The divided waters: an apology in 3 parts

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The Divided Waters:
An apology in 3 parts
by
Toiya Kristen Finley

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)
Major Professor: Fern L. Kupfer

Iowa State University
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2000
This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Toiya Kristen Finley

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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PART ONE

JASMINE (1993-1990)
Chapter One

This is not the story I wanted to write. Still, there's the sense of jubilee from pulling the manuscript out of the printer, breathing in that Hewlett Packard ink, and sifting 100+ pages through your fingers. Mmmmm mmm. Meaty, and it smells good. But, like I said, this ain't the story I wanted to write.

Oh, sure. I'm pretending like it is. See, I had a magnum opus all planned out for my independent study. "16 year-old Jasmine A. Waters writes a human/puman/Zelphite epic rivaling Huxley, Orwell, and Wells" the headline reads. Okay, I know New York would never say it was anywhere near rivaling Huxley, Orwell, and Wells. My point is, and I know you've been wondering, I never got a chance to try. Instead, I now have in my hands the quintessential ethnic minority memoir.

Don't get "quintessential" confused with "good." I don't believe it's any good. But that's not the point. The point is, and I know you've been wondering, Mr. German, my independent study advisor, will think it kicks. He'll be sucked in from the beginning. Here's the "note" I'm turning in with the manuscript:

I am now on the cusp of the advent of going off to college, and after working on this memoir most of my junior year, I am filled with a sadness. Will this sadness be settled my senior year? Will it accompany me to my future college or university? This sadness is fed by the state of
black youth. Granted, I am a black female, and I do not have to agonize over the fearful looks, violence, and the expectation to not succeed that plagues black males. Yet, as I have written this memoir, I am increasingly aware that all black youth are confronted with the ever-burgeoning pressures of getting overeducated, fatherlessness, and image in- and outside the black community. Writing this was often painful and self-revealing, but, as I told you Tuesday, I must reiterate that delving into the black subconscious has been an invaluable experience for me. Thank you, Mr. German. I would like to express my heart-felt thanks to Reina Wagner and Priya Prabakaran. They have given me immeasurable support and encouragement throughout the production of this manuscript. Their insight into human observation and editing skills have made this work possible.

I feel I should make one thing clear before this narrative gets away from me—I’m not against ethnic minority fictions, just the very bad ones.

Reina and Priya knew the real deal. Reina and Priya knew the great human/puman/Zelphite epic would never get off the ground. “Ya know he’s gonna want you to do the downtrodden black woman thing,” Reina said. But I wouldn’t listen. You see, I had the naive notion that Americans of darker hues were free to write on whatever subject they chose. So, the weekend before the independent study started, I prepared for my magnum opus, all excited I was beginning a process with a teacher
who'd give me a lot of creative freedom. I never do outlines or sketches or anything, but I spent all of Saturday writing character bios until my fingers cramped, crossing out imperfect descriptions and replacing them with better words. For three or four hours, I stared at the days and years on my chronology sheets until they blurred and swam into one number.

Creating future worlds was no easy feat—I wanted to show Mr. German I was serious, not just using the indie study to pad my GPA. (Well, I was, but he's none the wiser.) Once I was done with my cold and calculated estimations, I crawled into the back of my closet and picked up the stacks of folders on my mother's old black trunk. The perfect magnum opus notes couldn't go without the perfect folders. Well, I didn't want to buy new ones, so I looked for close-enough-to-perfect folders. There were three with double-side pockets that weren't too wrinkled at the corners. I brushed the thin film of dust off them and took my old Brit lit, algebra, and chem notes out and replaced them with the calculations for my magnum opus. Then I tucked the folders between my AP American History and AP Biology textbooks so they wouldn't get bent. Come Monday afternoon, I was certain Mr. German would be as pumped as I was.

Everything was set in place.

But he pulled a desk in front of me, sat down, and folded his hands. I laid out my notes before him and rattled on about my weekend experience. German scratched his dusty blond head, hmmmed, and gave me a thoughtful pause. At the corners of his mouth, the laugh lines a little too deep for a man in his late twenties popped up.
“Jasmine, why don’t you work on writing what you know.” Not a suggestion. A command. “I want you to work on something that will force you to consider realism. Detail. Relive the moments that were very real to you. Get the pictures in your head. Put what you see on paper,” he said.

For a moment, I wanted to protest and ask him to look at the dense information on my notes. There’s detail. This is my reality. I was in the moment when I wrote them. But I shouldn’t be surprised that he’d want me to write my life story, since he’s so into minority narratives. He likes to tell us about the time when he was in high school and college—a time when he tried to escape being an average, WASPy boy. He wore his spiked hair in fascinating shades of neon, dressed in frumpy shirts and slacks, and walked around in combat boots half way up to his knees. Some of the seniors and visiting alumni recount the days when he had a small diamond stud placed in the center of his earlobe. Now the hole in his ear has almost closed up. Now his dusty blond hair is just shaggy enough to be adventurous. He’s replaced his crumpled t-shirts and slacks straight from the laundry basket with twice-pressed blazers and starched shirts. Now (and he admits this openly) he rebels by teaching Morisson next to Faulkner, Hansberry alongside Shakespeare, and Tan with Steinbeck. Of course he’d want to support a young ethnic writer writing young ethnic writer things, if he ever got the chance. Ride the ethnic wave, Jasmine! Ride it while people are still listening to you! Maybe he saw me with my hands balled in tight little fists talking
back at the Literary Man in a sea of yellow, ochre, sable, and caramel faces, our patois, Creoles, papamientos and black Englishes blending.

"Um, Mr. German, what is it exactly you want me to write?"

His eyes got all bright and shiny with expectation. He tugged at the stiff shirt cuffs jutting from his navy blue blazer. “You have so much that’s made you you, Jazzie. What about the experiences you’ve had with your father and your sister? Moving from public to private school? Gosh, you’ve got such a wealth of material. You could be writing on this stuff for years.”

(“Stuff” is accurate.)

You have so much that’s made you who you are. You could be writing on this stuff for years. As I left German’s room, I was blind to the small group of sophomores that always crowd outside of his door for lunch. Their gangly bare legs sticking out into the hallway, they never move—expect you to get out of their way—and I almost tripped over them. As an upperclassman, I’d usually bark at them, maybe “accidentally” kick one of them in the foot, but my notes for the magnum opus were burning in my backpack and felt heavy against my shoulder blades. That day, as I made my way back to my locker, it felt like there were even more gangly legs in my path.

My locker’s halfway down the hospital wing, a small, newer corridor off the main high school hallway. The grey, high-glossed tiles of the old hallway move to shiny white with flecks of grey. Instead of dim light, my hallway’s painted a fresh
beige, and the light bulbs cast down a neon yellow. I love the hospital wing—it makes the rest of the high school floor look like a dungeon, but that day, it seemed just as dark. Over by the fire escape, a group of sophomore and junior boys played spades in the corner. Marcus, a black kid, had introduced the game to the rich white boys last year. They loved the strategy, the mind games, the insults. Marcus and I had to teach them the art of snapping the card as the ultimate insult and winning the book. Done right, it will “crack!” as it hits the linoleum. Not done right, you end up with a bent, sick looking card and a shower of humiliating laughter poured down on your head. That day, those white kids had just about ruined a deck, the cards dying with a muffled thud on the floor. Any other day, I might have laughed at them and given them a lot of grief.

“Hey, Jazzie, you wanna play a round?”

“Not today,” I yelled back. “I’m not feeling frisky enough.”

My best friend looked up from her book. “You, not frisky enough to play spades? What’s the matter?”

“He wants me to do the downtrodden black woman thing,” I said under my breath.

Reina, who was sprawled out at the base of our lockers, tossed Lady With the Lapdog and Other Stories aside and cocked an eyebrow. “So, write the downtrodden black woman thing.” It was her turn to cheer me up. Up to this point, she had done miserably. Tomorrow, I’d have to calm her down because the stupid Trig teacher
refused to call on her in class again. We’re twins in that way—we’ve got just about the same personality, and we know immediately what the other needs. Reina chomps on her doublemint gum and gives me a smile.

“I wanted to do my SF novel, but German feels I should become familiar with my voice and work on detail, and the best way to do this is by way of realism.”

Reina shrugs. “Don’t worry about it. Just write your auto and get the A.”

“It’s an independent study. I’ll get an A anyway.”

When Priya joined us at lunch, the conspiracy began:

“You know, Germie’s been doin the same thing to me,” Priya said. “You’d think he was tryin to get me to rewrite the Vedic scriptures or something.” At a glance, Miss Prabakaran might look submissive and innocent. Always dressed in unrevealing shirts two to three sizes too big. Her waist-long onyx-black hair spilling around her cherubic face. But in her heart lies the inspiration for Gothic English poetry, sweeping ominous landscapes, waves smashing against the craggy rock, a young princess standing on the desolate shore, her murderer eyeing her from the ivory tower. “I say do whatever you want. Regardless of the A.”

“I feel,” I said staring across the table at Priya and Reina, “like I’m being strangled. Yes, that’s accurate.” I held my hands around an imaginary neck and constricted my taut, shaking fingers into the invisible flesh. “Slow, painful creative stranguuuuuulaaaaaatitudeoooooooon.”
Reina pats me on the shoulder. “Yes, I know. But think of the wonderful opportunity being offered you. It’s ethnic chic, Jazzie. We’re in. You know black stuff is cool. Black girls are cool.” She should know. Black’s back. Dark’s back, and all of a sudden, when we go cruising the mall, pubescent boys swoon over her dark chocolate skin—no sugar, no cream. I’m a healthy beige, but all of a sudden, I look high yella next to her. High yella has never been cool. The more ethnic you look, the better.

“Hey,” Priya objected, “Indian chicks are in too.”

“Oh, sure,” Reina agreed. “All darkies are in.”

A smirk crept onto the corners of my mouth. Why not give German what he wanted? Why not recount the poor, adolescent history of dear Jasmine Waters? I’d get my A, and he’d think he was getting real writing. “If I do this, you’re going to have to help me every step of the way. “You’re going to have to tell me if it’s depressing enough, if the males are bad enough, if I’m caught between Scylla and Charybdis enough.”

The three of us shook on it.

“So where are you starting?” Reina asked. “Genesis or in medias res?”

“In medias res,” I said. “Who remembers the beginning?”

** * * *

How does one begin the ethnic minority narrative? you might ask. Well, I can’t exactly answer that question, but I decided to start at a major point of tension.
Tension, of course, is what locks in the reader (Mr. German). In all honesty, a major source of tension in my life was when one Johnathan P. Waters, my father, walked back into my life after twelve years and brought my little half sister along for the ride.

How, you might ask, did I first get wind of this? Well, when I came home from school, there was an envelope waiting for me in the mailbox. Said envelope contained a letter from the aforementioned father I hadn’t seen in twelve years. This letter disturbed me a good part of the day, and by evening’s falling, I went down to the creek.

The moon sifting through the trees, its light fell on the center of the creek where Wendy Nolan waded in inky-blue water. Her outstretched arms and curly blond hair floated, weightless on the surface. She dipped her head backwards, resurfaced, and brushed her hair away from her face with her palms, relishing in the meditation the still waters of the creek brought.

I hated to bother her, but she was the only one who understood my feelings for my sister. “Hey, Nolan, don’t you got work to do?”

She looked out at the bank and stuck her tongue out at me. “Yeah, but I had to get away from the parentals. What’re you up to, Waters?”

“I got a letter from my father. He’s moving back to Nashville with my sister. Is she going to like me? I mean, I’ve got all these ideas about her. What does she think of me?”
“Jazzie, I’ve told you a million times you can take any of my siblings. You already know them. They like you.”

“But—”

“Fine, Jasmine. I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

That’s the way it really happened, but keep in mind, this is an ethnic minority narrative about downtrodden black women. I could never open with this scene. One, Wendy Nolan happens to be white. May not seem like a big deal, but in an ethnic minority narrative, something’s gotta be wrong with the white people. They might appear like perfect packages, but underneath, they’re smarmy as that uncle nobody wants to talk about. There was absolutely no tension between Wendy and me here. Now, at this time, she was my best friend, so she had to show up in my memoir. But, as I said, any white person appearing in ones like mine have to be a little off. Thus, in this manuscript that has undergone several titles changes, I had to whiggerfy Wendy.

Problem number two: Anything about downtrodden black women should have an abundance of downtrodden black women. So, I darkened the beginning up a bit.

PS: If you felt there should have been some tension between Wendy, who is WHITE, and me, who is BLACK, GET A LIFE. I mean that.

(Working Title at This Point: The Downtrodden Black Woman Thing)

1.

Mama gave me a weak smile when I entered the kitchen. On any other day, she would have greeted me with enthusiasm, wanting me to go over every painstaking
detail of how things went at school when all I would give her was an “It was fine.” But she only watched me, lost in thought. I was afraid to ask about this difference. Mama was never shy about anything, and if she didn’t speak, I knew she was worrying about something I didn’t want to hear.

“Mail come yet?” I asked, daring to break the silence.

“No.” She drummed her fingers on the newspaper and let her coffee grow cold. I watched them weave up and down, tapping the paper with a muted thud, faint grey ink painting her fingertips. I would have fled to my room, but I noticed Mama was regarding me in quiet sympathy.

“What’s wrong?” I was scared, and unknowing had never settled well with me.

Notice “and unknowing had never settled well with me” is not my voice, that’s some imitation autobiography voice, some trying to get a sense that this 13 year-old Jasmine’s life needed a grandiose tone to make it seem worth writing about.

She sighed, slowly rolling her neck from side to side and quickly glanced up at the ceiling. The rhythm of my heart danced, and the beat carried up to my temples. I wanted it to stop so I wouldn’t concentrate on it. I forgot to breathe. She never got anxious, but now she was frustrated. My mother never kept things from me. She just told me. Maybe that’s what scared me the most—this was all about me.

“Jasmine, sit down.” Her tone mixed itself between the grave voice she used when she was upset with me and the sterility of the one that announced when someone had died.
I sat beside her, not wanting to look her in the eyes, and put my backpack under the table, squeezing it between my feet. Maybe this was all silly, nothing to worry about, and Mama was just concentrating on something else. I stared down into her coffee mug, and the pale brown liquid sent up an aroma of stale sweetness.

“I got a letter from your father.” As she mentioned him, my body lightened, padding the beating in my chest. She looked at me now. “He decided to leave Philly and move back to Nashville. His wife died.” Although I hadn’t even realized it was there, a gasp escaped my mouth.

We never talked about him. He left when I was a year old. He was somewhere else. He had made a new life for himself, but he was dead to me. It was hard to imagine him as a real person, with another real wife.

“When’s he coming back?”

“Three weeks. Are you alright?”

She thought this would hurt me, and I didn’t know why. Even I was amazed sometimes at why I wasn’t angry at him. I’d heard things, things no one in her family had ever dared to tell me. Every once in a while, I heard about some of his high school sweethearts who remained his sweethearts even after he married Mama. Before my brother was born, while my father milled over whether he would go to law school or not, he would sit in front of the television all day, a paper full of circled job listing draped across the coffee table. The women in the neighborhood who loved to rag on lazy black men always brought that up. I wanted to ask them if they were sitting in the
den with him at the time since they had such a perfect recollection of what went on in
his house, but my mother raised me better than that. The people I heard slandering my
father would do this not speaking directly to me, but took note of my reactions as they
whispered, just loud enough for me to hear. “It’s a shame about that poor girl. You
know about her daddy...?” I’ve learned that some people like to stir up emotions
because they know they have the talent, and they don’t have anything else better to do.
I always found myself angry when somebody did that. I could have just ignored them,
but why would they want me to hate him? I always question their motives.

He’d never written, never called. That may have been unbelievable. I’ve even
wondered at the incredulity of it, but when you had lived that way for twelve years,
ever hearing your father’s voice became rather normal. Still, I never wondered if he
loved me—I simply didn’t think about him, and when he did come to mind, he was a
foggy idea, not a man. Sometimes the ideas proved safer than the real thing anyway.

Here she was, trying to make sure I was okay, and I should have been the one
comforting my mother. Mama wouldn’t say a bad word about him, but sometimes I
had to wonder about his reputation. “Are you alright?” I asked.

She smirked. “I’m fine. I’m just worried about you. I know you say you’re not
upset with him, but it’s one thing to have him so far away—”

“I don’t resent him, if that’s what you mean. Actually, I don’t think meeting
him would be so bad.” Excited, I tapped my hands on the table. “I’ll finally get to
meet my sister.”
“Yes, you will, but Jazzie, if you do find yourself angry with him, it’s okay. You can talk to me about it.”

I nodded and quickly collected my things from under the table. I wasn’t upset. I’d run up the stairs with a wide grin on my face. I’d never really thought of my father, and I wasn’t thinking of him now. There was a little sister I’d never seen before, a little sister I’d always longed for. As I stood in front of my mirror, I dove into a thirteen year old’s fantasy. She was three years younger, but I was sure the face smiling back at me was exactly like my sister’s.

Detail, detail, detail. German wants detail. I’m bad at it and not ashamed to admit it. It only feels natural to actually say what we all look like here, and I’ll do it the only way I know how—through photographs. It’s a cheeky little device, but one that’s always worked for me. Maybe one day, in The Collected Works of Jasmine A. Waters, the editor will write a note in the introduction about how I always used photos and paintings as a way to develop my descriptions of characters. Maybe that editor will even say it’s a weakness. But ya know, if an editor does declare this, I won’t care. If The Collected Works of Jasmine A. Waters ever gets published, I will’ve made a whole bunch of dough by then. People can say whatever they want.

PS: If your teeth have already started to decay from the saccharinicy of all of this, I apologize. Bear in mind, though, that the minority-character protagonist is often pitiable. Of course, the reader may not find him/her so pitiable. The reader may even want to wring his/her neck. But I digress.
The only picture of my father remaining in the house was trapped between a shuffle of papers and tangled, gnarled rubber bands in a desk drawer in the study. When I’d first seen it, I’d felt guilty. Mama had probably forgotten it but never intended to keep it around. They were together, in one of those awkward poses couples are forced into—him standing behind her with her neck crooked facing him. He wore a modest afro. She had a large, orange bow around her neck, and they labored to smile, as if it were unnatural to hold their mouths in such a position. I didn’t focus on the ridiculousness of their clothes or the fact that they were actually together, close to each other. I could only look at my father. So many people who’d known him said I looked just like him. Sometimes old friends who knew nothing of his life after high school or college would be reminded of him when they saw me and my brother. The café-au-lait complexion. Strong, bony nose. Well-defined lips that formed an almost perfect oval, and deep brown eyes brightening into a warm amber in the sunlight—I had been blessed to receive his most beautiful features, and they would also strengthen the face of my little sister. We would both look like my father—the only bond between us.

But looks weren’t the only important thing. I knew we would be twins in every other way.

Caveat: You are about to be introduced to my brother, Johnathan P. Waters, II, better known as John John. Please don’t get too used to him. It’s bloody likely you won’t see him again. He’s a black male after all. Black males aren’t reliable—you
can't depend on them to stick around in this sort of narrative. In fact, if you believe the media, black males either get incarcerated or fall off the planet by the time they're 21.

If you feel dear John John is a whiny little punk, don't blame him. Blame the genre.

PS: No PS.

***

"John, act right," I said.

I kicked him in the foot again, tired of the bored-and-I-want-you-to-know-it look on his face. He had strolled into the living room twenty minutes earlier wearing nothing but a grey TSU shirt and khaki shorts. Mama made him turn right back around and put on a white shirt and tie. She wanted him to wear a pair of slacks. He compromised by putting on his newest pair of jeans. I couldn't blame him for the way he felt, he had every reason, but I didn't understand how he was going to feel better by acting ugly. He should just be indifferent towards my father like I was, at least for the first night in twelve years.

"Why should I? We're going to be uncomfortable anyway." His mind had always been impenetrable steel, but since John John had gone off to college, I couldn't tell him anything anymore. And I, being equally stubborn, never gave up my side of the argument either.

"You'll only make it worse," I said.

"How? Twelve years isn't bad enough?"
I slowly rolled my eyes, letting him know what I thought of his childishness. Hoping he hadn't seen me, I blinked quickly. I didn't want my eyes to water from the self-inflicted strain on my eyeballs.

"He leaves us, and you can just take him back so quickly?"

"I'm not taking him back," I said, staring at the coffee table. "I didn't get rid of him in the first place. I'm just meeting him, and like I act towards any other stranger, I'm going to be civilized."

John laughed condescendingly. "Good for you and your civilization." I swung my leg, letting my foot knock into the table. The rattle of the glass top unnerved him. He sighed and pressed his elbows deep into his thighs.

"You don't want to meet our sister, then?"

"She's not our mother's child," he said.

"So, it's okay to hate her?"

John John stared at me long enough, forcing me to look at him. "I didn't say that." He didn't need to. My sister belonged to another woman—innocent as she was—who would always remind my brother of the countless others my father had seen when he'd been with my mother.

"Why is Mama even letting him come here?"

"I don't know," was all I said.

The doorbell rang around six. I arched my back and turned my attention towards the front door. John sucked his teeth and slouched forward. My father was
half an hour late, and I had stared at my watch, paced around the living room, and sat down again. John kept mocking me, telling me it was stupid to wait so anxiously on a man who was probably never on time. At least I know where John John inherited his Colored People Time.

But around six, Mama answered the door. John plopped down on the couch and crossed his legs. I jumped up and smoothed down my skirt. In the few seconds before I saw his face, I kept wondering if I should walk up to him or let him come to me. I finally decided to let him come to me. I didn’t want to trip all over my feet, letting him think he had a clumsy daughter. But most importantly, I had to look dignified for my sister.

A nervous smile plastered itself on my face, making my lips feel stiff and my cheeks burn. I didn’t know how to react. The last thing I needed to do was make my little sister think I was weird. I listened to the staccato of my heart in my ears.

“Jasmine, baby, you can stop holding your breath.” Mama patted my shoulder, and a blank stared glossed over my face. My father stood behind her.

John John didn’t move. Mama walked over to him, and I heard the blunt crack of leather and foot as she kicked him in the shoe. We were side by side, facing our father, someone I couldn’t remember, someone John wanted to forget. I felt myself being pulled closer to my brother, anxious about the heaviness drawing us together. Everything was too clear in that moment. John’s stoniness, my pulse throbbing in every part of my body, twelve years. For the first time, I didn’t know what to call this
man. Daddy. Was that too informal? Father. Was that too formal? His eyes grabbed mine, and I knew he was much more nervous than I could have been.

“Look at the two of you!” was all he said. He enveloped us in a hug. He was a strong man. I felt the strength of his chest against my cheek and the weighted support of his arm across my shoulders. That hug, somehow, was supposed to make up for twelve years. He let me know that he might have been away, but he was my father, and he was going to be my father. It was stupid, but I believed it. I wrapped my arms around his neck. Next to me, John John’s body went limp.

He let go of us and examined my brother, taking him by the shoulders. “I bet the girls are after you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t get him started.”

“Well, there are a few.”

“Of course there are,” Dad said. “And Jasmine. Look at you girl!” He hugged me again and kissed me on the forehead. I wanted to look at Mama, to see how she felt. Her daughter was jumping into the arms of someone who had abandoned her. But I liked looking at my father, a person who could be heard and touched and seen.

“I’m sure you’d like to meet Alaunna.”

Alaunna. Yes, Alaunna. For a moment I stared at him, wide-eyed, and gave him a weak nod. I eased out of his arms, the pulse in my ears so loud now I knew everyone could hear it. All of this time, she had been standing behind him, probably just as
scared of meeting me as I was of meeting her. Dad placed his hand on her shoulder and gently guided her towards me.

My first thought was that she looked much more mature than ten, and then the tightness of my jaw eased, and my mouth hung open. As her pale brown eyes studied every detail of my face, I was confused by her delicate, thin lips and her soft, round nose. The reddish-brown hair woven into a thick French braid was no match to my dark brown waves. She stared at me a while, her face blank, then stretched a jaundice-yellow arm towards me.

She squeezed my hand. “Alaunna.” Her arm fell back at her side.

I forgot about worrying over my composure, what she thought of me.

“Jasmine.”

_Egak! “I knew we would be twins in every other way.” Sheesh. John John’s mind like impenetrable steel? Self-inflicted strain on my eyeballs? Is that supposed to mean crying? I told you this was tripe._

_I’m getting bored _ (Okay, I was bored from the beginning), _but this is due tomorrow, and I’ve got seven more chapters to edit. Last minute is the only way to do things._ I _flop back down on my bed and make sure to move my head away from my pillow to avoid the temptation of sleep. Finished with Genesis, I start on Exodus._

_Whether the Jasmine of Chap. 1 was the real deal or not, I’ve given her an attitude adjustment, made her talk about the idiotfication of junior high school._
Thirteen year-old kids are dumb. No offense to every thirteen year-old kid who hasn’t figured this out, but it’s true. I’m not sure if this dumbness is a mixture of cruelty and naïveté, or we’re just dumb because we’re dumb. We don’t seem to be dumb before then, or after, but puberty idiotifies us. I’d like to say I wasn’t dumb like that. I’d like to say I was strong enough to spit my opinions out, and I was just worried about getting slapped back into my place, reduced again to being mute when I heard something make my blood swirl and slosh around. Hours later my blood would still be telling me I should have opened my mouth. What annoyed me the most is I always had something to say, but I couldn’t get it out. It was like I was two different people, Jazzie on the inside, and Jasmine on the outside, trying to keep everything in order. I was too worried I’d make a mess by hurting somebody else, and I wouldn’t be able to put the pieces back together again.

Wendy and I were dumb and mute. Gloria and Shea (whose real name was ShaRhonda) were just dumb. I was too stupid to realize if I only threw kids’ acid back at them when they made fun of the way I talked, or the music I listened to, or the shows I watched, they never would have done it again. It was amazing how I could get used to letting acid dissolve me, get so comfortable with the feeling trying to control
the water pressing behind my burning eyes. I was good at comebacks, but Jazzie only allowed Jasmine to laugh at her insults.

Gloria was dumb because no one ever told her she couldn't open her proud, bronze mouth and let it gnaw on anyone it would have the pleasure to chew out. Gloria and I lived on the same street, and ever since kindergarten, she pranced the sidewalks in her terry cloth tank tops like a queen. Even back then, boys forgot about cooties whenever Gloria skipped down the block. All the black girls they'd ever seen had their hair pulled into tight braids at either side of their head; if they were really ghetto, the girls' mothers might have given them seven or eight braids with a different color barrette hanging from each one. Gloria's mother always pressed her daughter's hair into silky ringlets about her head. Before any of us started school and saw white girls shaking their pony tails, Gloria introduced us to good hair. Four and five year-old boys wanted to run their palms down that dyed-black corn silk, so unlike the woolly braids they were used to yanking. Now that dyed-black corn silk hung down to Gloria's arm pits and she knew how to swish it from side to side around that bronze neck to make the boys come a-calling. She was still Queen of the Street, and she'd replaced her terry cloth tank top with spaghetti-strapped slip skirts. Instead of the sticky red juice from kool aid cups plastered on her chin and cheeks, mulberry lipsticks graced her mouth. She'd learned that, if you were cute, you could say whatever you wanted. Sometimes people were shocked at the nasty stuff that came from behind those pretty lips.
Wendy was dumb because she didn’t know where she belonged. This was partly my fault because I let her defy where she was supposed to be. I never tapped her on the shoulder and said, “Um, Wendy, YOU’RE NOT BLACK. You’re not from the hood. I mean, you’re at least five miles removed from the ghetto. You can’t let those baggy jeans hang off your butt like the boys you see prowling the street.” No, I never said that, so Wendy continued to walk around with her shoes untied and let oversized football and basketball jerseys droop around her shoulders. I think she believed her parents would protest, but when they never said anything, she became comfortable with the whigger style.

Shea was dumb because she was too nice, especially to Gloria. Like Gloria’s shadow, she followed close behind, walking at Gloria’s right shoulder. She even traded clothes with Gloria until she shot up. Now, while Shea covered those long legs in jeans or slacks, Gloria flaunted hers by wearing skirts and dresses that fell above her knees and by rubbing her skin down with an extra coating of lotion for a healthy sheen.

There was a cute little joke Gloria told (still telling) that I didn’t find so cute. The one where she’d say, “What if me and you are sisters?” And then her laugh would say, “Oh, I’m just joshin’, Jazz.” Other kids might say this to be funny. Gloria meant to be cruel. Shea and Wendy would never say anything so stupid but didn’t come to Jasmine’s defense.
Allow me to shed a little light on the subject of my “friends.” Here, for the first time, Wendy, whiggerified, has entered the narrative. How do we do this? Number one, we have Wendy hang around three black girls (Cf. “Um, Wendy, YOU’RE NOT BLACK”). Two, we exchange her plaid flannels for Ewing’s basketball jersey and a pair of guy’s jeans. The guy’s jeans are a little too big, and they hang off her hips. I imagine a poster of Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre hanging over the head of her bed instead of Eddie Vedder.

You may be thinking: “Jazzie, this is one awful way to treat your former best friend.” Maybe, but this is for the good of the ethnic-minority narrative. With disenchanted oreos/tragic mulattos, you can reduce everyone, including the protagonist, to a stereotype. Don’t worry. The Wendy in this, whatever-I’m-gonna-call-it, is so different from the real deal that German’d never recognize her if he met her in real life. This is only for his eyes anyway.

As far as Shea and Gloria are concerned, there are some truths to stereotypes.

Back to your regularly scheduled program.

The Monday after Dad came back, I felt trapped.

Trapped because I had to make Alaunna seem like more than she was. Trapped because Gloria already knew the truth. When we were six, Gloria placed me in a box. I could be me, completely me, only when I was in there. I had even learned to stay in that box around everyone else until I knew it was safe. When I said what she wanted to hear, Gloria opened it up and give me a little air. When I didn’t, she let me
suffocate along with my impure thoughts. I cursed her under my breath. Today, she would gnaw at me, and I, not wanting her to win, would have to writhe in my little space.

My mistake was rambling on about the sister I never had. Gloria had asked me why Alaunna was so special. My sister had been there all along. I'd seen her every day since I was six. I wanted to remind Gloria that not knowing who her father was was nothing to be proud of, and it certainly didn't mean we were sisters.

"Whut's wrong?" Wendy ran her fingers through her dirty blond waves, untangling her hair and pulling it over her headband.

No, you're thinking, not accents! People in books always sound so stereotypical when authors try to "keep it real." Yes, I could avoid the whole thing by having everyone speak perfectly good English, but that just wouldn't be multicultural or authentic enough, would it? The problem with accents—the characters come across as uneducated, and readers trip over dialogue. "Whut," Wendy says, and anyone who sees it will think she's some yokel with loose gums and missing teeth. But she's no redneck; in fact, she's comfortably middle-class. But she says "Whut," and I know that makes her look like a hick. I couldn't get too crazy with the Suthun accents, but I still had to try to get them right. Does Wendy say "fer" instead of "for"? You betya. Does that mean she's been sitting in the trailer park all of her life waiting for her big break on the Country Music circuit? Nope.
If you find this dialogue difficult or even confusing, take a peek at Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God or Charles W. Chetnutt’s The Marrow of Tradition. When you come back to this, if you come back, it’ll read like the king’s English.

“Whut’s wrong?” Wendy ran her fingers through her dirty blond waves, untangling her hair and pulling it over her headband.

I looked up at her, my mind battling with my face to keep it from frowning.

“Nothing.”

“You look mad,” she said.

“Do I? I was just concentrating on something.”

Wendy smiled. No box with her.

We walked into the cafeteria and were shoved down the lunch line. Trays banging together and irritated kids staring at each other like this would push the slow idiots along, me wondering why they were in such a hurry to eat ye olde gruel. I would have loved to stay there, keep my freedom if only for a few more seconds, the smell of sticky processed gravy rising up in steam under my nose. But the servers, disgruntled over their jobs and hair nets, hurried us along. The special of the day, meatloaf squares, looked like bricks burnt in the kiln. Tomato paste dumped on top. The green beans shriveled and brown. I had to pick something, but the mashed potatoes were served by the little Ecuadorian woman we’d dubbed “the elf.” She had a habit of scratching under her hair net after scooping up the food. Eventually, I pointed
to the mashed potatoes after Wendy poked me several times and kids started whining "come on." Before we got to the cash register, my eyes raced back and forth, looking for Gloria in the lunch room and preparing myself for my box.

Wendy and I took our powdery, papier-mâché potatoes over to Gloria and Shea’s table. Strange, I was usually the one frantic to find them while Wendy followed me. Now I slinked behind her. The four of us really should have gotten along better than we did. After all, we were a picture perfect, politically correct designer-jeans ad. Shea and Gloria were the urban beauties, always trailing behind them was our hip, whigger sidekick Wendy, and I was a tan Little Miss Americana. My companions were cool enough to let me hang with them. How could four girls like us not get along?

Gloria and Shea were laughing, Gloria so amused her body convulsed, her back beating the chair. I knew what they were talking about. Shea looked up at me and smiled, but Gloria didn’t acknowledge me until I was seated in front of her and half-accidentally clanked my fork against the plate.

I wanted to know if Shea was going to be more on my side today. Some days, if she thought Gloria were being too hard on me, she was more vocal. I would need her, but I could see Gloria had let Shea borrow her fuchsia nail polish. Gloria had even done Shea’s thick hair into a shoulder-length French braid. Gloria always did it in five plaits, and Shea adored that. Shea wouldn’t dare appear ungrateful today. Gloria had set me up. I shouldn’t have been surprised. She’d thought of everything she could possibly do to make me feel uncomfortable, even down to her white silk baby t-shirt
and black knit pants. I felt stupid and underdressed in my sweatshirt and jeans. She was going to have a ball insulting me, and I would just have to sit there and take it.

“Shea, ain’t you hot in that jacket?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“Whazzup?” Wendy asked.

“Nuthin.” Gloria said.

“What’s so funny then?” I asked.

“Some’n happened in Biology,” Shea said.

“And that would be?” I prepared myself. I hated it when I forgot how to talk.

Gloria worked her best pseudo-British accent. “And thaat would beeeeee?”

I didn’t say anything.

“I saw yer sista today. She have an easy time adjustin so fa?” Gloria asked.

As much as I can’t stand her, the goal is not to portray Gloria as a darkie who can barely speak English. Yes, she says “yer” and yes, she says “sista,” but the average guy is going to read this like she’s been pickin’ cotton all day. There’s really no way to say her accent isn’t heavy without saying "Her accent wasn’t heavy". Can we at least agree on this: “fa” suggests subtlety, an Ooops! I forgot there’s an “r” at the end of that word. “Fah” means “Massah, suh, how ‘fab’ we gots to walk?” Okay?

I know what you’re thinking. If you were really writing the downtrodden black woman novel/disenchanted oreo narrative, wouldn’t you make her sound as “black” as
possible? Good question. If I were to dialectize the conversation in the full glory of the genre, it would probably look something like this:

JASMINE: Shea, ain' ya hot n dat jackit?

SHEA: Naw.

WENDY: What is up, my homies?

GLORIA: Nutin.

JASMINE: Den wha' so funnee den?

SHEA: Sum'n done happ'n in Bi'logy.

There are some borders I won't cross.

“I saw yer sista today. She have an easy time adjustin so fa?” Gloria asked. She leaned towards me, magenta lips stretching themselves into their mocking pose, waiting to hear about this perfect sister I never had. She batted those surrounded in purple eyeliner at me. I was determined not to lose my cool, to lose her game. I took my fork and mushed potato lumps, chunks shot out the fork prongs. I watched Wendy watching me.

“I guesso. Ain’t had a lotta time to talk to er.”

“Your mama beat the crap outta your daddy?”

Shea took off her jacket, revealing a lilac dress and tugged at her braid.

“She ain’t like that, Gloria.”

“I would have,” Gloria said.

“Probably would,” I said.
"My husband don’t run out on me and my two kids, go marry some ho up north and then bring some other kid back heah expectin me to love him up again.”

Gloria leaned back, never dropping that smile.

"Who said my mother felt that way? His wife died. She ain’t gon start nuthin now. She don’t want him back, neither.”

Gloria looked surprised. “How come you defendin ’im? You wuz a baby when he ditched you!”

"True dat. Cain’t do nuthin bout it now, can I?”

"You must be real excited, dough.” Shea never thrusted her tongue through her teeth to get that “th.” Instead, she tapped her teeth together. Many would attribute this to African tribal languages not preparing us for that sound, and the inability to “thuh” has been passed down through the generations. I think (one reason, anyway) we did it now just to be obstinate. “You lucky you get to do all those sister things now. Maybe we could take er out to a movie or some’n,” ShaRhonda said, the one line of defense she would make on my behalf.

She thought she was helping me, but she always ended up sucking out my oxygen for Gloria. “I don’t know, Shea.” I stuck an over-buttered hump of potatoes in my mouth and deluged pepper on the lump left on my plate.

Wendy sneered. “We don’t wanna rush er either, ya know? I mean, I don’t wanna make er think she can’t make friends on her own cuz big sister’s friends feel they have to take er out.”
Gloria rolled her eyes. It would have been so much easier on all of us if she’d just blurted out, “Shut up, honkey.”

*Is that how you spell “honkey”? “Honkie”? I’m sure it won’t appear on the spellchecker either.* PC software is probably too PC.

“I like your dress, Shea. Is that crushed velvet? Anyway, she won’t be here long. She’s goin’ to HSA soon as all the papers get done.” I didn’t look at them.

“Haynes Street?” Gloria started laughing. ShaRhonda, who had been running her hand over the flower print on her sleeve, now looked at me wide-eyed.

“No. Do your daddy know they gotta rebel as a mascot?” Gloria asked.

Time to avoid looking at Wendy. Time to keep my blood from tingling against the surface. Time to keep Gloria from mentioning the Confederate Flag hanging over Wendy’s porch. “Guess not.”

“I guess she don’t like our fine public school. You think he gonna send you there?” Gloria asked.

I cleaned the slimy mix of potatoes and spit from behind my wisdoms and looked up at Gloria. Funny how she knew I wanted to get out of here when I’d never told her. One step into the hallowed halls of a private school, and pure white blood was officially ruling my heart. “That ain’t up to him, is it?”

Gloria cocked her head from side to side and smiled. “Would you ask ’im?”

“I dunno. That’s up to my mother.” I didn’t tell them he’d already offered.
"You’d learn more at a private school," Wendy said. "You’d be happier there, ya know," and she looked at Gloria.

Even Wendy could spit acid better than me. I welcomed my oxygen.

Okay, there’s a slight problem now. I never would have let Gloria talk to me that way, but German’s gonna think so. In fact, the whole scene went down something like this: The four of us, Wendy, Shea, Gloria, and I, sat eating our papier-mâché potatoes in silence. Wendy wasn’t even paying attention to Gloria—she was surveying the newest issue of YM. Gloria looked up every now and then from her plate, waiting for the right time to ask me about my sister. I dared her to do it. I trailed my fork across the plate, smearing globs of tomato paste and chunks of potato around the rim. I hummed to myself an insipid little song one would only unleash in the shower. Shea watched Gloria watching me, ready to intercede if any tension should grow between us. She was so intent on this that she forgot to eat, and, for several seconds, she sat with her fork full of green beans and potatoes suspended beneath her open mouth.

Since we were tiny, Gloria, sisterless and fatherless, chose me to be her sister. She always had the knowledge of my real sister, but that sister was too far away, and Gloria considered herself the perfect replacement. But now the real sister infringed upon Gloria’s territory, audacious enough to replace the replacement. "What do you think of your new sister?" she asked. "It must be awful rough moving after your mother died. Lots of baggage. Two of you getting along okay, Jasmine?"
“You think we’re not?” I asked without looking up. “I just met the kid. We ain’t exactly soul mates.”

Wendy turned a magazine page a little too hard so that it made a crack in the conversation. Shea, at last, put her fork in her mouth.

“Yeah, you right, I guess. I heard she’s transferin to Haynes Street. You gonna follow her?” Gloria asked.

I placed my fork on the plate, cleared my throat, and folded my hands in my lap.

“Miss Bentley, I hope you are not intending to cause any trouble. If, in the event that I find this is true, I may have to tell your mother where you were Tuesday night at 9 pm.”

And that was the end of that, but back to what didn’t happen.

“Are you gonna tell me what really happened?” Wendy asked.

I pulled a book out of my locker, flipped through it. Pulled another one out. Flipped through it.

“Can we meet er?”

She shouldn’t have had to ask me. I felt stupid for hiding Alaunna from her, and I knew she felt silly for asking. “Things weren’t like I expected. She was aloof—”

“Stop usin those big words, Jazzie.”

“Sorry. She was—cold. She didn’t want to be there, and she didn’t like me.”

“Her mom just died though, and she’s not used to havin you fer a sister either,” Wendy said.
There was no way I could explain to Wendy that my sister’s coldness had nothing to do with her mother’s death, that when we met in my mother’s living room, her hand was cold in mine. Alaunna shook my hand a little too hard. She didn’t look at me again the rest of the night. She sat between John and me, her head angled towards my brother. And Wendy wouldn’t understand how Alaunna sat in silence when my father took the two of us to dinner. It was supposed to be a bonding experience, right? But from the moment the waitress brought out the mozzarella sticks, Alaunna never asked me one question, never was interested in my life. She sat there, staring at and dipping into the marinara sauce, stuffing her mouth so she wouldn’t have to open it. And I, growing more frustrated with her silence, decided to one-up her. I stopped talking too, and my father spent the whole time rambling on about how happy he was to be back in Nashville.

_Actually, the whole restaurant thing is true._

But Wendy would only attribute this to Alaunna’s grief.

She leaned over my shoulder and whispered in my ear: “Is she mixed?”

_This, however, isn’t. Even if Wendy were thinking it, she wouldn’t be dumb enough to ask me._

“No,” I said.

Wendy blushed. “It wouldn’t matter, if it was true.”

“I didn’t say it would. Who told you Aluanna was mixed?”

“Gloria.”
For a moment I stared at Wendy, wanting to tell her she was stupid for believing anything Gloria said.

I closed my locker, a little too hard, and dumped a book into my backpack. Shoes were squeaking down the hall and down stairs and out exits. Eighth graders trampled over seventh graders ignoring sixth graders rolling through fifth graders like bowling balls. Somewhere in the mess, Alaunna was a pin, and Gloria and Shea trampled their way over to me, wanting Alaunna.

I stood and picked up my backpack, pissed at Wendy because she had sympathy for the look Alaunna had given me. We waited for Gloria and Shea and walked to the garage underneath the cafeteria and gym. Alaunna, her hair brushing an open book, was half-sitting half-crouching in the pick-up area with her back against the wall, away from the group of fifth and sixth graders waiting for their parents. It didn’t bother me to see her alone. I wouldn’t expect her to make many friends her first day. Such a great excuse for my not caring.

“Hey, Al,” Gloria said.

Her eyes darted from Wendy, to Gloria, to Shea, and then me. “It’s Alaunna.”

“They my friends,” I said.

They tossed their names around. Alaunna didn’t stand up but shook their hands. She looked down at her book, but we didn’t leave.

“You like it heah so fa?” Shea asked.
Now, all of this really did happen, and, if you believe everything that you read, still is happening.

Alaunna shrugged. “It’s okay.” Her eyes went back to Gloria and Wendy—oppressor and oppressed. From Gloria’s gold hoop earrings and red nails with a diamond placed at each finger tip to Wendy’s untied Adidas and jeans hanging off her butt flashing black boxers. The Bronze Queen stared down with her cocky smile. Only African and Cherokee blood curdling in her veins. Lord knows what she would have done if some white man had made her hair manageable—she loved her Afro-Indian curls. Hey, what if Wendy and I were related? Maybe we were fifth so many many times removed cousins, and our skinny blue-eyed, pasty blond great granddaddy had been an overseer? That’s what Gloria would like to think. That’s the way she looked at Wendy, and me sometimes. That’s the way she was looking at Alaunna. Sometimes she made me wish our Wild Turkey-filled great granddaddy Seamus Maguire had whipped the chitlin diarrhea out of her great granddaddy Ashanti Rollingfeather—That’s the way Alaunna was looking at Gloria. It was almost like the look Alaunna had first given me.

“Well, nice meetin you,” Shea said.

“You too.”

“See y’all,” I said.

Gloria and Shea left us, not taking their time as I’d expected. But the sooner they were gone, the sooner they could gossip. Wendy watched us a little longer and
then gave me the call-you-later smile. Alaunna went back to her book. I watched sunlight flash across mini vans and sedans as they turned in the lot. Kids ran down to the curb and, exhausted, had to give the car doors a little extra push to get them to slam shut.

“She’s a good friend?”

I looked down. “Wendy?” Alaunna was giving me that expression—the one wondering how I could actually communicate with them or was simply glad to know she wasn’t the only one who bothered with crackers.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.” “Good” was cheating Wendy. “Best” was reserved for Gloria, and I called her my best friend out of obligation. I had known Gloria since I was six, and when most thirteen year olds had dumped friends four or five times, I wanted to be special. Besides, Gloria would freak if she found out my real best friend were a whigger.

“Why do you talk like that?”

“Like what?”

“You know how you talk around them. Like ‘They my friends.’” Alaunna’s eyebrows squeezed down over her eyes. She had no reason to be so angry with me. “You don’t talk that way around your family.”

“They’ll make fun of me if I don’t.”

“Friends wouldn’t do that. It wouldn’t matter.”
I wondered where my father was, but I wouldn’t recognize his car even if he
turned in the lot. “It’s not just my friends. Kids’ll make fun of you if you’re too
proper. If you talk like them, they’ll forget about it.”

Alaunna turned a page and started reading again. “They don’t forget. They just
wait for you so they can make fun of you again. You shouldn’t let them do it to you.
Talk the way you should, and they’ll forget because they’ll give up.”

Talk the way I should. I wanted to be there the first time she talked the way she
should and tried to be heard over them mocking her. I wanted to know how long she
would fight them until she gave up and became bicultural. I didn’t think Philadelphia
could have been much different from Nashville, but she would find out. “You’ll
learn.”

I watched her eyebrow creep higher and higher. “I won’t talk like that for
them. I’m not scared of them.”

“I’m not scared either!” I listened to my voice bounce around in the garage,
and when it came back to me, I wished I had chosen to be silent. The fifth and sixth
graders stared over at us. Some of them laughed. “I’m not scared either,” some half
shouted.

“If people don’t like me over the way I talk, I won’t be their friend. That’s
dumb.”

I wanted to be there when she found out it was dumber than just talking. I
wanted to be there when a Gloria came along and forced her into a box.
Chapter Two

Box Syndrome (BS): The real box is with German, not Gloria. Right now, finishing my Trig, a subject I am violently allergic to, is more interesting than editing this. I chew a pack of bubble gum and plod through a couple of problems. If German would just let me do what I want, I would have had half of my book written by now. A novel a year for the past 3. Doesn’t he know he’s ruining my rhythm? The only reason I asked him to do the independent study was to make sure I got the manuscript done. I’m lazy. I write when I’m not taking the time to think about it. I need the weight of a grade to pressure me into doing the work. But nope, he changed the rules of my game.

“Um, Mr., Mr. German sir?” (Or is it more like “Uh, Massuh German, suh?” Hmm.) From the depths of me olde dank, dark box, I try to see any light that might be peeking through the air-tight top. My words, unable to escape, surround me in a hollowed muffle.

“Why, yes, Jazzie?” He doesn’t open the flaps all the way, but I can see half of his smile and a glitter-sparkling eye.

“Can I please write the—”

“Why, no, Jazzie,” says the glitter-sparkling eye and the half-moon mouth.

“Stay strictly to what I told you.” The partial face disappears, and so does the slit of light. I hear the sticky static cracking of packing tape unraveling over the top of the
box. It thunders like the air taken out of a thousand Luftballons, worse than the helium holocaust Nena imagined.

I reach up with a reluctant fist and tap on the sealed top. Knuckle against flimsy cardboard doesn’t make too much of a ruckus, but I know German won’t answer if he hears me anyway. Stick with your life story, Jazzie.

I toss my calculator and textbook on the other side of my bed. I flip through the loose papers to the end of Chapter Two to that new, fresh, expectant page. EDIT ME, it cries, like some Franken-página. EDIT MEEEE! I’m so wrong. I need correction. When the stupid manuscript starts whining at me, I realize how utterly tired I am of this. Writing used to be entertainment. Write fiction, and you get to say whatever you want, right? Now it’s enter-taint-ment, downright painful. Write the truth and don’t leave a bloody thing out.

I myself am not an -ist. Oh, yes, theories and circles of thought are interesting, important, to study and understand, but I don’t prescribe to any of them. Marxism, multiculturalism, feminism, womanism, New Criticism, socialism, mimeticism, fatalism, deconstructionism, Afrocentrism, postmodernism, Ismism, post-post-de-anticotheorism—I’m not into following anyone else’s ideologies. I’m not anything. Okay, I lied. I’m a Jasminist, best defined as Christian, black, and female (how long will it be before they start throwing us in the ring with the lions again—on all three accounts?). I am nothing more and nothing less. But transcendentalism does
make some sense, if you take a minute to see through Emerson’s “Over-Soul” jive, Thoreau’s tree hugging, and Poe’s being so freakin’ disturbed upstairs.

“To Become One with the Over-Soul: A Comparison of Emerson and Thoreau” reads the title of one of my essays. German said it exhibited a “thoreau understanding of both authors” (I kid you not).

It was imperative that a person trust his or her own intuition and be an individual. Intuition was what guided a person along the right path. When one was an individual, s(he) would be able to discern truth for him or herself.

Selah.

Using inherent, somewhat animal-like instincts to become one with nature I have a hard time with, but can you understand anything if you don’t understand yourself first? So much input, so much information comes in shaded by all kinds of crazy angles and perspectives. How could you know which ones to believe, which ones to trust, if you didn’t even know what your point of view was?

“I saw not then what I now clearly perceive” the narrator says in wonderfully convoluted, ethereal, self-absorbed little “Ligeia.”

I saw not then what I now clearly perceive ...

Attached to the back of the essay is a short poem, an imitate-Emerson-or-Thoreau assignment. I’d given it a cute little Latin title, thinking
that Latin was more appropriate for poetry. I don’t claim to be a poet, and this one was whipped up in 5 minutes, but it was good enough for German:

   nosce te ipsum

   If the sheet lies blank,
   like a great, white void,
   Then what is it good for?
   What purpose could it possibly serve,
   with only its thin, brown grains screaming,
   wanting to be observed and possibly heard,
   If it says nothing?

   IT HAS NONE.

   But what of the sheet full of print?
   What purpose could it possibly serve,
   with its bold, striking letters,
   lying amongst a thousand other pages,
   If it is only one sheet?

   IT HAS A VOICE.

   Who discarded the nothing of the sheet?
   He found no desire to give it a voice.
He chose no words to reflect his ideas,
adding nothing to different opinions and succumbing to them all.

Then what is he good for,
If he can not even give his point of view?

And what of the author of the single sheet?
Who felt that it was important enough to put his ideas down,
so that the rest of the world may know his ideas have meaning,
so that his words may make some impression?

He has a voice.
He schools himself.
He attends to his visions.

Only he is complete.

THAT is why I don’t write poetry. Now why in the world couldn’t I have parodied Emerson instead of trying to sound so darn like him? Such a self-indulgent little piece. Great, white void? The nothing of the sheet? AND GEEZ, JASMINE, DID YOUR FINGER GET STUCK ON THE CAPS LOCK OR SOMETHING? But I’m not a poet, and I can’t worry about revising it now. What of the author of the single sheet? He’s doing alright for himself. Screaming on paper. He’s not whining about what he is and isn’t writing—he’s taking the moment, writing on his paper soapbox. Nosce te ipsum, I say. Know thyself. Do I really? Here’s your chance to prove it, Jasmine. You know what the label is on oreos. They’re lost, unable to find
themselves, always drifting drifting drifting between cultures. “The poem hath spoken!” I would say, but that is a statement for a poet, and I’m a non-poet.

But anyway, the slave narrative must go on.

Priya and Reina aren’t -ists either. That’s why I’m comfortable with letting them read my work. I know they’re not going to judge it through the eyes of theoretical philosophies. After finishing the first two chapters, I was at a crossroads, but I wasn’t exactly sure how to express my anxiety.

“Jazzie, how do you not confuse these three broads?” Priya asked.

We were sitting at the bottom of our lockers, Priya and Reina on either side of me editing the content of the latest installments. Normally, the three of us conspired in secret, but in the corner by the fire escape, the boys were playing spades, laughing, insulting, and cracking the cards. Our comments would go unheard.

“Wendy, Shea, and Gloria?” I asked.

“Yeah. They’re all the same.”

“They are so not all the same,” Reina yelled. “Here’s the simple way to tell them apart: Wendy’s the white one, Shea’s the quiet, unobtrusive one, and Gloria’s the snotty one. I actually met Wendy Nolan once. She was lying on top of Josh Schwartz’s piano singing ‘Heart and Soul.’” This is according to Reina. I wouldn’t know because I never go to parties, unless they’re movie parties. Reina only goes to watch the stupid drunks and to get blackmail material on the rich kids (she says the latter is a joke). “She’s a really good singer—when she’s bombed.”
"She's good when she's not bombed," I said, "and she doesn't drink anymore."

They argued a few more minutes over how confusing/not confusing the characters were, and I, staring at the card game down the hall, twirled a string of hair around my index finger. The implications of this piece, whatever you want to call it, began to weigh down on me, until I felt the full responsibility of embodying a stereotype.

"Is this annoying enough?" I asked.

"To minorities," Priya asked, "or German?"

"Minorities," I said.

"Yeah," Reina shrugged, "it's perfect."

I banged my back against the back of the locker and slid down to the floor. Reina and Priya hovered over me, Priya's hair falling in my face, distressed I'd found their answer unsatisfactory. I stared up at the ceiling, at the one loose tile where the darkness and pipes show through.

"That's the problem. It's not true, but when people read it, they think it is. Isn't that what bothers us about minority anything? People believe it whether it's true or not? It's what German wants, right? And if we're giving German what he wants, aren't we part of the problem? We're substantiating the stereotypes."

Priya's smile faded, and she brushed her hair back behind her ears and sighed. She took her copy of the manuscript and threw it on the floor.
“Wait a minute,” Reina said, “we’re abandoning the project? What about your A, Jazz? How’s this substantiating anything? German’s the only person to see it.”

I sat up and glared at Reina. She was shocked I was so offended and recoiled, silent for a moment.

“It’s different though,” Reina said. “This—is subversion.”

“If I continue this, for our next creative projects, you,” I pointed at Priya, “have to promise me you’re going to write about being trapped between the Indian culture of your forefathers and American lifestyles. And you,” I pointed at Reina, “have to write a short story about no-good black men.”

Priya, who doesn’t speak the language of her forefathers, and Reina, who’s never even dated, shook on it. I went back to my slave narrative.

(New Working Title Up to This Point: Bidialectal and Proud of It!)

3.

I think Dad believed he had the perfect plan. What he wanted, and I honestly feel this way, was for Alaunna and me to be close. Because he’d started work and couldn’t pick Al up after school, he asked me (very, very politely indeed) to walk her home. Plus he was going to send us both to Haynes Street Academy. Within a month, Al and I would have gelled quite nicely. He’d envisioned us sprawled across my bed, Alaunna corn rowing my hair and me painting spirals and stars on her fingernails once she was all done. But I would have none of Haynes Street. Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t mind wearing a uniform or being a Runnin’ Rebel. However, after a good deal
of practice, I just couldn't get my "Yessuhs" and "Nossuhs" down right—the respect my future superiors at HSA would be due.

Nope. No Haynes Street Academy for me. I was going to escape public school and resurface at the New School of Nashville. No uniforms. Cougar mascot, and a nutty mix of rich white kids, not-so-rich white kids, foreign exchange students, Indians (East, not American, mind you), Jews, Gentiles, and all of those in between. Best of all, New School was actively recruiting African Americans. While hopeful white couples were putting their fetuses on the waiting list, if you were black and had more than 4 brain cells, you were in.

I thought my father would have more sense than to send Alaunna to HSA. But for him, a plaid yellow, blue, pink, and grey shirt with matching grey skirt meant discipline and order. For the very same reason, I thought he might object to my wanting to go to New School, but after twelve years of absence, he didn't have much to say once Mama approved. So, if Jasmine wanted to go to school with all them crazy white kids, that was fine by him.

A week before Alaunna descended into Post-Confederate Hell and I was so marvelously corrupted by private school so that I could never step into the halls of public school again, I started taking my sister home.

Okay, here I should really do something with setting, right? We're walking along in silence, refusing to talk to each other, blah blah blah. Perfect opportunity for me to describe AI's neighborhood. But scene, detail, all that ambiance stuff is really
painful for me. So I'll do my best to throw in some stuff about the trees and duplexes and houses, and something about the air. Actually, I know nothing about trees, or how to tell them apart. I'll say there were ginkgoes (they have cool leaves—I know that much) and the standard species of elm, oak, and magnolia. It was humid. Was it really humid? How should I know? But humidity is more interesting than a pleasant, sunny day, and it ain't a stretch for Nashville.

As for subject matter, this allows me to delve into one of those other concerns always popping up in black fiction: well-off Negroes vs. not-so-well-off Negroes.

My father's neighborhood, even though it was only about a five minutes' walk away from mine, was a step up on the social ladder. He didn't have the projects 3 blocks away or the once-every-so-often police cars blocking the streets and helicopters humming around looking for running-scared drug dealers. Back during the 40s and 50s, my neighborhood had been all white, but one pesky Negro family decided to move in, and down went the property value. All the whites must have migrated over here, eventually allowing a few sprinklings of blacks among them. (Lately, whites have been moving back into my neighborhood, but that's because they're ex-hippies and they're "down with the tribes.") The only thing our two neighborhoods had in common was the wide, winding creek that slinked behind the underbrush of shrubs and trees. We had crab grass. They had Bermuda. While our dogs wore down our small back yards and dug holes leaving patches of dust and gravel, they had lush green back and front yards with sprawling oaks, elms, and magnolias hundreds of years old.
In the heat of the summer, they were well shaded, but not even the shade could save them from the humidity. Even in the middle of September, the heaviness was beating down on me, forcing beads of sweat to form under my bangs and on my top lip. It must have rained during the day. Ginkgo leaves and magnolia petals had been knocked to the ground and scattered all over the sidewalk. The delicate fans of the leaves began to shrivel up.

“When I first got here, I thought everybody was going to have Southern accents—even the African Americans,” Al said breaking the silence. “That’s what I always heard. Well, you know I was wrong. What I’m trying to say is...well—”

I did not look at her but kept walking. “Just say it.”

“You should be proud of the way you speak. I really really mean that. I had a friend who spoke broken English. Nobody judged her because of that. She was one of the most popular kids in school.” I couldn’t blame her for bringing it up again. It was the only point of reference Al aunna and I had.

“Well, honey, this ain’t Philly. Here, we don’t believe in letting you be you. Get used to it, sweetums. Better to win their respect any way you can.”

Al aunna stopped, turned, and stared at me for a second. It was then that I noticed she also had our father’s eyes. Their shape was the only thing that brought any strength or character to her fragile face.

“If that’s true, how come they never give me any trouble about being proper?”

“They haven’t to your face,” I said.
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You heard me. Don’t you understand standard English?” I asked.

Like sparks from flint, her pupils shifted and flashed. She turned away from me and started walking again.

Normally, silences are awkward and uneasy, and the victims of the conversational stalemate try their hardest, even though they may worsen the situation, to reach some kind of common ground. But Alaunna and I were quite happy that we didn’t have to force ourselves to speak to each other. We started walking faster, knowing that the sooner Alaunna was in the door, the sooner we could give up our civilized fronts, whether we were on speaking terms or not.

I was disappointed in my father’s house. That was just it—it wasn’t really a house, it was one side of a duplex. I thought my father would have some nice two-story or split-level, but it was just a duplex. A nice one though, a colonial-style townhouse look with crimson bricks and window shutters. I would wait until Alaunna were safely inside before I left her, but I saw her pull out an envelope that had been carefully placed behind the metalwork of the security door. Instead of taking it inside, she just stood there and read it, the whole time the stuffiness of the air sucked out my breath, and sweat started streaking down the sides of my face.

“What is it?” I asked in mock enthusiasm.

Alaunna stuffed the envelope in her pocket and walked up to me. “Daddy wants me to go home with you. He has to run an errand.”
“Did he say how long he’d be?”

“No, and don’t worry about me getting in the way. I’ve got a book I can read.”

The smell of lasagna and Mama’s blend of mozzarella and ricotta cheese hit me before I stepped on the back porch. With John John at school until the weekend, I would finally get to eat some of it.

You know, food is really important in a memoir. Now, I could put some kind of ethnic food in like collard greens or hotwater cornbread. Maybe it was really fried chicken on that day instead of lasagna, but that would just be too “black,” and we can’t give German exactly what he wants.

PS: For the record, can I just say that I hate watermelon? And chitlins. Really hate the chitlins.

Winding her fine hair around her finger, Alaunna began to unconsciously play with her bangs. Mama, without fail, was sitting at the kitchen table reading the paper, but I couldn’t predict how she’d react to my bringing my sister home.

“How was school, Jazzie?” she asked without looking up.

“It was fine.”

Mama knew, unless there was something earth shattering I wanted to share, that that was all she was going to get out of me. She always made one more futile attempt. “Just ‘fine?’” Smiling, she looked up, and then saw Alaunna. “Oh. What a pleasant surprise.”
“Surprise?” Alaunna let go of her hair. “Daddy said I was supposed to come here after school.”

Mama opened her mouth, said nothing, and looked at me. I shrugged and mouthed “What?”

Mama nodded. “Okay, baby. I probably forgot. I’m sure he called me at work. I’ve been so busy.” She folded her paper.

“That’s alright.” The funny edge in Alaunna’s voice lilted, making it sound sing-song and insincere.

Alaunna followed me and plopped down on the couch. “I’m going up to my room. If you need anything...,” I said, but she wasn’t listening. Pressing against the arm rest and trying to take up as little space as possible, she scrunched into the corner of the couch. Alaunna got a book out of her backpack and then carefully placed it between her legs and the coffee table. Happy that she wasn’t going to be any trouble, I went to my room and started working. An hour later, I heard the muted doorbell through the floor.

Too bland? How many different ways can you describe a doorbell? Muffled doorbell. So-soft rings the doorbell that I can barely hear it through the plush terrains of my carpet. Oh, well. I don't have to fix it now.

I could hear both of my parents, and I decided I should greet my father. Alaunna didn’t say a thing, but my mother’s and father’s voices traveled out of the living room, into the kitchen, and faded on the back porch. Downstairs, Alaunna was gripped by
her book. She didn’t look up, and once I came down, she turned her head away from me. When I crept into the kitchen, I opened the oven and inspected the lasagna. Beyond the screen door, Mama must have seen me (The Great Maternal Third Eye sees all) even though she never glanced in my direction. Dad never saw me.

“Listen, Mattie,” he said, “something came up, that’s all. Wasn’t part of my schedule. If I had time to call, I would have.”

I got a glass out of the cupboard, walked over to the refrigerator and poured some tea. I wondered how many times Mama had heard that one.

“You had all the time in the world to write that child a note, but you didn’t have time to call me? I would have said yes. You didn’t have to worry about that. In the future, John, I would appreciate a phone call. I told you right from the start that Alaunna is welcome here any time. But you need to tell me, Jasmine needs to tell me, or Alaunna needs to tell me.”

There was a very long pause. When there’s a silence like that, you have a lot of time to wonder if all that stuff people said about your father were really true. I inspected the lasagna again. The ricotta and mozzarella blend grew golden around the edges. Tomato, flecks of basil, and hamburger bubbled around the cheese covering. Almost done.

“I have to ask a favor of you,” Dad finally said. “I need for you to take care of Alaunna for me.”

Her laugh came out in short, exasperated bursts.
“Mattie, don’t start that again. I start work on Wednesday. I wasn’t planning on having the hours I got, but I can’t help that. I’ve got a good job, and the hours ain’t gonna ruin it for me.”

“What are your hours, John?” Mama sounded tired.

“Nine to seven. Some days I might be late.”

“Nine to seven?” I mouthed.

“Let me make one thing clear to you,” she said with the voice that made my brother’s and my backs arch. “I am not going to take care of your child.”

“I’m not asking you to take care of her.”

“How can you say that? She’s at school all day, and then she might be here half the night. When would you ever spend time with her?”

“Mattie—”

“John,” she said firmly.

In the living room, Alaunna was stiff. Trying to hold her book in front of her, her hands shook, and she had been reading the same page for several minutes. Her eyeballs didn’t move. Didn’t scroll down.

I checked on the lasagna, could taste the hint of oregano and parmesan in my mouth. It was done—time for my father to get off the back porch.

“Alaunna won’t be any trouble,” he said. “Jasmine can get to know her better. Jasmine can take care of her.”
“That child is much too mature. She doesn’t need to be baby-sat, especially when there’s an adult around.”

“Alright. Why don’t you just let her come over to visit Jasmine then?”

“Then it’s not my decision. It’s Jasmine’s. Ask her.”

They both turned around and looked at me. I stood there completely dumbfounded. I looked at Alaunna. She didn’t acknowledge me at first, but I prolonged the silence, had to let her feel the pressure from Dad’s expectations, his two daughters skipping hand-in-hand down the street, laughing together as they talk about the boys they like, going to the mall to buy new clothes. Alaunna stared at me out of the corner of her eye and lowered her book.

“Jasmine, baby, is it okay if Alaunna comes home with you on weekdays? It would mean an awful lot to me.”

I hated that smug little glint in his eye. I’m sending you off to private school, aren’t I? Isn’t that what you always wanted? His mouth was frozen in a half smile. New School not Haynes Street. Right? I’m giving you exactly what you want. Right?

“Well, I guess it’s okay—if it’s okay with Alaunna.”

She turned her head and looked at me like road kill when they know they’re about to be hit—and they know there’s nothing to be done. “I—don’t see anything wrong with that,” she answered.
Alaunna didn’t wait for Dad to summon her. She’d put her book away and joined him on the back porch without saying anything to me. “Thank you for letting me stay, Mrs. Waters.”

“Nine to seven?” I asked, when I heard my father’s engine start.

Mama shrugged.

* * *

Remember Reina Wagner’s classification of the 3 broads: 1) Wendy is white, 2) Shea is quiet and unobtrusive, 3) Gloria is snotty.

PS: I’m still not as self-abusive as memoir Jasmine makes me look.

Gloria wasn’t too happy about our afternoon routine being broken up by my “other” sister. She, Shea, Wendy, and I were supposed to leave school together. As soon as the bell rang, she plowed through the crowd of kids in the hallway, pushed her way up to my locker, grabbed me by the hand, and dragged me down to the mall, the creek, wherever she felt the most boys would be. My departure to New School drew closer, and the collar she’d placed around my neck began to loosen. She knew, and I began to realize, once I stepped into that private school, didn’t see her every day, I would be off her leash.

The second day I left with my sister and not with her, Gloria was miffed. Half an hour after school, she showed up on my back porch, plum-gloss smile wide on the other side of the screen door. She’d even brought Wendy with her. Too bad for
Wendy, since once I went to New School, Wendy would probably become Gloria’s new sidekick. Too bad Wendy’s leash was tighter than mine.

“Hey,” Gloria said, “don’t us almost ex-schoolmates count fo nuthin anymore? Pretty soon we won’t be seein you at all.”

“I ain’t goin nowhere,” I said.

“Well, hello there, ladies. How are you?” my mother called from the kitchen table.

“Hi, Mrs. Waters,” they sang in unison.

“I gotta go drop my stuff at home, but we goin to the mall after that. Wanna come?” Gloria asked.

Mindful my mother was right behind me, I bit my tongue on what I really wanted to say. “I can’t. My sister’s here.”

“Go on, Jazzie,” Mama said. I gave her a smile, but she did nothing to save me from the Inquisition that was coming.

When I stepped onto the porch, I stood in between Wendy and Gloria, taking my rightful position and putting Wendy in hers. Wendy shouldn’t have been here in the first place. Her mother wanted her home at 4. It wasn’t like Wendy to mind her mother, but Wendy’s presence might actually have been a good thing. Gloria probably wouldn’t get as personal as she wished.

“You think I could go to private school?” Gloria asked. “I make straight A’s and B’s. Then I can always see you.”
“It’s not like she’s gonna disappear, Gloria. She just lives around the way, ya know,” Wendy said.

“But it ain’t the same though.”

“Yeah,” I said, “it ain’t like I’m goin anywhere.”

We walked a block up the street to Gloria’s forest green house, dodging little kids riding their bikes on the sidewalk. Teenage boys who had nothing better to do cruised the street in glossy waxed cars with the windows rolled down. Their music pulsed and shook the ground, banged against my ears. When they passed by us, they’d call out: “Hey, you look good, girl,” and “How old are you?” and “You busy now?” I stepped in front of Wendy, screening her from the street so the boys couldn’t see how blond she was, couldn’t wonder why she wasn’t on the other side of the creek where she belonged. Gloria flashed her smile, flipped her head towards them, her Afro-Indian curls swishing around her face, and mouthed the words to the songs blasting from the back seat.

Gloria’s house always smelled like peach-vanilla potpourri. The rooms visible from the front door—the kitchen, den, and living room—were always immaculately clean. The rest of the house—a declared disaster area. For a woman who never had a job, I wondered how Ms. Bentley could have so much stuff cluttering every room, including her daughter’s. At least I don’t think she had a job. She always seemed to be home, as permanent a fixture in that house as the leaky plumbing.
Allow me for a moment, to speak on the subject of promiscuous-black-women archetypes. Most noted is Sapphire, the sallow vixen, corrupter of white men. She turned heads at the turn of the century. But for our times, the loose and lazy welfare mom has become more prevalent. Now, you shouldn’t believe everything that you read, but Ms. Bentley, Gloria’s mother, has never told Gloria who her father is. I like being as subversive as the next black girl writing a memoir she really doesn’t care about, but a chicken, is a chicken—is a chicken.

“Hi, girls,” she said walking out of the wilderness and into the living room. We were greeted so generically because after Ms. Bentley had seen Wendy hanging around for at least the past four years, she still hadn’t taken the time to learn the girl’s name.

Gloria brought us two Dixie cups of frozen Kool Aid. Ms. Bentley usually sold them to the kids on the street for a dime a piece. “I’ll be right back. I’m just gonna change.”

“Girl, don’t you keep them waiting. Lord knows you’ll take forever,” Ms. Bentley said. Gloria ignored her and disappeared into the clutter.

“Y’all don’t have to stand. Sit down.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Wendy said.

The ma’am/sir factor: Don’t forget to say ma’am—especially around this woman. John John and I weren’t taught the conventional Southern way of showing our elders respect, and although some adults didn’t mind, others thought we didn’t know our place. I respected my mother more than any other adult, and I never called
her “ma’am.” It felt silly to give other adults that special treatment, but some—I didn’t want to piss them off.

I hopped into the arm chair before Wendy could get to it, forcing her to sit on the couch. Ms. Bentley already saw her as a little white queen. I made sure to keep her off her throne.

* * *

About this time in the writing of the manuscript, I was tired of first person, annoyed with the “I, I, I” mantra.

“It’s a memoir, Jazz,” Reina said.

“Yes, but some people find that the amateur writer is most likely to use first-person POV. It’s more simple, easier to control than third limited or omniscient.”

“Hey! I write in first all the time!” Reina was mortified. “I’m simple? I’m not simple.”

“No, I didn’t say that. I said some people say that.”

“Well, what do you care, Jazz? You’re not taking this thing seriously anyway.”

I blinked. ”Yeah. Exactly.”

* * *

Gloria’s mother didn’t sit down. She leaned against the door frame and watched us—or, more importantly, watched me. I licked at the Kool Aid in silence and hoped Wendy would do the same.
‘This is good, ma’am,’ Wendy said nodding, nodding too much. ‘What is this, cherry? Fruit punch?’ I wondered how Wendy’s rounded vowels and sharp diction rang in Ms. Bentley’s ears. I wondered how ‘ma’am’ stung like a slap in the face.

‘It must be fruit punch. I had a batch of grape and fruit punch back there, and it cain’t be grape.’

‘Well, it’s good.’

I stared at Wendy, trying to get her attention. Gloria would be at least another fifteen minutes. I could not endure the failed attempts at starting conversations around Kool Aid cups until then.

‘Well, honey, I’m just glad you like it,’ Ms. Bentley said.

Wendy finally looked up at me and widened her eyes, asking what my problem was. I shrugged, rolled my eyes, and mouthed: ‘Stop looking at me.’

‘Are you sure you don’t have to be home? I don’t want you to get in trouble with your mom,’ I said.

‘She won’t know if I’m not there.’

‘Won’t your sibs rat on you? You gotta go take care of them.’

‘Yeah, honey,’ Ms. Bentley said. ‘Don’t get in no trouble on my account.’

I’d betrayed Wendy and made her look stupid, but it was better that I be the one to do it. Wendy finally gave up and picked her backpack up off the floor. ‘Yeah, I guess I should go. Thanks again,’ she said over her shoulder as she started down the walk way.
As soon as Wendy stepped out the front door, Ms. Bentley sat down next to me, right in the space Wendy had occupied. “So, John’s back in town? You must be so excited.” She leaned forward, elbows on her knees and cheeks cupped in hands. The rumors and whisperings I heard about Dad my entire life came flooding into my ears. I saw him hand in hand with Ms. Bentley. Them in some swanky little restaurant on the other side of town, her leaning forward with elbows on knees like she was now, playing with her earring and patting him on the knee. Her dress dipped down just enough to be suggestive. He didn’t stop staring at her, finding her more attractive with each sip of champagne.

“Yeah, I am excited to have him back.”

“And I hear you goin to NSN. Good for you, baby. You’ve always been so smart. I knew you’d make us proud.”

“Thanks—ma’am.”

“Don’t you forget us when you got that nice lil apartment in New York with all them degrees hangin on the walls,” she said. She tapped me on the shoulder. “Yeah, you know you always been my girl.”

I managed to smile.

“So, how’s your daddy been? I haven’t seen him in so long. You know, we used to go to school together.”
Go to school together? Did they walk, arms intertwined, down the hallway?

Go steady? Have lunch dates in the cafeteria, or did they just go to school together?

“He’s good, I guess, considering the circumstances.”

Combing and teasing her ends, Gloria stuck her head in the doorway. She narrowed her eyes. “Where’s Wendy?”

“She had to get home,” I said.

Ms. Bentley stood up and glared at her daughter. “What I tell you bout bringin them little white hos around here? They all wild and into everything. I don’t need to deal with their mess.”

“Mamaaaaa.” Gloria rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth.

“Don’t you ‘Mama’ me.”

“I didn’t even invite her over here. She’s Jasmine's little bitch. Follows her around everywhere.”

“Watch your mouth, girl.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I didn’t want to hear them talk about my best friend that way, but if I said too much in Wendy’s defense, I knew I was going to get a lecture; but I’d already shown Wendy up. I had to make up for it. “She’s really not like that, Ms. Bentley,” I tried to say as sweetly as possible.

“Jasmine, honey, all them little white bitches end up the same way,” Gloria’s mother said. “You’ll see. And I know her family might have you over for dinner and
chit chat, but you wait til one of our boys knocks her up. They’ll see you as just another nigga. You don’t want to get mixed up in all that. Runnin buck wild and expect you to do it too. Hell, it’s normal for them. You stay away from those whores.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, and if my mother hadn’t taught me better, I would have added, “and who is Gloria's daddy?”

That—I swear—is all true.
Chapter Three

Allow me to mention a few oversights. While editing this chapter, Reina exclaimed: “Where’s the creek?”

Sprawled out under my locker, I looked up from my daily ritual of doing my Trig homework at the last minute, happy she’d given me a reason to stop making a mess of my $x^2$s and $y^2$s. “I didn’t know you were so in love with the creek. I talk about the creek.”

“Yeah, well for something that’s been such a big part of your life, you’ve hardly even talked about it. You’ve only mentioned it twice. There’s that ‘Me making less frequent trips down to the creek’ line, and once you mention it in Chapter Three. You showed me he creek. You showed Priya the creek. It’s some kind of national landmark for you. You could do a lot more with it.”

Reina exposed my subconscious editorial decisions. Yes, I had left out the creek. Why didn’t I go down to the creek anymore? We used to hang out there all the time when we were kids. That’s where Gloria and I became friends, spending the entire day every day there the summer after kindergarten. We used to have a tire swing, and we’d fling out over the water until last summer when some of the boys outgrew it, and the rope snapped under their weight. Nobody bothered to replace it. That’s even where Gloria christened CF CF (yes, she takes credit for that legendary name, like she takes credit for everything that goes on around here). Actually, it wasn’t
even CF at first. It was Chicken Fingers, because he had skinny fingers or he was always eating chicken—I can’t remember which. After ten years, Chicken Fingers went to Chik Finger to CF. The kids used to tease him all of the time, especially the girls, probably because they all wanted him to be their boyfriend and go home and play house.

And why hadn’t I even included CF, the neighborhood mascot, in my memoir? He wasn’t out of sight, out of mind. I see him riding his bike in the street almost every day after school. He’s always at the creek, but I do worry about him. When he turns the corner and heads for home, I wonder if his cousin, Malik, will be hanging out in the street with all the dope fiends. I wonder if the cops will mistake CF for his cousin one day, and when the helicopters fly overhead, CF will be caught in the wrong place. He lives in the Numbers House, the 3-story, powder-blue brick monstrosity where his grandmother runs an operation. That woman’s never been caught, but does CF ever worry that she might, or that Malik might get shot, or that he might when the cops refuse to believe he’s not Malik?

But this story is not about CF—or the creek—at least not yet.

I know why I haven’t written about him, because if I did, I would have to write about the Numbers House down the street and Malik. Like I said, there are some boundaries I won’t cross.

Anyway, Gloria, Shea, Wendy, and Alaunna were just about to cause trouble.
4.

I would be lying if I said I didn’t intend to spend less time with me 3 mates. Once I started going to New School, I figured, I could gradually worm my way out of seeing them. No more walking home from school with them. Me excusing myself out of trips to the mall (didn’t they know there’s more homework at private schools?) Me making less frequent trips down to the creek. They’d finally realize poor Jasmine had way too much work to do, and whether she liked it or not, she just couldn’t hang anymore. But I’d forgotten the Third Law of Bentlean Entrapment: For every Jasmonic attempt at evasion, there is an equal and opposite Gloriat recapture. It wouldn’t be too much if Gloria, Shea, and Wendy spent a half and hour with me after school, would it? They’d come to me; I didn’t have to go to them. “We wanna KIT,” Gloria said. Keep in touch with me, or being nosy around Alaunna—I wasn’t sure of her motives.

I’m not exactly sure who felt more uncomfortable with Gloria, Wendy, and Shea stopping in ever day afterschool—me or Alaunna. Alaunna, just like she had promised, kept to her wallflower mentality and stayed hidden away in the study until Dad came to pick her up. From the living room, I’d watch her sit at my mother’s old desk with her back straight in perfect posture, a book clenched in her tight little hands. Once my “buddies” decided to show up on my back porch, Al started closing the door to the study. For all I knew, she was probably making faces at the door the entire time Gloria was there.
But nothing would go wrong as long as Mama was there, right? Gloria didn’t dare cross my mother. When we were younger, whoever was around would discipline us. When we got home, word always got back to our parents, and we got a double dose. We were beyond physical punishment now, but visions of switches at our legs still fresh in our minds, we would never act up away from home, and Gloria wasn’t stupid. My Mama’d tell on her in a heart beat. Gloria wasn’t going to do anything.

However, during the third week of my private-school bliss, Alaunna and I walked home (like normal), Gloria and her sidekicks invaded (like normal), but Mama was not drinking her coffee at the kitchen table when I came in.

Gloria rambled on about new kicks and why low tops were better than high tops, I nodded impatiently, ShaRhonda paid rapt attention, Wendy, totally uninterested in Gloria’s sense of fashion, stood at my mother’s knickknack shelf holding the crystal seal between her thumb and index finger, and Alaunna was hiding in my mother’s old study when the phone rang. I didn’t race to the kitchen to answer it. I would just let Mama handle it upstairs.

It rang again. Mama always let the phone ring twice. No problem.

It rang again.

“Ain’t you gonna get that?” Shea asked.

“No, Mama’ll get it. She know I got company.”

And again it rang.
“I don’t think she’s here,” Gloria said, and that magenta smile spread across her face.

I walked to the kitchen, watching Gloria the entire time. I didn’t want her starting anything while my back was turned.

“Hello?”

“Hiiiiiiii, Jasmine.”

“Oh, Mrs. Nolan,” I said rather loudly. Wendy’s head snapped in my direction, and she mouthed “I’m not here.”

“Have you seen Wendy? That girl’s runnin around again, and she’s not doing a damn thing. Brett just called me here at work and said she didn’t come home. I don’t know what she’s thinkin. A ten year old can’t take care of four kids by himself.”

“Um, I saw her after school, but not recently.”

Trying to soften her laughter, Gloria covered her mouth behind her blouse collar. Shea kept poking her in the leg to get her to be quiet. Wendy grew deeper and deeper shades of red, mouthing “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

“If I see her, I’ll tell her to get home, Mrs. Nolan.”

“Okay, huney. Thank you. Maybe I’ll see you around some time.”

“Okay, huneeee,” I said after she hung up. “Go home and take care of your responsibilities,” I yelled at Wendy.

“They’re not mine, ya know. I thought you were gonna tell me somethin new.”
“Wendy,” Gloria said looking over the back of the couch, “pissin’ er off like this all the time cain’t be good for you. Why don’t you run along and take care of them bad ass kids for ya mama?” When Gloria turned back around, Wendy shot up her middle finger. Shea noticed too but decided not to report it.

“Low tops or high?” Gloria asked me as I sat back down.

“High tops look better,” I said shrugging.

Gloria rolled her eyes. “Sure they do, if you wanna look like some jungle bunny. I wanna second opinion. Is Al here?”

Unable to control it, I frowned, and the longer I couldn’t keep the disgust off of my face, the more I dared Gloria to play her game. "She’s busy," I said. "She studies a lot."

“It’ll just take a second, geez. I need new shoes, and I’m tryin to get some opinions heah."

“Damn, Gloria,” Wendy yelled. “Let the kid study. Maybe you should try it for a change.”

Gloria faced Wendy, sitting up on her knees and balling her fists against the back of the couch. She cocked her head to the side. “Don’t you, of all people, be tellin me what I should and shouldn’t be doin, Miz Nooooooolan.”

Her face now close to Gloria’s and hands on hips, Wendy narrowed her eyes. “You keep your damn nose out of my damn business.”
Once Wendy got the damns rolling, there was going to be trouble. Shea was scared, but she wasn’t going to say anything to make them stop. I could see Wendy pushing Gloria, Gloria crashing into the coffee table, Gloria retaliating by shoving Wendy into the knickknacks it took my mother 15 years to collect. All the crystal and porcelain flying up in the air whole and landing on the floor in a kazillion pieces. Fun for me to clean up and explain to Mama.

*I have a confession to make. I don’t call my mother “Mama.”*

I hopped up and ran between the two of them. I’d dropped the dialect, but Gloria didn’t seem to notice. “Time out! Time out! Time out! There will be nothing breaking in my house today. No, no, no. We will not talk about Wendy’s parents, for that is a very, very sensitive subject. We will not tell people what they should be doing. We are going to leave this house in one piece, so that when you leave, Jasmine can do her homework in the comfort of knowing that her mother will not want her hide when she gets home. Okay, Wendy?” She stepped back and folded her arms. “Okaaaaay, Gloria?”

“Okay,” she said all cheery. Then she yelled, “Al, can I ask you a question?”

Wendy looked at me and rolled her eyes. She patted me on the shoulder and whispered: “That worked.”

“Well, you learn to control your temper,” I said through clenched teeth.

“She pisses me off.”

“She pisses me off. You don’t see me startin nuthin.”
Wendy pointed in the direction of the study. Al closed the door quietly, making sure it didn’t even click against the door frame as if she were going to disturb someone. Without letting go of the doorknob, she stared at Gloria, blinked a couple of times, and then looked at me.

“We don’t bite,” Gloria said. “Just stay away from Wendy. She’s the one with rabies.”

This time, when Gloria wasn’t looking, both of Wendy’s middle fingers shot up.

“You likin Nashville so fa?” Shea asked. Yes, good ol ShaRhonda. Always trying to soften the ensuing blows at all of the wrong moments.

“It’s okay, I guess.”

“When you’ve lived heah thirteen years, it tends to get borin real fast. I don’t know why anybody’d move heah,” Gloria said.

Okay, this wasn’t too bad. This was actually civil, but I wanted Gloria to hurry up and get to her stupid sneaker question. Al stood before her Inquisitor looking up every once in a while to make eye contact with Gloria. The corners of Gloria’s mouth didn’t flip up into their smart little smirk, but she sucked on the tip of one of her press-on nails, appearing almost thoughtful.

“Daddy just wanted to get out of Philly. He didn’t really know of any other place to go, so he came here, where he grew up,” Alaunna said.

“Do you like your new school? I mean the private school, of course.”
Aluanna did not answer right away. She cocked an eyebrow at Gloria and bit the corner of her bottom lip. “Why do you want to know so much about me all of a sudden? You were never so interested before.”

Thus ended the civility.

Wendy took a handful of the back of my shirt, and every time she anticipated the fallout, she would grip it even tighter. I wanted to jab her with my elbow, annoyed with the physical contact and the fact that she was enjoying this, but I knew she’d be headed right into the shelf.

“Well,” Gloria said, “aren’t you all prim and propah?”

Alaunna narrowed her eyes. The color left her cheeks. “I’d rather be prim and proper instead of ignant. That’s right. You’re not even ignorant. You're ignant.”

I started to open my mouth, but Shea reached over and grabbed my hand. “It’s their fight,” she whispered. “You know how much we love to be at ring side when sistahs fight.”

Easy to say, for those who are never in the ring, for those who like to hide behind the turnbuckle and throw fire on the melee. Wendy let go of my shirt and sucked her teeth in mock contempt.

Gloria’s mouth dropped in genuine surprise. Now it was Wendy’s turn to hide her smile. She bit on the neckline of her t-shirt. My heart began to flutter, tightening my chest. I took long, deep breaths out of my nose, even with my heart racing, even
when it was trying to force me to stagger breathe out of my mouth. My body wanted me to lose control, but I refused to—not like Gloria, or Wendy, or Al.

“That’s what I said.” Alaunna’s voice was more obnoxious than Gloria’s.

“Why don’t you check your hearing?”

“Don’t think you know everything, little girl, because you don’t. You’re gonna be eatin alive if you don’t get rid of yo snot-nosed attitude. Yo color don’t give you the right to own us.”

The little sister who annoyed me to no end was humiliating my worst enemy/faux best friend. Now, I always knew a Waters would do this one day, but I couldn’t support my sister, could I? I mean, it was fascinating to see Gloria at a near loss for words, but I couldn’t let Alaunna think her behavior was acceptable either.

Fighting in the house, especially when Mama wasn’t home, was never allowed.

“Who’d want you?” Alaunna asked. “Somebody could give me all the money in the world, and I still wouldn’t want you. I’m not me because of this,” she said pulling up the skin on her arm. For a moment she’d sounded sincere, but now she was almost frigid. “And besides, you’re the one who’s been hawkin me ever since I got here.”

That was it. I wrenched my hand free of ShaRhonda. They could fight all they wanted for as long as they wanted, but I wan’t listening to any more of this. Pointing my finger at both Alaunna and Gloria, I could feel the little tremors in my hand, and hear them in my voice. “You both sound pretty ignant to me right now. You wanna scream at each other? Be my guest. Have fun. But don’t you break nuthin, and when
you’re all done, Gloria, don’t you bring your mess over here no more. We can hang somewhere else, but I don’t need your drama in my house. Capice?” I tried to control the fluttering in my voice. “Now then, I’ve got homework to do, and you’d better not disturb me.”

I ran upstairs and slammed my door as hard as I could. I didn’t know if Gloria and Alaunna continued to fight, or if Wendy or Shea broke it up, or if they had even gone home. I was too busy delighting in the adrenaline rush that came in breathing that sigh of relief.

* * *

Two blissful weeks passed before I saw me best buds, me sweetest mates in the whole wide world again. Gloria and Wendy had both apologized, over the phone and in person that day at the mall. They knew it was coming, they could feel the split. I planned to stay in touch with Wendy, but Gloria knew Jazzie had smuggled in a box cutter, and Jazzie’d ripped that packaging tape cleanly from the flaps at the top of the box. Jazzie emerged laughing, and Gloria wouldn’t dare try to shove Jazzie back in, not with Jazzie swinging that box cutter around with those swift, precise strokes. We wild when we been cooped up that long, and Gloria knew I wasn’t afraid to cut her. You cain’t keep a sistah down too long. Don’ ya know that, Glory? Wendy would have to beat Gloria off with the proverbial stick on her own now

*Borderline cliché there, Jasmine. Bad girl.*
but that was her fault for sticking around Gloria so long.

Wendy (cap backwards of course) and Gloria were peering into a case of estate jewelry when Shea pulled me over to the rack of cheap earrings and decided to tell me what went down.

"Jazzie, you shoulda seen 'em. Dey went on sweatin each other. Why didn’t you tell me Al was so with it?"

I shrugged. "I didn’t know."

Okay, I’m well aware of the believability factor. When I left them, they were yelling. Hello? you ask. You didn’t hear them, even if you were upstairs? Well, I didn’t. Can’t remember exactly what I was doing. Does it matter? Must we bog ourselves down with technicalities? You really think German’s going to care all that much? It didn’t happen like this, did it? Somewhat. Somewhat’s enough.

“So, when did you guys stop it? Or did you?”

“Yeah, I stopped it eventually. Man, it got nasty. Dey started playin dozens.”

“Alaunna was playin dozens? Did she bum Gloria’s butt?”

You didn’t hear them playing dozens? You didn’t hear OOOOOOOHHHHHHS! and AHHHHHHHHHHHHS!? German won’t care, not like he knows what the dozens are anyway. It was 2 in the morning when I wrote this. Didn’t care much about what did and didn’t make sense.
“I thought she did. To tell you the truth, I think Alaunna won. Don’t tell. Things so different without you around, Jazz.”

“Yeah, Gloria doesn’t have two punching bags anymore, and she’s getting tired of just beating up on Wendy.”

“No,” Shea said laughing. “It ain’t like dat. I miss you, and who’s gonna keep Wendy straight?”

“I ain’t Wendy’s mama, and I ain’t never been Wendy’s mama. Both of y’all be just fine without me.”

“Yo, Jazzie, check out those fine, young things across the way,” Gloria said pointing. Oh yes, Gloria was sure to inherit her mother’s hoochitude. Shea and I walked up to Gloria and Wendy, watching a group of six boys that had approached the jewelry cases. The sales lady, not getting too close, followed them around as they moved from station to station.

“She probably thinks they’re gonna take over the whole damn store. Look at er. You’d think she never seen one of us before,” Gloria said, cynical smile on her face.

“One of ’ems clockin you, ShaRhonda,” Wendy said.

He gave Shea the peace gesture. She looked down into the case.

“Yeah, and you clockin one of them too,” Gloria added. “You like that brown shuga, don’t you?”

“Shut up,” Wendy said. She lowered her head but couldn’t hide her red cheeks.
ShaRhonda began to walk away from the display case. We followed her. She looked back at the guy who had been watching her. She narrowed her eyes, and a big grin spread across her face. The boy, in turn, blew her a kiss.

“You need a man, Jazz,” Gloria said.

“Not now I don’t. I don’t need some stupid boy always trying to find out where I’m at, callin me up all the time. I like my freedom.”

We headed out into the mall, not saying a word. Not much to say nowadays, which was fine with me. The more they felt uncomfortable around me, the better. Fish for something to say, I thought. Try to strike up some stupid conversation so you won’t feel so awkward. I’m not saying a word.

Gloria: I’m through with you. I’m ticked I even had to write about you. Keep on struttin’ your little Bronze butt around the hood. As long as you don’t get up in my face again, we cool.

Shea: I haven’t seen you around Gloria too much lately. Am I too assume a modern-day miracle has occurred? Shea Shea, you’ll be alright.

Wendy: I’m glad to hear you stopped your little experimenting spree with sid. Actually, I think that was 2 years ago that you stopped, but I’m not buzzing around the rumor mill these days. Anyway, if I hear you’ve been lickin’ it up again, I’m gonna mess you up so bad you’ll wish you were hallucinatin’.

Alaunna: You must pay your respects to the Bronze Queen. She has deemed CF to be her Prince; you must stop your foolish fantasies, young lady. You’ve mouthed off
to her. You won’t bow. It will only bring you trouble ’round this hood. You thought isolation at HSA was bad? You will pay the Piper.

Speaking of Alaunna, you’re probably wondering how she feels about all of this. After all, she is part of my subject matter. Well, she has no idea. It’s not like she couldn’t have found out. I see her five days a week. Once upon a time, she used to come over my house after school and even in the summer when Dad was at work. Then she started going home alone. Then—Dad asked me to come over to his house after school and watch over Alaunna. Make sense? Yeah, I know. I’ve never figured it out either.

My point is, and I know you’re wondering, I’ve worked on the manuscript at her house. In the living room, I’ve had the papers spread across the coffee table, and she’d walk by, make some snide comment like “oh, are you working on some fiction?,” and make her way into the kitchen. I wanted to tell her no, I was working on some nonfiction, but she’s a poet, an arrogant poet at that, so I didn’t bother.

Just last week, I was scribbling the last few chapters down in my notebook, when she came by sniffed, and asked, “Did Daddy say anything to you about that party next Friday?” Like I said, I don’t bother.

5.

I wasn’t used to seeing Alaunna on Sundays; the school week was enough.
Do we have to deal with this stupid narrative intro again? It happens every datgum chapter. I mean, is there some law that you’ve gotta always start with a nice, little intro? I, honestly, got tired of the introductions. My solution is a major no-no—I just jumped into the dialogue—the stuff I’m good at. The short of it—it was like a week after the mall thing. If German has a problem with my lack of setting (and he usually does) I can beat my brains out trying to come up with something later.

“Hello,” I said as I opened the back door, “I thought Dad always liked for you to have somebody with you when you went walking the streets.”

“I do have some freedom. I’m capable of taking care of myself,” Alaunna said.

Um, time for pleasantries? Did pleasantries really work with people you didn’t want to be pleasant with? “Do you want a soda or something? You look kinda tired.”

“I thought everything was ‘coke’ down here. No thanks. I can’t stay long. I just came to give this to your mother, and then I’m outta here.” She handed me an envelope.

“What is this? Money?”

“How’d you know that?”

“I can see it through the paper. Mama’s not going to accept this.”

“You don’t even know what it’s for,” she said.

Did she really think I was that stupid?

“He’s paying Mama for letting you stay over here.”

“You know everything, don’t you?” she said.
"How do you know that I don't know that? Mama said she wasn't going to accept the money. Your daddy called and said that he was going to give her money. Mama said that if the money should go to anybody, it should go to me."

*My goal is to make Priya, Repetition Police, sick of "money."*

"Sorry I snapped at you," her eyes sarcastic, "but you did lie to me."

"Yeah, well, maybe I did. But I can see the dough through the envelope." Then I shoved it in her face. "See?"

"So, you're taking the money?"

"Hmmm." I scratched my chin. Folded my arms. Scratched my chin again.

"Hmmm." Alaunna rolled her eyes. "Do you think I should? Was I really taking care of you? You did just point out that you're quite capable of taking care of yourself."

"Are you crazy? Why don't you just take it?"

"I can make my own decisions, Alaunna. I don't need you giving me any help. I feel bad enough already."

*This would be a nice place for a little narration—something about Alaunna's anxiety building, wondering what I'm going to say, or my great dilemma in expressing my feelings or not—but I ain't gonna do it.*

"Why?" she asked.

"You've been honest with me. Do you mind if I straight shoot with you?"

"Guess not." Of course she minded.
“Do you remember how we looked at each other when Dad asked me if you could stay over here? I felt guilty. I know you felt guilty too. Don’t deny it. I could see it there.” I pointed at each of her eyes. “You know why we felt guilty. He sees you staying over here as a way for us to get to know each other better. You and I both know, kid, that that just ain’t gonna happen. If I take that money, I’ll only feel worse.” I handed the envelope back to Alaunna.

We walked on to the back porch. The air was muggy, and I could smell a storm.

*Look! Setting! And it’s the worse kind too! Cheesy, foreshadowing setting!*

“Dear, dear, dear, Jazzie. It’s only been a couple of months. What will it be like in two or three years? The future does not look so bright for us.”

*Doesn’t sound like the way a 10 year old would speak, does it? Too bad. That’s the way Alaunna said it, and if this is exaggerated, it ain’t by much.*

“Dear, dear, dear, Al.

*Can you believe this? I always talk like this, but I probably didn’t say it in such a cheesy foreshadowing kinda way.*

The future is only what you make it.”
PART TWO

ALAUNNA (1993-1990)
Chapter One

The key jams into the lock, a metallic ripping opening the door, and finally, he is home. Alaunna turns on her side on her bed, flips a page, and starts reading about the House of Usher. When she goes downstairs—whenever she decides to go downstairs—she won’t bother asking where Daddy’s been. She’s afraid he spent his time on after-work drinks with the woman from the ad agency. Alaunna doesn’t remember—doesn’t care to remember—the woman’s name. She can’t make herself remember the name of anyone with the black lace of her slip hanging two inches beneath her skirt. Beware of pretty packages, Daddy, which is about all Alaunna’s thirteen year-old wisdom can offer—not that it matters to him. He did well with Mommy and Mrs. Waters, but he doesn’t know how to read women.

Like always, he exchanges pleasantries with the other daughter. Like always, the other daughter’s voice is a subtle melody of sarcasm and cynicism. Their voices float up though the register, hollow, tinny, muffled. He’s loud and excited, “How was your day, hon? Get most of your work finished?” Jasmine answers with a series of “fines” and “yeahs,” an anxiety in her voice asking if she can leave now, but he never picks it up. He wouldn’t know talking school things bores her, that she only gets interested in conversation when she brings up the topic and when she feels like talking. Her chorus of “unh hunhs” and polite, girlish chuckling grow more irritated, more clipped now, cutting off each of his questions. “We don’t have a relationship. Stop
forcing it on us,” she’s saying, but Daddy refuses to hear it. Release her, Alaunna thinks. Let her go home. The awkwardness, the staggering in Jasmine’s usually aggressive voice leaves Alaunna smiling, in spite of herself, but Jasmine doesn’t want to be here any more than Alaunna does.

Daddy, you’ve stacked our obligations against us, Alaunna thinks.

With a soft click of the lock meeting door frame, Jasmine leaves. Alaunna finds these exits so unusual because Jasmine inherited Daddy’s heavy handedness. Quiet exits, like she’s sneaking. Quiet exits, like the money Daddy gives her every week for watching over Alaunna burns her hands. Until he calls her for dinner, Alaunna’ll stay here on her bed, trying not to move, trying not to make a sound. She paces too much, wastes too much time, he says, daydreaming when she should be doing her work, or better still, interacting with kids her own age. But Alaunna’s decided it’s useless, telling him how she feels, telling him why she does what she does, why when she’s got the music buzzing in her ears, and he isn’t here, her feverish walking up and down up and down is more thrilling than speaking to silly kids in this neighborhood. Sometimes, the people in her head are more real to her than he is. So, since Alaunna can’t pace, she lies here on her bed with dead white men in her hands. Don’t be so afraid that I find comfort in them, Daddy, she wants to tell him. She knows he’d feel better if she read Wright’s disenchanted violent boys or Hurston’s dreamy-eyed girls, but Alaunna’s never seen herself in Toni or Alice. Poe makes more sense to her, with his tortured men and women, rational and scholarly on the outside, sullen creatures on the inside.
She wishes she could rise like Lady Ligeia. Can he understand that? No, which is why she doesn’t tell him.

“Alaunna.”

She tosses Edgar aside and heads to the downstairs of their little Usher. He’s busy rattling pots under the sink, pulling out a spaghetti strainer. “I stopped by Farmer’s Market and got some shrimp for dinner.” Thirty minutes, that might have taken him at the most. Where did the other two hours go? “Is boiled okay?”

“Boiled is fine.” She shrugs.

“How was school?” He hands her the bag of shrimp and takes one large green and one large red pepper over to the cutting board by the sink. “Could you shell those for me?” Alaunna would rather cut up the peppers. She likes to dissect them, pull their handle-like tops off and cut them in half, but he’s always afraid she’ll nick herself with the knife. For a few seconds, she struggles with the knot at the top of the bag, trying to squeeze her chewed-up nails between the folds of plastic. Growing impatient she rips the soft bag, fishy water clinging to her fingers. Using a steak knife, he pushes it deep in the green pepper, gutting it and pulling out the core. Alaunna listens to the light ping ping pings of the seeds in the sink.

“School was okay.” She realizes, lately, that she has resorted to the conversational tactics of his other daughter, but she senses a one-ended discussion coming, and she’s tired.

“Do you have a lot of homework?”
“Did it already.” He’s searching, searching for the right time to ask something. watching her as she cracks the underbellies of the shrimp and peels away the shells. Alaunna’s not going to look up—not going to give the audience he wants and make it harder for him to ask his question. She’s going to stare at her shrimp, hoping he’ll think she won’t look at him because she’s being careful, careful the shells won’t lodge in her skin and leave slits fine as paper cuts. She hears the peppers snapping under the knife and looks out from the corner of her eyes. His back is to her.

“You pretty much on top of your work?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“What are you doing this weekend?”

Not again, she thinks.

Alaunna takes the pot he’s left on the counter and fills it with filtered water from the refrigerator, places it on the stove, and drops a dash of garlic-flavored extra virgin olive oil in the water.

“Alaunna?”

“Nothing. I’m not doing anything.” She snaps the spaghetti.

“You wanna go to that party Saturday night? Jasmine’s going.”

How long before he learns Jasmine’s doing this, going here, doing that is no concern of hers? Do they really play their parts that well? It’s not something Jasmine and Alaunna agreed upon, just sort of happened, them as sisterly around him as
possible. Alaunna does it for him. Jasmine does it out of the guilt of
what-could-have-been, Alaunna guesses.

"Jasmine hates parties." She returns to the shrimp on the counter.

"Well, she says she's going. She said she wouldn't mind taking you."

Alaunna wants to know how much he's paying her sister.

"If I brought a boy home," she rips away at the shells, "you'd kill him. Now
you're telling me you want me to go hang out with a bunch of them."

"It's Jasmine and her friends."

And there's the problem.

Turning away from the counter, she throws her hands up in the air, knowing
that nothing will satisfy him until he sees her and Jasmine heading down the sidewalk
hand-in-hand Saturday night, and he tells her not to be out past twelve.

"I've already told you five or six times I don't want to go. Why do you have to make
me?"

"You're at a social age. You shouldn't be locked up in your room all day
reading or daydreaming, Alaunna. You need to get out and act thirteen."

She tells him she will think about it, but she knows she will be going to the
party with Jasmine like a good daughter should.

After dinner Alaunna retreats back to her room, takes up Poe again. Daddy was
late, she's decided, because he went to the Numbers House to play spades. Black Slip
Showing is innocent after all. Daddy was so intent on winning back that money from
last week that when he stopped by the store, he forgot to get cocktail sauce.

Mayonnaise and shrimp isn’t too bad, but mayo melts too easily, doesn’t sit thick on
the shrimp. Alaunna will read well past her bedtime, wait until he’s asleep, so when
she turns her lamp back on, he won’t see the soft glow in the hallway. Yes, she’ll
probably go to this stupid party, but she’ll spend the whole night sitting on the couch,
not talking to any of the other kids, certainly not Jasmine’s “friends,” and Alaunna will
end up staring into space next to some passed out kid.

Don’t worry, Daddy, she wants to tell him. You have no reason to. I don’t lock
myself up in my room because it was a choice I made. Well, it was her choice, but only
after it was her last option. Alaunna will tell herself, when she goes to this party for
him, that she may see DeWayne there. If Daddy’d asked her if she wanted to go last
week, she wouldn’t have hesitated, would have gone to see DeWayne. Yes, she thinks,
one of those Numbers House Negroes, Daddy. He’s my friend. Was? Is still?
Alaunna’s not sure, not because of anything DeWayne did, but because—well, it’s
difficult. She’s at that social age, yes, but any willingness to be social was taken from
her a long time ago. She’s tried to explain it, tried to help Daddy understand. Maybe
she didn’t say it quite right, left something out. She’ll try to come up with some new
translation, but probably won’t tell him anyway.

* * *

Three years ago, Alaunna thought Nashville was going to be different—she
really did, really intended to give it a chance. After her mother died, leaving Philly
would be good for her. She tired of that house, tired of imagining Mommy waking her up every morning after she slept through her alarm clock. She tired of watching Daddy pack her mother’s things away—taking the shoes off the racks and placing them back in the boxes, moving clothes up into the attic, wrapping the sample perfume bottles in bubble wrap—and worrying over whether to sell them or keep them. Alaunna was even more curious than she ever admitted to him or her mother about the two children he’d left, the ones they hardly spoke about except around the children’s birthdays.

And then she and Daddy got here, and Alaunna never clicked with the other daughter, and her brother spent most of his time at Tennessee State even though he lived fifteen minutes away. The kids at Jasmine’s old school, although Alaunna sometimes caught them staring at her—studying the curve of her nose, her lips—didn’t bother her too much even when they thought she might be mixed. But Haynes Street Academy ruined everything. Private school, especially HSA, immediately meant Alaunna thought she was better, smarter, whiter. The white kids at HSA were friendly, overly friendly, like Daddy said they would be, and when Alaunna found a few girls she thought she could gel with and talked Daddy into letting them come over when he was never comfortable with it, they didn’t show up. Alaunna was always welcome to their homes, but they always avoided hers. That was because of their parents, Daddy said.
The teachers were kind to her, always encouraging, always calling on her—maybe too much. “You’re so intelligent,” they’d tell her. And for the ten or eleven black kids who went to Haynes Street with Alaunna, she had to be their other, identified with the enemy because of her too-yellow skin.

That summer, she was confined to Jasmine’s house, reading those dead white men and carnapping with her cheek pressed against the top of the hard oak desk in the study while she waited for Daddy to pick her up. He still didn’t feel safe with her home alone, so she spent the summer being babysat. But Alaunna didn’t always obey him either. When Jasmine talked her mother into letting her go to the movies with her new friends, Mrs. Waters would take over Jasmine’s abandoned post and keep an eye on Alaunna. Mrs. Waters let her go outside, more confident than Daddy ever was that Alaunna was fine, grown-up enough by herself.

Even though Alaunna heard a lot about it, Jasmine never took her to the creek, probably because she worried more about running into her old school acquaintances than spending time with her little half sister. Alaunna wondered how far back it was hidden behind the shrubs and undergrowth. She opened the window in the study, heard kids’ voices laugh and call and echo above the tree line. The splashing and bodies tumbling into water sounded like they were diving into a pool at the center of an amphitheatre. The creek wound behind several of the neighborhoods in the area and then roamed endlessly through some uncharted territory—nobody could tell Alaunna
where it began or stopped, not even Daddy. She was going to walk the banks and find out what was hidden in that wilderness for herself.

One muggy June day, for protection against bug bites, she pulled her socks up to her shins and tugged her shorts down as far as they could go before exposing her underwear. As soon as she stepped outside, the humidity tickled Alaunna’s armpits and sucked out her breath. But it would be cooler, not by much, in the shade of the trees and undergrowth. At first, the shrubs, so close together, scratched at her arms and tracked red streaks next to the blistering mosquito bites. The leaves were dense, and she swatted gnats and small twigs out of her eyes. This couldn’t have been the easiest way, the way all of the neighborhood kids went, but she reasoned that she’d rather find the creek on her own than take their path.

The shrubs gave way to trees and more walking space. Alaunna was amazed by the quasi-forest, so different than the winding pavement and cars piled up on the street only a few feet away. She walked the packed-dirt road the kids had trampled out over the years down to the creek. She’d found a secluded section—the voices and splashing water were somewhere far off. Crouching on the bank, she picked up free-standing pebbles and dug out others lodged in the mud, swished them around and washed them off in the olive-green water, and scattered crayfish dashed in and out of mossy rocks.

The sun’s rays burning the top of her head, and the heat rolling down the sides of her face in sweat, Alaunna rubbed the smoothness of the pebbles between her thumb and forefinger, tossed them into the water with a lazy flip of her wrist. One skip two skip
three skip drop one skip two skip three skip four skip drop—she didn’t know how long she stood watching the stones sink before he came.

“Hey, you, yella gal!” How far had the greeting traveled? If the kids playing in the water somewhere she couldn’t see heard, would they know he was talking to her?

Alaunna spun around. The pebbles fell to the ground like a shower of bbs. She exhaled to release the tension in her voice. “Are you talking to me?”

Farther up the bank, he stood with tree branches blocking Alaunna’s view of his face. He was the color of warmed caramel saturated with golden butter, long-legged and skinny although his biceps swelled under his shirt sleeves. When he stepped down closer to her, his hazel eyes caught sunlight and flickered bits of grey, and his full, pink lips froze in a fox-like grin. Alaunna wanted to run her fingers along his fade, up to the thick, curly, reddish brown hair to see if it felt rough and woolly or slightly corn-silk.

Where had this Adonis, this Sweet Nubian Prince, been hiding himself?

“Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t mean you no disrespect. I was just tryin to get your attention.”

“Well, you’ve got it. You could have found a better way though,” Alaunna said.

“If I tried another way, you wouldn’t have said nuthin to me.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and took a few steps towards her. She forced all of her weight on her back heel, ready to turn on him if he got smart again.

“I would have responded.”
“Naw, you wouldn’t. I never met you ’fore you transferred,” he sounded more like a country boy than the other black kids she’d met. Where did he get his drawl from, with his urban self? “You are Alaunna, right?”

“The one and only.”

“I’m Chik Finger.” (Still Chik Finger then, later to become CF.) He stretched out his arm, and watching the thick veins travel up and down, Alaunna shook his hand. This was the infamous Chik Finger? The one the girls used to throw into the creek? One of those boys from the Numbers House who’d be bringing the cops around with all of their activity or dead by twenty (Daddy said)? Too much like his cousin Malik, Daddy said. Malik, who Daddy never could like because he hated the way Malik folded his arms, slouched against the wall, and sucked his teeth whenever his grandmother asked him to do anything. One of those Numbers House Negroes, grandson of the 70s Cadillac man who rode up and down the street with the top down, white cowboy hat on his head, both Cadillac and hat purchased by his wife’s operation. Whenever Alaunna was in the car with Daddy and Daddy had to get his slip in before the drawing, he’d leave her in the car, wouldn’t even let her inside that funky powder blue house. Some niggas, Daddy said, he didn’t ever want her around.

CF looked nothing like Malik.

Alaunna laughed low and amused. “You’re Chik Finger?”

“Yeah. I’m sure you heard about me from your sister. We go way back.”

“Where did you get that name?”
“People started callin me that cuz I love them chicken wings. Naw, I’m just messin with you. You know how little kids come up with them really stupid names. This one just happened to stick.”

“You were practically born with it, weren’t you?”

“Ain’t nobody that don’t call me Chik Finger, even my grandmama. Man, she useta hate it.” He went into a falsetto, “Why they callin my baby that? You ain’t no chicken, shuga. You my little tigah!” Now she just like everyone else. “Here, Chik Chik. Come on in, Chik Chik Chik.” Hey girl, listen to me. If you ever get stuck with a nickname, you better learn to like it.”

“I’m Alaunna, and I’ll stay Alaunna. What’s your real name anyway?”

“Now if I told you, it wouldn’t be the mystery that it is.”

She cocked her head and rolled her eyes. CF folded his arms, unoffended, daring her to question him further. “But some people have to know your real name. You could at least make up for calling me ‘yella.’”

Embarrassed, he laughed. The grey in his eyes sparked in and out of sight. Somewhere down the winding creek, laughter hollowed around the trees, and children’s bodies tumbled into olive-green water. “Yo, girl, I told you, I was just messin. I didn’t mean nuthin by it.”

“So, tell me, and maybe I’ll forget about it. Who would I tell?”

“All right! Okay, you got me.”

“You’re really going to tell me?”
"You the only one to ever ask. My real name’s DeWayne."

"Duane," she said. "You don’t look like a Duane."

"See, I didn’t say nuthin’ bout no Duane," he said through his nose, mocking her. "It’s DuhWayne, thank you very much. And if you want my last name, that ain’t no secret. Everybody and they mama know that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I gotta get home ’fore my grandmama thinks I’m up to no good." He turned back towards the hill. "See ya, Al."

Jasmine lived here thirteen years, went down to the creek almost every day since she was old enough to walk, and probably knew DeWayne before that. Alaunna stumbled upon the creek, bug bitten and scratched as she was, and came away with his real name in half an hour. Alaunna wanted to tell Jasmine she knew his real name even if she didn’t reveal it. He’s known you forever, she wanted to say, and he never said a word about it. I suppose that says a lot about what he thinks of you. But Alaunna would not come down to Jasmine’s level, to her “friends” level of manipulation and name calling.

Alaunna wondered what Jasmine knew about him, knowing who his grandparents and cousin were, knowing that her father played numbers, spades, and poker at his house. No, DeWayne wasn’t Malik, but did he sometimes act like he was?

Alaunna entered the house and found Jasmine had returned from her movie or wandering around the mall. She was sprawled across the couch, a little asleep a little awake, eyes slit open. Alaunna called to her from the office in a whisper. She jumped
up, half startled, half shocked out of the near sleep, surprised to see her little sister out of her hole and in the living room. Jasmine rubbed the bottom of her nose, stared at Alaunna for a second, and turned away from her.

"Don’t do that. You made my brain shift."

"Might help," Alaunna said.

"What do you want? I thought you liked to be out of everyone’s way."

Alaunna sat down in the armchair, rested her elbow on her knee, and cupped her chin in her hand. She grinned. Jasmine, already bored with this, fell back on the couch and closed her eyes.

"I just wanted to talk to you," Alaunna said. "I met Chik Finger down at the creek."

Jasmine sat up and inched over to her, pressing all of her weight on her hands resting on the arm of the couch. She leaned her face in close to Alaunna’s, her irises shifting back and forth studying her sister’s unflinching gaze, trying to get Alaunna to admit this was a joke.

"Come come, Jasmine, why did you fail to mention he’s terribly fine?"

"Oh," her voice was low, low like Daddy’s when he’s irked, "I didn’t know you went for that kind of thing. Are you seeing him again?"

"You make it sound like we’re going together or something."

Jasmine sat perched on the edge of the couch, stony and serious, a Jasmine Alaunna had never seen. Alaunna wanted her to look away. This was a game, she
knew, and she wouldn’t let Jasmine turn it into anything else, wouldn’t let her make
Alaunna lose.

“I just met him,” Alaunna finally answered. “You know, I really don’t see why
you tease him so much. He’s really nice.”

“I never said he wasn’t nice. I just said we teased him. Tell me, Alaunna, is it
against the law to tease somebody?”

“It could be teasing. It could be flirting.”

“Not hardly, little girl. Get that thought out of your head. Maybe it’s not such
a good idea that you’ve met him. Flirting with a physically mature ten year-old like
you.”

“I’m not stupid, and I just turned eleven.”

Jasmine could threaten her, warn her, stare her down as much as she liked, but
Alaunna’d decided she didn’t need her permission, not Daddy’s permission, to see
DeWayne. She never, will never, tell Daddy because she knows he thinks the way
Jasmine does, thinks DeWayne’s a sweet-faced animal. But after a year of HSA and
Jasmine’s friends, Alaunna had finally found what she was looking for. Even when she
saw Gloria Bentley down at the creek swinging her bronze butt in DeWayne’s face,
Alaunna knew that nobody could take him away from her. Black curls swishing about
her shoulders, Gloria took him, pulled at him, told him she wanted to talk to him.
Laughed at him with charmed laughs, girlie laughs, I-love-you-CF laughs, and led him
by the hand down the bank. She waved at Alaunna and winked, thinking she’d won
him away. But he looked back over his shoulder, looked at Alaunna to say he didn’t really want to go, pleaded with her to keep Gloria off of him. At that moment, Alaunna knew DeWayne belonged to her, and nobody had the power to take him away.

* * *

Daddy’s steps squeak the loose boards in the hallway. He thinks Alaunna’s asleep. He’s not careful. “There will be many Maliks at this party, Daddy, but you should already know that,” she says under her breath. Does he want a bunch of Maliks to stare down his fair, yellow daughter? Does he want her to see DeWayne, talk to him? The door to his room closes, and he turns on the stereo for a little night music. He’s going to go to sleep happy, knowing he’s won. But Alaunna’s going to keep fighting him, going to fight him in her mind. She wonders, Daddy, why do we give you what you want with nothing in return? Was it always like this? No. She has to find that point when she started to give in and didn’t ask questions so she wouldn’t be disappointed in him.

She knows he’s finally asleep, and she turns on her light.
Chapter Two

Alaunna always clicks the light on its lowest setting right after Daddy goes to bed. At one point he’d learned to trick her. He’d creep back into the hallway after turning on his stereo, and seeing her light blazing from under the door, he’d call, “Girl, put that book away, and go to bed!” In the dim light, shadows fall on every inch of the room, and Alaunna huddles closer to the little lamp on the bedside table. A burnt amber glow drifts across the pages of her book, and she squints, eager to read more of Roderick Usher’s descent into madness. When had he begun to close himself off from everyone and everything? Alaunna learned to close herself off too, but when did she decide to do so?

It certainly wasn’t when she first started attending Haynes Street two years ago. At first, Alaunna felt the promise of a place so far removed from public school. Around the grounds, there was no rusting chain-link fence. No graffiti on the walls of who-loved-who-for-how-long, when so-and-so was here, gang tags, or obscenities thrown at rival students. Kids didn’t lay around in the hallways yelling at their friends standing over them because everyone had such big mouths you had to scream to be heard. No scraps of paper all over the floor. Rubber bands and twisted staples. Hidden wads of gum under desks and between the cracks where the lockers didn’t meet the wall. No for-a-good-time numbers in the bathroom stalls. The soles of Alaunna’s flats didn’t stick on dried-up puddles from overturned soda cans. Haynes
Street Academy showed great promise, Alaunna once thought, because these people were civilized.

Her new peers always came to school with their shirts, slack, and skirts pressed. If they didn’t, they got demerits from the teachers or sideways glances from other students. Daddy made sure Alaunna fit her part. Every morning, she’d listen to the iron percolate while she scrambled for orange juice and an apple in the refrigerator. He stood over that board with a can of starch sharpening the pleats in her skirts and making sure the collars of her shirts ended in perfect points. That first day, and the first week, Alaunna buttoned her grey shirts as fast as she could to keep the buttons from burning her fingertips.

Jasmine hated uniformity and condemned Haynes Street’s plaid’s and greys, but the first morning Alaunna walked down the corridor watching her reflection march ahead of her, she didn’t feel like she had been absorbed into the masses, a drone. The kids all had their ways of looking different: chains, necklaces and pendants, hairstyles complete with dye jobs, trinket bracelets. And yes, they knew Alaunna was different for obvious reasons, but they made a point to introduce themselves and ask her name, to receive her.

For the first week, Alaunna sat with the most popular fifth-grade girls, Brandi, Jennifer, and Ellen at lunch. They were popular, Alaunna guessed, because they wore eyeliner but no eye shadow, and could make it look sophisticated at ten. They also had money. Money always helped. Brandi, Jennifer, and Ellen thought she was smart
(for a black girl, or smart in general, Alaunna’s still not sure). She didn’t say much around them, couldn’t add much to conversations about boys, why he sings better than him, what clothes are in and what clothes will impress them. It was normal for girl talk, she guessed, but Alaunna was not normal, and she didn’t know how to respond without looking like a poseur. She entered the discussion when they’d ask, “Right, Alaunna?,” and she’d say, “Yes,” even though there was no way for her to tell for sure. That first week, her new lunch mates’ conversations began to blur together until she could almost tell when they’d turn to her and perk up in unison, “Right, Alaunna?”

“Well, what about Brad Hatcher?” Brandi, Jennifer, or Ellen would ask, popping a piece of dried papaya in her mouth. It didn’t matter who made the statement since they were all pretty interchangeable.

In response one of the other two would lean back in her chair, glance over her shoulder, and look for Brad Hatcher to walk into the cafeteria. When Brad Hatcher entered with an influx of newly dismissed students, she would make eye contact with him, smile as he walked by and joined the lunch line, and then turn and answer with “His brother drives a Camry, a granny car.”

Then Brandi, Jennifer, or Ellen, whoever felt disagreeable that day, took a celery stick, smothered it in vegetable cream cheese, nibbled the end, and retorted, “So?”

“So,” the third picked up the argument, “if his brother drives a Camry, what makes you think his dad’s not going to get him a Camry too?”
They discarded the idea of Brad Hatcher ever being a future boyfriend, and Alaunna stared at her sandwich, lifted the two slices of wheat bread and rubbed the grape jelly and peanut butter together. She shoved in a mouthful to keep from saying anything she would feel uncomfortable explaining like: “Well, I would be proud to have a boyfriend who drove a limited-edition Camry with leather seats,” or “I wouldn’t mind having a limited-edition Camry with leather seats.” But Brandi, Jennifer, and Ellen were normal girls and didn’t waste their time meditating on dreams likely to go unfulfilled. For them, the expanse of their hopes ended with finding a boy who drove a posh SUV or a car that was Swedish or German enough.

Alaunna knew all girls were not like Brandi, Jennifer, and Ellen, but she started disassociating herself from them. She’d excuse herself from having to go to the lunch room with anyone by saying she needed to study or work on homework or some project. She was ashamed of how she tried to fit in, how she kept her mouth hinged shut when she knew she should have said something. She always spoke her mind—had been taught to do so—but she wanted to fit in, so she nodded her dumb little head in agreement to loser Brad Hatcher and his loser big brother’s limited-edition, leather-seated Camry.

Alaunna’s self-detachment from Brandi, Jennifer, and Ellen’s clique shocked and appalled the other white kids, and they started giving her odd looks, wondering if she were crazy. Now that Alaunna was in the spotlight, she was examined even more closely. They’d look at her, not long enough to be a stare, but enough to make both
parties uncomfortable when she dared to look back. Are you bi-racial? was the silent question. Again, they'd probe with their eyes. You're not like those other black students, are you, the ones who stare at us down their noses?

No, she is not, was not like the other eleven, eleven out of 400 total students, but they tried to pull her into what little fold they had. Clarissa, a 5’ 7” sixth grader always smelling heavy of musky incense, would sit next to her in the hallway the week after Alaunna left the clique. Alaunna had hoped it would be obvious she wanted to be left alone—she sat at the bottom of her locker, elbows resting on knees, book nestled in her lap, her eyes surveying nothing but the pages in front of her—but Clarissa plopped down beside her day after day, the overwhelming scent of intoxicating spice penetrating Alaunna’s nostrils.

Out of Clarissa’s mouth poured litanies about stupid white girls. She scanned the hallways looking for Brandis, Jennifers, and Ellens to pick on under her breath. “Oh m’God, Alaunna,” she’d poke Alaunna in the side.

Alaunna refused to look up. “Hmmm?”

“You won’t believe what that girl did at Lois Smith’s party. She’s only, like, twelve, and she pulled Gil into the bathroom with her. Can you believe that? He’s sixteen! Why do they always have to be so nasty? You know, if one of us tried to pull that off, everybody’d be talking about it, and she’d get suspended for setting a ‘a bad example’...”
At this point, Alaunna drowned out Clarissa’s incessant complaining, but never quite learned how to ignore that suffocating musk. Clarissa went on about how sick rich white kids made her, how racist this teacher or that teacher was, and Alaunna tolerated it, until the nagging pang between her eyes became unbearable.

For the first time since Clarissa became unwanted company, Alaunna turned away from her book and looked at the girl next to her. “You’re giving me a headache,” she growled.

Alaunna didn’t care if Clarissa understood the true meaning behind the insult as long as it brought the desired result. Clarissa rolled her eyes, tramped down the hallway, and never returned.

In under three weeks at her new school, Alaunna developed a reputation for her surliness (Alaunna was sure Clarissa helped to spread it), and she was finally left in peace. The only person she occasionally talked to was Melvin, a short, peanut-colored kid who floundered so much between asking if it were better to be accepted by the other eleven or the 400 that he ended up unable to relate to either. Alaunna finally cut off their conversations when she realized she was being associated with him, and she didn’t want the oreo label. Besides, she tired of Melvin’s constant evaluations of students, white and black, his finding a series of faults, and needing to justify each one.

The other eight black students were either in junior high or high school. They automatically looked down at her because of rank. They looked at her just enough to
make both parties feel uncomfortable. Are you mixed? was the silent question. Do you stare at us down your nose like those white kids do?

Alaunna never answered because she didn’t care. She started daydreaming London instead.
Chapter Three

The little black lines and curves merge on the white page, mixing into a fuzzy grey. Alaunna looks over at her alarm clock, startled that she has wasted time meditating on Clarissas, Melvins, Brandis, and Brads for the last hour. She considers going back to her reading, but the concerns of avoiding this party and ending the pursuit of developing new friendships take over her thoughts, and her attention wavers away from Poe’s words. She worries about the party coming up in three days. She’s only curious as to why she only has one friend. Alaunna turns off the lamp and crawls under the covers, sighs, lies on her back and stares at the ceiling. Keeping that friend had been a struggle, and now she fears she’s lost him. She’d thought she’d learn that lesson from John John, that lesson of putting your foot down and getting exactly what you want. How would he get out of going to this stupid party?

No, she really hadn’t learned that lesson from John John. In the end, she failed. She has to relearn. Alaunna closes her eyes and goes back to that moment a year ago when John John appeared in the old office confident, assured, unashamed, and showed her how it was done.

Her brother had always been kind to her, at least when Alaunna saw him. Thirteen years of experience with his other sister didn’t make him bitter towards her. She didn’t know what to expect of him at first; there were only two stereotypes of older brothers she knew back then. The first, they wanted nothing to do with their
younger siblings, especially the girls, because the sister tended to develop crushes on
friends. Secondly, older brothers were overprotective, thinking that every boy was a
threat to their sister once the girls began to mature.

Alaunna’s brother never came close to either.

Unlike Jasmine, John John wasn’t interested in Daddy or Alaunna at first. Most
of the time he was at school, and if he were home and Daddy came over, he closed
himself away in his room upstairs. Jasmine and Mrs. Waters never pushed him to have
a relationship with Daddy, and Alaunna didn’t blame him for not wanting one. Unlike
Jasmine and Alaunna, who, afraid of upsetting Daddy, tiptoed around his questions
and smiled too large too often, John John asked anything and everything of Daddy and
never expected to give anything in return.

Alaunna was trapped in Mrs. Waters’ old office one late spring day in ’91 when
the humidity hovered like a blanket, sending waves of heat rushing up and down her
arms and legs. In the stagnated silence, her older siblings’ shouting burst through the
dead air, bits of Jasmine’s and John John’s excited phrases deadened by the carpet and
floor boards over Alaunna’s head. She looked up, startled, and listened to her heavy
breathing mix with their agitated voices. You can’t use you did different because
how’s it? showered though the ceiling. Alaunna imagined Jasmine and John John
throwing their hands in the air, pointing fingers in each other’s faces, the squeaking of
the floor following their circling steps, backing-away steps, walking away. For five
minutes they went on, Jasmine steady and low, John John sometimes matching her and
sometimes a rising tenor of disbelief. He finally tired of the argument, his footsteps
moving from above Alaunna’s head to behind her, and his voice came rolling down the
stairs. “Mama!” Jasmine took her time leaving his room, but she followed him.

Usually, Alaunna closed the door to the office, but now she reached for the
knob and opened it just enough so she could see into the living room. She picked up
her chair and placed it by the doorway to get a better view. John John ran down the
stairs, skipping two and three steps at a time, and tracked down his mother in the
kitchen while Jasmine stood in the living room in front of the couch. Alaunna could
make out half of her body. The other half was blocked by the staircase. One of
Jasmine’s hands fidgeted around in her jeans’ pocket, and she tapped her foot.

“I told you, Johnathan,” Mrs. Waters’ voice started out muffled and brassy in
the kitchen but crescendoed throughout the living room, “that’s between you and your
father.” Ignoring Jasmine, Mrs. Waters walked right around her and went upstairs.

“Yeah,” John yelled from the kitchen, “you say that now, but are you going to
give me a lot of grief later after I ask him?”

“I told you I will not interfere,” Mrs. Waters yelled from the upstairs hallway.

“It’s not my decision to make. You’re old enough to go where you want, and as long
you don’t hurt yourself, I won’t mess with your free will.”

This was totally unsatisfactory to John John. He walked to the foot of the
stairs, stared up for a second, and put his hands on his hips. “You could at least be
supportive,” he whined.
Alaunna didn’t dare involve herself in their family issues, but John John’s sudden interest in Daddy puzzled her. Daddy hardly spoke of John John either, because, Daddy’d always told her, some fights left casualties, and there was no sense of him becoming one. All he cared about—he said he cared about—was that Alaunna get along with her brother. But now John John’s wanting to talk to their father was the source of Jasmine’s edginess and made Mrs. Waters avoid him. *Don’t say nuthin* said John and *I ain’t said a thing* said Jasmine from the living room.

Alaunna pushed the door wide open. “What is this about?”

A portion of the staircase hid Alaunna from them, and Jasmine’s and John John’s heads inched from behind the banister. Their eyes widened, mouths locked in steely disbelief. Until Alaunna’d spoken, they’d forgotten she was there, just like every other day.

“Oh, hey Alaunna,” John John said. His typical greeting, and then he usually went about his business.

“What can’t you ask Daddy?”

“See, now this is good,” he approached her. “I need your opinion—”

“John—” Jasmine called from the living room, a hint of warning in her voice.

“—because you know him better than any of us, and you’ll know how he’ll take this.” Stretching out his arms, John pressed his hands against the door frame and leaned into the room, his face inches from his little half sister’s. He crossed one foot over the other, “J” and gold cross hung from his neck. Except for his mischievous
smile that rivals Jasmine's, Alaunna has always marveled at how much he doesn't look like Daddy, her thinking it would be fitting for her father's only son to look exactly like him. But John John doesn't look like Daddy or Mrs. Waters, yellow undertones lighter than both of them like Jasmine, but more Indian. Jasmine's cheekbones high and rounded, John John's high and chiseled, his nose round, unlike Jasmine's. When he came into the room, he stared down at Alaunna, his dark-chocolate eyes begging her to side with him.

"I want to start my junior year at Morehouse next fall."

"That's great," Alaunna said, a little confused, "but what does Daddy have to do with this?"

"You should ask him how he intends to get the funding," Jasmine said from behind him. She rolled her eyes at the back of his head and looked at Alaunna.

John John watched the disappointment melting the corners of Alaunna's mouth, slacking into a semi-frown. "Wait a minute though. Morehouse is a really good school, and I've always wanted to go there—Mama just didn't have the money. I don't care how much you tell people you're poor, the government still wants you to pay off all those loans—but I have the chance to go now."

"Actually, John just wants to be across the way from those luscious ladies of Spelman."
John John stuck his hand in Jasmine’s face, and she swatted at it. “No, Alaunna,” he continued, “all I want is a good education, and I don’t see what’s so wrong with me asking for tuition money.”

“You’re using him,” Jasmine said, half-yelling.

“You used him to go to New School.” John John turned away from Alaunna. She couldn’t see Jasmine’s face from behind his shoulder, but her sister’s hands fell at her sides, and Jasmine opened her palms towards John John signaling submission or defeat.

“I did not. He’s the one who wanted to send me to private school anyway. I didn’t have to ask him nuthin. I just got out of going to HSA.”

John John glanced over his shoulder at his little half sister, and Alaunna tugged at her grey skirt. “That’s my whole point,” he said. “You’ve always wanted to go to NSN, Jazzie. You got exactly what you wanted.”

“You don’t even talk to him,” Jasmine continued, “and you’re going to ask him to send you off to college? You don’t have any problem with that?”

“Hey, all I’m sayin is if he wants to spend money on his kids’ education, why do I have to be denied what you’ve already gotten?”

Using Daddy, yes, but he was right also. Alaunna was a little angry, but she admired him for not putting on faces like she and Jasmine did, and she admired him for taking what he thought belonged to him. “Tell him you want to go to Morehouse, but don’t mention the luscious ladies of Spelman.”
Jasmine got what she wanted, and now John John would too. Alaunna decided it was time she learn from her brother’s sense of fairness and put it to good use.

The first failure: What Alaunna failed to learn from John John that once a victory is obtained, it must be maintained. The air of confidence cannot be dropped; you can never let the other party watch the fear and doubt seep into you. Alaunna wanted something much simpler than tuition money—she wanted to make Daddy realize that at twelve, she was old enough to go home from school by herself. No more babysitting. No more being cooped up in the old office. For some reason, Alaunna could no longer stand being in that house. Around January of Jasmine’s first year, Wendy stopped coming over, so Alaunna didn’t have to listen to her whine anymore. But Jasmine picked up new friends who called after school. “It’s Reina,” Mrs. Waters called up the stairs, or Priya or Josh “We’re-Not-That-Kind-of-Friends-Insists-Jasmine” Schwartz. It wasn’t the new friends that bothered Alaunna. Their voices were far away on the other side of the phone line to bother her. But she had to get out, had to stop catnapping with her head pressed against the hard oak desk, had to be isolated where she could finally daydream.

With Mrs. Waters’ help, Alaunna got Daddy to agree to let her go home by herself. No more Jasmine. No more Mrs. Waters feeling sorry for her. She could pace and stomp up the stairs and down the hallways as much as she pleased without Daddy questioning her sense of reality, her connectedness with other humans.
But Alaunna underestimated her father. On weekdays, Daddy came home at a normal time, around seven or eight. Maybe he stopped by the Numbers House on his way home from work or took advantage of Happy Hour, but he was never gone too long. Weekends were different.

Saturday mornings, Alaunna heard a light tapping on her door. She’d crawl from underneath her covers, and before she gave him permission to enter, Daddy cracked her door open, stuck his head in the small slit between door and frame and said: “I’m going out for a couple of minutes.”

Alaunna’d pull her covers back over her head and listen to his footfalls creak down the steps, knowing she would not hear him return in a few minutes. Maybe he left at ten in the morning, or maybe noon, but by the time he stepped in the door, it was three or four o’clock. Perhaps he lost track of time.

Alaunna remembers him dragging her to a friend’s house. In the front room, eight men and women, some of them looking like bankers and lawyers, others looking homeless, crowded around a four-person table to play cards. As soon as Daddy walked in the door, the man who owned the house greeted Daddy with a can of beer and sat him down at the table. “Where can she stay?” Daddy asked him, and the man turned and smiled at her, “Baby, you can go on into the den.”

Daddy played spades and poker all day and night, and Alaunna, spread out on a plastic covered couch, stared at the TV in the den trying not think of how much money he was losing. To keep her entertained, a woman who might have been the owner of
the house's wife, popped movies into the VCR. Alaunna dozed off on every one, and could only keep track of time's passing when movies began or ended.

   Every once in a while she would stagger into the front room where the men and women played, their expressions hazy and hidden in foggy cigar and cigarette smoke yelling *nigga this nigga that nigga just play and keep your mouth shut*. Alaunna looked over Daddy's shoulder, surveyed his hand, and asked when they were leaving.

   A few more minutes—let me finish this hand, he'd say.

   A few more minutes turned into a few more hours, and by the start of the fourth movie, Alaunna circled the card game again until one of his friends suggested Daddy take her home. Alaunna figured he probably went back after he tucked her in bed.

   So, on the weekends, she knew Daddy didn't want to bore her by taking her along, and he was content playing his poker somewhere, time no longer important.

   I'm going out for a couple of minutes, he'd say.

   How long is a couple? Alaunna called from under the covers before he could close her door.

   Five, he'd say. A man's minute is ninety seconds.

   But one Saturday, after his ninety-second minutes passed and bled into hours, Alaunna was sure she'd never see him again. By the third hour, she tired of pacing. She put her headphones away and tried to read but was too aware of the time, too aware of the sun going down, knowing Daddy had left that morning. She went downstairs. Played video games. He probably went to play numbers, get his slip in
before the lotto drawing. But the Numbers House was on the other side of the creek, only ten minutes away. Maybe he started talking to someone there. No phone calls. Alaunna couldn’t concentrate on the games anymore—she kept losing. The setting of the sun brought with it a strange silence that invaded the house. Alaunna put her headphones back on, but all she thought about, saw, was Daddy trapped somewhere, maybe crossed the wrong person at the Numbers House.

“763,” he’d said before he left that morning, “763’s a winner.” But 763 wasn’t a winner, and Daddy refused to hand over the money. He yelled at the Numbers Lady and demanded she tell the truth. Distracted from their poker game, the old men, beads of sweat on their upper lips and stub of cigar locked between their teeth, jumped up from the table in the back room and pinned Daddy against the wall. They took him down in the basement, Malik and his grandfather, while Daddy kicked at the wooden stairs, hoping the sharp thuds could be felt through the floor, hoping someone, anyone, would come and look for the source of the disturbance. But Malik and his father beat Daddy to death, and nobody could hear him scream because they were all busy drinking, laughing, throwing away money upstairs.

At first, this revelation caused Alaunna to whimper, but the image of her father lying motionless at the bottom of the stairs brought forth a shrill yell and an eruption of tears. Alaunna was embarrassed by her bawling, the snot and tears running over her mouth and chin, but her crying signaled that there was some sign of life left in the house, and she walked around upstairs and downstairs, determined to fill every room
with her wailing. But part of her, if she were wrong, didn’t want her or Daddy to look foolish. Eight o’clock, she sat in the living room, staring at the door, pulsating headache slamming against her temples. Daddy came in around 8:30, surprised to see her starting at him as soon as he opened the door.

“Hi, baby.”

“You said five minutes!” she yelled. Her eyebrows creased hard over her eyes, pushing back tears and blurring the figure of the man in front of her. “I thought you were dead.”

No explanations. No oh baby I’m sorry. Just you knew I was coming home.

Daddy decided Alaunna couldn’t handle being alone. For this reason and the fact that a robber had entered one of the houses in the neighborhood by taking the air conditioning unit out of the wall, Daddy re-employed Jasmine, this time asking her to come here and babysit. Alaunna lacks John John’s flair of hit-and-run, the ability to ask and receive without consequences. If only, when those thoughts of Daddy lying dead in the basement of the Numbers House first swept over, she could put a smile as mischievous as her brother’s on her face. If only, when Daddy paraded into the living room after hours of only-God-knows-what, she could have looked as cocky as John John did in the study with his face close to hers.

Alaunna pulls her covers over her head and turns on her stomach. She buries her face into her pillow. If she can’t keep from crying after Daddy’s been gone all day,
she’s not going to be able to say no to him either. Saturday, she is going to the party, and she cringes at the thought of spending the evening with Jasmine.

Poe falls to the floor.
Alaunna is picking an orange out of the refrigerator for lunch. None of the five apples in the bottom of the bin are acceptable—they are plagued with mushy brown spots, deep gashes, or cuts. She hates picking fruit out of the refrigerator before her uniform is ready; the cold air seeps in through the collar of her bathrobe and chills her legs and feet. Alaunna runs the tips of her fingers over the cold, dimpled peel, and one of last night’s questions still bothers her. The party, she knows, is inevitable, but Roderick Usher troubles her. Is he insane because he doesn’t have any friends? Once upon a time he did, and the narrator, an old companion, used to think he was normal.

“Alaunna, come get your uniform.”

She closes the refrigerator, and, her thoughts slowing down her steps, walks over to the sink to get a paper bag. She reaches behind the pots and pulls out the bag, sticks her hand in to inflate it, and drops in her orange. Alaunna does want friends, but she doesn’t want friendships with the kids in her neighborhood, Jasmine’s neighborhood, or at Haynes Street. She’ll wait until college to find kids worthy of lasting relationships, but will she end up like Usher before then?

“Alaunna?”

She realizes this is stupid, that she will not become Roderick Usher. This is Poe at his best, disturbing her thoughts, controlling her fears. In the laundry room, Daddy pours the remaining water from the still hissing iron into a plastic gallon jug, and
Alaunna slides through the narrow passage between him and the washing machine and reaches for her uniform hanging on the rack behind the dryer. He’s trying to determine the best time to ask her again, and if she should brush against him, her touch would release his tension, giving him the freedom to question her. She feels the weight of his desires bearing down on her, and as she plans her escape into the kitchen, he asks, “So, are you going to the party?”

“Um, I’m still thinking about it,” Alaunna says. John John’s face, the corners of his mouth turning up in playful boldness, flashes in to her mind. She is in love with the idea of her brother. “No,” his smile grows wider, “I ain’t goin.” Alaunna wants to turn around, grab her father’s attention with that cockiness, and repeat those words with the same spunk. But she goes upstairs to get dressed instead.

Alaunna misses her brother, and now that he’s experienced Atlanta, he finds Nashville uneventful and rarely returns. She’s thought of him ever since this morning and wonders what he’s doing at this very moment as she opens up her textbook during third period, eighth grade English. On the board, Mrs. Martell writes “Joseph Campbell and Mythology.” Only paying half attention to the class, Alaunna flips to the chapter featuring the *Odyssey* and bits of *Beowulf*. Her classmates sit with their feet on the floor, eyes focused on Mrs. Martell at the front of the room, pencils and pens in the ready position. Alaunna, chin in hand, stares at her open textbook without seeing any words or pictures on the pages. She’s not following Haynes Street’s proper classroom etiquette, but as long as she has her nose in her book and looks like she’s
interested, nobody minds. The image of John John sharpens in her mind, gold cross and “J” hanging from his neck, and the chalk scratching against the board grows faint.

“Campbell believes there are only so many types of people,” Mrs. Martell says, her back to the class. “He’s not saying we can’t be individuals, but there are only so many temperaments, personalities, ways of thinking. Remember how we talked about archetypes, how they appear in every culture and religion. They keep reappearing in stories. Who are some major hero figures in stories and legends?”

Archetypes, Alaunna thinks, and she doesn’t hear Mrs. Martell’s voice anymore. I see archetypes in real life all the time, she thinks, and she writes her observations in her notebook: Brandis, Jennifers, and Ellens—clueless little rich girls, Melvins—oreos, Wendys are whiners, Glorias are vixens, Jasmines—knowitalls.

“Alaunna, can you name some trickster figures?”

Her name ringing in her ears, she looks up, snapped away from her theories and back into the classroom. The chronic daydreamer, she’s learned to keep half of her attention fixated in reality.

“Tricksters are,” she says, “Loki, Coyote, Anansi.” Me, she realizes for the first time. In fact, through her web of daydreamed stories, she had outsmarted herself. Her first mistake was letting Jasmine find out about them.

The second failure: John John’s influence didn’t teach Alaunna how not to ruin her relationship with DeWayne, even though she fought to keep their friendship intact. In her father’s esteemed opinion, DeWayne might appear more innocent and less
menacing than his cousin, but that was only because he learned he could weasel his way into a lot more places if he dropped the thug image. After Daddy decreed she was not to see DeWayne again, she got Jasmine to cooperate in tricking Daddy. It was the least Jasmine could do, Alaunna thought. Alaunna wondered how Daddy found out about her meetings with DeWayne down at the creek—they were hidden from backyards behind the trees and underbrush, and the neighborhood kids never disturbed their spot. The only person who knew, and could have told Daddy, was Jasmine.

“I never said a word to him,” she said with the disbelief of the blameless. “I don’t spend enough time with him. When could I have said anything?”

“All I know is Daddy told me to stop going down there around the same time I told you about CF.”

Jasmine shrugged. “Coincidence.”

“Well, I’m going to see him anyway. John John took what he wanted. It’s time for me to do the same. Now, are you going to tell on me again?”

“I never told on you the first time. Water carries voices well. Anyone could have found out about you two.”

Jasmine remained confessionless but agreed not to say anything. On a short piece of manila-colored paper, Alaunna wrote DeWayne a note in green ink, telling him she intended to meet with him down at their spot on the creek bank. Jasmine assured her DeWayne would get the note via Wendy. The day Alaunna resurrected her friendship with DeWayne, she stripped out of her uniform and put on sweat pants and
a t-shirt. Jasmine watched baseball in the den, jumping up and down, screaming, and punching out batters with the umpires, cheering on her stupid Braves as if they could hear her through the screen. *Why didn’t you swing at that right down the middle bust him inside, inside!* he’s sittin on the change up Jasmine yelled as Alaunna stepped outside.

“Why do you waste your time with them?” Alaunna called from the front door.

“They still don’t have a World Series ring.”

“You just make sure you get your butt back here before your father gets home,” Jasmine yelled back.

Grey clouds shifted overhead, and Alaunna realized she had to rediscover their secret spot from her neighborhood. She contemplated the problem of rain for a moment, trudging through wet, itchy grass and cement-sticky mud. The creek was easier to find on Jasmine’s side—all of the backyards led to a single dirt pathway. The grass around the fringe of the underbrush had been trampled into the ground, and a few brown patches rose up in the rocky soil. On Alaunna’s side, the markers where the trails began were unclear. The grass grew a thick blue-green all the way down to the cluster of trees, and it got taller the closer she got to the underbrush. She took long strides through the grass, almost like climbing uphill. The grass slapped back at her, sweeping against her unprotected arms and irritating her skin. Alaunna turned back to see how far she’d come, but the waist-high sea of grass was so vast she could no longer
see any houses or the street. But for once, she didn’t mind the sweat the late September afternoon teased from her forehead.

By the time she reached the woods, tall wild grass grew as high as her armpits, and the fine edges of the blades cut into her hands and arms. Sweat and dirt, collecting into the fine wounds on her skin, stung her, and Alaunna tried holding her arms high above her head—the lactic acid build-up dropped her hands to her sides, and her muscles trembled. She would be a fine sight for DeWayne, whenever she reached him.

Fallen logs and tangled vines replaced the thick grass. Down a steep hill, rocks and logs shifted and rolled under Alaunna’s feet. She couldn’t see any houses, or the street, or the creek. No sounds but birds and squirrels scurrying from limb to limb above me. A mess of moss, hidden roots, and vines entrapped her feet, but she was determined to find that spot, whether she got home late or not, whether she had to apologize to DeWayne for not showing up in another letter sent via Jasmine via Wendy.

After some twenty minutes, Alaunna did find the creek, but it sloshed over jagged rocks ten feet below her. She walked down one end until she could hear cars stalled in rush hour traffic on the highway. Tired and wet, she rolled up her shirt sleeves to her armpits, wiped grime from her face and headed in the other direction. When she finally found DeWayne sitting on the opposite creek bank, her shoes to the top of her calves were covered in mud, leaves, and twigs, her t-shirt smudged with dirt, and her hair was plastered to the sides of her face.
DeWayne said nothing about her appearance but smirked.

"I'm going to have to find a faster, cleaner way," she said.

Stepping on the tops of stones jutting out from the top of the water, he walked across the creek. His eyes glowed more golden and his legs were longer and more toned than the last time Alaunna had seen him up close. "I received this from Miss Nolan," he said grabbing her note with the green ink from his back pocket.

"Who was more surprised, you for getting it, or Wendy for being chosen to give it to you?"

"Well," he laughed, "the verdict may not be in on that one. How you doin?"

He wrapped his lanky arms around her grimy shoulders and gave her a quick squeeze.

"I'm great now. I got tired of sitting around the house all day. I needed a change."

He tucked the letter back in his pocket and grew serious. Alaunna never thought of him as being serious, but something like wisdom flared behind his eyes, and his chin, cheeks, and mouth took on the hardened look of his grandfather and Malik. "What about your father? I know he won't be cool with this, and I don't wanna get you in no kind of trouble."

"He doesn't know, and he'd throw a fit if he did. But for me, there's a fine line between being bored and being happy, and frankly, I'd rather be happy."

Alaunna got too greedy. On the days she didn't meet DeWayne at the creek, she'd lie on her bed reading while Jasmine watched baseball or syndicated sitcoms on
TV. They still relished their silences, still felt comfortable not having to say a word to each other, but sometimes, Alaunna couldn’t lie still on her bed. She had a passion she locked away in her head—a series of stories she’d developed in her boredom during the long school hours. What she did some might call daydreams, but these stories were calculated, detailed, the only explanation of why the people around Alaunna were the way they were. Alaunna should have known she couldn’t see DeWayne and pace with Jasmine around without suffering the consequences.

But sometimes Alaunna couldn’t lie still, had to put on her headphones and see her characters, tell them what to do and watch them succeed and fail. She learned being quiet as possible was key and slipped off her shoes. But sometimes she couldn’t control the images the music brought. She saw Tina on the stage, guitar in hand, fingers caressing strings slick as mercury. Alaunna closed her eyes as Tina closed hers. Tina, sweat collecting in her hair and running down her face, was no longer on the stage, at the concert. She was off free-floating on a solo, just like Alaunna free-floated on daydreams.

One night she jolted Daddy out of sleep, her aggressive pacing rocked the walls, shook the floors, rattled books on the shelves until he dreamed the house was falling down. Since then, Daddy hated it whenever she paced. Something causing Alaunna to wreak such violence on a building couldn’t be good for her, he said. She was escaping relationships with kids her own age, escaping possibilities, escaping life. No matter where he was in the house, Daddy became sensitive to her walking. Every time the
springs in her bed squeaked, he'd ask Alaunna what she was about to do, his voice roaring from the other side of the wall in his room, in the hallway, or up through the vent. Alaunna made the same mistake with her sister.

Jasmine was mocking some Dodger hitter downstairs, and Alaunna twirled back and forth on her toes, but as her characters began to shout at each other, push at each other, Alaunna's steps pounded down, more flat-footed and heavy. Although she didn't hear the music blasting out of her headphones, her mouth moved along with the lyrics, the faster the songs, the more frantic her dance became. Now her characters howled at each other, her mouth silently spewing out their dialogue at rapid-fire pace.

"Al," Jasmine called up the stairs.

Alaunna thought she heard Jasmine calling, but she could never tell. Sometimes she heard her name in the music.

"Al, what are you doing?"

Alaunna stood still, too quickly for her heart which jumped and beat so fast her chest lightened. She tossed her headphones on the bed. "Yeah?"

"What are you doing? You're knocking books of the shelf down here."

"Nothing's broken, is it?" Alaunna ran downstairs to see how much damage she'd done, to see if she could hide any evidence from Daddy that she'd returned to unreality.

The blown-glass eagle bookend didn't fall, but several books had spilled from several shelves in front of and behind the case. They lay half open on the floor, the
pages exposed to the floor. Some of these books were twenty and thirty years old. Alaunna picked them up and examined their spines, made sure the bindings hadn't cracked and splintered any further. She tried to erase the creases formed in the pages when they'd smacked against the floor, bending back the yellow edges until the lines in the paper disappeared.

"Were you exercising or something?" Jasmine asked.

"No," Alaunna said helping her pull the bookcase away from the wall, "I was pacing."

They got down on their knees. Alaunna took each book and read the spine, noted the color of the cover, and placed it against the wall in a stack. Jasmine dumped them in random order on the shelf. "Be careful," Alaunna said.

Jasmine noticed the flutter of anxiety in her little half sister's voice. "What does that matter? I'm just sticking them back up there. You can do whatever you want with them later."

"Yes, but everything's gotta be in place."

"What are you so worried about?"

"Daddy'll know I knocked stuff down."

Jasmine smiled and sat down. "What were you really doing up there?"

"Daydreaming—well, not daydreaming. Stories I keep in my head. Sometimes I forget what I'm doing, and I knock stuff of the shelves."

The strain in Alaunna's calves and the tensing of her thighs forced her to sit down as well. Facing Jasmine, the
two of them in that small space, Alaunna knew she should have made something up—Daddy’s obsessive-compulsiveness, or her being anal. Jasmine would have believed Alaunna, but the truth of daydreaming erased the sarcastic glint in her eye. Alaunna saw images popping into her sister’s mind. Jasmine equated locking herself in her own room to write and peeking through the keyhole to see if anyone were aware of it to Alaunna’s pacing. Jasmine thought she knew what that crazy energy felt like, the one that wouldn’t let her be still, the one that made her feel like she would explode until she wrote something down. Alaunna wanted to take a pair of scissors and cut the imaginary bond she could feel growing between them as they sat crouched behind the bookcase, the bond that was threatening to break their comfortable silences.

“You daydream?”

“Yes,” Alaunna said.

“Stories?”

“Yes. Well, one story.”

“Dad has a problem with that?”

“Yeah,” Alaunna said.

“Why?”

“He thinks I should be doing other things, like talking to you.”

Instead of getting offended, Jasmine laughed and grew more amused with each answer. Alaunna didn’t want her to think—knew she was thinking—they were
kindred writer spirits. But Alaunna also knew Jasmine understood, wouldn’t censor Alaunna’s feelings and tell her how disconnected to everyone she was.

“So, you just get so wrapped up in them you knock stuff down?”

Alaunna nodded.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jasmine said. “Sometimes you become them, and you don’t see or hear anything else. Do you write any of it down?”

“No,” Alaunna said sharply. “I don’t do fiction. I write poetry, and not modern poetry. I don’t like all this who am I, and what is this world, and what am I doing in it? whining they do. I like forms.” Without looking at Jasmine, Alaunna continued to collect the books and add them to her stack.

“What’s your story about?”

“You wouldn’t be interested. It’s more like a soap opera, really. Not serious or quality.”

Jasmine does ask Alaunna often to tell her stories. Sometimes Alaunna will oblige, give her a little snippet here or there, knowing that Jasmine’s trying to get inside her head, that little pieces of characters are keys to little pieces of Alaunna. Jasmine absorbs everything Alaunna tells her, eyes wide and thoughtful, processing and analyzing and re-analyzing. But Jasmine doesn’t seem to understand that Alaunna may be lying or telling the other versions she discarded a long time ago.

Alaunna tells Jasmine about her imaginary London landscape, about her Hyde Park, her narrow streets, her slums, and her suburbs. Alaunna is patient, and she fields
Jasmine’s questions about Ehmilia, LA, Tara, and Tina, and the lesser characters that cause trouble. And with each answer, Jasmine believes she gains more insight into the mind of this little half sister of hers.
Chapter Five

Alaunna used to be patient with DeWayne as well. Now she feigns patience and hates being his Story Spinner, his name for her, and dreams of time with him before she learned to hate the power of words:

“You like to tell stories, don’t you?” DeWayne said not long after Jasmine discovered the same.

Alaunna was not sure what to make of this, not sure why Jasmine told DeWayne, if she told DeWayne. Alaunna never sees them talk. But on his side of the creek, sitting on the bank across from her, DeWayne tossed a pebble in the water and told her she liked to tell stories. “Who told you that?” she asked.

“Nobody.” His smile grew wider, and he leaned in closer to her. “You gotta be a good storyteller to put one over on your daddy.”

“How come you never told me that before?”

“How come you’re so suspicious?”

She leaned away from him. “Jasmine knows I tell stories too. I’ve got a series of them, and she kept pestering me to tell her some, so I finally did—but I didn’t tell her the real stories. She’s figured out she’s in them, and she’s figured I’m hiding things from her. So, I thought she might try to use you to get the real deal.”

“She ain’t said a word to me, but tell me the real stories.”

“DeWayne—”
"I told you my real name. You ain’t told nobody my name. I won’t tell nobody your stories."

She told him about London—not the real London, but her London—not Nashville, and not Philly. A place far away enough to be exotic. How Tina, Ehmilia, Tara, and LA are really Jasmine, Gloria, Shea, and Wendy. About their band Tripping Springs, how they mix alternative, pop rock, hip hop, R&B, trip hop, and hard rock like Jasmine makes mix tapes of TLC, Enigma, Sting, Depeche Mode and Sade. About their school, New School of London, made of Americans (Tina, Tara, and LA among them), and others like Ehmilia the Romanian.

Alaunna bowed her head and recovered the images in her mind. When she opened her eyes, DeWayne leaning back and resting all of his weight against his arms in hands, sat before her in rapt attention. In a few seconds, Alaunna appeared transformed, and DeWayne, in curiosity, regarded her as some kind of suburban shaman.

"There’s nothing like a Tripping Springs’s concert, and they don’t do concerts often. Tina likes to control all of their appearances, and she doesn’t like being on stage, claims she’s shy. Anyway, they’re throwing a concert one night, packed house, and all the kids storm past the bodyguards and lean up against the stage.

LA sings the last song of the night, her voice like drinking freezing water on the hottest days. LA has a voice that burns your ears like that water burns going down, but it doesn’t hurt. When LA sings, like she sings that night, all the boys in the audience
shove the girls out of the way, and they reach for her at the foot of the stage, mouth ‘I
love you’ and leave roses, teddy bears, and notes there. She’s a siren, and not a siren.
She doesn’t try to attract men with that voice, and she ends up pushing them away.

“Tara wails away on her sax, and Tina ends with a guitar solo. It’s one of those
better shows, the kind where the audience gets lost in the final number, and it takes
them a few minutes to realize the music’s stopped. The audience stands on their feet,
claps for ten minutes, but Tripping Springs doesn’t come out for an encore. As soon as
they step off the stage, Ehmilia’s already causing trouble.

“See, Ehmilia is as big a control freak as Tina, and she wants more song writing
credit on the upcoming album. By the end of the show, she’s pissed at all the boys
making googly eyes at LA and everyone getting entranced in Tina and Tara’s solos.
Now, Tara goes along with whoever’s being nicer to her that day, and Tina hands out
the paychecks. Ehmilia’s not stupid, so she goes after LA.

“As soon as they walk into the dressing room, Ehmilia slams LA into the mirror,
glass flyin’ everywhere, and she jumps on top of LA before Tina and Tara can do
anything. Tina and Tara see LA grabbing at the back of Ehmilia’s blouse with bloodied
hands, and for a moment, they’re too scared to say anything.

“Ehmilia and LA are still writhing around on the floor in broken glass. ‘Gimme
your song writing credits!’ Ehmilia’s screamin’ at LA, and LA’s screamin’ back, ‘No!
You’re crazy! I got friends who’ll wait for you in the alley if you don’t get off me.’
Tina and Tara start pleading with Ehmilia to cool down, but Ehmilia’s got friends of her own.

“You go ahead and tell your friends to meet with my friends,” she says. ‘I’m sure Petey’d like to know how much you’ve been rippin’ him off.’ LA gets scared for a moment, cuz she didn’t know Ehmilia knew about Petey. Petey owns a little dive bar in Southside, over by the bridge. The dive bar’s nice and hidden—you gotta walk down a flight of stairs below the sidewalk to get there. LA wonders how Ehmilia found out about Petey, how LA’s smuggling alcohol and imported cigarettes into New School of London for him.

“LA raises her head up off the floor, her hair’s full of glass, and she says, ‘You know, Tina, you should give Ehmilia those credits. She worked really hard this time.’ Tina and Tara always wonder why LA gives into Ehmilia like that. They think she’s weak for it.”

From early afternoon until the creeping dusk, Alaunna would tell DeWayne the stored away stories of the band Tripping Springs and New School of London—from the time a drug ring developed at the school and Tara got caught in the middle of it, to Ehmilia’s tangos with the various ethnic mafias, to the time LA was shot in an alley and almost lost her life over smuggled clothes and peach liquor. If any children appeared on the bank, they fell silent. If anyone in the stories appeared on the bank, they tried to fall silent but ended up giggling. Alaunna had almost got him up to date with the most recent stories when DeWayne stopped coming.
If he were still coming down to the creek, Alaunna would have told him that the stories now are more about LA and Tina. Alaunna’s not exactly sure what happened between Wendy and Jasmine, but sometimes she saw Wendy down at the creek, pretending to read her textbooks, or smoking, or trying to catch crayfish, her long ivory arms dipping mason jars into the water.

Wendy didn’t speak to her at first, probably because she viewed Alaunna as Jasmine’s enemy. As Alaunna sat reading, she would catch Wendy staring at her farther up the bank, her brown eyes hard as bronze. But Alaunna always liked Wendy. When she stopped seeing Jasmine, she talked to Alaunna more, asked her how private school was and did she like it and were the girls at Haynes Street as rich and stuck up as everyone said they were. Alaunna’d answer fine no and yes, and they both went back to whatever they were busying themselves with.

Daddy once told Alaunna that white women tend to overexaggerate, get overemotional, and Wendy was no different, she guessed. Alaunna bothered to ask him why, and he said that once you’ve been the queen of the land for so long and all of a sudden your man starts eyeing other women, you have to get his attention somehow. Farther up the bank, Wendy would talk to herself, talk too much, like she tried to get Alaunna involved. “You better not let her near me.” (Inhaled nicotine.) “Damnit, I’ll get both of you.” (Exhaled smoke.) “I’m not little anymore, if you haven’t noticed.” Somewhat amused, Alaunna would watch her twirl a dirty-blond strand around her
finger, her mouth snarling at the non-present parents she cussed out. “You’re lucky you’re an only child,” she told Alaunna once. “The first one’s always the servant—the rest are the real kids.”

But Alaunna always liked Wendy. Wendy told Gloria to shut up a lot. Alaunna had even heard that she smacked Gloria at school not too long ago. People wanted to make it into a black/white issue, but isn’t that what they always say?

When DeWayne would visit with her at the creek, he and Alaunna listened to her rant. They would watch Brett, Wendy’s brother, come looking for her and beg her to come home. *I’m not going without you* and *then don’t go* and *please, Wendy, they’ll get mad* and more resistance until Alaunna and DeWayne heard Mrs. Nolan’s tinny voice racing down the creek, calling for them both. Wendy and Brett would run home.

“She’s crazy. I woulda never talked to my mother like she does. Even if I didn’t agree with everything she said or did—I couldn’t disrespect her like that.”

“Wendy says a lotta stuff,” DeWayne said.

“You mean, she doesn’t really say all of those things?”

He laughed. “She wishes.”

“I know your mother puts a switch to your behind whenever you get fresh.”

“She *did,*” he said. In that stiff silence, Alaunna wanted to apologize, trying to figure if he were offended or if she brought up the wrong memories of his mother. But he never dropped his smile. “She was one tough lady.”
Alaunna redeemed Wendy through LA. That's why she let LA get shot, let her lie in her own puddle of blood in the alley. Before that LA used to drink and smoke. An only child, she liked to say her parents were crazy, but she was just as crazy as they were. Lying face first on the cold, sooty brick of the alley, LA realized what had brought her to smuggling clove cigarettes and liquor. With her second chance at life, LA gave up smoking and drinking. She learned to get along with her parents, joke with them, found out that that she had their sense of humor.

She wanted to tell DeWayne all of these things. She wanted to tell him why he would never appear in London. She wanted to ask him more about his mother, but he stopped coming down to the creek a few weeks ago. Alaunna never should have gone to that party with him—it ruined everything. This was inevitable, but she could have prolonged it if she had refused to go, made him wait and make one last visit down to the creek.
Chapter Six

Alaunna has the perfect reason not to go to the party Friday. She can compare it with the party she went to with DeWayne. The problem is she can’t tell Daddy about it.

DeWayne had followed her home from school to give her the post-New Year’s invitation. Alaunna turned the key in the lock and stepped in the doorway when she saw a tall, lanky form out of the corner of her eye. In the heavy, insulated coat, he would have made a fine navy snowman if he were not so skinny. Alaunna stepped back onto the porch and shut the door behind her. DeWayne stood at the bottom of the stairs with the trademark fox-like grin on his face. Alaunna became aware that he had never seen her in her uniform, and she reached for the bottom of the hem line of her skirt to pull it down below her knees, but she forgot she was wearing a parka.

“What are you doing here?” she asked through clenched teeth. “You could get me in trouble.”

“Ain’t nobody here but lil ol me. I just wanted to see your hood.” He looked around, “I approve.”

“No, DeWayne, why are you really here? You wouldn’t risk both of our butts for nothing.”

“Check it out. Why don’t you come with me this Saturday and meet some new people?”
Why this invitation? Why now? she wondered. Alaunna felt a strange nervousness beginning in her chest, and as it sucked out her breath, it converted itself to electricity and numbed her hands and feet. “I’ve tried to meet new people.”

“I’m not talkin about them snot-nosed kids at your school.” His hood almost covered his eyes, but Alaunna could see the little grey flecks sparking like flint. “I’m talkin bout new faces. You can’t be livin in your head forever, baby.”

“Who’s going to be there.”

“Bunch of guys and girls—my friends.”

“My father’s not going to like this.”

DeWayne’s smile grew wider. “I already thought that over.”

“Don’t tell me I’m going to have to lie.”

“All you gotta do is tell him you’re meeting with some new friends. He wants you to do that anyway. In a sense, it’s not lying.”

“In a sense.” She sighed.

* * *

Alaunna should have made DeWayne tell her what this party would be like because she had a decent idea in the first place. As soon as they walked through the door, a muted, trance-like bass and a cloud of smoke greeted her. The whole front room was misty, and her eyes stung. She couldn’t make out the music, but the same bass accompanied every song, pounded underneath the surface in every room in the house. When she finally got to the room where the party was “happenin,” her worst
fear, which was no parents present, came true. A makeshift card table had been placed along the wall near the chips and dip, and on it were several brands of beer in tall open cans and dark, brown glass bottles. Every once in a while, somebody would put a half empty bottle down, and someone else would pick it up, draw a swig. Alaunna wondered how much of what they were drinking was really beer.

“Where are the parents?” she asked, poking DeWayne in the side.

“Parents? You crazy? Ain’t no party with parents. Don’t start fussin. I wouldna brung you here if somethin was gonna happen to you.”

“DeWayne!”

“Don’t call me that here!” The flint in his eyes pulsed. As kids circulated in and out of the room, they’d greet him. DeWayne would nod his head. Alaunna tried to smile, but in the dim light, their faces were obscured, and Alaunna couldn’t determine if they returned the gesture.

He took her into a back room, and Alaunna started coughing. The cigarette smoke was so heavy, she could barely see, and she could feel the smell absorbing into her hair, her clothes, her skin.

“I gotta go catch up on someone,” DeWayne said, and he left her there. If Alaunna hadn’t trusted him, she probably would have killed him, put him in the London stories after all. Alaunna had to find a place where she could breathe. The muted, trance-like bass beneath her feet, she walked down a short hallway and found herself back at the entrance, but she stayed there because she saw a group of girls.
“Naw. You have no taste at all, and even if you tried, you still wouldn’t be able to get ’im.”

Yeah yeah and in you wildest dreams and that’s why you won’t never have no boyfriend.

One of them turned around and asked: “What do you think? See them two boys over there? Who’s the cutest?”

Alaunna was startled—because she didn’t think they were aware of her presence. She looked at the two boys standing in the threshold and blinked. “Uh, the one on the left, I suppose.”

All of the girls agreed with her except for the one with “bad taste.” She frowned while the rest of them laughed at her.

“Nigga, please!” she yelled.

Alaunna twirled around but decided not to say anything. In all likelihood, she probably meant nothing by it, but hearing the “n” word always made the tiny hairs on Alaunna’s neck prick up. At least she had identified Alaunna as being one of her own.

“So, who are you with?”

She almost jumped back when she saw the questioner’s eyes. They were engulfed in purple eyeliner and lavender eye shadow. Alaunna never noticed anything else about her.

“I came with, um, CF.”

“He cute, but he too innocent for me,” said Miss N Word.
“You better hold on to him,” said those horrendous eyes, “There’s a lotta girls after ’im.”

“I’m not surprised, but I’m not worried about that either.”

“Are you sure?” horrendous eyes asked. “You must know absolutely nothin about men. They may seem trustworthy, but as soon as you turn your back on ’em, they’re off to the races.”

“Well,” Alaunna said, building confidence, “if you knew what I know, you’d know I have nothing to worry about.”

When they moved on to discuss another boy, Alaunna started back down the hallway with the muted, trance-like bass beneath her feet, looking for DeWayne. The smoke was too thick, and it invaded her throat. She went outside.

Alaunna could still feel the reverberations of the bass under the wooden porch boards. Smoke heavy in her hair, charred menthol hung around her nose and burned her eyes. Daddy was sure to smell the party on her. Maybe she could tell him she didn’t know these new friends smoked, couldn’t get away from it because they smoked all throughout the house. In a sense, that wasn’t a lie.

“Alaunna?”

“Where have you been?” she spat.

DeWayne pulled his hood over his head. There was no trademark smile on his face. “You all right?”

“Oh, sure. It’s just that my dad’s gonna smell me smelling like a smoke stack.”
“I’ll tell you how to take care of that, but could you look at something for me?”

Alaunna had never heard him so somber before. The amber in his eyes dulled, and the tightness around his mouth made him look like he had aged fifteen years.

“Um, yeah, sure. What’s the matter?”

He looked around to see if anyone had joined them on the porch. He felt around in an inside pocket and handed her a once-folded piece of red paper. His face paled in embarrassment. “I’m no poet like you, but um—”

She opened the note. In tiny, capital, and black letters was written a poem

Alaunna, to this day, has never forgotten:

CROIX,

YOU ARE HEART—

FIRE—

BURNING ALL MY INHIBITIONS.

I’VE SEEN YOUR SILENT PAIN,

WATCH THE FLAMES CONSUME YOU

ON THE INSIDE.

MY HEART HAS ALREADY BEEN BURNED.

BUT I KNOW FIRE DOESN’T HAVE TO KILL.

LET OUR FIRE COME TOGETHER AND PURIFY.
“DeWay—CF—” the paper trembled in her hands.

“Is it any good?”

“Y-yeah. Who is Croix?” She smiled.

He sighed, smoky trail of breath extended towards the dark night. “Too many people around. I don’t want them all up in my business.”

Alaunna’s smile faded, but she tried not to sound too shocked. “You can’t show me something like this and then not tell me—She doesn’t know, does she?”

“No,” he grinned, and the flint returned to his eyes, “I was hopin this might break the ice, sorry for the pun.”

Alaunna nodded, and choked the anger back down her throat. “Well, why don’t you tell me who it is, and I’ll tell you if it’ll do the trick.”

He took her by the arm, gently pulled her close, and whispered Croix’s name in Alaunna’s ear. The inside of her ear burned, burned even when she ran cold water through her hair to get out the smoke. Alaunna wanted to tell him Croix would reject him—but she couldn’t with him so happy, with the soft glow of gold in his eyes and the trademark sly-fox grin on his face.

Indeed, Alaunna was a trickster who’d outsmarted herself. In all of her stories, she’d talked DeWayne into loving someone else.

* * *

The other daughter slams the front door and hangs up her coat. “I’m here,” she yells up the stairs. Alaunna acknowledges her, and Jasmine goes back into the den.
Baseball season is over, so she is probably doing her homework. Alaunna is finding the areas of n-gons, watching the clock, and deciding how late Daddy will be today. She still catnaps, but makes sure Jasmine arrives first. In the back of her mind, Alaunna can still see a man taking the air conditioning unit out of the wall of that house in the neighborhood. She wonders if anyone were home. She wonders if anyone were sleeping, got hurt because of it (Daddy refused to give her the rest of the story).

Alaunna knows where the Smith and Wessons are hidden in the center pillow cover on the couch in the living room and in the Nike box in Daddy’s closet, but they’re of no use if she is sleeping, unawares. Alaunna’s never told Jasmine about the guns, but she’s sure Jasmine’ll know what to do if any burglars come calling. With Jasmine here, Alaunna shoves her notebook and calculator aside and lies down. Alaunna had been up all night reading yesterday. She’s ready for a few hours sleep, when Jasmine knocks on her door. Alaunna considers not answering, but she will probably ask _Al, are you sleep?_ until she does.

“I just wanted to ask you something,” she says, sticking her head in the doorway. She wants stories. “What’s happening with LA?”

Lately, she’s very interested in LA, but LA is too complicated to talk about when Alaunna’s tired, and she won’t give Jasmine the satisfaction after she’s disturbed a would-be catnap. “Not now.”

“Just really quick questions,” she insists.
Alaunna tells her *no LA doesn’t drink* and *no she’s not on drugs* and *no she doesn’t have a boyfriend*, all of them answers Jasmine has received before. Jasmine wants to make sure nothing has changed.

She starts to leave, but Alaunna needs to retaliate. “How come you agreed to take me to that party? Is he paying you?”

“No, but he really wants you to go. He says he’s worried about you.”

“He’s always worried about me. Why do you always do whatever he asks? You don’t have a problem saying no to anybody else.” Alaunna closes her eyes. “Maybe I’ll go just to watch you squirm.”

Neither one of them can hit and run like John John.

“I figured that,” she says. “Tell me more about LA.”

“Man, LA makes me tired, and I’m already tired. I’ll give you a poem.” Alaunna reaches for the notebook on her bedside table and flips through the pages until she finds the loose sheet. It’s a sonnet, one Alaunna used to believe she’d written for Jasmine.

“You know poems aren’t my speed.”

“So. Just tell me if it works.”

She takes the paper. She reads it. Checks the meter with loud da da da da da da da da da da das. Alaunna wonders if Jasmine’ll ask her why she chose “six” and not “ten,” or “four” or “five.” Alaunna will tell her the s’s in “six” and “years” sound nice
together, instead of explaining “twelve years” which is too obvious, too recognizable by her or Daddy. Jasmine mouths under her breath:

    Behind the falling walls of crystal snow,
    an image fades beneath a shredded page.
    Forgotteness in its own splendor grows;
    the image lost is what she seeks and craves.
    Lost for six years and waiting to be found,
    snow chills the feeling of a tear-strained girl,
    and pictures fall from high, chaos unwound.
    Wounds stream like bleeding beads from strings of pearls.
    When did this image blast so fierce and strong?
    Against the grain of what she should forget,
    how were these feelings held back for so long?
    Forgotteness, chagrined, seeks to repent.
    In all imperfect memory, it lives.
    When we will not, the pure, blind heart forgives.

    “‘Forgotteness,’” she says several times. “You know ‘chagrined’? Was this some assignment?”

    “No, it wasn’t an assignment,” Alaunna says, annoyed, “I know ‘chagrined.’ ‘Forgotteness’ is the only thing that works for me. Just tell me if it’s good or not.”

    “Yeah, it’s good. Really good—for poetry.”
PART THREE

SPLIT END
I'm not exactly sure who told who about my memoir, but now everybody wanted to read it, probably to see if I pulled a *Mommy Dearest* on them. The final version was on a desk somewhere in German's apartment, delivered two months ahead of schedule. Hopefully he'd let me start working on my human/puman tragedy. Priya and Reina shared one copy of the ms, I read portions of it to Josh and Lucy, and now certain members of our group from my very close friends, to somewhat close friends, to friends, to acquaintances wanted to see it. Funny, that I should finish a memoir, and suddenly, I was a celeb. I'd written 4½ novels, and nobody ever got excited over those. Teenage poets and short fiction writers were cool, rising prodigies even, and 1 of 3 NSNers was at least semi-serious. But a novelist? Too weird. A memoir was a different thing—for some reason. Now I had freshmen saying “Hi, Jazzie” to me in the hallway, me saying “Hi” back and wondering who in the world half of them were. I was pretty picky about who saw my work though, mostly because I felt it was pretty crappy until someone told me otherwise. You'll hear that stuff about “Oh, it’s a part of me. I can’t let anyone see it!” Don’t believe it. Anyone who wants to write for a living will disown that sacred child in a nanosecond for a decent check. It’s just that, even when my mss totaled 150 and 230 and 370 pages, when I read through them, they didn’t feel like real books.
But now everybody wanted to see the stupid memoir. *Split Ends* I called it, not because I was being clever in defining my family history/educational experience; but the night before I turned it in, I still hadn’t found a name. I was rolling up my hair when I noticed the next time I saw my beautician, I’d ask her to trim my ends. German, I’m sure, believed the former.

In fact, German felt the whole thing was a remarkable achievement. Germie even went around endorsing it, mentioning it to my other teachers in the copy room and Main Office. In the hallways, they’d smile at me, and in voices too goofy to be supportive, they’d say, “Oh, Jazzie, we’ve heard about your memoir.” They they’d pat me on the shoulder and move on.

Apparently, when Reina discussed her no-good-black-man short story with Germie, he compared our masterpieces, saying they were both “unoffensive.” I’m glad to hear that because I really wanted a scene in *Split Ends* that I had to leave out. The problem was this happened before I was thirteen. At ten years of age, I discovered women shaved their legs. Wendy looked down one day and yelled, “Ew! You don’t shave your legs!” And I looked down at her slick little legs for the first time and said, “Oh, foul! You shave yours? Who ever heard of that?”

I was traumatized, and ever since, I’ve tried to come up with a theory to explain why most white women shave their legs and most black women don’t. I thought it could be culturally enlightening for Germie.
Jasmine A. Water's Theory of Why Most American White Women Shave Their Legs and Most Black Women Don't:

Well ya know, massuh been sleepin wid de slave gals for quietes a while. Now he knowed dat in de back a his mine, his God ain' na 2 happy wid this. An evie time he looka at de slave gal in his bed, he reminded that he ain' na wid his own missus. But he couldna give up the slaves dat easy. Dey 2 talented. Somehow, he had 2 stinguish de slave wenches from his missus. He never could stand how hairee dem slave gals wuz, and den he knew. De slave gals weren't totally human, dat made it awright. And de slave gals weren't totally human, what with all dat hair. But de missus was haiee 2. He went 2 his a wife's room in de middle of de night. "Lula Mae," he told de missus, "get dat hair off a yer legz. Ya look right apish like the nigras!" Lula Mae, good wife tha' she was, call for Lil Beulah right 'way. Lil Beulah was in de massah's bed, so when de missus was a cryin' for her, de massah wen and woked er up. "Can I hep ya, mizzie?" Lil Beulah said a-walkin in de missus' room. "Lil Beulah," said Lula Mae, "you cut dis hair off a my legz. Mah husband don wan me lookin right apish like you!" So Lil Beulah took de razor and de soap, and she shave-a Miz Lula Mae's legz. Ah da scratchin and scrapin dat razor 'gainst the legz make! De missus scream "Oh, Beulah, oh, Beulah, oh!" and Lil Beulah yell, "Oh, Lawd, Lawd, Lawd! Why she take it off dere, Lawd!? You's giveth, and she taketh away!" The deed done, de missus legs a-bled, and Lil Beulah run from de house until she got home and fell sick in Remus' armz. "Ah, Remus, ah, Remus!" she wailed.
"Never done I seen a sight like dat! De white wimmin, dey sho is crazy, now, Remus! Never you see me, nor my babez, nor my grandbabez babez puts de razor ever to our legz like dat!"

But German said: "Jazzie, this is an accomplishment! Sometimes it’s hard to write about such things without offending someone." He nodded and smiled, just enough to be approving.

Man! I shoulda put The Theory in!

I did try to be fair, though. Young teenagers could be witchy and superficial—Gloria's no different, and my father missed the target on several occasions, which can be expected of a guy who never grew up. Did I want Dad to be the REPRESENTATIVE SYMBOL OF EVERY BLACK MAN? No. It actually did cross my mind a couple of times while I was writing the thing, that German (or whoever) would read it as the statement I was making. A sophomore reminded me of my responsibility. Reina and I always joked about our work being added to the black Diaspora, even if we wrote about 11th century samurai and the Japanese women who loved them. I was an ambassador of sorts, or would be ambassador, if New York ever gave me a ring.

Somewhere down the pipeline, this sophomore must have heard about Split Ends. I was doing my Trig homework at the last minute at the base of my locker when he stood over me.
“You didn’t make us all gang bangers lyin around drinkin 40s all day, did you, Jazz?” He was only half kidding.

“Nope. As far as I’m concerned, there’s enough of us beatin up on you guys for leavin home, shootin and killin each other, not being able to commit, yadda yadda yadda. They don’t need my help. Besides, you have enough problems without me adding any more press to the state of black males.”

I think he was satisfied. At least he was then. Who knew what he’d think if he read Split Ends? There were guys like him, guys like CF, I felt bad for when I saw the news doing stories surrounding the chalk outlines on sidewalks or 16 year-old girls my age begging for food stamps with toddlers dragging behind them, snot and tears rolling down both faces. And I have yet to see anyone switch to the other side of the street when they see me coming.

That’s exactly what they thought of CF. I didn’t judge them. Pretty hard to when you saw him walking back and forth from the Numbers House every day.

“Badness runs through that blood,” was the word up and down the street. But CF had his redeeming qualities. He really had to have redeeming qualities, if even Alaunna found him worthy enough to talk to.

For a couple of years after I stopped going to public school, I didn’t talk to him much. From my bedroom window, I’d watch him ride his bike until dark, a handlebar in one hand and a quart of Jungle Juice in the other. I witnessed him go from skinny and lanky to tall and well-bulit, not big and bulky like football players but well-toned.
I'd gone out to get the mail one afternoon, and he stopped out on the sidewalk. Why he chose that afternoon, I don't know. He'd definitely passed me on the street many times before.

"Hey, Jasmine. How you doin, girl?"

"I'm good." It felt strange, talking to him again. For years we'd run down to the creek together and swung off the tree rope, dunked each other under water, and mock insulted each other, but three years made us complete strangers.

"You like New School?"

I wasn't sure what to make of him. No wonder the little girls used to pick on him and Malik and his friends beat up on him sometimes. No wonder he made Alaunna drool every time she thought of him.

"I love New School."

"Yeah. You where you need to be. You still writin?"

I nodded, surprised. "How'd you know I wrote?"

"Alaunna told me. You write poetry like her?"

"No poetry ain't my speed. She's much better than I am. You like poetry?"

He looked up and down the sidewalk to make sure no one was coming. It didn't take much to isolate someone into oreadom, and any of the kids on this street would be thrilled to know CF paid attention in English class. CF was too pretty, with his buttery undertones and light brown eyes, to not be picked on. I scanned the
sidewalks, looking for Malik and his friends (some of them CF claimed as friends too), roaming surly as dogs. When we didn’t see anyone, CF was satisfied.

“Yeah, I love poetry. We don’t read it too much at school, and we ain’t got none on the shelves at home, but I like everything I’ve seen.”

“Who’s your favorite?”

“I don’t know. Who’s that cat who wrote about chokin his lady with her own hair?”

“Robert Browning?”

“Yo, he is messed up. But I like it all.”

“Chokin by hair. You’ve never thought of doing that, have you?”

“Naw, girl. I just like that crazy stuff. I’m sensitive too. I can feel Bishop and Yeats, and you know my man is Hughes.”

Bishop and Yeats and Hughes. In spite of myself, I smiled. “You write poetry, Chik?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Can I see it?”

“Naw, girl.” He laughed and blushed. Behind him, the sun was dipping low, casting shadows that fell over his face, but I could see his grin widening and the bit of red flushing across his cheeks. “It ain’t no good. I just write it for my lady.”

“Mmm hmmm. And would that lady be my sister?”

“No, not Al.”
With how much she talked about him and all of the time she said they spent together, I couldn’t believe it. Maybe he was lying to me because he wasn’t sure what I would think. “CF, does she know that? I think she’d like to believe you see her that way.”

“Yeah, she knows.”

I nodded, content with his story for now. “I gotta book you can borrow. I’m not using it right now, won’t be using it in class for another month.”

“Poetry?” he asked.

I nodded.

“I cain’t let Malik see it. I cain’t let him think I’m actin like no sell out.”

So CF would take my Norton Anthology of Poetry every few days, hide it between the notebooks in his backpack, and smuggle it into the Numbers House. Every time he brought it back he’d leave it in my mailbox, and when I’d see him, I’d tell him to keep it the whole month. But Malik rifled through his things sometimes, and CF didn’t want to be caught with it for two reasons: one, his own personal safety, and two, he didn’t want to see my property destroyed.

I should have some type of ceremonial celebration, every time I finish a ms. Other writers do. All that usually happens is I tell Reina, Priya, and my mother. Mommy gives me the standard “Good for you! You’ll let me read it, of course?” and I’ll try to remember if there are any parts that will offend her, but she’s never offended by anything I write. For my reward this time around, I got to take my sister to some
dumb party. Dad offered me money to take her, said it was some party thrown by one of the sons of a partner he played cards with. I wouldn’t take the money, told him I was a little wary of the parents not being home, parties not being my scene, and all. Dad was a kid once, right? Couldn’t he remember how wild parties got? But Dad said this was a good kid (I’m sure), and his father trusted him too (I’m sure). In the end, after he had pestered me a googol times, I refused the bribe but agreed to take Alaunna anyway.

Al and I spent the week before that Friday grumbling about it. I had more fun, though, because I had the added bonus of teasing her about CF’s poetry. “It’s addressed to ‘Croix,’ not me,” she’d say. “’Kay, Croix,” I’d say. We actually talked about CF a lot. For the first time, most of our CF conversations didn’t consist of me scolding her that he was too old.

“He could have gone to magnet school,” she told me. “He was actually on the waiting list for a while, got a spot and everything.”

“Why didn’t he go? He’d have been a lot happier.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “You should be able to understand that better than anybody. Imagine what they’d actually do to him if he did go to a magnet school. Who needs a bunch of threats coming true?”

“Yeah, but he wanted to go, right?”

“And I tried to talk him into it, but, I don’t know. It’s easier being a girl, Jasmine. They forgive us if we get too educated.”
She’d lost one of her ¼ carat diamond earrings. The late-March weather turned schizophrenic, and we went home and changed into shorts after we had needed coats that morning. We searched for it like we did just about everything else, in silence, in an area where she’d read away Sunday afternoon. Alaunna and I crawled on our hands and knees for at least two hours, me rubbing my hands over the tiny pebbles and trying to avoid the splintered glass. Every once in a while, I stood up and brushed the small rocks that had embedded themselves into my knees, fingering the indentations in my skin. I washed my hands in the creek water, but it became pointless. A fine layer of dirt collected in the creases of my palms. As dusk approached, Alaunna grew agitated and started walking up and down the bank, saying it was getting cold and dark, glancing down at the ground although she was sure she wouldn’t find anything. I tried to get her mind off of it.

“I was thinking of asking Reina to come to the party.”

“That’s nice for you,” she said, along the outline where water touched earth.

“You’ll have somebody to talk to. What am I supposed to do?”

“Come on, Croix. CF is going to be there. I only wanted to invite her so I could have someone to talk to.”

“Do whatever, Jasmine. He’s not going to be thinking of me.”

“Look,” I said, “You could have lost it on the way down here. I’ll go back up the bank and look for it. Don’t worry, we’ll find it.”

She didn’t answer.
I got used to the idea, thinking it was kind of cute, kind of sweet, of Al and CF being girlfriend and boyfriend, but I started to believe her, that they weren't actually an item. I wasn't exactly sure when that happened. Maybe when I asked CF how Croix was doing, and he didn't say something like “You know. You see her every day.” Or when Alaunna challenged me to recall one time when I had heard of them going on a date, even if it was only down at the creek—or Dad going ballistics, because no matter what precautions they took, they couldn’t keep their relationship secret for too long. Not in this community. He would have asked me all kinds of questions, Alaunna reasoned, attempting to get what information he could about the true nature of their relationship. Or maybe I finally came to the realization when I walked along the bank, searching for Al’s earring, and I saw CF frenching Wendy, his hand half way up her shirt. Yes, that was it.

They were sitting away from the bank, up in the hilly undergrowth. I was caught between looking away and turning my butt in the other direction before they saw me and taking another second to make sure that was really CF and Wendy, not tricks by shadows and the dimming evening light, not two kids living in this neighborhood who I’d never seen before who just happened to look a whole lot like CF and Wendy. I’m no voyeur, but I chose the latter. I’d never seen two people go at it like that before, and I was riveted. Wendy saw me first out of the corner of her eye, and then CF turned towards me. At first they didn't say anything, probably because there was no way to answer the what-in-Higher-Hades? look on my face.
“Hellooo,” I said, trying not to sound like an idiot, and failing.

“Hi, Jazz,” Wendy said.

“Hey, girl,” CF said, hand still up Wendy’s shirt.

“Um, if you happen to see a diamond earring along the bank, could you please return it to Alunna?”

“Mmm hmm,” Wendy said.

“Okay,” I said, and I left them.

I made my way back down the bank, and Alunna watched me with expectant eyes. Those two? No. Not possible. Wendy always had a look-but-don’t-touch policy, and I don’t care how much she thought she loved that boy. Nothing was worth her parents finding out she had jungle fever. And CF? He thought Malik would tear up his behind if he ever went to magnet school. This was going to make him more popular? Were they both crazy? What if Brett came along and saw them? Maybe they knew what they were doing.

Man, this must have really made Gloria pissed.

“Did you find it?” AI asked. I felt bad. The absolute shock on my face must have made her hopeful.

“No. But I found something else. Tell me something. Did I, like, momentarily slip into a parallel universe or something?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“That’s Croix?” I whispered, pointing back up the bank.
“I told you I wasn’t Croix.”

“Okay, but—Okay, okay. She used to call him Chik Fillet, and like dunk him, and be really mean to him—”

“I know.”

“When, how, did that happen?”

“When you weren’t looking. Not too long ago.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be looking for that.”

“They understand each other, and all that crap. You didn’t find my earring?”

“No. Sorry.”

Her shoulders slouched, and she headed back for the street. The weather chilled over again, and we walked back to the duplex, arms folded tightly around our chests, me looking forward absolutely baffled, Alaunna with her head down. I rubbed my dirt-caked hands along the small rises of goose bumps on my arm.

“I’ve got to find that earring. I don’t wanna get grilled about responsibility and ‘Why didn’t you take it off after Mass?’” she said mocking him.

“He’s not going to notice right away. We’ll find it.”

“Oh, he’ll notice. He made such a huge deal out of buying them for me. Took me down to the jewelry store and had me pick them out of the case and everything. He’ll probably suggest I wear them Friday night.”

“Then we’ve got until Friday to find it.”
She shook her head. "What's the point? Somebody probably stole it already. I'm just going to have to deal with it. I just won't get anything I really want the next time I ask for it."

* * *

As far as I knew (and Alaunna could have been hiding the info. from me), Dad never mentioned the diamond studs. We walked to the party in our usual silence; Alaunna would have muttered about it all the way there if anything significant had happened with Dad. The party was on the nicer side of Al’s neighborhood, the side I’d expected her and Dad to live on when they first moved here. The further we walked down the street, the wider and longer the front lawns got until some of them took up a third of the block. The house was at a dead end hidden behind a grove of trees and a winding driveway.

I spotted Reina parked on the street. I ran over to her car, leaving Alaunna on the sidewalk.

"Who lives here?" she asked opening the door. "There ain't houses this fine in Bordeaux."

"No landfills either," I said. "This is a pretty mixed neighborhood. Just about anybody. I have no idea, and I'm a little afraid to find out. Oh, yeah. Reina, this is Alaunna."

Alaunna waved with a limp wrist.
Reina got out of the car, a plastic grocery bag wrapped into a tight knot at the handles hanging from her arm.

“What’s that?” Al asked.

“Soda. You always have to accommodate the spiked-punch factor.”

When we walked up the driveway, I tried to make sure Alaunna didn’t trail too far behind us, but every time I slowed down Reina’s and my pace, Alaunna slowed down even more, making it obvious she didn’t want to be identified with us once we got to the top of the hill. The music wasn’t too loud, there was mostly laughter and people talking over each other. Nice and secluded, I thought, a dangerous mix for teenagers. It would be just perfect if the first party I’d been to since 8th grade turned into an orgy.

“I brought my camera,” Reina said.

“Girl, you crazy.” I punched her in the arm. “You don’t know nobody here. Who you gon blackmail?”

“Who said I’m gon blackmail anybody? Can’t I just take pictures of a party? Some of us do enjoy them, camera shy.”

“That’s right—you keep me out of them.”

The son of my father’s card-playing partner stood at the door to the rec room greeting everybody. “Hello hello hello,” he said to us when we finally reached the top. For a minute he studied the three of our faces, not exactly sure who we were and
where we came from. Reina poked me in the shoulder. "Hello hello hello, indeed," she said. I introduced us, mentioning Dad's name.

"Oh, yeah. I heard you were coming. I'm Glenn," he said. Then he stood taller, arching his back and pushing his chest out. Not only did I have to be at the dumb party in the first place, but now I was going to have to thwart the advances of pubescent boys the entire night.

"Now see, he was real cute before he had to go and do that," Reina whispered. The kids weren't doing much. Honestly, I had no idea what to expect. Whether couples would be reaching third base on the couch right there in front of everybody and then retreating to rooms upstairs. Or passing around a bong so everyone could share and share alike, I had no idea. But right now, nobody was doing Jack, or Jill for that matter. I did smell a little hint of burning reefer, but I couldn't see where it was coming from. I wondered if the smoke would get trapped in my hair, the sick, musky aura hanging around my nose. There was a group of girls on the couch drinking beer out of clear plastic cups. CF and Malik, two of the few faces I did recognize, played pool with some black and white boys I didn't know. CF waved, although I wasn't sure if that were meant for me or Alaunna. Lucky for me, Malik saw me too, and while he didn't wave or smile, he stared at me while rubbing turquoise-blue chalk against the end of his pool cue. I turned to point CF out to Reina and warn her about Malik.

"Jasmine, how you doin girl?" Gloria asked, bottle of Root Beer Schnapps in one hand and blue plastic cup in the other. She reeked bitter-sweet. I knew why I
never liked alcohol. It was more pleasant in the bottle but permeated off of breath like antiseptic or cough medicine. Gloria’s newest find, some other boy I’d never seen before, followed close behind her as if he were attached to her back. He had his hands in his pockets but not far enough to cover the thick gold watch on his left wrist.

“Where you been hidin?” she asked. Gloria wrapped both arms around me, careful not to spill the contents of her cup. Raspberry and vanilla from her hair conditioner penetrated my nostrils, and the mix with the Schnapps knocked my head back for a second. I was careful not to crush her curls. Not exactly sure what to do with my arms, so I gave her several quick taps between the shoulder blades. She didn’t seem drunk.

“Oh, I’ve been busy,” I said.

The billiard balls cracked.

“I’m sure you have with all that work they got you doin. Oh, hey there, Alaunna. Jasmine, this is Perry, Glenn’s cousin.” She just grinned grinned grinned at Perry. This is my Perry. Couldn’t you just eat him up? Sweet as Schnapps.

“Glenn’s cousin,” Reina repeated.

“You go to NSN, don’t you?” As masculine as dear Perry looked, with those broad shoulders, high sculpted cheek bones, and dark chocolate skin, man! did he have a high voice. He reeked of Polo. Schnapps and Polo are not a good mix, let me assure you, not unless you like Root Beer Polo. Women wouldn’t know whether to jump on you or lick your wrists. Perhaps it was a good mix for men after all.
The billiard balls cracked. One tap, two taps, three. Nice shot.

Was that a bad thing, dear Perry, my NSN? "So does Reina here, my good friend," I said.

"Oh, you do," Gloria said shaking her hand, and she took a moment to look Reina up and down, one of the few girls who could compete with her in the trendy department. Except Reina wasn't prissy about it. Reina matched up with Gloria on every account, from Gloria's black slip dress hanging just above her knees, to Reina's silk white blouse tied up in the front and loose fit blue jeans. Reina's hair wasn't half as long as Gloria's, but it was thick and straight with spiraling curls on both sides of her face. The only place where Gloria had her beat was the nails. Gloria's were long and painted a warm pink with thin lavender v's reaching from the tips to the middle of the nail. Reina still chewed hers. I'm sure Gloria didn't know what to make of Reina, since she probably assumed all of my good friends were my shade or lighter.

"You wanna drink?" Gloria asked.

"No, we cool," Reina said. "We brought our own beverages," and she lifted her bag.

"Have you seen the house yet?" Perry asked.

"No, that would be nice though," Reina said.

Alaunna sighed.

"Why don't you check out the pool game?" I suggested. Alaunna folded her arms and walked away.
Mr. Perry loved his cousin Glenn's house, oh yes. Almost like he lived there (and Perry didn’t want to reveal his address), and Gloria sure did love hanging on his arm while he showed off cousin Glenn’s house. Downstairs, there was a smaller room behind the bar. Glenn’s dad spent two years putting a decent little studio together back there. A flight of stairs led up from the rec room area to the kitchen. On the island, an assortment of pastel colored plastic bowls filled with a variety of chips, pretzels, and gourmet flavored popcrons (caramel, cheddar, and butterscotch if you’re keeping score at home) circled around the sink. This was an Akira party—plates and napkins with the tortured anime boy’s mug had been strewn all over the counter, on the floor, and across the island. Empty, half-empty, full, and backwash filled bottles of mint, Root Beer, and peach Schnapps and a fruity assortment of berry-blend wine coolers sat on the island and the floor around it. Would we like to see the refrigerator? Oh, yes, Perry, let’s see the refrigerator. There were all kinds of beer, foreign and domestic, with snarling pirates and devils shaking pitch forks on their labels, but those were hands-off by order of Glenn’s dad. Can’t have kids full of alcoholic Satan, I guess. Let’s conduct a little experiment, I said to Reina. How long before those beers become not so hands-off? Then in we went to Glenn’s room (immaculately cleaned by the maid) with his built-into-the-wall bookshelf filled with five or six shelves of leather hardback editions. Then to Glenn’s away-at-college sister’s room (also immaculately cleaned by the maid), and the bathroom off of Glenn’s room, the jets installed in the black marble bath tub just two years ago.
“Oh, look the Mardi Gras’s going on up here too,” I said as we walked into the living room.

“No doubt,” Perry said.

Four boys and seven girls sat and stood around the piano, they set down the top of the baby grand. It made a nice table for the wine and beer bottles and ashtray. Not too long, I supposed, before the ashtray fell on the off-white carpet and smudged it grey. One girl sat at the edge of the bench, a leg crossed over the other and cigarette propped between her fingers. She exhaled at the ceiling, contemplating on smoke. The room filled with the essence of singed cinnamon. They must have passed around cloves. The boy sitting next to her kept rolling his eyes saying, “I don’t know how to play that” as his friends yelled requests at him, trying to talk over each other.

“Out here’s the deck,” Perry said. “Spread’s across the whole back of the house. It’s really nice early mornings sometimes. Might see deer trailing through the back yard.”

Perry opened the glass doors to the deck, whispered something in Gloria’s ear, went back inside. The corners of her mouth twitching, Reina looked at me, and I warned her not to make me laugh.

“It’s so good seeing you again,” Gloria said. “I’m glad you came.”

“Well,” I said nodding, “I’m glad I came too.”

“Hey, Jasmine. I didn’t think you were too much in to these things.”
The three of us turned towards Wendy who was sitting on the deck taking small sips from a bottle of Perrier. She’d avoided the blinding lights by huddling against the thick, dark red beams in the corner. The shadows covering her face made her eyes look black.

“I gotta get out some time. You’re beginning to make me feel like I’m some kind of recluse,” I said.

With a glass of red wine in his hand, Perry came back for Gloria. Gloria took it and paused for a long drink and then said to Wendy in her sweet little hostess voice: “What you doin out here, baby? Party’s inside.”

“I needed a breather. I’ll be back in a sec.”

“Well,” Gloria said as Perry pulled her back indoors, “don’t y’all stay out here too long. You haven’t seen the hot tub yet.”

“You know,” Reina said, “I think I’ll go check and see how drunk the piano man is and if he can really play. Like your little friend Gloria said,” she whispered, “don’t you leave me by myself too long. I might get assimilated.”

“So, why are you really here?” Wendy asked.

I knelt down beside her and zipped up my jacket. “My dad just begged me and begged me and begged me to bring Al because she doesn’t get out enough, and he wanted to make sure she behaved like a normal thirteen year old, and apparently, this is what normal thirteen year olds do.”

“Where is she?”
“Downstairs watching the mini-pool tournament.”

She crossed her legs and took another sip. “Sorry about the other day. Damn, that was awkward.”

I considered asking her how she thought that relationship was going to work, if they were serious enough to battle getting attacked and pressured to break up, but decided against it. I shrugged. “Wrong place at the wrong time, blah blah blah. Why aren’t you inside?”

“I’m feelin kind of pukish. I need some air.”

“Wendy, it’s only 8—”

“I’m not drunk, stupid.” She waved the bottle in my face.

“Perry probably takes credit for Perrier.”

“Perry’s a bitch ass.” Wendy set the bottle on the deck and then leaned forward, taking in shallow breaths.

“You know him?”

She sat back up and tilted her head back and breathed in again. “Go to school with him.”

We didn’t say anything for a moment. I sat down and leaned against the wall, listening to several male voices below the deck playfully arguing about who had the uglier hair cut. I couldn’t see anything, deer or even trees, in the back yard—the deck lights too bright. But I knew where the reefer was coming from now. Weed fumes
seeped up through the beams in the deck. Couldn’t have been too good for Wendy’s stomach. She bowed her head.

“You do look ill.” I could tell that much, even in the shadows. Her skin was transparent, filmy green underneath the surface. Blue crescent moons circled the bottom of her eyes. “Maybe you should go home.”

“No, I’ve got an excuse to stay away from Lewis and Mary Ann for a couple hours. I not givin that up.”

“Why don’t you at least lie down?”

“I don’t know where any of the bathrooms are, and I make a point not to throw up in people’s houses on the first visit.”

“You didn’t get the tour?”

“With Perry? Hell no.”

I laughed. Wendy ran the bottle across her forehead and neck. Maybe, if Wendy hadn’t stopped coming over to my house two years ago, she would have put her head on my shoulder. Maybe she was thinking about doing it now, and I wanted her to, but my body was too tense next too hers, my muscles cramping to keep from touching her.

“How are Lewis and Mary Ann?”

Wendy flipped up her middle finger.

“Uh, Wendy, are you—”

“God no. We just mess around. That’s all.”
Sure. Right.

“You better not be. You know what I’ll do to you if I find out you are, and I’ll sic my mom on you too. I worry about you all the time, Wendy.”

“Yeah. I know.” She smiled although she must have known I didn’t believe her. “I’m alright, Jasmine. I’ll be down there in a few.”

“Unh hunh,” I said getting up. “That’s what you always say.”

I was going to kill Reina. Not only did I find her perched next to Perry on the couch in the rec room, but Alaunna wasn’t with CF, and I didn’t see Malik anywhere. CF stood in front of Perry, waving a bottle of root beer (no Schnapps) as he talked. Gloria sat on the arm rest massaging dear Perry’s shoulders. I squeezed in between Reina and the other arm rest.

“Where is my sister?” I mouthed.

“In the kitchen,” she mouthed back.

“And where is Malik?”

“I don’t know. Jazzie, don’t worry about Al. There’re plenty of people around.”

“That makes me feel much better after all your stories.”

“They were never eye-witness, and I do tend to overexaggerate. Calm down,” she said patting me on the knee.

Perry and CF went on and on, arguing about the different types of kissing (the greeting, I-just-called-to-say-I-love-you, the romantic, and the erotic kisses), with
Gloria adding her “amens” and “that’s right baby” for support. Naw see, that’s how you get her to fall into you all weak, CF said. And no, I don’t want my woman all limp in my arms, Perry said. Wendy didn’t look too weak to me the other day, but that might have been because CF was holding her up with that one hand under her shirt. With certain comments, Reina pinched my knee, and I kicked her in the foot. We were reaching a collective boiling point, where both Reina and I would start bursting out laughing at any given moment. I decided to interrupt the conversation before we exposed our virginal status.

“So, Gloria, how long has Perry been your beau?”

“Five months,” she said proudly.

Ah. Golden anniversary by 16 year-old standards. “How did you guys hook up?”

“When I first saw this girl—” Perry started.

“You really wanna know that?” Reina whispered.

“I couldn’t believe she was free. Guys jack each other up for a girl like this. Smart, beautiful, sexy—”

“Especially sexy,” Reina whispered.

Perry looked at Gloria and pecked her on the cheek. “See, now that’s the I-love-you kiss. So many brothers these days are ignoring our own good, fine looking women and chasing after vanilla.”
CF dropped his hands to his sides. “I guess you ain’t never been nagged then.”

He went into a falsetto, “‘The only good black men are married, gay, or dead.’ They all treat us like losers anyway. What’s the point? We’re never good enough. Not smart enough. Don’t make enough money. ‘Why can’t you be like Bobby, Gladys’s husband? I bet you got five kids somewhere you ain’t payin fo.’ I don’t hate our women, just some of them with their uppity little asses.”

“But can you really blame them?” Perry asked.

“School him please,” Gloria said.

“But how can you deny African queens like Gloria what they deserve? The way we mistreat our women no wonder they get pissed off with us. We leave ’em, and we don’t want to help ’em out, and we expect them to understand? Come on, son, they’ve been way beyond patient with us. We don’t want to stick anything out. We don’t support our own businesses. We don’t take care of our own women. We ship are kids to private schools cuz the schools in our communities aren’t good enough—”

“No he didn’t!” Reina said.

What had just happened? I’d slipped into two parallel universes in one week.

“Alrightie then,” I said jumping up, “I hate to knock you off your little soap box and all, but I didn’t have to say anything when you were all up in CF’s business, but now you all up in mine. What was that little comment you made about private schools?”

“You ain’t suggestin what I think you’re suggestin about us,” Reina said.
“Naw,” Perry said. “I have not suggested a thing. You’re the one making all the suggestions.”

“Well, what’s your problem with me going to NSN?” I asked.

Perry remained very calm, still enjoying his Bronze Queen’s back rub. “I don’t have a problem with you going to NSN. That’s typical for you. Reina doesn’t belong there though.”

“Now how you gonna say somethin dumb like that?” CF started to walk away from the conversation.

“Yeah, you better splain this to me,” Reina said.

“We can’t talk about this in mixed company,” Perry said looking around the room, eyeballing the white kids.

I raised my voice. “Why can’t we talk about this in mixed company? How come I get to go to NSN and Reina doesn’t?”

Perry honestly didn’t seem to know why we couldn’t understand him. “Cuz,” he said lowering his voice, “she’s pure.”

Reina laughed so hard she almost fell off the couch. “Sucka, how you know I’m pure?”

“I don’t believe this. You are telling me I’m less of a human being than you are cause I got more Europeans messin up my bloodline than you do?”

“You’re still a good person,” Perry said.

Reina laughed harder until her chest was heaving in and out.
"You stupid, man. You cain't even prove you're pure. Hey, CF, we mutts!" I said.

"That's okay, baby," he squeezed my hand. "I'm down with the D-O-G."

"Oh, man," I said. I looked at Gloria. She didn't seem to be angry with me, just a little disappointed that I couldn't understand.

Reina stood up. "Jazzie, let's go find Al."

"You just might be okay though, baby," she said to me in the hallway, "Some mutts are cute."

Alaunna watched a game of spades. When I told her we were going, she wanted to see the last hand played out. I told her we would probably never be allowed in cousin Glenn's house again, and she looked at me as if to ask if I had gotten her into trouble too. Dad wasn't expecting her home so early, and he would know something were wrong. She'd rather suffer here and wait until 11:30 to leave. Dad would get home at 12:00, I bet her, right when he thought she'd be home. That made more to sense to Al, and the three of us left.

In the car, Aluanna never asked what happened. She sat in the back seat with her mouth set in a hard line and her eyebrows furrowed. Reina and I couldn't keep from giggling, which obviously ticked Al off, and led her to show her disapproval by sighing and yawning. Like I figured, Dad wasn't home. I walked Alaunna to the door.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"Fine," she said.
"What's the matter?"

"Your little friend Wendy is a gangsta ho," she said without looking at me.

I grabbed her arm. "What do you mean?"

"I saw her with Malik on the deck."

"Doing what?" I demanded.

"Talking."

"Oh that's it."

"You just don't talk to Malik." She looked up at me, squinting her eyes. Too much anger wrinkling her forehead. Too much anger for 13. "You don't know how she treats CF. One time she didn't even talk to him for two days. Wouldn't even let him touch her or nothing. He doesn't deserve to be treated like that. He deserves much better than her."

"He's three years older, Al. That's too old for you. 25 and 28, it doesn't matter. But 13 and 16 makes a lot of difference. You're not going to tell him, are you?"

"Who knows. Let's see how far she pushes me."

10:30 at night, Reina and I sat in Perkins eating pancakes. I was content with the maple syrup, but I really craved strawberry, wondered why they never had strawberry like IHOP. She talked on an on about a girl like Gloria who lived in her neighborhood and how they never talked anymore either. Split Ends didn't make Gloria witchy enough, she said. Too weird for me to think about the way Gloria received me. What was I supposed to think? Was that a mind game? Did she even
remember what she used to say to me, what she used to say to other kids about me?
Perry and Gloria, we agreed (we couldn't see it at first) were perfect for each other. I
never told her about Wendy and Malik though, knowing that Alaunna was right.
Nothing with Malik was ever innocent. I should have stayed with Wendy a few more
minutes. Reina wouldn't have missed me too much.

Before we left, we went to the bathroom to put on lip balm. I stood in front of
the mirror, smearing on three or four layers. My lips always felt chapped. Reina put
her stick in her purse and watched me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw how
puzzled her face appeared in the mirror.

"Do you think I'm a racist?" she asked.

"What?" I looked at myself in the mirror. "You don't even come close."

"Yeah, but I get so mad at them sometimes."

"With good reason," I said, "but you're not like Perry, or Gloria. You don't treat
them as The Great White Collective, and you don't hate them."

"Man, if I ever get as bad as Perry, smack me up against the wall and set me
straight," she said.

"You do the same for me, okay?"
Chapter Five

How Negro do I go? It’s amazing what a Perry could make you worry about, wonder if you really were one of those black bourgeoisie Baraka and Cleaver loved to spit at, trying to run out of your own skin. For a while I’d cringe at my speech, listening to the way I rounded my vowels or firmly placed the “-ing” at the end of words. I even questioned those words, not wondering if they were too “big,” but did I use them because I thought they were big? Did the words I spoke actually lighten my skin a few more shades? The kids in the neighborhood used to think so. And I didn’t listen to the same radio station all day long like they did, so when they started talking about singing this song or that, I’d kind of bob my head to the rhythm, and they’d mock me for being off-beat. All black chilluns can dance an’ sing, don’ ya know? I got labeled as listening to “that Metallica” because “that Metallica” served as the epitome of white music. I didn’t realize music had color.

Perry, I guess you wouldn’t know anything about that, right? I mean, you’ve probably never had other black kids make fun of you, hanging around your cousins’ house with its nice little wine cellar and recording studio. Kids from lower-middle-class neighborhoods—you know, kids like me?—have never cocked an eyebrow at you, have they? You never shivered just a little bit when Baraka wrote about nice upper-middle-class black families living out the upper-middle-class white families’ American Dream? No? Of course not. Not you, Perry.
Let me tell you, New School of Nashville was no Multicultural Dream Palace either. Oh, I know. That’s what you’ve been led to believe. That’s what we’d like you to believe, that we’re all “It’s A Small World” dolls spinning around with metal rods shoved up our backs, winking and smiling at each other 24/7/365. Yes, New School of Nashville tried to encourage us to be as individual as our little hearts desired, and nobody minded what I didn’t listen to and for how long. The more phonetically correct my speech the better, although the twings and twangs of some of the white kids’ southern accents weren’t uncommon, and I often found myself slipping into dialect with Reina and Marcus. You ever speak Black English, Perry, you know, dialect? Did anyone try to beat it out you once your cousins’ parents got a wine cellar and recording studio in their house?

But there was always something swimming just below the surface at New School, lurking, waiting for the right to jump out and bite. Freshman year, we got into a ridiculous discussion (I can’t even remember how) about the representation of blacks on TV. Who needs Black Entertainment Television, the majority thought, now all of these “black shows” were appearing on major networks? Yes, I said, frustrated, but that was still not enough, and BET was more than just “black shows”—it dealt with issues we couldn’t discuss on NBC. Of course, I didn’t go into detail about those issues, but you know what I mean. No reason for me to explain that we needed a place to vent where the Eye of America would not be weighing down on us because my classmates wouldn’t understand. BET was racist, they decided, and so was I, for
supporting it. I didn’t even watch BET that much. See, I told you they wouldn’t understand, but I’m sure you’ve never been in that kind of situation.

But being called a racist traumatized me—it punched me on the inside somewhere I couldn’t find, and that spot stayed there all day gnawing at me, whispering “You’re a racist. When they look at you, all they see is a racist. You’re just the same to them as those guys wearing pointy, white hats.” And I knew it wasn’t true—I’m not a racist—but that spot deep inside still burned away, like a large letter “R” had been branded on my heart. I was so cynical the rest of the day that my best friends avoided me. That night, though, when I told Mama, I cried, hollering, wondering how anyone could even think that of me, wondering how they couldn’t understand what I said wasn’t racist. None of my accusers remember that day, but I can’t forget it. Perry, I know you’ve never been called a racist, especially since I know you think the more African, the better. Nobody’s called you racist for believing you’re more human than the rest of us because you’ve got more of that pure, African blood. I’m sure you don’t know how it burns.

Sophomore year, a group of males (who to this day remain unidentified) drew balloons and racist commentary on the ads of *Ebony* and *Jet* in the library. The black people in the ads now talked about how much they loved fried chicken and the new hydraulics they were going to install on their hoopties. That was, after all, how black people spent the majority of their time—driving around with gangsta rap blaring up and down the street with a bucket of fried chicken and biscuits between their legs.
Well, nobody at New School could ever think that nice, little enlightened white kids could suggest such a thing. Racial stereotyping coming from one of us? Not possible! Not our Unity=Diversity Happy Land! The *Ebony/Jet* Conspiracy created quite a stir though grades K-12, and the administration decided to deal with those under-the-surface lurking things by putting all the high school students in the auditorium for an hour and letting us work it out for ourselves. No teachers present. Just 250 students in a hot auditorium with two mics, one at each end of the stage. Priya, Priya’s sister, Reina, Mae Li, the Wongbudhappitak sisters and I sat huddled together, watching white kid after white kid after white kid go to the mics and proclaim that racism was not an issue at NSN.

One young gentleman, Jake Reed, was impassioned and enraged that we even had to talk about this. He was one of those kids whose family showed up at every New School function and donated money year after year. When he walked up to the mic, his hands trembled, but his face was controlled. “It’s ridiculous that we’re even here,” he yelled. His face reddened as he talked. Whispering in the audience stopped. The auditorium became a hollow shell; his voice, magnified by the microphone, bounced off the walls and slapped us in the ears. “We’ve never had a racial problem, and we never will,” he continued. I nudged Reina, who nudged Priya, who looked down at Mae Li and the Wongbudhappitak sisters. “Get up there and say something,” we said in silence. But none of us did—we didn’t budge once some of the white kids started nodding in agreement. I can tell you why I didn’t go, Perry. I was afraid. I
kept staring at Jake Reed’s shaking hands. I’m not sure if my fear came from worrying that he would hurt himself or because he believed every word coming out of his mouth. Jake, when he finished his diatribe, stormed out of the auditorium, throwing the doors open and letting their glass rattle as they crashed shut.

None of us non-white kids stepped up to the mics that day. But you’ve never been in a situation like that, one where you knew you shouldn’t dare open your mouth. Nobody’d hear you anyway.

I wondered what Perry would think if he had been there that day. I wondered what he would think if he heard some of my conversations with Reina, how we agonized over how much our parents worried about us every time we walked out our front doors. How my mother freaked when Josh brought me home one day, and I was sitting in the back seat. I had a great time that evening with Josh and Lucy, but as soon as I reached the porch, my mother had appeared behind the security door. “Come in,” she said to me, and she took my hand and pulled me inside the house. Although she’d never looked her age, her forehead twisted in confused and angry knots. “Why were you sitting in the back?” she asked. “Why couldn’t Lucy sit in the back?” I’d chosen to sit in the back, didn’t mind the back—it had nothing to do with my color. But they’d allowed me to sit in the back, Mama’d said. They’d never even considered how bad that must look.

Now, I can never sit in anybody’s back seat without wondering if I’m really at the back of the bus. And I’ve heard Reina’s parents talking about the 60s and how
they had to cross the street, go to the opposite sidewalk, when walking past Vanderbilt University. No, Reina and I would try to tell our parents, you don’t have to worry about Carol, or Robin, or Peter, or Lloyd. You don’t have to worry about us being followed around at this Sears. And yes, we realize that some things haven’t changed. But some have. I’m sure Perry’s parents never worried about him like that.

Perry, I can’t go back in time and tell certain ancestors not to sleep with certain other ancestors. If my undertones are a little too yellow for your liking, tough. I don’t use “big” words because I think I’m some high-flying oreo showing off her education. I happen to love words. And yes, I do like and listen to everything except Country and Polka. I’ll never be black enough for some. I’ll never be white enough, tame enough, for others. And Perry, I’m not going to get ulcers over trying to convince you or Gloria or the *Ebony/Jet* Conspiracy Boys that I belong among you. I’ve done that for far too datgum long.

So what does that leave me with?

* * *

From what I could tell, my father considered Al’s little party journey a success. Obviously, she never told him a thing, never told him about the drugs, or the annoying kids, or how she wasted most of her time watching spades games. I hated bothering Alaunna—I never did get used to her long, quiet stares, the chill behind her eyes when I dared to interrupt her. But she had told me something, and it unnerved me more than Perry had.
"I wanted to ask you something."

Alaunna laid on her on bed on her stomach, peering into a book on her pillow. When I opened her door she, slouched-shouldered, slowly turned her head, her light brown eyes piercing into mine. "I'm kind of busy, Jasmine."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I said bowing my head and nodding, but I wanted to ask you something about Friday night."

"If you wanted to know something about Friday night," she said turning on her side, turning her back towards me, "you coulda called me over the weekend. Now the school week's started, and I have work to do."

Alaunna developed a heightened voice inflection especially for me. Whenever I got near, whenever she felt my presence, her voice arched and took on the quality of a parent talking to a child, or a disgruntled mistress chastising a servant. I drummed my fingers against the door frame. "Look, Al, we both know we don't enjoy talking over the phone, and what I need to ask you is too important. Now, don't pretend you're so bogged down with homework. We both know you're not doing it. I may have been born yesterday, but I stayed up all night."

"That's clever," she said dropping her book on the floor. "Who'd you steal that from?" She sat up, folded her arms, and glared at me.

"Public domain."
I sat at the end of her bed, which startled her. Her mouth hung open, as if she had been violated in some way, and I, trying to wipe all traces of sarcasm from my expressions, faced her. “Please be straight with me,” I said.

My seriousness made us both nervous because I had never made such a request, never desired her honesty, never called a momentary truce. The fact that I could even speak to her on such terms shocked us both, the electricity of the moment surging from head to toe then leaving us limp. Alaunna leaned back against her headboard, and for the first time when she looked at me, the resentment behind her eyes had softened. But truces don’t last forever:

“Did you really see Malik on the deck with Wendy?”

She sat up, and her eyebrows crowded over her eyes in anger. “Why would I lie?”

“I didn’t say you did.”

“Well, you’re questioning my integrity. What for?”

“Because,” I said, “storytellers never tell the whole truth. They always edit something out or add something to make whatever they’re telling more entertaining, more useful, even if the entertainment will only benefit them. I know you haven’t exactly been straight with me in the past. I’m not that stupid you know—I’m not taken in that easily. But before, you were only telling me what was coming from your mind. You’re really insinuating something here. I need to know if it’s true.”

She sniffed. “You’re still calling me a liar. Why don’t you believe me?”
“Well,” I said trying to keep voice as calm and leveled as possible, “I still haven’t called you a liar, and it’s pretty obvious you’re jealous of Wendy—”

“I’m not jealous of her. The only reason CF likes her is because of me. He fell in love with LA, and then he fell in love with her, and once he realizes she’s nothing compared to LA, he’ll leave her.”

In spite of myself, I bowed my head and laughed. Laughed so hard my shoulders shook. Laughed so hard I rocked her bed. This kid, this thirteen year-old kid, had been the source of my anxiety for so long? This thirteen year-old kid, who didn’t turn out to be my dream sister, who I carried a small twinge of guilt over in the back of my mind all these years because I couldn’t get along with her, had preoccupied so much of my time? Made me wonder sometimes what was wrong with me? Made me question if it were my fault we didn’t connect? “You know, Alaunna, not everything’s about you. Maybe their relationship has absolutely nothing to do with you. Maybe they were attracted to each other, and you didn’t start the fire.”

She shook her head and smirked. “You have no idea. You haven’t even paid attention to either one of them in 2½ years. You just don’t want to admit Wendy could be associated with someone the likes of Malik.”

“Soame the likes of Malik,” I said under my breath. “This doesn’t have anything to do with Wendy. It’s about him. I don’t want to believe anything happened for him, not for her. I worked on this huge writing project all of last semester, some nonfiction thing, about me, about my neighborhood, about the people I
knew, and I never mentioned him. I didn’t want a little black thug running around, figured we had enough portraits of black thugs. But now I wonder, do we automatically assume he’s doing something wrong every time we look at him?”

Alaunna laughed, inched towards me, snapped her fingers in my face. “Hello! We are still talking about Malik, aren’t we? We know who he hangs around. We’ve seen his grandmother popping him upside the head for busting somebody’s window or tagging somebody’s car, and you’re going to tell me you feel sorry for him? Go ahead. You get caught alone with him.”

“I didn’t say he hasn’t done anything to deserve his reputation. I’m saying I wonder if you chose him over some random guy for your little story because he’s such an easy target.”

“Listen to yourself. If you doubted me so much, how come you believed me Friday night?”

“Perry didn’t get me thinking until Saturday morning.”

“Well, if you wanna pity him, fine, but I know what I saw.”

When my father came home, I headed straight for the creek. The sun had already set, and it was hard to find the trail. My feet tangled in vines, tripped over rocks embedded in dirt, barely rising above the ground. Stray, thin branches of trees scratched my cheeks and forehead. I probably would have walked straight into the silent water if it hadn’t run dark, inky inside the banks. I watched Wendy sitting
farther up the bank smoking a cigarette. She faded into the darkening night, blue-black as a shadow, staring out at the water. I could only make out the trace of her body. When she took a drag, the glow from the ember lit up her face.

“Hey, Nolan,” I called through cupped hands.

She turned her head and stared in my direction. I waved, and she acknowledged my by raising the hand holding the cigarette, red and orange flaring at the end. “What’re you doing, Waters?” she asked.

“Looking for you.”

“Well, why don’t you get down here. Stop making me yell.”

I sat down beside her, faced her, but she continued to stare at the water. I could see a crescent moon circling the bottom of her eye. “You okay?”

“If that’s what you came to bother me about,” she said looking at me, I couldn’t tell if she were joking. “I’m tired is all. It’s not easy taking care of four kids.”

“No, that’s not what I wanted to ask you. Um, I, um, I just wanted to know if something were true or not. And I’m only asking because I’m worried, you know, about you and CF, and I don’t mean it like that, cause I know what you’re thinking.”

She scratched her forehead and sighed. “What, Jazzie?”

“I don’t know if I believe her, but Alaunna said she saw you out on the deck with Malik, and you know, and I was just wondering, you know, if you’re okay.”

“You mean,” she stood up and dropped the cigarette, “you wanna know if I was foolin around with him.”
“No, I never said that. I just—”

“Then why are you here? Then why bring CF into it at all?”

“But,” I said standing up, “I always have a knee-jerk reaction to Malik. I was just wondering if you were alright. To, to make sure—”

“To make sure I’m not screwing around on my boyfriend, who you also care so much about.” There was a strange serenity on Wendy’s face, as if she were keeping me from a joke I wouldn’t understand. She reached into her jeans’ pocket for a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She lit another cigarette, and in the darkness, the flame blinded me. “I’m so glad,” she said, “you’ve shown so much concern for me over the last few days. I guess that makes up for two years, doesn’t it?”

“Wait a minute,” I said, angry for the first time, “you’re the one who stopped coming over. You were always welcome, and you know that.”

“Oh, I know, but Jasmine, I guess you were too preoccupied with your new friends at your new school. Did it ever dawn on you that maybe you could call and find out why I couldn’t come over anymore? Or did you just sweep me out of your life completely?”

“That’s not fair,” I said folding my arms. Still furious, my lips began to quiver. “If you wanted me to know, you would have told me.”

“Maybe I couldn’t tell you.” She took a drag, looked up, and exhaled.

“I’m still your friend.”
“Yes, I know. I’ve never heard of bad weather friends. Here you come, running, getting all worried. ‘Oh, yeah, that Wendy chick I used to know. Gee, she looks pretty messed up—’”

“Wendy—”

“—and you know she’s been hanging out with the wrong people. I think I’ll go rescue her.’ God, Jasmine, why do you think I’m so weak? I useta beat Gloria off of you.”
John John, home for his spring break, sat in the living room reading the paper and swallowed whole pieces of toast smothered in grape jelly. Mommy must not have been home. She'd never let him shower crumbs in the carpet like he was doing now. He had just arrived—not anticipating warmer weather, dressed in a heavy sweater and hadn’t taken time to change. I’d just come home from baby-sitting Al, entered through the kitchen when I saw him there. Mommy and I never knew when he’d be home—he’d come on breaks, stop by some weekends, but with each consecutive visit, the time he spent with us grew shorter and shorter.

“'Ey, boy. I ain’t vaccumin your mess.”

“How you doin?” I wanted to point out he’d dropped the sports’ section in the mess of jelly and toast sitting on the coffee table when he jumped up, but he crushed me in a hug.

“You coulda called,” I said swatting him on the back of the head. I pointed at the paper. “I hope Mommy’s read that.”

“Aw, man!” He sucked his teeth and lifted the paper off of the jelly. He flipped through to the back pages, seeing what could be salvaged, worrying a grease stain was forming. John John wiped the jelly off with his finger and then stuck it in his mouth. “Shea’s really doing well for herself. Pulled down 10 rebounds and scored 22 points last night.”
"Yeah," I said. "Shea Shea's doin alright. Hardly ever see her anymore. Basketball and softball take up her whole year. If it's not the season, then it's camp, or pre-season."

"How come you're home so late?"

I rolled my eyes at him. "I told you I have to take care of Al."

"What? She's thirteen." He offered me the plate of toast, but I declined the purple mass of mush. He took another piece and shoved it in his mouth.

"I know she's thirteen, but the blatantly obvious hasn't always grabbed Dad's attention. She'll be happy to see you. You are going to see her, aren't you?"

"Jasmine, if it means I have to see him—"

"Because she thinks an awful lot of you, and you could stop by when he's not there." I decided I wasn't going to let him argue with me and started upstairs.

"Hey, Jazzie, she still seein CF?"

I stopped on the stairs and leaned over the banister. John John turned around and looked up at me, his eyebrows arched in fearful anticipation. The skin around his eyes and mouth was taut and had lost its glow. I had not seen my brother this serious in a long time, and I wondered when he got grown.

"How did you know about that?" I asked.

"I've heard them a couple of times, down at the creek."

"But John, you haven't been here—you told on them to Dad, didn't you?"
He smirked and picked up the newspaper and his plate. "I couldn’t have that little punk messin with my sister.” He went into the kitchen.

I wanted to tell him that she blamed me all this time. I wanted to tell him CF wasn’t a little punk, and did it ever occur to him that the very same sister he avoided was the one he decided to protect? I didn’t mention any of this to him because I knew it wouldn’t matter. John John and Alaunna were only brother and sister in name, and CF’s image had been tarnished years before he was born. Too many years had determined my brother’s relationships, and I decided to move on.

* * *

I took Alaunna to meet my friends not because I wanted to, but because I had to. School work interfered with quality family time. Lucy picked us up from Alaunna’s house and took us to Josh’s. Alaunna objected to the change in scenery, but I told her Dad didn’t mind my taking her, thrilled with the opportunity for her to meet even more new people. I wanted to see how she’d react to Josh Schwartz’s house, if you could call it a house. Lucy pulled up along the sidewalk (the driveway was full), and as the two of us piled out of the jeep, Alaunna sat, gawking at the property.

She was even more astonished when we got inside. Josh’s entrance opened up on to a balcony, and when Alaunna walked through the door, she went over to the railing and leaned over, amazed at the sight below. On the first floor, Josh, Reina, Priya, Mae Li, and Peter sat in bean bag chairs in front of the big screen TV.

“Oh, hey, Al.” Reina looked up and waved.
"Hey, Jazz, get down here!" Josh yelled.

We walked down the spiraling staircase, Alaunna clinging to me, her arm pressing against my back, making me feel she'd knock us both down. "What was the girl wearing?" she had asked. I explained to her, as we descended, that Mae Li was fond of blue and grey camouflage pants, and she always wore a flack jacket over a t-shirt. I knew she would find my friend's to be a bit different, but I never thought they would evoke fear in her. Josh greeted us at the bottom of the staircase in a jersey and a pair of faded, bleached sweat pants.

“You must be Jasmine’s sister. So nice to finally meet you," he said. He took her hand and shook it (she did not offer it).

“Oh," she said, “so you’re Josh.”

He looked at me and frowned. “Waters, I thought I told you about that cartel I started in Honduras in the strictest confidence.”

“I know, I know. What can I say? She bled it out of me. After six hours worth of that, you woulda told too.”

Alaunna looked at me and furrowed her brow. I put my hand on the small of her back, and pushed her into the entertainment area, sat her down next to Reina. Alaunna plopped into the orange bean bag chair and looked at me like I were crazy.

“Where’re his parents?” Al asked.

Priya shrugged. “Out.”
“And you’re not doing anything you shouldn’t? Just watching TV? Isn’t it like kids your age to get into all kinds of trouble when the parents are away?”

“She’s spunky, Jazz,” Mae Li said. “I like her.” Then she turned back to Reina and Priya. “You’re both crazy. Yokho’s so much better than A-ko. She doesn’t have to rely on her superhero parents for powers.”

“A-ko’s funnier,” I jumped in.

“Hey,” Lucy yelled from the upstairs kitchen, “you got any chocolate syrup?”


“Lucy,” Mae Li yelled, “Yokho or A-ko?”

“A-ko, Mae Li. That’s not even close!”

“Excuse me,” Alaunna butt in, the disbelief and fear flourishing in her voice, “don’t you have a project to do?”

Priya, Reina, Josh, and I exchanged glances. Josh nodded his head in agreement, got up, and went upstairs.

“Oh, that’s Lucy, Jazz’s and Josh’s project,” Reina said.

“Then, what are you doing here?”

“Hangin,” Priya shrugged.

Lucy came downstairs with a stack of porcelain bowls with a bottle of maraschino cherries and spoons in the top bowl cupped in one palm and a gallon of fudge swirl ice cream and chocolate syrup tucked under her other arm. Alaunna’s frazzled glare softened once Lucy offered her a bowl of ice cream. Josh brought down
poster board, and he, Lucy, and I spread our markers, glitter, and construction paper out on the floor. Priya, Reina, and Mae Li put Project A-ko: Cinderella Rhapsody in the VCR, and Alaunna, still quite afraid of Mae Li's flack jacket, huddled next to me and watched Lucy, Josh, and I outline the Naturalist period on our cardboard.

“We’re not going to finish this tonight,” Lucy said. “I gotta go and finish homework and take them home too.”

She was right—we still hadn’t drawn in all of the characters in the dinghy for Crane’s “The Open Boat” or cut out of the yellow construction paper the sacred cheese of life floating in the water. “Shouldn’t take too long though,” Lucy added. “Why don’t I drop Jasmine by tomorrow?”

My sister, still glued to my shoulder, sighed. I was amazed at her relief.

Dad was home by the time Lucy brought us back. All of the lights were off in the front room, but there was a soft glow coming from the kitchen window. Alaunna, half asleep, was silent during the ride home. I imagine she was formulating the existence for the London versions of my friends. She’d watched us, cautiously, the whole time, as if we were some kind of anthropological field study. She didn’t want to get too close to any of our rituals—she might be initiated through guilt by association.

“I never knew you were so weird,” she said as we walked up to the duplex.

“Your friends are weird.”

“The good kind of weird.”

“So, which one is Lucy?”
“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’ve all got your levels of weirdness. You, Reina, Priya, and Mae Li are all ethnic, and Josh is mixed—and confused. Where does that leave Lucy?”

I laughed and listened to it hover above the magnolias, gingkoes, and elms, above the posh yards in Alaunna’s posh neighborhood. “So where would you fit in, little sister? Would you be weird, because you’re ethnic too?”

“I didn’t quite mean it like that,” she said unlocking the front door. “It’s just that you’re not a normal group. You’re not normal period.”

“Thank you, Jesus!” I said pumping my fists in the air.

Dad met us in the living room. He greeted me politely, but his eyes were blank, not sparkling with the usual anticipation that maybe this time I would actually try to start a conversation with him. He put his hands in his pockets and looked at Alaunna for a moment. She stared up at him and washed all of the expression on her face. I wondered if this were the extent of my father’s parenting skills, a game of stare-down with his daughter. But he had no reason to be cross with her. He knew where she was.

“Alaunna, where are your earrings?”

Her mouth twitched, but she didn’t answer him. I looked at her bare ears.

“I haven’t seen you wear them in a while. For what I paid, you could at least get the mileage out of them.”
“You know,” I said, I grabbed my sister by the arm, and we backpedaled towards the door, “we’ll go look outside. We thought she lost it at my friend’s house, but we couldn’t find it. She took the other one off cause she didn’t want to look like a boy with one. Studs slip off. They can be hard to handle. You lose your earring, and you don’t feel a thing.” I hoped he’d never noticed my holeless earlobes.

Alaunna and I enjoyed the silences between us, but as we walked down her street and back towards the creek, this one felt awkward. I think Alaunna felt it too, because she walked ahead of me, didn’t want to see the silhouette of my profile as we walked side-by-side. We usually mocked silence, side-by-side, with the stomachs to endure the heavy air it brings. But something happened tonight, when I dared to interfere with their family life, their way of doing things. I had been to comfortable and jumped right in.

“Why did you lie for me?” Alaunna asked, her back still to me.

“I don’t know. I guess cause I know it’s not your fault that you lost it.”

The weighty silence rode me the rest of the way to the creek. We sat on the bank down by the swimming hole. The moon shone on the center of the water, appearing encased in a blue-green mirror. In front of us, the tire from the swing had washed up on the opposite bank, and the rope hung from the branch like a broken noose. Somewhere off in the distance, CF and Wendy’s laughter was muted by the underbrush. It was almost like music, painful but happy, acknowledging mutually tarnished images.
“Alaunna’s not going to ever find her earring,” my sister said, her sarcasm interrupted CF and Wendy’s melody, “and Daddy’s going to get her behind.”

“Would you quit referring to yourself in third person? It’s really, really creepy.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“I thought you might like to get away from him for awhile.”

I picked a twig up off the bank and dipped it in the water. Little ripples extended from the bank and out to the center and made the moon dance in swirling circles. Alaunna picked up a rock and threw it in. The moon stopped dancing, and the surface of the blue-green glass shattered. The moon became fragmented, amorphous.

“Did you write CF into your project?”

“No,” I said.

“Why not? I thought you were close.”

“Because I wanted to be fair to him. Same reason as Malik.”

She laughed, and I threw another rock in the water. The moon jumped around on the waves, and I remembered coming to the creek midnights on the Fourth of July with the kids from my neighborhood. We’d climb up on the old tire and swing out as far over the water as we could, trying to reach the center. As we leapt over the water, the mirror lay before us, and we plunged in, trying to break up the moon.

“Why’d you write this thing?”
I shrugged. “My teacher wanted me to. I don’t know. I kinda hated it at first, but then it got me thinking about some things, things you don’t really think about for a long time until you’re forced to.”

“Am I in it?”

I looked at Alaunna. Her face was as blank as when she looked at Dad.

“Yeah, Al. You’re in it.”

“What’m I like? Were you nice? Were you fair?”

At a time like this, I didn’t want to address issues of fairness. “I wrote you better than Tina makes me look.”

The blank expression left Alaunna’s face, and the corners of her mouth turned down. She started to defend herself, but I grinned, and I laughed, and I realized CF and Wendy heard me because their voices faded. “Come on, Alaunna, you made it so obvious. You wanted me to know. I understand, though. Sometimes the only way to deal with somebody is to write them in and rip them up.”

“Oh, okay. So that’s what you did with me. I bet you made me an oreo. Perry would approve. A lot of people would approve.”

“Al, you’re not an oreo.”

“Everybody thinks I am. They say Alaunna J. Waters is an oreo. They’re going to say I don’t know how to fit in because I’m so in between.”
“Al, this may sound like a load of crap, but trust me. You’re weird, not an oreo. You’re weird like me, and Lucy, and Josh, and Mae Li, and Priya, even Wendy and CF down there—”

She cringed.

“And people are going to read you however they want, and they’ll knock you upside the head and piss you off like Perry and Gloria do, but as long as you know the difference and don’t hide that you know it, others will too. Don’t worry about everybody else.”

Alaunna nodded her head. “Yes, Jazzie, that is a load of crap.”

I dipped the twig and watched the waters dance. It was only a load of crap because I’m bad at details, and it didn’t come out right. Sometimes, though, you can’t get lost in the fine print, the minutia nobody’ll remember. Sometimes, you just have to come out and say it. “It’s the only thing that’s worked for me.”