxes. “You’re going to be such a good mommy,” he says, and instantly I know that he’s cursed the treatment.

#

“Fourteen eggs is good,” Anand insists as we make the bed.

“The magic number is fifteen,” I remind him.

“How much difference could one little egg make?”

I don’t answer; he already knows: one little egg could change the whole world.

“Are you sure you should go to work?” He tosses our decorative pillows onto the bed.

“I want to be where people need me.”

Walter settles at the foot of our bed, grumbling as he arranges his creaky bones.

Anand comes to my side and wraps his arms around my waist. He used to be able to engulf me, but his hands no longer touch and he rests them on my hips. He nuzzles his crooked nose into my hair and murmurs, “I need you, Ms. Chetty.” And I have to turn away, to hide my face from my too good husband whose needing me is not enough.

#

I get the idea during morning announcements, when the ASB President reminds us that Spirit Week is eight weeks away. On my prep period, I stop by the office and convince Principal Bower to add Culture Day to Spirit Week.

I’m so excited to tell Anand about my idea that we don’t even talk about how I’m feeling, or my eggs. He serves me a helping of pasta as I tell him, “I was thinking of wearing my wedding sari.”

Walter pouts at our feet, hoping for scraps from the table. I remember how he sat on Anand’s foot through our entire wedding ceremony. He stole the show in his doggy tuxedo, under our wedding mandap. A curtain of marigolds hung around the three of us as we said our American vows.

“I thought the point was to show your own culture?” Anand breaks off a hunk of bread and sops up his puttanesca.

“Well, yes, but, it kind of is my culture, right? The culture of our family.”

Anand shrugs. “Sure.” The wet smack of his chewing churns my stomach.

“Maybe we should change it so the kids can represent any culture they want,” I say. I want my husband to tell me no. I want him to say that I’m a Chetty. That our baby will be a Chetty, too.

“That’s an idea,” he says. Greasy juice rings the corners of his mouth.

I want to ask if he thinks it’s a good idea or a bad idea, but I don’t want to hear his answer, so pretend that we agree.

#

“So now what?” Reba asks.

“We wait,” I tell her, smearing the small glob of dressing across my romaine, wondering if it’s greedy to ask for more.

“How many did they implant?”

“Five.”

She looks up from her field greens in a lite vinaigrette. “You could have five babies?” She horrified.

“With the quality of my eggs and our past failures, it’s not likely,” I parrot Dr. Tarm. “I’ll be happy if we get one.”

“Are your hormones going crazy?” Reba’s picking me apart with her eyes and I get the distinct feeling she’s not just asking how I’m doing, she’s digging for information.

I don’t want to admit that I cry all the time, or that yesterday I found an old picture of her and Anand at the bottom of his underwear drawer. The way that they were

looking at each other, giddy and alive, sent me into a downward spiral that lasted all night. Thank God Anand worked late or I'm not sure I could have kept my feelings in check. And I don't tell her that I still feel fragile, like the tiniest movement could shatter me like glass. Instead I say, "Yesterday I was convinced that Anand cheated on me. Isn't that ridiculous?"

Reba's picking through her salad, only half-listening. "Who likes this stuff?" she says. She grabs a passing waitress and orders a large side of fries.

"What happened to paleo?" I ask, shocked. It's been years since I've seen her eat carbs.

Her forehead wrinkles. "I'm not sure how to tell you," she says.

My stomach drops; whatever news Reba has to share, it's not good. She taps the table in front of her, her eyes on her untouched plate.

My desperation is rising. It's all I can do to keep breathing. I'm suddenly overwhelmed with the knowledge that Reba is about to finally say what I've always suspected, that she and Anand are in love.

I want to stop her, to go on pretending that my husband and my best friend can't stand each other, that I never saw the glances they shared.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I say, pushing my chair back so hard that the legs screech on the floor. I shove past the waitress bringing our fries from the kitchen. I smell the oil, the potato, the salt.

I lock the bathroom door and sink to the ground, my head between my hands.

Someone knocks. I ignore them. Then Reba is saying, "Are you okay?"

I can't talk.

"If you can hear me, say something. They're going to call 911."

"I'm here."

There is murmuring on the other side. I hear *IVF* and *hormones* and *it's been a hard road*.

Reba presses her mouth to the door, vibrating the wood with her words. I imagine her and Anand kissing, how she would lean into him with her whole body. How he would press back.

"You're my best friend."

"What a joke."

Reba pauses. "I should have waited."

"Didn't you think about me?"

"Of course. But by then it was too late."

"How long has it been going on?" I'm prepared to hear that they've been together for years. That all those late nights Anand was supposed to be at Blingly, he was making-out with Reba in a hotel room.

"About three months," Reba says.

For a moment, I'm relieved that they haven't been sneaking around behind my back for all of these years, but then it hits me that it's been going on, right under my nose, for three long months while they drove me to IVF appointments and told me everything was going to be okay. The bathroom walls are collapsing; I need to get out, but where would I go? Without Anand and Reba, I don't even know who I am. An animal noise

echoes in the bathroom. Then I understand that it's me. I cover my mouth and scream into my hand.

"Open the door," Reba begs. "You have to calm down. It can't be good for your eggs."

"My eggs? Why would you care about my eggs," I'm shouting.

"Of course I care," Reba says. "That doesn't change because I'm pregnant."

Pregnant? I'm filled with so much rage it's bursting out of my pores. Before I know it, I'm on my feet, swinging the door open. Reba stumbles against the wall.

"You're pregnant!" I scream at her.

The restaurant manager pops his head around the corner and says, "Ma'am I'm going to have to ask you to keep it down, or we'll need to call the police." Reba lifts her hand silently, telling him to back off. He clears his throat. Reba and I stare each other down. She smiles softly, but I don't stop the daggers I'm throwing at her. I hear the manager shuffle away. *Call the police, I think. Let's burn this thing to the ground.*

I grit my teeth. "How could you do this to me?"

"It was an accident. And with everything you and Anand have gone through. This might be my one shot."

"But, he's my husband," I say and even though I want to act like I'm made of steel, I can't stop the tidal wave of grief. I choke on a hiccupping sob. Gulp for air. Brace my hands on my knees. Let my tears fall on the restaurant floor.

"I know being married is ideal, but what if I never find the right guy?"

"Isn't he..." I can't find words to finish my thought.

“I’m so scared to go through this alone.”

“Alone?” I stand-up, look Reba in the eyes.

“He’s just some guy I met on an app.” She laughs, but it’s filled with pain. “I’m not even sure what his name is.”

I’m too raw to let the relief in, but my head is beginning to clear. I wonder what kind of woman is relieved that her best friend is scared and alone.

“It’s going to be okay,” I say. “You’ve got me and Anand. It’s been the three of us since the beginning.”

#

“Ms. Chetty, you’re quite the overachiever.” Anand pokes me playfully in the ribs as he hands the parking attendant our ticket.

“What’re we going to do?” I ask, still numb from Dr. Tarm’s news.

“We’re going to get tacos,” he says. “Then we’ll figure it out.”

I can’t read the menu at the taco shop. It’s as if all the words and their meanings have been deleted from my brain. Anand orders his food like our world hasn’t just been turned inside out. “Order me something,” I say and head to the salsa bar. I stare at the buckets of salsa, the jalapenos, cilantro and limes. The plastic shield makes me think of an incubator and Dr. Tarm’s words echo in my head: *bed rest, long-term handicaps, high-risk.*



Anand's hand slides gently across my low-back. He plucks a plastic cup from a tower. "You like the green one," he says as he places the cup in my hand. "You like it a lot, so get two." He kisses my head, fills a basket with chips.

The table is orange. It has always been orange--I know this, but it has never before been this orange. The light is so white, so clear, it stings. Anand sets a paper cup of milky horchata in front of me.

"Congratulations." He lifts his beer. I lift my cup, sip my straw after we toast. It's cold and sweet as it slips down my throat.

"We have three choices," Anand says, then he's interrupted by the cashier calling our number. When he returns he sets a plate in front of me, puts a fork in my hand and tells me to eat. *Mole*, my tongue tells me.

Anand squeezes lime on his tacos, pours thick salsa dark as blood on the open lips of their shells. "So," he begins. "We keep one, we keep two, or all three." He takes a bite of his taco. Thin red juice runs down his arm. He takes a bite and the first taco is gone.

"Do we want an only child?" I ask.

"If Reba can take care of one all by herself, then I feel like we should at least keep two." Anand picks up a taco, eyes it before he bites.

"We can't afford three," I say, testing the words to see how they feel.

Anand reaches over and puts the fork back in my hand, points to my food. I submit, dig in. Sweet, savory, bitter.

"I could move into Blingly management in less than a year. You could stay home while they were little and we could live in the condo for a few more years."

“You hate Bingly.”

Anand looks at me like I’m an alien. “I don’t hate Bingly,” he says.

“But you complain all the time.”

Anand laughs. “Do I?”

“And you’re completely paranoid.”

“No I’m not.”

I raise my eyebrows. “The phones in the drawers? Cover in the webcams?”

“That’s not Bingly,” he says. “That’s just how the world is now. I don’t want some hacker pervert watching you get out of the shower.”

“You really don’t hate your job?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I mean, I’d rather be snowboarding, but no, I like what I do.”

“If we didn’t keep all three, how would we pick which fetus to eliminate?”

My husband winces and I know where he’s landed. We’ll have three babies. I’ll stay home and he’ll move into management. Walter will die neglected and my widening bottom will never shrink.

Anand grins, blood red salsa on the tip of his nose. “Ms. Chetty, you are the most perfect daughter-in-law. Such a prodigious womb.”

I laugh. “You know she’s going to say it was the dal.”

Anand bobbles his head. “It was most definitely the dal.”

#

My mother-in-law talks into her webcam from her living room in Houston. When she sees my wedding saree, it's as if she doesn't already know what it looks like. "White is for funerals," she chides me.

"Amma," Anand says. "You promised."

She softens. "If you told me earlier, I would have sent you a new one."

Anand leans in, filling the camera, and speaks in Tamil. I don't have to understand what the words mean, to know that he's flirting with his mother. I'm embarrassed to think of all the times that I fought with Anand about his relationship with his mother; how I told him it was unnatural for them to be so close. But now, with these three lives swelling inside me it seems like the most natural thing in the world. I reach up and rub Anand's back as they chat. What kind of woman tries to separate a man from his mother, I wonder, grateful that I'm not that kind of woman anymore.

My mother-in-law swats the screen like a schoolgirl. She peers into her camera so that her eyes distort on our screen, teasing her son joyfully. I catch Walter watching us, embarrassed by what we've become.

It takes several attempts to wrap my saree. Even then it's lumpy and ill fitting. When we're done, my mother-in-law claps and says, "Very pretty."

I call Anand back into the room. "You look beautiful," he beams as he kisses my cheek. Walter grunts at his feet.

"You have the dal?" my mother-in-law asks.

Anand assures her it's in the car, right next to the crock-pot she bought us online.

"Is there enough?" she asks and Anand and I laugh. "What's so funny," she says.

“Nothing, Amma.” Anand kisses her cheek on the screen.

Before we hang-up, she says, “Your students are very lucky to have such a nice teacher.” It’s the kindest thing she’s ever said to me. And even though I know it’s not true, I’m so happy that she believes it, that I practically float out of the condo and into the car.

Anand gets out and opens my door. I exit belly first, the gold edging of my saree catching the sun. Our babies are the size of a plum, a peanut butter cup, a macaroon. They each weigh a half of an ounce. Meanwhile, I’ve gained fifteen pounds.

My husband sets the crockpot up on in my classroom while I put out paper cups and plastic spoons. When the first bell rings, he kisses my nose and leaves.

Kids trickle in wearing costumes. There’s a boy in a turban, a ninja. A tall kid in a hawaiian shirt strums a ukulele. A girl with her hair braided into a crown, wearing a long embroidered skirt. I serve them dal. The bell rings, the next batch of kids come in.

In the middle of third period, a pale boy in a dashiki and an afro wig, sticks his head in and clucks like a chicken. My students watch to see what I’ll do. In moments like this, I wish I was more like Reba; she’d have a sharp comeback ready to go. Instead I say, “Well, that was something.” Then I tell them to eat more dal.

The teacher’s lounge is a disappointment. Only a few of my colleagues are dressed-up. The Media Arts teacher is wearing denim overalls, a plaid shirt and cowboy boots. She tells me her great-great grandparents homesteaded in Montana and that’s as far back as she knows her family tree. Mr. Dillie, the Health Science teacher, is wearing a stiff pair of leather lederhosen, the suspenders straining over his gut. To her credit,

Principal Bower is playing along--though she looks like a wench from a renaissance faire.

“Is your family from England?” I ask while we wait in line for the microwave.

“I have no idea,” she tells me as she punctures the plastic on her frozen teriyaki bowl, skeptically eyeing my saree. “Do you have Indian in you?”

“My husband.”

She nods and is about to ask me another question, when her walkie-talkie goes off.

“We’ve got an issue outside the cafeteria.”

Principal Bower clicks the button and says. “I’ll be there in a minute.” She glances at her teriyaki bowl spinning in the microwave. “You can have that if you want.”

I watch the bowl spin, as I think about how Principal Bower responded--when there was a problem she leapt. *That’s the kind of teacher I want to be*, I think. *It’s the kind of mother I want to be too*. I stare at the digital counter falling back to zero wondering when I’ll just start being all the things I want to become.

When the timer dings, I turn and walk out, leaving the teriyaki bowl in the teacher’s lounge, and I head for the cafeteria to see if I can help.

Dozens of kids are swarming in the same direction. A boy shouts, “There’s a kid in the cafeteria who’s live-streaming. The MLK kid just got punched”

There’s a mob by the cafeteria door, trying to push their way in. Someone knocks me from behind and my phone slides out of my hand. I watch it tumble in slow motion, bounce off a student’s knee, slam against the floor. It skitters across the hall, wrecking

violently against a locker. Kids surge around me. The scent of their hormones and sweat make me retch.

A few kids notice me struggling and they push back the crowd, making a small circle of air around me. A girl leans close. She smells of cheese crackers and fruit snacks. It clings to the inside of my nose like an infection. *Soon, my whole life will smell like this,* I think.

“Ms. Chetty?” The girl is asking. Her eyes are slopped with mascara, her cheeks iridescent with flecks.

The air is so thick, I can barely breath. I want to rip the saree off, unwind and unwind it. I’m caught in its tangled arms. Then I’m falling to my bottom, in the middle of the hallway. Someone says, “Let her lay down.”

Mr. Dillie crouches over me, his leather lederhosen releasing an animal odor. The white belly of his thighs peek from the bottom of his shorts. Coils of hair snake up his groin and disappear into the dark cave of his lederhosen.

I’m clobbered by the thought that Mr. Dillie was somebody’s baby. That my babies will grow hair in vulnerable places and release their own animal scents. There will be three of them to tell me all the ways that I fall short; six little eyes to critique every move that I make. And I realize that I’m not just having three babies, I’m having three whole people, three whole lives. And we will misunderstand one another again and again. Everybody does.

**Reba**

**Reba Munson** <reba@munsonturkandlittle.com>

5:36 PM (19 hours ago)

To: Bryan Canaan

B,

I'm pregnant.  
Your move.

--R

...

*"If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman."*

--Margaret Thatcher

## Nessa and Cici

“I’m not gonna say she was popping bottles, but when we laid it out, she understood. Right, Cici?”

“She knows what they’re like.”

“Ya. She knows what it’s like. Mom’s been working at Jefferson Auto since she was our age.”

“Uncle Tommy owns the shop, so he hooked it up.”

“Right, when we got into Head Start.”

“Mom’s got stories from work, though.”

“Remember that lady who’s steering wheel was covered in boogers?”

“OMG! Ness, remember she had the nerve to make a fuss about the shop leaving a rag in her car?”

“That’s right. She wanted a refund.”

“That’s some Jefferson nonsense, right there.”

“Shaking my damn head.”

“Ya, so Mom knew what we were dealing with at Jeff High.”

“No doubt.”



“Ness, what was that part Mom said about Martin and Malcolm?”

“Oh, she said we have to try to be Martin, but sometimes you got no choice and you have to go full on Malcolm.”

“That's what she said.”

“And she was proud of us for not snitching on Leyza.”

“Because we got a plan.”

“Right. Cici and me got a plan.”

“First, we're finishing high school.”

“That's online.”

“Right, Ness and me aren't messing around with none of those city schools.”

“We got a pool going. It's like our start-up fund. What's it up to, Ci?”

“About ten thousand. Mom's holding the bank. People from Jeff Auto. Some neighbors. Church people. Pastor Applewood let us speak to the congregation. Minimum buy in was one hundred.”

“But Uncle Tommy gave us half.”

“He knows we're about to make waves.”

“Game recognize game.”

“Ya, Uncle Tommy's a hustler too.”

“How you think he opened his own shop?”

“In a place like Jefferson Heights too.”

“We come from a family of hustlers.”

“Remember what Canaan called it though?”

“Ya, he said we’re not hustlers. We’re disruptors.”

“That’s right. Gonna disrupt the economy.”

“Say the plan, Ci.”

“You know it already.”

“But I like to hear you say it.

“Fine. Phase one, we get high school knocked out in sixty days.”

“Then we get the full pot.”

“Ninety days and we get half and half goes back to the investors.”

“But they still get their shares.”

“Right, so we give up our equity for less money.”

“Canaan taught us about equity.”

“He got us started, but then we studied up online.”

“Lot of resources online.”

“Right. And if we don’t finish in ninety days, then they get all their money back.”

“Plus we gotta work some off. Running errands and working in the shop and stuff.”

“They got an insurance policy. They can’t lose no matter what.”

“That’s right, everyone in the pool gets a stake in our plan.”

“That’s what Pastor Applewood was explaining to the congregation. We have to invest in our community.”

“After phase one, we open up for investment in phase two.”

“Or, they can just hold the number of shares they have.”

“But, they can’t cash out after phase one, right Ci?”

“Right. Not unless we don’t graduate in ninety days--then they get their money back.”

“But that’s not going to happen.”

“Naw.”

“We’re gonna do two six hour shifts, seven days a week to finish school.”

“That still leaves eighty-four hours a week to sleep and chill.”

“But we don’t chill, right Ci?”

“No days off.”

“The real hustle is phase two though.”

“That’s the certificates we’re blasting through online.”

“Stacking those like Kanye’s shoe game.”

“We got a head start on phase two already.”

“No. Days. Off.”

“Gotta produce for our investors.”

“Bring up the whole hood.”

“I got certificates for supply chain and cyber security locked down.”

“And I got data architecture, blockchain and quantum computing on point.”

“Can’t say too much, but we got an idea for something big.”

“It’s got to do with virtual reality, social media, blockchain, and advertising.”

“Don’t say anything else, Ness.”

“Okay, I’m just saying, everybody’s gonna want a piece.”

“Let’s just say, we have access to lucrative market that most tech companies aren’t reaching.”

“Keeping it one hundred—while all those Jefferson fools are paying out college, we’ll be raking in the coin.”

“And we’re only hiring Promise Scholars to start with. Then people from the neighborhood.”

“Maybe a couple people from Jeff though, right? Like that Kandy chick was cool, even if Leyza did trip-out and straight b-slap her.”

“Maybe after we get our syndicate going.”

“Right. And we’re not blowing our money on dumb crap like Lambos and chains.”

“Hell no! We’re investing. Going full Carnegie.”

“Straight Buffett.”

“That’s right. We’re gonna rule the world. Everybody’s going to know our names.”

“But first, we gotta finish high school.”

## Kandy

Mom's got a new project. Her name is Leanne--the perfect name for what she is: some white-trash skankbucket looking for the easy road. For example, in this exact moment, Mom and I are cooking dinner while Leanne is "fixing her face." I'm pretty sure fixing that mess is going to take a while, at least until dinner is piping hot on the table and there's nothing left to do. Mom technically asked my permission before she let Leanne move in, but she forgot to mention that the skeez is knocked-up, a minor detail.

I've been doing the mental math on Leanne's situation since she got here (straight from County):

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Sober} \\ \text{(in the real world)} \\ \text{--- Pregnant meth-head} \\ \text{(30 days jail-clean)} \end{array} \quad \text{Or} \quad \text{Pregnant meth-head --- 30 days jail-clean} = X \text{ (sober)}$$

---

? Actual Sobriety

Either way, I don't figure into the equation. Basically, we're right on track for Mom's parenting strategy. If she was thinking about me at all, she'd at least ask how school was going with those new kids who transferred from MLK High. The stories have

been all over the news--first the Jefferson parents fighting to keep them out, then how that billionaire, Bryan Canaan, who gave all those MLK kids scholarships for being geniuses, disappeared in Panama without a trace--but as far as Mom's concerned, if it's not an addict she's trying to save, it's not worth her time. She doesn't even have a clue there's a video online with one of those MLK girls losing her shit and slapping me in the Jefferson hall. Mom's not exactly a hands-on parent.

I grab a wad of hamburger meat and jam a cube of cheddar into the middle. "If Leanne's still here when the kid pops out, are you kicking me out of my room?" I ask.

Mom looks at me like I'm a few squirrels short in the tree, but she doesn't actually say anything, which isn't very reassuring. "What if the kid's a retard?" I ask, because it feels like a reasonable possibility. But, apparently Mom thinks I'm talking to the spatula because she's still not answering.

I have a feeling she's working the steps of her anger management classes, which means I have to kick it up a couple notches. "Ya know," I say. "It's strange the number of ugly people who end up having kids."

Mom starts scrubbing the pots extra hard. I can hear the Brillo pad going back and forth like a machine. Now, I just need to reel her in, so I say, "You'd think in the zillion years since cavemen started humping, natural selection would've weeded out the crockapigs and everybody would be drop-dead gorge. But, nope! There're still plenty of uglies pumping rounds into the gene pool. Take Leanne for instance—"

"Kandy, I'm warning you." Mom's still looking at the sink. Her big shoulders are slumped and I can see where her home-dye job missed a spot on the back of her head.

I want her to take a good look at me before she starts defending another good-for-nothing-junkie over her own daughter, so I say, “Aw, Mom, you know I’m an ugly. It’s like black people can tell black jokes and Asians can tell Asian jokes. I mean, how you going to tell somebody if they get to have a sense of humor about being themselves? Maybe that’s Leanne’s problem. Maybe she’s been taking herself too serious.”

“Not tonight, Kandy.” Mom sounds tired. I almost feel bad enough to let it go, but then I get to remembering all the times I wanted her to put me first, and how she didn’t give two rat asses about anything but alcohol, and I ended up in foster care over and over again because she couldn’t get her life together.

“No, Mom. I think we’re really getting somewhere,” I tell her. “You always say, ‘We can’t run from the pain that’s inside. Right? Look at me, Mom. I’m not running. I’m standing right here, laughing.’” The words are good, but my voice sounds like I’m grinding gravel, and I’m squeezing the wad of hamburger so hard, little meat snakes are coming through my fingers.

I’m starting to think maybe I’ve gone too far, which is mostly because I have memories of this kind of thing ending with Mom crying and me feeling like an asshole, then staying up all night worrying she’s about to relapse. And even though I’m practically exploding with anger, getting my digs on Mom will only lead to me suffering later. So, I’m getting ready to drop the meat and hug it out, when I hear slow clapping in the doorway.

I turn and find Leanne standing there, looking at me like I’m in her house. “Brav-fucking-o,” she says, which sounds like a line she took from a movie, since there’s no

way her two brain cells could come up with something that clever. Then she kind of saunters into the room, all eighty-two pounds of her, picks up a carrot and says, “Every guy wants to bang an ugly chick at least once. They want to bang a fatty too. It’s on their bucket-lists: go to New York, skydive, meet a famous person, bang a fatty and an ugly, make a million bucks.”

I glance at Mom. She pretty much looks how I expect her to look: like maybe this is about to go south, but then again, maybe Leanne and I will end up friends. She’s way too hopeful for her own good. I think about telling her a couple places where she can shove the idea of me and Leanne becoming friends, but I’m still feeling like maybe I pushed her a little too far, so instead, I look at Leanne and say, “I think it’s the novelty of doing something that grosses you out.”

She nods like I just shared some real serious knowledge. Then she says, “Like picking your nose even though you know it’s disgusting.”

And I say, “Or liking the smell of your own feet.”

Leanne raises her patchy eyebrows. “That’s a good one. I bet if people were honest, almost everyone would say they like the smell of their own feet.”

And then I say, “It’s like when I catch a guy like Egan Turlock—who’s so pretty it hurts—staring at me across the quad—”

“Oh, honey!” Leanne’s scrawny face lights-up. “That boy likes a good whiff of his big toe right after football practice.” She starts laughing so hard she has to sit down.



Maybe Mom didn't do too bad picking this project. I decide I'll give Leanne a tiny chance. I'm pretty sure she'll royally mess it up, and I won't even have to tell Mom that I was right, because it will be so flippin' obvious, but at least for now I can be civil.

Me and Mom look at each other and we both know tonight's going to be one of the good nights. We'll sit down and eat hamburgers with Leanne. Maybe Leanne will stay sober. Maybe she'll still live with us when she has her baby—maybe the baby will be a retard, and maybe not. Maybe Leanne will meet up with her ex-boyfriend, who also happens to be her pimp, and he'll beat her to death for leaving him in the first place. Or maybe they'll move up north and start fresh. Mom and me have pretty much seen it all. But later that night, when I'm laying in bed replaying how things went down in the kitchen, I start thinking about Egan Turlock. I'm wondering if he really does like disgusting things and if that's why he let that older lady do it? Even though when I caught them he didn't look like he was enjoying it at all. In fact, he looked like a bug smashed on a windshield—like his guts were about to pop onto the outside and not just because that old hag bouncing on top of him was as big as a heifer. That's the look of somebody's soul dying—trust me, I've seen it plenty of times growing up in my house.

#

In the morning, I find Leanne standing on a chair, digging around in our cabinets. I'm still half asleep when I say, "What are you doing up there?"

Leanne jumps and almost knocks the chair over, taking her skeleton-with-a-bowling-ball belly with it, but she catches herself on the counter and says, “Whoa! You scared me.”

“You okay?” I ask.

“I was looking for coffee.” Her voice sounds a little panicky, but she’s a pregnant meth-head looking for coffee at six o’clock in the morning; I’m not exactly sure there’s a right way for a person in her position to sound, so I give her a pass.

“We don’t have any,” I tell her and she gives me a look like I just shot her right in the gut, then she starts chewing her fingernails and looking around the room like maybe I’m hiding a piping hot latte. “You okay?” I ask.

“I got to get some coffee,” she says through a mouth full of her fingernails. “It’s like the one thing I got left.” Then she puts her bony fingers on her belly and a nub pops up and moves under her t-shirt. She sees me staring and says, “You want to feel her kick?”

I shake my head and back away, because the idea of touching Leanne’s belly is gross enough, but the idea of touching her belly with a tiny Leanne alien inside really freaks me out.

“Come on,” Leanne says, and next thing I know, she’s taking my hand and putting it on her belly and that little thing inside her is pushing back like it’s trying to high-five me. Leanne’s stomach is warmer than I expect it to be, and that baby inside her is stronger too. Leanne looks at me and smiles, and it’s like her whole face transforms from being a meth-head skeez to a person who’s maybe worth saving.

“Pretty cool, huh?”

“Sure,” I say, with my hand still on her belly because I don’t want to stop feeling that baby in there. I can feel her trying to get out on her own, and it’s like I know exactly how she feels, and I have to protect that baby.

“I think she likes you,” Leanne says.

“How long until she’s born?”

“About six weeks.”

Six weeks isn’t that long. I could be nice to Leanne for six weeks. I wonder if anybody ever felt that way about protecting me when Mom was ordering up shots of tequila trying to pickle us both. “You got to stay sober,” I tell Leanne, even though I know telling someone they have to stay sober is stupider than trying to stop a semi-truck with your pinkie.

“I know,” she says, like it’s the most exhausting idea in the world. “That’s why I got to get coffee...it’s my thing.”

That’s at least one way I can help, so I say, “We got a bunch of coffee shop gift cards. Stay here and I’ll be right back.” I leave Leanne and I go to hall closet where we keep our safe. I have no idea where Mom picked it up, but it’s one of those hotel jobs where you can change the code every time. Mom and me keep it simple so neither one of us gets locked out. I punch in my birthday and the thing beeps. Inside are all the cards we get from the projects Mom’s saved.

“Are all those real?” Leanne says behind me.

“Jesus. Are you a ninja or something?” I ask and angle my back so she can’t exactly see what’s in the safe, but her belly is in the way and I don’t want to bump the baby too hard, so I know she catches a glimpse.

“Where’d that all come from?”

I’m irritated, so I say, “From the shitbags Mom saves.” Then I think maybe I should watch my swearing around the baby because it probably has ears by now and I’m sure Leanne hasn’t been using the best vocabulary.

But, Leanne doesn’t seem to care. She’s come around the side of me and is bend into the closet with her arms held up like a T-rex. “So all those cards have cash on them?”

I’m kicking myself for getting caught-up with the baby and forgetting this chick’s a meth-head. “It’s what we live on,” I tell her, hoping that means something to her, but I know if Leanne falls off the wagon, she won’t care about anything besides her next fix.

I try to close the safe, but Leanne sticks her hand in and plucks out a card.

“What’s this one?”

I take the card away from her. “Coffee shop. Some barista Mom got off Oxy sends us a hundred bucks a month. I’m pretty sure he steals them.”

“You’re kidding me?” she says. “A couple hundred a month?”

The baby’s moving around her stomach like crazy, and even though these coffee shop cards are what I use to eat lunch, I give her all of them. “You can have these, but you got to leave the rest alone.”

“What else you got in there?”

I swat her hand away and close the door. “Grocery store cards come from a produce manager with a sex addiction,” I tell her. “Guy was a creep. I had to sleep with my door locked the whole time he stayed here.”

“I saw gas cards,” she says, and I realize she got a better peek than I thought.

“Convenience store clerk with a gambling problem,” I tell her.

“I can’t believe people sent you all that.”

“When you get on your feet, Mom will asks for some kind of payment,” I tell her. “Whatever’s easy. Like if you got a job at a carwash, then you wash our car. Or this apartment, Mom fished some rich kid out of a gutter last summer. The family owns this complex.”

Leanne’s eyes are so big, I’m pretty sure they’re going to pop right out of her head. “You live here for free?”

I shrug. “How’d you think we live in this kind of neighborhood? Between Mom’s disability checks and the gift cards, we barely get by.”

Leanne shoulders sag like someone took all the air out of her. “I don’t have anything to give you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, because it doesn’t. I don’t say, *we’ll see how far you make it.*

All of a sudden Leanne perks up. “I know. I could do your hair. I used to be a beautician. I could do your makeup too.”

At first, I’m thinking, no way am I letting some meth-head touch my face, but then the hall light hits her just right and I can see that she used to be one of those girls at

the salon who always wears black and looks like they're going to a bar, even when it's the middle of the morning. And I can see that she's desperate to give us something, so I say, "That'd be cool."

Next thing you know Leanne's painting my face and curling my hair. Even she's seen the stories about the MLK kids and she asks me a hundred million questions about them while she's outlining my lips. She asks if I've ever met Bryan Canaan or that Jillian reporter from the local news. She stands back and looks at me like I'm some kind of puzzle. Then she says, "You know, Kandy, you're not ugly."

I don't know what to say, so I just sit there. After a while, Leanne says, "You just got one of those faces you got to grow into. Some eyeliner and lipgloss and all your problems are solved. I wish my problems were that easy to fix." She laughs like that's a real joke and not the true story of her life, then she hands me a mirror.

I have to admit, Leanne knows her makeup. My skin doesn't look so blotchy. All the lining and shadowing makes my eyes pop, and my nose sit back, and my cheeks plump up, and I think, damn, Kandy, you don't look half-bad.

#

Mr. Dillie wears the same pair of khakis hitched under his gut every day. I used to think he had a bunch of them, but then I noticed a stain shaped like the liberty bell on the inside of his left thigh, and unless he sits at home recreating national treasures in soy sauce on all his slacks, then it's the same pair. I just hope he changes his underwear. On

the other hand, he does have an impressive collection of plaid shirts, which he tucks in so tight you can see the hem bunching around his waist. Once, when he forgot to zip his fly, he spent the whole period lecturing us about suicide not being the answer while his red flannel poked out the front of his pants like an angry little trouser snake.

Today, he's wearing a forest green number with a yellow and black grid. His pants are zipped, but the liberty bell is screaming my name and it's hard to look at his face when he talks. He says, "Class, we're going to spend the next month learning about the miracle of life," which I guess is more professional than an overweight bald guy telling a bunch of hormonal kids we're going to talk about boinking. Personally, I've been looking forward to the Sex Ed chapter since the beginning of the year. I've got a lot of questions. In consideration of Mom's track record, and the lack of dad's existence in my life, these things will not be answered at home. Plus, you type some of this stuff into the internet and you end up with things you can't unsee.

Living in my house, I've seen plenty of stiffies, but none that I wanted to get a closer look at, so when Mr. Dillie pulls out his famous posters of genitalia, I lean over my desk, ready to learn all about the miracles. I wish I had more classes with those MLK kids. I bet geniuses take this kind of thing a lot more seriously. Unfortunately, I sit in the middle of two Isabelles and three Avas--considering how important they all think they are, the Jefferson families don't use much of creativity when they name their kids. The Jefferson kids usually bug me lightweight, but today I could shank one without breaking a sweat. Every time Dillie says, "scrotum" or "labia" or "ejaculation" they collapse on their desks and snort like a bunch of flat-ironed pigs in designer jeans. They probably

have stacks of Cosmos and responsible moms who want to talk about menstruation and Plan B, but this health class is my one shot at getting some facts.

I raise my hand, hoping I'll be able to steer us back on track. Dillie's got a laminated cross-section of an erect penis in his hand, which he points at me like an x-rated finger and I have to take a second to push some bad memories out of my head.

"Kandy?"

I can see Egan staring at me out the corner of my eye. And I do that thing I always do when I get nervous, I just start talking. I can hear my speaking-to-adults voice and I know I sound like a dipshit-phony when I say, "What's the average amount of times a female has to have intercourse, in order to get pregnant?" I'm sure the Isabelles and Avas are popping blood vessels giving each other looks, but nobody says a word. Egan leans back in his seat like he's got a bucket of popcorn and he's ready for the show. Dillie sets his laminated erection on the table real slow. Then he crosses his arms and tilts his head so the sun coming through the window hits his bald spot.

"I'm not sure I can answer that, Kandy. It depends on too many factors."

"But if you had to ballpark it," I say, and as soon as the word ball is leaving my mouth, I can see the Isabelles falling all over themselves. I imagine punching the soccer Isabelle right in her fallopian tubes, but I keep cool and start explaining, like being logical ever saves the day. "I'm just thinking that for an unattractive person to conceive, not only do they have to find somebody to ignore their face long enough for the male to accomplish ejaculation, they probably have to have intercourse at least a couple of times before the woman becomes impregnated, right?"



Now Dillie's mumbling and stuttering, and the Isabelles and Avas have on their, oh-no-she-didn't faces. Egan's smiling like there's some secret only he and I know and that makes me even more nervous because I feel like I must have forgotten something really important. So, of course, I keep talking. "I know a female can become impregnated from a single copulation, but what's the statistics on that kind of thing? One in a thousand? And that's assuming you didn't use protection."

Dillie shoves his hands in his pockets and he's rocking back-and-forth on his heels like he's mentally deficient. I'm running out of things to say and the whole room is dead silent except for Egan chuckling and shaking his head, because obviously my flaming car wreck of a life is the greatest show he's ever seen. But, joke's on him, because in my mind I can see that older lady's chunky white ass bouncing up and down on him under the bleachers and him looking like a dead bug. And now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure she's the manager at the grocery store where Egan works and I figure there must be some kind of story there.

After about a hundred years, Dillie finally clears his throat and says, "You're correct, Kandy, using protection is always the best policy, until your spouse and you decide you're prepared to conceive."

One of the Avas snorts and then the rest of them crack like a bunch of idiots on whip-its—which, if you grew-up in my house, you'd know exactly what I'm talking about—and before you know it, the Ava with braces says she's going to pee her pants from laughing, even though she's not wearing pants and her skirt is so short, her who-hah must be smashed against her chair. Dillie's standing there with his hands in his pocket,

playing with his loose change like a perv and Egan's staring at me like I'm about to tell the greatest joke known to man, which is a lot of pressure for a girl with no expectations I'll do anything but follow in some royally screwed-up footsteps.

"I'm a sixteen year old virgin," I hear myself say, which sends the Isabelles and Avas into hysterics and I realize that I probably didn't need to be that honest, but what's done is done and I just have to keep going. "Even I know having sex with a stranger and not using a condom is about the dumbest thing a person can do. I guess condoms break, but not that often—so, what I'm trying to say is, if an ugly person gets knocked-up on a one-night stand because the condom broke, well that kid is pretty much a unicorn. That kid probably deserves to exist. Don't you think?"

#

As soon as the bell rings, I'm out of there. I step into the hall, trying to blend in with kids from other classes, who don't know I accidentally spilled my guts to my whole health class—even though about a hundred people probably already got a text about it and by tomorrow I'll be a frickin' internet legend--like that last video of the MLK girl slapping me wasn't bad enough. But, at least I wasn't the star of that one.

"Hey! Kandy!" Nobody ever says my name, so I mostly turn around because I'm shocked, but then I see Egan standing there grinning like he's going to tan me with the power of his radiant hotness and I can't believe my eyes. "You want to skip sixth

period?” he asks. And even though I know exactly the kind of shit-road skipping school leads down, I’m nodding and walking over to him.

Apparently Egan’s never been slapped for asking too many questions because he fires them off one after another. “When’d you start here?” he asks, but before I can answer he starts talking again. “I know you didn’t go to East for middle, cuz I went there, but Worm said you didn’t go to Junction either. And I know you’re not one of those MLK kids, cuz the news says that they’re all black.”

Egan’s leading me outside, across the soccer field, to the backside of the bleachers, and I’m starting to wonder if this is where he takes all his uglies and if I’m about to get boinked. “So’d your family just move here?” he asks as he jumps off the wall and into the carved-out hillside below.

“My mom and I moved in the middle of last year,” I tell him.

He looks up at me and his perfect face almost makes me explode, but then I see a shriveled up condom next to an empty Doritos bag and things kind of balance out. He reaches up his hand and I grab it, trying not to think about the fact that my naked skin and his naked skin are touching, and I jump.

You might have guessed Mom didn’t sign me up for sports. A couple of the foster families tried, but something always happened and I stayed slightly less athletic than a roll of toilet paper. I land flat on my feet and lightning shoots up my shins knocking the wind out of me. Egan must have bent down to help, but I don’t notice because I’m trying not to gag on my hair.

When I stand, his hands are lifting me, and his mouth is so close I can smell his breath. “You okay?” he asks. I make a noise like a mouse getting stepped on. He smiles. And his teeth are straight and white, except there’s a chip in one of the top ones which makes my heart do a flip knowing that he’s a tiny bit broken.

“Kandy? You okay?” Egan leans down and I can see that even though he’s got a perfect nose, and blue eyes that glow, and the kind of eyelashes girls lose their shit for, and even though he’s got that caramel skin that comes from being a mixed kid who got all the best genes, and he’s about six foot two and built like a twenty year old, and though his lips are the best thing you could ever want to kiss—none of that’s why he’s so hot. I’m not an idiot; his face helps, but I’m pretty sure the secret ingredient is that Egan Turlock is a genuinely nice person. My bar is probably pretty low, but I get a strong feeling that all the smooth guy stuff Egan does is just an act.

Over his shoulder I see a nest of blankets in the exact place I caught him getting humped by that old fattie grocery store manager, and I’m trying to figure out if I want this to go where I think it’s headed. He follows my eyes to the blankets, drops my arms and steps back. “Sometimes I sleep here,” he says, which is not what I’m expecting.

“Huh?” I say, because besides being as athletic as a roll of toilet paper, I’ve got about as much game as a paperclip.

“It’s kind of complicated,” he says. He looks at me like he’s trying to figure out if I’m worth telling the truth, which I guess he decides I might be since he says, “My family’s got some problems.”

Now we're in my wheelhouse, so I say, "My mom tells people my dad died when she was pregnant."

"Did he?"

"Naw. But she didn't tell me the truth until I was seven, and she only did that after her sponsor told her she had to."

Egan puts his fist to his mouth and bites his knuckles, and I figure I might as well tell him some more. "My dad was some guy she played hide-the-sausage with in the bathroom of a dive-bar."

"She said, 'hide-the-sausage?'"

"Probably not hide-the sausage," I admit. "She probably said, 'screwed' or something, but same difference. She did say, 'You wanted into the world so bad, you broke right through that condom and swam as fast as you could.' Which, if you've never thought of yourself as some stranger's sperm, is pretty gross."

I can see Egan wants to laugh, but instead he gets all serious and says, "So when you were talking about that kid being a unicorn, back in class, that was you?"

"Ya," I say.

"Did you ever meet your dad?"

"That's about as likely as my mom winning Miss America," I say, then I realize everyone in Egan's family probably looks like Miss America and I'm dangerously close to saying something stupid, so I say, "She told me his name was John, but I bet she never even asked, and if she did, he probably lied."

Egan laughs, which isn't exactly what I'm going. "My mom split with my little brothers last winter," he says kind of quiet. "She got a job out of state and she couldn't take all of us, so she left me with my sister. She's a dancer." He looks around, like somebody might be listening. "You know what I mean?"

"Like a stripper?"

He just nods and I get the feeling he doesn't tell people this kind of thing. I figure the polite thing to do is tell him I get it, so I say, "My mom is basically Captain Save-a-hoe. She's brought more creeps into our house than I can count. Most times the strippers are cool. Except the meth-heads. I don't know why she even tries with the meth-heads." Then I realize maybe his sister is a meth-head, so I say, "Most of them anyway. We got one right now, She's not so bad."

"My pop's got in trouble for dealing," he says. "He's like your mom's arch-nemesis, Captain Ruin-a-hoe."

"Naw, my mom doesn't think bad of anybody—that's her problem," I say. "She'll bet everything we have on a total loser." Then I realize I basically said his dad's a loser. "I mean, I'm sure your dad's cool," I say.

Then Egan says, "I wouldn't know. He's been locked up for most of my life."

So like an idiot, I say, "Oh," and just kind of nod my head a bunch until I realize I've done it too many times and it's getting awkward, which, honestly, pisses me off because Egan's supposed to be the expert in this situation, but pretty people never have to do shit, so obviously I'm supposed to be the conversational genius. And I'm starting to

wonder if he makes the old grocery store fattie carry the conversation or if he does any of the lifting.

Then Egan says, “I like you, Kandy.”

And I say, “Thanks.” I decide boinking him would be an okay way to lose my v-card, even though his face would probably ruin me for every other face I’m going to be looking up at, at least I’ll have this one time to think about. So I step a little closer and I close my eyes, and I lift my lips up, and pucker like I’ve seen in every stupid movie, which I immediately know is a bad idea, but once you’re in that pose there’s not a graceful way to get out of it, so I just kind of hang there waiting for something to happen and thinking that even though it’s the longest second of my life, I don’t hear Egan laughing, or the sound of his shoes running away and that’s probably a good thing, but on the other hand, maybe he thinks I have some kind of strange disease and he doesn’t know what to do, or maybe, if you look like Egan Turlock, you don’t have girls waiting around to get kissed like stupid cartoon princesses, maybe all the girls just whip off their shirts and get right down to business.

And just as I’m thinking that maybe I can crack one eye without him noticing, I feel heat circling around me and before I have time to figure out what’s happening, Egan’s hugging me, being real careful to keep his arms above my shoulders, and patting my back, and I have a mouth full of his t-shirt and he’s saying, “That was a good talk. We should get back to class.”

#

Sometimes I want out of my skin. Like, I completely cannot handle it. Getting denied by Egan Turlock (the old-grocery-store-fattie banger) sent me right over that edge. I'm making a bagel before school and thinking about how stupid I felt walking back to class with the taste of Egan's cologne in my mouth and him acting normal like he didn't totally dog me, when Mom walks in and says, "Make sure you wipe the crumbs off the counter. I don't want ants."

And, even though I know it's not exactly her fault I have the kind of face a person has to grow into, it's at least half her fault, and since "Daddy John" is MIA, she gets all the blame, so I grumble something that even I don't understand and shoot her a look that basically says she should die.

"What crawled up your butt?" Mom's leaning against the refrigerator with a cold Diet Cola in one hand and her other hand on her hip, staring at me over the top of her sunglasses. She has on her favorite lipstick, this orange mess that dries-up and really brings out her rosacea. "Kandy, I'm talking to you."

"What?" I snap.

"You seen Leanne?"

Even though I was hoping to ask Leanne what she thinks about the whole Egan situation, I say, "She's your project, not mine."

Mom says, "What's your problem?"

I slap the butter knife on the counter. "I'm sick of looking like a Klingon."



Mom shoves me a little with the palm of her hand, because, obviously what I need right now is violence. “I’m telling you, those lips are going to make the boys go crazy once they figure out their heads from their asses,” she says.

“I look like a fish. People call me flipper,” I say, even though no one has ever actually called me flipper.

“Dolphins don’t have lips,” Mom says, like that settles it.

“You’re missing the point.”

“Trust me, you’re going to get calls from these dickheads when you’re thirty. They’re all going to be asking you on dates.”

“Great. I’ll just wait a couple decades for some asshole to apologize.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Mom says. “They probably won’t apologize. They’ll just try to get in your pants and hope you don’t remember what they used to be like.”

For a split-second I think, *what did she just say?* But then I see Mom looking over the top of her sunglasses with her big horsey grin. “You’re a jerk,” I tell her.

“Takes one to know one.”

“Life’s a pile of shit.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Language.”

“Fine. Poop. Life is a huge, sloppy, diarrhea pile.”

“That it is,” Mom says. “Hit that nail right on the head.”

Then, out of nowhere, I get this image of what I must have looked like to Egan with my eyes closed and my big fishy lips puckered. I feel like someone knocked me in the gut. A rope tightens in my throat and my eyes get hot. “I’m serious, Mom. I can’t..”

She stops smiling and pushes her glasses on top of her head so she can look me in the eyes. “You ever feel like you want to escape?”

“Like from prison?” I say, even though I know where Mom’s one-track mind is headed.

“From the feelings, Kandy. You ever feel like you want to escape from how you feel?”

I can almost see Mom’s heart stop beating, but I don’t care. She tries to have a stare down with me and I think, *you’ll buckle a hundred years before I do*. After about a minute, she gives up and says, “Do you ever think about drinking?”

“Sure.”

“When?”

I watch a big lump move down her throat and I know I should feel bad for messing with her, but I don’t. “When I’m thirsty.”

For a second, Mom’s eyes look like one of those dogs in commercials about animal abuse and then she realizes I’m messing with her. And she reaches up to smack me on the back of the head. I duck, but she’s fast for a woman her size and she clips my ear, which is way worse than a thump on the neck. “Kandy Klanderman, I should skin you alive.” A piece of hair flops across her nose. She tries to brush it away, but it tangles in her lashes. Her big shoulders slump and the crease between her breasts crinkles in a tired line.

She looks more pathetic than I can take, so I say, “Sorry,” as I pluck the hair from her eye, and tuck it behind her ear.

“It’s genetic, you know?” she says. “The alcoholism. What if I gave you the thing that ends up killing you?”

Inside I’m thinking, *if something you did was going to kill me, I would have been dead a long time ago*. But, I remember the way Mom’s face looked on family truth-telling day the last time she was in rehab, and I know she can only take so much, so instead I tell her, “I don’t want to drink. I just want to get it sometimes. Like, I just don’t want to have to work so hard to figure everything out.”

And Mom says, “Don’t we all.”

#

Mom’s kind of a vigilante in the recovery world. She doesn’t believe people have to get all the way sober to be productive citizens, even though she can’t touch a drop or she’ll be six feet under while I tour the foster care system again. She says that not too many people get kicked out of Alcoholics Anonymous, which puts her in a very select group. I told her, “I’m pretty sure that’s not something to aspire to.” But, then again, plenty of people are grateful enough to give us stuff, so what do I know?

My all time favorite gift is my car. Mom saved some guy from bankrupting his car lot by snorting blow and boning underage hookers, and she told him she wanted a car. Presto! I end up with a banana yellow, 1986 Mustang. A real sex-mobile.

It’s not that I don’t appreciate having wheels, especially when my mom disappears on one of her missions, but a few less compliments from former Marines

about my sick ride would be aces. In any case, it gets me to school right before the morning announcements, to the coffee shop at lunch, and out of there as soon as the last bell rings--which is to say, I don't have to hang around waiting for the Isabelles and Avas to confirm they're total bitches or for Egan Turlock to make me feel like a bigger fool. I can hear Egan calling my name down the hall after class, but I don't look back. I'll have to deal with him eventually, but not today.

#

When I get home, shit has officially hit the fan. Mom's sitting in the middle of the living room and all of our furniture is gone.

She looks at me and just shakes her head. Her face is a wreck and I can see she's been crying. "Leanne," I say. It's not a question; we both already know.

Mom lifts up a plastic baggie crammed full of tubes and plastic cases. "The safe's gone, but she left this in closet for you."

"She took all the cards?" Mom can't even look at me. "It's my fault," I tell her. "She snuck-up on me in the hallway, but I didn't think she'd take the whole thing out." I feel like an idiot. I take the bag from Mom's hand. Inside is a bunch of half-used makeup and a folded-up piece of paper that says:

*To fix your face*

*Love, Leanne*

“You have to stop trusting these kind of people,” I say to Mom even though inside, I’m telling myself the same thing.

“I *am* these kind of people,” Mom says.

I mumble something about thanking God that at least that cracked-out white-trash whore wasn’t one of those bible-thumping saved addicts since she probably would have left me with a bible instead.

Mom says, “You gotta forgive and let go.”

“No, Mom,” I say. “Sometimes you have to pitch a shit-fit or you’ll end up with tire-Mikes all over your face.” Then I take my bag of makeup to my bedroom and close the door.

There’s little squares of carpet pressed down where my bed and my dresser used to be. All my clothes are gone--even the dirty hamper is empty. Leanne must’ve had an army of meth-heads help clean us out. The box where I keep my extra car key is gone, which makes me want to vomit--it’s not like my Mustang is hard to pick out in the parking lot.

I peel up the corner of my carpet, where I stash my rainy day fund, and the little stack of cards is still there, but in my heart, I know that Leanne didn’t leave them, she just didn’t know where they were.

About midnight, I wake up to pee. Mom’s not anywhere to be found. When I was younger, I would have worried she was getting sloshed, but these days Mom’s probably drinking bad coffee in some emergency room, or wiping vomit off some junkie’s face,

looking for her next project to save--because now rescuing shitbags is her addiction. For a second, I wish mom would get addicted to parenting, but the idea is about as likely as Leanne coming back with all new furniture and giving us a million bucks.

When I peek through the curtains, my car is still under the carport. We'll see if it's still there tomorrow.

#

In the morning, I'm pissed. My car's still in the carport, but I've got no clean underwear, or toothbrush, and Mom still hasn't come home. Clearly finding a new junkie is more important than me. I splash water on my face and wipe it off on my dirty t-shirt, then I dig in the bag Leanne left, until I find what I'm looking for. I line my eyes in thick black strokes and slap on some bright gloss called, *Insolent Plum*. I look exactly how I feel: like I'm ready for a fight.

By the time I slide into fifth period Health Science, I'm still mad at Mom, but I'm also starting to really worry about Leanne's baby. I can't help feeling like maybe I could have done something to protect her.

Mr. Dillie says, "Today we're going to talk about sexually transmitted diseases." There's a big stack of laminated posters on his desk and he's sweating so much I'm afraid he might pass out.

I see Egan out the corner of my eye. His hotness is a flaming magnet that pulls me toward him, but he's the last person in the universe I want to see (except maybe Leanne) and the power of my humiliation breaks the spell.

It doesn't help that Egan's leaning over his desk, looking at me and *psssst*'ing while Dillie talks about, "burning sensations," "greenish-yellow discharge," and "foul-fishy odors." The soccer Isabelle thinks Egan's trying to get her attention, because obviously, why would he be trying to talk to me? But, honestly, I'm more fed-up with the Isabelles of the world than I'm scared of whatever Egan's got to dish-up, so when Dillie's looking for a poster of ulcerated sores, I turn around and say, "What?"

I can hear the Avas and Isabelles blowing Frappuccinos out their noses, but then Egan says, "Meet me after class."

And they go silent.

One of the Avas look like she just swallowed a fly. I turn to Egan and say, just loud enough, so it sounds kind of sexy, "At our regular spot?"

And he's got that smile on again, that makes it seem like we have some kind of secret only he and I know. He turns up the sex laser so high I can barely breathe and says, "You know it, baby-girl."

And even though I'm one hundred percent sure that all this baby-girl stuff Egan does is just an act, I'm beginning to feel like everybody is just acting all of the time--the Isabelles and Avas, Mr. Dillie, Mom and every shitbag junkie she ever brought home--they've all got some kind of schtick going--even the MLK kids, but I give them props

because being a genius isn't the easiest schtick to pull off. Apparently I'm the only idiot who's been trying to figure out how to survive by just being myself.

#

I don't worry about what I've got myself into until Egan has already jumped down and is reaching his hand up to help me. The moment his naked skin touches my naked skin, it hits me, am I the kind of girl that lets a guy treat me like shit and the moment he shows me a little attention I'm wagging my tail like a starving puppy? And I realize that all the evidence points to, yes, I am that kind of girl, but I'm already on the ground in the pit, only this time I don't knock the wind out of myself and I'm standing up all by myself, which must count for something.

"Nice," Egan says, and it sounds like the greatest compliment I've ever heard. "I like your lipstick."

Before I know it, I'm telling him it's called Insolent Plum and unloading the whole Leanne story on him, including how that baby felt kicking my hand, and how I'm an idiot for letting her see the safe, and how now I have to worry about Mom relapsing--even though she probably won't. I tell him that Leanne has a key to my car and that I'm afraid it might not be in the parking lot at the end of the day. Then I hear myself telling him, "There are rules for stealing, you know? For example, you don't take something from someone if you care about them even a tiny bit, or they did nice stuff for you when you already burned every bridge in your whole stupid life."



Egan's staring at me with a big grin eating up the bottom half of his face.

"I was talking too much, wasn't I?" I say.

"I like when you talk."

Of course, now I have no idea what to say and he's got that look like he's waiting for me to entertain him. Over his shoulder I can see his nest of blankets all set-up like a bed. I start thinking, maybe it's not such a big deal that he didn't put the moves on me the first time we were down here. I probably would have spontaneously combusted anyway. He sees me looking and says, "You want to sit down?"

"Sure," I say and walk over all casual like getting cozy with the hottest boy on the planet is something I do every day. When I sit down, I see the blankets have a bunch of stains on them and maybe I don't want to know exactly what they're from.

"You comfortable?" Egan asks, but before I can answer his lips are on mine. They're soft and wet and I feel like I'm spinning through the bottom of a hole. Then his hand is up my shirt and he's squeezing my boobs too hard. I'm wondering if he thinks it feels good, and if I should tell him it doesn't, or just let him have at it, but then he's gently pushing me down, and I'm flat on my back, and he's on top of me making moaning noises that don't sound exactly real.

For a second, some of the bad memories flood through my head, but then I open my eyes and I see Egan's face all scrunched up, like he's trying really hard to remember how to do all this making-out stuff. And I realize he's as mixed-up as I am, he's just got a better face to hide it behind. But those moaning noises coming out of him sound like he's

trying to fake something he heard on a porn site--or maybe like he's mortally wounded. And I can't help myself--I laugh.

I laugh right into Egan Turlock's open mouth, with his tongue going around like a bumper car all over my big fishy lips.

Egan pauses for a second, then I guess he decides he must have imagined it--because why would a girl like me laugh at a boy like him--and he starts up again, moaning and flicking his tongue. I think, this is your chance to get it right, Kandy. Just go along with it. What would an Isabelle do?

So I try moaning back, but I guess I've been practicing being myself for too long because the whole thing--all the moaning and pretending--is too ridiculous. The laughter comes tearing out of me like I'm the whole universe cracking-up at itself--which might sound like a good thing, but actually it's the exact feeling of having a messed-up mom and an empty house and head full of bad memories. It's the feeling of accidentally trusting a meth-head whore and falling in love with her alien baby and thinking for a minute that everything might work out after all. It's finding out that even the most beautiful boy in the world is faking it too--and maybe nobody ever has anything figured out--and maybe I'll stay this lost and confused about everything forever.

I guess making out with a girl who's laughing so hard she might pee herself isn't the sexiest thing in the world, because Egan rolls over and lays down next to me. Out of the corner of my eye I see Insolent Plum all over his perfect face and it I know it must be smashed over my face too. Right then, I get this image of Leanne driving off in my car, all eighty-two pounds of her skeleton body with that little baby inside, and Mom's

chasing after her, and Dillie's chasing after Mom waving one of his laminated erections, and the Avas and Isabelles are chasing after the whole mess, and somewhere, way, way behind them are the MLK geniuses figuring out a way to get there faster than all of those idiots--and me and Egan are just laying here looking at the underside of the bleachers, with the wads of gum people stuck under their seats, and the drips of bird-poo that ran down the sides, and the sun coming through in streaks.

All those people chasing after each other and nobody knowing where they're going makes me want to cry, but I'm done getting upset over things I can't change, so instead I laugh even harder. I guess Egan must have figured something out too, because he starts laughing with me. And before I know it, Egan Turlock is laying next to me, both of us laughing so hard tears are running off our faces onto the stained blankets and dirt, and the last bell is ringing, and everybody is leaving, but there's no place to go.

**Bryan Canaan**

**Bryan Canaan** <brycan@Blingly.com>

11:43 AM (2 days ago)

To: me

R,

I'm going to be a father?

--B

...

*"We have always held to the hope, the belief, the conviction that there is a better life, a better world, beyond the horizon."*

--Franklin D Roosevelt

### **Captain Save-a-Hoe Klanderman**

One of them Bingly dipshits came to my Sunday night group wanting to talk to us about our habits. Anand Something-or-Other. He's working on an artificial intelligence sponsor for the phone. There's already a bunch of AA apps that'll let you find a meeting wherever you're at, and there's a couple that'll pull you up quotes from the Big Book if you need a quick fix, but this thing he's talking about is something else.

He says it'll access all your known data, from your internet searches, your emails--anything you got online. It'll use maps and GPS, and it'll know if you're headed to a liquor store, or your dealer's house. Then, it'll start yapping out your phone speaker about the decision you're thinking about making and using all the knowledge in the whole world to talk you out of it. Apparently, it'll talk to every person different, use your own words and all that. He said it's like taking that part of your brain that knows better and making a copy on the outside, so when it starts losing the battle in your head, you got a backup version that kicks in.

I asked him why a person wouldn't just turn off the volume--that's the first thing that I'd do. He said he's still working on that part. Two ideas he's got are to make it keep buzzing until you turn the volume back up. He said there's a lot of studies that say when

that buzzing goes off on your phone, it's real hard for people to ignore it--it triggers some chemicals in our brain that drive us crazy until we check. He said that even when it doesn't make a noise we check it about every fifteen minutes just to make sure. I told him that sounds a lot like how addiction works--always on your mind, can't stop thinking about it. He didn't say anything about that.

Another thing he said he's working on is the phone auto-sending alerts to a group of pre-determined people, like your P.O. and your family members. If the addict turns off the alerts, that'll send a message to the list too. I told him he should make sure sponsors are on that list. He said they were already at the top. Then, I had this idea that I told him about, how he should make another part of the program where people like me can sign up to get alerts from addicts who are in our area and need a person to talk to. Like a Bat Signal. But he said there was no point in doing that because that's what the artificial intelligence sponsor is for. He said introducing a human being would add unpredictable variables--he's got his studies that show us humans cause more harm than do good. Apparently, this robot-phone-thingamajigger is more reliable. I argued with him about that. In the end he said he'd consider it, but if there's one skill I've got, it's a highly-tuned bullshit detector. Doesn't mean I always listen to it--Kandy will tell you that--but I know when a person is feeding me a line they think I want to hear.

This Anand fellow found out about me through some of my regulars. A bunch of them hit up AA meetings when they need a boost between my groups. A couple of them told Anand he should get in touch with me and gave him my number. My approach is a little different than the Friends of Bill W. and if Anand wants to get all the knowledge in

the world, then he should probably talk to people like me too. So, when he called me up and explained what he was doing, wanting to visit the group and hear what makes us tick, the kind of things that send us over the edge and the kind of things that have reeled us back up over the cliff, I thought to myself, sure, why not?

He showed-up looking just like I imagined one of those Blingly dipshits would. Had his dark jeans and hoodie on, tall and skinny, messy black hair and a face that was just a little sideways of good-looking. After I introduced him to the group, he sat down in one of the chairs, flipped his laptop open, hunched over and got to typing. Every now and again, he'd raise his hand and ask the group a question, then he'd get to typing more. I got the feeling he thinks getting sober is just a mathematical equation and he's going to figure out how to solve the problem once and for all.

The group had some questions for him too. He explained that the artificial intelligence just has to stay one step ahead of the addict and with access to all the knowledge that was ever come up with in the entire world, staying one step ahead should be no problem once the thing was programmed.

I still don't know about that. I figure if an addict will toss their wife and kids down the drain, what's going to stop them from throwing away their phone? But this Blingly guy, Anand, has his studies, and he says we addicts keep our phone around a lot longer than we keep our family members. Which I guess is probably true--I mean, how else are you going to get in touch with your dealer? Hell if I know, I can barely work the damn thing, but it seems to me, if you'd throw away your family before you throw away some electronic device, then maybe the addiction to electronics is the problem, and this

Anand fellow should be trying to figure out how to fix that because it seems like everybody could use that kind of help.



## Pretty Boy

Worm says, “Why you always got to call the cafeteria lady Baby-girl?”

And I say, “Why you got to call her The Warthog?”

Then Worm looks at me like I’m some idiot. “Dude, she looks like a warthog.”

He has a point, but I say, “Look at your tray, Bro, then look at mine.”

We both check out the tower of greasy pizza the lunch lady stacked on my tray and the one limp slice she put on his. Neither one looks great, but at least I won’t be hungry by fifth period. Then Worm says, “Why you even want that crap?” which is exactly the kind of thing that kids who have parents that actually buy groceries always say about school food.

“You offering to take me out?” I say. “Cuz, if you’re offering to hook a brother up, I’ll ditch Baby-girl right now and we can make it happen.” I step so close that I can smell Worm’s fruity shampoo, and I’m thinking how uncool it is his mom makes him smell like a tween girl, like having Down Syndrome isn’t enough for him to deal with. Maybe I should tell Worm’s mom to stop letting him wear those Sesame Street t-shirts, even though he’s obsessed with them.

I give him my best pervy-porn star look, which is when I pucker my lips so he can see the pink underside, while I half-close my eyes, and raise my eyebrows at the same time. It's a look that says, *go ahead, touch my wiener. I know you want it.* It's definitely not a look I'd ever give to an actual female. That would make me a total dick.

"You're a freak." Worm lowers his shoulder and bumps my chest, like, get the fuck away, but he's joking. He's only five-four, but he's built like a lump of cement, so if he really leans into me, he can do some damage. I make sure I'm squared up in case he gets too pumped and I have to take him down.

"I don't know what these ladies see in you," he says, then he kind of growls, while he pummels his elbow into my gut and I have to tighten up so it doesn't hurt. Worm's face is all red, and pieces of his spit are splattering on my shirt. I'm beginning to think maybe he's not joking. I feel bad because I know he'd like to get some play with the ladies. I keep sending him pictures of cute Downs girls I find on the internet, but he says he wants a normal female. The way I see it, Worm's cock-blocking himself. The girls at school are pretty chill with him, but they act like he's a puppy, not a bag of hormones with a chronic hard-on--especially Hannah Stevenson. That girl's a trip. She took Worm to Homecoming last year and the internet might think she's Mother Teresa, but as soon as she asked him, I knew what she was up to. And now she's been dragging it out like Worm's her boyfriend for so long that I'm starting to wonder if there's something really wrong with her that she needs attention that bad.

There's a couple other girls, though, who'd probably get with Worm if I asked. Maybe not full-on sex, but at least a little touchy-feely. I'm still trying to figure out if

that would be a messed-up thing for me to arrange, or if it would make me the world's best homie.

Worm's had enough pummeling into me, so he backs off, panting like the Hulk. He's still taking himself too serious though, so I say, "Don't knock it til you try it, champ." Then I wink at him and laugh. Over his shoulder I see Kandy watching us from across the cafeteria, so I give her a what's up nod, but Hannah Stevenson thinks I'm nodding at her and she waves back. Kandy just rolls her eyes, but, of course, Hannah is completely clueless.

Worm sees Hannah standing next to that light-skinned girl, Leyza, who came over when all those engineering geniuses transferred when MLK High got shutdown. "Damn that girl's a baddie," he says. Then he flexes, because that's something Worm does when he's pumped. A couple of younger guys laugh at him, but I look at them hard and they look away quick. Then I get kind of bummed, because it hits me that I'm going to graduate, which is cool for me, but Worm's got two more years of figuring out how to take care of himself.

"You looking at Hannah?" I ask him.

"Naw, the new girl," he says.

Hannah and Leyza got their heads together, and they're kind of giggling, and doing that looking-at-you-not-looking-at-you thing that totally screams, PAY ATTENTION TO ME, so I give them a smile with only one side of my mouth. Hannah gives me her version of the same smile back, but she and I have been doing that since middle school and we both know it doesn't mean anything. Leyza, on the other hand, is

straight frozen to the spot. I can see right away that she's not used to getting looked at like that, which is surprising because Worm's right, that girl is a genuine baddie. She got legs for days, curves in the right spots and her light-skinned game is on-point. "Ask Hannah to hook that up," I tell Worm.

Worm groans and says, "You know Hannah's my lady. She gets jealous if I even looks at Leyza too long. Stay single." He advises me, then takes a chocolate milk from the cooler and keeps moving down the line.

Part of me wants to tell him what's going on with Luma, but she and I got an understanding to keep our relationship on the downlow. The last thing I want to do is screw up what we got going--she's not like any girl I've ever known. And that's kind of saying a lot, since I've been knowing a lot of girls since I was just a young buck.

#

She likes to back me up against the fancy gourmet blends, where the display lights make everything a little golden, and pretend like we're strangers who met at a cafe. Her favorite version is the one where I'm a college kid who wants to get it on with a hot old lady. I guess that's a lot better than facing the truth, that I'm a homeless high school kid who has to screw his boss so I don't get fired and starve to death.

Today, she catches me dusting the canned green beans, so I'm kind of caught off-guard. I feel her long nail trailing along my shoulder and that shiver goes through me that makes me want to hurl, but also wakes up that monster in my pants. I start to hate myself for what I know is going to go down later in the storage room, even though I know I'm

going to do it anyway. But that's just how life is, sometimes you have to do stuff you don't want to do, and sometime you do stuff you do want to do, even though you know it's disgusting and you'll be pissed at yourself later. When it's happening, I'll be thinking about Luma and that makes me feel a little better. So, I take a breath, put on my game face, and turn around with a smile.

“What's up, Baby-gir-” I start to say, but there's some kid standing next to her. I size him up: about my age, crew cut, too much gel, dry skin, chest too big, calves too skinny, grinning like a complete idiot. “Hello, Mrs. Dominguez,” I say, like she hasn't told me to call her the nastiest names as her leathery tits are flying around my face and I'm trying not to suffocate.

She says, “This is Rick. Our new guy. I want you to show him the ropes.” Then she turns to Rick, who's wringing the life out of his apron. “This is Egan.” I want to throw-up a little, just hearing her say my name. “He's my number one guy.” Then she reaches over and next thing I know, her hand is slinking down my spine. She hooks a finger through my belt loop and gives a tug, like *I'm gonna slap that ass later*. The new kid is trying to act like he doesn't notice, but I'm pretty sure we both hear Mrs. Dominguez growl.

“I'll leave you boys alone,” she says, so close to my face, that I catch that vinegar smell she has. For a second, I get a flash of her hot breath pounding my face and the slick feeling of her sweat on my skin. By the time I recover, she's waddling around the corner, and Rick is standing next to the canned vegetables staring at me.

“You go to Jefferson?” I ask before he can say something about what he just saw.

“Country Day,” Rick says, like he’s embarrassed.

“How come you’re slumming it here?”

“I gotta pay back some people.”

“What for?”

“I knocked down some mailboxes.”

“You did what?”

“I took a bat to some mailboxes.” Rick looks to the side, where the creamed corn is, and I see he has a big scar that goes all the way from behind his ear, down his neck and across his throat. And I wonder what kind of crazy shit that’s all about.

“How come you did that?” I ask.

Rick shrugs. “Just felt like it.”

I nod and say, “Cool,” because even though I never knocked over anybody’s mailbox, I know what he means.

“You go to Jefferson?” he asks.

I nod.

“You one of those Promise Scholar from MLK?”

“Naw, man. I been at Jefferson since freshman year.”

“Must be cool though to have more brothers there, right?”

I have to take a second so I don’t go off. Then I say, “It wasn’t really a problem before.”

Rick slaps his hand on my shoulder. “I didn’t mean anything, Man. I was just saying it’s--”

“I know what you were saying,” I cut him off and look at his hand until he takes it away.

“We should probably get started.” I tilt my head toward the cans. “We’re supposed to line them in rows, and stack two high. Like this,” I point to a mess of pearled onions and beets that’s all jumbled up. The generics are mixed with the brand names, which tells me The Memory Care old folks home must have taken their field trip to the store that afternoon. “This one’s all messed up,” I tell Rick and slide the cans around, until everything’s on point, labels facing forward, onions with onions and beets with beets. I step back to admire my work.

The rest of the aisle looks good, so I say, “Come on, I’ll show you how to do cart duty,” and we head out to the parking lot.

The sun’s starting to go down and the air’s got a chill in it. I realize that tonight, I’m either going to have to suck it up and deal with my sister’s asswipe boyfriend, or freeze my nuts off under the bleachers at Jefferson. Neither option sounds like a party. There’s always a third option, but I’d rather not even think about it, because staying in Mrs. Dominguez’s guest room while her husband makes me grilled cheese and the kids show me their Lego creations is more than I can take. I wanted to shoot myself the first time I stayed over and Mr. Dominguez told me I was welcome any time. I’m guessing he didn’t know that his wife was doing me in the basement at four am. I’ll figure out where I’m going to sleep later, right now, I got Rick to deal with.

“Okay, so first thing you have do is get your plan together,” I tell him. “You don’t want to be headed to the end of the lot with twenty carts—that’s an accident just waiting

to happen. They got company insurance, but trust me, you hit a car and Mrs. Dominguez is taking it out of your check.”

Rick’s nodding like a bobble head, so I keep going. “You want to be out of the store as long as possible. Out here, you’re kind of a free man—at least for a couple minutes. Don’t collect the carts too fast or you’ll screw it up for the rest of us. Cool?”

“Cool,” Rick says and I’m about to give him some tips on docking the carts, but out of nowhere, he says, “Are you banging Mrs. Dominguez?”

“What?” I say, like I’m going to beat his ass for even thinking something so disgusting, but inside, I’m shitting myself.

Rick doesn’t get it though. His eyes are huge and he’s bouncing around like a spastic Chihuahua. Even Worm could teach this guy a couple of things about being chill. “She was practically humping you right there in the store.”

I take a breath, so I don’t go off on this kid, but instead of calming me down, it loosens something inside me. I feel the whole story of what’s been going on with Mrs. Dominguez and me, sit right on my face for the anybody to see. I try to fix my face, but I’m struggling to keep my composure.

Rick’s hooting and slapping, and saying, “Daaaaamn.” A mom with a couple kids is looking at him, like maybe he’s on crack and she should call the cops.

“You got to keep your voice down,” I say. “Maybe your therapist can get you another job, but I got bills.”

He stops jumping and settles down. “Sorry,” he says, and I can tell he feels bad for real. His skin is crazy red from laughing, and his pimples look extra white like they



might pop for no reason. I wonder who's ever going to want to touch that face? Thinking about it makes me kind of depressed, so I say, "You ever been laid?" even though I'm positive I already know the answer.

Rick shoves his hands in his pockets. "Not officially, but I got close a couple times."

I respect his answer; a lot of guys would have lied. "Alright, I'm going to do you a favor, but I'm only going to tell you this once, so listen close." Then I start to download my knowledge on him. "You're going to find a lot of females on aisle four. It's Personal Care. But stay with the hairsprays and lotions. You don't want to get stuck in feminine hygiene. If you're into the natural thing, then you can find some fine ones in the bulk food section, but it's hit or miss with the body odor over there. Do a fly-by and try not to get stuck stocking the quinoa—that shit gets everywhere. Friday night you want to hit up the ice cream aisle. Not the cheap gallons. Check the premiums. If she's buying two, then she's got a boyfriend, but if she's got her hair up all sloppy and she's grabbing a pint of salted caramel crunch, maybe got on yoga pants, and she doesn't seem like she's in a hurry—that's like taking candy from a baby. She's just looking for someone to chill with. That's the basics, there's other stuff, like the ethnic aisles, diapers and formula, the specialty juices, but I think you got all you can handle for now."

Rick's grinning at me like I just told him the meaning of life.

"You good?" I ask.

He tosses me a thumbs up. I don't believe him for a second, but it's almost time for my break and I need to text Luma before her mom locks down the wifi for the night.

“Okay,” I say. “So that covers stocking, cart duty and the aisles, let’s go inside and I’ll start you on bagging.”

We run into one of my regulars coming through the doors. She a stay-at-home mom with a Mercedes and a husband who works too much. Her two older kids are hanging off the side of the cart like monkeys. The baby has her mouth plastered to the handlebar, sucking off all the goo and ball sweat she can get. “I was looking for you,” my regular says. Then she takes her hands from the cart and fluffs her hair. “The kids are driving me nuts. Can you help me out to the car?”

I feel kind of bad for skipping out on her, but if I don’t text Luma soon, it’ll be too late. “Sorry, I’m training the new guy.” I slap Rick on the back.

My regular gives Rick a once over. She doesn’t seem too excited about what she sees, but I guess she’s pretty desperate because she says, “He can come along, can’t he?”

I hear Rick start to say, “Ye—,” so I slap him again, only this time I do it hard enough so he gets the message to shut the hell up.

While he’s trying to catch his breath, I say, “Sorry. Have to get inside. Manager’s orders.”

My regular says. “I guess I’ll see you next time.”

When we’re barely out of earshot, Rick says, “Did you bang her too?”

I almost tell him yes, just to find out if his head will explode, but the guy’s so gullible, I feel bad, so I tell him the truth. “I help her out to the car, make her feel good. She gives me five bucks and I see her next week.”

“But you could bang her. If you wanted to.”

This guy's too much. I stop walking and push him into the alcove between the Lotto machines. "I'm going to tell you this because I like you," I say, even though what I really mean is that I feel sorry for him. "Stop saying bang. It sounds like you want to shoot somebody."

"What should I call it?" he asks, and I can tell he seriously has no clue what an idiot he is.

"Don't call *it* anything. Don't talk about *it* at all."

"Okay. Be breezy," Rick says under his breath, and I realize that Worm has way more game than this guy, even when he's wearing his stupid Bert and Ernie t-shirt.

I look at the clock by the Customer Service counter. I only have fifteen minutes to text Luma. "I got to handle some stuff," I tell Rick. "Let's talk about the registers."

I take him to the end of the checkout lines. "Right here you got self checkers," I say, pointing to the machines. A couple is leaning over the scanner arguing, while the machine says, "Please wait for assistance," over and over again.

"Should we help?" Rick asks.

"Not our problem. We don't have the keys." I move him over to the first manned register. "Rows one and two are fifteen items or less. Fifteen-and-less folks only need help if they're old, or handicapped, or they have triplets, or something. They're not good tippers and, I don't know about you, but I feel bad taking cash from somebody's granny." I check to see if he's following. He's twisting his apron around his thumb like a pinwheel. "Don't do that," I tell him.

"Do what?"

“That.” I point to his apron.

Rick looks down at his hands like he doesn't know who they belong to. “Sorry,” he says and drops the apron. A crease spirals out right at his crotch. I think about pointing it out, but the poor guy looks like he's about to blow a fuse from all the knowledge he's getting, so I let it drop and figure, one step at a time.

“Okay, so after the fifteen and less are the ones that anybody can use. There's the different checkers, and it depends on what you like. Some are a little thicker; some don't have much in the back. What you have to remember is, you won't ever be looking at their faces. Mostly, we're standing behind them, sometimes we get a side view, but if you're trying to get in some cashier's lane because you think she's got nice tits, you might as well get a bag of frozen peas, because about all you'll get is a set of blue ones.”

Rick just stares at me. The guy is totally clueless and I almost feel bad for getting pissed at him earlier when he started saying crazy stuff about me being black. “Balls. You're going to get blue balls,” I tell him. “If this is too much we can talk about how to bag. You know heavies on the bottom, eggs and bread on top.”

He snaps to. “No. I'm cool.”

I'm not buying it, but I figure I'll give him an education anyway, plus I've still got ten minutes before my break. “Alright,” I say, “but tell me if it's too much.”

He looks so relieved, that I feel kind of bad for messing with him. And I figure I'll give him some advanced knowledge to make up for kind of being a dick to him. “On the other end of the check stands are the impulse buys: candy, balloons, magazines. They go in fours. Stands one, five and nine have *Women's Health*, *Cosmo* and *Us*. Those are

the honey aisles. Then you've got two, six and ten: *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Wired*. Cooking and decorating mags on three, seven and eleven. You get where I'm going with this?"

Rick's nodding like his neck is on a spring. I'm not convinced he's keeping up, but I go on anyway. "Okay, so if you're bagging for some honey and you want to go to the car with her, there's two ways of looking at it: you can bag real light—use a lot of bags—and make it look like she's got way more than she does, and she might ask for help. But, on the other hand, if you make the bags real heavy, then maybe she thinks she can't lift them. That's where you come in and save her day. Sometimes you can figure out which way to do it just by looking her, but sometimes you got to roll the dice. To be real, if she's thinking about getting you out to the car, then it doesn't matter how you bag—she's going to make it happen. You got that?"

Rick's standing there smiling like an idiot, with the pinwheel crease spinning out from his crotch, and part of me feels like I should tell him to chill out and stop worrying about sex so much, because it's not all it's cracked up to be, and honestly, it just ruins a bunch of shit. But I know what it's like to have that monster in my pants, and I know Rick's not going to listen to me no matter what I say. And besides, it's time for me to text Luma, which is all I really care about anyway.

#

I'm sitting in the dark, by the broken carts, wondering why Luma's not texting back and wondering if maybe her mom turned off the internet early. And I'm starting to

get pissed that Luma won't just let me buy her a phone, so she can text whenever, like every other teenager on the planet, or at least every kid in Ludwig. Then I hear her voice say, "Hey," like it's totally normal for her to sneak up on me at work.

"How'd you know where I was?" I ask, even though as soon as I see her, what I want to say is, *you're so beautiful*.

Luma shrugs and says, "Worm told me." Her hijab slips a little and hair spills around her face. She repositions the loose metallic cloth and tucks the curls back. Sometimes I wish she wore her scarf tight, so I couldn't see any of her hair; it kind of messes with me to see just a little bit. Plus she's always wearing those tight jeans that show off her assets, and it's not like it's hard to imagine what she's got going on underneath all that fabric. I guess I don't get her religion, but it seems kind of strange to dress like that and then worry about covering up your hair. If I had a daughter I was trying to protect, I'd tell her to wear baggier clothes and I wouldn't trip about her hair at all. But, like I said, I don't know much about religion.

Something about it pisses me off though, like it's an accusation that I'm a danger to her when all I've ever done was be respectful to the fullest. Maybe I'm stressed out because of dealing with Rick, or maybe I'm just tired of not being able to touch my girl. But when I hear myself saying, "You been getting ready for the Jihad?" I feel like a total dick before I even finished with my sentence.

Luma looks like I punched her in the face. "Why you got to say stuff like that?"

"Sorry," I say.

We stand there for a while, looking at each other in the loading dock. I used to think it was weird to stare at each other like this, but when you can't touch somebody, your eyes figure out how to move the molecules around so it's almost like there's nothing between you. I can see the outline of Luma's face. I let my eyes feel the skin on her cheek.

Then the dip in the middle of her top lip.

Then the soft space at her temples.

Luma bites her bottom lip and holds it between her teeth. She's looking at me like she has something important to say, but she can't figure out what the words are. All I can think about is what it would be like to be that lip stuck there between her teeth. "I got to get back to work," I tell her, even though what I want to say is, *let's just run away*. But where would we go? It's not like a girl like Luma can live under the bleachers with me.

"Egan?"

"Yeah?"

She takes a deep breath, the kind that sounds like you're swallowing rocks. I can hear that she's trying to gulp down tears and that maybe she's about to have one of her panic attacks. Then I start to panic a little too, because I can't leave her alone, but if I'm not back inside the store in about three minutes, Mrs. Dominguez is going to come looking for me, and I don't even want to imagine what kind of circus that would be. I tell Luma, "Just breathe. I'm right here." And I think, *this would be the perfect time to wrap my arms around her and hug her*. And I wonder if it's okay to touch her in a medical situation, or how bad it has to get for it to be okay, like what if she needed CPR or the

Heimlich Maneuver? But I don't touch her; I just say, "It's going to be okay," because I know what it's like to want to hear those words. And I know what it's like when nobody says them.

She does this chokey-sobby thing, then she takes the end of her scarf and wipes her nose on it and says, "Just don't give up. Okay?"

I rub my face in my hands and try to find a way to tell her how I feel, it sounds like, *I'm tired of all this next-level bullshit*. But I know it will come out sounding like it's her fault, or I'm mad or something, but that's not what I mean at all. So I don't say anything. I just swallow it.

"If you married me," Luma's voice is all light and flirty, like we're just fooling around, and we haven't been talking about getting married since last year. "You'd be the only man who's ever touched me."

I know this is supposed to be the biggest prize ever, getting to be the only one who's touched her, but I can't even begin to tell her how much I don't care how many men have touched her, or how touching people, or even sex, doesn't always mean something about how you feel about somebody, or change the way you feel about the person you love, so I just say, "I know how I feel."

And since Luma only knows the part of me I let her see, she says, "Then prove it."

And I say, "I thought that's what I was doing."

#



When I'm in the dairy case, I love her so much I want to die.

When I'm cleaning up a spill on aisle 7, I hate her so much I want her damn scarf to choke her to death.

When I see a little girl skipping down the cereal aisle, I feel so pathetic and broken I want to crawl in a hole and disappear.

By the time I'm bagging the last customer of my shift, it's the slippery idea of Luma's tongue just sitting in her mouth waiting, that makes me drop the jar of spaghetti sauce. Chunks of glass fly two lanes in either direction. Everything smells like oregano. It's dripping down the sides of check stands and it's all over my work pants.

Rick is two lanes over. He says, "I got it, man," and takes off for the pasta aisle to grab another jar.

"You okay?" The checker is looking at me. "Did you cut yourself?"

"I'm good," I tell her.

"Jesus Christ," the customer says. She's some old battle-axe who's built like a tank. She elbows me out of the way and starts throwing her produce and eggs, butter and beer, into bags.

I watch her toss a gallon of 2% on top of bananas. "Let me," I say, but the old tank won't budge. She's staring me down, like I tried to ruin her night on purpose, and I'm thinking, *lady, you don't know a tenth of what I've been through*. Then I notice her eyelids are so droopy that I can see the pink insides like an open mouth, and I think,

*maybe she's been through some stuff too.* So, I say, "Please, ma'am. Let me get this for you."

And she says, "No!" in some kind of accent and elbow jabs me in the chest. Now she's talking so loud, that other customers are looking. She's saying, "You do it, I get home, my eggs all cracked, my bread is flat. But what you care? Huh? Nothing! You know why? Huh?" She stops throwing her cans and crackers in bags and turns around to poke me in the chest. "Never had to suffer. Everything handed to you. You break jar, no problem mommy buy you new one. You don't want chicken? Okay, mommy make ham. Now you don't want ham? No problem! Mommy take you to McDonalds. Get you Quarter Pounder."

The checker's looking at me like, *I'm so sorry, but what can I do?* Customers are staring. The old tank throws a jar of pickles in with the bananas and milk. Now everything smells like bananas and oregano. I see Mrs. Dominguez waddling toward us like her pants are on fire. Seeing her, makes me think about what I'm going to have to do with her in the store room an hour from now, and that I still have chemistry homework, and it's cold outside and I still don't know where I'm going to sleep.

Mrs. Dominguez is telling the lady, "My apologies, ma'am. We'll get you a coupon for some free deli meats." I can catch Mrs. Dominguez's vinegar smell with the bananas and the oregano. Then Rick's standing next me all red and panting, with his pickles and the pinwheel crease in his apron. He presses a fresh jar of sauce into my hand and he's looking at me like, *I got you.* And my heart kind of hurts for him.

The old woman's still talking as she shoves things in her bags, saying, "Always playing video games. Doing your marijuana and your crack cocaine." I look at her big square back, and I wonder what a woman has to do to get a back like that. I look at the jar in my hand and imagine letting it fall, a second red mess over everything.

Rick says, "You good?" which kind of snaps me out of it.

I feel my face smiling, but inside I'm numb, and I'm thinking, *am I really going to do what I think I'm going to do?* Then I'm handing Rick back the jar, saying, "You got this one." And I lift my apron over my head and walk out.

#

The doors slide open and the night isn't as cold as I thought it was going to be. I can hear Mrs. Dominguez saying my name, "Egan? Egan, get back here. Egan?" but I just keep walking. The parking lot is almost empty. There's carts all over the place and for a second I feel bad for Rick because he's going to have to get every last cart all by himself, and if Mrs. Dominguez is horny enough, she just might set her sights on him. But I keep walking.

I turn the corner and there's a couple of homeless kids with a pitbull huddled against the side of the building. They ask me if I got a light, and I tell them no. Mostly I'm thinking, *that could be me. But that will never be me, because I have other plans, even if I don't know exactly what they are.*

I can hear Mrs. Dominguez in the parking lot, still calling my name. She doesn't sound mad. She sounds sad and tired and desperate. And for a minute I think about what I'm going to have to do tomorrow to make sure I don't get fired. I get a flash of the way she looks too hopeful when I call her Baby-girl, and the white underside of her thigh when she lifts her leg on a box in the storage room so I can get a better angle. And even though I want to hurl, I think, *at least I'm not some homeless kid begging for a light.*

I don't even know where I'm going until I'm standing in front of Worm's house. And then I'm going around back, where his bedroom window is, and I'm hiding in the dark, looking inside. Worm is sitting against his headboard. He's got on Cookie Monster pajamas and his hair is wet and combed over to the side. I can almost smell his fruity soapyness. He's resting a big white mug on his belly and then he starts laughing so hard, that he has to lift the mug so it doesn't spill.

Worm's mom is sitting on the end of his bed. I see the back of her head and I can tell she's laughing too. I watch for a while, shrinking the molecules of space between Worm and me, until we're almost touching, and then I shrink the molecules more, until I am Worm. Until it's me in that bed, with all that warm yellow light and love.

And when Worm's mom reaches for the mug, and he takes the last sip, I feel the hot chocolate go down my throat, with those crunchy marshmallows that come in the packet sticking to my teeth.

And when Worm slides down and settles his head on the pillow, I feel the cool sheets wrapping around me.

And when his mom leans over and kisses his head, I feel her lips.

And it's my mom smoothing the hair from my head. And it's me feeling safe and like I know what tomorrow is going to bring, and even if I don't exactly love every part of it, I know there will be this person at the end of the day who just wants to love me. And I think maybe Worm will be okay next year when he has to figure his life out without me. And maybe there's somethings that I need to figure out too--maybe everybody does.

**Reba**

**Reba Munson** <reba@munsonturkandlittle.com>

12:01 AM ( 2 minutes ago)

To: Bryan Canaan

B,

I don't know. Are you?

--R

...

*"Doubt, of whatever kind, can be ended by action xalone."*

--Thomas Carlyle

## **Luma**

I'm not OCD; I just like to count. For example, there are forty-three lamp-posts between Freedom High and Terraces Memory Care Manor. If I miss one, I circle back to the school parking lot and start again--not because the universe will explode if I don't; I just feel better when things are on track--especially if I'm on my way to see Tootsie at the Manor. There are also four stop signs, two traffic lights, and eleven restaurants, if you count the coffee shop where the popular kids go at lunch. Egan and I went one time. It was when we first started hanging out and the other kids weren't used to seeing Egan and me together. While we waited for our iced mochas, acting as if we didn't notice everyone gossiping about us, Hannah Stevenson told me she liked my hijab--but I could tell she meant it as an insult. The next time Egan asked me to go to the coffee shop, I told him caffeine is against the teachings of the Koran. I'm pretty sure that's a lie. I keep meaning to look it up, but, so far, it's sitting on the long list of reasons why I'm a fake Muslim.

When I get to the Manor, Florabeth is standing in the reception area biting the back of her chubby hand to keep from laughing. "Missy Luma, you should see her face today."

"What's she done?" I unwind the hijab from my head.

Florabeth giggles. “She likes the lipstick you brought her.”

I hand her my scarf and she hands me Penny’s ratty cardigan in return. It’s more than sixty years old and it looks as if it’s been run over by a dump truck, but it smells of fabric softener. “Thank you,” I say, and I mean thank you for washing the sweater, but really I mean, thank you, Florabeth, for a couple hundred things--like never asking why I take off my hijab when I visit, and why I don’t put it back on when I leave. Or, why no one else in my family is a Muslim.

“Showtime!” Florabeth waves her hand in the air, then she leads me down the hall to Tootsie’s room. We pass the library with the fireplace and leather arm chairs, then the cafe and the game room. It reminds me of a petting zoo, but instead of llamas and baby goats, the pens are filled with old people. Some are angry to be held in captivity; some smile when I walk by, so excited to see a visitor they might piddle on the carpet. I try to imagine Tootsie playing cards with these people, or taking a trip to the grocery store where Egan works in the Manor shuttle, but I can’t see her hanging out with these corpses. And the fact that she’s too far gone to even hold her cards straight, is like rocks in my gut.

I find the pot of Fresh Fuchsia nail polish in my pocket and roll the neck between my fingers. This is Tootsie, I tell myself. Tootsie is Fresh Fuchsia. Tootsie goes on get-aways with her boy toys, awkward-almost-cool guys she meets in yoga. She drives a convertible and takes Salsa lessons and wears scandalously low-cut blouses with push-up bras. If Tootsie realized she was trapped in this petting zoo, she’d ask me to shoot her in her sleep.



Florabeth's got her hand on Tootsie's door. "Remember, Missy Luma, it's funny. One time my own mother ran naked through the Mikeet." Florabeth tells me stories about her mother's dementia, like knowing we're not the only family going through this makes it easier to deal with. "It was a small village and everyone knew her. Her long chichis were flapping in the wind. See? Funny, right?"

Florabeth and I nod, as if we both understand something that we both know is impossible to understand, then she opens the door and Tootsie looks up.

Tootsie's crepe-paper skin is covered in blue glitter. She must have used the eyeshadow I brought her all over her face. Her glassy eyes twinkle under globs of mascara. Slick orange gloss is splashed on her lips. Only the ends of her hair are still dyed strawberry blonde, the rest has grown out grey. A crinkled silver bow is stuck dead-center of her skull. "Hi-de-ho, Penny!" she says and tries to stand, but even if my grandmother believes she's nineteen, gravity hasn't forgotten she's old. A flicker of confusion sweeps her face as she sits.

"You look gorgeous," I say to distract her.

She bats her glittered eyes. "Parnell's paying a visit. Don't tell mother."

"Don't worry," I say. "I won't tell anyone."

Florabeth winks at me and closes the door as she leaves.

As soon as we're alone, I know Tootsie will say what she always says when she thinks Florabeth is out of earshot: "I don't trust that woman."

"She's your friend," I remind her.

"She keeps taking my things."

“She’s taking your clothes to be washed.”

“I don’t understand why Mother insists on hiring them after what they did at Pearl Harbor,” she mutters.

Once I tried to explain to Tootsie that Florabeth was Filipino, that she was Tootsie’s caretaker, not a maid, that Tootsie’s own mother, my great grandmother, had been dead many years. It didn’t end well; Tootsie had to be sedated.

Sometimes she says these things right in front of Florabeth. Florabeth tells me, “Don’t worry, Missy Luma. A lot of the old people say racist things. They don’t know what they’re saying.” I apologize and tell her, Tootsie never said anything racist before. But Florabeth just shrugs and says, “My mother started eating dirt. She never did that before either. Also spiders. Big ones from the jungle. She pulled their legs off one-by-one while they tried to run away.”

Today, Tootsie and I are alone, so I let her comments pass. I feel bad for not sticking up for Florabeth, but it’s not like Tootsie will remember if I teach her a lesson anyway. I take a seat across from her and she says, “What are you wearing under your sweater?” I look down, and see that Penny’s old cardigan is hanging open and my tank top is showing through. I wrap the cardigan over my chest and hope Tootsie will forget. I feel guilty about wanting her disease to work out in my favor, but sometimes her forgetting is the best thing for both of us.

Tootsie leans forward in her chair. Her forearms poke from her robe, two twigs wrapped in rice paper. She grins and says, “I ain’t no fuddy-duddy, but lord knows where you find these things. If mother sees you, she’ll have a conniption!”

“Is Parnell coming?” I ask. It's the one topic she can't resist, even though I'm still not sure who Parnell is, only that this is the man that my grandmother's mind can't unglue itself from--not my sweet Grandpa Barry.

Tootsie looks down at her gnarled hands, the chipped polish that Florabeth pampers her with when my grandmother allows the Oriental to touch her. I wonder if she's trying to figure out how these weathered fingers got on the ends of her arms or if her eyes actually see the past--if at the ends of her arms are the smooth hands of a much younger woman. When Tootsie looks up, she says, “Mother will come to see. When the baby is here, she'll fall in love. Don't you think?”

“Of course,” I tell her, because it's what she wants to hear, but I'm scrambling to figure-out what she means. My mom is Tootsie's only child and Penny died years before she was born. Time is flexible for Tootsie, but things are lining -up. Then I have a crazy idea, so I say, “Is it Parnell's baby?”

Tootsie cocks her head. The crumpled bow dangles by a clump of her thin hair. “Well of course. Whose else would it be?”

#

Life is messy. Counting keeps things in order. There are three steps up to our front door, six panels on the door, eighteen stairs to my bedroom, which is the second door on the left, directly across the hall from my younger sister, Taalia.

If I thought I could get all the way to my room without seeing anyone, I'd leave the hijab in my purse, but it's after six and Mom will be home from Pilates. As soon as she hears my key in the lock, she'll rush from the kitchen to ask about my day. She acts like we're normal. But four-hundred-and-nineteen days ago, an envelope was shoved through the vents of my locker. Inside were dozens of emails between Mom and my dad's business partner, or Uncle Gary, as I'd called him since I could talk. They wrote a lot about "blowing each others minds," meeting at an Embassy Suites, Mom's "tight bod," and all the years they'd kept their feelings inside trying to do the right thing.

It took me about ten seconds to figure out where the envelope came from. My sister's printer leaves streaks in the left-side margin. She's smart enough to hide it, so I knew she wanted me to know it was her. When I got home, there was another envelope in the kitchen and more emails scattered across the counter, black trails like Taalia's signature up each left-hand side. Mom and Dad's strained voices were arguing behind their closed bedroom door, but apparently they came to an understanding that they didn't find necessary to share with Taalia and me. If I was my dad I would have divorced her, but that's not what happened. Since Taalia made Mom and Uncle Gary's emails all of our business, every other Saturday night Mom doesn't come home, and Dad drinks until he passes-out. Taalia and I are supposed to act like everything is normal.

Mom never hid her paranoia that marrying a guy from the Middle East would lead Taalia and me to Islam. Since as long as I can remember, she's talked about how much she feared that we'd marry some radical guy we met on the internet and join the jihad. So, I couldn't think of a better way to make my feelings about her and Uncle Gary more

clear than to start wearing a hijab. I was nervous how the kids would react at school--that was before we moved and I started at Jefferson where nobody knew me anyway. It turned out that everybody was so busy freaking out about the kids from MLK High that the state told Jefferson they had to let enroll, that nobody even noticed one girl wearing a hijab.

When I open the door, the house smells like peanut butter cookies and roast chicken. Mom must have heard me park, because she's waiting in the entry, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "How was Toots?" she asks as she puts out her hand to confiscate my phone, which is stupid because the thing is so old it barely sends texts. Besides, if I wanted to look up how to become a terrorist on the internet, I could do it all day long at school and Mom wouldn't even know.

Mom's hair is in a loose bun. Her neon workout gear barely covers her recently updated boobs and her cardigan is hanging open over her toned abs. She's fifty-three going on twenty-five and it's totally embarrassing. "Why don't you visit her and see for yourself," I say. But we both know she can't.

"That really hurts," Mom says, but I know she's secretly happy that Toots can't stand the sight of her; it gives her more time to take Pilates classes and blow Uncle Gary's mind.

Dad comes up behind her. He's got a dark brown bottle of beer in his hand and he's looking a little too fit and manscaped himself. I wouldn't be surprised if he went and got himself a side-piece, too. A person can only put up with so much before they start to do their own dirt. "Pretty scarf," he says. "Reminds me of one my mother had in Tehran."

Mom's jaw stiffens. "What happened to not encouraging her?"

Dad throws back a slug of beer. The bottom of the bottle is inches from Mom's forehead. He's basically giving her the finger.

But Mom's got a talent for acting untouchable; she sighs as if she's witnessing the most boring conversation in the world. This is how my parents get off, they humiliate each other until somebody calls mercy. I've been watching it my whole life. I used to think it was normal. Thank God I'm finally old enough to realize it's sick.

Dad slowly drops the bottle to his waist. He looks at me and says, "Sadly, Luma my dear, my mother didn't have a choice. But, I imagine, if one day you don't want to wear a hijab, then you'll take it off." Then he looks at Mom and says, "Besides, as far as I know, religious freedom is welcome in this country."

#

I spend sixteen hours a week with Tootsie. Two hours after school, Monday through Friday, and three hours a day on the weekends. Once I got strep throat and I couldn't visit until the antibiotics kicked in. I worried about Tootsie alone in her room, but Florabeth told me that she just talked to the empty chair. I try to act like Toots really needs my visits, but I have a feeling I might need them more than she does.

"Is there a guy for you?" Toots asks.

I think about how, this morning, I caught Egan flirting with Hannah Stevenson. He swore he was just being friendly, but i could tell there was more to it than that. I tried to play cool, as if the Koran taught me some juju that makes me invincible to jealousy.

Egan is really crushed out on the idea that I'm a saint, and I'm really crushed out on Egan, so, I just smiled like I felt sorry for their silly teenage games, but inside I wanted to let Hannah have it.

I must have been daydreaming too long, because even time-traveling Tootsie says, "What's the tale, Nightingale? Some daddy-o taking you around the block." She's got one false eyelash glued half-way up her eyelid, but she's still the most reasonable adult in my life.

"It's no big deal," I tell her.

"Are you going steady?"

"It's complicated."

"He's not pressuring you to play backseat bingo is he? If you need Parnell to go ape, just say the word."

I think of Egan's mocha skin, his sideways smile. I think of how bad I want to touch him and, how if I do, it will break the spell between us. "Thanks Toots," I tell her. Then I ask, "How'd you and Parnell meet?" I've been thinking maybe I could find Parnell and bring him to visit. He probably has arthritis and ten grandkids--and maybe seeing him would crack Tootsie like an egg--but, maybe her mind would airbrush the years, and he'd be the same as he is in her memory.

Tootsie slaps her knee so hard I'm afraid she'll snap the bone. "You're a gas!" she says. "You know I met him on the campus lawn and asked him to the Alpha Chi social. I don't know what possessed me to be so fresh." Tootsie blushes and I catch a glimpse of

the woman who told my mom, I have no idea how I raised a daughter with a stick so far up her ass.

“I remember,” I say. “But, what’s his last name?”

Tootsie’s face darkens. I wonder if I’ve taken it too far. I should have asked Florabeth if she knew anything before I started pushing Tootsie’s fragile mind.

Thankfully, Toots says, “Penny, are you feeling well? You’re asking me the strangest things.”

“I just enjoy your stories,” I say.

She bats her eyes and the strip of lashes breaks free and lands under her nose like a tiny mustache. Then, in the most sweet and pure voice my grandmother says, “It is a bit of a love story, isn’t it?”

I let my breath go and say, “It is. Can you tell it to me from the beginning?”

#

The days of the week have their own order. It's not the same as counting, but it helps to know the patterns. It’s a Tuesday so I don't expect Mom or Dad to be home, but I put my hijab back on in case I run into Taalia, which is a good thing because I’m wrong about my parents being gone. When I open the door, they’re both in the living room, four steps to the left of the entryway, acting like it’s normal that they’re hanging out.

“Luma! You're home!” Mom says, she’s way too excited, so something must be up.



I want to say a dozen snarky things, but Tootsie's story is bouncing around my brain. So, I just pass Mom my phone and say, "Hi," which I instantly regret because the hope on her face makes me nauseous. Dad's right behind her grinning. "I have a lot of homework," I tell them. "I might need the internet a little longer tonight."

Dad's hand goes to the small of Mom's back, which is confusing because I haven't seen him touch her since the emails showed-up. Then he says, "What are you working on?"

"A report."

"About what?"

Not about the jihad, I want to say, but I can hear Tootsie in my head, telling me to cool it. "The history of adoption." I tell him so I won't have to clear my browser history and search a bunch of extra stuff before Mom checks my computer to make sure I haven't booked a flight to Yemen to meet my dream man.

"That's a strange topic," Mom says. "What class is it for?"

"Health. It's part of Sex Ed."

Mom nods.

I figure if I'm stuck talking to her, I might as well get some information. "Did Tootsie have kids before you?"

Mom frowns. "You know I'm an only child. Why would you ask that?"

I ignore her and say, "How old was Tootsie when she met grandpa?"

Mom looks at Dad, but he just shrugs and takes a big gulp of his beer.

I say, "I'm wondering because she was almost forty when she had you."

Mom's face brighten and she says, "She was a woman ahead of her time. After college, she worked in D.C. for a few years--mostly on women's rights and access to birth-control. Then she met Grandpa and the rest is history."

"Did you ever talk to Toots about her life before she had you?" I ask.

Mom tucks her bottom lip under her teeth and looks at me like I'm some big math problem she's almost figured out. "I guess not," she says. "She was just my mom."

#

Time is the most obvious way to count, but hardly anyone notices they're doing it because the clock never stops. If I told people about my counting, they'd say I had a problem, but you better believe they know what time they get off work, or when the lunch bell is going to ring. When the lunch bell rings at Jefferson, there's a four second pause before the speakers click off. I wait at my desk until the speakers go dead, counting: one-two-three-four, then I start to pack up my things. This way, I'm the last one to leave. But, that's not about counting; I'm just giving Egan enough time to get to my class so it doesn't look like I'm waiting for him.

Today, he's wearing my favorite outfit: camo pants, and a white t-shirt that looks crisp against his brown skin. He's so hot I could imagine him on a reality dating show, and all the girls would want him to pick them. The scar over his eyebrow makes him look a little dangerous, but when he smiles that crooked smile, his face turns on like a light bulb. When he sees me walking out the door, he says, "Hey girl, you want to eat lunch?"

We used to keep a real low profile, especially at school, but as we've gotten closer, we spend more time in places where other people can see us together.

I play it cool and say, "You're not eating with Worm?"

"He's got Robotics." Egan puts his hands out to take my books.

If I wasn't trying to make him think I'm a saint, I'd carry my own books and we'd hold hands instead, but I'm already in this lie so deep, that if I tell Egan the truth now, he'll think I'm a psycho. So I say, "Cool," and try to hand him my books in a way that makes it impossible for his fingers to not graze mine. I'll act startled and then tell him it's ok. I'll be a saint, but also a chill girl who's easy going about mistakes.

But, Egan's head is elsewhere, because he just waits for me to drop my books in his arms and says, "You heard about the fight?"

When I see he's not going to take the books from my hands, I drop them in his arms and say, "No."

"It was right in front of me. They jumped one of the MLK kids in the locker room."

"Who did?" I ask.

"Three white kids."

"Why?" I ask. And as we walk toward the cafeteria, I can hear that other kids talking about the fight too.

Egan shrugs. "He was minding his own business and one of the white kids just straight sucker-punched him for absolutely no reason at all."

"What did you do?"

Egan looks at me sideways. “Babygirl, I can’t get mixed-up in that. Suspensions don’t win scholarships.”

“Did the MLK kid get hurt?”

“He got beat-down. Big kid too. I heard he’s real good at basketball. Coach came in and broke it up. Fifty bucks it’s the MLK kid who gets busted.”

“But he didn’t do anything.”

Egan stops in the hall and looks at me like I might be crazy. Then he sighs, drops his voice, and says, “The kid was standing around being black. If you haven’t noticed, that’s a crime around here.”

“That’s discrimination,” I say.

“You telling me nobody ever trips off your scarf?”

“That’s different,” I say. But what I want to say is that whenever someone looks at me crazy because of my scarf, I tell myself that I’m not even Muslim. And, if I wasn’t trying to make Egan think that I’m a saint, I would’ve taken my hijab off weeks ago. I want to make my point to Mom, but getting cut-off from the internet, and not having a real phone, is getting super annoying. I can’t say any of that to Egan though, so instead I say, “If you’re serious about your beliefs then it doesn’t matter what anyone thinks.” I know that’s totally stupid. Some poor kid just got beat up for the color of his skin. Egan’s right, if the way things have been going with the MLK kids is any indication, the black kid is probably getting suspended right now. It’s a totally different situation than my hijab. I can just take off my scarf any time--it’s not even really my religion--but, nobody can take off their skin.

Egan says, "I love when you get all Mother Teresa, but sometimes I swear you're not even on the same planet as the rest of us."

"That's not fair," I protest, but even I know he has a good point.

"I'm just saying your religion gives you a way of looking at things. I mean, I'm not ashamed of who I am, but sometimes it'd be cool if I could just chill and be white for a minute."

I'm about to apologize but then Hannah Stevenson walks past. "Hi, Egan," she says, wiggling her fingers and Egan practically falls over saying hi back.

When Hannah disappears, and Egan realizes that I'm still alive, he looks at me and says, "What were you saying?"

And I snap. "Why don't you go hangout with Hannah."

He looks so confused, I almost feel bad. But, I'm so over with him flirting with Hannah while I mess-up my whole life trying to be a saint for him. So I say, "You'd obviously rather be with Hannah than me."

"What are you talking about?" he says, which makes me even more mad.

"I'm talking about how you get stupid every time Hannah is around." I don't sound like a saint, but I'm tired of being that girl. I crank-up the volume until I'm standing in the door of the cafeteria yelling. "You talk a big game about how the black kids have it unfair, but if you're chasing some basic white girl, then you're a total hypocrite." Then I turn around and leave him to deal with all the kids staring at the Muslim chick losing her shit on the most popular boy in school--that girl who nobody could figure out why Egan was hanging out with her in the first place.

#

I started counting the day Mom called me at school and told me that Tootsie had climbed over the fourth floor railing at the Lemonwood Fashion Plaza clutching Penny's old cardigan and screaming for her dead sister.

It took six police officers, a social worker, the mall manager, and a Sears employee to talk Tootsie off the ledge. Then one twenty-four hour hold, an emergency room doctor, and a hospital psychiatrist to determine she had a raging case of dementia--which I could have told them months earlier, if anybody in my family had been listening to anybody else.

If my mom hadn't been so stubborn, she would have picked up on the clues, but she stopped visiting Tootsie the day Tootsie told her Uncle Gary only wanted what he couldn't have, and if Mom thought that was love then she deserved what she got. I had headphones on and they didn't think I could hear what they were saying, but I guess they never heard of turning down the volume and spying. The last words Tootsie said to Mom were, "You're my daughter, and I'll always love you, but I didn't raise you to be this kind of woman."

Now I'm the only one who can visit Tootsie--even though I have to wear Penny's rotten old cardigan. If Toots catches a glimpse of Mom, she starts shrieking and nobody can make her stop.

#

Florabeth hands me the cardigan and I hand her my hijab. “Today is not a good day,” she says.

“You’re telling me,” I say.

If Florabeth hears me, she doesn't let it show. “Missy Luma, there was a whole year that my mother grieved the death of my father, but he was the one who was holding her hand while she cried. One time he tried to say, ‘I am your husband and I am still living,’ but she called him a ghost and wouldn't let him back in the room for a long time. Then they both cried, but in different rooms.”

I’m getting a bad feeling. “Is Tootsie okay?”

“Maybe it's time we try to bring your mother back.”

“Maybe.”

“When it's over you can not go back and make changes,” she says as she opens Tootsie’s door. When I see inside, I know why Florabeth is worried. Tootsie’s face is pale and naked. No glitter or lashes, no bows.

“Mother,” she says and I realize she's speaking to Florabeth.

“Yes, dear?” Florabeth says.

“Would you mind giving Penny and me a few minutes alone?”

Florabeth looks at me and I nod to let her know I’ll be okay. “Sure,” she tells Tootsie, then she hugs me and whispers, “If you need me I’ll be just outside.”

As soon as the door is shut, Tootsie says, “Three suits came looking for Parnell.”

“Why?” I ask.

Her eyes drift to the corner of the room and I wonder what she sees. “He left me, Penny. What am I going to do?”

I remember Tootsie who rollerblades, Tootsie who speaks fluent French, who flirts with busboys and repairmen. Now there is this Tootsie: Tootsie who is showing me the mountains she climbed to become the woman I knew, the woman who raised my Mom.

“Mother thinks it would be best for me to go away...to a home for unwed mothers.” She looks at me and her eyes focus. I think that maybe we’ll have one of those rare moments when Tootsie is lucid, but when she opens her mouth, she says, “I can’t do it, Penny. I can’t go on while my baby is raised by someone else.”

I hold my breath in case time starts crashing together inside her and Tootsie starts to spin out of control, but she stays calm, so I ask, “What will you do?”

“I know it’s a sin, but...I hope you won’t think less of me.”

I kneel beside her and take her hands in mine. I remember the strength of her fingers leading me through the zoo, flicking her cigarettes, opening tight jars--these are not the hands I hold. The hands I hold are drained, two empty packets of skin. “I could never think less of you,” I tell her.

“I need you to help me find a doctor.” Her throat catches and she has to gulp before she can finish. “I need you to help me find someone who can take care of it.”

I’m so shocked at what I’m hearing, that without thinking, I say, “Do you mean an abortion?”



She whimpers quietly at first, but her volume gathers quickly. I try to call her back, “Toots, no, it’s me, Penny.” But I’m too late. In a matter of seconds, Tootsie is screeching so loud I can’t hear my own voice.

She bolts up-right, her twiggy arms shoot from her robe, fingers writhing at the ends of her hands. I scramble back until the wall is pressed to my shoulders and push the call-button, but Florabeth is already rushing in. Two more caretakers run in behind her. I watch, my heart pounding through my ribs, as Tootsie falls into Florabeth’s arms. And while Florabeth gently strokes my grandmother’s hair, I take off Penny’s sweater and quietly slip away.

#

I lose count on the way home, but I don’t circle the block and start again. I focus on the road and keep repeating, “Tootsie asked me to get her an abortion.” In between repeating, I try out different laughs hoping one will feel right, but I don’t think even Florabeth could find a way to make this funny.

When I get home, there’s real laughter coming from the kitchen. I’m a zombie moving toward the sound. I don’t know what I’m going to do when I get to the kitchen, but all I know is I need to see Mom. I need to understand why she’s the one Tootsie chose to have--and why she ended up being my mom. I can’t help thinking that I was supposed to be Tootsie’s other baby’s daughter and maybe if I can just see Mom, I’ll understand what went so wrong.

Mom sees me coming. “Luma’s here!” she says.

When I step into the room, Dad’s taking a tray out of the oven. A pretty blonde woman wearing ripped jeans is sipping white wine. “Hi, Luma,” she says.

Then I see Uncle Gary. He’s leaning against the refrigerator, smiling like he’s not half the reason my family is a mess. Mom and Dad are looking back and forth between me and Uncle Gary like we’re the world’s most exciting tennis game. The room gets so silent, I can hear Taalia’s music upstairs. I wonder what she’s been doing while this circus has been going on right under her bedroom.

Uncle Gary clears his throat. “How’s Tootsie?”

The sound of my grandmother’s name in his mouth fills me with violence. I slam my hand on the counter, sweeping a tray of mini quiches onto the floor. The blonde gasps and steps back. Her ankle rolls in her strappy heels and she tumbles into a bar stool. I feel bad because she’s just the innocent victim, but I’m not the one who started this war. Nobody else makes a peep--they don’t even ask if the blonde is okay. “I can’t believe you people,” I say, then I turn around and walk out. No one follows me up the stairs. No one even calls my name. But when I catch my reflection in my mirror, I realize I’m not wearing my hijab. For a second, I kick myself for letting them see me without a scarf, but then I think, who gives a damn? Let them all wonder. It’s not like they ever felt like they had to explain their actions to me.

I take all of my scarves out of my drawers and I make a nest of them on my bed, then turn off the lights and lie down. I pull the ends of the scarves over my legs, my back,

my shoulders, until I am covered in slippery rainbows. Then I open my laptop and message Egan, *I'm sorry I tripped out.*

My parents are downstairs laughing. I can hear the clinking of their dishes coming through my floor. I wish Taalia was the kind of sister who wanted to hangout, but she's one of those computer engineering geniuses and we don't have much in common anymore. It's like Taalia and I are alone right next door to each other, the same as Florabeth's parents, only we don't cry about what's happening to our family, we surf the internet instead.

I click in the search bar and type, history of abortion US, clicking from site to site. I read about Roe vs. Wade and twelve-year olds forced to give birth to the children of incest and rape. I read about therapeutic abortions for wealthy white women, and coat hanger abortions that tore out the insides of scared girls. I read about Septic Wards full of women fighting infection, chemical burns from forcing radiator fluid into their bodies. I think about poor Tootsie, going through this, scared and grieving the loss of her love. Then I find some college student's research paper with a mention of Tootsie's work on women's rights and something clicks in. Tootsie has never been a victim, there have just been times where she didn't know how the story was going to end. I think about her now, how there's only one way this part of her story ends, but maybe that's not so bad. Maybe there's more going on than what I understand. Who knows, maybe that thing is even God and me wearing a hijab is like putting money in the bank, even though I've only been faking it, because faking it was still a choice that I made.

Downstairs, chairs screech as they slide away from the table. The voices move into the living room. Someone turns on Bob Marley. Maybe Dad is dancing with the blonde. Maybe they're going to swap and I'll have to choose who I live with: Mom and Gary or Dad and the blonde. If Tootsie was well, I'd live with her, but that's not one of my choices anymore--it's not how this part of my story is going to end.

I type in, book abortion appointment online. There are dozens of sites. It crazy that Tootsie didn't have all of these options and how time can change everything--if it doesn't run out. I get an idea and even though I know it's ridiculous, there's something about it that feels right.

I click on the first site and make Tootsie an appointment for the Monday after next. Then I go through the sites, one-by-one, filling out forms with Tootsie's information. In an hour, I've got her booked for a dozen abortions across three states.

I still haven't heard back from Egan, but he's been working, so maybe he just didn't have time and then he forgot. I message him again. He DM's me back right away, *Hey, I thought you'd be offline. You ok?*

*Sort of.* I type. Then I wait. He doesn't write back.

The front door closes and I hear voices outside. I peek through the blinds. Uncle Gary is opening the passenger door of his car for the blonde. She tips her head back and laughs at something he says. He looks pleased with himself, but also hunched and old. I think about how he never got married, never had kids, never even brought a girlfriend to our house for dinner. And I wonder if maybe that was because he was always in love with my mom. If he made choices and now this is just how his story is turning out.

I hear Mom and Dad coming up the stairs, the sound of their steps, the swish of their clothes. Their bedroom door creaks closed and the house is silent. After a while, I hear a soft ping from my computer and realize that Mom forgot to turn off the internet. I lay back down on my bed of scarves and read, *Sorry, had to do some things for my manager.*

I wait.

*Are you there?*

I type, *Would you still like me if I let you touch me?*

*Are you serious?*

*I don't know.*

*If you did it because you wanted me to touch you, then yes. But if you did it because you thought you had to, then no.*

*What if I didn't wear a hijab?*

It takes Egan a minute to respond and I start to wonder what I'll do if he says that he only likes me because of my religion, but when the words show up on the screen they are perfect: *What if I didn't wear socks?*

**Bryan Canaan**

**Bryan Canaan** <brycan@Blingly.com>

8:06 AM (5 days ago)

To: me

R,

If you'll have me back. I'll leave Panama right now. I promise that I'll be everything you need me to be.

Love,

B

...

*“ One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar.”*

*– Helen Keller*

## **Taalìa**

I can hear Luma's TV on the other side of my bedroom wall. Sometimes I wish I was more like my sister; when Luma's upset, she crams it in everyone's face, then she locks herself in her room and watches reality tv until her brain melts. I miss being best friends with her, like when we were little, but so much has happened in our family, I can't figure out how to reboot. If Luma and I were best friends again, I'd go knock on her door right now, I'd tell her what's going on with Jaycee and ask her to help me save him. But, Luma and I aren't close anymore, so she's alone in her room watching reality bimbos and I'm alone in my room hacking teachers' email accounts.

So far, I've got four teachers hacked, but they were all just for practice. Now that I'm ninety-nine percent sure there's no trails leading back to my computer, I'm running Principal Bower's account. Depending on what I discover, maybe I'll run the password cracker on the Superintendent, or the Athletic Director--and whoever else I find out is responsible for ruining Jaycee's life.

I've got both my computers working on the darknet. While my laptop runs the cracker, I'm using my desktop to fish a perv online--but, to be honest, my heart's not totally in it because I can't stop thinking about Jaycee. He's basically my only friend and the whole situation has got me pretty messed up. Don't get me wrong, I'm not some

creepy loner plotting to shoot up the school. I know a lot of people, like the Robotics Club kids, but they're just acquaintances, not real friends. Real friends are people like Jaycee--people I'd take a bullet for--and people like that don't come around that often.

I watch the little dot-dot-dots blinking in the reply box on my desktop screen. I imagine the perv on the other end trying to figure out what to write. Maybe she's not really a twenty-eight year old bartender like she says. Maybe she's a bedridden kid with a rare form of cancer. Behind the screen, anything is possible. Then again, *BadAssBandita!* doesn't sound like a kid. It sounds like a trucker with a smoker's cough. Maybe that's why it's taking "her" so long to respond. Maybe "she's" buying cigs while "she" fills up her rig.

It makes Jaycee nervous when I mess with online pervs. He says I should leave it to the cops. I told him catching these creeps is my stress-relief, like when he plays basketball, but then he said, "Taalia, basketball can't get you arrested," and I have to admit he had a good point.

Sometimes I wonder why Jaycee and I are friends--besides second period Bio, we don't ever hang-out in person and we have almost nothing in common. He's one of the MLK Promise Scholars that they're bussing over from the hood; my house is on a golf course. He plays basketball; I fish pervs and build robots. His grandma would whoop his butt if he skipped church; my parents are probably swingers and my sister is a pretend Muslim. But, I guess that's how friendship works, we don't have to be the same, we just get each other.



My desktop pings. *BadAssBandita!* says, “Just tell me you’re not twelve. I want to help you, but twelve is too young. I could get in a lot of trouble.”

She must know I’m lying. I’ve already told her I’m a fifteen year old virgin with lesbian feelings. I also told her my parents are sending me to one of those crazy christian conversion camps in the morning, so they can pray away my gay. I told her that’s why I’m going to run away tonight. Posting online that you want to run away is sure fire perv bait. It works ninety-nine percent of the time. “I’m not twelve,” I write back.

“Can you prove it?”

“How?”

“What’s your birthday?”

“Seriously?” I write. “I could look that up on a calendar--that's not proof.”

The dot-dot-dots blink on the screen. I picked a real winner. I could have caught five pervs in the amount of time it takes *BadAssBandita!* to write one response. I consider disconnecting and just focusing all my attention on the password cracker, but once the program is launched, it's a waiting game. I need something else to occupy my mind or I'll just sit around obsessing over Jaycee.

I’ve wanted to hack the school administration since the very first time one of those kids from MLK got busted for no reason, but Jaycee told me it wasn’t worth it. He told me he understood where I was coming from and that it was cool that I cared that much, but that I didn’t really get what it’s like to be one of the Promise Scholars and the last thing any of them wanted was more attention from the media. I could see where he was coming from, since I had knew about the Promise Scholars before I even came to

Jefferson Heights. I guess that's what happens when a tech billionaire picks some big charity project, the whole internet blows up. I even saw a picture of Jaycee once, like a year before I knew him. It was a group shot of five Scholars on a trip to New York City. Jaycee is so big he really stands out, so that kind of stuck in my mind.

Then there was all the attention when the Jefferson parents freaked-out that the Promise Scholars were going to be bussed in to Jefferson Heights. Jaycee didn't have to spell it out, I knew he meant that I don't understand what's it like to have a bunch of freaked-out white people waiting for me to make a mistake, freaked out that I'll infect their kids with my black people problems. I listened to Jaycee that first time and I listened to him as more MLK kids got blamed for stupid things while Jefferson kids never took the rap. But now it's Jaycee on the line and I'm not listening any more.

I can't decide if I'm upset because I'm worried about Jaycee, or if I'm just pissed that he didn't let me hack the administration two months ago. I keep feeling like there has to be a way to rewind time and change what happened. It happened so fast. Second period we were in Bio cracking jokes. He goes to P.E. and I go to Advanced Photo, like normal. By the end of third period, he's gone. At lunch, everybody is talking about what happened. I heard some kid say Jaycee punched a teacher. Then, a girl says he got caught selling drugs. The kid who sits behind me in Econ said he heard Jaycee got arrested for gang-activity. That's when I wanted to stand up and yell, "Jaycee wants to be a neurosurgeon and he got a perfect score on his math SATs!" But that's something Luma would do; I'm better behind a screen.

I'm tired of watching those dot-dot-dots and the password cracker could take all night. It's time to speed things up. "Want to know a secret?" I type to the perv I've got online. Secrets are straight-up molester bait. I can almost feel the molesto-index rising on the other end.

But all I get back is: "Hang-on."

"I can't," I write. "My mom's going to check on me in ten minutes. If she finds me talking to you, I'll get the switch."

The dot-dot-dots blink, then, "Give me two minutes. My girlfriend is putting together a list of organizations that can help you."

It takes me a second to realize what she's saying and that I've wasted half my night on a nice person when I could have been catching a real perv. I feel bad, so I type, "Just had a miracle. My parents are cool with me being gay." Then, I unplug my desktop from the wall and cover my webcam with a new Wonder Woman Band Aid. I'm not taking any chances letting some creep hack my camera to watch me sleep. Then I tuck my secret router under my dirty socks and panties, so mom keeps thinking that she "controls the internet in this house," and I put my laptop in my closet so I can keep the password cracker running. I'll have Principal Bower hacked by morning. She's probably the kind of idiot who uses the same password for everything.

I drift off listening to the murmur of Luma's reality bimbos, thinking about how after I track down Principal Bower's personal email account, I'll sign her up for a buttload of newsletters and coupon sites. I'll check out her bank account, make some donations to charities, order a bunch of crap online and have it delivered to animal

shelters and old folks homes. I'll definitely post weird political stuff on her social media accounts, random memes and confessions that make her college friends think she's lost her nuts-and-bolts. If she's got one of those connected thermostats, or robot vacuum cleaners, maybe I'll jack up the heat in the middle of the night, program her vacuum to run in circles like a dog chasing its own tale. If she leaves her computer on twenty-four-seven, like most idiots do, I'll make sure she's got a nice steady stream of porn pop-ups. I won't do it all at once, of course. I'll do it piece-by-piece, bit-by-bit, until she's pulling her hair out, wondering where I'll attack next. Which serves her right for what she did to Jaycee and how she's been targeting the MLK Scholars at school. She might have her name on the office door, but I've got the keys to every place she can hide.

#

“Taalia!” Worm says when I walk into the robotics club meeting. “Damn guurl, you look so good I could eat you with ranch dressing.” Then he licks his finger and pretends to touch me, but apparently I'm sizzling hot and he pulls his hand back. Most of the club is already there and everyone's watching to see what I'll do. I know Worm thinks talking to me like this is a compliment, but I've told him I don't like it a million times and he just doesn't get it. Sure he's got Down Syndrome, but he's not stupid. He knows what's up, he just thinks because he hangs out with Egan Turlock he can act like a player and embarrass everyone else.

Usually I don't let it get under my skin, but I'm stressing about Jaycee and I've

had enough, so I say,

“Ya, well you look like a Muppet.” My voice comes out harsher than I meant for it too and right away I feel like a jerk.

Worm cranks his neck so he can look down at the huge Snuffalupagus slinking across his shirt. “That’s not cool,” he says. His chin is pressed to his chest and his raspy voice is even more choked than normal. For a second I think I’m about to go down in Jefferson Heights history as the asshole who bullied the special needs kid, but then Worm lifts up his head and he’s cracking-up so hard he blows snot out his nose. A couple of the other kids laugh and then everybody goes back to doing whatever they were doing before I walked in.

“Sorry,” I say as I set my bag next to Worm and sit on the desk facing him. “I’ve been under a lot of stress.”

“You’re a bitch,” he says. Then he flexes his pecs like a WWE wrestler and passes me the tub of treats his mom always makes for our club meeting.

I pick up a cupcake. “No brownies?”

“Next time,” he says, then, “Hey, you want to have sex?” like the idea just popped into his head. I’m surprised this is the first time he’s asked me today; he probably asked a hundred girls before lunch. It’s a new thing he’s started doing since he broke-up with Hannah Stevenson. They weren’t actually going-out, but Worm thought they were. He says, now that he’s single, “he wants to sample the goods.” I’d say Worm’s a perv, but he stays cool even when you tell him you don’t want to have sex with him. Sometimes I wonder what he’d do if someone actually said yes.

“No thanks,” I say. “You’re not my type.”

“You don’t like Downs guys?” He flexes his chest and crosses his bulky forearms over Snuffalupagus. “That’s prejudice.”

“I don’t like dudes,” I remind him, even though he doesn't need reminding. He texts me lesbian questions all the time, and I have to pretend that I know what I’m talking about. Sometimes I even have to look stuff up just to give him a legitimate answer. I’ve learned a lot about lesbian sex trying to convince Worm that’s my thing.

“If I was a Downs girl you’d do me?”

“Probably not.” I crumple up the foil cupcake wrapper and jam it in the pocket of my jeans.

“Sex-nazi,” Worm says. Then he grabs another cupcake and crams the whole thing in his mouth. His lips are ringed with bright yellow frosting and tiny blue sprinkles. I pass him a napkin and say, “You’re never going to get a girl looking like that.”

“You don’t know about food play?” he asks. “You really need to open your mind.”

Sometimes I catch a glimpse of Worm in a certain light, or maybe it's the way he moves his head, and I can see what he’d look like if he didn't have Downs. He’d probably look just like one of those guys on my sister’s reality shows with piercing blue eyes and a chiseled chin, a guy who lives like his penis is on permanent spring break. In those moments my heart cracks a little because I’m glad he’s not that guy, I’m glad he’s just Worm. He still got a little yellow icing on his upper lip, but I don't tell him to wipe it off. There’s a fine line between being Worm’s friend and being his babysitter.

I see Annalee as soon as she walks in. She's got on my favorite outfit: lace-up

boots, cream tights, a plaid schoolgirl skirt and a thermal. She's carrying her skateboard and her blunt bangs make a perfect black wedge across her pale forehead.

I must be staring, because Worm twists around in his chair to see what I'm looking at. He's got a grin on his face when he turns back. "That's who you want to do."

"She's not my type," I tell him because I don't know how to explain that I don't want to *do* Annalee, or anyone else, I want to *be* Annalee. I want to be that perfect anime gamer chick, with huge almond eyes and blunt bangs. I want boyish hips and a tiny chest, not the thirty-six, twenty-four, thirty-six, holy-smokes! I inherited from grandma Tootsie.

Annalee sets down her skateboard next to us, and says, "¿Que pasa, Geeks?"

"Worm was just asking if I want to have sex," I shout, before he can say something embarrassing about Annalee and me.

Annalee nods. "He asked me twice in P.E."

Then, Mr. Dillie walks in. "Good afternoon!" He flings open his button-up shirt like Superman. Underneath, he's got on one of his secret t-shirts. On the front is a graphic of the evolution of man from ape to human, but, at the very end, pushing the man backwards, is a robot. The words say, "ARE YOU AN EXPERIMENT IN ARTIFICIAL STUPIDITY!?!?"

We all laugh and Dillie smiles in a way that he never does when he's teaching Health Sciences. "You like this one?" He wads up his work shirt and crams it in his bag. "Got it online." The shirt is pretty cool, but the best part is that all day Dillie had it hidden just under his work shirt, right there in front of everyone and they didn't even know.

“Let’s get down to business,” he says. All nine of us in the Robotics Club slide into chairs. “So, my future luminaries and tycoons, they’ve opened registration for the state competition. Are we ready to battle?”

The group makes an awkward attempt to cheer. This kid Jacob kind of barks. Three girls in the back squeal. Worm gives a deep, “Yeah!” which is the most normal noise in the room. It’s clear that none of us have ever been on a real sports team. Annalee and I just look at each other like *these people are ridiculous*--even though we’re clearly part of the group.

Dillie opens his laptop and balances it on one of his forearms while he paces. “I’m looking at the rules. There’s some size restrictions and a few other things we need to keep in mind, but let’s get the juices flowing. Who wants to take notes while we brainstorm?” He holds up a red dry erase pen. I’m hoping Annalee will do it so I can stare at her, but that kid Jacob almost knocks over his desk to grab the pen. I know why he doesn’t have a lot of friends.

“If we had our dream bot, what would it do?” Dillie asks.

“Sex bot!” Worm yells.

Annalee looks at me and I smile like *I know, right!* But really I’m thinking, *Come on Worm, at least mix it up a little.*

Dillie says, “Maybe ‘dream’ was too strong of a word.”

One of the girls in the back shouts, “My dream bot could fly.”

Dillie points at her. “Good! I like where you’re headed. But the rules state that the bot must remain on the ground for the entire battle.”



Jacob says, "It could have circular blades on its sides."

"No flammables and no blades." Dillie says.

"We can't torch it or cut it?"

"Not in the teen division."

The rest of the room groans, but I have an idea. "What if we took our opponents apart?" I ask.

Someone says, "The other bots?"

"Ya. What if we disassemble the other bots while we're battling?"

"That would be awesome!" Worm says. He's still got that little bit of frosting on his upper lip, so I point at my upper lip and he gets the message.

Then, because Jacob's a hater, he says, "That's impossible."

I shake my head. "It's simple. We just need to create a high compliance bot with multiple end effectors which will allow us to reconfigure the attachments between matches. That way they'll never see what's coming. If the attachments are also manipulatable, that's even better. I can program the board with some basic AI, so the bot can learn from one match to the next and we can use a combination of CPU and GPU processors to maximize the efficiency and image recognition so it'll be crazy fast." I stare at Jacob like *you're a tiny little ant and I just crushed you*. Then I smile and say, "How does that sound?"

"Expensive," Mr. Dillie says.

But I say, "We can play the education card and get an open source board for a couple hundred bucks. Even if we buy the end effectors prefabricated, we're talking like

a thousand bucks for everything.”

One of the girls asks. “What’s an end effector?” Jacob’s pimply face is flaming and he’s clutching the dry erase pen so tight his knuckles are white. I can tell he has no idea what an end effector is either, but there’s no way he’d admit it.

Annalee flips her sleek hair over her shoulder and says, “It’s a tool that goes on the end of a robot arm.” I instantly want to be her even more than I did before.

Dillie scrolls around on his laptop. “Rules state a thousand dollar max, so that works. You guys have eight hundred in your account. You’ll have to raise the rest.”

“We could do a bake sale,” Annalee suggests. “Maybe Worm’s mom could help us?”

Worm says, “My mom would totally bake for our bot.”

“Tell her to make those caramel brownies.”

“And those peanut butter bar things.”

“Nutty dream bars,” Worm says all serious. He’s taking notes.

While the other kids are talking about baked goods, I have another idea. “What do the rules say about hacking?”

Dillie hunches over his screen and he looks like the caveman on his shirt. When he straightens back up to homosapien he says, “Nothing here on hacking.”

Worm flexes because he knows where I’m headed, but nobody else in the club knows about my other extracurricular activities. “Taalia! Taalia! Taalia!” Worm chants.

“Are you a hacker?” Dillie asks, and even though he’s got an adult *I’m not condoning this* tone in his voice, I can see he’s also impressed.

I have to fight the impulse to tell him I know the password to his email is BabyGotBack#92Rulz. But I just say, “Sort of.”

Annalee sits up straight and looks at me in a new way, which feels good, but also like I’m naked. But then Jacob-the-hater says, “Getting game cheats online doesn't count as hacking.”

My face gets hot. “How about taking control of their operating system and reprogramming their bot to take itself apart?” I say while I stare him down. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Worm flexing.

“Right,” Jacob says. “Like you could do that.”

“Right,” I say. And even though I’m not totally sure I know what I’m talking about, I say, “Ya, I could do that.”

#

I love when the house is quiet like this, but it’s after six, and I know everyone will be home soon, so I throw together a big plate of cheese cubes, hummus, pepperoni and chips to bring up to my room. If I time my bathroom breaks right, I won't have to see anyone until morning--maybe Luma, but it might be kind of nice to run into my sister.

I lock my bedroom door, throw my backpack on my bed and hook my desktop back up to the power and the internet. The Band Aid stays on the camera, though; I’m about to do some digging and there's no need to take unnecessary risks. Plus, I like the way Superwoman is staring at me with her hands on her hips like she’s saying, *let's go*

*kick some ass.*

I use a chip to scoop a glob of hummus, top it with pepperoni and cram the whole thing in my mouth. While the desktop fires up, I dig my laptop out of my dirty panties and socks. I'm tempted to run Jacob-the-hater's email through the password cracker, but he's already doing an excellent job ruining his own life by being such a royal jerk. Besides, I've been waiting to get into Principal Bower's email account all day. While I wait for the logins to complete, I wrap a pepperoni around a cube of pepper jack and chew.

The screen-saver lights up my big monitor. It's my favorite picture from when Luma and I were little. We've got on matching American flag bathing suits. And we're both missing the same front tooth. Our stomachs are pudgy, our arms skinny and flung to the side like tap dancers. Tootsie is kneeling in the sand next to Luma. Her arm is wrapped around both of us, her red nails latched onto my shoulder, Luma smooshed in the middle. Tootsie is tan, and wrinkled, and beautiful, and happy. That's how I want to remember her, not freaking out in the old folks home. I know I should go with Luma to visit Tootsie--at least every now and again, but the only time I went, I spent three days crying and throwing-up. If anyone ever asked me, I'd tell them my grandma died six months ago.

A car door slams in the driveway. I peek out the window to see who it is. Dad's got his arms full of groceries. If I was a good daughter, I'd run downstairs and open the door, but then he'll want to talk. Instead, I sit down and open my protected folder, then I click on the icon for the anonymous browser that will connect me to the dark web. While

dad's putting the groceries away, I login to Principal Bower's account with her password: Nana+Sophie4Ever! It's that easy.

I know Bower is at a school board meeting, so I've got a couple hours to poke around. I start by running keyword searches. First I try: "black kids," but nothing comes up. Then I try: "black students." There's couple emails from an MLK junior who's trying to set-up a black student union. Bower's answers are pretty normal. She sends him a handbook for starting student clubs and tells him to ask the only two black teachers at Jefferson if they'll be the club advisors--which is kind of weird, but also makes sense.

I try another search: "MLK students." There's a bunch of angry emails from Jefferson parents that were sent the week the state Superintendent confirmed the kids in the MLK Scholars program would be bussed over. Bower responded to every email with the same letter which had obviously been written by some school district lawyer.

I'm not sure what I thought I was going to find, but I definitely thought it would be easier than this. I know there's dirt in here. I can feel it in my gut. "I just have to think like an unethical high school principal," I say to the screen, then I stand-up, and stretch my back, and look around my room, like there might be a clue on my dresser, or my closet, or in the folds of my purple comforter. I'm staring at my cluttered nightstand and thinking what a mess my room is, when I hear keys in the front door. Then Mom's voice hums through the floorboards and I hear dad yell, "I'm in here, Honey," from the kitchen. I'm thinking about my cluttered room, and what mom did to our family, and wondering how dad can stand to be around her, when I walk back to my desk like a zombie and type in: "our little mess." I don't really expect anything to come up, but an email string with

fifty-three responses appears on the screen.

The other name is familiar, but I have to run a search before I realize it's the president of the Jefferson PTA. I scroll to the bottom of the email string and start at the beginning.

In the first couple of emails, Principal Bower and the PTA prez are writing about the possibility of MLK getting shut down. The prez asks, "Are the rumors true? Will the MLK students be bussed to Jefferson?"

Principal Bower write back, "I can't imagine they would mix our populations. There are city schools better equipped to deal with these types of students."

I think I'm onto something, so I keep clicking. There's a bunch of messages about coordinating "a critical mass of parents to attend the June school board meeting." And on July 27th, the prez writes, "I want to alert you that we have contacted the media."

Principal Bower writes, "I understand."

Mom's voice downstairs is making it hard for me to concentrate, so I get up to find my headphones and when I do, I look out the window just in time to see Uncle Gary parking across the street. "What the..." I say out loud, because Uncle Gary showing up at our house doesn't make any sense at all.

I haven't been in mom's accounts in more than a year, not since I discovered Uncle Gary and her were having an affair. I made three copies of everything I found, sent one copy to Dad's office, one to Tootsie--before her brain starting glitching, and shoved the third through the vents in Luma's locker, then I washed my hands of the whole thing. Now that I'm watching Uncle Gary get out of his car, I'm thinking I probably should

have checked Mom's email every now and again to see what was going on. It's too late now though. Uncle Gary, and some blonde woman half his age, are walking up our front steps.

The doorbell dings, Mom answers and I hear everyone being extra friendly downstairs. I nibble on a slice of pepperoni and consider ditching Bower and the PTA prez so I can check out mom's email for clues, but then I decide there's nothing I can do. Even if I piece it all together, it's not like I'm going to go marching downstairs and confront anybody. I make myself focus on the screen and try to imagine that all of the talking and dishes banging under my feet is just a bunch of strangers being really loud.

The next email is from the PTA prez. She says, "Since we have exhausted every possible avenue of stopping this runaway train, I urge you to take a firm hand in setting the right tone for the new students."

Principal Bower responds, "Though we ultimately did not receive the outcome we hoped for, please rest assured that I intend to take a no tolerance stance toward any behavior not befitting of our student population." When I read that, I realize Bower is no idiot. She's talking in code and even though I know she's really saying, *I'll be breathing down those black kids necks so hard they won't be able to sneeze without getting a detention*, I have to find more if I'm going to bust her. I'm almost to the end of the email string and I haven't really got anything.

In the very last email, the PTA prez says, "I trust you will uphold the learning environment homeowners in our area expect, and that any disruption, or appearances there of, is dealt with swiftly and with a firm hand." I know that PTA bitch means, *the*

*white people who pay for your salary want these black kids gone, even if you have to lie,* but as a girl who appreciates hiding in plain sight, I also know that she wrote it far enough between the lines that she's protected.

The smell of hot butter and garlic is creeping under my door. The hummus and cheese on my desk are starting to crust over and my stomach is growling, but there's no way I'm going downstairs, not for a million bucks. I'll just have to starve until morning.

It's getting late and Bower will be out of the meeting soon. So even though I haven't found what I'm looking for, it's time to log-off. I'm thinking about my next steps, when I hear Luma's car in the driveway, then her key in the door. I'm so caught up in my thoughts that I'm not even thinking about what she's walking into. But then there's a big crash and I hear my sister scream, "I can't even believe you people!" I listen to her feet running up the stairs, and her bedroom door slamming, and I realize maybe I should have text her to let her know what was going on.

I feel like a bad sister, and a bad hacker, and I'm pissed off that adults get to act like their poop doesn't smell, so I decide to phish a perv to make myself feel better. I'm not messing around; I want one fast and I want to take him down hard. I log on to a gaming site where a lot of pervs hangout. I make a profile that says I'm a thirteen year old girl. Then I post, "I'm horny. Anyone want to play?"

In two seconds some guy named *ChemicalWolf* responds. I check his IP and see he's in Baraboo, Wisconsin. I run a quick search and find a town about forty minutes to the north and I tell him I live there. I tell him my dad is passed out drunk in the living room and my mom is working the night shift. I tell him I'm going to run away because



my parents caught me sucking-off my twenty-five year old neighbor and now they call me a whore just because I like sex. I ask him to hang on while I take off my bra; I tell him I have double-Ds and sometimes they get so heavy I wish I had someone to help me hold them up. Soon he's begging to pick me up. We agree to meet at a convenience store on highway twelve outside of some town called Delton. I ask him to bring alcohol and "something stronger to party with." He says he's going to take me to a hotel. Then I write, "What are you going to do to me?"

And he writes, "What do you want me to do to you?"

But I need him to write it himself, so I type, "I don't know, Daddy, you're the adult." Which I guess really lights him up, because he writes all the nasty details about what he's planning to do to me in that hotel room.

Luma's room is really quiet, but downstairs, somebody has turned on Bob Marley--it's probably Dad. He's always been a reggae kind of guy. I don't even want to think about what they're doing down there.

I screenshot my conversation with *ChemicalWolf*. Then I take a satellite street view image of the house his computer address is linked to. After a quick search, I download a PDF of a business license and a home title I find for the same address--both are in the name of thirty-six year old Trevor St. Neill. I write an email to send to the Delton Sheriff's office and attach the screenshots, IP, satellite images, license and title. Lastly, I make a quick anonymous call from my desktop to a nice woman named Noreen at Delton dispatch. I explain that a man will be arriving at the Jiffy Stop-n-Shop in about thirty minutes, driving a burgundy Ford F-150, looking for a thirteen year old girl. I tell

her I'm emailing the Sheriff's office all the information they'll need to press charges, then I hang up before she can ask me any questions.

I get that rush that I always get when I nail a creep, but I still don't feel quite right. Maybe it's the music downstairs, or the idea that mom and dad might be trying to hook up a foursome on a Wednesday night, with their two teenage daughters right upstairs. Or, maybe it's the fact that Luma's room is too quiet and even though I can totally figure out how to talk to a stranger online, I can't figure out how to talk to my sister who's right next door. Or maybe it's that I can nail a stranger, but I can't figure out how to nail Jefferson Heights High School's unethical principal. Either way, there's only one of those things I know how to change. So I start to type.

By the time I'm done, it's way past midnight. Uncle Gary and the blonde have been gone for a long time. Mom and dad are in bed and I'm sure Luma is too. I log on to Principal Bower's account and load a plugin that lets me set a timer to send the email while I'm sitting in second period with thirty-three alibis. Then I load a freeware app that will auto-uninstall the plugin, forty-five seconds after the email blast is sent. Finally, I cut and paste:

Dear Jefferson,

This year we were joined by the Promise Scholars from Martin Luther King Jr. High School, which was closed because they lost their accreditation. Jefferson has the closest honors program so the MLK students were invited to go to school on our campus. A lot of people didn't like it, but the court decided kids shouldn't be punished because the adults

messed-up.

Instead of welcoming the MLK students, we made it hard for them. The PTA wanted me to make sure the Promise Scholar students understood that they're not wanted at Jefferson Heights. At first I went along because the PTA raises a lot of money for the school, but it's not right to keep picking on kids just because of the color of their skin.

Jaycee Spikes was expelled for no reason. I take responsibility for blaming him even though he was the one who got jumped by three white boys for no reason at all. I am not fit to be a principal so I am resigning.

Yours truly,

Principal Bower

#

By the beginning of third period, the MLK kids are huddled over their phones, whispering and forwarding texts. By lunch, everyone is talking. In my fourth period English class, a kid looks out the window and says, "Daaaamn! Channel ten is here!"

Another kid says, "Is it Jillian Matthews? That chick is hot."

The teachers look worried. They talk fast and avoid eye contact, but not a single one says anything about Principal Bower's email. In fifth period, the secretary makes an announcement over the intercom: "All after school activities have been cancelled. There

will not be a late bus.” And by the end of the day, an email is circulating from the Superintendent to our parents. A girl in my sixth period class lets me read the email her mom forwarded to her. It says, “We’re piecing together the facts and will provide you with an update as soon as accurate information is available. In the interest of curbing rumors, we ask that you please be patient while we investigate this delicate matter.”

As I’m walking out to my car, Mr. Dillie catches me on the sidewalk. “Taalia,” he says. “Can I speak with you for a moment?” His work shirt is unbuttoned at the throat and I can see the ringed collar of a blue t-shirt underneath. I wonder what message he’s been hiding today.

I stop on the sidewalk and shield my eyes from the afternoon sun. “Sure,” I say like everything is totally normal, but inside my stomach is clenching.

When he’s standing in front of me, I can see little beads of sweat on his bald head. His eyebrows crumple and he looks like he wants to say something, but he doesn’t know exactly how to do it. He claps his palms together and squeezes them like he’s awkwardly shaking his own hands, or maybe saying some kind of weird prayer, then he says, “I assume you heard about Mrs. Bower’s email?”

I just nod, afraid the sound of my voice might give something away.

Dillie chews on his bottom lip and stares at me like he’s trying to dissect my face. He pinches his nose, and drops his hand, and says, “I’m not accusing you of anything, but I have to ask. You didn’t have anything to do with that, did you?”

My heart feels like it’s trying to break out of my chest and I’m sure my face is as red as the top of Dillie’s head. “What do you mean?” I say. I imagine SWAT officers

swarming out of the bushes, a man in a coat and tie handcuffing me while he reads me my rights.

Dillie takes a big breath. His chest swells and the buttons strain on his shirt. I catch little streaks of a color on his t-shirt beneath, but not enough to figure out what he's hiding under there. When he talks, his voice is slow, his tone measured. "I've known Principal Bower long enough that I consider her a friend." He hesitates, like he's trying to find the words and I'm convinced he's going to bust me. My stomach is doing so many flips, I feel like I might throw-up right in front of everyone. But then Dillie starts to speak again, and his voice isn't angry, in fact he talking so quietly that I have to lean in to hear what he's saying. "A few years back I lost someone very close to me to cancer." He chokes like he has to try really hard not to cry. "Principal Bower got me back on my feet." Then, Dillie clears his throat, and looks me in the eyes. "She's a good person, Taalia. This crap with the Promise Scholars, it's not her fault. The whole mess just landed in her lap. It's a difficult situation"

I don't know what to say, so I just stand there staring at Dillie while kids are swarming past us. We're like two big rocks stuck in a river while everything else moves on. Dillie is looking at me, but kind of also looking past me to something in his mind. And I'm starting to think that he doesn't know I had anything to do with Principal Bower's email; in fact, I get the sense that Dillie doesn't feel like he knows anything about anything at all.

He takes one of those big sighs, like he's trying to shake something heavy off his shoulders, then he says, "The thing is, Taalia, Mrs. Bower takes care of her

granddaughter, Sophie. And Sophie is a very sick little girl. She needs a lot of medical care--Mrs. Bower took guardianship because her own daughter couldn't deal with Sophie's needs. And then last year, Mr. Bower passed away. So, you see, Mrs. Bower is the only one taking care of that little girl. And as frustrated as she might be at the PTA, and as unfairly as she might think the Promise Scholars are being treated, I can't imagine she'd just quit and give up her health insurance. I can't believe she'd risk doing anything that would hurt Sophie."

The lump in my throat is so big, I think Dillie must be able to see it. In my mind, I imagine little Sophie hooked up to tubes and monitors and Principal Bower holding her tiny hand.

Dillie reaches his hand out and puts it on my shoulder. He gives me a fatherly squeeze and says, "You're a good kid, Taalia. I didn't think you had anything to do with it, but I had to ask. I hope you understand."

I just nod and Dillie walks away. But when he's a couple steps away, he turns around. "I almost forgot," he says. "I called the state director of the Bot Battle competition and he said no hacking. He was impressed with your idea though, and he said if you're interested in an internship, give him a call."

#

By the time I get home, it's all over the local news. Jillian Matthews is standing in front of Jefferson, a big foamy microphone in her hand, the wind blowing her blonde hair

in her eyes. “Earlier today, an email was sent from Principal Diane Bower to parents, staff and students at Jefferson High School, alleging administrative misconduct and discriminatory practices toward a group of African American students. Our viewers may remember these students as billionaire Bryan Canaan’s much touted Promise Scholars. Tensions at Jefferson have ran high since the State Superintendent ruled Canaan’s Promise Scholars would be enrolled until their graduations, despite significant protests by the Jefferson community. Hundreds of Jefferson parents unsuccessfully attempted to block the integration, but were ultimately unsuccessful. We have obtained a copy of Bower’s email which reads in part, ‘I am not fit to be a principal so I am resigning.’ A source close to the matter says that Principal Bower did not send the email and while a possible cybersecurity breach is under investigation, some say the real issue is the treatment of African American students at Jefferson High School.”

Luma walks in and the first thing I notice is that she’s not wearing a headscarf. I don’t really care if she pretends to be Muslim or not, but I know that something must have happened. “You’re early,” I say. She doesn’t answer, just sits next to me on the couch and keeps her eyes on the TV. We haven’t sat like this in a really long time and I’m afraid if I move too much it she’ll get up and leave. So, I sit as still as I can and watch the TV.

Now there’s a split screen between the anchor and Jillian. The anchor is saying, “Have you been able to substantiate any of the claims in the email?”

“Yes, Bill. The school district complied with our request for information, although they will not release the names of specific students, we have learned that in the

first three months of school alone, MLK transfer students were disciplined at twice the rate of their classmates. The important thing to remember here is that the transfer students are not a general representation of the MLK High School population. These are a highly selective group of academic achievers, which were carefully hand-picked by Bryan Canaan himself. In fact, in the three and a half years the Promise Scholars program has existed, there has only been one previous disciplinary action with a Scholar. Records at Jefferson show a very different story. Suspensions also ran much higher in the transfer students than Jefferson's general population, and, in at least two instances, law enforcement was called to deal with issues related to Promise Scholars, although no official charges were ever filed."

"All this has really been going on?" Luma asks.

"Ya," I say.

"I didn't even know."

"You're not in the engineering program," I say. "Have you even met any of the MLK kids?"

Luma shakes her head. "It's like two different worlds, I guess."

Now the anchor is saying, "Jillian, there's been quite a bit of mystery around Bryan Canaan in the last several months. Can you tell us anything about that?"

"Yes, Bill. Billionaire Bryan Canaan, who is notorious for dating well-known actresses and seeking the public spotlight, disappeared in early September. His last confirmed whereabouts are said to be a sea turtle sanctuary in Panama. Officials from Bingly Corp., where Canaan is still the majority stockholder, have released several



vague statements, which critics say are more about protecting the value of Blingly stock than shedding light on Canaan's whereabouts."

"So, Jillian, it's safe to say that Canaan has not weighed in on the issues his Promise Scholars face at Jefferson Heights?"

"Officials at Jefferson Heights will neither confirm nor deny that they have been in touch with Mr. Canaan, however I spoke to one Promise Scholar parent who says that they have not heard anything from Canaan since MLK High was closed for a litany of serious allegations. This parent told me that she repeatedly attempted to contact a Blingly representative, but was told that person no longer was employed at the organization."

"That's certainly very interesting, Jillian. We look forward to updates as the investigation progresses."

Commercials come on, but I keep staring at the TV. I ask Luma, "Why are you home so early?"

She says, "I didn't know where else to go." And it reminds me of when we were little, and Luma would come into my room, and crawl into bed with me, and we would talk about how I would never leave for college unless Luma could come with me too. How out of everybody else on the whole planet, we were the luckiest to have each other.

"Me neither," I tell her.

"You did that," she says and I don't need her to spell it out, we both know that she's talking about Principal Bower's email.

I don't say anything, but I nod my head and even though Luma's not looking right at me, I know she can see me out of the corner of her eye. And I think that maybe that's

what's been going on all this time we've been barely talking, but sleeping right next to each other night after night, with only a wall between the pillows on our beds--maybe we've been watching each other out of the corner of our eyes, keeping track of what's going on.

Luma doesn't say anything, but we sit there for a long time, with the sun going down, and the room getting darker, watching the newscasters talk about a suicide bomber, and a car accident, voter fraud, and contaminated water--and a lot of other things that neither one of us has the slightest idea how to fix. But, every now and again, one of us reaches over and squeezes the other one's hand, like, *Hey, I'm right here. I've been right here all along.*

**Reba**

**Reba Munson** <reba@munsonturkandlittle.com>

10:07 PM (2 hours ago)

To: Bryan Canaan

You Promise?!?!?

Are you f'n kidding me, Bryan Canaan?

You made promises to those kids from The Flats you thought you could throw your money at. You even named them the Promise Scholars for God's sake! Where are you now when everything is falling to pieces? Hiding with a bunch of turtles because you got scared?

What kind of father goes and does something like that? I'd rather raise one child than two.

--R

...

*"You must learn from the mistakes of others. You can't possibly live long enough to make them all yourself."*

--Samuel Levenson

## Jaycee

“They jumped that boy.” Grans is working her jaw, fighting the devil from using her tongue. These days, her voice shakes so bad it’s hard to understand her most times, but in moments like this, she makes herself heard. I got plenty of things I want to add, but I keep my mouth shut when *that boy* she’s talking about is me.

Ms. Rose says, “That’s why we wouldn’t let our Dasialeen go to Jefferson Heights. All those angry white folks.” She clucks her tongue like anybody who thought different about us neighborhood kids getting bussed into Jefferson was just asking for trouble.

Generally, I keep my thoughts to myself, but I have to bite my tongue to keep from setting old Ms. Rose straight. Jefferson isn’t so much white as it’s rich and what all them rich folks was truly pissed-off about was us poor kids dirtying up their image--the fact that we happened to be black was just salt in the wound. No doubt, it was a whole pillar of salt--it would’ve been easier if we were white--but, those Jefferson folks would have still put up a stink when they found out we were broke even if we had the peachiest skin they’d ever seen.

Besides, we all know Dasia wasn't invited to switch over when the state shut MLK High down. Only the Promise Scholars got invited to go and Dasia was lucky she passed preschool way back when--though, if talk on the court is anything to go by, Dasia has other talents Ms. Rose wouldn't be so high-and-mighty talking about.

Since Grans isn't one to directly point out another family's flaws, she sucks her teeth and says, "What you suggest we do? Send them to these neighborhood schools? City Tech is worse than MLK ever was. I hear they don't even have computers. The nerve--calling yourself Tech and not even having computers! Might as well refer to the church van as my Lamborghini!"

City Tech is where Dasia is parking her butt when she's not hanging out at the corner store looking for trouble to get into, but Ms. Rose doesn't say anything about Grans' insult—at least not right off. She takes a long slurp of her coffee and makes a show of setting the mug back on our Niagara Falls coaster. The mug covers the scene, except for one plume of water shooting out the side like a cartoon character passing gas. Then, when Ms. Rose is good and settled, she says, "I suppose you'll have to send Jaycee to the neighborhood school now--no other choice."

Grans' voice warbles. "We'll just see about that," and even though I want to believe her, the quiver in her tone leaves room for doubt.

If they weren't talking about my future, then I'd be laughing at these old birds pecking at each other. As it is, I'm wondering what Grans thinks she's going to do. Principal Bower was clear I wasn't getting a second chance. I'm thinking about asking what Grans has in mind, but then my phone buzzes in my pocket. I start to apologize for

the interruption, but Grans says, “You better check that. Your daddy might need something.”

I look at the screen, but it isn't my dad, so I silence it and slide the phone back into my pocket.

Ms. Rose looks at me like I got no manners at all, but Grans says, “Who was it?”

“Taalia.”

“You spoken to her since all this?” Grans waves her hand, like me getting expelled is a fly in the room.

“No, Ma'am.”

Then she goes and blows my mind, saying, “Why don't you go give Taalia a call while I show Ms. Rose out.”

Ms. Rose gets the picture loud and clear and she's not about to suffer the indignity of being asked out twice. She starts digging herself out of the easy chair, which is whole lot of commotion. I'm not sure if I should offer my hand or act like I don't notice she's gotten so fat she doesn't move right anymore. When she's finally on her feet, she nods at her coffee mug, lipstick prints pressed along the rim and says, “Handle that for me, Jaycee.”

“Yes, Ma'am,” I say. Then, before I can get away, Ms. Rose plants a big wet one on my cheek. I have to fight the urge to wipe off her slobber with the tail of my shirt. I pick-up her mug, Niagara Falls gushing underneath with her cold spit drying on my face and I head into the kitchen while I try not to think about that old lady spit on me and making myself gag.

Behind me, Grans is saying, “Taalia is Jaycee’s little white girlfriend he met over at Jefferson,” which isn’t true on a couple of points, but I’m not about to correct her. As soon as I’m around the corner, I wipe my face with a dish towel, hoping Grans spits all over Dasia sometime--which leads to me wondering how Ms. Rose doesn’t know Dasia hoes around with any boy who smiles at her. I guess sometimes folks go blind when they love somebody.

Then, from out in the hall, Ms. Rose says, “You can’t keep making excuses for that boy just because his mama died. It’s been too many years to be blaming everything on that.”

I freeze with the mug over the sink and Ms. Rose’s lipstick grinning at me on the porcelain. Ms. Rose knows that even though Mom wasn’t Grans’ blood child, she was as close as a daughter, and losing her was the worst thing that’s ever happened to Grans in her whole life. Even worse than the day they told us Grans had Parkinson's disease. Worse than when Grandpop passed. Worse than anything.

When Grans answers Ms. Rose, her voice is so low and hard, I have to strain to hear. Steady as cement, she says, “I won’t have you disrespecting the dead in my house.”

But, Ms. Rose either doesn’t catch Grans tone or she doesn’t care, because she goes right on, saying, “You consider maybe he started that fight?”

Then I get an image in my head of those Jefferson boys standing over me in the locker room, growling *nigger* from some swampy place in their gut, and I feel like Ms. Rose might as well be one of them.

I'm wondering if I should go in there, but I don't need to worry because Grans can take of herself. I hear her say, "Rose, you best leave my house before I go and forget I'm a Christian."

"I'm only saying--"

"Good-bye," Grans says and either Ms. Rose leaves on her own or Grans shoves her out because the door slams so hard the walls shake. Then Grans shouts from the hall, "Jaycee, I know you're listening. Don't you pay her no mind. That woman's got her nose is so high in the air, one day she'll drown in a storm. Also been that way, always will be."

#

Taalialia and I ended up lab partners because we were both new--me, because MLK shut down; her, because her family needed a fresh start after her parents had some marriage problems. That's some white folks' way of dealing with things, right there--switching up neighborhoods and buying a new house just because one of you all got caught cheating. I don't know the whole story, but to hear Taalia tell it, her mom's got a hard time keeping her hands to herself. One time I seen Taalia's mom at Jefferson for some parent meeting and that lady doesn't look like any mom I ever met.

She'd be pissed if she heard me say it, but Taalia got her looks from her Mom. She's stacked coming and going and her face isn't giving anybody nightmares either. But Taalia's not about any of that, though. For example, on that first day in class, when I



asked her to be my lab partner, she sized me up so hard I felt like she was cooking me with her eyes. Then she said, “You’re not some perv, are you?”

I told her, “Girl, I'm here for the science,” and we’ve been tight ever since. To be real, though, sometimes when Taalia is busting through our extra-credit like it’s elementary addition, I have to force myself to think about something else so my hormones don’t get the better of me. That's nothing though, just biology. Taalia’s my girl and I'd never push-up on her.

It’s not hard to keep my hormones on the under with Taalia. She mostly kicks it with the robotics club and I hang with the basketball team. Primarily, we deal with each other electronically.

I have trouble finding words with most people, but with Taalia it’s just different. When I’m talking to her, my thoughts usually come gushing out--that is, until what went down yesterday after I got jumped. Taalia has a way of not letting anything hurt her. So telling her about how I got sucker punched while I was changing my PE clothes, how I got stomped on by those Jefferson fools, when I wasn’t even dressed, makes me so embarrassed that I’ve been hiding from her ever since.

That hasn't stopped Taalia, though. She’s been blowing up my phone non-stop; hanging up and calling right back like she can see me staring at the hear no evil, see no evil, say no evil monkeys she programed as her contact instead of her name. For a minute, I wonder if she’s watching me through the camera, but then I decide that if that was happening, she would’ve texted that she could see me and to pick up the damn phone.

I can almost hear her saying: *You can't figure out every situation beforehand, Jaycee. Sometimes you just dive in, then you learn how to swim.* I can't avoid her forever, so I cram the earbud in and press the monkeys.

When Taalia picks up, there's keys clicking in the background. She doesn't even say hello, just, "Did you hear about the email?"

I say, "I'm fine. How are you?"

The keys stop and Taalia sighs. "I'm a jerk," she says. "How are you?"

I grunt.

"Are you hurt?"

I tell her, "No," but that's a lie. Those boys barely landed a fist, what hurts is feeling like a sucker. "What're people saying?"

"Just rumors. Except Egan Turlock. He says he was right there and that the Jefferson kids jumped you for no reason."

I remember Egan telling the kid who sucker-punched me to chill, but after that it's fuzzy. "He was there," I say.

"Well, you know, it's Egan...and he's basically Jefferson's version of God, so a lot of kids believe him." Taalia hesitates, then says, "Have you seen the email?"

"What email?"

"I'll text it."

The message comes through in four out of order chunks and it takes me a minute to put it in together. I read it twice then I say, "Is this a prank?"

"Why?" Taalia asks.

“It doesn't sound like a principal.”

“Yes, it does.” It takes me a second to figure out why Taalia is getting defensive, but when I understand what’s going on, it’s like a punch to my gut. Even though I want to believe Principal Bower had a come to Jesus moment, I’m ninety-nine percent sure Taalia’s computer is at the bottom of this.

“Who got the email?” I ask.

“Everybody,” Taalia says. “Parents, teachers, kids.”

“Did you do this?”

It takes her too long to answer, which is all the answer I need. “It came from Principal Bower’s account,” she says.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Listen, Jaycee.” I know Taalia’s serious because she’s using my name. “You’re not the first MLK kid to take the rap for something you didn’t do.”

“Both of us getting in trouble won’t fix it.” My voice rises and I have to remind myself to keep it down so Grans doesn’t hear.

“I was in class,” Taalia says, but we both know she’s got the hacking skills to send an email from the Pentagon while she naps.

“What now?” I ask.

“Nobody from the school called you?”

“Maybe they called my pop. He’s at the legal aid office.” Then I add, “Maybe you should think about getting a lawyer, too.”

Taalia sighs. “I know what I’m doing.”

I tell her, “But, this isn’t some online troll. It’s the school district.”

“I can’t just stand around and watch this crap go down,” she says. “That’s how the Nazis got away with it--a bunch of nice people didn’t do anything, because it wasn’t their problem.”

I don’t like admitting it, but Taalia’s right. When some of the other MLK kids started getting busted, and people were saying the Jefferson folks were out to get us, I thought it was just people playing the race card, and even if it was real, it wasn’t my problem. But now it is. And I have no idea what to do.

#

I tell Grans, “I’m going to check on Tink.” Her eyes immediately narrow on me, like she’s picking through my brain, looking for what’s putting off the stink. I’m a terrible liar and Grans knows it; if she asks me about Taalia, it’ll be game over. Grans isn’t talking though, just sitting there, chin lifted, so even though I’m standing, she’s looking down her nose at me. Cold rings of sweat cling under my arms and I’m positive Grans is just giving me a chance to come clean on my own. But if I tell Grans what I think is going on, I don’t know if she would turn Taalia in or keep our secret--but, either way it would break Grans’ heart.

Grans head quivers like a flower on the end of its stem. These days, her medicines seems like they work less and less. She sucks in a breath so loud and heavy it’s like she’s picking up the whole house. When she lets it go, her shoulders sag, and I have one of

those moments where I realize I'm near-enough three times Grans' size now. I wonder if my mom was still alive, would I have these moments with her instead?

In my head, Grans is a giant, but the woman in front of me is ninety-eight pounds in her Sunday best and five-foot-one with her hair done-up. She looks at me, her head starting to tremor more vigorously, and says, "The Lord delivers the righteous. You remember that. Jaycee. Just stay on the side of the righteous and it will all work out in the end." It sounds like something she's trying to convince herself is true.

"I'll be fine," I tell her.

She looks at me real hard, her head shaking so much it's making me seasick. "You know, Jaycee," she says, "most of the time it depends how you look at a thing that makes it what it is."

#

Tink's at the gate wagging her butt so hard she's about to dislocate a hip. "Hi, Lil Mama," I say and she whimpers back like we're having a conversation. Tink's got one of those Rottie faces that looks like she'll split her skull from smiling. Drool is falling out her mouth, onto her five pups' heads. Some breeders let pups go at six weeks, but it's better to wait eight. Which means we've got two weeks left before these pups leave for their new homes.

I've been trying to figure out if the pups will remember Tink when they're gone. My mom deployed when I was four and even though I tell Pop and Grans I remember

her, it's a lie--she's more like a blurry space in my brain where I know I have a piece that fits, but I can't quite make out what I'm looking for. I'm not sure if it's better that I don't remember Mom. From the looks of Grans and Pop, missing her is a terrible pain. So, I kind of hope the pups won't remember Tink--even though right now she's their whole world and I get the feeling that my mom was probably like that for me too.

Another thing that I've been trying to figure out recently is if my pop is any better than the guy who set off the bomb that killed mom. When my pop takes Tink's pups away, they'll never see her again. I'm not sure that's any different than her being dead. In some ways it might even be worse, knowing your mom is out there someplace, but you just can't get to her.

Grans would have a fit if we kept all five pups, but I maybe I should at least try to stop them from being sold--that would at least make me feel like I tried to do something, even if I knew it wasn't going to work out. Some people say that's what Bryan Canaan did with us Promise Scholars--like he didn't even really believe he could make a difference in our lives, but it just made him better to feel like he at least tried. In some people's minds, what Bryan did with us was a bad thing. From my perspective, I can't stop wondering if there was someone who could have tried to stop the suicide bomber who killed Mom, but they didn't say anything either because they didn't think it would make a difference. When I think about it like that, then I feel like we should all at least try--even if we know it's not going to turn out any different.

The air's got a bite. Even though the pups have their worming, they're still too young to be outside when it's this cold, so I head toward the shed at the back of the

kennel and they follow me. It's more like a house than a shed, with a heater and windows. Dad and I made it from scratch. Tink circles and plops on her bed. The pups nuzzle around her belly and I tuck myself around the mess of them.

Laying there with the heater on, Tink's breathing and all those puppies squeaking and dreaming, my mind goes to how it was when I first started at Jefferson. I was happy the day they told us that MLK High was closing. We had this one lab with all these fancy computers and that's where they came to take all the pictures they used in the magazines, but most of our classrooms were falling apart. How were we supposed to learn chemistry with only three bunsen burners and a teacher more interested in her phone than teaching us science? I could've learned more chemistry from the meth heads down the street.

After all the protests by Jefferson families, some of the MLK kids walked into Jefferson trying to be invisible. But, I couldn't hide if I wanted to. Maybe those light-skinned pretty boys got a shot at flying under the radar--not giving some white-girl's family a heart-attack when she brings him home to dinner. Then, when that white girl's family finds out Tyrique's headed to college on a full-ride academic scholarship, they start thinking how articulate young Ty is. Me and Tyrique both know he talks mad shit on the court, got a daddy in state pen for armed robbery, and is the oldest of seven if you count all of the halves on both sides--but, Tyrique makes damn sure all that kind of business stays in the neighborhood.

Tyrique can do that, walking around in his polo shirts with his naturally straight teeth. Not me, though. It doesn't matter if I'm a National Science Scholar, or that I sing in the Holy Shepherd choir--I'm big as a house and brown as one of those mochas all the

white chicks love. “No six-six, dark-skinned, kid from the hood can fly under the radar in a place like Jefferson Heights,” I tell Tink and her pups. “No matter how many AP credits I got.”

So, while Tyrique played the light-skin game, I played it how I had to: I sat in the front row of every single one of my classes--until the teachers sent me to the back of the room for being too tall. I shook all of my teachers’ hands, gave them a *pleasure to meet you*--code for: *don't worry, I'm a good one*.

“Would’ve been nice if one of my teachers spoke up when those white boys jumped me,” I say to Tink. Did I expect it? What keeps biting me in the butt is that I did--I expected at least one of those sorry-ass, on the down-low racist mother-fuckers to take the mic on my behalf. But that’s on me for letting myself get played.

#

I wake-up to the toe of Pop’s shoe. “You the dog whisperer?”

The shed is dark. “What time is it?” I ask.

“About seven,” he says. “Scooch.” He nods at the back of the shed.

“We won’t fit,” I tell him.

“Scooch,” he says, then he sits on my hip, so I have to move.

There's only one person Tink loves more than me, and that's Pop. She twists until her head is in his lap. “That’s my girl,” Pop says.



We sit in silence for a couple minutes. There's a siren in the distance. Tires crunch in the alley. The heater makes everything orange, just bright enough to see. Pop says, "Nice in here."

"Nicer than my room," I say.

"Maybe I'll build you a shed."

I huff and one of the pups startles. Tink lifts her head to watch as her baby settles back against its siblings. "You and Mom ever think about having another kid?"

Pop raises his eyebrows. "We talked about it. Then we decided I could probably handle one, but if there were two, she might come home to something ugly."

Neither of us says anything about Mom not coming home at all.

"She always said, 'It wouldn't be fair to have another child with Jaycee already taking up the love.'"

I've heard this before and even though I know it's Pop trying to say mom loved me, it always sounds to me like I was a parasite who sucked up everything she had to give.

Pop says, "You heard about the email?"

"I heard," I tell him.

I don't have to look to know he's nodding like he does in church--not singing the hymnals, but affirming them. He says, "Glad to see that woman's got a conscience."

I think about how Principal Bower was probably more surprised than anyone to see a confession with her name on it. "I guess."

“That took courage,” Pop’s says. “I don’t like that she did what she did in the first place, but it’s a better person who can admit when they were wrong.”

I just lay there watching the pups’ stomach rise and fall, not saying anything.

“I spoke with the attorney down at the free legal aid office and she says the district will probably issue an apology on Monday and you’ll be back in class by Tuesday.”

I know Pop isn’t going to like what I’m about to say, but I figure I might as well take a shot, so I say, “I’m been thinking maybe I don’t want to go back to Jefferson. What if I just went to City Tech instead?”

The air get stiff. Pop’s says, “They don’t have an engineering program.”

“I could just get good grades in the regular classes.”

Pop isn’t one to lay a hand on me, but his disappointment can strike just as hard. He stops scratching Tink, then real quiet he says, “You think that’s the freedom your mama died fighting for?”

#

Ms. Rose is standing on the porch in her Sunday suit with a store bought coffee cake. Pastor Applewood is standing behind her. He bends so his head is peeking around Ms. Rose’s big body and says, “Sorry to disturb you so early.”

Ms. Rose pushes past me, saying, “Got to get in before the cameras set up,” and that’s when I see a whole bunch of news vans pulled-up on our curb.

Pastor Applewood nods at me like he's truly sorry for all the commotion, then he steps inside the house and closes the door behind him.

From her bedroom at the top of the stairs, Grans shouts, "Who's down there, Jaycee?"

"It's Ms. Rose," I shout back. "And Pastor Applewood."

"Good Lord," Grans mumbles.

Pastor acts like he didn't hear a thing, calling up Grans, "You take your time, Ms. Spikes. We're sorry to disturb you."

"I brought coffee cake." Ms. Rose hands me the box like she got up at the crack of dawn to bake it herself, even though there's an orange day-old sticker right on the top.

"You should look out the front window," I shout up to Grans, then I lead Ms. Rose and Pastor into the living room.

#

When Grans comes downstairs, her wig is left of center. She's got on a blue dress and thick heeled shoes, like she wakes up thinking about bible study. Pop is close behind, his name embroidered on his coveralls: *Germaine*. Pastor says, "My apologies for waking you all. Ms. Rose saw the news stations setting up on your lawn and she thought it was best we check in on you. Make sure you're doing okay."

Grans glares at Ms. Rose and says, "Isn't that charitable, to be watching my lawn before the sun's up," then she excuses herself to make coffee before Ms. Rose can say another word.

“How’s work?” Pastor asks Pop and I get the feeling he’s filling-up space so he doesn’t have to hear what Ms. Rose has to say either.

“Can’t complain,” Pop says.

I stifle a snort; I’ve been hearing what’s wrong with the Transit Authority since as long as I can remember. Pops shoots me a look, but Pastor is busy checking out Grans’ souvenirs and all of her dusty fake plants. He says, “Surprised you haven’t taken Jaycee out to the suburbs by now.”

Pop glances at the picture of Mom on the mantel and the folded flag in its glass case. Next to the flag is a picture of me. I’m four years old and I’m taking the triangle of red, white and blue from a man in uniform. I don’t remember that day, but Pops says he took me out to ice cream while Grans dealt with all the people who came to pay their respects.

Pop says, “Well, you know, the house is paid free and clear. Me and Jaycee’s grandmother have been planning to get Jaycee through college debt-free.” He doesn’t add that Mom lived in this house, slept in the bed he still sleeps in, the contour of her body dented in the mattress--where I sometimes try to feel the shape of her.

“I thought I heard that Jaycee has scholarships,” Ms. Rose says.

“That’s right. He’s got some,” Pop tells her. “But there’ll be expenses.”

“You think those colleges might reconsider in light of all this?” Ms. Rose nods her head toward the camera crews on the other side of our blinds. “Seems they might not want the trouble coming into their schools.”

Pastor's shiny forehead crinkles like he's trying to figure out how to respectfully put Ms. Rose in her place, but it's Grans who speaks. She's standing in the doorway, tray in her hands, spoons clinking against the china she must have pulled from the hutch for Pastor's visit. Her jaw is clenched tight enough to open a pickle jar. "What you know about college, Rose?"

I take the tray and Grans sits in the chair opposite Pastor.

While the guests fix their coffees, I wedge myself between Grans' chair and the wall, resting my hand on her trembling shoulder. She reaches up and squeezes my fingers. Outside, a man shouts, "Where do you want this cable?" Grans tenses, but when everyone is settled, she says, "Ms. Rose, I will ask you to kindly save your concern for Dasia. The principal sent a letter clearing Jaycee's name."

Pastor and Ms. Rose exchange looks, then Pastor says, "About that letter, the principal is saying it didn't come from her."

I have to push against the chair to keep my gut from making some unholy noises.

Pop's says, "I saw it with my own two eyes. It came right from the principal's email address." I want to save him from the lie he doesn't know he's telling, but I can't give myself away and even though I might be willing to take the consequences, I'm not going to do anything that would put Taalia in danger of getting in trouble.

Pastor leans forward, his purple tie dangling between his knees. "Apparently there's a way to send letters from someone else's email."

Ms. Rose says, "If you were going to lose your scholarships, then you might have a reason to do something like that."

Pop jumps in, “Now, Ms. Rose--”

But Grans puts her hand up and Pop silences. “I know you’re not saying Jaycee did this.”

Ms. Rose opens her mouth, but Pastor looks at her and she silently lifts Grans’ china to her lips, like she was just meaning to take a drink of her coffee.

Grans’ voice is shaking bad, but she starts quoting the Good Book, saying “Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”

Ms. Rose goes ten shades of red. “But the principal says she didn’t write the email.”

Grans’ whole body is vibrating under my hand. I’m worried this is all too much for her health, but then Pastor saves the day and says, “Let’s pray over it.” And before anyone can suggest otherwise, he bows his head and begins, “Dear Lord, in your unquestionable wisdom...”

I dip my head too, but first I catch a glimpse of Grans and Ms. Rose glaring at each other before succumbing to The Word.

Pastor goes on for an eternity and I get the feeling he’s giving folks a minute to calm down. After his last amen, he looks right at Pop, ignoring Grans and Ms. Rose, and says, “You still got that hoop out back?”

Pop nods. “No net, but the hoop’s out there.”

“Mind if Jaycee and I shoot around?”

Ms. Rose says, “Awful early to be bouncing a ball.”

Grans snaps back, “Awful early to be knocking on doors, too.”

Pop ignores the both of them and tells me to get the ball. When I return, Pastor is waiting in the kitchen. “Your dad had to go to work,” he says, putting his hands out for a pass. Grans would skin me if I threw a ball in her house, so I walk over and hand it to him. Pastor looks at me and fishes his lips out like he’s confirming something he already suspected.

Outside, the air still holds the morning chill. Tink and her pups are tucked in the shed with the heater buzzing. Pastor tugs at his tie and says, “You mind if I take this off?”

“No, sir.”

He hangs it on the porch and unbuttons his shirt, putting it over the railing also. When he turns around, he’s in his undershirt and I can’t believe what I’m seeing.

Tattoos snake from Pastor’s wrists all the way to his shoulders and across his chest. He sees me staring and says, “For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.” Then he puts his hands up and says, “Pass.”

We shoot around, all the while I’m trying to sneak peeks at his tats. There’s a Christ on his left bicep and a demon reaching up his forearm with it’s horrible claw wrapped around Christ’s foot. Twisting along the demon rippled muscles, a word rises like smoke toward Christ. Pastor keeps taking shots, his arms moving so I can’t make out what the letters spell.

“I used to know a guy,” Pastor says as he shoots, “A good kid who had the misfortune of growing up in a neighborhood like this one here. His mama had problems with men.” He passes me the ball and I make a basket. He rebounds. “You know the type--her heart’s a little too forgiving.” He looks at me like he wants me to respond, but I don’t know what to say. “This kid gets tired of seeing his mama beat and he decides to do something about it. One things leads to another.” Pastor looks past me, into the kennel, ashe speaks. “The boyfriend was a mean bastard and he wasn’t going to back down. The kid meant to hit him in the leg, but you fire a gun and anything’s liable to happen.” Pastor looks back at me, his arms wrapped over the ball so I can read the script. At first I think it says, *Redemption*, but then I see it’s, *Redeem me*, like the demon is asking for a favor.

When Pastor speaks again, his voice is quiet. “They throw the kid in jail. Nobody wants to lock him up, but something has to happen—a man’s dead. While they’re figuring out what to do, a cop brings in the District Attorney’s son. The DA’s kid has a nasty habit of drinking and driving and the DA’s had it . He wants his kid scared straight. So, they toss him in the cell next to me with another guy.”

Pastor looks to see if I caught his slip-up, but I keep my face blank.

He starts-up again. “Kid wakes up to the DA’s son screaming, muffled, like there’s something over his mouth. He knows the guy over there is trying to hurt the DA’s son. The kid’s got a crisis on his hands. On the one hand, everybody knows what happens to snitches. But, on the other hand, this kid knows he can’t live with himself if he doesn’t do something to try to help the DA’s kid. So he makes a ruckus, banging on the bars,



screaming his head off. In the end, the DA has a heart to make sure the kid come out clean.”

“What happened to the DA’s kid?” I ask.

Pastor bites his lip. “He died a couple years later. Wrapped his car around a pole.” But, then he says, “The point is, sometimes God hands you a piece of solid gold wrapped in a shit blanket. You have to take the gold where you find it and let the shit slide away.”

I guess I just feel like I need to tell someone what’s really going on, and Pastor just took a big leap of faith trusting me with his own story--which, honestly, was way worse than mine--so I take a deep breath and say, “The principal didn’t send that email.” I wait for Pastor to respond, but he just stands there, and I think maybe he didn’t totally understand what I meant. Maybe he just thinks that I’m repeating what he told me, not saying that I know who did send the email. But, I also feel like maybe I just dodged a bullet, so I change the subject and I say, “Do other people know that story you told me?”

“Only people who appreciate where I’m coming from,” and Pastor stares at me so long and hard that I crack.

I say, “My friend sent that email from the principal.” I say it so fast, that I’m not even sure that the words made sense.

I’m afraid to look up, so I stare at the cracked cement and finally, Pastor says, “They got this word in another country--can’t remember which one. It’s the feeling you get when you want something to be different, but you can’t change the circumstance. Sometimes, I think that being a young black man in this country means that you feel that way all the time. What do you think about that?”

I'm afraid I'm going to stick my foot in my mouth, so I don't say anything.

"I'm not looking for a right answer," Pastor says, trying to coax something out of me.

I get the feeling he's not going to let me off the hook, so I say, "I think most people probably feel that way. Not just us."

Pastor nods. "But the system is working better for some." He spins the ball between his palms. "Did you start that fight in the locker room?"

"No, sir."

"So how come you're the one who got expelled?"

"I thought if I did good, then it'd all work out," I tell him, even though that's not answering the question he asked.

"And now?"

I wish Grans would call us inside, or one of the news trucks would creep down the alley, but it's just Pastor and me, and his tattoo demon staring at me with those huge bugged-out eyes. Pastor says, "Some might say Jesus had the same thought--that if he just did good, then there might be a chance to save us all. I suppose that puts you in very good company, Jaycee, but look where that boy, Jesus, ended up."

When Pastor calls Jesus, *that boy*, Grans' words come back to me. It's really is how you're looking at a thing that makes it what it is.

Pastor puts the ball in my hands, then he says, "We didn't ask for a broken system, Jaycee, but that's what we got. So now, we have to play it better than them or we're going to get crucified."

#

Inside, Grans and Ms. Rose are playing cards, a pile of pennies on the table between them. “Nice to see you enjoying one another,” Pastor says.

Grans slides more pennies into the pot. “I can do all things through him who strengthens me,” she says.

Ms. Rose mutters something about cheating, but Pastor ignores her and talks to Grans. “Must be quite a few people from the news stations on your lawn by now.”

“That Jillian Matthews rang the bell looking for an interview. I told her we’d talk when we’re ready,” Grans says, then she looks at me. “Mr. Dillie called to check on you. Seems like a nice man.”

Out of all my teachers, I wouldn’t have expected crusty old Dillie to be the one who stepped up.

Pastor says, “If it’s okay by you, I’d be happy to speak on the family’s behalf.”

Grans steadies her hand on the back of her chair. Her head tremors so violently, I wonder how she keeps from getting sick. “If Jaycee agrees, then me and his daddy agree.”

I confirm that I’m ready for Pastor to speak on my behalf. We decide I’ll stand between Pastor and Grans, and we won’t answer any questions.

Ms. Rose asks, “Where should I stand?”

And Grans says, “Over my dead body.”

Pastor jumps in saying, "It might be good to have two elders showing support."  
Then he looks at Grans and adds, "For Jaycee's sake."

"You better not open your mouth, Rose," Grans warns.

Ms. Rose says, "You know I marched with Dr. King."

"With both did, Rose. I was right there next to you." Grans looks at me and says,  
"Put on a clean shirt and your pearly tie."

When I'm all cleaned-up, Pastor, Ms. Rose and Grans are waiting by the door.

Pastor straightens my tie and says, "A scholar and a gentleman," then he turns to  
Grans and says, "You ready?"

"Since 1943," Grans says and she opens the door.

#

Maybe I've seen too many movies, but I thought the cameras and microphones  
would be right in our faces, When we step outside though, the crews don't even notice  
we're standing on the porch. Pastor clears his throat, and when that doesn't work, he  
shouts across the lawn, "The family is ready to give a statement."

A camera guys looks up from his phone. He elbows a lady in a suit. When she  
looks up, I recognize her as Jillian Matthews. She takes a second to fluff her hair in the  
side-mirror of their van. The others catch on, and there's a slow tide of activity, but  
nobody's in a rush. They take their time, cracking jokes as they cross the lawn. Pastor  
leans over and says, "Not exactly prime time, are they?"

Ms. Rose positions herself at the edge of the porch, facing the street, big as a truck. Grans grumbles, “The old goat thinks they’re here for her.”

Pastor asks, “How you holding up?”

Grans is trembling hard, but she waves Pastor off. “Don’t worry about me. Just get your head straight and say what needs to be said.”

The neighborhood’s up now. People are rubbernecking from the sidewalk and hanging out their open windows. Grans hooks her arm through mine and whispers, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” Then, she jabs Ms. Rose with her elbow and says, “Move over, Rose.” But, Ms. Rose stands her ground, grinning like she won a game show. Grans steadies her voice and shouts, “For the love of God, Rose, move the hell over.” A couple of the news folks laugh and Rose snaps out of it long enough to scoot over. Grans shuffles to the edge of the porch and I put myself next to her.

Pastor straightens his tie. Sweat is dripping down his face and I realize he’s as nervous as I am. I guess this isn’t quite the same as preaching to the congregation on Sundays. I nod at Pastor and he flips on his smile like he’s got it on a switch. Then he starts talking.

“My name is Pastor Christopher Applewood and I am the spokesperson for the Spikes family. We’d like to thank you for gathering here today.” For a second I think maybe he’s going to get all churchy, but he catches himself, and says, “As many of you know, yesterday morning Jefferson Heights Principal, Diane Bower, issued an apology via email. In an act of rare leadership, Principal Bower admitted her wrongdoing in

taking disciplinary action against Jaycee Spikes. While Mr. Spikes--who is a National Science Scholar with a four-point-two grade point average--has suffered emotional distress, the Spikes family recognizes the courage Principal Bower's exhibited in her act of restitution. The family wishes to express their sincere desire that others follow Ms. Bower's extraordinary example and rectify whatever situations might be within their control. Jaycee Spikes looks forward to resuming his studies at Jefferson Heights without further incident."

When Pastor stops speaking, Jillian Matthews asks, "Mr. Applewood, what about the school district's claim that Principal Bower did not write the email?"

Grans stiffens against me and I hold my breath. Pastor steepled his fingers on his chin and says, "The Spikes family is focused on moving forward in partnership with the district to resolve the issue and chooses not to address rumors."

Jillian Matthews says, "Will the Spikes family seek legal action?"

Ms. Rose says a long, "Um-hmmmmmm."

But Pastor shoots her a look and says, "The family's only wish is that Jaycee return to school as quickly as possible in order to complete his senior year. They accept Principal Bower's apology and look forward to working with the district to ensure measures are put in place to protect students like Jaycee who are trying to better themselves through education."

Before anyone can ask another question, Grans steps to the front of the porch and says, "That's all. Go on and get off my lawn, now. Nothing left to say." Then she turns and walks back into the house, leaving the door open for the rest of us to follow.

#

While we wait for the vans to leave, we sit at the kitchen table and eat stale coffee cake in silence. When the grumble of the last engine recedes, Grans says, “You two go on home to your families, now.”

Pastor rises and begins to collect the plates and forks, but Ms. Rose has missed the boat entirely. She says, “Dasia’s fine on her own,” as she shovels another bite of cake between her lips.

Grans has had all she can take. She lifts herself up, shaking like she’ll break the whole house apart, and says, “Rose, the last thing that girl needs--”

Pastor cuts Grans short saying, “Ms. Rose, I hate to ask for more of your charity, but with all the unexpected activity, I’m quite behind on my preparations for this Sunday’s services. Could you lend me a hand at the church?” He turns to Grans and adds, “If that’s okay with you Mrs. Spikes.”

Grans’ mouth is frozen mid-sentence and for a moment I think maybe she’s still going to unleash on Ms. Rose anyway, but then her eyes crinkle and she laughs so hard I’m afraid she’ll choke. “Yes, that’s just fine,” she says.

Grans and I watch from the porch, as Pastor and Ms. Rose make their way over the lawn. I’m getting ready to go back in, when Grans grumbles like she’s just lost a bet. Then she calls across the grass, “Hey, Rose?”

Ms. Rose turns, her Sunday suit catching in the light so it looks like she's sparkling. "Yes?"

"Thank you for being neighborly," Grans says.

Ms. Rose nods. "You'd have done the same."

When the door is shut behind us, Grans says, "You want eggs?"

Even though all I want is sleep, I say, "Yes, Ma'am," because there's something so normal about having Grans' eggs on a Saturday morning--and, even more than I need sleep, I could use some normal right about now.

While Grans goes upstairs to change out of her Sunday clothes, I get the kitchen ready. By the time she comes down in her house dress, the pan is warming on the burner and the eggs are cracked into a bowl. Grans tells me to sit and gets to work whisking her secret spices into the eggs. She slaps butter into the hot pan and a salty tang fills the air. My stomach growls and I think maybe I'll be able to eat just fine. I watch Grans' back as she she cooks. "You know, Jaycee," she says. "Your mom would have done the same thing."

I'm thinking about eggs and hot buttered toast, and this sudden talk of my mom confuses me. "Excuse me?" I say.

Grans flips the eggs. "We meant well, but maybe your daddy and I did you wrong."

I have no idea what she's getting at, but you can't rush Grans, so I sit back and wait for her to finish.



“Your mom wasn’t a saint.” Grans shoulders shake and for a moment I think it’s the Parkinson’s, but then she makes a hiccupping noise and I realize she’s chuckling to herself. “That girl gave me trouble from the day she and your daddy started dating. But when I saw how he looked at her, I knew my squawking wasn’t going to do any good, so I brought your mama in close where I could keep an eye on her--Lord knows her own family wasn’t watching.”

Grans sets a plate in front of me, then she slips into the chair beside me and says, “Say your grace and eat.”

I close my eyes, but it’s not praise that fills my head, I’m thinking about my mom running around like some back-in-the-day Dasia.

“Eat,” Grans says. “Before it gets cold.”

As soon as the eggs hit my tongue, a giant hunger wakes inside me.

Grans talks while I eat. “She was a good woman. But, she wasn’t a saint. None of us are. Not me. Not Pastor. Nobody. You understand?”

I think about Taalia and Principal Bower, Pastor and Grans and Ms. Rose. I think about all those teachers who didn’t speak up--except, maybe, old Dillie. I think about Pops never getting on with his life, keeping me here in the neighborhood when we could have lived someplace where I would never had been in the position of needing to get bussed over to Jefferson Heights in the first place. I think about Grans fighting Ms. Rose over pennies. A verse comes to me and I say, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Grans purses her lips and says, “That’s true.” Then she leans over the table like she’s got a secret to tell. “But, what I’m trying to say, is my ears work just fine. You tell Taalia she’s welcome here anytime.”

I stop chewing and set my fork on the edge of my plate. “You heard me talking to Taalia?” I ask.

Grans picks up a piece of my toast and takes a bite, staring at me the whole time. She’s got a sparkle in her eyes that makes me think maybe how I’ve been thinking about her has been off my whole life.

“I want to keep one of the pups,” I say.

“They’re spoken for,” Grans says matter-of-fact.

“I’ve been thinking about Mom,” I say. It crosses my mind that I don’t mention her out loud much. The hungry look in Grans’ eyes makes me want to freeze. I want to lay in the orange glow of the shed with Tink and her Pups, where nobody needs me to talk, but I also want to be a person who speaks when things need to be said, so I push the words out one-by-one.

“I’ve been wondering if there was someone who could have stopped Mom from getting...could have stopped the guy who made the bomb...” My voice cracks, and my chest heaves, and a noise comes out of me. I make the noise again, because it’s clawing to be free. And I want to be the one who saves it.

I stare at Grans’ hands trembling on the table. I wish we could just understand everything without words, but I knows the world needs words or people get confused, so I keep talking. “Was there someone who could have stopped the bomber?” I say. “Did he

have a son? Or a friend? And they were too scared. Or maybe they kept thinking they would get around to stopping him, but they never did and then it was too late?”

Grans puts her hand over mine, and even though I want her to be a giant, she is just a human who is much, much smaller than me. “I don’t want to be that person,” I say. “That person who didn’t do anything. I don’t want to be like everybody else.”

**Bryan Canaan**

**Bryan Canaan** <brycan@Blingly.com>

4:38 AM (12 minutes ago)

To: me

R,

I've chartered a helicopter to the capital. I'll be back in four days. I PROMISE I will make this all better.

Love,

B

...

*"An error doesn't become a mistake until you refuse to correct it."*

*– Orlando Aloysius Battista*

## Dillie

Not to be a Negative Nelly, but Tammy's screwed. The district lawyers are focusing on who hacked her account, but that's not the real problem--five minutes with the gal and you'd know the email didn't come from Tam. That message was about as suave as a jackhammer on a raw egg; wasn't her style at all. She's got an iron fist, but it's wrapped in a velvet glove. Not even drunk Tammy would've blasted that off. Trust me, I'd know, I'm her go-to guy when it comes to letting her hair down. Or, at least, that's how it used to be.

First, I thought the hacker was one of the Promise Scholars. The media hyped those kids to the moon when that Blingly fellow, Canaan, started the program over at MLK. I was sure it was malarkey for the Blingly PR machine, but when MLK shut down and the Scholars transferred to Jefferson, it was easy to see they're the real deal. Sure, eighty percent of the kids are run-of-the-mill smarty-pants, but there's a couple super geniuses in the mix.

Too bad Jefferson had their head up their stumps and didn't give the kids a fair shake. If I was one of the scholars, I'd have hacked into Tam's email myself. But that's me, just don't see any of the Scholars doing that kind of thing. Sure, those twin girls got

caught gluing the teacher's lounge door shut, but twins are twins; Eleanor and I got into plenty trouble egging each other on when we were young. Thing is, kids are messy, they make stupid mistakes--this hacker didn't leave a trace. Had to be an adult. Someone with skills. Who's got skills like that? Plenty of people at Blingly. Wouldn't be surprised if Canaan himself hacked into Tam's account.

But, like I said, the email isn't the real problem, the crux of the matter is the steaming pile of poo that email leads to. Numbers don't lie; Tam suspended those Scholars left and right--and there wasn't a single detention on any of their records before they hit Jeff. Pretty stark difference there. Might call it black and white, and you'd be right on more than one account. I should've said something. Sure, El was dying, but it would've taken me two secs to pull Tam aside and say, *What the hell are you doing?* Now it's too late. Tam's going to fry.

Frankly, the situation has me in the dumps, which gives me a taste for Chinese. Since the divorce, and then El getting sick, some might say that I've taken a bit too much comfort in food. One look at my gut and you get the story. Put on so much weight, that I had to dig Dad's slacks out of storage. Five pairs of chinos and they all got a stain right where our old man rested his varnish brush. Should buy some new ones, but there's no one to help me figure out which pairs to get. Thought Tam and I were headed in that direction. If not lovers--Tam's not a hot-to-trot gal--companions of a sort. Maybe it could've grown into romance--then I went and screwed the pooch. When it's said and done, the companionship would've been enough. Should've just left it at that.

You get to a certain age, and it's about the company more than anything else. Tam could probably use some company right about now. What a day she must've had, with the news people showing up on the lawn as the kids were getting picked up, and the district lawyers coming in with their suits and sour looks. Maybe I should call Tam, make the first move, stop by with some wontons and Sizzling Beef, see if she's okay. But that's fool's talk; of course she's not okay. People don't recover from this kind of thing. Tam's life is over. Jesus, poor Tam.

She was there for me when El got sick--didn't give two licks that she was my boss, she showed-up like a friend. Genuine class. Now, I've got to figure out how to be there for her. Give her what she really needs this time. I'm not the best shoulder to cry on, always had a bear of a time seeing the brighter-side of things. Been dealing with a dark cloud since day one. When we were kids, El even made-up a code to remind me of good stuff. Just a bunch of nonsense, like *talligati* for the understanding between us. El was one special lady. Hard to find love like you get from a sister. That gal even did her dissertation on the psychology of happiness. Can't imagine another woman making her life's work about figuring how to tighten my loose screws. Talligati, I tell you. Talligati.

So, turns out you're basically born with happiness or you're not. Can add a little here and there, but not much. El took that tidbit real hard. Thought it might be she grabbed all the joy and left me to scrounge for the scraps. If that's how it works, I'm glad El's the one of us who got it. Couldn't live with myself if I did that to her. Suppose that's how she felt too.

I moved in with El about a year before we knew she was sick. My divorce was in the pipeline and the condo was in foreclosure--if I'd have known the cancer was lurking in El, I'd have off'd myself right then and there. A guy can only take so much bad news. Weekdays, the job kept me focused, but after last bell Fridays, I crashed. El saw what was happening and she got right to work, passing me shovels to dig myself out of my widening ditch. Like Friday nights, she'd put three menus on the table and say, "You pick." I'd read her research; knew she was trying to make me take control of a small task so I'd remember I was "capable and worthy."

"I call it in, you pick it up," I'd counter.

"That's not an equal level of commitment," El would say. Chapter four of her book was about finding "global perspective." That was El's PhD way of saying I needed to get out of the house and remember there was a whole world outside of my head.

I'd say, "Cut the highfalutin honkey, El," and she'd challenge me to a Roshambo for driving duties. Roshambo for dealing with the estate lawyer. Roshambo for selling Dad's train set, Mom's porcelain dogs. Roshambo for who got the master bedroom (her), who got Dad's eighty-nine Corvette (me). Then Eleanor got sick. No rock, paper, scissors about it, my pathetic genes would be the last bud on the Dillie family tree. Talk about a game of chance.

Nobody here anymore to put the menus on the table. Thought that might've been Tam by now, but odds seem stacked against us and getting worse. Got to do everything myself. It's utterly exhausting, but that's just the way the cookie crumbled. So, I grope in the drawer for the China Palace menu--under the plain paper Greek, the placemat Italian,



the coupon insert bar-b-que and Thai--then my fingers hit the pointed corner, the crisp fold, and I know I've found another one of El's origami squirrels. Each time I find one, it's like my sister has risen from the grave, *Gotcha!* Gotcha in a new roll of toilet paper. Gotcha half-way through a box of dryer sheets. Gotcha in the bottom of the Folgers's tub, a box of envelopes, between two couch cushions, a stack of bathroom towels. Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha! It's like the whole god damn house is infested with paper rodents.

Can't figure why my sister spent her last days folding these suckers. Thought about calling hospice to see if they've got ideas about what she was up to, but I figure there's other people dying now and I don't want to be a bother.

I decided the origami beasts belong in the living room, on the mantel next to El's ashes. It's where she took her last breath, watching the real squirrels out the big bay window from her hospital bed. This new squirrel will make an even dozen. Twelve glossy blue rodents my sister hid before she bit the proverbial dust. *Gotcha!*

"Damn it, Eleanor," I say. Then, "Damn it," I say louder, like raising my volume will make sense of the fact that El is gone, that Tam has gotten herself into a big pile of muck. "Damn it, Tammy," I say. "Damn it to hell."

The phone rings. Tam's the only one who calls me, and my heart goes thumpity thinking she's decided I'm what she wants in her time of need. "Tam?" I say.

"Hello." It's a female voice, but it's not Tam and I feel like a fool for thinking she'd call. Got lawyers and her book club friends. I'm way down her list, course I am. "Is Eleanor available?" the caller says.

“She’s not here.” I shrug at the origami squirrels next to El’s remains like, *what do you want me to say, she’s dead?*

“Is there a better number for me to reach her?”

Lady’s got a nice voice. “Where’d you say you’re calling from?”

“Wildermar Resorts. I have a direct line if Mrs. Dillie would prefer to call me back.”

“Ms.” I correct her. El was a stickler about that: *Mizzzzz*; liked drawing out the z’s.

“My apologies, Ms. Dillie.”

Got a soft spot for call center gals. Dated one after college. Things didn’t work out, but I remember her fondly. Left me for a guy she met on a call. “What did you say your name was?”

“Colleen.”

The call center gal I dated told me most of the gals made-up names. I said strippers did the same. My gal didn’t think that was such a hot thing to say. “I was heading out to get Chinese,” I tell this Colleen on the other end.

“Ms. Dillie won an all expense paid trip to Wildermar Resorts in sunny Papagayo, Costa Rica,” Colleen says in a game showy voice. “How can I reach her so she can claim her prize?”

“She would’ve liked that,” I say. “But, Eleanor passed away thirty-eight days ago.”

Colleen gasps. Something satisfying about that sound she makes. Haven’t heard noises like that, coming from a woman, in quite some time. “My sister died very slowly

over the last two years,” I say, hoping for another pretty gasp. When I don’t get one, I add, “It was awful.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Colleen says, and I can tell she is genuinely sorry. I feel like a jerk for playing on her sympathies like that. Out the window, one of those real squirrels is standing on his hind legs, just like the origami ones do. My sister loved those squirrels. I’d come home from work and she’d tell me about their shenanigans. This one stole that one’s nut; that one almost got hit by the Schneider’s SUV. Those damn squirrels don’t even know El’s gone. I bet they never knew she was here in the first place. Isn’t that the real crapper? You give your whole heart to something--like a squirrel, or a person, for example--and that thing might not even know you exist? Must’ve been quiet for a while because Colleen says, “Mr. Dillie?”

“Call me Larry.”

“Larry,” she says. “I know what it’s like to lose someone you love.”

I don’t want to be rude to this kind-hearted gal. I’m sure she’s got sales quotas breathing down her neck, so I say, “I don’t want to waste your time with my troubles.”

“It’s no waste.”

“Don’t you have more calls to make?”

She says. “Mr. Dil--”

“Larry.”

“Larry, to be honest, this is my last day on the job. I’m completing my counseling degree online and I’m starting my internship at a center.”

“I see,” I tell her. For a second, I think my students are pranking me—they like to do that, make fools of people, then post it online. Last year they did a series with lewd chalk drawings and a rap song. Same kid, that Huddy boy who was involved in this latest dust-up with the MLK kid--can't see how the boy never gets punished. Guess his dad's some big hotshot they don't want to ruffle the wrong way. Bunch of us got hit on that one. That was when I was taking El to her treatments; looking in every damn corner we could find, praying for a cure. Tough time.

I crack open my laptop, prop this latest origami squirrel between the keyboard and the screen, ask Colleen for the name of her school. She must know what I'm doing because she says, “It's w-w-w-dot-u-n-t-i-l-dot-com.” Of course, if the kids were pulling a prank, they'd have a website ready to go. These kids are sneaky. That's what you get when you raise them on social media and porn, give them smartphones and tablets to shut them up. Lazy parenting. That's what it boils down to, and the rest of us have to pay because you wanted another craft brew and one more episode of your trash TV.

I scroll through the school's website; it looks legit. “So you're in the remote counseling program?”

“I graduate in May.”

“How'd you say you got Eleanor's number?”

“She was selected in a raffle.”

“Those little boxes with the slips of paper?”

“Exactly,” Colleen is pleased that we’re on the same page. I like the sound of her pleasure. It kind of ripples through me, but then it’s gone, and I’m more empty than before.

I remember El filling the slips out while we waited at the holistic light therapy place. She’d lost faith in chemo and was trying every wheatgrass enema and shaman in town. We fought bitterly about her abandoning real medicine for the quacks. I’d actually used the fact that there was a raffle box next to the Buddha fountain as proof El was hanging her hopes on scams. Told her that once the timeshare folks had her number, they’d never stop calling. El laughed so hard her silk turban slipped from her stubbly head and slithered to the floor like a boneless snake. *I’ll be dead, Lar. Who gives two shits? I’m filling out the whole damn stack.*

I’d asked how she could laugh.

“Because it’s funny,” El said.

“It’s not funny,” I said. “You’re leaving me.”

Then my sister took my hands, right there in the light therapy waiting room, and made me look her in the eyes. “For me, it’s just another leg of the journey. This last leg has been pretty crappy. I’m ready for a change.”

“But what about me?” I said. Knew I was a jerk for saying it, what with El being the one dying and everything, but that’s how I felt.

“Labaloo,” she said--*labaloo*, that was the word El made-up to describe the puppy Dad got for us for our tenth birthday. I loved that dog. Thing was so happy it was

like he was trying to squirm out of his skin and melt into the lawn. He got hit by a car. Damn driver didn't even stop.

“Talligati,” I told El and then she went in for her light therapy.

Later that night, when my sister was asleep and the respite nurse was watching Wheel of Fortune, I met Tam at a Mexican joint and we drank enough tequila to fill a bathtub. Tam let loose about her crappy drugged-up daughter dumping Sophie like a piece of trash. Cried in the chips and salsa about the insurance company fighting her on Sophie's off-road wheelchair, saying the girl had limited life expectancy. Apparently that meant Sophie didn't need to get to the beach or go hiking. I got in my fair share about El's situation, too. Told Tam about El ditching the chemo for the hocus-pocus. Tam played devil's advocate and said, “Lar, she has to do this on her own terms. It's her life.”

I told her she sure made a lot of decisions for Sophie if that was her official stance. Wasn't fair of me to throw Sophie in like that, the child barely sits-up on her own, can't tell Tam if she crapped herself, let alone thoughts on her medical decisions.

Tam said, “Lar, I think it's time to go home.” Then she got us a car, took me home first, gave me a couple Tylenol and a big cup of water--and I thanked her for her kindness by trying to pull her into my bed.

Tam said it wasn't a good idea, so I told her I needed it, that I'd never ask for anything again, that I wouldn't tell anyone at work. When she still refused, I told her that I wanted to die. That I'd kill myself that night if I didn't have her company. I told her I'd take a handful of El's pills and wash them down with more tequila. Tam and I stared at each other in the dark for a long time. We both knew I meant it. Hell Tam knew that

feeling too, but, we also both knew that I was trying to get in her pants. Finally, she said, “That’s not fair, Larry.”

And I said, “Tell me about it.”

For the six months since, Tam and I have been acting like neither of us remembers me begging her to just lay next to me, that she didn’t even have to touch me. That I just wanted to feel her warmth.

Colleen’s voice is soft, snapping me back, and I wonder how long I’ve been drifting. “If you don’t mind me saying,” she says. “Perhaps you’d like to talk about losing your sister? I might be able to offer some insight.”

“I should be grading quizzes,” I say, but my heart’s not in it. I pick up the origami squirrel from my computer, glance at the photocopied sheets falling out of my bag. The quiz is two diagrams of the human reproductive systems the students are supposed to label--like slapping a name on the parts explains what goes on between a man and a woman.

“You’re a teacher?” Colleen asks.

“Sure,” I say, like I’m agreeing to a favor.

“My wife’s a teacher,” she says.

I know the gay thing is normal these days. Got a couple of them at school; heard some of the kids swing both ways. There’s even a rumor Coach Olsen is one of those transgenders; pretty sure she’s just a masculine gal. See, I’m not closed-minded, but I still get caught off-guard when Colleen mentions her wife. It’s like I’ve lost twice: once because I just found out Colleen is married and a second time since, even if she was

single, I don't got the right parts for the gal. "How long you been married?" I ask, looking to show I don't have a problem with her choices.

"Three years."

"Good for you."

"How about you, Larry? Are you married?"

I rub the origami squirrel between my fingers. "Not at the moment," I say.

"Is there a special person in your life?"

I think about Tam, but I can't claim what we got with a definition. Wish I could, but the facts don't support it. "Tough to say," I tell Colleen.

"Would you like to talk about it?"

I blow out a big huff of air. "Wouldn't know where to start."

"Perhaps you'd be open to a counseling exercise? See what we can find out?"

I don't want to disappoint Colleen and what could it hurt? "Sure," I say.

"I'll start a sentence, and you complete it with whatever comes to mind."

"Shoot," I say.

Papers shuffle on Colleen's end of the line. I imagine her fingers. They're plump and she likes to run them through her wife's hair. I wonder which one plays the woman and which the man. El said it doesn't work like that, but don't see how it couldn't. "Here we go," she says. "This one's my favorite. I'm afraid that..."

I watch one of El's real squirrels leap from the neighbor's roof to the fence, sprint to a patch of Touch-me-nots along the street.

"That's your sentence," Colleen prompts. "I'm afraid that..."



“Oh,” I say, embarrassed. “I didn’t understand.”

“It’s okay. Just try. I’m afraid that... The first thing that comes to your mind.”

“I’m afraid that Tammy is going to lose her job.”

“That’s great,” Colleen says. “Not Tammy losing her job, of course. Who’s Tammy?”

The email had been blasted to everyone--staff, parents, students; got a copy myself. I think about how the news vans had lined-up on the curb this afternoon. “I’m not sure I can tell you,” I say. “There might be some legal restrictions.”

“Anything you tell me is confidential,” Colleen says. “Unless you’re going to hurt yourself or someone else. Then I have to report it.”

“Nothing like that.” My mind skips over the semester, all the Scholars in detention. The expulsions. “It’s complicated,” I say.

“Most things are,” Colleen says.

I shrug at the origami squirrel in my hand, like, *she’s got a point*. “Tammy’s gone to bat for me a couple of times. She was there when my sister passed,” I explain. Don’t want Colleen to think less of me, so I don’t say that Tam could’ve fired me for harassment, at least made me feel like more of an idiot than I already felt. But she never said one word about what I’d done.

“It sounds like Tammy’s a good friend.”

After Eleanor took her last breath, I sat with her body, right here in the living room, all her leftover pills in my lap, thinking about quitting myself. I picked up the phone and called Tam, didn’t tell her what I was thinking--didn’t want her to feel like I

was trying to manipulate her again. Instead I said, “El’s gone,” with my sister’s body right there in front of me.

Tam said, “She’s free now.”

“Sure,” I said.

Tam said, “Her suffering is over,” and it made me wonder what that meant about me being left behind, but I hung up and called the hospice people and they made the arrangements to take Tam’s body away. Guess I’m still kicking around.

“Larry?”

“Sorry,” I tell Colleen. One of El’s real squirrels pops up on the windowsill and looks at me. I can see the house reflected in his inky eyes. “We were twins,” I say, but it’s only a whisper. “Twins,” I repeat.

“It must be difficult,” Colleen says.

“Yes,” I tell her, and my voice cracks, and I spill everything. I tell her about cheating on my wife because I couldn’t figure out why the gal had married me and I was positive she was planning to leave me from the start. I tell her about begging my ex to stay and how she said I was the worst decision she’d ever made. While I’m spilling my guts to Colleen, that squirrel scampers around the yard, nosing the ground like he’s on a mission, but as far as I can see he accomplishes nothing. I keep talking and talking and Colleen is making her noises saying, *ummm, wow, I’m so sorry to hear that*, but the sounds don’t hit the same nerve that first pretty gasp did.

I tell her about the Promise Scholars--how Canaan spent his million dollars on those black kids and how their school shut down because a couple administrators were

lining their pockets. Then, I tell her about Jefferson fighting to keep the Scholars out, but the state making us take them. Tell her about Tam being principal through the whole damn mess.

Colleen says, “Yes, I’ve seen the stories on the news.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything, but this Colleen told me we’re talking in confidence, so I say, “Maybe your wife’s school is different, but these Jefferson parents are a real case of the tail wagging the dog. They get their panties in a wad when things don’t go their way. Start calling meetings and making threats.”

Colleen makes a kind of harrumphing sound that’s not so pretty. Then she says, “That Jillian Matthews is a good reporter.”

“Sure,” I say and I ask if she’s heard about the email that went out from Tam’s account.

Colleen says, “I saw Ms. Matthews reporting in front of the school this afternoon.”

“But, Tam didn’t send that email--she’s being set up.” I know I sound like a conspiracy theory lunatic. “If you knew Tammy,” I say. I look down at the tiny beast in my hand; I’ve rubbed a bunch of the blue ink off and the paper is plain white beneath.

“Sometimes people do things that surprise us,” Colleen says.

“Not Tam,” I say. I’m thinking about the second mortgage she took to remodel for Sophie, the medical ventilation system, the shower with the motorized swing. I’m thinking about the specialists, the medication—the fact that Tam’s a widow—how she’s

all alone too. The squirrel is back on the handrail watching me, his rubbery nose sniffing for clues. "I knew," I say.

"What did you know, Larry?" Colleen asks.

I knew the PTA was harassing her day and night about getting rid of the Scholars, reminding her they could make her job plenty hard. I knew Tam was doing things to keep them happy--little things that added up. "Tammy's not a bad person," I say. I'm rubbing that origami squirrel so rough the blue ink is sloughing onto my pants, the squirrel's going white and naked under my thumb.

"People rarely are," Colleen says.

I don't agree, but it's a nice way of looking at things. "Tam's more than not a bad person," I say. "She's a good person--a really good person."

"Everybody make mistakes. Even good people."

"Doesn't change who she is."

"I believe you," Colleen says.

"But those kids still got hurt," I admit. My thumb catches on the edge of the squirrel's ear, pops it free.

"Yes, it sounds like they did get hurt," Colleen agrees.

"Do you think there's a way Tam could make it right?" I try to poke the squirrel's ear back in, but his neck unwinds and now he doesn't look like a squirrel at all.

Colleen says, "I don't believe that a situation could be so bad there's no way to make it better."

I look at the squirrel with his neck unravelled and I say, "Unless you're dead."

“I’m sorry, Larry. You’re right. As long as we’re living, I should say, there’s a chance.”

“Tam’s still living,” I say.

“She is.” Colleen perks up. Then she says something that catches me off-guard.

“And so are you, Larry. You’re still living too.”

“I’m still living,” I say.

“Yes, you are.”

This origami squirrel is already done in, might as well figure out how he works. I pop open a fold. His tail opens, then his belly. “If you were Tammy how would you fix this?”

“I would tell the truth,” Colleen says.

“The truth will set you free,” I say as I flip the squirrel over, open up his hind legs.

“What does she have to lose?”

I think about Tam’s fear that the state will stuff Sophie in some grim institution to drool and collect rashes. The last fold opens and the squirrel is just a flat piece of paper, speckled blue and white; all El’s hard work come to nothing. I flip it over and on the other side is El’s handwriting. “Wheelah. Ommpharoo. Talligati,” I read aloud.

“Excuse me?” Colleen says.

“My sister,” I say. “We had this language for her to remind me of things.”

“What does it mean?” Colleen asks.

“Wheelah is being mid-cartwheel. It’s when your head’s upside down and you can smell the summer grass. Ommpharoo is the feeling of a firework in your chest, when the colors spread across the sky.”

“That’s beautiful,” Colleen says. “The last word. What does it mean?”

“It’s how El and I said we loved each other. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“I see,” Colleen says. Then we’re quiet for a while until Colleen says, “What would Eleanor say about this situation with Tammy?”

“I have to think on that,” I say. “El was like a different half of me. That’s what I’m missing now, that part that knew what to say.”

“I think you know what to say,” Colleen says. “That’s why Eleanor made up those words to remind you. Not everybody would understand what she meant.”

“Sure,” I say, but I don’t want to admit it, because there’s this part of me that thinks if I do--if I admit that I have answers inside--I’ll be letting El go, but El’s not here anymore. She’s just not and that’s a fact. It doesn’t make sense--hell, if there’s a God, that sucker made a big mistake taking El instead of me--but, I’m the one who’s left. That’s the way the cookie crumbled.

“What do you think Tam should do?” Colleen says.

I look at El’s writing in my hand, then all those tiny beasts lined up on the mantel next to her ashes and I’m betting each one’s got a message in its belly. Betting there’s more little guys hidden in the house--hoping there’s enough that I’ll never run out. The sun is sinking and the real squirrels have packed it in. They’re somewhere out there, in

their nest or a burrow--don't exactly know where squirrels go--but, point is, they're out there--even if I can't see them anymore. "I got to call, Tam," I say.

And then me and this Colleen gal, we say goodbye and we hang up.

Reba

**Reba Munson** <reba@munsonturkandlittle.com>

7:03 PM (58 minutes ago)

To: Bryan Canaan

B,

Trouble with the Promise Scholars. Get home as soon as you can. They need your help. Send me your itinerary. I'll be there to pick you up.

--R

...

*"To ease another's heartache is to forget one's own."*

--Abraham Lincoln



## **Jillian Matthews**

I type in Tammy Bower and hit images. I always start with the images. Smith says it's because I'm a millennial. He, on the other hand, is fifty-two years old, and claims his first world handicap is a chronic inability to take a decent selfie. He has a valid point. He never starts with images. If he were researching Principal Bower, he'd probably start at the library, or maybe a trip down to the public records office.

Tammy Bower is a more common name than I'd assumed. There's a bunch of pictures of a fitness model, posing in workout gear, rock hard abs, one knee lifted, hand on hip. Definitely not the Tammy Bower, I'm looking for.

Down the hall, Smith rustles loudly. The slap of his body flipping deliberately on our mattress echoes into my office. There's a snap as he flings our sheets with crisp intention. Smith is having himself a regular tantrum. I'm twenty-three years younger, but I'd never flip loudly, or try to bully him back to bed. For that matter, I'd never sleep with a random person I met at a conference in Vancouver and jeopardize my marriage. But that's just me.

I click to video. At least half of the clips are from Channel Ten. I can't stand the sight of myself on camera. If Smith hadn't been so persistent about me moving in with

him, hadn't pulled strings at the station, and if I hadn't been so young and stupid--I'd be working at the Post by now. Instead, I'm covering school board meetings.

"Jills?" Smith calls.

I sink my head into my hands. "What?" I say, trying to keep the irritation from my voice. I don't want to fight. I'm too tired, too wrung-out.

Smith stands in the door, blocking the light. He's disheveled. His t-shirt misshapen, his skinny legs pale and hairless in the light. What did she see in him? At least I was young, blinded by the fact he'd lived in Japan, spoke fluent Japanese. "It's after midnight," he says.

"I'm working on something," I tell him.

"A lead?"

"An instinct."

He runs his hands through his razor cut hair. What kind of man gets haircuts that cost that much money? I should have known from the beginning. "The Jefferson thing?"

"Yes." I stare at him through the soupy light.

"Maybe it's time you gave it up. Let the legal system deal with it."

"There's something here," I tell him, smooth the stray hairs from my face, push away thought of my husband slugging back caipirinhas in a hotel bar; the sound of his buckle hitting the hotel floor; the sound of her slipping between the sheets. "I need to work," I say and turn back to my screen.

I run another search: *Promise Scholars*, narrow my eyes, lean in, square my back against Smith. The obvious suspects fill the feed: local Chronicle hacks plying penny

words. No lyricism or appreciation for the art of journalism. The national rags are better, not without flaw, but miles more refined than the locals. There's the investigative piece from the Post. I've read it a dozen times. Written early in the game, when the Jefferson Heights parents were still battling to keep the Promise Scholars from being bussed in. Tammy Bower's was just a public school administrator wedged between a billionaire and a litigious community.

"Are you going to stand there and keep looking at me?" I say. I hear the crackle of his feet on the carpet, the muffled drama of his retreat. The bedroom door closes and I can breathe again. I want to scream.

I stare at the screen, resist the urge to search her name, dig through her social media accounts, pour over pictures of her kids, click on her husband's profile, research the company he works for, the marathon he ran in October, look at pictures from their vacation. I've done it all before. It's a trap, I tell myself. Tammy Bower, that's who I need to figure out.

It doesn't add up. I was on the scene when Canaan announced he was funding the Scholars Program. I was there when things went south and they took the administration from MLK High School, the first Promise Scholar's school, out in cuffs. I was at every school board meeting they held to keep the scholars out of Jefferson Heights. I even went to the capital for the state hearing.

I'm inside the guts of this thing. Something stinks, but I can't put my finger on what it is.

Tammy Bower doesn't strike me as the kind of woman looking for her fifteen

minutes of fame. I'd love to get her talking after a couple of martinis. That's the problem with TV; everybody knows your face. There's no way Tammy Bower is giving me an exclusive interview. And that's what I need if I'm going to break out of Channel Ten, break back into real journalism, get out of this stupid town, and far, far away from Smith.

#

I dial the station, wait on the line for Mike to pick-up. Smith's cologne lingers in the air. I wonder if she went home from the conference reeking of Smith, if her husband asked what the smell was. Gio, Buddy. It was Giorgio Armani. I bought it for Christmas.

Mike answers. "Jills, what's going on?"

My stomach is jumpy with nerves, but I dive in. "I've been digging into this Jefferson Heights situation."

"The Promise Scholars?"

"I think there's something going on here."

"What you got?"

"Just a feeling."

"Feelings don't feed advertisers. You got a source?"

"That's why I'm calling. I want to do an investigative piece. Real journalism."

There's a long pause. I imagine Mike staring out his office window at the scrubby business park beyond the station. "Listen," he says. "I'm going to be real honest here. And, I'm going way out on a limb when I say this--what with all the sexual harassment

going around—but, I’m counting on you to understanding where I’m coming from. See, the thing is, Jills, they’re tuning in to watch you...your...your assets, as it were. It’s not the reporting. You hear where I’m coming from, Jills? I’m not hitting on you. I’d say this with Smith on the line. Hell, everybody knows it, Jills. You’re a looker, right? The journalism, it’s sort of second rate. Now, don’t take that as an insult, it’s just how it is.”

“I went to Columbia, Mike.”

“So did a lot of girls. Listen, if it wasn’t for Smith, you think I would’ve looked at your reel? I’m glad I did. I am. It would’ve been a real miss to pass you up. You bring in the advertisers. Lana’s retiring in a year, maybe two, and that desk is all yours. Anchor before thirty. That’s an accomplishment to write your Columbia friends about.”

“Maybe I’ll do a freelance piece,” I say. “For NPR or one of the podcasts.” I don’t mean it to sound like a threat, but that’s what it comes out like--a sad lump of a threat.

“That sounds great,” Mike says. “Nothing in your contract says you can’t do something like that. Maybe though, try one of those streaming sites. Use your assets, if you know what I mean. You were meant to be on camera.”

#

When I get home from the late edition, there are big white lilies on the table. A note card is propped against the vase. Jills, what can I do to convince you? The kitchen smells of honeyed death. The muffled sound of the TV drifts down the hall from the bedroom. Smith probably fell asleep before my segment was even on.

No loss. Tonight's piece was about packages being stolen off porches. They've got the thief on a half-dozen security systems. I interviewed a stay-at-home mom who's "terrified" for her children. The woman said, "What kind of country are we turning into? It was bad enough when they bussed those city kids into Jefferson. Next thing you know, we'll be the next Afghanistan." Reni popped into my mind, when the lady said that. I'd read a piece Reni did for *Vice* on women seeking refuge in Afghan prisons. The rest of the night, I couldn't get Reni out of my mind. She'd know what to do about the Promise Scholars story.

I haven't talked to her since Smith and I got married. What's a couple of years between friends, I tell myself. I might as well give it a try. I tap my text app, type out, Miss you so much, Reni Darling! When can you chat?

To my surprise, dots immediately blink on my screen, then the text bubble appears. *Jillie-bean! Talk now, Doll Face?*

Reni doesn't wait for me to respond. My phone rings once before I answer. Her angular face fills the screen. "Jillie-bean!" She pulls the camera to her lips, kisses, once, twice, three times. "How's my girl?" Her hair is dyed black, gold earrings drip to her golden shoulders. Her lips are stained deep plum.

"You look fancy," I say.

Reni taps her forehead. A luminous opal swallows her finger to the knuckle. Her nails are crimson. "On assignment," she says. "Johannesburg. You know how they are here."

I don't have clue what they're like in Johannesburg. I say, "What are you

working on?”

“Counterfeit designer ring. Four hundred billion worldwide. Purses, shoes. You know how it goes. You start pulling a thread and next thing you know you’re in Johannesburg.”

“I thought all those knock-offs were done in Asia?”

“Sure. Vietnam. China. I’ve been hopping around for a few months. South Africa is just the head of the snake. Same old story: rich white guy behind the scenes.” She leans in close and whispers, “His family owns sixty-one percent of a huge fashion house. If I said it, you’d be like, ‘are you kidding me?’ He’s literally knocking-off his own goods. It’s kind of brilliant, don’t you think? Who knows the product better than him?”

My blood is going just listening to Reni. “Who are you writing it for?”

“Freelance. *Vanity Fair* and *Salon* are interested. But, I’ve got to get to the inner circle if I want a big glossy. Manis with the girlfriend isn’t going to cut it. I could do a great travel piece on South African spas, though.” She leans back. Her blue dress shimmers as she reaches behind the camera and pulls back a glass of red wine. “I guess I could fall back on a travel piece if the big story falls through,” she says, then tips the wine to her lips.

“What time is it?” I ask. She sets her glass on the table; lipstick stains the rim.

“A little after three.”

“In the afternoon?”

She laughs, hoarse, but happy. “I got in around four in the morning.”

I look around my remodeled kitchen, the Viking stove and double-wide fridge.

When was the last time I was exhausted with excitement? I can't remember.

"You know how it is when a story gets in your blood and you need to get it out. I sat down and started pounding at the keys."

"You've been writing since four am?"

"For the most part," she says. "If you hadn't texted, who knows how long I would have been at it? You probably saved my life."

"Sounds exciting," I say. I don't want to be jealous, but I am. How did Reni end up infiltrating a counterfeit ring in South Africa and I'm sitting in the suburbs?

"Work." Reni shrugs. "Tell me what's going on with you and Mr. Handsome?"

"Smith?"

Renee laughs. "Yes, Smith. Unless my Jillie-silly-bean has been a naughty, naughty girl while Auntie Reni has been working herself to the bone."

"Smith is fine," I say as I pluck a lily from the vase. I twirl its gaudy head between my fingers. Water runs down the stem, splashes the card, running the ink.

"I thought for sure Smith would have you knocked-up by now."

"Things change," I say as I pluck a petal from the stem. It's meatier than I thought. There's something satisfying about how it fights back. I tear it between my fingers. Tear it again.

"You want to talk about it?" Reni asks. "Or just murder that flower?"

"I don't want to talk about it one bit," I tell her.

Reni nods. "Have at it with the flower then, my dear. I imagine you were checking in for a reason, Chili-bean. What've you got up your sleeve?"



“It’s a story I’ve been working on,” I tell her. “Something doesn’t smell right.”

“Sounds like my kind of scoop.” She drains her glass. I tell her about the Promise Scholars. She says, “That program Canaan started? That’s guy’s such an entitled prick.”

Then I tell her about the Jefferson community fighting to keep the scholars out when MLK was shut down.

“Classic bourgeois new money bullshit,” she says.

“After the kids transfer is when things get really interesting.”

Reni puts rests her chin on her forearms. “What kind of things?”

“Fights. Pranks.”

“Sounds like high school.”

“But only the Promise Scholars get suspended. Nothing happens to the other kids.”

“And they’re all black?”

“One hundred percent.”

“And this other school?”

“Let’s just say, it’s a different demographic.”

“That’s horrendous,” Reni says. “This Principal, what did you say her name is? Bower? Are you sure she’s not a closet racist?”

“Maybe,” I say. “But, I don’t think so. Something tells me she’s a victim too.”

“Trust your gut, Jillie-bean.”

“You think someone might be interested in a piece about what’s been going on here?”

Renee furrows her brows. “It depends on what you find and how you angle it. It’s either small town news and nobody cares, or it’s an expose on America’s hidden racial bias. Might be a good piece for the New Yorker. I know an editor. You write it and I’ll pass it on.”

“You’d do that?”

“Of course. What’s the point if we can’t help our friends?”

“Reni, remember when we were at Columbia and we uncovered that story about all the unspent scholarship money?”

“And the deans were saying they didn’t know the money existed. That accountant had filed it under a wrong account and it was just sitting there.”

“And the university president was telling donors she needed more scholarship money.”

“Of course I do, my Chili-Jillie-bean. It was my first big scoop. You never forget that.”

“Ya, well it was my last.”

Reni’s sits up and sets her glass carefully on her table. “Jillian Sarah Matthews we have to change this,” she says.

“That’s what I was thinking, too,” I tell her

#

I wait for Smith’s car door to close. The electric hum of his motor is too quiet to

hear from inside the house. I peep through the blinds and watch him glide silently away. He must have put the decimated lily in the trash can, coffee grounds and eggshells tossed over it like confetti. The rest of the bouquet is gone. I brew a cup of coffee on our fancy Italian machine, while I consider what I'll say. I decide a simple introduction, then I'll get right to why I'm calling—if whoever answers lets me get that far.

Coffee in hand, I sit at my desk and dial the Spike's family number. "Hell-o?" It must be the grandmother.

"Hello, Mrs. Spikes. This is Jillian Matthews from Channel Ten."

"We aren't talking to the media," she says.

I speak fast, before she decides to cut the line. "Please let me say a few words. If you don't like what you hear you can hang-up."

"I can hang-up now," she says.

"I think you'll want to hear what I have to say."

"Say your piece," she tells me.

"Thank you," I say. "I've been covering the scholars since Canaan started the program. I've never met Jaycee personally, but I know who he is. He's a good kid. I don't think he started that fight, Mrs. Spikes. I think he's being treated unfairly."

"He is," she says, but nothing more. I was hoping that would open the door, but I'm obviously going to have to work to gain her trust.

"But, I also believe Principal Bower didn't send that email. Something else is going on."

"Jaycee didn't send the email, Ms. Matthews. If that's what you're saying."

I've gone and stuck my foot in my mouth. I rush to make it right. "I'm not suggesting Jaycee is at the bottom of this. I just want to find out who is."

"You can talk to Pastor Applewood," Mrs. Spikes says. "He's our representative," then she gives me his number and adds, "'Having put away falsehood, let each of us speak truth with our neighbors, for we are members of one another.' That's Ephesians, Ms. Matthews. God bless you," and hangs-up.

I dial the pastor before I lose my nerve. He answers on the first ring, "Applewood."

I rush through my spiel while he listens, then I say, "I'm interested in clearing Jaycee's name, Mr. Applewood."

"Ms. Matthews, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but we have to consider Jaycee's future. The school hasn't admitted wrongdoing, and Jaycee hasn't been allowed to return to classes. We're forced to assume his scholarships are in jeopardy, so we're making contingency plans. We'd be happy to discuss fair payment in exchange for an interview."

My stomach drops. This isn't good for me and it's not good for Jaycee either. Before they know it, the Spikes family will be labeled money-grubbing media hounds. "Pastor Applewood, I understand your concern," I say. "But, it's not ethical to pay sources for serious journalism."

"With all due respect, I have it on good authority that those girls held captive in Wisconsin received a hundred thousand dollars for their interviews."

"Those were exceptional cases. I couldn't even get permission from my station to

investigate. I'm doing this on my own." I'm pleading now. I imagine Reni telling me to lift my chin, stop whining, play hard to get.

"Ms. Matthews, I can see we're on different pages and I don't want to waste your time. Hopefully one of us shines a light on the truth."

"If you change your mind--"

"I know how to get ahold of you."

Applewood hangs-up and I stare at my blank page. I didn't get a single word worth writing. I try to calculate what time it is for Reni and decide, it doesn't matter-- she's not keeping regular office hours.

As soon as Reni pick-up, music blasts through the speaker. "Can you hear me, Jillie-bean? I'm stepping outside. Hold on, Doll. I hope you can hear me." The screen swings past golden arms, bits of hair, a backlit bar. There's a security guard in a black suit and Reni says, "I'll be right back. I'm with Monica." The guard opens the velvet rope and nods her forward. Then Reni and I are on a Cape Town street and she's leaning against a black Maserati. "What's going on, Chilly-bean?" she asks.

"I can't get the family to talk."

"And there's no hope with the principal?"

"I didn't even ask. It's a dead-end."

"Then you have to go undercover."

"You think I can pull it off?"

"Not all glammed up for the evening news, but how you look right now: bare face, messy hair, you could pass for eighteen easy. Dress like one of them. Have an

attitude. Act you belong there. You said it's a big school."

There's a wild screech. A slender arm swings across the screen, and then a curtain of black hair sweeps over the camera. Reni wobbles, fumbles the phone. The screen flips, fills with a street lamp, a square of night sky, a loud clatter as the phone hits the pavement. "Oh my God, Jillie-Bean." Reni's cleavage spills from her sequined top as she scoops me back into her hand.

"Are you alright Chili-bean?"

"I'm fine," I say. "How's your phone?"

"Who cares about the phone," a South African accent says, then a gorgeous Asian woman squeezes onto the screen next Reni. "Who's this?" she says.

"My friend," Reni says. She staring at me hard, trying to communicate telepathically. I know well enough to play along.

"Hello, Maggie's friend," the woman says, then she giggles and disappears. Reni watches past her screen. After a moment she leans in and whispers, "The girlfriend."

"And you're Maggie?"

"Yours truly."

I look around my home office, the knick-knacks and Ikea desk--everything so plain, so ordinary. "You think I can do this?" I ask.

"Chili-bean, it doesn't matter if you can or you can't. You have to. So you will. That's how we work; when we see injustice, we do something. That's what makes us who we are."

#

“Jills, you can’t do this to me.” Mike’s angrier than I thought he’d be. “I’ve got a fatality on the highway, a water main broke under the library, the Jefferson Principal is giving a statement and that Pastor is raising a hell with the ACLU. These are the days reporters live for.”

I force a cough; choke my voice so I sound more hoarse. “I’ve got a fever.”

“I’m going to have to put Gary on camera. Gary, for Christ’s sake--the god damn sound guy. You can’t suck it up for two minutes on camera?”

“I can’t, Mike. I wish I could.”

“Jesus. If you want anchor, you can’t be doing this. You show up rain or shine. Smith got you in the door, but not even he can grease you into the desk.”

“Won’t happen again, Mike,” I croak, then I hang up, grab my keys and leave.

#

My heart thuds under my sweatshirt as I pull into a spot along the back of the student parking lot. The infamous MLK bus pulls through the drop-off lane and a stream of black students spill out: the Promise Scholars. They couldn’t stick out from the crowd more if they flew in on dragons. I watch them file towards the door. A few of the other kids wave, say a word or two to a couple of the Scholars. One MLK girl peels off to walk

with a tall blonde, but the bulk of MLK kids pool through the crowd like a stream of dark ink spilled into water.

I flip down my visor, slide open the vanity mirror. My dirty hair is knotted high on my head, black smudges of leftover makeup ring my eyes, but my face is otherwise bare, my freckles in full view. I look pale, plain and most importantly young. Judging by the girls parking near me, I've hit the nail on the head with my black leggings and a sweatshirt. I grab my gym bag off the passenger seat, throw my earbuds in and push myself out of my car before I lose my nerve.

I can do this, I tell myself as I head towards Jefferson High's front doors. Reni would be proud. "Act like you know what you're doing," she told me. "Act like you own the place. Ninety-nine percent of the world is so caught-up with insecurity they barely notice anyone else. Act like you're beyond reproach and you will be."

I smile at a girl in the hall. Her face clouds and my heart catches in my throat, then, just as suddenly, she smiles and waves. "Who's that?" her friend asks as I pass.

"We had pre-calc together last year," the girl says confidently.

The bell rings and the halls empty. I find a bathroom and slip into a stall. I can do this, I tell myself.

The door opens. I turn on the water and pretend like I'm washing my hands. A girl sets her bag on the floor beside me and looks in the mirror. She catches my eye. We stare for a moment, side-by-side looking at our reflections in the mirror. "You're that news lady," she says, her forehead wrinkling.

My stomach drops. "Excuse me?"



“The lady on Channel Ten.”

“I’m a senior,” I say, but my voice is high and false, my face hot and red. “I’m Maggie,” I squeak.

“I don’t think so,” she says slowly. “You’re definitely that news lady. Why are you here?”

“No I’m not,” I say indignantly.

She stares at me, perplexed. “Yes, you are.”

I crumble. “Okay, fine. Can you keep a secret?”

She laughs. “Like a pro.”

I wrote a paper once about hostage situations. Humanize the situation, the research said. Appeal to their humanity. “What’s your name?” I ask.

“Luma,” the girl says.

“I need your help, Luma.”

“What’s up?” she asks.

“I have a hunch things aren’t what they seem at Jefferson and I want to help figure out what’s really going on.” I hold her eyes. “Things don’t add up,” I say. “Do you know what’s going on?”

Luma dips her head and stares at the grimy bathroom floor. I get the distinct feeling this girl knows something. “I want to help,” I remind her. “That’s all I want to do. I don’t want to get anybody in trouble.”

“If I tell you something, do you have to say where you heard it?” she asks.

A source with a name is a million times better than an anonymous one, but I’m talking to

a minor without her parent's permission; as much trouble as she could get in for whatever's on her mind, chances are it would be worse for me. Reni said, get inside—even if you have to crawl through a window. It looks like Luma is my window. "I won't tell anyone anything without your permission," I tell her.

She tucks her dark hair behind her ears and says, "My boyfriend was in the locker room when the MLK kid got jumped. You should talk to him. Then maybe my sister—if I can convince her to talk to you—but, first, Egan."

Keep cool, I hear Reni's advice in my head. Let them come to you. "When would be a good time to meet your boyfriend?"

"Do you know where the football field is?"

"I can find it."

"Meet us under the bleachers at lunch."

#

I'm not sure what I expect Luma's boyfriend to look like. Pimples? Awkward limbs? A boy. That's not who jumps into the hollow beneath the bleachers. Luma's boyfriend is tall with the muscularity of a man in his twenties. His skin is smooth, his shoulders square with confidence. He jumps into the hollow, flashes a crooked smile at me, then reaches up to help Luma down. She steps off the ledge and into his arms. He sets her gently on her feet. "This is Egan," she says, looking at him with a puppy love I'd forgotten existed.

His cologne washes over me, woody, male. Something about him is familiar. “I know you,” I say, trying to place where I’ve seen him before. Then I remember where I’ve seen the kid; he works at the grocery store on San Pablo. I’m pretty sure I’ve flirted with the kid, thinking he was older. “You work at the store on San Pablo,” I say.

“I used to,” he tells me. “I’m between jobs right now.”

“Luma said you have information that might help me.”

Luma says, “Tell her what happened in the locker room.”

Egan looks at me and says, “The MLK kid was minding his own business, getting dressed for PE, and those kids jumped him for no reason.”

“Did they exchange words?”

“You mean did they call him names and stuff?”

I nod. “Or, did they have a verbal argument?”

Egan raises his eyebrows. “Naw, the one kid sucker-punched him out of nowhere. After they had him down, they started yelling the n-word and all that.”

“For no reason?”

“Kind of. I mean, they ball together.”

“Ball?”

“Basketball, you know? They all play varsity.”

This is the first I’ve heard that the boys knew one another. “They know each other?” I ask to confirm what I think I’m hearing.

“Not like you normally would on a team. This year’s been different.”

“How?”

“In the beginning people were cool, but then the honeymoon was over, if you know what I mean. Pre-season started around October. That was a couple months in—when things were starting to get bad.”

“So it was tense on the team?”

“Seemed like it. White kids stuck together, black kids stuck together and then the other kids, they just kind of floated. Plus they had a bad season—no chemistry; you got to have chemistry to win. The fight happened the day they found out they didn’t make play-offs.”

“You think that had something to do with it?”

Egan nods. “The kid who started the fight, his name is Hudson.”

“Hudson what?”

“I don’t know. Hudson might not even be his first name. Huddy, people call him. See, that MLK kid was better than him. Bigger too. So, Huddy lost some playing time. I heard his dad was pissed. You got to earn your spot, but some people think things belong to them.”

“Did the coach know there were problems?”

Egan shrugs. “Maybe. But, kids hide stuff.”

“Who knew you witnessed the fight?” I ask, trying another angle.

“I was there when the PE teacher broke it up. He saw me.”

“Was anybody else a witness?”

“Guys came from all over when they heard the yelling.”

“But, you were the only one there when it started?”

“Ya.”

“Nobody asked you what you saw?”

He shakes his head. “No, ma’am. Nobody asked me nothing.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Egan looks at Luma, then he says, “Huddy’s dad is on the Boosters. His mom works the snack bar. It’d be kind of messy if Huddy got in trouble.”

“And the MLK kid, Jaycee, what about him?”

“Those kids don’t have anybody. Or, maybe they got people, but they’re busy. Like, I got people, but nobody’s working the snack shack, looking out, if you know what I mean. So, I know a little what it’s like for the MLK kids. Plus, maybe you noticed, there’s some brown kids here, but before the Scholars came over, it was just me and a couple other kids. We had some kind of way of blending in, you know? But, then, with the Scholars, there’s no way they can blend in. Nobody would let them. Not that Canaan dude, or the media—sorry, but it’s true—not, the parents or teachers. Not nobody.”

He’s right—we wouldn’t let those poor kids be. It makes me uncomfortable to think I played a part in keeping the spotlight on the poor kids. “The email that came from Principal Bower’s account, what do you know about that?” I ask.

Egan nudges Luma with his arm. “You have to tell her, Baby-girl.”

Luma chews her bottom lip, then she says, “You need to talk to my sister.”

#

Luma whispers on her phone a few feet away, while Egan and I try to make polite conversation. I catch bits and pieces of Luma's conversation. "Just meet her," she says. "If you don't trust her, then you don't have to talk."

Egan is looking at me expectantly. I must have missed I'm distracted by trying to eavesdrop on Luma, so I have to ask Egan to repeat his question. He says, "What's the craziest news story you've ever done?"

"This story," I tell him.

Luma turns to us and says, "She's got a robotics club meeting after school. Then we're going to visit our grandmother. You can meet us at five o'clock at Memory Care Manor. Ask for Florabeth when you get there."

"I'll be there," I say.

Then Egan says, "But before this story? What was the craziest thing?"

I think about it for a second, running through all the fluff I've reported, but then I remember a particular story that had gotten under my skin. "Last year, there was a guy they found with a bunch of kiddie porn on his computer. I did a report for the station, just a two-minute segment when the guy was arrested, but then I started doing my own research. I guess it's not really a story. I didn't end up reporting on it. But, I fell down a rabbit hole learning about the darknet and some of the things that happen there. It kept me up for a month."

By the time I'm done talking, Luma and Egan are grinning like I've just told them the best news they've ever heard. "What's with the smiles?" I ask.

Luma says, “Taalia’s going to like you.”

#

Florabeth is a tiny Filipina, with large dark eyes and a ready laugh. She leads me down a long hall, cracking jokes with the Manor residents we pass. “This is the one,” she says as she opens the door to an empty room. “Wait here. I’ll bring Missy Luma to you when she’s done visiting her Tootsie.”

Florabeth closes the door and leaves me alone in the sterile room. The mattress is stripped of sheets. A flowerless pot sits on the windowsill. It dawns on me that the room is empty because its resident has recently died. A shiver runs up my spine. I feel like I’m invading. Nothing to do now but wait. I pull my phone from my purse and text Reni: It’s working.

She text me back a gif of a woman dancing in a purple leotard. The woman’s hair is frosted and feathered. She contorts her red mouth as she shimmies and bops. *Do your thang, Chili-silly-bean.*

I laugh out loud. The sound bounces bluntly around the room. I feel like I’ve shouted in a library. Where are you? Reni texts.

*Old folks home,* I text back.

*Whaaaa????*

*Long story. Call later.*

*Okeydokey. Kisses from the Cape.*

The door handle turns just as I'm dropping my phone into my purse. Luma enters, tugging a girl by her arm. While Luma is olive and dark, this girl is fair, their faces, however, are nearly identical. "I'm Jill," I say extending my hand. The girl wraps her arms over her chest and shoots Luma a pained look. So much for Taalia loving me.

Luma nudges her sister. "Tell her, Taalia," she prods.

Taalialia stares at the wall over Luma's head. I'm sure there's no hope of this girl telling me anything, but then Luma whispers, "If you don't tell her, I will."

Taalialia's scowl falls, her face filling with the pain of betrayal. "Really?"

Luma doesn't answer, instead she looks at me and says, "Jaycee is Taalia's best friend."

"He didn't do it," Taalia says.

"I believe you," I say. "That's what I'm trying to prove."

Luma walks over to the mattress and sits on the edge. Taalia follows her, sits and lays her head on Luma's shoulder. Luma slowly strokes her sister's hair as she says, "Jill did a report about a guy who had kiddie porn on his computer."

Taalialia studies my face. "That guy was a perv," she says quietly.

"He was," I agree.

Taalialia looks out the window, past the pot of dirt and says, "I'll tell you what happened, but you can't tell anyone."

"I promise," I say.

Then she looks me straight in the eyes and says, "I sent that email."

"Why?" I say, and I know it sounds stupid, I know Jaycee is her friend, but the



risk Taalia took is bigger than friendship. “I know he’s your friend, but hacking into your principal’s email account, that’s kind of a big deal.”

Taalia looks at her sister, then Luma answers for both of them. “Ms. Matthews, our grandma Tootsie taught us a person can have all the power in the world, all the money, all the fame, but it doesn’t mean anything if they don’t stand up for what’s right.”

#

I think about what the girls told me all the way home. If I had copies of Tammy Bower’s emails, then maybe I could use them to justify the letter that Taalia wrote and sent out in her name, but Taalia informed me that keeping records was a rookie hacker mistake. And even I knew that hacking back into Principal Bower’s account, just to show me the emails that got Taalia so upset, would be a really bad idea. Then there’s the fact that, even if the emails do suggest that Tammy Bower was targeting the Promise Scholars, at the end of the day, she didn’t write that confession—Taalia did. I can’t see a point in turning Taalia in to the authorities. By the time I park in the garage, I’ve come to the conclusion that I have to figure out a way to clear Tammy Bower and Jaycee Spikes’s names, without revealing Taalia was behind the email. I’m planning on calling Reni to work this out, but when I open the door Smith is standing in the kitchen waiting.

“Where have you been?” he demands.

“Out,” I tell him. There was a time, before he decided that our marriage wasn’t worth the paper it was written on, when I would have sat him down and told him

everything—how I’d snuck into the school, about meeting Luma and Taalia’s confession—but the trust is gone.

“Mike called,” he says, his voice rising, his jaw knotted. “He wanted to know how you were feeling. I had to lie to him, Jillian. I had to make something up. And then I come home to check on you, and where are you? God only knows, Jillian. Because I sure in the hell don’t.”

“I needed time to think,” I tell him.

“When are you going to get over this, Jillian?” he’s shouting now. Slamming his fist on the counter. “I messed up. I told you I’m sorry. What the hell do you want from me?”

“Nothing,” I tell him, and I realize it’s true. I want absolutely nothing from my husband.

“It’s one thing when you’re doing it in the house, but now you’re making Mike look bad. He put his name on you. I put my name on you, and you’re throwing it all away—for what? A mistake. You need to grow up, Jillian. People make mistakes.”

“Yes, they do,” I say calmly, then I pack my bag and I leave.

#

After I check in and take I shower, I pick up my phone and call Reni. She answers in bed, her head sideways on a white pillowcase, dark hair spilling around her bare face.

“Chili-bean,” she says groggily. “I’ve been thinking about you all night.”

“I left Smith,” I tell her.

She lifts onto her elbow and licks her lips. “Are you okay?”

“I’m good, Reni. Scared, but good.”

“What are you scared of?” she asks.

“I guess I’m scared of being alone.” I laugh uncomfortably, embarrassed to admit this to my fearless Reni.

She laughs. “Aren’t we all?”

“Are you?” I ask.

“Of course. I’m afraid I’m going to be an old cat lady, with no one to share my memories with, but you know what’s worse than that my little Chili-bean? Being dead inside.”

“I think I’m a little dead inside,” I tell her.

“You’ll resuscitate,” she says. “You’re just learning how to breathe again.”

“Jesus, Reni, it’s been a day.”

“What happened?”

“Those kids, I don’t even know where to start.”

“Lucky for you, I’m good at getting the scoop.”

Then, I tell her about walking into the school, how I played the part and nobody questioned me. I tell her about meeting Luma, and Egan, and Taalia.

“You hit the jackpot,” she says.

“Beginner’s luck,” I say. Then I tell her about Taalia’s confession.

“Wow,” Reni says. “You need to fly to Jo-burg and pop this one open for me.”

“But, I don’t know what to do,” I tell her.

“Here’s what you do, Chili: You take out your laptop and you just start writing. You don’t stop until there’s nothing left to write. Don’t stop because you’re tired, or you can’t find the perfect word. Keep going, until there are no words left inside you.”

“And then what?” I ask.

“It’ll be there. Don’t worry, Chili-bean. You were born for this.”

#

I sit down and I start to type. The words are slow. Imperfect. Raw. Ugly. I’m unworthy. I’ll never get close to the thing I want, to give a thing of beauty to the world. Then I’m stumped and there is nothing, just a blank space with no thought. I force the letters out slowly, one by one; certain each one is stupid. Inadequate. I should pack it in. Give up. But, I don’t. I keep writing and writing, and then my fingers are flying, and I don’t know if the things that I’m writing make sense at all—but it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter at all.

I write about the kids, the Promise Scholars and the Jefferson Heights students. I write without editing. I write desperately--seeking; to find a reason. I write the story from the beginning. Then I write it from before the beginning—before Bryan Canaan, before technology, before rich neighborhoods and poor neighborhoods, before civil rights, and segregation, and cotton fields—before teachers and politicians and billionaires.

I write about how communities like Jefferson Heights and the Flats exist, side by

side but worlds apart--why a man like Canaan would believe his million dollars could move mountains, could change destinies. How it did and how it didn't. I write about boys like Jaycee and girls like Taalia, and Luma and Egan, too—and all the other kids I haven't met.

I write about the teachers and what kept them quiet; what they maybe saw; or, maybe didn't want to see. I write about why a person would become a teacher in the first place, when it's so hard, and the pay is so bad, and a kid can blow it all up with a gun or an email. I write about good teachers and bad teachers and teachers who aren't either, but are just stuck people, about teachers who, on the inside, are still the same insecure kids they were when they were in school—how we're all kind of that way, or maybe some people aren't, but then how did they get that way? How do I get that way?

I write about what happened to Smith and me. About the things we brought to the table from a lifetime before we even met, and how those things became each other's fault. I write about my assets and the advertisers—how I want that validation; how I hate that limitation.

I write, and I write, and I write. I feel like I'll never stop, there will always be more to say; the answer will never come—because there is no answer. Not for Jefferson. Not for the scholars. Not for me. And even if there was, who am I to write it? And I realize, suddenly, in the dim light of morning filtering through my hotel curtains, that the only real question is who am I? And, that the question is also the answer—the whole point of the exercise of living.

Who am I?

I don't want to stop the flow of my fingers moving on the keys. It's a thing that I've barely begun to understand coming to an end, but there's a new thing behind it begging to be born. And I know I need to be brave--for me, but for everybody else, too. For Luma and Taalia, for Smith even. For all those Jefferson parents and the MLK families, for old Mrs. Spikes--for the people who can see what's happening and the people who don't even believe that it's real. I have to step boldly into becoming who I am. I have to keep becoming.

My phone says it's just after four a.m., it also says Smith has been texting me all night. I could go back; we could work on our marriage. I could forgive him. We could move on--that could be my future too. There's a future in every direction, but the life I had with Smith isn't the future that I want. I'll text him back. I'll tell him that I'm grateful for the time we had. I tell him it's time to move on.

I dial Tammy Bower. I don't worry that it's before dawn or what I'll say when she picks-up. I hear her say hello and then I let the words go, I say, "Principal Bower, this is Jillian Matthews. I'm working on an investigative piece and I think we should talk."

## Tammy Bower

I pick up because it might be Lauren. Every time the phone rings, it's the same: my heart leaps, *maybe she's reaching out?* Then it drops, *maybe she's finally done herself in.* And then I answer. I always answer.

"Tam," he says. "It's Lar. How you doing?"

I flop into my easy chair and rub my temples. I don't want my heart to flutter-- but, Henry's gone and Larry does something to my heart, some chemical-animal thing that I'm too old to be feeling. "Hi, Larry," I say. "I've been better."

"Sophie doing okay?"

"I just got her down."

"Good," he says, but I can tell he's just waiting to get to something else. Then he says, "Tam, hear me out: I'm going to come by with some Chinese. Don't tell me no. I've been thinking about it since Sunday. I'm coming by and we're going to eat wontons and sizzling beef, and we can talk if you want, or we can just watch some shows. That's how it's going to be. Okay?"

I think about protesting. I really do. I get that flood of guilt about having another man in my Henry's house. But it's too quiet with Sophie down and the nurse already sent home. I figure it'd be nice to have some company, so I say, "Okay, Lar. Come on by."

He says, "It'll take me an hour," which is a good thing because the place is a mess. I tidy up the living room and then give the guest bathroom a good once over. I don't want Larry thinking I'm a slob. I'm known to be a tad heavy-handed with the Lysol and I have to climb in the tub to open the window for some ventilation. The fumes are giving me the dizzies. "That'll do," I say, flip on the fan, grab the cleaning bucket and hightail it out.

The air in the hall is a good deal better and I take in a couple of good breaths. When my head clears, it comes to mind that I've got a nicely tidied living room and a spic-and-span bath, but I'm wearing my scrubbies, stains, holes and all; not quite looking my finest. "I can't be entertaining looking like a hobo," I say. I wonder if cleaning-up is a slight to my Henry, but Henry was the first one to put on something nice when the neighbor lady visited, so I figure he'd be understanding.

The master's a sight: shoes spilling out the closet, slippers and hose strung over the ironing board. "Lar's not coming in here," I say. "It'll be fine." But, then I straighten the sheets--no sense in keeping a messy bed. I'll need some place to lay out my outfit, as it is. Might as well put the hose back in the drawer, hang the slippers. No sense in being a slob for the point of it. I close up the ironing board, tuck it back in the closet and nudge my shoes behind the door. Well, now that's much better. All of five minutes and the room's a good sight better. Not that Larry will be seeing it. But still.



“What to wear?” I say to the hangers. Not too conservative. I don’t want Larry thinking I sit at home in my work-wear. “Not too casual either.” If we’re going to watch shows, it should be something with a comfortable waistband; nothing I’ll need to rearrange a good deal. I settle on navy leggings and my new striped tunic. It’s a bit nautical, but that’s the look, isn’t it? Now, the hair. Tuck it behind my ears? Maybe a bit of spray. Goodness knows. I’m too old for this. Too old. I’ll just put in a bit of curl. Freshen up a tad. And, perfume? Is that presumptuous? I reckon it would be a sight more presumptuous to smell ripe. A dab goes a good distance. Henry gave me that perfume. It’s a pleasant scent. Not too floral.

Since Lar’s bringing the meal, it’s only hospitable for me to pour drinks. I’ll mix up a pitcher of my skinny-ritas. Not the typical drink for Chinese food, but the lime goes well with any meal. I’ve got a gorgeous tequila. It’s only Monday and there’s a hell of a week ahead, I might as well use the good stuff--I measure a good bit into the shaker, then splash in a smidge extra for a kick--no need to be frugal. I don’t want it watered by the time Larry gets here. I’ll just chill it in the icebox.

There’s a drop of tequila on the counter. No sense in letting it go to waste. I wipe it up, then lick it off my finger. Oh, that’s very nice. I’d forgotten how nice that bottle was. What’s a nip going to hurt? I’ve not even washed the glass yet. It does settle beautifully in the glass. A nice golden color. This one’s for sipping. Not a thing to be rushed over the tongue. It’s lovely going down. Delightful warmth in the chest. Just a touch more wouldn’t hurt a fly.

By the time Lar is knocking, I've had a touch too much tequila and my head is swimming. Nothing Chinese won't clear up. "Larry," I say as I open the door. I've forgotten to turn on the porch light and he's standing in the dark with two bags from the China Palace.

"Hi, Tam," he says. "Mind if I come in?"

"You come right into the kitchen," I tell him, my voice is a bit overloud, but I'm being a good hostess and it's reasonable to welcome a guest warmly into the home.

"You look nice," Larry says as he sets the Chinese on the counter.

"I've got some oriental plates," I tell him as I pull the china from the cabinet.

"Oh, that's nice," Lar says, admiring my tableware.

"Skinny-rita?" I ask.

"If it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble," I say and then I giggle--just a touch, the nerves wearing off and that chemical thing that happens to me when Larry's around. He looks at me a bit quizzically and I have to admit, "I've had a taste already. I'd feel like quite an alcoholic if you didn't join me."

"Can't have that," he says.

We get our drinks poured, and then we shuttle between the living room and the kitchen, laying out a nice spread of fried rice and wontons, the sizzling beef and egg drop soup. We've gone through the first pitcher of skinny-ritas, by the time the food is laid out, so I make another batch to enjoy with the meal.

The coffee table is set for royalty. We stand kitty-corner looking at the spread. I say, “This is a real feast, Lar. Thank you. Quite the treat for a Monday evening.”

He says, “Pleasure, Tam. What are friends for?”

Then we stand there gawking at the food getting cold until Lar claps his hands and says, “We should dig in.”

“We should,” I agree. I pass him one of the oriental plates Henry picked up in Singapore and Larry passes me the sizzling beef. I’m famished and the food smells fantastic, but I don’t want Lar to think I’m a glutton, so I measure out my scoops on the lighter side.

Larry says, “Egg roll?”

“Yes, please,” I tell him and he sets one on my plate. It’s a lovely golden thing. When we’re all served and ready to eat, it seems the house is on the quiet side. It’d be rude to start a show while we eat. That was something my Henry and I insisted on when Lauren was coming-up: no television during dinner, and later, when she was a teen, no phones either. I’m not proud to say it, but since Henry and Lauren have been gone, and seeing as Sophie takes her food through a tube, I’ve found myself eating a fair amount in the living room, glued to the boob-tube. “Shall I put on some music?” I ask.

“That would be nice,” he says. “If it’s not too much bother.”

“No bother,” I say. Then I tell the smart speaker, “Play easy mix,” and my favorite Barry White cover comes on.

I’m a bit nervous the song is more romantic than the occasion of two colleagues eating Chinese on a school night, but Larry says, “That’s a nice song.”

“It is,” I say. “These egg rolls are also very nice.”

“Little bright in here, though, don’t you think?” Larry says.

It does seem a bit bright, so I say, “I could turn off the overhead. The lamp is plenty.”

I start to set my plate down on the coffee table, but then Larry taps me on my knee and says, “Got it. You enjoy your meal.”

The room is nicer with the overhead off and the yellow lamp on. “LED’s really are too much,” I say as Larry freshens up our glasses. “I know they’re much better on energy, but the light is harsh.”

“This is nicer,” Larry agrees. He takes his plate into his lap, but he doesn’t eat. He looks at me like he’s got a question on his mind and my nerves get going.

I’ve been thinking about what to do since the first time Larry made a pass at me; caught me off guard and I handled it poorly. He’d had a good deal to drink and I’m not so certain he’s got a memory of it. It’s not like I can ask him after a staff meeting. Thank god for the skinny-ritas keeping a lid on my jitters. “What’s on your mind, Lar?” I ask.

“Wondering how you’re doing?” He’s staring at me very earnestly. He’s got those soft brown eyes, like a Labrador puppy. Sure, he’s a little thick in the middle, but that’s a thing I like in a man, speaks to certain priorities.

That chemical voodoo starts kicking into a higher gear and it’s a challenge for me to look at Larry straight on. “I’m doing okay, Lar. How are you doing?”

He nods, thoughtful like he is, then he looks at his plate and I think maybe the moment is over. Which on the one hand would be a genuine relief, but on the other I'd be quite disappointed if I gave him another wrong signal. I really am too old for this.

"Doing okay," he says. "I miss El. But, we knew it was coming. Glad she's out of her pain. Hard to lose a twin though."

I put my hand on his knee. I do it out of instinct, but then it's already there and to pull it back would be an odd thing to do, so I leave it there, feeling the knob of his bone, the heat of his skin. "El was a good sister," I tell him. "No doubt about that."

"That's not what I'm talking about though," he says. He looks up from his plate and I feel like I've been caught with my hand in the cookie jar, so I slip it off his knee and pick up my skinny-rita like it's what I was intending to do and I accidentally made a detour to Larry's knee. "Okay, Lar. What are you talking about then?" I ask between sips.

"How're you doing with the email and what's been going at school? Can't be easy."

The heat drains and I'm left with a sobering chill. "I didn't write that email, Larry."

"Still, it's got to be stressful."

"Sure, it is," I admit. "But that's what you take on when you're principal. It's a twenty-four, seven job. Most people don't know that. They think it's Monday thru Friday seven-thirty to three, maybe four, pm, but that's not how it works. You're under the microscope all the time."

"Especially in a place like Jefferson," he says.

I nod. “I knew what we were getting into when MLK shutdown. Our parents thought they could keep the Promise Scholars out by raising their voices. I knew the state would make us take them. It’s the law. The next closest engineering program is all the way across the state. They weren’t going to bus the kids that far.”

“Laws are laws,” Larry agrees and drinks his skinny-rita.

“But, that doesn’t stop Jefferson, does it Larry?”

“Certainly doesn’t.”

I drain the last of my glass and Larry refills me. “So we jumped through the hoops. We give them their hearings. We let them appeal. That’s their right to do. But, listen, Lar, I’ve been at this game long enough to know the Promise Scholars would be walking Jeff’s halls come hell or high water—and I knew there was going to be a big ruckus about it.”

“But, this email is something different.” Larry sets his plate down and scooches to the edge of the couch. He reaches puts his hand just above my knee, squeezes on and off like he’s pumping a bike tire. I figure he doesn’t know what he’s doing to my hormones or he wouldn’t be doing it. Oye, I’m too old for hormones. Maybe Larry and me just need a good adult conversation. Put it all out on the table. If we’re on different pages, so be it. No harm done. But, I’m not going to do it. Not worth the jeopardy. If Larry went to another district; if I wasn’t his boss, well then, maybe I’d have the nerve. But I wouldn’t suggest it.

“Oh, it’s going to wash over, Lar,” I say. My cheeks are a bit flushed, but I suspect he can owe that to the skinny-ritas. “Trust me. Something else will come along

soon enough and the public turns their attention elsewhere.” I flick my hand to the TV. “One of the celebrities gets a DUI, a priest touches a kid—it’s awful, I know, but that’s the way of it--the world keeps on spinning. They’ll forget all about me and our little problem.”

Larry sighs and sits back. He takes his hand from my knee and slugs back the rest of his skinny-rita, then he pours himself some more. The scraps of sizzling beef are beginning to congeal and I’m thinking I should pack it up and stash it in the fridge. Larry looks at me and I can see the skinny-ritas have gone to his head too. His eyelids are heavy and his cheeks are sagging. He’s struggling to focus. “You sit back, Lar. Take a rest.” I tell him.

“No, Tam. Gotta tell you this. It’s not easy, but you better... better you hear it from a friend.” His tone is sobering me up a bit. He’s slurring, but he’s serious.

“Okay, Larry,” I say.

“This thing is not going to blow over.”

Is that it? Well, that’s nothing. “Sure it is, Lar. Trust me.”

He motions for me to give him my hands. The thought of it is a thrill--not a chance sort of touching, this is a thing on purpose. I drain my glass, set it on the coffee table and put my hands in his. He rubs my skin with his thumbs. It’s nice. Not too forward. Nothing untoward that I’d be obligated to turn down. The thrill is certainly there, warming in me with that lovely tequila.

“You’re a real special lady.”

“Thank you, Lar.”

“Last thing I’d want to do is upset you, but the thing of it is Tammy, I don’t think you’ve got a good grasp on this. Have you been keeping up on the news? Jillian Matthews over at Ten is all over this thing, and not just her. The national news, too. Nobody is questioning if that email came from you-- they mention it, but it’s not what they’re focusing on. Everybody is asking why the Scholars were getting in trouble all the time. That’s what they want to know.”

“Well, now, Larry—“

“No, Tam. I need you to listen. I’m not so good at this kind of thing and I’ve got myself a bit of courage and I need to keep it going.”

Hearing how serious he is, I seal my lips up and I wait. Larry squeezes my hands and gets back to talking. “Did you know not a single one of those MLK kids had a Mike on their record before they came to Jefferson?”

I have to admit that I didn’t know that. “Things are different at Jefferson. You know that. The bar is higher than at those city schools.”

“Might be, but the numbers are damning.” He looks at me with his puppy dog eyes.

“I don’t know what you want me to say. I was doing my job. That’s all I was doing.”

“Course you were. What I’m saying is maybe things got a little out of control.”

“You know how these Jefferson parents can be,” I tell him.

“We all do,” he agrees. “That’s what I’m saying. Maybe the parents ended up with too much say-so. Could have happened to any of us in your position, Tam.”



I think about all those calls from the Boosters and the PTA, all those parents asking for meetings to express concerns--the thinly veiled threats. "I wouldn't do anything unethical. You know that," I tell him, but there's a knot in my stomach that I'm thinking has been there since the beginning of this whole thing with the Promise Scholars coming over to Jefferson.

"Course not. Wouldn't think that for a second. It's just maybe things got a bit out of whack. Should have said something before it got to this point, but with my sister passing—"

"It's been a tough year for you."

"For all of us."

"I just need to get through this patch, get the email fiasco cleared up and then we can get back on track with the kids. I'm sure there's programs we can put in place. Bring in consultants."

"See, here's the thing, Tam. I think we're passed that point."

"Oh, no Larry. I've seen worse get cleared up. The district lawyers are quite capable. They'll get us back in commission."

"What I'm saying is I'm not sure this is something you should sweep under the rug."

"I didn't write that email, Lar."

"That kid Jaycee Spikes didn't start that fight either."

"You don't know that."

Larry looks at me long and hard. “What if it was Lauren? What if she was being blamed?”

I pull my hands away and tuck them in my lap. “That’s not fair,” I tell him.

“Maybe not,” he says, “but, I’d bet a pretty penny you prayed somebody was going to step-up to the plate for Lauren when that mess happened. You told me yourself that she took the blame and look where it led her?”

“Larry, I will thank you very much to not drag my daughter’s name into this. Think what you may about what’s happened to the Promise Scholars, but what Lauren went through was another matter altogether.”

I feel right silly for thinking he was flirting with me. Bringing up Lauren like that, how could he? I thought better of Larry--I really did. Shame on me.

“Think this is easy for me, Tam? It’s not easy. What happened to Lauren was terrible. Not the first time a young lady took hellfire while the boy walked away. Won’t be the last either—long as nobody steps forward.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I tell him. “It’s what killed Henry. Watching Lauren want to die like that gave him the heart attack. Nobody can tell me different.” I don’t want to cry, but my nose is getting all plugged up like it does and my eyes are starting to sting. This is not what I had in mind when I was tidying, waiting for Larry to come over with the Chinese.

He slides off the couch and takes a knee on the floor. I don’t normally get this view of the top of his head, what with him being so much taller than me, but the skin up there is golden and smooth as glass.

“That boy should have three lives on his hands, Lar. Not one time has he come to see Sophie? Not even in the hospital. Swears up one side and down the other it was consensual. Sure, I got him for child-support, but what’s that,? What’s that when Lauren is half-dead with a needle in her arm, and Sophie can’t...”

Larry reaches into my lap and takes my hands. I can’t make my eyes meet his, but he fishes around with his head until he’s got me in his sights. “Not trying to say I understand,” he says. “But, there’s a way to figure Jaycee into how it happened for Lauren and your family—“

“Larry Dillie, you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Maybe, I don’t. But, I’m going out on a limb here, because, see, here’s the thing, Tam. I love you. Now, don’t say anything, because it’s hard enough getting it out. And, these aren’t the best circumstance, understand that, but damn it, Tammy Bower, I love you and that’s the long and short of it. What’s going on with those kids is wrong. Now, you might think you can live with saving your own butt, but I know you and you can’t. So, here I am, making an ass of myself, saying I love you and you are dead wrong on this matter with the kids.”

I don’t like what I’m hearing Larry telling me, but I haven’t seen him taking charge like this before, so I say, “What do you want me to do, Lar? The ship has sailed.”

“What would you want for Lauren?”

The room is suffocating and I’m getting overheated. “What would I want for Lauren?” That’s one hell of an insensitive thing to say. There’s a lot of things I’d want for my Lauren. A. Lot. Larry Dillie, believe me you.”

“But when the school said they couldn’t press charges. When they said it was a he said, she said situation, and when Lauren was wanting to die and all those kids were calling her names like she deserved what she got--what did you want then, Tam? See, that’s the point we’re at right now, but now you’re the one in the driver’s seat. You see what I’m getting at here, Tam?.”

“Damn it, Larry, I wanted someone to speak the hell up and say the truth.” I’m shouting a bit and I’m shaking like a dog gone mad. I go for the skinny-ritas, but wouldn’t you know it, the dang thing is empty. “I need a drink,” I say and I push past Larry, leave him sitting on the ground, scrambling to his feet and chasing me into the kitchen.

My hands are shaking so bad, I can’t get the cork out of the tequila. Larry says, “Give it to me.” He’s calm and I wonder if I let it go, dive headfirst into the crazy, how calm can Lar get? That’s what I need--a good letting loose at the seams; a nice solid week at the looney bin. I shove the bottle at him, put my hands on my hips and pace the kitchen. Lar pours me a nice big shot and holds it out. I take the glass and toss it down the hatch, hand it back to him. Larry raises his eyebrows, then he pours another. I assume it’s for him, but he holds it out for me. I think about taking it for all of a split second and then the heat is going down my throat, swelling my chest.

Larry goes to my cupboards. “Where do you keep your mugs?” he asks.

I point at the right cupboard and keep up my pacing, while he fills a mug at the tap. He catches me on a turn and puts it in my hand. “Drink,” he says and I do.

“Jesus, Lar, what the hell am I supposed to do?” The mug is shaking so much it’s splashing on my vinyl floors. “I need to sit,” I tell him and then I’m walking fast into the living room, heading for my easy chair.

Larry’s back at my knee, with those Labrador eyes looking up at me and he says, “You’re a really fine woman, Tam. And I know this is what you have to do. I know it. Now maybe Jaycee Spikes is going to thank you, but I know at the end of it, you have to do this for yourself. It’s just the lady you are, Tammy Bower. No two ways around it.” Then Larry cranes his neck forward and he puts his lips on mine.

The fight just goes right out of me. Larry’s breath is sweeter than I thought. The skinny-ritas are pouring out of both of us. Sweeter than tequila, I think. Then Larry’s tongue is peeking through my lips, like he’s politely asking if he can come in. My Henry wasn’t a kisser like that. It’s been a long time indeed.

My, I am far too old for this, but my mouth opens and wouldn’t you know it, I’m doing things I forgot I knew how to do. Well, there’s nothing to do, but come out of the easy chair, because Larry can’t keep his neck like that forever--not without needing some help from the chiropractor. And, I don’t want what’s happening with us to end, so I make to get up and wouldn’t you know it, Larry is standing up with me, lips locked to high heaven and then I’m leading him down the hall.

#

I pick up because it might be Lauren. Every time the phone rings, it's the same: my heart leaps, *maybe she's reaching out?* Then it drops, *maybe she's finally done herself in.* And then I answer. I always answer.

"Hello?" I say, fumbling in the dark for the clock. Four a.m.

"Principal Bower, this is Jillian Matthews," a woman says. My head is pounding and it takes me a moment to remember why I know the name. It's that girl from the news, the one who reminds me of Lauren. "I'm working on an investigative piece and I think we should talk."

"Ms. Matthews," I say and then I have to clear the frog in my throat before I can say more. "It's quite early to be calling."

There's a grumble behind me and I'm near startled to death. It takes a moment for my eyes to make out Larry sleeping on top of the duvet in his chinos and shirt. He's curled like a baby, his hands pressed between his knees. He must be half-frozen. My head is foggy, but the night comes back in wisps. Oh my. My lips are sore from all the kissing. It's actually a lovely feeling and a touch of the butterflies go through me.

"I think you'll want to hear what I have to say," the news girl says. She's a persistent one, always the first to set-up at school board meetings, first to the bus turn-around with her cameraman. Very nice looking young lady, too; not one of these skinny-minnies. She's got a bit of womanly meat on her. What I suspect Lauren would look like if she put down the drugs.

"I need my coffee," I tell her. "Call me in a half an hour." Then I hang-up. The phone starts ringing before it's had a moment in the cradle. It, could be Lauren. It could

be, even though I know it's probably Ms. Matthews, but it could be Lauren calling to say she wants to come home, or, she needs help. Larry reaches out and puts his hand on my back. I look over my shoulder to see if he's awake, but his eyes are still shut and his breathing is slow and even. The phone goes to the machine while I watch him sleep.

Whoever it is hangs up without leaving a message. It was just Ms. Matthews, I tell myself

No sense in sitting here worrying it was Lauren, not with Larry in my bed and Ms. Matthews watching the clock for her thirty minutes to pass, might as well put on some coffee, go check on Sophie.

I'm still wearing my tunic, not that Larry's hands weren't on the other side of it--and, not that it was easy to keep my clothes where they should be, what with my hormones kicking up a mile a minute. It makes me blush just thinking about what Larry and I did. Not so comfortable with the thought of him waking up and us figuring how to manage this thing. But, I'm a mature woman. He's a mature man. I'm sure we'll manage.

My head is pounding, nothing a nice strong brew and a couple of pills won't fix. I lay the throw over Larry. I imagine a good cup of coffee will do him wonders too.

I take a quick peek on Sophie--her tubes are clear and she's sleeping like a log. I can't believe I didn't think about her once last night. I normally check on my Sophie at least a half-dozen times in the night. Might be wrong to have not done it, but I do feel like a decent night of sleep did me some good--even if it was cut short and the skinny-rita's are doing a number on my head. I pop into the restroom to make myself presentable. Wouldn't want Larry catching me with bedhead. I run a cold rag over my face, dab on a bit of makeup--nothing too obvious, arrange my hair. This is my face. It'll

have to do. Larry seemed to like it just fine. I touch a finger to my lips. Push thoughts of my Henry away. I suspect he might tell me that there's no sense in wasting my remaining years, might as well find a nice companion to pass the time. That's the kind of man my Henry was, always wanting the best for me--the best for everyone.

The coffee table is a sight. Lar and I must have knocked the fried rice over in our moment of passion. I'll have to run the vacuum after Sophie is up.

Might as well get the coffee brewing. I measure out enough grounds for us both to have a few big mugs. That nice bottle of tequila, only has a splash left. Would it be terrible to put it in my coffee? I suppose I should have my wits about me before I talk to the media. The district warned me to keep to myself. I won't say a word. I'll just listen.

I set out a couple of mugs, the creamer and the sugars. If I knew how Larry liked his morning beverage, I'd fix it and deliver it to bed--that would be a nice way to start off whatever we've got going here. Though, I suppose I wouldn't want him thinking it was a regular service.

The phone rings, and of course I pick it up, because even though I know it's the news girl, it might be Lauren.

"Hello, Principal Bower," she says. "Did you have time to drink your coffee?"

"It in my hand right now," I tell her. "I should warn you, Ms. Matthews, I'm not to talk to the media without the school district's attorney present."

"That's fine, Principal Bower. Is it okay if I call you Tammy?"

"I would prefer you didn't," I tell her. Not sure what it is with the younger generations doing away with formality, but I'm not a fan of the practice.



“My apologies, Principal Bower.” She stumbles over her words. I’ve clearly caught the girl off-guard. I take a nice pull off my hot drink while she finds herself. “I know you’re a busy woman, so I’m going to cut to the chase. I know you did not write your resignation email.”

“That’s correct,” I tell her, which I’m sure is fine since I’ve made a public statement to the affect. “I’m sorry Ms. Matthews, but this is not exactly breaking news. I believe my statement was very clear on the matter.”

“Your statement was clear, Principal Bower, but I know who did write the email.” The girl is smart enough to stop talking. She sits on the phone silently while I figure this through my mind. I must be very careful, try to think like one of the district lawyers. The bedroom door opens down the hall. I’ve got a clear shot to Lar popping his head out. We make eye contact and I motion to the phone. He nods and scooches over to the bathroom. I should have put a towel out for him.

“Principal Bower, are you there?”

“I’m here,” I tell her.

“Do you understand what I’ve told you? That I know who wrote the email?”

“I understand,” I say. “You should tell the authorities.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

I’m not sure how the laws work, but I suppose there’s something she can be charged with. Larry pops out of the restroom and comes towards me smiling. If it wasn’t for this news girl on the line, I’m sure I’d have some kind of feeling about him looking at me like that so early in the morning. His hair is smooth and damp, his skin pink with

sleep. He slides his hand around my back and kisses my temple. That was something my Henry would do. It takes me back a moment.

“Principal Bower?”

“I’m here,” I tell the girl and I’m a bit shorter than I mean to be, but there is far too much going on between my hormones and this phone call. Larry raised his eyebrows at my tone and I mouth, *Jillian Matthews*, so he knows what I’m dealing with, then I point to the coffee pot with the fixings. “Ms. Matthews,” I say. “If you’re not going to tell me who write the email, then why did you call me?” That gets Larry’s attention. He turns from fixing his cup and looks at me.

On the other end of the line, Jillian Matthews says, “I called because I think there is something we can do to make a difference, Principal Bower. I know it’s unconventional, but I think if you could hear the kid’s story--”

“So, it’s one of the MLK kids,” I say.

“Actually no, Principal Bower, it is not one of the MLK kids.”

I’m not sure if I believe her, but my curiosity is piqued. “How would I hear the kid’s story if you won’t tell me who he is?”

“I was hoping you would allow me to tell you.”

“Why would I take your word?” I ask the girl.

“I suppose you don’t have to take my word, but I think there might be a way to do something really good here, Principal Bower. I’ve been researching what you’ve gone through. The incident with your daughter. I think you might see this a different way if you could hear the kid’s side.”

What is with all the talk of Lauren? Between Lar and now this new's girl dredging up the past. Lar must notice I'm a tad distressed, because he comes over and starts rubbing my back in little circles while he sips my coffee.

"Principal Bower?"

"I'm here," I damn near shout at the girl now. I can't take another second. I stand up and I hand the phone to Larry, then I march into the kitchen and futz around tidying up.

"Hello?" I hear Larry say. He's quiet for a second then he says, "Yes, I know who you are." More silence from Larry. I can hear a bit of Ms. Matthews making noise on the other end, but not a lick of what she's saying. "Gotcha," Larry says. Then, "Alrighty, well here's what we're going to do, I'm going to talk to Tam and then we'll maybe give you a call back, Ms. Matthews. What's a good number to reach you?" he says, then he starts scribbling in the air, so I grab him a PostIt and a pencil. He writes down Ms. Matthews number and says, "It was nice to speak with you also, Ms. Matthews. Good-bye."

"Did she tell you she knows who wrote the email?" I ask as soon as the phone's in the cradle.

"She did," Lar tells me.

"Did she tell you who it was?"

"No, but she said maybe there would be a way to talk to the students."

"Students? There's more than one of them?"

"She said that there are three."

“Jesus,” I say and then I have to sit down in the recliner to catch myself. “Lar, what am I going to do? Maybe I should just retire. Spend more time with Sophie.”

“That might be nice,” Lar says. Then he kneels in front of me and I remember what it was like last night when he was in the same position and next thing we knew we were lip-locked. My Henry would be wondering how I got my life so turned upside down in such a short span.

“I’m not a woman to run from responsibilities,” I tell him.

“No one would suggest you are,” Larry tells me. “See, here, that’s the thing, Tam. You’re the kind of woman who can turn around and face whatever is chasing you. Not the kind of woman to hide behind the lawyers.’

“They will string me up, Lar. I’ll be disgraced. I won’t be able to show my face anywhere.”

“Might be so, for a while, but it was you who said these things pass. Maybe telling your story to Ms. Matthews will give you a way to do it so you can keep track of your dignity. I listened to the girl and believe she means well.”

“Oh, Lar, I can’t do it,” I say. “They will drag me through the mud.”

“Tam, you think maybe Lauren is watching this whole thing?”

It hadn’t crossed my mind before, the idea that Lauren might catch the news every now and again. Jefferson has been on enough, there’s a good chance she might have seen a thing or two, even with a needle half-hanging out of her arm. “Maybe so,” I say. “Hard to know.”

“I’m just thinking out loud here, Tam, but it comes to mind that if Lauren saw you on the TV saying some things that maybe she wished someone had said for her, well maybe that could mean a thing to her in her situation. Don’t really know how these things work, but maybe so.”

The sun is starting to come-up outside, the light in the windows is smokey and still. No cars pass on the street. My Henry always loved the early hours of the morning, he said it was the best time for level-headed thinking, that the rest of the day was for talking you out of your courage, but the morning was where your soul spoke. Sophie will be up soon and her tubes will need checking, her diapering done, her breakfast feeding and a rub down with the lavender lotion. Not sure Lauren ever thinks about Sophie, or maybe it’s all the girl thinks about, that might be the trouble, too. I suppose I could deal with everybody else looking down their noses at me if it might bring my Lauren home. It probably won’t, but if there’s a chance, well that’ll be good enough for me. “Okay, Lar,” I say. “Let’s call Ms. Matthews, then.”

## Reba

I pick him up in the baggage claim area. I'm ready for a swarm of paparazzi, especially since Bryan's been off the map since things went bad for the Promise Scholars. I'm sure there are plenty of people who want a quote from him. But, Bryan is standing alone at the curb, sun-burnt and bearded. I almost drive past him, but he recognizes my car and waves me over. I swerve over at the last minute to let him in.

He doesn't say anything when he climbs into the passenger seat, just looks at me, then he leans over and kisses my cheek. I don't want to feel what I feel for him, but it's there inside both us. Now, we have to figure out what to do with it.

"You had to take a red-eye?" I say as I pull into traffic and exit the terminal.

"You said to get here as quickly as I could."

"But, three o'clock in the morning?" I say.

Bryan reaches over the console and takes my right hand from the wheel. "I'm driving," I chide him, but he lifts my fingers to his lips and kisses them softly. It's the perfect move to open a tiny window between us.

“What’s going on with the Scholars?” he says and then I tell him everything I know about the problems they’ve had, the kids getting expelled and the principal’s email getting hacked.

At the end he says, “Jesus, I had no idea.”

And I say, “It’s been all over the news. You didn’t see one thing? Nobody at Blingly contacted you?”

He shakes his head. “I had IT block everyone but you. I told my Chief of Staff to only call if it was you.” He lays his head against his headrest. “What am I going to do?” he says.

“Hell if I know,” I tell him. “But that’s what everybody else has been wondering, too.”

## Huddy

I type in *Lennon*; hit the playlist. Kick-up the volume. The pace is wrong. I scroll through the list, past Marley, Tupac, Zeppelin. I try my Pumped mix, then Inspirational, let a couple songs play while I watch the street out my windshield.

The neighborhood is quiet, the sun pushing back the night. A new day being born. The music spills through my headphones, fills up my head; tells me to rise-up, say what I need to say--love is what I need. They're all good songs, maybe even legendary on another day--not today. I need the right chord, the perfect lyric, something to split me open and dig out the words I got stuck inside.

The front door opens. I sink low in the driver's seat, pull my hoodie around my face, watch a guy lock the door and cross the yard to the sidewalk. He stands at the edge of the grass, staring at my car--an older Jaycee; must be his dad.

The song switches. Violins swoop through me. Sam Cooke. My chest tightens. Floods. This is what I've been looking for. I know the video. John Lewis next to King, those white ladies and college kids, same age as me, the nuns and the workmen in their Sunday suits--everybody marching together. Sam starts singing about change.



Jaycee's dad stands on the sidewalk, staring at my car--my dad's old BMW. The Flats aren't Jeff Heights, where everyone drives a Tesla. My black paint might as well be blinking, my rims screaming. Cooke's in my ears singing that he's afraid to die because he doesn't know what's in the sky, while Jaycee's dad is standing there, looking at me, two houses down, parked next to a dumpster. I don't think he can see me, but he definitely sees the car.

Cooke says he went to his brother and asked for help, but his brother knocked him down, so, of course, I see Jaycee curled up between the lockers and the bench, covering his head--me stomping on him, spitting the n-word like it's a thing I say--like it's me.

I have to do something. I have to talk to Jaycee--make sure he knows that's not who I am.

Jaycee's dad takes out his phone, holds it up, snaps a pic of my car. Then he nods, like, *I got a pic of you*. What am I supposed to do? I'm not trying to talk to Jaycee's dad. Adults started these issues; this is between Jaycee and me.

Jaycee's dad puts his phone in his pocket, salutes me in the car, like *I'm on to you*, then turns and walks down the street in the other direction. I watch him disappear, and then I'm alone again, but my heart is pounding and I'm not ready to see Jaycee yet. His dad took me off my game, now I got to re-find my motivation.

Cooke will do it. I know. I restart the song, tap repeat--this could take a couple times. The violins pour into my head. I watch the screen: a woman faces-off with police, a homeless man sleeps on the street, a kid cries--covered in blood. I think about how

those things are real--how scared that kid must have been. I think about how messed-up the world is--how many things there are to fix. How I got to do something.

Cooke keeps singing. I let the song into my bones; watch the pictures roll: the refugees, the babies, the bombs--I let them all the way in, let myself feel how somewhere, right now, somebody is suffering. Probably a lot of somebodies are.

The song repeats. I keep watching: Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, bodies hanging from trees, the Ku Klux Klan. I let it all in. I think about what I did to Jaycee, how it wasn't even him--how I was freaking out about not making playoffs--what my dad was going to say when I got home from school. What he was going to do. And Jaycee was just there.

I let the violins in; watch the pictures turn; Cooke fills me; pumps my courage--and then, when I'm as full as I'm going to get, I say, "I got this. I. Got. This." I slap my hands on the steering wheel, open the car door--keep my mind focused--step onto the street. Keep doubt out.

I hang the headphones around my neck, so I can hear the world, but Cooke is still thumping against my heart. I set my sights on the door, cross the street, hustle across the lawn, take the steps to Jaycee's porch two at a time.

The house is dark, but I didn't come this far for nothing. "I got this," I tell myself, knock. Dogs bark. I wait, then I reach for the bell. The ding-dong breaks the morning stillness; I flinch as it hits my nerves. There's sound on the other side: a scuffle, a cough, a footstep. "I got this," I pep-talk myself. "I. Got. This."

Jaycee opens the door like he's expecting someone. "Ms. Ro--" he says; but then he stops.

"What's up, Bruh?" I say. I'm foolish--a poser--smiling too big. My cheeks hurt, but now I can't stop. Can't stop being friendly. My hand hangs in the air for a high-five that's not coming.

Jaycee pulls the door shut behind him. "Why are you here?" he hisses.

I drop my arm.

These words are backed-up in me, pressure behind a knot, waiting to be cut loose. "I'm sorry, Bruh," I say

Jaycee looks at me like I started a story in the middle--or, like he's looking for a place to spit something bad he's got in his mouth. He looks past me, to my car. "That your car?"

I nod.

He lifts his hand, snickers behind it. "Bruh, my pops sent a text to neighborhood watch. He thought you were a pimp or something." Jaycee looks at me. I know what he sees: fresh cut, hardline on one-side, the pretty-boy comb-over, six-foot four, one hundred and seventy-five pounds after a meal. "Parents," he says.

"Parents," I say, bobbing my head, huffing through my nose because: parents. He laughs. I laugh. Things lighten-up.

Jaycee points to my headphones. "What you listening to, Bruh?" I pass him the earbuds. He listens, looks at me confused, says, "Cooke?" like maybe the song switched.

“Cooke.” I nod, all those pictures from the video inside me. “Straight genius.” I say. I feel like I got to tell Jaycee what I’m thinking before my heart blows, but then the door opens. An old lady pokes her head out, face made of clay, brick, stone: rugged--she seen stuff. Sometimes I can look at a person and I know: they got a whole story. She’s shaking like old people do, maybe that whole story in her bursting to get out--like the words I got stuck in my throat. “Who’s this?” she says.

“Huddy,” Jaycee says.

Her stony forehead wrinkles as she works out my name. I’m so nervous, I’m breathing through a sack of rocks. I could turn off the porch and peel out in my pimp-mobile, go straight to Jeff Heights, never look back. But I got those pictures inside me; Cooke saying all that shit about change.

“You’re that boy,” the lady says.

My mouth is an empty bowl; my tongue a flat piece of meat. Jaycee says, “Huddy came to apologize.” Then, to me, “This is my Grans.”

I want to run so bad; get in my car; leave; act like Jaycee Spikes never mattered--but, then I might as well keep running forever. Maybe I’m full of myself--and maybe it’s because I’m white and that’s a problem in the first place--but, I feel like I was born to do something better. I wasn’t born to keep running. I’m not saying I’m Jesus or nothing, just maybe I could do something instead of watching all the bullshit go down and acting like it’s not happening.

Jaycee's Grans stares at me. None of us know what to do. Cooke goes quiet around my neck, the song looping. The violins start, leak tinny into the quiet morning. Jaycee tips his head, listening, says, "Can I see that Cooke, Bruh?"

I pass him my phone, the earbuds.

"Listen," he says, slips the headphones into his grandmother's ears. He points at the screen. She watches the pictures of soldiers, and protesters, Dr. King and the Klux Klan. Maybe her eyes tear-up; maybe she's just old--I don't know. After a while, she takes the headphones out, says, "That's your music?"

"Yes," I say. Jaycee mouths, *Ma'am*, so I say, "Ma'am."

She digs into my eyes, searching; maybe looking for the thing I'm looking for, too. Maybe if she finds it, then I'll know for sure it's there--then I can stop worrying I'm making all this crap up, hoping there's something better than what we got.

She says, "Come on inside. I'll make you some eggs." I guess that's a good place to start.

#

The house is warm. It smells like bleach and wood polish. Jaycee's Grans' tells me to sit; there's a table tucked into the corner.

"I can help," I say.

"Help by sitting," she says, but then asks, "You got more Cooke?"

"Sure," I say. "I can play whatever you want."

“You could put more Cooke on?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I tap the screen, pull up the Cooke playlist.

I ask Jaycee for a speaker. He laughs, says, “Sure, Bruh. I’ll ask the butler to get it.”

Grans shoots him a side-eye. “Is that how you talk to guests?”

Maybe I stepped in it, but Jaycee grins. I plug in the headphones, give them to Jaycee’s Grans, press play. The music pours into her. She smiles, gets to cracking eggs.

Jaycee makes sure she’s not listening, then says, “So, who made you apologize?”

Jaycee makes sure she’s not listening, then says, “So, who made you apologize?”

“Nobody. What happened was messed-up,” I say. “My dad...he’s got ideas.”

Jaycee says, “What kind of ideas?”

“He’s got ideas,” I look at my hands. The answer’s not there. I don’t know where the answer is. “Music’s my thing, but I was trying to earn my spot.”

“You were going hard,” Jaycee says.

“You’re better,” I tell him, because it’s the truth. “My dad said it a million times.”

Jaycee’s Grans takes out an earphone, says, “You got Marvin Gaye?”

Jaycee shows her how to search. She takes the pan off the burner, singing

“Mother, mother...”

Jaycee rolls his eyes. “You might not get your phone back, Bruh.”

She scoops eggs onto our plates, singing off-key, “Bring some lovin’ here today!” Jaycee and me lock eyes, fall out so hard--all the feelings I been holding breaking free. I grab my sides, let the laughter tear through me.

“What’s so funny?” Grans shouts, Marvin Gaye so loud I hear: *punish me, brutality, you can see*. Jaycee tells her it’s nothing. She shrugs, slides the plates in front of us, keeps singing, “... bring some understanding here today.”

I say, “Thanks.”

She shouts, “I’m going to the living room,” and dances out, with her hands in the air, swaying to Gaye, singing.

Jaycee passes me the ketchup. I pour a bunch on. He does, too. We dig in. “Was your pops trippin’ about you not playing?” he asks.

I don’t know how to say my dad’s been trippin’ forever. Trippin’ because to wants me to want ball like he wants it--but music is my thing. I can’t say all that--the cork in my throat is still dug in too tight--so I say, “It wasn’t good, Bruh.”

Jaycee finishes his bite, chews, swallows, says, “Wasn’t so good when I got kicked out, neither.”

Grans is singing so loud we can hear her in the kitchen, “What’s going on, what’s going on.”

This is the moment. Change is going to come. We’ve got to find a way. That’s what Cooke would say, Marvin Gaye, Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder. I say, “We got to do something,” rush the words out, past the cork, keep my tongue running, don’t let doubt in.

“Do what?” Jaycee asks.

“Something,” I look around the kitchen, the stove, the fridge, the microwave--like the answer might be in the appliances, the tile, the cabinets. “I don’t know, Bruh. Just something.”

He looks at the cabinets, trying to figure out what I mean. Words jam my throat, all the pictures of those people doing something. I say, “It should have been me that got kicked out.”

Jaycee crosses his arms. “No shit, Bruh,” he says, then, “I was hoping you were going to tell the truth.”

“You didn’t fight back,” I say.

“You sucker-punched me,” Jaycee says.

“Not cool,” I agree. Shake my head.

“Not Cooke, that’s for damn sure,” Jaycee says, looks at me, smiles like, *I got the right to mess with you.*

I say, “After Principal Bower sent that email saying she messed up, that you could come back to school. I thought--you know how sometimes guys fight, but then they’re cool--I thought we could be bros, you know? If I apologized.”

Jaycee shrugs, and I get that he didn’t see it the same way. I have to make him understand. “She didn’t send that email,” he says.

“I heard,” I say. My dad was tripping out when he thought the principal sent that email. Then I was tripping out when they said she was hacked. “Maybe all this,” I start, I’m pulling on the cork, thinking about my dad raging, thinking about those people



marching together. “Like MLK High getting shut down, you coming to Jefferson...me and you getting in a fight--maybe we’re supposed to do something.”

“Do what, though?” Jaycee says.

“It’s like the Cooke video--there’s all these kids, everywhere--adults even--maybe it’s because of their skin, or maybe they’re poor, or lonely, or maybe just different--and Cooke, and Marvin Gaye, it’s like they’ve been saying. We’ve been killing each other. For real, we’re shooting each other down, in schools, or wars, or blowing each other’s lives up. And it’s stupid.”

Jaycees leaning forward, nodding. I got the cork out and I keep going. “We can do better. You know?” I look at Jaycee; we’re vibing. I say, “I can do better. I thought you might want to do better with me. If we did something together--like post a video about what happened, about being friends now--then maybe some people would listen.”

Jaycee rubs his chin. I emptied out my guts, and I’m not sure I made sense, but, maybe Jaycee can see what I mean.

“Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves,” he says. “You know what that means?”

I’m shaking so bad I can’t focus. “Honestly, Man, I’m not sure.”

“You have to take action or you’re just fooling yourself.”

“Ya,” I say.

“I didn’t hack the principal’s account,” Jaycee say. “But...” He waits, maybe he wants me to say something, but I wait too. Then he says, “There’s people who want me to

pretend Bower sent the message.” Jaycee looks at me. “You think we have to game the system, Bruh?” he asks.

“Game it how?”

“Like, beat The Man at his own game.”

I got to think about it for a minute. “I guess there’s probably times,” I say. “Like politicians, maybe, but that’s not who I’m trying to be. What you think?” I ask.

Jaycee shakes his head. “Two wrongs don’t make a right,” he says.

Kid’s got a point.

#

We start with Jaycee’s Grans. She’s been listening to Gaye and Cooke, and whoever else since she’s had my phone for plenty time to look up more--she’s an easy sell. Then Jaycee calls his Pastor. I’ve seen the dude on the news. He talks for the Spikes family, Jaycee standing behind him. Grans and me listen to Jaycee tell the Pastor what we’re thinking. We stare at him while he lets the pastor talks. After a minute, Jaycee says, “But, we’re trying to change that.”

Grans says, “Give me the phone,” wiggling her fingers in Jaycee’s face.

Jaycee says, “My Grans wants to talk to you,” then hands the phone over.

Grans says, “I did not march with Dr. King to raise some scared little ninny for a grandson. We’re doing this whether you’re with us or not, so I sure do hope you’ll join.”

Jaycee raises his eyebrows. Grans is listening to the pastor, then she says, “We’ll see you in an hour.”

She hangs up, slides the phone to Jaycee and says, “Now, call your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Jaycee says.

Grans looks at him sideways, says, “I just told the Pastor what for; you know what you got to do.”

Jaycee looks at the table. Maybe he says, “She was trying to help,” or maybe it was, “try not to help.”

His Grans tells him to sit up. He does. She tells him to look her in the eyes. He does. She says, “I’m not making you say who she is, but the girl needs to know.”

Jaycee picks up the phone, says, “I have to make a call.”

I says “Cool,” but, I’m not expecting him to stand-up, leave out the backdoor, me sitting with Grans--but, that’s what he does.

When he’s gone, Grans says, “You like those eggs?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” then I ask the real thing I’ve been thinking since she was on the phone with the Pastor. “Did you really march with Martin Luther King?”

She sits up tall. “Sixty-five. I was twenty-seven years old, married with two babies. I couldn’t let them grow-up in that mess--I had to do something. So, I got me a bus ticket to Selma, left the babies with my mother, told my husband what was happening and off I went. Scared as a rabbit, but I did it.”

“Did you meet Dr. King?” I ask.

She snorts. “Lord no. I had just enough nerve to get me there, but not a penny more. If Dr. King would have said good afternoon to me, I’d have fainted. I saw him though. The man could speak.”

“Did you get arrested?”

“No. I was in the middle someplace. They weren’t much interested in us. Just the men up front.”

“Then what happened?” I ask.

“What you mean?”

“After the march,” I say.

She looks at me. Her smile says, *you got a lot to learn, Kid*. She says, “I got on the bus and came home.”

“Did you do other things? Sit ins or protests?” I ask.

“I raised those babies,” she says, takes a big breath, her shoulders trembling under her house dress. “Then Jaycee’s daddy came along--one of them oopsie babies they call them now. I was old enough to be his grandmother. Then here comes Jaycee, and then his mama dies over there in Iraqi. Life gets lived,” she says. “I raised good people, that’s how I marched.”

“I can’t believe you marched with Dr. King,” I say. “You were a part of history.”

She stares at me, with her clay face, those wrinkles and the places that sag--those parts of her whole story that ended-up on her face. I can feel her digging in me, looking for that thing that I’m looking for too. “King sat in a lot of kitchens,” she says slowly, “talking to old church ladies before he started marching.”

“I’m just trying to fix one thing,” I say quietly.

“So was King,” she says. Then, maybe she wants to let me off the hook, or maybe she wants to give me a minute to think, but she points at my phone, says, “You got that Lennon boy on there?”

“John Lennon?”

“That boy who got shot by that crazy fellow...the one that was reading that book. Can’t remember the name of it,” she says.

I say, “I’ll look it up.” I tap on the phone, click a link, find out the dude was reading *Catcher in the Rye*.

“That’s the one,” she says. “You read that book?”

“For school.”

She says. “What you think about it?”

I shrug. “It was good, I guess.”

“What you think about what it says?”

“About people being phony?” I ask.

Grans nods, or maybe her head is just bobbing. She puckers, says, “About kids losing their innocence.”

It’s like I got my own video in my head, but instead of MLK, the babies, and bombs, I got pictures of my dad raging, mouth open, face red, telling me what to do, what to think--who to be. That’s the video the music tunes out--the words the lyrics replace.

“Yeah,” I say quietly. “That’s true.”

“Always been true as far as I can see,” she says. “But that doesn’t mean we stop getting on busses and trying for the babies.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I say. It’s weird--I don’t know how to say it--and maybe it’s because I’m still a kid, but I feel like it’s not just for the future, it’s for the past, too. For that girl in the Cooke video, crying and bloody, for Grans marching in Selma and those men up at the front with King, for the nuns, the housewives, and workmen. Maybe a lot of them were scared as rabbits--or had a cork in their throat--but, they stood up and they did it anyway. Me and Jaycee doing something won’t change what happened, but, it helps. I don’t know how to say it. It just helps.

“Play some of that Lennon boy,” Grans says, poking my phone with her shaky finger.

I tap on the app. Type, *Lennon*; hit *Imagine*; hand her the headphones, press play; her eyes close; the music goes into her blood, her heart, her bones--John Lennon tells her to imagine, that she’s not the only one.

I’m not the only one.

## Grans

Got that Lennon boy singing to me about everybody getting along. Imagine this and imagine that. I always liked this song, except the part where it's all about imagining. Too many folks sitting around on their big butts imagining. They think they got all the time in the world, but old age is going to sneak up and bite right in that big ol'derriere. Get up and do something already before your life is over.

I give this Huddy boy credit for coming up in here and sitting down at my table; wonder what he's got going on up in that head, staring at my kitchen cabinets so hard, the paint's going go and peel off. Might be rude that I'm sitting here listening to his music while he's watching the paint peel, but seems to me he needs some time to think on things.

I won't say I'm pleased he hauled-off on my Jaycee like he did, but the Lord's got a plan. Not going to count my chickens before they hatch, but if Jaycee getting kicked out of school leads to something good, then it'll be okay by me. That's where I got my prayers aimed.

These boys got the world at their fingertips--might be they could really do something. Jaycee's something special. This Huddy boy's got moxy, that's for sure--and

that Taalia girl, Jaycee's little girlfriend, to do what she did. Well, we'll just see. I'm not condoning her breaking pretending she was that principal lady and sending out her email confession, but something had to be done. The Lord works in mysterious ways.

That's Taalia girl is one of God's children. So is that principal lady, and all those folks over at Jefferson High School trying to keep my Jaycee out. We are all God's children. That Lennon boy singing his *Imagine* song is reminding me. I guess sometimes we got to imagine so we can go ahead and make it true.

People shooting each other up in the schools and the movie theatres, flying planes into buildings. Always been crazy folks, that's for damn sure, but there's another kind of sickness happening now. An old woman like me don't have the answers. I got the history I can share, but these kids are living in another world: cars driving themselves, any song you want, movies on pocket computers, talking to your friend on the video line. Changes the brain all these things. I've been reading about it. The librarian knows I like to keep up with the times. Times are passing me by though. It doesn't matter how many books I read. I got the old kind of brain and they got some new kind of version. I got enough sense to see that.

Sometimes I get to thinking if Dr. King had the social media. But the Lord's got a plan. That I know. Just wish he'd go on ahead and make that plan clear for the rest of us. We don't got King, but we got these babies. Might be one of them is the next.

The back door opens and Huddy and me turn to Jaycee coming back inside. He's got a real serious look on his face. Not bad; not good--just serious. I take out the headphones. "What's going on, Baby?" I say.



Jaycee slides into the chair between me and his friend. He says, “Taalia’s been talking to the news lady, Jillian Matthews, the one on Channel Ten.

“That blonde lady that was over at the house,” I ask.

Jaycee looks at Huddy, I suppose wondering how he feels about the news people being here after he jumped my Jaycee. Jaycee says, “Yes, Ma’am. The one who’s been calling.”

“What’s she want with Taalia?” I ask. Me and Jaycee both know his little girlfriend went and did the computer hacking, but I’m not going to spill the girl’s business in front of Huddy.

“She’s knows what Taalia did,” Jaycee says, then he looks at Huddy and says, “Taalia hacked Principal Bower’s email. She’s the one who sent out that email.”

Huddy looks fairly stunned. “Who’s Taalia?” he asks.

Jaycee says, “She a girl I know at school.”

“Is she one of the Scholars?” Huddy asks.

“Naw,” Jaycee says. “She’s a Jefferson kids.”

“How’s the news lady know about Taalia?” I ask. I don’t want to alarm my Jaycee, but I’m nervous for the girl. I’ve been nervous for her since I figured out she was the one who did the hacking, eavesdropping to Jaycee’s side of their phone conversation right after the principal’s email went out to every parent, teacher and student at Jefferson Heights High School.

Jaycee sits up tall and says, “Taalia told her, but that’s not all.”

My heart is beating too fast for an old lady. I'm not trying to pull every last detail out of the boy one by one. "Spill the beans, Child," I tell him.

"The news lady has been talking to Principal Bower, too."

"Talking about what?" I ask.

Jaycee says, "The principal wants to make a statement. Taalia says Principal Bower had herself a come to Jesus moment and she wants to say what's been really going down at the school since the Promise Scholars came over to Jefferson."

"You sure?" I ask him. I don't want to doubt the Lord's plan, but I seen enough of life to know that sometimes the devil will lay a trap.

"That's what Taalia says."

"Does this principal lady know what Taalia did?" I say.

"The news lady promised Taalia she's a confidential source. There's a code."

"Taalia believes her?" I ask. I know I'm being a negative nelly and I'm the last one that wants to rain on my boy's parade, but I got to move a step in front of him for as long as I can, sweep the devil from his path.

My Jaycee nods and says, "Yes, Ma'am. She does."

"So what now?" Huddy asks and I'm glad it's him and not me, even though I got the same question on my mind.

"I told Taalia what we were thinking about doing," Jaycee tells him. "I said we were thinking about making a video together about what's been happening, about the fight and how we're friends and what we think needs to happen in the world and

everything. I told her we're planning to put it up on social media. She asked if we wanted more kids in the video, and I told her I would ask you."

Huddy says, "That's cool with me."

Jaycee says, "I thought so. Then more of us that can use our followers to get it out. She said that we want her to, she would talk to the news lady. Maybe the news lady can help us go viral."

Then the boys start talking about some kids at school who had social media going viral, some girl got slapped and there's another girl who took a special boy to the school dance. They talk about all these kids they know and how many followers they got and maybe they could call the kids up, or message them, to see if they want to be in this video. I listen for a while, but my head gets spinning, so I reach over and tap on Huddy's phone with my finger. He smiles and slides it toward me. I type in *What a Wonderful World*, like my Jaycee taught me. Then I let Louis Armstrong tell me about how the roses are red and the sky is blue and this is a blessed day, while I watch these boys plotting how they're going to change the world. I got tears in my eyes, but my heart is full. Mr. Armstrong is singing,

"I hear babies crying, I watch them grow  
They'll learn much more than I'll never know  
And I think to myself what a wonderful world  
Yes I think to myself what a wonderful world."

These boys got excitement on their faces. It is a wonderful world and the good Lord's got a plan. The devil might try and lay his traps in these boy's path, but that's okay--we got to keep trying. The Huddy boy reaches over and touches my arm. I take the headphones out. He says, "Mrs. Spikes, do you think maybe you would be in the video with us? Maybe you could talk about what you did in Selma."

"I didn't really do anything," I tell them. "I was just a mother who wanted things to be different for her babies, so I got on a bus and I went for a walk and then I came home. That's it."

Jaycee and Huddy look at each other, then Jaycee says, "That's not it, Grans. You been holding this family together forever. You raised me up when my mom couldn't. You raised up my pops. None of this would be happening if it wasn't for you."

"You really want me in that video?" I ask the boys. "I don't have no followers."

Then that Huddy boy smiles so big I'm afraid his face would break if he stretched it any further and he says, "Grans you about to be internet famous."

## Hannah

I'm buffing my CC cream, thinking about how I should start doing makeup tutorials, when my phone rings. My screen says *Leyza* with the pic of us buggy with cartoon eyeballs and rainbows coming out of our ears. Obvi I'm going to answer for Leyza--but who actually calls anymore? Something is definitely going on.

"What's up, Girl," I say, press speaker and lean my phone against the bathroom mirror.

"Are you at school?" Leyza asks. Her voice echoes in my bathroom. She sound jumpy.

"It's not even seven fifteen," I tell her.

"Oh," she says, like she doesn't even know that it's early in the morning. Then she says, "Would your mom call you in sick today?"

"Probably. Why?"

"I need your help," she says and I get the feeling she's holding back something.

"What do you need?" I say, swiping pink blush on my cheeks. *This product will totally make your cheekbones pop*, I picture myself telling my viewers as I show them the tube. *Micro-bursts of color for all day wear.*

Leyza says, “Jaycee called me.”

“That kid who got kicked out for fighting Huddy?”

“Jaycee got jumped,” Leyza says. She’s pissed. She’ll act like she’s not, but I’m not dumb. I know what the black kids are saying. They don’t want to admit that it’s the Scholars’ own fault they keep getting in trouble. Those twins got caught red-handed super-gluing the teacher’s lounge door. Even Leyza slapped Kandy. I was right there and she did it for pretty much for no reason, at all--and that’s *Leyza!* But it’s everybody else’s fault, right? If I say what I’m thinking, I’ll sound racist, so instead I just say, “I’ve known Huddy forever. That kid wouldn’t hurt anybody.”

“Huddy was with Jaycee when he called,” she says.

“They’re friends?”

“They’re making a video. That’s why they called.”

“One of Huddy’s pranks,” I ask.

“Not a prank. A video about what’s been going on at Jefferson...since we came over.”

*We* means the black kids. Leyza and me don’t talk about this: how she lives in The Flats and I live in Jeff Heights--not since she cracked and slapped Kandy Klanderman for practically no reason. We both act like it never happened.

I’m not saying it was all bad that Leyza slapped Kandy. She got a lot of followers from that video. Not as many as me; but, taking Worm to homecoming was internet gold. Leyza doesn’t think about her brand; she’ll post any random picture with her mom and she doesn’t even use a filter. She’s going to regret it when she gets older. Not me. I’m not

wasting opportunities like that. I stay on top of posting b.f.f. pics of me and Worm. I've got an app that makes us look one-hundred even if the light was bad. If I don't get fifty likes in the first fifteen minutes, then I take the pic down. You have to have standards or your brand up gets confused. Worm might have Down's Syndrome, but the kid has thirty thousand followers online. Being Down's is his platform--and, being the popular girl who's best friends with the Down's boy is mine.

"Are you there?" Leyza asks.

"Sorry," I say. "Hey, if I made makeup tutorials, would you repost them?"

"I guess," Leyza says.

"Do you think my followers would be in to that?"

"I don't know," Leyza says. "But what about Jaycee and Huddy? Will you be in their video with me?"

"What do I have to do?"

"Just talk about how we're friends."

"Huddy's just doing this to get more followers," I tell her.

"I don't think so."

"Have you seen his prank videos?"

"I talked to Jaycee's grandma," Leyza says. "I'm pretty sure she's not trying to get followers."

"I'm not sure it's good for my brand," I tell her. "Racial videos and makeup tutorials don't really go together."

“Are you kidding me?” Leyza says and I’m shocked because she’s never raised her voice at me before.

“It’s just--” I start to say, but Leyza cuts me off.

“If you don’t do this, Hannah, then we can’t talk anymore.”

“That’s not fair,” I tell her. “I’m just trying to think long term.”

“I’m a real person,” she says loudly into the phone. “Your followers click like on their screens. That’s it. They don’t even know you. That’s not real, Han. If you chose getting fake likes over helping me--your real friend with a real problem--then, I just can’t anymore. I can’t.”

For a second, I wish I hadn’t answered the phone. I wish I had just finished my makeup and gone to school and I wouldn’t have known anything about Huddy and his stupid video. “This is going to be bad,” I say.

“What if it’s not?” Leyza says.

“When do they want to do it?” I ask.

“In an hour,” she says. “Do you think you could ask Worm to come, too?”



## Worm

M&M's all taste the same. That's what I'm thinking. The red ones. The blue ones. The green ones. They all taste the same. Also, everybody likes chocolate. Also, besides being a kind of Down's Syndrome, mosaic means a picture made of small pieces of colorful things, like M&M's. Or, glass and broken tiles. Or, people.

My mom took me to a conference for families with Mosaic Downs kids. They told us to make a mosaic, then talk about how we feel about being a Mosaic family. There were no girls there. I said, "I feel this conference is lame," then I told my mom, "I feel next time, let's go to Las Vegas or New York." Las Vegas or New York has a lot of girls. Millions of girls. Other places that have a lot of girls are the gym and the yogurt shop. The gym is the best place to get pumped. The yogurt shop is the best place to get fro-yo.

My mom said, "Okay," and we did not go back to the conference. We do have the mosaic we made. It's a lot of shapes and colors all together in a circle. Mom puts hot things on it so they don't burn the table. Then she says, "Be careful, don't burn yourself," and I think, *the mosaic doesn't get burnt*. Then we eat dinner. My favorite dinner is Taco Tuesdays. My favorite part of Taco Tuesdays is nacho cheese sauce. I do not like shredded lettuce or salsa. Mom says, "Eat your vegetables or you'll get constipated."

The video Hannah said that we're going to make is a mosaic. Me and Hannah, Leyza, Jaycee and Huddy, Taalia, Egan and Luma, we are the colorful things. Principal Bower is a colorful thing. So is Bryan Canaan and the parents who don't want the Promise Scholars at our school--but, they are not in our video. Our video is only for people who want to make a change. Bryan Canaan wanted to make a change, but he messed-up. Messing-up is okay. Running away from messing-up is not okay. Bryan Canaan ran away. That's not cool. Also, I do not want to mess up and not have any friends anymore. That is one thing that makes me nervous about the video.

Hannah is talking too much for being the driver. It makes me nervous. I can't get pumped or I will get more nervous. I can't think about the video or I will get pumped. I have to think about calm things. Also, I have to watch the road for dangerous things because Hannah is not being careful. I can't listen to what she is saying because I have to focus and think of calm things like colorful mosaics and girls, New York, Las Vegas and M&M's all being the same flavor. Girls get me pumped, but in a different way. I can *always* think about girls.

"Worm, are you listening to me?" Hannah says.

"Red light." I point. "Stop."

The car in front of us stops. Hannah stops hard. When my mom stops hard, she says, "Are you okay, Honey?" Hannah does not say, "Are you okay, Honey?" Hannah just keeps talking. That is one problem with a girlfriend. Girlfriends talk. *We need to talk. Talk about your feelings. Talk to me.* Not all girlfriends talk. Taalia does not talk. But,

Taalial is not my girlfriend. Taalial is good at building robots. She won't build me a sex bot. She says it's not cool. She is wrong. Sex bots are very cool.

At the red traffic light, there are other cars. There is a silver one, a blue one, a brown one, a black one. Hannah's car is red. If I had a drone, I would fly over the road, and the cars would be a mosaic. The houses would be a mosaic, too. And all the people inside them. Planet earth is a mosaic. So is outer space, all the planets, and aliens, and suns all put together. They are the colorful pieces. Mosaics can be really big or they can be two pieces, but one thing is not enough to be a mosaic. That is just one thing being alone.

"I'm asking you a question," Hannah says.

"What question?"

"Do you think they're using us for followers?"

Hannah already asked me this question. I already told her, "No." Also, I told her, "I don't care." Followers can follow as many people as they want. They can follow me, and also Leyza, and the Vice President and the Speaker of the House. They can even follow Michael Jackson, but he is dead. I think that is a fake account.

"Leyza is my friend," I tell her. "My followers are her followers."

Hannah stares at the car in front of us. It is a blue truck. She says, "I feel like everybody wants something from everybody else." Hannah is talking like I am not there. She does that, sometimes. Sometimes, I talk back; sometimes, I just listen.

Today, I say, "What do *you* want from everybody else?"

The light turns green. The blue car goes. Hannah's red car follows the blue car. She does not answer. "I'm asking you a question," I say.

"What question?" she says.

"What do *you* want from everybody else?"

Hannah shrugs. "I don't want anything."

Hannah thinks she is one thing being alone, but that is a lie. Nobody is one thing. Not even when they think they are. People think, *That kid has Down's Syndrome, he does not know what's going on.* But I do know what is going on. My eyes are twenty-twenty. It is in my medical record.

What Hannah wants is love. I try to give love to Hannah, but her love is followers. I am just one M&M. She wants a thousand hearts on her pictures. Not one kid with Mosaic Down Syndrome. Hannah does not understand that one person is many colorful things. That is Hannah's special need. It's okay. We all have a special need. A special need is one of the many colorful things that is inside one person. Another special need is not having any friends. That is not my special need anymore. Not having any friends sucks. That is one reason why I am making the video. A kid in Texas or Kansas, or also Idaho, will see the video and say, *I am not alone* or, also, *I will not do suicide*, or, also, *I will not shoot people because everyone has a special need.* There are a lot of things people will say after they see the video. That is why we have to do a good job. Good jobs are not always easy to do. I do not know how to do this good job. But, I will try. Also, trying matters. Also, I hope I do no mess up and have no more friends.

“Is this the right address?” Hannah says. The building is an old mall. With empty stores. The empty stores have boarded-up windows. The doors have wood over them. There is also graffiti on the wood and on the building. Hannah gives me her phone and says, “The address is in Leyza’s text.”

I look at Leyza’s text message. “This is the right address,” I tell her. “It’s down there.” I point to the end of the parking lot. This is where the map says Jaycee’s church is. Jaycee’s church is where we are going to make the video. Hannah is not driving on the street anymore. Also, she is not talking. She is watching the road. Also, she is staring at the building, the wood on the building, and also the graffiti.

At the end of the parking lot, there are cars and a big van parked in parking spaces. There is a sign that says, “This area under surveillance by Jesus. ”

My dad lets me park his car in the driveway. But I cannot drive it on the street. Dad says, “Won’t it be great when cars drive themselves and you can have your own car?” The social worker says I can drive my own car now, but Mom and Dad say that I cannot. I asked the social worker to put that in my medical record. He said it is in my medical record. It is called my IQ. My IQ is high. That means I can drive a car even if the car cannot drive itself. Dad says, “Don’t worry.” Dad always says, “Don’t worry.” He says cars will drive themselves soon, then I can live a *more independent life*. He says driving is not fun. He says driving gets on your nerves.

I said, “Driving is like having a girlfriend.” Dad laughed. He said driving *is* like having a girlfriend, but I should not tell Mom that he said that. I did not tell Mom.

There is an old movie theatre in the mall. The sign where the movie names go says, "Holy Shepherd Church." Under that part of the sign, it says, "Now playing: Redemption." Under that part of the sign, it says, "Everybody welcome."

Hannah looks at the sign. She says, "I thought we were going to a church."

"Holy Shepherd Church," I read the sign. Maybe Hannah needs to check her eyes. The letters are very big. She should not be driving if she cannot see the letters.

"I know," she says. "But, it doesn't look like a church."

"What does a church look like?" I ask her. Hannah does not answer. Sometimes she does not answer when I want her to answer. Sometimes she talks too much when she is driving. Sometimes she talks like I am not there. Dating a hot girl is not always great. Maybe Dad is right. Maybe it *is* good that cars will drive themselves. Another good thing would be sex bots. Also, if I had a sex bot, it would be okay to have no friends.

#

The inside of the movie theatre, is not like a movie theatre. But, also, it is like a movie theatre. There is movie theatre carpet that is a mosaic that got pumped and made a carpet. There is a cash register. Also, a popcorn machine, but there is no popcorn. Also, there is a nacho cheese sauce cooker, but no nacho cheese sauce. Also, a glass case for candy.

My mom says candy at the theatre, "Costs an arm and a leg." Before we go to the movie theatre, Mom stops at the gas station. She says, "Pick your poison." She does not mean pick poison. She means pick candy. I always pick M&M's. After she pays, Mom

puts my M&M's, and dad's 100 Grand, in her purse. Mom is on a diet. She is trying to lose her *fat ass*. Mom does not get candy for the movie theatre. Mom takes celery from home. She eats her celery in the movie. It is very loud. Also, she eats my M&M's, and also half of Dad's 100 Grand.

Also, Mom does not mean that candy really cost an arm and a leg. That is a metaphor. Metaphors are good to explain things that are hard to explain. When Mom and me made the mosaic, the mosaic was a metaphor. Also, life is a metaphor. Also, technology is a metaphor. Maybe the video should be a metaphor. I will try to think of a metaphor to say for the video. I know what a metaphor is because I am good at reading. I am not good at math. I am also not good at volleyball, or eating my vegetables. Also, neither is Mom.

Inside the glass case at Jaycee's church, there is not candy that cost an arm and a leg. There is not vegetables. Inside the case is books. One book says, *Follow Me* with a picture of Jesus. If Hannah wrote a book and put it in a movie theatre church, her book would be *Follow Me*. Also, if Hannah was in a movie, and she was a character who was living her actual life, the book in the movie theatre would not be a metaphor. The book would be a symbol. Symbols are metaphors that mean something else. I would like to be a sex symbol. My mom says that I am wrong. She says I would not actually like to be a sex symbol. Dad says that she is wrong. He says, "I'm pretty sure he would like to be a sex symbol." Dad is right. Being a sex symbol would be awesome. Also, there are CD's in the glass case. Also, t-shirts that say, *If lost, please return to Jesus*. Also, one that says,

*Every Saint has a Past, Every Sinner has a Future. And one that says, God: Rated E for Everyone.* That is a metaphor about technology.

Hannah says, “This place is weird.”

I do not think this place is weird. I think this place is cool. I say, “Why do you think this place is weird?”

Hannah does not answer. She points up. I look up. There is a statue on the wall. The statue is a black man with his hands and feet nailed to two pieces of wood. It is called a cross. There is blood on the man’s feet, and blood on the man’s hands. Also, the man is crying. The man is Jesus. I know he is Jesus, because everybody knows a man on a cross is Jesus. Black Jesus is cool. It is not cool to be nailed to a cross. But, it is cool to see something different. Black Jesus is different. I do not know if Jesus is a metaphor or a person. Mom said Jesus is a metaphor *and* a person. That is confusing.

We are looking at black Jesus and a man says, “You must be looking for Jaycee?”

Hannah turns around. I turn around. The man is tall. He is wearing a nice shirt. Also, a tie with a golden cross on it. Also, he shakes our hands. He says, “I am Pastor Applewood.”

Hannah says, “I am Hannah.”

I say, “I am Worm.”

Pastor Applewood says, “Your name is Worm?”

I say, “Yes. My name is Worm.”

Pastor Applewood says, “Okay. Worm it is.” Then, Pastor Applewood shakes my hand. When we are done shaking, I say, “You can call me Gary.”



Pastor Applewood says, “Okay, Gary.” Then he says, “The other’s are in the sanctuary.”

#

A sanctuary is a movie theatre. There are seats that fold up and down. There are curtains. Also, there is a big screen. Also, there is a camera.

Talia says, “Hi, Worm.”

I say, “Hi, Taalia.” I do not ask her if she wants to have sex. That is a joke we say, but we are inside a sanctuary and Pastor Applewood is here. Also, Principal Bower is here, and some of the teachers. Also, Hannah does not know that asking Taalia to have sex is a joke we say. Hannah might get jealous and say, “We can not make this video because you are cheating on me.” That would be bad.

Mom said the video we are going to make is very important. I said, “What if I mess it up?”

Mom said, “Speak from your heart.” Mom does not know what it is like to have no friends. Mom does not know what it is like to be a Downs Syndrome person who does not want to be lonely again. Being a Downs Syndrome family is not the same thing as being a Down Syndrome person. Also, Mom does not know what it is like to be a guy. Dad does know what it’s like to be a guy, but Dad is not home when Hannah came to pick me up. Mom told Hannah, “Drive safe. You have precious cargo.” That is an idiom. An idiom is a type of saying. I am precious cargo. Also, Mom said to make sure that I

stay hydrated. Staying hydrated is not an idiom. When I get pumped, my lips get chapped. Chapped lips suck.

Egan says, “What’s up, Bro?” Then he gives me a bro handshake.

Hannah acts different when she sees Egan. I do not get jealous. I would not say, “We can not make this video because you are cheating on me.” This is part of Hannah’s special need. On the internet, Hannah needs followers. In real life, Hannah needs attention. Also, most girls act different when Egan is there. Also, Egan does not have that many followers because his profile picture is a llama, and also because his account is private. If Egan’s profile picture was a picture of Egan, then he would have a lot of followers. Egan said he will make his profile picture his picture to make the video go viral.

Sometimes, I wish Egan would take Hannah so that I cannot have a girlfriend for a little while. Then Egan could give me back Hannah when he was tired. Having a girlfriend makes me tired. Also, Egan already has a girlfriend.

Hannah says, “Hey, Egan.”

Egan says, “What’s up, Hannah?” and he gives her a hug. Then Egan puts his arm around his girlfriend, Luma, like he is saying, *This is my girl.*

Luma is Taalia’s sister. Luma is not good at making robots. Being good at making robots is not genetic. Genetic is about your genes. Genes are the mosaic that makes a person. Genes make the color of your eyes, also, genes are how tall you are, or, if you have blonde hair. Also, genes do not say if you have Down’s Syndrome or if you will

make a good viral video to change the world. Genes do not say if you will mess up the video and if you will still have friends.

Hannah looks sad, so I put my arm around Hannah like I am saying, *This is my girl*. Then Egan says, “Did you see who is here?”

There is Principal Bower and Mr. Dillie. Also, there is Ms. Chetty who is pregnant. Mom says, “Ms. Chetty is as big as a house.” That is a metaphor.

There is also, Jillian Matthews reporting live for Channel Ten. She is not reporting live for Channel Ten. She is talking to Principal Bower and Jaycee Spikes. Jaycee Spikes is the MLK kid Principal Bower kicked out of the school. Jaycee got jumped. Getting jumped means you are not doing anything and someone beats you up. I do not want to get jumped.

Also, people can say, “That person jumped my bones.” Jumping bones is not getting beat-up. Jumping bones is a kind of sex. If I had a sex bot, I would ask my sex bot to jump bones. Hannah cannot get jealous of a sex bot, because a sex bot is not a person. A sex bot is a machine. A cash register is a machine. Also, a car wash, and a coffee pot, and also a computer. People are not machines. People are people. Also, Hannah does not want to have sex with me. I do not think she is my real girlfriend, but I do not want to make her more sad. Also, many people are my friends because Hannah is my girlfriend. Not Egan. Egan is just my friend.

Principal Bower looks like a sad llama. Jillian Matthews is talking and Principal Bower is listening. Then, Principal Bower puts her hand on Jaycee’s shoulder. Jaycee is very tall. Principal Bower has to reach up to put her hand on Jaycee’s shoulder. Jaycee

bends down and hugs Principal Bower. Principal Bower cries. Principals do not hug and also they do not cry. Also, Jaycee is black. Also, he is a Promise Scholar. Also, Jaycee sinks buckets. Sinking buckets is not Jaycee's special need. Sinking buckets is cool. I do not know what Jaycee's special need is.

Jillian Matthews asks everybody to come on the stage. I am standing next to Egan and also Hannah. Jillian Matthews says, "We have the opportunity to create real change, but you should be prepared for backlash. People can be nasty online. If any of you are uncomfortable, you should say so. Everybody will understand."

All of the kids, and also the adults, look at each other. Nobody says they are uncomfortable preparing for backlash. I think Hannah might be uncomfortable, but she does not say that she is. Kandy says, "It's not like we haven't been on the internet."

Nobody says they are uncomfortable preparing for backlash. Huddy says, "Let's do this." Then, Pastor Applewood tells us where to sit so we all fit on the camera. When we are all on the camera, Taalia says, "Now what?"

Jillian Matthews says, "I could do an introduction."

Kandy says, "No disrespect, but this is for social media, not a news report."

Jillian Matthews says, "Point taken." Point taken means that Jillian Matthews understands what Kandy means.

Then, Jaycee says, "Huddy should talk. It was his idea."

Huddy says, "Naw, man. I'm down to say what happened, but it should be an MLK kid that kicks us off."

Jaycee and Leyza are the MLK kids, but they do not want to talk first. Leyza says, “If we want the video to go viral, the person who talks should be the one with the most followers.”

And, everybody looks at me, because I am the person with the most followers.

Principal Bower says, “Would you like to talk?”

It is a fact that I have the most followers, and also, I do not want my friends to be mad at me, so I say, “Okay.”

Then everybody decides that I will stand on the stage alone. Then, other people will make videos, too, but the first one will be my video. I am standing on the stage alone. There is no one near me. I can see everyone, but they are not near me. The air is cold and I feel lonely. I feel nervous. Pastor Applewood says, “We’re rolling.” We’re rolling means the camera is on.

I do not know what to say. I do not say anything. Everyone is waiting, but I do not say anything. Hannah is getting mad. I know when she is getting mad because she breathes loud. She is breathing very loud and it makes me very nervous.

Principal Bower says, “You don’t have to speak if you don’t want to.”

Ms. Chetty is smiling at me. Ms. Chetty is nice to everyone, but Ms. Chetty is also not my friend. She will not get mad at me if I mess up. She will say, ‘It’s okay,’ but she will not eat lunch with me, or invite me to go to a party. She will not break-up with me.

Egan says, “Say what’s in your heart, Bro. You got this.”

I look at Egan. Egan is my true friend. Egan does not care how many followers I have or if I mess up. I say, “Egan is the real MVP.”

Egan says, “You’re the real MVP.”

Then I know what to say. I say, “When I was young I did not have any friends. Everybody else had friends and I did not have any. No friends asked me to go to their house, or to a birthday party. I cried every day. My dad said, ‘It will be okay,’ but it was not okay. Also, my mom cried every day. She said she did not cry every day, but I saw her. I did not want to be alive. I did not want to make my parents sad.”

I do not want to cry, but I am crying. I am remembering what it felt like when I had no friends. Hannah is looking at the ground. She is not looking at me. I want Hannah to look at me. I want Hannah to say, ‘It’s okay. I love you,’ but Hannah does not say that. I am feeling what it feels like when Hannah does not say, ‘I love you,’ and it makes me cry.

Egan comes onto the stage. He puts his hand on my shoulder and he says, “I got you, Bro.”

Then Taalia comes onto the stage and she stands on the other side of me. Taalia does not say anything, but Taalia does not always talk.

I say, “Egan and Taalia are my friends. Also, Leyza and other kids. But mostly I have followers and followers are not friends. Followers do not eat lunch with you or invite you to a party. People need friends, not followers.”

I look at Hannah. She is looking at the floor and she will not look at me. “I’m sorry, Hannah,” I say. Then I say, “People think, ‘That kid has Down’s Syndrome. He

does not know what is going on, but I do know what is going on. What is going on is that everybody wants friends and everybody wants love. That's all. That's all that's going on."

## **Bryan Canaan**

When I started Blingly, I had a vision. I imagined a utopia where all the world's problems could be solved with technology. Maybe I was just young and naïve, but I really believed we could make it real. The problem is, real is messy.

Reba and I stand in the back of the theatre watching the kids on the stage. What the boy said was profound, but it won't go viral--not on it's own. "We have to go," I tell Reba.

Reba puts her hands on the mound of her belly. Inside, is our child. I can't wrap my head around how quickly everything can change. One moment you are a person in the world and the next moment you are a father and everything is rearranged. "You're not going down there?" she asks.

"No," I tell her. "I need to borrow your laptop. I've got to mess with some algorithms and make sure this video gets out."

"Is that ethical?" she asks.

"I don't know," I tell her. "What do you think?"

Reba doesn't answer, she looks down at the kids on the stage. Two other boys are in front of the camera now. I recognize one: Jaycee Spikes--an extraordinary young man.



The boy next to him is speaking to the camera, explaining the pressure he was under, why he jumped Jaycee. Jaycee has his arm around the kid and these two boys are talking about how things get out of hand, how sometimes we take things out on people who aren't even really part of the problem.

“You know it wasn't you, right?” I say.

Reba doesn't take her eyes from the kids.

“What wasn't me?”

“You're not the reason I left. Or, you were, but not for the reasons you thought.”

“What did I think?” Reba asks.

Reba and I stand next to each other in silence, watching the boys on stage, listening to them talk about changing the world. “I guess I don't know what you thought,” I say. “But I wasn't running away from you.”

“Go figure,” she says.

“I always wanted to be with you.”

“Leaving is a funny way to show it,” she says.

“Life is funny,” I tell her.

Reba doesn't take her eyes from the boys, but she nods, pursing her lips, considering.

“You know, Reba,” I tell her. “I'm just some guy trying to figure it out--like everybody else.”