ABSTRACT

THE AWARD WINNER AND OTHER STORIES

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The Award Winner and Other Stories explores the question of success within the African-American community and the moral, ethical and personal sacrifices made by some to attain it. Three of the stories follow one young girl, Josie, in particular as she jostles between cultures and worlds, integrating a predominantly white private school, visiting an all-black summer enclave and attending an Ivy League school. Issues of race, class and gender influence her even as she searches (with varying degrees of success) for personal meaning and agency. Other characters wrestle with the burden of being pioneers, of carrying the weight of a race's (still somewhat questioned) potential while facing their own personal concerns, wants and needs. In a country where the "pursuit of happiness" is written into its very DNA, these struggles reflect the ever increasing weight and complexity of the "American Dream,' its at once persistent elusiveness and heady promise.

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by

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The Award Winner

Lionel touched the car phone, the first of its kind, positioned just beneath the gear shift. Even the buttons on the keypad glowed a faint orange. They'd thought of everything. This was his favorite part of the day, passing the Clifton Estates sign on his way home from the hospital. He considered himself akin to an auto mechanic, going in, repairing splintering bone, hammering bolts into place. He was naturally squeamish, finding the pulpy insides of human beings a repugnant soup of veins and intestines. But this had been his mother's wish, for him to become a doctor and it was the least he could do after she had raised him alone, his missing father spoken of in hushed tones at family gatherings. She'd never lost her composure, always held her head high and he'd rewarded her with trips up from Jacksonville, buying her favorite chocolate covered cherries to eat while she watched her daytime soaps on the family room couch.

He pulled into his drive, up the steep incline and parked the Lincoln beside Magda's red Mercedes. She insisted on a diesel fed engine and it rumbled like some old world aristocrat. He opened his front door, slid his shoes off on the landing and entered the dining room. Sifting through the mail she'd placed at the head of the table, he called out for her. He liked his dinners served on an oven warmed plate.

A floor below his wife, Magda, yanked a hose free from the washing machine and ran her fingers along its ribbed insides. The tub was flooding again. She checked the black tubing for clogs. It looked clean which meant it was probably the pump. She placed a dirty hand towel stiff with grime beneath the unit and pried off the clips holding the hose in place. As it broke free, water showered down. She worked a wad of damp lit from it with a screwdriver and carefully replaced all the pieces. Her hands were red from the water. A plumber would have charged her one hundred dollars for the repairs and that would have been a hundred less from her allowance. Lionel could be strict about expenses. They'd met on an international flight from Stockholm to JFK. He'd responded to her question, "Would you like something to drink?" in Swedish surprising her, his beige complexion having blended into the plane's monochromatic décor. She took a second look, reminding herself that she was free of prejudice and leaned forward to display the soft curve of her breasts. He would, she knew, be unhappy with the potatoes au gratin. The butter frightened him. He'd tell her again about the heart attacks he'd seen rip through seemingly healthy chests. The basement smelled like fabric softener. Their cross country skis were lined up against one wall, their boots just beneath them. She grabbed a plastic hamper full of clothes, turned off the light and shut the door. She set it down on the family room couch and began folding one piece after the next. He didn't know how to work the microwave or the oven. He would have to wait.

He pushed the thinly sliced potatoes around on his plate frowning at their greasy trail. He would have to talk to Magda about her cooking again and its heavy emphasis on butter. The Scandinavians believed in food that stuck to the ribs. Usually she respected his need for quiet, the one hour he took to calm himself before helping the girls brush

their teeth. But tonight she appeared beside the table in her matching blue long johns, standing with one hand on her hip, gesticulating with a dishtowel in the other.

"I spoke with Carla today," she said and he could imagine her wiping down the kitchen counter, stretching the phone's long coiling cord to its limits. The two women planned jewelry parties together where the silver was laid out on black velvet cloth and their friends and neighbors flitted about nibbling on strong cheeses and thick Swedish meatballs. For Magda it was a purely social event. For Carla they brought in some much needed cash. "AJ has been having an affair," she said now, "with the au pair."

AJ, Lionel knew, had been having difficulty transitioning from player to management, standing on the sidelines in his brown store bought suits with his hands deep in his pockets still looking slightly ashamed of being off court. Sports were a risky shortcut. One day the body gave out, a joint tore free or a muscle came apart with a snap. And then the future ended with an abrupt halt and you were selling used cars off a sunbaked lot. Lionel walked with a slight limp, the result of a college football injury that had made all this perfectly clear to him. Only the desperate continued, the ones with no other options, the ones who had grown up with brick at their backs, concrete under their feet and tiny snapshots of the blue sky above their heads. Lionel had seen them, these former warriors ending their days as the objects of other men's brisk pats and condescending affection like a once beloved toy, now used up but not entirely forgotten.

Which is why Lionel had done everything in his power to help AJ ease through this transition, throwing him a book party for his autobiography that Lionel recalled with a pang of embarrassment for his friend, began with the sound of the crowd chanting AJ's name. Later, when he developed a line of Celtic's memorabilia, plastic viewers with

iconic images from the team's history hooked to a cheap, link key chain and sold at the stadium's front booths, Lionel had loaned him the start-up money. But none of this could really ease the shock of anonymity and with a wife like Carla any man's life would be difficult. The last time Lionel had seen her at the Legal Defense Fund's Awards Luncheon, she'd been downright rude. In response to an innocent enough question, she'd said, "How do I *know* that, Lionel? I read. That's how." AJ had tried to cover it up with a joke but in that one exchange it was clear why Lionel could never marry a woman like Carla. She reminded him of his Aunt Estelle, a mannish figure who appeared on his mother's front porch in a worn, dark house dress, clutching an oversized bag to her mammoth bosom, demanding that his mother do "x," "y," or "z." She wore clunky shoes that gaped around her swollen feet and treated him like a nuisance, like a spoiled useless thing. "Go get me some lemonade," she'd say and then knowing he could hear, "Lord, but he's a sullen little creature." So AJ had found comfort in the wrong arms. He wouldn't be the first.

"I'm sure," Lionel said, "they'll work it out."

"He held a kitchen knife to her throat," Magda said. The way she was staring at him made him feel self-conscious, the same way he felt responsible for the loud, cursing black teenagers at the bus stop near the hospital.

"Did she tell you that?" he asked.

"She had to tell someone," she said.

"Well, she obviously lived to tell the tale."

"What does that mean?"

"Only that Carla can be difficult some times."

"Difficult? Like it's her fault he was cheating on her and it was her fault that he held a knife to her throat?"

"Don't put words into my mouth, Magda."

"I do not understand you people," she said. Lionel chose to believe that she was speaking of Americans. 'She did not understand Americans,' he said to himself.

"This is between a man and his wife, Magda. Let them handle it." He rose from the table, ending the discussion, already anticipating the retaliatory drive. At night she climbed in her car in nothing but a nightgown and her body outlined beneath the nylon, drove through the quiet streets, her engine broadcasting their marital affairs. She drove barefoot with her toes pressed against the dusty accelerator, the engine belching at the slightest provocation. Lionel had hidden the keys when they first bought the car promising their safe return only after she'd read the manual from front to back but really he had meant to put an end to her leaving. It hadn't worked. Somebody had to buy the groceries and pick up the girls from soccer practice. She'd simply waited him out.

Lionel couldn't remember the phone ringing only Magda poking him with the long antenna. "It's for you," she said, "and it sounds like AJ." She sat up propping a pillow behind her, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

"Lionel," AJ was saying over the line, "Lionel, man, I need your help."

"Is everyone ok?" Lionel asked.

"I think so," AJ said, "but we need your help."

"It can't wait 'til morning?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Ok, I'll be over in a minute." He pressed the "off" button and glanced at Magda. One rose colored nipple appeared above her crossed arms.

"Go back to bed," he said, "it's going to be ok" and after she didn't move added, "really." He wanted to press himself against her, nestle back under the comforter. Black barked trees rustled outside the bedroom's window. They were surrounded by several acres of conservation land and he often felt on good days that he'd been woven into a Germanic fairytale, his Nordic wife baking Swedish meatballs, and cookies held together by threads of caramelized sugar laid out on the table like golden lace doilies. He was annoyed that AJ and Carla couldn't find a similar peace.

Their driveway sloped backwards away from the road and if you didn't know it was there, Lionel thought with envy, you would miss it. Tiny lights at respectful intervals illuminated the black topped path and coming around a bend, Carla's home – he always thought of it as Carla's home – loomed bright and spotlighted in the darkness. He felt like a child standing in front of it. Its exaggerated proportions dwarfing his six foot frame. It was a little girl's dream house with its dormered, peaked roofs like something sprung from pixie dust, a kind of tribute, a temple on a hill to its mistress. Inside it opened onto gracious heights. But the kitchen was its masterpiece built in homage to Carla's mother, Mrs. Felicia Johnson. When a girl caught AJ's eye and Carla shamed him back into submission with her coldness and hurt, it was always Mrs. Johnson who AJ pictured in her cramped kitchen commenting over him, "Lord, child, but you can eat." She'd pat his shoulder while he shoveled her warm cooking into his mouth – southern food, fried chicken with a battered crust, moist greens flavored with chunks of bacon, and

yams sweetened with marshmallows. It coated the inside of his stomach and calmed him. He'd wash it all down with a cold river of milk.

"Jesus," AJ said, greeting Lionel bare-chested at the front door. "Thanks for coming." His reddish brown hair was furrowed as though he had recently been running his fingers through it and a pair of suspenders hung from his trousers. He looked slightly old fashioned in his dishevelment like he'd just come from brewing moonshine out back. Before Lionel could comment on his appearance, AJ said, "She's in here."

He expected to find Carla bloodied and bruised maybe just weeping through her clumped mascara and it took him a moment to accept what actually lay before him on the den's floor like a crumpled bird he'd once seen recently fallen from a tree, its wing like this young girl's arm folded beneath it at an odd angle. She must have been sixteen or seventeen at the most, the bruises already rising on her near translucent skin. She had the complexion of skim milk and a poor diet. She reminded him of a photo he'd once seen in Jacksonville.

Little Timmy Matthews, a shifty boy, had stolen it from his father's bureau. He held it in his sticky, pudgy fingers at recess while they gathered around him on the black top peering over his shoulder. She was sprawled out on the bed, her face partially covered by her long, brown hair and her body twisted at the waist as though trying to conceal her private parts. She'd been raped by a Negro soldier, the local Sheriff said, although everyone suspected it was rigged since he was up for re-election. Nothing stirred his base like an interracial rape case. Timmy's Dad worked cleaning up at the courthouse, and one of the deputies had passed the illicit photos on to him. They'd taken it when they raided the lover's nest out in a cabin in the woods. Even as Lionel grew

hard looking at her, the straining tendons of her neck communicated anguish like a single, imploring cry. He felt that same combination of adolescent desire mixed with self-loathing as he did now staring at this poor twisted girl beneath him, her denim skirt still pushed up around her waist and her bare torso, the denuded mound exposed for all the world to see. That photo had been staged. This was real. He looked at AJ who was sitting in an overstuffed armchair with his hands in the air, pleading, "Look, I know. I fucked up but I need you to help me, man. You were the only person I could think of to call."

Lionel felt for a pulse and checked her airway trying to ignore the slime on the inside of her scrawny thigh at the space where muscle hung loose from bone.

"What did she take?" he asked.

"Jesus, I don't know. She said 'do you want to party?" and I said, 'Yeah.' I mean I've tried some stuff before. I thought it would just be weed or something.

"Meth? Ecstasy? Did it come in a pill or powder?"

"Pills. Definitely pills."

"Ok, show me."

Lionel wondered as he rolled the blue capsules around in his palm whether AJ had finished before she passed out. If he hadn't realized he was hurting her until he saw the red streaked latex or if she had been like this all along, unresponsive and prone when he mounted her. He didn't want to ask already imagining the screaming headlines. The *Globe* of course would be more sedate, more subtle, taking a more intellectual approach to the topic of sexual aggression among pro athletes. The *Herald* would get straight to the point, conjure up images of the children of Ham, marked by the sign of the Beast,

calling it an epidemic, the way these overpaid monsters longed for tremulous white flesh. And how, he wondered, would he be portrayed? The team doctor – a side gig that brought in more prestige than money – called in to help his friend cover it up. He could lose his job maybe even his license. AJ had implicated him the moment Lionel stepped into the house.

Lionel had always known he wasn't a particularly smart man but he could follow instructions well and that had been his saving grace. He'd followed them slowly, plodding through med school, seeking out the correct professors for well-balanced references, never too glowing, and strategically moved through the faculty living rooms with punch in hand, avoiding the other students to speak to the blue blazered deans. Until, with that single focus, he'd graduated, ignoring the barbs and racial taunts that snagged him along the way. He was the First and therefore the Only. He made no friends, no connections that could lure him back to campus for the white tented reunions, turn him into one of those complacent alums, satisfied with his degree, wide gutted, drinking too much and talking a little too loudly about his med school days. And now this. Something as stupid as misplaced desire threatening every well constructed step. Each brick laid with such care undone by AJ's freckles and what Carla referred to as the "team sluts."

Lionel thought about his family's Christmas card, the girls like three descending stair steps on a beach in Southern France dressed in white shorts and matching pink striped tops. They wore their hair in ponytails. He preferred it that way. Magda had taken the picture and he knew after it was developed that it would find its way to the neighboring homes. His leather backed chair came into view, the one that always sat

empty in his home office. It was framed by his diplomas and awards, his education, his effort, his work, codified in Latin, sealed with royal colors and festooned with golden ribbons. The image calmed him, slowed his breathing, the way it did during particularly difficult surgeries. He tugged the girl's denim skirt back into place and said simply, "You can go now, AJ." He gathered her, all of her, as wispy and light as a feather, a collection of tiny, supple bones and walked her into the guest bathroom. He laid her on the cold marble counter and started with warm water, steadily reducing the temperature, sluicing it onto her face, smacking her sallow cheeks and calling out, "It's time for you to wake up now girl." She twitched as though to avoid his palm. She turned her head and gagged, choking up a white curdled substance. He rolled her onto her side, reached his fingers into her mouth, scooping the vomit out and flicking it off his hand, spattering it against the Italian tile floor.

"That's it," he said rocking her back and forth. "That's it, girl."

Lionel shook her slightly for good measure and wrapped her in one of Carla's fluffy terry cloth guest towels. He rubbed her hard, rubbed her until her skin turned pink and raw and she made small protesting sounds. She needed the hospital, the assurance of a bed and stern, pinioning sheets. She needed monitoring, the kind he would have wanted for one of his own daughters if she were lying there like that. He imagined pulling up to the Emergency Room unloading dock and leaving her on the cement out front. Only it was too well lit like a stage in the night. He couldn't risk being recognized. He couldn't leave her like that. He wiped the matted hair from her forehead and picked her up again, laying her down on the den's couch and then he sat on the floor, placed his face in his hands and waited for her to wake up.

A Last Chance to Say Goodbye

If you think for one minute that our survival hasn't been marked by compromises than you're a fool. I guess at some point it just got to be too much. I wish I could put my finger on it to say, "There! There is the beginning." But I suppose there was always a certain unsuitability towards my work lurking in my personality just waiting for the right moment to make its presence known. I was too tender, too soft. From an early age my parents marked my propensity for emotion, weeping in the sandbox when I threw a handful of grains into a young boy's eyes, not for myself but for him. I could imagine the dry sting of the crystals, the sudden surprise of their presence. If only I had understood earlier the consequences of my actions; I would not have hurt him so. I'd spend, from that moment on, the rest of my days marveling at the way man manages to hurt his fellow man, the inventiveness of the insults and injuries. I think I know where it started, the steady erosion of my soul. It began with his death some called it an accident, others an assassination. It was hard to say those first few days. Hard to say in the moment, difficult to make head or tails of all the goings-on.

I saw his killers once, all four of them in their attorneys' office at the Police Benevolent Association. They were there to get their stories straight and were having trouble, I knew, thanks to my correspondent, a former NYPD public information officer, with Brian, the youngest cop. They were being ushered away from our camera crew and I caught only a glimpse of them in the hallway. Brian's eyes, as usual, were red-rimmed

as though he had been weeping and I could imagine him then in his t-shirt with the Undercover Street Crimes' Unit's motto emblazoned on the front, "We Own the Night," a pair of stone washed jeans tucked into his tan work boots and his gold badge strung around his neck like dog tags. It was mostly playacting for him, I imagined, standing on the street corner with his thumbs hooked into the belt loops, one hip cocked, the very picture of relaxed lethality, a man even at ease with a deadly purpose. Mostly they'd jump out of the car all together at once for the effect and slam cocky teenagers against walls. They preyed on the young, the saplings whose bones were still pliant, searching with jabbing fingers under layers of baggy clothing for the weapon they already knew didn't exist. No one complained. Who was there to complain? Only that night, from the moment they'd stepped into the unmarked Crown Victoria, from all reports, something had been off. Tommy, the lead detective, sported a long scratch from lower eyelid to chin, the first and only indication that his wife, Jackie, had finally fought back. Polariods of her yellow bruises and puffy, swollen upper lip were routinely misplaced in the evidence cage but would appear again, as if by magic, after the shooting in the *Times*. She'd really dug in, the serrated skin oozing a pinkish fluid in the car's weak overhead lighting and throbbing to Brian's eye, I imagined, accusingly between the four of them. Someone had borrowed the Vickie and eaten fast food in the back seat. It smelled of beef tallow and something else, a hairy armpit or steaming crotch. It was too cold to roll down the windows and they sat encased in the fumes beneath Tommy's watering eye. And then they were leaping to the pavement as a single organism, moving together as one. And the guns appeared and the sound overwhelmed them, engulfing them in a cacophony of sound until it was difficult to tell where the popping was coming from. But

surely Brian thought in retrospect, surely it had been directed at them all along. Why else would Tommy draw his weapon and Steve, always by his side Steve, crouch beside the front wheel of the car and fire across the hood, the two of them firing, firing, firing into the darkness, into the vestibule. All of them now spooked? You should have seen the building's entrance, the streaks the bullets left in the wall. Shallow channels furrowed all the way down the plaster as though reaching for human flesh, the splinter of bone, the refreshing blossom of blood. That's what I imagined standing in the hallway staring at them.

Over almost a month's worth of reporting, I learned that their victim, Nasim, did not as we had all first assumed, sell fake gold Rolexes pinned to a battered piece of cardboard in Times Square. He worked in front of a corner store, renting the space from the pious Muslim owner, Amir. When I raised Nasim's name, showed him my business card from Action News Network, Amir framed by cigarettes, lotto tickets and candy, stepped down from the counter and led me to a storage room in the back. "This," he said, "was Nasim's," pointing to a prayer rug on the dirty linoleum floor facing east towards a metal shelf with crackers and jars of mayonnaise. Nasim, the unit's victim, sold bootleg CD's and DVD's lined up in neat rows on a card table. A tinny player belted out West African lullabies. He'd sit there with his wares, night after night, surrounded by flattened cigarette butts and other strange debris and watched the twinkling city, the headlights and brake lights captured and streaming along the parked cars. It was most pleasant during the summers when the warmth reminded him of home, of the market place at night turned into an open air cafe. But that winter, I imagined, Nasim drew his coat closer around him, and hummed along to the familiar melodies. Death was never present in his mind.

He was a twenty year old business student, taking classes at City College during the day in macro-economics. He hated being inside, and his neighbors reported that he sat out front on his Brooklyn stoop deep into the night. Theresa, a jittery woman with three kids and I suspect a drug habit that kept her rail thin, sucked on a Salem 100 and said to me, "if you saw him ten times a day, he would say 'hello' to you ten times a day." It was unclear just what happened the night of his death. Theresa explained, "We never used to see cops on this block. Now they come by in their cruisers driving real slow. There were people out that night. There always are" and then she clammed up, acting as though she hadn't said anything of importance at all. So the only story that survived was the one of the cops told and it got repeated so often by the newspapers and television reporters that it took on the ring of truth. Nasim had walked down the block. To Tommy's eye or maybe Sean's he looked suspicious. And even though he'd been taking those night courses, as off as this may seem, he didn't understand the cops shouting at him and thinking himself innocent reached for his pager, his wallet or his keys. Someone shouted the word "gun" and the next day the Nation of Islam appeared on his doorstep in dark, matching suits. Their hands crossed before them over their crisp, pressed dress slacks. Potted marigolds sprung up in the cold, beside lilies, their cellophane wrapped stems preserved in the iciness. A local activist chanted into a bullhorn and a young councilman his ambition glinting in his discerning eye, gleaned the chaff from the wheat and approached only the network camera crews, sensing behind their lenses a vast and as of yet untapped national audience. Middle-aged black women who weren't from the block brought stuffed animals to the shrine, paused to turn into the microphones and say, "What a tragedy. My God, what a tragedy." The taxi cab drivers that had carried them uptown,

tasting for the first time their immigrant status wondered aloud, “Is this America?” Thirty-nine bullets were accounted for, twelve Parabellum rounds hit Nasim, and forty-three casings were found at the scene.

They were all four acquitted, excused of any wrongdoing although I suspect that over time Brian, the youngest and most uncertain, went mad from it. He was a lapsed Catholic. No matter what they had said on the stand, they had killed a man, an innocent man who had fired not one shot at them. And the burning incense and chanted prayer of his youth would never let him forget that. After the whole hullabaloo had died down, he would have begun to doubt Tommy’s version of events; that Nasim had reached for his wallet or pager – hadn’t stopped when Tommy had called out to him. Brian probably couldn’t even remember hearing Tommy’s voice only the barrage of bullets and then the silence descending on them. He’d turned around to face the slumbering buildings, feeling eyes on him, a thousand pairs of unseen eyes, hiding frightened behind curtains and blinds. Were there children on this block he wondered? Were they even now peering at the bloodied pulp on the doorstep, worrying in the insanity of this night that they too would be next?

I carried Brian inside of me in my chest, heavy with sorrow, seeking redemption, but our news piece was about the mechanics of unloading four clips in fourteen seconds. Could it be done? We went down to the firing range, Frank Murphy, my correspondent and I, and we shot Frank squeezing the trigger slowly, lovingly, tenderly and the muzzle flashes up close. The serrated paper, the black outline of the man ripped to shreds displayed Frank’s expertise with a gun. He used to be the PIO for the NYPD and even though he favored double breasted suits with brass buttons and brightly colored silk

handkerchiefs, he still carried a gun around in an ankle holster. "For uptown," he explained. He retained an official looking sign with numbers in red that allowed him to park in yellow zones, and for the thrill of it, to impress younger production associates (usually female), still stuck a revolving red and blue dome light on his dashboard, cutting through rush hour traffic with impunity. On the range, I marked the various camera angles on a steno pad, concerned with building a sequence in the edit room, my ears covered by the bulky, unwieldy safety headphones and the cold winter air cramping my fingers, the mechanics of lethality on display before me. I didn't feel helpless. Just distant. I should have asked our Executive Producer with her $200 blowdry and diamond engagement ring the size of a bird's egg on her finger, why the mechanics of the killing and not the psychology ? I should have asked her, ignoring the empty tequila bottle that rattled at my foot beneath her desk or the framed Polariod of her playing poker in a jail cell with Geoffrey Dahmer beside a plaque that read, "It CAN be done," if she could imagine herself, on her Park Avenue doorstep, reaching for her keys and being slaughtered for the effort? But words failed me. A great sadness, a great sorrow had seized my throat. I'd wanted to cry, to weep right there at her Gucci clad feet, remembering her bird-like bones between my fingers as she pressed herself against me at the Tavern on the Green holiday party, whispering hotly into my ear as we slow danced around the room, "You move like a panther." I wondered if I had been brought on as a safety measure. They could always point to me and say, "See, we had one on this story. We covered it well."

Over time the trial faded along with Nasim's memory. There were a thousand other stories to be documented. Layer after layer until a strange callousing occurred and

it was harder and harder to reach out to people over the distance, to be touched in return. I still dream at night of Old Man Pollock's woods. I'd wandered through them as a boy having adventures, slaying swashbuckling pirates, subduing unruly Indians. One day, by accident, I'd stumbled into a clearing surrounded by bending, swaying trees. I sat down right in the middle of it, my legs pressing against the damp earth. And it was as though I were powering the wind, forcing it between the branches, flipping the silver-green, nictitating leaves, this way and that. A rush went through me, through my body that now only visits me in the darkness when I am least conscious of it. It moves and moves, and forgives me my failings, my shortcomings, and my inability to rescue Nasim, even in memory.

Good Hair

This is a difficult story to tell largely because my understanding of it has changed so many times through the years. At first my grandmother was the villain, then victim. After having my own child, I developed a kind of empathy for her. I don't know much about her early life which isn't uncommon in the African-American community, particularly in a certain segment of it – there are things left unsaid, whole chunks of missing personal data. My grandfather, for instance, had a brother. I don't know if he was older or younger. I don't even know his name, only that he existed and some decision was made, some kind of sacrifice. We understand that he was the price of my grandfather's progress but he haunts us like a missing limb, fills the space of some unarticulated sadness at family gatherings. And so my grandmother's childhood is hazy at best. I imagine Depression-era poverty. I picture tenement buildings with splintering porches and flaking exteriors. But this is probably from a staging of *A Raisin in the Sun* I saw in middle school and no real place. I've never seen any photographs of her as a child. I met her sister once, Aunt Alice, they didn't speak often – had some kind of falling out. She wore a flame colored wig but I could be confusing her with someone else. She was rumored to have gone mad.

I don't want to tell this story. It's not an easy story to tell because it's an admission of something we've kept quiet for many years. That silence if you haven't noticed already has felt like the key to our success. I used to watch it move on

Thanksgiving beneath the plastic chandelier like a nineteenth-century pestilence, a brown miasma that slipped between the good silver and the gravy boat while the fake crystal overhead shed its spinning rainbows against the china cabinet. My sisters and I would watch my mother's tight, pulsating jaw as she chewed and chewed and chewed grinding sweet Virginia ham between her back molars.

This is all to say that growing up I never really knew my grandparents -- not in the common way. They didn't share stories about themselves. They were the Reverend and Mrs. Wright with a four story home on Orange Road. Out front plastic geraniums bloomed. A black Cadillac Coup de Ville sat in the driveway. A vine climbed a white trellis against a back wall. A patch of oily water filled a depression in the driveway and the homes around them sat blind and silent.

Grandma spent most of her days in her den watching the Home Shopping Network. She sat in the middle of the room, rocking back and forth in her chair, her heat swollen ankles parked in a pair of worn pink slippers, the weave flattened and grey from use. Back and forth she rocked, pausing only to pick up the wireless phone and place an order or two. Five black and gold motor powered pepper grinders with a light on the bottom to illuminate the spice as it fell onto your food. Fake pearls, glass emeralds and zirconias, the Samurai Pro with Tungsten Carbide Steel to sharpen dull household blades. She ordered them in large quantities and stored them in the attic. In between calls, she watched sitcoms and soap operas using a tissue to dab at her glaucoma damaged eyes. The images flickered in her trifocal's lenses, the human dramas reduced to pinpoints of light along their surface. She'd busy her hands with that week's edition of *The Daily*

Word. Her rolls of fat straining against a pair of stretch pants, her own skin rubbing against her own skin, and expressing with each caress the presence of disease.

Over her rocking body in that small, dusty room hung a framed photo of my mother as a little girl. Her hair was curled into a half dozen Shirley Temple ringlets. She wore a white frothy dress, lace trimmed bobby socks and patent leather shoes. She looked like a living doll. At age three, Grandma had started relaxing her hair with the lye based treatment and she was instructed for days on end not to move from the couch. At age eighteen, her hair began to fall out in clumps and my mother began to associate the treatments with a vague idea of abuse although the link remained hazy at best in her mind. She refused to wear lipstick or any other glittering thing, hiding our grandmother's gifts of gold. At one point she even shaved her head but nothing could hide my mother's beauty, it was as inexplicable and certain as the summer rain. I found her lips once carved in yellow jasper and attributed to an unknown Egyptian goddess or queen. It followed her, startling people. And Grandma saw those unadorned lips as an act of war.

She took aim at everything, our dusty colonial home, my father's fleet of used cars but most especially our hair. Whenever I visited and she found me alone, she'd pull me aside, lean in close and ask me how I felt about being so ugly. It went on for years, only now can I see the cunning in it. How she would lure me in with the air of confiding something important, perhaps the affection she claimed she felt but never once showed and my hand on the Cadillac's door handle on our way to the pharmacy or some other errand, I would pause and listen. At age thirteen, the summer the Boule Convention was being held in Los Angeles, I appeared triumphant on her doorstep with my hair finally

pulled back into a ponytail. She said nothing only stared at my two little sisters' who still wore braids.

Grandma pulled her dresses from the closet and piled them on the bedspread, running her fingers over the elaborate beading. In the corner stood her fifteen-piece Samsonite travel set in orange vinyl. Every bag, I knew from previous conventions, would be filled with her belongings. We could watch her from the den which, despite the heat, was home to two key pieces of furniture, an old television set with a curved screen and claw feet and an olive green exercise bicycle that we took turns riding, its tension wheel swinging uselessly back and forth. We found ourselves here, Cora, Ella and I, dressed in our nightgowns despite the advancing day, sitting practically one on top of the other, watching syndicated sitcoms and cartoons. After packing, I dressed them, one six years younger and the other ten and we climbed into the back of the Cadillac. Grandma smoked a mentholated Salem 100 at the wheel, refusing to roll down the windows for fear of letting the cold air out, and we sat suffocating on the scarlet velour's factory scent and the cigarette's fumes. One hand on the wheel, she fed a paperback sized cartridge of Mahalia Jackson's greatest hits into the 8-track. Outside shops advertising "Nails," "Waxing" and "massages" in clashing orange and green neon rolled by. They were stacked one on top of the other like cheap goods at a dollar store. At the end of a particularly depressing block squatted Yvette's Hair and Nail Salon. The proprietor was one of my grandmother's oldest friends and they greeted one another like co-conspirators.

"You're all getting your hair done, right?" Yvette asked.

"No," I said, "Just me" and I left my sisters stacking and restacking magazines in the reception area.

The chair's cracked cushions dug into my thighs and I stared at myself in a mirror dimmed with age. Hair extensions blew across the black and white checkered floor – the lighter squares yellowing with grime. Framed women in three quarters profile recommended by the joy of their good looks various products. The beautician, a thick slow looking woman named Beth opened a vat of pink petroleum jelly and wiped the ointment, her touch momentarily surprising me, along my edges, protecting my skin from the chemical's bite. She pulled latex gloves over her dark hands. The ointment warmed behind my ears. A plastic dish of white relaxer was placed on the short red counter in front of me. The comb's edge ran along my scalp, parting my hair into quarters held in place by large clips with two rows of interlocking, dagger like teeth. Dabbing the applicator, Beth applied the chemical gently to the dark tangled mass at the nape of my neck. "The kitchen," my mother called it. Snagging on a tangle here and there, she parted my hair, quickly laying the cool paste down. It wasn't a matter of if the chemical would burn but when. First a slight prickling, just enough to inspire dread. Then the feeling mounted until you were sure a hole was burning through your scalp. A father entered the room to check on his young daughter and I imagined what I looked like sitting there with tufts of hair anchored by the weight of the wet relaxer sticking up in the air. I stared at the wastepaper basket at my feet. He seemed so complete. Beth had become an armpit in my limited field of vision, expelling puffs of air as she strained to reach the top of my head. Over the last year, I had become practiced in the art of approaching my breaking point, knowing when to cry "Uncle" just before the chemical

ate its way through my flesh. The first time my mother failed to warn me about the suddenness of the burn. My scalp oozed a strange amber liquid for days afterwards. My body tense, my senses heightened by the impending pain and my nostril's filled with the sodium hydroxide's powdery scent, I imagined what I would look like when it was over. The relaxer brought out blonde highlights and I could move my head from side to side and watch it sway. That first time, watching me stare at myself in the mirror my mother said sadly, "Yes, we have good hair."

Beth ushered me to the sink. The shampoo felt cold against my skin. Then she placed me under the pod like dryers for another twenty minutes, the air roaring around me and I emerged feeling light-headed. I watched as Beth blew dry my hair straight, pulling the strands up light and airy through the brush's bristles, wisps of smoke rising from the tendrils. Even as I smiled and touched my flattened roots, I knew something was wrong. The salon was too quiet. Still dressed in the long black apron, I walked past the shoddy partition dividing the room and saw Ella, my youngest sister, her cheeks shiny with spray and her neck straining across the sink's basin. "It burns," she said.

Many years later working as a journalist I met a cameraman who described meeting a young Muammar Gaddafi who was high on coke. The old timer said, "I got the sense that the general didn't care whether I lived or died" and I knew just what he was talking about because I'd seen that same emptiness in my grandmother's eyes when I confronted her in the salon's storage room and she said, "This is between your mother and I. It doesn't have anything to do with you at all." It was a kind of madness, the way she erased me from her sight. I didn't recognize the world she inhabited where I, even as I stood breathing before her, didn't exist. We went to the convention. My mother to my

surprise didn't scream or demand that we come home. On the phone, her voice was high and tight as though fighting her own embarrassment at not being able to protect us. Our last day in Los Angeles, my sisters and I, their hair golden and curled in Shirley Temple ringlets, attended the Children's Ball. It was just down the hall from the Gala event where the women glittered beneath chandeliers in formal gowns and the men wore tuxedos. We were confined to a smaller conference room. Someone had placed a wooden dance floor in its center and turned off the lights. A DJ spun records on a card table in the dark. No one was dancing. We stood around the walls and leaned against the swaying room divider with our arms crossed, staring at him as he switched album after album on the turn table. 'Don't you know,' I thought bitterly, 'that we are special.' Finally he came across a strange song devoid of bass. Its composer, an androgynous male was neither black nor white, he claimed, straight nor gay. He wore purple velvet lined coats and sported girlish, processed curls. A genius, on his first album, too broke for a back-up band, he'd played every single instrument himself, his fingers almost unresponsive in the cold Midwestern studio. Sheer will had driven him to it. The song drew us to the dance floor and the DJ played it again and again until it erased everything else that had come before.

Within These Castle Walls

When they lifted their faces, against the Castle's backdrop, they looked like savages come to storm the keep. A diagonal slash cut across their foreheads over the nose and across the far cheek, rendering one half blue, the other white. The eye surrounded by the darker makeup glowed strangely bright. They called it the "Death March," taking the field in double lines, as silent as the school league committee still deliberating on the fairness of the war paint. They were playing Sacred Heart, a local school without a single distinguishing feature on its campus – not even a low lying stone wall to separate it from the surrounding gas stations and mini-marts, and they had every intention of throwing their castle's weight against the little girls in their innocent white jerseys and ponytails, performing disjointed jumping jacks and chattering like sparrows on the opposing side. The captains entered the center circle and still without a word broke into the stretches, each straining muscle burning against the pull. In winter, even as seventh graders, they didn't wear pantyhose, allowing the artic blasts to sweep up their skirts and burn their bare legs.

The game started off easy enough until it became apparent that Kay Weiss, their captain, would do anything to win. Her sisters had both led the school to the Independent School League Championships and won, the blue and white banners with their class years hanging in the gym right beside the boys'. Kay was expected to do the same. She did one hundred abdominal crunches on her floor at home every night beside her pink and white dollhouse until her stomach was washboard lean, and threw up, for good measure,

after lunch every day. The bulimia alarmed them at first, causing a lot of useless twittering outside the bathroom stall, until, through a series of grudges and complaints, it became something to use against Kay – something that they didn't mind she did to herself.

"JAB. JAB," she hissed on the field in the direction of Amy Cohen, a particularly awkward player. Amy had a head of short curls and a prepubescent boy's gangly body – all limbs flying rarely in unison. "Get the fucking ball," Kay cried. Amy, a defender, had little technique. She threw her body at her opponent, a tangle of legs and arms flapping like a confused bird, until the other gave up out of sheer confusion. Her technique worked about fifty percent of the time. The nickname, Josie knew, had a disempowering effect. It was a play on words – Jewish American Princess turning into Jewish American Birth Defect. It seemed to work particularly well because of Amy's physical strangeness and they all shuddered at its cruel specificity. Kay had a great disdain for most things Jewish. When asked, because of her last name, if she were part of the Chosen People, she stroked the bridge of her nose in alarm, widened her eyes and asked, "Is it really that big?" Like the bulimia, these comments over time lost their power to startle. After only a year of attendance, they were all fully integrated into the school' social landscape. The boys called it "ranking," the way they teased one another. Anything could get it started, anything at all – say a brightly colored outfit, or a throbbing unfortunate white head or maybe just the faint sprinkling of dandruff on an otherwise unmarred navy blue suit. The subject of ridicule, no matter how small, would become fodder for a series of jokes, told in a kind of round robin fashion, each student trying to outdo the other. There were certain boys, usually the ones most adept at ranking,

handsome and full of physical prowess on the playing field who were never the object of ridicule. Josie dreaded every free period, worried she might find herself in the snack bar, her eyes downcast, Led Zeppelin playing on the stereo, and her throat constricting as she gazed at her bargain basement clothes and wondered when the attention would be turn to her.

She was the only African-American girl in her class, a distinction so great that it went largely unmentioned. Kay had no nickname for her. She'd simply shoved a meatball sub into her face at lunch time and Josie had found herself outside of the herd, the mark of her sin apparent though unarticulated to all. In that moment, the tomato sauce dripping down her face, she'd thought back on the black and white class photos taken at the turn of the century posted along the school's main corridors. They boys wore their dark hair slicked back or parted down the middle. A bright white "A" was knitted into the center of their blue turtlenecks, standing in for "Abbot Cromley." They were arranged in a pyramidal formation, the two smallest always holding a pair of crossed oars. They were all, Josie assumed, dead. Technically, these ghostly boys were her forefathers, captains of industry and banking whose fortunes were assured even then as they conjugated their Latin verbs. The disconnect was so severe that she imagined herself on the banks of the River Styx staring at them across the dark water, wondering what if anything they had ever held in common. The answer with the lunch meat clinging to her eyelashes seemed clear, nothing, nothing at all.

Kay battled for the ball with Sacred Heart's captain, a pretty girl with flushed damp cheeks. Out of frustration or malice, it was unclear which, Kay lifted her foot and slammed her cleats into the girl's ankle, the spiked bottoms digging into the flesh and

crushing the bone beneath. The girl went down, her hands around her foot. The ball finally free was passed up the length of the field and Kay leaned over and said, "Get up bitch" before skipping merrily away. Play was halted and the player limped off the field. They were winning 4-2 and when the final whistle blew Josie walked over to the coach, a young man in his twenties, probably a Junior faculty member assigned to Middle School girls' soccer. He was bent over his weeping Captain. "I'm sorry," Josie said, "She's an–" and then she couldn't say the only word that had come to mind, "abomination."

She'd spent one night at Kay's house, a Cape Coder, deep in the heart of an unremarkable suburb. First, her older sister had came home, back from college for the weekend. Words were exchanged and she began to punch Kay with a closed fist, overpowering her easily with her height and weight. Kay fought back as best she could, resorting to artfully placed karate kicks before her sister grew bored and walked off. Kay limped back to her bedroom where they rested quietly staring up at the blank ceiling together. Later they'd taken a walk to her best friend's house. She was a freshman in the local public high school and she sat at her kitchen table describing a blow job she'd given to a senior. The girl, Beth, was the youngest of four boys and she seemed as damp and used as the dishtowel she toyed with in her hands. She wore a flannel shirt opened low and she kept wiping strands of her stringy brown hair from her eyes. She seemed abused. Her eyes filled with hurt. Kay watched her like she was a goddess, or some oracle come to prophesize her future with hard, angry words like "cock" and "spunk." Josie wanted to go home, to distance herself from what she saw. They had pizza for dinner and then Mr. Weiss returned from work. He yelled something at Mrs. Weiss –something like, "Converting wasn't enough for you?" and spent the night fully clothed in his shirt, tie and

dress pants on the living room couch. Josie lay in bed wondering what was wrong with her, imagining that Amy would have enjoyed this afternoon or at the very least faked some enthusiasm for it and all Josie wanted to do was get back home with her annoying little sisters thrusting their Barbies into her face and the sound of George Clinton on the stereo asking "Do you promise to funk? The whole funk and nothing but the funk?"

Mrs. Weiss stood on the sidelines in her full length mink, opening her arms to pull Kay deep into its furry embrace. She came to every game, her face made up with blush and eye shadow, her lashes heavy with clumping mascara. Her hair was the texture of cotton candy made sticky with spray. Amy's mother followed her lead and also appeared at the games in matching outfits. Mrs. Cohen wore shiny gold jewelry and multi-colored gems on her fingers. Sometimes they were joined by Mrs. Stein, Lori Stein's mother, and the three ladies huddled together more bright in the fully fall afternoons then the other parents. They looked like stars from a daytime soap or even the First Lady, wife to a former movie star, who no matter the appearance – say to an elementary school to espouse her War on Drugs – looked fit for a fashion shoot. Kay sucked on an orange wedge beside Mrs. Weiss who beckoned towards Josie. Josie moved slowly scanning the road for her father's car. She glanced up at the Castle, its granite façade at this angle, appearing to tilt back away from her. A great mansion of the Gilded Age, it had been built by a paranoid railroad owner. Its southern architect partial to yellow silk vests and noon martinis had stolen from all the great civilizations to construct her – the loggia from Florentine palaces, tall rectangular windows from Versailles, satinwood finished walls from Ceylon, until she was a hulking behemoth of grandeur ringing at the end of her days

with children's voices and shuffling feet. Josie paused at what she considered a safe distance from Mrs. Weiss. Kay stood beside her mother picking at a cuticle.

"Josie," Mrs. Weiss said, "Do you know who Ruby Bridges is?"

Josie shook her head wondering if she was an upperclassmen.

"You don't know who Ruby Bridges is?" Mrs. Weiss asked in mock alarm.

Josie shook her head again. Something strange had occurred to her after the meatball sub had been shoved into her face. It had happened when she stood up from the table in Mr. Nickerson's former music hall now converted into a cavernous cafeteria. They'd all been sitting under the fireplace, its soapstone mantelpiece engraved with the Nickerson family crest, flanked by lions, peacocks and doves in flight. Amy and Lori sat across from them and she'd heard Lori laugh –a short joyless burst of air. Just for a moment, both hands rested on the table's surface, she'd thought about those boys in their black and white photos but then she'd felt a rush of air on her face – a kind of certainty that she knew would define her from the moment on. She'd walked out of that building, the Castle, aware that no one else would ever know what she was feeling, right then, right there, at that very moment in time. And she hadn't spoken a true word since—not to her mother who asked about the stain on her chest, or her sisters who greeted her at the kitchen door with an unmitigated joy that she knew she could never emulate again, not to her father who needed her to do so well so badly that it blinded him to the fact that this wasn't right, none of it was right.

"She was this little girl who integrated a school in Little Rock," Mrs. Weiss said.

"Oh, right," Josie said, "Her. Yeah, I know her. I mean, I know of her."

Just then she felt her father's hands on her shoulders and closed her eyes against the rush of comfort they brought. She knew they were small for a man's hands. A light brown color, they were deeply lined, the flesh pooling around the knuckles. The thumb nail was flat and warped, crushed when he and his best friend had foolishly thought they could move a wood burning stove by themselves.

"Sorry to miss the game, Josie," he said, "but I heard you guys won."

She didn't turn around, worried that if she looked at him she would begin to cry with relief.

"I was just telling her," Mrs. Weiss said, "about Ruby Bridges."

"You don't know who Ruby Bridges is?" he asked.

"No, I do," she said, turning towards him. He looked at Mrs. Weiss expectantly.

"I wanted to share with her," Mrs. Weiss said quickly, startled by their combined expressions, "that Ruby *prayed* for all the racists when she walked into school. And that's what I think Josie should do. She should pray for any racists who she meets."

Her father frowned. "Well," he said gently, "I suppose that's one way to handle it." Involuntarily, Josie's chin came up. She cocked her head to the side and squinted at the frizzy haired woman in front her. "You better hope," she thought, "that's all I do."

The memory of the Sacred Heart Game was fading and they were thinking about the larger schools to the north who recruited their players nationally by the time they boarded the bus to Wabanaki Wilderness Camp,. Like the seventh grader's annual recitation of *The Christmas Carol* this trip was a school tradition. A week long retreat to the northernmost tip of Maine on a survival course meant to build leadership skills and class cohesion. On the bus ride up, Josie sat by herself just as she had for the seventh

grade ski trip to Vermont. Then she'd leaned her forehead against the cold glass, the stark snow covered hills rolling passed, and fought a kind of rising panic. The houses growing sparser, she had been convinced that the bus and its inhabitants would simply disappear into the bleakness. This time she was more certain of her destination, her neck aching from keeping her head trained forward. Kay, Lori and Amy sat behind her, lolling into the aisle. They were giggling and chattering pressed against the Emergency Exit door. Josie couldn't shake the fear that she was the subject of their conversation. Before they'd left, she'd caught a glimpse of Kay talking to Spencer, the freshman transfer student in the hallway that leading out to the library. Her bulimia jaundiced legs were bare to the November air in the unheated corridor and her arms crossed tightly over her bony chest. She'd smiled up at him, her eyes no longer red rimmed but bright with silver liner. Spencer's bored gaze slid down to Kay's exposed thigh muscles and lingered as though trying to gauge the authenticity of a Ming Vase. The second bell rang. Kay would be late for World Cultures. She talked rapidly never once growing distracted by her audience, the other student passing by in the hall wondering what a seventh grader had to say to a freshman. Her eyes winked silver. He toyed with something in his pocket.

At the camp's main compound, they were split into five groups of eight made up evenly of boys and girls. Josie found herself assigned purely by virtue of their last names' alphabetical proximity to a tent with Kay. After a lecture about the geography of the peninsula and the rules of low impact camping, they strapped their knapsacks to their backs and followed in single file, Clive, a recent college graduate into the woods. He had a scraggly brown beard, kind eyes and blended almost instantaneously into his

surroundings, merging with ease into the foliage and darkness. They found their camp, a circle of raised wooden platforms, and with the help of Clive and his partner Beth, erected their tents. After stowing their gear, he built a fire and they sat around it, the heat lapping at their faces. Josie wasn't sure how the Round Robin began. It was lead by Trip Jenkins, a boy considered to be one of the funniest in the school.

"What kind of name is Clive?" he asked.

And Josie answered, "It sounds like a skin disease."

"Something irritating and red," he said.

"Like a rash," she finished.

Clive blinked. They waited for him to respond. He had a look of disbelief on his face. He stood up and without a word walked away from the circle. For a moment they were quiet then they took up the game again. Josie received her own fair share of licks including a particularly harsh one that would become that week's refrain. It was a play on words. Instead of suggesting that she'd switched into "over-drive", Trip said she'd switched into "over-bitch" and it stuck. She went to bed that night with it ringing in her ears.

Clive pried a block of Spam from a tin can. Despite their protests, it fried up salty and brown and they found themselves in the morning cold digging into the meat. Equipped with a trowel and a roll of toilet paper, Josie trudged away from the camp, deeper into the woods. She went to the bathroom and did her best not to disturb her surroundings. Something about the morning air and Clive's expression the night before suggested that this space would call for something a little better from her than the towering Castle. She wore a thick cable wool sweater borrowed from her father who

typically war it sailboat racing during the winter. It held her body's warmth so well she didn't even need a coat. She returned to camp surprised by Kay's face in the dawn. She looked like an elementary school girl without the frosted green eyeliner, her cheeks flushed against the cold and the tip of her nose a dripping red. She was wearing a thin, cotton turtleneck and a parka that was too big for her. Air was easily trapped between the layers and she was uncharacteristically quiet, shivering beside the morning fire. Beth made an announcement about crossing the gulch and they marched again in single file, breaking free of the woods at the edge of a tidal ravine, a brackish scent rising from the water below. At the bottom, a drop as deep as the Castle was wide, pulverized rock debris lay covered in black sea weed. A cable stretched from cliff to cliff. Josie leaned over the edge and volunteered to go first. While Beth strung a harness between Josie's thighs and across her back, Kay seemed dwarfed by her surroundings, made plain by the burning morning sun. She picked at her cuticle again, refusing to look up at the gulch.

For one sickening moment, after that first backwards step into nothingness, Josie thought the safety line had failed. It caught sending a wave of vibrations through her body. She waited for them to end and then pulled herself along, refusing to look down, always up, one hand in front of the other. She could feel the water whispering at her back and closed her eyes, the darkness filling her ears, the soft wind touching her face. She felt comfortable resting against the straining straps and moved again only when Clive reminded her, calling from the other side, that there still seven others who needed to cross. All of them, even Trip, his block like body heavy in the harness passed that way. Only Kay remained on the far side. Beth placed the helmet on her head. It slipped forward before she potted it back in place. Kay placed her hands on the chin strap, tried

to settle the helmet, and moved to the edge with short, mincing steps. She stared for a long time at the bottom, a pause so long it set off in Josie the first alarm. She squinted at Kay who appeared shrunken in the equipment, the carabiners dangling at her side.

Clive walked up beside Josie and said, "You should cheer her along." At first Josie thought he must be mistaken. But watching Kay pull herself along a few inches and stop, her face tipped backwards and the tendons straining in her neck, Josie found herself making the same sounds she made along the sidelines, urging Kay to the other side. She moved a few centimeters, shuddered and stopped again. She was dangling in an awkward position, her hands, Josie imagined, turning to claws around the cold cable. Kay began to cry, the tears further reddening her face, streaming down her cheeks as the harness twisted around her groin and pressed into her pelvic bone. The wind plastered damp strands to her face. Clive seemed bored, breaking off conversation with a few of the other students to offer a "You can do it." But Kay's fear to Josie seemed to be too much for any one person to bear. She sensed that Kay, the indomitable Kay, was in real trouble and wanted to explain to Clive how this case of acrophobia, something he must have seen a thousand times before, was different. She'd confronted Kay in the schoolhouse not about the meatball sub, the stains still on her shirt, but about her anti-Semitism and Kay had screamed and screamed and screamed. The only intelligible words she uttered were, "Are you trying to take my friends away from me?" The rest was a collection of shrieks and moans that sounded like the emanations of a deranged, cornered animal. No one else knew what Josie was beginning to suspect – that there was something wrong, really wrong with Kay. She convinced herself that since she was the only one in possession of this knowledge, that she was the only one who could save Kay.

She placed her hands on her knees, pitched her voice across the gulch. Her tone turned warm, intimate. She believed that she was whispering to Kay through the wind, soothing her with her encouragement. Kay would come down off that wire and she would be relieved, even grateful. She would apologize. They would become friends. She would show them all that Josie could be one of them, that what separated them, that silence, that vastness was nothing, nothing real, nothing real at all. She waited for what seemed like hours, the others melting into the woods, bored with the spectacle in search of the promised lunch and still Josie whispered. Inch by inch. Kay crawled back in and just at the edge, unaware of how precious she had become, Clive's strong, perfunctory hands pulled her over the lip.

"You did it," Josie gushed.

Kay pulled the helmet from her head and brushed past her into the woods.

The Talented Tenth

Josie sat on the edge of the encampment fully clothed, her arms wrapped around her legs and without a beach towel, rocked gently back and forth on the warm sand. If the conversation turned to the city or to people she didn't know, she dug her fingers deeper into the ground beside her, churning up larvae, their pale delicate bodies curving away from her touch. Across the bay, a brown half-crescent of shimmering translucent tiles, as shallow as a creek bed, white boats dotted the horizon. At the sunbathers' backs, marsh grasses bowed, buzzing with iridescent horseflies. Josie didn't come out often enough to enter the easy flow of conversation. She wasn't even sure of everyone's name although she recognized faces. Dennis, she thought, was her father's age, maybe younger with orange tufts of hair on his chin. He sat in the center of the group in a multi-colored beach chair, his long legs stretched out before him and his red swim trunks drying in the shade of an oversized umbrella. He gripped a sweating Budweiser can and absentmindedly manned the boom box at his side. Seventies funk was on heavy rotation, reflecting a time when this group in their twenties roamed dark streets. Niecy, a single mother, who's acne pocked face had never been pretty but who's booming, sharp-edged voiced carried a certain authority, a certain weight sat in the half circle beside Dennis and next to Johnetta who wore a striped pink and blue one piece and her ubiquitous tennis shorts. Short and chubby Johnetta was an overwhelming force on the courts who crushed anyone who misread her girth and size.

"It's a disgrace. How could Dinkins say he didn't know? Hutchinson *worked* for him and he was the one stealing the money," Niecy asked. She slapped the air and turned her head away, squinting into the setting sun to make out a figure walking along the surf. Homes in the community had been built and then passed from one generation to the next. Mothers knew children knew grandchildren. This figure was unrecognizable, emerging out of the light with a hand pressed to a straw hat that barely contained escaping corkscrew curls, the other clutched a pair of damp sneakers. At her feet frolicked a golden retriever, yipping at her salt reddened ankles and by his presence alone breaking a dozen Association rules. The stranger smiled uncertainly as though sensing the sudden hush, the quiet caused by her approach. And all their faces turned, expressionless to her, like dark, unmoving masks until Dennis broke the tableau with a single, joyless nod. The woman, middle aged with sagging skin stumbled and they all thought as one, "Careful now." No one, they knew, would come to her aid if she hurt herself. "She's a grown woman," Niecy, her narrowing eyes seemed to be saying, "She can take care of herself." Josie shook her head surprised by the force of her own reaction. She would never have admitted it to herself, or articulated it to anyone on that beach, but she felt the one thing that separated her from the others was her familiarity and comfort with white people. She grew up around them, went to school with them and now would be attending an Ivy League School. Sitting beside the others on the beach, always just a little apart as though in fear of being hurt or doing some damage in return, she sensed their vague disapproval of the way she had been raised, with the choices that her parents had made and how they routinely removed her from their midst. And then that woman came along and a sudden,

unbidden dislike had welled up inside of her and she had felt as one with the group. She rose from the cooling sand and beat the creases of her shorts.

"You heading back, Josie?" Niecy asked.

"Yeah, it's getting cold out here," she said.

"We're diehards. Tell your mother and Darlene I said 'hello."

"Will do," she said, trudging up the sand to the entrance, a path that lead out onto the concrete street below. She pressed the soles of her feet flat into the hot cement, feeling its prickly warmth radiating up her calves. To her right was the Dead End where one Labor Day Weekend, they'd built a stage and decorated it with Christmas lights. And late into the night, on her roller skates with the sound of her plastic beads clicking at the end of her braids, she'd danced to the sounds of "Rapper's Delight" the first urban lullaby of that decade. She turned past the newly built home, a three story yellow and white trimmed monstrosity that had its very own Widow's Walk. It was beautiful and as lovely as a deliciously iced wedding cake. She pushed down a rising sense of envy. Approaching her house, she almost didn't see it, set back from the road on its lot with the semi-circular drive and the island out front. Nailed to a tall tree in the center of the raised mound was a wood-carved whale. In white, painted against its dusty black background were two names, Blye and Hendricks. Marigolds, their bright orange centers fearless against encroaching sand or twigs, brightened the island's perimeter. She weaved between her mother's grey Toyota and her grandparents' shiny, emerald Lincoln Town Car. When she sat beside Grandma Vesta on its plush white leather interior it practically floated under them, down the street like a boat swinging along the swelling tide. She climbed the maroon painted stairs, brushing her fingers against the pine shrub's needles

and pressed her face against the front door's mesh, peering into the now, faintly patterned interior. She could hear the television going in her grandmother's room and rustling in the kitchen. Probably her mother and Aunt getting ready for the reading.

The interior of the summer house always reminded her of an imagined but never realized future. It was split on two levels, the first opening up onto the living room and connected to the dining room by wall to wall yellow shag carpeting. Downstairs, in perpetual gloom and as dank and cool as a cellar were the bedrooms. Their walls were lined with raised, walnut paneling deepening the darkness and if you were to stick a hand into a shadowy corner it would return gritty with cobwebs. The communal television was on the bottom floor but Josie couldn't bring herself to be entombed during daylight hours and climbed the short flight of stairs. White leather and chrome director's chair's, their seats sagging and stretched from her grandmother's weight and the chrome speckled with rust flanked a beveled glass coffee table covered in back issues of *Ebony* and *Black Enterprise.* Two white and green striped couches faced one another, and she plopped down on one, absentmindedly scraping flecks of sand from her heel. She flipped through the pages taking little notice of the hair advertisements and subscription solicitations.

Her mother came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a flowered dishtowel. "Is that what you're wearing?" she asked.

"No," Josie said, rising grudgingly.

She went downstairs and changed, pausing to look at herself in the mirror. She was wearing a cropped blue jacket over a simple yellow tank top. It was insolent the way the two pieces, one dressy and the other casual were thrown together, an intentional discord that rose to a high pitched wail in the mass of unraveling braids turned golden by

the sun and twisted together into a messy bird's nest on top of her head. They were expecting Roland Dobbs, author, filmmaker and intellectual who's best-selling book claimed race no longer mattered. He'd created a formidable African-American studies department at Princeton, luring the best and the brightest from other universities to his program.

At 1pm, he appeared on their front porch with Josie's grandfather behind him, wearing a double-breasted suit in the midday heat and a yellow silk cravat. A well-manicured goatee covered his mouth and his skin was smooth and flawless, like an airbrushed ad of a rap mogul she'd once seen, selling his line of designer sweat suits. Josie heard him before she saw him, laughing loudly at something her grandfather said before making his way indoors. For the past hour, the house had been filling up with neighbors and friends. The women wore matching pantsuits and the men blazers and khakis, their shirts unbuttoned at the throat. Many of them represented the Sigma chapter of the Boule, come to welcome a fellow Archon to the area. It was an informal book signing and meet and greet, a chance to shake hands with the author. Her mother handed her a tray of halved cherry tomatoes covered in olive oil and herbs. "Here," she said, "take these" and Josie carried them to each guest, smiling and introducing herself to those who didn't recognize her. She found herself beside Roland and her grandfather, lifted the tray and asked, "Cherry tomato?" He didn't stop talking long enough to acknowledge her, only lifted the red morsel to his mouth. She caught a glimpse of white even teeth before it disappeared down his gullet.

She moved away taking stock of the luxury brand watch on one wrist and a gold chain link bracelet on the other. She returned the empty tray to the kitchen.

"Well," her mother asked, "what do you think?"

"Of Roland Dobbs?" Josie said, "Not much."

"Your father feels the same way," her mother said, "Ok, one last round and make your grandparents proud."

They gathered around the baby grand piano in the living room, a few guests sitting on the white leather and chrome chairs and the others standing with drinks in their hand. Roland's book was propped on the instrument's gleaming black surface beside a stack of unopened copies. On the cover, he sat hunched forward in a chair, his chin propped on his hand, staring intently out at the reader.

"I wrote this book," he explained, "on the Vineyard over the course of one summer, eating lobster and fresh corn on the cob and in another up in northern Italy with a fellowship from the Saltonstall Foundation. I find I need these sanctuaries to think, to immerse myself in the world of words. I've tried to create a similar oasis at Princeton and believe the academic world is starting to take notice. I've twice been profiled in *The New Yorker*."

"I believe we are entering an extraordinary age." He paused here to consider the sunset outside the sliding glass doors. "Extraordinary," he continued in an even louder voice, "because for once we are unburdened by the trappings of race and able, through the force of our own accomplishments, to transcend those imposed limitations. The cream of crop, so to speak, has risen to the top. Each of you here represents what DuBois called the "Talented Tenth," the essence by which the race should be judged. Your success explodes the very categorization of race. My book explains in greater details how this has come to pass and I encourage each of you to purchase a copy, read it and

discuss it. I think you will also find it handy in many of your discussions with white colleagues and friends. Make no mistake, each of you here is a credit to the race. Thank you."

Josie's grandfather stepped forward to open the floor for questions. There were a few about the process of writing and then the crowd fell silent. Josie raised her hand. Her grandfather looked pained but it was the only one raised and he couldn't ignore it.

"Josie," he said, "my granddaughter Josie who will be headed to Stanford in the fall."

"Your book," she said, "claims that race no longer matters because people like Michael Jordan and Michael Jackson and Oprah are no longer considered black because of their success---"

"What I believe," he said interrupting her, "is that their blackness is a mantle they can choose to adopt or discard or *stand upon* at will."

"Ok," she said, "but I was in the Dominican Republic last fall on a school trip and I couldn't help but notice how the darker skinned women were either domestics or prostitutes. It was a real phenomenon. I was there with my white boyfriend and almost everyone assumed that he had purchased me. That seems to be an example of how race still very much matters in the sense that it has prescribed two crappy occupations to darker skinned women."

Roland laughed. "Stanford, little lady, is lucky to have you. I limited my discussion of race to African-Americans."

"Ok," Josie said, "well back in the day, the better jobs were awarded to lighter skinned African-Americans suggesting an unfair economic advantage. So can we really

look around this room and say this is the Talented 10th? When we know that opportunities were so unevenly distributed?"

"Josie," he said, "It's Josie, right?'

She nodded. "Stanford will be lucky to have you. You know I graduated from Stanford myself. I was one of only five African-Americans in the class. You have no idea what that's like. We had to justify our interest in ethnic studies. It wasn't even considered a discipline. We protested. We shut down the administration just to get the departments you and your friends now take for granted. I think everyone in this room has a story like that and you do them a great injustice by suggesting their accomplishments were the result of luck and luck alone---"

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying –"

"Let me finish," he insisted, "how can you rob your grandfather of his achievements? We are here to celebrate not join our white brothers and sisters in tearing each other down."

Josie looked around the room for support. They were all staring at the ground or the air above her head.

"Well," her grandfather said, "I think that concludes our question and answer period. Please everyone help yourself. B. Smith catered our reception and I can tell you it is all delicious. Thank you again Roland. He'll be up here for about a half an hour signing books if you'd like one."

Josie retreated to the kitchen.

"Did you hear that?" she asked her mother.

"I did," she said, "Good for you." But she also couldn't give Josie eye contact, and bustled passed her with a platter of crab cakes.

The following afternoon, Josie sat in the living room, reading a book and drinking a beer. She couldn't face the people on the beach, imagining that they had spent the entire evening talking about her and what an embarrassment she had become for the Reverend Wright. The doorbell rang and she tossed the paperback aside, expecting to find an elderly neighbor at the screened in front door. Instead, she saw Roland Dobbs, his face pressed against the mesh, peering into the foyer and wearing a yellow polo shirt and madras shorts. The collar was turned up. Josie took her time, the sweating beer bottle dangling between her fingers and opened the door only slightly.

"Hi," he said, "is your grandfather here?"

"No," she said, "he went into town."

"Any idea when he'll be back?"

"Probably in an hour or so."

"I just wanted to thank him for yesterday."

"It was quite a show," she said.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"No, not really. My entire family is mad at me."

"Really?"

"They'd never say it but I'm the young hussy who doesn't know her place."

"Sorry about that. If you like I could tell your grandfather they were good questions."

"If they were so good, why didn't you answer them?"

"Listen. You kind of put me on the spot there," he said glancing into the street behind him, "I was trying to sell books."

"I thought you were engaging in serious intellectual debate."

"You'll understand when you get older."

"Will I?"

"You will. Everbody's got their hustle."

"So now you're a hustler?"

He laughed.

"Do you want to come in for a beer?" she asked.

He paused and she said, "My family's down at the beach. They'll be there for a while. You can sit and chill until my grandfather gets back."

He nodded and followed her inside, hastening to explain, "I'm staying with the Campbells and they're having an argument."

"Yeah," she said, "he's kind of ornery. Want a beer?"

"Sure," he said "should you be drinking?"

"Legally? Probably not but my parents don't mind."

"Pretty liberal."

"About some things. How long are you staying in town?"

"Just another night."

"Did you get a chance to go into East Hampton?"

"No, not yet."

"Bummer. That's the best part," she said, leading him up the steps to the living room.

"This seems pretty nice."

"Really? As nice as northern Italy?"

"I'd have liked something like this growing up."

"I'd prefer a shot of Limoncello."

"Have you been?"

"Yeah."

"Really?"

"My Dad's a doctor and we used to go over there a lot for medical conferences." She crossed a leg under herself on the couch. He sat in a chrome chair across from her.

"You've had a pretty privileged upbringing."

"If you say so."

"I grew up in Cincinnati. You know where that is?"

She went into the kitchen and grabbed him a beer, stalling in order to pop the lid.

"Yeah," she said, returning to the living room and handing him the bottle, "I know where Cincinnati is. And now you're an Archon of the Grand Boule."

"Do you mock everything?"

"Do you think I'm mocking you?"

He laughed again, adding, "It seems like it."

"You're the one," she said, "trying to set up some class distinction here. The assumption that just because my grandparents have a house in Sag Harbor I've had a rosy childhood. But you seem to have this reductionist tendency."

"How old are you again?"

"Eighteen."

"Eighteen?"

"Yep. Just legal."

"That explains it."

"Explains, what?" she asked.

"The mouth."

Josie stood up. The same feeling she had while staring at all of those immobile faces at the book talk had returned. She walked downstairs to her bedroom, figuring he could wait up there by himself. She stood in front of the bureau staring at her reflection in the mirror. She could hear him calling from the staircase and his feet sliding along the plastic runner nailed to the steps. He seemed to be braving the darkness for her and she turned to find him standing in the open doorway.

"I'm sorry," he said, "You seem to get a rise out of me."

She considered him in silence, taking in the outfit ripped straight from the pages of a catalogue. Not exactly Over-the-Rhine attire. He was such a fake. Everything about him borrowed from some idea of wealth and success he'd seen in a commercial. She hated his phoniness and sensed that it hid real weakness. She stepped closer to him and placed her arm around his neck.

"What are you doing?" he asked but he made no move, she noticed, away from her. She stood up on tiptoes and kissed him, forcing her tongue into his mouth. Her hand slid down to his crotch.

"Jesus," he said.

She stepped back and lifted her shirt over her head. She pushed the door shut behind her.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" he asked.

"Nobody's home," she said and placed his hand on top of her breast.

"Jesus," he said again, his fingers tightening. She reached beneath the edge of his shorts and touched him, moving her hand up and down. This wasn't, he thought, her first time doing this. He gripped her shoulders, unsure of where to place his hands. He was about to come and she stopped, leading him like a child to the narrow, twin bed. He let her lay him down and watched as she removed her shorts. He didn't move while she straddled him, just kept staring at her lace bra. She rubbed against him a few times and reached into the bedside table for a condom.

"Are you sure," he asked again, "we should be doing this?"

"If you don't want to," she said, "we can stop." But she took his two hands and placed them on her hips, at the fatty softness of her upper thighs and began moving again. She opened the condom, slipped it on him and slid on top of him again. He groaned. It was embarrassing how fast he took. He turned away from her and she leaned over and kissed him sweetly on the mouth.

Someone was shaking him.

"Wake up," she said, "My family is going to be home soon. You should at least be dressed when they get here."

"Sorry," he said, "I fell asleep."

She pulled on a pair of biker boots.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm thinking about walking into town. Maybe getting some ice cream or a slice."

"You want company?"

"I thought you wanted to thank my grandfather."

"Right," he said.

"No problem," she said, "See you later."

"I'll call you."

"Sure," she said, "whatever."

He lay in the bed for a moment and studied his hands on the duvet. It was a light silver color with green and yellow blossoms on the front. He was pretty sure it was made out of nylon or polyester. A single plastic thread had come undone. He wound it around his fingers, pulled it tight, cutting off the circulation. It turned white. He released the strand and the color flooded back. He swung his feet over the edge of the bed, pressed his toes in the matted carpeting. It was dusty beneath his feet. She was right. This place was kind of a dump. Who installed green carpeting? He got dressed and caught his reflection in the bureau's mirror. He shouldn't have had sex with her. What kind of a girl did that? One, he told himself, with serious mental problems. He should find her and apologize.

He didn't have a car. It wasn't a long walk to town. She had probably walked. He could catch up with her if he began now. He put a hand in his madras shorts. He knew now they had been a mistake. She was right. He'd pictured East Hampton. He walked up a hill. The homes on either side were closed up tight and quiet. Everyone here seemed old. Now that he thought about it most of his colleagues talked about vacationing on the Vineyard. He was hot. It was hot. He twisted his watch free, exposing a sweaty patch. For a moment the short hairs on his wrist caught in the links. It

was a pleasant kind of tug, a pleasant kind of pain. What had he been thinking? Should he have said 'no'? She was so cocky. It seemed in a way to put her in her place. But that's what worried him, the suspicion that he'd been provoked into doing something he shouldn't have done and all along she knew that he would do it. How he would react. He'd been played like a college freshman. Not that he had that much experience with women. He hit Route 114 and made a right, heading into town. He wondered what he looked like to the drivers in their cars, trudging along in his yellow polo shirt. They probably thought he couldn't afford a car. How long had it taken to drive from town to Sag Harbor Hills? Five minutes? It should be a pretty short walk he assured himself. He bent his head against the exhaust fumes, the roaring engines. He passed a gas station. It looked like something out of a Rockwell painting with two simple pumps out front. Had he really been trying to make her feel guilty about spending summers here? She'd thrown him with that Northern Italy crap. It was like she could see right through him and all of a sudden he was back in that cramped apartment, Over-the-Rhine just outside his windows, a collection of broken glass and litter. Hell yes, he was proud to be an Archon. What had she done with her life besides act petulant and drink beer? He passed a cottage with purple hydrangea and an American flag poking out from beside the front door. He stared at it, trying to imagine the life inside. It seemed intrinsically charmed like home of Hansel and Gretel. He suddenly felt tired. He could feel the dampness beneath his arms. His feet ached in his loafers. They were new, purchased for this trip, and without socks his toes felt gritty in the tight leather. He wandered onto a side street. It brought him passed equally as quaint homes until he found himself down by the harbor staring at the yachts moored there. He sat for a while on a park bench, too far from the water to enjoy

it, closer in fact to the parked cars along the street. He lived on campus in a one bedroom apartment, subsidized by the university. Every day he walked among the Gothic architecture to and from classes until he tricked himself into believing this was home. But he didn't actually *own* anything. Not even a car. He lived from fellowship to fellowship, grant to grant. He wouldn't even know how to begin. His mother embarrassed him. He watched the masts bobbing, as though jockeying for position, one against the other.

The ice cream was sticky on her palm. She licked it, laying her tongue down flat and broad against the rough skin. He'd been fun. They'd had fun until he greeted her with those puppy dog eyes and she knew she'd knocked him loose. She wandered down Main Street, her thighs brushing against the rough edges of her cut-off jeans. Trash. Her father said she looked trashy wearing them. She wasn't sure when the town had changed, turned into the Upper West Side, but her flip flops looked out of place amongst the filmy summer dresses. She'd bought her shirt on sale at Pier 1, some kind of imitation Aztec print in a nonsensical fuchsia and lavender repeating pattern. The ice cream melted down her arm. She retrieved it with her tongue. She'd done that to him. He'd tasted like seaweed she'd once sucked on down by the bay and smelled musty as though he'd forgotten to bathe. It was a way of knowing people. The look in his eye when she took off her shirt. She glanced into a book store. The paperbacks were piled into a pyramidal formation on the round tables. She couldn't help herself. She finished the ice cream and went in, the bell ringing overhead, signaling she could tell, no one in particular. She hadn't decided her major yet. She moved towards fiction. Touched the raised titles. Espresso was being brewed in the back, the machine let off steam, a dry hissing sound.

She picked up a *New York Times Bestseller*, turned it over and then replaced it. She wandered towards non-fiction, smiling when she saw it. A framed newspaper review with a photo of him looking distant and thoughtful. She picked up the book and read the back – how they were entering a new age, poised for great success and then comments about this new mind, this revolutionary voice. She'd felt like she'd heard it a thousand times before, how the race at any moment – no, not any moment but this *very moment* would be lifted from obscurity, on his shoulders, on the shoulders of men like him. She smiled again remembering her mouth on him. That was a form of ownership too wasn't it? She replaced the book and turned. He was wandering across the street, large sweat stains spreading beneath his armpits. She knew he was looking for her. He seemed so sad. He must have walked. She should offer him a ride home. She pressed herself against the wall display and waited for him to pass.

Demons, Gods and Machetes

Max sipped from a plastic tumbler of champagne waiting for the traffic light to change, one hand on the wheel as International Drive's high end resorts glittered like tacky tinsel beside him. A Japanese pagoda blinked scarlet neon, wan and urgent in the sunshine and a family stood in front of a miniature replica of Versailles Put-Put course, the father, his neck red and stippled like pigeon flesh in the heat, clutching a glossy, colorful map. His children, dehydrated from one too many sugary drinks, wore perky Mickey Mouse ears and stared with tired eyes into the passing traffic. Josie sitting in the back seat could almost hear their mother calculate the expense of that week's entertainment, spelled down here in Orlando with a capital "E."

A good percentage of that revenue would find its way back to Max and Alan, old friends who were responsible for everything Josie could see outside her window. At first Kate had claimed in their poorly heated dormitory room that her father was in "real estate," a term Josie associated with middle-aged mothers suffering from empty-nest syndrome. After accepting Alan's offer to fly them down to Orlando for their winter break and stay with Max in his restored plantation home, Josie had begun to doubt the depth of her imagination. They had seen Alan only once in his office downtown where he welcomed them to the tune of multiple fax machines. It was then that Josie stood in front of a six foot black and white aerial of International Drive, turned to Kate and said, "You're father's not in real estate. He's a *developer*."

They pulled into the parking lot of Stuie's, a plastic log cabin meant to look like a shack in the Everglades. Max, just back from a business trip to Hong Kong, was hell bent on welcoming them to Orlando with their first taste of gator and as they crossed the restaurant's parking lot, Josie considered him from behind. A pink oxford shirt, damp at the collar's edge, stretched across his thick back. He was gigantic, his every feature, his fingers, calves, even his nose enlarged, swollen almost to the point of disfigurement. He had jet black hair and bright blue eyes and a German title either inherited or stolen it was unclear which.

The hostess recognized him and gushing lead them to a table on the second floor balcony. They sat chewing and chewing on the fried gator bits. Max kept ordering round after round of beer. The air conditioning was working overtime. They stretched their legs beneath the table. For a long while they sat listening to the people below until Josie blurted out something they'd discussed on the plan ride down.

"Max," she said, "We need fake I.D's."

He turned to her, leaning forward slightly. "Pick a town," he said.

"Pick a town?" she asked.

"Right," he said, "your hometown. Then you'll need to go there and scout it out."

"Scout it out?" she repeated.

"Head to the local library and get a card. Get to know the elementary and high schools so if anyone asks you can say with confidence that you've been there. Do you have any tattoos? Any identifiable mar—"

"Max," Josie interrupted, "We just want to get a drink."

"Right," he said laughing at himself. "Right. I'll see what I can do." He flagged the waitress for the check, refusing to look Josie in the eye and she realized that he was embarrassed. Kate glared at her from the other end of the table. A single glance had the power to draw a distinction between them – one had been raised on Madison Avenue, her family's name firmly lodged in *The Social Register* and the other was a flea market version of prosperity, her look and attitude pieced together from the wealthys' hand-me-downs. They'd had the house to themselves for two full days before Max returned from Shanghai and they'd opened doors and closets like nosey children. They found a bottle of gourmet ketchup in the refrigerator, cases of champagne stacks beneath the kitchen counter and much to Kate's delight, a three foot long machete in Max's bedroom closet. Her eyes too bright, she'd unsheathed it and leapt through the house issuing war-like cries. Eventually she'd made her way down to the living room and brought the knife with a satisfying thud down on a shifting pile of *Penthouse Letters* spread out on the coffee table. Making a whistling noise, she'd picked up the issue, the magazine separating in two with ease. Kate could handle a weapon but not a breach in propriety.

Josie felt like a crass interloper but after the check was paid strutted back to the Explorer, as if everything that surrounded her was also her birthright. Max dropped Kate off at Alan's condominium to retrieve her father's extra car for the week and he and Josie returned in silence to his Plantation home. She didn't want to make conversation and took a magazine out onto the wrap around porch. Someone, she wondered if it had been Max, painted the floorboards blue. When the light hit them, not direct sunlight, just average every day light, the air turned into the color of water and swinging in the hammock through the thick, humid breeze, she could almost feel the weight of the wide

open sea pressing against her cheek. She wondered about the man who could create this sensation and hang from a green satin ribbon, a single, ominous bell over the second story landing at the top of the stairs. He opened the door behind her carrying two glasses of champagne. He offered one to her and walked to the railing, sipping at his as he stared at the modern homes across the street. His looked slightly decrepit in comparison, set back and surrounded by oak trees thick with Spanish moss. She would have chosen this house too and promised herself that one day she would also have lace curtains that lifted on the breeze. He sat down in a chair across from the swinging hammock and stretched his long, heavy legs out in front of him. The sun was going down, the air was cooling.

"How did you meet Alan?" she asked.

"Alan? I met him in Key West in a bar of all places." They sat together in silence. She believed that she was a good listener like her mother and people for reasons she didn't entirely understand confided in her.

"Actually," he said, "We first met in Honduras. I was making runs up to Miami in twenty-foot Boston Whalers. You know Whalers?"

She nodded.

"They can go pretty fast and that's all you need, something basic to slip in and out."

She sipped her champagne and tipped a boot over. Studying the unblemished sole, she wondered what her father would say if he could see her then, sitting with a criminal although the precise nature of his crimes remained unclear.

'It was beautiful out there," he continued. "Just the sound of the engine, the smell of the diesel, the water as smooth as glass. I used to love those trips."

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Josie's father picked her up from Logan airport in her mother's Toyota Camry. She shivered sliding into the front seat, her skin slow to adjust from Florida to Massachusetts. They followed Route 128 home to Hingham. It had snowed a few days before and the road was gray with salt and slush, the banks along the emergency lane peppered with dislocated gravel. They pulled into the drive and she couldn't help it. Her heart sank at the sight of the small house, a replica of a dozen others on the block. There were no lace curtains on the front windows but plastic venetian blinds that made the home look shuttered and grim.

Josie lugged her bag up the back staircase into the guest den and nearly tripped when her cowboy boot caught on the carpet's curling edge. It had been purchased at a Home Depot fire sale and its grey synthetic fibers were as coarse as Astro turf. They had all shifted bedrooms down the hall. Her younger sister Janelle had taken her old room, and Liza had taken Janelle's until there was only this one left. She dropped her bag at the foot of the brown pullout couch where it would remain unpacked for the next two weeks, clothes and books spilling out of its opening, as though Josie refused to acknowledge her surroundings, that this place was of lasting importance in her life.

Her father claimed to have taken a phone call and absentmindedly fingering the things spilling from her bag, came across a topless photo of her. Kate had taken it out by the pool. It was supposed to be artsy but came out flat and banal. Her father confronted her with it in the kitchen and ordered her into the Camry. She stared out the window, ticking off the mailboxes as they passed by the Walkers, the Duncans, the Sandells. He seemed calm. According to his colleagues at the hospital, he never got angry, not even

when a mother spat in his face calling him a liar in the Emergency Room, insisting that her twelve year old daughter suffered from indigestion and not the pangs of early labor. He was mild mannered which had made these punitive drives since puberty all the more incomprehensible, the hostility rising up from the floorboards like flooding water.

At Concord Road, he set the blinker and asked, "What if your sisters had seen that?"

"It was buried pretty deep in my bag. I didn't leave it out," she said.

"I found it pretty easily," he said. He made a left onto Stafford Road and they passed the Dugger's house. Three overflowing garbage cans were positioned at the end of their drive. Her father had always suspected they were low class, that their skateboarding son would amount to little although you wouldn't know it to see him pump Mr. Dugger's hand by way of greeting.

"Who took it?" he asked.

"A friend," she said.

"A friend?"

"Kate," she clarified. "It was supposed to be artsy."

"Were there any boys around?"

"No," she said.

"Because I would never take a photo like that of a woman I loved." He paused to let that sink in and she continued to look out the window. She had known that this moment would come – that he would start off slow.

"My father, your grandfather always used to say there were two kinds of women in this world." She closed her eyes. "The ones you married and the ones you slept with,"

he finished. She wondered why he felt the need to say all of this. She was after all his daughter. Four years earlier, she'd entered a room and even though she had no intention of having sex with the boy who followed her that's exactly what had happened. She'd cried. He'd ignored her tears, taken what he wanted and dropped her back off at home to that sullen little house. The guilt was severe. She was, everything about her upbringing told her, deserving of punishment. So she'd followed her father's instructions, opened the car door, stepped inside, knowing full well what awaited her on this drive.

She stared out the window and thought about Max out there alone in his Whaler, the bow rising and falling on the swells and the stars shining over the dark, oily water. He must have felt that he existed, during that passage, outside the bounds of reason. Maybe he cut the engine and drifted, listening to the dark and savoring the sensation of everything he had known falling away. What would her father say about that as he made up rules for her to live by, yanking his strictures from the air, codifying nothing but belief? What would he say about Max and his fortune or anything that existed outside of his rat-in-a-maze-like-understanding of the world? It was hard not to hold him in contempt, not to believe that she had seen more and understood more of the world than he ever would. True, she had emerged from that bedroom changed but with a secret knowledge. She had for a moment been one with a desperate man, had lived and breathed in his body, felt the world as it played out along his skin. She'd felt him searching for something that didn't exist within her, hoping to make himself known in some searing, lasting way. Her father thought men and woman had roles to play. He had no idea that human kind went far beyond that – and that's why they had all developed

myths, rites of passage and ways to conquer ancient, unnamable monsters. She would take her chances with Kate with Alan and with Max.

"Is that what you're doing?" he was asking now. "Is that what I'm paying all that tuition for?" Shoppers World was coming into focus. She waited until the traffic light changed.

"You're getting a job this summer," he said, "You don't have a trust fund, you know. You're not one of them. You remember that."

That summer she spent her weekdays working a steaming espresso machine in a chain coffee shop, the wet grinds clinging to her palms and leaching them of moisture and her weekends sipping beer on Alan's forty-two foot sailboat up in Peneboscot Bay. Kate was taking a basket weaving and floral arrangement course in Blue Hill, close to her family's summer compound and Josie went up to see her almost every chance she could get, driving her father's rattling Cherokee Jeep along 95, across Schell Bridge, past Portland into Brooksville. The last leg took her through blueberry fiends and wild pine forests. She worried about breaking down and finding herself knocking on trailers set back from the road and the look on their owners' faces when they saw a young black girl appearing out of the night. She kept her foot pressed down hard on the accelerator, racing up Route 15 until she pulled into the dirt drive, and practically ran into the large family house lit up on the hill. Kate was always there to greet her, Max not far behind, holding his tumbler, ushering her into a lobster dinner. He recognized her beneath the Northern skies and she sat next to him at dinner. The following day they took a long walk over the blueberry fields. She wondered if she could sleep with him – if that's what he wanted from her.

When Kate and Alan suggested jumping the Bagaduce, a rapid running river that cut through Blue Hill, she didn't think twice. There were so many traditions and rituals enacted up in Maine. She felt with each one that she was being drawn closer into their family. Max drove them down to the bridge. He was, she understood, too large to jump. They parked on a turnoff and walked carrying life preservers in their hands to the overpass. Josie hoped for some kind of instruction on how this was done, but was met with only vague expressions of enthusiasm. Both Alan and Kate were in rare agreement and she hated to question them about it, feeling almost as though her creeping doubt as she gazed at the churning brown water would make her somehow less courageous in their eyes. They stood in the emergency lane, only a few inches wide over the narrow bridge and lined by a galvanized guardrail. Josie waited for a while with her hands on the cold metal, staring at the twigs and debris carried along by the current. In some parts an angry yellowish foam had collected on the surface. Long after Kate and Alan had jumped, she pulled on the preserver and swung her feet over the rail. A family of three had stopped to watch them and she felt them chattering at her back. She checked the water again and decided to make her way to an undercut rock. She jumped, the water seizing her and made her way for the boulder's lee. The life jacket rose up her neck practically choking her. The metal clasps holding the nylon ties in place dug into the underside of her chin. She wondered clutching the rock and fighting the discomfort of twigs and pebbles scraping against her legs how something so uncomfortable could ever pass for fun. Alan crawled onto a muddy bank a few feet downstream, his legs red with long scratches. She let go and struck out for him, fighting the current and its determination to wash her away.

She crawled up the bank on all fours and stood quickly aware that she must look like she a groveling beggar to the spectators on the bridge. With shaking hands, she pulled damp leaves from the waistband of her shorts. Head bowed, she made her way up river, crossed and came back down the street to the turnoff where they'd left Max's car. Finally in dry jeans, she thought about her father, how he would have called this activity the height of foolishness – the height, to be more exact, of white foolishness. She walked along the emergency lane sensing a new distance from Alan and Kate. They seemed to dare one another into action suggesting a strange penchant for self-destruction that Josie in that moment associated with their wealth. As though nothing tested them or held them in place, so they went out daily taunting the heavens. Walking unharmed back to the bridge, she had a good view of the car as it came around the bend. The driver's grey head was just visible above the wheel. He took the downhill curve too fast, overcompensated and clipped the family who had stopped to watch them, before settling on top of Max, his upper body thrown at an odd angle against the windshield. He climbed out of his maroon Honda Civic sporting two large plastic hearing aids and dressed in a plaid flannel shirt, tucked neatly into a pair of jeans. Josie imagined a kindly daughter-in-law dressing him that morning in the dark of his bedroom. She passed the young girl who cried out over her father's crushed legs, "Help him" and sat on the guard rail, waiting for the ambulance and rescue workers to arrive. In the movies and on television, they materialized in a matter of minutes. It took them a surprisingly long time and she sat between the bleeding father and Max, who Kate with the help of Alan had lowered to the ground. She couldn't see him on the other side of the car but the windshield was shattered and smeared with plasma. Even after they had trundled him

into the back of the ambulance, she sat there until Kate asked her to drive her to the Emergency Room. For the next forty minutes a nurse pulled slivers of glass from Kate's heels while Josie tried not to be sick on the clean tile floor.

That night on the hill, they gathered in groups of two or three to talk in hushed tones. First they drank champagne, its drive expensive taste flat on the tongue. Then they moved on to beer, eventually to scotch. No one was watching the kids. Alan returned from the hospital, explaining Max's condition. So many bones had been broken that the marrow was thick in his bloodstream, leaching it of oxygen. It would be touch and go until morning. Kate grew incoherent, weeping and drinking. She had convinced herself that Max stepped in front of her at the very last moment, taking the brunt of the impact and she had been the one meant to die. Overhead the stars appeared one by one, cold and bright. They seemed to swirl together as Josie tipped her head back. The Atlantic looked calm. The pine trees were dark along the coast. The blueberry fields lay at their feet. She understood the meaning of "dust to dust, ashes to ashes." She would keep all this from her father. She knew what his final verdict, pronounced over them all, would be.

Lester's Story

Lester opened the front door in his leopard print silk bathrobe, his chest hair, he knew, still damp from the shower. He'd had just enough time to slap on some aftershave. He was anticipating a warm response. Her voice had sounded warm on phone. His sister, a nationally recognized radio personality had warned him that these types of pieces always had a good guy and a bad guy but that voice had promised she and her correspondent would be fair. She was frowning at him, her eyes resting on the hem of his robe. It stopped at mid-thigh.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi, Lester," she said.

He ushered her into the living room. His house just like his Range Rovers was an advertisement for his business, an urban safari company that offered personalized tours to groups of travelling businessmen through the narrow streets of San Francisco. It wasn't your usual boring, run-of-the-mill kind of tour. He wore full safari gear and a pith helmet as he led them through rounds of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight." Miniature giraffe and lion figurines lined his bookcases and a zebra skin stretched across the far wall.

"Please," he said, "help yourself. I had breakfast catered for you and your crew."

She glanced at her watch, a look of annoyance crossing her face. "Lester," she said, "I told you we don't really have time for breakfast. We're on a tight schedule. Any

chance you could get dressed and let the crew know which Range Rover you'll be using today?"

"Sure, sure," he said, fumbling with the tie. This would be good press for the company he reminded himself and she'd promised him – or at least said there was a good *possibility* -- that she could give him the raw footage. He wanted to post it online or even, he hoped, craft it into a national commercial. His big sister – she called herself "Dr. Amy" – acted like she was the only one in the family capable of success. He'd built this company from the ground up. Sure, he'd spent a few years in Africa living off his trust fund, but he'd come home and turned that passion for adventure into something worthwhile. He'd sent Corinne a few shots as she'd requested and he knew the warmth in her voice when she responded was genuine. She got it. The Rovers weren't about status. They were about those evening in the wild. It was about freeing yourself of all civilization's trappings and making love like a common savage beneath the starry sky. It was about romance. And he was eco-conscious. He had a low flush toilet and LED lighting installed throughout the house to keep his energy costs down. Sure, he wasn't a total nutter with solar panels on his roof, but those efforts, he assured himself more than compensated for his six SUV's.

Nancy walked into the room and up against Corinne, she looked every bit of her fifty-five years. She lumbered in sneakers and white athletic socks, the "Urban Safari" t-shirt that was too small for her stretching across her sagging breasts. You could even see the roll of flesh that he desperately tried not to handle when she lay on top of him.

"Hi," she said, "I'm Nancy." And as they greeted one another he was so struck by what his life was and what it was about to become that he had to turn away. He

wanted to let Nancy down easy. It was so plain with Corinne in the room that she wasn't suited for him and he wished she and her two kids would just disappear. "I'm so sorry you guys can't stay for breakfast," Nancy was saying and now Corinne was softening suggesting that yes, maybe they could eat after the shoot since it would be such a shame to let all that good food go to waste.

Lester dressed in his full gear and went outside, descending the stairs to the street below. In a booming voice, he greeted the two men peering at the underside of the Rover. They took note of his outfit, glanced at one another and then gamely shook Lester's hand. One, the cameraman, Lester understood from their introductions, had a pair of designer sunglasses strung around his neck. In a white polo shirt and cargo shorts, Lester didn't like the way he crossed his arms over his chest, planted his feet and started asking about the Range Rover. He seemed cocky as he described placing a camera on the gear shift, in the wheel bed to catch the tires taking turns and on the hood. He had a full head of jet black hair, this guy. When Lester got frustrated or angry, he knew he shrank back into himself and came across as timid, just the opposite of what he was feeling which was ferocious and large. But Corinne appeared by his side and perhaps sensing his growing discomfort with their hands all over his Rover, drew him into a conversation about the business until he forgot about the men at his back and their prying fingers.

She smiled at Lester, placed her hand on his shoulder and asked a leading question about the "business." All the while she was fuming. He'd opened the door in a fucking silk leopard print robe. She couldn't believe it. What did he think this was? A 1970's porno? This was network news for Chrissakes! She'd damned near died staring at those hairy knees. It couldn't have been a mistake. She'd made it perfectly clear.

Lester, Crew and Producer (her) to link up at 8am and she'd faxed him the shoot schedule and everything for his approval. So why was he standing there with his receding hairline and cheap aftershave smell, *naked*, under a bathrobe? She'd kept her eyes on the floor feeling like a fool for flying in a twelve million dollar a year anchorman to interview a sheer nutter. Because that's exactly what he was. At first she thought he was just eccentric with his safari business, painting a Range Rover in zebra stripes. And then she'd fallen for those photos taken on film, grainy with time, showing the jerry-rigged Land Rovers in what appeared to be their natural habitat. He loved them, he claimed, for their durability and ease. He'd fixed one in the savannah with a paper clip and there were the pictures suffused with their rosy light, looking like stills from *Out of Africa*. She'd begun to picture a Robert Redford type in those tights pants ready to whisk some colonial minded woman away at a moment's notice.

As the shoot day had approached, Lester had made more and more demands, and she'd found herself agreeing to almost all of them. Do you know how hard it had been to find an SUV owner in the most environmentally friendly city in the country? And one who would agree to go on camera, exposing their love of the gas guzzler, to family, friends and neighbors? She'd made a few calls to friends in the Bay Area – just to get a sense of what they thought were the most important issues facing their community. And an old college friend had given her what she thought was a brilliant story. San Francisco was one of the first cities in the nation to legalize gay marriage and those couples were now having children and those children were entering the school system with two mommies or sometimes even two daddies. And teachers, parents, and counselors alike were all having to make adjustments. These children and their parents were pioneers, on

the cutting edge of a new Civil Rights Movement, literally re-shaping the city's cultural and social landscape. Corinne went to her senior who listened with a sad expression. His demeanor seemed to say, "having trouble booking that SUV owner?" "Green," his eyes seemed to be communicating, was "in" and she'd better get on board the ratings bandwagon. There were two other stories already under commission that explored San Francisco's ecological soul. The gay parents and their children, although interesting, wouldn't work. She'd returned to her office and promised Lester everything.

In all honesty she didn't know the answer to many of his questions. This was her first affiliate trip with the Anchor. She was, to her knowledge, also the first African-American ever tasked with this responsibility. In truth, domestic stories bored her. She wanted very much to be overseas, preferably Iraq and had made herself a real nuisance in staff meetings. The Executive Producer could be talking about a new medical series on cancer and she would somehow, in front of everyone, steer the conversation back to her family's overseas experience. It was embarrassing for them both but she'd had enough – enough of watching other producers capitalize on their talent and success while she languished covering the low level celebrity pieces – OJ, that epic failure, breaking into a hotel room with armed "friends" to retrieve "stolen" memorabilia. Did they really think this was what interested her? If she did this piece well she could eventually be invited on the Anchor's trips abroad. They were giving her a chance to build a reputation – to prove herself and it began with this simple enough task: book a SUV owner.

Even as she did it, Sean, the producer on the other side of her office's paper thin walls, coughed. He coughed whenever her conversations turned too personal or when she was making a mistake. Another producer who never seemed to rise very far, as apt to

botch a piece as he was to turn it into an on-air gem. He was a card carrying Republican who wore designer shoes and was known for his charm. Somehow Sean's coughing convinced her that she should follow her gut. Where he might book the safe SUV owner – the Silicon Valley tech tycoon with a 401K plan, she would take a risk on Lester and his love of the broken down ancient vehicles. She would go with the man who bucked the norm which was precisely why her heart sank when he met her at the door dressed as an aged Lothario. With everything riding on this piece, she should have played it safe. Now she would have to make this work.

The trick was to make every shot count. To make every shot count you had to pick the right locations. They traveled to Clarion Alley in the Mission District. Lester rode in the lead Rover and Corinne trailed him in the production van with the crew. When they arrived, Ron, the cameraman, set up at the end of the block. The Anchor pulled up in a Lincoln Town Car with blacked out windows and stepped into the litter strewn street. He was taller than most expected, in a tailored suit cut to accommodate a rising gut. Nightly it was hidden behind the anchor desk. She briefed him on Lester and his six SUV's. But Lester presented himself altogether differently. He talked about his LED lighting, his low flush toilets, his attempt even in the winter to save on heating costs. The Anchor, frowning, took her aside again. "What's going on here?" he asked, "He's confusing me." She told him to focus on the vehicles. He nodded and they began their stroll down the alley with the camera shooting them from a low angle, the murals lit up behind them in an explosion of color and counter-culture exuberance.

"Do you know," the Anchor asked, "how much you spend a month on gas for the SUV's?"

"No," Lester said.

"Do you have solar panels on your house? A sense of how much energy you consume a month?"

"No," Lester admitted again, this time his voice was just a little bit softer.

"You have no idea, do you," the Anchor asked, "the extent of your carbon footprint?"

"No," Lester said again and then mustering all the courage he could under the thrice lifted face, he confessed, "I guess I'm not as environmentally conscious as I should be. I just really love my Rovers and the sense of adventure that surrounds them."

They'd reached the end of the alley. The Anchor shook Lester's hand and slipped back into the Town Car. They had the soundbite they needed and that, Corinne thought, was why they paid him twelve million dollars a year.

After a quick breakfast with the crew, Lester had crammed the back of the Rover with local business owners whose establishments he frequented on the tours and they had enthusiastically sung round after round of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight." When they made their first stop at Twin Peaks, he'd asked to take Corinne's picture in front of the sprawling white city at their feet, and she had cocked a knee and smiled sweetly into the camera. Afterwards, she'd laid a hand on his bicep and explained the various shots that the cameraman was getting, assuring him that since this was an anchor piece, they were using the most innovative technology to capture the Rover's artistry. He'd asked again to have the company's logo in the final cut. She'd assured him again that she would try to make that happen. He had felt inhaling the clean, crisp Bay air that everything was working to his advantage. And then they were in Clarion Alley. Her demeanor changed.

She distanced herself from him. Had hushed, whispered conversations with the "Old Man" that's how he thought of the correspondent, downright geriatric. The way he barely glanced at Lester made him think of his sister and her friends. The corporate car, the stringent suit. It was awful the way someone could box themselves up and become successful doing it. So he'd started right in explaining that he was cognizant of global warming and its implications. And the Old Man had nodded sympathetically. But something had changed when the cameras started rolling. The Old Man seemed more commanding than ever. He'd fired off all those questions and Lester wasn't even really sure of what he was saying, only that everything -- his receding hairline, his crooked bottom teeth –- was being broadcast for the world to see and he'd suffered a kind of panic attack. By the time he'd caught his breath, they were at the end of the block and Corinne was assuring him he'd done just fine. Only something about her affection rang false now. They drove back home, his eyes smarting behind his glasses and even though they were going on a ten hour day, she asked him to answer just a few more questions. They took forever setting up the camera in front of his bougainvillea bushes and when the lens was finally trained on him and the tape rolling, he looked right into it and said, "Fuck you, America."

The bathroom was all white. The only color in it appeared on a set of translucent plastic vials with names like "jojoba face scrub" and "replenishing serum." Each bottle had a block of coral colored text describing the products miraculous properties. Seated on the toilet, her aching foot propped on the bathtub's edge, she felt like she was in a space capsule jettisoned into the outer reaches of the galaxy and expected at any moment to hear a mechanical voice narrating their progress. Her foot was damp having spent all

day in her shoe's pointed tow, a fashion craze that was accompanied by a needle thin heel to ensure no ease on the key pressure points. A strange black goo was caught along the nail beds. She rubbed tiredly at it. She'd taken half a pill of Ambien and would have to go to bed soon between the stern white sheets and the optimistically fluffed down comforter. This was a five star hotel and it boasted not simply a comfortable stay but an "experience." Tomorrow she would spend the day with the Prius owner. They would stand on his rooftop surveying over $20,000 worth of solar panels, one orange arch of the Golden Gate Bridge just visible through the surrounding pine trees. He would show her the low flush toilets he'd installed in his six bathrooms, and describe with the glowing eyes of a fanatic the day his electric meter would tick backwards, paying back the grid. His teenage son who rode a bike to his private school and was the President of its Recycling club would let her interview him and she would hear in the easy patter of his responses his father speaking and wonder to what extent we are all products of parental indoctrination. The day would go by so smoothly, she would become bored with the ease of it and wonder as the cameraman shot the Prius owner starting his car with a push of the button, just why she was standing there, in that street, on that afternoon. She'd miss Lester then, the rough texture of his skin, the unexpected detours in his conversation.

After a full day of shooting, she'd take the tapes back to the affiliate and log hours of footage. Then she'd go back over the logs, highlighting the time codes for the shots she must use. Then she'd move on to the interviews. She'd transcribe as many of them as time allowed, long after the 11 o'clock news aired and the station emptied out. Then she'd write the script. The day after that she would edit the piece on a traveling pack in the same room as the Executive Producer and her senior. She'd lean over the editor,

twenty years her senior, with as many years of experience in the business under his belt and she'd insist on laying down those highlighted shots even though he'd look at her through bored eyes that suggested she was a frantic, neurotic thing, that any shot was as good as the next, until the sequence appeared and he saw what she saw and he listened to her from that moment on. The piece would air. Lester in his Rover, shifting gears up Twin Peaks. The environmentalist basking in the golden glint of his panels. And she'd find herself passed the point of exhaustion, retrieving five frantic messages from Lester. He had to see her, he would insist, before she left town.

They'd gotten it all wrong, all wrong. He didn't live in a two bedroom house. He lived in a four bedroom house. He just hadn't shown her the bottom floor because he used the basement for storage. His sister would see that piece. She would shake her head knowingly. Everyone would see that piece. He came off as a stubborn old coot. Attached to his environmentally damaging cars. Nancy sat watching him from the couch as he paced back and forth in front of the set. They were broadcasting *Wheel of Fortune* the stupid players acting like dull sheep, believing that they could in fact win something, that the stupid wheel wasn't rigged. He talked while he paced and Nancy watched him. And he told her to get out if she was going to sit there and judge him, sitting there staring at him like a stupid cow with her eyes wide and that roll of fat straining against her t-shirt. Nancy just said, "Oh, Lester. Let it go." Let it go? How could he let it go? They hadn't just been unfair, they'd been inaccurate. And now Corinne wasn't answering her phone. She had time for him when she needed him but now he was nothing and she'd reduced him to a laughingstock. When she did pick up the phone and answered him he felt, against his better judgment, a wave of relief. She did care. She hadn't simply used

him. She was coming over and he would point out the mistakes and she would air a retraction and his sister would see. She'd see that he was a professional and he could handle things in a professional way. He grabbed the bottle of wine from the kitchen with the yellow bow around its neck and the little blue present he'd purchased for her. He put it in his pocket so Nancy wouldn't see but she stood in the hallway watching him with that bottle in his hand at the front door. And he told her it was over, that it had been over for a very long time, and now that the company was poised to make a huge leap forward it was time for her to move on, to find someone else and she just stood there, staring at him. She didn't cry or object or anything and he got the strangest sense that she silently agreed with him. He slammed the front door and took the steps two at a time, seeing again the dry skin, the crooked teeth the balding forehead pixelated in HD colors. That was not how he viewed himself on a daily basis. On a daily basis he was still that guy, unwinding a paper clip with a British backpacker girlfriend lounging in front of his fire, smoking a joint. He sat heavily on the curb, his knees thrust into his eye line and they were hairy and wrinkled and he wondered what had happened to him. What had happened? He gripped the bottle in one hand and pulled out the present in his other. He sat clutching them both like a Boy Scout waiting for his mother to come pick him up after a day of activities, presents in hand.

Corinne pulled up to the house and he could see from where he was standing the packed bag resting beside her in the passenger seat. She climbed out of the car and pushed her sunglasses up over her head.

"Hey Lester," she said smiling, "What did you think?"

She looked so triumphant, so pleased with herself for a moment he hated to criticize the piece. He looked across the street at his neighbor's home, at the ugly "Beware of Dog" sign posted on the wooden fence and said, "You got a few things wrong."

"Like what?" she asked.

"I live in a four bedroom house," he said, "not a two bedroom. I didn't show you the rooms on the basement level because I use them for storage."

"Oh," she said, "ok. So our comparison was slightly off. I mean, Lester, the other guy had $20,000 worth of solar panels on his roof – even with the additional rooms I don't think your carbon footprint was smaller than his."

"And you didn't use any of the company's logo," he said, glancing back at her. The shine had disappeared from her face. She looked harried and he noticed for the first time the dark circles under her eyes. She looked like an exhausted little girl, in her fancy dress shoes, the suit jacket damp and wilting around her. And he wanted to crush her beneath his boot heel for the promises and lies she'd told just like a conniving little bitch.

"I'm sorry Lester," she said, "in the end I didn't have the editorial control I thought I would have. The Anchor re-wrote everything. Look, Lester, I can't stay. I've got a flight to catch in an hour." She got back into the car and he lurched forward. He didn't want her to leave. He hadn't convinced her yet of everything he knew to be true, about his company, about his Rovers, about himself.

"I got you these," he said, clumsily thrusting the bottle of wine and present at her through the open window. She took them both without looking at him and placed them on top of her bag. The present slid from the top between the seat and the door, to that

irretrievable space and he knew with utmost certainty, that when she returned the car to the rental agency, she wouldn't go searching for it.

"Thanks, Lester," she said. "Look I gotta be going. It was nice meeting you. Nice working with you," and then she was pulling away from the curb, barely glancing at the rearview mirror where he stood in the middle of the street, still dressed from head to toe in safari gear, staring at his neighbor's house.

Right Here, Right Now

The unmarked bus waiting for them at the Bossier Gate had the hint of madness about it, faint traces of jeering white teeth and clattering chains. Two middle-aged men blocked the aisle in front of Nell as she boarded, guffawing and slapping backs, shifting their boom mics to get at one another. "Sound men," she thought uncharitably. She found a seat in the middle where she was hoping she would go unnoticed. A soldier bounded up the steps, yanked the accordion doors closed and pulled them out of the parking lot. They passed an empty airfield bordered by browning cheat grass. The control tower stood over a single B-52 Stratosphere, hulking and utilitarian in the dark. Her stomach was on fire. She shifted in her seat. The gas station coffee had been a grave mistake. Stirring in the powdered creamer she could just make out through the ad splattered window, a Pro-Life Billboard across the street. A fetus, pink and new, enlarged several times over stared back at her with a single strange eye. A few hundred feet away sat a gun shop. Shreveport seemed the land of signs. As she'd driven along Route 51 to the Base, they'd flashed at her from electric poles and cheap nylon stuck into the crabgrass along the cement. Even over the brewing coffee pot someone had taped, "Support, don't prosecute our American troops." She hadn't seen real cream since Dallas. The sun was rising and with it the first notes of reveille.

They bounced over every crack in the road, the rectangular windows rattling loosely in their panes and pulled up to Building 834, a low lying warehouse that would

serve for the duration of the hearing as a makeshift courtroom. They were just in time to catch the pilots' arrival. US Air Force Major John Gunn, clutching his mother's hand and his wife, Molly, trailing behind them, her eyes trained on the concrete path leading from the parking lot to Building 843's main entrance arrived first. Nell imagined Molly could see the star filled sky outside of Kandahar and the strange flashes along the ground that her husband mistook for enemy fire in the blacktop's sparkling quartz. Maybe she even heard her husband's voice calling out, "Check my sparkle, Check my sparkle," before he dropped the first laser guided bomb. He'd killed five Canadian light infantry men, wounded six others. Deep lines bracketed his mouth and as Nell considered his impassive face, she remembered his call sign. Mad Dog.

A few seconds later, Major William Dowding appeared between the parked cars. He was almost a foot shorter than his partner and held his wife's, not his mother's hand. Even in the morning light, Nell could make out his strawberry blonde hair, a thin layer of peach fuzz trapped beneath his peaked pilot's hat. His eyes were set too closely together and what she had expected to find on Gunn's face was there writ large. He leaned on his wife with the uncertain steps of a mourner heading to a gravesite. A weekend warrior, he'd followed Gunn's lead and dropped the second bomb.

Considering their mistake, made Nell think about hers. The last, she supposed, was the most egregious. Hurricane Arlene, the first of the season, had been brewing in the Gulf of Mexico for days, trying to figure out whether to move towards land and ratings gold or fizzle out over deeper, Southern waters. On the morning call, broadcast through speaker phones around the world, their Executive Producer, recently promoted and incapable of hiding the need for a larger audience, bragged that they would be the

first on the ground, covering the hurricane and destruction with the best team available. He urged them to add value to the story. Nell was assigned the piece, his newest, youngest hire. She sat in her edit room and waited for the promised footage. But the bureau chiefs said Arlene was being stubborn. What she didn't know was the Vice President of News Coverage disliked their new Executive Producer, thinking him cocky and inept. Having failed to receive her proper due, she'd urged the southern bureau chiefs to cut the number of crews in the field, claiming there was no use wasting good money on an as of yet undeveloped storm.

By midday Nell had some sad pictures of drizzle off of Key West. A red hurricane flag flapping in the wind. Some choppy surf crashing against a pier. Really, when it was all said and done, nothing. She insisted her senior producer tell the EP they were headed for disaster, but got up from the news desk, went out back and smoked a cigarette instead. What she didn't know was that affiliate and agency footage was coming in on a shared satellite line and it was being logged and inputted into the main server by a production associate, assigned to do just that. Every time the Ops-Producers visited her edit room and asked how things were going, Nell claimed in an increasingly choked voice that "everything was fine, just fine." Her editor, a twenty year veteran, remained silent but looked at her as though she were insane. She tracked her correspondent, alarmed by his aggressive adjectives, the howling winds, the battering rains, the local terror. They did what they could. It was she told herself, given the circumstances, a valiant effort.

They watched her piece on one of three monitors, the other two broadcast the competing networks. It rolled for an excruciating minute and a half with picture of

people boarding up their homes beside shocking footage of destruction and the subsequent human misery it evoked. On NBC, a roof on a nine hundred square foot airplane hangar peeled back with the ease of a dampened Band-Aid and flew away. On CBS, a pink hotel crumbled from the top down like a sand castle dissolving into the sea. Shrubs hurtled through the air like projectile missiles. A man actually came on and said the wind sounded "like a freight train." A woman, her home reduced to a pile of matchsticks wept in the rain, her fat mascara streaked cheeks glistening. Their eight million viewers would have been better served watching their competitors.

Touching base with her camera crew outside the main entrance, Nell wondered briefly if her reputation had preceded her. They'd sent her down to Louisiana to cover the friendly fire trial as a kind of rehabilitation and she imagined the rumors of her affirmative action driven hire raging through the bureau in her absence. She took refuge in the room designated for journalists adjacent to the hearing. It was wired with a closed circuit television and projected a blown out image on its large screen, the white walls blinding and the prosecutor and defense teams, dark, indiscriminate smudges. The opening proceedings were full of jargon and she transcribed as much of it as she could. When she read it back to the lead producer at the Investigative Unit, he sounded bored. He wanted to know if correspondents from Newline or 60 had appeared and seemed frustrated when she answered truthfully that she didn't know. He instructed her to meet Barry Slavin, Gunn's defense attorney. Slavin had documents they needed for their next piece. All she had to do was get them and fax them back to New York, a simple enough task.

She parked the rental car beneath the Waffle House's nine foot sign, the restaurant's globes swimming on the Buick's hood. She found Slavin in a back booth, his bottom lip fuller than the top giving him the sensuous pout of a porn star. The illusion was shattered by his stout body that seemed even at ease as muscled as a waiting fist.

"This is my first time in a Waffle House," she admitted.

He sipped a cup of coffee and motioned for her to sit.

"Thanks for meeting me. I don't know why the media call is so early," she said.

"For security reasons," he said, "They want to check the satellite trucks every day."

"We're not the enemy," she said.

"That's what you think. The military is a paranoid institution. You should see what they're trying to do to my guys."

"I'm really just here," she said, "to get the documents."

He patted a manila folder on the table top. "How do you think the trial is going?" he asked.

"You mean hearing," she said, "Everyone keeps reminding me it's a hearing."

"Right," he said.

"I've only been here a day."

"But you've been covering the story?"

"Sure," she lied.

"You guys up in New York broke the 'Go Pills' angle."

"Right. Tell me again what they're made of?"

"Dexedrine," he said, "They're speed."

"Right, I knew that. I just couldn't remember specifically what kind. And the military offers them to pilots to keep them awake on long missions."

"It's not really a voluntary thing. They say *if* you want to fly you have to take them." He stared at her, his fingers splayed out on top of the documents.

"It just seems," she said choosing her words carefully, "like a terrible mistake."

"Terrible, but not criminal."

"Is there a difference?"

"There most certainly is."

"I think they should apologize," she said, glancing at his hands on the folder.

"Which is tantamount to an admission of guilt," he said.

"Maybe in court but here, I don't know. They *did* make a mistake. Six men are dead. That strikes me as worthy of an apology."

"Do you know what these documents say?"

"No," she said.

"They say that even the command and control plane didn't know there were friendlies in the area. So when my boys radioed in for permission to fire in self-defense thinking they were under attack, they were put on hold for *two minutes*." He leaned across the table and she focused on the angry skin along his jaw, recently burned by a razor. A faint whiff of sweet cologne rose up between them.

"I get it," she recited, "there are no discernible fronts in Operation Enduring Freedom. This is unlike any war in US History." She glanced out the window, the globes reflecting back at her in the glass. She wondered why he needed to convince her

of Gunn's innocence. It was like a game to him, convincing people of what he believed as though controlling the perception of a thing could make it so. He reminded her of Tyler, her fiancé.

"Correct," he said leaning back, "that's correct."

The tension along her cheekbone eased and the right side of her eyelid twitched from the release.

"Listen," Slavin was saying, tapping the folder, "Gunn, he was on top of his game. Third generation Air Force. Dowding on the other hand had no business being there. He should have been back home flying his 747's. Let me tell you something no one else knows, not even your producers up in New York. Dowding was circling way too low. He was going to get hit. My guy, Gunn, moved in to *protect* him. He's the real hero here."

Their last weekend together before getting shipped off to Dallas, they'd gone to a hip-hop lounge. Seated beneath a mounted speaker, the bass sending ripples through their mixed drinks, it had been difficult to talk. She'd left her glasses at home but was fairly certain Tyler was trying to make eye contact with a blonde in a halter top. On the street, she'd commented on his apparent interest and had known as soon as the words left her mouth that it had been a mistake. "You're crazy," he began and the topic of her mental instability became his chief concern. At times he moved in close like Slavin to make his point, at others he walked ahead as though abandoning her to unfamiliar streets. She bounced back and forth between the threat of being hit and the threat of being left behind until they were in a Falafel joint with hissing fluorescent lights overhead, food

spitting on the grill and his spittle flying in her eyes. She was tired of this conversation. She wanted it to be over.

"It just seems to me," she said, "that an apology might solve this thing. Do it in the hearing room. They're no cameras there. It wouldn't be on tape. But the Canadian families and print reporters will pick it up."

"Maybe," he said and she knew he'd already considered it.

"But if you want this piece to air tomorrow, you need to give me the documents."

He slid them across the table to her.

"Thanks," she said.

She returned to her hotel room at the Shreveport Sheraton, a pink cinderblock set back from Route 51. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she stared at a photo of a stranger, a Latina in her early twenties with her arm wrapped around Tyler's neck. They were smiling up at the lens. She'd developed the film hoping to find photos of her sisters on it – something cheery with which to decorate her hotel room. It was hard to pinpoint when she'd known but she guessed she'd known for a while. She didn't really need the picture as proof. She set it aside and changed into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt that read, "I have a black belt in insanity and made her way down to the hotel's exercise room.A treadmill, derelict and forlorn, stood in the corner. It issued a series of beeps, its motor whirring and revving before dying down. She punched the keypad with her index finger. On the mounted television screen a string of images dissolved one into the other. Treated photographs that glowed with a halo effect of a young boy, now an awkward teen, now a soldier in his dress blues, the maroon beret tilted at an angle signaling his membership in an elite Canadian fighting unit. The sound was muted but the photos were chryoned

"Corporal Pierre Belaque." She used the complimentary house phone to call the front desk and waited, seated on the edge of the treadmill for the repair man to appear. He was older than the machine. Stooped over with a few strands of white hair combed across his shiny pate, he reminded her of Marty the film editor back home in New York who spent his days alone in a windowless room splicing reels together and framed by postcards from overseas correspondents. The maintenance man's red suspenders yanked on a pair of faded jeans. A tan leather belt sagged at his hips. He groaned as he eased it from his waist, lowering it to the floor with a clunk. He didn't acknowledge her, an omission she'd grown used to from an older generation down South and flipped the on/off button. The machine came to life. He pressed the touch-screen panel. It revved, her hopes along with it and then died again. He stared at it. "Good luck with that," she said and slid her headphones on. She sprinted down the hallway. A man opened his door. A woman stood behind him. He stopped as she flashed past, throwing up an arm to protect his companion from the flash of brown skin. "Sorry," she yelled over the techno beat. Breaking the rhythm of her pants, she inhaled the hotel's hot air. It felt as prickly as fiberglass insulation in her lungs. Her legs pumped down the worn carpeting and the smell of sweat surrounded her heavy in the still air. She picked up speed in front of the Grand Ballroom, digging in her edges before turning down a narrow corridor that dead ended into an emergency exit door. She slammed her hand against the cold glass, leaving behind a partial imprint. "One," she said to no one in particular.

Colonel Pierre Belaque took the stand. He was just a dark smudge on the screen but for once the journalists were silent. A half-eaten turkey sandwich sat on the table beside Nell. It smelled like congealing mayonnaise. "When the flash hit," he said, "I

was enveloped in white light. 'Why can't I touch the ground?' I wondered. Then everything went dark. When I woke up my ears were ringing. I could see someone's boot. It belonged to one of the dead guys. I didn't find out who until about three months later. I could just make out a light moving on the ground. It was a medic checking the bodies. I tried to call out but what I didn't know was my chest was filling with blood. I prayed that I would make it home to see my wife and son. He'd been born almost three weeks to the day. I hadn't met him yet." He paused.

"The other day," he began again, "I was walking to the gas station about a block from my house in Winnipeg. A storm came up. There was a flash of lightning and I hit the ground. My face was pressed into a puddle." He touched his cheek. "I don't know what just made me think of that but it seemed important," he concluded.

That night their piece aired and it made no mention of the Corporal's injuries or the way he seemed disoriented while retelling his story. It accused the military again of incompetence and after the show aired, she drove to Bossier City and bought a pair of brown suede ankle boots. She treated herself to a steak dinner at the 50/50 Casino in downtown Shreveport and purchased a bottle of Jack Daniels for her hotel room. She dreamt that night that she was locked in a prison cell with a convicted sociopath. He was bare-chested and whipcord lean, his muscles the result of fasting and excessive weight lifting. His skin was covered in faint blue etchings, the ink applied by a jury-rigged Bic pen attached to a sterilized straight needle. His head was shaved. He smelled oddly enough of Egyptian musk, the kind sold in brown vials on Harlem Street corners. He had a knife and was leisurely pricking the skin along her collar bone with it. Blood beaded up beneath the tip. Behind her crouched a young boy about six or seven years old. He had

blonde hair and his blue eyes were wide. It was understood that she was standing between him and the blade. The knife didn't scare her as much as the convict's oversized brass buckle. She stared at it. Nick. Nick. Nick.

On the following day, a man wearing a full body wet suit, snorkeling mask and flippers appeared at the Bossier Gate. He carried a sign reading, "Tell Al Gore, I'm here." He walked awkwardly on dry land, lifting each webbed foot high and free of the other. When the soldier checked the media transport bus' overhead mirror, she smiled back. At Building 834's security check-in, a soldier in full desert camouflage and boots called her, "Sugar." Two others snickered nearby. *Newsline's* lead anchor, Liam Hastings, cornered Molly Gunn in the hallway. He had the corn fed good looks of a 1950's movie star, but it was his voice that had made him famous. It poured out of him rich and soft like a river of processed, melted cheese and Molly Gunn finally released from her husband's tether was looking up, right into Hasting's face. Bathed in those mellifluous tones, as intoxicating as the studio lights humming back in New York, she seemed transfixed by the possibility of escape and Nell momentarily hated him for duping her. She stayed late, threw softball questions to Slavin and fed his responses up to New York, the truck lights flashing around her, the men staring.

Just when she'd given up hope on the pilots altogether, US Major Dowding against his attorney's advice stood before the crappy camera and addressed the Canadian families. His voice was steady as he read the prepared statement. Gunn sat beside him, opening and closing his fists.

"I am a soldier," Dowding began, "I accept my duty. I believe there is evil in this world. I believe it is my duty to protect the weak from that evil – my sons, my wife.

Your sons, your wives. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would hurt a fellow soldier. I ask God every night, "Why did this happen?" This never knowing will be my punishment. I am so sorry. I've never understood the meaning of that word until today. I hope my apology can bring you some peace."

As soon as he was done, the Public Information Office, Sergeant Abrams, a neat woman in a tan uniform asked her and her crew to leave. "With pleasure," she said. The Sergeant was apologetic. The orders had come down from the Pentagon. Waiting for her flight back to Dallas, the bureau chief explained that their Department of Defense correspondent had also been pulled until they were able to present, according to the Generals, a more balanced picture of the events in Kandahar. She returned to her maroon hotel room outside of Dallas and waited.

Running on the treadmill, almost a week later, she watched the Space Shuttle Columbia blow up, and disintegrate into a thousand pieces overhead. Nell and her cameraman, Tom, raced down I-95, leaning out of the window to keep the trail of smoke and debris in sight. They trudged through east Texas' damp woods looking for space parts with a young rancher who guided them through the converted graveyard on his ATV. He wore a trucker's hat pulled down low and a Carhart jacket against the cool winter evening. Unlike some of the older rancher's, he didn't seem to view their presence as an intrusion. Tom was shooting on a tripod, his camera lens cocked all the way down to the ground. He panned up slowly capturing a hatch door, its window still intact and the dying light on the horizon where the crew evaporated into thin air. He had a queer way of seeing things. She imagined his eye now pressed against the rubber guard and the world set at an angle. It was the same light that had hovered on the horizon of

their first date. He picked her up in a used 1985 silver Volvo station wagon. The car was something her suburban neighbors would have used to ferry their children to and from soccer practice. She'd assumed the faint smirk on his face as she said goodbye to her parents and sisters was an awareness of that fact. He was easy behind the wheel, the car like his studio apartment in a fashionable section of Boston a gift from his mother. They took the Mass Pike into the city. He was a slow, careful driver, nonchalantly slipping between lanes. After the last toll, they mounted the final rise. For the briefest moment the highway was on par with the highest seats of the Boston University stadium. The elation of the heart. It was the same feeling she had as a young girl crouched beside her canary yellow painted radiator whispering life into her dolls, her legs folded against the hard grained, dusty floor, her pulse throbbing in her ear, whispering breath, whispering words. That same sense of the infinite soared all around her now in the thousands of empty seats, the half-shell frame like a whale's exposed ribcage, the Charles River silvering in the twilight, the Citgo sign, its triangular form filling with blue, now red and the brick row houses twinkling below. She'd glanced at him in his white t-shirt set against his beautiful brown skin, his firm wrist and hand sprinkled with golden hair locked against the wheel and thought, "if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be right here, right now."