

# **Chains in the Attic**

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## The Union Buffet

When my parents were young, broke and newly married, every day they waited until three o'clock in the afternoon to eat their one meal for the day. They'd sit hunched over their plates, waiting for the food to settle further into their intestines until they could stuff down more fat and salt and grease. This one to two-hour venture to the corner diner met their food requirements for the day. And if they drank a tall glass of water and went to bed early enough, my parents could survive comfortably with their memories of oily corn on the cob and cold mashed potatoes.

Perhaps it is this tradition of theirs that draws me to the doors of these all-you-can-eat restaurants. It becomes the center of my existence for the day, my visions of plate after plate of hastily prepared food, which bakes on the hot bar for much longer than the health department would allow. Even after the over-sauced, overcooked, crusty-edged meal left my dinner date bedridden, clutching her stomach for three days, I am defenseless against the call of the grease.

With the exception of my late-night chain-smoking habits, I generally pride myself in being an *under* consumer. I don't shop at the mall or buy new things. I don't mind sewing up the hole in my shirt or stuffing a wad of duct tape to cover the hole in the sole of my shoe. Nothing turns my stomach more about American culture than the wastefulness, the over-consumption. But despite all this, Monday night finds me sitting in the corner alone with eyes half closed, a third plate barely finished, and the water pushed to the far end of the table, (water takes up room in the stomach). *lean't waste this food*, I think, and I take a bite of cold creamed corn.

The newest buffet in town plays host to 13 kinds of ice cream, four flavors of pudding, curried vegetables, pizza, sushi and French fries. There's ready-made mac and cheese, pot pies, apple pie, stuffed mushrooms, pigs in a blanket. There's green canned olives and ice burg lettuce, kung pao and spinach casserole. By the fourth plate I am ill, detesting the hardening food and wondering how I fooled myself once again into thinking I had to eat so much.

When the waitress comes to take the final plate, I avoid her eyes. I can't even tell where she's from or what language she speaks. I am sure she thinks of me as a hopeless, wasteful, dumb American. But she smiles as she wipes up my crumbs, my remnants of conspicuous consumption.

"That it?" she asks warmly.

"That's it," I sigh.

"See you next week?"

"Yep," I say. "See you next week."

## The Legend of Willie Jones

The knob felt cold in my seven-year-old hands. There was a man behind that door. And it wasn't my father. My father had left us just months before in his mint-green Thunderbird with the cool leather seats. Tires slipping on oil and tears, my father had driven away.

We liked that my mother made friends with Willie Jones. We liked when he stayed over on the weekends, because he worked at the Oscar Meyer Wiener factory and once brought my brother and me two giant, inflatable hotdogs. It almost lessened our resentment at the hint of perfume we smelled on my mother's neck, the whisper of her and the sound of her heels clicking down the stairs.

Red taillights swallowed by darkness and distance, she left us with our gum-popping babysitter who didn't like our puppet shows. She left us with the hot dogs; and the plump, plastic sword fights made it almost okay.

It was Sunday morning when I found that my mother locked her bedroom door. The doorknob clicked and turned when I picked the lock with my thumbnail.

When the door flung open, the sunlight blinded me from the sight of Willie's face. But not his body, enormous and naked. And not the obtrusive flesh that held my eyes captive.

I couldn't see my mother, but I heard her gasp as I ran away. Away from her and Willie Jones. Away from those giant inflatable hot dogs.

Later my mother found me in the basement hidden behind the dryer. My back trembled with noiseless sobs. I shriveled away from her gentle touch and her murmured apologies. Even with my eyes squeezed shut, I could still see Willie Jones's penis.

Willie was gone when I came upstairs, and later my mother made us breakfast, as she always did on Sundays. But on this day, I wasn't so hungry. The spoon stood upright in the clumps of my oatmeal, and a cold chunk clung to my chin.

"Men and women have a certain thing that we call needs," my mother said. Her fingers tugged at the strands of her terry cloth robe.

*Needs.* The word rolled lazily around my head. Needs were something I could stash away in my pocket. A blue marble with flecks of gold and red coiled around its heart. Needs were something I could crack in half with my teeth and lick away its colors with the pink of my tongue. I looked into my mother's eyes, and Willie's appendage stared back at me. I stuck my hand into my pocket for the marble that wasn't there and remembered that I lost something.

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## My Mama's Beautiful

Miss Perry's smiling ruby lips called me to the front of the classroom. "Class, I have an announcement to make."

My ears burned as I dragged my feet across the linoleum. The echo of my footsteps, the only sound in the room. And then I stood, guilty as charged, beside Miss Perry's wooden desk, and braced myself for the inevitable.

Miss Perry often called me to the front of the class, to the back of the class, or to the orange plastic chair in the corner. Things were simple back then in third grade. You were either a good kid or a bad kid. Miss Perry liked to narrow her cold green eyes and toss her head of reddish curls while reminding me that I, Tammy Harris, was a bad, bad girl.

"Now everyone stay quiet," said Miss Perry. She held up her index finger, a symbol that meant we had to keep our mouths shut or we'd all be sorry. "I have an announcement boys and girls. Turn around, Tammy, and face the class."

Miss Perry's punishments weren't always unfounded. Maybe sometimes I was bad. Laughing out loud too much with Darnell, the skinny-legged boy who stuttered. And *maybe* I should have gotten sent to the principal's office for chasing Barbie Pagan across the wooden bridge and through the woods and all the way home, because she said mean things about my mother.

But Miss Perry got the angriest when I erased all the vowels on Trent Thomas's spelling test. His answers were all right when I wanted them to be wrong.

Trent Thomas and me had once been in love and used to "go out." He, the doe-eyed blonde boy, always chased me across the playground during recess. And just when I pretended to be a little slower. Just when 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade white boys maybe weren't so icky, and maybe I'd turn my cheek, maybe let him kiss it, Trent Thomas put an end to it all. His mama said, "Don't *ever* mess with black girls."

Stiff-armed and standing before Miss Perry, I heard Trent Thomas snicker. The heat spread from my ears to my face.

"Class," Miss Perry said. "Tammy Harris has a *beautiful* mother."

My eyes darted wildly across the room. I stared at Trent's chicklet-shaped teeth, stared him in the eye.

Last week, my mother had come for a parent-teacher conference, and now Miss Perry thought she was beautiful. I held Trent's eye until his grin twisted to a grimace.

My mother *was* beautiful. She wore her hair parted neatly at the center. She twisted her braids into two neat buns that perched over her ears, just like Princess Leah. If the world was lucky, my mother's hair swayed gently across her back, kissing the air with her strawberry shampoo. And if I was lucky, I could press my face into her hair and breathe. I loved to watch my mother pluck her eyebrows and outline the shape of her lips with a light brown pencil. I loved to watch her hands powder the skin on her face, and the pink to her cheeks. I'd stare at her reflection in the mirror, the honey skin, the dark brown eyes. My mother was beautiful.

But this was uncharted territory for Miss Perry and me. It must be good. It must have meant that / was good. Maybe Miss Perry would give me a new desk. One that was

next to hers. Maybe I could pass out the lunches, and I'd skip Trent Thomas. Be the first in line for recess, and Trent would stand in the back.

But later my mother frowned at the story, and Miss Perry's words felt awkward on my tongue. They recoiled against our kitchen walls. Hollow words that echoed like my footsteps to Miss Perry's desk. They didn't belong to us. A compliment my mother didn't want, and I felt ashamed to have handed her, though I didn't know why.

"She said *what* to the class?" my mother said.

"She said you were beautiful," I said. By then my smile turned rigid.

"You mean to tell me, your teacher summoned you to the front of the classroom to tell your classmates she approved of the way I look?"

It hadn't always been this way. They used to say my mama was as ugly as the goop you find on the bottom of your shoe. Or at least her aunties did.

"Yo skin is so black," they used to say.

"Yo hair so nappy," they'd say to my mother. "Too bad you don't have that *good* hair like yo mama and yur brothers. Yo mama so beautiful with that light, light skin and that good hair. How'd your eyelashes turn out so tiny?"

My mama was ugly. Or so they said.

But Miss Perry's compliment burned worse. Like icicles on my feverish head. I wished then that I could take them back. That I could crawl into my mother's lap and press away the frown on her head with the tips of my fingers.

Miss Perry's words, the ones that had carried me over the dandelions that had gone to seed, across the wide grassy field to my house, two steps at a time to our green front door, turned foreign. Like us, in our white suburb of Chicago.



I couldn't understand Miss Perry then. Or how Miss Perry, before she met my mother, had us all figured out. I was a pickaninny, a wild thing, a creature out of the big black lagoon. Braids coiling from my head like untamed snakes. I was Topsy from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and my mama had a bright red kerchief wrapped tightly around her head, just like on the box of pancakes before Aunt Jemima found hair relaxer.

We never talked about it again, but shortly after that day, I was placed in the gifted and talented program at school, instead of in the orange chair in the back of the room that faced the corner. I went on special field trips with all the other kids Miss Perry thought were smart. Once we took a bus downtown to the planetarium, where the ceiling was lit up with stars. Sometimes we molded animal shapes out of clay or made log cabins out of painted Popsicle sticks.

We never talked about that day, but I watched my mother grow tired. I watched the pale-faced make up begin to thicken on her face. The hair she dyed two shades lighter to apply for a job as a manager in an office.

My mother's in her 50s now. She has blonde streaks in her hair and wears hazel contacts, and people always say she's beautiful.

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## Hair

Sarah kept my hair in a plastic bag.

"Hurry up," I'd said before she cut it. If she didn't hurry I was going to change my mind.

Sitting on the lid of the toilet, my eyes squeezed shut, I listened to the scissors gnawing away at the dreadlocks. I felt them inch down my back like a fuzzy-footed millipedes and slide to the bathroom floor.

I didn't open my eyes until the scissors grew silent and the only sound was Sarah's breath. I didn't open my eyes until every last one of them lay limp at my feet. The hair that swung from my scalp like jungle vines for more than 11 years.

A week later, Sarah swears she walked into her room and found the dreadlocks scattered throughout her house; on top of the piano, on the kitchen floor, poking out from beneath her bed. Maybe someone was playing a joke, we laughed. But that night I dreamt about the dreadlocks as they escaped the plastic bag. They crawled on their furry bellies the half-mile from Sarah's house to mine, determined to reattach their bodies to the follicles of my hairless head.

The last time I cut my hair was back in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Back then, I was forbidden to stand out in the rain without a hood. The water extinguished my beauty shop hairdo and with that my mother's hard-earned money.

"It's supposed to rain today," my mother would say. "You'd better wear that coat with the hood."

"But I don't want to wear that coat, Mom," I complained. "That coat is ugly."

"Well, I'm not taking you to the beauty shop if your hair gets nappy," she said.

And so I'd wear the ugly coat.

Back then, girls like me were never supposed to cut our hair. Instead we forced our hairs into thin, straight lines, hair that wasn't meant to be straightened. We scorched our scalps with lye and straightening combs, oiling our heads with electric green stuff that comes in jars and sticks to the walls when you throw it. We sat patiently in hard-backed seats, stifling our whimpers as our mothers brushed our heads until they were raw, trying to tame the wild out of them, but it just never worked.

I hadn't planned to have my hair cut that day in my 7<sup>th</sup> grade year, and neither had my mother. Her best friend Cynthia, a Tupperware hostess, convinced my mother that a new hairstyle, a Jheri curl, would lead my hair to grow long, healthy and luxurious. At least that's what the package said. Instead it left a round bald patch the size of a golf ball on the back of my head. My mother tried to fix her mistake. She cut my hair into a tiny afro with a patch on the other side of my head to match.

My mother never liked afros. Back in the 70s people strolled through the streets of Chicago with afros hovering over their heads like halos. But in the suburbs, my mother sat before the mirror on her floral comforter, and ironed her own hair stick straight.

In Los Angeles in the 80s, I was the *only* girl with an afro, and so the next day my mother kept me home from school. I covered the bald patches and the afro with a White Sox baseball hat that I'd borrowed from my brother.

Later, my mother drove me to the other side of town and stopped in front of a store with rows of plastic heads on shelves in the front window.

"I don't want to wear a wig, mom," I said from the back seat, adjusting my baseball hat.

"Well, what else can I do with it?" she said. "Quit worrying so much."

When we walked into the shop, the saleslady let me try on as many wigs as my mother wanted. She, herself, wore a straw-colored wig that looked itchy and curled up at the ends like Mary Tyler Moore's.

"Oh it looks really good," said the saleslady. She tugged at a shoulder-length curl of her wig. Her nametag said Tarn,' and she offered a sympathetic nod.

I stared at the strange creature piled on top of my head and at the saleslady's hands as she pulled and teased its strands. My mother had chosen a bouffant wig that looked like it belonged on someone's grandmother.

On the way home, I stared at my new hair in the rearview mirror. It looked like a dead black poodle.

My mother watched me, while she drove, through the corner of her eye and pretended not to notice my tears. "Now it will really grow," she said, and she was sure the kids at school would love it.

My first day back to school my social studies teacher did love it. He made a point of telling me so. In fact, everyone that day made a point of telling me what they thought, especially the boy with the bleached blonde bangs that hung over one eye. He pulled the wig from my head and threw it across the lunchroom.

The wig sailed in slow-motion over the sea of blonde bobs and bowl cuts, mocking white faces. My hands reached up to cover my head but it was too late. My bald head exposed like a crime.

It took several years to stop listening to people about what to do with my hair, especially my mother. The first time she noticed my dreadlocks growing, she reached out to touch them, then flinched and took two steps back.

"But it looks so *different*" she said. "I mean... it's *really* different."

"Yeah, it is different," I said and then changed the subject.

For now my hair clings to my head in tight little curls, like my 7<sup>th</sup> grade afro but without the patches. Sarah says she'd like to braid it, but I think I'll let my afro grow tall and wide and hover over my head like a halo.

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## The Present

"You know bout Ayvonics?" The man they called Charlie stumbled out of the garage like he'd spent the day in a barroom that closes before dinner. The men, mostly old ones, were gathered in the shade of the garage, sipping honey-colored whiskey out of styrofoam cups. They sat on metal folding chairs and upturned buckets, laughing and sweating, the garage door open, the air stiff with heat.

"Ayvonics?" I said. "I don't know what you mean."

I'd been sitting alone in my grandfather's kitchen, but now Charlie hovered over me and rocked back and forth on his heels.

"C'mon now.. .the way we talk," he said. "Ya know.. .conversate."

"Oh, Ebonics.... Well, I sort of do, I guess." The heat from the steel pot of greens on the stove rose to the crown of my head. I folded a stray napkin into a fan and studied the width of its creases.

"You don't know nuthin bout no Ayvonics. Ah kin tell." Charlie slurred as he spoke. The cup caved in from the grip of his fingers and the whiskey slopped around his hand. "Me?" he answered, as if I'd asked. "Ah know all kinsa languages...."

My head nodded, though I wasn't sure why, and the corners of my lips began to twitch.

"Do you know where my grandfather is?"

It was supposed to be a family reunion for my grandfather's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, but only six or seven of us showed up. We are scattered now, like the dust of our dead ones,

and we've all come to expect family gatherings such as this. Outnumbered by my grandfather's flock of drinking buddies.

Charlie was a fool. Everyone said so as he followed me, staggering back to the garage. But he'd seen through me, awkward and alone, a stranger in the land of my own kin.

My family's roots lay buried, although we pretend they aren't, deep in the rural south. We cut the lights out and tiptoe to bed when we hear the southern breeze, sweet like the flesh of oranges, calling out to us in whispers. We skip the funerals of old folks we don't remember, and when we close our eyes, the marshlands rub at our angles and the warm lakes lap against our insides.

Years ago, my family's feet were firmly planted in the dirt of three little sister towns, which have been swallowed up by what they now call Orlando. The roads were made of sand and miles and miles of orange groves stretched all around. Folks hung out in the square and drank cheap liquor, sucked on grapefruits and swapped neighborhood gossip and lies.

Long before my birth, the City came strolling through our one-street towns, beckoning with her crooked finger and sequined dress. She tilted her feathered hat to shield her eyes from the sun, hiked up her dress, and one by one dug up the roots of my foremothers and fathers with a shovel she found in a nearby shed. When the City left, my ancestors stared after her. The leather heels she wore dug holes in the earth and a trail of gold sequins glinted in the dirt. My grandparents followed after in a hurry, leaving their fishing poles and mango trees behind. They left their bare feet on the dusty porches and

strutted on smooth sidewalks in new shoes they bought at Sears. They traded in the moon for a lamppost and didn't think a thing about it.

Everyone but Charlie crowded their way into the dining room beside the kitchen. They'd heaped paper plates with buttered biscuits, ribs and mashed potatoes laid thick with gravy. They threw their heads back and laughed at my grandfather's gold sequined birthday hat. Told him his head was too big, that he was old and senile.

My grandfather settled in at the head of the dining room table. He watched his dinner guests hold hands for prayer with half opened eyes and flashed the gap between his teeth, drunk and happy.

I stood in the corridor with my plate, but no one seemed to notice. There was no more room at the table. And no extra chair. Only rows of touching elbows. The room felt hot with breath. With steaming corn.

My grandfather closed his eyes to say grace, and I slipped back into the kitchen with my plate.

"Lord, ye place dis meal befo us...."

I listened to the soothing voices, the way one word leaned into the next, like two palm trees bending and swaying, the tops of them touching.

And then I heard my mother's sandals slap against her heels. I heard her darting back and forth across the dining room. She opened and closed the blinds. I heard the flash of her camera. Pictures of people masticating.

"Pam, sit down and eat," someone said.

"Hold on," said my mother. "Smile Daddy. Wait, you need a toothpick."



"They in the kitchen in the junk drawer," my grandfather said between bites.

My mother's face appeared in the doorway.

"Why are you in here by yourself?" she said. She opened the drawer and pulled out a toothpick.

"There's not really any room," I said.

"That's ridiculous, I'll go find a chair."

"No, Mom. Really, I want to stay here," I said. "It's too crowded. Pa won't even notice...."

But my mother was already gone. "Here you go Daddy," I heard her say.

The laughter spilled in from the other room, and the kitchen felt even emptier then. I picked bits of pink ham out of the collard greens and hid them in my napkin. Through the window I watched Charlie slinking out of the garage. He sunk into his bright yellow jeep and drove away, dodging the fresh-cut lawns and mailboxes.

The grease from the ham soaked through the napkin and left splotches of discolored teal on the tablecloth. I covered the oil stains with my plate. My mother was right. This was ridiculous. I was a grown woman, but I felt like a pubescent child. Like my legs had turned to gangly sticks hidden under the table.

I could be in the cafeteria at Orville Wright Junior High School in L.A. It could be the last day I would set foot in a school lunchroom.

The worst lunch ever. Hunched over my tray. The fluorescent lights ticked. The smell of meat and rubber sneakers. Adolescent sweat and laughter steamed the windows. I sat alone at the long, long table and traced someone's secret crush with the tip of my fork.

Only moments before, I'd walked through the crowd of noisy kids, gripping a tray of Salisbury steak and canned green peas that weren't really green. A boy, who'd been waiting in line behind me tugged at the back of my shirt.

"You got change fo a dollah?" the boy asked.

"No," I said. "I don't have any money."

"What you say?"

"I *said*, I don't have any money. I spent it already."

"What you mean you don't *have* no money," he said, eyes growing wide and excited. "Man, she talk like she white!"

Hundreds of eyes. Eyes of every shape, size and color. Blue eyes, brown eyes, green, hazel, almond-shaped, red-rimmed, horn-framed; they all turned toward the object of the boy's pointing finger, me.

The tray of food grew heavy in my hands, and my chin sank into my neck.

"No, I don't," I whispered to the floor, but the words fell angular and sharp from my tongue. No one heard above the laughter. And no one saw the pea roll off my tray and land on my shoelace.

"Yes, she do," the boy addressed the crowd. His eyes twinkled. "She think she white!"

The laughter rose and fell across the lunchroom and clamored its way into my chest. It echoed there, crowding out the inside parts, and my heart felt empty like an old tin can.

Later, I slipped through the hole in the fence by the baseball field, skipping P.E. and my favorite Honors English class.

It wasn't my fault that my mother never taught me Black English. Like the mothers and fathers before her, she placed her sun-brown hand in the City's velvet glove.

My mother first moved us to Chicago; then 2,000 miles away to Southern California, where people play electric guitar on roller blades and drink cappuccino in ceramic neon cups.

I grew up without hearing the stories of the naked road my family once tread upon, the gardens they raised with their hands, the buckets they filled with water to wash the dirt and pain from their skin. My mother kept from us the stories of my great-grandmother, who mailed us crates of oranges and did day work for the white folks. She never explained that we called my great-grandmother Nanny because that's who she was to the white children she worked for, and she liked the way it sounded. My mother never explained the shame she had of the orange groves, the day work, or the simple house in Eatonville that smelled of citrus and rotting wood. Instead I heard stories of my mother's new ambition to buy me a nose job and a lip tuck.

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"Miko, you too good fo' the oF folks? What you doin' hidin' in here?" said my grandfather. He'd made his way into the kitchen. A toothpick dangled from the corner of his lips.

"I don't know," I said.

"Where my present?"

"But we didn't sing happy birthday yet."

"Ain't nobody singin no happy birthday. I dun heard that song 74 times," he said.

"Now go git my present."

I disappeared into the guest bedroom and found my grandfather's present, a literary magazine, stuffed in the bottom of my backpack. I hadn't wrapped it yet, and now there was a crease on the back cover. I fanned the pages, dusted off the crumbs and loose tobacco.

"Now what's this?" My grandfather extended his hand.

"It has a couple of my stories in it," I said. "You can read it later, Pa."

"Don't be tellin' me what to do on my birthday," he said. "You just like yo' mama."

My grandfather took off his sequined hat and laid it on the table. He fished a pair of reading glasses out of his breast pocket and tucked the arms over his ears. His eyes moved up and down the page, and he licked the pad of his thumb and turned to another, and then another. He began to read the words out loud, and as I watched his lips the old emptiness in my chest had begun to fill, the old tin can heart overflowing.

My grandfather smiled when he finished reading my stories. And I looked at him and smiled back.

"Ya'll, we got a writer in the house." My grandfather yelled into the dining room when he'd finished reading. "Are ya'll deaf and dumb? Come in here ya'll and listen to my present," he said.

"What you want," someone said. And one by one everyone shuffled, with their full bellies, back into the kitchen. Under my grandfather's birthday command, I stood at the center of the room with the magazine in my hand.

I looked around at all the faces. The half drunk old men, some of them still chewing. My aunty dusting the skirt on her floral print dress. My uncles, smiling, and my

mother nodding her approval. This room was filled with love and acceptance and people who wanted to listen. This was my grandfather's kitchen, not Orville Wright Junior High School.

I enunciated each word, as I read the stories aloud. I listened to my voice. Because it was *my* voice, the words falling angular and sharp from my tongue. I liked the way one word leaned into the next. And I *liked* the way it sounded.

"*My* grandbaby got a gift with words," Pa said, and the gap-toothed grin never left his face.

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### Chains in the Attic

My son, Logan, is ten years old. He's a shy kid, the kind who looks down at his feet rather than look you in the eye. He walks with his shoulders hunched slightly forward, his hands stuffed deep in his pockets, as if he's ashamed of his hands.

I hated taking Logan to the park when he was little. All those other babies screeching and kicking while they rocked back and forth in their swings. But Logan made no sound at all. His face unmoved, he clung to the swing with his dimpled hands, and summoned the clouds with his eyes.

"Jeez, why is he so serious looking?" my friend, Gina once said. "I mean, I'm not trying to insult you, but it's kinda creepy when a little kid stares at you like that." She pointed down at the Halloween photograph of our year-old sons.

She'd dressed her boy, Eli, as a spotted cow, and Logan was pumpkin. Eli's mouth stretched open, and you could see the laughter bubbling from his throat, the thin stream of drool dripping from his chin. But Logan's lips were pressed together tightly, his eyes wide and staring at something past the camera.

My son began to speak the year he turned four. In sentence fragments. Words he made up. I enrolled him in preschool three days a week with hopes that he'd make a friend.

Sunshine warmed the windows of the classroom, and the teachers hung brightly colored construction paper with scribbled drawings on its walls.

On the first day of school, Logan and I sat together and watched the children paint with their fingers and make tiny sculptures out of clay. But when the teacher offered Logan his own clay to squeeze and press and mold with his fingers, he just stared at her outstretched hand.

The children played with each other's hair at story time and held hands during recess. Then, at circle time they stretched their little bodies like cats and made animal noises, but I felt Logan flinch in my lap.

After a week it was time for Logan to attend preschool without me. I left him crying at the window, and when I returned at noon, his tears were dried, but I could still see his face from behind the curtain as I approached.

"Has he been at this window all day?" I asked the head teacher Ms. McCall.

"Well, he joined us at circle time, but he wouldn't sit in the circle," she said. A blonde tuft of hair had fallen over her lip. "Don't worry.. .it's normal. It just takes time for everyone to adjust."

"What about friends?" I said. "Has he made any yet?" I could feel the tears collecting in a pool behind my eyes.

"Ms. Murray, we just need to have patience," she said. "He's just a little shy."

*Shy?* On bad days, like the days when we went to the park, the days when I wondered if my son would ever be right, I blamed Logan's father. He never hit Logan. It was me who talked back. Like the time he kicked me in the spine, punched me in the stomach. From the front porch Logan had watched, his mouth open, but there was no sound. Some invisible fist pounding away at the words in his gut.

On other days it was the houses we lived in. The way our walls were smeared with crayons and insults and the blood from all our hearts.

It didn't matter whose fault it was. I just wanted to make everything right.

I turned to gather up Logan's things from his cubby and saw two little girls building a city with wooden blocks. All around us there were little kids laughing, teasing, arguing over toys, peeling glue from their fingertips. But Logan stood waiting for me by the door. His face without expression, his hand perched on the doorknob.

Mr. Johnson taught Logan for both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades. Twice a year I met him for a parent-teacher conference, and each time I already knew what he would say.

"Logan really needs to work on his social skills. He plays all by himself," he said. "The other kids try to relate to him, but it's like he's in his own world." Mr. Johnson sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"Do you think I should send him to a psychologist?" I said.

I cried that night at the dinner table.

"What's wrong Mom?" Logan said.

"I want you to have friends," I said.

"I have friends," he lied.

I cried even harder.

The years would come and go. We would come and go, Logan and me. To the police station. Until we came back home. To the courthouse. Where I bounced my child up and down on my knee. Where I built my courage out of bricks and carried him, my



life, under cruel stares, and lied to that blue-eyed judge, and said his father didn't. What good is a father who rots in the county jail? Or a mother who can't feed her son?

A different house. A different state. A move from the west to the east, because we needed to feel the seasons change. To make us new. Make us different.

The teachers changed. Hours with a therapist. But Logan's stories remained. There were still few words. Fewer smiles and not a friend to speak of. Alone on the playground. A conversation with a make-believe friend.

It would be years before we found it. Before we pulled apart those burly fingers that clutched my little angel boy's voice. The corners of Logan's mouth flickered when we found it in the window at the pawnshop. It was Logan's eighth birthday, and we paid cash for the saxophone.

We pulled that rusty, old thing from its velvet-lined case, and Logan held it to his chest. Held the mouthpiece to his pursed lips and blew into it with a wind from somewhere else. That sound was so loud. So loud and offensive. It pierced my ears, crawled all over my skin, and no matter where I went in the house, I couldn't quite escape. All those words that Logan never said shook the lids on the kitchen pots, climbed under the blankets, and echoed in the baseboards. It rumbled through our house like an old, lost soul rattling chains up in the attic.

My son, Logan, is ten years old, and my father has never met him.

My father kept a saxophone tucked away in the hallway closet with all his dusty, unworn suits. I never heard him play it, but once when I was little, I found an old photograph of my father on some unknown Chicago stage. He was wearing a beige suit

with big, pointy lapels, clutching a saxophone in his large brown hands. In the photograph his eyes were closed, and I would close my own eyes and try to imagine its sound. But whatever song my father played that night was trapped within the cracks of the faded Polaroid.

My parents separated when I was five, but for a week or two I didn't notice. We lived in Chicago back then, and my father was a janitor, working late into the nights. Sometimes he hugged me in the mornings before I left for school, his collar always smelling of Windex.

Aunt Peggy always babysat us while my mother was at work. She was with us the day my father came to get his things. We stood there at the window and watched my father stuff his suitcases into the Thunderbird's trunk. He told us he was moving away. That my mother didn't want him to live with us, and someday, when we were older, we would understand.

I ran down the concrete stairs of our house and hurled my five-year-old body onto the hood of car. Aunt Peggy watched my father pry my hands away. She watched me run after the car, all the way to the end of our cul-de-sac, but my feet were no match for the Thunderbird.

For a few years I visited my father on the weekends. He remarried a woman with three children of her own. At night my new, older siblings watched horror movies on cable in the room where I slept. I would press my palms to my ears and squeeze the pillow over my head to drown out the screams that belted out from the TV.

The horror movies seeped into my dreams, and in the mornings my blankets were always wet. I woke up early to stuff the sheets into the washing machine, and hoped no one noticed that I wet myself or the dog sniffing around the carpet where I'd slept.

Once when I was running through my father's yard, his German shepherd sank his teeth into my leg.

"I can't believe he didn't take you to the hospital," my mom said, disgusted. "It could have gotten infected, and then they'd have to cut your leg off."

After that I was only allowed to visit my father during the day. Our visits dwindled to one afternoon per week, then eventually down to once every month.

Sometimes my mother dialed my father's number and I'd ask for money for food or a new pair of shoes. He always promised to mail us a check, and every day after school, I rushed to the mailbox. I knew my dad had written me a letter. I knew he'd sent me a sheet of stickers that smelled like grape or maybe a stick of peppermint gum. I knew he put it all in a large yellow envelope with a check for my mom.

My father always promised us, but never sent a thing. And eventually he stopped returning my calls.

My mother moved us to California when I was 10. I saw my father once before we left. My legs were growing long, like his. And I could see traces of his face when I looked in the mirror.

He took us to my favorite restaurant, and I wore my favorite dress. It was grey imitation velvet with ribbons hanging from its collar. My mother bought it for our appearance at divorce court.

"Do you think you'll visit us in California?" I asked, stirring my milkshake with a straw.

"You know I will," said my dad. "Maybe I'll get out there next month."

My father never came to California. His phone got disconnected some time during the first year we lived there; then I heard from an uncle that he'd moved in with a new woman. No one knew where she lived.

Sometimes I hid from my mom on the back porch and dialed the 10-digit number to Chicago, even though I already knew it was wrong.

Once someone answered.

"Hello," a woman said.

"...I'm...uh...looking for Joe, my ...uh...father."

"Oh, honey, you got the *wrong* number."

After that I never called back.

I hadn't heard my father's voice for 12 years. I was still living in California, married, then divorced, with a family of my own. I was not prepared for the phone call. "Can I speak to Tammy?"

*Tammy?* Only my father called me that. "Uh.. .who is this?" I asked.

"This is Joe," the man said. "Is this the right number?" "Sorry," I said and slammed down the phone. I immediately regretted it.

Here was the one chance I had for my son to meet his grandfather. Maybe he wanted to say he was sorry for all those years. Maybe he wanted to start over. I waited for my father to call back, but he didn't.

Logan's little body lay sprawled across my lap, his hair billowing from his head like a soft black cloud. I stroked his face and noticed I was drenching him with the sweat from my hands.

I tried to imagine my father's face, but I couldn't. There were only fragments of memories and distorted sounds, screams and dog bites, unanswered phone calls, the smell of Windex.

It took several years for my father to call back, and my son, Logan, has never met him. It's been 22 years since I've seen my father's face, but now every few months he calls.

I live in North Carolina now, and my father still lives in Chicago. I listen to him talk about the weather or his favorite team, the Bulls. My father has remarried and re-divorced twice. I have a little half-sister, Charnelle, who's nine years old.

I tell him I don't like basketball, and I ask if Charnelle lives with him.

"No, she moved to Texas with her mother," he says. "Maybe I can send you the address."

"Do you visit her?" I ask, but I already know the answer.

"No, not just yet. But I'm planning to get out that way soon," he says.

My father tells me he has a janitorial service and that he is moving in with his new girlfriend, Laverne. He says my half-sister, Charnelle, looks a lot like me, but how does he know what I look like?

I call my father 'Joe,' instead of 'Dad,' and I tell him I have been separated for almost five years. I tell him about Logan and his saxophone. I tell him that Logan earns his own spending money by performing on the street. And that he once played in a grown-up band at a local club. I tell him that his sax teacher thinks he's really good, and that by the time he's in high school he'll have gigs on the weekends.

There is silence at the other end of the phone, and then I hear my father suck in his breath.

"Well, how 'bout that..." he says softly. "A sax player."

I tell my father that Logan is really shy and that I've been home schooling him since 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. But Joe has never heard of that.

"He needs to be around other kids," my father says.

"He's around kids all the time," I say defensive. "He's in a jazz band with all kids, and we go to home school groups. He just doesn't really socialize. He'd rather play music."

*I'm through trying to force him into being something he's not, I want to say, but I'm not that close with Joe yet.*

"Well, that just doesn't seem right," says my father. "How's he going to get a girlfriend?"

I am silent. *How dare he criticize my parenting skills?*

My father asks to talk to him, but I see Logan outside from the kitchen window. He is sword fighting with imaginary villains.

"Maybe Logan can write you a letter," I say.

North Carolina is much closer than California, my father says, and every time we talk, he promises to visit. He can't wait to meet his grandson, and listen to him play the saxophone.

Sometimes Joe offers to send us money to help with our expenses. Other times he promises to mail photographs of my little half-sister, Charnelle. Sometimes he promises to send Logan presents. But I'm older now, and we don't ever rush to the mailbox.

On Thursdays I take Logan to Haywood Street, his favorite spot to play the sax. I sit across the street on a park bench and listen. Once in a while I think of how proud Joe would be to hear his grandson. But mostly I hum along to Logan's songs.

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## Handmade Puppets

I'm not so sure what I was thinking when I joined my arty white friends on a trip to New Orleans. But I definitely wasn't thinking of the ruined city that awaited us, nor of the hurricane that had ripped so many neighborhoods up by the roots with its big, bloody claws.

In fact, as we descended from the mountains of North Carolina, through the rural fields, past the Podunk gas stations, the trailer parks littered alongside the highway, into the traffic of southbound cities and out again, I only thought of myself. How lucky I was to have befriend my new neighbors, Mariah and John, and that they'd offered me a free ride out of town.

"It's gonna be crazy there," said Mariah. She squinted through her thick black glasses at the cars weaving back and forth across the highway.

We were in Birmingham on our second tank, still hours away from New Orleans, and every radio station called out the news of Hurricane Katrina. Parts of the city blacked out for weeks. The shootings. A mandatory curfew. Flooded streets. The mayor crying during an interview. A newscaster's voice cracked when he spoke of all the bodies. The elderly trapped in nursing homes. The people left without food or water. Most of them poor. Most of them black.

"I hope they let us into the city," said John. He took a bite of his Snickers. "We could try to make fake press passes."

Mariah and John had moved down the street from me several weeks before. They landed in Asheville along with the massive exodus of white people who left New Orleans



right before the hurricane hit. Mariah needed to see if their old shotgun house was still standing, and John wanted to take photographs of the rubble. I was a single mother with dwindling days of vacation time without my children. I was really just along for the ride.

I didn't know either of them very well, but the closer we got to New Orleans, the more I learned. Mariah was a puppeteer and John sat before his potter's wheel, contemplating the curve of his teapot's spout. They'd rented for cheap house in a poor part of New Orleans. Mariah performing with her handmade puppets, John painting unicorns on the faces of little girls or American flags on the beefy arms of drunken jocks.

"I feel like a nervous wreck. It's gonna be a total wasteland," said Mariah. She'd downed three cups of gas station coffee and I could see she was grinding her teeth.

"We should have a video camera," said John. He picked a fleck of chocolate from between his teeth. "We should be our *own* newscasters."

"Yeah maybe," I said.

And that's when it hit me like a steel-toed boot, headed 70 miles per hour toward a heartache. I leaned my head against the window and listened to the two people chatting away in the front seat. Saw myself between them, parading down the streets of New Orleans, a city now known for its racial injustices, and shrunk further down in my seat. If only I could turn invisible.

I remembered once in Asheville, on my way to see a band at a local bar, a man with a blue button-down shirt tucked into his jeans strolled past me, his fingers playing with the coins in his pocket. He looked me in the eye when he walked past, then stopped and turned back to face me.

"What are you doing going in there?" the man said.

"What do you mean," I said. "I'm going to see some music."

"How can you go in there with all those white people...."

"My friends are in there," I said, instantly embarrassed.

"I can tell you're not from here," he said, and I shook my head.

"Do you know these streets used to be ours?" he said and motioned up and down the street with his hand. "This town was bumpin'. That was a blues club down the street. This town belonged to us.. until all these white people moved in and moved us out. *Now* look at this place...."

Large groups of people walked up and down the pavement. They walked around this man and me, the only black people on the street, as if we weren't even there. They walked around us and over us and through us.

The street, where I often spent my time, grew suddenly unfamiliar. A restaurant window behind us exposed profiles of white couples chewing samosas and sipping chai tea. In the bookstore across the road, there were rows of magazines. Images of white men and women pressed against the glass. Pale-faced mannequins pouted at us from behind a storefront window.

"I wouldn't go in there if I was you," the man said and turned on the heels of his shiny brown loafers.

"My friends are in there," I said, but he was halfway down the block.

I don't remember walking into the bar, nor the music that followed.

There is only the memory of a bouncer with a balding head and camouflage pants. He approached me just as the stranger left to ask: "Hey, was that guy bothering you?"

The Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward smelled like an uprooted cemetery.

It was my third day in New Orleans, and we were crossing the bridge on our bikes to the area hardest hit by the hurricane. It was John's idea, but we'd all heard the stories about the Lower 9th. It was the poorest, blackest section of New Orleans. Single mothers. Aging women. It was separate from the rest of the city, an impoverished island, as most projects are, and when the levees broke during the hurricane, entire streets were swept away with the floods.

We passed a group of workers sweating in orange plastic vests. There were no stop signs on the corners, only swollen piles of debris. John and Mariah stopped at a boarded up gas station and leaned their bikes against a fallen tree. I pulled up beside them.

We weren't prepared for what we saw. The piles of waste. The rows and rows of houses that weren't really houses but were more like giant heaps of shingles and molding tar. The fallen rooftops and caved-in walls. There were no doors or windows, only open wounds, innards exposed and spilling onto the concrete.

We had no words to say. Only grit and glass beneath our feet. John's camera thumped against his chest. And then Mariah and John disappeared behind a house that leaned toward the left.

"Come look at this," I heard Mariah say.

I walked on, past the massive piles of what they left. My footsteps slow, over the buckled asphalt, staring into the empty rooms. The unhinged doors, the spray painted messages: "Two hungry dogs." "You loot. We shoot." And then the epitaphs tagged in neon orange by the national guard: "DOA."

I couldn't take another step. My feet turned too heavy, my body a burden. I felt their voices swell. Inside my heart. Catch up in my throat. The ghosts of children playing. Mothers scolding teenage sons. Grandmother's stirring pots. Last week's gumbo. I heard the snap. The levees breaking. Neighbor screaming for neighbor, and then only the gushing of water. *These were the people left to perish.*

I was crying now. And smelling raw sewage. The death sunken into my bones.

A rusted bulldozer drove by then, its wheels grinding into the dust. The driver looked down at me and nodded.

John came running toward me from down the street. I almost ran toward him with outstretched arms. I wanted him to hold me. To feel that hearts still beat in our chests. I wanted to ask him if he felt it to? Did he want to close his eyes and scream for hours?

But I couldn't say a word. My arms hung limp at my sides, because I watched John's camera still clutched in his hand, and the arm he waved to flag down the bulldozer.

"Excuse me sir, but what are you bulldozing?" said John. He shouted over engine.

"We get orders from the city," said the driver. "We have a list."

"Are you demolishing houses?"

"If the city tells us," the man shrugged.

"But what about the ones that are still standing? Do the people that lived here know their houses are being bulldozed?" John said. "What about their stuff?"

"Son, I don't have the answer to that," the driver said. "These folks are scattered all over the country." He pushed back the yellow hard hat and revved the engine. "It's my job. We have to do what they tell us."

I walked up beside John, and we watched the cloud of dirt followed behind the bulldozer. I said nothing. I felt too sick.

We found Mariah a few blocks away. She stood before a single wall of what was once a house, in a tiny lot scattered with debris. A child's shoe, a pair of broken glasses, a garden hose, a pot.

"Hey, let me borrow your camera," she said. "Look at the carving on that wood."

John craned his neck to see the decorative piece still nailed to the wall. "Yeah, that's pretty amazing," he said and handed Mariah the camera. "That's gotta be really old."

The camera hid Mariah's face as she took the picture. And I hid my face from both of them.

"I can tell I would have wanted to live in this house," Mariah said. "And that one over there too." She pointed across the street.

My head hurt, and I wanted to go home. But I wasn't home. I was in New Orleans.

I left Mariah and John there in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward. I walked back to the windowless gas station and found our bikes had fallen into a chaotic heap of handlebars and tangled metal and spinning wheels. I jerked my handlebars away from theirs, pushed my feet down on the pedals.

I thought of the man in the blue button-down shirt back in Asheville, and his words rattled around my head like the rusty wheels of my borrowed bike. I thought of John placing his instruments into cases, his pottery into crates; and Mariah wrapping her puppets with newspaper, then draping them with a silky cloth. I thought of how they loaded up their records, their drawings, John's favorite old boots, the ones with the duct taped heel, and how they left New Orleans and her hurricanes behind. I thought of all the people, *my* people, who were left behind. I thought of all these things, but I kept pedaling. I'd left Mariah and John on the other side of the bridge.

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## The Grand Wizard

I knew this was trouble. My bike pump valve broke off. The spare tube didn't fit, and my tire had a nail in it. My cycling partner, Eric, was probably 20 miles away.

My bike loaded down with gear, I dragged it across the gravel, and imagined Eric lounging under the cool shade of a tree, sipping lemonade through a straw.

Someone yelled over squealing tires from a truck full of doorless appliances and scraps of metal. I gripped my handlebars a little tighter in an attempt to make my muscles a bit more visible. I straightened my back and widened my gait. Willed myself to look mean and tough.

The heat rose from the cracks in the pavement, and I had run out of water. An empty road stretched out for miles. Rows of tobacco leaves rustled in the sun and whispered menacingly from their roadside beds.

I tugged my T-shirt further down over my bike shorts, because how could I look tough wearing purple spandex?

I imagined Eric still lying in the shade, finishing up his lemonade and peeling the wrap from his peanut butter banana sandwich. He'd be doing his stretches now, bending down at the waist and touching his toes. He would slowly roll his head around his neck, then his shoulders. Satisfied, he'd lie back down, and drift in and out of sleep. Eric would forget all about me by now, or that he ever had a cycling partner at all.

I lugged my bike and all my camping gear for two or three miles before I saw it. A small shack-like structure with a handmade sign nailed above its door. I surveyed the shack and the rusty cars and pickups parked haphazardly out front.

A grayish Buick turned slowly into the parking lot. I leaned my bike against a payphone's empty shell but held onto the handlebars with both hands. If I had to, I'd use my bike as a weapon. Dust swirled behind the Buick and settled on my legs and purple spandex. I licked the cracks on my lips. Tasted the dirt from the tires.

I saw the John Deere hat first. And then the tanned muscular arm emerged from the car, a dirty T-shirt, with the arms cut off, pulled tight around a man's chest. His giant belt buckle glinted in the sunlight.

I stood frozen beside the payphone, tightened the grip on my bike. Kept the hands from trembling.

I'd heard of stories like mine before. A black woman stranded in some little town where people still say "colored." These back road stores that hung antique postcards of black men suspended from trees. A place where clansmen, dressed in blinding white robes, gathered to sip watery coffee. Folks like me never set foot in places like this.

The man in the dirty T-shirt stared out at me with icy blue eyes. He frowned and walked slowly toward the shack, then closed the door behind him.

I closed my eyes and tried to send a psychic message to Eric. But instead I saw images of myself tied to a parade of pickups, dragged to my bloody death down some lonely dirt road. *Where was Eric!*

We had been on our bike trip for nine and a half days, riding 360 miles across North Carolina. From the mountains of Asheville to the beaches of Wilmington and back.

Eric had come over the night before we left to make sure I had everything I needed. Someone lent me a pair of cycling shoes, the kind where you have to twist your



feet to take them off the pedals. Eric watched me roll down the hill and fall in the driveway, my feet still fastened to the pedals.

"I feel nervous," I said, staring down at my only belongings for the next two weeks. I sucked in the smoke from my cigarette and blew it down toward my feet. Pouches with various bike tools that I couldn't use. A water bottle, a sleeping bag, a tent, dried food. Two chocolate bars.

"The first time I went on a bike tour, I rode all the way to California. I was nervous too," Eric said. "Don't worry about anything. It'll be fun." He patted my shoulder.

"What about tubes? I only have one extra," I said.

"Quit worrying," Eric said, and handed me three of his own tubes to stuff in my pack.

The next day, I stubbed out my last cigarette right before I mounted my bike.

"You're going to regret that," Eric said. "I thought this trip was going to help you quit smoking. And did you pack that chocolate? Sugar will kill you on this trip."

"I only brought a little," I said. I'd never biked for more than six miles, let alone 300. "I'm trying to quit smoking, not chocolate. Don't you have any vices?"

When Eric wasn't looking, I stuffed two cigarettes in my saddlebag next to the chocolate, just in case.

"No matter what happens," Eric said. "Always stay on the 23. If we lose each other, I'll always wait for you at the first grocery store along the highway."

"What do you mean *lose* each other?" I said.

"Well, I can go hours with out looking back," Eric said. "You know, just to be safe. In case something happens."

We first biked past the strip malls, where people stared at neon signs, not the two bikers with a death wish. From the very start, Eric rode blocks ahead of me. He ran all the lights. Did a wheelie off a curb.

I imagined being hit by an SUV driver. Someone staring in the mirror instead of the road. She would be removing the pink smudge of lipstick from her teeth while my bones crunched under its wheels. Or maybe I'd be hit by a semi, the trucker shuffling through his breast pocket for the last bit of smuggled ephedrine. Children would point as my body sailed across the traffic. But Eric would be too busy doing wheelies and too far ahead to notice.

On the third day, we rode through Charlotte. My knees ached, and I spent the whole day alone, pedaling through chards of glass, discarded tires and crushed aluminum cans.

At sunset I found him waiting at a supermarket a mile or so from the airport. He led me to a wooded campsite off an abandoned road. I pitched the tent while Eric boiled water for tea and instant chili. As we settled in for dinner, I noticed the tent flaps rustling, then a train, less than 30 feet away, roared past.

"Maybe we should move the tent somewhere else," I shouted over the roar of the train.

"Aaah.. .we'll be fine," Eric said and massaged his calves.

Just then, an airplane bellowed across the skyline.

I only slept for two hours that night. I dreamt of airports and semis and trains. While Eric snored, I snuck over to my bag and fished around for a cigarette, but they were crushed and covered with melted chocolate.

What I would have done for a piece of chocolate then, as I stared through the window at the green John Deere hat bobbing and at the store's crooked rooftop. *Anything but go in there.* I left my bike at the payphone and crept to the side of the building in search of a spicket.

I stood there for awhile. Felt my tongue grow thick and pasty. The sun dry the sweat inside my pores. *Okay, I had to go inside.*

My hands pushed the door open, and the hinges whined. Every bar stool swiveled, every eye watched as I walked toward the front counter. The man in the green John Deere hat chewed on his sandwich.

My voice shook as I asked the man behind the counter where to fill my water bottle.

"Where'd you come from?" he sneered.

"Uh.. I just need some water," I said. I was going to faint.

The men all looked at each other, then back at me.

"Can I use your restroom?" I said in a hoarse whisper.

The man behind the counter grunted and nodded toward the door.

I walked, with buckling knees, into the bathroom and closed the door behind. I was trapped. No weapons. Wait. I had the water bottle. Shit. It's plastic. Shit.

I pressed my ear to the door. The men cackled in unison. Chanting skinhead mantras. They were calling the grand wizard. Summoning the white knights on their horses. The Nazis. And all the KKKs.

But then I heard the laughter leaving. The front door opening. The footsteps leaving the store.

Were they going to burn down the store? How would I get out? Had it been 15 minutes? An hour?

Those men were plotting my death, and Eric would stumble across my body somewhere on the side of a road.

The bathroom smell made me dizzy, and I was standing beside a urinal. And then I heard the knock.

"Ma'am, you okay in there?" the voice said.

"I was just.. um .. I'm... leaving," I said.

"Now yu'ins don't have to rush off now," he said as I slowly pushed open the bathroom door. "Let me get you some coffee."

There were only two men left in the store, and I could see the others outside gathered around my bike. I accepted the coffee but didn't drink it, in case it was poisoned or drugged. I forced my feet to walk outside.

There, the man in the John Deere hat stood crouched over my wheel. The other men gathered around him, offering tire-changing tips. Their heads all turned to me smiled.

"Do you got a tube?" The Deere man said.

"No," I said, confused. "The only one I have is the wrong size. You're trying to change my tire?" *You 're not running me over with yours?*

They asked me, then, where I was from and where I was going.

"Well...uh...Wilmington. I mean, Asheville," I said. And then I explained.

"You mean t'tell me you rode your bicycle all dis way?" The Deere man's mouth hung open, and then he grinned. "Yur tough gal. Come all this way...."

"It's dangerous for a woman to be all by herself," another man said. He shook his head. Told me he was a tobacco farmer. "Now, what are we going to do with you?"

I stepped back. My eyes darted across their faces.

"You sure are lucky," the farmer said. "Some people ain't so nice."

The John Deere man had offered to take me into the nearest town to find a bike tube. It was 15 miles away and a long way to walk. We stuffed my bike into the back of his trunk. I climbed into the front seat of the car and kept my hand on the door handle. As we drove off, I whispered a silent prayer and accepted the cigarette he offered.

We found a bike shop in a strip mall, and then the man helped me change my tire. I didn't tell him I could do it myself. Instead I loaded up with extra water and a pack of new tubes that fit my wheel.

Later, he pointed me in the direction of the nearest grocery store, only a mile ahead.

I hopped back on my bike and ran into Eric a few miles up at Piggly Wiggly's . He was sitting cross-legged with his fingers buried in a bag of trail mix.

"Man, I can see those purple spandex from a mile away," he laughed. "Did you have to stop? I've been here for hours." Eric yawned.

My first impulse was to kick Eric in the shins. To curse him up and down Highway 23. Instead I snatched the bag of nuts Eric offered.

I thought about telling him all about my day, my last hours with the man with the John Deere hat, the man who brought me coffee, the tobacco farmer. But I realized I never got their names. Maybe I could tell Eric how I thought I'd be victim to a hate crime, but instead I was heir to a few men's kindness. I wanted to tell Eric all about my day, but instead I walked straight past him into the grocery store without a word, the trail mix still in my hand. I was buying a king-size chocolate bar, and this time he was riding in the back.

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## Please Eat My Arugula

The Red Cross truck blared its horn at dusk. The people shuffled by the shotgun house where I slept. Collected free dinners, alone or in pairs, styrofoam containers stacked high in their arms.

I'd only been in New Orleans for a few days but had already found my routine. There was no electricity, so at night I'd sit by the lantern, drinking wine out on the porch.

On this day, I'd returned from the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward. I felt sick and useless and depressed. I sat on the porch with a mixed green salad and sprinkled some nuts on the top.

That's when I met Earl. He passed by me on the way to his house, his hands filled with Red Cross dinners. That night's special was a slab of chicken with air-brushed grill marks and a half portion of canned green beans.

I didn't have much. I couldn't save New Orleans, but I wanted to help everyone I saw. I called out to Earl, who was a stranger at the time. I asked him if he wanted some of my salad.

Earl wrinkled his brow, then scratched his head. "Some salad?" he said.

"Yeah, I have some extra if you want it," I said.

The confusion on Earl's face relaxed to a smile. "Well, sure," he said. "I can't even remember the last time I had some."

"I'll be right back." I grabbed the lantern and ran into the kitchen. I found the salad in the cooler along with a bottle of miso ginger dressing.

I almost skipped down the hallway to the porch. My heart so full. My belly churning with butterflies. This was what love was all about. This was sharing. This moment between Earl and me, a true experience of humanity.

"Oh," Earl said, when I tried to hand him the bag of organic mixed greens. "I thought you had.. .you know.. .lettuce."

"Come on," I said, a little too urgent. "I have some dressing too." I held out the bottle of miso ginger.

Earl stared at the brown liquid swirling in the bottle. The bag full of oddly shaped greens. The garnish of edible flowers.

"Nah.. .no thanks," he said. "Maybe if you had Ranch...." Earl then held out his hand, offering me his box of dinner.

Something in me wanted to accept what Earl's tender offering, but I knew it would go to waste. I shook my head.

The colors began to drain from the butterflies in my belly. The wings began to crumble, to flaked, and then I felt them turn to gastric dust in my stomach.

And then we stood there, sad eyes looking into each other, like we'd met at a bridge that neither of us could cross.

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## The Graduates

I arrived at my little brother's D.C. apartment in the late afternoon. It had been four years since I'd seen him, maybe even five.

My little brother, Justin, was graduating from Georgetown with a Master's in foreign studies. I've learned a lot can happen to a person in five years.

Sunlight crept in through the barred windows of Justin's apartment. A single mattress pushed against a dingy wall. And beside it, a shelf lined with books I've never heard of. Or maybe I had, but they were written in Chinese.

"I'm so proud of you, Jus. None of our family even *goes* to college," I said. "I feel like I don't even know you anymore."

"Don't be too proud," he said. "I'm sure there are things you still don't like. Probably some new things too."

"What? Like your room still smells like dirty socks?" I grabbed a pillow off the mattress and threw it at him. "You still listen to that horrible music?"

Justin laughed then, a deep guttural laugh that I'd never heard. And then the pillow hit me in the face.

Later, we met a few of my brother's friends from school for pizza and a pitcher or two of beer. I felt like an outsider looking in at Justin's life through a peephole. I was meeting people who knew the grown up Justin, one that I had never seen. Knowing him was something I could no longer claim.

The little brother I knew performed puppet shows with track socks on his hands. He had the skinniest legs and knobbiest knees I'd ever seen on a boy. The Justin I knew

was 13 years old and bossed around his only friend, Luciano, who was 8. While other kids in junior high school listened to Dougie Fresh and Michael Jackson, Justin hid in his room and blasted "Les Miserables" and "Phantom of the Opera" on his headphones.

After the waitress took our order, I struck up a conversation with Alex, the friend of my brother's who sat beside me.

"Are you in school too?" I said.

"No," Alex said. "I'm taking a year off to work on the Hill." Alex appeared to be in his early twenties, but it looked as if his mother dressed him in a plain white shirt and a creased pair of khakis.

"The *MIT* I said.

"Yeah, *Capitol* Hill."

I tried not to grimace.

"And what about you? What do you do?" said Alex. He lifted his chin and straightened his back.

"Uh... Well, I live in North Carolina," I said. "I have kids and maybe I'm going to go to nursing school."

"Oh."

I'd dropped out of high school while my little brother, Justin, was still in junior high. My ceremony took place at the mail box, my fingers walked down the aisle of the envelope, and I gladly shook hands with my high school equivalency certificate.

Although later, there would be regrets. I was trying to get into nursing school in the podunk town of Waynesville, and I didn't meet the requirements to attend.

Standing before the registrar at Haywood Community College, I waved my high school equivalency certificate in my hand.

"But you don't understand," I'd said to the registrar. "I took this test when I was 15 years old, and I passed it."

But it didn't matter, the registrar said. That was Southern California and this was Western Carolina. No getting around it. I had to enroll in the adult education program and take the GED.

"Well, can you just give me the test real quick?" I said, already knowing the answer.

The registrar peered at me through her thick, round glasses. Her hair was a frosted nest piled atop her head. It didn't move when she shook it.

"You'll have to sign up for the classes," she said and picked up the romance novel she had set to the side.

The adult education teacher was more helpful. "Well, I've never heard of that," she said when I told her I didn't want the classes, just the test. "I'll have to check with my supervisor."

I wanted to go to nursing school. It seemed to be a respectable profession. I saw myself wearing a crisp white uniform parading along the sterile halls with a clipboard and a pen. I could work night shifts and spend days with my two children. And when people, like Alex, asked what I did, I could say lift my chin and straighten my back and say proudly, "Well.. *I'm* a nurse," instead of a high school dropout.

As the pitcher of beer dwindled, the chatter at our table grew louder, and the silence widened between Alex and me, like a great black hole in space.

But then from our nebulous place of silence in the cosmos, our eyes, both pairs of them, zoomed in on the hands. Two pairs of them, resting on the table.

Justin had grabbed his friend's hand, who sat directly across from him, and squeezed. The two men stared into each other's faces, then Justin offered, his friend, Edmond a slow, private smile that *I'd* never seen.

I looked at Alex. Alex looked at me. We both looked at the hands. And then back at my brother.

Justin ignored our stares. Or maybe he didn't notice, because his eyes were kind of glazed over and starry-like.

Alex began to twitch and clear his throat. He folded and refolded the napkin on his lap. Crossed and uncrossed his legs.

I stared at the two hands resting gently on the table. I stared at my little brother's open palm and the lines that stretched across them like so many miles, distance and years that have kept us apart. How could I have not known that my own brother was gay?

I ate two slices of pizza, but they just kind of sat in my stomach.

Alex sat stiffly. Glancing nervously around the room. His chest out. His back arched. Sawing away at the pizza with a knife and fork.

I was glad that Alex left before the dinner was over. Glad when he dropped the slice of pizza on his khakis. And glad that he couldn't get the stains out with the napkin. Alex had stood and shook hands much too hard with his new gay friends and couldn't look Justin in the eye.

My brother looked a little puzzled but shrugged off Alex's quick departure. Too dizzy from the excitement of graduating, and maybe having a new boyfriend, to notice.

At Hay wood Community College, I still awaited the return of the adult education teacher. Through the window I saw an older man leaning on a dingy pole. He was chewing tobacco, black spittle shooting from his lips.

"Well, Ms. Murray," the teacher had returned. "We can give you the tests. Not at all once, but over two days. And that's not negotiable."

I looked out the window again. The man with the black spittle adjusted his camouflage hat.

"Are you sure you don't want to schedule a quick review?" she said.

"Uh.. .no thanks," I said and backed away slowly.

My brother's graduation would be at 10 in the morning, and I discovered I'd forgotten one of my dress shoes back in Waynesville.

"Can I borrow a pair of your shoes?" I said. I knew Justin's shoes would be too big, but I'd embarrass him less in shiny men's shoes, rather than my old, scuffed-up boots.

'Yeah, look in my closet," Justin called from the shower.

"Don't use all the hot water," I said. "

I opened the door to Justin's closet. Looked at all his suits, the crumpled pile of dirty socks on the floor, his long-legged jeans.

A familiar tiny white T-shirt hung from a nail on the closet wall. And then I remembered it was me who had given it to him, the year he turned seven. They'd held

him back a grade in school. I remembered how the kids had teased him and how he'd cried and cried for hours.

Later I burned my hand when I ironed the patch on the T-shirt I'd give him.

"Don't Give Up," it said in bright red letters.

"Don't give up," I said later when Justin had hugged me. "Gross, I didn't ask for a hug." I gave him a light punch in the arm.

"Did you find any shoes?" Justin said. His shower was over.

"Hold your horses," I said. I bent down and picked out a pair of black lace up loafers.

I was nervous for my brother. I was nervous that he was a Black gay man in America. Nervous that he was graduating into a whole new life.

But later when we were alone again, Justin told me of his plans to move to Hong Kong. That he was moving out of the country for good. He told me Edmond was his boyfriend and that they would live together on the other side of the world.

At Justin's graduation, I clapped furiously and yelled while he walked across the stage to accept his new honors. I think I may have embarrassed him, but I enjoyed watching Edmond's smile.

During the reception, I stood near the wine table. I was little self-conscious of my brother's big shoes on my feet, plus it was hard to walk around in them.

During the long drive back to Waynesville, I imagined the two years away when I would accept my own nursing degree. I thought of the old decrepit bodies I would have to touch, the sterile hospital walls. I thought of the bodily fluids that would stain my crisp white uniform. I thought of my brother in Hong Kong speaking in foreign tongues with

his new lover. I thought of my brother living out his wildest dreams, and I wonder what mine are.

It was 2 a.m. when I arrived back at my Waynesville apartment. My anatomy and physiology books were lined up neatly on the shelf. I stared at them for a minute, at the drab-colored sleeves, the plain-blocked letters, the stiffness, the hardness of the covers. Then I took a deep breath and pulled them down, one by one, and stuffed them in a cardboard box to take to Goodwill.

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Chains in the Attic (a  
dramatic monologue)

**Note: The following dramatic piece has been adapted from the short story**

**"Chains in the Attic."**

*(Billy is seated, solemn looking at the floor. Perhaps he looks at the floor.*

*Throughout the monologue he can occasionally stare blankly out at the audience.*

*The mother addresses the audience. She needs to carry a lighter in a pocket. A saxophone hangs on the wall or leans upright against a table, but is covered and out of site with a piece of cloth or a sheet. A kitchen table with a candle at the center).*

Characters:

Mother, physical traits open.

Billy, aged 8-12. Needs to play instrument.

Props:

Lighter, a sheet, a musical instrument (note: The instrument in this play is a saxophone, but this is interchangeable. It does need to be a wind instrument), table.

Mother: *(This part of the monologue is happy, joyful sounding).* My son, Billy, is ten years old. He's a shy kid, the kind who looks down at his feet rather than look you in the eye. He walks with his shoulders hunched slightly forward, hands stuffed deep in his pockets, as if he's ashamed of his hands.



I hated taking Billy to the park when he was little. All those other babies screeching and kicking while they rocked back and forth in their swings. But Billy made no sound at all. His face unmoved, he clung to the swing with his dimpled hands, and summoned the clouds with his eyes.

*(Change voice drastically when speaking for Gina. Maybe a Northern sounding accent).* 'Jeez, why is he so serious looking?' my friend, Gina once said. 'I mean, I'm not trying to insult you, but it's kinda creepy when a little kid stares at you like that.' She pointed down at the Halloween photograph of our year-old sons. She'd dressed her boy, Eli, as a spotted cow, and Billy was pumpkin. Eli's mouth stretched open, and you could see the laughter bubbling from his throat, the thin stream of drool dripping from his chin. But Billy pressed his lips together tightly, his eyes wide and staring at something past the camera.

*(Voice turns bitter...mocking).* My son began to speak the year he turned four. In sentence fragments. Words he made up. I enrolled him in preschool three days a week, but when the teacher offered Billy clay, to squeeze and press and mold with his fingers, he just stared at her outstretched hand. And as we shuffled through the formalities, the 'see you tomorrows' the 'thanks for your help', Billy's face was blank, his hand perched on the doorknob.

*(Billy slumps further and further down, maybe curls up into a ball on the floor by the end of this part of speech. In this part the mother should sound desperate)).*

On bad days I blamed Billy's father. He never hit Billy. It was me that talked back. Like the time he kicked me in the spine, punched me in the stomach. From

the front porch Billy had watched. His mouth open, but there was no sound. Some invisible fist pounding away at the words stuck in his gut.

On other days it was the houses we lived in. The way our walls were smeared with crayons and insults and the blood from all our hearts.

*(Voice turns flat).* The years would come and go. We would come and go, Billy and me. *(Mother grabs Billy's arm and pulls him up).* To the police station. Until we came home. *(She pulls Billy to her chest).* To the courthouse, where I bounced this child up and down on my knee. Where I built my courage out of bricks and carried him, my life, under cruel stares, and lied to that blue-eyed judge, and said his father didn't. What good is a father who rots in the county jail? Or a mother who can't feed her son?

*(The mother paces back and forth across the stage in wide circles. Billy follows behind her.)* A different house. A different state. *(The mother is center stage now facing the audience.)* A move from the west to the east, because we needed to feel the seasons change. To make us new. Make us different. But then the father left for good. *(A pause. Then the door slams loudly and abruptly. The mother lights candle almost simultaneously with slamming door. This should be a tense moment of sound, then immediate silence ).* And the mother burned his footsteps.

The teachers changed. A psychologist once. But Billy's stories remained. There were still few words. Fewer smiles and not a friend to speak of. Alone on the playground. A heated sword fight with imaginary villains.

It would be years before we found it. *(Pull sheet off sax case. A sweeping motion).*

Before we pulled apart those burly fingers that clutched my little angel boy's

voice. We were window shopping on Billy's eighth birthday. I watched the corners of Billy's mouth flicker when he saw it hanging in the pawnshop window. We paid cash for that saxophone. We pulled that rusty, old thing from its velvet-lined case, and Billy held it to his chest. Held the mouthpiece to his pursed lips and blew into it with a wind from somewhere else. *(Billy makes disruptive sound with saxophone)* That sound was so loud. So loud and offensive. It pierced my ears, crawled all over my skin, and no matter where I went in the house, I couldn't quite escape. *(More disruptive sounds)* All those words that Logan never said shook the lids on the kitchen pots, climbed under the blankets, and echoed in the baseboards. That sound rumbled through our house like an old, lost soul rattling chains up in the attic. *(Dead cow sound. Then an evolution to a \*1/2-to one minute song, preferably mournful sounding.. The mother leaves the stage while Billy plays. Billy smiles at audience when the song is over).*

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