

Hurt People Hurt People
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Cover Essay

It was during the first semester of my sophomore year at Purchase College, in my Fiction Writing I class, that I was given my first dose of reality. The class was different than the previous year's Narrative Techniques, in which non-Creative Writing majors could take without prerequisites. I was in my element, with other students also firmly dedicated to writing stories with real emotions, and eager energy to get all the words in our heads down as quick as possible.

I wrote the original draft of "Four Feet" in two days, and it was a story that for once, I didn't rush through for the sake of time and getting the assignment of a 12-page minimum story out of the way. It was the most serious piece of work I've ever written pertaining to the subject of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The original story set in second person, was about a young black college student who is pulled over by a cop that kills them (Racism—naturally). The story ended in the middle of a sentence, as I thought I was clever coming up with the idea since death ends in the middle of something, always. The workshop started off smoothly. I was given respectable feedback from my peers and I satisfied was with the constructive criticism. When it was my professor's turn to wrap up the discussion of my piece, she says in more or less words, "Ya know, I kind of wished that at the end, the cop didn't shoot the girl, that he would do the right thing and let her go. I wasn't sure if it was working."

I was in a state of shock after that. The workshop kept going instead of wrapping up as everyone around the table proceeded to disagree, thankfully, politely arguing that the cop shooting the student was the most accurate part of the story due the events of the year (the recent shootings and Trumps impending election). I was silent of course, as

during the workshop process, the author of the piece must remain silent. I was quiet even after the class dismissed and she pulled my friend and I aside (two out of the only three black people in class) to break into tears and tell us, “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know how hard it was for you guys right now. I’m so sorry you’re going through this.”

I remained silent. I let her hug and break down on friend, but I didn’t let her touch me. I waited for her to stop crying and I told her to have a good day and we left. My friend and I were in disbelief on our way out the building, still not able to comprehend what had happened. I was livid on the inside, my mind scrambling between “Did she seriously fucking say that!” and “What do I do about it? *Can* I do anything at all?” and “What can I say without being that angry black girl?” Because I genuinely didn’t know. I was speechless for days. I’ve never had an encounter like that before. Sometimes I think back and I’m like, maybe it’s because the professor is old and doesn’t pay attention, as she visibly tuned out during classes. I wonder if maybe she isn’t in tune with the media, or maybe she genuinely didn’t know. But then I think, how could someone *not* know about this? And why was it so easy for her not to believe that a cop in my story can shoot a student? And then I think, *Duh, Ashley, of course she wouldn’t believe it, half of the country doesn’t.* But what does my professor see? What does she believe in when she looks at me?

Then I realized the extent to which white people don’t have to worry about life in the way I must. White people don’t have to worry about issues like police violence. White people don’t have to worry about racial profiling. White people don’t have to worry about their color hindering them from necessities like applying for jobs or getting accepted into higher education. White people can forget about those who are affected

because it's not happening to them. White people don't have to tell these stories because they don't have to remember them. People of color don't have those choices, people of color can't forget these stories.

I have no choice but to remember the past because it still affects me today. The world has evolved, but it is still the same. Black people are dying at the hands of racism, black children are dying, and it's wrong how quickly people can forget that it's never stopped for centuries. We can't forget, because we must remember we still are far off from what we deserve. We are far from equal and we must push for more. With fiction, we can tell these stories from different perspectives, each story a new way to express the emotions black people feel daily that others do not address. We must tell black stories and push for others to read them, to understand, empathize, sympathize, share, and do better. People need to appreciate them, lament on them, and cry for them, like they do for stories with white main characters.

My Senior Project reflects the promise I've made to myself to always feature Black characters, and to tell the stories of people of color, for all audiences. The pieces in this project are heavily influenced but loosely based on important events in my life as well. The writing process was rough. At the start of writing my project, my goal was to have five short stories. I had three written already, including "Four Feet", and two ideas for unwritten work. It was hard finding time to write between classes, two jobs, and extracurricular activities, but I had to force myself to sit at odd moments (on the train, from all-nighter's and coffee, to writing *in* class). When the new year hit, I cut the project to four pieces, as one wasn't working because my head wasn't it. A serious block kept me

from even opening the piece to edit. Two months later, I cut another due to time and struggling to condense pages.

The title “Hurt People Hurt People” struck me when a therapist from Dr. Phil said it to a young black girl who believed she was white, disassociating herself from her ancestry. In a way, the world is like that, full of hurt people hurting other people, and it’s an endless cycle. Each story reflects a concept of hurt people hurting people from a black perspective and basic form of conflict, but also my own perspective because I live the stories.

The revised version of “Four Feet” is based on my best friend from high school, who started a protest to walk to Barclay Center from our school to host a die-in, in solidarity for Michael Brown who was killed that month. The title came from a quote from *Beloved* by Toni Morrison where Paul D tells Sethe, “You got two feet, Sethe, not four”. The words reference animals and barbarianism, and it made me question the humanity in the same people who call black people animals. The story reflects my own fears of the new world, and takes on the concept of Black Pride, and how much of it I have and fight for. I don’t want to be erased like the don’t matter. My race is being hurt by a society built on the dehumanization of people of color.

“An Ache I’ll Always Remember” is about black love and the effect of love around us. It’s about hurt people hurting people because their actions are observed and followed. When the main character’s parents’ divorce, he is angry and in disbelief of love existing because of the way he’s been hurt. It’s how I’ve felt watching my family get hurt by others and makes me guarded.

“Hurt People Hurt People” and “Here is my Story, Mom” are about black self-love and loving our bodies and souls despite the people that don’t. It’s about a girl, Tallulah, who is deep during the prejudiced competition world, and will do anything to win a trophy, even it means hurting herself and others. I hope this story illuminates the stress, drive, and work it takes doing something you love, and how much it sucks when you do it for the wrong reasons.

I want to continue writing stories and novels that tell the stories others don’t acknowledge because black stories matter. I want to write compelling and eye-opening stories like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and George S. Schylers, for today’s generation and social structure like Angie Thompson’s *The Hate U Give*, or anything by Nicola Yoon. All main characters of color, all moving stories about black people affected by the past and the ways in which we can’t let the results hold us back. I want to write stories where the main character has coarse hair she wears in an afro proudly but is scorned by white peers because of it, but she is resilient and an excellent student. I want to write stories where young black boys are watched by the police while they are playing basketball in the park. I want to write stories about qualified black people who are denied jobs given to unqualified people, who later start their own successful businesses. I want to these stories that have every bit of strife black people have suffered and have broken through that strife, because we are here and we are real, and we are going to make people listen to us.

Black Lives Matter means Black Lives Matter, *too*. There was always an implied “too”. Our stories matter *too*. Our pain matters *too*. Our suffering, our joy, our history, our love, our lives matter *too*. If it weren’t for that professor, I would have never come to

this conclusion in my life, where I know what I am meant to write in the future. And to that professor from sophomore year, if she ever reads this project, or remembers me—I forgive you. I sincerely thank you, and I wish you well.

Dear Polaris

It wasn't until my back was against the cold,
dewy ground of the Great Lawn,
my burdens sinking into the soil,
eyes gleaming up at the constellations drawn,
laughter and smoke floating in the air,
my friends and I drinking without a care—
that I found the North Star, and I asked it a silent question,
and ten more thoughts struck the longer I stared.

10.

I see you, the star my ancestors did. I know you see all the pain
that will never cease, that we're forced to pay.
Three hundred years feels interminable, sixty a vacation,
and every year is distorted, yet unfortunately the same.
We've been surviving since birth and it's all I've ever known,
I walk the same earth on which my ancestors have bled,
They danced, and sang, and ran when overseers rang.
Polaris, do you too cry when we're left for dead?

9.

Freedom is a concept I will never know.
It's fighting for gold, but my blows never quake.
It smells like temptation, a ticking bomb,
a withheld explosion of choices I never get to make.
It's intangible to me, a simple mystery I'll never know the answer to,
a happy ending I can't read.
But it's there, without reach, a beautifully bronzed laurel wreath
only the white and privileged get to keep.

8.

Who can I be without my constant switch of personality?
Without an adaption for white society to hire me?
I am scared I will accidentally say 'yo' to a gun,
because *my* back will be on the ground due to hostility.
I'm the one who needs to code-switch, I'm the one who knows racism still exists,
I'm the one who is surprisingly articulate, I'm the one who must persist,
I'm the one who is forced to change in a land that spills blood,
when it comes to equality, I'm not the one who resists.

7.

We sleep in darkness, yet darkness never sleeps.
With a callous grin, they'll snuff us out before we reach any dreams.
There is a seat at a throne, I can never claim
My life in waiting to be reaped.
I am David at the foot of a billion Goliaths.
I am a doe, in a forest of hidden wolves that want me to subdue,
I am a mouse in a field of lions that salivate for the rich culture in my fur,
waiting to skin me, for their *own* revenue.

6.

I am a blind person on a tightrope, hands behind my back
surrounded by a thousand obstacles and transparent knives.
I'm being pricked and poked, beaten down, breaking down,
underestimating the depth of each stab every single time.
There are millions of ghosts in my ears, they are wailing,
Shouting warnings to watch our backs, your lifespan is not guaranteed,
Spend your days and nights wondering: Who is next?
Who's going to get me? Which one of my white friends smile like they fear me?

5.

I can't breathe, why am I not allowed to breathe?

I tremble from the fear of my stolen identity.

They can kill me, fear me, beat me, and chain me,

replicate me so they can be me, breed me,

say they don't see me, feign indifference, then still

mentally, systemically, blamelessly, guiltlessly enslave me,

turn the fault to me, then berate me,

because melanin, I am copper, almond, rich chocolate, and honey.

4.

I am a target, to them I am dangerous, a liability,

a rabid dog that needs handling by brutality,

I am that useless commodity.

I don't know how much time is saved for me,

How many more breaths I have left to breathe

before a bullet, or a noose, or any other crime of hate finds me

because

3.

I am Black

2.

I am a black woman.

1.

Polaris, you must see what else society is going to do to me.

Where is the spot God has left for me to write my name in history?

Polaris, do you cry for me?

Is freedom in the future only you can see?

Is change there, are my dreams there?

What shall I do for a seat on our throne?

0.

I keep surviving, I've been doing it since birth,
It's all we've ever known.

Four Feet

Since the news that the grand jury decided not to indict the officer who killed Josiah Davidson, a black high school student in the Bronx who was followed home from school by said white police officer and shot to death because the officer mistook Josiah's reusable water bottle for a firearm, a lump has formed in Ruby Banneker's throat that she cannot release. She's been following the news about a Black Lives Matter protest in the city and mulling over the mistaken thought that she was safe in New York City, that she didn't have to worry about being shot dead by police because of her race.

As she listened to the rumble of the L train passing outside her room window, she couldn't help but think of the hundreds of passengers on the train who were on their phones. How many of them knows about Josiah Davidson? How many of them cares? Did any of them go to the protest? Are any of them talking about it?

If my Dad was here he would've... she freezes at her train of thought, a small gasp rippling through her. He'd mock all those people. He'd say, "sitting still is a sin".

He would've done something, she thinks to herself. *I must do something.*

This leads Ruby to Facebook, an idea spilling from her fingers into a post that she hopes will spark something. She needs to start somewhere after all.

Ruby B. Banneker

27 hrs ago.

Yerrr! My brothers and sisters at Linda Brown Academy! Two days ago, the grand jury has failed to place criminal charges on the white police officer who killed Josiah Davidson last week! This is UNACCEPTABLE!

We MUST stand up for Josiah Davidson and protest this as it CAN NOT happen again! Join me and @Marilyn @Tyrell this Friday after school across the street

from the school, to march in solidarity to Barclay Center and have a “die-in” for Josiah Davidson to protest this atrocious murder!

Posters can be made during lunch periods in the back of the cafeteria!

#BlackLivesMatter #police brutality #JosiahDavidson

Liked by Mari Deveaux and 36 others

9 Comments 11 Shares

Brandon Jean-Baptiste Heard youuuu

Tia Pierre I got practice but good luck!

Jayden Francis Bruh, yal buggin

Marilyn Deveaux @Jayden wym

Jayden Francis I mean yal dead doin the most

Cassandra Joseph Here for this...right after I get my BLT from the bodega

Kaila Charles YASS! I’m comin!

Otis McIntosh Tf is a die-in???

Madison Flores @Kaila @Whitnee @Zachy We out?

The next morning, she meets her friends at their usual hangout spot in Mr. Hironaka’s (the cool biracial teacher than contains an atmosphere of learning with Loose Change videos and theories about Flint Michigan, yet still manages to facilitate a typical English lesson on George Orwell’s *1984*) empty classroom during their free period. Power and determination aligns her back, her chin is high, and Ruby is ready to take initiative, and express the rest of the ideas with her friends.

“Why did you tag us in this post without talking to us about it first?” Marilyn immediately demands when she walks in, making Ruby falter in her step. She sits down in a chair next to Marilyn, who pushes her iPhone in her face, like Ruby didn’t recognize it herself.

Ruby grins with pride at her handiwork. “Sorry, I thought of the idea at like two in the morning, but I’m surprised by the responses, considering how low-key I am in school, not many people know me like they know you or Tyrell, but—”

“Nah,” Tyrell cuts her off with a low drawl of the word.

“Nah?” Ruby splutters. Tyrell continues dribbling a handball between his legs, occasionally tossing it in the air and catching it again.

Ruby thought he’d be interested by the idea, maybe even impressed. She didn’t expect him to lavish her with compliments or jump on it immediately, but to have no questions? No comments?

Marilyn doesn’t say anything, munching on Fruit Snacks with wide-eyes. Ruby clasps her fingers together to keep from playing with the coils of her hair.

“Why do you say that?”

Tyrell shrugs and Ruby wants to throttle him. “If you could stand up and scream ‘Free the Bro!’ in the cafeteria for a kid who got arrested for a minor misdemeanor in class, you sure as hell can do it in a public protest for something that actually matters.”

Tyrell still doesn’t say anything. Marilyn slowly puts her bag of candy on the table. “I don’t know. It seems like... a lot.”

The if-you-guys-don’t-listen-to-me-right-fucking-now glare Ruby sends the two of them breaks Tyrell just a bit. He sighs. “Ruby, we can’t start a protest. And at Barclay’s Center?”

Ruby smiles when he mentions her favorite part of the plan. The basketball stadium for the Brooklyn Nets is in front of the express train station stop; downtown Brooklyn with its shopping area and close to Prospect Park, is the perfect place to disrupt

the flow of traffic and get the attention of passersby. The space in front the train station exit was large enough for the whole school to lie on the floor. They'd be sending a message to hundreds of people walking past.

"No one will be with it," Tyrell continues. "People gonna' want to go home after school, especially on a Friday. That's mad work."

"Are you deadass right now? You didn't exactly say anything like this in the post."

"I wasn't gonna' call you out like that."

Ruby's fingers tremble, her lip curling, another urge to scream boiling within her. "I don't get it. It's mad work to stand up for black boys like you getting shot by racist cops?"

Tyrell relaxes back in his chair, his long legs wide apart, no longer tossing the handball around. "Look, the idea is cool and all, but I don't think it'll be a good turnout. What would it even accomplish? Who's gonna' listen to us? Mr. Hironaka just left the classroom to stop a fight downstairs. Our teachers already think we can't do shit, white people don't believe we can do shit, everyone thinks we are a bunch of stupid kids when we aren't doing shit. We are a bunch of stupid kids when we want to do shit, but we are shut down. Besides there was a protest last night in the city, do we need another? What's the point?"

"One person spoke up so no one else needs to?" Ruby says. "Thinking like that won't help the problem."

Marilyn glances at Tyrell, then back at Ruby with uncertainty. “I kinda’ get what he’s saying though. If we can’t get our class to get it together for a school dance, how can we for a protest like this? The school wouldn’t want to be a part of this. Remember what happened last year when the seniors were put in charge of planning the senior trip? It was pure chaos, and now we aren’t even allowed back to the Poconos Resort. If this protest fails, that’s on us. Ruby, we’re all for your activism and shit, but you’ve always been fine with supporting and sharing on the side. You’ve never done anything this big before. Why *do you* want to do this?”

Because Josiah Davidson is...he was dark skinned, gay, a senior in high school about to graduate; he reminds Ruby too much of herself. Ruby knew she was attracted to both girls and boys ever since seventh grade when she played a game of spin the bottle and kissed Julia Hernandez and delighted at the taste of her lips. But she also couldn’t ignore the pit of butterflies in her stomach whenever she locked eyes with Eddie Johnson. And of course, Ruby’s been black her entire life. Her hair is as coarse as it comes, and she has a thick nose. She is graduating high school in a few months.

The shooting of Josiah Davidson popped a bubble Ruby did not realize she was in her entire life. She was walking around with naïve doe-eyes. Josiah was killed in the Bronx, a different borough than Brooklyn, but still in New York City, still close enough to feel the tremendous wave of grief and resentment spread through the city for days afterwards. Growing up in a dominantly West Indian neighborhood and attending an all black school, she’s never felt the overt pain of racism or prejudice against her from white people. Even when she would venture outside of her neighborhood with her friends, walk around the more gentrified areas of Brooklyn, she’s never had any serious problems.

Sure, she must code-switch when speaking to others outside of her culture. She ignores the looks she gets from white people that tell her she doesn't belong. But she's never felt scared for herself in the way Josiah Davidson did. She thought she was safe from racial injustice like that. She thought New York City was diverse enough that people weren't as hateful, as they do have to all coexist together. But if Josiah Davidson can die at the hands of someone who is supposed to protect him because of the color of his skin, then it could happen to Ruby too, and the thought terrifies her. If Josiah was a walking target for white bullets, then so is she.

She slams her fist on her desk, her water bottle nearly toppling over. "I want to stand up and let these dickheads know that they can't keep killin' us off. Adults can easily protest and maybe they're taken more seriously. But *us*? It's *us* they are killing too. We're only seventeen. We're just kids. If we send that message, imagine the impact it could make. It could get others like us to protest, to focus that anger and fear on getting people to fix the problem. If a white kid were shot in Coney Island or Williamsburg, people would protest against the cop who killed him. So why not us? We matter too. Our lives matter, too. Yes, we're talking about it, but why aren't we fighting for it? Because I can't do it by myself." She looks at Tyrell, begging him to understand. "Don't you want to fight for our lives?"

"Of course, I do," he says. "But I'm just being real. We can't even get faculty to help us do some good because they think we're a bunch of animals, just like white people. I just... I don't know."

"So are you with me or not? Because if I have to do this myself, I will, but I'd expect my friends to help me because this is important to me."

Marilyn nods. “I’m with you. I was always with you. I’m just concerned.”

Tyrell’s eyes flitter around the room, anywhere but at her, and that gives her his answer.

“Fine,” Ruby says. “We’ll do it without you. Marilyn, let’s strategize.”

Ruby isn’t sure what she is more disappointed by; the fact that Tyrell won’t support because so many already won’t, or if he won’t support because he genuinely believes in what everyone else says about them not being able to do any good, or because she understands exactly what he feels. Despite him not helping, Ruby wants to prove him wrong, but not for everyone else. She’ll do it for Tyrell, Josiah Davidson, and any person of color that has ever doubted change because of those who refuse to make it happen.

The morning of the protest, Ruby prays to her father instead of God, moving to kneel at the base of her bed. A hand to the forehead, down to her chest, to each shoulder, Ruby claps her hands together, elbows up on her soft mattress, head down. Nothing is more important in the moment—not her wild curls fanning her face and poking at her eyes, not the drool at the corner of her mouth, or the sensation of pins and needles pricking at her numb feet.

Dad, she prays, I ask you for strength, not just for myself, but for my friends too, for the Davidson family, for anyone hurt by these vicious acts of hate. May today be successful and impactful. Amen.

Before her father, a Civil Rights activist like his father, died from a stray bullet of a glock pistol two years prior at a riot in Maryland, he used to participate in die-ins when

he was younger. He was a teacher at a community center in Bed-Stuy, and Ruby would listen to everything he told her and her peers. He told them what to do if they found themselves in specific situations: if a group of men walked towards her and she was alone, to cross the street. If a cop pulled her over when she was driving, to comply to their orders. Remember *all* of your rights he used to say. Anyone can end up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He pushed Ruby to stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves, to never let anyone silence her, and to never stop fighting despite those who will want her to stop. Ruby grew up following his teachings. She wants to be like him, helping and supporting others. She wants to fight for the rights she knows she doesn't have systemically. Ever since the Black Lives Matter Movement took America by storm, Ruby pays close attention to the acts of racial injustice that occurs. She spreads awareness through social media and starts fundraisers to send donations to people in need.

She gets ready for the day quickly. She pulls up her kinky curls into a high bun and wears all black with her uniform shirt on top of her hoodie.

Her mother calls her from the kitchen, "Hurry up, Ruby! Come here for this food!"

The smell of cornmeal porridge hits Ruby's nose as she trudges down the stairs. In the background, her Dad's old and small satellite television burrs and whirrs static noises until it settles on a news station. Ruby sits at the kitchen table with her eyes glued to the screen. Reporters talk about the protest from a few nights ago in the city. The screen flashes from Jamie Davidson as the face of many posters, to police officers forming barricades in the streets, to fights breaking out, and black power chants verses

white power chants. There is no emotion in the reporter's voices, no opinion on the matter.

“Why your face screwed up like that?” her mother appears before her, spilling the sweet cereal into the bowl she didn't notice before. Her mother is out of her purple scrubs from her night shift at the elderly home, and into comfortable pajamas. Her permed hair is in a low ponytail. She looks ready for bed, but Ruby knows she is waiting for her to go to school. She only sees her mother in the mornings and for two hours in the afternoon before her mother leaves for work. There is concern in her glassy and tired eyes.

Ruby makes the sign of the cross on her chest before she begins eating. “I'm starting a protest afterschool today.”

“You're doing what?” Her mother sits down, plopping her mug of tea on the wooden table with a hard smack.

She tells her mother about the previous day. She tells her about watching the news reports about the protest in the city days ago, the idea for her own protest, and her plans to execute it. Her mother listens with a stern expression, and by the low dip in her brow and the pout in her lip, Ruby knows her mother wasn't happy about the idea.

“I don't want you protestin', Ruby. What are you even thinking?” She raises her voice only a bit, but not enough to discourage her completely. Ruby should have seen that coming. Her mother is the widow of an activist after all. Of course she isn't happy.

“But—”

“No buts,” she hisses, then tsks at the television. “Look at all that madness everywhere. Black people at protests bein’ degraded, surrounded by police barricades, and a whole lot of nonsense. All because we’re black. You don’t need to around that.”

“I already am,” Ruby defends. “We were always around it. So what if I want to join the cause?”

“You could get hurt!” Her mother retorts. “Who knows what else could happen?”

“Exactly! We *don’t* know. We’ll never know until we wake up tomorrow and another black person is on the news, dead, their families crying in the background, and nothing is done about it still.”

Her mother tenses. “Ruby, I love that you are trying to be like your father. He wanted to bring peace to the world, fight for our freedom and everything, but he’s gone. I work hard to make sure that you don’t have to worry about things like this.”

“Dad died from a stray bullet, not from helping people.” Ruby says. Her eyes burn at the mention of her father.

“Most bullets have our names written on them,” her mother says. “Lots of people get shot. Lots of people die.”

“Because racism is unavoidable, Mom,” Ruby throws back.

“You think I don’t know that,” she sighs and takes a sip of her tea. “Listen. Back then, way back during enslavement, there were overseers. They were the ones who ran the plantations for the masters, kept order, and most of the time were the ones that punished slaves. You know what that sounds like? Officer, Overseer, Overseer, Officer.” She says the words quickly. They almost blend together.

“I know racism is unavoidable,” she continues. “It’s always the same thing, a different story, evolved into a new name. They’ve always seen it. Sometimes it’s all you can see. Don’t put yourself in a position where they can hurt you because of what they see, because who knows what else they can do. Some people out here run around on four feet instead of two. No compassion or humanity. I already know who is which. But I don’t have a choice but to keep pushing forward. I’m just trying to protect you, baby.”

“Four feet,” Ruby chuckles humorlessly. “I guess we’re all animals in the end, huh? We don’t know what we’re doing. It’s kill or be killed, except the supposed predators are really the prey.”

The smile her mother gives her doesn’t reach her eyes. “You sound like your father. You’re a fighter, just like him.”

It always feels good to hear that. Her mother always makes sure Ruby knows how much she is like her father. Ruby has his willpower, stubborn-streak, and thick nose. She likes knowing she keeps his memory alive for her mother. She is a little bitter-sweet gift, as she does remind her mother of her father. They both miss him.

“You’re one to talk,” she snorts.

“I don’t like this at all,” her mother stands to squeeze her shoulder. “For your sake, please just leave it alone. Let the adults handle it.”

How can a problem like this be left in the hands of adults when its children dying now? What are children supposed to do? Did the officer that killed Josiah Davidson see a child, or a black child? Or did he just see colors and nothing more? Her dad used to say that sitting still is a sin. How can Ruby not stand up? How can she remain complacent?

Sorry, Mom, she thinks to herself. She refuses to spend the rest of her life wondering who is next.

It's not crowded. The sidewalk is filled with about twenty-five students, but at least they were there. Ruby shoves down the disappointment building within her like water flooding a boat. As she waits, she watches many of the students heading down the block to the bus stops and the nearest bodega. Some students stop to catch up with one another, but they all ended up leaving anyways.

There are more girls ready to protest than there are boys. She tries holding out a bit longer, waiting for Tyrell's face to appear, hoping he will show up like he is supposed to. She loses hope when she does see his face. He leaves with his other friends for the bus stop.

"Why are there more girls here than guys?" Ruby fingers the edge of her own poster, watching and waiting for more students to exit the building. She eyes the group of boys who flick food at one another and play fight.

Marilyn kneels on the ground and adds exclamation points as a border decoration to her "We Will Not Be Silent!" poster.

"Boys are stupid," she says automatically. "That's why they be gettin' shot. Dumbasses."

Ruby falters. "That's not even remotely funny."

"You know I'm jokin'."

They got all the art supplies from Mr. Acker earlier in the morning, the teacher later tipping his cap towards Ruby, with the promise of helping at the protest. Mr. Hironaka passed around word of the protest to other faculty members. Those teachers pulled Ruby aside to express their support and thank her for her bravery. Mrs. Sinclair joked about making attendance at the protest an extra credit assignment (to which many students failing her Global History class perked up to), and the security guard, Ms. Honda, smiled at her and Ms. Honda never smiles. She doesn't like anyone. Mr. Howard, the Dean, was the only one to turn his nose at her. He tossed her a stern and intimidating look, letting her know that he didn't like it at all. Nonetheless, that doesn't stop her.

Ruby wasn't popular at school. The change from people not paying attention to her, to girls in class smiling at her and telling her they've seen her Facebook post, and are down to support left her in awe. Girls told her that she is doing something amazing. A few guys told her she has their respect and they think she's lit, but none of them are there.

Mr. Hironaka stands next to Ruby and Marilyn, looking at his watch. "Okay, we leave in two minutes. You ready for this?"

Marilyn sends him a thumbs up. Ruby clutches her poster and manages a nod. With a deep breath, she holds her poster high above her head for the world to see. She shouts as loud and firm as she's ever shouted before. "HANDS UP!"

"DON'T SHOOT!" The response from all her classmates join in, rippling like a small wave. Everyone raises their posters.

Ruby shouts again. "HANDS UP!"

"DON'T SHOOT!"

They march up the block in the direction of Flatbush Avenue to get to Barclay Center. Ruby continues to lead the chant, and they surge forward like a freight train, all at once and full of powerful energy. Despite the lacking in participants, Ruby feels unstoppable. It isn't much, but it's something.

Students heading to the bus stop notice them and gawks like they couldn't believe they were causing such a ruckus outside and that no one is there to stop them. Residents of homes along the blocks poke their heads through their blinds for a brief second before retreating to a typical New Yorker style of minding their own business; even though this issue is everyone's business, as it's happening where they all live. This makes Ruby chant louder. She thrusts her poster in the air with every shout.

Some people stand to the side to let them pass with eyebrows raised in either awe or shock. Cars honk as they cross the street at the crosswalks, and Ruby is unsure if it's to scold them or praise them.

This isn't a regular chaotic grouping of students crowding around one another to watch a stupid fight. No, they are a tidal wave of supporters for those who have been wronged. With every "HANDS UP!" Ruby screams, she hopes her mind isn't tricking her when the response grows louder than she originally expects.

And that's because it is growing, slowly, but surely. Somewhere along the walk, Marilyn shakes Ruby's shoulder and points to the back of the crowd. The chants are taken over by Tyrell, followed by two boys she recognizes from school. Ruby nearly trips over her own feet, elated that her friend didn't let her down.

“MY LIFE MATTERS!” Tyrell screams so loud, so raw, that Ruby doesn’t doubt it.

“OUR LIVES MATTER!” The budding crowd responds.

Ruby suddenly realizes how many people are behind her. The crowd of protestors are students, teachers, and to her surprise a few other students in uniforms she didn’t notice. Among them are two blonde girls who walk beside their black friend with braids. Only the girl with box braids chants, and the other two walk beside her quietly. One wears a shirt over her beige polo that reads “White silence is violence!”.

Her chest swells with a mix of pride, thankfulness, and hope. She lingers back in the crowd so the girls could catch up to her. She digs into her bag for the extra posters she made on printer paper, and eagerly hands a few out to the newcomers without signs. They accept the posters with eager nods, raising them high in the air.

By the time they reach Jay Street Metrotech ten minutes later, halfway to Barclays Center, Ruby catches a rough count of sixty people. Some people on the street cheers them on, returning shouts of “YAS!” or “Alright yal!”. Very few join their walk and most continue to walk away. The chants change over the course of the entire walk.

“HOW MANY BLACK LIVES WILL YOU KILL!” Ruby yells.

“MICHAEL BROWN! EMMETT TILL!”

“NO JUSTICE!” Ruby hollers.

“NO PEACE!”

“I CAN’T BREATHE!”

“I CAN’T BREATHE!”

“I CAN’T BREATHE!”

They all plead together until they reach the basketball stadium. They don’t stand too close to the entrances, but closer to the train stations. The large sign that reads “Barclay Center” glimmers in the sunlight like a crown, and Ruby is in front of royalty. The set of glass doorways at the entrance shines their reflection, and she feels like they are a small sea of fish before the Great Barrier Reef. She feels like she isn’t meant to be there only for the fact that it’s so grand, and their group count looks like they merely exited the train station.

The space is large. The sidewalks are bustling with shoppers from the Atlantic Mall across the street. They are given the same reactions as they were when they initially started walking. Only about six people walk closer to the protest. Some people have their cameras out.

Ruby stops chanting, and hushes fall amongst the group. Her heart thumps at the moment of truth, the moment to make a statement. She locks eyes with everyone participating. It’s still not as much as she hoped for, but they make up for it in eagerness, strength, and pride in their heritage. They are a sea of many colors Ruby is proud to live amongst. She is thankful for the support from all the teachers, students, and strangers in the crowd.

They all follow her lead. Ruby is the first to lie on the grey cement. Others slowly lay themselves next to her and around her. Her ears peer at the rustling of bodies around

her. A few camera's click from photos being taken. Shoulders press up against shoulders, and Ruby is warm.

She places her poster on top of her face and most of her upper body. The few faculty that have joined them surround all the students in protection, watching over them. Ruby takes a last look at the sky. The sun peaks through the clouds and its rays caress her face. The heavens above can see her and she knows the angels are with her. Her father is with her.

One of the first things she thought of when she had the idea of the die-in, was how long would the die-in last? How long should they rest on the ground in solidarity? How many minutes are too little and too much? The time is her call, everything has been on her call.

It is silent.

She takes a deep breath and focuses on acknowledging the deaths of many black youths at the hands of racism. She closes her eyes and thinks of the children who have died in the last few years.

Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley Jones. 2010. A SWAT team raid in the Detroit Home where she and her grandmother slept ended in tragedy as she was shot through the neck by a cop. The cop was only charged for recklessly discharging his firearm. Aiyana was only seven.

Trayvon Martin. 2012. He was shot by a neighborhood watch volunteer of a gated community in Florida, on the walk from a convenience store, who assumed he was "up to

no good”. The jury declared a verdict of not guilty for second-degree murder. Trayvon was seventeen.

Laquan McDonald. 2014. He was reported to be erratically walking down a Chicago street with a knife, and was shot sixteen times by the police for allegedly lunging towards them with the it. Video surveillance revealed that the switchblade was closed and McDonald was walking away from the police. His killer is serving only six years and nine months. Laquan was seventeen.

Tamir Rice. 2014. The twelve-year-old boy was fatally shot by Cleveland officers who mistook his BB gun for an actual weapon, the officer fearing for his life. Prosecutors pointed fingers that Rice looked large for his age, his home neighborhood is full of violence, and other officers have been previously killed before. There was no indictment for his case.

Josiah Davidson. 2019. The Bronx high school students was trailed by an off-duty officer for suspiciously walking with his hand in his pocket. When he pulled out his hand, the officer mistook his water bottle for a gun, and shot his four times. Josiah was sixteen.

Each case, each story, each death, each child, brings tears to her eyes. This is what her father had died fighting for, to protect black people, to protect black children. Ruby is sitting, but she isn’t sitting still.

Before she can think of more names, she hears a siren blare out, only twice. Her eyes pop open and beneath the poster on her face, she can see flashes of blue and red. Her stomach sinks. Her heart thumps heavily against her chest.

She could hear the slamming of a car door. *Ba-boom.*

Heavy boots clomp against the ground. *Ba-boom.*

Belts jingle with keys. *Ba-boom.*

The closer they come the sooner the die-in breaks, and Ruby sits up, opening her eyes to see everyone still on the ground. She spots Tyrell across from her, peeking out from the poster over his face. He glances back at Ruby nervously, his eyes shifty and flighty. Marilyn, who lies next to her, clutches her wrist as two tall and bulky men in NYPD gear approaches them. Their walkie-talkies whizz and gear with noise, but it's muffled. She can't see their eyes through their black shades. One pops gum in his mouth.

Life is moving in slow-motion as the cops come towards them and a bitter sense of irony creeps up her back. A strong "I told you so" she knows she will get from her mom later sits in the back of her mind.

Mr. Hironaka is the first to move and no one else speaks. He walks calmly over to the police, but his fingers twitch. "Good afternoon officers. Is there a problem?"

The one on the left, Badge 232, does most of the talking. "Yes, we were reported on a community disturbance, so we need you all to peacefully disperse."

Marilyn sits up and quickly digs into her purse for her phone. She hits record and throws a concerned look to Ruby.

"And we are the supposed disturbance?" Mr. Hironaka says back in a cool voice.

Ruby is paralyzed as she watches the cop on the right's hand rest on his waist, vertically parallel to his gun. Her eyes lock onto it like tunnel vision. A 9-millimeter gun is in her direct line of sight. There is an object of death practically between her eyes.

Usually when she is in the presence of police, it's hard for her not to notice the gun, the

weapon of destruction clear with a dark aura around it. Whenever she sees one she fights the urge to walk the other way. Her body screams to run away, but there is nowhere to go, she can't leave everyone else. This is her protest, they can't just ruin it.

She swallows her fear, and stands.

“Everyone stay down,” Ruby says, her voice wobbling. Her legs are jelly, but she forces herself to walk with her chin tilted high. Marilyn watches her with wide-eyes. She walks up behind Mr. Hironaka, keeping the camera held at an angle that captures their badge numbers.

“We have a right to be here, sir,” she says cautiously. “This is public property.”

“Ruby...” Mr. Hironaka warns, stepping in front of her, backing her away from the cop, like there is a bomb about to go off.

Badge 232 chuckles. “This is Barclay Center, which is an owned business in which you are trespassing, miss. You are causing a disturbance. Please, disperse immediately.”

Ruby grits her teeth. She can not afford to get heated. Arguing will make the situation worse, and she is panicking enough as it is. “We are on public property, sir. We are on the sidewalk. We are within our rights to be here.”

She feels a hand on her shoulder, and Marilyn is beside her with her phone pointed at the officers. The phone is angled to where it only captures their badge numbers and all of their feet.

The officers look past Ruby and Marilyn. Ruby can see through the left one's shades, and the other students are sitting up on the ground, watching and waiting. A majority have their phones up as well. There are many cameras and many people.

The jaw of the other cop twitches, and Ruby's nervousness heightens. His Badge number is 287. She repeats their numbers in her mind. Ruby wishes she could get into their heads. What do they see? Do they see a large group of mostly black people with a few non-people of color? Do they see adults or children? Do they see targets or humans? Does humanity matter to them at all?

"What's your name, kid?" he demands from Ruby. Badge 287's hand moves to rest against his gun. His hand is clenched, and Ruby's breath hitches. She trembles. *Is he going to pull his gun out? He knows I am a kid, why is his hand there? What is he going to do?*

"My name is Ruby Banneker," she swallows.

"Is this your doing, Ms. Banneker?"

"Yes. We have a right to be here," Ruby repeats, still shaking. "This is a peaceful protest."

Badge 287 hums and Ruby knows it's to mock her. He isn't interested in the slightest.

Marilyn squeezes her hand and the chanting begins again, starting from the back. "I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I Can't Breathe."

It is a slow burn, a soft hum that turns into a roar. The chant is virulent, growing to the point where it's all she could hear through her heart beating in her ears. She joins in with a whisper. "I can't breathe. I can't breathe."

The officer on the right pats Badge 287, stepping backwards. "We should head to the station." His voice is even, not the voice she expects of a man who can kill her.

Badge 287, hesitates, then nods to his partner.

"Tread carefully, Ms. Banneker," he says in an icy tone before they retreat to his car.

Cheers ring in the air as soon as they leave and Ruby's shoulders drop in relief. People are clapping, jumping up and down, and the excitement turns into "Black Lives Matter!" chants. The space is deafening. Mr. Hironaka gives her a hug and tells her he is proud of her.

Despite the small win, Ruby's body feels numb amongst the celebration. A million what-ifs run through her mind. What if he said no? What if there wasn't a good number of us? What did he mean by "tread carefully". What would have happened if—

Stop, she tells herself. She will drive herself insane dwelling on it. But after she goes home, after she relays to her mother the successful result of the protest, after she reads an apology text from Tyrell for doubting her, after she watches the news reports on Josiah Davidson's funeral, after she scrolls through the Facebook and Instagram posts she is tagged in—she cries. She doesn't cry soft tears that trickle down her face. She releases ugly sobs she desperately tries to conceal with a hand over her mouth so her mother can't hear. She cries out the fear she's internalized all day. She cries for the family of Josiah

Davidson. She cries in grief for the loss of her father, and how he can't see what she has done today.

And yet, there are negative thoughts that swirl her mind too. She understands where her mother and Tyrell were coming from with their hesitance. Seeing the cops at the protest reminded her of what they feared: Fighting for a lost cause. No matter how much people try, there will always be a backlash, big or small, serious or light. Racism will always exist, but it can't go ignored. People of color don't have a choice. So why fight for something that will always remain?

Ruby refuses to believe her father died in vain, that any of the activists before him, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, anyone else who has fought for freedom did not die for no reason. They fought until the very end.

Ruby is a fighter. She isn't waiting for the next person to die to stand up and fight for a life already lost. She isn't waiting for denied justice. She isn't sitting still.

Bottling

There is a soda bottle that is overflowing.
This bottle with the glass hill curves, the almond pigment, the soft glimmer.
This bottle with the prison guarded gate and non twist-off cap.
This bottle with the plastic paper, “stay calm, don’t shake,” in urgent letters.
This bottle with the weak, “non” twist-off cap that has a smiley face on it.
This bottle with its blaring alarms echoing the air for its convicts are escaping.

There is a soda bottle that is overflowing.
This water is rioting, and its tsunami clashes against the ground.
This water is crying, it screams, and wails, and laughs in agony on the way down.
This water is a climax of bubbles and foam and suffocation and chaos.
This water is freedom, a lifetime of war stories that reached a peak.

There is a soda bottle that is overflowing.
This bottle spills a river styx of should’ve, could’ve, would’ve’s.
This bottle spills tears of silenced resentment, self-loathing, and philiphobia.
This bottle spills exhaustion, “I’m doing my best” and “try harder”.

There is a soda bottle that is overflowing.
This dam, this chest that holds no gold, but Pandora’s horrors has been opened.
This dam, that has flooded the floor and a face of clogged pores.

There is a soda bottle that is overflowing.
This unknown liquid burning the ground and a drinker’s feet soaks it back up.

There is a soda bottle that is overflowing.
Why?—Because of pressure.

How long did it take
for you to see it too?

Want to watch
me clean it
up all by
myself?

An Ache I'll Always Remember

“This bitch!” My older sister, Dominique, shouts so loud that some heads on the crowded Manhattan street can hear her. She slams my cracked iPhone into my chest so hard I stumble backwards. My sneakers squelch in the winter slush on the ground.

It was Dominique's idea to go out to the bar I'm not even old enough to drink in and I'd only agreed because she insisted. She wanted to go out into the city like our parents' divorcing doesn't change a thing. Like she wasn't the catalyst for the way it was exposed that Dad was having an affair, on Thanksgiving over a month ago in front 11% of our family. My sister popped her head into my bedroom earlier this afternoon, saying she is worried about me. She doesn't want us to spend the last few nights of her winter break hating one another.

I almost didn't respond. I was adamant on being petty and ignoring her until Lord knows when, but I've never been able to hold a grudge against my sister for so long. It's easy with my Dad, since he left our house with a suitcase and hasn't returned. Mom just locks herself in her room after work to cry.

Bad thing after bad thing keeps happening. I feel like there is a storm cloud over my head, following me everywhere I go. Nikki changed her relationship status on social media this morning and she sent me a text an hour later: *Are you okay?*

I didn't take either that well. My phone's cracked screen is a result.

Dominique takes my phone back and types something in response to her text.

“Yo! Don't do that!” I reach for my phone. Dominique glowers at me, her eyes resembling molten lava under the dimmed city lights.

“Chill! I’m not writing anything too graphic,” she retorts, still typing. “And it’s not like you’re gonna’ say anything anyway.”

I remain quiet.

Dominique grits her teeth. “You’re just *asking* for me to slap the shit out of you.”

“If I text her back, there might be a chance that—”

“—What? What do ya’ think is gonna’ happen? You sound mad pathetic, Jared. You think she’s gonna’ tell you to pull up to her crib and you both will get back together? You think she’s gonna’ come back after you beg?”

This is what I don’t miss about Dominique since she transferred to an out of state college her junior year. Her blunt and sometimes hurtful way of speaking to people is frustrating. One minute she can be completely cool, and then the next, she speaks to you like you’re beneath her. It isn’t just annoying, it’s confusing.

Even though she is right, I do sound pathetic. It still hurt coming from her.

“No...” I trail off. I admit, that is what I want to do, but hearing it out loud makes me feel even more pathetic. I was working on a gift for her for weeks, a pastel painting of her in her own artistic element. Maybe she’d love it and see how much I’ll love her more than the guy she is with now. She loves me more and I know it. Nikki must be confused.

Dominique huffs, seeing right through me. Plus, my nostrils flare when I lie. It’s been that way since I was a child.

“You’re buggin’,” she scowls. “Nikki is a fake ass snake, who broke up with you through text because she couldn’t support you like a girlfriend should. She wanted all the attention. And she’s in a relationship only three weeks later. Bro, you’re better without her.”

I don't want to be without her. I groan. "She might change her mind."

Dominique snorts, "Yeah sure, and she'll accept your DM request too."

We walk down the street, my head bowed. I am drowning in the scent of my shame. If I could sink into a pit and never return right now, I would.

It's dim outside, and the ambiance of Christmas was in the air. Leftover snow crunches beneath my sneakers. Twinkly red, green, and gold lights shimmer on the cable wires and stoplights. I'm not in a Christmas spirit. I have no one to shop for besides Dominique now. I told my two friends I'm not in the gift-giving mood. They let it be and left me alone. Had Dominique not asked me to come out with her, I would be holed up in my room. I'd be painting more pictures of Nikki, missing assignments, or cyber-stalking her. We go to the same high school and we are both in the senior class. Sometimes I would try to catch her when she walks to the train station on her way home, but I stopped once I realized how psychotic that must look.

I just don't get it. How do you go from pillow talk about post-graduation plans and the future, to not having a future at all? I don't see what went wrong. How can she throw away two years? As far as I know we've been a good couple. I've been a good boyfriend, at least before I got in my feelings after my parents.

It's Friday night tonight. We went on dates every Friday night. We spent hours together, painting, drawing, and talking about the world, and how much we both hate lasagna. We loved spending time at her apartment, chilling with a blunt on her balcony, her avoiding the pictures I would take of her. I love her with everything in me, and I felt that love in return whenever I looked into her eyes and whenever she kissed me. Even if I didn't pay enough attention to her, I still love her. I've apologized so many times and she

doesn't answer. It doesn't matter how young we are. Some people say that your first love is always your greatest. I know what we felt.

We were supposed to be like how my parents were. We were supposed to be in love for years, for forever. I had always looked up to my parent's romance. They told my sister and I stories of how they were high school sweethearts who beat the odds with a long-distance relationship after my mom left for college. They got married young. I grew up with them kissing in my face, going on frequent dates, and celebrating their anniversaries in the grandest way possible.

How could love like that just end? How could Nikki send one text after the millions of apologies she's ignored from me? How could Dad cheat on Mom? How could they not get back together, when they were meant to be?

Nikki and I were meant to be.

Dominique's hand rests on top of my shoulder. She stops me from walking further and pulls me closer to a building wall to get out of people's way. The anger is off her face and replaced with pity. I'm not sure which is worse: the breakup, or that look.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm odeein'. My bad."

I turn and start walking back to the nearest A train station stop. "I'm not feeling it tonight. Can we just go home?"

When Dominique had first come home from school, I was excited when she promised she would take me out to a bar and buy all my drinks. I'm only eighteen and she's twenty-two. I should be excited about the offer right now. I could drink away my problems. What early young adult wouldn't? But I'd rather be in my room, avoiding the world than being immersed in it right now.

“Fuck outta’ here, we’re gonna’ finish this conversation.” Dominique scrambles behind me, saying it like it’s an order.

“There’s nothin’ to talk about. Don’t you gotta’ get back to your boyfriend? You should be with him since you’re headin’ back to campus soon. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine. Give me my phone back. I’ll get over it.”

I just don’t know how long it’ll take.

“I don’t wanna’ talk about Luca’s dumbass. I wanna’ talk about Nikki,” she puts her hand on my shoulder to stop me from walking again. “This is your first break-up and you need an outlet. I just want to help you.”

“Like you were helping when you revealed to the whole family that Dad was cheating on mom,” I spit bitterly.

Thanksgiving two years ago was a disaster I don’t want to remember. I had been so angry leaving. I still don’t understand some of the details. Everything was fine as far as family dinners went. Then, as soon as the potato salad got passed around, the bickering started. Dominique goading Dad and it was like she had beef with him all night. She suddenly pushed his admittance.

“Fine! I’m sorry I cheated on your mother!” slipped from Dad’s mouth, right in front of our grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and Nikki. The chill in the room was unbearable. Mom didn’t know. None of us knew of the affair. None of us except Dominique.

There was a lot of rage during dinner. My grandparents took my mom’s side, telling her they knew he was no good for her. My aunts and uncles called him a bastard and kicked him out. And I screamed at Dominique.

“This is all your fault!” I had shouted to her across the table, before storming out.

Thank God Nikki had come with me to dinner. The train ride back from where our grandparents lived in Long Island would have been lonely and dark.

“Fuck everyone else,” Nikki took my hand in the middle of the Long Island Rail Road ride. “We’ll have our own family dinner.”

We went to McDonald’s after and it was nice, but my mother’s pain shadowed over me. I’m scared of how real their separation is.

Dominique looks away from me. People walk all around us on the sidewalk, but we are both still in the moment, both of us thinking of the past. “That’s not fair. You can’t completely blame it all on me. Dad made his bed and is laying in it now.”

“No thanks to you,” I retort. “You didn’t think that maybe Dad could’ve figured it out on his own? End the affair? Tell Mom himself?”

“Jared—”

“No!” I raise my voice. “You had to put it all on blast.”

Dominique swallows. “I’m not the bad guy here. Stop taking it all out on me.”

I shake my head. “Whatever. I’m going home.”

“Wait!” Dominique stops me again. “Just listen to my side of the story. I’ll explain everything to you, but you gotta’ promise to listen. We leave when the night is over. When we get back home, I’ll give you your phone back, *and*, I’ll let you text Nikki if you still feel the need to.”

Running a hand down my face, I say, “You’re doin’ the most, ya know.”

Dominique chuckles, and pulls me back in the direction of the bar. “I know. Now, time for drinks.”

Brown's is a pub somewhere on 5th Avenue and Broadway. I find it annoying how much Dominique still likes to leave our sanctum in Crown Heights for "bougie" and "hip" parts of the city. Whenever I tell her that, she patronizingly reminds me that Brooklyn is part of the city too, but I never care to correct myself since she knows what I mean.

There is nothing special about the bar that is worth squeezing onto a crowded 5 train. The place looks basic to me. There are booths all along one side, tables scattered everywhere, a stage in a corner with a DJ behind turn tables playing pop songs I do not recognize at all, and a long bar with hundreds of bottles on the shelves behind it. It may be the first time I've really been *in* a bar, but if it looks anything like bars and clubs my family rents from for party spaces (and what I've seen on TV), it is quite ordinary. However, Dominique is a people person, so everyone knows her and welcomes her with open arms. Her charisma is often refreshing as it is annoying. It takes too many hugs and greetings to get to a seat. So yeah, she comes here often when she's home I assume.

We take seats at the very end of the bar. She waves the bartender over.

"How you know these people?" I ask her.

Dominique sighs. "When you fuck with someone who likes to take you out, you end up going to all of *his* favorite places. Hi Manny! Can we get shots of tequila!"

I shake my head at Manny. "Actually, I'll have a beer."

"Please, give him a tequila," she corrects me, then winks. "Mom won't be back til tomorrow morning. We can get as lit as we want. And, you need it."

Mom has been drinking more of the rum stored in our liquor cabinets lately. I try not to think about that as I take the shot.

The bartender places two shot glasses before us. I'm amazed that he doesn't card us, a pro to Dominique's charisma. Dominique downs hers immediately and nudges me to do the same. I almost remind her that I've taken shots before, but choose not to since it might tip off the bartender.

I change the subject. "How's Luca?"

"Why?"

"Because if we are going to talk about my problems, we can hear yours too."

"Why do you assume there's a problem?" she deters.

"You called him a dumbass earlier."

Dominique snorts. "Because he is a dumbass. He told me he loved me the other day."

"Well, that's a big step," I say cautiously. She does not look happy when she says this. Instead her voice is full of pain, and she caresses the rim of her shot glass. "You said it back?"

She shakes her head gently. "Nope. Love's a sham."

Dominique always believed that, never trusting her past boyfriends, never letting herself love them or letting them love her. She dated people in shorter spans, but she was always the one who ended it. Something was always wrong with the guy and she'd want someone better. She would get over the break-ups quickly.

Luca is her longest relationship, and long-distance essentially. I assumed they had said the precious "L-word" to one another a long time ago, but this *is* Dominique after all.

To Dominique, marriage and commitment is just a piece of paper that messes with your money. You're forced to do things like have kids and divorce, then go through life

wondering why you went through the whole process in the first place. To her, marriage is a fluke and it's something people do, just to do.

I think her reasoning's are quite selfish. I don't mind marriage or kids.

I wonder if that's why she exposed Dad. Was she bitter? Was she angry? What would life be like now if she hadn't? Maybe Dad would have come clean to Mom and they could've handled the situation in a better manner. Maybe they would be in couple's therapy or working on things, but they'd be doing it together. I've never seen my parents apart from one another before. It sucks.

"Who the hell does Luca think he is?" she rants. "Dropping it while we're watching TV out of nowhere."

I take my shot. "Dominique, you are twenty-two years old. Don't you think it's time to get over this fear of marriage?"

She waved to Manny for another drink. "Don't you think you should stop thirstin' after a woman that doesn't want you? It *has* been over a month."

Ouch.

"You have someone who cares about you enough to ask," I say with more envy under my breath than simple reasoning. "You have someone who loves you with all his heart. And what's your excuse? He said it while you were watching Netflix? There wasn't a grand gesture? What was wrong with him? There is someone who *wants* you at least. Do you even want him? If you don't, then stop playin' games, you're better than all that."

It's not like Dominique is an unlikable person. She is very lively for her age. She's majoring in Business so she can start up her own line of nightclubs, so she's smart.

She isn't ugly. She has a loud and fun personality, but can become fiercely tough when she wants to. Her weaves are always done, since she keeps monthly hair appointments. She has clear almond skin. She likes to wear crisp business attire in the day and then funky relaxed outfits in the evenings. Her face and figure is alright, I guess. Dominique *is* my sister after all. But she is still a good person despite our problems. Who wouldn't want to love her?

Dominique snuffles. "Real talk?"

I nod. "Yeah. Be real. Please."

"Of course, I love him too," she wipes a tear at her eye. "He's amazing Jared. He takes me out a lot, and he always wants to be around, helping me, taking care of me. He calls me every day when I'm away. But he's going to leave. And I mean *leave* leave. I know I'm going to push him away at some point and I don't want to hurt him, or be hurt."

"Like our parents?" I guess.

Dominique shrugs. "Our parents are right to split."

"You're not dead-ass?" I clench my teeth together.

"What?"

"Do you not feel any regret to what you've done?"

Dominique blinks at me. "What *I've* done? Dad cheated on Mom, Jared. I didn't have anything to do with that."

"But you put him on the spot, because love is a sham, right? You don't believe they can work things out on their own, so you ruin it in the worst way possible."

“It wasn’t easy you know,” Dominique nearly yells, her voice raised and steam whistling from her ears. “The night I found out, it was right before I left for school last semester. Mom was at work and you were out with Nikki. I was coming over to pick up a plate of food Mom left for me and I walk in and there he is. With *her*. And, and, I didn’t know what to do with what I saw. He promised it wouldn’t happen again, it was a one-time thing, he wasn’t going to do it again, and I believed him like an idiot. God, I was so stupid. He told me he loved mom so much and blamed her for pulling away and that they’d do marriage counseling. So, I stayed quiet for months. Then I got so mad when I came home for Thanksgiving and I looked at him and knew, he didn’t change. Thanksgiving happened so fast, and I didn’t mean to hurt mom by pushing him, but the lie needed to end. I only regret the way it happened. You know the worst part of it all? He didn’t even have a reason to why he was having an affair. He just did it. Fucked up, right?”

I sniffle, the memories trickling into my brain. My voice cracks when I ask, “Why didn’t you tell me? We tell each other everything. Instead, you went to school two days early, like it was nothing. Like my feelings didn’t matter. No contact until break started again. You left me alone.”

Dominique muffles a sob with a hysterical laugh. “You weren’t exactly making it easy, ignoring me. It’s different knowing what you know, and having it flaunted in front of you. I was away at school, it was easy to keep the secret, and it was easy not to look at dad and think, ‘My father’s a cheater’. You didn’t need to deal with that, especially while you were with Nikki, your first real relationship. Now look at you. You don’t even know the difference between puppy love and real love.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

She clasps her fingers together and her voice is tender. “The way Dad cheated on Mom, the way Nikki up and left you while you were clearly affected by their separation—that’s not love, Jared. If you love someone, how can you do things like that to them?”

“Y-you can’t tell me that Nikki and I didn’t l-love each other,” I stammer. She just can’t say that. How could she think that? “Mom and Dad love each other.”

“*You* love Nikki, probably more than she deserves. Mom loves Dad more than he deserves. And it’s okay that you both do. Love is a sham, but it’s up to you to decide what you’re going to do about the love you give, and the love you receive. I didn’t force Mom to send Dad divorce papers. Dad made a choice to cheat. Nikki left you when you needed her, like I did. Really think, Jared. Is this the love you want to receive in the future? Is this the love *you* deserve? Are you going to text her back?”

I honestly don’t know anymore. What Dominique said made sense. For someone who is rejecting the love she’s receiving, she is spouting a whole lot of bullshit right now. But it makes sense. Dominique knows the choice she’s making.

“You didn’t leave me,” I say. “You’re here right now, right when I need you.”

Dominique smiles. “Yeah well, I’m your big sister, it’s in the job description.”

We both chuckle a bit. She leans her head on my shoulder, wrapping an arm around my back. The motion is comforting and painful. It’s been so long since we’ve hugged like this.

“Have you heard from Dad? Have you seen him?” I ask, forgetting that I haven’t spoken to him since either.

“No, I haven’t,” she says. “I can’t really bring myself to speak to him either.”

I take a deep breath and nudge her off me. “I’m sorry for what I said to you, and leaving everything like that. It wasn’t your fault.”

“It’s okay,” she squeezes my hand. “I’m sorry too.”

She clutches me towards her and hugs me tight, then pulls back quick, swiping at her eyes again. She bites her lip with a small smile and stares at the ceiling.

“Okay, no more mushy shit. Gimme’ that picture of Nikki from your wallet.”

“I don’t got a—”

Dominique raises her eyebrow at me. I stick my tongue out at her. “Fine, here.”

I take out the wallet sized photo. It’s my favorite picture of Nikki. I took it when we were at the beach together sometime in the summer. She was shivering from the cold sea breeze, but she had a sweet grin nonetheless. She had her hand in a peace sign.

“That’s just sad,” Dominique glances at me then stands up from the barstool.

“Tight’. We’re supposed to be talking bout’ how much she ain’t shit. Let’s go throw darts at her face.”

Twenty-five minutes later, Nikki’s picture is defiled with devil horns, a mustache, blackened out teeth, shit stains on her pants, a tiny dick drawn beside her mouth, and a dart hangs from her left boob.

I also had two shots of tequila and Dominique dared me to try this shot called “Blue Balls”.

“And you know what else I hated about her?” I slur. I throw a dart and it sticks to the wall, two feet below the dartboard.

Dominique eggs me on anyway. I feed off her drunk energy. “What? Whatchu’ feeling? What the hell did she do? Tell me the tea!”

I trip over my own feet. “She stay erasin’ the shows on my DVR. It’s *my* fucking DVR, not hers. No one cares about the Young and the Sexless.”

Dominique gasps and punches me softly, although somewhere in my mind I know it’s supposed to hurt. She has a decent right hook. “I like that show!”

“Alright people, it is 11 and time for karaoke! Any first takers?” The DJ says from the microphone on the stage. The DJ sways and he looks like he has three heads.

Dominique’s hand shoots up like a little kid in school. “Meeee!” She throws her last dart and it hits the top of the dartboard. “Come do a song with me, Jared!”

Dominique pulls me along to the stage. Manny, the bartender, grins at us from the bar. People cheers for Dominique.

“What song?” The DJ asks.

“Something that says, ‘Fuck my Ex’” Dominique responds.

“I got yal’,” He turns to the MacBook that most likely holds the music. The DJ hands us two microphones that he pulls out from below the stand. Everything feels like magic to me. A familiar song starts playing through the speakers. Dominique bops her head to the music and sways around on the stage.

“I barely know this song,” I whisper to her.

“Oh my god, I’m takin’ your black card from you. How you don’t know Big Sean? This song is everywhere! Just go wit’ it. Dance. Fake the words. I don’t know. I DON’T FUCK WITH YOU! YOU LIL’ STUPID ASS BITCH I AIN’T FUCKIN’ WITH YOU!” Almost everyone in the bar sings along with her.

I don't really listen to much popular music. I'm an old-school person. I like to listen to 90's music, sometimes early 2000's. I like to listen to old reggae and "summer of 2003 backyard barbecue" dancehall tunes. I don't like the new wave of trap music much. I vaguely know some songs, including the one Dominique picked, but I'm so drunk it sounds muffled, like there are cotton balls in my ears.

Dominique continues rapping along with Big Sean and she waves me over. I am still standing beside the DJ. "And every day I wake up celebratin' shit, why, cause' I just dodged a bullet from a crazy bitch, I—come on, Jared!"

I have no idea what I am doing, but I try to sing anyway. I fall behind the music—I, a black man, is off rhythm—and I can't keep up, but somehow everyone in the bar looks encouraging. Someone in the back whistles for me.

"Uh...you...dumbass...ain't...with YOU!" I scream the last words, exhilaration within my body, or maybe the alcohol is controlling my brain. The song isn't just for Nikki, but it's for my father too.

Dominique twirls around me, hyping me up, and she bobs her head along with the beat. I laugh when she bumps her hip into mine. I bump her back and bounce my legs to loosen up. Despite my awkwardness and bad dancing, I do it anyway. Even though I completely suck, I still force myself to have fun until I really do feel it. When the song is over, Dominique throws her arms around me and I hug her back tightly. The people in the bar cheer for us. I look around at everyone, reveling in the smiles, the bright eyes, and applause when the song fades out.

"Alright. *Now*, it's time for you to go home." Dominique puts my arm around her shoulders, because my legs stop working. She's sobered up before me.

“I’m not drunnnk, Dommy,” I squeak gleefully at her. “*You’re drunnnk.*”

Dominique laughs and shakes her head at me. “God, you’re such a lightweight.”

“That’s great!” I shout. “I’m only 187 pounds!”

“That’s lit, Jared,” Dominique pats my head. “You need to go to more parties with your friends now that you’re not with Nikki.”

She forces me to put my coat on and helps me when my hands don’t go into the sleeves. My limbs aren’t comprehending what I want to do. It feels nice to be a “baby brother” again. I missed Dominique taking care of me and taking me out places, babysitting while our parents were out, but not treating me like I was a brat she had no choice but to watch over when she really wanted to be with her friends. I missed this. I missed her.

Soon enough we are walking outside again, waiting for an Uber to take us back to my apartment in East New York. Dominique offers to pay if she could crash on my couch. While we wait for the Uber, Dominique stops me from skipping like a child. She also stops me from giving my emergency credit card to a homeless man.

The ride is long and I somewhat sober up along the way. Dominique keeps a hand on my back, worried I might trip again, but we manage to get up the stairs to our brownstone in one piece.

Inside, we both collapse on the sofa and I kick my feet up onto the coffee table. Dominique heads to the bathroom to change her clothes. It’s quiet when she leaves. I head to my bedroom to get cleaned up for bed myself. Unfortunately, my bedroom is a mess of easels and acrylic paint, as that’s how I left it before I went with Dominique.

My eyes lock on the gift I had been working on for Nikki. The bright pastel painting captures Nikki in the light, standing by her balcony, looking out at the rest of Brooklyn like she is ready to charge into it. I painted her in an angelic light, a soft glow casting onto her body, a twinkle in her eyes.

What is she doing right now? Should I text her back?

I don't think, I just do what I know I shouldn't. I go to social media and I find her profile. It isn't private, but we aren't friends anymore. She unfriended me, not the other way around. Her profile picture changed today. It's of her and the guy she is dating now.

Trevor. I can't even think of his name without malice, without wanting to find him and punch him. They sit close together on the same balcony we made so many memories together on. She doesn't look different.

Nikki liked to sit on her stoop late at night with a cup of tea and cookies, just so she could draw something real, and be inspired by the "Scenes of the City". She never let me watch her draw even though I liked watching her absorbed in her element.

In the picture, they are sitting together on her bottom step. My beautiful Nikki and a guy I immediately know is her new boyfriend.

She is wearing heels, but she hates heels, why is she wearing heels? The ends of her favorite red dress peek out from her fur coat. Fur? What happened to wanting to save animals and veganism? Her hair is shorter and it is curly. Why has she never worn her natural hair out around me before?

"Why? Why'd you do it," I slur, looking at the painting of Nikki, into her hazel eyes, as if she could speak back. Her eyes pour into mine, something she used to do to

make me putty in her hands. Now, it makes me angrier. “How can you the most beautiful creature in these world, but you’re insides are fuckeddd.”

“Nikkiiii,” I whine. “Why’d you leave me for him? Does he have more money? Is he older? Smarter? That’s fucked up, man! Real fucked up! Why?”

Before tonight, I wallowed in my misery and blamed myself for her leaving. I spent every day wishing that she never left, that she didn’t break my heart, and that she didn’t choose Trevor. But now, I’m livid. I’m livid because before tonight, I wallowed in misery, blaming myself *for her*. I’m sick of thinking about her. I’m sick of the way I feel when I think of her. She’s made her choices, and now it’s time for me to make mine.

I pick up a paintbrush and a tupperware filled with wet acrylic paint I had used earlier. I dip the paintbrush in the tub, and with a shout, I slash at the painting of her. The painting smears along her face. The first thing I mark is her eyes. I can’t take her eyes looking at me like that.

I make another slash, the brush nearly stabbing the canvas. The easel teeters backwards, but I don’t stop.

My chest burns with the knowledge that I am now the other guy. I am not her choice. She didn’t want to stay. I am the one tossed to the side. Everything is false. No more early breakfasts together. No more plans to leave the city and buy a house and travel the world. No more future kids to save and adopt. Everything we’ve planned together is over.

The paint starts to drip down my fingers, and I throw the paintbrush at the canvas. I punch it with the hands, scratching at the cloth, ruining the portrait.

Dominique stops me. I didn't even notice her come into the room, but she pulls me away from the easel, gently turning me around to hug me. I can't stop shaking. I want to continue hacking at the canvas.

My voice breaks, sounding weak and helpless. "We were *fine*. Mom and Dad were *fine*. Everything was *fine*."

I drop to my knees on the floor, the rage leaving me, taking my pent-up energy with it. Dominique doesn't stop holding me. This is the fastest my heart had ever beat.

"I'm sorry," she apologizes, after a long silence. "I'm sorry this is happening."

I continue bitterly, "You were right. Love is a sham."

Dominique frowns. "Jared, don't believe that just because I do. Love isn't completely a sham. You love Nikki with all your heart, and that's how I want someone to love me like. You deserve that love in return, just like Mom. Nikki's just not the right person to share that love with."

"Then tell Luca you love him, Dominique," I say. "You deserve it too."

Dominique hums. "We'll see."

And we sit there in the paint fumed room, not talking about anything at all anymore. But I still think about Nikki. My image of her is ruined and yet, I still love her. Hopefully with time, I'll learn to love her less and less, but for now, she's just an ache I can't erase, an ache I'll always remember.

The next morning, I delete the text. I delete her number. And I start a new painting on the same canvas I erased of Nikki.

Here Is My Story, Mom

‘When I cried for help with my lips sewn shut
My mother confronted me while I was in bed
She said, “I had a friend like you.”
And in my head, I thought,
this isn’t what this is right?
My mother said her roommate put up a fight
but one day her disorder and death nearly said hi—
“Ashley, do you want to die?”
No, I cried.

Mommy, you don’t understand.
I thought I had control balanced in the palm of my hand.
It was 2017 where I had noticed the change in my body.
I had ignored Freshmen 15, and it became Sophomore 30.
When I noticed my thighs touching more than usual
and my lower back sagging into my hips—
a story began that I didn’t dare let escape my lips.

My sisters are beautiful and I am the odd end
It’s no wonder I compare myself to all my friends.
I can take any rejection, it’s the craziest thing
how the “why” are the thoughts that are lingering.
It’s just me, maybe that was why,
and I didn’t expect that to falter my smiles.
I am tall and pudgy and I slouch a lot
even for a dancer— “You’re a dancer?”
Yes...why not? Oh.

Mommy, I try not to ask myself if I’m good enough,
because I know I’m good enough, I’m worth enough,
but it’s hard because pregnancy jokes aren’t funny
no matter how much self-love I strive to carry.
Every day I tell myself I look fine,
and then a roll of skin is where I draw the line
and I weigh myself, I played myself
thinking this is all I can do to help myself.

Then there was a day where I managed to say, “You look amazing”.
I felt it. Sort of. Then I ate. I could handle more food. I look great...
I couldn’t help but analyze the hills above my waist
The roundness of my face, the oddity of my breasts,
And after a quick rise and fall of my chest
My fingers snuffed out my breath

And I wretched out all my sorrows.
“Just one time, then no more.”
A cycle of lies, down to my core.

There were moments where I was caught
and I played it off like I was sick. They’d believe it.
I put on a charade for the game that I played,
how many times would I see someone and they’d say,
“Hmm, Ash, you’ve lost a bit of weight.”
Why didn’t that feel good anyway?
I’d do it again, every other compliment felt the same.
They passed through my ears, they were empty.
Mommy, I had lost my mind to my insecurities.

I promise, I didn’t purge every day.
It’s only once in a blue when my mind makes me cave
because I treated myself all week,
because I treated myself, I was weak,
and the conscience you installed in me ordered a halt.
I stalled to tell you, though I knew I would fall
soon if I didn’t do something sooner.
I was terrified, so instead I told my mentor,

She told you, then you came to me, my mouth was shut
as you attempted to lecture me out of my rut.
And instead you said, “I had a friend who was bulimic.”
This isn’t what this was right, I can’t be sick?
I was putting up a fight because I didn’t battle often,
why is this even a conversation?
You didn’t compliment me, you didn’t get mad, instead
you said, “Ashley, do you want to be dead?
Ashley, do you want to die?”
No.
I cried.

Hurt People Hurt People

It's a regular Saturday morning at Dance Wild!, a stupidly named competition that I need to win. It's the weekend of Regionals and Nationals only three months away. I am in the usual swing of competition mode. Standing backstage, I mark my choreography, careful so that no one would notice. I make sure I'm not in the way of the crew bustling to organize the groups that were going after me, and what the previous dances were going to win. Marking my moves is better than shuffling my feet in a basic tap step, which I tend to do when I *do* get nervous. I pretend I'm not nervous until the feeling disappears. I have nothing to worry about with the dancer who is on stage going before me. It's the dancer going on *after* me, that nearly has me doing paradiddles in place.

The soloist on stage is dancing to Queen's "Somebody to Love," before five judges and I can't help but silently critique her...considering how shitty her dancing is.

Stop sickling your feet whenever you point, it makes your foot look broken instead of a line. Spread your toes when your turning, your turns look choppy as hell—that's why you just fell out of them, stumbling in your landing. How do you not know how to do a simple pirouette? Stop cutting each step short, your movement is not flowing right.

Jesus, her technique is awful. It makes sense that she is a beginner's category in the competition. She wouldn't survive in a higher category. Dance is clearly just a hobby for her. Maybe her mother thought of dance as a recreational activity, not understanding how separate the competition world is and how intense some competitions can be. The soloist on the stage is a baby seal amid sharks.

Since I was old enough to be a company dancer, every year when April rolls around, it's competition season. After preparing pieces for months, we finally take our pieces to different competition a weekend. In Dance Wild's case, dance studios pay the competition to compete with their pieces and win title awards and trophies. Lots of studios submit up to a hundred dances, bringing every student in their studio to compete for guaranteed wins. Basically, we are competing against our own dances, since Giovanni's usually comes with the most.

As for me, I am a dancer under Giovanni's Dance Inc. way out in Queens, far from my home in Brooklyn. Giovanni's was one of those studios. I typically dance in multiple pieces in different categories, but for this competition, I had been working my ass off. I made sure that I only had a solo to focus on. If I want to get to Dance Wild! Nationals in Atlantic City, I need to get in the top five soloist ranking. Dance Wild is known for its winners usually being noticed in the commercial market. If I am going to become a dancer in movies like Debbie Allen, Julianne Hough, early 2000's Zoe Saldana, I need to win. There is also a hefty scholarship award for high school graduating soloists and I am going to get it. I put it in the air, it's going to happen.

I am doing a jazz number and I'd be up against other soloists in other categories. I'm not worried though. I have been working with the best choreographer at the studio and I've been practicing for months. I'm going to do just fine. I'm used to winning in the top three spots in the Overall Awards.

I am amongst catty dance moms who fight about which child is the best, dancers who are sick of their moms, and claim their studio is the best studio. At the end of the

day, I am around hundreds of girls who also want to win. Titles come with winning. Everyone wants that.

Unfortunately, I can't afford Giovanni's Dance Inc. anymore. Ms. Giovanni's knows that, and has only been letting my payments slide because I have been winning. My wins giving her studio more credibility. To Ms. Giovanni, there is no use for me if I lose. There will be no place for me. Giovanni's Dance Inc. will no longer be my home dance studio as I will be kicked out.

I have to win, I just have to.

The dancer's piece ends with her kneeling in a pose, one hand above her head like she is reaching for the sky, and the other towards the ground. The audience full of dance moms and a few dads clap. I cringe when the dancer stands and bows before the judges. She speeds off stage like she is afraid she will be stuck there. Other dancers waiting their turn backstage clap for her as she crosses to the dressing rooms. I can hear her crying to her friends about how she fell out of her turn and messed up big time; scared that she is going to lose, scared her teacher is going to yell at her.

Everything is quiet once the backstage coordinator tells all the girls to stop talking. I roll my eyes. Do none of them know backstage etiquette?

I stop marking my choreography and walk closer to the stage. It's my turn.

I adjust my backless, black leotard, pulling the end of the back higher up my waist. I ignore the way the leotard is tight around my hips. I wiggle my toes in my soft jazz booties. I have heavy makeup on and my hair is straightened into a low ponytail that brushes between my shoulders. I never get a say in my costume. Ms. Giovanni chooses

them all, and although it's pretty with its gold sequins, it isn't pretty on me. But, I'll let the judges judge for now.

The announcer speaks into the mic. "Next we have a teen jazz soloist, Tallulah Jamison, from Giovanni's Dance Inc., number 124, 'Fever'"

"The only way to go is up," I whisper to myself, something my mom used to tell me before most of my performances, when she was around to be there.

There is some applause. I slowly strut out to the center of the stage, my feet dragging behind me and my hips swaying, while my shoulders remain squared and facing the judges. I make eye contact with each one, then relax into my starting position, my feet spread apart and my hands on my hips. I place a smirk on my face when the base of the song starts.

The song Ms. Giovanni assigns to me is a soft and sensual, smooth jazz song that was surprisingly a Beyoncé song. I had expected her to give me a much more funky, musical theater song, but Ms. Giovanni insisted with an, "Of course! With that natural sexiness, you're going to sell it for sure."

"What sexiness?" I muttered back.

I jump right into the two minutes of choreography I'd been practicing for two months. The rush of competition enters my body. Any little nerves I have leave my body and muscle memory kicks in.

"Never know how much I love ya'. Never know how much I care."

Although I've been working on it for months, I hate this choreography. It was a little too sensual, as the song calls for it, but I didn't call for it. I feel more displayed for

the whole audience in a way that it shouldn't be. It isn't considered inappropriate. I'm playing a part, and the choreo isn't too sexy all the time. It is much more mischievous and cocky. But I can't object to it.

“When you put your arms around me, I catch a fear that's so hard to bear. He gives me fever.”

A light shimmer of a maraca rings through the song and I slide to the floor in a center split, my legs splayed out evenly on both sides, until I touched the ground.

Every step is in my bones, and I know the next move without even thinking about it. My brain dances for me, a light switch flickering on a performance, loving the center stage. Usually when I dance, I pretend I am someone else, I am away from my own problems. I forget about Ms. Giovanni's ultimatum. I forget the competition I am against. I even forget how I've been the last few days. Today, I am sensual, yet classy. I dance as woman on her own in a city ready to be with a man. I am a girl, longing for my lover. I am a free soul, looking for someone to be free with me. In truth, *I* am the fever, not the man.

I force myself in the zone, letting my body step-touches, *pas de bouree's*, straddle jumps, and *pirouette a la seconde turns* in a thirty-two-turn sequence for me. I become a spinning top that is in control of the turn, stopping with a leap. I push my body soar through the air and I continue flutter across the stage with quick moves. I do not hesitate the next move. Everything is continuous.

The stage lights are bright, but I can see enough of the audience. The judges sit in the front, eye-level with my feet, and eye-level with all my potential mistakes. There are

two women and three men. Out the five, only one nods their head to the tempo of the music, and only one scribbles notes on their scoring sheet. They all mutter into their headpieces, giving criticism I will only be able to hear on a DvD later.

Ms. Giovanni sits rows behind the judges. A lot of the students and moms from the studio sit in random groups throughout the audience, but I don't bother glancing at them when they cheer for me.

I can see her mumbling the choreography, willing my body to perform the way she taught me. Even though we had rehearsed the piece for weeks, anything could happen: a missed hand movement, an arm thrown away, a fall out of a turn. I will not let that happen.

The last few steps of the dance transitions to some small floor movements. I finally stop, sitting on the floor, fanning myself with my hand for choreographic effect, breathing heavily and desperately in need of water.

The audience roars, full of people I don't know. Two of the judges smile, while the others flip the score sheet over, ready for the next performer. I already imagine what they have to say about me. I imagine it in Ms. Giovanni's critical and raspy smoker's voice: *You need to be lighter on feet when landing you sound like an elephant. Relax your fingers, they aren't sticks. Point your toes harder, your energy is as inconsistent as your payments.* All things I forever work on. I need them to remember me. I need to prove them wrong.

I stand up and strut off stage the same way I walked on, slowly and sensually, swinging my hips with every step. When I'm far enough in the wings of the stage where

the audience can't see me, I relax my shoulders. My legs shake as the power and adrenaline leaves my body. Tension leaves my limbs, like I am settling into a hot bath. My body feels like gelatin, wobbly and trembling through each step.

Despite it all, I revel in the pain. I know I've put myself to work. I know I worked hard. I remember what my first dance teacher used to tell me when I first started training with her years ago.

"If you're in pain, it's a good thing," Ms. Jasmine would say, gently pushing my back closer to the ground while I whined in the straddle position I sat in. *"Embrace it. Love it. But don't be afraid of it. Pain means you are working. It means you are improving."*

The pain is most certainly throbbing within my lungs as I catch my breath. I smile a bit.

Tilt your chin up. Square your shoulders back. You are above everyone. Don't doubt yourself. The only way is up.

The girls backstage clap for me, but I ignore them. I know, it's a bitchy thing to do, but it's the only stage etiquette I ever break. The difference between us is that I know what I'm doing. I know what I need to do to succeed. These other girls aren't competition to me. Plus, I already know I'm not the nicest person in the world, especially at competition.

Before I leave for the dressing room, the MC announces, "Judges, turn your scoresheets to number 125, Serena Taylors with a teen lyrical solo from Jazz It Up! Studio of Dance, 'True Colors'.

Did he just say Serena Taylors? Serena Taylors from Jazz It Up! Studio of Dance?

I whip around to see the girl who I've never met before, but have most definitely heard of and kept up with. I scowl at the sight of my biggest rival in my head, and the heads of some others who compare us in the dance world (which is a *very* small world), and my replacement as star student at my very first dance school. It's also the only other dance school I've ever attended before transferring with Ms. Giovanni to her new studio, after the studio fiasco five years back. There were rumors that Ms. Giovanni was prejudiced, making money off black students, as the old Givannni's Dance Inc was based in Canarsie, one of the blackest neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Ms. Jasmine, Ms. Giovanni's best choreographer and teacher, quit after allegations of racism were made, and she built her own studio, while Ms. Giovanni moved hers to Queens.

If Serena Taylors, the girl who became Ms. Jasmine's new star student at her new studio is here at this competition, that means Ms. Jasmine is here. Ms. Jasmine in the audience and probably saw my solo

I focus on Serena's solo. *Of course*, Serena Taylors so happens to be going on right after me. *Of course*, her ivory dress is prettier than mine, making her appear as a heavenly body. *Of course*, her choreography is more technical than mine.

I clench my legs together, not realizing that I had started doing a paradiddle tap step while watching her. Serena dances along with the words of "True Colors" (of course it's some pretty, inspiring little thing). Every step is perfectly calculated to tell a story of true beauty, and honesty. Even her facial expressions switch from a beautiful smile, to an anguished flash of sorrow as she chaîné turns across the stage. I can't even find a single mistake, nothing I can call out to ease my new nerves. The judges give her their full

attention. Serena looks at ease on the stage, like she didn't need to try as hard as I did, or work as hard as I did. Everything, every *jeté*, *battement*, comes easy and natural to her, unlike me, who has worked every night stretching for a year to maintain my flexibility, to keep up with technique.

I leave as soon as she finishes. She ends her dance in a turning sequence like mine, except her leg just *has* to be higher, her turns just *have* to be faster, and she just *has* to intentionally fall out of it with grace. She is flawless and I hate her. I hate her so much.

Trying to get a hold on the anger bubbling in my chest, I head for the bright lights of the hallway. A door leading to the auditorium opens. Roaring applause echoes when Ms. Giovanni walks through it. She grins when she sees me, rushing towards me with a bottle of water and my costume bag. She pushes the water into my hands and I start chugging the bottle down.

None of the other moms from the studio comes out to congratulate me. My own parents aren't even here. My mom died when I was seven, and my Dad said the only way I was dancing at Giovanni's is if I'm paying for it myself. He doesn't support the art. Ms. Giovanni usually helps me with my things during competitions, knowing I have no one else to. It's not like any of the other moms are volunteering.

"That was amazing," Ms. Giovanni cheers in a light voice, digging through my bag for my clothes. She smells like Dunkin' Donuts coffee and cigarettes. We walk back to our dressing area, having to follow the posted signs on where to go. The dance competitions are usually in big performing arts schools with stages that had proper dance floors installed and stage lighting. Here, the "dressing room" is really in a large cafeteria,

where different studios hog chairs and make their own sections to sit in as groups. Moms even place their things on top of others, even if they didn't know one another. I'd throw a fit if anyone moved any of my things.

"Okay, so a lot of the moms are ready to leave after Awards in a few, so go get changed in this," Ms. Giovanni hands me a black jacket with the studio name on the back in cursive. Unlike the usual gear, it doesn't have my name embroidered on it. I hold it out in front of me. She is giving me a studio jacket? I've never worn one to the Awards ceremony, mostly because I can't afford it. Most studios prefer their students to represent with all their gear worn, but I can't afford Ms. Giovanni's expensive studio gear, so I always wore black. She's never offered to let me wear one before for free. Why now?

I take the jacket. "Thank you?"

"Of course, anything for my star," Ms. Giovanni nudges me with a wink in her blue eyes. She hands me a concession stand hot dog in a napkin. I eye it, unsure if I should risk eating more. I hadn't eaten since last night, and I made sure it was out of my body before I went to bed. Maybe a bite or two might not hurt. I didn't want to pass out.

"Thanks," I say, taking a bite.

"Okay. Wait for me outside here. I need to gather the other girls." Ms. Giovanni pushes me inside.

There were only two stalls in the bathroom. One stall is taken and the other is out of order. For such a big performing arts school, you would expect they'd have bigger bathrooms. So, I start undressing in a corner. My feet aches in my jazz booties, but I have no choice but to deal with it.

I scold myself when I realize I ate the entire hot dog instead of half. I shouldn't have done that. Before I can consider running into a stall to rid myself of it, a little girl squeals. My heart skips a beat from the shrill of her voice.

“You're Tallulah from Giovanni's Dance Inc.!”

Well, this is new.

A five-year-old looking little girl stood in front of the bathroom door. She grins madly at me, almost like she is ready to keep me captive in the restroom. Her copper skin glows against her yellow rain coat costume.

Please don't try to talk to me, I silently pray. I hate little kids. The little ones have low attention spans and are hard to get to dance without screaming “I want my mommy!” and bawling their eyes out in the middle of the dance floor. I am in competition mode. I am in a state of mind that only focus on choreography, water, and breathing. The little kids are always in the way, running around like everything is all fun and games.

“Um, yeah. Sup’,” I say awkwardly, turning my back to her to continue changing. I start moving faster, but careful not to snag sequins from my costume in my stockings.

The little girl continues staring at me, and I grow more uncomfortable. Placing my “Fever” costume on the counter, I spare a glance back at her. “Can I help you?”

She lurches forward and wraps her stubby arms around my legs from behind. Her head reaches my thighs.

“I'm your biggest fan!” she squeals. I stumble, whipping the both of us around as I try to shake her off me.

“Hey! Kid!” I splutter. “You're going to mess up my tights!”

I push her arms off and she lets go. I pinch at the nude stockings on my legs and check for any new marks. The little girl doesn't seem to have make-up on, not even lipstick. I breath out a sigh.

"I love watching you dance!" Oh, my God, is she fangirling? Over me right now? "I saw your solo, it was amazing!"

"Yeah, thanks," I say, slipping on my Adidas pants and black tank top. I open my make-up bag and rummage for my hair brush to switch my ponytail into a bun. My scalp is relieved when I undo the ponytail, and I frown at the crease marks where the scrunchie held it together. I would have to re-straight my hair when I get home and that's a tiring process considering how curly it can be.

She moves next to me, and watches me through the mirror. "I want to be just as good as you someday."

I pause. *Eat, sleep, and breathe dance. And work your ass off to afford training if you can't.*

But instead I say, "Keep working and you'll get there, I guess."

"Can I show you my dance?" she asks, swaying on her feet.

I scowl, but she doesn't seem to notice my disinterest. "Don't you have to pee?"

She giggles, turning around, making the small bathroom space her stage, and places her hands on her hips. "Yes, but I can hold it! I swear! I'm dancing to 'Walkin on Sunshine'. Five, six, seven, eight!"

"Listen, kid. Sorry, but I can't right now. You should go back to your parents." I put on a final layer of red-lipstick and zip up my make-up bag.

“I’m going now,” I call out to her, holding my stuff, and heading out the door.
She stops flailing her arms around.

“Wait!” She follows me out.

Jesus Christ.

The little girl grabs my wrist and pulls me to the side.

“Hey, kid, let me go. I really can’t—”

“Mommy! Look! I found Tallulah!” She calls out to the other side of the hallway.

I swear to God if this woman doesn’t come get her child...

When I look over to where the little girl looks, I am frozen.

“Tallulah?” Ms. Jasmine walks up to me with a gentle smile. Her studio jacket is blue, and I remember when I was younger she chose lots of royal blue costumes because that’s her favorite color. Even the tips of her dreadlocks are blue. Her ebony skin has some patches of glitter, like she was so busy attending to other student’s make-up she didn’t worry about herself. Her director’s pass dangles down her shirt.

Even years later, when I am no longer her student, I still feel the need to straighten up in front of her. Her judgement feels more important to me than Ms. Giovanni’s. Ms. Giovanni knows the dancer I am now. She’s groomed me, but Ms. Jasmine bred me. I owe a lot to her too.

The little girl runs into her arms. “Ms. Jasmine!”

Ms. Jasmine picks her up, holding her in her arms. “Marleigh! Your mommy’s looking for you, girlie! We have to gather for Awards.”

“Wait,” Marleigh stops her. “I want to show Tallulah my dance.”

“I wouldn’t mind watching,” a voice pops in, approaching us. Shit, even the way Serena carries herself is strong. I spot the girl my age walking towards us from down the hall.

Serena’s almond skim past my face. A bright smile spreads on her lips and there is a glint in her eye that makes my stomach bubble. I take a moment to assess her. I can’t help but compare myself to her. She is radiant in her lilac costume, the color humming against her flawless caramel skin, the fabric clinging to her dainty figure. Her long hair is wrapped up in a bun like mine, except hers isn’t as frizzy and full of sweat. She is vibrant and flourishing. Serena Taylors is a perfect delicate flower, a perfect replacement for me at Jazz It Up!

I heard she is a nice person, but as kind as she may be, I still hate her. My whole life I did my best to be a girl like Serena, to be a simple, only child for my parents—but then my mom left, my dad became useless, and *he* happened. I learned that I will never going to get anywhere by just being nice. And I am never going to get past Serena, win a 1st place National Title, win a \$5,000 scholarship, by just being nice.

Marleigh is more excited to see her than she was with me because she practically jumps into her arms. Serena holds her dearly, like they’ve been the best of friends since Marleigh was born.

Marleigh babbles, “You were amazing! I loved your dance! I—”

I tune out the rest of Marleigh’s assessment of Serena’s solo. I’ll let the judges determine that, and not a little girl in a rain-dress costume.

Ms. Jasmine looks back at Serena. “Can you please take her to the other girls?”

Marleigh giggles as Serena tickles her. “Sure, thing.” Serena carries her away, down the hall and out of sight.

Ms. Jasmine hugs me. It takes a moment before I awkwardly raise my hands to hug her back. She is warm and smells like Bath and Body works perfume.

“So, girlie, how have you been? I saw your solo, you did wonderful.” Ms. Jasmine is relaxed, not looking at me like I am a rival student at a rival studio, but normally, like we are conversing regularly, like nothing has changed. It’s unexpected. I also don’t like the word wonderful. My stomach churns. I truly regret giving myself the luxury of that hot dog.

“Thank you,” I say, my voice stiff. “I’ve been well.” Not good, or great. I’ve been well is my default answer in place of saying *I could be better*.

“That’s good, that’s good,” she nods. “How’s your Dad?”

Busy. Busy working and ignoring me.

“He’s fine,” I say.

“And school? Everythin’ good?”

I know she is genuinely interested in my life, as she’s always cared about all her students like any decent leader would, no matter how annoying or uncooperative some children and dance moms might be. Even after I stayed with Ms. Giovanni, Ms. Jasmine and I were friends on social media. She likes and comments on my pictures a lot whenever I post. She never has anything bad to say. She never stops caring. She was

there when my Mom died, and she personally checked up on me by coming to the funeral. I can't forget that.

But I also know what she really wants to know, but isn't asking for fear of prying. She wants to know about Ms. Giovanni and the studio. She wants to know any information she can get. She wants to know how rigorous the classes are, how we are treated, how expensive the rates are, as any studio owner would want to know for comparison. She doesn't push for the answers she wants though and I know she'd analyze my words. She's observant, and would come out knowing something I don't.

"Yea," I say then correct myself, "Yes. Yes, everything is fine."

Ms. Jasmine chuckles and nudges my shoulder. "Loosen up, girlie, it's only me. I miss you. I just wanna' make sure you're alright."

Before I can feel guilty, Ms. Giovanni steps into view. Her face is red and she watches me with a stern brow, and I know she's mad. I technically just fraternized with the enemy.

"Jasmine Jane," Ms. Giovanni greets with disdain in her voice. "Still trying to poach my students I see."

"Poaching?" Ms. Jasmine scowls, her shoulders tensing. Her words change, becoming colder than mine were. "As far as I'm concerned, all my students come on their own free will, I don't need to reach out to kids from other studios to for them to dance with me."

The word "with" strikes me. She didn't say "for", she said "with".

Ms. Giovanni tsks. "That's not exactly what happened though, is it?"

It's a brewing tennis match, listening to them talk.

Ms. Jasmine snorts. "Well, your memories must be deluded because *I* remember students running from someone who has told them that they feel like they are a slave master, because they couldn't control a beginner's class. What's your version?"

Ms. Giovanni narrows her eyes at Ms. Jasmine. "Tallulah, Awards have started. Get to the stage with the rest of the girls."

Ms. Jasmine sends me one last smile. "Good luck, Tallulah. I'm sure you'll do great."

"Thank you," I manage. I try to get out the words "you too", but they don't form. Ms. Jasmine walks away quickly and sends a resting bitch face to Ms. Giovanni.

"Nice jacket, by the way," she throws over her shoulder. And that's when I realize why Ms. Giovanni had given it to me.

Ms. Giovanni starts muttering up a storm.

"Who the hell does she think she is coming to this competition, treating *me* like I'm the bad guy once again. Like she's the top dog here when her choreography only wins in hip hop categories."

I want to defend Ms. Jasmine, to correct Ms. Giovanni and remind her that Jazz It Up! has won many awards for many categories and not just hip-hop. As much as I didn't like Serena, she is a valuable rival. She is good for a reason.

I want to ask her why she said that, what did Ms. Jasmine mean with the 'slave master' thing, but I push it aside. It's studio beef.

Ms. Giovanni glowers at me. “I swear, Tallulah, if you don’t beat that girl from that studio in the Overall Solos, you definitely know what’s going to happen.”

I did know. Ms. Giovanni had been telling me for a while now what’ll happen if I didn’t win. My chances change with Serena at the competition. She is not my rival in my head anymore. She is a real now that we’re at our first competition against one another. I can no longer compare us together through the scores I check at the competitions she wins. If I don’t beat Serena, it’s over for me.

I head to the stage where studios are all gathered. The stage is crowded and full of dancers of different ages. The MC just got everyone to sit down and make an aisle for the crew to pass trophies to winners. I sit with the other hundred girls from Giovanni’s, but I sit near the wings, so I can make a quick escape if I need to. I never like sitting through awards. I didn’t have any friends in the studio, so whenever I won an award, the looks they’d give me were discouraging. They looked at me like I didn’t work hard enough to get it, despite being Ms. Giovanni’s favorite. They look at me like they can’t believe I am the favorite. I don’t feel like I’m a favorite though.

I can see Serena sitting on the other side of the stage with the rest of Jazz It Up! The little girl, Marleigh, sits with two other little girls in matching raincoat costumes. They are the only fully black team on stage and they don’t have as much students as the other studios do. They don’t even have much dances registered, only competing with about twelve.

I countdown as the MC goes along the list of pieces, announcing their trophies.

The pieces are scored by, division, age, and dance categories. The competition is broken up into divisions of beginners, intermediates, and advanced—and *those* are scored by age—the toothy seven-year-olds, the annoying ten year olds who scream during the awards ceremony, the sassy thirteen years old, the cliquey sixteen year olds, and the professionals. Then all the pieces made by those groups are entered under certain dance categories like upbeat jazz, or soft contemporary, or more. Pieces are scored by their execution, technique, and personality. The dances are given trophies to show their score with Gold, High Gold, or Platinum. High Score Awards are the top ten highest scores in each category, age, and division. Then Overall Awards are the highest dances of the night for Soloists and Groups. It's a lot to remember, but easy to get used to.

I countdown as the MC goes along the list. For a long while, soloists only have been receiving either Gold or High Golds.

When the MC reaches my number, I sit up in anticipation. “Number 124, ‘Fever’. Platinum!”

I stand, gracefully, and step up to the one of the crew members who hands me a thin, plastic, platinum trophy, the top sculpted into a dancer. I don't allow myself to be happy just yet. Ms. Giovanni sits towards the back, and she looks indifferent. This win doesn't matter to her.

“Number 125, ‘True Colors’. Platinum!”

The MC says platinum with a bigger emphasis for Serena than he did with mine. We were both tied so far. Serena takes the trophy with a regal smile. The rest of Jazz It Up! screams for her, stomping on the floor, clapping their hands the loudest.

People barely clapped for me.

I tune out the rest of the awards as it zooms through the group pieces. I wasn't in any so it didn't matter to me. Ms. Giovanni's Dance Inc. wins a slew of Platinum's and High Golds, and so does Jazz It Up! With the little amount of pieces, they've had.

When it's time for overalls, I am focused once more. The MC gets to my category.

“Best Advanced Jazz, 16 to 19, in third place, Number 87, ‘This Little Light of Mine’.” The dancer walks up to the MC, and he hands her a small plaque.

“Runner Up, we have Number 111, ‘Cabaret’. And in first place, Number 124, ‘Fever’!”

I stand up much quicker, walking to the front of the stage, taking the plaque from the MC. The light applause, the stares from all the other girls, everything starts slowly fading away the more I keep looking at a stoic Ms. Giovanni and my heart thuds against my chest.

Serena wins 1st place Best Advanced Lyrical. Of course.

Ten minutes later, the MC begins announcing the best overall soloists. Only 1st place winners of Overall categories can place. No one else mattered to me. Serena was my only real competition here, I know it.

“Best Overall Soloists. In third place, Number 85, ‘He Lives in You’, Zion Jones!” A boy of maybe ten years old from Jazz It Up! Stands, not sad or disappointed, but pure elation on his face as he wins third place overall. If this little kid could win such a high placing, out of maybe 1000 pieces, imagine if I'm first. The only thing in the way is Serena.

Usually in dance movies, the moment before the MC announces the winner of the competition, time slows down, sound drowns out, and all that is in sight is the main character and the prize, and the rival in the way.

At competitions like Dance Wild!, that moment always happens quickly, and before you can blink. I almost miss hearing him call my name.

“Runner Up! Number 124, ‘Fever’, Tallulah Jamison!”

My body is frozen. I feel like water has doused over me. I am aware of the hot dog that sits in my stomach. I don’t need to look at Ms. Giovanni. I *know*.

I stand up and take the larger plaque that reads, Dance Wild! Overall 2nd Place.

Second place for second best, second best for a second thought. I hold the plaque with numb fingers. I try to keep breathing at a proper pace. In through the nose, out through the mouth. My body trembles.

Serena stands next to me, holding a large check for \$200, smiling for a photo. I am barely holding on.

When we are dismissed to sit, so the MC can announce the overall winners for the group pieces, I don’t stay on the stage. I quickly walk out. I had never expected myself to be one of those girls who got upset from not winning a trophy, but the win was more than just a trophy. It was supposed to be a route for the rest of my life, and now I’m stuck.

I can’t help but criticize myself, a harsher voice in my mind. *You weren’t light enough on your feet. You’re one to talk about choppy movements, you drop your arms when you do the a la seconde turns, your knee is slightly bent at the leap, you didn’t do it right, you didn’t do it well, you aren’t good enough. You will never be good enough.*

I rush into the bathroom, tossing the plaque onto the counter, and throwing myself into a stall, dropping to my knees. Before I know it, my fingers are down my throat, and the hot dog comes back up in spurts, into the toilet. It smells disgusting but I bear it. My eyes water and blur, snot coming out of my nose.

This is why I'm not light on my feet. This is why I'm not good enough. This is why.

And then I'm weeping on the lid of the toilet. Unsanitary, I know, but I had nothing else left to do. Pulling myself together after throwing up is always difficult. The guilt eats at my chest, and I pant, gasping for air. I shouldn't have done that again, I know I shouldn't have. When I wipe my face with my hands, black streaks appear on my palms, and I know I've ruined my make-up. My make-up bag is with the rest of my things in the dressing room. People could see me like this, people could see my meltdown. They can't. I can't let them.

I step out the stall and head for the sink. The mirror reflects how awful I look. There are dark circles under my puffy eyes that aren't better when I rinse off my face. My hands squeeze at my hips, wondering if I would've won if I didn't look the way I did, if I wasn't darker, if my hips weren't as wide, my thighs as thick.

The bathroom door opens and Marleigh skips in, a second-place ribbon around her neck, and I wipe my eyes. Marleigh waves to me eagerly.

"Congratulations Tallulah!" she says brightly, then heads into a stall.

"Thanks," I mutter. I take off Ms. Giovanni's studio jacket.