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Life before breakfast

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Life before breakfast

by

Ayana Alberta Rhodes

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Steve Pett, Major Professor
Brenda Jones
Sidner Larson

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2003

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of
Ayana Alberta Rhodes
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my brothers, Peter Rhodes and Salim Rhodes. Writing this thesis kept me from worrying about you while you were serving your country. Come back home safely so that you can read it for yourselves.
Something Not Quite Shakespeare

I am the girl in this story, Gaia. Gaia is the daughter of a blonde ex-hippie mother and a loving but careless father who looked a lot like Shaft. In this story she is sixteen years old. I remember her at that age, remember what she looked like in the mirror every morning before school. Very thick, wavy black hair resting a little below her shoulders. Hazel eyes to match her hazel skin. Long, thin nose. Breasts that were full and sat up without help. A small waist and hips that swelled out in exactly the right places. Her only flaw was that she was shorter than average at an even five feet. I miss her body. Boys her own age and men old enough to be her father whistled at her or tracked her with their eyes as if she were prey. But mostly I miss her arrogance, her certainty that she had escaped the life of the social outcast to which her parents had doomed her with that name and with that color contrast that was always apparent in the suburbs. That girl is gone.

But this story is not solely about Gaia. It is also about Edgar, who is not the son of hippies or Afro-centric Richard Roundtree lookalikes. Edgar is the invisible middle son of an engineer and a real estate agent. Edgar’s older brother is a basketball star. Edgar’s younger brother is a musician. Edgar makes straight B’s, avoids the chess club, and accepts his unexceptional status with grace and dignity. The only reason any of us paid attention to Edgar at all was because of his brothers. And when we noticed him, we always got along with him because he was never worth our time.
He was a regular collared shirt and khakis kind of guy. Dark blond hair was cut like Ken the male Barbie doll's and only slightly less plastic. Almost artificially green eyes. Six feet tall and still growing. He never wore glasses, never had any weird habits or body odors. He would have been handsome except that he was androgynous the same way he was invisible. There was nothing very male or very female about Edgar. There was nothing sexual about him.

Edgar and Gaia were in the same art class and the same English class. Gaia treated him with a mix of tolerance and genuine kindness but only when she saw him. When he was not around, she never thought of him at all. But then Edgar decided to become visible.

The discussion topic was Romeo and Juliet. Gaia was slumped back in her chair, legs crossed in boot-cut jeans. She doodled a flower on her desktop, content to contribute little that was valuable to the group. Edgar sat two chairs away from her in the kind of half-interested way that was usual to him. He sat up straight, palms flat on his desk, watching the faces of those who spoke.

“What do you think of it, Gaia?” Cory, the sexy, black-haired soccer player with the scratchy voice asked her. He sat next to her with his arm around her shoulders and his fingers twisting her hair. She didn’t sit up and didn’t say all that she thought. She said something about its being a great love story and she could see why they’d read it and then smiled what she hoped was her sexiest smile and returned to her doodle. Cory did not respond to her comments.

“Do you really think so?” Edgar said. But Gaia didn’t hear him at first. She was too busy doodling and imagining what her and Cory’s children would look like. He repeated himself, this time calling her name.
She looked up at him and nodded and felt uncomfortable because his green eyes were brighter and wider and more interested than she had ever seen them before. And she could feel underneath her clothes, next to her skin, the question he was really asking. *What is it that you really think about?*

Gaia shifted herself in the chair so that Cory’s arm fell away. And the bell rang.

II

Everyone went to the Homecoming pep rally, even the misfits, even the kids who objected to sports on principle. The pep rally was about school spirit, “Go ’97!” “Go Roosevelt!” We tenth graders came out in purple, our class color, and we did it creatively. I loved the pep rally, loved seeing people with faces smeared in purple face-paint, with hair sprayed purple, with purple pom-poms and jerseys and lipstick and jackets. We were sophomore royalty, with neither the freshman fear of seniors nor the senior fear of life. God, it was a good time.

Gaia maneuvered with and through the herd of her classmates towards the bleachers on the football field. She had her hair curled in spirals and tied up with a purple ribbon. She wore the class sweatshirt, purple with “Class of ’97” in white letters on the front. She avoided touching people, tried not to bump into them, twisted her small body in and out of tight spaces. But somebody pushed her to the side and she fell into Edgar.

He was wearing a purple collared shirt with khaki pants, but for Gaia he may as well have been wearing nothing at all. She felt his body, felt the hardness underneath his shirt and in the strength of his arms as he kept her from falling down. She jumped to get away.
“Hey, Gaia, you all right?” He was half-smiling, half-smirking at her as if he knew that her insides had just traveled down a roller coaster from touching him. She nodded her head and he reached out and tugged on a curl. “Well, I guess I’d better walk with you the rest of the way to keep you from falling into any more people.”

And he did. And they sat together, cheering for the members of the dance team, the cheerleaders, the football team, the soccer team. They yelled as loud as they could whenever anyone mentioned their class. Gaia laughed at Edgar. And Edgar laughed at Gaia. And they were friends.

“Edgar?” They were walking out, she to her school bus, he to the beat-up car he’d inherited from his older brother. For the first time, she felt real shyness, the kind that made her wish she were invisible. She kept her eye on the ground, watching the cracks on the sidewalk. “What did you think about Romeo and Juliet?”

“You know, I like that you call me Edgar. Everybody else just calls me Ed as if my name don’t mean nothing. But I guess with your name, you understand how much a name means.” I felt Edgar’s eyes on me, underneath my clothes, next to my skin. “Anyway, it’s about sex. Romeo and Juliet, I mean. Definitely about sex.”

I nodded and without looking up, ran off to my bus.

III

Gaia and Edgar started dating, and it was good enough that she ignored the comments her friends made. “You’re going out with who?” “Is this some sort of pity thing?” “His brothers are so much cooler; why don’t you try one of them?”
Edgar took her bowling and to the school plays and came to her house to study. Her parents thought he was wonderful except that he wouldn't grow his hair long and he rarely watched Black Entertainment Television. His parents were relieved to find that he wasn't gay and could not care less that she was half black. His brothers continued to ignore him and, by default, her.

The first time they had sex was miserable. They were squished in his junky old car. They both were virgins. And foreplay was minimal because they were in a time crunch to get Gaia back before Edgar's curfew. The ride home was silent, and Gaia simply said goodnight and trotted into her house, disappointed that sex was not all goodness and light and fireworks and wondering if it would have been better with Cory, the black-haired soccer player.

They didn't call each other for a week. But in that time, Edgar had devised a plan. He had spoken to his brothers and their girlfriends, read a few magazines, Cosmo included, on how to please his woman, and decided to turn up the romance.

"Gaia, do you think you could spend all day with me on Saturday?" Edgar asked over the phone.

Gaia was happy he was not face-to-face with her because he would have seen her face scrunch up. "Sure, Edgar. What time will you pick me up?" He told her to dress nice.

She wore a pale yellow sundress and straw sandals. He wore a short-sleeved green collared shirt and khakis. They drove two hours into Virginia, down dirt roads, and back to an old abandoned house by a stream. The house and stream were in a clearing that was circled with huge trees that stretched to meet God. Gaia thought she'd never been in so beautiful a place in her life.
They had a picnic lunch—Popeye’s fried chicken and biscuits, macaroni and cheese from Gaia’s father’s recipe, and tossed salad. They sat at the edge of the stream and Edgar told her about the house, told her that it was originally his great-grandfather’s land and house. He said that his family still owned the land but that they had all become too attached to the malls and the fast food of the big cities to move back out here to the country. “It’s a sad house without someone to live in it.” He threw a pebble into the stream.

Gaia looked at the house and felt it inside her throat. She let a tear slip down her cheek. “It’s a poet’s house.” And Edgar leaned over and kissed her.

The second time they had sex was wonderful. It was next to an abandoned house, a house right out of a poem. Edgar had the time to touch Gaia, to discover with his hands and tongue what a sixteen year old girl is. And Gaia watched him, never closed her eyes for a second in case she missed something. She saw every smile line on his face, watched his tongue slide across her skin, his body tense up and shake at the end when he held her against him as if she were going to evaporate.

IV

Edgar did not die or fall ill with some crippling disease as you might expect. I am just telling you this because the tone of the story has gotten to be quite romantic and the most fitting end to all romance is death or tragedy. But Edgar is not Romeo. I am not Juliet. And this is just a story. So don’t be disappointed that we live.

V

Gaia walked into a grocery store in a nearby suburb. She was alone; her mom stayed in the car. It was three months after her seventeenth birthday. She had applied to colleges.
Edgar had applied to different colleges far away from hers. They talked about it. They didn’t want to hold each other back.

Gaia walked towards the aisle labeled Feminine Hygiene. She ignored the appreciative looks from the young man standing near the door, answered his “How you doing?” with a polite “I’m fine.” She looked down so that she wouldn’t roll her eyes. She noticed the man’s tennis shoes. She had seen them on a TV commercial.

She scanned the rows of boxes, trying to decide whether she would risk getting the generic brand as her mother instructed her. She did not want there to be any mistake. So she grabbed the pink and white box, the one she saw on the commercials, the one that would show her a plus sign or a minus sign.

She went up to the counter with the box still tucked under her arm. The young man with the tennis shoes was still standing there, smiling at her. Gaia pulled the box from under her arm, held it in front of her chest and stared at the man. “Is this what you were looking for?” she asked him. He raised his eyebrows and turned away. She paid the cashier and walked out of the store.

Her mother said she should get an abortion. Her mother said she had supported Roe v. Wade for just such an occasion.

Her father said he would support her in whatever she decided. He went into the living room to watch music videos.

She decided not to tell Edgar until she knew what she wanted to do. She sat down at the kitchen table, her mother beside her watching every move. She poured herself a glass of skim milk and downed it as if it were alcohol.
“Well what do you want to do?” Edgar stood halfway across his bedroom against the Godfather poster on his door. He was not wearing khakis. He was in blue boxers and a t-shirt. Gaia had woken him up.

“I don’t know Edgar.” She stared at the chips in her fingernail polish.

“Let me see if I have this right. You have known for two and a half weeks that you were pregnant. You show up in your pajamas at 6 on a Saturday morning, which my Dad did not appreciate, by the way. You don’t know what you want to do.” Edgar’s eyes were closed as he spoke. His head was tilted back against the door; his hands were tucked behind him. He sighed and they were both silent.

Edgar walked over to his bed, sat down, and put his arm around Gaia. He still didn’t speak. Neither did she. After half an hour of silence, nothing was clearer. So they decided to drive.

They took Gaia’s car. It had air-conditioning and a radio. They flipped the radio on immediately and sang along with the songs they knew. Gaia drove around for an hour and then they switched. Edgar slid the driver’s seat back to accommodate his long legs. Gaia pulled her seat forward.

“You remember the first time we had sex?” Gaia asked him during a commercial break.

“Yeah. In my car.” Edgar did not smile. Today, it was not a memory that made him smile.
Gaia switched the radio off. "I wanted to dump you. I thought somebody else would be way better at sex than you were. I know plenty who would have been interested. All that week I thought about it."

"I know. I knew when you didn't call me and you avoided me in school." Edgar kept his eyes on the road. "You were a selfish bitch and my feelings were hurt. It was too fast and too cramped and I knew that. But you didn't have to be like that. You didn't have to act like I wasn't there."

"So you were mad at me?" Gaia watched his face. His jaw was clenched and his eyes never left the road. "And you're mad at me now?"

"You waited two weeks to tell me you were pregnant. And now you expect me to fix it. You always do that. You forget that I'm seventeen and want to go to college just like you. And you act like I'm not scared just like you acted like I wasn't hurt about our first time." Edgar slowed the car down and pulled over to the side of the road. The pine tree air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror twisted back and forth until it settled down.

They watched the cars pass by them along the road. A caravan of tractor trailers blasted their way past. And there were an ungodly number of minivans in odd shapes barreling down the road. Gaia opened her door and got out of the car to get some air.

I remember that the air smelled heavily of gas fumes and ivy. I stood there listening to the sounds of the cars zipping by. I did not cry. I was never the type to cry about my own misfortunes. But there was something certain in the soles of my feet that told me that Edgar no longer wanted me. So I walked away from that spot, walked back in the direction we had come.
I heard Edgar’s door slam and heard him running through the gravel after me. He grabbed me around the waist and held me still. I gripped the loose material on his younger brother’s gray sweatpants, the ones Edgar had scrounged up for me to go out in. I could not see his face but I knew he was searching the air for the answers just like I was.

But we were seventeen and there were no answers. So we drove. Later we read pamphlets, examined options, spoke with people who would offer assistance. Later I began to bleed and we both cried and we both went away to college. But on that day Edgar and Gaia drove.
Getting Comfortable

I started developing breasts in the fourth grade. Before I knew any better, I’d read *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume. I stood in my room, shirtless, facing the mirror. I stuck my arms straight out from my sides, brought my fingertips in front of me until they were touching, and jerked my elbows back and forth, chanting “I must, I must, I must increase my bust.”

And I wanted to. I wanted to look older than I was because the boys at school paid attention to girls with breasts. Those girls were popular, and everybody thought they were pretty, even if they were as ugly as sin. It was natural for me to want to be them, until my breasts began to develop a little faster than was necessary.

I began to pay attention to the breasts in my family: my mother’s, my aunt’s, my grandmothers’. Mommy’s breasts are, according to her, slightly smaller than mine. They have nursed five children, have put on weight along with the rest of my mother, and have gone through several incarnations of the bra. They are not the first thing people look at on her. In fact, I don’t think very many people notice them at all, except Daddy. My mother’s mother appears flat-chested compared to the other women in my family. But Grandma Thompson’s whole body is small compared to the other women in my family. She has medium-sized breasts, about the size mine were when I was sixteen.
My father's side of the family is completely different. Aunt Karen and Grandma Cunningham have big frames and big breasts to sit atop those frames. Grandma's were sagging with age, but they still looked huge.

So I began my prayer when my breasts first began to look bigger than my friends'. "Lord...Please don't let me have breasts like Grandma's." I prayed the prayer every time I went up a cup size. I prayed the prayer when my mother would poke and prod my chest and say, "Hmmm. You filling out there, Ya."

God has a sense of humor. Today, I have large breasts. They are all-natural and inherited—painful when bounced, bumped, or pinched. They are not grotesquely large; I would not get a spot on a TV talk show ("My Breasts are So Big that They Won't Fit on Your TV Screen!"). And they are not the size of my grandmother's. But they are large enough to cause concern.

My breasts were squeezed into a C-cup my freshman year of college. I was very modest, got dressed with my back turned when my roommate was in the room. She never got to see the soft, thick flesh that spilled over the sides of the stretched material, the way the straps were loosened as far as they would go, the hooks grasping at the very first set of eyes they came to. I wore loose t-shirts most of the time to hide them.

The one person who consistently blew my cover was my friend Shannon, whose breasts were bigger and much more noticeable than mine because she was not ashamed of them. The first time I emerged from my room into the dorm's central parlor in the pink and purple t-shirt I wore for bed, she poked me in my breasts.
That night, my friend Leslie was sitting on the blue-green couch in front of the TV, one knee pulled up to her chest, the other tucked underneath her. She was the first to notice my shirt. “Ayana, I thought you didn’t like Dallas ‘cause of the Redskins!”

I tugged at the bottom of the shirt, pulled it out and looked down at it. I scrunched up my nose. “I know, but it’s not about the football team. Nah, I bought this shirt the very first time I ever bought anything. I was about six, and my friend across the street was selling some of her old clothes. So my sister and me, we used our allowance money and bought some. This shirt was huge on me, then. It ‘bout swallowed me up.” I laughed and scratched my head through my scarf. “It’s stretched some, too.”

Shannon came out of her room while I was explaining. She was dressed to go, dark blue jeans, Sam and Libby leather boots, a red, V-necked sweater. Her hair was down and her dark red lipstick was on. She heard the last part of what I said.

“Well, it ain’t big on you now!” She was always so loud about everything and I felt my ears begin to get warm. She came toward me with this grin on her brown face, and I knew what she was going to talk about. “Look at your breasts!” The blush slowly burned its way to my cheeks. Then she just stuck out her hand, grabbed my left breast and lifted it up and down as if she were weighing a melon. “There is no way you wear a C-cup, girl. You need to go to Vicky’s Secret and get measured.” And she left me there, as red-faced as I can get.

I finally did go with Shannon, nearly two years later, to get measured at Victoria’s Secret. Her boyfriend was with us. And I didn’t mind that because I assumed he and Shannon would be somewhere else in the store looking at lingerie or something. So I strolled shyly across the red carpet into the bra section, went to the wall, and began searching for 36-
D bras, one size up from what I had been wearing for three years. I was excited that I was going to buy my first Victoria’s Secret underwear. Up until that point, Hanes had provided the bras and what my friends called the “granny panties,” large white cotton briefs. I fiddled through A, B, and C cups, then turned to the saleswoman and practically whispered, “Uhm, do you have any 36Ds?”

The saleswoman looked at my chest. Shannon heard me, walked over, and looked at my chest. She and the saleswoman looked at each other. “Ma’am, can you please measure her? I think she’s bigger than a 36 D. I wear a 34 double D, and I think she’s bigger than me.”

“I am not.” I was embarrassed about having my breasts measured. I was embarrassed about having to buy a new bra. I was embarrassed about having breasts in the first place.

The saleswoman, a slim, young white woman with long brown hair, and a B-Cup chest smiled, pulled out her tape measure, and honored Shannon’s request. She talked as she worked. “Hold your arms up. Thanks. I think your friend may be right. You never got measured before?” She wrapped the tape measure around me, starting from the tip of my right breast, around my back, around the other breast, and back to the starting point. “Good, thank you. Okay, turn to the side for me. Keep those arms up.” She measured my breast from my underarm to the tip. “Mmmhmm. Let me see. Now, that means you are a 36 double D. I knew you were bigger than you thought when I looked at your breasts.”

Shannon burst into a grin. “I told you. I knew you were bigger than me!”

Zuri, Shannon’s boyfriend, pointed and giggled. “Damn, Ayana!”
I turned red and followed the saleswoman to a drawer where she dug through multi-colored satin bras and picked out two 36DD, a black one and a purple one. I pouted, told Zuri to shut up, glared at Shannon, and went to the dressing room to see if the woman was right.

Shannon and the saleswoman came in after I had put the black bra on. They poked, stuck their fingers in between the material and my breast, adjusted the straps, decided between them that they’d picked out the right bra, and then asked me how I felt. I wanted to tell them to go to hell. “It feels fine.” I bought the bras and pouted all the way home.

In my house, breasts were a gift from God, made for a specifically beautiful purpose. We were supposed to accept them with grace and dignity. Grace and dignity meant covering them up the best way you could and never, ever flaunting them. Decent, godly women nursed babies with their breasts. Indecent women, those who participated in the “sleaze” that my mother saw constantly on television and in the street, wore clothing that emphasized their breasts.

When my breasts finally became noticeable to the opposite sex, I began to wear clothes that not only covered them, but de-emphasized them. I wore very few turtlenecks. My expectation was that, if I hid the breasts, then teenage boys would look deeper and see a smart, funny, kind-hearted person. I also expected world peace. I was so naïve, I could have been Miss America had I been able to convince myself that showing cleavage was not closely related to sexual depravity.

After a couple of months of wearing bras that fit, I finally accepted my breasts as part of my attractiveness. I bought shirts that fit instead of shirts that were two sizes too big. I wore tank tops in the summer time and didn’t tug at them or try to stretch them to make them
bigger. When people talked to my breasts instead of to my face, I tried to ignore them and assumed that they could not help it. But they still manage to cause some trouble for me.

A few months ago, I was in my college roommate’s wedding. It was held at The Venetian hotel in Las Vegas, and I was the only bridesmaid, so I picked my own dress. It was a strapless periwinkle blue satin dress with a bell skirt. The dress was the perfect color for my skin and the perfect style for my shape. When I tried it on in the store, it was a little too loose around the breast area, so I had to get it altered.

The wedding day was the first time I put the dress on since it had been altered. I got myself sucked and tucked into the corset bra I had to buy. Then, Missy helped me put the dress on. I felt like a sausage. The dress was tight around my breasts so that it pushed them up and together. I had a mountain of cleavage sitting where my chest used to be.

When the wedding was over, the guests came up to tell me how beautiful I looked. They asked who had curled my hair into all those little spirals. They shook my hand and patted me on the shoulder. They gushed over my dress and how gorgeous it was. And all the time, they either kept trying to avoid the many glances at my breasts, or they just stared outright.

The women stared, and I could not blame them. Their looks spoke to me: “How in the hell can you walk around with those things!” I would just smile and glance away, pretend I didn’t notice so they would not be uncomfortable. When they walked away, I would tug, trying to cover myself up.

The men took a different approach. They did not want me or their wives to think they were ogling me. So they tried their best to avoid looking. I could see the concentration in their faces as they tried to maintain eye contact with me while they talked. And when their
glances strayed down, I just continued to talk to them as if nothing had happened and tried not to add to the spectacle I made by turning red from the neck up. The next day, my breasts were covered up, nobody stared, and I won 30 quarters at the slot machines.

There is a picture of the wedding on the coffee table in my living room. It is a lovely picture. Sometimes I pick it up and examine my breasts in that dress and laugh. I would have stared at me, too.
I saw him from the corner of my eye while I danced, so I broke the circle, thinking he wanted to go through. When he did not move, I thought he wanted to talk to one of my white friends because no white boy goes into a group of girls to talk to the black one. Not in the South. Not in America.

He stood in the same place, watching me until I turned toward him. "What's your name?" He leaned in close to my ear so that I could hear him and smell his alcohol and cologne and sweat. He smiled at my name, gave me a compliment, told me that his name was Tony. "I'm Italian."

He had dark hair and eyes, olive skin. Handsome. Not white. Italian. He was dressed in a brown and white plaid shirt and cream khakis. He could move to the music, didn't push his body against mine. He stared at me as if I were a piece of candy in a store window, something he wanted but could not get to.

I could feel my friends watching me. They wanted to see what I would do with this boy. They wanted to see how long he would last before I turned back to them without giving him the chance to ask for my phone number. I wanted to know how long he would last, too. So I kept dancing with him.

He asked me questions about work, school, home. I liked the way he looked and the way he smelled, and I knew I had to push him away. So I told him that I was going to
graduate school in Iowa. Instead of leaving, his eyes lit up in the dark. "You’re beautiful and smart." Beautiful.

Tony did not care that I was going to Iowa. Tony did not mind getting to know me long distance. Tony had no idea how much I wanted to just keep on dancing with him, to have him continue to look at me.

I told him I didn’t think anything could come of his calling me. I told him there would be no point. I smiled at him, thinking it would be better if I smiled. He told me I had a beautiful smile. Beautiful.

On a hot day when I was nine years old, I stopped believing I was beautiful. The boy I adored through my young life stood in front of my house bouncing a basketball. He turned to my friend, "I don’t want her to be my girlfriend anymore. She’s ugly." And because I thought his slanted brown eyes were lovely, because he was the smartest boy I’d ever met, because I had not yet learned to love myself, I put my head down and told him that was okay.

For over ten years, through my first hair relaxer and my first bra, through the first time I ever felt fat and the first time I ever worked out, I have believed that there is something wrong with the way I look. Tony could not change that, so I walked away from him. But it was not an easy thing to do.
I sit with the car running as my wife flips down the visor, leans close, and coats her lips for the third time this morning. Her lipstick is rusty like the bumper of my father’s ancient pick-up truck. When she turns to me for approval, her lips still thin and flat, I smile and cut the engine. My son, the one who is fourteen and does not talk to us, slides the door open to get out of the car. He hunches over, stuffs his hands into his khakis and walks away without a backward glance. *I hope you have ten sulky brats just like you.* I shake the thought from my head and help my wife with our five-year-old twins, all ribbons, lace, and patent leather. It is Easter Sunday.

We stand in front of the First Baptist Church of Willow Oak Farms. It is a building of angles and steeples, pale brick and brightly stained glass. It takes up half a block with its parking lot and youth center. There is a marquee made of brick and plastic in the center of the church lawn. It proclaims the name of the church, the pastor’s name, and the fact that JESUS IS RISEN! Lilacs have been planted at the base of the sign. They clash with the color of the brick.

No one is out in front of the church because we are late for the fourth time in a row. It took my wife forty-five minutes in the shower this morning. The smell of her special occasion body wash drifted from under the door. It’s the smell she uses when she wants to have sex, not when she wants to pray. But I don’t mention it.
The thing is that we got a new preacher at the beginning of this year. My sister-in-law says he looks like a tall Tom Cruise. *Like Tom Cruise is all that great looking.* The preacher’s name is Jim, and he won’t allow us to call him anything else, which is a little weird for middle-class church-going Americans. We’re used to giving respect where it’s due and we’re used to keeping some kind of distance between us. But Jim’s not like that. *He’s scary.* He hugs people.

When we go into the church, we stand out in the vestibule because Jim’s in the pulpit praying. My son’s standing in the corner with his arms folded across his chest. His blond hair hangs in his eyes. His mother says he needs a haircut, and usually I would agree except that he looks more comfortable with all that hair. Instead of turning red and stuttering out answers to relatives he’s forced to be civil to, he just hides behind his hair and grunts. It’s much less painful to watch.

I walk up to the window that looks into the church sanctuary. Jim is wearing a red jacket and a tie with a wolf on it. I hear my wife giggle beside me, “That Jim.” I ignore her. Pretty soon she’ll claim that she’s a North Carolina State fan like the rest of the church, which is just plain ridiculous. We are not from North Carolina. ACC sports are completely unimportant to us. At least they were. But now I find myself wishing for Duke to win every title from now until the rapture. And I never talk sports with Jim.

I scan the backs of the heads until I see hers. She has her hair pinned up in a bun and I wonder at how that much hair can be forced into something that seems so small. Her neck is long and the color of peanut butter. It is the only dark neck in the room and I wonder how soft it would feel if I ran my finger along it. *Is her skin salty?* I feel uncomfortable in my pants, so I stuff my hands in my pockets and adjust myself so that my wife doesn’t see. I
glance around out of nervous habit, though there is nobody but us out in the hall. My son has swept his hair back from his face and is grinning at me. Maybe I should let my hair grow long.

The church is full of big hats, lace and ruffles, and a ridiculous amount of starch. Many men stand against the walls, stiff, periodically wriggling or tugging at their collars. The church regulars are being heroic today, standing in the aisles so the women and children can sit in the pews. The men I don’t know, the ones who keep glancing at their watches, are being heroic by missing the pre-game shows. My son and I find a spot on the back wall in the shadows. My wife and the twins go downstairs to Children’s Church. I direct my attention to the pulpit and breathe as quietly as possible.

Deacon Thomas is reading the week’s announcements. He keeps tossing his head slightly to the right. He is trying to keep his shaggy white hair from getting in his eyes. He is not young enough to put up with such irritations. “Directly after service, this morning, there will be a brief meeting of the trustee board. Please meet in the outer office immediately after service. That means you, Bill.” The Deacon smiles and the congregation laughs in unison. Mr. Bill, the deacon’s brother, waves his wrinkled hand.

Deacon Thomas closes his program and leans his smoky-suited arm on the podium, his lips just a centimeter away from the microphone. “EASTER PLAY TONIGHT!!” He grins and I feel my legs lock. Don’t remind me. “Now nobody knows better than I do that there’s gonna be some sports between a few rams and a mighty, mighty wolfpack, but that’ll be over by the time the play happens, so y’all better make it back here.” The church laughs again and, again, it’s one sound.
My son nudges me with his elbow and I lean over. His lips are so close to my ear that I can feel the moisture in his breath. “You ready to die today, Daddy?” The way he says it convinces me that he has learned more about sex than our birds and the bees talk taught him. I grin and won’t meet his eyes. I am in the church play, and I have a big part.

At the end of the service, Jim stands with her at the doors to say goodbye to everybody. She is his wife, Anita. She is from New York. She is Puerto Rican. She laughs with her entire body. She is the preacher’s wife.

I know we will stop because my wife would never miss the chance to hug Jim. I pick up one of the twins to shield me. It works. The preacher’s wife grabs the girl instead of me. I let her and feel the hairs on the back of my arm stand up as her arm brushes mine in the exchange. She smiles at me and all of her teeth show and all of her teeth are straight and white. But her lips are so thick and they look so soft they probably taste like a plum. “Do they have plums in Puerto Rico?” I try my best to contract my muscles so that I appear smaller. I think if I practice doing this enough, I will learn how to make myself disappear.

She doesn’t stop smiling, but I see the brightness in her eyes sharpen. “Of course we have plums. Puerto Rico’s not the third world, you know?” She is tense handing my daughter back over to me and everyone around us can sense it. Her anger is a force. It is like the air suddenly becomes stiff and it is difficult to move. There are only a few seconds of silence, but they are enough for me to curse my mother for ever having taught me to speak.

Jim slides his hand around her waist and rests it on her hip. His left hand is large and pale against the sea-blue of her skirt. His palm cups her hip and his fingers trail down to the beginning of her thigh, just above the split in her skirt. His wedding ring is gold. He is
smiling at me when I look up, the kind of smile that football players give when they’re at a charity function for underprivileged youth. “Well, if it isn’t our John the Baptist! What are you saying to get my wife mad at you, John?” There is no edge to his voice, no hidden threat underneath the pleasantness.

Before I have the chance to speak, my wife speaks for me. “Oh, I’m sure he was just making some sort of silly joke, weren’t you dear? He’s a sweetheart, Anita, really he is.”

My wife pats Anita on the hand. My wife’s hands are pale and bony, like a skeleton’s. I used to think they were sexy because they were thin.

Anita smiles back at my wife, a dimple in her right cheek. “It’s okay. I will get him back. I play Salomé, remember.” They all laugh. I do my best not to frown.

I do not like Easter plays. I do not like plays at all, but the one’s for Easter have absolutely no imagination. They are always about the Passion. The guy playing Jesus never has any charisma, and then at the end, they throw in plastic, neon eggs filled with jelly beans for the kids.

First Baptist’s play is no different, except that this time, in the wake of 9-11, our director felt the need to emphasize the wonder of martyrdom. So the play includes John the Baptist, and I volunteered to play him before the director handed me my usual part of Soldier With Spear. I swear I didn’t know that she would play Salomé. My wife says, “Well, who else looks sinful enough to play her, silly? The woman is sex incarnate.” Anita does not impress my wife.
I have been to every rehearsal, me and my son. He plays the guard who cuts my head off. *Little twit volunteered for the part.* I know the lines as if I had written them myself. I practiced in the mirror while I shaved, practiced every facial expression, every look of fear and calm and delight. At work, I pretended to have the sense of conviction John had. The sales clerk at the deli where I eat my lunch thinks I am a crazy white man. "I ain’t never heard anybody order a tuna fish sandwich like that.” I listen to her comments and smile serenely because I am John the Baptist. He wasn’t afraid of what people thought of him.

I repeat that to myself now. *John wasn’t afraid. He wasn’t afraid of anything.* I am standing in the hall at the back of the church letting the make-up woman put what looks like dirt on my face. I am dressed in deerskin. There are a lot of hunters who go to church in the suburbs of Raleigh, and a lot of their wives can sew. Finding a costume for me, John the Baptist, to wear was not difficult.

But I am embarrassed now. I can feel people’s eyes on me, on the muscles they never see underneath my suit and tie. Jesus stands in front of me, looks me up and down. He grins and sweeps his long brown hair behind his ear. "I forgot you’re a runner, cousin. Makes me glad I’m all covered up. I wouldn’t want Old Sister Shaw thinking about what she’d like to do with me if she were just a few years younger. Runners gotta have endurance, you know? Good luck with that.” *Thanks Jesus.* I smile back at him and try not to vomit on his sandals.

The make-up lady winks at me. She is somebody’s niece in the theater department at State. She pats me on the knee and I flinch. "Don’t worry,” she says. "You are not my type.” I relax a little. Something in the way she laughs makes me think that no man is her type. I tell her that she is my new best friend. She pinches my cheek and moves on to put make-up on Pontius Pilate.
My son walks up to me, his hair pulled back in a ponytail. Everything about him suddenly reminds me of my father, down to the way he used to stand on his toes, his muscles tense, whenever he was indoors, like a wild animal caught in a trap. Do I ever stand that way? I sure feel that way right now. He grins at me for the five hundredth time today. Guard Number Two, flipping two plastic swords in his hand, calls my son over. He waves. I feel alone when he goes.

“Aren’t you cold?” Anita stands in front of me, her hair in several long braids with silver beads at the tips. She is wearing a blue robe and hugging herself. John the Baptist would not be afraid of what’s under that robe. I reach out and touch her braids. I let them fall one by one from my fingers. I tell her I am not cold.

“Good luck out there.” She smiles at me and both her cheeks dimple.

I say my lines perfectly in the scenes before I die. I baptize Jesus with all the solemnity and spectacle that Jim has when he baptizes new Christians. I confront Herod like a barking bulldog. My entire body shakes with righteous anger. I am John the Baptist.

Then Anita comes out from backstage and I am suddenly me again. Me with an erection underneath my deerskin. Me with muscles that will not let me run away. I cannot take my eyes from her. She is Salomé, veiled like a belly dancer, sheer black skirts sliding against her skin. She has come for my head.

Her dance begins with her hands. She holds small gold bells that ring with every undulation of her fingers. Her arms begin to twist and the twist continues all the way down past her bare belly to her beaded hips. John the Baptist would not be afraid of those hips.
But it is difficult for me to breathe. So I concentrate on that while she rings her bells and her braids fly and her hips punctuate the music playing in the background.

I feel wet breath in my ear as my son whispers, “Dad!” His grip on my arm tightens. His hand is slick with sweat. He has forgotten that he is Guard Number One. I have forgotten that I am John the Baptist. We breathe in unison and there is nothing but the spotlight on Salomé.

But the dance does not go on forever. She stops, breathing hard, sweat rolling down her skin. She does not look at me or at my son when he raises his plastic sword to cut off my head. She looks at Jim, sitting in the front pew in the corner in the darkness of the church.

And as soon as the cold plastic touches my skin, I feel a pain in my neck, feel sharp, cold metal dig into my skin and then through it. I am the head of John the Baptist, and I feel more terror than I ever have in my life. *John the Baptist would not be frightened of death.*

Everything is black. I blink my eyes, but I see nothing in front of me. I try to breath, but there is no air coming, no air and I want to cry or scream and I can’t. I cannot do anything but wait. There is no light for me to walk towards. There is only the feel of my son’s hands gripping my hair.
Reed walked out the door to Link’s truck, a big black Dodge that he used to haul his repair equipment around in. The truck had “REED’S HOME REPAIR” painted in white block letters on the side, along with a little yellow house with a red roof. The truck was dusty and had a hundred small dents on the sides of the truck bed from boards slamming into it. There was one round dent that came from a baseball. Reed and his brothers had gotten whipped good for that. His father had saved a long time for that truck.

When he got to the truck, Reed peered over the side. There was nothing there, so he opened his father’s door. Sitting in a little wire cage in the middle of the seat was a damn rooster. Reed did not say anything, only waited until his sister and brothers got there and saw for themselves. He got tired of being the first one to comment on how ridiculous their father was. Everybody would just attribute it to a phase he was going through. “You know, at this age, all boys are embarrassed by their fathers.” That’s what people said. They didn’t know.

When his siblings arrived at the truck, they collectively decided that it was the ugliest little animal they ever saw.

“He couldn’t get a clean one?”

Reed stepped back from the truck and watched the scene. Man had climbed into the passenger side of the truck and was holding his nose. The twins, his 10-year-old sister, T.J.,
and brother, J.T, were both standing squished, sharing the space in the driver’s side doorway.

“He got mud crusted up all over him! And he don’t look happy about it.”

He watched his father walk up to the truck and stand behind the rest. Link’s black wavy hair was pulled back in a curly ponytail that reminded Reed of a rabbit’s tail. His faded black jeans and t-shirt were dusty. He turned to smile at Reed, that wide grin that made everyone love him and forgive him for being an odd man.

“Why in the world did Daddy bring home a rooster...a stinky, dirty-ass rooster?”

“Watch your mouth boy,” Link said. He was grinning like he just hit the numbers.

“Y’all making fun of my rooster? His name is Bernie. That’s what Grandaddy said your old country grandma wanted to name me. I figure it fits him.”

Reed just stared at his father and calculated the situation in his head. They lived in a residential neighborhood not very far from D.C. with very little grass and even fewer trees. Plus, grocery stores and fast food places were within walking distance. Plus, people in the neighborhood got shot or shot at other people regularly. Not a farm. Roosters belonged on farms. It was simple. He looked at his father and spoke. “You know you can’t keep him.” He stated it as fact. His father stared back, still smiling, but his eyes never left his son’s.

Reed looked down at his ragged tennis shoes. They were so worn that they had cracks in the leather. “What Ma say?”

Link stayed silent until Reed looked back at him. “Well, she say y’all got to wash that bird off and feed it before you bring it into the house to show her. So you might want to get to work.” He turned around and walked into the house without explaining any more.

“Now, tell me this. How is it he bring home a rooster, and we have to clean the nasty thing? I can’t wait till I’m an adult.” His sister folded her arms and shifted her weight to one
“T.J.,” Reed said to his sister. “I’m telling you, it won’t matter if you an adult or not. This ain’t got nothing to do with that. Our father...is CRAZY.” Reed was careful to stress the last word. His sister nodded as if she knew. But she didn’t. “The man been getting into trouble since the day he was born. How you think I came along? But he gets people to see things his way. Why you think grandaddy ain’t shoot him when Ma came up pregnant?”

Reed had been born before his parents got married. His mother gave him both his father’s last name and her own. So he was Reed Stevenson, carrying his family’s last name as his first. People had expected him to feel a little jealousy towards his brothers and sister because they all shared their last name. When he had first asked about it, Link squatted so that he could be face to face with his son. “What’s your name, son?”

“Reed.”

“What’s your whole name?”

“Reed Jeremiah Stevenson,” he responded, without knowing what his father’s point was.

“Who in your family has the name Stevenson?”

“Grandpa Joe and Grandma Marie.”

Link grinned at him. “And you know where Jeremiah comes from don’t you?”

Maxine had explained to him about his uncle who had died in Vietnam several times. “From Uncle J. The dead one.”

“That’s right. The soldier.” Link patted his shoulder when he said that and looked past his son for a moment. When he turned back to him, he grinned. “Now who in your family has the name Reed?”
And at eight years old, all Reed could do was smile at the man who had bent down to his level to talk to him. "YOU!" He said it proudly, and Link grabbed him, tickled him, and gave him a big hug.

"That's right, son. You are my boy, and it don't matter where in your name it says that, so long as it does." His father had a way of making people forget the questions they asked.

But Reed was sixteen, now. Link had to answer his questions.

"Hey, look. Y'all gonna help us get this bird out of here or what?" Reed's brothers were sliding the cage along the seat, leaving clumps of dried mud. The rooster sat quietly, only shook its head quickly as it was pushed. The boys were careful. None of them knew enough about roosters to know whether Bernie would bite them.

Man joked about the situation as he reached underneath the seat to get a rag. "People standing around running their mouth when they got a job to do," he said. "Just like black folks. I'm gonna throw this rag over top of the thing. I don't want no rooster getting upset cause it sees how fine I am, you know?"

"Shut up." J.T. gave the cage a quick shove and made Man jump. "You crazy. Reed. How are we supposed to get this thing outta this truck without losing a couple of fingers?"

Reed hadn't the slightest clue. But they did not want to hear that from him. They expected him to have a good answer, a responsible answer. Reed frowned.

"Yeah." His sister, who hadn't moved from the spot she was in, took on her annoying habit of supervising other people's work. "And how we supposed to wash it when we do get it down?"
Before Reed could say anything, J.T. leaned out of his side of the truck. "Well, I think we should let T.J. figure out how to get it, since she ain't done nothing yet but want to ask all these questions. How about that?"

The girl shot a look at her twin. "If y'all leave that up to me, that bird is not getting out of that truck. It's as simple as that."

Reed finally spoke. "Then, open up the gate, stand to the side, and shut your mouth. You're bothering real men at work." He glared at his little sister and her face sank. His stomach pulled at him as if it were empty. But he wouldn't take back what he said, so he turned toward the truck and the rooster.

"Fine." He heard T.J. try to cover up her hurt feelings. "Let me know when I can talk again, boss." She stood quietly while they struggled with the animal.

"Hey, T.J.!” The shout came from across the street and Reed turned to see Richie McClain, the little white boy who was J.T.’s friend, waving at his sister, barefoot, dirty, and grinning. He was ten years old, and for some reason had decided to attach himself to their entire family.

"Hey, Richie." Everybody said it, all without enthusiasm.

"What y’all doing?” Even though nobody wanted to have a conversation, the rule of the neighborhood was, put up with Richie. It ain’t his fault he white.

So T.J. answered him and Reed just hoped that would be enough. "We washing our rooster."

Reed heard a shout and looked over the hood of the truck at the house. Link was standing in the doorway grinning. He cracked the door enough to tell T.J. what to do. "Ask Richie if he want to come over and help y’all.” And he went back to smiling like that was
the best damn idea God ever gave him. Reed rolled his eyes.

“Richie. My Daddy told me to ask you if you want to come over.” His sister sure had a loud voice when she wanted to. Reed noticed that there was a constant pain pulsing in his head

“Sure, let me put on my shoes.” Richie ran into his house, barely bothering to open his screen door. Reed hoped the boy’s grandmother would punish him for being too fast.

“That’s just great.” He sighed. “All we need is another kid who doesn’t know shit about cleaning roosters. And the damn boy talks a mile a minute. No wonder he doesn’t have any friends.” Reed looked at J.T., but his brother would not look at him.

Reed and Man lifted the rooster from the truck. They took it to the side of the house, on the gravel, makeshift driveway. Both of the boys were holding the cage carefully, their fingers wrapped around the wires. Rust came off on their hands.

Reed turned on the hose. The rooster was strutting around the cage on its wrinkly yellow legs. The thing was even uglier moving around. Its orange-brown feathers were all crusted up with mud.

Man still made jokes. “Hey, T.J. That bird got legs like yours.”

J.T. joined him. “’Cept the bird’s are prettier.” They burst out laughing, and Reed smiled too. His poor sister didn’t look like she would ever hit puberty, but that was just fine with him.

Richie showed up and instead of arguing with her brothers, T.J. turned her attention to him. “Hey, Richie. See the rooster my Daddy got.”

“Yeah, I see it. That thing’s hair is the same color as mine.” Richie was pale with bright blue eyes and hair that made him look as if someone had lit a match and set fire to his
head. Reed thought the boy couldn’t stand out more if he were a blue-black kid in an all-
white school.

“Yeah, you right Rich.” He may not have been happy to see the boy, but he would
always be polite. “But how can you tell? It’s so much crap in the thing’s feathers, you can’t
hardly see what color the feathers are.” Reed stood up and moved away from the bird’s cage.
He waited for his brothers to do the same. “Y’all ready?”

When the first stream of water hit the cage, that rooster let out a holler that gave Reed
a chill. “Shit!” Everybody jumped and Link came rounding the corner at full speed.

“What the hell y’all doing to that rooster?! Reed, ain’t you got no better sense than to
spray the thing on full blast?!” Link yanked the hose out of Reed’s hand and stomped over to
the faucet to turn it off. Reed frowned as he rubbed his hand on his pants leg and tightened
the other into a fist. Link looked around at them like his feelings were hurt that his children
were that stupid. “How would you like to’ve been that rooster with somebody spraying you
full blast? Reed?”

Reed felt himself turn red. He only glared at his father, determined not to speak.
Link moved until he was standing two inches away, towering over him even though his son
was almost as tall. Reed blinked as his father spoke in a whisper that sounded more like a
hiss. “Answer me, son.”

Reed’s anger gathered in his throat. He coughed. “Well, Daddy, ain’t nobody tell
you to bring that thing here!” He did not shout. “We don’t know nothing about taking care
of no rooster, and you don’t either. You always doing crazy stuff like that for no reason, and
we got to get cussed at when stuff don’t work out the way you want it.” He knew what he
was saying. He saw Link’s face grow pale and his neck grow red. But Reed would not back
down completely. "Now, I ain't meaning to be disrespectful or nothing, Daddy. But this is not my fault. You can't expect us to know what to do if you don't show us." Reed took a step backwards.

Reed could no longer meet his father's eyes, so he watched Link's hands get stuffed into his pockets. "I picked Bernie up out at the farmhouse I been working at. The man, his name's Mr. Taylor, Samuel Taylor." Link turned away from Reed to look at the rooster.

"Mr. Taylor, he lost his first wife and just got married again. He wanted to fix the house up for his new wife. That's her wedding present. Well, Taylor got a boy from his first marriage. Boy's retarded, don't talk to nobody but his daddy since his mom died."

"How long his ma been dead?" Man's question was almost a whisper and he didn't look up when he asked it, just kept staring at his feet. Reed held his body stiff. Wrong question, he thought.

"She been dead a year. Boy's twelve, but ain't got no more sense than a five year old...Richie, why don't you go inside and ask Mrs. Maxine for a bucket of warm, soapy water and a rag."

Reed watched Richie go around the corner of the house. Richie's mother and father were dead. Died in a car accident when he was five. He lived with his grandparents. He wouldn't have thought about that story making any difference to Richie, but Link always seemed to look out for him. Reed noticed how much smaller he was next to his father.

"How'd she die, Daddy?" T.J. wanted to know more of the story.

"Cancer." That's all he said for a while. Reed watched his father take off his t-shirt, fold it, and hand it to his sister. T.J. took it around to the front of the house. His brothers began to take off their shirts, too. Reed just stood there with his hands in his pockets. Link
would have a good reason for bringing a rooster home. And everybody would think this was just another manifestation of the I-hate-my-father phase.

Richie and T.J. came back around the corner with a bucket of soapy water they carried between them, T.J. taller than Richie by a few inches. “Thank you Richie.” Link rubbed the boy’s head and smiled at him. “Why don’t you get me some suds on that rag while me and the boys get old Bernie out of this cage.”

Richie was glad to do it. Reed just stood and watched while the boys all got on their knees. They were all set to attack the bird if it tried to get away, but Link just made a kissing noise with his mouth and tapped his fingers on the ground. The bird came out and snuggled right up to his father’s hand. Reed looked at his father as if he had turned into a rooster himself.

Richie just grinned and brought the rag. “He’s a pet, ain’t he Mr. Link?”

“Yeah, Rich. That’s what I was about to tell my children. The boy had this pet rooster. It was his favorite thing in the world. Ain’t give it no name, cause he don’t talk. But this rooster followed him all over the place.” Reed watched Link begin putting soap on Bernie and saw the crusty mud come off as he rubbed him. He backed away.

“Well, if he loved the thing so much, how come you got him?” Reed looked at his father suspiciously. His hands were shaking inside his pockets. He didn’t know why.

“I been working on that man’s house a while now. Me and the boy developed a little friendship over this rooster. I seen how the thing kept following the boy around, ate with him, played with him, everything. I thought it was about the coolest thing I ever seen, so I stopped him one day and asked him about it. He just looked at me like I was crazy. Kind of like y’all do.” He smiled when he said that, and Reed felt his ears burning.
Link had stopped washing the rooster. Richie and J.T. were rubbing him with their hands. Man got the water hose started again and was putting the water on low pressure. T.J. walked over to Link and put her arms around his neck. “Hey little girl.” He put his hand on her arm and looked up at Reed, who stood there, trying to be a man in front of his father.

“I talked to the boy. Nobody ever talked to him. They gave up on him cause they figured he wouldn’t never talk back. But he did start to talk to me even though he ain’t use his mouth.” Reed looked eyes with his father. The man sounded serious, but his eyes looked amused. “He showed me how to make the rooster like me. Showed me how to feed it and pet it and call it. I showed him how to hammer stuff and let him help me around the house. He helped me paint and all that. He never said nothing the whole time though. But I knew he was enjoying himself.” Link’s eyes looked Reed up and down, as if weighing him, trying to balance out something about him. Reed straightened his body and crossed his arms in front of his chest. “That rooster’d just sit on the porch and wait for us to finish. Today was my last day. The boy gave me the rooster. I packed up and was getting ready to leave. I said goodbye to the boy, but his rooster wasn’t with him. So I got on in my truck and this here rooster was sitting on the seat beside me in a cage. I didn’t say nothing, just drove off. Me and the rooster decided on the way home that his name would be Bernie.”

“You didn’t tell the boy thank you?” Reed’s question hung in the air for a while. Everybody turned to look at Link. Reed felt himself relax a little.

“I didn’t need to. It was a fair trade. That boy had helped fix up his new mother’s house. He was proud. I’d say that was worth a rooster, wouldn’t you, boy?”

Reed looked at Link, picked up the towel that Richie had brought, knelt down and patted the rooster dry. When he finished, he stood up, looked at his feet, said, “It’s still an
ugly rooster, Daddy," and went into the house.
A Meeting

I have never been ashamed to be black. My neighbors were black. My elementary school stressed black history year-round. My father used to go around the house sometimes shouting, “Say it loud! I’m black and I’m proud!” I would laugh, but I would shout it.

A necessary part of being proud was a wariness of those who thought my color made me an inferior human being. But there is no way to tell which person believes that and which does not, so I tended not to trust the white race as a whole. That never interfered with whites I got to know, never interfered with my wanting to know them in the first place. But I was always clear about my people and my culture. I wanted neither my black friends nor my white friends to believe that I wanted to be any other color.

By the time I moved to North Carolina for college, I was so sure of myself around whites. My grandmother called me up and told me she found some information about my school and there were very few black people there. I told her I knew that but it didn’t bother me. When I hung up the phone, I felt sorry for her. She didn’t understand how much times had changed for young people. White people were not my enemy. I had met plenty and none had any serious superiority issues.

I am like many young blacks of my age and situation. I never struggled in school, have always been driven to show that I am just as smart as any person whose skin was lighter than mine. I met teachers and students who never showed any dislike for me because I was
black. They seemed more interested in me because of it. I convinced myself that racism was a thing of the past, except for isolated incidents like Rodney King’s beating and O.J. Simpson’s publicly televised trial. I was dangerously confident that racism, at least the white on black kind, would never touch me personally.

Then I met April’s father. April was one of my college roommates and her father did not like black people. I don’t know when April first told him about me. I first heard about him when he refused to come to April’s wedding if our friend Shannon, a black woman, was one of her bridesmaids. April told her father that Shannon was in college, was smart, was pretty, was nice, was not like other black people. I yelled at her when she told me that. I said, “If this had been about me, I would have told you to go to hell. Don’t you ever try to explain me away to your father. He is the one with the problem.” She didn’t understand why I was so mad. I told her that was because she was not black.

I met April’s father one day after we had run some errands. He drove into work in Raleigh from Johnston County, a place where there is a road sign proclaiming it to be home to the Klan. And he worked with cotton. Clearly, I was hesitant about the meeting. I wanted to sit in the Tarheel Mobile, April’s sky blue and white truck named after the University of North Carolina’s mascot. “I’m not going in there to meet your damned daddy, April. Not today.” I pressed myself further into the seat and crossed my arms as we sat in the parking lot.

“He won’t be bad.” April’s green eyes looked at me. I knew she wanted me to meet him, not because she wanted me to understand him but because she wanted me to understand her. She loved this man because he was her father, and she had been having to deal with what she didn’t like about him her whole life. She wanted me to see him in person, to be
able to put a human face to the man who made me cry sometimes without our ever having met. “He knows if he’s bad, I’ll cuss him out.” April’s accent sounded just like one of those white-sheeted bastards in the movies.

The movies, a couple of pages of discussion about lynching and a chapter about segregation in my US History textbook was where I got my information about racists. In the books, what they did to black people was stamped in black and white, no feeling behind it, just a blank white page. That did not frighten me. The movies frightened me because the movies put faces on the people. I could see sneers and cold eyes. I could hear hateful shouts full of conviction. I could see black faces full of fear. But those were actors. They were not real people.

I unbuckled my seatbelt. “Fine.” I put on my polite face as I walked behind her through the building back to the beige room where her father stood with a little mask covering his mouth. He was doing something strange to the cotton on this machine in the middle of the room. Another man sat in a chair to the right of him.

April went over to her father and hugged him. He looked no different than every other white man in the world. He was taller than she, thinner, tanned from hard work in the sun. His hair was white, and he did not look like the man who had abused April’s mother and brother, the man who could hug his daughter after he had refused to come to her wedding, the man who could hate me because of the color I was born.

She introduced me. I put on my weakest fake smile. My small brown hand shook his big red one. I looked into his eyes. I was not afraid of him; he knew that. I was afraid that I would not know how to deal with his hate or the hate of the other white redneck sitting in the room with him. I don’t think he knew that.
April’s father and I talked about Washington, D.C. He told me that he used to drive a truck and that he’d driven through Maryland a few times. He asked me questions about places I knew. He asked me questions about my major and what I was going to do with my life. I answered his questions, smiled politely, laughed at his jokes. I played the good, shuffling “house nigger.”

Hate is not something that just exists in the air that exerts pressure the way gravity does. People hate. And I was not ready to face that, to face a human being. Perhaps, if he had been honest about what he thought of my blackness, then maybe I could have remained stiff and angry. But racism is not always open. Even the Klan hides their faces. And it is easily passed from the aggressor to the victim and to the children of both. How do you fight that?

I don’t remember whether I said, “Nice to meet you” to April’s father. I just know that when I left, I felt dirty.
In a shoe box with a sky blue marble, a green Honorable Mention ribbon, her first driver's license, and a cassette tape with *Madonna—Like a Virgin* written in black magic marker, Loretta kept a letter from Lil' Rob Wilson, her boyfriend from third grade. The paper was greasy from her young fingers and was tearing slightly along the folds. Loretta kept it anyway.

Loretta Ashton was beautiful the way an orange is beautiful. What people saw was exciting because they were certain of what would be when they were close enough to touch her, to open her up, to devour her. Men and women watched her wherever she went, watched her white-brown skin and curly jet black hair that hung down her back and nodded their heads with secretive smiles as if to say, "Yes, that's what a woman is." Once, a blond man in a bar said she was like a mixed-race Marilyn Monroe. So nobody cared about what went on beyond her symmetrical face, her long neck, her plump breasts, or curving hips. Each had his or her own idea of what would be found inside—what color, how sweet, how juicy—when they finally peeled off her skin.

Loretta smelled of peaches. That's why she liked warm weather because she could smell herself without trying. She drove to the airport with the windows down and the radio blasting her *Riverdance: The Show* CD. It made her laugh out loud when black guys pulled up beside her, turned down their music to talk to her, and then stared at her as if she had lost...
her mind when they heard Irish reels being blasted from her speakers. She winked, waved and drove on. Black guys registered the disparity between what they expected and what they got from her. And they seemed to accept it with as much grace as possible by moving on to the girls who liked Ludacris more than they liked Phil Collins. But those on campus she'd spoken to always remembered her name.

She was a graduate student in History at Florida State University. She had volunteered to pick up, orient, and entertain a prospective fellowship recipient from NYU whose name she could never remember without looking at the information sheet he had filled out. Robert Baker Johnson. Twenty-four years old. African-American. No wife. No children. No allergies. No meat. She thought he sounded wholly uninteresting, but then there were very few history buffs, or vegetarians for that matter, who didn't. The only thing she noted about him was that he had printed out every answer neatly with a green pen.

In the airport, someone immediately asked her if she needed help. The woman was younger than she with a silver eyebrow ring and blond highlights. "No, thank you," Loretta said. "I am just looking for which baggage area the person I am meeting is in."

"Oh, girl, what flight was he on?" The woman smiled at her and maintained eye contact. Loretta stifled a sigh and told her. She waited politely, her hands folded in front of her, for the woman to find the baggage area and then walk with her to the escalators where she told her three times to make sure she went left at the Enterprise car rental place. Loretta thanked her and watched her walk off, her head bobbing up and down.

She knew the man as soon as she saw him. He was tall, at least six-and-a-half feet. He wore black slacks, a blue button-down shirt, and a diamond stud in his ear. His skin was as light as hers, his hair as curly and black. The way he stood scanning the people walking
by with an intent frown made her think that he looked that way when he printed the answers to silly informational questionnaires.

She smoothed down her skirt and strode up to him with her hand extended. "Robert Johnson?" She flashed a nice-to-meet-you smile, did not wait for him to extend his hand but grabbed at it and pumped it up and down. "I'm Loretta Ashton. Been sent to pick you up."

He raised his left eyebrow at her. His eyes were gray, but they looked blue like his shirt. "The name's Baker. And if you let go of my hand, I'll tell you that your hair is sticking out in ten different directions. Been riding with the windows down?" He smiled at her without showing any teeth, but Loretta was sure he was laughing at her.

Loretta could feel herself turn red as she let go of his hand and she became annoyed. She shifted her weight to one side, narrowed her eyes and smoothed down her hair. But she controlled her tone carefully and maintained her smile. "Yes, Baker, as a matter of fact, I have been riding with the windows down. It's Florida." She snatched his rolling suitcase from his hand and marched away quickly. She did not want him to feel as if he had to slow his stride because she was shorter than he and rolling his suitcase.

He caught up to her in a few steps but never seemed to shorten his stride though he never pulled ahead of her. She locked her eyes ahead of her and did not speak to him again until they had gotten to the car, though she was not sure why he had made her lose her temper and why it was so hard to control it. She had become a master at tolerating people with a smile and an overdone amount of politeness when they treated her as if she were a silly child. But not today.

When they got in the car and she had explained to Baker how to adjust the seat, she snapped her seat belt shut. "So I guess we'll take you to your hotel and then the plan is that I
take you to eat lunch with a few of the other graduate students. Kay?" She turned the ignition and Riverdance blasted out of the radio. Her first impulse was to turn it off, but she only turned it down enough that she could hear him speak.

"Uh, could we not do that lunch thing, Lolita?" He was rolling up the sleeves on his shirt. He was wearing a silver watch and the skin on his forearm was stretched tight over his muscles. But Loretta thought he had a ridiculous amount of curly black hairs on his arms.

"But it's already been arranged, Baker. And my name's Loretta, by the way." She reached into her purse and grabbed a ponytail holder. She twisted her hair up and secured it as she continued talking. "I, Loretta, am supposed to take you to this Italian place where they have great vegetarian lasagna. And there you are supposed to meet the stars of the history program." She put on her sunglasses.

"Are they interesting people, Loretta?" She thought he was joking with her, but his eyes were intense and expectant of an answer. So she told him the truth.

"No. They are not. But they try." She wheeled the car out of the parking spot and drove back towards campus, the windows down and blowing the little curls that escaped her ponytail. Baker's curls didn't move, and she figured he'd moussed them or something ridiculous like that. Loretta did not like the feel of hard hair.

"Well, I've had a long trip. It's hot here. I'd rather not eat with people who try just yet." His voice seemed to have an echo deep inside it, something edgy and a little angry. Loretta glanced over at him. His right arm was resting in the window space, his left resting on his thigh. He had pulled down the visor to shade his eyes.

She started to hum the "Firedance" that was playing on the CD. She caught the movement of his fingers from the corner of her eye. He was tapping the beat of the song on
his knee. "You like Riverdance?" She tried to take the jealousy out of her voice. She had never expected any other non-white person to like them as well as she did. Especially not a guy.

"Yeah. I tapdance. And I like all kinds of music. Don't look so surprised. Not all black guys are one-dimensional, you know." He grinned at her, but she felt the knife that he'd pulled out. And she didn't like the way it felt against her skin.

"I know that, thank you. My grandfather is a black man and so is my uncle and so is my younger brother. You are the only black man I've met who is in danger of seeming one-dimensional to me. Do you have something more than asshole to show me?" They were getting close to campus. The traffic was thicker, and there were more stoplights.

"I bet every guy who has ever known you has told you you are beautiful." Loretta flipped him the bird and drove the rest of the way to his hotel in silence.

When they reached his hotel room, Loretta leaned against the wall in the hallway and the door clicked shut behind him. He poked his head back out almost immediately. "You can come in. You may as well be pissed at me sitting down. Unless you're actually scared to come in." The way he said it made Loretta think he was making another racial comment. She slid past him, her breasts just brushing his arm. They both pretended not to notice.

"Anyway, I have to change my shirt. It's too hot for this one."

Loretta talked to him as he changed his shirt. He did it standing right beside her while she sat on the bed and looked up at him. "So if you don't want to eat with the group, then you want me to drop you off at some place within walking distance of campus? I could tell you how to get to Marshall Hall, and you can meet me there." His chest was hairy, too,
but not as hairy as Loretta had speculated. The hair was thin and curly and it met in a line in the middle that traveled down to his navel. She cleared her throat. "And if you want one of those guys to finish showing you around today and taking you where you need to go, I can get one of them to do it."

He looked down at her with a frown. "Are you tired of me already?"

Loretta let her eyes widen and her mouth drop open. "Aren't you tired of me? You've been bitching at me since I picked you up."

"You smell like peaches, Loretta. And you're going to have lunch with me someplace where the students like to just hang out. If it's a burger place, then I'll just eat French fries."

He pulled a dark red polo shirt over his head. "I don't need special treatment and you're not going to treat me special."

She said "Damn straight" as she slid over to the phone on the fake wood night stand. She canceled lunch with the other history students. She stifled a smile when she hung up.

They went to Loretta's favorite spot to have lunch, in the artsy, multi-ethnic, gay, poor part of town. Loretta loved being there. The freaks, the minorities, the homosexuals, and the broke folks all laughed at themselves and each other good naturedly. And the food was delicious.

They ate at a small Greek restaurant on the bottom floor of an apartment building. Loretta parked at the meter. Baker put in the quarters.

At the front of the restaurant, there was a man sitting on a piece of cardboard on the ground, holding a plastic cup with a few coins in it. He had a dirty, ratty black duffle bag
beside him and his hair was matted like unkempt dreadlocks. But his dark face and hands were clean and his smile, missing teeth and all, was bright as Loretta walked to the door.

She looked down at him, "Hey, Costas. What'll it be today? The usual?"

The man nodded his head and chuckled. His voice was like sandpaper. "Yeah, Loretta. And tell that old goat that I'm not moving until he admits I'm Greek, too." Loretta said she would and she held the door open for Baker who walked stiffly past her.

When they were seated, Loretta leaned across the small, circular table covered with a white tablecloth with blue flowers. She began to point out to him what was good on the menu. He cut her off. "I know Greek food."

So she leaned back and picked up her menu. Nicolo, the owner of the shop, came over to take their order. He was dark and extremely handsome with streaks of silver hair at his temples. He bowed to Loretta. "So, my love, you have returned once more."

Loretta truly liked Nicolo. "You know I could not stay away from you long, Nicky. I'll have the usual and the usual sent out to you know who, you old goat." Loretta truly liked to look at Nicolo, and she knew every line in the man's face, knew exactly where his smiles and frowns would press into his skin. She always felt lonely when she left his shop.

Baker cleared his throat, and both she and Nicolo turned to him as if he had suddenly appeared. Baker ordered his food, vegetables, cheese and bread. When Nicolo asked him if he wanted to try a lamb dish because it was very good, Baker simply said, "I'll have what I ordered, thank you." Nicolo sniffed and walked away.

Loretta bit her lip and rubbed her fingers along her water glass. She stared out the window to avoid looking at Baker, who she was sure was staring at her. She spoke quietly and without turning her head, "What is your problem?"
His voice was just as level, and she felt his anger resting on top of it. "What is your deal with the homeless guy?"

Loretta wrinkled her eyebrows and looked at him. His hands were side by side, flat on the table. He was hunched forward. "I buy Costas his favorite food whenever I come here. He and Nicolo like each other, but Nicolo growls about how Costas won't accept his offer of a job washing dishes and being a sort of security man by sleeping in the store all night." His expression had not changed. She shifted in her seat. Her legs had begun to stick. "Costas says he likes the fresh air and wouldn't be caught dead washing dishes when he could probably cook Greek food better than Nicolo. Costas swears he's Greek."

Baker nodded his head and smiled slowly. But it wasn't a good smile. Though Loretta wasn't sure what a viper looked like, she was sure Baker resembled it. "I asked you what your deal with Costas was. Do you buy him food out of pity? With the money your Daddy gives you to spend?"

Loretta did not understand where this man's anger was coming from and why it was directed at her, but she was beginning to lose patience with him. He continued talking. And his tone, for the first time that day, became condescending.

"Do you really think your buying food is going to help that man? He is a black man who's homeless. Have you ever even touched him? Your pity gives him nothing but a confirmation that he is worthless. No black man really likes to get something for nothing." He slid his hand across the table quickly and grabbed hers. She tried to pull it away but he held it tight. "Even the ones who live off of women are doing their part in bed, pretty Loretta. But I'm sure you haven't ever wondered about what it's like to have a black man in bed."
Loretta yanked her hand back and before she understood what she was doing, she hurled her water at him. He sat there, water dripping from the curls in his hair, his face red with rage. But Loretta had her own rage and she leaned across the table until her face was an inch away from his ear. And she whispered, "Do not ever presume to know what I am like or what I will do. You will lose that bet." She pulled napkins from the holder on the table and began to wipe off his face and the table in front of her. They ate their food in silence.

She said goodbye to Nicolo. Baker slammed through the door and walked to the car. Loretta walked slowly after him and stopped at the door to turn to Costas. He was holding out a purple beaded bracelet from his bag. "Here you go, Loretta."

Loretta could feel Baker’s eyes on them. She put her hand around Costas’s but did not take the bracelet from him. "You keep it this time, Costas. Sell it to one of your other girlfriends. And when you do, try something different on the menu." She smiled at him. She truly liked Costas.

For the rest of the day, Baker only spoke to her to ask or answer questions related to the school and the history Master’s program. Loretta tried not to care. She was still angry, but she noticed every move he made, everything he did to avoid coming into any physical contact with her. He was careful and very in control of his body, so even in close calls, he managed not to touch her.

Every time it happened, Loretta wanted to scream at him, "Touch me, you idiot!" But she thought that would just sound wrong. It certainly sounded wrong in her head. So she didn’t say anything at all and kept her face as smooth and unconcerned as possible.
When they got in the car and she drove him back to his hotel, she switched Riverdance off of the radio. "I keep a letter that a boy sent me in the third grade. His name was Lil' Rob. He was one of the kids they bussed in." Baker's breathing was quiet. Loretta could hear the crickets starting to sing. "He was my boyfriend because of this letter. He wrote 'I love you,' and you know he spelled love with a 'u' and no 'e.' But anyway, he said he loved me because I punched like a boy." She laughed at herself, at how special that was to her, at how saying it made her stomach feel lighter.

But Baker didn't say anything. So neither did she. At the hotel he got out of the car and stood on the sidewalk waiting. So she got out, too, and walked him upstairs. He turned away from her to open his door and she saw the dark arc of sweat rings underneath his arms. When he got his door open, he turned around to face her, still frowning.

So she moved into the space between him and the edge of his doorway. And she looked up at him and felt sorry for him. "You didn't expect me, did you?" He shook his head. "And now you have to come here because of me."

He nodded and she knew exactly what he would taste like before he kissed her.
“Maxine, I don’t want you to go back to work.” Maxine’s stomach growled in protest to her husband’s statement. She rolled her eyes away from him as he sat up. She smelled the faint odor of sweat from his skin. “I can take care of us just fine.” She heard the bed creak, the springs on his side of the bed return with relief to their natural state.

“This is not about you, Link.” She whispered it as he left to get into the shower. She continued to face the ceiling. The shadows of the tree outside their window performed their gray dance. The sun was shining, and she could feel the heat running up her legs. It would be another scorcher. The problem with D.C. in the summer was that added to burning heat was the heavy humidity that made her tired simply from breathing. She hadn’t just woken up on the wrong side of the bed, this morning. She’d woken up on the wrong side of the world.

“Damn,” she groaned as she got up.

Maxine walked downstairs to the kitchen in her bare feet. She always felt at home there because it was the one place where she could be alone. She went to the cabinets above the stove and pulled out the grits pot. It was an old pot without a handle, scarred black along the bottom from contact with many fires. It was perfect for grits, perfect for her kitchen because it had character. That was something Link had said when she first moved in with him into their first apartment. She had raised her eyebrow, taken the pot away from him and claimed it as her own. Because it was his. She’d needed to take that from him so that she
could feel like she was more than a visitor. *Now I can't get away.* She pushed that thought back down into her stomach.

Normally, she would go see if Link needed any help getting the kids up. It was his job to do that on Saturdays, but they always ended up doing it together, yelling and laughing at the kids and at each other. Today, she decided that he could handle it his damned self just like he figured he could handle her life. Maxine poured a little vegetable oil in the frying pan and began to cut onions up into it. Her eyes burned and she felt relieved to have a reason for tears. She tried to put the smell of the frying onions into words—*thick...sweaty.* *Now that doesn't sound appetizing.* She drew a circle on the cold faded-yellow floor tile with her Candy-Apple Red toenails and decided that the best thing to do would be to describe how she felt when she inhaled the onion aroma—hungry and human. It didn't make much sense as a food description and her college poetry teacher from a million years ago might have found it abstract, but she figured, *what the hell?*

This was her favorite time of day, before the noises began—the random noises that lasted all day long until she blocked them out in her sleep—and she began to feel better. Now all she could hear was the cracking and popping of the grease in the pan and the *bloop, bloop, bloop* of the water in the pot beginning to boil. Control. The sounds around were of her creation, were doing exactly as she expected them to. Not like people. Not like Link.

Her college poetry teacher had always worn sandals. Even when it got cold. He had just added socks. Maxine had always thought him strange but likable because he was encouraging. She missed that, missed having someone tell her that if she cut a little here, and cemented a little here, and flourished a little here, then she would have something good.
“Damn.” She cursed at grease that had popped onto her feet. She poured the grits into the pot of boiling water, stirring simultaneously. She turned to the open can of tuna fish and smiled to herself. Tuna fish and grits. She remembered how she had wrinkled up her caramel nose the first morning Link had made that for breakfast. She had stubbornly refused to eat it. He’d looked at their first-born, Reed, only three months old then, and said, “Baby boy, don’t never go marrying no girl who don’t know how to eat. Might cause exactly this kinda marital strife.”

_I was barefoot then, too._ Maxine looked down at her feet, toenails painted the same cherry red that they had been over 10 years ago. Of course, her apparel was not the same. She had been in a navy floor-length silk night gown—one of her two good ones, wedding gifts from her worldly aunt. She had been pleased with her little family. It was a “we’re only playing house” morning, the kind in which the house looks clean, the sun looks brighter, the baby looks adorable, and the man looks as sexy as he did the wedding night.

Three children later, Maxine had retired the navy blue nightgown in favor of Link’s old work shirt and boxer shorts, and she was experiencing a different kind of marital strife. She still loved being a mother, loved everything about her children, even the fact that they were little devils. But her patience had grown shorter. She wanted to throw things at the women on the soap operas, felt old for the past two weeks because Link fell asleep without touching her. Her father’s voice answered her complaints, _That’s life, lady._

She heard Link upstairs padding around. Her older sons, Reed and Man, were supposed to go play basketball with their father today, so they had to take a shower together without killing each other. Maxine could picture Link trying to help get the twins dressed and keeping the peace between the older boys at the same time. Both of J.T.’s legs would be
sticking out of one hole in his pants, while Link would be fighting with T.J. to take off her brothers’ clothes and to put on her own. “If you boys don’t get out of that shower in two minutes, I am coming in there after you!” When he used that tone of voice, the kids listened. Even they could pick up on the threat in the steeliness of their father’s usually easy-going voice. Maxine assumed that most of his frustration was not really directed towards the boys and she felt a little sorry for them.

While the tuna fish was still frying, she grabbed two grown-up plates, two G.I. Joe plates and two Muppet plates from the cabinet. She placed them on the wooden table Link built after the twins were born. “We gonna need a whole hell of a lot more room, Beautiful. If you insist on having more of these crazy-looking children of yours, I might have to build you a whole new house.” He had puckered his lips, and she’d thought he was going to kiss her. Instead, he had leaned over, planted a kiss on her stomach, and rose with a goofy grin on his face.

As she turned off the stove’s burners, she heard the marching and singing of her husband and her four children as they came down the stairs clean and hungry: “We are soldiers, bump, in the army, bump, we have to fight, bump, although we have to die…” They liked that song because they got to make the bumping noise when they sang it in church. But they never got the words quite right.

She switched into mother mode as soon as she heard her kids shuffling into the dining room. There was no use being mad at the kids. It wasn’t their fault that their father was a jerk. “All right, my little soldiers. Have a seat at the soldiers’ table and tell the big soldier to come on in here and get y’all some chow.” She stood at the entrance to the dining room, smiling as Reed and Man walked J.T. over to his chair. They were all dressed in cut-off jean
shorts and Star Wars T-shirts. The two older boys helped J.T. get settled in his chair, always looking out for him, though they could hardly ever seem to stand each other.

Link was carrying T.J. She had a little puff ball on top of her head, her Saturday hairstyle because Link’s hands were too big and clumsy to do anything else to her thick hair. T.J. rode her Daddy’s hip as comfortably and as gracefully as though she were a queen, with one skinny arm around his neck and the other by her side. Maxine could see that Link had compromised with his daughter. She wore a flowered jumper with one of J.T.’s Star Wars T-shirts in order to match with her brothers.

She saw Lincoln deliberately avoid looking at her as he put T.J. in her yellow booster seat. He knew she was mad at him, but Maxine could see that he was mad at her, too. There was no wink, no shoulder shrug, not even an “I don’t like to fight” smile. He knew her too well to think that she had given up the idea of going to work just because he’d said she shouldn’t. He knew she’d be angrier that he had presumed to tell her what she could and could not do. Her husband was no dummy. She could see him working himself up to coming in the kitchen.

“Tuna fish and grits. Smells good.” He handed her the first of the small plates.

“Yeah, well. Usually does.” She plopped the first bit of grits on the plate he held out to her. She saw Reed smack Man in the back of the head. “Reed, do you want to lose that hand, boy? Sit down and don’t move.”

“So you not talking to me?” Link had his left eyebrow raised as he spooned fried onions and tuna fish on top of the grits. His hands were darker and rougher than the rest of his body. And they were so big, the hands of a country boy.
“Did I not just say something to you? I could have sworn I had. Was it not good enough for you?” Her voice challenged him. It held the hostility that had been building towards him for the past week. As she spoke, she spooned grits onto the other three plates sitting on the stove. She had slim fingers, piano hands. They looked delicate. She’d bloodied many noses in street fights when she was young.

“Maxine, I don’t want to do this now.” He finished serving the plates and took them into the dining room. “Say your grace.”

Man piped up, “Ain’t we gonna wait for you and Mommy?”

“That don’t sound like no grace I ever heard, boy. Now say your grace like I told you.”

They all put their hands together and began their little sing-song, “God-is-grace-and-God-is-good.” When they finished, they began eating. They all liked tuna fish and grits, so she heard no complaints. They got that from him, that happiness with all things weird. She laughed a little to herself, but stopped when Link returned to the kitchen.

“Can I see you in the den?” She shrugged like a defiant teenager. She followed him into the den, stepping over stuffed brown bears, red fire engines, and yellow trucks as she went. There were no dolls. T.J. had never found them at all interesting. Link didn’t face her when he began talking. “Max, I don’t get what’s going on.” She noticed that he’d called her Max. “You been pouting all week, and all of a sudden you want to go to work. I know you don’t buy that your place is in the home mess, but you liked being home with the kids. Now you want to get away from our family. Is it me? Am I doing something wrong?” His voice was sad and tired, and she didn’t know how to handle it. She was the one who was the victim here, but somehow he’d turned all of it around on her.
“Wait a minute, now.” She shook her head and stared at his back. “Don’t go trying to make me out to be the criminal of the century. You’re the one who took the Me Tarzan, you Jane position this morning. The only reason you didn’t say, And that’s final is because you knew I’d have thrown whatever I could find at you.” Her voice was higher and louder and more hostile than she would have liked. She heard silverware drop in the dining room and looked through the area in the wall where the fishtank sat. Reed was picking up J.T.’s fork for him. He looked up at her as he went back to his seat, his eyes begging her not to fight.

Link was facing her now with a sincere look of hurt on his face. “You wanted to throw something at me anyway, didn’t you?” He brushed both of his hands roughly through his wavy black hair. “Look, I know money’s been tight lately, Max. But I’m trying. I’m working overtime at that place so that you and the kids can have what you need. I ain’t a failure, babe. I ain’t gonna fail you.”

“Do you think everything is about you? Maybe I’m the one who feels like a failure. Did you ever think of that?” She grabbed his chin and pulled his face down close to hers. “When I got pregnant, I had dreams that did not include you and the kids, Link. I want some of them, and the first step to getting them is to leave this house.”

He poked out his pink bottom lip. “Well...Can’t you just take up knitting or something?” He smiled and put his arms around her waist.

“No, now don’t go snuggling up to me. And no, I can’t take up knitting. I don’t want a hobby.” She stood on tiptoe and kissed him on his chin. “I want a part of my life that I lost when we got married. I want to have something to think about other than how we haven’t
had sex in two weeks. I don’t want to be one of those women who go around saying their family is all they have.”

He nodded his head and sighed. “I guess I can play the supportive role for once, huh? And sorry about the sex. Maybe if you get a really good job, I can stop working and just sit at home waiting to sex you up whenever you want.” He grinned wide and squeezed her tight. His hands moved to her bottom.

She kissed his chin again. “In your dreams.” She stood on her toes to kiss him, but he stopped her.

“I think we have an audience. There are two pairs of little brown eyes peering through the fish tank. I think we might need to wait till they get a little older before we give them this show.”

“I don’t think they’ll ever be old enough for this.” Maxine straightened up and took Link’s hand. As they walked into the kitchen, she saw the plates she had left on the stove.

“Damn. Breakfast is cold.”
Getting to Know My Father

Daddy looks like a football player. He is six-foot-four and weighs over 200 pounds. He is used to moving quickly, used to making decisions and then carrying them out, used to working with his hands to build and fix things. Daddy laughs loudly, makes the same jokes until we tell him that the horse has been dead a while, and then he tells them one more time. He shouts when he’s angry, which he gets very easily. His temper is short and dangerous, intimidating to those who have not spent years living with him. Daddy walks with a long white cane, with a foot of red at the tip, and shoots himself every morning with plastic syringes filled with insulin, and wears thick glasses that make his eyes look as wide as an owl’s.

All my life, I have known that my father is diabetic. But I have not always known that he could be hurt by it. How could I know when I was five years old and he was a laughing giant whose hands were too big to fix my hair properly? I always ended up with a ridiculous puff of hair directly in the middle of the top of my head. But that had nothing to do with diabetes. How could I know when he spent the beginning of a summer building a deck onto the back of our house, doing the measuring and the lugging, the sawing and the hammering? He looked tired when he came in the house, smelled musty. But that had nothing to do with diabetes. How was I supposed to know that anything could make my father weak?
Daddy kept his insulin in the refrigerator and his needles and alcohol pads in a cabinet over the stove. Every day, he pulled a needle and an alcohol pad out of the cabinet. Every day, he held the bottle of insulin upside down with the needle poking into the orange plastic covering on the bottle. He pulled back the plastic stopper and the insulin, thick and milky, dripped into the syringe. He wiped a spot on his large stomach with the alcohol pad. Then he turned away from us, his children, hid the needle pushing into his skin. He only turned around when he was finished, when he had bent the metal tip of the needle and balled up the pad and the metallic wrapping it came in. And every day, after he did that, he continued being Daddy, the man who could fix anything, protect me from anything, love me more than any man.

But the older I got, the more the disease chipped away at my vision of my father. Daddy fell out while he was fishing. He took his insulin that morning but did not eat, and the sun was hot on the water. Mommy fed him watermelon, tons of watermelon. The sandwiches she made him for the trip, turkey sandwiches with lettuce and tomato and mayonnaise, sandwiches that I envied because ten-year-olds are always hungry, were still in the cooler cold and smushed. Nobody ate them.

Then Daddy’s teeth began to fall out. Slowly. They loosened in shifts, his back teeth going first. His gums could not seem to hold them any more. He looked funny when his front teeth had loosened and gapped. He still smiled with his lips spread apart. And then they were all gone. Daddy made jokes about gumming it, smacking his lips together and sucking down mashed potatoes. He seemed to have an awful lot of extra lip, without his teeth. He got false teeth because he looked like an old man and an infant baby at the same
time without them. But with them, he looked only a little less like my invincible father. He was a sort of Hercules, not quite divine and not quite human. And that was okay with me.

But diabetes would not leave Daddy alone. It was stronger than he was, and, when I was a teenager, it took his eyesight. The day before his surgery, the surgery that never quite reattached his retinas, the surgery that was followed by laser treatments and the complete loss of sight in one eye, I saw him through the crack in his bedroom door. His body was hunched over as he sat on the edge of my parents’ king-size bed. The sun came in through the window behind him, and a weaker, softened sunlight lit the room.

My father sat, a king-size man on a king-size bed, crying. He was tired of fighting the disease. It was winning the way it had won over his grandmother. He would be blind. His big hand, the one that could still cover mine completely, covered his eyes. His shoulders moved with the sounds he made. His crying sounded like a deeper version of my own. I must have breathed. He looked up at me, his brown eyes shining, his cheeks wet. He used the backs of his hands and the hem of his t-shirt to wipe away his moment of weakness. But I saw.

Daddy has one eye that looks light, light gray. Almost white. He keeps it closed or covers it up with sunglasses when he is around children. But he no longer hides his diabetes from us. We are grown-ups now. And we watch him, pay close attention to how he fumbles with a tool or how he reaches into the spice cabinet and puts candy sprinkles on chicken. We tell him when we’re about to step onto a curb and watch to make sure his foot does not trip. We do not speak of his weakness. We accept it. It is part of him, part of our family, now. Daddy is diabetic.
The Inside of Surviving

Sean has never seen his granny’s hair, so he studies it while Dr. Peterson talks to him. It is feathery and as white as the doctor’s coat. It covers patches of her head, settled in indistinct patterns. Peterson is saying something about diabetes, about how his grandmother hasn’t taken care of herself, about how she could, will die if...Sean leaves him to his “ifs.” He wants to bring her favorite wig from home, wants to hide her from the smell of medicine and alcohol pads. He thinks she would like that. Sean imagines her waking with a grateful smile, all gums, thick red wig tilted just a little to the side. She would be dignified in the way only his granny could. The doctor is still babbling about his granny’s pancreas and sugar and diabetic comas. Sean interrupts him. “Where’s the snack machine?” he asks. Peterson has bushy black eyebrows that he presses down so that they meet in the middle. As he walks in the direction the doctor has pointed, change jingling in his pockets, Sean thinks that the man will never, ever need a wig.

Sean returns from the vending machine with a shrink-wrapped ham and cheese sandwich. He walks into his granny’s room, 423, the room they put her in after she fell, after the 911 call and the ambulance and the emergency room doctors barking orders and pushing him away. Sean returns, walks into his granny’s room to see that the cavalry has arrived and has brought their middle-class black arrogance with them. His aunt Patrice is standing an inch
away from poor Dr. Peterson, one hand on her hip, one hand gripping her leather purse strap. Her mouth forms a big red O; her perfectly arched eyebrows rise an inch higher than is natural. She is the dictionary definition of concerned. He glances quickly at the figures along the wall—his aunt’s husband, Jack, closest to the door in a perfectly pressed suit, his cousin, Jack Jr., in baggy jeans and silver chain, his other aunt, Lonni, seated in a plastic chair, long legs crossed, whispering into her cell phone. Sean sniffs loudly and takes a bite out of his sandwich. Patrice whips her head around hard. Sean is about to say hello, but her look stops him. Her eyes begin at his shoes and slowly lift upward, pausing a second on the sandwich in his hand and then to his face. She licks her lips slowly, makes a sucking noise with them and says, “Hello, Sean.” Sean flinches from the disgust in her voice and watches her turn back around, finished with him for the moment. He looks down at his sandwich and feels the burning contents of his stomach creep back up his esophagus. *Always keep your dignity, boy.*

He wonders what his father would do in this situation. Sean walks over to his aunt, grabs her rear end in his left hand, kisses her cheek, and says, “Hello, Aunt Patrice. You know you get sexier every time I see you. What has it been, two years? Have you lost weight?” He goes to his chair on the far side of his grandmother’s bed, turns it backwards and straddles it.

Patrice finishes with the doctor, who leaves with a relieved sigh. Sean does not let his aunt ask the question he knows formed in her mind the minute she heard granny was in the hospital. “I was working.” He turns his head to look at all of them. “Same as you, except, of course, for Junior.” His cousin glares at him. His aunt Lonni clicks her phone shut. Jack, Sr., tugs at his pants legs. Sean sniffs again and returns to eating his sandwich. He knows that no matter what he says, his aunts will blame him for not taking care of his granny. They begin to fuss about his responsibility to the family. Sean tunes them out, no longer hears
words, only the sound of their voices. He thinks they sound like chickens. Sean blames himself for his granny’s current state. But he will not let his aunts know that. They were working, too.

Sean stops at the grocery store on the way home. The neon lights there remind him of those at the hospital. He lingers in the store, compares the prices of frozen peas before deciding he prefers collard greens. He does not yet want to be away from the lights or the people. When he comes home, he turns on all the lights in the house and takes the phone off the hook. He wants no sympathy, not the helpless kind his friends gave him after his father died, the kind where they told him they knew how he felt and then hurried away before they were too uncomfortable. He turns on the radio. The gospel music station his granny listened to. He seasons a hen, slices collard greens, boils macaroni. He does everything precisely as his grandmother has taught him. He has always been a quick learner, has always soaked up everything that anyone would teach him. His aunts thought that he, unlike his father, would go to Howard University—the only college they ever considered—and would become a doctor or lawyer or politician. His last name, after all, makes him African-American aristocracy. And Sean had gone because of the competition, because he was not as strong as his father. His father was happy being a janitor. _Nothing wrong with doing something you like to do as long as you do your best, boy._ But Sean needed to prove to his aunts that he was better than that. His father died three years ago. And Sean had dropped out of school, stopped calling his college friends, tried to forget how he’d been ashamed to have his father come visit. Granny had let him move in with her, the same way she’d let his father move in after he returned from Vietnam. And the way she’d let them both move in after Sean’s
mother left them for a man with goals and aspirations, a man who had no war demons to contend with.

Sean tosses things into the garbage can directly on top of the insulin needle his grandmother avoided using that morning. The syringe is empty, the needle point bent in to render it harmless. The orange cap is off to the side of it next to old magazines his granny tossed. He had filled the needle today, put it in her hand, kissed her on the cheek and told her he would see her after work. Sean thinks she emptied the syringe into the sink. She was always “sick and tired” of having to take medicine and having to check her blood sugar and having to be dictated to by some “child doctor.” She kept insisting that if it was her time to go, it was her time to go. Sean thinks she has been avoiding her needle for at least a week now. The doctor thinks it may have been longer. He puts the rest of the groceries away. Steaks and roasts and chicken wings go in the freezer. He stores cheese and bread and milk and eggs and potatoes and greens and bacon and grits. He picks at his macaroni and cheese, wondering how long it will be before his granny can come home to help him eat all the food he bought. He wishes he had watched her better.

Sean has not slept and The Tonight Show has long ended. He picks up the phone, the cordless black telephone that he convinced his granny to get. It is completely out-of-place in the old-fashioned town house filled with dark mahogany furniture built by his great-grandfather. His granny had not been a big supporter of change, only updating her kitchen, the plumbing, and her telephone without putting up a huge fight about it. Sean dials long-distance, the area code for Chicago, where he had spent summers before he was a teenager and flat out refused to go. He does not feel guilty for calling so late. He mumbles to himself.
"They’re an hour behind us, anyway.” He hears her voice. It is low and rich like a large bell. He shifts his weight on the sofa and wishes he had a cord to twirl nervously around his fingers. “Mama,” he says. His tongue feels sticky. He clears his throat. “Granny’s in a coma.” He strains his ears, listening to the silence and he feels his lip begin to quiver and his eyes begin to burn and her voice saves him. She tells him to hold on, tells him that she needs to switch phones. And they talk about everything. They talk about how he is coping; they talk about his grandmother’s condition, about how she never did take her insulin when she was supposed to, never did stop eating all that fatty soul food. His mother asks about the aunts, and he tells her what he did that morning. She laughs and laughs. She tells him how she dealt with the aunts when she was the new wife of their failure of a baby brother. She says he shouldn’t let them bother him, that they are just afraid that someone else will actually be happy without a diploma from Howard. But Sean’s mother gets serious, and he feels himself stiffen at the same time her voice stiffens. She begins her sentence with If your grandmother dies and he interrupts her. “She is not going to die, Mama.” She continues talking as if she expects such idealism from him. She tells him she can send him money or he can come to live in Chicago until he figures out what he will do. “I bought food,” he tells her. “And grandma and I are going to cook it when she gets home. And then I’ll buy a healthy cookbook and make her eat right so it doesn’t happen again.” Sean’s mother is again silent. This time he does not care whether or not she speaks. She says okay and asks him to call her tomorrow after the hospital. He agrees but she makes him promise. “I promise, Mama. Goodbye.” Sean does not sit downstairs to think about what his mother said. Instead, he goes upstairs to his granny’s room, buries himself in her pink and white quilt, and dreams of Chicago.
The next morning, Sean goes to work with hangover eyes. They are red and heavy and swollen. Mr. Sampson is a deacon at his granny’s church, and the church grapevine has already reached him. He puts his large arm around Sean and uses his muscle to pull the resisting young man to him. Underneath the smell of auto grease, Sean can smell laundry detergent on Mr. Sampson’s dark grey coverall. Mr. Sampson tells him he’s a good worker and that he is praying for him and his grandmother. Sean can feel a knot forming directly in the middle of his stomach. He pulls away from his boss, “Guess I’ll get to work now.” He doesn’t look Mr. Sampson in the eyes. Sean goes to work underneath a gold Toyota Camry that has been lifted up closer to heaven than he. He wonders whether people will drive cars in the afterlife. He thinks, If they do, I’m pretty sure God won’t be a Camry man. He gets lost in the noises of the shop: tools clanging, workers laughing and joking, car engines revving. Mr. Sampson is in the choir and sings while he works. Today, he sings about how he wants to cross over Jordan. Sean hears his father. Dying ain’t the worst thing in the world, son. It’s not living that’s bad. Sean ignores the song and his dead father. He concentrates on car parts.

Sean has a conversation with his granny over a game of War. He sits in a chair pulled up close to the bed and flips cards from two blue and white stacks on the tray that flips out over his grandmother’s bed and neatly places them face down in two piles. “How’d Dr. Peterson treat you today, granny? Well, I hope. You’d let me know if he weren’t treating you all right, wouldn’t you?” So far his granny is winning. “Your kids were here, yesterday, granny. I’m sure you had to have felt the evil when they walked in the room.” He laughs at that. His
granny would hit him upside the back of his head if she were able. She never made excuses for the personalities of her children, but she always maintained that she loved them just the same. Sean shakes his head and says, “To each her own,” as if his granny had spoken in defense of the aunts. “You know they were here hoping you’d die so they could get some money out of you. Now, granny, I know you don’t like to hear that, but it’s true.” His granny is still winning at cards. He is much better at being her than she ever was, at least at games. She never won anything. He drops the cards on the bed tray and slumps back in his chair. “You have to win this fight, though, granny.” You are a strong boy, Sean. You’ll do what you need to, his father says. Sean leans over and kisses his grandmother on the forehead. “You have to...because I’m no good without you.” He tucks the cards back into their box, puts them in his pocket, and leaves the hospital.

Early in the morning, before work, Sean finds himself sitting on a swing on a school playground. He has not planned to come, but he accepts where he is. His father worked here. Sean drags his feet along through the sand as he lets the swing sway back and forth. He makes no particular design. He remembers when his feet did not touch the ground, when his father would wrap his big leathery hands around his waist and lift him into the swing. Sean remembers the cold metal straining in his hands as he flew through the air. His father shouted, Touch the sky with your toes, boy! Sean stands up out of the swing and walks over to sit against a tree on the grassy field where the children had their field day games. His father had always judged the sack race on field day. The first time, when his granny listened to the race described, she’d pointed her finger at his father’s chest and said, “Now you ought to know better than to encourage a ridiculous thing like that. Potato sacks are for carrying
potatoes. Races are for people to run using their feet. Them kids gonna grow up confused.”

Sean and his father had sat at the kitchen table startled and trying to figure out whether they could explain how fun the game was. Then granny had chuckled and called them stupid boys, of course she knew about sack races. Better watch out for your old granny, boy. She’s a tricky one. Sean mumbles under his breath, his head resting back against the tree trunk.

“Then why don’t you get God to let her stay down here.” Sean picks at the blades of grass, tearing each one into small pieces. He laughs out loud and speaks even louder. “Look at me. I’ve been telling everybody she ain’t gonna die and as soon as I get the chance, I start talking to myself like she is.” Sean wishes he had kept in touch with his uncomfortable friends.

They would not know what to say to him, but they would give him someone fully alive to be angry with. Sean takes a deep breath. And then another. And another until he is crying.

Sean does not just let tears fall. He sobs loudly, babbles prayers to God, curses at no one in particular. And when he is all cried out, he lies there, his face buried in the grass at the base of the tree. He looks in the direction of the bushes lined along the fence, close to the tree. He looks through them, staring past them into his imagination. He creates a picture in his mind of his future without his grandmother. He tries to concentrate on making it as bleak as possible but he is interrupted by movement in the bushes. A rabbit hops out. It is a thin, brown rabbit, not starving thin but surviving thin. He watches the rabbit sniffing around, its nose wiggling, and he pities the rabbit. He wishes he had some carrots or lettuce or whatever it is rabbits eat, but he feels useless. The rabbit stops sniffing. It does not run away. It stares at Sean, and Sean feels the unspoken dare. It sits up, front paws resting against its chest.

Sean stares back, his pity for the animal and for himself forgotten. His father is dead; his granny will die; he will not. Sean makes no noise, only breathes and stares.
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