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Touch
By Breeanne Elizabeth Daniels

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for
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I try to imagine the day I was born. I try to remember the time I slipped out and seeped into this world. I cant. I want to but I cant. I try really hard. I close my eyes and dip my head under water. Because I know that's what it it's like. God wont let me remember. But I can remember so many other things I would rather forget. The memories of birth that exist behind my eyes are snapshots from others.

Others all over.

From Mommy whispering, "welcome," and telling Grandma, "I finally have a girl of my very own."

Of Daddy falling asleep at home and coming to see me for the first time in the nursery. I keep this with the expanse of his smile when he says the words he first says when he lays eyes on me-

"Hi sweet Pea! I'm your daddy!"

I look around at the pictures and toys that were there that day. They have a memory too. Jimmy carter greeted me on the face of the New York Times as it hung in a pink frame above my crib.

I read it out loud and know the world a little. I know where I am a little. The springtime, far away from hostages and peace talks. Safe

in a place called Brooklyn. Home in a crib surrounded by stuffed elephants and male lions and Curious George. I want to hug the animals because they are bigger than me, but Mommy says my little hands don't fit around them.

"You would just grab and grab and then smile! Such a happy baby!"

I lay in the dark and stare at the mobile that encompasses a universe in a musical star and spins around my face taunting me to reach up but instead I want to fall asleep. Instead I kiss the face of Curious George and wait for the breast.

I try to imagine the day I was born. I try to close my eyes and remember the well-wishers and the light breaking into my eyes for the first time. I try to picture the smell. The way the cold first gripped my skin and my lungs burned with nitrogen mix and I scream not because it hurt but because I don't know what else to say. All along there was a straight path to the light. I saw it before but didn't act until the tiny earthquakes propel my bloody self forward. And there I am. I don't think it would be so traumatic if God let us remember. If we could remember the light. The light is the most, the center of the memory. Because of its brightness. Its warmth. Its perfect silence that beckons us onward into open and insulated embraces. Eases us out over a precipice of zero air pressure, out of a

flood, into a fire. Fitting into the arms of the creatures we are destined to become. If we could piece together the exact time and date not from pictures and memories from other people. But from ourselves. From the memory on the other side of our own eyes. And we close them and are flooded with the time we came to be here. Why if we have to remember all the pain, why not let us remember the first time the sunshine touched us and mother whispered welcome? *Dear God- are you there? I see people praying to you. And I have to pray too, because I need you with me for what I am about to endure).*

Skies change and move like birth. Like an unending contraction moving across heaven. The color adapts because we can't smell the smell like we do when we come out. The clouds turn, shift like a baby crowning. They twirl into the blue denseness of watercolor. They part ways and reunite over and over again, still making room and paying credence to the invincible and immense light that always seems at the center. When I look up at the moon I think about the babies that are born at night. This is what they see. This is what guides them out, just as the wise men were coaxed to treasure by the North Star. Just like geese, ornery and cantankerous, join in consonant rhythm,

silent, almost awe struck and add streaks of black dancing on the blue and white canvass, as it starches and becomes more vibrant as the world around me becomes colder.

Brooklyn skies are only different from Englewood New Jersey skies because the buildings are so tall; they reach up past the giant and jangling trees. Here, where the houses aren't above two stories and the people walk and drive and ride their bikes so slowly, the sky seems more alone, and to me, more beautiful. More free, unencumbered. Holy. It makes me feel like this place we call home now is the right place. This house is blue and white. The roof's grey even looks blue to me, trying to stand by myself in a front yard covered in all green. God must love these colors best. He must love me best, because they are all around me. Making me a home.

Home is a corner property that Mommy and Daddy have bought to bring us out of Brooklyn and up from slavery like the books Daddy puts in the bookcases in the living room. 330 Tryon Avenue is the answer to the "What will we do?" question that Mommy asked Daddy before I was born. It's the solution to the "Where will she go to school?" problem that they whispered to each other at night with hands on Mommy's belly.

It's the playground to "Where will she grow?" query that Mommy would wonder as she walked by parks on crowded Flatbush corners, ackees and scallions in a bag in one hand, her other on her belly. Mommy and Daddy were the realer; browner version of what TV says is the dream. The American Dream. TV says there are many dreams, but this is the most important one.

This is the one that propels us from Albany Ave to a tree-lined street in Englewood New Jersey.

Daddy has wanted this for as long as he can remember. Daddy is a tall and handsome man, an educated man, a proud man, who dreams of hanging his college degree on the living room wall, and under it, one day, hanging mine.

Daddy grows up wanting to live in this house. Because Daddy grew up in a project apartment with 8 brothers and sisters one mother, and one father, a shadow that he calls Benji, a ghost he sees when he looks at alcohol bottles, a voice he hears when he uses his own, so he chooses to be silent, a lot, and listen intently to doo-wop songs and Nat King Cole, and cry sometimes, because the shadow is unreachable, and in this house, he has privacy to turn the music up and sob without falling over another sibling or embarrassing his mother by being a man who cries sometimes.

He smiles sometimes too. He smiles at me like I am some kind of precious ore. He holds me tight and smiles singing songs that sound so high and so low. Never in the middle.

Mommy's voice is the middle. She found it one night on a plane in the dark. She told Grandma that she was leaving and she meant it. Gone to a place far away called Brooklyn where husbands wouldn't beat you and jobs didn't involve skinning chickens. She took her two little boys and boarded a plane far away from the red earth she knew as home and landed on the concrete she knows as opportunity and made a life for herself and her sons. She got a job that didn't involve chickens and got promoted easily, because even though there was no affordable college in the third world, she is smart and beautiful. She looks like a sculpted a light brown TV hostess with thick billowy hair and perfect teeth Grandma had to buy her after that raining season when the bad water in the well rotted everyone's teeth out in the parish. It served her well, because when work got easier and her sons got comfortable she got lonely, and she remembered the night before the plane ride, and the tears and fear about leaving all your know behind and then she feels warmer inside, because she knows she made the right decision. So she prays again to God, like she did

that night as she ascended into the uncertain nimbus that from the window looked dark and discerning.

“God.....my God...”

She asks him for someone to love, someone to love her and she promises she will lay the pain down if she could only find it, for real this time. And God sent her Daddy. She saw in him what she had prayed for and he saw in her what he had always dreamed of. I believe God knew they were looking for the same thing. He figured maybe they would find it in each other. The thing is, it was buried so deep behind other things. I think God should have told them that they would have to dig. Maybe God should have bought them shovels.

We are a dream. We are the finish line. Here on 330 Tryon Ave, we are the winners. Mommy smiles when she looks at the house and then at me, smiling in Daddy's arms. We can be still here and sit on the porch and drink lemonade like the families on the magazine covers. We can have 2 cars and a dog and sense of safety and people can visit and cook food and eat outside and throw parties and have picnics. We can do all these things because of 330 Tryon Ave. We can even forgive. Grandma can come and stay and Mommy can smile and hug and not think about the sting of what is shared in their past.

Grandma can hold me in her perfectly rough and velvet hands and I can still feel welcomed at home.

We can love it here. We can call this life. And we can call this life good.

We are in the kitchen at 330 Tryon Ave. Mommy puts wallpaper that looks like yellow flowers baking bread. The wallpaper makes the kitchen warm even in winter and smell like a fairy tale in during reality. It breathes, especially when Mommy or Daddy or Grandma make food. I am there always, by there sides, watching because it smells good. Daddy is the best cook except for Grandma.

“Christopher!” Daddy calls the older boy of Mommy’s two.

“Come set the table.” He comes, broad smile on his dark face. Broad eyes and long lashes. He smiles like he is about to crack up laughing all the time.

“Jim,” he calls Daddy. “You need me to wash those dishes?”

“No,” Daddy speaks low, with sureness. “Your brother will do it.”

Colin wanders in the kitchen from the back way, where their room is. He looks lost; there is always a look on his face like he doesn’t quite understand what is going on. His skin is much lighter than his brothers, lighter than Mommy’s. He stands next to all of us and looks like he doesn’t belong. His hands are always up by his shoulders and

at any moment he looks like he might fall. Daddy smiles at me from the oven, I am sitting in a high chair with perfect vantage of the kitchen except for the back door that leads out to the backyard. That is behind me. Boscoe sleeps at the closed door. When I see him there, I know that no one can come in. That's how he posts up and keeps us safe. Truth be told, no one should be afraid of Boscoe. His size is the only daunting thing about him. He is big and oafish and loving, a floppy black and white sheep dog whose tongue is always hanging out. He makes me laugh. He is a big stuffed animal and Daddy knows how much I love him.

"You hungry, Sweet Pea?"

"Yes, Daddy."

He smiles and starts singing Lou Rawls. This has been his favorite song for about 3 hours. I think Lou Rawls only ever sang that one song. Daddy's vibrato is tremulous and indulgent. He holds a tray that seeps steam and pieces of meat waded in a thick sauce.

"You'll never find, as long as you live..."

He hums the rest.

Christopher and Colin follow the tray of delectables he has in his hands and lays in front of me. I know not to touch it.

"Put the glasses to the left of the plates, Christopher."

Christopher is still mad at Daddy. Yesterday they went to Alexander's because Mommy said he needed new sneakers. She works all the time, so Daddy is Mommy most of the time.

"This is where the sneakers are. Which ones do you want to get?"

"I don't want one pair. I need two. One for gym and then one to dress up."

"You want two pairs of sneakers? For what?"

"Because everybody else does! I need one to go to gym and one to wear everyday."

"I'm going to buy you one pair of sneakers. You pick which ONE."

"Fine, then I wont get any."

"You aint got to tell me twice."

They got back home almost around the time they left. Mommy was inside on the phone and me and Grandma were on the porch. Boscoe was underneath my feet and I rubbed his flank with my soles. Daddy opened the door and smiled. Then he pulled out a lollipop from his jacket pocket and lifted me up off from Grandma. I took the lollipop and was carried into the house.

Colin sat down at the table next to me. Christopher put a glass down next to my sippy cup. I kicked my legs, as Daddy's voice hummed into crescendo of what I think was the chorus Lou Rawls.

“Someone who hmmmmmm hmmmmmm, like I do.”

Daddy sat down and poured everyone juice in their glasses. Then he looked at me closely and put juice in my glass, not my sippy cup. He was still humming.

“Hmmmmmm...you gonna miss, you gonna miss...”

He shared and cut up my food first, then serves my brothers.

The warmth from outside the kitchen travels into my stomach through Daddy’s food. Daddy’s love. Daddy’s attention. His affection. His eye. I the apple.

When Daddy chews he exhales heavy and his mustache makes it look like he is a dragon. He could blow out steam from his nostrils because they are so big. I laugh when he chews, and he makes faces at me so I laugh harder. The gravy is delicious, the bread he breaks for me gets soft and chewy when I swirl it around in my plate. I pretend I know how to use the knives and forks and spoons that are laid out in front of everybody else at the table. I pretend me and Boscoe can twirl spaghetti with utensils like they all do at dinner on the nights when Mommy doesn’t work late and we are all here together. Those nights don’t happen a lot. Mommy works late a lot. We are proud of Mommy. I take up my glass next to the cup and drink juice like a big girl. Daddy is proud of me.

“Use the sippy, Sweet Pea.”

I slam the cup down because I am not a big girl.

Daddy laughs. He pours everyone more lemonade. The food is good because the boys are silent.

It’s not quiet. It’s just silent.

Dinner goes on like this a lot. Dinner is Daddy cooking and enjoying in a trance like state. Dinner is me in front of a sippy cup I view as my nemesis. Dinner is Christopher and Colin hovered over plates like they will be taken from them at any moment. Dinner is Boscoe, sitting guard by a door. Dinner is the kitchen window above the sink, broad and open like a camera lens. Dinner is Mommy working late. Breakfast is like dinner. Except with sunshine and the news on the radio.

The scrapes of knives on empty plates means dinner is over. Daddy wants his after dinner congratulatory cigarette.

“Alright, that’s your cue. Throw the dishes in the sink, kids. You know what to do.”

When he leaves I am sitting in the high chair holding the sippy cup. I want to spin it in my hands to show dexterity. It falls on my plate but doesn’t make a clanging sound, like the glass would.

When Daddy is completely out of sight, Christopher gets up, fakes like he is full, with his hands patting his belly. He smiles.

“That’s right, it’s time for my after dinner mint. You know what to do, Colin.”

Colin follows suit. “Ahhhhh, “ he stretches as if completely sated.

“Yes, I believe I do.” He pats his smaller belly. His navel is showing. He has an outtie.

Mommy says outties are good luck. I think they look wrong, like something awful happened to him when he was born, and now he has to walk around with a swollen wound as a reminder.

They laugh and start to wrestle. Christopher takes Colin in a headlock. His eyes bulge but he continues to laugh. I can hear that the front door is open; the cars passing by have greater sound. Colin is released and Christopher gives chase into the back hallway from where they came.

Now is my chance. The sippy cup is on its side in the middle of my plate. It looks like it’s asleep. I spin in and it rotates in silence.

All of a sudden I feel caged. I cannot get out of my high chair alone and everyone has abandoned me. But I don’t cry because I know there is work to be done. Daddy wants the dishes in the sink. I am a big girl. I can do it.

The sippy cup has to be first. If it doesn't work, it will just make a subtle sound, like it did on my plate.

I pick it up, look at the window by the sink and think, "just a little less than that."

The toss is perfect. It bounces into the sink and makes a noise of a weight dunked in water. I am a straight arrow. I am a marksman. I can clear the table like an Olympian.

The glass is next. It would be the same touch as the sippy, only more graceful, more pretty. I like the way glass looks when it's moving. I like the sound it makes when it flies. I look at the window, a shimmering show. Now the sun has completely set. I can see myself moving, holding the glass. I wave it in the air like I am looking in a mirror. The toss is perfect. When I do it, the top part of the high chair slips off. Now I have more use of my arms. When it shatters in the sink, Boscoe gets up and leaves the kitchen.

The plate will be more difficult so I will need leverage. The plate is like a Frisbee, so I have to be more cautious in my toss. Now I stand fully on the table. I am the biggest girl, capable of crushing this town of plates and glasses like Girl Gulliver. The forks and knives look worried. They are the children in the village. They run for cover

under the plates. They hide in fear of my shadow. And they should.

The plates are no matches.

My plate is my hand. The image in the window mirror looks like a warrior Gulliver, with a huge Afro and short arms. Short arms, until the plate goes spinning and crashing into the sink with a clang that separates the glass into tiny fragments in the sink. It sounds like music; the breaking glass is like a musical note echoing, even when a piece hits the window.

Daddy comes running in just as I pick up another glass. He is wide-eyed and heaving. He looks around. I am standing on the table with a glass in my hands shaking it to signal Daddy what dish is next.

“What are you doing?!” He seems so scared that he doesn’t move.

Christopher and Colin creep in the other side of the kitchen. No one goes in because of the glass at the bottom of the sink.

“You said to throw the dishes in the sink.”

He exhales with an incredulous look on his face. He comes forward and grabs me in his hands. They smell like gravy and cigarettes. He pulls the glass out of my hand and carries me into the living room.

“Good idea leaving the baby alone in a kitchen full of dishes. Clean this up. Assholes.” We are heading up to the den to listen to Daddy’s records.

Christopher and Colin can't come because they have chores.

(God, I can see gravity. I can feel motion. There is a line that is invisible, except only to me. I know you can see it too. And I need you to use it, to pull me through...)

New Jersey is an art show. A full on installation with a soundtrack. Mommy found the theme song one day on the way to Trader Horn, where her brother Uncle Downie works. He got here a couple weeks ago.

Mommy found Bruce Springsteen. She buys his album and brings it home like the day Daddy brought home Boscoe.

"I love his voice. He is the stamp of the earth type of man."

"Salt of the earth, yeah, right." Daddy smirks.

"Salt of the earth," she repeats.

That same day, Daddy buys me 2 albums. Cant Slow Down- a light skinned with glistening hair sitting on a chair in a room in all white. And another. A boy. A long, shining black boy with a smile that glows as bright as his socks. He stands with a tuxedo on, and his hands in his pockets. Against a brick wall. The picture is like looking into familiar, but different all that the same time. Not different like

dissimilar, different like unrelated. He is the missing piece to all the people in my world. It's a strange feeling, but I look at him, and I know what I want.

"Off the Wall. You see the bricks, Sweet Pea?"

"Yes, Daddy." I really just nod because the light in his face is something I never want to miss. I stare at the cover like Mommy stares at Bruce Springsteen. Except I don't giggle. I am serious. Mommy goes to the den where Daddy's record player is and he picks me up and sits me in the chair. Grandma sings. There is music in this room so we are all right at home. I hold on to my new gifts. I stare into the eyes of the glowing black boy against the brick wall.

"You wan fi play de music, don't?" Grandma laughs.

I look at her, can she see him? How can anyone be this beautiful?

"Jim said the store has good sales," Mommy smiles and puts on the album. Bruce Springsteen croons about running.

Mommy starts dancing, squealing in delight and undistinguishable patois.

Daddy stands behind my chair, but I can feel the light of his smile behind me.

The melody starts jingling, like Mommy's hips and thick black hair.

The window carries in light that bounces off her eyes. She looks like a Barbie doll, spinning in front of a record player.

I hear Christopher and Colin come up the stairs. I hear Boscoe barking at the bottom of the stairs.

Mommy's voice is high pitched and twangy, like a Jamaican Julie Andrews.

"In de day we sweat it out pun de streets of a RUNAWAY AMERICAN DREAM..." She squeals the words like she owns them. This makes Christopher and Colin start dancing.

Grandma claps her hands, staring at her child like she is on stage.

I want to be on stage too, but I want to be on stage with the boy on the record.

"Spring de cages out on highway 9, chrome wheel, fuel rejected stepping out ovah de line!" Mommy starts to twirl. Grandma giggles louder.

Daddy claps his hands behind me. The boys start singing too.

"Mamae, those aint the words," Christopher is smiling.

"Leave me, nuh! Cuz vamps like us, honey we were born to run!" She puts her hands up at the chorus. I stand in the chair.

I want to run with the boy in my hands. I want to take in the sunlight from the window. I want to scream about vamps and giggle like Grandma.

I feel Daddy's hands pick me up under my arms; spin me around with the boy in my embrace.

The simple notes of the repeating melody are us. Our circle, here in the den, on Tryon Ave. Our American dream brought to life thanks to a cure white man from New Jersey. Mommy smiles and Daddy laughs and Grandma giggles and Christopher and Colin dance.

I want to run. I want to run into the light and circle the dream like an orbit, to make it last forever.

Daddy's arms are warm and his cologne makes me hungry. Or am I hungry because of the picture of the black boy in my arms?

I love that the melody repeats. I love that the circle has not corners.

I love that the album is black. I love this moment. This dream. This song. I will keep singing it. I will sing it and run. I hope Daddy never puts me down.

Grandma and Mommy lived in St. Elizabeth before the American Dream. Deep in a compound where the Sun was closer to

the earth than any other place. The well in the center of the compound rotted everyone's teeth, so now Mommy and Grandma have perfect dentures. They smile, and everything looks perfect. When they talk to each other, it's another way. Grandma speaks to Mommy and Mommy clenches her mouth, and says something low, and Grandma looks as if someone has hurt her.

She is in the house with us, and Mommy says that's enough. Mommy says the past doesn't matter. Mommy says family is important. But when she says it, her eyes, don't look like her teeth. They are browner, darker, dented.

Early in the morning Grandma would be at the kitchen table, singing sweetly, smelling sweetly, smiling even better. I come down the stairs to her and my mind and heart synchronize because she fills both of them. I get closer to the kitchen and hear the crackling of frying pans and I see the small spots of oil jumping and scattering and landing back in the pan.

"Good mornin, darlin," she sings it.

"Hi, Grandma!" I squeal it.

"You want some tea?"

"Yes please," Grandma believes in teatime, like a good British woman. Teatime can be early in the morning, or late in the day. And

should always be observed with crackers.

I always like to sit in the chair she last sat in. I watch her brownness float around the countertop. She is brown like me. Dark and smooth. We are darker than Mommy. Grandma is so tall, taller than mommy with long legs.

"Grandma, did you know your grandma?"

She giggles a shy and coy dismissal reaction but then she answers me. She turns around still smiling holding a teacup.

"No darlin. My grandma died when my mommy was young".

Grandma sighs and puts my tea in front of me. The sprigs of ginger swirl around and steamy smoke smothers my nose and I breathe in and blow out softly over the cup.

"Why, grandma?"

She sits still.

"Because God called her to heaven, and she went. The Lord wanted her home, so my mommy was all I had".

"Did you love your grandma?"

"Of course I did!" she laughs.

"But you didn't know her."

"Na matta, she was my grandma and I loved her. She grow my mommy, so I loved her."

My tea is warm and feels like one of grandma's hugs but on the inside of my body.

"Don't you love Grandma?" her smile radiates on to me and I climb into her lap as if I were called and my heart and mind wrap around her soft sturdy body and call this moment victory.

"Yes," I say and finish the rest of my tea against her soft body. Her exhale is steady and deep, and calm. Then, she stands me up and rises to finish cooking the salt fish.

The house is still sleepy. Even the dog is tired. Outside the trees shimmy at the wind's touch. I open the back door. New Jersey Morning is always wet and whispering with either the crackling of stiff leaves or like now, when dew shines on the trees. In the summer when it rains in the yard, there are so many trees with fulvous and bustling flowers. The wetness hitting the leaves sounds like nature's applause. It competes with the crackling of cooking and Grandma's chimy voice. The hymn she sings is called, *It Is Well*, but I am sure she is making up her own lyrics. When she says father God it sounds like "fahda gyod".

I love her. I breathe her in as much as I can, the kitchen her moth ball-ish mintiness. Her song. It mixes with July like Mommy mixes her yams with marshmallows.

Mommy comes down the stairs. I can hear her humming softly. I come from a long line of women who hum. I guess, somewhere in history, we just decided that humming was better than singing out. Or maybe someone told us not to sing out, just hum. It fits Mommy, she seems quieter when she hums, quieter than when she does not hum or talk at all. She comes into the kitchen and Grandma's face crystalizes as if she is looking at fireworks, or she is in a museum, or at a light show. Even as she moves around the kitchen she watches Mommy.

And she should. Mommy is beautiful. Her long hair is everywhere, streaming down her back, billowing in her face. Her long pajamas make her look like wind as she walks. The summer breeze adds to her countenance.

"Beach day!" she squeals, as she looks at me. I smile like I am in on a secret.

"Ya ya, mi jus wan to finish de salt fish. Firs ting firs." Grandma sounds determined. When she speaks, she stops looking at Mommy.

"Moma, uno tek out de banana?"

"Yes, Beverley, look in a de scandal bag."

Mommy looks in the plastic bag on the kitchen table. As the plastic rustles, Boscoe gets restless. I jump to the floor and slip on Mommy's

slippers. I open the back door and he and I go outside. Into the outside. Into the open, out, side.

The sky would change a slow waltz sometimes, I would stand next to Boscoe and run my fingers down his flank and run my eyes up the nimbus of softness that danced across 330 Tryon Avenue. Boscoe is bigger than me. I can hear his breathing like it's mine. Christopher and Colin are stirring in their room, packing up bags to go see their father. There is rhythm all through the house because for the rest of us today is beach day. I look down at the grass and wind even makes it look like it's excited to go too. My 4 year-old toes flap and Boscoe's paws move side to side. We start a slow trot, around the property into the front yard, kicking up due and errant grass. He stares at the poodle across the street and I know what he is thinking. I want to run across to the schoolyard too and play with the poodle. The one with long grass and jungle gym, and the one with the fluffy ears and bells around its collar. I cant do things I want to do all the time, though. Mommy says that's not what girls are supposed to do. I walk toward the house and Boscoe follows my lead. I can see the women the in window. Mommy is in the kitchen putting food in a cooler and Grandma is warning of something at the table. I can look at Mommy's face; she is upset when Grandma talks. I love when

Grandma talks because her patois sounds like song. Me and Boscoe wander closer to the kitchen window and Mommy and I lock eyes. I stand and stare into hers and she looks me up and down. I know she is checking my knees for grass because late last night at bedtime she rubbed coco butter carefully over my parts. I feel soft and smell like chocolate. The air smells like me when I am close to it. It smells like warm me. I think of the beach air, the salt and wet and smell of roasting and think how I will mix in. Boscoe almost knocks me over and runs ahead of me. I see Daddy come outside and put something heavy in the car.

“Hey Sweet pea.” Daddy has on shorts and his legs are so long he looks like a stick man crossing the street in the yellow signs by school.

He picks me up and spins me around and Boscoe barks twice.

“Daddy, are we leaving soon?”

Sure, Sweet Pea, Mommy is just finishing the food”.

He looks in the window too. All of a sudden, Mommy looks down into the sink, and Daddy’s top lip disappears. I know this means there will be silence in car. Maybe Grandma will sing a bit.

“Mommy should be ready soon, Pea”.

“Ok, Daddy”.

When he goes back inside, Boscoe swags slowly back toward me. I think he likes my chocolate smell because he licks my arm and I run into the front yard.

Mommy and Grandma come to the front holding food and arguing.

“Mama, don’t tell mi how fi raise mi picknie”. She sucks her teeth like it’s the period on the sentence.

“Beverley, yu na wan fi listen to mi no more?”

Mommy shoos Boscoe away from the trunk, that sweet and smoky smell of jerk.

“Grandma,” I call out.

She comes to me, smiling; her lips painted red and her eyes glinted behind Grandma glasses. She is so pretty. Her perfect purchased teeth. She hugs me and giggles and her arms are imprinted on my skin and I feel like I have a new scent, and it smells like love and coco butter.

“Grandma are you gonna swim with me in the ocean?”

She laughs.

As we pack up the car, Christopher and Colin are bringing their weekend bags to the front porch. Colin takes longer because he had to wipe down his mattress from him peeing the bed. Daddy tells

them to take out the garbage. Colin mumbles something I can't hear under his breath.

Mommy is visibly upset. She screams at him, and hits him over the head. He starts to cry. Boscoe and I don't move. Mommy hitting Colin is normal. Christopher is usually the culprit, but Colin is usually the one who gets caught. He's not as smart as Christopher. His eyes aren't as sharp, his walk isn't as straight.

Christopher gets the garbage, and when he does, his father pulls up in the driveway. Mommy is inside, and she won't come out. Daddy stands in the driveway and Grandma goes inside after her child. The boys get into the car without a word. Ralph, their father, barely even stops the car when his sons get in. They pull out of sight and Mommy comes back out. Grandma follows her.

"Let's go." Mommy says.

I was right. The car ride is silent.

Even Grandma doesn't sing.

Later, much later Grandma and I will sit in the spot where Mommy was born. Later, much later, when Grandma can barely see and can't stand on her own, I will support her, help her build a house on the spot where she gave birth to her only daughter.

Later, much later I will ask her the questions. The why questions.

Later, she will try to give me answers.

“He beat her. All de time. And rape a gyal in the parish. When yu Mommy lef for the US, she didn’t even tell me. She didn’t tell anyone. She just pick up her picknie and lef. Mommy didn’t want him near de picknie, but he was their Daddy. You love your Daddy. She love her Daddy. Children need Daddy.”

Later, much later, it still won’t make much sense to me.

We drive in the car with the radio on. He does it so me and Grandma cant hear what he’s saying to Mommy.

All I can hear at the end of the conversation is Mommy saying,

“They are still my children, Jim. They are still my children.”

He rolls the window back up.

Coney Island Beach is next to an amusement park. Next to cotton candy and giant teddy bears. Next to the cyclone and candy corn. Grandma literally has to carry me to the beach because I cannot walk. I can barely stand. I am a stone pillar staring into paradise. I want to live here. I want to run around my new house and play with my new toys. Daddy holds the cooler and the umbrella, his camera around his neck. Mommy holds a big bag of towels and lotions. And then she grabs my hand. I am her child too. Her touch reminds me.

Her touch makes me forget about the cyclone and the cotton candy and want to follow her to the water. Grandma puts me down, and I keep holding on to Mommy's hand. I walk up with her; legs striding the dock, hard knocks of the wood and her sandals. I can keep up when I touch her. The sand is coming. The dock starts to crackle a bit with the brush of the sand before the beach. Daddy stops and looks back at us. He really looks at Mommy. I can feel her squeeze my hand a bit, but she doesn't break stride. She walks past him. I pull her, I stop, and I reach back and grab his hand. Now, we walk to the beach connected. Touching. Grandma starts to sing. So does Daddy. I am in the middle of Mommy and Daddy and I feel like I don't want to live here. I want to live where they are. I want to stay touching them. I want to stay walking on this sand with them. I don't want to break the circle. Mommy releases the tightness of her grip a little.

"This is as good a spot as any." Daddy says.

Mommy agrees. She spreads a big sheet and Grandma sits down first. I sit next to her. Mommy and Daddy put their load down. They don't sit. They stare at the water for a while; they listen to the wind longer. Then they grab hands. Me and Grandma watch them walk slowly down the shore.

“Come, baby.” She says.

“Come with me.”

We walk closer to the shoreline. The water gets louder. But I am not afraid. The sand is hot against my feet, but cools, as the water gets closer. Grandma touches my hand, makes a noise and sits down in the sand. I do the same. We are at the cusp of land and water. I watch Grandma exhale and look up like she is praying to the wind. But I know she prays to God, knows him like a cousin. She smiles when the wind hits her brown and lined face and I want nothing more than to touch her. I reach my hand out and feel the softness of her flesh. There is no greater connection in this life and world than this. The feeling of her skin at the sea. The look on her face that is my reference to forever. That earth turns from liquid to solid to wind to skin to love.

She stares down at me and pushes her hand in the warm softness of the sand and picks it up in front of me. She takes my hand and mashes the softness into my palm.

“See this, granddaughter. This is us. A speck of sand in a huge beach.”

The ocean rises from the hole that is created. The water rushes in and she welcomes it. She picks it up in her other hand. She holds out mine and pours it into my other palm.

“See this, granddaughter. This is us. A drop of water in a huge ocean.”

I do not have the words to tell her I understand. But my eyes understand. My heart understands. I mash my palms together. Daddy and Mommy come walking back up the beach and Daddy is snapping pictures. He takes a picture of me and Grandma. In that moment, we are both looking at Mommy, who is looking into the wind.

We walk back to the large sheet and Mommy shares food. I am hungry, but I don't want to put the soft sippy sand in my hand down. Ever. It is both soft and scratchy to the touch. Like us, Grandma says. Like who we are.

When the summer ends, other things start. School is starting. Grandma is going back to Jamaica. TV is getting exciting again. Mommy starts to watch her favorite stories. Falcon Crest. Knott's Landing. Dallas. The theme song from Dynasty was so intoxicating. It sounded like tall buildings and crystals banging in giant domes of

gold. Dallas was warmer, it moves more, and it's more exciting. I love when Mommy watches them because sometimes I hear her trying to half hum the theme songs, like in church when she doesn't quite remember the words to the hymn. She doesn't hum. She breathes out, I want to go in the room and watch with her, maybe she will let me, but I know at night only Daddy lets me lay in the big bed and watch when he watches TV. But it's not the weekend. It's Dallas night. It's a good night on CBS for drama. The man with the grey hair reminds me. He tells us all, and lets us know how exciting Friday night drama is. In between the commercials she sighs again. I sit on my bed holding my fashion plates wondering if she can hear that I have stopped making noise. Wondering if she cares. The doors are open, and then hers closes. Dallas is faint; the Ewing slang rises with one-syllable words, then mellows again until commercials stop screaming. My fashion plates are stained with thick soot from the colored pencils. My bedspread is pinkish where it should not be. I can't let Mommy see this; I bring them down to the floor again. That is when it starts. Like a rumbling, and concentration like a jackhammer but in a field. My fashion plates feel cold and I wonder if they would make good earmuffs. The noise comes again. A scraping. It's coming from Mommy and Daddy's

room. I rise up slowly and pray that Thriller is not waiting in my Mommy and Daddy's room. It stops, but I am already in the hallway. I pass the stairs and the sound gets stronger again.

When I open the door to Mommy and Daddy's room, she is standing at his closet door, prying the double lock open with a golden letter opener. Each time she scrapes, more wood from the lock grinds to the ground in pieces and sand. The lock is the color of the opener, it shines, they both do. And she does. I can hear Dallas in the background. I want to seal myself in the corner so she does not see me, but she wouldn't notice me at this moment. The blue of Christian Dior robe was dark contrast to the delicate silk cerulean of her pajamas, she flows, her arm runs the opener back and forth and her body shakes, under the layers of valor and silk, blues like sky, shaking the sweet smell of Racco Rabbane so close to me I forget how scared I am when I see her tears. She grits her teeth and pushes the apples of her cheeks up, they are soaked, and I turn around and follow the sound right out the room. I shut the door. The bottom door opens and I know it's Daddy. Here he is! He bounds up the stairs two at a time. He has on a white hat. He has never worn a hat in his whole life! I look at him when he strides past me toward the sound. I back away into my room. I have never seen Daddy with a hat on.

There is a commercial break. There is a time out. There is a minute when no one has to be on. In that minute, eyes and ears and tongue and feet and heart all exhale, I do this and I grow big into the universe, like all of us do. When I exhale I hear myself and the commercial break is done but I cant tell until I hear the crash of the glass bottles on Mommy's vanity, and a squeal, some kind of declaration. Daddy's voice is fainter, a small one, cracking like boys is preschool, but it was an admission, it sounds like, "for a little while"

And I know. I don't know why I know but I know. I look around the room and go slowly to the hallway and wait for the door to open. I run back to my room. I listen. Even the lights make too much noise so I turn them off hoping then will slow my breath.

"How do I know? I know what he did."

I want to go in the den and play Al Green or Isaac Hayes. Daddy wants to hear them right now. Maybe they would dance. The bed squeaks, someone is sitting down and someone is pacing the room.

"Is the closet open? Did she give him that hat? How do I know?"

I stand in the hallway next to the bathroom staring into the door. I stare into wood that is moving one the other side, wood that is sweating. Wood that is cold. The light on the other side is bright and

warms the wood even on my side. The light that peeks out from under the door is covered from the blue carpet. I want to sneak my feet in the floor. The door speaks words, echos, and I move away from it, Daddy comes out with a bag. He still has the hat on. He doesn't say anything; he steps around me this time in a slow slanted stride. When he goes down the stairs he slants his body and slings the bag on his right shoulder. I know I shouldn't say anything to him. I don't want Mommy to feel bad. And I know. I know he will be back. And I know why he leaves.

The man on ABC news is talking about the Fashions for the ladies on Dallas. He says that Sue Ellen looked so beautiful tonight, he called her hat sultry. HE said her hat made her outfit. I cant hear much for a long time in Mommy's room. The news then something else. Then the sound of Daddy traveling over the George Washington Bridge without me, without Mommy. To see her. I wonder if he is listening to AL Green right now, or Phyllis Hyman, or if he is still in his car in the driveway. Or if he is downstairs. Or if he can fit through the chimney when everyone else in the house goes to sleep.

Trees can signal Halloween in New Jersey. They become like town criers when their leaves get dry and begin to sound the coming of October. The colors adorn the lawn and make 330 Tryon Ave look like the house from Hanzel and Gretel. A setting in a scary story. Thriller was coming. I watch the sun slowly slide away and feel warm in the pit of my stomach because Thriller is coming. Michael Jackson's video will come on when the sun goes down. I pull my album from behind the light bright and stare at the man with the perfect face and the strained arm picking up a tiger. Daddy says this is a better album than the last one, but the last one is still my favorite.

I love to watch Michael. I still love the first album when he is standing against the wall and his white shirt is glowing like his socks and his face is like black heat and his teeth make me want to smile and I can't describe the feelings inside me when I look at the album, but I don't want them to go away. When I look at Michael, I feel sure of something, positive of really wanting something. I want Thriller to be right now.

"You couldn't find a nigger outside tonight, heh heh," Daddy smiles. He walks over me as I surround myself in Michael's albums. When I unfold them Michael and I are the same size.

"Jim, you know you mustn't curse round the baby, tee hee," Mommy chortled. She had makeup, her cheeks are streaked with pink and her lips are kissed with red. When she steps over me the Paco Rabaane smells seeps down from heaven and me and Michael are covered with a fresh and pretty aroma. I think it brings us closer together.

The inside of the Thriller cover is so shiny, and the tiger on Michael's lap is my archenemy.

"You ready to see the video, baby?"

I nod and smile. Mommy is in a good mood because She and Daddy are going out after we watch the video. Daddy steps heavy around me again toward the bathroom.

"It's close to midnight, something evil's lurkin in the dark..." Daddy picks up Michael and sings like he is a girl. I jump into the air but not too high because I don't want Daddy to drop Michael. Daddy laughs at me. I never take my eyes off Michael and the tiger,

"Jim," Mommy squeals, "Don't tease the baby". Her laughter gives away her enjoyment, and I pick up other dark Michael just in case she gets any ideas.

"You scared he's gonna, get up and run away, Sweet pea?"

"Gimme my Michael back," I will not cry before Thriller comes.

Daddy almost buckles over with laughter and hands me back my Michael. He rubs my head and keeps singing into the bathroom.

"Christopher!" Mommy calls him from downstairs.

The steps thud under his weight. I hold my Michaels close so they don't get hurt. Maybe the tiger will get hurt.

"Mamae, I don't have any blank tapes for the VCR".

"You seriously want to record this? You know it's a video. It will be on for 3 minutes at most. And look at this one," She turns her body towards me. Her brush wading through the thick silky blackness on top of her head. "She thinks the album is him!"

They laugh. I stare back at them but at the same time whisper to my Michaels that it's ok.

"Mommy, Michael said you look pretty."

"Thank you darlin!" She giggles more. When she laughs her belly shakes and her legs make her dark green parachute pants look full. Christopher sits on the side of the bed. I listen to the water from the shower stop, and Daddy's heavy footsteps land on the shower mat. The window behind the big TV shines back at me. The sun is almost gone, and the panes are now almost a mirror. The light in the middle of the room has a twin, the green wall where Mommy's closet has a reflection. I watch Daddy walk back into the bedroom through the

window. I stare at myself. Now there are two me's. And four Michaels.

Daddy walks around slowly to his dresser, and sprays the Polo cologne under his arms. Christopher leaves the room.

"Come Breeanne," Mommy motions for me to go back to my room.

"But it's coming on soon! Look, like the lady on MTV said-the sun is down".

"Daddy jumps and turns around, "It's close to midnight-"

"Jim!" Mommy is still laughing. "Come take the Michaels and go play in your room".

When I walk out the door toward the stairs, I get scared because I don't want to fall down them, even though I am not letting the Michaels go. I will just do it slowly.

One step, two steps, three. The front door is cracked open at the bottom of the stairs. I am scared, what is Thriller comes in? Michaels will protect me. I use them as fans and jump down the last two stairs. I am safe and fine. I close the door right after I notice that night has fallen completely. All the windows shine like mirrors and Mommy's plants make the reflections look like life.

"It's close to midnight..." Christopher runs up behind me and grabs my waist.

"No!!!!" I am squealing and in the air, but I am most afraid of dropping the Michaels.

"Pistopher!" I laugh out loud and I can see him smiling.

"Why do you call me that?"

I laugh again "Pistopher!"

When I am in the air Michaels and me look like we are going to heaven. Everything is perfect. I don't even mind the tiger anymore.

"Put me down."

My feet touch the blue shag carpet. I walk to the kitchen, touch the door with Michael but he gets a shock and it scares him. Christopher laughs. His stomach shakes. He looks like Buddha.

"The VCR is ready I think," Daddy pounds down the stairs when he says it. He finds me fanning Michaels through the air, drying them off so they don't get too nervous. It's scary being in the spotlight.

When you first get on stage you have to be brave, but that is hard.

It's hard to be fearless, even when you are talented and wonderful like my Michaels. It's hard to be perfect and have everyone love you.

But it's worth it. Daddy loves me. He says it's worth it. But when he talks about worth I am not sure what he means.

"Can I go back upstairs?"

"Yes, Sweet Pea."

This time when I go up the stairs I hug Michaels close to my chest. I think this makes them feel warmer so that their muscles will be loose for the video. At the top of the stairs, I can see Mommy in the room. She looks at herself in the mirror. I wonder if she knows she is beautiful. I wonder when the moment comes when a girl becomes a woman and she gets the word that she is beautiful now. I wonder when my word will come. She runs her fingers through her hair and then fixes her lipstick. Lipstick and hair means you are beautiful. When I walk into the room fully, she smiles.

“Hi Mommy!”

“Hi baby. You ready for your big night?”

“Yes, we all are.”

I plant myself in front of the big TV at the foot of Mommy and Daddy’s bed. My back is straight against the thick and high bed. My feet are flat against the thick and warm carpet. My Michael’s are always with me. I am ready.

“I got the tape,” Christopher pops it into the VCR. Now, outside is pitch black. I rest Michaels against the backdrop of the foot of the bed. I know they have a good view.

“Hmmm Hmmm,” Daddy giggles. He comes in and sits next to me and Michaels. His knees are always ashy no matter how much lotion he puts on. I touch his knees and he laughs.

“Go check on Colin, Jim.” Mommy asks.

Colin has been sick in his room for 2 days. On Wednesday afternoon he and two of his friends snuck alcohol into school. They started drinking in science class, which is 2nd period. By noon they completely drunk. By lunchtime they were sick. When the vice principal finally realized what was happening the ambulance had to be called because two of them had alcohol poisoning. When Mommy went to school to get him he couldn't stop vomiting on himself.

Christopher and Mommy dragged him home with his arms draped around their shoulders.

I watch Mommy spray herself with perfume. Paco Rabbanne Metal.

The smell is in the air like gold flecks, it revolves around the light and settles upon her skin. Tonight Mommy and Daddy are going to Uncle Downie's house. Downie, Mommy's younger brother, finally has citizenship. They have a lot of reasons to celebrate the dream.

The adults are going to have fun tonight. Tomorrow, we are going to the park with the cousins. Tomorrow, during the day, when Colin can

walk around and eat food without puking. That way, no one will know what happened.

“Bree, remember to tell Christopher to close the windows before you got to sleep. It’s gonna be cold tonight.”

“I wanted to sleep in your bed, Mommy.”

“Nu boddah sleep in here, Breeanne, sleep ina yo own bed.”

I know Mommy is serious because the patois in her voice is thick.

Mommy doesn’t want me to be in the bed because when her and Daddy get home tonight they are going to lock the door and turn on the radio. That’s what they do on nights like these. I remember there were two nights like these before.

Daddy comes back upstairs and goes into his closet and takes out a yellow sweater.

“Well?” Mommy asks.

“He’s alright, I guess. Still cant eat. I gave him something to sleep.”

“Good,” Mommy exhales.

“Dyam Jackass.”

Her patois was less solid, but still palpable. She whispers it because she doesn’t want to spoil her and Daddy’s night.

Daddy puts on lotion and walks around with his yellow sweater. I watch his knobby knees traverse towards the ironing board.

“Bree, tek de album dem offa de bed.”

I move quickly, and Michaels and me go to my room.

“It’s close to midnight, something evil lurkin in the dark,” I am dancing around my bed with butterflies in my stomach.

“Do you know any other words, Sweet Pea?” Daddy appears fully clothed and freshly lotioned in the doorway.

“You see a sight that almost stops your heart.” I answer.

“You try to scream!!” we both sing.

“But terror takes a sound before you make it,” as I sing it, I raise Michael straight up in the air, like he is the wheel and I am driving a car.

“Your ashy knees!” Daddy sings.

“Daddy-that’s not the words!!”

His laugh is high pitched, which means it is real.

“I think it’s starting soon, Sweet.”

I follow him back into the bedroom, Christopher is at the VCR, Mommy is fixing her jacket. Daddy puts his shoes on as I plop down on the big bed. My feet dangle over the side, unable to keep still.

“Okay thriller fans. We will be back.” Mommy kisses me and rubs Christopher’s head which peeps out from under the giant machine.

Daddy hands me a SUGAR DADDY and puts his finger over his mouth, not to say anything. I smile and look at Christopher as Daddy walks by him and says nothing.

When the door slams at the bottom of the stairs, Christopher turns the lights off.

“You’re not scared are you?” He laughs.

“No.” I am holding Michaels to my chest.

“They can see better if you arrange them on the floor.” Christopher suggests.

This is brilliant. Of course Michael should have a birds’ eye view for his premier.

Nina Hartley smiles and shakes her hair as the MTV theme song blares out of the speakers of the TV and Christopher hits, ‘record’ on the VCR. Michael is propped up against the bottom of the bed. The reflection from the TV makes his faces shine. I don’t which one to watch. Him, him, or him on TV. My smile is so big it must make noise.

“You’re really not scared, huh.”

“No.” I say and jump back on the bed starting to bounce.

Christopher smiles. I smile back and then the silence comes. The video starts.

“Now, we present, a special broadcast presentation.”

The words, MICHAEL JACKSON’S THRILLER comes up against a dark backdrop of a moonlit night. The car pulls up, with him and Ola Ray in the front seat.

He looks so beautiful. He is an exact mixture of the both of my Michaels, except without the tiger.

“I’m not like other guys.” Michael is acting. I am awe.

“No, I mean I’m different.”

When he becomes a werewolf I get scared. I grab Daddy’s pillow and try to muffle my hick up screams. The light from the TV is so big the room doesn’t even seem that dark. It is illuminated by him.

The chorus comes on and I can’t help but to sing, but to dance. But to run.

“Cuz it’s the thriller!!! Thriller night! And no one’s gonna save you from the beat that’s bout to strike, you know it’s thriller! Thriller night you’re fighting for you lives inside of thriller, thriller....”

“THRILLER!!” Christopher booms the word and jumps up onto the bed with me.

“Thriller night,” I reply.

The dancing begins. We stare at the screen in silence. Awestruck.

Michael glides down the black shining street with zombies afoot. His

red jacket bounces off the blackness of his skin and makes his sweat look like high black gloss. His skin like illumination dipped in mahogany.

I know what this feeling is. I know that from now on, I want to be with boys. I know I love him.

When the video ends Christopher yells out.

I am shaking because I feel an electric current running out from the TV through me. I jump off the bed and check on the Michaels.

I am spinning around and don't realize the lights are still off.

"That was the freshest thing I have ever seen!"

"Michael?" I ask Christopher.

"Yup. Thriller." Christopher smiles and watches me dance around the room. I look at his face and his smile changes. He gets up and looks down the hallway. I think he is going to turn on the light, but he closes the door.

"Come here," he says softly.

I follow him to the bed with Michaels in my hand.

"Leave those," he says. "I want to show you something."

I don't want to leave Michaels.

"Don't you want to learn the Thriller dance?" Christopher teases?

“Yes,” I answer slowly. I go to turn the lights on and hear Christopher careen off the bed from behind me.

“No, they danced in the dark, just like us.” He picks me up and spins me around.

“It’s close to midnight,” He starts to laugh and holds me up to the window.

“Look, see? It’s still dark outside. It’s midnight now, you know. Aren’t you scared?”

“No,” I answer.

“You should be!” He plops me on the bed and tickles me.

“Cuz it’s the thriller!” he sings.

I laugh because he laughs. He keeps tickling me, but his hands move lower than my ribs.

“Let’s dance.” His breathing is heavy and the weight of his body is on top of me.

“We cant dance on the bed. Michael doesn’t dance on the bed, we-“

“Look,” he points to the TV. “They are gonna show it again.”

I stare up at the TV and Nina Hartley is talking but I cant hear what she is saying because Christopher is breathing hard in my ear. He presses down against my underwear but not with his hands. His hands are on my legs.

“I, ouch, I-“

“Shhhh, it’s comin on again”.

He pushes against me. Hard. I cant breath because his shoulders are on my chest. It hurts, but he keeps pushing. I try to catch my breath as the light from the TV goes dark again. I hear the moaning and groaning in the background of the beginning of the video after the credits appear on the screen.

I hear the car with Michael and Ola Ray pull up. I hear the squeaking of the tires and the phrases of the dialogue.

“I’m not like other guys.”

Then, I hear a pop, I don’t feel it right away, but I hear it, a tiny tearing sound and then I hear Christopher breathe like someone is choking him, and then he begins moving faster and faster. I hold my breath and count as the music begins. I want to be a dancer. I want to be a zombie moving to the rhythm of Michael’s words. I want to be a breaker who pops and locks during the chorus. I close my eyes and count the times I hear the word.

Thriller.

Thriller.

Thriller.

Christopher lets out a strange noise and flies off of me, holding his body like he is hurt. All of a sudden I am scared. I look down and see my panties are soaked and bunched in the corner of my private and leg. My thigh is sore. My stomach hurts. He gets up and turns on the light, with his back to me, holding himself looking down, and then back to me, and then down again.

Like he is going to change.

Like he will become the werewolf.

He leaves the room. I am lying on the bed, and there is a burning feeling between my legs. I touch myself down there and it feels raw.

It feels like I am sitting on sandpaper. I am throbbing down there too, a feeling I have never felt.

Christopher comes in and stops the VCR. He doesn't look at me.

"It's close to midnight...."

When he takes the tape out of the VCR, he turns and turns off the light and goes to close the door behind him.

Before he leaves I open my mouth, but sound doesn't come out, I want to ask him what happened. I want to ask him when we are going to dance.

"Mommy says to close the windows." I get it out before the door slams.

In the darkness, the video is over. The TV seems less bright now, the vee-jay's look like they have seen something they never have before and never will again. I get off the bed. Michaels are spread on the carpet, and because the light is dimmer seem sadder now. I can't catch the stare of their eyes because the lights are still off. I don't want to look in their eyes, though. I pick them up; I don't turn the TV off. I walk into my room and close the door. I take off my panties and notice there is blood on them. I am scared. But I know Mommy uses things for blood and keeps them in the bathroom. I go into the bathroom and look under the sink for the things. When I see them, they remind me of diapers. Diapers are for babies. I am a big girl. I use tissue until the blood stops. Then I flush the toilet. When I go back to my room, I turn Michael's face side down. The bed's softness feels good against my hips, because they are hurting too. My head is hurting too. My eyes are hurting, but I am not crying. I pull the blanket up over my head and close my eyes. I still wish I can learn the dance.

(Dear God, what have I done?)

I wake up in the morning with a pain in my body that feels unnatural. Michael is even staring at me wrong, like I did something. I feel smaller now, not like a little girl, but an unfinished sentence. A thought that was fleeting, that was whispered in passing in an insignificant conversation. I feel like this for the whole day. I speak to no one, and no one in particular notices.

Mommy has to go into the city for a meeting before we go to the park. Daddy is in Harlem because his mother is sick. We are going to the park when all the errands are done, which means I have to wait here, with Christopher and Colin, for them to be done. She comes in my room and wakes me with Milo and I look around and smell around for Daddy's cologne but I smell nothing and I wonder if what happened to me has warped my senses. And I know that it has.

Mommy takes me out of the bed and dresses me.

"Did you bathe last night?"

"I tried."

"What do you mean you tried?" She holds up my panties so I can slide into them in front of her.

"It hurts down there."

The look on her face is urgent and accusing.

"Down where?" She almost yells at me.

"Here."

"Ya bungie hurts?" She asks me.

"Yes."

"Why, you bungie hurts?" She seems so scared, I don't understand why.

"Because of what Christopher did to me."

The silence in the room has weight and mass. She stares at my head as I slide on the last of my pants. That is all. She says nothing else. My undershirt goes on over my head, my t-shirt over that. Then I am sent into her room to play.

I hear her go downstairs and talk to Christopher. She yells at him, almost a shriek, like some crazy animal. Then I hear the door slam and no more footsteps. At least for a while.

I turn on the TV. Secret Garden is on channel 11. I watch the ladies swing back and forth, and I rock side-to-side and pretend like I am between them. I use their pig tails as my anchor and float past the garden, into the air. I hold on so I am not blown away by the breeze from the swinging. I climb on top of trees and let the birds use me as a perch. I keep holding on to the pig tails. The birds sing to me. Smile at me. They make me harmonize with their chimy chirping. The leaves join in. The swishing sounds like our samba, our rhythm

created by their greenery, their touching. The leaves making love.
The trees allowing our orchestra. I close my eyes and hit high notes.
The birds giggle and the leaves clap.

All of a sudden there is a burning sting on the back of my neck. It
takes my breath away.

I open my eyes.

"What the fuck did you say!!!??" Christopher is standing over me
with his belt.

"What did you say!!? What the fuck did you say!?" he brings the
buckle down again against my head. I scamper to the bed to jump
under it and he grabs my leg.

"I... didn't!! I...don't want to..."

"Say something again, say it again and I will beat the shit out of
you!!" One last hit. This time against my back. The searing renders
me speechless. Then he leaves.

I hold myself. Against the wall and let the tears warm my face. I
don't understand. I am being punished for saying something I don't
understand. I am being punished for talking to Mommy? For not
liking what happened?

I don't understand.

On the TV, the ladies are still swinging. Smiling at me. The birds are still stinging. The leaves are still clapping. But now it seems different. Like I am being mocked. I get up and look in the mirror and try to turn around to see the welt on my back that I know I have. I can't turn that much. I can't see it. I must become the snake. I must slither my body and contort my back so that I can examine my scales. When I do. I make the "sssss" noise loud so that I can begin to molt this skin. The surface under all this is smooth, shiny, pure. I shake the scales off and watch them fall to the ground. My hands and feet become fused together as the scales fall away. Down down down, away from my new and beautiful surface. I am pretty again. I am new. I smell fresh, and I feel strong again. I can crawl out of the bathroom into the jungle and catch fresh meat now. I can take down an okapi, the large horned animals Daddy showed me in the jungle. I can twist myself around the trees in the Secret Garden. I can shake the leaves into a quicker rhythm.

I come out of the bathroom on high alert. There could be a rabbit or a squirrel just around the corner and I need predator practice. I make it to my room with no food, and check under the bed to see if the edible woodland creatures are hiding from the newer, sleeker, shinier, snake me.

When I fall asleep on the bed, the squirrels are outside on the branches, breathing sighs of relief,

"Come on," Christopher comes up the stairs with company. I can smell him coming now, my snake sense make the human senses he killed more acute.

"This is cool, for real?" Colin is laughing, the smile on his face like it's Christmas.

"She wont say nothing, not no more."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, do it.?"

When I turn around the two of them are towering over the bed and Colin unzips his pants.

"Suck it." He smiles at me, like he is extending the hand of gratitude.

Christopher nods behind him, encouraging me to join in.

I look around for a minute, out the window, and I see that all the squirrels have run away. Even the sky changes.

"Suck it!" He grabs my head and pulls me to his penis. As it enters my mouth, Christopher unzips his pants and begins rubbing himself quickly.

The house is still quiet. The sky is still blue. The ladies are still swinging. But I am no longer the snake. I do not know what I am.

Mommy comes home in the afternoon at the same time Daddy does. I hear them downstairs laughing, making jokes, rustling groceries, putting bags on the table.

"Let me help you guys." Colin is being useful.

"Yeah, Mommae, we'll carry it." Christopher is so noble.

I don't want to move from the bed I have been in all day. I don't want to take off the shirt that is stuck to my chest because of all the salty sticky. I just want to stand still.

I hear footsteps come up the stairs after a while. Soft, unsteady footsteps and I know they belong to Mommy. She comes in the room like an inspector looking for violations. She walks up to me slowly. I am staring at a TV. I am watching a constant stream of noise.

She looks me over once, then back at the door. "What did you do?"

She whispers to me, like she is scared.

"What did you do today?"

I look at her like she is the TV. I want to tell her what happened but I don't want to get hit again. I shake my head.

She stares down at my shirt. And then back up at me. And then to the door, she is listening for Daddy's footsteps.

"Come." She takes me to the bathroom and strips me down. She runs the bath and puts me in. She leaves. When she comes back I want to tell her that the water is too hot. I want to tell her that my mouth tastes tart because they took turns. I want to tell her I want to know what is happening to me. I want to tell Daddy. I say nothing.

She puts my clothes in a plastic bag and peeks out the door before leaving again.

Before she disappears she looks back at me and says, "Hurry up."

I am standing in a marsh,, a shallow, tepid water body with tadpoles and frogs fighting for survival. But they are not ordinary frogs and tadpoles, they are equipped with military gear. Nuclear weapons.

And they are not afraid to use them. I am just a statue in the pond.

They swim around me, charging, retreating, taking and losing different parts of different beaches.

"Attack!!" they scream from underneath my feet.

"Retreat!" they yell from behind my knees.

"No surrender!" A giant frog with the colonel hat yells at his troops.

He looks into their frightful eyes and holds his breath before he says it again. He knows most of them will not leave this swampy pond alive. But they know their sacrifice is for the greater good. It must be. Why else would this colonel, who has lead them and loved them

this whole time, lead them to this swamp,, and ask them to keep going?

Christopher

He is born a couple days after Christmas, one day after Boxing Day to be correct. Boxing Day is quite the to do in Jamaica and a first born son is even more exciting than dinners on beaches and cricket games on television and presents under trees. Mommy's firstborn. With chocolate skin and big bedroom eyes. He is a fat baby, with big legs and a thorough cry. Mommy's little boy.

She grows him in a small house just outside of Kingston, grows him as he watches his father beat her over and over and again.

Cousin Winsome comes to watch the child so Mommy can go back to work. Ralph, his father starts to make eyes at her, starts making lude comments and walking around with his genitals exposed.

Winsome tells Mommy. Winsome is fired. Christopher watches.

When he is 6, his father Ralph rapes a girl in the neighborhood, a teenager. Brutally. Mercilessly. She is left bloody and barren.

No cops are called. Mommy pays the girl's family off. Christopher watches again. He sees that no consequence is necessary for things such as this. When they make the trip to the states, Christopher is a

young boy who sits at home in an apartment in Brooklyn, wondering when his chance at an American Dream will come. A dream to be like his father, whom he adores so much.

Christopher grows up listening to rap music, watching the birth of the genre give soundtrack to his teenage progression. He is present for the advent of the VCR, the Walkman, the cassette tape, and the laceless adidas. Crack cocaine. He watches again and realizes that in life, there are no real and immediate consequences if you don't want there to be. He watches, and learns early that his mother loves him best of all. And no one is there to protect the little girl, who has stolen his mother away.

He watches and realized justice lies in his pants, and vindication comes out in milky white secrets, shoved into the mouth of a 5 year old child.

He grows up and marries, has a house in Southern New Jersey, has friends, and a life, a family, memories, and never has to think about the petty little indiscretions of his youth.

For my 6th birthday, something amazing happens. Mommy and Daddy take me to a place called the Winter Garden Theater. We are there to see a show called CATS. The drive across the bridge, across

the water, across the world is like a pilgrimage. Our car is a boat, we are the billy goats gruff, crossing to the green pasture. Daddy knows Manhattan by car like a sea captain knows the blue shoreline by smell. Mommy is happy because she is singing the Christopher Cross song jangling out of the radio speakers all around our comfy Ford Taurus, our spaceship in this dream.

Mommy and Daddy are happy right now, but it's a fragile kind of happy, a precarious type of joy that at any moment can be shattered by more silent stretches and grown ups sleeping on couches.

Everything has to be right, perfect. Mommy's hair is flawless, her makeup flawless. Her outfit flawless. Her silent daughter sitting and staring out a window behind her flawless. For the daughter, flawless means silent. Flawless means compliant. What Christopher and Colin are doing to me, with much regularity would break the gentle cords of this unsteady reconciliation. Every couple of blocks she smiles at him and then looks at me in the rear view and smiles, but the smile is different. The smile is a "please play along" smile. I know this smile. I don't know how I know, but I know.

I know so many things I do not want to know.

When we pull up on Broadway, Daddy lets us out to park the car.

Mommy and me walk into the theater to wait for him inside.

The inside looks like a giant castle, the ceilings go on forever and my 6-year-old mind wants to scale the top of the building. The baroque beauty of the hanging statues and rails look like a different planet.

Mommy registers my awe.

“It’s nice, right, Bree?”

“Yes”.

There is a pause.

“It’s nice like this. This is just us, right?”

I look at her.

“Yes, Mommy?”

She puts her hands on my face.

“Yes, Baby. Here he is!”

Daddy walks in and takes my hand.

“You ready, Sweet Pea?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Mommy looks upset. She follows us to the large stairs that take us all the way up to the balcony. Mommy calls them nosebleed seats and laughs. Daddy doesn’t laugh.

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“Yes, Baby. Here he is!”

Daddy walks up to me and takes my hand. Then he takes Mommy’s.

As we climb the stairs of the mammoth theatre, I try to keep stride with Daddy’s long legs. I try to hold his rhythm and his somewhat sideways gait. It is hard to do in my dress, but he notices, and slows to keep with me, and smiles.

Mommy walks behind us.

When we sit in our seats, finally. The house lights go down. There is a strange but electric buzzing around me, like the start of a disco song.

Then it begins.

The music comes up, smoke comes out.

We are transformed.

All of a sudden, people in cat costumes come dancing out of every direction, chanting, stepping, coming closer to us.

I am scared. One comes right up to me and Daddy and Mommy.

I want to cry.

“It’s ok, Sweet Pea.”

Daddy holds my hand. I feel better.

The cats start singing. The music sounds like a spaceship landing on Earth. It sounds perfect to me. The music, the noise. The smoke coming up from the stage even sounds perfect to me.

Then the lady cat comes to the stage. She is dusty and disheveled. She walks out slowly, and all the cats stare at her. She opens her mouth and starts to sing.

“Memory...” the word sounds perfect in her lyrical mezzo trill. The word has such power. The word strikes me, instantly. Just one note sang into a three-syllable word. The word that makes me remember. That makes me think if I sing it, the memory will be as sweet as her voice.

“If you touch me, you’ll understand what happiness was...”

I wonder if she is right. I wonder if memory can be wiped away, or relived, with a touch.

“Look a new day, has begun.”

The dissonant melody begins again after her last note. The cats come out again, but this time I don't mind. When the smoke clears and all the cats are back on stage, I realize I am crying.

When the cast comes out for their applause, the lady who sang the memory song gets a standing ovation. I stand with everyone and watch her take in our praise. I want to be like her.

Mommy and Daddy laugh while I hoot and cheer.

“Did you like it, Sweet Pea?”

I nod, falling back in my seat, exhausted and exhilarated.

We buy the soundtrack and play it back over and over again on the way back to New Jersey. The silence is filled with Memory. My memory is filled with song.

In the middle of the 80's something amazing happens. A series of “I never” events. Black people. On the center stage. Not just Michael, even though he began it. All of us now. Eddie Murphy, Richard Pryor. Bill Cosby. Jesse Jackson. Daddy turns on the TV and I see high chocolate Black man with a mustache like Daddy talking about

running for president. Daddy mumbles to himself and nods proudly at the screen. Mommy sits in her room and dreamily stares at Claire Huxtable, a browner version of her. And it's not just us watching. It's everyone. Now, we are everywhere. Now, Mommy and Daddy are making "I never" money. Mommy and Daddy hash out a Huxtible existence that makes it possible for movement, upward mobility. Black success, admission into the Niggeratti. The Black elite. Elite meaning that we didn't have to take the subway and live next to people on food stamps. For Mommy and Daddy, that was success. They didn't have to sleep on the same block with drug dealers and gunfights. They could call themselves respectable. We could call ourselves suburban.

330 Tryon Ave has become too unstable for the American Huxtable Dream. 330 Tryon Ave is too small to hold our big family and bigger desires. We need a bigger house. We need a bigger lawn. We get a bigger loan. But really, we needed a bigger space. Space away from the rest of the dreamers who kept hitting snooze on their chance to do better.

The first sign comes early one winter morning, before everyone gets up to go to school and work and the babysitter.

I wake up in the silence of my dark room. I can hear Mommy and Daddy's footsteps. They aren't concerned with me though. Because the doorbell is ringing. It's too early for anyone in the regular rotation of visitors to be at the door. It's too cold for anyone that would be welcome.

I slide out of bed. And hear Daddy mumble lowly as he bound down the stairs toward the front door. Mommy and I are standing at the top of the stairs.

"Jim, who is it?" Mommy asks, clutching her blue robe.

"I don't know," he answers, facing the peephole.

"Who is it?" Daddy beams.

The voice from the other side of the door is almost inaudible.

"Who is it?" Daddy is louder now, so loud that Boscoe starts whining.

"It's Dwayne, Mr. Daniels."

Daddy opens the door.

Dwayne stands in the doorway, scared to come in.

"Christopher-your friend is at the door."

Christopher and Colin come out of their room, as soon as Dwayne sees their faces, he steps forward. He looks at Daddy as if asking permission to keep talking.

“Yo,” he greets the boys. Daddy stands back and folds his arms.

Mommy comes down the stairs a bit and watches without saying anything.

I stay at the top of the stairs.

Dwayne, Zan, and Christopher were friends. Three black boys who wore ADIDAS without laces and fake gold chains on the outside of their jackets. The boys were always outside the house when Daddy and I came home from the babysitters. Zan didn't hang around much lately, Christopher said it was because he had a new girlfriend. He had changed.

Dwayne and Christopher took the blow by rapping. Standing on the corner in front of the middle school trying to be box and make up verses. Dancing on cardboard that they would quickly take up when Daddy would pull into the driveway.

Colin would watch them, whispering rhymes to himself, usually only relegated to changing the tapes in the big radio player that Mommy bought him and Christopher for Christmas.

Dwayne continues his greeting.

“You guys going to school, today?”

Christopher and Colin nod.

“Why wouldn’t they, Dwayne?” Mommy chimes from the top of the stairs.

“Because of what happened to Zan.”

Daddy turns and looks at Christopher and Colin. He remembers the boy. It’s evident in his face. Out of the memory comes concern.

“What happened, son?” Daddy unfolds his arms.

“He shot himself.” Dwayne clears his throat and looks at Christopher.

“Regina, that girl,” he paused, “broke up with him. He went to her house late last night and asked to talk to her. When they went outside, he shot himself in front of her. On her porch.”

Christopher looks around the living room like he needs to hold on something. Mommy holds her blue robe and her breath.

“Thank you, son.” Daddy starts to close the door, a signal to Dwayne that it’s time for him to leave.

Mommy and Daddy look at each other. In a way, this is a good thing. This means that Mommy and Daddy will talk tonight. Whisper quietly, about this. They rarely don’t talk about too much anymore, except when something bad happens, or nights when Daddy has been sleeping on the couch for a while. That goes on a lot lately. I like

when Daddy sleeps on the couch, because Christopher and Colin stay in their room at night, instead of coming into mine.

In the morning, Daddy drops me off at the babysitter. He is silent in the car, I can tell by his face he's not even listening to the radio.

When we drive to the babysitter, we pass Regina's house. There is a crowd of people, young, brown. Some older adults, also. There was a woman pacing up and down the sidewalk, looking for something it seemed like. Her face looked crushed, like her eyes were going to sink into her mouth. I stare at her, I cant take my eyes off her. I wonder what she is looking for.

Daddy makes a sharp right, and I almost break the passenger window with my face. Sometimes, Daddy drives like a lunatic.

"Lunatic" is Mommy's word. Daddy says that he isn't a lunatic because a lunatic's actions are predicated upon the moon. Then he laughs.

We are racing down Main Street, swerving. Daddy is clutching the steering wheel so hard the colors of his knuckles are lighter than the rugged dark of his hands. This is one of the moments when we do not speak. I cant always speak to Daddy. Although most times I want to. I want to tell him things. But I don't know how. I want to talk to him about Christopher's friend. But I don't know what to say. I want to

tell him what Christopher and Colin did to me. But I know Mommy wouldn't like it. Colin tells me over and over again if I tell I'm the one who will get in trouble. I'm the one that's wrong. That's why Christopher beat me that day.

Then he laughs. Because to him it's funny.

I like this song. Perfect Combination. Johnny Gill and Stacey Lattisaw.

When he drops me off he pauses.

"Sweet Pea, wait inside for me today, don't come out in the yard."

"Ok, Daddy."

Usually, he tears down the street on his way to work. This morning, when I look back before I go inside Ms. Jones' house, he is still there, in the car. Staring at me like if he takes his eyes off of me I will disappear.

I was right about Mommy and Daddy. That night I hear them speak quietly, muted tones, about what happened to Christopher's friend, about what's happening to the neighborhood, about what's happening to their dream.

They never really talk about what is happening to them. Or to me.

We start looking for a new house later on that month.

Mommy says this move is the dream of new beginnings. Grandma says it is the result of hard work. Daddy doesn't say much. Our new house is on a cul-de-sac by a railroad track in a town called Middletown. The middle of New Jersey, the middle of the town. At the end of a street. There is a creek that runs through the back yard, which sits on about 2 acres. It's a ranch house, sprawling and serene, with sliding glass doors that lead to a deck, and to Mommy and Daddy's bedroom.

My room is the biggest bedroom in the house. Daddy says I should get the bigger room because Christopher and Colin will be leaving soon. When he says this, they look scared. They look like they want to cry, like they are being sent away. Mommy looks concerned too, she frets over them, dotes over them. Especially Colin.

Later on Grandma would tell me what it was like when he was a baby. Always sick, always smaller. Later on, at the cusp of a different sea on a different shore, Grandma would say that he was never right as a child. That his father hit him too hard. That he couldn't really go to regular classes in school.

Later on, much later, I would tell her what they did to me.

“When graduation comes, you guys are going off to college! It’s an exciting time, isn’t it?” Mommy spoke to them like she was translating directions for tourists.

I sit in the front lawn, and watch spring blow around two giant weeping willows. Daddy parks a huge U Haul in the driveway next to me. The engine smells and rattles with the noise of heaviness.

Downie and Everton, Mommy’s two surviving brothers in the states, come and help us move into the place.

“Nice, Jim,” Everton swoons.

He is right. The house is beautiful. The family room has a huge fireplace, and the dining room has windows with plenty of room for all of Mommy’s plants. The kitchen has a pantry. The spare bedrooms have their own bathroom and the master bedroom has a super shower. The deck has a space for a garden and the backyard has a shed. The front yard has two beautiful weeping willow trees that look like a welcoming committee, waving happy to see us. I walk around the block with no shoes on. The street has new pavement. Sleek black blemish less road that feels like silk under my 8-year-old feet. The block is quiet. The houses are still. When I get to the top of the hill there is a band of kids playing with bikes and dolls in someone’s front yard. At least 8 of them. And I see what else this

neighborhood has, more than 330 Tryon Ave, way more than Englewood.

White people.

I don't even realize that they have stopped playing when I walk by. I just keep walking. The children look at me like I am the first black person they have ever seen up close, like I am an alien, landed from the planet Negro.

Maybe TV has not taken in this part of New Jersey. Maybe there is no GIMME A BREAK and nobody listens to Michael Jackson. Maybe PURPLE RAIN hasn't come out yet down here. Maybe they just don't like the Cosby's. They weren't the only ones. There were old people sitting on porches that stopped in mid conversation when I walk by. There were women staring out of windows and people walking dogs that couldn't stop staring.

I turned and walked my barefoot self back down the cul-de-sac. I wonder if Mommy and Daddy know there are white people.

When I get back to the street I see Daddy talking to a man, a small man with a nice face and glasses.

"Breeanne, this is Warren. He lives next door."

"Hello," he says with a smile.

I wave back. I think now is not the time to tell Daddy that there are white people.

Later on that evening, as the sunsets over the newness of expansive grass, I sit on the hammock and wonder if newness can be mine too. I wonder if them going away will mean that I will be left alone. I wonder what my new school will be like.

At night, just like always, I can hear Mommy and Daddy talking in quiet whispers. They are talking about me. And the white people.

“But Jim, Warren seems nice,”

“You’re so naïve, Beverley, he’s a Jew. He’s not one of them.”

“Them? Now there is us and them?”

“Yes-there always has been. You still don’t understand this country is not some third world tropical island. These mutha fuckas are all around us now. Watching us.”

I hear the ticking of the clock by their bed click out at least ten times before the whispers start again.

“Watching me.”

“Jim, us. I am here with you too.”

More silence.

“I am here with you too.”

This time Mommy is louder.

“What do we do about the baby?” Daddy changes the subject.

“What do you mean?”

We are even farther away from the city now, Beverley. What if something happens and she needs us?”

There was a long pause.

“Colin will still be here. He can take care of it.”

The night creeps around me like smoke. Only one of them is going off to school. Only one of them will stop. Newness means nothing but more suffering. I close my eyes tight. I am drowning in the darkness. My ears are inundated with black water. I wade into the opaque currents that envelop my boat bed. There are creatures swimming all around me, edible ones, night fish. But I have no appetite. I am sick to my stomach. I have no desire for sustenance. I have no desire to sustain anything. I want to float away. The covers become waves. The pillows giant glaciers, swimming in sackcloth. Maybe, before morning comes, I can drown away. I can appear and disappear and close myself behind my own eyelids. nothing is permeable. no dick, no slap. no harsh word. I am a cocoon that grows and pulsates and jabs back at the specter that looms over my bed when the night casts itself into this carcinogenic ramshackle shell that is 37 Kamar Court.

Colin

He is the gift of Christmas Eve, not a year younger than his brother, Christopher, but different. From the beginning the it is evident that he is slower, not as smart, and developmentally stunted. He is a bed wetter, he cries all the time and runs and hides when he hears the voices in the other room, of his mother pleading and his father terrorizing her.

School is not for him, rather he sees promise in fantasy, telling stories and following his big brother around. His happy moments are in the country when he leaves Kingston on holiday and stays in ST Elizabeth. The peacefulness of the bush, the animals that cannot speak. He is found on occasion by his brother trying to convince the baby goats and docile puppies to lick his genitals. He learns quickly that small and silent things can be used, humiliated, tortured and he can be the master of his own twisted common universe. He is the likeness of his father, he is fair, light brown hair and sharp bones in his face. He is his mother's prince, her cause, she must protect him like she protected his father, because she knew God did not give him the stomach or mind or where with all for preparation of life.

He cannot excel in school, so he does not try, and his mother is fine with that because he seeks another calling.

He comes back to her a hero easily. She hails his second coming as her own celebration, acknowledgment of carrying such fine strong sons.

Until the drugs find him. Softly. Furtively at first. The a command. An order, and the soldier willingly obeys. His brain is wired to excel at this. And he does. His mother assesses it as just being his father's son.

But her baby.

He grows up in the same age of rap and crack and moves towards the latter.

And there he stays, happily.

September eases in like Daddy in the driveway. The sun starts to retreat before dinner. The freshly paved black street of Kamar Court gets cooler faster and the lights come on before Webster does on Channel 7.

Third grade begins on September 7th 1984. The date sounds like a math equation. Like an answer on the IOWA tests. I am in the 90th percentile. 3rd grade is Mrs. Pfeiffer's class in a small schoolhouse

named Middletown Village. A large red headed woman named Francis Dermer is the principal. I know this because on the first day of school she sits with us in the cafeteria and introduces herself.

“Good morning, boys and girls!”

Her smile is wide and reminds me of morning. Even though the cafeteria is almost windowless, she seems to emit some kind of light source.

“I want to welcome you to the first day of school for this year and wish everybody lots of success.”

All the students sit cross-legged around this woman, like it’s story time at 8:30 in the morning.

“You know, boys and girls, every year, I love to start the school year with a song. It’s a special song, one that helps us learn a little, and one that can help us make new friends for the school year. Who would like to learn to sing the song with me?”

All are in.

“Mr Yanone, the music teacher, a tiny pale man with a Clorox smile and perky nose starts tinkering out a beat on the piano behind Mrs. Dermer. She waves her head side-to-side trying to keep the beat like an old time lounge singer.

She is so much fun.

“Getting to know you, getting to know all about you....”

The older students chime in in synchronicity.

“getting to like you, getting to hope you like me.....”

She has a good voice and the fifth graders who sit farthest from her provide the perfect chorus. Mr Yanone looks like he is in seventh heaven. It doesn't take long for all us kids to start singing by the time we repeat the first verse. Even those of us new to the upper grades, who hadn't the vaguest conception under God what to sing at first, fell right in line.

I walk into the third grade room after morning songs and announcements. Third grade is a room with large closets and a giant totem pole in the back. Reading stations, libraries and free standing desks in rows. Walls jammed with posters of letters and numbers and multi colored construction paper. And Jeanette.

Third grade is a towering red head with glasses and a clear and consistent smile. A diminutive girl in a woman body, who always laughs like she is being tickled.

She is Girl Scout to my ballerina. She is softball to my jazzercise. But she smiles at me like she wants us to be best friends so that is how it will be.

We sit next to each other on the bus home, and I am thankful because no one else on the bus offered. There is one girl, Michelle, with Down syndrome, who sits alone and I didn't want to be like her. Jeanette asks me quickly.

"You just moved to this neighborhood, huh?"

"How can you tell?"

We both start to laugh. I am the only brown face on the bus and she is the only ginger.

"Where did you move from?"

I pause.

"Brooklyn."

"Get out!!!! Me too!! My mom and dad moved here last year from Mil Basin! Where did you guys live?"

"Flatbush."

"Really? Hey- what do Brooklyn and pantyhose have in common?"

I look at her in complete unknowing.

"Flatbush!"

Her laugh.

She is the funniest person I have ever met. I know that the bus ride is going too well because we are at our stop already. Jeanette gets off first, but I decide to get off with her.

“Hey, where do you live?”

“37 Kamar Court, you?”

“45 Woodland Drive. It rhymes a little. It’s over here. Come with me and I will show you.”

I walk with her across the street from the bus stop down a road that is laced with weeping willow trees. It can't be more than 8 blocks from my street but no one is prying behind a drawn curtain, and no children are whispering and holding their possessions as I walk by. Jeanette waves to kids, so I wave to kids, and they wave back.

We bound up a porch and into a kitchen where a zaftig blond woman with kind eyes and a round face sips coffee and greets the both of us. Mrs. Clayton has a hard line Brooklyn accent that reminds me of Archie Bunker’s wife.

“Hello, girls, and how are you?”

“I’m fine, Ma’am.”

“Ma, this is Breeanne.”

I wave, so large my hand looks like a windshield wiper.

“C’mon, Bree, we’re gonna go outside.

We stare at the trees that form a perfect square in Jeanette’s back yard.

“What do you like to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like do, what do you like to do? Like me, I like to play the piano, Mom says it’s good to learn an instrument. I think she’s right. I like it. What do you like to do?”

I think about it for ten seconds. I remember the cats from my 6th birthday.

“I like to sing and dance.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” My realization makes me feel like a weight has been lifted from my stomach.

“Then you should. We could start a band!!” She laughs again, a machine gun laugh with a crackle in her voice.

We laugh in the yard until Mrs. Clayton calls us in for dinner.

“Girls! It’s time!”

I know I have to go home. I know Mommy and Daddy will be wondering where I am. I tell Mrs. Clayton that I cant stay for dinner.

“That’s ok, honey. I’ll drive you home.”

Jeanette and her mom and me pile into a Taurus wagon and drive the seven-block difference between my house and hers.

We pull up and Daddy is waiting for us in the driveway.

“Hey there.”

“Daddy, this is Mrs. Clayton.”

“This is Jeanette!”

We both amble out the car and wave to Daddy.

Parents make small talk and me and Jeanette sit by the porch.

Christopher comes to the door, Jeanette waves hi.

“Put your hand down.” I say to her.

“Who is that?”

I pause.

“My older brother.”

Jeanette looks at me, wondering why I didn’t give him a name.

“You should go soon.”

Daddy comes back to the porch and shakes Jeanette’s hand.

“It’s nice to meet you.”

Jeanette smiles and shakes it back, looking back at the door with confusion. She gets in the car, and I wave goodbye to the family.

Me and Daddy go inside and sit down for dinner. Mommy comes out of the bathroom and calls Colin to dinner. Christopher is away at school. During the day, it’s just me and Colin.

I sit in between Daddy and Mommy and listen to them talk about their day.

I listen quietly over a bowl of chili. I watch them go through tense motions and through tense silences.

“I want to take dance lessons.”

Everyone looks at me.

“I want to dance I think.”

Mommy and Daddy pause.

“You do?”

“I do, maybe I can go after school, maybe, instead of coming straight home...”

“I think it’s a good idea, we can look into it after the weekend.”

Mommy smiles at me.

“You know, there is a place off of Route 35, Katia Forrest Dance School. It might be good, the lady who runs it used to be in CATS. You remember, right Bree?”

“Yes, Mommy.”

Dinner ends on a good note. No one is fighting. The smiles are not forced.

After we are finished, Daddy asks me to help him clear the table.

“You really want to take dance lessons?”

I want to tell him that I do, but mostly because I don’t want to be in the house alone with Christopher and Colin anymore.

Ever since the idea is my head it is all I think about. When I leave school during the day I trace the route to ballet class. Daddy says I start right after Halloween. I can take the bus to the dance school, and he can pick me up after work. This is all I think about until Halloween. This is what I want to do so I don't have to bide my time locking myself in my room, only when the lock works.

September turns to October and I come home from school and want so badly to dance. I want to fly around my room and lose myself in the soft blue carpet. The house is calm, which usually gives away nothing. The smell tells me that no one threw out the garbage this morning. Tells me that I wasn't the only one who ran out of this place like sunlight would replenish what keeps getting stolen from me. The family room has a strange smell and I walk slowly through the dark hallway, dark and old feeling, even though right before it and after it there are so many giant bay windows. The wood creaks because of the pressure being seeped in the bedroom before me. I can hear the VCR. the moaning of a woman and slapping of skin. This is the noise that reminds me that Mommy and Daddy are not home. Christopher and Colin are watching pornos again. I don't need the soundtrack carrying from their room to know this. I can feel it, the sickening

tension that reminds me of horror movies-zombie flicks right before somebody gets eaten. There is a smell, too. A strange one. Like stale gym socks and hot. And the sounds become different the closer I get to the door. It's cracked open just a bit, but I don't think they can hear me. When I walk by the room I realize why even if they could hear me they wouldn't bother looking up. Through the crack in the door I see Christopher sitting upright on the bed, his head back, and Colin's face between his lap, performing. His head moves up and down to the guidance of Christopher's hands on his neck. He is bottomless and squatting in front of his brother, his hands moving quickly in front of him like he is strangling a wild animal.

My gasp snaps them out of their engagement. I don't bother sticking around in the doorway, I run for my room and close the door.

Mommy takes me to my first class. Daddy hasn't been home since yesterday night. Mommy got a call from some woman named Marilyn last night, calling looking for Daddy. This wasn't the first time she called, she has been calling at dinnertime, which is why the strange play of small talk has become more tedious every time we sit and eat dinner. Two days ago, I ate in my room because no one was at the table. Mommy wakes up with a swollen face, pained, like she cries at night. Daddy hasn't called.

Classes are on Mondays and Wednesdays at 4:40, so when they end and I go home, I know I won't be alone with them.

Mommy and I are in the car on our way.

"I'm proud of you, Bree. You know, when I was your age, I wanted to take ballet, but Jamaica didn't have a lot of ballet classes. You have a good opportunity here."

"Yes, Mommy."

"Why are you so quiet, then?"

"I don't want to be in the house with them."

"With who?"

I look at her, I can't believe she wants me to say it again.

"With them. They don't leave me alone!"

"Breeanne!" There is a snapping crackle in her voice.

"You have to stop this. You just have to stop. Sometimes I don't even think you know what you're saying. You have a good opportunity here, you got what you wanted. No one is bothering you! Just stop it!"

My tears burn my eyes and I wipe them with my sleeve.

"We are going to talk about this some more when I come get you tonight."

After dance class we drive home in silence. I can feel her anger welling up like the car is filling with water. When we get to the house, Daddy is still not home. He should be, but he's not.

"Colin!"

Christopher isn't home either.

"Yeah Mamae"

"Come here!"

He meets us in the living room, my coat is still on over my ballet leotard.

"Tell him! You said it before, tell him what you said!"

My body is shaking and I am hiccupping tears.

"He calls it...eating people. He makes me put it in my mouth."

"What!" Colin looks mortally wounded.

"Is it true!?" Mommy is shrieking.

"No, Mamae, she is my sister I wouldn't do that to her!"

"I'm not lying, Mommy! I wouldn't lie about something like this!"

"What the hell is going on here? Are you both crazy?! I am going to get to the bottom of this!"

Mommy grabs me by the arm and takes me in the bathroom. Colin is behind us pleading and swearing to God. She strips me naked and

puts me in the bathtub. The water is so loud, but I can hear her mumbling prayers. She washes me. Hard. Down there.

“Never, never. This is too much.” She says it over and over again.

I stop crying because tears don’t matter anymore.

Afterwards she takes me into my room and puts on pj’s and tells me to go to sleep. I can hear her and Colin talking in her bedroom while I am laying in the bed. The same bed two nights before the Colin came into while she slept and put his fingers and mouth inside of me. The same bed that Christopher lays me on to put his penis in my mouth. The same room that is no longer mine, because it is theirs.

Later on that night, Daddy comes home. Mommy is crying. They are whispering to each other loudly. This is your family, this is your family. Mommy keeps saying it over again.

This is what I hear when I finally fall asleep.

The next morning, at breakfast, Mommy is smiling. Daddy has on a blue suit with a silver tie.

“Hey Sweet Pea, how was dance class?”

Mommy stares at me with accusing eyes. She puts her hands on her hips and waits for my answer.

Colin comes to the kitchen and kisses her good morning.

“Fine.” I surrender. “Everything is fine.”

Daddy

He was once an honor student, a medical student then an army man.

So he says. He never talks about who he was when he was a young man. He never talks about his family. When he thinks about his father, the glazed look in his eyes warns of serious pain and unanswerd questions.

For some reason, the peace he sought that eluded him in childhood could not be found in our American Dream. Daddy cheats on Mommy. All the time. He stops being discreet about it and she starts to take it out on me. After a while he is just there in body. After a while he begins to care more about the white people's accusing looks when he mows the lawn, or walks into the neighborhood pharmacy in jeans. After a while he stops listening to music. And his daughter. It became easier for him to find someone else because the people in front of him required more than his silence and lies. He was told that a man should provide for his family. He knew this because his father didn't. So he believed that was all he had to do.

But it wasn't.

It wasn't enough to close his eyes and lay next to a woman who wasn't his wife.

It wasn't enough to stop coming home on time and eating dinner. It wasn't enough to ignore his suffering daughter and miserable wife. After a while, nothing was enough. So he stopped asking for more. He stopped asking for anything. After a while he just became a face in the crowd. A figurehead in a family he no longer wanted.

When junior high school comes, something extraordinary happens again. They left. Christopher went off to school and Colin joined the army. I am left alone for a while. Literally. I can come home after dance class by myself and not worry about being touched. About keeping secrets. I only have to worry about the strange white girls in class and ignorant teachers who don't understand why this little Black girl is sitting in gifted and talented classes. Me and Jeanette walk the halls together, singing rap songs, the other girls looking at us like we are aliens.

Mommy and Daddy sit in front of their respective TV's and speak to the actors who entertain them.

One night, late this time. Marilyn calls again. Mommy slams the phone down.

I come from dance class by myself now. I take longer and longer to get home sometimes, I walk slowly instead of taking the bus or opting for rides from the parents of the other girls in my class. I am used to silence that everyone in the house has wrapped themselves in. My silence is warm and comfortable, because I have a Walkman. I can turn the volume up and pretend like Mommy and Daddy talk.

When I come in this time, I turn the volume down, because I sense a strange shift in the house.

Mommy is yelling.

“Why is she calling this time! What does she not understand that you’re married!”

Daddy doesn’t really answer anymore. He mumbles or her ignores Mommy.

This time it’s different. This time a volcano that lay dormant under the house begins to bubble over and rumble the floors. The china closet shakes, the dog starts to whine.

“I don’t fuckin know!! I don’t fucking ask her to call! I don’t fucking know!”

He pounds through the house. Every time he curses I hear something break. Glass, then what sounds like plastic. The voice

comes closer. I cover my ears but that just makes it louder. Mommy is shrieking.

Her footsteps get louder toward my room. When I look up, she is in my room, coming towards me breathing heavy, hands out. Daddy is behind her, glass in hand bellowing curses at the top of his lungs.

“What the fuck do you keep asking me the same fucking questions! I don’t fucking know!” The glass crashes against my closet door.

Mommy runs behind the bed. Daddy punches the wall and knocks Jimmy Carter to the ground. He picks it up and throws it in her direction.

I don’t realize I am screaming. I don’t realize I am clutching at his hands, mouthing words that will not come out of my mouth. My heart is beating in my head and my hands are cold to his white-hot touch. He pulls himself away from me, still cursing and storms down the hallway toward the door.

My room is still shaking. Mommy comes from behind the bed, wide eyed, holding her sweater across her body with both hands. I run out of the room. The rest of the house is still shaking. The living room looks broken and the kitchen looks like a monsoon has passed through the cabinets. The front door is open and the driveway is empty. Daddy is gone again.

Mommy comes into the kitchen and fixes one of the upturned chairs. I stand in the corner. Trying not to trip on broken glass. The broom is next to me on the floor. I pick it and then throw it down and then go to walk out the door.

“Breeanne.” She calls me back.

“Where are you going?”

“I-I want to leave this pl-“

“No- you cant leave. We cant let anyone know the family business. Stay here. Stay with me.”

“I-I want-to-t-to.” I cannot catch my breath. I cannot sit down. My head might explode at any second.

“No, it’s ok. Just stay here. Do me a favor and pick up some of this glass with the broom and dustpan.”

I slide my body down the corner of the kitchen. I sit on the broom and pick up a giant jagged piece of glass on my left. Mommy picks up the phone.

“Mama,” she starts. “Mama, I need you.”

I cant hear what Grandma is saying on the other line. Mommy closes her eyes tight and puts her hand over her face.

“No, Mama, I’m just depressed. I just need you to-“

Grandma interrupts her. Mommy waits a while. Standing like a statue amongst shiny shards of kitchen.

“No, Mama. Never mind. It’s alright.” She pauses.

“Yes, Mama. I gotta go. I’ll call you late- yes, Mama, everything is alright.” She hangs up the phone. She exhales like she has just run a marathon.

Mommy turns to me.

“Pick up the big pieces of glass.” She walks into her room and closes the door.

When I finish cleaning the glass in the kitchen, my left hand is bleeding. I go into the bathroom and find a bandage and wrap my fingers with a makeshift tourniquet.

My room is still. There is glass still lying on the floor by the closet. I climb into the bed and pull the sheets over me and pretend not to hear Mommy’s wails in the room next to me. My fingers burn, the blood leaks out of my bandage. I pretend it’s wine, a drunken and suite elixir that I can pour out over the house and transform it into a welcome home party, or a dinner dance, or baby shower. People sipping from my hand and smiling, drinking down happiness and clapping at the kisses Mommy and Daddy exchange. They call me to them, ask me to fill their glasses. Then Daddy lifts me up over his

head, and I throw my hands in the air, my fingers like a wine spray, saturates the room and people applaud. They love me. They love us. They love our family.

The car lights color the windows and I know Daddy is home. When he gets into the house I am the one crying. I hear him pack a bag and leave again. Now the only sound in house is my tears. I suck my fingers until the blood stops. The coppery taste is not at all like wine. The warm blood slips down my throat and mixes with my tears. I close my eyes and want to remember what it what like to be born. I know it is like this. The tears, the blood, the passing light that signals the coming of my parents. If only I could do it over again. If only I could stop the bleeding.

Daddy comes back later on that week. No one talks. We pretend like the glass have always been broken and the walls have always had dents. We pretend that him being here means that we are a real family. We pretend because Mommy wants us to pretend.

If we ignore it, it will go away. If we pretend, we can look happy. If we look happy, we can still be the dream.

Summer comes and me Jeanette get on bikes and pedal ourselves down by Spruce Pond, half a mile away from our development. The summer days are long and lazy, languid and sticky. There is no

pretending. There is just me and her, our bikes and OUR dreams. Our barefoot bodies searching the bottom of the water for treasure.

Our nighttime excursions to Route 35 to watch the sun set by the library. Our morning walks to Bradlees to go shopping for her mom. I am the Black child of the Clayton Klan, and no one in the Daniels house seems to notice, which is good because Christopher has failed out of school and is back in his room copying pornography and waiting for me to come home in the evening. I sleep at Jeanette's house 3 nights a week. She sleeps at mine on the other nights. I cannot tell her how she saves me. But I think she knows.

August turns the sun to haze, and Mommys' birthday is coming. Daddy is in the house for now, and Grandma comes over to cook dinner for us. Jeanette's family comes over to eat for Mommy's birthday. We sit at the table again. Mommy and Daddy, Mr and Mrs. Clayton. Me and Jeanette and her brother and sister. We look like a family, checkered, contrasted, but breaking bread and laughing. The house isn't a tightly spun piano wire waiting to pop. It is a moving breathing melody that sounds like friendship. It is warm. It is full. It feels good, and Mommy and Daddy say goodbye to the dinner guests holding hands. It is the first time in a long time I have seen them touch.

August ends and September begins. School wants us to believe that summer is over. But we know better. The haze still follows us. The black tar streets still fit warmly under our bare feet. The trees still sway like back-up singers to our nirvana soundtrack. Even the streetlights leave us alone.

Me and Jeanette. We rule this world. We are the mistresses of destiny. Manifest on Kamar Court. Now, we don't even have to call each other on the phone. We can just scream like banshees up the block and then answer back.

8th grade promises a challenge since we are not in the same class anymore, but like Jay says, fuck it. We're in the same hood now. I stand at the bottom of my cul-de-sac that feels to me like a giant salad bowl. The bottom of the mix, where all the heavy and sweet things end up. Tomatoes, almonds, even the densest and sweetest parts of the dressing. I wade pack and forth in my zest Italian kingdom. I kick slippery sweet cucumbers back and forth and dodge wilted pieces of grass. Mostly I wait. That is all I have to do. Because the best pieces always fall to the bottom. Like gravity, Jeanette comes teetering down the hill. 2 houses and 200 feet away from me. She runs in a giant wave of red hair and happiness. I am waiting,

drenched in dressing, to eat her up. Our words begun right before we hug.

“My mom says she can take us to the movies tonight.”

“Yes!!!” is my only reaction.

Jeanette and I have a secret love affair with Keanu Reeves and decide tonight that since we are officially eighth grade women we are going to see the movie without our parents even though it is PG13. We are independent and strong. And we must take her little brother and sister with us. I gaze up at her and take her by the hand and lead her into the house. No one is home, so we are safe and alone.

“How is home ec?”

“It’s fine, I guess,” she says. I know she wants me to join her there, I want to change my elective too, because I cannot stand the clickish sickening step ford gap turtleneck girls who pretend to sing in chorus.

“I may talk to Ms. Gilberti and get changed into that class.”

“Yes!!!!” is all she reacted.

In the living room, while my dogs look at us like we are strange, Jeanette turns on MTV and we start dancing. Back to Life from Soul II Soul comes on.

“YES!!!!” we both scream.

We watch Caren Wheeler and the rest of the unnamed Black women behind a cloak of mist and silhouette, observing just glimpses of their Black frames. Their locks. The beautiful Black girls playing violin. The mulatto women with no bras on dancing at the house party. Caren Wheeler and her flowing natural hair and smoldering brown eyes. And her voice. We are entranced by these women. We did not know that women could be this beautiful. I know Jeanette feels the same way, because she moves the way I move, trying to mimic them. She is still when I am still. In awe of them. Every time we get to the chorus, she swings her long red hair like the pretty black girl in the video swings her long dreadlocks.

This is blackness and I share it with this strange and wonderful white girl who I love more than members of my own family. This is where I feel most loved when Grandma is not here. Orbiting around this ginger amazon, bouncing to a soundtrack of black voices. I don't understand why the poisoned creatures at our junior high school have not caught on. Or maybe they are just ashamed to admit they have.

"I want an Africa medallion," she says during the interlude before the second verse.

Sometimes it doesn't occur to me that Jeanette is white. Sometimes she is nothing like them.

When the video ends, Daddy's car pulls up into the driveway. The dogs start barking with signals us to turn the TV on and go into the dining room to pretend to do homework.

"Hey Daddy- Jeanette is here!"

I learn to give auditory cues so he does not come in the house screaming and cursing around company.

"Hey girls, what are you up to?"

"My mom says she's gonna drive us to the movies later."

"Ohh, nice."

He walks by us. Since he is home, I can leave.

Jeanette and I walk out the door.

"Bye, Daddy!"

"By, Mr. Daniels."

Daddy's muffled goodbye tells me he is undressing in his closet.

We step out into the sun still singing Soul II Soul.

I wonder how many more days until Mr. and Mrs. Clayton open up the pool in their back yard.

"We have to wait til summer to go swimming, you know."

"God damn- I was just thinkin about that!!"

“I was jus thinkkin uv thot!”

Jeanette purses her mouth in order to sound serious when she tries her British accent. Her braces scrape her cheeks so she opens her jaws wide and sounds like Danger Mouse the cartoon.

“Colors!” she screams it out into the dark green of the trees above us.

“I can’t wait for the leaves to turn.”

“I can.”

“I know you hate the cold weather, Bree, but I love it.” It reminds me of us, of walking to school, running through leaves, trick or treating.”

“You’re right. I just hate being cold.”

“I just ate being cowld.” She laughs again trying out her British accent.

Mrs. Clayton puts her family and me into her blue Taurus Wagon and we set out for the movies on Highway 35. Me and Jeanette sit in the seat farthest to the back. We sit in silence, staring out the window, both dreaming about what this school year is going to be like, so close to each other. When we get to the theater we pile out like peas and amble up towards the ticket counter.

“Bye kids!” Mrs. Clayton screams at us and we wave back crazily.

“3 hours from now! Right here!”

“Yes Mom!” her children speak to her as if they are annoyed. I am in awe, children allowed to speak their minds to their parents. White kids really do have it better than us.

The movie started on time and we were late, trying to decide which chocolate candy would go better with popcorn. Jeanette’s suggestion of Junior Mints wins out over all others.

Jeanette and me sit in the last row in exactly the center, flanked by her brother and sister. When the movie starts, when the illumination of the screen fills the darkness around us, makes our eyes burn to adjust to the feature presentation, we are quiet. We are sitting soundly as unit, taking in our first taste of pseudo independence.

I watch the screen when Keanu Reeves comes on. He is so beautiful to me. And to Jeanette. I feel her cheeks flush red like her hair when he saunters through the screen looking half lost.

I watch the little angry boy and the pissy sister who grieve Diane Weist to no end. I wonder why she doesn’t just beat them. I wonder if white families really are better. I wonder what about mine is so wrong that we cant talk about anything. Maybe it’s just because this is a script. It’s written to end well. This is why I am here. Because I don’t know the means to my end.

I look at Jeanette, sharing popcorn with her little brother. They seem to me like the family on the screen. Like the family in my head. This is why I love her. Because I know she loves me too. Because I am her family just like this brother and this sister surrounding us. When the movie is done, we pile in to the Taurus wagon again.

“How was the movie, girls?”

“It was awesome!”

“I loved its realness.” I try my best to sound like a film critic.

The car teems with laughter.

“I’m serious!!! I thought it was nice how in the end, everyone had a new baby.”

Mrs. Clayton, glanced at me from the rear view window.

“That’s the beauty of family, honey. When you welcome someone new.”

My mouth hurts from the heat of my smile.

“This means you’re gonna be living with us now, Bree...”

The car bursts into laughter again.

“You practically do, you know, now that we are neighbors.”

“This really is the best!” Her baby sister chimes in, pulling at my braids.

By the time we pull into my driveway, she is sitting on my lap. I tickle her and toss her to the other side of the car.

“Thanks so much, guys.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Bree!”

I walk up to the porch and watch the hands I just left wave at me through windows and take the 200-foot trip back to their new home. When I walk into the door, Daddy is sitting in front of the TV in the family room, he doesn’t notice that I walked through the door. I am used to him not noticing anymore.

The dog pulls at my pants as I walk passed the dining room and the kitchen. When I get to the hallway, I can hear the TV in Mommy’s room playing over what sounds like tears. I guess they had another fight. I guess that woman called the house again.

When I walk by her room she is staring into space, crying. This is not an argument cry. This is a numb cry, like she has been slapped in the face.

“Mommy?” the blank stare scares me. The tissues around her body startle me. She has been at this for a while.

“Mommy?” I am little louder. “What’s wrong?”

Nothing. Usually when she fights with Daddy she is more than willing to recount to me the details of their arguments. The woman

calling, the pornographic magazines in plain sight. This time, she sits catatonic with balled up tissues in her hands.

I run down the hallway, unable to catch my breath. I go right to Daddy on the couch in the family room.

“What happened?” The tears compete with the fear in my eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“Mommy is crying!”

Daddy looks at me with a puzzled look, almost like I am trying to fool him. He gets up from the couch and we walk toward the room.

When we get to the bedroom he enters, Mommy wakes from her coma. He closes the door behind him, leaving me in the hallway, to listen.

Again, in the hallway, to listen.

“Beverley, what happened?” His voice soaks of exasperation and fear.

“Beverley, what happened?” He is louder this time. I feel the rumbling again. The blast off, like everything in the house that is not bolted down may take off into orbit. I stand at the door and listen hard- the whispers are sharp, like they could cut glass. But then I realize it is not the whispers that are sharp and clanky. It’s the words. Just one word.

Cancer. I open my eyes wide to take in more light and watch the words unfold through the crack of the door.

She wasn't crazy. She wasn't depressed. She was sick. Stricken, according to the doctor. And the only "viable" option was a "regiment" of surgery with "aggressive" chemotherapy. Aggressive. When I watch mommy say those words the doctor used for her they look so sweet. The word coming out of her pretty and tear snot stained mouth looks like a kiss. When you just mouth the word aggressive it looks beautiful. Out of her mouth it resembled a love song. I imagine her singing it, holding a guitar and her tears are *tempo*. The room feels farther and farther stretched apart. Daddy kneels beside her asking questions he will not get answers for. Not until much later. Much later. I turn around and go inside my room and whisper the word "aggressive" over and over again. I turn the lights off just as the phone rings. Jeanette speaks to me over the squealing of her baby sister.

"We must remember that the notebook has farted! hahahahhaaa!" she laughs like someone is tickling her.

"Bree?"

"My mom is sick, j".

"Huh?"

I try to say it louder.

"Something aggressive".

"Oh my God, is she ok?"

"I think she has cancer, j."

I don't count the seconds of silence between us. I count the breaths I hear her take. Each one trying to say something comforting, but hindered by tears. I love her for every breath and I repay her with my tears. I hear Daddy from the hallway.

"I gotta go J".

"Oh my God Bree please tell your mom I am so sorry and we are gonna pray for her! I love you so much!"

"I love you too."

Daddy steps into my room and looks around like he has never been in here before. When I hang up the phone he tells me.

"Well, she says se has cancer Breeanne. They're gonna operate on it.

Are you alright?"

"What kind of cancer?"

"What?"

"What kind of cancer, Daddy?"

"Breast cancer".

He spits it out like it repeated on him.

I grab handfuls of carpet in each hand and dig my feet into the ground and clear my throat.

Daddy stands next to the bed for a few minutes. He will not look at me. He rubs his chin and then turns around and goes back into the room.

The movie is the furthest thing from my mind. Jeanette in a house only two hundred feet away doesn't matter anymore. The carpet sweating in my palms is warm like out of my hands is heat and I am a superhero. I can touch things and burn them- make them warm up, ignite. I can change things. I can touch things with these hands and heal them. Make them warm and burn them away. I put my hands on my breasts. I want to get up and go back into Mommy's room but I can still hear them muffling sounds to each other. Mommy's sounds like tears, Daddy's sounds like pleading.

The whole universe is contained in a cell. A small microorganism that landed somewhere inside her body and now all the forces of good have to align and fight the power. Nature must pray. God has to answer. My hands get hot again but this time it scares me and I pull my hands away from my breasts and stop crying. I don't turn on the radio to fall asleep. I sit in the darkness and listen to music my

parents make and try to count the cracks in the ceiling like they are stars in the sky.

Chemotherapy.

It sounds like a plant food. But it isn't. Dr Ahmed, a slight, brown, Pakistani Oncologist says the word flips the "r" like it is candy in his mouth.

Lumpectomy.

The word feels like a hiccup, a pause in the rhythm of words. It should hurt when it comes out your mouth. It should make your whole body move when you say it.

Dr. Ahmed says it and falls out his mouth like he is singing a hymn in church.

Grandma cant say the word. A little because her accent is so thick lumpectomy doesn't feel right for her to say. A little because she doesn't really understand what the process entails. A little because she does not want to believe that her only daughter has cancer.

Mastectomy.

The word sounds maternal. Like an answer to a desperate question.

All these words become bad, so much that word "breast" is no longer a bad word to say in the house.

Dr Ahmed is specific, and patient when he talks to us. When he talks to Mommy, with us in the room. He discusses options and treatments. He discusses percentages and remission. He tells Mommy about hope. He touches my head when he says the word, "survival".

I wonder if he knows.

At home I sit in my room and Mommy and Grandma talk about procedures and medicine and God.

"Mama, this is my body, not yours."

"Beverley, the Dr. says the Mastectomy would-"

"Would take my breast. Would make me look like some picked over zombie, would-"

"Would keep you alive?"

"Mama, they caught it, right? This is why he gave me options, this is why we all sat there listening to what he has to say!"

Grandma gets quiet. Mommy goes into the kitchen and puts the kettle on. Daddy is in the living room watching TV. The living room has become his bedroom, no one really goes in there when he is in there. His side of the bed stays cold, and the drawers in his night table hold stale candy. I walk into the room and lay on his side. I am

afraid of Mommy's side now. I am afraid that the cancer inside her is lying there waiting for another body.

In the top drawer of Daddy's night table, there is a Playboy magazine. A Black girl is on the cover, her name is Rene Tennyson. I open the pages and look at her body. She is beautiful to me. She is soft and brown. She smiles from under thick silken hair, her hands on two perky breasts, and her legs slightly parted. Her breasts are beautiful to me. And I imagine, beautiful to Daddy. I look at the picture and I know now why the word "mastectomy" is a curse word to Mommy. Women are supposed to have two breasts. Women with husbands can't be picked over zombies. I put the magazine away when I hear Grandma come back in the room.

"Darlin?"

"Yes, Grandma."

"Come have some tea with your mother."

"Yes, Grandma."

The next week is tryouts for the school play. I paint on a performance face and sign up in class. Acting comes easy to me now, because I can fake happiness and bubblyness and cheer so easy. I can

lie that I am ok like second nature. I can read whatever is on paper and make it sound believable. I practice this everyday at home. In class, I look at my script Ms. Humann the drama/gym teacher gave me from the day before. It was easy enough, play the wife. I could pretend I was Mommy, but maybe if I did that, I wont get the part.

When I walk in class to sit down, there is regular buzzing all around. The white girls are putting on lip-gloss and the boys are watching them. A tiny Italian boy is flicking his tongue watching spit come out, saying that he is not really spitting on each people, because it's just water in your mouth. He smiles like he has discovered a new fact about the human body.

Mrs. Humann calls the class to attention.

“I just want to say that all of you did really great jobs so far. I think this performance is going to be one of the best of all the drama classes I have had.”

There was shifting in the class. Most of the white girls stopped with their lip-gloss.

“Last night when I was looking at the script I thought about something, if this is going to be your play, you should be the ones deciding on who gets to play the lead.”

“Let’s do one more round of call backs then- I have a list of four girls who want to go out for the lead? Where are they?”

I raise my hand, the first one to do so. For some reason, Mrs. Humann doesn’t see me first, she calls on the two other white girls in class who raise their hand after me.

“Ok, one, two.....Breeanne, you’re three.”

The first girl goes. Her name is Lauren, she is skinny, shy, but pretty, used to being the lead because of her looks. She reads her lines like it, too. Like she is doing the audience a favor.

The second girl goes. Her name is Trish. She isn’t a good reader, but she is blonde with blue eyes, so she must be a contender.

My turn. My moment. I don’t need my script. I am the only one who doesn’t. When I read my lines with Mrs. Humann opposite me there is a silence in the room. Almost like reverence. I know the part is mine. When I sit back down, there is applause for everyone, as the teacher asked the class to hold the applause until all of us go, but I know the clapping is for me.

“Ok, ladies and gentlemen, let’s vote. Ladies, come back up her again.”

Lauren and Trish and me stand in front of the class and Mrs.

Humann directs the students to raise their hands when she calls our names.

“Lauren?”

The lip-gloss girls in the back, loyal to their friend, raise their hand.

“Trish?”

The short Italian boy who likes to spit on himself raises his hand.

“Breeanne?”

fifteen of the twenty-three kids in the class raise their hand. I feel the applause in my ears. I smile inside waiting for place in the cast.

“Breeanne?” Mrs. Humann calls my name again, this time the class applauds.

“It looks like Breeanne gets the most votes. Thing is, since Ryan is the husband, I don’t think the school would approve of a Black wife and a White husband, so you can play the librarian. Why don’t you take your seat, honey. Let’s vote again guys.”

I sit at my seat with no breath in my body. I feel like I have been stripped naked. I feel like I don’t even have skin on my bones. No one looks at me, they just keep on voting. The teacher smiles when Trish finally gets the lead. My seat gets smaller and smaller. My head burns and my hands shrink under my legs. When the bell rings I

want to get up, but I cant. I want someone to tell me this was a joke but they don't. Mrs. Humann looks at me like I did something wrong. I am the last one to leave the room.

When I come home, Daddy is still at work. I walk to the back of the house and Mommy is lying down in her bed. She has a towel over her face. The lights are dim, and I know she doesn't feel well.

Chemo started with small increments of fatigue and dark rooms. Then it progressed into coughing fits and vomit spells. Today looks bad, smells bad. She seems soft, fragile, she isn't even like this when she cries.

"Mommy?"

"Mmmmmm." She moans into her towel on her face.

I want her so badly to make what happened ok. I want to tell her what happened to me. But I know, like all the other times I tried to tell her what happened to me, she wasn't going to listen. Something else was more important.

"I'm home from school."

"Mmmmmm."

"Do you need anything?"

She breathes out heavily into her towel and turned over.

I wait in the doorway, scared to go inside. I know she has to feel me standing there, even if she can't see me. I wait and wait but she doesn't make a sound. She doesn't look up. I go into my room and sit on the bed, take out a highlighter from my dresser and take out my script and begin highlighting the lines for the librarian.

"That is such bullshit, Bree." Jeanette curses loud enough for my house to hear her on the phone. No one is listening, though.

"Yeah,"

She wants to do something, but she doesn't know what just like I don't. So she asks a question to give me a game plan.

"How is your mom?"

"Same." My answer lets her know that plan was already executed, and didn't work.

Later, much later, I will tell her how much the plan didn't work. How many times I tried to tell her and my complaints fell on deaf ears.

"Well, I mean, fuck it, Bree. The librarian is gonna be the best part!"

I laugh through my tears, and keep highlighting.

"I'm coming over."

"Don't-" I hurried. I know how Mommy feels now about people seeing her like this, even Jeanette.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Jay."

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I look down at the script and realize that the highlighted lined have all run together, my tears have soaked the paper.

Mommy goes into remission as high school is about to begin. 1991 sounds like Tribe Called Quest and the Cure in room. Like Jeanette singing Dépêche Mode and playing “Heart and Soul” with me on her piano. High school is easy because it’s so big. I can be anonymous, I am not the only brown girl. I can walk in and out of classes and hallways and not be whispered about, or even noticed. It feels good. It feels independent. Between school and dance class, I am a completely autonomous island in the universe.

I wear ripped jeans and off the shoulder shirts. I put on mismatch sneakers and turn up my music loud. I play songs with curse words and no longer try to speak during dinner. I don’t talk. They don’t ask. Mommy and Daddy are their own islands too. Now, every time they fight, Mommy finds a reason to blame me.

I’m moody. I’m quiet. I don’t come home enough.

“I almost died, and no one comes home enough to check to see if I am alright, you know. You’re not too grown that you cant mind your mother, you know.”

“Yes, Mommy.” This is all I say. This is all I can say. I learn that having an opinion just gets me beat.

I agree. I bite my tongue. I listen as she talks about me like I am never in her presence.

Fifteen is a tough age- Mommy says it all the time to visitors and well-wishers, like I am the obstacle keeping her from being completely cured. She gets a boost in her morale- Colin comes back from Operation Dessert Storm. Mommy hails him a hero, even though he has been dishonorably discharged.

Fifteen is tough age. She is right. It is hard to stay silent. It is hard to swallow sickness. I think she knows that. She has to know that.

The house is in celebratory spirits. Mommy’s hair is growing back and Colin walks around in his uniform, looking for his old friends in town, using Mommy’s car to go to bars and coming home drunk without consequence.

Mommy decides to plan a party.

“We can invite the family, and friends. Now is the time to remember what is important. Family. Health and Strength.”

She moves me out of my bedroom and gives it to Colin.

“He’s a grown man, he needs space.”

“I need space- I am a girl-“

“You need to be grateful! Your brother could have died out there! I don’t want to hear any of your shit now!”

“Right, because I-“ when she hits me the first time, her hand is open, the second time, she has a closed fist and brings it down in the middle of my back.

“You always want to start problems- you always want to be selfish right? This isn’t about you and your bullshit!”

I move my stuff into the smaller bedroom that night.

Later on, I wake up, and Colin is standing over me. He is rubbing himself against me, whispering something. The smell of alcohol makes his breath smell like poison. It hurts. When he is finished, he makes a mess in his hand and whispers, “goodnight”.

He laughs when he leaves the room. The hallway light is on, I can hear Grandma snoring from Mommy and Daddy’s room. She is sleeping next to her daughter.

The next day after school, I walk to Jeanette’s house. She is in the back yard smoking one of her father’s Kool cigarettes. We smoke

now, not because we like it, but we need something wicked to keep us young.

“The party is tomorrow, Bree- is your grandma gonna make more of that cake?”

“She’s making it now.” I exhale from the drag of her smoke.

Jeanette’s eyes look bigger. We have discovered eyeliner, even though we have to take it off before we get home so our parents don’t see. Her eyes are so green, it is almost impossible for her to get rid of all of the liner, and you can tell, against her alabaster skin, it makes her look like a movie star.

“I don’t wanna go.”

She laughs.

“Rum cake, Bree!” she takes another drag.

I look at my friend. Her face reveals her unabashed happiness, it’s a look that is so distant to me, I cannot remember when I stood in my backyard and felt giddy, at ease, welcomed and loved.

“I never told you why.”

“Huh?”

“I never told you why I don’t want to go.”

“It’s been a while since I even thought about it, but I,” I cant get the words out before I start to cry.

“Bree-what’s wrong!? Is it your mom?”

I pause. “Kind of.”

“I don’t understand. Bree, why are you crying?”

The tears come down to my surprise. I wet up the tip of the cigarette.

“My fucking brothers are child molesters, Jay. They are fucking scumbags. They’ve been doing it since I was 4.”

I half expected her to not believe me. I half expected her to laugh.

When I felt her arms around me I couldn’t help but cough and snort there were so many tears.

“What do you want to do?”

“I-I” I stutter the words out between the smoke.

“I want to leave.”

She looks at me, her eyeliner running from the tears in her eyes.

“Then we’ll leave tonight.”

Mommy is floating around the house, packing and unpacking party favors and setting them out in the dining room.

Daddy is in the family room, checking the receiver under the record player.

I am in the bedroom waiting for the house to wind down. Jeanette and I are going to meet at Spruce Pond at 10 o’clock.

I lay in my bed listening to sounds of chatter and electricity. When Mommy and Grandma retire into the room, I know my chance is here.

I open the bedroom window, climb out slowly. The night is heavy, the stars are swollen with heat and light. I am quick on my feet. When I cross the train tracks I feel that I am home free.

When I get to the pond, she is there. She is given away by the large billowing clouds of smoke that smell of her father.

“Bree!”

I run to her and we hug. When we sit down, I pull out a cigarette from her coat pocket and tell her the story. From the beginning. We cry for about twenty minutes.

“What are you going to do? Where are we going to go?”

“I am not sure. But I just wanted you to know. That’s why I couldn’t stay there in the house. I cant be there for that party.”

“If you cant, then I cant.”

We hug. Not a deep embrace. I sideways hug. We lean on each other.

We stare out over the pond with our arms around each other’s shoulders. Our cigarettes burn out, but the light from the stars reflect on the pond and I feel like God is watching.

We sit in embrace so long, we don't notice the headlights pull up and park in front of us.

Mommy gets out of the car with the engine still running. The lights shine on us like police flashlights.

She is shaking with rage. I don't notice Jeanette's mom pull up behind her.

"Get in the car." She whispers it to me.

When I get in the backseat she pulls off down the road and brings me home. I go into my room silently, I speak to no one.

She comes in behind me with a belt in her left hand.

She screams as she starts thrashing my arms and legs.

"You just have to ruin everything- you need that much attention!"

She hits me over and over, she never stops screaming.

"It's not enough that you made me sick! It's not enough that you can't just be satisfied! You need to take everything?"

I grab the belt and scream.

"You know why I cant be here! You know why I want to go!"

"You're just selfish, that's why!?"

"And you don't care what your sons do to me, do you?! I hate you!!! I fucking hate you!!" The words leave my mouth with bullet speed. I cannot take them back. And they keep coming.

“I hate you!!!”

Her hands are around my throat and she pushes me down on my bed.

“I hate you!” I gurgle one last time.

Daddy comes into the room and pulls her off of me.

“I hate you!!!” I scream it at the top of my lungs. I feel free. I feel unencumbered, like loosened notch on the belt that has raised welts on my skin.

“I hate you.” This one is whispered. Like a sacred prayer.

“Breeanne.” Daddy looks at me like I am an alien. He puts his head in his hands, standing between me and Mommy.

Grandma is standing at the doorway, shaking her head.

“No!” is all I can say. I walk passed Mommy and Daddy and Grandma into their bedroom.

I know where it is. While the adults talk and yell and argue, I cross the bed and crawl to Daddy’s nightstand. The gun is in the bottom drawer. A small, snub nose .38 revolver. I am going to finish this.

Over the muted mutterings of Mommy and Daddy and Grandma, I am going to finish this.

I load the gun, like I used to watch Daddy load and unload it after he cleaned it. I walk toward the door when Daddy stops me.

He looks at me, like he has been shot.

“Breeanne...what are you doing?”

I am shaking, swollen but unwavering.

“I am going to end this.”

“Breeanne,” his voice cracks.

“I am going to end this. I am going to kill him.”

Mommy is standing behind Daddy now. She shakes her head at me, rabidly like the words coming out of my mouth are the onslaught of bullets I want to unleash on her children.

“Why, Breeanne. What happened?”

“She wont tell you, she doesn't want you to know, right?” the tears cause hiccups and I know I sound crazy.

“Him and his brother have been molesting me since I was 4, Daddy, I tell her over and over again and NOTHING!”

The denseness of my anger feels like glue against my skin. Mommy is still shaking her head like she can dodge the words I have put in the air.

“Breeanne, give me the gun.” Grandma steps forward from behind Daddy.

“Give me the gun, granddaughter.”

The four of us stare at each other from different sides of the bed. I throw the gun on the bed and Daddy sits down like he has been kicked in the face.

“This is enough with this madness.” Mommy proclaims.

“I’m a liar, right?” I smile at her. “Ask him again.”

Daddy jumps up and runs to Colin’s room. The door is locked.

Mommy starts screaming for him to stop.

“Jim, wait, wait, we can talk about this.”

“Did you touch my daughter!? You cocksucker! Did you touch my daughter?”

Grandma grabs his arms and pleads with him.

“Jim, uno mus calm down, Jim-“

He bangs on the door the walls of the house shake like they did that day Mommy and Daddy fought.

Mommy begins screaming.

“Jim! Wait!”

I sit on the bed and stare at the gun. I wonder if I could really pull the trigger. I wonder if I could really take a life. I listen to Mommy pleading for her son, and I wonder whose life I really want to take.

I put my hands over my ears so I don’t have to listen to them deciding my fate. So I don’t have to think about my fate. I pick up the

gun and put it in my mouth. The cold steel tastes like blood. Like a sharp and sweet mixture of cigarettes and poison. Daddy comes in and looks at me, walks toward me, pulls the gun from my hands and sits down next to me.

“Breeanne, what were you going to do with the gun.”

I stare over his head at the door, half expecting the ceiling to fall in.

“Listen to me.” He stands up and closes the door.

“I want you to know, I believe you. Ok? I want you to know that.

It’s alright.” He clasps the gun in both hands and unloads it.

“When did it first happen?”

“When I was four.”

“When was the last time?”

“Last night.”

“Both of them?”

“Both of them.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I stare into his face, I don’t know how to tell him how much I wanted to, I want to tell him that Mommy would never let that happen, even if she never really said it. I want to tell him.

“I don’t know.” I cry.

He nods his head.

“Ok. Ok.”

He takes me into my room and sits me on the bed.

“Ok.” He leaves.

Mommy comes back out from Colin’s room. She and Daddy go back and forth in half sentences.

“You gotta get that mutha fucka out of my house, now Beverley.”

“Jim, jus wait, nuh? Think about this- I”

“Colin!” he yells. “You gotta go. You cant stay here.”

“Jim, wait- tomorrow is-“

“Fuck a tomorrow! Get that mutha fucka out of my house, now!”

Grandma walks into the hallway with a slight hum in her voice.

“Beverley, the picknie pick up a gun you know-“

“Mama!” she yells- this is MY business! Just leave it alone, you don’t know her.”

“He’s gotta go-he’s gotta go tonight.”

Mommy breathes out like she is giving up a ghost.

“Jim, I don’t want to get sick again. I cant deal with this. I just want a little peace, for once I just want some peace.”

“I don’t give a fuck about peace, I want to protect my daughter from these pieces of shit. They are pieces of shit just like their father.”

“Then you take your daughter and leave.”

I walk to the door with only half my body. The half that is Daddy's.

The half that doesn't belong to her.

"You want me to leave?"

She won't look me in the eye. She starts to scream again.

"Why on this night? Why only on this night? Why would you do this on this night!?"

My parents look like chess pieces scattered in the hallway. A queen knocked over on her side. A rook upside down. A king in checkmate.

"You want me to leave." I say it as a declaration. It is no longer a question. It is evidence. It is truth.

"I'll leave." I turn around and go into the room.

"Breeanne," Daddy calls behind me.

"I wanted to go in first place. Isn't that what started all this?"

"I'm coming with you." Daddy looks pained behind his words.

"No, Jim-" Grandma stands up from the floor.

"I will take her."

"Mama you have to be here for tomorrow. You have to be here for me." Mommy grabs her mother's hands.

Grandma looks at her child and then down on the ground.

No one is at Grandma's house. I can go there and be alone.

"I'm taking her Beverley."

The whole time, Colin never comes out the room. Mommy stands vigil at the door. His protector. His counsel. She stands there as I pass her and go back to my room.

I pack a bag and put it in Daddy's car and ready for the drive to Grandmas' house. I sit in the car like I am being held by omniscient arms. Daddy is still in the house with Mommy and Grandma. The evening sky reminds me of a video game. The stars look like targets I wish I could shoot. The moon looks an eye, squinted and judgmental. Even when I close mine, I can still feel it on me.

Daddy and I get on to the highway with a heavy quiet. I can hear his questions in his mind, even though he doesn't say anything.

When we get to Grandma's house and he opens the door, he takes my bag into her room.

"I'm sorry, Sweet Pea."

I sit on the bed.

"It's ok, Daddy".

He goes out into the living room and lies down on the couch. I know tomorrow we have to go back to the house for the party. We have to be a family again, for the people coming to celebrate Mommy's life and Colin's victory. We have to pretend that the dream is still real.

Because we know that is for the best.

After the party, I packed up the rest of my stuff and moved into Grandma's house completely.

Mommy

She is born the only daughter on a couch, in the middle of a brutal and beautiful island. She learns quickly how quantifiable a woman's life is. And how inevitable a woman's will be.

She is skinny. Slight. Light brown and lanky.

And beautiful. She is so beautiful that she gleams.

Her mother doesn't know what to make of it. She was taught to fear beauty like her daughter's. Because she knows what the beauty can make a man do. So she shelters her daughter. Holds her within a compound whose own beauty torments her. Makes her watch the world from behind gates guarded by verdant trees and framed with blood red earth. She loves her as best she can, but love is a language lost in translation on the girl. Her father leaves quickly, and Mother is all she has. She is a tomboy. She joins the track team, not because she loves it, but because the team travels. All over Jamaica. She sees, things. In her, a fire is ignited. A fire to see, to touch. to do. To gain, to fulfill all her God given senses that would remain stunted on

this tropical provincial paradise. Because she is just a girl. But what a girl she is.

She promises herself that one day she would get out. Not before she falls in love with a bright skinned man who promises little more than taking her away from the oppressive eye of mother. She marries. She births two boys, alone on a couch. She looks up from birth and sees her mother's reflections staring back at her. Her mother's mistakes and misconceptions about love and motherhood mocking her. She is scared. She is frightened to the point of change. The first time he hits her she takes it. The second. The third. She builds a wall in herself and tells herself that this must be love. But when she looks at her children, she knows this isn't enough. She knows she cannot stay. She won't get the answers to the lingering questions by remaining on the island and being some punching bag. She wants more. She deserves more. She will have more.

By God.

The breaking point comes when the girl knocks on the door. Tiny, disheveled, a peanut shell of thing, with a sick sadness in her eyes, the same sadness that will drive her sickness when she sees in again in the eyes of her daughter, much later.

He raped the girl. Her husband took the child and violated her, and

now the onus is hers to fix. But the blessing comes from the burden. Now she knows she has the strength to leave. But not before she sees the girl one last time. Not before she hands her the money, and looks in her eyes. Not before she whispers a prayer to the child, before letting her grip go on the envelope full of bills. She must pray. A prayer of protection, that she wished someone prayed over her, when she was ten years old, and the old man who rode the children on his bike around the parish turned his sights on her. When she became the object of his terror and shuttered in silence as his hands perforated her innocent secret place. A prayer to keep the silent secret within her. Because letting it out would compromise her survival. And she would survive. She would survive. She would survive. No matter what.

Being away from them was all that mattered. I don't have to be someone else. I don't have to swallow whole sadness all the time. I can be unhumiliated. I can be happy. At school there are people who don't know me to be so damaged so school is a good outlet. Sometimes being away from them was enough. Them was all of them. Them. Me.

The separation seems normal to me. And it has always been there. I know when sit in the train and watch the Bronx go by, bisected by giant tracks and floating stations that I do not belong with them. Them. Me. and Grandma. There is a sadness to the Bronx that suits me. Like when the sun comes up on a cold early morning and the east facing widows of the train reveal the damaged structures and sick trees that have slept too long. The sun shining on its shame. It is somber but it is beautiful because there is no cover. There is only bare earth and light. They are decorated with smoke and moisture. And with adornments on comes alive and moving and vibrant.

I want to stay here in the crowded confines of this red box. Wrapped up like a safe treasure in a toy chest. I want to watch the sun go by. Name the vast expanses of green I see only once in a couple of stops. Yankee stadium. Pelham parkway. The red rickety train is like a cockpit flying over the Bronx buildings and tail ending the stream of sunlight at the top of the horizon.

I like riding this train because I am all-alone up here. Mommy and Daddy say it's dangerous here, that I should never ride the train. they say it, although danger is different to me. Safety is away from their house.

Living with Grandma is easy. Her house is humble, but sturdy. My room is right next to hers, and it smells like her. Mothballs, ginger, sweetness. No one will touch me. No one will ignore me. I can sleep and get rest.

After 10th grade, Mommy starts to lose weight again. When I see her, she looks like an Ethiopian. Daddy doesn't really talk about it. We try to keep small talk since I don't live in the house. He picks me up one weekend a month after she gets sick again, to bring me by the house. When he brings me to the house for the weekend, he tells me that she wants to spend time with me.

When I come in, she says she wants to go out. Which probably means that she and Daddy had another fight. Since the party, and the gun, they haven't really spoken. They haven't slept together, and Colin moved in with Christopher in an apartment in Neptune New Jersey. It also means that we have to pretend that we are friends and I have to go with her. I don't know what she is expecting of me. I don't know what to expect from her.

"Bree," she beckons. When she sings my name like that, I know that she is trying to plan something nice, something where I have to

smile and be silent and appreciative and go along with whatever plans she has half thought up.

“Yes, Mommy.”

“What time is it?”

“Noon, Mommy.”

“Ok, let’s go catch a movie. You want to?”

“Sure Mommy,” I lied.

I know she and Daddy have had a fight. She takes his car keys and doesn’t say a word to him. I hate being a culprit in these missions. I hate being between them in times like this. I hate being a product of them. I hate being the excuse they use to keep conference with each other. Mostly I hate being the ambassador of everything that is unsaid between them. I hate it because I have no ambassador.

Nothing is unsaid between me and them. It’s just ignored. I know they both have different reasons for their rift. But I also know those reasons involve me.

We drive up highway 9. The sky is dreary, like a sick kid you have to force out of bed in the morning. Like looking up the clouds and not being able to tell what time it is because the sun is gone but the sky is bright. A December sky.

We pull up to the movie theater and get out the car. The wind is dry.

The sky verbose. Mommy has a look on her face like she is on a date.

“What do you want to see, Bree?”

I don't even want to be here.

“Whatever you want, Mommy.”

She takes my hand. She smiles. When we walk up to the ticket booth.

“Two, Forrest Gump, please.”

“I wanted to see this when it first came out, remember, Bree? But you were so busy,” she smiles.

“I was busy.”

We enter the warm carpeted quiet of the movie theater. Mommy wants popcorn, she is giddy about it, she stands on the concession line and looks around like she might see someone she knows.

“The doctor visit felt good yesterday, you know.”

“I know, Mommy.”

“I feel good. Don't I look good?”

“You look good, Mommy.”

She stares in my face and I look away.

We go up the stairs into the theater. I sit in the back, moving in toward the center of the screen.

“You didn't want any popcorn?”

“No Mommy.”

I can feel her eyes burrowing into me again.

“Breeanne, you may want to fix you dyam face, we are here to have a good time, you know,” she warns.

“Yes, Mommy.”

“Breeanne,” she grits her teeth.

“You sure you want to be here with me, right? Your precious sons weren’t available for date night?”

I don’t look at her when I say it. I brace myself in the seat for the onslaught of fists to come.

She exhales. I feel her warm breath against my arm.

“What is it?” she breathes out. “What is it with you? Why cant you just be normal? Why cant you just be normal?”

The film starts. I watch the boy in stilts on the screen being hugged by his mother. The damaged little kid who is loved anyway. I want tears to come, but my face is dry. My face is dry because my insides are dry.

We watch the movie in silence. We are almost at the end when Mommy gets up and leaves. On the screen, Forrest Gump brings Jenny some soup as she lays in the bed, stricken, quiet. She is dying. In the next scene, Forrest is standing over her headstone.

“You died on a Tuesday morning, I had you placed under our tree. And I had that house of your father bulldozed to the ground. Mama always said, dying was a part of life, I sure wish it wasn’t...”

The theater was silent. I can hear the couple in front crying. They whisper something to each other. They laugh together as Forrest finishes his speech.

“I love you” was the last thing he said to Jenny. The last thing they said to each other.

When the movie ends, I get up and leave the theater. I go into the bathroom to look for Mommy but she isn’t there.

I go out to the parking lot, the car is gone.

The walk back home doesn’t seem long, but when I get back it is way past evening. Mommy is sitting at the table eating dinner. Daddy is gone. I pack my bag again and leave for Grandma’s house.

The doctor report comes back later on that week while I am visiting Blondie, my aunt who lives in Nanuet. The doctor confirms that the

cancer is really back, the second lumpectomy was not successful.

The chemo/radiation combo would have to be more severe this time.

I get this news third hand, I haven't been to her house in weeks.

Grandma shows me pictures of what she looks like now. She looks skinny. Bad. Like the cancer has literally taken a bite out of her.

"I want to go see her, spend time with her. I know she needs it, it will be good for her."

I say it out loud so that people can hear me say it. So that the look on my face that betrays my real feelings will be counted out. No one really looks at me anyway.

"Bree, you don't have to say it if you don't mean it."

I forget sometimes who can really see me.

Blondie stands tall in the kitchen as everywhere. A tall and sinewy version of Daddy, Her skin is deep shiny molasses. It makes her look young. All the time. I wonder if she frowns the way Daddy does, deeply with contortion to the mouth and eyes- when she is alone as well. I think she does. I think when they are alone they sometimes can't help to remember the things they saw as children. They were the siblings who were closest-literally, born eleven months apart.

We stand together in her kitchen, she is washing the dishes her sisters always use, since she doesn't cook much.

I don't tell her about the shell that Mommy's skin has become. I don't tell her that when I rub lotion on her belly the entirety of her flesh follows my fingers. I don't tell her that I can't use the palms of my hands anymore because I move her organs around. I don't say that mommy feels like a sac of soup in my hands. And that when she looks at me during these sessions I know she can measure it in decibels on my face.

"She's coming out of the hospital tomorrow. She is probably not going back to work this time."

"Yes she is. She wouldn't not."

"Or she has to."

"It's a little of both I guess. She needs to be around people too."

There is a fly in Blondie's kitchen. It lands on my hand and sits there. I know I have the strength to move it. I try to concentrate on perfect stillness. I am a stone. The fly can even move me. I am a morsel of food. Inanimate and porous. Stolid. Inconsequential in size but placed in the dirt for a purpose. I can be sustenance for the smallest of life. I can travel from nests to skies and be dropped from great distances to the ground and land unharmed. I do not even need wings.

Daddy picks me up later that week, on Friday, to spend the weekend with him and Mommy at the house. Not really him. He drops me off then leaves. I go into the house and walk into the room.

“I’m here.”

She doesn’t look up from the TV. I don’t expect her to. I stare at her briefly, waiting, before I walk into the living room.

Her skin didn’t even look like leather. That would be too kind.

“Breeanne-“

i hear her call my name from outside. The TV wasn’t loud enough to drown out the warning tone of her calling me. She sounds like police at the door when she says my name.,

“Yes mommy”

“Come here.”

I think of anything she thinks I have done wrong since the last time she called me. Nothing. Hopefully I will only get cursed AT. The food thing about cancer is that it makes you too weak to throw books at your children. And the children don’t have to pretend to duck.

I come close to her so we can inspect each other. I want to cross my arms over myself. I can just stand still because I know like I know that I need air to breathe she will no longer even try to touch me in

affection. I want to look at her to see what part of death ignoring problems can stave off, for a while.

“Go and get my lotion. Do you know where it is?”

“No.”

“Its the one in the cabinet above the sink. In the white bottle,”

-“Keri-“

“Yes, there should be some left in the top cabinet.”

“Yes mommy.”

I pass her to get to the bathroom. The mirror on the cabinet is covered with the scarf she sleeps in. I don't know what that means, so I leave it there. When I come back into the room, she is trying to raise up slowly. I am the servant. She grunts and signals for me to help her take her shirt off. Slowly I do this half looking at the TV in front of her. I want my mind to go blanker than it is now. I don't want her to read my thoughts. I don't want her pity or shame. I give her dignity this way.

“Come.”

This word means so much to her. She says it and has said it to me for so many years it means everything to me. Move. Sit. Go. Come.

Leave. Speak. Shut up. Smile. Stay. Wake.

Hate.

You and me.

When we get her shirt off she lays back on her back. She lays straight but her skin is so sallow and her frame so fragile that she looks contorted. There isn't enough meat on her arms to even pull them straight on sheer weight, her head is rounded and swollen with a sparse dusting of grey fur patched inconsistent with auburn and violet from her past life. Her mouth won't close anymore because it hurts her to breathe. Her stomach seems like cellophane cast in burnt sienna. She is darker than she has ever been. I remember Dr. Ahmed talking about how chemotherapy can singe the skin, make it look like it is being burned, fried almost like food.

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Or makes you hungry. Her breath is always brackish and salty smelling. She spits up more than she cares to admit. But it is always obvious to anyone changing the bedpan by the foot that this is happening.

I can feel her eyes on me. I know she wants to say something, wants me to say something. But I will not. I have learned that silence is inherited trait. But the silence is never passive. It is not tense. It is stagnant, like the silence between two prisoners who have no use for each other trapped in the same cell. I rub her body out of complete obligation and try with all my might to think of somewhere else. She

collapses in thought behind her eyes and gives in to my touch, like I am the attendant and she is the pharaoh. There is peace in her face. I don't know why. I believe she doesn't really want me touching her. But then I think, I try to remember the last time anyone has ever touched her. I try to think about the times she was caressed and held in a way that made her feel beautiful and desired and was not therapeutic or didn't involve ben gay or bed sore salve.

I try to remember the last time I heard her and Daddy whispering in the night like they did when I was little. It has been so long since I have slept a night under their roof that I cannot call it to memory.

Then I realize.

I am an attendant. I am her servant. I am her board. This is my severance. This is why rubbing this woman who birthed me feels like a bucolic and compulsory chore. Because it is. She cannot remember the last time someone touched her with love. I cannot remember the last time I wanted to touch her.

It's hard to turn her over. As light as she is, she seems like dead weight during the shift. I try to be gentle, I try not to scrape her, even though I notice the bedsore above her right buttock looks a little tender.

I want to gasp, I want to tell her that it looks bad, but I don't want to engage her. The bedsore, if I say anything will be my fault too.

I start with her shoulders, slowly, rounding my fingers so she doesn't get bruised by my knuckles. The lotion warms in my hand and I know she likes it because she moans, soft and low. Her eyes are still closed, and I wonder where she is. I wonder if she is either dreaming or remembering.

Then I remember what she looked like when I was little. Beautiful and vexed, either dreaming or remembering. But never really present. Not with me.

I come down slowly to the small of her back, mindful not to brush near the bedsore. I can message the small of her back with one hand. The loose skin that used to be her ample buttocks dimple and flap over the sides of her hips. Her deep, slow breathing and nakedness make her skin look more supple than it really is, like an old woman sunning on the French Riviera. Maybe that is where she is right now. Maybe she is remembering. I know she has been there. She would never tell me, but I have seen the pictures. I have heard the pieces of the stories she laughed about when she and Auntie Sonia and Auntie Dion Auntie Myrna and Juliette talk about what they did when they were young. When she stood in the café in France and sang the

Harry Neilson song at the top of her lungs. Or when she went skinny-dipping in Spain just because she had never done it before. I know all these things like I know my birth- from someone else's remembering. And like my birth, I touch this woman who should be my manifestation of memory, my modicum of information, to all of it. But nothing is there. Nothing but skin and silence.

When I get to the back of her legs she stirs. Her eyes do not open, but she is not asleep. I start slowly on her right leg, still mindful of her sore, still cognizant of her silence. The lotion is colder because my hands move slowly. The sticky sweet smell of it reminds me of summer. Heat, nakedness. Her feet are ashen and calloused. I rub them slowly, trying to saturate them as best I can.

"That's enough."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No, I'm just tired. That's enough."

I put the cap back on the lotion.

"Ok, Mommy."

When I get up to walk out the room. She calls me again.

"Breeanne,"

I turn to her.

"Thank you."

Some dreams can only last for so long. Dr. Ahmed says the longest documented dream was only seven seconds. He says the rest of the dream we remember is just our subconscious adding to what we want our dreams to be.

I wonder if this is what happened to Mommy and Daddy's dream. I wonder if when they shut their eyes, how much of the brief reverie is real, and how much is just made up. Grandma doesn't get financial support from Mommy and Daddy anymore and has to move to Long Island into Uncle Everton's house. No room for me. So I have to go back with my parents.

The dream uprooted has landed in Westchester, in a one-bedroom apartment because that was all Mommy and Daddy can afford.

Mommy cannot really work anymore, Daddy has been fired again.

The house is gone, to pay for chemotherapy.

The apartment is humble and pretty. Mommy buys a white sectional that Daddy says we cannot afford. She looks at him with venom in her eyes and takes out her credit card, and it is delivered the next Tuesday. It fills the small living room, makes the apartment look crisp and modern. While they look around for pillows to add color to

Mommy's new purchase, I step outside the furniture store and see a lady with animal next to the strip mall. A portly woman with a mole on her nose is selling bunnies.

"Hello, lovely!" She is bright sounding and straight backed, not at all what I expect her to sound like.

"You look like you need a friend."

"Ma'am, you have no idea."

"We are selling these little ones, come take a look."

I walk closer to the box and stare down into the opening. Three bunnies stare back up at me. One gray, straight ears. One all white with pink eyes, and one black and white splotched with floppy ears. When I see his skin I remember Mommy's birthday. I remember sitting at the dinner table with Jeanette. I pick him up and he flops easily into my arms.

"How much for him?"

"Yes, this one is special, right?"

"How much for him?"

"How much you got?"

I look at Mommy and Daddy coming out of the furniture store coming toward me.

"I don't have much."

Mommy and Daddy walk up to me holding the bunny. Daddy is smiling. I am not sure what to make of his happiness. Mommy looks interested. I think maybe I have a chance.

“You selling these bunnies, Miss?” Daddy asks.

“Yes sir, I think your daughter is quite interested.” The woman says daughter like she is asking a question.

“I think she likes my bunny. He’s yours for \$50.”

I think Daddy is still mad about the sectional. I think maybe he wants more life in the house. I think maybe he thinks the black and white bunny would be a good accent for the all white sectional.

“Sold.”

I stand there silently, holding the bunny in my arms while Daddy counts out five ten dollar bills and shakes the lady’s hand.

We walk back to the car with a receipt for a couch, three new pillows and a bunny.

I get into the back seat and whisper “hi” to my new family member.

He sniffs up at me, looks at me with huge brown eyes, and nuzzles my nose. I can’t stop smiling and realize that I am crying and Daddy is looking at me from the rear view mirror.

“Where will we keep it?” Mommy asks.

“We can keep him in the kitchen.”

“We’re not gonna eat him, right?”

“I can make a cage for him, he can stay in the kitchen.” Daddy nods like he has purpose.

We drive home and wait for the delivery van and Daddy gets some scrap metal from the garages by the apartment complex and builds a cage for my bunny. HE works quietly near the laundry room.

When I go outside to see him, he doesn’t look up at me, he hums a tune I never heard him sing. I sit next to him and watch him with Rolo in my lap. It takes him about twenty minutes to acknowledge that I am there.

“What are you gonna name him?”

“Rolo. Rolo Loomis Simmons.”

The name makes Daddy laughs. He snorts.

And then works again in silence. I walk back to the apartment with Rolo under my arm. Mommy is in the bedroom lying down, listening to gospel music.

I feel better with Rolo in my hands. I feel like if I have to be alone in the house, I can be alone with him. I can stay here with him. I put him down on the hard wood floor and he poops.

The routine becomes like the new normal. I stay in the living room on the pretty white sectional with Rolo. Mommy stays in the

bedroom, recovering from a newer and more harsh round of chemotherapy.

Daddy comes in after his new job, fixes dinner, checks on Mommy, and leaves.

Sometimes he stays when Mommy needs to go to Dr. Ahmed, or if she cant bathe herself, which is much more frequent now.

The doctor has to put a surgical tube in her chest to drain the liquid that formed from the chemo.

Slowly, her chest fills with fluid all the time. She goes to the Dr. to get it drained, almost once a month.

Our routines are surrounded by work, school, bedpans, oxygen tanks, and silence. It goes on like this. It goes on like this for months.

It's Friday, almost the Lord's day, that's what Grandma says. There are so many 7 day Adventists in Jamaica they could probably start a revolution. Or an evolution.

The house is quiet, not like fishbowl quiet, or muted TV quiet. Like silent quiet. Like there is a peace I cannot describe that I have never

had around any of these people since I have hit puberty quiet. A drop-your-heavy-load quiet. A quiet that comes and goes and is never heard from again. The quiet when Forrest realized that Jenney was gone. Quiet. This is the first time in my life that quiet has also sounded like peace. No matter how many times people in this family shout and curse and hit and spit for peace; and quiet. The two are not mutually exclusive. With us, the two don't even like each other.

This is the Friday after Halloween. When the scary decorations on door become turkeys. I think this is funny. Ghosts become turkeys. Pumpkins become pilgrims. But the leaves stay the same. The wind changes though. Its crispness seems lonely, winding down, like a preparation for transition, like Mother Nature was about to give birth.

Or bury her child.

Mommy had a doctor's appt today. This morning Daddy took her to see Dr. Ahmed again. Now, Daddy says, it's really just a formality. Because of her last appt when he sat us down and told us how the last surgery went.

His room was all windows, bright and shining, the way the sky shows off in the fall. The hard edges of nimbus don't leak into the blueness of the sky and blend vast expanse the way summer does. The colors separate. They break away. They contrast each other, like they aren't speaking. It's still so beautiful. I guess that's why Dr. Ahmed brought people in his office to tell them awful news. The view is always so comforting.

Daddy comes in the office even before Dr. Ahmed and sits at the couch on the far side of the room, far away from the desk. I sit at the chair in front of the desk. The doctor takes his seat at the helm. His back is to the biggest window. And the sun is high in the sky. Dr Ahmed reminds me of Vishnu, or a giant picture from the Kama Sutra, a sweet looking brown man with a fat face and big round eyes that look like they never get mad. I always think it's strange to see an evil Indian man. They all look so serene and sweet to me. Dr Ahmed loves to smile, and when he does, he gets a double chin. He knows that Daddy knows what he has to say won't be good. He knows because after the surgery Daddy went into Mommy's room and wouldn't let anyone else see her, wouldn't let the nurses bathe her. Wouldn't let the doctors touch her. I didn't want to look at her. I

can't look at her anymore because I know no she doesn't see me. I doubt she ever really did.

"SO, guys, the thing is..." Dr Ahmed begins, smiles at me and stares at the couch to try to catch Daddy's eyes. I turn around and see him staring at the table in front of the couch he has lounged himself on. The table was oblong and inconspicuous. The window before him was so vast, warm, and beautiful. It beckoned anyone who was touched by the light that flooded in all over the room like a tsunami. But Daddy wasn't really in the room. Daddy didn't want to see the sun. That's why he sat so lazily on the couch, because he was exhausted and didn't want to see the sun. Didn't want to talk to the dr. Didn't want to breathe out and say "okay" anymore when he talked to the dr. about next steps. He just wanted to stare at the table and pretend he wasn't in the room, like what I did when I was younger.

I cross my legs to signal to Dr. Ahmed to talk to me.

"Yes, Dr." I smile at him.

He looks in my eyes and I finally see the sadness, it almost seems like the omnipotent sun behind him set a bit, retreats. I become aware of the space between us in the room. The space between me and Daddy and when Dr Ahmed exhales before he speaks. I feel like I am leaf being uprooted from a branch with nothing to hold on to. I

am floating away over an expanse of forest, praying I don't land in the pond. Hoping against all hope that I can find another branch and anchor myself again. But as the words form in his mouth, and I hear Daddy hold his own breath, just a little, I know that this can never be. I will have no more branches to hold. I have to float away, and learn to land on my own, softly. Hopefully and softly.

Dr Ahmed looks at Daddy, head to toe and then me. His smile becomes somber, like he is paying homage. On cue a bird flies past the sun and takes both our attention to the sky.

"When I was a little boy, in Pakistan, I wanted to follow my sister everywhere. She was my older sister, my mother was already so old when I was born, my father was very busy with my older brothers, and his boys turned to young men. He was very physical in those days, even though his age was showing.

The sharpness of his accent sounding likes music to me. His "w" sound like "v" and "Th" blends into "z", his timbre reminds me of woodwind instruments and his cadence of heavy tympani.

"She was so beautiful." I believe him all the more because WAS sounds like VAS.

"In the morning, before she would walk me to school, her job was to carry water from the river back to the house. My mother was too

ailing to do it anymore, Rya, my sister, she was....skinny and spry. She would take the pail and fill it with ease and bring it back and do it again. She would do this 3 times, and I knew after the third time I should be ready to leave. I should be ready to take her hand and walk with her up the mountain, sing our songs and listen to her humming, and then go into the schoolhouse, wave to her, until I saw her again when she came to get me."

"I wanted to go with her, so badly sometime, when she went to fetch the water, but my mother, I was the baby, the youngest, and a boy so I had to wait til I was older, had too be careful. My life was too valuable to her I guess. When I was younger I felt so lucky, but now..." His voice trails off and he looks at his hands, rubs them together and smiles.

"One day, I was ready early, I stood at the door and waited for Rya to bring back the pail, one time, then two times. I felt the butterflies rise up in my body, when she dumped the bucket out and my mother took some water into the bathroom, I knew it was my chance. I would go with her this time. I would go and get water too.

I walked behind her, slowly, trying to keep pace, timing the rhythm of my feet with the tune she hummed. Watching the sway of her skinny hips created from the stillness of how she held the bucket

atop her little head. I was so hypnotized by her, so excited to be doing something forbidden, my excitement gave me away. She turned around and sucked her teeth, half smiling."

"Chintan!! She yelled. Bibi is going to give you a good lashing! Even in my youth I could not give away my fear. No! I said, I would tell her that i need to help you.

She smiled at me. She smiled because she knew that i would risk a lashing to help her. I would risk being beaten, or falling down, or almost drowning in that river, the current was rough. Just to help her. Stay behind me, she said. And I did. I walked closely to her sari would blow gently from the almost stagnant and occasional breeze, it would flit by my knees and this is how we kept pace.

When we got to the river, I watched her take her place with the other women in the water, some washing babies, most were gathering water in their buckets like Rya. Some of the women were twice her size but Rya could carry a bucket three times bigger than them. That made me so proud. I watched her; she was a woman to me. She was a woman, my mother was a mother. One of the old women tssked at me when i was standing there idle. What are you doing little boy? What are you wasting time for!!! Such an insolent little boy? Whose child are you!?

I stood frozen and almost on cue, Rya came up to us bucket on her head. Demure, humble, but sure, graceful. He is helping me, she said.”

“Me! The ladies cussed at us. What does he have to carry water! They laughed at me.”

“He has his hands- Rya stood, sure, replied, and the look in her eyes were so certain, as if what she suggested was not the most ridiculous thing any of us had ever heard.”

He looks down at his hands, as if he may cry.

“Carrying the water in your hands. I tried it, too. I did it because Rya told me to. I did it to see if I could really do it. I put my hands together and cupped all the water I could. Then I followed Rya, silently, my head down, passed the chirping women.

Hold the water, Chintan. So I tried. I tried to keep the water in the palm of my hands, but about halfway home, my hands were empty. I didn’t want to show them to Rya, so I kept my hands cupped until we reached our mother's kolba. I kept them cupped even though the water had long since leaked out and the rest evaporated under the heat. The only water present was the sweat that accumulated in the folds of my knuckles.

Rya looked at me, smiled and then walked in the house and set the bucket down. Mami was shouting, and Rya told her she was taking me to school. She looked out the window and saw me, and stopped shouting. I still stood with cupped hands as Rya approached me, still smiling, holding my schoolbooks.

It's ok, she said, you can't grab up all that water in your hands. It's impossible."

Dr. Ahmed looks up, stares at Daddy, and the sun shines behind him again.

"We opened Beverley up in the hopes of removing the metastasized cancer cells from her lungs. What we saw was.... evident to us that this would be an impossible feat."

"Like picking up water from a river with your hands," I don't realize I say it. I understand it came out my mouth when I look at and see Dr. Ahmed nodding at me, with kind brown eyes.

"You understand." He said.

"Yes, Dr, I do."

Daddy was stoic, spread still upon the couch, now, instead of a catatonic stare, his chagrin took him somewhere else, maybe to that river, maybe trying to figure out a way, he could hold the water in hands, so he could again hold his wife in his arms.

"Thank you, Dr." I walk over to Daddy and he comes back to life. He stands up without my help and the Dr. follows us out the office, just as he follows us in. I want to ask him what happened to his sister, but I know from the look on his face, from the way he held his hands, from the way he whispered her name when he told the story that she is dead. I know now, that me and Daddy, we have officially been prepared.

Friday sets in Fri evening, and the house is still at peace. I wait at the window, like Forrest waited for Jenny, for Mommy and Daddy to return.

Mommy was going to die. Not because I wished it, not because we would all die. Not because she didn't cut her breast off the first time. But because you cant pick up a river of water with your hands.

Dr Ahmed's words still don't make it seem like fact. I want them too, because I know she can no longer walk on her own, she can no breathe on her own, she can barely eat on her own. She is small, she is weak, she sleeps all the time and sometimes when she sleeps too soundly Daddy gets nervous and pulls his face close to her and listens for a moment. All these things are evidence of her water. The river inside of her that will rage no matter hand or bucket or

surgeon or scalpel. But it still does not seem real to me. The notion of her not being there, even though she is only partially there now, is not real to me. She has always been there, even when I wish she weren't. She was there before me. And soon, for real she could be gone. The leaves that fall off the trees do fly away, sway and float into the air and off on a lark, and they seem graceful, they seem determined, they leave and rock back and forth, change their mind and change trajectory and change landscape.

But in the end, they all land. They all brown and wrinkle. They all dry up and wither away. They all die. It occurs to me that no one has watered Mommy's plants in weeks. The verdant leaves are still heavy, swooping and green, they look pregnant with rain, like they are holding water and at any moment may deluge upon the floor. It's November and I wonder if they can hear me and are just being ironic.

The car pulls up into the parking lot and I can see her staring out of the window, the way I am staring out the window. I don't look like her. Especially now. I have made a concerted effort to make sure I don't not do or say or walk or dress or act anything like her.

Especially since. Daddy gets out of the car and goes around to her

side. He opens the back door and slopes the oxygen tank over his shoulders. He opens the front door and she comes out, slowly, steadily, certainly, like a woman who has accepted her fate. Even if no one else around her can.

When she gets to the porch I open the door. She comes in and looks passed me, which is what I expect. I grab the oxygen tank from Daddy and he helps her into the bed. I wait at the door until I am allowed to come in. There is rustling behind the door. Muted grunts and whispered assurances. The bed squeaks. Shoes hit the floor hard. In another time it would sound like them making love. But I know them. I know that making love didn't happen like this. This is more intimate than they have ever known each other, man and wife, caretaker and burden. Lovers.

Daddy calls my name.

I bring in the oxygen tank loudly, announcing my presence. I lay it down at the foot of the bed. I drag it the rest of the way, like a broken foot, and stare at her. She is frightened that I come upon her. I am surprised that her fatigued face can register any emotion.

"That's far enough, Breeanne."

"No, Daddy, I can do it. I want to." I know she is too tired to object. I know if she really had any energy, she would.

"I want to." I look in my father's eyes. For the first time in my life I am shit sure he has no idea what I am thinking. And I thank God for that. Because he would have ripped the mask out of my hand and hauled me out of the room by my hair.

"Come," I say. I want her to hear me. I want her to know I can use the word too. I can take care. I can hold life in my hands. I can stare at death and tie it to a memory. I can get into heaven. I can be redeemed. I can walk down to the river and put the water in my hands. I can come down to the riverside and be baptized. I can be the baptist and know who comes before me. I can call out and be right. And be counted. And be named. And have value. And show use. Like a shining gem. A north star. A beacon leading her home. She looks up at me and does not blink. I take her furry and warm head in my hand and raise it, as if i will give her the sacrament. And she waits to receive. The mask is in my hands. Its shape reminds me of a vagina, or a fetus, or an open wound attached to an umbilical like band to traverse around the equatorial line of her fragile skull. I bring the mask up above her head and catch the band in my right hand that cradles her head. I pull the band loose and guide my left hand in front of her face, holding the mask. I am still looking in her eyes. When the mask goes over her mouth her lips part.

Daddy turns on the machine.

"Suck in." I command her, softly but matter-of-factly. I think about the first time Colin's penis touched my mouth. I watch her breath in, her eyes roll back a little into her eyes, and I realize how much he looks like his mother when he is receiving fellatio.

"Good." I hold the mask to her face, push it to her skin, and squeeze the back of her skull like she is giving head.

"Good girl."

She closes her eyes, and the peace and quiet is gone.

When I turn around, Daddy is in the corner standing, staring at his hands open and close, clench and unwind. I wonder how much water he thinks he can hold.

"I'll wash the bedpans this time." I walk passed him out the door and close it shut behind me. I am staring at her plants, watching them watch me like I am the caterpillar, hungry, looking for food. I want to believe God is good, even though i do not know Him anymore. I imagine this is His payback to me, for me having endured, I wont go to jail for killing her. He would do it himself.

Or maybe He was still mocking me. Yes. I feel it in my chest. The burning. The heat of the "a ha!" moment. Yes. I know He is. If I were going to kill her I would have done it then. But He would not let me. I

could feel it. I could smell it I want it so badly. That is why the peace surrounded me.

But *we* cannot kill. *We* cannot murder. Not because it's wrong.

Because vengeance is not ours. God saves it for himself because it is so indulgent.

I still don't water the plants.

When I finish washing the bedpans, I hear Daddy in the kitchen. I do not go in because i know he needs his privacy. We have not spoken to each other since Dr. Ahmed's office. I don't know how to talk to him anymore. But that has never been a problem, because we never had to talk to communicate. Now he is too far away from me to see me, to communicate with me and I am scared he will never come back. I don't know if he feels the peace and quiet. I don't know what he feels. He doesn't sing anymore.

There is no more music in the house.

My rabbit looks at us like he feel sorry for us. Sometimes i want to eat him. So does Daddy. I see Daddy eye Rolo, and think what a delicious last supper he would be for Mommy. Maybe if he doesn't kill Rolo, he thinks, like I do, that she won't ever really die.

I put the bedpans back into the room. I place them quietly at the foot of the bed. The noise from the oxygen machine reminds me of a

water pick. The vibration feels good on the hardwood floor.

Mommy's body is shaking like it is being mixed or scrambled. Her eyes are closed and her mouth is covered. When her eyes are closed her head looks even larger, sicker, like the unskinned bodies from the movie COCOON. All I hear is the shaking. I cannot hear her breath. I cannot tell if her chest is rising and falling because of all the shaking. I wonder if this is my moment.

I move slowly, touching heel to toe as I approach her side of the bed. That wet and miserable smell gets fuller in my nose and mouth and eyes and I can feel tears well up and bile back into my throat and my heart jump and my hands heat up. Heel to toe. Heel to toe.

And I bend over, slowly, from the waste, straight kneed. Open-eyed. I am so close that my breath fogs up the other side of the mask. My tear falls into her eyes. This wakes her. She is still alive. Her eyes are wide and fearful, like a child who wakes up from a nightmare. She hasn't looked this alive in months.

"Do you need anything?"

She just pants into the mask and tries to speak.

"No?"

She still breathes out, heavy, hard. Her hands reach up to the mask because I have backed away but she doesn't have the energy to take

it off herself. I turn my back and leave the room. When I go into the living room, passed the kitchen, I see Daddy staring out the window next to the sink.

Immediately I think of Tryon Ave. I want to sing Lou Rawls. I want to throw dishes in the sink. I want to pet Boscoe.

There is a thump that jolts him back from wherever he has gone.

He runs into the bedroom. The plants look at me again, wagging their leaves, accusing me of something.

When I sit on the couch, I don't bother trying to listen. I turn on the TV, loud, and wait for him to come out the room again. He doesn't for a while. Whitney Houston is on the TV, talking about filming a movie with Angela Basset and Lela Rochonn. I remember the movie when it was a book- I remember. I feel better with that memory. Rolo hops over to my lap. I reach over to the center table and grab some skittles and crush a yellow one in my fingers and put it in his mouth. He chews, greedily, happily. He licks my fingers, almost bites them. I give him an orange one in the same fashion. When Whitney begins to sing, I realize all the noise from the room has stopped. Even the oxygen machine. Maybe they are listening. Whitney does sound beautiful. So serene. She makes me sleepy. I lay across the white sectional and hold Rolo close. I pull the throw over us and cup the

remote like it's a pillow. All the lights in the house are off, except for the TV, and what is happening in the bedroom. The TV light isn't enough. I still fall asleep.

Sunday I wake up well into the afternoon, like vampire that has just been bitten. There was an overwhelming need for my body to rest. I felt sleep still in my bones and its track mark lay across my face and arms as I make my way into the bathroom and almost trip over Rolo. The mirror even seems sleepy. My hair is a mess and my face is swollen. My ears don't work. My waist is tight. My legs feel like I ran five miles. I rub my body trying to understand. Stomping my feet helps, even though it scares Rolo. I yawn loudly and shake my body in the middle of the living room. I realize that no one has told me to keep it down. No bell is being rung and no one needs anything. I walk to the bedroom and no one is there. The oxygen tank is gone. The bedpan has disappeared. The sheets have been stripped. The room looks like a museum display of a crime scene cleaned up. Even the smell is gone. The smell. The eerie and warm odor of death. The sick and slightly sober aroma of insides being eaten. The pungent and brackish smell of loneliness. Now there was only a naked bed on top of a perfect Persian rug. Two mahogany nightstands and a rustic

matching dresser. All wiped clean, like they have been baptized.

Saved from an evil and inevitable fate. I open the windows in the room. Then I walk into the kitchen and open those. Then I walk into the living room and open those. Rolo stirs, like a timid puppy.

Sometimes I think he really doesn't know he's a rabbit. I open the door. Slide it open, like I am afraid of sunlight, or of whoever is waiting on the other side. But there is no one. Only silence. Not even the typical sounds of outside beckoning me. Just outside.

Rolo jumps out onto the chilly grass from behind me. He stands there, sniffs around, and then eats some shrubbery. I step out next to him. The cold feels good against the balls of my feet. The grass itches the inside of my arch. I sit on the curb and watch to see if anyone is going to burglarize our house. Maybe because It's Sunday. Maybe because it's the Lord's Day. Maybe because everything of value has been taken from the house already, so long ago. I realize, sitting on the curb, watching my bunny flop his obese frame around in arbitrary circles waiting for rescue, how much I value peace and quiet, even though I have never really known it. In my pocket, there is a mashed up joint so I light it and smoke it and then go back inside. The whole house is about twenty degrees colder, and now the bedroom looks feels like a mausoleum. When I walk into the kitchen I

can see my breath. I wonder if it's the marijuana. Or the cold. Or the loneliness. I imagine my soul is exiting my body from my mouth. I dream that my essence is smoke, dancing up into the atmosphere, dissipating into the nothing of the air around me. I am permeable. I am able to travel through other materials. I can float around and I am at the mercy of the winds. I will never land. I will never become solid. I will never die.

I breathe out again and watch my stomach get smaller. Rolo hops into the kitchen. I walk to the hallway and close the front door. The sun is so bright, the sky is so small. The windows don't do outside justice, because to me outside means freedom. Maybe that's why I wanted to open everything. This is the first time in as long as I can remember that there has been the passing of air in this place. Air that no one else has breathed. Air that has not been tainted with sickness. Air that is not weighed down by secrets and resentment. And the frayed edges of a family that was never really closely knit in the first place.

Not really.

Rolo and I sit on the white sectional that has become my bedroom. He burrows his head in my lap and I realize he is cold, so I go around the house and close all the windows.

When I get to the dining area windows, I see that Mommy's plants are dead. They were alive this morning-verdant, fulvous, but worried. Now, they are shriveled and dried and look as if they were scared to death, they died suddenly. People don't believe that happens to other living things, just humans. People think that only humans die of trauma, with frozen and contorted faces forever imprinted on their shells.

These plants were twisted and dried, looking like they were reaching up for a final respite as opposed to withered and hallowed, dying a sacred and honorable death.

They look like people at this moment. And they were dead.

I go to the kitchen and fill up a glass and water them one last time.

When I laid down back on the sectional and turned to the TV the phone rang at the same instance. The sound of the phone shakes the sectional. Rolo is scared.

I reach up to the credenza and grab the phone.

"Grandma?"

"Yes, darlin, I wanted to call you... Mommy wanted to call you..."

"Mommy is there with you?"

"Yes, darlin....Daddy dropped her off early this mornin. He said she was scared to stay in the house alone."

“She wasn’t alone, Grandma, I was here.”

“Yes, yes, darlin, but she is here now. She is in my bed, and she won’t stop crying.”

“...Grandma...I was here...”

“Breeanne, she wont stop crying, now. You must do something for me, Breeanne.”

“I don’t have a car right now, Grandma, I cant-“

“No, darlin, Listen to me, now. I am going to put her on de phone.”

There is a rustling pause. I put the TV on mute. Even Rolo is watching me, wondering what is going on.

“Here, Breeanne, I am going to put Mommy on the phone. Just tell her you love her.”

I can hear someone breathing in the background.

“Just tell her, Breeanne. Tell her you love her.”

The phone burns my head. I want to hang up. For the first time in my life, I don’t want to lie when asked a question about Mommy. I stare at the TV, at two people kissing, holding each other.

Touching.

I can fake this. We have faked being a family for nineteen some odd years. Maybe if I don’t this for Grandma, I will go to heaven like she

said. Maybe if I do this for Mommy, she will be forgiven.

Maybe this is her way of asking for my forgiveness.

The words bubble in my throat like bile. I wonder to myself if I have ever really meant them. I cannot remember the last time I ever really said them. But this is what Grandma wants. And I love her.

The breath on the other side of the phone sounds more disconnected, let rhythmic, like it is waiting.

She is waiting for me. Waiting for me say it. Even though she knows I shouldn't. She knows I don't. And she knows why.

"I love you."

It is almost as if I can hear tears hit the receiver, the sound of the silence between us makes me sick. I hang up without saying goodbye to Grandma and hit the unmute button. Rolo hops around again. All is right with the outside world. These are last words I will speak to her. These are last things she hears me say. I want to say something else. I know I have to. I want to remember when I was born and she was Mommy and she wanted and loved me. And her touch felt like heaven, and mine felt like healing power. I want her to believe me. I want her to answer me back. Even if she doesn't love me. I want her to say it. I want to have her truth just as much as Grandma wanted her to have my love. But it will not be this way. Not on this day.

Mommy died on a Tuesday, just like Jenny in Forrest Gump. 3 days after the plants.

Grandma is crying. She doesn't want anyone to hear her but I know. I can hear it. I can feel it. It makes the glands under my ears burn like I am drinking lemon juice. The word makes my head hurt, and my mouth dry. I can hear in Grandma's voice that it does the same for her. Cancer. She looks at me. I know she is trying to discern what I am thinking.

I wonder what you see when you look at me. We talk about the cancer like it was part of the family too. I know you don't see me, or do you? I know you must see your daughter, but not much, because I'm not as beautiful as she was. You look at me and see her; she would look at me and see you. You look at me and see your mother. Who will see me? Perhaps my daughter?

Grandma likes to speak of Daddy with affection. I know she is right. Even though she knows about all the other women. She still cannot

dispute the fact that he tried, somewhat. Tried to make a family.

Tried to make something from nothing. Tried to bring together all the people that really weren't there.

Cancer. It came and sat down at our table. And one by one, we each got up and left it there. Nobody came around to eat again. And dinners used to be so important with us, they were so much fun, until....

It came for her and took her in the evening, and we knew from then that Grandma would have to bury another child. I couldn't stand in the hallway and listen to her cry anymore (true I did use every elixir I could to block it out) She couldn't carry herself away, or drown herself out, or not just go sit at the table. No. This was her child.

I wonder, would you have done the same for me? Your only daughter? The other Taurus in your life? It doesn't take much to ask you now....after all, you're dead, so I win.

Grandma sat at the table. She and daddy cooked dinner and served and cleaned up, and cancer sat back and picked its teeth and belched at desert and asked for coffee...we pushed ourselves away hungry.

But Grandma, Grandma stayed. She never turned an eye or winced or blinked. She sat next to her child and spoon-fed her. She lifted her up and brought her from the table to her bed, with my father by her

side. Caressing the thin shell that was once so exquisitely beautiful...Grandma would sing before her daughter would fall asleep in her husband's arms. I would just sit, trying to drown the silence of a dysfunctional suburban soundtrack.

No one can ever speak badly about that man, Grandma would say. Grief makes you crazy. It makes you see things, and do things that would only come to fruition if you were not in your right mind.

Perhaps out of sheer necessity. Imagine, what those with broken hearts and sound capacity have been driven to.....

I suppose he had to go a little bit crazy. Supplemented by the fact that he was crazy to begin with. But Grandma understood that, even when the rest of us didn't. She had the best of intentions and infinite wisdom. And spoke with the fragile twinge that made her melodious voice shake (she is music to me), but she wasn't there. She didn't live with him. She didn't watch the fits of crying or the weeks where we didn't know where he was, or the worse. He destroyed all of her pictures; there were no images of her left in the house. The ripe, buxom, young images, from the timid Jamaican girl in the passport photo, or the shy blushing bride in the wedding pictures... or the stunning brown woman who stared intimately at a lens, poised atop a beach chair, thick hair blowing, brown eyes fixed, long limbs still

and perfect, captured on a Hawaii beach at honeymoon's sunset.

Perhaps he felt that those memories were just his own. Perhaps he had to quiet the voice. Perhaps he was just that crazy. Perhaps we have all forgiven him. Perhaps.

What has this done to the fabric of family? To those whom we claim to love, but are forever bonded to otherwise, and regardless...

But there is strength still. I do know from whom I derive it. I know it is God, and I know he is manifest in this great woman. Who better but Him to know that I would need her so badly in those first years, and I would have her again in the formative, and it would in turn prepare me, and later save my life. Who but Him would have known that again she would provide oasis, and sustenance, and life, and love, when a broken woman riddled with disease was no longer able. Who but Him? Is this a grand design? ? Is this more than a circumstance? ? I stand in awe. ?

I ponder this gift and never felt so important and insignificant wholly and binary. This leads to the next family chapter, the next soul chapter, the next chapter God has written for me, and for her, and her, and them, for we are all linked.

I wonder sometimes what you must really think of me. I wonder if I ever made you proud. I wonder if you will ever fully appreciate what happened. I wonder why of all other things...

It is silly to spend time asking an unanswerable question. Especially when there are other answers to be gleaned. That would make me happy I suppose. I ask your mother questions and the answers come, and for the first time since you died they make sense.

First of all, let me just extend my deepest apologies, and sincerest condolences. I never knew it was hard for you; I never even fathomed a guess because I was so selfish and hurt. The pain you caused me was so visceral and life altering, there was a time when I even hated God. I'm glad to say I am not there anymore, and your mother was right (thank you for her, by the way) forgiveness is good for the soul.

I can write this now.

I forgive you.

And I love you very much.

I can imagine what it is like as a little girl when it happened to you.

You said you were so scared, I wonder if you ever told your mother. I thought about asking her many times, but I never did. I imagine I never will. I do wonder, if it happened to her.

I know your first husband was an asshole. Is that why you stayed with my father? Was it just a little bit of fear coupled with the complete dejection of the whole species? If I were you I wouldn't have faith in them. I suppose I can't thank you enough for things, most of all, enduring as long as you did; could.

I will always remember you as being one of the most beautiful women on the planet. I don't just say that because you were my mother. It is a truth. You were stunning. Everyone thought so, especially me, and Grandma. I know I am not as beautiful as you were. Before the dinner guest you were ethereal, but then...

At first all you lost was your hair. That hurt, cuz girl, you had some hair. It grew back so fast, and you began looking like yourself. But then the guest got hungry again. Why didn't you just give him the breast? All this maybe could have been avoided, maybe you would be here arguing with me and Grandma.

He took everything the second time. Your hair, your color, your weight, your lungs. I remember when you were so skinny I could pick you up. It didn't really occur to me then, not even those times you would make me lotion your skin and I would look at your body in stoic amazement because I didn't want to upset you. I did so much just to not upset you. Even after you died.

I wonder if you really did love me. I wonder why you lied. I guess its ok; you were trying like hell to maintain some semblance of motherly authority, even though I had been lost to you as almost a baby.

The funeral and the time right after was hard. That's when Daddy really lost his bloody marbles. That's when, even after you were gone, Cancer just wouldn't leave.

It lay low in the air, like malaria. A sad, sick, palpable breath that permeated your nose and eyes and chest when you walked in the house. So much so that a day before you died, even the houseplants checked out. There was not enough window opening and draft getting to change the air of sorrow that cancer exhaled from some purgatory after the death. Maybe that's life's last good one, life's own death rattle that shakes rank, still particles into the universe, where the person you loved once took up space. Maybe it was you still, trying to make a way.

The casket was beautiful, even if the festivities following were carnival like. Grandma picked out a beautiful blue dress, and we all admired how well it hid the pounds of padding the undertaker needed to use to make the body look viewable. The subject was so worn and thin, even with padding and on stilts inside of a casket, she

looked delicate, drawn and pretty like a hungry Ethiopian bride. Then some woman Daddy knew sang, even though we all were amused and appreciative, no really remembers what the hell she was singing about. I remember thinking that they had probably slept together. The work lacked a bit of the subject, a beauty of beauty, some class, a bit of style or grace: it was bucolic and formal. There weren't even hints or traces of the children, just the sisters in law. Maybe that's why it was so awful.

Grandma had remained so diligent right after the actual time of death. She was on a mission to find the dress. She was on a mission to console her other children. She was on a mission to counsel her granddaughter who was in total shell shock. In retrospect she moreover was on a mission not to grieve. She couldn't ignore the monster anymore as she stood over the casket of her only daughter and the supports began to lower so we could seal the body under the marble containment. It was as if the descent of the subject had pulled the pain right out the woman, like a specter freed from a body.

I watched as first I heard the monster surface from the back of my grandmother's throat. Its ghost traveled up so until its very motion contorted her sweet wrinkled face and made her gasp for a breath that should have not been audible to anyone with a human heart. It

made her wince a bit, and then bent her over toward the casket and prepped her body to lean forward, joining her subject in the ascent. It was as if she were pulled by her womb and God. I grabbed her hand in time for her to let out a sound that I choose not to remember or write about. It was sadness and pain with a hole in the middle. She shook my hands as she cried, and stood and we laid eyes on the woman in the casket for the last time in this life.

Then it was sealed.

It is well. Hmmmmm. With my soul.

This was a momentous to do. All the family came in from the island, to this island. There were so many tears and unrecognizable faces. I hugged my grandfather for 2 whole minutes before he realized it was me. I cant wrong him, there are so many of us, but only 1 eldest daughter. He could barely stand up, but he was happy to see her, and I was happy he was there, even though I planned on leaving as soon as I could get back in the car.

I listen to the song play again. It is well. Hmmmmm. With my soul.

I never prayed so hard in my life for words to be truer.

Breeanne

I believe in happy endings. Mostly because I believe in fairy tales.

Magic. Miraculous occurrences that make people believe in the spirit of God.

I believe that life is a deliberate and bounding fire line.

It burns you.

But then it illuminates you.

I am the life in this story, as we all are. As we come vaulting into this world and stride onto hot coals we are all trying to fight fire with fire, just as I am.

I buried the dead because I wanted to live. And I tell the story because I want to speak. Being silent and invisible lasts only as long as you let it. Only as long as you are able to stand it. Like breaking forth from a womb. Like taking the first leap off of the springboard into the river of life.

Like jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire.

I have always and still do believe in the healing and redemptive power of love. In all its vexing and venerable forms. I also believe that it at times is necessary to learn in stark and stunning fashion what love is NOT so you can know what real love is when you find it.

For a while, I didn't get the moral of that story. Much later I realized that even though those around me had a blueprint of love and caring from their experiences growing up, I would learn that I had one of the opposite. Much later I learned that the blueprint I was given was the perfect formula for happiness, written upside down and backwards. Much later I would learn that in order to get passed my past and live and love and forgive, I would have to view these memories like a spiritual dyslexic, and learn from their disjointed sequence that I needed nothing else in this life than what God has already given me.

Later, much later, I would know that was bullshit and fall in love with a man who would show me that God has so much more for me it couldn't fill 50 books.

But later, much later, I will try to fill those book pages with something anyway.

Call it a thank you note.

Or a love song, maybe written by Michael Jackson.