

BINGO AND OTHER STORIES

by

Richard Peacock

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

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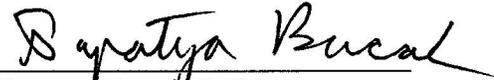
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Professor Papatya Bucak, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

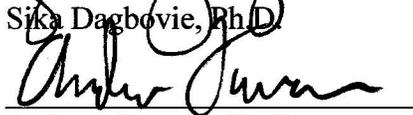
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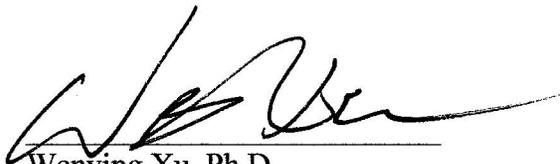
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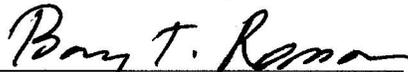
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## ABSTRACT

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*“Bingo” and Other Stories* is a collection of short stories whose individual primary characters are forced to make profound changes in the wake of a discovery that comes about as a result of a tragedy or strained personal relationship or a combination of both. This collection is multigenerational in its collective scope and it reflects influences that come from the African-American and Southern literary traditions. In addition, it uses realism to create the settings for and sensibilities of the characters who populate the stories. Stories in the collection are also connected in how they conjure up various geographical locations in Florida, especially regions of Florida that identify with the traditional American South.

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## Unwritten

If I can recall, if I can remember—yes, I do!—first, we started off on the campus lawn, and let people see us there.

There was this unwritten rule (if it was written somewhere, I never saw it) that students shouldn't sit on the lawn that was at the front of the campus. People would say the school was worried about the appearance, how it would look. What if the trustees were on campus—and, of course, you know, some of them were white!—how would it look to them? There was a spot on campus for recreational activities, where the guys played ball games and did that sort of thing. But in other areas, like the front side of the campus, students thought it was forbidden. You knew where these other areas were because these places had the greenest grass; there were, you know, no dirt paths made from people treading on the grass.

There he was, Reginald, stretched out on that grass, sort of sitting up, resting on his elbows. Legs stretched out in front of him. I was supposed to have met him at the library, I was on my way there. I said, called out, "What are you doing, boy?" He said, "What does it look like? I'm sitting on the grass, this green grass of this very fine Negro college." He asked me to join him. "C'mon," he said, with his hand patting the ground next to him. "Join me." I walked over to him but had no intention of joining him on the ground. Getting closer to him allowed me to talk to him without anybody hearing;

besides me, people were already looking at him. I was where he was sitting, standing over him, and he was looking at me, a smile on that face of his that was just as wide as it could be. I said, "Reginald. Get up before someone says something." He mouthed the word no while he had his finger rubbing up and down my leg, just above my ankle. "Have a seat," he said. I said I wasn't. He asked me if I was afraid. "Oh hell, it's grass," he said. "Nobody's going to get kicked out school for sitting on the grass."

I knew it would bring more attention to us, but I sat down next to him. Had to cross my legs because of the dress I was wearing, and I put the books I had in my hand to the side of me. "See. Look. That didn't hurt, did it?" Reginald said. "Campus looks different from here, doesn't it?" It was true. The campus was small, but it did look different from where we were. It seemed bigger, with us being isolated, with us being away from the sidewalks around us. A lot like being in a park, where you can see the buildings, trees and people around you. Where the blue sky is as wide as it can be.

Reginald managed to ease his fingers into mine, and we started holding hands. And I was just looking at him, with that big little-boy smile on his face. As cute as he could be. And handsome too—oh, he was a good-looking man.

"Why are you doing this?" I said.

"Doing what?" he said.

"Don't act stupid—you know what I'm talking about, boy."

He never answered the question, and he wasn't going to. "Look at 'em," he said, pointing with his other hand at the people passing by, most of them students like us but some college instructors and college staff too. "They're all looking at us. Look at what you did."

"Me?!" I said.

I can't lie. It was a certain excitement, being there. Giddiness building up inside me, being there when I knew we shouldn't have; the way people, other students, looked at us, the expression on their faces, and I just knew they were thinking: "Y'all pushing it—you two are really, really pushing it."

It didn't take any time before his sidekick saw us. I heard something saying, "Reggie, Reggie." Bernard walked his big happy butt on over, stepped off the sidewalk and on the grass, and plopped his tail on the other side of Reginald. "What y'all doing out here on the grass?" he said. I knew Bernard wasn't talking to me. He almost never talked to me directly. "What does it look like we're doing?" Reginald said. "Looks like y'all sitting on the grass," Bernard said. He was real intelligent like that. I guess that's why his mother and father sent him off to college. Bernard was from somewhere in south Georgia, he was husky, and had a voice that was something like Barry White's. He was bigger and taller than Reginald, but he acted like a little boy around him, like "Reggie" was his big brother, the one he couldn't get enough of.

Sure enough, we had Mr. Whatley in front of all three of us. I knew that was coming. Mr. Whatley was something like security for the campus. Not really a police officer. Sure enough, Whatley—with that gut of his that hung over his pants—was asking why we three students were sitting on the grass. Nobody answered at first. "If y'all want to sit on the grass, y'all can go to the recreational area," Whatley told us.

Reginald said, "Can't you see we are recreating here, looking at our Negro brethren, the young men and women who go to this fine institution. I don't believe it's a crime for us to sit here. No, I don't. It's not like you can arrest somebody." And I'll never

forget what else Reginald said to him. He said, "Here we are on this warm, beautiful day. And here you come like a rain cloud. Why don't you find a way to show your true color. Why don't you find a way to get with the white man, join his police department? That way, you won't be by yourself when you're harassing the colored youth who aren't bothering anybody."

You could tell Whatley was holding back. The fingers in his hand curled in, a fist balled, and the fist just went to bouncing on his thigh, and he was concentrating on Reginald, who was smirking when he knew he should not have been. Mr. Whatley said, "I ain't gonna tell you too many more times, boy. None of y'all!" And his eyes shifted to me and Bernard.

I got up first. Bernard next. Reginald took the longest, still staring and taunting the man. I said, "Reginald, c'mon. Let's go." Reginald kept taking his sweet time while getting up. When he was on his feet, he wiped the grass and dirt on his hands like he had all the time in the world, right in front of Mr. Whatley's face. Reginald said, "Hey y'all, let's go. Let's go someplace else"—all the while, he was staring at Whatley like he dared him.

I started looking around. There was a little crowd. Some students. I can't say if people heard Mr. Whatley or Reginald, what they said to each other. But they knew something was happening. I pulled Reginald by his shirt, walked away with him, his shirt pinched in my hand; and he was still staring down Mr. Whatley. Bernard followed us. The three of us went to the library to hang out some more, outside, away from where we were on the grass. Reginald and Bernard wanted to smoke.

Me, personally, I never had anything against Mr. Whatley. He was always nice to me, pretty much. Would have a nice conversation with you. He'd ask about your parents, if you had brothers and sisters. And, when he would see you again, later, he'd ask how you were faring and ask how your family back home was doing.

But I was partial to Reginald. Sitting out there on that grass, we weren't bothering anybody. We really weren't.

Reginald hadn't started smoking until that school year—and I hated it (I don't like cigarette smoke even now). Said he picked it up when he was up there in New York, the city, when he went there for the summer before the new school term. (Bernard smoked because Reginald smoked.) I had asked him what else had he picked up while he was up there; told him it better not be another girlfriend. I can't say if it was that summer, if that was what had changed him. I just he knew he came back different. Said he had started reading communism, and he said he decided he didn't believe in God. A black person who doesn't believe in God?—you ain't going to find too many of them. Can't say exactly or precisely why, but it didn't bother me too much that he said he was through wondering about God, because, you know, I believed I knew him, knew his true heart. (Or at least I thought I did.) Said he didn't believe in no kind of God! And went and changed his major from sociology to history, then from history to philosophy. Now, like everybody else, he was brought up to be a Christian. His mother, father, brothers, sisters—they were all Christians. All of them A.M.E. (Me and him, we had a little joke we used to tease each other with. He was Methodist, I was Baptist, yet we wasn't going to let that come between us. No, we weren't.) Reginald said, as far as he was concerned, God had made too many exceptions for the white man. He started saying that a Negro and a white man

couldn't be Christians at the same time, not both. He stopped going to the convocations at school that were mandatory for us. During that time, convocation was held in the chapel, and it was like going to church.

I used to tell him he was wrong; that God was on our side, no matter what the white people believed.

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From our sit-in on the grass, we moved on to Lil Joe. Moved up, I guess you could say. With Lil Joe, nobody at first really knew what actually had happened. He was at school one day and the next day, he wasn't. We found out about Lil Joe, because the campus wasn't that big, you know. Everybody was talking about it. People telling the story in a lot of different ways, but one thing was said over and over: Lil Joe got beat up by some white men for not being in the colored area down there in Fenton. Some people said it happened after he tried to use the white restroom, and they refused to let him; so, he took it out and peed on one of them. Some said he was being his playful self but didn't have the good sense that God gave him to know you don't play with those kind of crackers like that. Especially if you don't know them, and especially not the crackers who lived in Fenton. Either way, Dean Patterson put him out.

People didn't think it was right. Me and Reginald, we thought about Lil Joe being alone, how it might've been different if he wasn't alone. The boy just wanted to use the restroom—it wasn't like he was asking them to feed him or for a glass of water. As I remember it, the administration and most of the faculty, they acted it like never happened. But, you know, deep down, I think, it probably bothered them too. Some of them had children, some probably in college like we were.

One time, after Reginald and I had been intimate—right out of the blue—he said he and Bernard were going to picket in downtown Fenton. They were going to drive Bernard's car. I said, "Are you crazy?" We were steadily putting our underclothes back on when Reginald mentioned it. I could tell he had already made up his mind; he didn't answer me about it. I said to him, "Then, I'm going too."

It didn't take long before the grapevine got a hold of it. Don't know who told—Reginald? Bernard?—but I know it wasn't me. The biggest surprise of it was Geraldine. Geraldine was from Alabama, and she was very, very poor. Real po'. People used to call her a slave behind her back. Seemed like she had one pair of shoes, I think, and might've had two dresses to her name. People said she smelled, had a bad odor, and wondered if she bathed. All I can say is when she was with or around me, she looked clean to me; I never smelled a bad odor. Geraldine was short, had big hips. And quiet too. So, when she came up to me one day in the library, in that soft voice and asked, "Can I go with y'all?" I didn't know what she was talking about.

She probably thought I was pretending.

She and I were never friends. I had never really talked to her before.

She sat down next to me, all the while I was hoping too many people wouldn't see us together. (Yes, I actually acted like that.) She told me she knew about Lil Joe, about what happened. Said he was her friend. You couldn't say she was lying. Not really. Lil Joe talked to everybody. Every girl was going to be his wife. He flirted with every girl, talking about how he was going to marry them and how they would become Mrs. Dr. Joseph Allen. (Joseph was his real name). He used to mess with the guys too, talking about how he could knock them out, like he was Muhammad Ali or somebody. Would

put his hands up and everything, like he was a real boxer. Chile, please! His skinny, little butt couldn't scare a fly, talking about how he was going to slug somebody.

Geraldine said she had been wondering for a long time if any of us students would do something, and for a while, she didn't think anything would happen. Her eyes—she had real, real pretty eyes, clear as the day—they were begging me. *Begging!* So, because, you know, her voice was getting louder and louder up in the library, I just said she could come with us. Didn't even ask Reginald or Bernard (didn't think I needed to ask him!), didn't ask them what they thought. I told her yeah. Wasn't a big deal, because Reginald and Bernard, they didn't seem to mind either.

Geraldine turned out to be a "trip," as the young folks say. She and I made all the protest signs we carried in Fenton on that day. We bought our own white poster board from one of the stores in downtown Eileen, not too far from where the college was. But we didn't have to buy paint, we didn't have to buy stencils, because, honey, Geraldine took care of that, I want you to know: she stole them from the art room, chile. That tickled me so. You would never have guessed she could be a thief.

We made the signs in her room, over there in Blake Hall. It was a good, secret place. The room was for two but, evidently, Geraldine had the room to herself just about all the time. Her roommate, some bright-skinned girl from Philadelphia, Paula . . . Paulette . . . Pauline—I can't remember the girl's name—she was like other girls: she didn't want to have anything to do with Geraldine. Not only did she not talk to her, but she didn't stay in that room either. It was just a place for the girl to keep her clothes and other things. Word was she was staying off-campus somewhere. Had a boyfriend who went to Chesterville State, and most of her time was spent with him.

That girl was kicked out of school too. Or left on her own, one. She got pregnant.

We were in the room thinking what we could write. Seemed like it took a long time to do that because we wanted to say so much. We wrote down on regular paper what we were thinking. Geraldine, she went on and on and on, like she was writing an essay for class. I think I even told her that too, something like, we can't put it all on there. She wrote on the paper that Joseph (we spelled out his full name) was loved and he had a family and dreams; and that he was studying to be a doctor; and that he had friends who cared about him; and what happened to him was not right—and on and on and on and on and on. I said, "Geraldine, we need to find the right words, to make a point with a few bold words." So she wouldn't feel bad, I, you know, told her that what she had done was nice and everything; we just didn't need that much. Geraldine looked up and said, "You're probably right." And she told me she knew I was going to be a really good teacher someday. Just looked up at me and told me that. How she knew I was going to be a teacher, I don't know. (You know, I don't remember, I can't recall what her major was. Maybe she was going to be a nurse?) In that dormitory room, it was like a reverse. I was the one who was mostly quiet; she was doing most of the talking. Lord, forgive me for saying this: I started getting so scared, scared somebody was going to come up in that room and see me with her; was wondering if I had made the right decision to let her come along—you know, was it a good idea? She either didn't notice or didn't care, one. Just kept working and talking about how to make the signs.

She asked me what we were going to say while we carried our signs. I told her I didn't know, hadn't really thought about it. (I don't think any of us did.) I just kept thinking the worst while we were up there making those signs. Somebody was going to

find those signs in Geraldine's room. Or if we did make it to Fenton, the police would pull us over and see the signs and then we would be put in jail. All of us.

We finished. One sign read: JUSTICE SHOULD BE COLORBLIND. That sign got at the fact that nothing had been done to the group of men who beat up Lil Joe. (Or at least you didn't hear that something was done.)

They beat him up in broad daylight. Everybody saw it. I know they did!

Another sign said: WE REMEMBER JOSEPH ALLEN. And the one other: NEGROES HAVE RIGHTS; SLAVERY IS OVER.

We had a lot of different colors but all the letters on the signs were either completely black or completely blue. Geraldine and I decided that yellow was a bad choice. Too bright. And red, it was the color of blood; so, me and Geraldine didn't want to, you know, give anybody any ideas. (Now, to think about it, I don't know: black and blue might've been too much.) We spent I don't know how long on those signs. We started out with six even-sized poster boards and ended up having three left. That meant one of us would not be holding one. We messed up on a few—you know you can't erase paint.

In less than two days, we would go to downtown Fenton. The Saturday coming up is what kept going through my head—all I could think about on my way back to my dorm room. Geraldine had offered me her roommate's bed that night, but I needed to get away from her and those signs. Although I probably should've stayed, since I was out after curfew. Seemed like I was the only one out walking on campus. The campus was pretty well lit, but, that night, with my thoughts as they were, it just seemed darker, heavy like theater drapes, like I could go to one part of the campus and step into the night and just

disappear. That's what I wanted to do for a minute. Just wanted to say, "Time out for a second!"

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Nothing happened.

Don't get me wrong. There were some white people out there looking at us like we were out of our natural minds. Like I was walking around bare-chested or something. At first, they did. But they mostly let us do it.

They weren't the white people I expected to see: red-faced; throwing rocks and bottles at us while we used our poster boards to shield ourselves. Some of them even walked around us or avoided us altogether.

And, to tell the truth, you might not believe it, I got bored. For a while. We walked around in a circle. Didn't say nothing. We followed Reginald, who ended up being the one who was without a sign. I was behind Reginald—and I know Bernard must've hated it; Bernard was behind me; and Geraldine was behind him. I was hoping that Reginald would change it up some, maybe move down the street or walk in another direction. I even started daydreaming, chile. There was a dress in a dress store I could see, the store not being that far from us, about a few feet. It was on a real shapely mannequin. And red. I imagined myself wearing that red dress, while I was with Reginald, each of us looking eye to eye. (Me and Reginald were about the same height but he was a little lighter than me.) We were dancing in this real, real classy place. With a nice band playing. He was holding me close, and he was happy to be near me. (And don't ask me why I was thinking about that while we were protesting in front of those white people.)

Through it all, each of us was quiet. It was a typical spring day. The only thing you could hear was the commotion. Cars going down the street. Doors of the downtown shops opening and closing; and squeaking and slamming; and some of them had little bells that clanged. The sounds of the birds and their wings flapping. There was this one white lady who told her two children not to stare.

I felt bad a little bit, because there were some black people too (local people, I guess) who felt, you know, embarrassed. And they were afraid. You could tell. They would go out of their way to avoid us, like the white people, but much more. They didn't stare; they just glanced our way and went about their business real, real quick-like, like they didn't know us (which they didn't).

And they didn't talk to each other with us nearby either. Not a "How you doing?" Not a "Hello."

It might've lasted about forty-five minutes or a half hour, maybe less. (I can't remember.) Reginald just stopped, said, "You ready to go back?" I think Bernard, Geraldine and I said "Yeah!" all at the same time. We followed Reginald back to Bernard's car, which was parked around the corner from where we were picketing. When we got to the car, we put the signs in the trunk. There still wasn't any talking.

And would you believe nobody bothered the car?

While riding away, we were still anxious. Driving, Bernard asked if we could see the police. We just knew the police would come—just like that—our eyes and necks were moving in every which direction until we got out of Fenton city limits.

No police. We couldn't understand it. Me and Bernard actually started talking about it while we were taking 98 back to campus, to Eileen. No police?

Geraldine hadn't really said a word since we started out that day. The only thing she had said up to that point was "Excuse me," and that was because she accidentally bumped into me when she and I were getting into the backseat of the car. Reginald was quiet on the way back too. Bernard asked him if he was alright. Reginald said yeah, he was. Said that he was just a little tired because he didn't sleep much the night before. (Probably none of us did.) As he said it, he looked out of his opened car window. He was deep in thought, wondering something; I wanted to know what but didn't know what. I was directly behind him, on the backseat, with Geraldine. But I could see his face when he turned to look right, toward the window.

He hadn't said anything to me all day. No, I don't believe he did. He would talk to Bernard but wouldn't talk to me.

You couldn't criticize Reginald around Bernard. Once I said something like, Reginald was hard-headed and that he needed to loosen up sometimes. Bernard said—I don't know where it came from—I wasn't smart enough to think like Reginald; that I wasn't on his level; that I was a typical girl. I turned around and told his butt, how could he know something about a girl other than what he knew about his mama, since he probably had never been with one?! Me and ol' Bernard got along like that sometimes. Reginald would say I was just jealous of their friendship; that I needed to have my own best friend. He said I didn't need to worry about why he wanted to hang out with Bernard sometimes instead of me.

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The more I became aware of the fewer and fewer miles we had on the way back, the more I started thinking about Dean Patterson. Was he going to be waiting for us?

With the police ready to lock us up? Started thinking about the boys who sat at that lunch counter. (What happened to them? You don't hear too much about them. But you still have to wonder.) There wasn't much traffic on the road, on 98. And still no police car in sight. Up to this point, the only time we got more uneasy was when a pick-up truck came from behind. Instead of passing directly, the truck rode parallel to us for a little while. The two white men inside just looked at us. And we looked at them back, stared at them like they stared at us. I guess we hadn't gotten all of the picketing and protesting we did in Fenton out of us. Bunch of poor crackers, that's what they were.

Besides those two, there was a white boy who was sitting in the back, in the cab of the truck, his back up against the back windshield. Geraldine tickled me. Tickled everybody, in fact. While we were being stared down, she looked up at those two white men who were inside, and jerked her head to the side, made this ugly face—ugly—all that to let them know we didn't like being stared at. Since she was on the left side, when they were passing by, they were closer to her and Bernard than they were to me and Reginald. They eventually passed and got in front of us. And later, all you could see was the back of the truck, with the white boy, the front of his body, his face and everything, slumped down, facing us. The boy looked like he was drunk. Or tired, one. And then the truck was out of sight. Then it was just us and 98, with the pine and oak trees and more trees, and the farms, and the cows in the pastures. Most of 98 was still a country road back then; you know, it was still two-lane. We weren't going real fast—and we certainly were not going real slow either. What Geraldine did got us to talking. Bernard said to Geraldine something like, "I don't think they took to you too good," talking about that face she made. He and Reginald started laughing, and it made me laugh. "If you had

made that face back when were in Fenton, downtown," Bernard said, "good Lord, who knows what would've happened to us. Miss Geraldine, when you have your children, they are going to know you mean what you say. And your husband will too."

Geraldine asked how did Bernard see her. Reginald told her couldn't nobody miss that head-jerking.

Yes. I was laughing too.

Reginald then turned around and glanced at me, quick and uncertain-like, and looked back toward the front. Did it a couple times, I believe; that second look back lasted longer, like he couldn't make up his mind about something. It bothered me. I didn't say anything. Not in front of Bernard and Geraldine.

Fenton is about a thirty-minute drive from Eileen. We were a little more than halfway home when one of the back tires went flat. I knew it was a bad sign. That and the fact that I picked a dark-colored dress to wear that day. Dark blue. It wasn't all that hot, I don't remember that, but, you know, dark colors attract more light and, because of that, you get warmer and hotter. I chose that dress instead of the other stuff I had because: one, it was old; two, I didn't know if we would've had to tussle with some of those white people and then get all dirty. I just couldn't see myself getting all dirty like that. I perspire easy anyway, and in that dress, I almost sweated like a dog in Bernard's car. And Bernard's car—it was a gray Ford—it didn't have any AC. Seemed like we had the windows rolled down all the time to get some air.

Bernard pulled over, off to the shoulder, so that he could fix the tire, both he and Reginald. The two of them got out of the car. And Geraldine and I decided we weren't going to sit in the car and get hot, so we got out too, if only to stretch and exercise our

legs. When I got out, I could feel my dress sticking to my back side and the backs of my legs, I was sweating so much. Didn't know I had that much sweat on me until I got out that car. Reginald and Bernard were squatting, they had already taken off the flat tire and were putting on the spare from the trunk when I looked over at them. To make conversation, I said to Geraldine something like, "Everything can't go smoothly." She said, "Yeah. I guess not."

We heard a loud pop. All of us. Reginald, Bernard, they looked up. They looked at each other, then Bernard looked at me and Geraldine, like she and I had done something. Me and Geraldine looked at each other, looked around. Geraldine shrugged at me. I thought it might've been the tire.

They just had finished tightening the bolt on the tire. Just finished putting on the tire.

Another loud pop, then a whizzing sound. And then another pop. Whiz. A bullet hit the back end of the car, at the bumper.

Geraldine and I screamed at the same time. I put my two hands over my beating heart, one on top of the other; looked up to the sky, said "Lord."

Bernard screamed too. His scream was one that you let out when you know the pain is coming but haven't felt it yet. I thought about that face that Geraldine made. Those white men. They were probably in the woods somewhere shooting at us. Somebody. Somebody was shooting at us.

And somebody said, "Let's go!"

We rushed back into the car. The doors shut. Geraldine screamed again, louder, in pain. I asked her was she okay. Bernard and Reginald looked back at her from where they

were in the front seat, while they each tried to keep an eye out for what was around us. Geraldine was holding her left fingers in her right hand. She had not been hit. She had only just smashed her fingers when she shut her door on them, she said.

Reginald yelled, "Go!"

Honey, Bernard put it to the floor, I want you to know! We were moving as fast as a rocket ship. Geraldine started crying some more. I wasn't sure if it was the pain from her fingers or fear.

Not one of us in that car had a seatbelt on. Everybody, except Bernard, was holding on to different parts of the inside of the car; you had to when Bernard was making those turns. If you didn't grab something, you would have slid all over the place; we were traveling just that fast. Like a ride at the carnival, the kind that makes you pray silently to God that you won't fall off or be slung to your death.

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We got back to Eileen. A lot of black people lived in Eileen (they still do). It was equally white and black. So, I felt better when we got back to campus.

We got out of the car, all four us, not knowing what to do, not knowing where to go. But we couldn't just stand around the car, in the parking lot.

Reginald said we didn't need to tell anybody what happened, under no circumstances; nobody needed to know what we did (like they didn't know or wouldn't find out). "If people ask where we've been, you should," he said, "tell them something like, we went out to Fenton to get something to eat and to look around in some of the stores." I said, "What about the signs?" Reginald said he and Bernard would take care of them. He told us to act normal.

We split up before we could decide what we would say to people who asked us about Bernard's car. About the bullet holes. We didn't say if we were going to get back together again. The guys walked toward their dormitories. Me and Geraldine walked in the opposite direction, since the female dorms were on the opposite side of the campus.

Pretending nothing had happened, Geraldine did a much better job than I did. Wasn't as self-conscious as I was, even though she had probably more reason to be, with her swollen fingers and everything. Her dorm, Blake Hall, came up first. My dorm, Ware Hall, was a little farther up. Before we parted ways, she asked me what would Lil Joe think about us if he knew. I almost didn't hear; she spoke so softly.

I got to thinking about it. Lil Joe was probably nice to Geraldine. One of the few. Got to thinking: we almost got shot.

The only thing I could come up with to answer was that I thought Lil Joe was somewhere making somebody laugh and cracking jokes, being his playful self. Geraldine said, "You're probably right."

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She was first. My roommate Darlene told me.

Darlene said Geraldine got the notice of her expulsion, was sent on a bus home to her hometown in Alabama, all in the same day. That happened that Monday following Fenton. Darlene asked me what I was going to do.

Reginald was next. His day was Tuesday, the same day I heard about Geraldine. I heard from Bernard. I saw him as I was walking out of class. He was near the chapel, alone. He beckoned me over with his head, tilting it back the way men do. We went

behind the chapel, near a tree, where we could talk without being heard. Dean Patterson had sent Mr. Whatley for Reginald early that morning.

"He's in his room packing right now," Bernard said.

I asked him if he had been to Patterson's office. He told me no and said, "You?" And I said no. "Our time's coming, I guess," I told him.

"Yep," he said. "I reckon so."

I was about through after that. I ran from where Bernard and I were to Reginald's room in his dorm. Didn't care if I was violating the dorm's visitation policies for female visitors. (By then, it didn't matter noway.) Went right to his room on the second floor. Door was unlocked. And there he was: packing. Alone.

He saw me and told me to come in. "Shut the door," he said. I did. "What happened," I said. He said to me, his faced all frowned up, "What do you think happened?" And I let him talk to me like that because, you know, I knew he was upset.

"I hate this school. I hate this place," he said and was just throwing his clothes in the suitcase that was on the bed in front of him, saying, "And you know what?"—and he looked at me then, serious, too serious—he said, "I hate Negroes." He went on about the only reason he was at the college was because his mother and father were alumni and they wanted him there, all the while he kept packing his things. I looked around for that picture of me he kept up in the room. I didn't see it. From behind, I wrapped my arms around him. He didn't even stop what he was doing, like the weight I put on him didn't do anything. While I was holding on to him, I told him I loved him. I think I said I always would. He didn't say anything back to me other than, it was hard for him to move around with me on top of him like that.

He didn't even wait for Mr. Whatley to drive him to the bus stop. Honey, I want you to know, before the day was over, he and Bernard left together in that gray Ford Bernard had. Word was Bernard didn't wait for his turn with Patterson. When Reginald was ready to go, Bernard was right there for him.

The next day, Whatley came and got me right out of class.

None of us didn't need to pretend, because people have a way of letting you know you are in for nothing good. The way they look at you, it's like they're more afraid than you are. It got to the point where people on campus would pass by you—walk right in front and pass by—but they would look away. Just like those people in Fenton.

Dean Patterson must've been over six-feet tall and fatter than an old Baptist preacher. Yet his office was nice. Shiny wood floor. Shiny wood furniture. Looked real expensive. I saw where the tuition money was going. Up to that point, I don't think I had been in any other room in the school that looked nicer. Being in his office was a formality as far as I was concerned. My mind was on what I was going to tell my parents, who, Patterson was telling me, the school was in the process of contacting. Sitting in that chair in front of Patterson's desk, I tried to imagine Geraldine. She probably did not say anything to him. But something tells me he and Reginald probably argued. Reginald probably called him a coward. With me, Dean Patterson was Dean Patterson. Dry. Stiff. Sitting behind that desk, he might as well have been reciting the pledge of allegiance, the way he was talking to me, you know, with no kind of feeling. He went on about how the college's students were exceptional and the school had built a reputation with the community, something like, "Our reputation will not be sullied by the disruptive actions of students who are without the least bit of decorum"—this, that and the other.

I didn't say anything. And I don't think he was expecting me to either.

I guess he was nice. He didn't send me home that day. Said I could stay one more day so I could gather my things. He didn't know I had already started packing. That night, in my room, before I lay in that dorm bed one last time, my roommate Darlene, out of the blue, told me she thought what we did was brave. I heard her but couldn't see her because my back was turned to her. Darlene said we would not be forgotten. All I could say was, "You're probably right."

"It's not the end of the world," she said.

I said to her, "No, I guess not," and that was the end of that conversation.

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If you would have asked me then, I would have told you Reginald Davis was going to be my husband. I just knew it. Knew it like I knew the name my parents gave me. It was I who said to Reginald that we should write each other, before he and I were both expelled, when we were in his room that day. He transferred, ended up at Columbia University, up there in New York City. I wrote Reginald a few letters. He never wrote me back. We never got married. No, we didn't.

I never saw or heard from Geraldine or Bernard again either.

Some people say they did this or they did that. Marched here, marched there, marched with that person or this person. The fact of the matter is, people lie. They do.

What you know, I haven't told many people. Of course, my parents know, they found out; but I never told them what actually happened. They just think I got kicked out for marching. I lost my scholarship. My mother called me stupid. For years. (Even ol' Whatley said, "Your parents didn't send you here for this foolishness, bothering them

white people,"; that's what he said when he was driving me to the bus station in Fenton.)

My own two children don't know the whole story. One day, I will tell them, I think. Their

father, my ex-husband, he laughed at me when I told him, talking about some: "You?!"

Like he's supposed to know everything.

## **After Halloween**

Me and Kevin was walkin' down Harris Street in Larkan Heights. Crackhead Larry came up to us. Dirty like always, but this time he didn't have on no shirt. He asked us if we wanted to buy the pink oil and hair cutter kit he had in his hands. The pink oil looked like it was a month's supply, like the kind that beauticians buy, and the hair cutter kit was a complete set. "Twenty dollars, and I'll give you both," Larry said. Kevin turned up his mouth, told him he didn't want to buy nothin' from him, sayin' to him, "With your dirty nasty ass."

I told him I didn't want no pink oil, but I told him I would give him five dollars for the clippers. "Five dollars?" Larry said, like I was the one who smoked crack. I told him again I didn't want no pink oil. He said shit, that he would find somebody else. He started to walk off before I told him I would give him ten. He looked at me and then Kevin. Kevin shot him that frown. "Give it to me," Larry said. I gave him the money. He gave me the clippers. You could tell he was bitter about it. He looked at the money like somebody had put the wrong kind of dressin' on his sandwich but he was too hungry to complain about it.

"Ain't nobody gonna to buy that pink oil from you," Kevin said, like he wanted Larry to feel worse. Larry sucked his teeth. Kevin kicked at him, made that nigga flinch and hop. Larry walked away. You could see that pink plastic bottle in his hand from

down the street for as long as you could see him. I opened the kit. Everything was jumbled together. It smelled like metal and how a house be smellin' when it got mildew in it. The tip of the clipper blade was dotted with rust. "Damn," Kevin said. "You shoulda checked it out before you bought it."

A few days later, I was cuttin' my hair, after I had went to the store and bought some cleaner for the clippers. I didn't try nothin' fancy. I wanted somethin' low but not all the way bald. Ever since Mr. Harold died, you couldn't get a haircut from a real barber. Keyshawn can cut hair okay. He cut at his grandma house but that nigga is too sometimey *I don't feel like cuttin' hair today*. What you mean? You don't feel like makin' money? It's other boys who cut hair, too. But I had done seen they product: not enough experience.

I put the clippers through my hair while tryin' to watch my head in two mirrors. One was the bathroom mirror on the wall, the other was the one I held in one of my hands. Gobs of my hair had fell on the floor. When my sister Belinda was alive, she would leave hair on the floor from the weaves she wore. Even after she died, sometimes, I used to get up in the mornin' to take a bath before school and my mind would be set on seein' that weave. The hot iron. The stylin' gel that come in the clear jar. The pink oil. I'd be thinkin' sometimes I got a rush to beat her to the bathroom. She used to take so long.

I don't got no other brothers and sisters.

Mama kept askin' what happened that night. She my mama and everything, but sometimes I wanted to tell her, "How many times and how many more ways do I got to

tell you." She kept askin' me, "What did she say? Where was y'all at? What did she do?" I don't know if she didn't believe me or she felt like she missed out, one.

I was the last person to see my sister Belinda alive. I can't say I saw her die. She died before I could get to her.

The police acted like they didn't want to believe me *So you sayin' you didn't see anybody?* I told them I saw them but not they faces. Told them I could tell them who they is if I heard they voice. Before I got Belinda out of the ditch, I heard them laughin'. It was dark.

He knew Belinda was dead. Ran and didn't give me no help. He wore a hat. After it happened, I used to say to myself, God help that nigga if I'm somewhere and hear him laugh.

The police questioned mama too. She was scared they was gonna call the state on her. They asked her to take a drug test. "They supposed to be lookin' for them boys instead of fuckin' with me," she said that one time when me and her was on the porch. "One of they children got to die before they care. Oooh, white people make me sick." Mama threw down on the concrete the cigarette she was smokin'. Smashed it with her foot like it was the last roach on Earth.

Me and Belinda was comin' from Cozy Corner that night. "Why in the hell was y'all up there at that bar?!" my mama said when I first told her. It wasn't the first night me and Belinda had snuck out to go to one of them parties. We could sneak out all the time if we wanted. My mama worked at night. It was supposed to be a Halloween Party at Cozy Corner. We went. We snuck in, but nobody was there. A few people. So, me and Belinda left.

It done got better since then. Nobody don't go to battle no more. But that night was the same shit. For a long time, every Halloween, a bunch of boys would load up with oranges—them green oranges. It was split up. Some boys would be from Larkan Heights. Some from the Subdivision. Some from Crosstown. Some from the projects. People who would be trick-or-treatin' got more than candy.

I never told mama this but it was a couple of years I was out there, too. By me livin' in the projects, I was with the project boys. I stop doin' it when I saw that little kids was gettin' hurt and people property got damaged. Jerod, I was with him one time. He threw a orange and hit this little boy who some kin to Eric Lee. The orange got him in his leg. The lil dude looked up, cried out like a little girl, tears runnin' down his face. In his Dollar Store, plastic skeleton costume, he was shakin' at that street corner, that lil dude was scared to move. He was all by hisself.

One of them years, a orange knocked out a window in a church.

Them green oranges, they be hard like a baseball.

Me and Belinda had made it all the way to the grassy area behind the old gym, a little ways before you get to that concrete bridge you gotta take to cross the ditch, before you get to that bunch of trees. Belinda was bein' silly. While I was walkin' in front of her, she would try to trip me with her leg. I said, "Stop, girl. You play too much." Belinda was my little sister, but she would also hang out with me. And she could ball like a boy. Was the only girl to play on the junior league—with the boys.

The first set of oranges, we heard them. Swoop.

They bounced off the gym wall like it was nothin' and rolled on the ground. I started to pick some up to throw them back, but I didn't have enough time. I got hit. I got

a chance to know what it feel like to be a baseball player, when they get hit by one of them pitchers who be throwin' with a fucked-up aim: It's like havin' a sting on your body that spreads out like water do after it splash.

Them niggas wasn't just throwin' oranges. A grapefruit came by and splattered on the gym wall. Rotten smellin', the mist singed your nose, got in the air, had my eyes waterin'.

Belinda wasn't stupid. She ran like a squirrel crossin' the street. I was right behind her. Then I was even with her and then I started to pass her. Them niggas that was throwin' them oranges was laughin'. I said, "B, please run faster." I ran across the bridge, slowed down, looked back, saw she was comin'. With my arms and hands, I was tryin' to shield myself. Looked like she was gonna make it.

One of them green oranges hit her right dead in the face.

One of them niggas was laughin'. I heard him, that punk.

Belinda had done staggered back, tripped, tumbled. She fell like she was bein' snatched from around the waist, with her arms and her hands reachin' up and grabbin' for the air.

Them oranges kept zippin' by until I got to the ditch, and some of the oranges rolled over and roll down inside there. Belinda laid on the ground, twisted, with the front of her body up, like she had done been asked to pose crazy. Her legs were sideways, lookin' like they had done been froze in place after she started runnin'. Around her was trash, soda and beer bottles, a bicycle frame. And you could see the tree roots where the dirt had done been washed away.

I leaped into the ditch. It smelled damp like dirt in a bait can. She never answered when I said her name.

She was heavier than I thought. I had picked her up before, when we played around, but now her body . . . It was like it was comin' undone. Her droopin' head rolled sideways, then from the front to the back. I almost started to cry.

I saw him up there, watchin'. He saw me and ran. Left me lookin' up at that black sky.

I had to fix my arms and legs against the tree roots stickin' out in the ditch so I could get me and Belinda up. Every step up I made, I felt her head bounce on my back. If the tree roots wasn't there, I wouldna had nothin' to hold on to.

When I got to the top, the only way I could all the way pull myself up with Belinda limp over my shoulder was to dig my fingers and thumbs into the grass, into the ground. And I had to push up on a tree root with my leg, and I had to flip Belinda, my little sister, over, like I was body slammin' her. She fell to the ground, off of me, when we was out of the ditch. It was the only way I could get both of us out.

I wanted to carry her home but didn't have the strength. That shoulder and arm I used to I carry her out of the ditch wouldn't let me. All I could do was drag her while I held her up from underneath her arms, her head still droopin'. I dragged her home. Past the bridge, past the basketball and tennis courts, past the baseball field, and that field of grass where we play football. Called the ambulance myself.

After I thought about it, what happened to Belinda that night, I went back to cuttin' my head with the clippers I bought from Crackhead Larry, went back to concentratin', lookin' at myself in the mirror.

Mama came home from work. She wanted to use the bathroom. "What you doin' in there?" she said. She could see I was cuttin' my hair. It was somthin' I ain't never did before. "When you got that?"

I told her I bought the clippers from a friend. I told her I was almost done.

"Take a break, because I got to pee."

I turned the clippers off, let my mama in the bathroom and waited. I just needed to line up the front. The toilet flushed. Mama came out.

"So you a barber now?" she said.

I told her I was tryin'.

She looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. My reflection and her reflection. "Look like you got most of it," she said, her head was swayin' from right to left so she could see. "Make sure you clean out the lavatory sink and get the hair from off that floor when you done." Mama went into her room.

I turned the clippers back on and went over my head one more time with the blade guard on. The clippers started vibratin' bad and I lost my grip. The clippers was still in my hand, near the front of my head. Tryin' to catch it, I knocked the blade guard off. A screw, it fell off. The clippers came down, bumped my head twice. The screw, the blade and the guard fell into the sink, and the screw went down the drain.

I snatched up the blade and blade guard and laid them on the counter, but when I looked in the mirror, I had these two patches of skin showin' in my hair—in the front of my head—where the blade had skipped after the guard fell off. Each bald patch was about as big as a quarter.

I was gonna fix it by just shavin' all of my head bald but I couldn't find no razors.

"I ain't takin' you to the store this time of night," Mama said after I pleaded with her. "Ain't no store open this time of night noway. You just gonna to have to wait til tomorrow, after you get out of school."

I told her I wasn't gonna go to school.

"The hell you ain't," she said. "You takin' your narrow ass to school tomorrow. Them people at that school done already told me if you miss anymore days you gonna flunk. You already done been suspended. Don't go to school in the mornin' and see what happen to you—you worried about how you look now?"

She got up that next mornin' and drove me to school. After I took my bath, she was waitin' in the livin' room, with her shower shoes on and her hair was stickin' up from the way she probably had been sleepin'. She usually wouldna been up that early. I usually would walk to the bus stop. "I did you favor," she said when she dropped me off at school. "You coulda rode that bus."

I still had to ride the bus home, and you can't wear hats at school.

I went to the far end of the school yard, where them Mexicans be hangin' out. I know they saw my head but I ain't care. If they was gonna say somethin' about it, I couldn't understand them noway, they be always speakin' Spanish. I sat down on a bench, waited.

The first bell rung.

I got around the corner, rushed to where my locker was and I saw Kevin there.

"You didn't take the bus? I was wonderin' if you was comin' to school," he said.

"What happened to you?"

I asked him did it look real bad. He said yeah but it coulda been worse. Then he started laughin'. I said, "Fuck you, nigga."

"That's an interestin' haircut you have there," said Mr. Donovan, my science teacher, when he was walkin' by while he was passin' out our papers. Miriam, Brian and Lateesha and Patrick—I saw them, actin' like they needed to turn around when Mr. Donovan said it.

In the lunchroom, they was laughin' at me. Mike, Ray, Harold and Eddie and them.

When I got on the bus, I sat in the middle instead of the back. Didn't look at nobody. I wasn't even gonna talk to Kevin. I sat by myself. Nobody said nothin' til Black Tony brought his fat, roly-poly ass on the bus.

"What was you when you tried to cut your head? Drunk?" Black Tony said to me when he walked by. He sat in a seat that was behind mine, on the other side, catty-corner.

Black Tony, that nigga wore a nasty curl like it hadn't gone out of style. He been in high school so long, nobody knew how old he was. He lived in the Subdivision. He wasn't supposed to be ridin' our bus. His bus was bus 50. We had that new white bus driver and she didn't know.

I ignored him.

Black Tony kept talkin'. "I know not to ask you for no haircut."

"You need to ask somebody for a bra," I said, "with them titties you got hangin' from your chest—you fat bitch!"

"Fuck nigga, that ain't what your mammy said," Black Tony tried to comeback at me, spit comin' all out of his mouth.

"Don't even try it, faggot," I told Black Tony. "You ain't had pussy since pussy had you."

The bus driver's eyes was lookin' back, reflected in the front window, up there where she was at. "Guys!" the bus driver said. "Cut it out. I mean it." She said she was gonna take us back to school if we didn't behave. People was starin' and shit. The girls in the front. Kameesha, Lashaunda, Natasha and Katonya. And Lil Pooky. And Bill.

"But I know what pussy look like," Black Tony said. "Pussy look like you."

"Dawg, don't let that nigga talk to you like that." "He couldn't say that to me."

"How you gonna let somebody call you a pussy?" It was Kevin and Ray and all of them.

"I wish that featherweight nigga would roll up on me," Black Tony said.

We stopped at the red light. The bus driver looked at us, usin' the mirror that was in the front where she was at. The light changed to green. We was movin' again. I looked over at Black Tony. He was loungin' like that nigga was Jabba the Hutt. I got up and swung on him. I slipped and Black Tony grabbed me around the neck.

He was chokin' me. I could hardly breathe.

He head butted me, his sour-smellin' curl all up in my face.

My eyes stung. My eyes burned. Was waterin', my head bent back.

I tried to fight him back.

He picked me up and we was in the walkway. I tried to wrestle free and bit down on that nigga cheek. He slung me into the emergency door, in the back.

The bus driver brought me and Black Tony back to school. Everybody on the bus came back with us, but me and Black Tony was the only ones that had to get off. The bus driver took everybody else home and left me and him at school. Me and Black Tony had

to go to Dean Calloway office. Me and him, we didn't stay there too long because it didn't take too long for Dean Calloway to tell me and him that we was suspended indefinitely. We had to walk home. Nobody was comin' to pick us up.

Dean Calloway let Black Tony go first. He made me wait before he let me go. About twenty minutes after Black Tony left. Before I left, before I started my walk home, Dean Calloway asked how did I feel—I wasn't too sure why he asked me that. I knew one thing, though: Black Tony got a swole cheek from where I bit him.

## Bingo

There were times like this when she wished she had her own car, when Rutha Mae wished she knew how to drive. Ask her, and she'd chalk up her not being able to drive to her never having had a husband to teach her. She tried not being the one to complain, so she let Margareet and Franklin take her to the casino. After all, Margareet and Franklin, they had been nice enough to take her to the church conference.

They were bent on it anyway. "Y'all, I don't know about no casino," Rutha Mae said. "Y'all think it's right? We just came from church." Margareet and Franklin had made up all kinds of excuses. Franklin had even reinterpreted scriptures. "The Bible don't really say you can't gamble," he said while they were all riding on I-75. He was the car's driver. "It just tell you about the times when people was doin' too much of it and God didn't like it."

"What about when Jesus was in the temple?" Rutha Mae countered from her backseat, her voice low, as non-confrontational as she could make it.

"Wait a minute now," Franklin came back, "Them people wasn't really gamblin' up in the temple. It was the other things they was doin' that Jesus condemned." Margareet, in the front passenger seat, nodded. Rutha Mae couldn't tell if she was nodding in agreement with her husband or if she was acknowledging him. "And don't the Bible say God help those that take a risk and help theyselves?" Franklin said.

“I read my Bible all the time. *I ain’t* never read that in no Bible verse,” Rutha Mae said, her eyes down on her plump hands, which were folded in her lap. “I’ve been readin’ the Bible for over fifty years.”

Margareet piped in, a slight annoyance in her voice. “Oh Rutha,” she said, “you ain’t got to do nothin’ if you don’t wanna. Just get somethin’ to eat. I mean, they got bingo, I think. I know you done played bingo before. It ain’t like you gotta be bothered with the slot machines.”

“Slot machines!” Rutha Mae said, her eyes now big, her voice shrill. She could believe that Franklin Patterson gambled and knew all about the casino, because he was that type of man. It wasn’t as if he attended church all the time, not on a regular basis. But Margareet? All these years, she and Margareet had been on the church’s stewardess board together, too. Margareet was even the president of the Missionary Society one time. She had even known Margareet before she became Margareet Patterson, when her maiden name was Leon.

“Rutha,” Margareet still, turned around to look, blink, blink at Rutha Mae. “They got a nice restaurant. Don’t you want to get some dinner?” As Margareet spoke, a small clump of her graying hair fell over one of Margareet’s eyes, covering it. She pulled the hair back in place.

It’s their car, Rutha Mae thought. She was a little hungry—her stomach had growled a few times— but she would have gladly forgone dinner for the straight and direct two and half hour ride to the town of Acora, where she, Margareet and Franklin lived.

The only reason she was traveling with Margareet and Franklin was because she wanted to go to the church conference, as she had done for more than thirty years. Margareet had said she was going, Franklin was driving and Rutha Mae didn't have time to think or ask if somebody else could take her. She had only missed three conferences since she started going. Once she was sick; another time it was because of a death in her family; and the one other time, during that year of the hurricane, nobody was going anywhere then. When she would go in the past, she would ride with her good friend and sister in Christ, Izella. When people saw one, they expected to see the other. They'd say, "I saw Sister Izella, I knew you would be here, too. Praise the Lord!" Izella had died in January, earlier in the year. Izella was a good Christian woman, that was what Rutha Mae liked to remember. If Izella were alive, Rutha Mae thought, I wouldn't be dealing with this casino foolishness.

Something told her Franklin wasn't being nice for nothing. Stopping at the nursery, at the place right outside of Tampa, off of 75. On the way up, Rutha Mae had commented on the beauty of the different palm trees and flowers at the plant nursery that could be seen from the road. "Rutha, after church service, we can stop by there on the way home," Franklin said. "Maybe you can find you somethin'. I know how you like flowers. Everybody do. Your yard got to be the prettiest in town." Rutha Mae took the compliment with pride, knowing the many hours and days she spent to keep her lawn and flower garden looking attractive. She hadn't paid much attention then to the passing billboard sign for the Indian Casino that was nearby, only a few miles away from the nursery. While in the back seat, Rutha Mae glanced down at the potted spider plant she

purchased from the nursery. It sat opposite her, atop a spread of newspaper that had been laid out as a precaution against the possibility of fallen dirt.

That Franklin—with that annoying laugh of his that sounded like radio static—Franklin, he had tricked her.

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Franklin parked the car. The doors unlocked automatically.

He got out first and then Margareet, who, as she rose, looked back at Rutha Mae. Rutha Mae couldn't decide what to make of Margareet's face. Was it the face of a sheepish child or was Margareet saying, "Don't be stupid, Rutha. Get your butt out of this car?" Rutha Mae took it to mean the latter, because after Margareet stood up on her feet, she slammed her door. For a while, all Rutha Mae could see through the car window was the midsection of Margareet's blue dress, since the car's ceiling blocked Rutha Mae's view of Margareet's shoulders and head. Margareet knocked on the window. The knocking rattled Rutha Mae's nerves. Lord Jesus, help your child, Rutha Mae thought.

She got out of the car warily, clumsy. When she opened her door, she had little room to maneuver, her plumpness being the problem. Plus the door opened too wide, it bumped the car nearby. She winced at the sound of the impact. Margareet was standing behind the car; she blinked hard when she heard the noise. "What you doin'?" shouted Franklin, who was several cars up ahead. Rutha Mae couldn't decide if his question was for her or Margareet. From the car, Franklin had moved like a checkerboard chip, swift, unanticipated, you'd think he was a lone traveler by the distance that separated him from his wife and Rutha Mae.

“Franklin,” it was Margareet shouting back, “If you wouldna never parked so close to that car, it wouldna never happened. *I* almost hit that car when I got out.”

Franklin dismissed his wife with his hand. “When y’all two get the molasses out of y’all butts, find me at the door waitin’.” He continued to walk briskly toward the elevator door entrance in the parking garage. With his rude self, Rutha Mae thought. Help me Jesus. Help me.

Margareet stood behind, waited for Rutha Mae. This made Rutha Mae more self-conscious. The space between the Pattersons’ car and the other car that Rutha Mae had pushed the door against was so tight that she felt squeezed in, her stomach touching one car and her buttocks against the other. She slid out, not easily, of course, because both the movement of her body and the grip of the cars caused her light green skirt to pull. The dust from the two cars left streaks of smudge. “Look at my skirt,” she said once she got loose. She tried looking at her behind but her neck would only go so far; so, she saw nothing but the concrete ground behind her and the shadows of parked cars, and she wasn’t bold enough to lift her skirt or twist it around in public view. She stared at the smudge she could see before bringing her eyes up to Margareet. “My skirt,” she said. Margareet looked over to Franklin, who was now even farther away, waiting for the both of them at the garage elevator. “When we get inside,” Margareet said, “we’ll go to the restroom and work on gettin’ that stain out. It ain’t that bad, Rutha. Take it to the cleaners.”

The idea that Rutha Mae would be inside a bathroom—in a casino of all places—trying to treat any number of stains on her skirt infuriated her inside. “Lord, Lord,” she groaned to herself.

She and Margareet made their way to the elevator. Rutha Mae was surprised that Franklin had actually waited. The three of them got inside along with a small crowd of white people around their age. Rutha Mae was quiet, still steaming from seeing her skirt stained. Being inside the elevator made her even more worrisome about the way she looked.

The elevator door sealed itself. A delay. It didn't move.

"Where's the goddamn buttons on this thing," said one of the white men whose voice resounded gravelly as his hand slid along the wall.

"I'm sorry, Alex," said another white man, chuckling after he moved and then realized his body hid the row of elevator buttons. "It looks like they're on my side. I guess I better push on it, eh?" He looked back at Margareet who gave a weak smile, just to acknowledge him. He pushed the button for the ground floor and chuckled some more "We are all probably going to the same place, eh?"

Rutha Mae thoughts about her skirt began to break up as she caught sight of the activity and people around her. Wandering heads, wandering eyes. Eyes upon her, eyes upon Margareet, who stood almost directly behind her. Where was that Franklin?

"Well, don't you two look lovely," a short white woman standing in front of Margareet spoke. The man who chuckled smiled and nodded, to show he agreed. Rutha Mae and Margareet said thank you, their words overlapping, their voices seeming to echo each other. The woman's compliment, Rutha Mae didn't take it as very serious because of her skirt. Yet she took it as an opportunity to look around more, casually, to twist her head where it hadn't gone before. Yes!—that ol' Franklin—he was behind her. She saw him! He had managed to take off his tie. He had his jacket under his arm.

The elevator landed, its doors pulled open, Rutha Mae's heart fluttered. She would not have gotten out of the elevator had she not felt obliged by the crowd of people moving forward. Blocks of sunrays flooded through the openings of the garage edifice and cast down all around, into partitioned shadows. Franklin bumped into Rutha Mae. He didn't even say excuse me, and he kept on walking. Near the white people, as if he came in with them.

Rutha Mae walked uneasily forward to a spot where Margareet was waiting for her. Franklin was at the point of leaving the garage, under an overhang that suspended out from it, on a sidewalk that trailed right up to the automatic door entrance of the casino. Margareet yelled, "Franklin, Franklin, you ain't gonna wait for us." His reply was muffled by the distance, but you could still make out: "Why don't y'all come on instead of makin' somebody wait for you!"

Rutha Mae could see that Margareet's face immediately began to twitch, and Margareet had tilted her head back. It was as if Margareet's tolerance for the foul odor that was Franklin was giving in. "Margareet," Rutha Mae whispered aloud, hoping that only the two of them could hear her. The taller Margareet turned her head and look down at Rutha Mae to respond to her name being called. "I can't do it," Rutha Mae said, all airy. Her head shook. "I can't do it. I can't go inside that place."

"It'll be alright," Margareet said. "You and I will just go to the restaurant. We'll get somethin' to eat."

It was still difficult for Rutha Mae to believe that Margareet had probably been to the casino before. Almost as hard to believe that she would give in to Franklin.

While inside the place, Rutha Mae kept her pocketbook clutched to her. She walked warily, close to Margaret, no longer too concerned about how her smudged skirt appeared, even as some of the periodically bizarre lighting in the casino seemed to illuminate some of the otherwise invisible details of her body and those of the bodies of the other people around her: the very faint hairs on the arms and the faces; and a variety of lint, on clothes, on the carpeting, that glowed under the different fluorescent colors—red, yellow, green. No, Rutha Mae’s fear was that some addicted gambler would steal her pocketbook, take her money—try to. How odd, she thought, for she seemed to be the only woman carrying a sizable purse. The various electronic chirping noises and blinking light features inside reminded her of the videogames her grandchildren—especially her grandboys—loved to play to the detriment of her nerves. (She would sometimes yell: “Take that Nantenda and all that noise off my TV!”) Yet, it all reminded her of one of the newly constructed megachurches she had just recently visited during this year’s conference. Minus the casino’s slot machines and gambling stations and the white people and the Hispanics, that church was vast, expansive, and held so many people, with all its array of lights that made her sweat underneath her church clothes despite the working air conditioner. And that huge television screen that would occasionally broadcast the faces of the people sitting in the pews.

The two of them caught up with Franklin, finally, but not for long. He spoke, “I’m gonna walk around. I will see y’all in a minute.” And Franklin walked off again. Rutha Mae dropped the arm under which she had her purse clutched against her body. The purse flopped down and swayed from the straps she kept gripped in her hand before stopping on its own. This man is something else, she thought.

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A young white waiter sat Rutha Mae and Margaret at a booth in the restaurant. To Rutha Mae, the restaurant looked out of place. It was relatively elegant compared to the casino environment outside, which was gaudy. They were given menus, and the waiter said he would return.

“I’m not really hungry,” Margaret said as she looked over the menu.

“Me either,” said Rutha Mae.

He came back. The waiter wrote down their orders—two slices of sweet potato pie and ice cream and iced tea. “You mean you aren’t going to have one of the entrees?” he asked. Both Margaret and Rutha Mae said no and then looked to one another for an explanation for the young man’s question. The waiter rolled his eyes before saying, “Okay.” He removed the menus and walked away, his hips swishing as he went.

“That boy don’t know me,” said Margaret, her eyes slanting as they followed him walking among the other diners and waiters, his hips still swishing.

“He young,” Rutha Mae offered, adding, “and just as *sweet* as he can be.” Her right hand kept reflexively tapping her pocketbook to make sure it stayed beside her on the seat. Rutha Mae went on to say, “Thank the Lord for Jesus that *we* Christians.”

“Yeah,” Margaret replied weakly. She took her eyes away from the diminishing image of the waiter and turned to Rutha Mae, in the seat opposite of her. “I need to apologize to you. I’m sorry that you had to see Franklin like this.”

Franklin? Rutha Mae thought to herself. No, *I’m* sorry I had to see you like this.

“He is a good man.” Margaret went on. “We wouldn’t have been married this long if he wasn’t.” Margaret looked around, as if Franklin were nearby. Her voice

lowered. “Gamblin' is a weakness he got. He be bettin' on the ballgames—football, basketball, baseball—all of 'em. Him, Willie Lee, Montaigne, they ...”

“Brother Willie Lee be gambling'?!” Rutha Mae said.

“Yeah, chile,” Margareet said, her voice still secretive. “They even be bettin' on the high school games.”

“Willie Lee a deacon!” Rutha Mae said and then paused. “Well, you know how men are. All you can do is pray for them and hope they do right.”

“And love them,” Margareet said. She lowered her head and that stray clump of hair fell in her face. Margareet pulled the hair back with a wiping motion and looked up.

Now was the time to ask, Rutha Mae thought. “So you done been here before?”

“Yes. A couple times.”

Rutha Mae tried to appear unfazed, as she had been suspecting it was a possibility.

“Well, I can't let him get carried away,” Margareet said, the words rushing out. “It ain't just his money, you know.” She then added that, “It done been a few times when he won a lot of money,” all the while her head nodded to let Rutha Mae know she was telling no lie.

“A lot of money?” Rutha Mae said. Her ample breasts edged forward, slid on the table as she got nearer to listen. “How much it was?” she asked.

Margareet looked around again. “One time, he won two thousand dollars playin' poker. . . . And he ain't that good. He won the two thousand out there, at a table near a corner. I can show you the place if you want.”

Rutha Mae's hand stopped tapping her pocketbook: Margareet knew where the poker table was.

“Two sweet potato pies with ice cream, and iced tea, and, just in case, I put some lemon on the side. I wasn't sure if you said you wanted any lemon.” The waiter carefully placed the food on their table as if everything was hot enough to burn. “Is there anything else I can get for you, ladies?”

Margareet took a sip from her tea and put it down. She looked at the glass of tea. Her face was in a brief trance. “This tea is not sweet,” she said. Her head turned toward the waiter and looked up at him. “Could you bring back some sugar, darlin', *sweetie*?”

“Sugar? Sure. I can do that.” The waiter left.

Rutha Mae chuckled. “You oughta stop.”

Margareet smiled and then giggled like a little girl.

Rutha Mae sipped from her glass. She cut into the pie. “This ain't too bad,” she said after a taste.

“You know what?”

“What?” Rutha Mae said.

“I can't eat this. I don't know why I ordered it.”

“Listen to you,” Rutha Mae said to her longtime friend. Margareet was always the skinny one. Margareet, forever pretty. Rutha Mae, steadily eating pie, now and then she would dip a piece into the ice cream. “Don't tell me you on a diet. I'm the one that should be on a diet, as fat as I am.”

“I can't eat when I worried,” Margareet said.

The waiter came back with the sugar. “Anything else?”

“No, that will be it, sweetheart,” Margareet replied.

“The waiter dropped the bill on the table and left for the last time.

“He got a lot of nerve,” Margareet said.

“The devil sho' is busy today, ain't he?” Rutha Mae added. “Lord, have mercy. Have mercy, Father.”

“See if I leave his butt a tip,” Margareet swatted one of the sugar packets away from her.

“Margareet, don't be like that.” Rutha Mae picked up the bill. “How much is it? It ain't too bad, even though they charged almost three dollars for a little scoop of ice cream.”

“Three dollars!”

Picking up her pocketbook, Rutha Mae told Margareet not to worry. She would handle it.

Margareet frowned. “Better you than me.” Then, she said, “What you doin'?”

Rutha Mae carefully counted money for the tip and the bill itself. After that, she took out from her pocketbook a little notepad that contained sheets of paper that were smaller than the paper money she set aside. On one of the sheets she wrote for the waiter “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and the words “May God Bless You.”

Margareet continued to frown.

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Back on the casino floor, among the electronic noises of the slot machines—the whirs, the blurps, the buzzing, the chirp, the beeps—Margareet and Rutha Mae walked around

with no clear destination, Rutha Mae following Margareet. Rutha Mae's firm grip on her purse returned. Even tightened as she held the purse as if she were trying to get a better hold of a bag of potentially shifting produce.

“What are we gonna do?” Margareet said as she looked out, around.

Rutha Mae coughed. “They let people smoke up in here?”

The two eventually found themselves in a walkway between a row of slot machines that flashed furiously at times. Margareet turned to Rutha Mae and beckoned her with her hand. Rutha Mae followed. At the end of the walkway were two empty seats, side by side, in front of two slot machines. Margareet sat in one and pulled Rutha Mae by her arm and gestured for her to sit in the other. Rutha Mae did, very cautiously. From her wallet, Margareet pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, and Rutha Mae went wide-eyed.

“Here,” Margareet said, extending the twenty dollars toward Rutha Mae.

“What?!” Ruth Mae said. “What you want me to do, Margareet?”

“Take it,” Margareet retorted.

“Oh, no—you ain't gonna get me to gamble.”

“Oh it ain't gonna hurt you to play the slot machines one time. This here ain't no illegal gambling place. The Indians own this place. They get all the money. It go to them. This here how they make they livin'.”

Rutha Mae looked around for a moment, to see if she could see someone who might look like he or she could be an Indian. Nobody. But that didn't mean there weren't any Indians in the place. Rutha Mae raised her hand toward the twenty dollars; she pinched it between her thumb and forefinger as if it were the remains of a dead insect, some roach's leg or a bug's wing. She tugged and, to her mild surprise, because she had

underestimated how loose the bill was in Margaret's hands, Rutha Mae's hand sprung back, striking her in the chest, with the bill in her hand and all. Margaret took out another twenty. She slid it in the bill slot for the slot machine in front of her. With mounting curiosity, Rutha Mae watched the bill ease into the machine. And then, a cast of bright light shone all over the front of Margaret's face. "Now put yours in," she insisted to Rutha Mae. Rutha Mae could feel her heart beating rapidly. Margaret urged her to go ahead. Rutha Mae told herself that the money in her hand was not hers; it was Margaret's. She dropped the bill in the money slot and watched it get sucked away. Now the same bright light shone on her face—startlingly. A kaleidoscopic. Different colors and different patterns. A spinning wheel appeared and disappeared. The words WIN and then MONEY flashed, blinked. At the bottom of the screen a blinking arrow pointed to the words PUSH BUTTON TO PLAY. Rutha Mae looked over at Margaret, helplessly. "Push the button," Margaret ordered and then demonstrated by pushing hers. Her machine beeped and chirped, and Margaret jerked her head back from the machine's screen. "Look at that—I won thirty dollars," said Margaret, perking up.

Rutha Mae still had not pushed her button.

Margaret reached over, grabbed Rutha Mae's arm. She fumbled against Rutha Mae's pocketbook as Rutha Mae flinched. Margaret grabbed the pocketbook. For a moment, there was a tug-of-war between the two old women, with Rutha Mae protesting, "I can't do it—I can't." While Margaret held Rutha Mae's purse in one hand and Rutha Mae's arm in the other, she forced one of Rutha Mae's hands onto the button of her machine. Rutha Mae said, "No!" She snatched her pocketbook back from Margaret, and in the motion, freed herself.

Rutha Mae's machine bleeped, whistled, chirped. Bright lights illuminated all around it. The two women watched at the twenty dollars became fifty . . . one hundred . . . one fifty . . . two hundred . . . two hundred fifty. The words YOU'RE A WINNER flashed across the screen. The screen returned back to its game mode, with the blinking arrow indicator also returning, pointing as it did before to the words PUSH BUTTON TO PLAY. Rutha Mae looked at Margareet quizzically.

"You can cash out or keep playin'," Margareet explained.

"Cash out?!" said Rutha Mae, who was back to clutching her purse to herself as if she needed a familiar touch.

Margareet pointed to a button. "If you touch that right there, you can go to the cashier or one of them machines and get the money you won, like if you had a check."

"You mean, no money don't come pourin' out of this thing here if you win."

"Chile, this ain't T.V.," Margareet chuckled. "Did you see any money come pourin' out?"

Rutha Mae was embarrassed. She looked to the right and to the left of her and then to the back to see if anyone was paying attention.

"Wait a minute," Margareet said. She moved back to her own game machine and pressed a button to wage a higher bet before pressing the button again to see if she herself could get lucky again. The result was she lost all the money she won as well as the value of the original twenty dollars she had put in the machine. A slight puzzlement showed on her face. She went for another twenty, slid it in, and, while she did it, told Rutha Mae to come to her for a minute. Rutha Mae didn't want to get up from her chair. She was too concerned that someone would push her completely out of the way and somehow either

steal or cause her to lose the money her game machine had announced as winnings.

“Ain’t nobody gonna bother it,” Margareet said. Rutha Mae stood up slowly, cautiously, before Margareet jerked her over by her arm, which caused Rutha Mae’s pocketbook to become almost unclenched. Rutha Mae jerked back, freed her arm and her blouse sleeve.

“The devil done got in you?” Rutha Mae said.

“Push my button,” Margareet said.

“Push your . . . Do what?”

“Just push the button one time.”

Rutha Mae walked up, still cautious, to the front of the other game machine.

Margareet scooted back in her chair so that Rutha Mae would have enough room. Rutha Mae pointed to the button, sort of a question of whether that one was the right one. “Push it,” Margareet said. Rutha Mae closed her eyes, and with the hand that was not encumbered by her pocketbook, she brought three fingers down on a red button. She felt the button lower itself to a stopping point. Margareet eyes had closed completely, too, in anticipation for a bombardment of flashing lights, what she had seen before.

There was some music, mild in tone.

Rutha Mae opened her eyes. She saw nothing that was like what had happened, just the arrow blinking for the button to be pushed again. She turned to Margareet.

“I guess you ain’t as lucky as I thought,” Margareet said, sort of sour.

“What happened?” Rutha Mae asked.

“Can’t you see I lost more money?” Margareet said, with a snap in her tone.

Rutha Mae couldn’t explain it: Why did she feel disappointed too?

She put her free arm, its hand, over her mouth in order to ponder what just happened. Margareet pushed the button on her slot machine again. She lost more money, was down to a dollar and some change. Carelessly, she pushed the button another time. More money lost; she was down to forty-five cents. Rutha Mae watched anxiously, even after the paltry sum of forty-five cents registered. "I guess I'm through," Margareet said, sort of bitter. "Rutha, so what you wanna do? Cash out or what?"

Rutha Mae pondered for a moment again. Margareet did give her that twenty dollars; she did lose her money. Rutha Mae thought, I, on the other hand, got lucky. . . . But it didn't work when she had pressed the button on Margareet's slot machine. . . . When she would cash out, she would give Margareet her twenty dollars back, probably more. . . . It wouldn't hurt to press the button on the slot machine one more time. . . . Her winnings so far were a blessing from the Lord. . . . She'd give more the next time she tithed.

If she won more, she could buy that bicycle for her grandson.

She could help her daughter, who never paid her bills on time.

Her brother complained about the costly part for that truck of his that he has gone without because he doesn't have the money ("I might as well get another truck or car for what they wanna charge.")

"I think I'ma play a little bit," Rutha Mae said, timid as she sat in front of her slot machine. She concentrated on the button. She guessed enough to know that that button meant she could lose everything. She sat down on the chair behind her and scooted up. Her pocketbook strap was still in her grip and the pocketbook itself bounced against the chair with every creeping movement forward Rutha Mae took. If I win enough money,

she thought, I could buy myself one of those exercise machines that appear in those commercials.

Rutha Mae hit the button. Margareet watched intensely. Rutha Mae's heart fluttered again. Margareet moved in closer.

Somehow Rutha Mae had lost, was down forty three dollars, she saw. Then, instantaneously, she pressed the button again.

The sound: Cha-ching!

A horizontal row of dollar signs.

New lights around the machine—unseen before—came on. Flickered. Two eyes replaced the dollar signs, followed by the development of a line that turned into a smile. A smiley face that bounced. And bounced. Bounced. Bounced. Bounced.

And the number: Rutha Mae's winnings grew exponentially. Rutha Mae and Margareet's mouths dropped at the same time when the number grew to one thousand and then two thousand. Rutha Mae reached over with her pocketbook arm, reached for Margareet's hand until she clasped it, tight; she needed to feel Margareet's hand.

By the time the number stopped turning over, Rutha's winnings had come to \$4,020.

Rutha Mae clapped her hands gleefully, like a child. She was once again a very happy girl being treated by a smiling clown who gave her a sucker when he could've given the candy to another child. Her pocketbook swung wildly as she twisted in delight.

“That ain't too bad,” said Margareet, commenting about Rutha Mae's winnings.  
“That ain't bad at all.”

"Bingo!" Rutha Mae shouted. She threw a hand up to the ceiling. With her fingers and thumb splayed, she waved the hand and shouted, "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus! Thank ya, thank ya!" Possessed with the Spirit, Rutha Mae began to shake where she stood.

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"Yes, yes—yes Lord," Rutha Mae whispered aloud, her eyes closed.

She and Margareet were standing in one of the cashier lines. Exhilarated, Rutha Mae had forgotten about the smudges on her skirt. When she opened her eyes, she looked at the people in the line at her left. She looked for the other winners who were like herself. The people in the line looked anxious, yes, but not as happy as she was. Even pitiful-looking, she thought: a skinny white boy and his even skinnier girlfriend, each in jet-black, baggy clothes, including pants whose dirty-soiled bottom ends swallowed their feet and their shoes and swept the floor when they walked, the silver piercings in their ears and on their faces gleamed a tear-blurry brightness whenever the jewelry was struck by light; and Rutha Mae saw the faces of a group of men—they were together—one black man, the rest Hispanic—whose filthy faces and clothes were speckled and streaked with the tar, concrete and dirt from the construction site where they all worked. The line that all these people were in was for check cashing only. Rutha Mae frowned, glared, when one of the Hispanic construction workers glanced at her.

When it was her turn, Rutha Mae approached the cashier with some trepidation, Margareet standing behind her. The cashier's eyes ping-ponged for a moment, unsure which woman wanted assistance. "May I help you?" she said, no politeness, showing the two gold teeth on the bottom palette of her mouth. Rutha Mae looked to Margareet for

guidance. “Tell her you want to cash your slip,” Margareet encouraged. “I want to cash . . .” Rutha Mae tried to repeat but the cashier had already outstretched her opened hand. Rutha Mae passed her the slip. The cashier was swift in taking it away, like a snatch. It caused Rutha Mae to blink and wince. The cashier had an annoyed look. Rutha Mae’s slip—nothing but paper—was crumpled as if it had been destined for a trash can. While rolling her eyes and shaking her head, the cashier ironed out the slip with both of her hands until she could read the redeemable value clearly. She lowered her head. \$4020.00. “How do you want it?” the cashier muttered.

Rutha Mae didn’t understand. She looked again to Margareet. “Do you mean if she wants in twenties or one-hundred dollar bills? Is that what you sayin’?” Margareet asked.

“Yeah,” the cashier replied, her voice impatient. “Do she want a check for the amount or do she want me to give it to her all in cash money?”

“You ain’t got to get no attitude, young lady,” Margareet retorted.

“I ain’t gettin’ no attitude,” the cashier said back. “I’m tryin’ to give her her money. She ain’t the only person in line.”

A grumbling voice from behind: “Lady, can you please let the girl do her job?” Margareet jerked her head back, said, “Shut up!” her eyes glaring — a reaction she directed toward the white man standing directly behind her, not even knowing if he was the one who had interjected a moment ago. “I’m tired of this,” she said and then yelled, “We need a supervisor over here!”

“Margareet,” Rutha Mae tried to whisper, “It’s okay.” She turned and looked at the cashier with all the politeness she could muster. “I’ll take all hundreds, if you have

them, please.” She turned again to Margareet, muttering in a low voice that was only meant for Margareet to hear: “Who do they take me for? I ain’t takin’ no check—get home and try to cash it, and then it been done bounced. Oh no—no sir, no ma’am!—they ain’t gonna get’ Rutha Mae McClendon like that.”

The cashier mechanically counted aloud hundred dollar bills and placed them in sets, each set in a money clip. Before the cashier finished counting all the money, Rutha Mae tried to put what had been counted so far in her pocketbook, so fearful was she that some or all of it could disappear if the money was left out in the open too long.

“Ma’am,” the cashier said, her voice straining not to reveal her full-blown irritation, “please don’t touch the money until I’ve finished counting it all.”

“OK darlin’,” Rutha Mae said, moved her hand and waited.

The cashier was done. Rutha Mae put her pocketbook on the counter and quickly put the money inside. Although the cashier had given the appearance that she counted accurately and exactly, Rutha Mae had a feeling that the young woman might have pulled a fast one, might’ve intentionally left out a few bills, might’ve counted in ten dollar bills instead of the one hundred dollar bills she was supposed to have used. But she was too afraid to ask for a recount; she didn’t like the attention that had already been drawn to her by the mere fact she was in the line she was in, by the mere fact the cashier and Margareet had argued. Money inside, Rutha Mae zipped her pocketbook closed. She moved from the front of the line and away, walking to where she did not know. Margareet followed. Each woman intuitively knew the other was ready to go home. Rutha Mae returned her pocketbook to the clutched position in which she carried it before.

Margareet took the lead again. Together, they went looking for Franklin. They didn't get very far before Rutha Mae called out Margareet's name, urgency in her voice.

"Yes! What is it?!" Margareet replied.

Rutha Mae looked around. When she felt as if there was no one to bother her, when no one was close by, she unzipped her pocketbook with her free hand and then put the hand inside and felt for money. She randomly pulled out some bills that were in one of the clips. Out came two hundred dollars. "Here. Take this," she said.

Margareet resisted. "I can't do that Rutha Mae. That's your money. You won it, not me."

"Chile, take this money!" Rutha Mae said. "You know I wouldna never got this money if you hadn't gave me that twenty dollars. Take it!"

Margareet took the money from her hand and in turn placed it in the little wallet she carried with her. "Thank ya, Rutha," she said. "Now if we could only find where Franklin at."

After circling around, they found Franklin outside the Casino, standing in the night time. In a surprising burst of energy, Margareet rushed to go outside, through the automatic doors, her shoes clapping on the uncarpeted floor.

Before Rutha Mae could exit through the doors, Margareet was already outside. Rutha Mae could see through the glass that the wife and husband were talking in a rapid manner . . . No . . . Arguing? . . . Margareet looked toward Rutha Mae; her face was distressed, aggrieved. They are talking about me, Rutha Mae thought.

Rutha Mae walked through the automatic doors, to where they were standing. Margareet's face was even more dispirited. "Well, hey Franklin," Rutha Mae said. Her

voice was pleasant. “We was lookin' for you.” She looked at Margareet for confirmation. Margareet's face was unchanged. “Well, we found you, didn't we?” Rutha Mae said.

From that point on, there was silence among them—all three—as they walked back to the parking garage. Franklin leading the way. Next Margareet. Next Rutha Mae.

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Just as Rutha Mae had trouble getting out of the car, she now had trouble getting back in. She again wedged herself in between the car the three of them came in and a car that was next to it. She held her pocketbook in her hand above her shoulder, so fearful was she that she would lose her pocketbook. By holding her purse above her head, she reasoned that she would prevent its straps from breaking off with the friction she was creating as she tried to pry herself in. Margareet and Franklin were in the car already, waiting.

Once inside the car, she slammed the door hard. The sound of the door jarred both Franklin and Margareet. “I didn't mean to do that, y'all,” Rutha Mae said. Her chest heaved; she breathed hard. Little beads of sweat had formed on her forehead. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and then wiped the back of her hand on her skirt. She was sure that her skirt was filthier now. She didn't care as much, though, because she decided that when she got home she would throw away the outfit she had on and then buy another one, a better one. Maybe two.

With the perspiration on her face, the air conditioning in the car felt especially cold, like dry ice sticking and stinging her skin. She knew from previous experience that if her body didn't adjust to the cold air like that, later, she'd get a headache. The car was on but not moving. Franklin hadn't put it in reverse.

“Margareet told me she gave you twenty dollars and then you won some more money,” Franklin said. To Rutha Mae, his voice sounded like it was all around her. She couldn’t see his face. She didn’t want to see it, to tell the truth. Her head was down. Even in the darkness, now she could see her skirt was dirtier. “You supposed to be a Christian woman,” said Franklin, not willing to let up. The car engine and blasting air conditioner could be heard in the silence.

“Why you botherin' me, Franklin?” Rutha Mae said, her head still down. “Can’t you just drive us home. . . . Please. I’m tired.”

“It was with Margareet money,” Franklin said, “that was how you got that other money. Margareet money, that’s *my* money.”

Rutha Mae lifted her head. “I paid her back. Ask her. Ask your wife. I gave her back more than twenty dollars. Margareet, tell him. Tell him, Margareet.” Margareet kept silent. “Margareet,” Rutha Mae called out again, an incredulous tone.

“All that talk about how gamblin' ain't right. Look at you—a gambler,” Franklin said. To Rutha Mae, his voice seemed to move around as if he were encircling her. “If people back in Acora knew what you did today, what would they say, you using somebody else money so that you wouldn’t use yours?”

“That ain’t right. It ain’t right no kinda way.”

Rutha Mae called again for Margareet.

Margareet remained silent—she said not a word. Not one.

Franklin carried on. “My wife done did some much for you all these years. Driving you to the store, to the doctor; letting you ride in our car and you never paid us no gas money—you ain’t paid us no gas money for this trip! . . . You got to do right.”

Rutha Mae screamed in a loud whispery voice, “Margareet!” But still no answer.

Rutha Mae looked over at the reflection of herself in her window. She was teary-eyed; she saw her double chin. “Franklin, you ain’t no good,” she said, her voice croaking. “You ain’t gonna get no money from me.”

He turned his head to the side, to the back, faced her. “Then, how you gonna get home,” he said.

Rutha Mae wept more, her head drooped down. She put her fingers over her mouth as she shut her welling eyes. She looked at her reflection again, seeing her tear-streaked face, the double chin—always there—seeing the potted spider plant she had bought earlier. *You got the prettiest front yard.* Lord forgive me, she said to herself, Lord please forgive me. “Franklin,” Rutha Mae said with more composure, “so, you sayin’ you ain’t gonna take me home?” He didn’t reply; Rutha Mae didn’t expect him to. “What you gonna tell people Franklin when you go home and they see I didn’t come back with you? What you gonna say to ’em?” Her voice was breaking up again. “What you gonna tell ’em, Franklin, when they ask, ‘Where Ms. Rutha Mae? Wasn’t she supposed to come back with y’all. Did y’all drive her up there to the church conference?’ When they ask you, ‘What happened to Ms. Rutha?’ what you gonna say, Franklin?” Rutha Mae got louder. “Huh?”

The sound of the car motor, the air conditioner and Rutha Mae’s hiccupping sobs filled in when no one spoke.

Rutha Mae swung her pocketbook at the spider plant. It fell over, dumping dirt onto the car seat. She pulled at her door handle and pushed out. The door crashed against the other car; the other car’s alarm blared, its safety lights triggered, flashing repeatedly.

Rutha Mae lost her balance in the motion. The upper part of her body fell onto the door. She hit her head; the skin on her right cheek folded into itself when her face landed against the door. Rutha Mae raised herself, applying with determination more pressure against the door—her fatness, her tool. She pushed away. Extraordinary strain showed in her face.

When she was free from the pin of the two cars, she waddled away hurriedly toward a glowing red exit sign, which hung above the entrance to a stairwell. Her skirt fit her backside unevenly; her panty line was showing. She rushed down the steps while bracing and balancing herself on the arm rails. Her large waddling shadow followed. Her pocketbook was with her, with all the money it. She needed to find someplace to go, she thought. Her home in Acora was more than two hours away, but she wasn't sure if she should go to someplace else first.

## **Him**

Carlos giggled as he moved his marijuana-drunk head back, bringing it to rest on the sofa where he was sitting. His giggling caused Damian to do same in the chair in which Damian sat. A mint-green sofa and chair, both the same color, in the darkened living area of Carlos' apartment. Carlos raised his head from its resting place. He spoke: "So, you passed me over for him? Alexander, the Jamaican truck driver. You got something against Puerto Rican boys?"

He and Damian were friends. Had become that through employment. They used to work at the same call center. That's when they first met. But, Carlos—when drunk or high—would bring it up: Damian never did want to have a relationship with him. And Damian couldn't tell, not now, if the feelings were still there, lingering or latent. When Carlos brought it up, Damian knew to keep quiet. He knew.

Carlos was the first real friend he made after he moved to the 941 from Bartow, in the 863. Truth be told, the only friend, really. It was hard making friends. A hard time for Damian. Who do you trust? Who can you trust? Who?

Alexander had become his regular lover after that night in the Laundromat when the two exchanged cell numbers. Outside that, he didn't know what to make of their relationship. After months, for several months now, he knew that he more than liked Alexander. More than liked him, Damian thought while he silently massaged the neck of his beer bottle with his thumb.

"He still works there?" Carlos asked.

"No, he quit doing that Laundromat work a long time ago," Damian said. "He was just doing it for a little extra money."

"So, that's how the fishing trips started?" Carlos said. "He asked you for your number; you gave it. And right, you didn't know it was leading to something else? When you call his house, his wife answers the phone and she thinks, 'That's the fishing buddy.'" Carlos laughed even louder, his tongue and his teeth out to see. His face, a chubby-boy's face, with chubby-boy cheeks.

Damian wasn't sure if he should laugh along with him.

"And that lady at the Laundromat, she scared the shit out of you two when she came back," Carlos said, guffawing, laughing more. "Y'all didn't see her there. When she came back. I wish I could've saw the look on all three of your faces." Carlos sat up and said, "I joined a gym." Serious. He wasn't laughing.

Damian said, "Oh, you did?"

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Damian, Little Alex, and Him. The three of them were at the pier that day.

Little Alex swung his arms and fists wildly while his father's outstretched arm and hand held the five-year-old in place, at the boy's head. Son and father at play while the three waited for fish to bite. Three fishing rods, two for adults, Damian and Alexander, and one fishing pole for a kid, that one for Little Alex. All three poles rested against the pier's wooden railing. "Stop windmilling," the father said to his son. "You swing like a girl. You are leaving yourself open to get punched." Alexander and Damian sat on upended buckets the two of them brought. Little Alex's arms were tiring, his arms

slowing down, like a wide swim stroke each, each one dragging to make it around. Alexander grabbed his son, pulled him in by his small arms, the son flying into his daddy's chest, where father and son hugged each other in laughter. A very warm breeze. A very warm sun. Sun rays that sparkled on the calm water below. Smiling, Damian remembered the last time he and Alexander embraced each other. At Damian's place. In the bedroom: Damian and Alexander hugged and kissed in a room faintly illuminated by a movie on a television that went unwatched.

A pelican landed on the pier walkway and sauntered past, waddling on its webbed feet. Little Alex, enraptured, chased the bird in spite of his father's protestations: "Alex, boy, leave it alone. Did you hear me?" And there was Damian: "Alex, come back." Little Alex didn't go far. First daddy, then Damian. Voices of authority. Little Alex turned around and came back. His father thumped him on his forehead. "Oww!" the boy said, wincing too late. The father put Little Alex in a soft headlock that caused the boy's shirt to raise, caused the boy's belly button to be exposed; that caused him to laugh even more as he wrestled with his daddy. And there was a gull that distracted Damian. Momentarily. Damian's eyes came back to his lover and Little Alex. "Let's take a break," the father said, and released his son, who spun himself around, into Damian, at whom he smiled when he stopped in place. A smiling little boy, two missing front teeth. "My mummy is pregnant," Little Alex said and Damian said, "She is?" and the little boy nodded his head happily. Damian looked at Alexander. For confirmation.

"What did I tell you, Alex?" the father said and pushed his son in the head with his pointer finger. The boy's head tilted, snapped sideways when struck. "You don't go around telling everybody that."

"But I told Mr. Damian," Little Alex said. Bewildered. And his eyes welled.

"Don't—cry out here and see what I do to you, boy," Alexander said to his son.

With a hiss. His furrowed brow.

Damian pulled Little Alex toward him and wrapped his arm around the boy's body while Little Alex cried silently, his head away from his father, burrowed into

Damian's shirt. "Alex," Damian said, "it's okay. Don't worry, Alex. I'm not gonna tell nobody." From his pocket, out of his wallet, Damian pulled out a couple of dollars.

"What about a snocone?" Did Little Alex want a snocone? The boy nodded, so faint, and

Little Alex looked at his father, such fear. "It's okay," Damian said. He patted Little Alex on his head. "Your daddy doesn't mind. Go to the man at that booth and get us a couple of snocones. Alex, you want one . . ."

"No," the father said. "He might've used a corn sweetener and I'm allergic to it."

Two snocones then. The boy trotted away, happy, uplifted by Damian and his father's approval.

And Damian said, "When were you gonna tell me?"

Alexander got up from his bucket and walked toward his fishing pole. He unlocked the release, began winding in the line, his hand circling, repeatedly. "Is that how you're going to teach your son when you have one?" Alexander said. "Give him a snocone when he cries?"

"How many months along is Michelle? . . . You weren't gonna tell me, were you?"

Alexander turned the handle faster. "Don't do that again. Alex is my son."

"Fuck you!" Damian said, low, heavy, watchful; wary of making the other people

at the pier onlookers. Worried and wary. Damian stood up, he turned his bucket right side up, he stomped toward his own fishing pole, and he started winding in the line once the pole was in his hand. Less than a foot apart from Alexander. Damian about the same height as Him. He and Alexander, both men, what you'd call thin.

"I thought you would be able to figure it out," Alexander said. All of his line had been brought back in, its hook in view. A soggy, untouched shrimp, the bait still there. Alexander spoke only loud enough for the two of them to hear. Calm and even. "We, today, came to the pier in separate cars. We usually come to the pier in one car, yours or mine, and we go back to your apartment. I brought Alex with me. I didn't want to make you mad—I never knew you would get mad like this."

Damian disassembled his pole in angry silence. And when he finished, he grabbed his bucket by its handle, pole also in hand, and stomped off toward his car, passing Little Alex, who was returning, a snocone in each hand; Little Alex, who said uneasily, "You leaving us?" A little boy's smile. A smile dissolving.

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Carlos was stirring chili, pot lid in his hands, pepper-scented steam going up in his face. "There's too much dick out there in the world to worry about him. Forget that bitch," Carlos said and put the lid back on the pot and looked over to Damian. Not to just see if Damian was listening, but also to see if Damian was still in that dream space, thinking about Alexander. Him.

Damian heard Carlos from where he sat at the dining room table. He heard him while in that dream space and he woke out of it, the pepper scent now in his nose. "I could never buy him food," Damian said. "He was allergic to, to . . . to everything,

almost. Couldn't eat chili or spaghetti because he was allergic to tomatoes. He got crazy if a bug was flying around, panicked. He said a bee sting could kill him."

"Maybe he was allergic to you," Carlos said. It wasn't funny to Damian. "Just kidding." Satisfied that the chili was doing what it needed to do on the stove, Carlos walked over to Damian and sat next to him. "You ain't never had a boyfriend before him?"

Damian said no.

Carlos raised his two, finger-splayed hands up toward his chest and stopped them before they got there. He brought the finger-splayed hands down to the kitchen table with the graceful motion of bird feet landing. He spoke: "I'm just gonna tell you this: You ain't stupid. You knew that bitch was married. It ain't like he never told you. To me, he got it a lot worse than you."

Damian stared at Carlos. Bewildered. Carlos was his friend, the one who should understand.

"After we eat this chili, I got this shit I bought from this Mexican, we can smoke it if you want?" Carlos said. The early stage of a smile on his face.

Damian said no.

The two of them ate the chili while at the table. Chili poured over rice. Orange juice for Carlos and water for Damian. They talked about their time together, when they both worked at the call center. Carlos was still there. Damian wondered why Carlos refused to ask for a promotion, to be a coach for one of the call center teams. Other people who were the coaches who supervised a team of people were getting paid more, yet Carlos had more experience, had been on the job longer than they had. Carlos didn't

want to be a supervisor to anyone—"Those other bitches can have that." It was enough to manage his own life, he said, let alone having to worry about somebody else's.

"Why don't you try to be a coach for the Spanish queue?" Damian said. "They don't get as much calls as everybody else—the pay's the same, ain't it?" He was still mystified by his friend's insistence on keeping the employee position he had—it didn't make sense.

With his hand, Carlos dismissed the thought of being the supervisor of the bilingual workers. "You still working at that hotel?" he asked Damian.

Damian said yes.

Carlos didn't see how he could do it. All those long hours every day. No benefits, not even what Carlos thought of as being the super-crappy-might-as-well-be-worthless benefits from the call center. A call center would pay more. "You working six days a week, too, and they're taking out FICA taxes."

"They don't take out taxes," Damian said, spurring a surprise on Carlos' face. "They pay us in cash, the two of us who work on the grounds and maintenance crew, me and Pierre. They think I'm Haitian, like him. Pierre knows but he don't say nothing, and I ain't said nothing." Damian smiled in thought. "He's looking for a new job. He brings the paper for me to read it to him. The job ads."

"Seems like Pierre's a smart man," Carlos said. "You should be following him."

If he should or shouldn't follow Pierre, regardless, Damian was never going back to work at a call center again—he hated it!—believe that. The hotel wasn't going to be permanent. "It's just me. It's not like I got a wife and kids to go home to."

One of Carlos' eyebrows raised itself.

As Damian was about to leave, as he was about to walk through the door, he and Carlos hugged, embraced each other as if their hugs in the past had never meant as much.

"Don't worry so much," Carlos said. Then something in jest, maybe: "You know, none of this would've ever happened if me and you would've just hooked up like I wanted—but, no, you wanted a Jamaican boy. Looks like me and you are both single now, brothaman" Carlos offered the drugs again. "You sure you don't want to party?"

Damian said no.

The two hugged once more and gave each other a good-bye peck. Carlos.  
Damian.

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There was occasional sex after Alexander. Guys Damian met at a club or bar. The one-nighters when Damian went out on the weekend sometimes. In Sarasota. Sometimes as far away as St. Petersburg and Tampa. If he were single for the rest of his life, then that would be fine, Damian thought while he sat clipping his toenails on the sofa in his apartment. Carlos was right. Why worry or wonder about Him?

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A few more months. Damian quit the hotel maintenance job, right after Pierre. The both of them ended up getting jobs with the county, same kind of work. It was more money, it was fewer hours and it came with benefits. The two would cross paths, occasionally. Sometimes, they chatted. About old times at the hotel—the constant nagging of management, the petty hotel guests who got irate over the smallest problem. Then, Pierre got married. Three times he invited Damian to dinner to meet her, his wife, Rochelle. He had asked Damian to go fishing with him, having heard Damian talk about

it a lot. Pierre and Damian loved the water. The bay. The harbor. Damian never saw Pierre outside of work. No, he did not. And yet, the two were always happy to see each other. Whenever they did.

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"Bitch, forget it. I ain't doing it," Carlos said. "I can buy fish in this store. I don't need to go to the water to catch it."

"How do you know you won't like it if you've never tried?" Damian said.

"Well, I've never tried pussy either," Carlos said as he threw a bag of potato chips into his grocery cart. The two of them in Wal-Mart. Damian accompanying Carlos.

"Look at that," Damian said. "Potato chips. What do they do?"

"You eat potato chips, bitch."

But Damian wasn't the person who paid for the gym membership yet only went a few times in more than a year's time. Damian was using Carlos' gym membership card, using the gym for free. ("Them bitches at the front desk, they don't check," Carlos had said to Damian about the card. "Just don't get caught if they ask for photo I.D.") Damian pointed out at least he was getting regular exercise He played basketball, jogged. And he went to the gym!

Carlos shrugged at it. "I've been losing weight," he said while the two of them walked the store aisle. Carlos in front and Damian walking behind. "I just cut back," and Carlos said, "I can't overeat if I'm always cooking for you!"

Truth be told, Carlos was losing weight—a good thirty pounds at least, as anyone could see, anyone who knew him before—though he was still quite chubby. And Carlos' teeth: More noticeably yellow now and more sooty gray in spots.

Truth be told, Damian had been over to Carlos' place a lot more lately. It was for Carlos. He liked his company, Damian figured. And when Carlos asked a few months back why he started coming by less, more irregularly—"Oh, so you through with me too? Going to drop me like you dropped that other boy?"—Damian felt sorry for him. But: Carlos still did the drugs. But: He still had his job—his job, car and apartment. Carlos was always Carlos. Damian made sure he wasn't around when Carlos and Enrique or Marcus or any one of Carlos' other smoking buddies were lighting up together. That's Carlos. No: He couldn't be with Carlos every minute or every hour.

"And, bitch, you have never invited me over for dinner at your place," Carlos said pointedly. "How many times have you invited me to visit. Three times? Just three." Carlos pushed the cart and walked ahead. He got to the end of the aisle before he backtracked with the cart in tow. "Stay right here," he told Damian, whispering to him, more mouth than sound.

Damian asked why.

Alexander was there.

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"He saw you," Carlos said. "I saw him look over at us a few times. Me then you. Me and you." Carlos smiled. "Maybe he thought we were a couple."

"He knows who you are," Damian said. "I told him about you."

Carlos looked at Damian questioningly while he fiddled with the radio knobs and buttons inside the car he and Damian had rented. Exasperated by all the country music radio stations, Carlos sat up in his seat. "I knew I should've brought my cds with me."

And Damian said, "That gay shit."

"Oh, I forgot you don't like it," Carlos said, sarcastic, and turned to look at the endless stretch of orange trees outside his window. "I should've drove. We would've been there by now."

The two had argued about the best route to take to Fort Lauderdale, to the 954. Carlos wanted to take I-4 and then the turnpike. That's what he did when he lived in Orlando, in the 407. Orlando, I-4, the turnpike to the 954. Damian was from Polk County, nothing but 863. The back roads and then 60 to the turnpike was faster, that's what Damian maintained. "I know Polk County," he said when they were loading their duffle bags in the car. And to save money, to avoid a toll, they could go through Highlands County. Polk and then take 27 in Highlands. All 863.

"Let's just take the turnpike, you cheap bastard," Carlos said, now that the two of them were on their way. "No more of this country backwoods shit. I want to see people. I'm driving on the way back."

"Your period on?" Damian almost regretted saying it, even though Carlos was getting on his nerves. He didn't want to get in an argument. Not with Carlos. When Carlos got mad—and he was hard to calm down—he'd get loud. To argue back with him when he got like that was to run into a wind that was blowing against you no matter which way you turned. And he held grudges.

They were traveling to Fort Lauderdale to get away for the weekend. Spur of the moment. The two had paid their bills—rent and utility and Carlos' car. They had the money, and they would save money by splitting the hotel room, meals and cost of the gas. It was all Carlos' idea. He was going to take Damian to some wild place. A place he wouldn't believe. "It ain't nothing like this place in the 813 or 727, where you've been

before, the gay clubs there," Carlos once said. Carlos had been to places like the one they were going to before, sometimes with a travel buddy, most times alone. "To save money, I used to go straight from the club and drive more than three hours home," he said to Damian. "I stopped doing that shit after, when I was by myself, I woke up while driving and saw I was headed for the little building where they take your toll money. After that, I was like, fuck that. I'm staying my ass in a hotel."

They got to Fort Lauderdale just before nightfall. Carlos directed Damian through the streets of the city. After they went through a stop light, he directed Damian to turn into a parking lot of an adult store.

"Carlos!" Damian yelled. "I know me and you ain't been on the road for more than three hours to come to no bookstore. Tell me this ain't happening, Carlos."

"Calm down, bitch, and park the car," Carlos said. Damian did. Carlos went inside the store and came back shortly with a plastic black bag whose contents Damian could barely make out. The items being so small and it being night now.

"What did you buy?" Damian said.

Carlos pulled out two small bottles and Damian thought it might've been pills. "No," Carlos said. "Poppers. For later." Damian didn't want any. Wouldn't use it. Poppers gave him a headache.

Later at the place—The Pile Driver, it was called—he and Carlos paid thirty dollars to get in. That's what it cost for a one-time membership, the man behind the window said after he checked Carlos and Damian's photo I.D. White guys. Blacks. Latins. The old and the young. Damian asked, "How did you find out about this place?" And Carlos said, "Internet."

The Pile Driver was dark inside, lit enough to make out a body a few feet away. The private rooms could get darker if the people inside wanted it that way; they individually had switches inside that could adjust the illumination, capable of making a room totally dark if that was what was preferred. And there was music. Electronica. Loud and throbbing.

Carlos and Damian circled, walked to and from the same spots, again and again. There were eyes that eagerly looked to get attention. There were eyes that got attention and then looked away when the attention didn't suit the looker. Two men walked away from a corner, one following the other into a room where a door shut behind them.

"You should take off your shirt," Carlos said as he and Damian walked by the back wall again. "You have a nice body." The two of them again looking at the men around themselves who watched Carlos and Damian pass.

Damian hadn't spoken much since they arrived, his eyes staying constantly in motion. To him, a new place. Exciting and worrisome, both. Wherever Carlos went, Damian followed. The Pile Driver didn't appear to be large on the outside, not from its façade, but its inside seemed cavernous. Even in spots where Carlos and Damian would return to again in the walking trips they made. Those spots seemed different each time, something else Damian didn't see before, another room and its opened door.

There were many shirtless men. Some almost shirtless, the buttons on their shirt all undone. Some in underwear. Some, no clothes at all. A small number of them bounced and danced in place where they stood.

Carlos stopped and so did Damian. Near a corner that led to a back way. The two of them stood against the wall with other men there. "That guy over there," Carlos said,

"he's been checking you out."

True: The man, a beautiful silhouette in the distance, had been. Was.

"Go over to him," Carlos said. "You know you want to."

Damian and the silhouette man finished. In the room they darkened, locked and made private for themselves, they had been considerate of each other, each doing something to ensure that the other would come. David came first and then the silhouette man. No orgasmic disappointment for either. And the electronica could be heard in the room.

Damian pulled up his pants and turned the knob to adjust the dim lighting, making the room brighter. The man was dark-browed and bald and clearly uncircumcised. Bushy eyebrows but he was no less beautiful. He pulled up his pants. The tattoo on his right shoulder? Damian asked.

"Oh." The man stopped tying his sneaker. "That's my son Cory." His daughter's young face was tattooed on his other shoulder, like her brother's, the man showed. "I want my children to always be with me."

"Are you married?" Damian asked.

The man gave a swift no and pushed his arms through his T-shirt. He had been divorced for about eight years now. "You think I'd be doing this if I were married?" This was his first visit, he said.

"Mine too," added Damian.

"The man patted Damian on the butt as he unlocked the door. "I got to go."

With his shirt in his hand, Damian went to search for Carlos. He was ready to go too.

Damian got around a corner and there was a group of guys, each angling to get a chance to look in a peep hole in a door. "Man, he's giving it to him," someone said.

Damian made his way over; his own curiosity needed to be satisfied. A man in the front felt Damian hovering. "You want a look?" the man in front said and moved aside so Damian could see. Damian saw: Carlos. Smelled poppers.

He couldn't argue with Carlos. Carlos was too out of it to know what Damian was saying. What he said. Carlos smelled like burnt cloth. He sat in the chair in their hotel room, sat singing Mary J. Blige ballads, parts of them, while he wiped at his face and eyes with both of his hands, on and off. Damian had never seen Carlos like this.

Damian sat on the hotel bed. Watching Carlos. Afraid Carlos would hurt himself. The digital clock by the lamp said 5:47 a.m. There was no way Damian was going to sleep. Checkout was at eleven.

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*I was headed for the little building where they take your toll money. After that, I was like, fuck that. I'm staying my ass in a hotel.*

There were two four packs of Red Bull next to Damian. Carlos stared intensely in the passenger seat, ahead. He had stopped wiping at his face a few hours ago but the drugs were still affecting him. Damian wished the turnpike had been built in the part of Polk County the two of them were now driving through: That way, he wouldn't worry as much about the bubba cops who could catch him for the speeding he was doing; that way, he could driver faster—the speed limit was faster on the turnpike.

Carlos rotated his head slowly in Damian's direction. Dreamily. Intense. "What's up, boo?" Carlos said.

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The lady behind the counter at the car rental place didn't ask if Damian was Carlos. She gave him the receipt after he gave her the key. If he could only stay awake long enough to get himself home.

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Damian dreamed a strategy while he slept all day that Sunday. He was mad at Carlos but sad too. He dreamed about Alexander. Alexander. Carlos.

### **The Bowling Ball Effect**

My grandma had to go to the hospital again. It wasn't because she was trying to mow the lawn like the last time, when she fell out because she was tired and didn't get outta the bed for two days, and grandma wouldn't get outta the bed even though mama was pulling at her; and my sister Berta started crying when the ambulance came to grandma house. She went to the hospital again because she was in a car accident. She got in a car wreck on her way to church. The ambulance came again and got her and everything. Her car—it was the El Dorado—it was too messed up to where it look like it got mashed up in half. A policeman that called our house say grandma car was totaled—that mean it was mashed up real bad. He called our house because grandma had our phone number and address in her purse. A tractor trailer hit her. My mama was shaking when she was on the phone talking to the policeman. She was in the kitchen, using the phone that's in there. She was shaking when she got off the phone, and that's when I heard her tell my daddy what the policeman had told her.

Daddy didn't want mama driving to the hospital by herself. He say, "Freida, the way you acting, you're gonna be in your own accident—and then we gonna have to go to the hospital to see about you and Mama Dorene." He told her she should stay home and that he, not her, should go to the hospital to check up on grandma. My mama say, "That's my mama. I gotta see about her." It didn't take too long before Berta started crying. But I didn't cry, though. I just kept watching mama. Her eyes was looking all around like they

do when she be forgetting where she put her car keys and she be worried because she be running late for work. Daddy was trying to calm down Berta. He say, "It's okay, baby. Baby, it's okay. Everything is gonna be alright."

We waited in the car for mama. Me, Daddy and Berta. Mama had got outta the car and ran back in the house because her wallet or something else wasn't in her purse but she thought it was. She came back to the car, and she was running, her purse was jangling and you could hear the things inside her purse hitting up against each other.

We was at a red light. Mama told daddy not to stop, to go through. Daddy say he wasn't. He say, "Frieda, calm down. You worried now but if I get a ticket, how much longer will you have to wait?"

At the hospital, grandma was sitting down, waiting for us. She was—for real! She was sitting in the room where you wait to see a nurse or a doctor. We wasn't too far away from her in the room. She say, "I figured y'all be here directly." Her left arm was in a sling. Her wig was crooked; you could see her real hair showing in the back, above her neck. Mama went over to grandma fast-like, like the way she had run to the car when we was leaving for the hospital; you could hear her purse making that jangling noise. Daddy and me and Berta was behind mama, and my daddy was holding Berta hand when we was walking. But Berta let go of my daddy hand and ran toward grandma, ahead of mama. When she got up to grandma, she look up at her and she say, "Grandma, you alright?" Grandma say to Berta, "Yeah, baby, I'm okay?" And she pat Berta on her face. And then, my grandma, she got mad and she say, "Robert, Frieda—why y'all brought these children up here, around all this sickness? I know y'all wasn't thinking."

Grandma got up from where she was sitting and started walking to the front doors that slide open when you get close to them. My mama tried to ask her about the car wreck, but grandma say, "Frieda, don't be bothering me with all them questions. Just take me home. I gotta see about the car." Mama told her what the policeman told her when mama was on the phone at our house. She say, "Mama, the car can't be fixed." Grandma got quiet, and it seemed like everything else got quiet with her. She walked past mama, then past daddy, then me. She had her purse in her hand; if the straps on her purse was longer than they was, she woulda been dragging her purse on the emergency room floor. She got to the sliding doors. They opened, she turned around, and the sun was right behind her, bright to where you couldn't see her standing in the doorway. She say, "What y'all waiting on?"

Grandma had two cars. The El Dorado was one. And when Papa Glen was alive, they had the same two cars then. He and grandma didn't drive the El Dorado a lot. It usually just stayed under the carport. They only drove it when they got dressed up—like when they was going to church, like when my cousin Malika got married. They drove it sometimes when they went outta town, sometimes to go out to eat. The other car they drove—the one that was left—is the Chevy. It was the car that her and Papa Glen drove more than the El Dorado. They bought the El Dorado when Papa Glen retired from working at the post office. He say to me when he was alive, "See here Andre, if you work hard and save up your money, you can get yourself a nice car like me and your grandma got here."

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Me and grandma was outside hanging clothes on the line, I was helping her. Dante mama, Miss Evelyn, was outside in her backyard hanging clothes on the line too, like us. She saw us, and we saw her. She waved and say, "Hi y'all doing?" Me and grandma say fine, and Ms. Evelyn say that was good. Ms. Evelyn stopped what she was doing and walked over to the fence that was between her yard and grandma yard. When she got to the fence, she say, "Mrs. Young, I heard about what happened to your car. If you ever need help with anything, don't you ever hesitate to ask us, okay darling? Me, Cedric and Dante, we your neighbors, but we been knowing you a long time, so you family to us. If you want my Dante to help you out in the yard like he done before, I'll get him to do it. Okay darling? Any one of us—Dante, me or Cedric."

My grandma say, "Thank ya, Evelyn. I sho' appreciate it. I saw Dante the other day, and he done got so tall, looking like his daddy—a good-looking boy."

Ms. Evelyn say thank you and she smiled and say to me, "Andre, you ain't been by to see me. You being good?"

I say yeah, I was.

She say, "Where your sister? Where that Ms. Alberta at?"

I told her she was in the house, taking a nap.

"Y'all tell Alberta, Frieda, and Robert I said hello." And Ms. Evelyn waved bye and went back to her own clothesline and picked up her clothes basket and she went inside her house.

Grandma told me to give her another clothespin, and me and her went back to putting clothes on the line. She say, "I wonder what Evelyn was talking 'bout when she say Dante helped me out in the yard." Grandma stopped, her two hands was holding up a

towel. She looked down at me and say, "Ain't that what she say?" I shrugged my shoulders.

She didn't remember what Dante did. When she had tried to mow the grass that one time, she got real tired because she had tried to mow the lawn with Papa Glen old lawnmower. It was too much for her. She couldn't do it. I was watching. It was hot outside. She slipped, fell forward a lil bit before she got her balance back. She told me to come to her, with her hands, she told me to come. I came to her. She say, "Andre, you gonna have to help your grandmother. Help me walk back to the house." We left the lawnmower running. She say she was dizzy and say she needed lay down. I helped her to her bed. I tried to finish, I tried to mow the rest of the backyard for her, but the lawnmower was hard for me to steer. And then, I saw Dante. (Me and him best buddies!) He was walking by. I left the lawnmower running. I ran up to him when he was walking by on the sidewalk in front of grandma house. I say, "Dante, will you help me out?" He say, "Something wrong, lil man?" I told him I was trying to finish mowing the yard. He asked me why I was doing that. I told him I was helping grandma. I say, "My grandma was doing it but she couldn't finish, and it's hard for me to do it by myself."

When Dante was in the backyard, he looked around. He was looking at the backdoor to grandma house, and he was looking at the utility shed, with its door opened. And he was looking at the rest of the grass that wasn't cut. He asked me where my grandma was. I told him in the bed. And he went home, and he came back with his work clothes on. He mowed the rest of the backyard. And he got the places that me and grandma couldn't get. He mowed the front yard too, but grandma didn't see him and nobody told her. And she didn't ask after she went to the hospital; she forgot. I heard my

mama tell my daddy that the doctor say grandma had done got dehydrated from trying to mow the lawn and from sleeping in bed for them two days, that long time. Dehydrated is when you ain't getting enough water.

Grandma pinned the towel up on the clothes line. "How long we been knowing Evelyn and them?"

I shrugged my shoulders but she didn't look down at me when she asked me that. I handed her one of the T-shirts.

She say, "Who shirt this is?"

I say, "That's your shirt."

Then, my grandma say, "It is?" And she laughed. "Sho' is, ain't it?" The clothes I was helping her hang up was, most of them, hers. Some of them was my clothes and Berta clothes. Grandma say, "You think Evelyn will drive me to Sarasota?" Then, she was looking directly at the sun up in the sky—why she was doing that, I don't know—then she stopped what she was doing. She say, "No, I wanna go to Fort Myers—no, I wanna go to Port Charlotte." She laughed at herself and say, "I don't know where I wanna go."

I asked her why she say she wanted to go to them places.

She stopped what she was doing, and she looked down at me again, and she say, her voice got low, "I'ma buy me another car. You wanna go with me to pick it out?" I say yeah. She patted and rubbed my head and she was all smiling when she did it. She had Berta shirt in front of her, she was gonna put it on the line, and she say, "I'll take you and Berta with me." Grandma looked back over at me and she say, "I'll let you have that other

car. I'll teach you how to drive. " And she looked away from me and say, "We could start in the yard, just drive around the yard first. Then, we'll go out on the road."

And I liked that! Grandma was gonna give me the other car—she was gonna give me the Chevy. When she told me that, it got me to thinking I could be like Dante and them other boys. I could drive around, and I could have some speakers in the car like Dante and them. And I would let Dante ride around with me if he wanted to. And me and him would ride around playing Jam Pony tapes. People would be smiling at us and waving at us. Right then, I wished I was in high school like Dante.

Grandma say, "Yeah, after I get us a new car, I'll teach you how to drive. You and Berta. Y'all could share. Berta could use the car sometimes and you could use it sometimes."

I didn't wanna share with Berta.

Grandma kept talking, and it made me think she wasn't talking to me even though she was saying what she was saying.

I say, "Grandma."

She say, "What baby?"

I say, "Me and Berta ain't old enough to learn how to drive."

Grandma started laughing. She say, "I believe you right, Andre. Lord have mercy! I believe I'm losing my mind. See what happens to you when get old, Andre?"

When we finished hanging up the clothes on the line, Grandma looked up at the sky again. She say, "Don't look like it's gonna rain, do it? I guess these clothes will be alright. Look, Andre. Look at the catbird that flew down on the clothesline pole. Look at it looking at us. What you think it thinking?" I told grandma I don't know, and she say

she don't know either, and she started laughing. And she looked at her watch, and she say, "I need to start cooking. Glen will be home directly." And she told me to carry the clothes basket inside. I picked up the clothes basket when Grandma was walking to the backdoor. While I was picking up the basket, I got to thinking, "Why did she say that?" She knew Papa Glen was dead. I wished God didn't take Papa Glen. Maybe, if God didn't, then Grandma wouldna started acting crazy like she do.

My mama told my daddy that grandma might have to go to a nursing home. My daddy say he ain't like it because he say me and Berta good for grandma and grandma good for me and Berta. And he say if she go to a nursing home, then he and mama got to find somebody else to keep us. I heard my mama say it, after grandma had the car wreck. Mama and Daddy thought I was asleep, but I wasn't. I heard her and I ain't like it, and I told Berta and she ain't like it either.

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Ms. Barbie, who work in the front office, I heard her through the intercom when I was in my class at school. I was coloring like everybody else. Ms. Barbie told my teacher that I needed to come to the front office. She say grandma was there to pick me up.

When I got to the front office, grandma was there and Berta too. Grandma was dressed up like she was going to church. She had one of her big church hats on her head.

She say when she seen me, "There go my other baby." I don't be liking when grandma call me that in front of people.

Ms. Barbie, she usually be smiling when she see me—and she always be smiling when she see Berta (she be saying, "Hey Bertie, Bertie!"), but she wasn't smiling then,

when grandma had came and picked us up that day. She didn't say nothing to me, and she just kept looking at grandma, trying to act like she wasn't.

Me, grandma and Berta was walking to where grandma had parked the car. Berta asked her where we was going. Grandma say, "I'll tell you when we all get in the car." Then she say, "I guess y'all look clean enough."

When we was at the car, before we got inside, I took off my book bag and grandma took it from me. Berta couldn't get hers off too good. Her book bag got twisted. Grandma told me to help her. I say to Berta, "You don't know how to do nothing" while I was helping her. Grandma say, "Andre, ain't nobody ask you about that, what she know how to do. Boy, you think you grown." I ain't say nothing back to grandma. Berta licked her tongue at me, and grandma saw her and she say, "Berta, don't y'all start." Berta in kindergarten. That's why she be so aggravating. I told my daddy and my mama what Berta be doing at school. Bothering me. Coming over to second-grade section and talking to me. Touching me when I pass by her in line, when my class be walking to lunch and her class be coming from lunch. She be pointing at me, saying, "That's my brother." All loud.

I like to sit in the front seat. Usually, me and Berta have to take turns. Mama, daddy, grandma (and Papa Glen too), they be telling me and Berta it don't make no sense for me and her to fight and argue about who gonna sit in the front. Daddy be saying, "Front seat, back seat, either way, you don't get to any place any faster." But you see the outside better when you in the front. That day that grandma picked me and Berta up, I didn't wanna sit in the front.

It was hot inside the car. Grandma took off her hat and she fanned herself for a minute. She say, “Thank the Lord they make air conditioning.” She cut on the car and let the air conditioner run before we drove off. When she was fanning herself, she looked over at Berta and she say, “Oh Lord, look at my baby sweating.” Grandma took a handkerchief outta her purse and wiped Berta face. She asked Berta what she was chewing on. Berta poked out her tongue; it was a hair barrette in her mouth. Berta always be chewing on her hair barrettes, and my mama sometimes swat her hand because she be chewing on them. My mama be getting scared she gonna choke. Grandma say, “Baby, don’t chew on your hair barrette.” Grandma told Berta to spit the hair barrette in the handkerchief, and Berta did what she told her to do.

When we was riding away from the school, Grandma say we was going shopping. Berta say—and she shouted and turned around and looked at me—“Oooh, we going shopping!” Grandma yelled at her, and she told her to turn around and to put her seatbelt on. She told me to put my seatbelt on too.

She started paying her Shirley Caesar tape. Grandma don’t listen to the radio. That’s why, sometimes, I don’t be liking to ride in the car with her too long. If she do listen to something, then she gonna be listening to her Shirley Caesar tape. I been listening to that Shirley Caesar tape all my life; I wish she would get another one. She and Berta started singing with Shirley Caesar. Papa Glen, he was like grandma. He say we couldn’t listen to the radio because they be playing the blues on the radio in the car. Him and grandma, they say Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston is the blues.

The Shirley Caesar tape stopped, and then grandma say to me, “You been mighty quiet back there, Sporty Sport. Everything alright back there?” She looked back at me

when she say it. I told her I was alright. Sporty Sport, that's what Papa Glen called me when he was alive. The songs on the Shirley Caesar tape stopped, but grandma kept on singing. Her and Berta. They sang that song, and it go, "Jesus, the light of the world." I like it, that song. It's alright.

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I was looking at the price sticker on one of the cars and saw they cost a lot of money. I don't know how much it was, but it was more than a hundred dollars, I could tell by the zeroes. My grandma was looking at the same car too. She frowned her face up.

She say, "What is this? What this is? This a Coup de Ville."

Berta say, "I like it, grandma. I like it. It's pretty. "

Grandma say, "You do? I wonder where the El Dorados at?"

I walked over to a car that kinda look like grandma and Papa Glen El Dorado, and I looked at the sticker. I say, shouted, "Grandma, Grandma. Here go one. This a El Dorado right here."

She was holding Berta hand. She and Berta walked over to where I was. She looked down at the car, to where it say El Dorado. She started frowning like she did when she looked at the other car. She say, "This don't look like my car."

Then, it was a white man behind us. He kinda scared me and grandma because we ain't know he was there. His voice was loud. He say, "How's your credit?"

Grandma jumped, and she say, "What?!" Then, she looked at him.

The man say again, "I said, how's your credit. Do you have good credit?"

Grandma say, "My credit is good. How's your mammy's credit?" And she gave him a mean look. Berta started giggling when grandma asked how his mammy credit

was. The man turned red and he walked away and we didn't see him no more. Grandma told me and Berta to c'mon. She didn't wanna be at that car dealership no more. She pulled Berta by the hand and started walking away fast, to the Chevy. Then, it was a white lady who say, "Ma'am, is everything okay?" Grandma say, "Everything fine. We leaving." The next thing you know, that lady was right behind us. She say, "Hi. My name's Rachel, and I saw you looking at the El Dorados. If you'd like to test drive one, I'll be glad to help you with that." Grandma say, "That's okay." We was at our car, and grandma was opening the door for me and Berta to get in when the lady say to grandma, "You can test drive as many cars as you like. Nobody's going to complain." The lady looked at me, and she say to me, "Do you like candy?" She had in her hand some peppermints and some butterscotch candy. Berta say, "I want one!" The lady looked at grandma, and asked grandma if she could give me and Berta candy. And she say to grandma that she had forgot grandma name. Grandma told the lady she ain't forgot nothing, because grandma ain't never told her name. The lady say she was sorry and she say she was sorry for that man who had came up to us. She say, "Scott is new and needs more training. And I think you taught him a lesson. But I'll help you with whatever you need." Berta looked up at grandma and asked her if she could have the candy the lady had in her hand.

We was all sitting in one of the new El Dorados, Ms. Rachel too. Me and Berta was in the back and grandma and Ms. Rachel was in the front. Grandma turned around and she yelled at Berta because Berta was eating the candy and she had a piece of the candy in her hand while the other piece was in her mouth. Grandma say, "Give me that candy before you mess up these people car!" And she stretched out her hand and she had

her handkerchief in it. I had some candy in my mouth, but I didn't have no candy that was making my fingers sticky. Ms. Rachel say Berta was okay and told grandma not to worry if she got candy on the seats because they was leather.

Then, Ms. Rachel told grandma to watch her. Ms. Rachel seat started moving up where her butt was and the seat started moving back where her back was. It was like a robot seat. I asked Ms. Rachel how she do that. She say, "Isn't that neat, Andre. There's a button over here I push. And the windows are automatic. The air conditioning, it's internally controlled." I asked Ms. Rachel if the seats in the back had some buttons. And grandma say, "You better not touch none of them," and she was mean, looking at me.

Ms. Rachel told grandma she could drive around to see how smooth the car drove. Grandma drove in the parking lot, and then she went out and drove on the road that was in front of the car place. Ms. Rachel say to grandma, "Didn't I tell you it was like floating on air? Nobody makes a better suspension than Cadillac." Then, Ms. Rachel say to me and Berta: "Don't you love this car?! Don't you think grandma should get it?!" I shrugged my shoulders, but I don't know if Ms. Rachel saw me. Berta say to Ms. Rachel that grandma should get the car we was riding—it was light blue—and another El Dorado, which was white. Berta say both of them cars was pretty. She say, "Grandma, get both of 'em." Then Grandma say to Ms. Rachel, "I would appreciate it if you wouldn't talk to them anymore." And Ms. Rachel, she say real low, like a whisper, "Okay."

We got back to the parking lot, and we all got outta the car grandma had drove. Grandma look at the car and she say, "This is not like the car we used to have." Ms. Rachel looked like she couldn't understand grandma. Ms. Rachel asked grandma what kind of car she was talking about. Grandma say back to her, "El Dorado—Cadillac El

Dorado.” Then, Ms. Rachel say to grandma that she had just done drove a El Dorado that was new; she say it came fresh from the factory. But grandma say, “The El Dorado we had didn’t look like this. It was red, red like a red wine.” And Ms. Rachel say to grandma that there was some red El Dorados on the lot. But grandma say that didn’t matter, because they didn’t look like the one she and Papa Glen had. Ms. Rachel asked grandma when she and Papa Glen first got they El Dorado. Grandma told her that it was about few years ago. Ms. Rachel say, “But Ms. Young, that was an older version. Cadillac no longer makes that design. The cars here on the lot are all new—better than that older model.” Grandma told her again that she didn’t want them El Dorados they got. Ms. Rachel say—and she was acting nervous-like— “Ms. Young, no car model ever stays the same. They redesign cars all the time. But Cadillacs are known for keeping their design. These El Dorado models we've got here on the lot might not look like the one you have, but there’s no question—just look at them— that they are all El Dorados, every single one of them. And like I said, these are better. They have new features—new safety features, new comfort features—I know your car doesn’t have.

“Look, Ms. Young, just bring your El Dorado in. The trade-in value on it will be pretty good. It’s not that old—really not old at all. We’ll give you a good deal.”

Grandma got quiet. She say, “We don’t have the car anymore. That’s why I’m here.”

Ms. Rachel say, “Well, that’s okay. If you want, you can look at trading in that Chevy you all came in. You can trust me, Ms. Young. We’re all Christian people here.”

Grandma say, “Uh huh.” Then, she say to Ms. Rachel thank you. She say to me and Berta, “C’mon. Let’s go.”

When we was about to leave, Rachel knocked on grandma window while we was in the car, after grandma had cranked the car on. Grandma jumped like she was scared, and she rolled down her window. Ms. Rachel gave grandma a card; she say she forgot to give her her card before we got in the car. She told grandma to call her if she had some more questions. She say that the car place was even open on Sundays.

Grandma took us to McDonalds. She let me get a quarter pounder, french fries and a milkshake. (Mama don't let us get McDonalds because she say they food ain't good for you.) Berta got a Happy Meal. Grandma got a Big Mac and soda water. (She call soda water because she say when she was young, that's what people called it.) When we was at the table, Grandma asked if I could eat all of my food. I had tried to, but it was too much. Grandma told me to wrap the rest of my sandwich up so I could eat it later. She say, "You can eat it when you come home from school tomorrow." Berta ate all of her food. But Grandma didn't eat all her food because she say they put too much salad dressing on her sandwich.

When we was getting ready to go, grandma told me and Berta to use the bathroom because she say she wanted to drive straight home without stopping, because mama and daddy might be worried about where we was. I went to the bathroom first and then Berta went. When me and grandma was sitting at the table waiting for Berta to come outta the bathroom, grandma asked me what I thought about Ms. Rachel. I told her that I thought Ms. Rachel was nice. She say, "You think she was telling the truth, that they don't make El Dorados like we had no more." I shrugged, because I ain't know. Then, grandma started crying; but she wasn't loud so everybody could see and hear her, just quiet. She say, "Why they don't make them no more?" I shrugged because I didn't know that either.

She stopped crying, but she was, you could tell, still sniffing a little bit. She took one of her handkerchiefs from her purse and lifted her glasses up so she could wipe the tears that had come outta her eyes. She looked to the window that was by us. She was looking out at the people and the cars passing by. And she say, “Gonna ask me if I got good credit. Ol' cracker!”

Then, grandma stood up. She say, “I’ma see about your sister, in the bathroom.” And then, she almost started to cry again, her lips was trembling. She say to me, “Andre, you stay right here 'til I come back with her, you hear me.” I say to her, “Yes ma’am.”

Grandma stopped at a gas station to get gas on our way home. She tried to call mama and daddy at a pay phone, but when she tried, nobody was home. So, she left a message.

Berta and me had traded places. I sat in the front seat and she sat in the back. Berta was tired, and grandma told her to get in the back so she could take a nap; and she took one too, just about all the way back home. Grandma and me didn’t say much on the way back from the car place. Sometimes, she looked over at me and smile. And she didn’t play Shirley Caesar either. For a while, she just hum the song we sing right when church about to be let out. It go, “God be with you.”

We got to grandma house and mama and daddy was waiting for us. Mama was mad, she had her hands on her hips and everything. The two of them was outside, standing near the carport. It had started to get dark. When grandma opened the door on her side of the car, she say, “Praise the Lord. We made it home safe.”

My mama started yelling at grandma the minute she stepped outta the car. She say, “Mama, where y’all been?! Where's Berta?!” Mama couldn’t see Berta because

Berta was still laying in the backseat, she was asleep. Grandma told mama where Berta was. Daddy didn't say much, like he always do when grandma and mama get to arguing. But you could tell he didn't like that we had been with grandma. He came to my car door and I could see his mouth moving, he was saying "Get out." And then, he went to the backdoor and opened it, and then he woke Berta up and took her outta the car 'til he was carrying her. Berta was wiping her eyes because she wasn't woke up too good, not yet. And mama say, yelling at grandma, "And why did you take them all the way to Sarasota so y'all could go to McDonalds? We got a McDonalds here!"

Grandma say, "Frieda, you ain't gotta yell at me like that. I'm still your mother."

Mama asked her again why she took us outta town to go to McDonalds.

Grandma started pulling at the part of her dress that was over her thighs. She looked down at the ground, and she say, "We didn't go to Sarasota just to go to McDonalds. We didn't go there first."

Mama say, "Where else did y'all go?!" And mama was all loud. I thought she was doing grandma wrong. She yelled again, "Where else did you go, mama?!"

Grandma say, she was mumbling, "I took the children to the movies."

"The movies?" mama say. "And why are you wearing that dress?" And then, mama looked at Berta. She say, "Berta, what's the name of the movie y'all saw?" Berta shrugged. You could tell Berta was afraid of mama—she was woke then.

And then I say, "She don't know because she was asleep when the movie was on—she and grandma had fell asleep when the movie was playing."

Mama looked over at grandma. Her eyes was scrunched together because she was confused. Or she didn't want believe me, one.

Grandma say, "I guess I might've dozed off once or twice."

My mama say to grandma, "Mama, why didn't you wait until the weekend, until Saturday? They have to go to school tomorrow, mama. And why didn't you call anybody?"

Grandma say, "I tried, but y'all wasn't there, y'all wasn't at home. I left a message saying we was outta town. I guess I could've waited to take them to the movies."

Then, my daddy say to my mama, "Frieda, let's go home. They went to the movies and now they're back."

When we got home, mama was still mad about grandma taking us outta town. When me and Berta was in our room getting out our sleep clothes, mama came in, and I was scared. She was standing in the doorway, and she say, "Let me tell y'all something. The next time mama says she's going to take you out of town—and y'all know me and your daddy don't know nothing about it—y'all get on the phone and call either me or your father—hear me?"

Me and Berta say, "Yes ma'am," and we say it about at the same time.

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One time, after me and Berta had came from school, me and Berta, we was with grandma, in her front yard, helping her weed and water her plants and flowers. Grandma was using a hoe and me and Berta was pulling up weeds with some old gloves that was too big for our hands, that grandma had gave both of us to wear. Dante walked by and he waved at us, waved at me, Berta and grandma. And we waved back. We say, "Hey Dante." And Dante say, "Hey, y'all."

He say, "Ms. Young, you need some help there."

And grandma say, “Thank you, baby, but I think we got it.”

Dante walked in the yard, and he walked up to where we was, and he grabbed the hoe while grandma was trying to dig up the ground, and he say, “Ms. Young, let me do this for you. I got it, Ms. Young.” And grandma say, “Okay, baby, if you insist.”

Krell drove by in his car, and we all stopped what we was doing to watch. He was in a El Dorado that looked like the one grandma and Papa Glen had. But Krell car was a different red color; it was painted red, with glitter. The hubcaps on the car was silver, shining.

Grandma say, “What'cha call that?”

And Dante say, “Ms. Young, that’s an El Dorado. It's a Cadillac.”

Grandma say, “I know that—we had a car like that. I’m talking about the way it look. I guess the paint?”

Dante say, “Oh, that. Bowling ball effect.”

And grandma say, “Bowling ball?”

And Dante told her it was the style now to get cars painted like bowling balls.

My grandma say, “Young people is sho' nuff creative, ain’t they?! And she and Dante laughed when she say that. Then grandma say, “I believe I done seen that car before, seen that car and that boy who drove it.”

Berta say, “That’s Krell car!”

And grandma say, “Who?!”

I say, like Berta, “Krell!”

Grandma say that she didn’t believe she knew him. She asked who he was some kin to, who his mama and daddy is. And Dante told her Krell mama name, but he say he

didn't know his daddy. And Grandma say she didn't believe she knew who Krell mother is.

Grandma say to Dante, "Do you know him good?"

Dante eyes got real big. He say to grandma, "I don't. I mean, I do, but I don't know him real, real good. He older than me."

Grandma look at me and Berta. She say, "How y'all know him?"

I say, "Because people be talking about him."

Grandma say, "They do?"

Grandma asked Dante what Krell last name was. Dante told her that Krell was a nickname. He told her that his real name is Geraud Grant. And grandma mused up her face because she was concentrating. She say, "Do I know any Grants?" And she looked at Dante and she asked him if he knew how she could get in touch with Krell.

Dante looked at grandma like he didn't understand her. He asked grandma why she wanted to get in touch with him. He say, "Ms. Young, Krell is a drug dealer."

Grandma say, "That's alright. I don't want no drugs from him. The doctor already give me plenty. I don't need no more."

Dante say, "Like I said, I don't know him too good."

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Me and Berta didn't have no way of calling mama and daddy that other time when grandma came and picked us up from school. She was wearing another one of her church dresses and one of her hats. Ms. Barbie, who work in the front office, looked at her like she was crazy. And grandma looked back at Ms. Barbie like she was crazy. Ms. Barbie turned red. She didn't think grandma would look back at her like she did, I guess.

When we was walking to the parking lot, Berta asked grandma where we was going. Grandma say we was going outta town again. Then, Berta say, “Mama say we gotta call her or daddy if you gonna take us outta town again.” Grandma told Berta that she didn’t need to worry none, because she was gonna call them, and she patted Berta on her head, and she looked at me when was walking and she say to me, “Look at my Sporty Sport.” And she and Berta walked ahead of me. And I looked back at the front office where grandma picked us, where Ms. Barbie looked at grandma like she was crazy, and I was shame, because Ms Barbie, Ms. Wade, who is the secretary for Ms. Holtzendorf, who is the vice principal at my school—they was all standing by the window looking at us.

We got to the parking lot, but grandma car wasn’t there. Krell car was; grandma say it wasn’t his no more because she had bought it from him. Berta look at me and then she look at grandma, and she say to grandma, “This your car now?”

I looked back at the office. I could still see Ms. Barbie and them, even from where we was at in the parking lot. The three of them was still there. Looking at us.

Grandma got in first and then she unlocked the door from inside so me and Berta could get in. When she was inside Krell car, she waved her hands for us to get in, and she say, “Y’all c’mon.” You could barely hear her because the car windows was up.

The door handle was hot. I didn’t wanna open the door. Grandma got outta the car and she say, “What’s wrong? You can’t open the door?” Me and Berta didn’t say nothing to her. She came to our side and opened the door, and she told us to get in. It was red, the inside. It was dark red. It was like the red could knock you out. The seats, the floor mats, and the steering wheel, and the dashboard—they was all red. It kinda made me feel like

the way I felt that one time when I was at the top of a escalator looking down and scared—I ain't wanna move. Berta didn't move none either.

Then grandma say, “See here, I ain't got time for no mess. I ain't got time to stand here and wait for y'all to decide who gonna sit in the back and who gonna sit in the front. Y'all ain't gonna bother me with no arguing about that.” Grandma told me to sit in the backseat and she told Berta to sit in the front. She say, “On the way back home, y'all can trade places. Go'on now, Andre. Get in the car. It's hot out here.”

When we got on the road, grandma say we was on our way to Fort Myers, to the mall. She say she would take us to McDonalds after we finished shopping. She say we didn't have to go to McDonalds. She say we could go to some other place to eat if we wanted to. She say she made sure this time that she would pick us up on Friday. “Y'all don't have to go to school tomorrow” she say. “I reckon Frieda won't be too worried.” Grandma was talking loud because the noise from the air conditioner in Krell car was loud. It was more stronger than the air conditioner in grandma car, the Chevy. And the two front seats in Krell car was furry and they was red like almost everything else. When she was driving, grandma asked me and Berta if we liked the car. “It's pretty, ain't it?” she say, and she was smiling when she say it. Berta musta shook her head to show that she liked the car because grandma started laughing. I couldn't see Berta, because I was sitting right behind her.

I ain't say nothing about how the car looked. Grandma looked back over her shoulder at me and say, “You can sit back there and pout all you want, Andre, because you can't get your way. That don't bother me none. You can pout, cry—go right ahead.

Them tears ain't gonna bother me. Not one bit. You gonna learn one day you can't always get what you want.”

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Grandma drove Krell car to a bank place. She say she needed to get some money. I ain't still wanna be with her then, and I ain't even wanna look at her. After grandma parked the car in the parking lot where the bank place at, she told me and Berta to stay in the car while she went up to that machine where the money come out after you put a card in it. She say, “I'ma leave the car on, let the air conditioner run. Y'all stay here. I'll be right back.” She shut the car door behind her and started walking to the money machine with her pocketbook. She wasn't all the way there before she look back at me and Berta, to make sure we was doing what she told us to do, I guess. I guess she decided we was because she went ahead, up to the money machine.

Berta stuck her head out from where she was in her seat in the front and she looked at me like she do when I catch her doing something she ain't supposed to be doing—like when she be sneaking and eating cookies and other stuff after mama and daddy tell her she can't have no more.

She say, “We gonna get in trouble?” and she talked like she was scared grandma could hear her.

I shrugged because I didn't really know. And I told Berta, “Grandma probably is gonna get in trouble with mama. I'ma tell mama that she took us from school when you told her that mama and daddy say we gotta call them.”

Berta was getting mad at me like she do when I tell her to go away, to get from around me. She say, “If you tell on grandma, then I'ma tell on you!”

“But I ain’t did nothing,” I say.

And Berta say, “I’ma still tell!”

## Constant

The way the sun floods the inside of his car, he knows he is headed West. Coming off the exit ramp on the interstate, the sunlight is bright in the back, in the rearview mirror, the sun positioning itself for the coming of night.

Despite the grime and film from the dead lovebugs, he can see through it, somehow. Slits in the windshield, openings like latticework, allow for some visibility, some. His eye manages to focus, manages to see. A gas station. Jerry's Amoco.

At the pump, the driver side door opens, and whines, and the summer humidity is not holding back, canceling away the pleasant coolness that the car's air conditioner had put out, the pleasant coolness. The joints in his left leg bother him as he swings outward to get out. Months and years of therapy and there's still a stiffness in his walk.

With his good hand, he reaches for the handle at the pump, and on his index finger, there's a conjoined lovebug coupling climbing up—up and up and up. That's when he draws back his thumb; that's when he draws back and presses. With his thumb, he crushes. Goo bursts out. The one that survives dangles on his fingernail, crawls, gains its footing again, goes across the cuticle, the red spot at the top of its slender body a tiny bull's-eye. There's a gust of his breath, and the one that survived is blown away. Goo on his hand, he wipes it away on his pant leg, on his khakis, the khakis he's wearing.

At his nose, there's a whiff of gas. And the lovebugs levitate. Float. Float around, up and above. Lovebugs in the air. Lovebugs everywhere. He lets down the lock on the

handle, and the gas pumps, automatic. He could use his left hand but doesn't; his left hand's missing digits, necessary digits. The right hand is better for gripping, a whole lot more precise. He used to be left-handed, when he was a kid.

It doesn't matter as much with the water-drenched squeegee. The right and the left hands work about the same. He alternates. Left, right. Some of the lovebugs don't come off. They stick like cement. And he feels the bumpiness in his arms as the squeegee wipes over them, the ones that will not be removed, not now. And the squeegee drips dirty water, dirty water that streaks and streams the glass. You'd be a whole lot better off, he thinks, if you bought some washer fluid.

The door to the store at the gas station, the sign in its window, says CIGARETTE ON SALE HERE. He will buy cigarettes, he thinks. He shouldn't but he will.

All the lovebugs that smashed into the front of the Buick as he drove down I-75, he sees them altogether now as he inspects the car. The lovebugs coat, they cover the car's grill. Like sprinkles on a cake.

And the radio antenna, it's a totem pole of carcasses, lovebugs mostly. Except the leftover rear segment of a dragonfly and one of its shimmering wings; the dragonfly that crashed into the antenna so many miles ago.

With no hubcap, the Buick looks much older, more used. Why did I buy it? is what he thinks.

He walks away from the pump, to the door for the store. Walking away, he sees all of his car under the overhang that is above the gas pumps. The overhang does less and less and less to make shade or shadow as it gets dark outside. The dark will cover everything.

A man wearing Confederate-flag emblazoned cap walks through the door and passes; and then the man's wife, she's in the way. "Go ahead," the wife says, polite. "Thank you," he says, and he catches himself before he lets his bad hand go up; that left-handed tendency is still there. "Sure," the woman says. Her lips form a smile that only lasts just for that moment. Her eyes can't stay on his face too long; they go to the floor. Her staring, she tries to control it. But. He walks through the store's door and gets inside by the time the man and his wife are gone.

"Give me a pack of the Ports you got back there," he says. He has failed again, given in to his old cigarette habit. Failed.

A pony-tailed woman is at the cash register. She smiles. She says to him, "What's that, hon?"

"A pack of Newports," he repeats and points to the cigarette box behind her with the hand that has all its fingers and its thumb.

Her eyes are on his shirt. She says, "You probably want to get that lovebug off ya there, hon. That's a lovebug there, you got a lovebug crawling on your shirt." He looks and sees, and he wipes away the lovebug coupling as if he were smoothing out an uneven place, a wrinkle on his shirt. He does it so delicately. He does.

"They are the most aggravating things, ain't they?" the woman at the cash register says. "The other day, my son came home from school, and when I opened up his book bag, some of them flew out, like they was living there or something." And she feigns a smile before she passes him the box of cigarettes. He asks her for the quickest way back to 75. He won't buy the washer fluid after all. He will wait; he'll do it when he can get an oil change.

To Tampa, that's where he'll go.

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Back to 75. Back to driving. There's the Gatorade he bought at the gas station that he drinks while he drives, while he smokes one cigarette and then another. Getting the cigarettes and driving and holding the Gatorade, being careful—it's tricky.

The lovebugs outside are colliding. They keep smashing and crashing into the windshield of the Buick he's driving.

There's one shitty radio station after another, so he slides in Dre—Dre with Snoop. Red-tipped cigarette out of his mouth. Red-tipped cigarette in. He is snapping his fingers on his good hand, the other hand managing the steering wheel.

The dragonfly's wing that is on the radio antennae is iridescent. Even in the dusk of night. It glimmers. Glimmers in his eye. The dragonfly. And the lovebugs. The windshield. They make him remember. Constant.

He remembers the time when he was playing in the front yard. A yellow grasshopper under an oak tree—he called it a "hoppergrass"—it dribbled brown fluid from its mouth and frightened him. The brown liquid, it's what they call tobacco juice. A brick, he picked it up and threw. And missed. The grasshopper jumped. He remembers.

*GRANDDADDY: Great Day! It's a heap of them grasshoppers out there. I could feel them under my boots when I was pushing the lawnmower, feel them just breaking and crunching, like I was stepping on pecans or walnuts.*

*BERNARD: I'ma go out there and catch 'em.*

*GRANDDADDY: Listen to you. You ain't gonna do nothing. Look here. I'm gonna be to the front of the house. Either you gonna stay outside, out here, while I finish cutting this grass or you gonna go back in the house. Bernard, which one you gonna do?*

*BERNARD: I'ma stay out here and play with Kenyatta.*

*GRANDDADDY: Who? You gonna do what? . . . Never mind. Stay here then—you and Kenyatta.*

*KENYATTA: Your granddaddy gone now. He think you scared of a hoppergrass.*

*BERNARD: I ain't scared of no hoppergrass.*

*KENYATTA: Yes, you is.*

*BERNARD: No, I ain't.*

*KENYATTA: Look! Under the tree.*

*BERNARD: Gasps. A hoppergrass! A big ol' yella hoppergrass.*

*KENYATTA: I'ma catch it.*

*BERNARD: Better not. If you go too close to it, it'll spit tobacco juice on you, if you go too close.*

*KENYATTA: Nuah.*

*BERNARD: Uh huh, my granddaddy told me.*

*KENYATTA: What do it do when it do that?*

*BERNARD: I don't know. It come out of his mouth, I guess.*

*KENYATTA: I'ma kill it then. Go get that brick right there.*

*BERNARD: What you gonna do?*

*KENYATTA: I'ma throw it on the hoppergrass.*

*BERNARD: Here. This brick heavy. Ooh, look at its mouth—the tobacco juice. It jumped. The hoppergrass jumped. Run!*

He was running and screaming, he remembers that. Remembers: His granddaddy called for him. *Bernard Lee, don't you run in that street. Boy, didn't you hear me! Look out for that car, boy!* A car.

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It's nighttime in Tampa now. And the lovebugs are resting. Resting on leaves, in trees, on walls. They don't fly at night, it seems.

He turns the car into the hotel parking lot, drives around. And around. All handicapped parking spaces are full.

He parks, gets out, walks into the path of the mole crickets. And steps on one, not intentional. Its body crackles.

In the hotel lobby, a little boy stares at him as the boy and his mother wait for the elevator. The elevator beeps, opens, beeps again. Sealed behind the elevator doors, the staring little boy and his mother go away.

"May I help you?" she says.

He says, "I want a room."

"Do you have a reservation?" Her nametag says Yvonne.

"Yeah," he says, "I called in about an hour ago. And how you doing today?"

"What's the name?"

"Lee. Bernard Lee."

She types, looks at the computer screen. "We don't have a room under that name." Her eyes don't come up.

“Try Kenyatta, Kenyatta Lee.”

“How do you spell that?”

“K-e-n-y-a-t-t-a. My name is Kenyatta Bernard Lee. You need some I.D.”

“I.D. and credit card.”

She nods, looks up, sees that the face on the driver’s license is the same. Checks the birth date. He’s 28.

She says to him, “Is a smoking room okay?”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he says and documents are signed. The I.D. and credit card go from her back to him. The wallet goes back in his pocket, with the good hand doing all the work. And she gives him the key—“Room 112,” she says—and she sees it when he takes the key from her: just a pinky and a thumb, and some nubs. And she says, “Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Kenyatta?”

“It’s Mr. Lee, baby,” he says, winks. “Yeah, one more thing. Tell me when the pool is open.”

“Pool?”—like that, because she can’t believe it.

“That’s what I said, baby girl.”

“7:30 to 10 p.m.”

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The powerful smell of cigarette smoke and berry-fragrant air freshener hit him when he opens his hotel room door. And he says, “It’s stank up in here.”

Kenyatta Bernard Lee flips on the light in the bathroom in his hotel room. The ventilation hums. He sees himself reflected in the mirror. He sees the good hand and the bad one too. He sees his good eye, and the one that protrudes out of its socket, it’s an eye

that stays droopy. The surgical scars on his face make the droopy eye look as if it were jammed in, as if the skin cracked when the jamming occurred. He blinks the one good eye, hoping the scars will be gone. The blink, this is his quick prayer. Always.

But nothing ever changes. Never

He's peeing in the toilet now. The sound of the streaming urine mixes in with the hum of the bathroom ventilator. When he is done, he looks at himself in the mirror again, sees his dick flop while he shakes it to swing away any leftover fluid that might drip. At least I still got a dick, he thinks.

Sitting on the bed, he sees the TV. But no remote.

Crawling on the floor, he spots the remote under the bed. He doesn't like to crawl, not with his prosthetic leg.

He reaches the remote, nudges it with his fingers, uses the hand that is good.

A menu of channels. A listing of programs. The T.V. is on. CNN Headline News. ESPN. Adult. The Adult channel will cost him extra. He will wait. He was going to go the strip club anyway. That's why he didn't drive straight home.

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In the hotel parking lot, with a paper towel he dampened in the bathroom lobby, he wipes the front windshield of his car. He wipes with his bad hand, just because that hand feels right. And he laughs: Ha, ha, ha—that hotel attendant, she doesn't think he can swim.

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In the strip club, everything is good, he thinks. The cigarette in his mouth; the liquor in his drink; and the AC is nice and cold; the lighting; the girls—everything's just fine.

“What’s up, boyfriend,” she says, all smile, and she grazes her fingers across his face. She's beautiful. And smiling. A white bikini whose top clasps in the front, whose bottom is a G-string thong, this is what she is wearing. Her boots are made for space travel. And she smiles.

She tips her head back, with her eyes closed, mouthing words, singing along with the music that is throbbing. She dances in front of him, at the table where he sits alone. He hands her two twenty dollar bills. She keeps smiling and dancing and smiling. Smiling at Kenyatta.

And she says, “I could do something special if you want.”

“I bet you could,” he says. “I bet you could.”

“We could go to VIP,” she says.

“VIP?” He takes a drink of the liquor that is in a cup, a cup that is plastic.

“VIP,” and she is caressing his shoulder. “It costs a little bit more.”

VIP, he thinks. He asks, “What about your friend over there? Can she come with us? Can she come too?” The liquor, it has given him courage.

“Her?” She points to the other dancer, and her smile disappears. Her face isn't expressionless; there's something, something subtle. The other girl is in a purple leather bikini and purple high heels. She sits in a chair, forward-leaning, one hand on a thigh, her other fanning her face. She's resting and oblivious.

“I got money, baby girl,” he says to the girl in the white bikini and touches the smoothness of her thigh.

“Stay here. I’ll be back,” she says. “Wait for me, boyfriend.”

She goes over and talks with the other girl. And the other girl looks over at him. And he sees her. She won’t smile.

In the windowless VIP room where the door is locked, it's darker than the main floor but still red-lit. The two of them dance in front of him as he sits on a couch, a couch of leather with wide rips on the seating area that would be obvious if the room were brighter. The two of them sing along to the song that is thumping through the speaker. They sing to each other. They smile and point. Smile and point. Smile. They sing as if they've rehearsed. And he watches. Uncovered breasts that jiggle. The body glitter. He sees the navel that is pierced. Two girls for Kenyatta, one light and one dark brown; dark brown nipples on both.

It’s a twenty-dollar bill taken from his hand by one. Another twenty dollar bill for the other. Bills, more money collected in bunches. And the girl in the white bikini says, “You real good to me, boyfriend.”

And he says, “You the most beautiful girl in the world.” And he looks to the other. “Both of y’all.” He grabs the other girl’s hand with the hand of his that is a pinky and a thumb. The girl in the purple bikini jerks her hand back, away—away from him! And he looks up at her, the girl in the purple bikini, looks at up at her, both with the good eye and the droopy eye that cannot see. Red lights dim out; that's when the white fluorescent lights are turned on.

“It was nice to meet you,” the girl in the white bikini says. She and the other dancer put their tops back on. And the two of them walk away to a door that opens after a click. They go through.

In comes a man, large and fat. “You gotta go,” the fat man says. “Somebody else's waiting to use this room.”

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In his hotel room, Kenyatta thinks about it. In the darkness, he thinks about it while sitting in his undershirt and boxers, while sitting on the bed. No money—the cash, it's all gone. What did his grandfather say? *You did what you did, Bernard. Ain't no use worrying about it now.* But there's another voice. *Your granddaddy, he act like he know but he don't!*