

**HOW LONG
CAN A
WHITE GIRL
LAST ON
NEBRASKA
AVENUE?**

AND OTHER STORIES
OF WAYWARD YOUTH

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For anyone who's ever felt pushed...

how long can a white girl last on nebraska avenue?

The terminal at Tampa's Union Station was hardly the grand affair Ellie had conjured in her teenage mind during the previous twenty five and a half hours aboard a cramped Amtrak train. There was no sailor in white sparking up a cigarette after plopping down a military-issued duffel bag. No elegant dame in a flapper skirt leaning into the strong arms of a handsome man in a fedora and a three-piece linen suit. No conductor in a blue uniform urging a lovesick soldier to board the departing train. The only man in uniform Ellie spotted had to be one of Tampa's finest. This she discerned from the badge on the chest

and the gun on the hip of the muscle-bound brute, who crossed the room and escorted a bearded man with leathery skin and dirty clothes to the door after he'd fallen to a prone position on one of the benches. Sleeping, Ellie deduced, was forbidden in Union Station if you looked a certain way.

Ellie put a cigarette between her lips; but before she could strike her lighter, an angry voice reverberated from behind the ticket counter. Her eyes met those of the bellower, who emphatically pointed to a sign that indicated smoking wasn't allowed in Union Station, either. With no hint of apology, she pocketed her lighter and left the cigarette dangling from her lips as she slowly crossed the floor. Her heels tapped a rhythmic cadence against the tile, suggesting the dramatic exit of a femme fatale on the silver screen. Thus far, Tampa wasn't living up to its reputation—at least not the one Ellie had imagined.

Her month-long, late-night Internet research binge revealed that Tampa was the Cigar City and birthplace of the lap dance. A place where gangsters once reigned supreme, like drunken dinosaurs obliviously treading over the home of a future strip

mall. Sin City, Ellie had decided, wasn't in Las Vegas. Even if it was, she didn't have a cousin living there as she did in Tampa; so the point was moot. This was where her summer adventure would occur. Rent-free accommodations had an undeniable appeal; and given Ellie's budget, zero was fast becoming her favorite number.

Wikipedia hadn't mentioned a word about the humidity that slugged Ellie across the face the moment she stepped from the terminal to the outside world. Dusk was settling; an indigo haze followed the retiring sun over the horizon as lights winked on across the downtown skyline. Ellie glanced at her watch out of habit even though she knew it was still on back-home time. After a quick calculation of the time change, she knew her cousin was late. Typical. She hadn't seen Klause since she was 10 years old, but knew even then he was flake. Apparently not much had changed.

Her cell phone was dead, having run out of charge somewhere along the Florida state border. Even if she could call Klause—and the thought of using a Union Station pay phone did present a certain

nostalgic charm—her lay-about slacker of a cousin wouldn't answer. She'd wait for him, but not for long.

Ellie leaned against a light pole and lit another cigarette, striking a pose and artfully exhaling smoke as though she had an audience. When it was gone she lit another, but only after she stamped out the former. Chain-smoking held no dignity, she had come to reason, recalling the scores of pot-bellied men back home who gave the practice anything but a glamorous earmark.

Three smokes later with no sign of her cousin, Ellie decided she'd had enough. Suddenly her father's insistence to ship her luggage seemed like a clairvoyant stroke of genius, since her imminent trek would certainly be more chic without the burden of dragging a suitcase.

Cities were meant to be explored on foot. Ellie couldn't recall the origin of the phrase, but she fixed it in her mind like a mantra as she crossed the parking lot and headed north on Nebraska Avenue toward a place called Sulphur Springs, where her cheese-brained cousin dwelled. She couldn't say for sure how much ground she'd have to cover, but the trek

promised the kind of adventure Ellie knew the City of Tampa wouldn't include in its tourist brochure, which made it all the more appealing. She could imagine the veins in her father's neck pounding through his skin at the thought of his only daughter traversing such an urban landscape at the onset of night. Her parents were against the trip from the beginning, but which of Ellie's decisions *weren't* the luddites against these days? They threatened to disown her when she dyed her hair a neon shade of lollipop-pink, and were a phone call away from summoning a priest to perform an exorcism when she pierced her nose. When they saw Ellie's tongue had fallen prey to her recently acquired piercing fetish, her father had turned to bribery and offered to pay for this summer frolic. Maybe it was a parent's way to send his only daughter on an oats-sowing excursion before he combusted. Good thing the old man didn't have a clue about the tattoo she'd permanently decorated her back and nether region with sometime during the wine-sloshed night before she hopped a plane and then a train bound for Tampa. That would have sent the veins in her father's neck hurtling right through his skin.

She was far from home now. Far from the overbearing scrutiny of her parents. She was free. America the beautiful was built on freedom and the desire to live without the pains of oppression, was it not? God bless America, Ellie thought as she turned away from the crashing waves of interstate noise and began her trek up the sidewalk along one of Cigar City's most notorious thoroughfares.

With her cell phone out of commission, traveling music would be up to Ellie's imagination. She cognitively ran through all her playlists searching for the appropriate tune to set the mood. As she crossed the tracks just before a street named Cass, the bass-driven rattle of an approaching vehicle interjected its own musical suggestion. Ellie knew what kind of buildings lay ahead. Here in Tampa they'd be called projects; back home, they wouldn't be spoken of. Hip-hop, too, was something of a de facto outlaw where she was from, yet the indiscernible lyrics emitting from the approaching vehicle brought a smile to Ellie's face. She knew it was common practice in a place like Tampa to turn an automobile into a subwoofer-on-wheels that blasted its volume

from street to street. Another ritual that was frowned upon back home.

The sounds drew closer. Closer. Still closer, until Ellie could stand it no more and had to turn to see what approached her. Instinctive reaction forced her to jump from the sidewalk like an off-balanced bullfighter to make way for the source of the music. It was then Ellie realized that the sounds she had heard came not from a car roving the urban landscape, but from an oversized tricycle. Mounted between its rear wheels was a mammoth speaker that pulsed like a throbbing heart with each clattering beat of the music. The rider, a shirtless man with rippling dark skin and a head of frizzled black hair, did not look back at Ellie as he crossed Cass Street and headed east toward the projects. Innovation, Ellie thought, as she reestablished her path on the sidewalk. Wikipedia hadn't mentioned that about Tampa, either.

She didn't see the elderly man sitting under the overpass, at least not right away. But she could hear the sound of his harmonica lofting its ardent melody into the rafters of the highway barrier above, where it danced among the passing cars as though they were

trading fours in a heated jazz improvisation. As Ellie advanced beneath the overpass, she saw the man in dark sunglasses seated against one of the mighty pillars, with his back to Nebraska Avenue and his heart focused on creating soulful sounds Ellie had only ever heard in old movies.

This was a street performer whose efforts were certainly worthy of some spare change, yet Ellie knew she had none. She didn't have any money save for a fistful of travelers checks her father had demanded she attain before her departure. Ellie felt remiss that she couldn't show her appreciation to the artist by contributing to his offering pot, as she knew was the native custom, but soon realized the man had no pot to speak of. Perhaps, she reasoned, his intention was simply to fill the Tampa night with sounds the city had long forgotten. A romantic gesture Ellie silently commended as she walked past the man, who paid her absolutely no attention as he continued to blow his mouth harp with a rigorous passion that seemed to intensify as she drew near. He was blind, which didn't seem fair given that the man was more than holding up his end of the relationship with the street. He

would never see the smiles his music elicited from passersby who enjoyed his melodies for free.

She opted not to look back as she continued north, crossing beneath the other side of the overpass and stepping out of its amplified theatre. A stretch of sidewalk soon distanced her from the art she, too, had enjoyed for free, though she could still hear the sounds. And as they grew fainter and farther away, Ellie wondered why her father could ever object to her coming to such a cultured place.

The sounds of the harmonica waltzed in Ellie's head for the next hour or so, oscillating between harmony and discord against the visuals of the Tampa night. They seemed to perfectly fit the commencement of a church ceremony as a flood of negroes exited from and congregated around a worn brick building whose urban holiness could use a makeover. Most of the crowd didn't notice Ellie, but those who did seemed eager to break eye contact. A few of them merely shook their heads.

Upon viewing the flashing lights of a police cruiser in an abandoned lot several blocks later, Ellie tried to purge the harmonica's soulful tune from her mind, believing that the score was inappropriate for the present scene. Then she saw the handcuffs forcibly slapped on a man with utter defeat in his eyes, his freedom taken by a light-skinned officer who seemed to be enjoying himself a bit more than the situation warranted. In that moment, Ellie identified with the soon-to-be-incarcerated captive. What had he done to deserve punishment? The man seemed so incapable of harm that she felt certain his only crime must be that he was misconstrued in the eyes of authority. Ellie knew the frustration of being misunderstood by the world and felt a tinge of guilt over the fact that she was free. After the man was forcefully pushed into the back of the police car, he locked eyes with Ellie through the bulletproof window—and his glare silently told her something that quickened her stride. *You're nothing like me. Remember that.*

As Ellie continued north along the avenue, historic architecture gave way to a seedy run of motels

and liquor stores. The new scenery brought with it a predictable change in the local inhabitants, who seemed perfectly at home amid the gritty urban landscape. The night had grown more humid and the cast of Nebraska Avenue moved about the stage with a collective intoxication that Ellie found to be welcoming.

Half a block later, Ellie could sense a car slowing along the road just behind her, as though the vehicle had singled her out for an impromptu binge of roadside stalking. She peeked over her left shoulder and saw what she instantly recognized to be a sports car, perfectly equipped for an American midlife crisis. Nothing too flashy or exotic, but enough contour and horsepower that Ellie suspected it was compensating for some lacking aspect of the owner's life. She could see this particular owner waving at her through the windshield. When the car pulled alongside Ellie, she peered through the passenger window to find a clean-cut man in his thirties. A banker maybe, or even a doctor. The driver motioned for her to come closer and Ellie obliged, lighting a cigarette and taking slow, confident strides toward the car. Her thin black skirt worked its magic against her long teenage legs as she

approached the window. The man's eyes widened as Ellie leaned into the vehicle. She blew a pall of smoke into the car, a gesture that seemed to captivate the driver who spoke in short, nervous bursts that Ellie couldn't understand, not that she really tried. Beads of sweat lined the man's forehead as he reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out a wallet, as though he might ask Ellie to make change. Their exchange was interrupted by a police car that charged past and rocketed north on Nebraska with its lights flashing and sirens blazing a pounding alarm, buzzing the duo with a force of air like the passing of a single-car locomotive. By the time Ellie returned her eyes to the driver, he had tucked his wallet back in his jacket and had his car in gear. Ellie stepped back as he pulled away from the curb and quickly made a three-point turn, heading away from whatever attracted the pursuing police cruiser.

She turned back to the sidewalk to find a rail-thin woman with skin like molasses, who was wearing a tight purple dress and platform heels Ellie knew she herself couldn't walk more than a few feet in without risking a broken ankle. This woman, who must have been at least 6 feet tall, spoke in a deep raspy voice

Ellie couldn't understand despite its musical inflection. When the heel-walker realized words were failing, she resorted to charades and pantomimed the act of smoking a cigarette, then pointed at Ellie's hip and locked eyes with her, indicating to Ellie that this was the part where she was supposed to give the stranger a smoke. Ellie complied, and the stranger placed the cig between her lips like a man and sparked it like a construction worker.

While Ellie thought the two might share a moment together, the woman looked at her with hard eyes that said *You're not welcome here, bitch*. Just to make sure Ellie got the message, the heel-walker gestured for Ellie to continue on her way by waving her gaunt hand as though she were trying to shoo a fly. Ellie caught the drift and headed north without so much as a word or a glance back.

The advancing hour did little to quell the smothering heat. Judging by the intoxication levels displayed by the patrons of a concrete building Ellie took to be one of the all-nude establishments that Tampa was known for, she could tell the evening's festivities were well underway. The locals let her pass

without much fanfare, which, given the attention she'd attracted thus far, surprised Ellie. Any misogynistic sentiments along this stretch of Nebraska appeared to have taken a backseat to loud and heated man-to-man exchanges Ellie didn't try to decipher, content to press on as the clouds debated whether to hose Nebraska Avenue down with a nocturnal shower.

She doubled her pace when the first clap of thunder smacked the sky like a gong laced with shards of glass. She dashed through the pouring rain until she reached the shelter of a bus stop just shy of a road called Lake Avenue. Fitting, given her now-saturated state.

As she ran her fingers through her hair in attempt to wring out any lingering rainwater, Ellie noticed she wasn't alone in the bus stop. An elderly man with a full head of white, curly hair—save for a fist-sized bald patch at the crown—sat on the bench facing Nebraska Avenue as though he were waiting for something. Not a bus, she reasoned. She doubted even a city like Tampa provided its denizens with public transportation at this late hour. This man looked like he would know that. No, he was here for

other reasons, like a broken soul waiting on a friend who fudged the date and thought he meant *next* Tuesday. Maybe, Ellie thought, the two had something in common, as she had come to believe her vacant-minded cousin had done just that and was probably on his second round of nachos and ranch dip by now. Yet she could see in the man's slouching posture and tired eyes that something was missing.

Perhaps it was simply youth. Clearly she was on the opposite end of life's pendulum, closer to the beginning than the end. Whatever road metaphorically lay ahead for Ellie was one she had plenty of time to explore, and she could always alter her route if she felt like changing direction. Youth afforded such luxuries, which is why she could never fathom her parents becoming so critically flabbergasted at every bold move she decided to make. Why roam the paved and predictable path like everyone else, especially if it led anywhere near the dull apathy of people like her short-sighted parents? Ellie's ultimate goal this summer was to embark on the first steps in taking ownership of her life. She knew and took comfort in the long the road ahead, relishing her freedom of choice but cognizant that

time only flowed one way. Forward. There would eventually come a time when she would look back and ponder her choices, a time when youth itself would be a memory. Her legs would fatten. Her breasts would sag. And all she would have of her blooming years would be the memories of her juvenescence. Maybe thoughts of yesteryear were the company the man in the bus shelter kept. When he cleared a newspaper off the bench space beside him and gently smiled at Ellie, she knew he was politely asking for a friend. Ellie could do that. It was raining, after all.

She eased herself onto the bench as the rain intensified from a calm shower to a relentless pounding of the pavement and aluminum structure she now shared with the silent stranger. Any attempt at conversation would be futile given the ambient noise of the rainfall, so the two taciturnly stared at Nebraska Avenue and watched the slanting sheets of precipitation descend from the heavens and assault the street Ellie had chosen as the entry point for her summer adventure in Tampa. Steam rose from the ground like ghostly spirits taking a much-needed walk, and Ellie couldn't help but acknowledge the utter lack of tension between her and the stranger. His

aura was void of any threatening presence. He simply stared out at the rain.

Her thoughts returned to the speculation of what the man may have been thinking, though she was certain there was no need to break the tranquil silence between them by speaking. She simply wondered what was promenading in the stranger's mind and began inventing a narrative backstory to satisfy her curiosity. He was a dancer in his youth, a good one who had his elbow-brush with fame and came to the point where the achievement of a dream was within reach. He needed only to rise to his toes and hold the position just long enough to grasp it. Then came the girl. She was beautiful, of course. Yet there was something more in the sparks that flew between them when the two locked eyes for the very first time while waiting for a trolley at this very stop. It was love. A love so divine he would give up his selfish ambitions and marry the girl in a small ceremony attended only by the closest of friends and dearest of loved ones. The couple made the kind of plans lovers do when life is open with the thrill of possibility, when the number of tomorrows far exceed

the count of yesterdays. The world, however small, was theirs.

Then came the war. To Ellie, it was a conflict she would only know of from a history book or a Wikipedia page; but to this man, it was the hell that took him away from the woman he loved. There was a defined enemy, as American wars tend to have, but this man's only true foe was time. Every moment he spent away from his beloved was one in which he fell closer to death by way of a broken heart.

The war finally ended and the soldier returned home to his love. They started a family—a large one with seven kids, who grew up happy and had kids of their own. The man watched it all through the same eyes that now stared out at Nebraska Avenue. The same eyes that gazed upon his beloved every day and night in the hospital as she withered down a dying path, afflicted with a disease the doctors were helpless to reverse. Decades of vibrant life had passed since the war, yet the man now found himself again in a battle against time. Life's pendulum had swung the other way, and he found himself pleading with the same God he had so often asked to speed up the next sunrise during the war. Now he humbly begged to

extend what little time he had left with the woman who made his world.

Time, Ellie knew as she wiped a tear from her eye, would never stop. The best we can hope for is a rainstorm; a reprise from time's advance that allows for self-reflection.

The rain slowed and eventually subsided, prompting Ellie to rise to her feet and continue her journey. Before she embarked down the freshly cleansed avenue, she looked at the stranger who still held his gaze on the parallel road. She leaned down and gently kissed his cheek before crossing in front of him and taking her leave from the shelter they had shared for a spell. Though Ellie didn't know how much time had passed since she arrived at the bus stop, she was certain she'd remember those moments forever. She never looked back as she walked away, but in the coda to her imagined narrative, she could see the stranger as he maintained his vigil at the bus stop that had changed his life. He was smiling.

She crossed from Nebraska's east bank to its west at a street called Chelsea, and aimed her stride toward the glow of festive lights that donned an auto

service station, which boasted a pile of tires stacked so haphazardly high they must have been put there on purpose. Whatever party had taken place here was over, and now all that remained—save for the cups and beer bottles strewn about the grounds—were two men seated on smaller tire stacks listening to music Ellie knew to be Latin in origin. Salsa, perhaps. One of the men, a portly soul who had likely sweated through his tuxedo hours ago, started to sing in a language Ellie took to be Spanish. It was a tongue she didn't understand, yet somehow grasped the meaning through the man's passionate tone and the universal language of music. She couldn't help but find the groove inherent in the song and move her body accordingly.

The second man stood and approached Ellie with a matador's purpose in his eyes and a caballero's grace in his stride. Men didn't come in this variety where Ellie was from. Tall and lean, with olive skin that glowed and rippled in all the right places. His shirt was open in an after-hours custom that seemed charming to Ellie. He extended his hand to her like a gentleman from a more civilized generation, and in a deep and level voice said, “¿Puedo tener este baile?”

Ellie didn't understand the words, yet took his hand in hers upon catching a glimpse of the man's smile as the glint of the lights sparkled in his captivating eyes. He pulled her towards him in a way that made Ellie spin and land with perfect form into his body, where she stayed for an instant, then returned to her starting position when the man extended both of his arms and eased her into a pose in synch with the beat. He wanted to dance, and clearly this was a man who knew how to get what he wanted.

The lead was his and the man deftly moved both of their bodies over the asphalt dance floor as though it were center stage at the most majestic ballroom Ellie could conjure. Her heart began to flutter as he locked his eyes on hers and moved his hips with such force Ellie couldn't help but follow and wonder what other powers he may possess off the dance floor. He spun her into him and then away in a tantalizing rhythm that made her blood rush, never wavering in his lustful gaze or commanding posture. The music reached a crescendo, and the man pulled Ellie towards him for the finale, lifting her from the street to the heavens and landing her back to Earth in a bent drop Ellie hoped would end in a moonlit kiss.

She peered through her lashes to find his eyes locked on hers. This was the moment, she thought. The perfect culmination of a flawless routine. She closed her eyes gently, so as not to seem desperate or overly eager, and waited to receive his soft lips on hers. The anticipation only heightened her surging energy, a tactical move made by a man who understood the nature of timing and the inherent romance involved in marrying action with moment. Another beat passed, then Ellie felt a pull and suddenly she was on her feet.

Ellie opened her eyes as the man took a stately half-step away from her. He looked deep into her soul and smiled graciously, bowing as he still held her hands in his.

“Gracias,” she said softly, cursing herself for not learning Spanish in school.

“El placer era mía,” the man returned. Just then Ellie’s alluring dance partner was playfully attacked by two children, who each grabbed one of his legs like they were expecting a ride. “Papa!” they shouted in unison as the man bent to their level, scooped them up into his arms and lovingly spoke to them in his native tongue. All the while he backed his way to a woman who stood in a doorway, backlit by a

light from within that outlined her curvy silhouette. When all four were together, Ellie could see that this was a family whose love for one another would never dissipate, no matter what challenges life may instigate. Ellie turned and strode north on Nebraska Avenue, deciding it was better to not look back, a policy she'd successfully maintained thus far. But she couldn't help herself; and as she glanced over her shoulder, she saw the man's gorgeous eyes one final time as he waved to Ellie in a way that seemed to wish her luck on the journey ahead. Then he placed his hand on his wife's swollen belly that would bring another child within a month. Love, Ellie thought. There was no mistaking it.

It was well after midnight when Ellie crossed the Hillsborough River and veered off of Nebraska Avenue at an old theatre called The Springs. Her cousin's home was down a street named Sitka, which Ellie could instantly discern was void of the culture and charm held by its more colorful urban neighbor. Dew clung to the canopied foliage like stragglers at a party that ran dry of booze some time ago. It would be morning soon, and Ellie replayed the events of the

night's journey in her mind, bringing each of Nebraska Avenue's individual characters to life for a final bow before she reached her destination. The oversized-tricycle rider, who turned his three wheels into a rolling subwoofer. The blind harmonica player, who transformed an under-the-bridge thoroughfare into a soulful music haven. The churchgoers, who looked at Ellie as if she were a sinner-in-training. The handcuffed dark man in the police car, who warned her with his eyes not to tempt the same fate. The tall woman in the tight purple dress, who guarded her territory like a mother lioness. The stranger whom she imagined had lost his beloved, waiting and hoping for one last glimpse of her at a bus stop before rejoining her in Heaven. The dancer. That wonderful dancer with whom Ellie fell foolishly in love, even if only for a cinematically dreamlike moment filled with passion and movement.

Ellie had come to Tampa in search of memories she could capture for her life's vault. She sought both experiences and emotions that would endure and could never be commandeered by her parents, who suddenly seemed less of an overbearing nuisance and more like caring souls whose naivety would forever

hinder the job Ellie knew they were sworn to do. She would write them a letter tomorrow, a note that would omit the gritty details in telling them she'd arrived in her personal Sin City unscathed. She'd keep her tattoo a secret, but she'd be sure to mention to her parents that she loved them. She'd write it in a way that let both of them know she meant it.

Based on the overflowing ashtrays and crushed beer cans that cluttered Klause's front porch, it was likely that his domicile would be as dingy on the inside as it was on the outside. This thought waltzed through Ellie's mind as she extended her hand and pounded the weathered front door with the business end of her open palm. Her battering maintained a steady cadence, as Ellie knew her cousin would certainly be up at this hour, whatever it was, yet might not move from the comforts of the couch unless she maintained a constant thumping that was persistent enough in its annoyance to inspire action in its apathetically lazy audience. After about a minute, the door opened and Klause emerged in a mustard-stained tank top that stretched with the hundred or so pounds her cousin had put on since last she saw him.

“Pusbrolis?” he wondered aloud in his native Lithuanian tongue, “Jūsų traukinys buvo šiandien?”

Of course he'd mixed up the dates of her arrival and admitted as much, yet Ellie couldn't help but smile knowing the serendipitous reward her cousin's incompetence had provided.

“Jūs vaikščiojo visą kelią čia?” he asked. Ellie nodded to acknowledge Klause's suspicion that she had, in fact, walked all the way from the train station to his home, then placed a cigarette between her lips.

“Jūs neturėtumėte padarei, kad pusbrolis. Tai bloga kaimynystė,” he said with plausible concern in his tone.

Ellie paused for a moment to consider her cousin's assessment that she had put herself at risk by walking alone in such a dangerous neighborhood. Then she casually uttered, “Aš ne pastebėjau.” Her calm reply indicated that she hadn't noticed any of the perils that her conservative cousin lamented. Then she lit her cigarette and crossed the threshold into the home that smelled as it looked. Along the way, Ellie decided that she would add learning English to her summer adventure in Tampa. As she took another drag of her smoke and recalled the strong hands of the

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dancer, she thought learning Spanish might not be such a bad idea, either.

closure of choice

I knew before Rone even kicked down the bedroom door. We'd jacked the wrong place. Pushed up on the wrong person. Got seduced by the wrong kind of greed. When I heard the click of the trigger and saw the smoke erupt from the shotgun's barrel, I tried to be cool. Relax and keep my head. Think. What now? But I knew the time had come for us to get what we had coming. I knew even as I saw Rone's body fall back through the doorway like a busted mannequin. We'd made the wrong choice, and now...we were fucked.

Two minutes earlier, we were in the car with Shawn Randall discussing the plan. Rone had scoped the joint and knew from the overflowing mailbox and

the pile of plastic-sleeved newspapers that the owner was on vacation. It was a sweet pad on the far end of Davis Island. A two-story crib that looked like it could belong to a doctor or a lawyer or some honkey who made a fat living off of kids like us. It was an easy score waiting to be made. Kick down the door, then head straight for the bedroom. Grab the jewelry, nothing else. A quick in-and-out job. Back in the car and bounce out of the neighborhood with the house alarm still wailing. That was the plan. Not much different from any other place we'd ever hit.

The day before, I was with Chandra at her place. I remember thinking I was gonna get some. But the look on her face when I walked into her room, as she sat on the bed with her arms wrapped around a teddy bear, told me something was wrong.

“What’s up, baby?” I tried to be sensitive and sincere. Chandra just glanced down at her nightstand, where I saw a small plastic stick with a purple handle. I didn’t even have to look to know what it showed and why she wore the face she did. The stick was a pregnancy test. I was going to be a dad.

Three days earlier, I came home at dawn. Not drunk, but close enough. I opened the fridge looking for a sip of Kool-Aid before realizing my grandpa was sitting at the kitchen table with the lights off. I jumped back as though I'd been caught by the cops. Seeing Pop didn't make me feel any better.

"You doing wrong, son. And you know it."

"Ease up, Pop. Just having fun is all."

He shifted his weight and kicked a chair out from under the table. His way of inviting me to one of his talks. There was no choice to be made on my part, so I sat down and tried to act sober.

"I pray for you, son," he said in a voice that sounded less like a preacher and more like concerned family. "I pray you'll get off this path you're on and make something of the life your mother gave you." Pop didn't waste any time before bringing up my mom. Normally he'd let me get in at least a few words before he called on her ghost to set me straight. He must be tired.

Last week, I was just another confused kid trying to be hard on the outside because I was insecure and scared on the inside. Seemed like

everyone had an opinion on what direction I should take. Teachers. Guidance counselors. Pop. After a while, the voices collide into each other like a massive pileup on the interstate and form a wall of noise that lurks at teenage ear level. I knew there were choices to make, but I couldn't decide on a path. Truth is, I wanted to be like Jericho Jackson.

"School's for suckas and fools," he would say from the driver's seat of his black Benz with tints as dark as Nigeria. He never went to college. Dropped out of high school when he was seventeen. Now he was living large with a heavy pocket of Benjamins and all the ladies flocking to him like he had the antidote. He was a hustler. Pure as the street. I wanted to be like him.

A month ago, I took the SATs in a stuffy library at a school I'd never been to. It made sense that I'd be taking test to get into college at a white school. All the posters in the hallways suggested kids actually liked filing into class here and enjoyed listening to teachers spout useless facts about things like the Byzantine Empire. The teacher that gave the test kept her eyes on me the whole time. Thirty kids in the room, each

with the same motivation, and she locks on me like I might not just cheat, but steal something on my way out. A proctor, that's what they call people who preside over standardized tests and tell you to put your pencils down when time is up. She was like a security guard at a department store. Her only job was to make sure the token nigger in the room stayed in line.

I came across a question that made me think of something my Uncle Winston told me once.

Select the underlined word or phrase that needs to be changed to make the sentence correct. Some sentences contain no error at all.

The students have discovered (A) that they (B) can address issues more effectively through (C) letter-writing campaigns and not (D) through public demonstrations.

(E) No error

“Those tests are culturally biased, and not toward our culture,” he said with a cigarette hanging

from his mouth and his greasy hands cranking a wrench under the hood of minivan. “But you don’t got no choice. It’s they rules. You goin’ make sumptin’ of yourself, you gotta play by ’em.” Winston, from what little family history I know, never went to college. Dropped out of high school in the tenth grade. Got busted stealing a Mercedes that ended up belonging to a judge, and did four years in what he liked to call “the state college with a dress code limited to orange.” That’s where he learned about engines, in prison. Some people go to a four-year university to learn what they need to know so they can be what they want to be when they grow up. Uncle Winston learned how to keep soccer moms’ rides on the road while he was in jail, where the only test to get in involved crossing the line and being in the wrong place when the cops found you.

Six weeks earlier, Rone and I pulled our first job when we stole a Porsche parked in the lot at International Mall. Boosting it wasn’t the hard part. The trick was not drawing attention to ourselves as we walked through the parking lot before we got our hands dirty. We needed to be two kids no one paid

attention to and couldn't recollect when the cops took statements. I played the part. Rone got high and was singing Beyoncé tunes like a little kid and would get defiantly louder if you tried to shut him up. So much for a low profile. Despite his blowing our anonymous cover, I needed him since he had the skills to jimmy the lock, disable the alarm and hotwire the ignition. He needed me because I could drive a stick. He sang the whole time; didn't even stop when we pulled up to a traffic light next to a cop. As if we didn't look conspicuous enough—a black kid driving a Porsche that costs more than a home in the hood and a tatted white boy with a gold grill singing *All the Single Ladies* at the top of his lungs. I almost dropped a deuce in my pants when the cop hit his lights. If he hadn't sped away in pursuit of a suspect more probable than us, I might have.

Two months before, I got shot down by a girl who wouldn't give me the time of day, much less her name. She told me something about herself at least, saying she didn't "waste time with broke-ass losers from the hood" and that I should call her if I ever get some game. Jericho Jackson saw the whole thing and

asked me to step into his office, which meant get into the passenger seat of his Benz and listen to him spew about the ways of the world while we passed a blunt back and forth.

“Shorty like that ain’t interested in your *nobility*,” he said, taking a deep toke and holding the harvest of smoke in his lungs for both practical and dramatic effect. “You wanna get with that, you gotta have a hustla’s game, son.”

I knew what he meant, but didn’t know how to break in. Right about the time I was trying to figure it out in my head, Jericho told me about a Porsche that needed boosting. Said it was a two-man job and that I needed a partner. Right about the time he saw me wrestle the details in my mind, he blew a cloud of smoke into the air between us and said, “Her name’s Chandra, in case you wondering.”

* * *

Breaking into a home is a high most people will never know. The rush of adrenaline as the crowbar pries open the portal to a forbidden world is like a drug the takes over the body and demands to be

fed. I felt it the moment Rone pushed open the door and we crossed the threshold into a suburban dream. Surprisingly, there was no alarm. The decor of the house made it look like a movie set: expensive furniture with no sign of plastic covers, houseplants in the typical corners, family photos on the wall. I knew something was wrong the second Rone picked up a picture of an elderly white woman and talked to it like a back-alley prostitute. He was high on something other than fear and energy, and now he was flitting about the home like we were invited and had all the time in the world. I caught up to him in the kitchen, where he was staring into a refrigerator that was damn near as big as my bedroom. His glassy eyes wavered then found mine when I grabbed him by the shoulders and tried to shake the plan back into his intoxicated mind. He laughed like a hyena and sang *Oops!... I Did It Again* by Britney Spears as he danced down the hall toward the bedroom where the score was hidden. All he has to do, I thought with fading optimism, is pop the safe. Then we're out. I drifted into the living room, plopped myself down on a couch like it was a Rolls-Royce and gave Rone a mental clock of 60 seconds. If he didn't make a dent by then,

I was pulling the plug on the job and we would live to fight another day. Right about the time I let myself relax is when I glanced down at the coffee table and saw the half-finished glass of wine with a splotch of lipstick around the rim. Someone was home.

Rone's singing stopped. I sprang to my feet and ran to the hallway, unable to speak and warn my partner of what I'd discovered. I never saw the gun, but I heard it and felt the entire house shake like an earthquake when the shot exploded from within the bedroom. Then I turned the corner of the hallway.

I could see Rone's body convulsing on the floor. Instinct told me to run. Get out of that house and hightail it as fast as my legs could take me. Then I heard the squealing tires of our getaway ride tear across the street and flee into the night. I never trusted Shawn Randall and couldn't figure out why Rone insisted we bring him along on this job. He had a thing about him where he acted tough on the outside, but inside you knew he'd turn to pudding if anything serious ever went down. Turns out I was right, but Rone would never know. He was dead.

I thought about giving myself up. Throw my hands in the air and await whatever fate would be

mine at the hands of surrender. Then I saw the shotgun and the pair of small hands with red nail polish desperately loading another round of shells into the chamber. I ran out the front door. Pure instinct.

A vortex of swirling red lights greeted me in the front yard. Cops. At least three cars' worth. There was no place to run. I thought about retreating back into the house. I'd tell the lady with a shotgun that we broke into the wrong place and didn't mean her any harm. She'd understand.

Instead, I dropped to my knees as instructed and locked my hands behind my head. As the cops pushed my face into the lawn and forced a pair of handcuffs on me, I thought about Chandra and my unborn kid growing in her belly. Then I thought about my Uncle Winston's words of blue-collar wisdom. He was right about the rules, but I should've listened to my Pop about the choices I make. I'd made mine; and as the cop read me my rights, I wondered if I'd ever get a chance to make another decent choice in my life.

Closure of Choice

Four-and-a-half minutes ago, I had a future with unlimited possibility and choice. Now I'm just a crying punk facing involuntary closure.

the closet

Lisa heard the screams and tried to make herself as small as she could. The closet she was hiding in was pitch black, not much bigger than a phone booth and smelled of bleach. But for now, it was her only refuge from the terror that reigned just beyond the darkness of her sanctuary. The sheer panic that owned Lisa in the moments leading up to now had waned, as she realized the frequency of the screams from the nearby hallways had decreased in the last few minutes. But she was still every bit as scared as when the whole thing began. She could hear her own breathing and wondered how loud it may sound to the outside world.

Lisa hadn't heard gunshots for a while. Five minutes. Maybe more. She couldn't know for sure. The shooting began without warning and turned the school into chaos sometime during second period when Lisa was in the library. She had left her cell

phone in the reference section when it began; and for the life of her, she couldn't remember how she got here or how long she'd been in hiding. The bell signaling the end of second period hadn't sounded, yet. Or had it? Maybe she had missed it amidst the screams. She wondered if it was all over; perhaps somewhere in a distant corner of the school, students and teachers rejoiced and hugged each other knowing there was nothing left to fear. Fear, in all of its mental and physical anguish, was still very much alive in Lisa. She knew she couldn't get up. Fear had paralyzed her.

She had fled the library and made her way through the 700 hallway when it began. The hall was infused with kinetic horror. An aimless frenzy of kids and adults bound in a reckless pact of mass confusion, like an anthill that had been trounced by giant with a deadly weapon. No one knew what to do. They just ran. Lisa couldn't run. The fear had taken hold and wouldn't allow her to move any faster than a sloth in a waking dream.

As the halls thinned of people, Lisa slithered her way to the nearest exit. She turned the corner at Mr. Barlowe's room and instantly froze. At the end of

the next hall stood a hooded figure dressed in black from head to toe. The figure held a rifle.

Lisa was paralyzed. In a moment the figure would see her and end what had begun with hail of bullets she knew she'd never escape. And so she retreated back down the 700 hallway and slipped into the janitor's closet next to Mr. Barlowe's room. She expected the figure would follow and in a moment open the door to her chamber. She kept the lights off and desperately tried the lock the closet, realizing then she needed a key. So she settled on the floor and waited. And waited. And waited.

She hunched on the floor wishing she could melt into its surface when she heard the doorknob turn. The door opened slowly, spilling a shaft of light into the closet. Lisa held her breath and tried to be still. Knowing she could never face the end with any kind of view, she closed her eyes and waited for the penetrating shot that would vanquish her fear forever. Each passing second was agonizing, a teasing killer's sadistic attempt at humor. But the end never came. Instead, the door closed.

Lisa opened her eyes to blackness. She could hear ragged breathing other than her own and knew she wasn't alone in the closet. She stayed perfectly still.

Minutes passed but felt like hours. The halls were quiet now. The two strangers in the pitch-black closet were silent, with only Lisa aware that she wasn't alone. The knowledge comforted her, though she didn't dare give herself away. The darkness seemed to slow time to a standstill. How long had it been? Maybe it was over and the gunman had given up. Maybe someone would come through the halls and announce that it was over, that everyone could come out now, as though this had all been a game of hide-and-seek. Lisa listened with hope. Then she heard two more shots.

She flinched, causing the shelf behind her to flex—a bumbling reaction Lisa wished she could take back knowing she had given herself away.

“Who’s there?” The voice was thin and frail with uncertainty, though clearly male. Lisa remained silent.

“Who is that? Answer me! Please!” Lisa’s unseen companion uttered in a strained voice. Trying to be quiet, but wanting to shout. Its timbre carried a

desperation that Lisa could sense was deeper than her own.

“I’m here,” whispered Lisa, trying to sound warm and reassuring. “I’m sitting on the floor.”

“Who are you?”

“It’s Lisa Capehart. I’m a sophomore.”

“The door won’t lock.”

“I know,” said Lisa. “It only locks with a key.”

“How long have you been here?” The voice was still gripped with fear.

“I’ve been here the whole time,” said Lisa, “since the shooting began.”

“Who did it? Who did the shooting?”

“I don’t know. I saw someone, but I don’t know who.”

“Who? Who did you see?” His level of panic was rising.

“Who are *you*?” Lisa thought familiarity might make them both feel better in the darkness. Yet her question was met with silence.

“I’m Lisa Capehart,” repeated Lisa, this time with an intense focus on being calm. “I’m a sophomore. Who are you?”

“Ricky. Ricky Sampson. I’m a ... I’m a junior.”

“You’re a free safety on the football team, Ricky. You had three interceptions last year and were second team all-conference.”

“How’d you know that?” Ricky’s panic had turned to genuine shock.

“I’m on the yearbook staff,” said Lisa. “I was looking over this year’s stats when...” She trailed off. “...When all this began.”

There was silence for a moment.

“I don’t know you,” Ricky said.

“It’s OK. You know me now.” Lisa let out a sigh that calmed her and seemed to ease Ricky, if only for a moment.

“I’m gonna hit the lights,” he said.

“No!” Lisa managed to keep her voice at a low whisper. “They can see that from the hall. Leave it off.”

Ricky complied, but Lisa could now feel his physical uneasiness hang between them, creating an even more desolate mood that neither of them wanted to acknowledge.

“Lisa?” Ricky sounded calmer, though Lisa wondered if the darkness helped their situation or made it more uncertain. “Is there room on the floor?” Ricky sat before she could answer and Lisa could

sense his presence next to her. He was still a stranger, but she felt safer knowing he was now by her side.

“I saw someone,” said Ricky in a struggling low voice. “I saw someone ... get shot.” Lisa listened, not wanting to hear the rest, but knowing she had to for Ricky’s sake. “It was Jeremy Skoelnick. I was running through the 900 hall. I turned into the 700 hallway, and he was there. Standing in the hall. He looked at me. Like he was scared. And then it was like his chest exploded. But he just looked at me. Even when he was on the floor, he looked at me. He reached his hand up to me. And I ran. I ran and I hid in here.”

Ricky was in tears. Lisa could tell. She had known Jeremy Skoelnick since the fourth grade, though they weren’t friends these days. They weren’t anything now. Jeremy was dead. His mother didn’t know it yet, but Lisa did. His lifeless body was probably still in the 700 hallway, just outside the closet she and Rickey shared. Jeremy Skoelnick. He was always smart. Good with computers, and funny. Lisa had Geometry with him in the ninth grade. He understood the proofs and theorems that had baffled her for most of the semester. He was smart .

“Did you know him?” Lisa quietly asked.

“I made fun of him last week,” Ricky fought back more tears. “I don’t even know why. Something he was wearing, maybe. He didn’t say anything. He just looked at me.” Ricky couldn’t fight the tears anymore. He cried and Lisa listened.

“I can’t get his face out of my mind. He just looked at me.” Ricky’s whimpers grew louder. Lisa knew she had to do something or they’d both be found.

“Ricky, listen to me.” Lisa’s voice was steady. “I knew Jeremy. We talked yesterday. He wasn’t hurt by you or what you said. He didn’t have any hard feelings.” It was a lie, but it made Ricky feel better.

“I’m sorry,” Ricky’s sobs regressed to a snuffle. “I’m so sorry.”

“Ricky,” Lisa tried to sound as sincere as she could, “I know you’re sorry, but we have to be quiet. We just have to be quiet and stay here until it’s all over”

They leaned into each other in silence. The halls were now ghostly quiet and Lisa tried to occupy her racing mind by replaying the images from when it all began. It was second period and she was in Yearbook. Tuesdays were research days; and on this

morning Lisa was in the library at one of the computers, looking at football stats that she might use in the layout for the upcoming annual. Everything seemed so normal. The library was quiet, just as it had been on every Tuesday of the year thus far. Then she saw Jenn Rogers run past her table like a flash. Then Lisa fell back in her chair like something had kicked her. Then she was up and in the hallway, moving against the grain of panicking student body. Then she was staring at the figure. Then she was lying on the floor in the closet. She started to shiver.

“Are you OK?” Ricky asked.

“I’m cold,” said Lisa. Ricky tried to put his arm around her. It was an instinctive reaction. An attempt at comforting her more than anything else. Lisa cringed at the touch, prompting Ricky to quickly withdraw his arm.

“I’m sorry,” Ricky blurted, “I just —”

“It’s OK. It’s not you.”

“What the hell is this?” Ricky said aloud to himself. “Why are you all wet?”

“I’m not wet.”

“Wait a minute.” Ricky sprang to his feet and hit the light switch, which harshly illuminated the

closet in a flickering instant, causing Lisa to squirm. Ricky looked at his hands. They were covered in blood.

“What the...?” He looked at Lisa on the floor below. She writhed in pool of her own blood, her clothes stained red. “Jesus, you were shot?”

“I’m OK. Turn off the light.”

“The hell you are. We can’t stay here. We’ve got to get you to a doctor.”

“No! We have to stay here.”

“Lisa, you’ve been shot. I don’t know how bad, but you’ve been shot. And it ain’t gonna get any better if we stay here. We’ve got to get you out.”

“I can’t,” Lisa’s voice trembled as tears rolled down her face. “I can’t walk,” she whimpered in a barely audible rasp. “I can’t walk.”

Ricky dropped back to the floor and put his arm around Lisa, who buried her face in Ricky’s chest and sobbed. Rickey held her until her heaving gasps slowed down.

“Lisa, listen to me.” Ricky was calm as he spoke, “There’s a first aid kit in Mr. Barlowe’s classroom.”

“No.”

“It’s just at the end of the hall.”

“No.”

“I’ll only be gone a minute.”

“Don’t leave me.”

“I’ll only be gone a minute. Then I can help you.”

“Please, don’t leave me.” Lisa held him tight, refusing to let go. Ricky stood and pulled away until Lisa had no choice but to give up her grip.

“I’ll only be gone a minute. You can time me.” Lisa imagined he smiled, aware she would have no way to know for sure how long he would be gone.

“Ricky—,” her voice trailed off. Ricky slowly turned the knob and cracked the door open enough to assess the hall. He could see Jeremy Skoelnick’s body between the closet and Mr. Barlowe’s room, and knew he’d have to look in Jeremy’s eyes again. He glanced back at Lisa and saw she had slumped to the floor. Her prone body was fading, and Ricky couldn’t help but think she didn’t have much time left.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he said. Lisa summoned every ounce of strength she had to impart one final request before Ricky ventured into the unknown to save her life.

“Turn the light off, please.”

Ricky took her in and hated himself for thinking this could be the last time her ever saw Lisa. Then he turned off the lights. She didn't have long, Ricky thought as he stepped out to the hall and closed the door behind him, leaving Lisa guarded only by the hauntingly familiar company of darkness.

She had no way to know for sure how long Ricky would be gone, so she started to count. First in her head, then continuing aloud. "...eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen ... thirty-four, thirty-five ... seventy-nine, eighty, eighty-one ... one hundred eighteen, one hundred nineteen..." Two minutes had passed. Then she heard a gunshot.

The shot was close. Closer than it had been before. Lisa wanted to run to Ricky. She wanted to flee from the closet that had suddenly started to feel like a coffin. She tried to get to her feet and rise to the door, but she couldn't stand. She couldn't move. She was bound to the floor and resigned to accept whatever fate lurked beyond the closet. She closed her eyes.

Minutes passed. Maybe hours. Lisa had tried to continue counting, but drifted in and out of consciousness. She opened her eyes as she heard the doorknob turn and was blinded by the flood of light that spilled into the closet. Lisa looked up and saw the figure in black. The silhouette moved toward her. She closed her eyes and waited for the end, hoping it would be quick and without the pain she wondered if she could even feel anymore.

She didn't see her life pass before her eyes as she thought she might. Instead she saw her ninth-grade Geometry class. She saw a half-worked proof on the board next to what she imagined were congruent triangles. She looked to her left and saw Jeremy Skoelnick, who seemed to understand. He was always smart. It would be over soon. She'd come to accept her fate and had finally evolved beyond the paralyzing grip her fear had held over her. She felt hands on her body as she rolled onto her back. Then she heard Ricky's voice.

"Lisa! Lisa!" Rickey was alive with excitement. Lisa opened her eyes and saw him. She tried to get up and felt herself restrained.

"It's OK, Miss Capehart." This from a broad-shouldered man Lisa took to be someone who could

help. "We're going to take care of you. Just try and stay down. We're going to help you."

"It's over, Lisa. It's all over," Ricky said as he knelt by Lisa's side. She looked at him as the paramedic slid an oxygen mask over her mouth. She breathed slowly, as instructed.

"I told you I'd be back," Ricky said with an easy smile that warmed Lisa. She felt her body lift to the heavens, only to be lowered and then secured onto a gurney.

She wanted to be clever and say to Ricky with a movie star's sarcastic grace, "Took you long enough!" But she couldn't muster the strength, so instead she simply smiled and reached for Ricky's hand.

"You're going to be OK," Ricky said with a tear in his eye that told Lisa he meant it. She wanted to say, "Thanks to you," but would settle for, "I know." When neither would come from her mouth, she squeezed Ricky's hand, looked him in the eyes and smiled.

She knew, and so did he.

14th street

Darren has speed. Everyone knows that. Kid's got some moves, too. He'll make ya miss in the hole and in the open field. And when he gets through the secondary and can smell the goal line, no one's got the jets to catch him. Least not in our league. This year he led the 112s in rushing, scoring and interceptions. No one was even close to him. Kid can hit like a truck, too. Hardest hitter in the league, for sure. That's why the game plan is usually pretty simple on the field or in the street. Get the ball to Darren and get out of his way. No one our age can stop him.

On 14th Street, the Watsons' mailbox is one end zone and the Jacksons' is another. We always play two-hand touch below the waist, 'cuz no one

wants to get tackled on the asphalt. And none of us wants to tackle Darren. It's one thing for him to juke you on the grass and leave you eating dirt with your jock in your hand; but on the street, you've got more to worry about.

He was killing us that day. I should know, because I was covering him on defense and he was sticking me on offense. He was beating me so bad he gave me two nicknames. Every time he burned me for six he'd hand me the ball and say, "Nice coverage, Toast." And every time he shut me down or jumped my route he'd call me "Buttah"; except he'd draw it out so it sounded like *buttaaaaaaaaaab*. It didn't help when I dropped an easy pass that hit me right in the numbers.

"Hit ya in a bad spot, Buttaaaaaaaah?" Darren taunted. Then he stepped up his game when I botched another gimme. "You want some sour cream with that buttaaaaaaaah?"

Buttah and Toast. Darren said I should keep myself company on the chess team. That one got a few laughs from the fellas.

Sometimes I think that the only thing Darren's better at than playing football is trash talking. He

practices, I'm sure. Must have a notebook somewhere with all his material. You should hear him in a real game. He'll set you up in the first quarter and finish you off with a punch line in the fourth. He's the master. He might not be old enough for the varsity team, but his mouth sure is.

The game has to stop when a car comes. Sometimes if the car turns onto 14th from Northbay, you can get another play off if the offense is headin' toward the Jacksons. I had my back to the Watsons' place and lined up about 5 yards from the goal line. Darren had that look in his eye as he lined up at wide out. You couldn't read his route. Didn't know if he was going to beat you with a fade or a slant. You just knew he was going to beat you. He had the look.

I heard the rattling of the trunk from a car droppin' bass behind me. Any second and the game would stop, but I never took my eyes off Darren. The rattle came closer until it felt like it was playing with us.

"Snap the ball!" Darren shouted. "Snap it, fool!" He wanted another score. Jimmy Tyson was

ready to halt play, but thought better of it when he heard Darren's command.

"Run the play!" Darren was impatient, and somehow I knew he was going for the slant. Something in his hips. Jimmy Tyson self-hiked the ball. Darren stepped to the outside, just like he had when he beat me on a fly pattern the first play of the game. If he ran a corner route, I was toast ... again. I was sitting on the slant. It had to be a slant. He turned his hips and headed back for the inside, but I had position. I swiveled my head from Darren to the QB and saw Jimmy Tyson wind up. Not much of a quick release for Jimmy, but he's got an arm like Michael Vick. I came back to Darren and made my move. I jumped the route and beat the MVP of our league to the point of attack, but the pass wasn't there.

Jimmy Tyson fired high and the ball sailed over our heads toward the oncoming car. "Pass interference!" yelled Darren. I swear I never touched him, but Darren didn't see it that way. "Man," I said, "even you couldn't catch that ball." Darren realized I was right and took it out on Jimmy Tyson.

"Where you throwin', Airmail?" Another nickname, but no one laughed.

“You changed the play,” Jimmy said. “S’posed to run a corner, not a slant.” A lucky guess on my part, but I figured it was my time to be lucky. I smiled.

“What you smilin’ at, Toast?” If I had any guts I would’ve asked if he was going to send in the field goal unit. Instead I settled for satisfied silence.

“Man, get the ball,” Darren said with his hands on his hips like he was Terrell Owens and I wasn’t. I turned and started to run toward Northbay to get the ball when I looked up and saw Leon Spence holding it in his giant hands. Leon is the starting running back for Hillsborough High. To us, he might as well be Adrian Peterson. He’s all-city. All-state. And rumor has it he’s heading to Florida State next year. Probably start as a true freshman. No wonder Darren wanted to get the play off; he wanted to score in front of Leon.

Five years ago, Leon Spence led the 112s in rushing and touchdowns, breaking records that had stood since our dads played. Leon’s records were intact until the championship game of this year when Darren broke both of them with a 78-yard sweep in

the first quarter. He padded the record that day by rushing for 237 more yards and three more scores.

Leon stared Darren down, but the staring contest didn't last long.

"Throw us the ball, Old School," Darren said as he stepped away from us toward Leon.

"What you say, shorty?" Leon fixed Darren with a big-league stare that made most of the fellas drop their eyes to the street. Darren stepped toward him.

"Gimme the ball, Skates."

"You best watch yourself, shorty. You gonna get flagged for unsportsmanlike conduct."

"Man, give us the ball back 'fore you cough it up like you did against Lakeland in the regionals last year."

Leon's nostrils flared. That play cost Hillsborough a shot at a state title. The minute Lakeland recovered, Darren laughed and told everyone in the stands how he would've scored. But now didn't seem the best time to bring that up. Leon slowly closed the gap between him and Darren, but Darren didn't seem too interested in backing down. The driver and passenger doors of the purple Chevy

opened simultaneously and Reggie Rogers and Dimitri Ballamore got out. They were the left side of the best offensive line in the city, and it looked like they were ready to protect their star runner even if it meant a little illegal use of the hands.

“Nah, shorty. Think I’ll keep this here ball,” Leon said with a what-you-gonna-do-about-it grin. “Maybe y’all kids can find a jump rope and play hopscotch.” The O-line laughed as Leon turned and headed to the Chevy with our ball in his hand.

“Leon!” Darren yelled, but Leon stonewalled him.

“Leon, gimme the ball!” Nothing.

“A’ight. Go ahead and take the ball. That’s the only way you can stop me!” It wasn’t Darren’s most creative line of the season, but I figured it was enough to save face for the day. We could always think of something better when we told the kids at school. But true to form, Darren wasn’t done trash talking. And it was the next line that proved to be the game changer.

“Go ’head and keep walking ... pussy.”

Leon stopped in his tracks. His entire upper body seemed to grow as he turned around.

“What you say, boy?”

“You heard me.”

Reggie Rogers and Dimitri Ballamore laughed, but I couldn't tell at who. Jimmy Tyson cowered a bit, but then again he nearly cried when Leon fumbled away the season in the regionals. I tried to look tough, but knew deep down that I wasn't fooling anybody.

“Man, who's this kid think he is?”

“I tell you what, soft hands,” Darren drew and imaginary line in the street. “This is the goal line. You on offense. I stop you, you give the ball back. You score ...”

Everyone waited. “You score, you can have my bike.”

Leon chuckled and looked back at his boys. “What do I want with your rickety-ass bike?”

“Figured since I've got all your records, maybe you'd want a chance to take something of mine.”

Leon held an imposing stare on Darren that seemed to last as long as a TV timeout.

“It's your funeral, shorty.” Leon slipped off his shirt and chain and handed them to Reggie Rogers, who looked like he'd just been asked to write the entire playbook by memory.

“What you doing, man?” asked Dimitri Ballamore. “Let this kid be, man.”

“Where we gonna put that bike, Leon?” Reggie asked. “Besides, we s’posed to be heading to Alabama John’s.”

“Ease up, R & R,” said Leon. “I ain’t gonna take the kid’s bike. Just gonna teach him a lesson is all. We makin’ one move, let this prima donna tackle air, then we out.”

“To Alabama’s?” Reggie made sure his priorities were in order.

“You know we headin’ to ‘Bama, baby.” Turns out Leon promised to treat his O-line to all-you-can-eat BBQ when he went over 1,500 yards for the season. Alabama John’s had the best ribs any of us knew about. The left side of the line was coming back for seconds when they ran into us.

Darren bent down and laced his shoes. Jimmy Tyson tried to talk some sense into him.

“You crazy, D?” Jimmy pleaded more than asked.

“Be scared on the sidelines, Mother Teresa . You ain’t on the field for this play.”

I thought now was as good a time as any to offer encouragement. “Darren,” I said without much heart.

“What you want, Toast?” Darren bounced and limbered like Deion Sanders ready to receive a punt.

“Watch the cut back,” I suggested. Not much of a game plan, but it was the best I could offer from what I’d scouted of Leon Spence this season.

The senior running back stepped up to position. His chiseled arms and legs glistened as he flexed a final message of intimidation.

“You ready to get schooled, son?”

“Fourth and goal in the regionals,” Darren answered before Leon’s words had left his mouth. Darren slapped the asphalt. They never discussed the terms, but everyone on 14th Street knew that this play wouldn’t be decided with two-hand touch. This was full tackle. It was on.

Leon Spence had built his legend by beating would-be tacklers from across the state with finesse and power. He was a 195-pound version of Darren, complete with the ability to run around or through anything that stood in his way. I’d heard he could bench press 315 pounds and squat another 575. As

bad as Darren had beaten me all day, I knew this was different. This was a varsity superstar with muscle. I just stood and watched and hoped it would be over quick.

Leon made his move. Darren shuffled his feet and took his angle of pursuit. The ground between the two closed with what seemed to be a single stride. I thought about closing my eyes for a second, not wanting to see the outcome. Darren broke down into tackling position. Leon stepped inside and pushed for the corner.

Then it happened, and I'm not sure 14th Street will ever be the same.

Darren uncoiled his body and launched into Leon's legs. It looked like he might get just enough of the Hillsborough High starter to warrant a failed arm tackle. But the last surge of our team's best player hit Leon square and knocked his legs out from under him. His body toppled in place, his chin hitting the asphalt with a thud. The ball bounced from his clutches and wobbled over to Jimmy Tyson. Darren never stopped his feet and leapt up in a single motion after dropping his opponent with a hit worthy of a highlight reel. He looked dead into the eyes of Reggie

Rogers and Dimitri Ballamore, but didn't say a word. The looks on the O-line's faces were all the props he needed.

Darren turned back to Leon, who staggered to his knees like a wounded warrior and looked for the pigskin, blood dripping from his chin. His eyes met his opponent's as Darren stood over him. For a moment it looked like Darren might take the high road and help Leon to his feet. But the moment passed; it wasn't Darren's style.

"Our ball, punk."

Darren made his way over to us and suddenly we felt like 14th Street was our turf, and we knew someday Hillsborough High would be *our* team.

to jada on her 16th birthday

My daughter Jada,

I don't blame you for hating me. But if you knew what I went through to bring you into this world, you might be a bit more understanding.

Today is your 16th birthday. If you're anything like me, it's a day you've looked forward to for a long time. It has to do with an idea called entitlement. That's a word I never understood as a child, but came to realize means what people think they have a right to. It's not unreasonable for a rich girl with rich parents to feel *entitled* to receiving a car or a big party on her 16th birthday. If you're anything like me, you're not entitled to those kinds of luxuries. I guess when entitlement and reality cross paths, the harsh

truth of poverty shows its ugly face. At least it does if you're anything like me.

I'm sorry if this letter is hard to read. You might not know this, but I never graduated from high school. I can read and write, just not very well. But this letter is really important, so I thought about using a business I found that lets you speak into a microphone and hand the recording over to someone who can write well and use the right words to make a letter sound the way it should. They also put all the commas in the right place. This costs money, of course. Not much, but then I don't have much and I couldn't afford professional help. So again, I'm sorry if this letter doesn't sound exactly how it should. I just wanted to tell you as much of the truth as was humanly possible. You deserve that, Jada. After all, it's your birthday.

I was 16 when I had you. You might not know this, but we have the same birthday. I didn't plan it that way, but I was happy when it happened. We'll always have at least one thing in common. No matter what. Hopefully the day we entered this world is the

only trait we share. I want more for you, Jada. Always have.

I come from less than nothing. My mom tried the best she could for someone who had two kids by the time she was a junior in high school. I used to have an older brother, but he got sick and died in his sleep. I was 3 years old, so I guess that means he never was your uncle.

I never knew my dad and as far as I'm concerned never had one. My mom never spoke ill of him, which means she never said anything bad about him even though I know he treated her like shit. Sometimes, when I was a little girl, I would sneak out of my room at night and listen to my mom cry by herself in her room. This would go on for hours and I would listen until she stopped, all the time wondering what could make her so sad. I knew she must have a broken heart. That's what little girls always think. I used to lie awake at night and pray for another man to come into my mom's life. A strong and handsome man who would sweep her off her feet and take us away to some castle, like a hero in a storybook. But it never happened. One morning I walked into my mom's room to wake her up because it was late. I found her

asleep with an empty bottle of pills on her nightstand. She never woke up, even though I waited at the foot of her bed all day with my dolls. Eventually I got hungry and knocked on our neighbor's door and told them that my mom was asleep and we didn't have any food and could I have some of theirs. I remember that woman who lived next door to us gave me a bottomless bowl of ice cream, but I never saw my mother again. When I got old enough to understand what happened, I convinced myself that she wanted to see my brother in Heaven.

Don't ever go into the foster care system, Jada. No one loves you there. The best you can hope for is a family that will feed you and give you clothes and make sure you do your homework. I'm sorry if I sound bitter, but I was in the foster system and I know what I'm talking about. It wasn't so bad at first. I ended up with a family that was really nice to me. We did all the things I thought families were supposed to do. We had picnics, played games together and laughed all the time. The Rudolphs. That was their name. A man and a woman who apparently couldn't have kids and felt they were blessed by God to have

me. I remember telling them all about my mother and they listened. They understood and told me it would be better from now on, and I believed them. I really think I loved them.

Then came the day they told me they had to move and that I couldn't come with them. The Lord had plans for the Rudolphs they said, and apparently I wasn't part of them. I remember they both cried when they said goodbye, which told me there must be a least a little truth to their story. They said they would write to me whenever they could, but to this day I haven't heard from them. I don't even remember where they went.

It goes to show, Jada—and this is a lesson mothers want their daughters to learn as early as they can—that you're on your own in this world. No matter what people say, you never know when they'll leave you, so you'd better not put too much trust in anyone. I know that sounds terrible, but I can say from my experience that it's 100% true and I just don't want you to ever feel the pain I did. I know you've felt abandoned. I know you've had nights where you stay up staring at a cracked ceiling and wishing it would just fall in and make all the hurt go

away. I know because that's how I felt for most of my childhood and you and I aren't all that different. I guess we do share a lot more than just the same birthday.

I can't do much to take away the pain you've already felt in your life. Lord knows I'm the cause of some of it. You probably think it's all my fault, and I can't say that I blame you. I admit that I put you in a hard situation. The least I can do, now that you're 16, is to try to keep you from making the same mistakes I did. Pain is magnified when it comes from a mistake you make as an adult because (and this is important) there is no one to blame but yourself.

And so here it is, Jada. What I'm about to reveal is why you and I are the way we are. It's going to be difficult for you to read what comes next, so if you want to stop and just keep hating me the way you always have, I understand. But if you want to know the truth, painful as it is, keep reading.

I bounced from home to home in the foster system for a few years. Some families were OK. Some had drunks. Some were abusive. But when I turned

15, I landed in a family I thought was like the Rudolphs. They didn't have kids. Husband was a preacher. Wife stayed at home. They gave me the whole spiel about how the Lord had finally given them the child they had asked God to bless them with for years. The husband loved his religion. He quoted the Bible day and night and always made sure I was studying the copy he had given me. We would stay up nights and get up early on weekends to go over the Bible. He would give these long lectures like he was preaching to some congregation, but it was just me. I thought he was crazy, but his wife said he was just passionate about the Lord and wanted others to feel the same.

This family had lost a child some years before. Their 9-year-old girl found her daddy's shotgun and ended her own life when her afternoon play wound up on the wrong side of the barrel. The family was devastated. Of course the husband blamed the devil. He threw out all his guns and went on a mission to get others to do the same. Losing a child, they say, is the hardest thing a parent can go through. I didn't realize it then, Jada. But I do now. They're right, though I

didn't completely understand why the husband was so fascinated with me.

At first I thought he was just being friendly, blessing me and thanking the Lord for letting me be a part of their lives. A chance at redemption, he kept saying. After a few months, he started coming into my room late at night. He would sit on the end of my bed and we would talk about the demons that had haunted us our whole lives and made us afraid. I told him about my mom and he told me about his daughter. We had something in common and that made me feel good, knowing that there was someone out there who was in the same pain that I was.

One night he started to cry and I wanted to make him feel better so I put my arm around him. He just cried harder and I said that it would be OK and that I would be there for him. We'll get through it together, I said. He just cried and asked the Lord to forgive him. Over and over he begged the Lord's forgiveness, like a man guilty of some unspeakable crime he couldn't shake from his mind. Then it happened. I have to explain it, Jada, and it won't be easy for you to hear. So if you want to stop reading, I understand.

We were in my bed when the wife burst into my room with a shotgun that looked like it was bigger than she was. She pointed it at both of us and I hid under the covers. “Recognize this?” she asked her husband. Then she told the entire history of the weapon, complete with the gory details of how they found their daughter lying next to it after she’d blown her head off. The husband said a prayer like he knew this was the end and there was nothing he could do about it.

“Please,” he said in a calm voice. “Please don’t hurt her.” He meant me. Then the woman took two steps toward her husband and put the barrel of the gun on his forehead.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “There’s nothing I can do to the girl that will hurt her any worse than you already have.” Then she pulled the trigger and I thought a bomb had exploded and I cried and prayed that someone would help me. I buried myself under the covers with my eyes shut. If I was going to die, I was going to die like a coward who was too afraid to face her killer.

“You don’t have to look at me,” she said as she reloaded the shotgun and pumped it into the kill position. “Just know that he did the same thing to our little girl as he did to you. That’s why she killed herself, and that’s why someday you will too.”

I didn’t hear the blast right away, but when I did and realized I was still alive, I knew what she had done. She’d taken her own life with the same gun that had ended her daughter’s.

I’ll spare you the details, Jada. Even if I could describe the scene, my words wouldn’t be enough. I see the blood every day of my life. The bodies haunt me when I go to sleep and often wake me in the middle of the night. Tonight is one of those nights when I can’t seem to shake the horror from my soul and so I’ve found comfort sitting in a chair next to your cradle and watching you as you sleep peacefully. As I write this letter, you are only 12 months old. You can sleep through anything, Jada, and I pray that you’re able to keep that up for as long as you live, because true pain is an impossible handicap that stays with you for life.

Someday soon you'll ask me about your father and I won't tell you the truth. I'll do what mothers do and try to convince myself that protecting you from the truth is the best thing for you. You deserve to know the truth, but I feel it's best to wait until you're grown to give it to you. And now that you know, I'll understand if you hate me. I don't even know where I'll be when you read this. I may be dead. I may be in the next room. Just know that your father and I loved each other very much. For the short time we were together, we found shelter from the pain this world put on us. I pray that someday you find shelter of your own. And if you're as lucky as me, I know you will.

Happy birthday, Jada.

Love,

Mom

the poet's laureate

The weed James had on him when he was busted was hardly worth the hassle. A dime bag of rags he'd been carrying from back home was supposed to ease the 17-year-old's transition to the new city. He figured if he couldn't make a quick friend over a toke, he'd at least have calm nerves and not be the kind of jittery mess that had led to his becoming a social pariah on the first day of the last two schools he'd been dragged to in the previous 18 months. That was his plan. It didn't work. Instead it brought down the wrath of his mom, who discovered the bag during an impromptu search of his backpack on the eve of opening day.

The usual fight ensued.

His mom would say (in no particular order):

What are you doing with your life? Why do you think you need this crap? Don't you realize what it does to your mind? You're lucky I found it before the school did, because I'll only ground you.

Then she'd utter the phrase that would escalate the exchange:

If your father were here...

And James would promptly retaliate:

Well, he's not here! He left us because he hated you. He's off banging some college girl and I'm bouncing from school to school like a ping-pong ball!

At this point, his mom would usually break down and cry in an overt display of emotion that surrendered every thread of authority to her rebellious son. But not this time. She was through playing the role of the hapless parent. It was, after all, her perpetually wounded mentality that drove her Viagra-crazed husband into the snatch of another woman—a 25-year-old, at that. It was her passive-to-a-fault nature that made her the obvious choice to be laid off at the last two jobs she'd held in other states. Tampa would be different. She'd resolved to change

her ways and make a stand here. Try as she might to delude herself with positive reinforcement, she knew that desperation fueled her decision to change. There was nowhere left for her to go.

The usual fight ended in an unusual way.

“You’re going to do community service,” she said in a commanding tone that caught James off guard.

“Community service?” was all he could reply. For once, his wielding of words was reduced to mere repetition. “Doing what?”

His mom held his gaze with a smirk that let James know that she had at last gained the upper hand and was poised to maintain it. “Go to your room,” she said in a calm voice. “I’ll email you the details and you’ll spend the rest of the night researching it.”

“Researching?” he asked, as though the word were foreign.

“It’s what people do when they encounter a new situation, James. Deal with it. Things are going to change around here. You’d better deal with that, too.”

James stared at his email's inbox wondering how long his mom had this plan in her back pocket. She knew she would catch him. Sooner or later he'd slip up and she'd be there to nab him in the act. James even pondered whether he had made it too easy for her by leaving the baggie of green in an obvious compartment of his backpack. Maybe deep down he wanted to get caught. Give mom a sense of herself in this new town. Let her be the authority for once instead of the victim. Wouldn't it be great if someone did that for him? Hadn't he been dragged here, to yet another new city and tomorrow another new school, against his will? Didn't he deserve the slack that an herb-buzzed head could provide? Couldn't he be granted at least that?

He grabbed his school bag and pulled out his sketchpad. If he couldn't be high, at least he could draw. With a charcoal pencil in hand, he began to mark the empty page in short, violent strokes that James justified because they reflected his feelings of the moment. He pressed harder onto the paper as he filled in the contours of his father's face, a loathsome

visage whose anger and purpose were obvious in the eyes that focused on the helpless and half-naked woman he had bent over the desk before him and pounded from the rear with his oversized phallus. In the background was his mother, watching the lurid scene play out with horror emoting from every pore of her cartoon-sketched body, realizing that what she saw meant not only the end of her marriage but the death of her family. Her eyes were frozen on the moment that would haunt her for the rest of her days; she couldn't look away.

When it was done, James held up the work for examination. *Not bad*, he thought as he wondered where he might leave it as a message to his snooping mother to get off his back. He had just set the spiteful piece down when he heard the ping from his laptop indicating he had received the details of his occupational sentence. He opened the email and read the message from his mom:

James,

Believe it or not, I think you might actually like this (see attached).

Love, Mom

He skipped the post-reading pause normally reserved for psychoanalyzing his mom's words and looking for hints of a passive-aggressive attack pattern, and instead went straight for the attachment. He read it word for word. Then he read it again. And a third time. Then he looked back at the picture he'd drawn minutes earlier as a vent for his now quelled emotions and as a passive-aggressive attack of his own. He took the picture in his hands and looked at it again, noticing how each detail spoke to a larger, more hateful message. Then he tore his creation into small pieces and filed it away in his trash can where he knew it couldn't hurt anyone. Ever.

The first day in a new school was never the toughest. By now, James had learned how to be the new kid in the halls. He still felt every set of eyes fixed on him when he entered a classroom or traversed a corridor—glancing at first, then staring and sizing him up like lurking alligators in a moonlit swamp. James could deal with the eyes. He could cope with the whispering as the denizens of the school formed

their collective opinion of him. The toughest day for a new kid at a new school was the day the general population made its judgment and relegated the newbie to a definitive social stratum; a sentence that, once read, could never be repealed.

It took three days at the last school for the animals in the zoo to assign him a cage of his own. The delegation was particularly harsh. James was minding his own business in the locker room at the tail-end of Phys Ed when a trio of Neanderthals led by Jackson Walsh grabbed him from behind, stripped him naked and tossed him outside with nothing but the skin he wore when he came into the world. It was a test, of course. James had played the role of the bullied long enough to understand that if he named names in the aftermath, the beatings would only get worse. So he simply sat down on a stone bench in the courtyard, and when a teacher spotted him some minutes later and asked what in the hell James thought he was doing, he held tightly to the Fifth Amendment and exercised his right to remain silent.

James knew his social destination at his new school before the kids did. He was an outsider, a

loner. Part of the cafeteria fringe that never found its way to an inner circle of any kind. James played the part well and saw this stretch of life as the standard suffering any artist had to endure to earn his stripes as a tortured soul—one with the right to show the rest of the world what it meant to be alive through his art.

Then he saw her.

Her face was lit from the overhead fluorescent lights, the same as everyone else in the windowless cafeteria, yet a warm glow cast across her countenance as though the angels had opened a window in the heavens and singled out to James this lone being on Earth. The instant he saw her, it was as though the entire color scheme of James' world shifted from a cold grey to a heavenly gold. She was with friends. Of course she had friends; a girl this divine would never be alone during the high social hour of lunch. Yet she broke from her conversation for an instant and her eyes found James' for an awkward beat that suddenly felt like the kind of defining moment James had until this point in his life only read about. She looked at him and smiled. Then she returned to her friends, laughing along with the conversation that was inaudible to James. But that

didn't matter, because he knew the laughter wasn't snickering at his expense; and for the first time since he could remember, he didn't feel so tortured. He was alive.

The high carried him on a cloud for the rest of the day. James even found himself making eye contact with strangers in the halls, a strategy he'd never even considered employing on any of the previous first days he had dismissed to the trash bin of his memory. Today was different. Today, James reasoned in his thankfully clear and sober mind, was the beginning of something. He didn't even know the girl's name, but he couldn't shake her smile from his mind.

He mentally held onto her eyes as he crossed this new town called Tampa aboard a city bus en route to the job his mother had sentenced him to take. He pulled his sketchpad from his backpack and went to work recreating the face of an angel. James was careful with each stroke, applying gentle pressure to the page to create a soft perspective that maintained

its distance as though from across a room. It was James' way of remembering, a habit he'd picked up as an artistic technique in the fifth grade. Yet it never seemed so refined as it did today.

Today is the start of something new.

Even his mother didn't seem like so much of a menacing drag today. Hadn't she suffered enough? Losing her husband to a 20-something was tougher on her than it was on James. The man was a scumbag, but he'd always be James' dad, no matter how ugly the divorce got. He was a misogynous cheater and soon he'd be James' mom's ex-husband, a title that seemed much more burdensome because it came with a choice. His mom had indeed suffered. James didn't need to replay the crying he'd heard coming from her room during the late-night hours to reinforce the truth. He'd be nicer to her from here forward. Tampa wasn't so bad.

The bus came to James' stop on a major thoroughfare called Dale Mabry. James took a long glance at his work, not knowing if the feeling of elation that resonated through his body stemmed from

pride or love. He decided to be proud as he gently placed the pad back into his pack and made his way to the bus' exit. Love, in comparison, was a scary proposition to James; yet as he stepped from the bus onto the city street, he decided that he wasn't completely closed off to the idea.

He walked down Spruce Street toward his new job, which his research told him was about a half-mile walk. He also had learned that two blocks from his bus stop would be one of the most famous strip clubs in the world. The Mons Venus wasn't much to look at from the outside, and James wondered if he was in the presence of a working metaphor for Tampa. Modest on the outside and sleazy-cool within. He held the thought only for a moment before returning his mind to the more pleasant memory of the girl who'd convinced him that Tampa was filled with possibility.

James' destination was also modest. An unassuming ranch-style house with two Cadillacs in the driveway that looked like they hadn't moved since James was in elementary school. He crossed the scorched yard to the front door and checked the address again. This was it. Just as James raised a

hand to knock, the door swung open and out stepped a weathered woman, with skin like a baseball glove in the waning years of its life.

“You James?” she asked in a tired voice on the verge of exasperation.

“Yes, m’am.” James kept his answer to the point, still wondering if he had come to the right place.

“’Bout time you showed up. My shift ended twenty minutes ago and I was wondering how long you were gonna make me wait. C’mon in.” The woman retreated into what James could tell was a dark house, and it was then that he realized she was clad in nurse’s scrubs. He followed her and felt an immediate change in atmosphere the moment he crossed the home’s threshold.

“He’s in the library,” the nurse said as she threw a bag over her shoulder and placed an unlit cigarette between her lips. “Down the hall. Last door on the right.” James glanced in the direction the nurse had indicated. By the time he returned his gaze to her, she had reached the front door and seemed poised for an abrupt exit.

“Wait a minute,” James said with a hint of urgency. “What am I—”

“Don’t ask me, kid. I just work here.” The door slammed behind the nurse as she darted for daylight and left James in the familiar position of fending for himself. He turned back to the home’s interior and took stock of his surroundings. The place was dark. Heavy curtains hung over the windows like sentries on a mission to guard the domicile from the outside’s penetrating light. Someone lived here, or at least used to. All the telltale signs of domestic life were on display: the smell of food fresh from the microwave, the din of a rumbling air conditioner. Yet James could sense something missing, as though the home he was in was a movie set waiting for a close-up shot that some far-flung producer was about to cancel.

His eyes locked onto the hallway down which the nurse had said James would find the man he’d come to meet. Like the rest of the house, the corridor was dark. Like mood of the house, it was ominous; yet in the moment it seemed less daunting than the first lunch period a new student faces in a new school, a nerve-racking ordeal he’d survived just hours before. James reminded himself that he’d not only survived

the initial midday meal, but he'd come out the other side on a cloud kept afloat by the angel who'd smiled at him with eyes that could make the world stand still. Descending an under-lit passage toward a mysterious and unknown end hardly seemed like such a formidable task. And so James took his first steps into the void, wondering what the angel's name was and looking forward to seeing her again so he could find out.

James reached the hallway's end and decided that he would meet whatever lay on the other side of the door with a cocky-cool demeanor the room's occupant would have to interpret and handle. That tactic had won him an upper hand with his mother so many times in the last year it was bound to work as well on foreign land as it did in his own. Yet before James could even raise a hand to knock on the heavy door, a booming voice from within the chamber called to him.

"Come in," the voice rumbled with a bass-driven timbre that made the hair on James' neck stand at attention. "I've been expecting you." James swallowed hard then pushed open the door, which slowly swung on its hinges and creaked a dissonant

melody as the portal to another dark chamber presented itself.

“Step inside, child,” the voice beckoned. “We have a great deal to discuss.”

James remembered his game plan and stepped into the room with a brash posture. He was promptly greeted by a rich smell he couldn't quite place; and as his eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, he realized he was surrounded by what seemed to be endless rows of shelved books.

“It's dark in here,” James pointed out what was surely obvious, but did so in a tone that would establish with his host the kind of standoffish rapport he hoped to create.

“Perspective, young man. Darkness is beholden to one's point of view. And if yours requires enlightenment, then hit the light switch on the wall to your left before sitting down.”

James ran his hand along the wall's facing until he found the switch. The room turned a glowing amber hue, but hardly came to life with the flood of illumination James was hoping for.

“Now,” said the voice whose body and source James could finally see, “do sit down. We have much to discuss; and as you’ll soon learn, one of us hasn’t time to waste.”

On his way to the center of the room, James confirmed that he was amidst a vast library whose sprawling collection ranged from floor to ceiling in every direction. He turned his attention back to his host, whom James could discern was an aging man with skin nearly as dark as the room had been. The man had a stately paunch and sat in a leather chair like a king whose court had been replaced by the printed word. He wore dark glasses, though that wasn’t what commanded a sense of respect in the man as far as James could tell. There was an aura present, a vibe he emitted that permeated the environment and gave the room a definitive character the books alone couldn’t extend.

The man offered his hand in James’ general direction. “Forgive me for not getting up,” he said. “On days when Nurse Ratched spreads her voodoo, I’m often left in a fatigued state of confinement.

Satchel is my Christian name. Lewis, my surname. But please, call me Satchel.”

“James Wall.” James hoped the tone of his voice matched his host’s in dignity as he immediately felt the experience and life in the hand he shook. “Your nurse’s name is Ratched?”

“Not literally,” Satchel said with a chuckle. “At my age, though, when you learn a new name you have to forget an old one. But she does remind me of Kesey’s Big Nurse.”

“Whose what?” James puzzled, realizing he involuntarily abandoned his game plan the moment the words rolled off his tongue.

“A literary reference. Nothing more.”

“Did you read all these books?” James asked.

“Over a lifetime,” Satchel replied without a hint of superiority. “I managed to write a few, too. At one time I was considered this city’s poet laureate.”

“What’s that?”

“You could say I was the person whom the city called upon to put its existence into words so future generations may understand what it was like to live in our time. It *was* an honor. Now it is all but over. But

enough about the past. Please, take a look around you and show me what you see.”

“Show you? How do I do that?”

“The same way Michelangelo gave us a glimpse into the heavens in the Sistine Chapel.”

“Uh—”

“Draw it, James. Draw what you see. And don’t be afraid to let your imagination get in the way.”

“How did you know that I could draw, Mr. Lewis?”

“Satchel.”

“OK. But how did—”

“I’m blind, James. Or on my way to being so. It doesn’t mean I can’t see the inherent talents in others. Now let your feelings free and draw.”

James retrieved his sketchpad and seconds later, without further questioning, began bringing the scene before him to life. His thoughts veered momentarily from an art focus to one of cause, and he concluded that his mother must have gotten to Satchel in the kind of preemptive strike for which she was notoriously known. How else could this blind man know that sketching was the sole means through

which James made sense of the world? This meeting, he reasoned, must be a test. James was being measured for some elusive reason he chose not to think about as he pressed his charcoal pencil into the paper and recreated Satchel's mysterious lair.

"What's her name?" Satchel's baritone broke a hanging silence that had held the room at attention for several minutes.

"Who?" James replied, keeping his head buried in his work.

"The young lady that's been on your mind since you walked in. I was once a young man myself, James, and can certainly recognize the signs of one whose world has been upended by the power of an entering angel." James suddenly wondered if Satchel had a network of spies following him. Even James' snooping mother couldn't have known about his heavenly exchange in the cafeteria.

"How did you —?"

"You practically skipped into this room despite its clandestine nature. As you've sat in that chair and let your passion for drawing run wild, I've sensed another feeling in you."

“You can tell all that just by sitting there?”

“Intuition, I’m afraid, is what I have in the waning life of my vision. I’ve known that feeling that’s kept you on a cloud since you first saw her, James. Now tell me, please, what’s her name?”

“I—uh. I dunno.”

“You don’t know. Then I have an assignment for you,” Satchel straightened his body and locked his hidden eyes on James. “Go. Take leave and learn this angel’s name. Do it by asking her.”

“But what if she—”

“An angel has stepped into your life, perchance to change it forever. And you want to contemplate the ifs? Go now, James; and tomorrow when we meet again, we’ll talk more about this angel, who by then will have a name.”

On the bus ride home, James watched the lights of Tampa’s street life blur together in a dreamy trail accented by the dusk’s purple glow. He thought about the people that had entered his life on what he understood to be the most wonderfully bizarre first day of school he’d ever attended. Tomorrow he would

ask the angel her name; but for now, he sat at ease with the memory of her smile dancing in his head as he listened to the rumble of the bus's engine. For the first time since his father had wrecked his family, James felt happy. This is what happy felt like, he concluded. Then he wondered why Satchel never asked to see the drawing he had made.

The next day began for James with a series of flutters, which was a departure from his normally sludgy routine. He fluttered out of bed two minutes *before* his alarm would pierce his room with a siren that could be reserved to warn of an enemy's imminent air strike. He fluttered into the kitchen and engaged his mom in the kind of chipper conversation the two hadn't enjoyed since James was in the second grade. He fluttered through the halls between class periods until the heavens parted and shone a light on the angel who stood before her locker in the east hallway. She had somehow evolved into a being James found even more beautiful than the one he had held captive in his mind for the duration of the night. She was exquisite. She was perfect. She was talking to another guy.

James couldn't tell by their body language and gestures toward each other what their relationship was, yet he was immediately overcome with the sickly sensation he often felt when he realized that his inspiration for a painting was not his own but a subconsciously borrowed image from one of the greats. Like a musician who thinks he's found the promising seed of an original song, only to realize he hasn't the next time he hears the radio and discovers the plagiaristic source of his muse. And so he watched from afar as the two bantered, paying particularly close attention to the angel's reactions in search of signs that this was nothing more than an amicably platonic liaison. He kept the core of his focus on her and didn't pay her unknown scene partner much attention. Had his artistic curiosity tapered into competitive jealousy, James certainly would have noticed the unknown male's height along with his tanned complexion and chiseled physique. But James was a romantic at heart and didn't take note of such superlatives. And though he couldn't hear the details of the conversation, James saw that the angel was distressed. The words spoken between

her and this unknown character had stirred pain that was visible to James from across the hall. He wanted to go to her, but waited until her companion took his leave, slamming his hand against the wall of lockers for a dramatic effect the passing crowd took to be a sign of anger. James saw that the angel was distraught and so he went to her.

His approach was direct yet slow, so as not to startle her. Along the way he mentally rehearsed his opening line. When the last wave of passers-by crossed and there was no one between him and the angel, James could see the uneasy state she was in and offered the only words he could think of to fit the situation.

“Are you OK?” He had veered from his script and wondered if he would now come off as nosey instead of sincere. A selfish insecurity he quickly discarded when the angel turned her attention from her locker to James and the two aligned their eyes for the second time in 24 hours. This time, the exchange was void of smiles. James could see the angel was shaken and on the verge of tears.

“I’m fine,” she said in a voice that clearly was meant to sweep her pain from the forefront of her exterior. A ruse James saw beyond.

“I don’t mean to intrude,” James said softly, “and it’s really none of my business. You just seem upset.”

“I’m— No; really, I’m fine.”

“I think so, too.”

“That’s— Thank you,” the angel said as she tried to hide the blushing in her cheeks. “You’re new here, right?”

“Yeah. I’m James.” He held out his hand and waited for the angel to take it, which she did.

“Devin.” James shook her hand; and just like that, the angel had a name. He held his gaze and studied her face, which had taken on a new layer of sophistication. Before him stood a true beauty. A heavenly soul and a glimpse of perfection that could make even the most steadfast pagan see the light and lay claim to the almighty. James burned an imprint of Devin’s face in his mind, for it was a visual he wanted to hold onto long after this brief moment inevitably ended.

The ring of the bell echoed through the hallways like an alarm clock piercing the serenity of a dream. "I'll see you around," Devin said as she slowly backed away, holding eye contact with James for what seemed like an eternity before turning into a classroom three doors away. James felt his mouth involuntarily form a smile as Devin disappeared and the sea of kids in the hallway thinned. He turned around and walked into a wall he quickly realized was a trio of kids who stared him down like a new inmate in a prison yard.

"You lost, boy?" This from the ringleader, who James quickly discerned was the unknown player in the previous scene, when Devin was still an angel without a name.

"Yeah," James said with a sarcastic hint of bravado in his voice. "Can you tell me where the bowling alley is?"

"Stay away from her, dick. She don't give a damn about your ass." The speaker stuck his chest out like a strutting bird. James tried not to laugh.

"And I take it you've got something to say about hers," James said with a grin. He noticed an

extra vein pop out from his antagonist's neck as the supporting duo snickered.

"Watch your ass, new boy."

"Maybe you can do it for me." James knew he had crossed a line that didn't need to be crossed, but couldn't resist arousing a hint of homophobia in the high-strung alpha male whose feathers had clearly been ruffled. It was a tactic James had employed twice in the last year with wonderfully satisfying results that endeared him to the gallery of onlookers. Of course, the first time he tried it, he'd gotten his ass kicked, which makes the play a bit of a risk at any juncture. Still, James was riding high from his exchange with Devin and was now overcome with a rush of self-confidence. In his prideful psyche he decided this unknown jealous lump was the kind of adversary who needed his buttons pushed, no matter how big he was.

"What are you, some kind of queer?"

"Not just any kind," James said, letting his voice slip into an effeminate drawl. "I get off on hot studs like you with an attitude that matches the body."

The stud's nostrils flared as he took a step toward James, who matched his adversary with a step of his own. James quickly discerned that he was giving up at least a foot in height advantage. Not to mention the fact that numbers weren't on his side, either. He'd go for the nuts. It was the best tactic against an over-pumped alpha. He'd keep up the lulling tactic of his queer ruse until the opportune moment, then throw a devastating right into the alpha's family jewels—a blow that would undoubtedly double his opponent over and render him vulnerable to a knockout shot to the back of the head. All of this played out in James' mind as he sized up the circumstances and waited for the moment to present itself. The two would-be combatants locked gazes like toe-to-toe gunfighters in the old west. Then the bell rang again and a heavy voice from the far end of the hall yelled, "Get to class!" James waited for what seemed like an eternity, but likely was just a few seconds, before the challenger stood down and retreated with his posse.

"You look even better going than you do coming," James said in an accent thick with overtone.

The alpha spun around and stared James down from three-quarters of the way down the hall.

“Stay away from her, bitch.” With that, James knew he’d gained the upper hand and won the first battle. That the initial skirmish was a punchless duel played well for James, since he was well aware that he’d never actually won a straight-up fight in his life. He smiled and waved at his departing rival as the posse turned the corner of the hallway and disappeared.

Devin. What a perfect name for an angel.

Satchel wasn’t nearly as enamored with the sound of the angel’s name as James; or if he was, he didn’t show it. He held his position in his great chair and stared into the black abyss of a room that seemed darker than it did on the previous day.

“Time is something you and I see from different perspectives, James.” Satchel’s words were delivered in a serious tone James knew better than to interrupt. “I’ve seen a lifetime’s worth and have lived every moment of it. No instance, save perhaps for the birth of my only daughter, could surpass the

exhilaration I felt the moment I laid eyes on my beloved. May she rest in peace.” James remained quiet and looked at the floor, hoping Satchel wouldn't notice.

“The darkness descends on me. It started the day my daughter left this home and quickened the day my beloved left this Earth. It moves in on us all, James. It's merely a matter of time.” James kept his eyes locked on the ground, the way he did when one of his parents scolded him and shame spread throughout his body like a poison whose only antidote was the restored approval of his reprimanding parent. “This world has a way of making you feel like a lion heart in the morning and an ignoramus by nightfall. Yet for people like us, art is our means of making sense of the codswallop. You, my boy, have a lifetime of days to create and make sense of the world. Mine are dwindling in numbers. And so it is that I've brought you here to ask for your help. In exchange, I can offer the path to your desire.”

“My desire?”

“I can help you attain what it is you want, James. But before I do that, I need you to help me

attain what I need.” James pondered the proposition for a moment, then let his interior monologue slip.

“What do I want?” he asked, realizing he’d perhaps made a mistake by letting the words find their naive way to the outside world.

Satchel chuckled. “Ah, to be blissfully confounded by youth’s perplexity. I, too, was once unaware of what was truly important. Only after she was gone and there was nothing I could do to get the most important woman in my life back did I realize how sacred a gift I had let slip through my fingers.”

“You mean Devin?”

“I mean to help you see, James. But first I need you to help me record my voice. No longer do I possess the vision to read the words I’ve amassed over a lifetime of trying to make sense of the world by creating. When I’m gone, which will be soon, my words will survive me on paper. Yet I have a single poem committed to memory that I wish to record so that my voice will endure beyond the days of my worldly body. You have the means to help me in such an endeavor, James. And so here it is that I kindly ask for your favor in granting my voice a sense of

immortality, if only for the duration of a single poem. What do you say?"

James knew what Satchel was asking. And before he could wonder how this enigmatic man with a penchant for big words came to know that James' father had given him a batch of recording equipment on the eve of his destroying their family by planting his seed in a 20-something secretary, he had an answer for the dying the poet. If his help meant a path to Devin, James surely had an answer; and with two simple words, he cemented his allegiance to Satchel.

"I'm in."

James sized up the situation immediately upon entering the apartment. His mom was on the phone with his dad. This he could tell by the yelling tone of his mother's voice, which quickly gave way to a desperate whimpering she tried to cover up but couldn't once her emotion took hold. It was pathetic, James had long since decided, that an adult would cling to such naive hopefulness. The man was never coming back. James could see this as clear as a glassy river at high noon on a winter's day. Why couldn't his mom come to grips with reality and move on? There

was always the chance that she loved him even after he'd ripped the family apart with the repeated thrusting of his penis into a girl who wasn't that much older than James. Maybe it wasn't about the loss of love for his mom so much as it was simply about loss. Like Satchel, her days of youth were in her rearview mirror. Unlike Satchel, James' mom had years of life left to live and was choosing to live them out under a cloud of hate and self-doubt. Since it had happened, James tried to empathize with his mom. He forced himself to feel what she felt and see what she saw, and so he drew picture after picture depicting the lurid scene of his father impaling the helpless tramp under the horrified eye of his mother with the same prolificacy Christians depict the birth of their savior. After the completion of each drawing, James would christen the piece by tearing it to shreds, a gesture that symbolized the fallout the notorious event had caused in his once loving family. Eventually, he'd intervene in his mother's self pity. He'd say the things that needed to be said. He'd be the rock she needed him to be, the embrace she could bury herself in like a blanket that shielded her from the harshness of the world until she was ready to face it with a rejuvenated

resolve. He'd be there for her when she was ready. This James knew as plainly as he knew that he wasn't ready yet himself.

Once in his bedroom, James erected the easel his mother had bought second-hand at a garage sale back home and armed it with a piece of stretched canvas. He dug out the set of oil paints he'd been saving for an inspiring vision that until now had been elusive. James stared at the blank canvas for a moment, then rewound his mind to earlier in the day when Devin's eyes locked with his and he thought that the world might spontaneously combust. The eyes. That was where he'd begin. And so he did.

He saw Devin exactly four times the next day, with each sighting taking place in a predictable locale at predictable intervals throughout the day. The parking lot before first period. The hallway by her locker after third. The cafeteria at lunch and the courtyard after school. Each time she was with the unknown homophobe, who upon catching sight of James latched onto Devin like a jealous shepherd who was determined to let the world know that this particular sheep was the most cherished in his flock.

James wasn't interested in making a scene. He only cared that each time he saw Devin she returned the favor with eyes that made sure their glance was parting but noted by their intended target. James noted and burned those eyes in his memory, knowing he'd recreate them later on the bus ride to Satchel's.

Recording Satchel proved to be a mundane task from a technical standpoint. The microphone goes here. The XLR cable plugs in there. The levels of Satchel's recorded voice should peak somewhere around minus six decibels. Technical settings anyone with access to the Internet could figure out. Yet the sounds James captured, the words spoken by the aging poet, awakened in James feelings and emotions he never knew existed. Satchel's booming voice filled the darkened room with an energy that rattled James' spine and stimulated his mind. Each word seemed as though it was created by a higher power to serve Satchel's meaning. Fate had dealt the proud poet a hand that might have easily broken weaker men. His sight stolen from his body, Satchel spoke the words of his poem as though they were the last known instance of a tribe's history, and it was James' responsibility to

pass on what he had learned to future generations. This was, James reasoned, a case of an artist making sure that he emoted the last ounce of art from his soul before leaving this earth for the heavens.

The room fell silent for several beats, and even after James knew that Satchel had spoken his poem's final words he didn't dare make a sound. He held his tongue and remained perfectly still until Satchel broke the silence.

"Now go, James. Write in the pieces that will comprise *your* story."

"My story?"

"Your life is your own and can be as extraordinary as your imagination will allow. Go now, and don't be burdened with coming here anymore."

"But what about —"

"I'll be fine, James. Your prowess has given me immortality, and for that I'm forever in your debt."

"What do I do?"

"That's up to you, James. But I might start with asking Miss Devin on a date."

"I meant with the recording."

Satchel shifted his mighty body in his chair and turned his head to James. Then he removed his glasses and looked at the teenager with eyes that could no longer see, yet could penetrate an inner being as if they were in the prime of life.

“You will know,” he said with a hint of a smile. “When the time is right, you will know.” Then he placed the glasses back over his eyes and James took a look around the dim library, knowing this was the kind of moment he should remember for the rest of his life.

James’ paintbrush danced about the canvas with a purpose that night, inspired by a presence he knew better than to disrupt with something as futile as questioning. The muse had taken hold and James’ movements felt as though they were not his own. Some otherworldly being had entered his body and guided his hand by dropping the head of the brush in and out of a surface pool like a dolphin leaping from the sea through the sky to the delight of children in a nearby vessel. His mother called from the hallway outside of his room with a mundane query James ignored with a brush-off comment of his own. His cell

phone vibrated. The world was doing its best in trying to knock James from his track of creative concentration. So James shut the world out, believing that the moment into which he was locked by inspiration was more important than what lay beyond the edge of his canvas and the walls of his room.

He would make his move after school. James would approach Devin in the parking lot when she was with friends and free from the unknown jerk's watchful eye. He'd be smooth, of course, like Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic*—who could naturally be confident in any course of courtship knowing he had yet to live the drawing scene in which the leading lady would succumb to his desire by disrobing to fulfill the inspiration of his paintbrush. James had no way of knowing if such a scene with Devin was in his future, yet he knew his only course was to follow Satchel's advice. And so he made his move.

Two steps into his approach, James felt the arm around his neck take control and redirect his body to an area behind the dumpsters where the more seedy elements of the school were known to satisfy their nicotine addictions away from the watchful eye

of the hall monitors. Despite the lack of blood to the brain the heavy grip was causing, James knew he wasn't being escorted to a smoke session. This was an ass-kicking. James was past the point of negotiation, and he was past the point of mockery in hopes of playing up to the crowd. There was no crowd, only the hands and feet that took shots at James in a rapid-fire assault he could only defend by lying in the fetus position with his arms protecting his face. He didn't know how many there were in the mob. Three probably, though he was guessing based on how many goons the unknown homophobe had with him during their first confrontation in the halls. When the beating subsided, James kept himself covered. Even after the unknown assailant barked his parting line—"Stay away from her, queer!"—James knew there would be one final blow. There always was. And when it came with a kick to the ribs, James played up the groan he bellowed to let the mob know they'd made their point and could go home now.

When he was certain he was alone, James picked his beaten body up from the ground and dusted himself off. As ass-kickings went, he'd endured worse in his high-school career. His ribs stung like

he'd been stabbed and his legs wobbled with the kind of limp that keeps for a week, but his face was in one piece, which was the goal of the defensive strategy he'd employed during the beat-down. If he could just check to make sure he hadn't suffered any embarrassing blows to his mug, he could continue with the afternoon mission to ask Devin out.

That's when he saw his bag and its contents overturned and the recording gear smashed beyond repair. Suddenly, his ribs stung a bit more. His legs throbbed on a new level, and James was almost certain he'd broken his nose. The gear was destroyed and now the rest of him hurt all that much more. He'd failed Satchel. Failed the great poet by not asking Devin out, which James reasoned wasn't so bad. There'd always be tomorrow or the next day. But Satchel didn't have many tomorrows or next days left in his fading life, and now James would have to face him and explain his failures and how he was beaten down by a trio of thugs who smashed his body and destroyed his means of preserving Satchel's words forever.

From around the corner of one of the dumpsters, James surveyed the parking lot full of kids milling in social circles for a few minutes of post-scholastic buzz before heading off to the rest of their lives. He saw the thugs, each with a triumphant, smug grin on his face, as though triple-teaming the new kid was any kind of feat to be proud of accomplishing. That didn't bother him. He would deal with the bullies in time by exacting the kind of humiliating revenge that labels a kid for years. What bothered James was the smile on Devin's face, a smile that had morphed from angelic into fiendish as the unknown homophobe told his tale of conquest over James to Devin's delight. She kissed his rival with a showy display that was intended for an audience. It was then that James' self-delusion came to a crashing halt. The homophobe may be a bullying hoodlum, but he was also Devin's boyfriend. And James was just the new kid who had gotten his ass kicked.

While on the bus, James rehearsed the story he would tell Satchel explaining his failures. The truth would remain at the confession's core, yet James wondered where the tale might benefit from

embellishment. Perhaps he could say there were four thugs instead of three. Maybe even make it a half-dozen. Maybe he could say that he put up more of a fight at the decisive moment, even got in a few good shots of his own before the evil mob overpowered him with their furious numbers. James had lied gloriously to his mother using such tactics over the years; might Satchel succumb to his abilities, as well? James pondered the scenario as he exited the bus and made his way toward the house with two Cadillacs in the front yard. He paused when he reached the front door to mentally confirm his story, then he entered the home hoping for forgiveness and willing to beg, if it came to that.

The light greeted him with an unexpected harshness the moment he crossed the threshold. So disoriented was James that he wondered if he'd mistakenly entered the wrong house. When his pupils adjusted to the change in perspective, James could see that the added luminance did little to enhance Nurse Ratched, whose surly body moved toward the front door with an oversized tote bag around her shoulder and a cigarette dangling from her mouth.

“What’s going on?” James demanded.

“He passed last night, kid. My condolences.” The nurse’s tone was void of heart as she sidestepped James, as though she wanted to make her exit before he could process the information she’d given and avoid any emotion he might let escape.

“Was he happy?” James asked, prompting the nurse to turn back from a two-step advantage she gained on the outside world.

“How the hell should I know, kid? I just work here.”

The local media drew no attention to the fact that Tampa’s poet laureate had passed away during the night. There were no stories in the papers. No mention on the nightly news. This didn’t bother James as much as his meddling mother did the second he walked through the door of their apartment. Upon seeing her only son limp into the home bearing the visible scars from an obvious fight, she was naturally concerned and bombarded James with all the usual motherly questions: *What happened? Who did this to you? Who do I have to call at that new school?*

Wanting nothing to do with his mom's interrogation, James headed straight to his room, but not before making a spiteful quip he knew he'd likely later regret. Then he slammed the door to his bedroom behind him and locked it. Then he was alone, and it wasn't long before his eyes met the ones he'd recreated on his easel. Devin's eyes were the focal point of a painting James intended to be his masterpiece. Yesterday he'd considered it be the greatest work he'd ever done. Today it was just another failure. He had immortalized someone he'd built up in his mind to be something she so obviously was not. A wrath erupted inside James as he methodically removed the work from its mount and promptly tore it to shreds. Feeling better, but not completely satisfied, James then went to work on the rest of his room, tearing it apart in a fit of rage worthy of psychiatric study. Desk overturned. Bookcase toppled. Closet emptied as though it had thrown up its contents. When he was done, he dropped to the floor and tried to catch his breath. His world had been destroyed. Not just today, but over time. Self-destruction, James reasoned, suddenly seemed like a

logical escape. Then he glanced to his left and saw a small package wrapped in a brown paper bag.

He reached for the parcel and examined its markings. James' name was the only word written on the wrapping, though it looked like it might have been scribbled there by an eight year old. Before he could decide if the style was intentional, he tore the wrapping off and discarded it on the trashed floor that surrounded him. His mother was now pounding on the bedroom door, demanding to know what was going on and pleading with James to let her in. He trained his vision from the locked door to his hands, which held a small, hard-bound book. James opened it and turned to the flyleaf, where he discovered the volume's title: *Unsolicited Counsel to a Young Artist*, by Satchel Lewis. On the next page was a flurry of handwritten scribble whose style mimicked the one that bore James' name on the outer wrapper:

Dear James,

Darkness is beholden to one's point of view. Let her in, and may your world be bright with inspiration.

Peace,

Satch

James pondered the words as he'd now all but tuned out his mother's pounding on the outer shell of the bedroom door. He'd known the great poet for only a short spell, yet the man seemed to have James pegged from the start. Perhaps he'd failed Satchel. This he had considered heavily in the hours since he realized Devin had no interest in him. Then James reached into his pocket and pulled out the memory card from the recorder that had preserved Satchel's final notes of spoken music. His mom's pounding on the door had lightened in intensity, yet her verbal pleading continued. *Let her in, and may your world be bright with inspiration.* Let her in.

James looked up and past the ceiling of his room, as though he expected to see the great poet smiling down on him. Then he rose to his feet, crossed his room and opened the door; and when his eyes found his mother's, he could see the paralyzed concern that bombarded her soul since the family had fractured months earlier. In that moment, James wished he was a poet—an artist whose command of language ensured that he'd always use the right words at the right moment, and whose audience would weep

and give itself over because it had been touched on the kind of emotional level that conveyed the ultimate display of human empathy. Since his father walked out, James' perspective had only focused on the darkness, while his mother held on to what fleeting light the family possessed. James couldn't find the right words to console his mother in that moment, yet he was willing to let her into his life so that they may both experience days ahead that were bright with inspiration. He couldn't find the right words, so he settled for these:

“I love you, mom.”

The crowd at the Tampa Museum of Art was full and enthusiastic on opening night. The atmosphere held the kind of charge normally reserved for movie premieres, or so James imagined as he and his mom exited the cab and made the ascent into the building whose neon brilliance surely dominated the city's skyline. As they entered the main space of the gallery, James glanced at his mother and noticed the glowing aura she emitted. Dressed in an evening gown worthy of her own red carpet, she had completed the transformation from basket-case to

goddess during these last six weeks. Tonight was the pinnacle of her metamorphosis. Who knows? She may even meet someone special amidst the crowd that was bustling with the kind of energy creativity can ignite.

The duo moved anonymously through the space until they turned a corner and were met by a pair of eyes that stopped them where they stood and held their gaze as though they had all the time in the world. It was Satchel. On the back wall of a room that had yet to be discovered by the crowds was an oil painting of Tampa's poet laureate that stretched from floor to ceiling. A portrait of the great wordsmith and philosopher as James remembered him, created by the young artist so that his visage would be preserved for eternity. Added to the exhibit was a touch of multimedia flair. The overhead speakers played Satchel's recorded words. The same words James captured and thought he might have forever lost when he was trampled by three thugs who hardly seemed as though they ever existed now.

For a moment, James and his mom were alone in the room. It was a fitting juxtaposition, given that Satchel was responsible for bringing them together at a time when the family was at its most fragile. In the

weeks it took to create the painting on display, James had occasionally wondered what prompted his mother to send him to Satchel in the first place and how much she may have told the great poet about their dire situation, but he never asked. Even in this proud moment of reflection, James was silent. He took his mother's hand in his as the two listened to Satchel's words and stared into his mystical eyes, imagining a future whose possibilities knew no boundary. They stayed there all night. Anonymous among the crowds that gathered and listened and gave praise to the great poet for all that he had given their fair city.

James didn't speak when he turned to his mother and hugged her in a way he hadn't since he was in the sixth grade. He knew Satchel was watching and figured wherever he was, the great poet laureate was smiling. James never saw the three thugs again. Nor did he ever see Devin again. It didn't matter, though; he may have lost an angel, but as he embraced the woman who gave him life, he understood that he'd rediscovered the star that would keep his sky aglow—and knew he'd never lose her again.

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About the author

A product of the Florida public school system, Fred Smith is a multimedia storyteller who believes that the readers of today are the leaders of tomorrow. His work aims to show young adults a glimpse of themselves in a way that relates to the rest of the world and inspires the youth of today to fall in love with the joy of reading.

Visit theonlyfredsmith.com to learn more about his books, plays and films.

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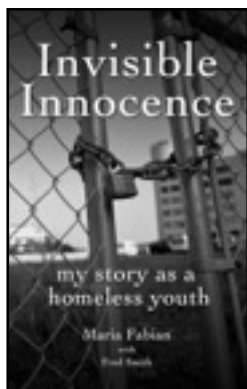
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