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# The Smell of Rain

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# THE SMELL OF RAIN



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GLORY BE TO GOD

## Foreword

Dear Reader,

Have you ever been outside right after it rained or even as it is raining? If you were to take a deep breath, you will smell something earthy and comforting. It's like wood, but not quite. It's fresher than that. It is the smell of rain. There's something alluring about the earthy smell that rain gives. However, there's also something oxymoronic about rain. It is needed, but uncomfortable. Many times, rain makes us scatter to our shelters. It makes us groan and wish for sunny days. It brings some people's spirits down and confuses them. However, the land needs rain. Without rain, we stand the chance of not having water, not having food. Without rain, we stand the chance of not surviving. Even in the smell of rain, there's an irony. How can this wet substance, which makes me uncomfortable smell so good and feel so comforting?

It is with this question in mind that I introduce you to my short story collection, *The Smell of Rain*. It's an unusual title but I believe it encompasses the main question that all my characters are dealing with. How does one deal with the duality of encountering both good and evil in the same substance? How can that which gives me pleasure be wrong? What is the line between trust and deception? *The Smell of Rain* seeks to explore that.

The first time I wrote a story, it was a continuation of a book that I had read during my lunch period in elementary school. Although the author had ended the book one way, I felt like the story could go further. So, I continued the story, not stopping until I felt I had reached the end. In some ways, the stories in this collection are continuations. What happens to a daughter after her father is sent to prison? What happens after an interracial family moves to a ghetto neighborhood in East Brooklyn? What happens fifty years after a black woman gives up her daughter? What happens when a young girl is faced with the reality that her friend was never her friend?

When I first began each of these stories, I had images in mind. For *Harriet Tubman*, I had the image of a small girl in front of a rundown apartment building, watching as a white man and a black woman moved into her house. For *Road Trip*, I had a physical image. In my senior workshop class, one of our exercises was to write a story based on a physical picture. I chose the picture of a white girl. Her face was streaked with tears, she had her hand in her mouth. She was in a carriage, and next to the carriage was a woman. Behind them was a building that looked like The Capitol building. I began this story not sure where I wanted to go with it. I knew that it was Anderson's story, but I didn't know how important the child had to be to Anderson. But as I worked on it over this semester, it became clear that she was his cousin, the child of his great aunt. When I began writing *Piano Lessons*, I had the image of a daughter in

mind, a daughter who was shocked to find out that her father is a sex offender. But the more I wrote it, the more I realized that the story is about disbelief. Finally, with *Friday Night Special*, I began with the image of a daughter and a father sitting in front of a table talking to each other. I knew that the daughter was confronting her father and that the father had committed a crime.

If there's one thing that I wanted to accomplish with these stories was tell the kind of stories that I want to read. While I enjoyed the many classes I took at the English department during my four years here, I felt that what was lacking was stories that related to black people. Many times, the classes that I took were filled with books written by old white men. And while there's nothing wrong with those kinds of stories (and I enjoyed them), at times I longed for books that described the struggles of people that were like me. But I didn't only want books about black people, I wanted to read about the many bias that I had seen in my own lifetime. I didn't necessarily want to write for black people, but I wanted to write about them. Therefore, all the main characters in this collection are black. While race is not the main topic of all these stories, it is not absent. Two of my stories *Road Trip* and *Harriet Tubman* deal heavily with race. However, I attempt to examine race, not just from one perspective, but from all sides. What does it look like when black people are racist towards their own kind? What does it mean when you must make a life wrenching decision because you know that your race could be a hindrance to your half-white daughter?

Another aspect of these stories is their heavy emphasis on family. One thing that I realized about myself as I wrote and rewrote these stories is that I am constantly going back to the family home, to the father, and to the mother. How are they working in the home? What are my characters' relationship to their family? Family has always been a big part of my life. I come from a home with a single mother. And I think this is reflected in all my stories where the family structure has been punctured in some ways and need to be rebuilt. Particularly in *Piano Lessons* and *Friday Night Special*. In *Piano Lessons*, my goal was to explore the idea of the family that we choose. What happens when the family that we have disappoint us or don't understand us? Where do we turn to? The answer could be to turn to someone else, find the person that won't disappoint you and cling to that person like in *Piano Lessons*? Or maybe confront your family like my main character in *Friday Night Special*? But what I wanted to show was that neither of those solutions are as easy as they seemed. As humans, we are bound to disappoint each other. And sometimes the person who can disappoint us the most is ourselves.

Although I read, books were not my only inspiration. I was inspired by authors like Toni Morrison and Francine Rivers. Reading an excerpt from Morrison convinced me that writing about my race was important. I'm not completely sold on all of Morrison's books or writing style, but she

challenged me to bring race up and center to the front of the page. The first time I was introduced to Morrison was through the excerpt of “God Help the Child.” After reading the excerpt, I felt like there was no excuse for me not to write about race in such an open and shocking way like she did.

Francine Rivers is a different kind of writer. She is a Christian fiction writer. The way Francine inspires me is to not shy away from the hard problems. I don’t mind exploring issues like rape, abortion and other tabooed problems on the page because I’ve read Francine’s works. I explore the topic different than she does, but the fact that the subject is still talked about is important.

Other than reading, I think I drew mainly from my life. As I was describing *Piano Lessons* to my friend, she asked me why I write the kind of stories I do. Why write about rape, or racism? Because these are the topics that interest me. I know what’s like to have your skin color make you feel like you stand out. I was molested as a child. I know what’s like to feel misunderstood by family members. I have seen many black people be racist to their own kinds. My stories are my way of trying to understand my experiences and the experiences of those around me. They are my way of trying to figure life out as I grow. However, it is because that I am sometimes so close to the concept of the stories that I find it hard to write them. I’ve sometimes had to look at the problems my characters faced from a different lens so that I can write them.

None of my stories seek to find solutions to the problems of life. Many times, my characters are still left with the questions they had in the beginning. There are no happy endings in my stories. It’s not because I believe that life doesn’t have happy endings, but it’s because the purpose of each story is to show the growth or lack of growth in my character.

I hope that you enjoy entering this world. I ask for your patience as each character slowly reveals their wants and desires to you. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Esther Shittu

## Harriet Tubman

“Damn shameful,” Hadassah’s father said at dinner, as he ripped a piece of bread with all his might and placed it in his mouth. Hadassah watched as her father chewed the bread with his mouth half open.

“King,” her mother replied. She glanced at Hadassah and Timothy, her brother. “Watch your language.”

“I ain’t gonna watch nothin’,” her father said. He took a big gulp of water. Hadassah could hear the footsteps of the Johnson’s above their floor. She heard *The Steve Harvey Show* next door through their thin kitchen wall. She was glad that everyone was too preoccupied with their own lives to hear her father.

She watched as her father ripped open another bread with his teeth. She felt a speech coming. He was talking about their new neighbors. The new arrival into their East Brooklyn apartment building.

“After all the things those people did to us, it’s just damn shameful to see one of our own decide to defile herself like that,” her father said

“She didn’t defile herself, King,” Hadassah’s mother said. She was always trying to calm her father when he got into moods like these.

“Ya’ll aint ever marrying a white person,” her father said. “It’ll be over my dead body before I allow one of my child to be with one of them. You hear me?”

He looked at his two children who knew better than to disprove their father during moments like these.

“Yessir,” her brother said, chewing with his mouth wide open, just like his father.

Hadassah nodded. No white man, check. Not that she knew many white men. In fact, up until recently, she had only seen white people on TV.

Their new neighbors had come during the day surprising everyone, even Hadassah and her friends as they played Double Dutch in front of their building.

They rolled up in a dark blue wagon with a U-Haul behind them. No one in their neighborhood had a car like that. The girls watched as a man stepped out of the driver's side. He had on a black two-piece suit and all Hadassah could see was his face, which looked almost invisible as the sun shone on it. He stretched before walking around to the other side to open the door. The next passenger of the car was a woman. She wore a deep purple shoulder-less dress, a contrast to her rich brown skin. She looked around, taking notice of the four girls staring at her. She smiled, revealing straight white teeth. The man began to pull furniture out of the back of the U-Haul. Two twin girls around Hadassah's age emerged from the backseat, wearing pink and blue shorts that revealed long legs that reminded Hadassah of a dark yellow. She watched as all four strangers pulled furniture out of the U-Haul, placing them on the sidewalk.

"They're not moving here, are they?" Tina, one of Hadassah's friends asked. The question hung in the air for the four girls, but it was clear that they were not the only ones captivated by the four strangers that stood in front of their building. The teenage boys who had been playing cards before the arrival of the new family stopped their card games, their mouths forming O's. The old women, who moments earlier were gossiping about how disrespectful young ones nowadays are, were as quiet as ever; although their squinted eyes revealed their shock. Occasionally, they looked at one another as though to ask themselves if they were truly seeing what was in front of them. The men who usually stood by the entrance of the apartment

building talking in hushed voices, were also silent. Their eyes stared unabashedly at the woman, their pipes hanging out of their wide-open mouths.

Everyone had Tina's question written all over their face. Even the only dog that lived in the building had stopped her barking as if she also didn't know what to make of the new people. The whole neighborhood stood still, the only movement coming from the four people, who either didn't notice the attention they attracted or ignored it as they pulled suitcases, bags and kitchen ware out and placed them on the side walk.

It wasn't until Mr. Smith, the landlord, came out of the building, his arms wide open, his mouth revealing a crooked smile, that Tina's question was confirmed. Mr. Smith, who never smiled at anyone and always shook his head at every child, greeted the new arrivals as if they were his long-lost cousins. He pinched the cheeks of the girls, his lips moving so fast, Hadassah imagined that he would soon die from lack of breathing.

"I guess they are moving here," she said, turning to face her friends. She picked one end of the two ropes they had dropped on the floor and motioned for Cassandra to pick up the other end. The two girls began to turn the ropes into each other. It was a dismissal, a sign that she didn't care who was moving here or not. Although she knew that Tina, Cassandra and Danielle knew she was lying. She cared, all four of them did, but they knew better than to say anything.

Hadassah's mother's friends made their opinion of the new family clear as the four of them sat in front of the TV to watch *General Hospital*. As she scrubbed the dishes in the sink, Hadassah couldn't help but overhear their conversation. Mrs. Stanley thought that the black woman was a whore. A self-hating whore at that. How could anyone who marries a white man not hate herself? Ms. Rebecca asked.

Ms. Rebecca had never married and always said that part of the reason was because she ain't about to be dominated by no man. Why be dominated by a man at all, she would ask when her friends complained about the actions of their husbands.

“Why be dominated by a white man?” she asked loudly after the arrival of their new neighbors. “Haven't we had enough of that?”

“Anyone is better than the white man, even a Mexican,” Mrs. Stanley added. Haddie cringed. She knew that if Cassandra, who was the only Mexican in their building, heard Mrs. Stanley, she would be upset.

“She must not know her history,” Tina's mother, Mrs. Kendra said. She and Hadassah's mother were best friends. “Doesn't she recognize that we had to fight against the very thing she is now doing willingly? I used to shudder at night when my mama would tell me stories of how slaves were abused by their masters. I just don't understand some people.”

All of them became quiet when the commercial break ended, and Hadassah could hear guns coming out of the TV screen as their soap opera took a dramatic turn. She rinsed the pot she had been scrubbing and was just about to turn off the water when she heard Mrs. Kendra address her mother.

“What do you think of all of this Jane?” Mrs. Kendra asked. “You've been awfully quiet.”

Hadassah held her breath, allowing the water to run as she listened for her mother's response.

“I think,” Jane began before pausing. “Hadassah turn off that water. How long does it take for you to watch a few dishes?” Hadassah heard her get up and walk the few feet it took to

get to the kitchen. She turned off the faucet and turned to face her mother, who gave her daughter a knowing glance.

“The pots were really hard to scrub, mama,” Haddie said, holding her hand out and scrubbing the air to show just how hard it was.

“You got homework?” she asked, hands on her round hips. Haddie didn’t respond. “Then you better go and get it done. Get going.” Jane pointed her index finger toward Hadassah’s room.

“Aww mama,” Haddie began, but rushed out of the room at the sharp look she received from her mother. She walked past the women who were captivated by the show they were watching, and saw a car crash into a body on the TV screen as she passed. Closing her bedroom door behind her, she slid down, her ears against the door waiting for her mother to answer the question. But all she heard was a scream coming out of the TV screen, as someone yelled, “Jason!”

It was later that night, after her mother’s friends had left, that her father made his comment about the woman defiling herself. Hadassah listened as she laid in bed and watched as her mother entered the room to check on her children, like she did every night before she went to sleep. In the dark, Hadassah watched the shadow of her small framed mother. Jane King was a small but chubby woman. Although she always took small steps, there was no distinguishing that she was the one coming. Her footsteps woke Hadassah up every night.

She watched in the dark as Jane kissed Timothy’s forehead, and she could see her lips moving as she said a little prayer over her son. Jane moved to Hadassah’s side of the room. Out of habit, Hadassah’s eyes shut close before her mother could note that she was wide awake. She

heard a small chuckle and felt the tips of her mother's small lips on her forehead. Haddie waited for her to leave, but instead felt the weight of the bed shift as Jane sat down.

"I know you ain't asleep so you better get up cause I want to speak to you about something," Jane said.

Propping one eye open, Hadassah squinted up at her mother and was surprised when she saw a small smile on her face. Jane nodded her head up, a signal for her daughter to sit up.

"I'm sorry, mama," Hadassah said as she sat up. "I was asleep, but I always wake up when you come in."

Ignoring her daughter's excuse, Jane King looked intently at her. Hadassah knew she was about to get a lecture. She tried to think about anything she may have done wrong recently. Did she do anything to Timothy? Not really. Did one of her teachers call because she had said something disrespectful again? She couldn't think of anything bad she had said in class lately, but then again, these teachers are easily offended so she couldn't be sure.

"You ain't do nothing," Jane said. She reached over and turned on the lamp next to the bed. "Except maybe eavesdrop when you ain't supposed to." She gave Hadassah a knowing glance. Haddie pressed her lips into each other and smiled, a reaction she couldn't help when she knew she was guilty.

"I don't want you saying anything bad to those people. I don't care what anyone else says, but I want you to leave'em alone. It ain't none of our business what anybody else decides to do, but it is our business how we treat them. You understand me?" Hadassah nodded. Jane turned off the lamp and got off the bed, heading towards the doorway.

"Mama?" Hadassah said before Jane could shut the door behind her. "Is Papa right? Did she defile herself?"

“You ain’t need to worry about what grown people say,” Jane said, her back still turned to her daughter. “What you need to worry about is what I told you: leave’em alone.”

It would have been easy for Hadassah to follow her mother’s direction, except she got paired with one of the daughters at school. It was during social studies. Mrs. Roach, who Hadassah thought was the meanest teacher in the school, decided that Hadassah needed to be separated from her friends for a project, where they were supposed to help each other memorize and recite the amendments of the constitution.

“What do you mean you can’t work with her, Hadassah King?” Mrs. Roach asked when Hadassah said in front of the class that she can’t work with “those people,” referencing her mother’s words the night before. The whole class erupted in laughter. With her hands to her hips, Mrs. Roach, whose narrow face reminded Hadassah of a V, glared at Hadassah waiting for an explanation.

Opening her mouth to give one, Hadassah was interrupted when Mrs. Roach said that she would in fact be working with “those people,” whether she liked it or not, unless of course she wanted to spend the whole summer in her company. The discussion was over and the whole class got into pairs.

Hadassah, who was as stubborn as her father, sat still, refusing to move from her seat. She was surprised when one of “those people” pulled a chair and sat in front of her wooden school desk.

She was intrigued by the hair on top of the girl’s head. It was curly and long, not permed and short like her own, which her mother had been perming since she was four years-old. Hadassah had thought that the twins had a skin color that was closer to the shade of their

mother's but now as she faced one of them closer than she thought possible, she could see that she was wrong. She didn't know whether to say it was orange or yellow or brown. She hadn't seen a color like that before. All the kids that lived in her neighborhood were fully black, and although there were a handful of Hispanic children at her school, Haddie didn't see the difference between them and her.

The girl's eyes captivated Haddie, silencing her ready-made response when the girl sat down boldly in front of her. It was a mixture of blue and brown. They intrigued her and as she stared at them, she couldn't help but wonder whether it was the blue or the brown that was more dominant.

Light brown freckles dusted all over the girl's face.

"I'm Harriet," the girl said, her voice showing her uncertainty about how to proceed, but seemed to think that an introduction was the proper step to take. "Like Harriet Tubman?"

It was the Harriet Tubman that took Hadassah out of her trance.

"If you are Harriet Tubman," she said, her voice rising, inadvertently capturing the attention of everyone in the class, "then I must be Rosa Parks." The whole class erupted in laughter again, and Hadassah watched as Harriet's face turned red.

"Wow, I didn't know you can change color," Hadassah said, the class laugh harder. Harriet lowered her eyes, her neck becoming brighter and brighter.

"That's enough Hadassah King. If I hear one more peep out of you, I will call your father," Mrs. Roach said. It was a trick that all Hadassah's teachers had learned. If you wanted Hadassah to behave, you don't threaten to send her to the Principal's office. You call her father.

Hadassah rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Alright, Harriet Tubman.” It was too much, the class snickered. “I wasn’t trying to make a joke,” Hadassah said when Mrs. Roach glared at her. “I promise!” But it was too late. Harriet got up out of her seat and ran out of the class, tears trailing her light freckled face. Her sister also got up and ran after her, but shot a look at Hadassah before leaving the class. Mrs. Roach went after the two of them, promising Hadassah that she would be receiving a phone call from her that night.

Mrs. Roach followed through with her promise, but it wasn’t her father that Hadassah had to worry about. King’s only words of warning to his daughter was that the next time she disrupted the class instead of doing her work, she would get a beating so bad, she wouldn’t be able to sit still. Jane King was harsher to her daughter. She refused to listen to Hadassah’s explanation that she had been following her mother’s instruction to leave “those people” alone, but was unable to do so because Mrs. Roach hated her. Hadassah was to go and apologize to Harriet. But she wasn’t going to apologize the next day, she was going to do it that night.

Jane grabbed her daughter’s hand and pulled her out of their apartment, towards the door and up the stairs to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor.

As they walked up, Haddie held her breath to keep herself from choking from the strong smell of marijuana in the stairwell. She could hear running footsteps above her and guessed that the weed boys were running away. She didn’t understand why they ran since everyone knew they smoked weed anyway. But it also occurred to her that they didn’t know whether it was a resident or the Po-Po walking up the stairs.

With each step to the seventh floor, Haddie became more anxious and the fact that her and her mother had to step over garbage and a puddle of pee turned her anxiety to anger. Why should she have to apologize? She was only doing what her mother had asked her to do.

They finally reached the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, and Haddie heard her mother try and control her breathing. They walked past the elevator, down the long hallway to the last apartment door on the left.

Jane made a fist and rapped her knuckles to the door twice. Laughter could be heard from inside.

“Who is it?” a deep voice asked from the other side of the door. Looking at her mother, who motioned for her to respond, Hadassah said it was her: Hadassah King. The door opened to reveal the man she had seen that first day, the father. She couldn’t help but shrink back. He was almost as tall as her father. In contrast to the suit he wore the first time she saw him, he now wore sweat pants and sweatshirt. He smiled. Hadassah glanced at her mother, who motioned for her to speak.

“Is Harriet Tubman here?” As soon as the words were out, she threw her hands over her mouth and Jane cringed, rolling her eyes upward as if to ask God, why He gave her such a daughter. “I mean is Harriet here?”

An amused expression ran through the man’s face at the reactions of mother and daughter. He motioned for the two to come in and as they stepped inside the apartment, Hadassah couldn’t help but be amazed at how different it was to the one she shared with her family. The walls of the apartment were blue and inside were couches that she had always seen her mother sigh at when glancing at catalogues, as though by sighing at them she could make

them appear in her own living room. Next to the couches was a round dining table with four matching chairs around it. Sitting on those chairs was the woman and the two girls.

“You’re the first visitors we’ve had here,” the man said as he closed the door and walked around to face Hadassah and Jane.

“Thomas Jones,” he said, extending his hand to Jane, a smile on his face. Hadassah stared at his pale hands and looked at her mother who also seemed surprised by it. Jane glanced from the hand to Thomas Jones to her daughter. Thomas kept his hand out, but his smile faltered.

“Jane King,” Jane finally replied, but she kept her hand firmly by her side. Thomas nodded and lowering his hand. The woman got up and walked towards her husband and their two visitors.

“My wife, Helen Jones,” Thomas said when she reached their side, making a sweeping motion as though to announce her for a game show. He motioned his hand to the back, and smiled down at Hadassah. “And my daughters: Harriet and Hope Jones. I guess you came to see Harriet Jones, not Harriet Tubman?” His eyebrows moved up and down in a teasing motion. Hadassah nodded.

Stepping around Helen and Thomas, she walked to the round dining table, her eyes glued to the tiled floor. When she reached the table, she looked at both girls, unable to tell which one was Harriet and which one was Hope.

“Harriet,” Thomas said behind her, “this young girl came to say something to you.” Harriet got up off her seat, her eyebrow raised in expectation. Unlike her twin sister, Harriet’s face was longer. Hope stared hard at Hadassah and touched her sister’s fingers, a show of support.

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings,” Hadassah said.

“Haddie,” the warning was evident in Jane’s voice. Hope snorted.

“I’m sorry,” Hadassah began again. “I’m sorry for hurting your feelings. I didn’t mean to. Okay?” Harriet nodded, her eyes looking anywhere but at Hadassah. She sat back in her seat and turned back to her dinner. Her sister followed suit. Haddie’s cheek burned. She wasn’t used to being dismissed, not by people her age. But she nodded and walked briskly back to her mother’s side.

Thomas smiled once again, and Hadassah couldn’t help but wonder if he ever stopped smiling. He clapped his hands together, bringing them to his face and thanked Hadassah and her mother for coming.

The whole apartment building had heard about Hadassah’s and Jane’s adventures by the next morning.

Tina, Danielle and Cassandra wanted to know what it felt like being inside the Joneses’ apartment. Haddie pretended not to be impressed. Instead she complained about her mother’s meanness for making her apologize. However, she did tell them about the couches and dining set. The information had little to no effect on Danielle and Cassandra, but Haddie saw the wheels turning in Tina’s head. Tina disliked the twins even more.

It would have been nice if Hadassah felt like she could leave the Joneses alone, like her mother suggested. But it seemed impossible. They were everywhere, even in the conversations she had with her friends.

“They think they’re better than us,” Tina said, two days after the apology, as she, Haddie, Cassandra and Danielle walked back home from school.

“Do you know what Hope said to me today?” Cassandra joined in, counting her steps as they walked through the intersection. “Hope said that--”

“Shut up Cassie,” Tina said, her voice dropping. She motioned behind her and Haddie turned to see the twins walking a few paces behind them, laughing.

Her eyes met theirs and she watched the laughter die on their faces. Hope sneered and whispered something, glaring at Hadassah. She laughed louder. Harriet smiled nervously. Haddie stopped and turned around.

“I don’t know why the Tubmans are laughing but I know ain’t nobody ever be saying something about me behind my back,” Haddie said loudly.

She and her friends stood near the sidewalk, waiting as the twins walked closer and closer. It was when the two were in front of the four girls - Harriet looking at the ground and Hope, looking less certain than before, but still having an adamant expression on her face- that Tina said it.

“Black and white trash,” Tina murmured under her breath. Hope stood still, turning, her face completely red. Haddie saw her fingers curl into a fist. The six girls stood, not saying a word and Haddie wondered what would happen if Hope hit Tina. She knew she should help her friend, but she was uncertain about whether she would.

“We have to go Hope,” Harriet finally said. Her soft voice broke the tension. She tugged at her sister’s shirt, and Hope began to walk away, still looking at Haddie and her friends. She didn’t turn around until she was almost near their building. Haddie let out the breath she had been holding and groaned.

“I’m going to get into so much trouble,” she said.

But Hope didn't tell on Hadassah and her friends. Haddie waited for Mr. Jones to come and bang on her door to report her, but he didn't. When she saw Mr. and Mrs. Jones the next day in the elevator, they both smiled at her, with Mr. Jones asking so many questions in the short amount of time it took to get from the fifth floor to the first.

It was Saturday morning when she saw the twins again. Haddie, Tina, Cassie and Danielle stood in front of the building. Tina held one end of the Double Dutch rope and Cassie held the other. Danielle jumped into the turning ropes from one side and Haddie jumped in from the other.

The twins came out of the building, pushing their bicycles. Hope had one with purple seats and Harriet had another with pink seats. The shiny rims told Hadassah that the bikes were new. The two got onto their bikes and rode up and down the street.

Haddie didn't have to look at the faces of her friends to see their reactions. No one had bikes like that, not anyone who lived in their neighborhood.

She watched as Hope raised her body up, so that she was almost in a standing position on the bike. Hope pedaled hard as she rode down the block and made a hard turn. She stopped abruptly, almost tipping over but balancing herself in time. Some of the boys, Haddie's age, that lived in the building, went up to Hope and Harriet.

"I bet their mama are going to beat the daylights out of them when they get home," Tina said. She dropped the rope and crossed her arms.

It wasn't long before the twins were allowing the boys to ride their bikes, taking turns with them.

"They think they're so good cuz they're rich," Tina said again, her anger getting worse.

“It doesn’t matter what they think,” Haddie said. She picked up the end of the rope that Tina had dropped. “Your turn, Tina.” She began to turn the ropes into one another as Tina jumped in the middle of them. She wondered how much it would cost to buy a bike like the ones the twins had.

Later that night as she entered the room she shared with Timothy, her mind went once again to Hope and Harriet Jones. To Haddie, the two girls had everything: the clothes, the bikes, and now, the attention of the boys. They were invading every part of her life, and she wasn’t sure how to feel about it.

She wondered again how much the bikes cost, but knew she could never ask her parents about it. They would say what they always said when she asked for something: “where’re we gonna get the money for that?” So Haddie had learned to stop asking.

She was startled when the door of her room opened and Tina walked in.

“Knock much?” she asked, rolling her eyes. Tina ignored her question, her face showing her excitement. Haddie guessed why, the Joneses. She fell back onto her twin bed, groaning as she did so.

“You know there are other people in this building,” she said, but saw the confused look on Tina’s face. “Alright what happened?”

Tina excitedly told her that while she, Cassie and Danielle had been in the park, all four of the Jones walked in. They began to play around, with Mr. Jones chasing his wife and children. After a while, Mr. Jones caught his wife around her waist and picked her up, making her squeal in laughter.

Both Hope and Harriet also laughed, egging their father on as he pretended like he was going to drop their mother. But instead of dropping her, he set her firm on her feet and leaned in to kiss her.

“On the mouth?” Haddie asked sitting up. Tina smiled, glad she finally caught her friend’s attention.

“Right on the mouth, in front of all those kids, too. It was so disgusting Haddie, I almost puked.”

Hadassah glared at Tina for calling her by her nickname, but then she paused.

“What did Hope and Harriet do?” she asked.

“They didn’t do anything, they just laughed,” Tina said. “Even thinking of it now, I just want to puke.” She twisted her face.

“Why?” the word was so unexpected that Haddie wasn’t sure that she had been the one to say it. She saw the surprise on Tina’s face. “What makes it disgusting?”

“Because it just is,” Tina said.

But why? Hadassah wanted to ask again. But Tina had already moved on to another topic. She came for homework help. Hadassah smirked. “Homework help” between the four of them meant they didn’t feel like doing it, so they copied off the person that did it. Haddie looked in her book bag and found the math homework Tina wanted. She handed it to her. As Tina sat on the floor of the small room copying the homework, Haddie thought once again about the Joneses.

Things with the Joneses remained the same, at least on the surface. Everyone knew not to speak to Mrs. Jones, and the children knew to stay away from Harriet and Hope.

But Haddie found it harder and harder to follow those rules. Whenever she was in the elevator with Mr. Jones, she couldn't help but laugh at his small jokes or smile when Mrs. Jones smiled at her. Although she didn't like Hope, she admired the girl's tenacity. And even though she always hated the girls the teachers liked because she thought they were fake, she saw that Harriet was genuinely nice.

Moreover, instead of being envious by the obvious wealth of the Jones like Tina was, Haddie was fascinated by it. She wondered why they moved to the building if they had money. Her building was filled with people who could barely pay their rent, not those who had enough to buy a house. It seemed to her like the twins always had new clothes or shoes every day. They hardly wore the same things twice.

Yet what fascinated her the most was not the twins, but Mr. and Mrs. Jones. Whenever she saw them, Mr. Jones always held his wife's hand. They were always touching, smiles on their faces as they gazed at each other. Without realizing it, she began to compare her own parents, who seemed to only tolerate one another. She wondered what made one right and the other wrong, even though one seemed like the happier option to her.

Haddie was almost able to keep what she thought about the Joneses to herself. But then they invited her to dinner.

Technically, they invited most of the kids in the building, but within days almost everyone with an invitation had turned it down due to one excuse or another. Tina immediately ripped the paper when she received it, saying she would not step inside the Joneses' house even if she was paid a billion dollars. Danielle's and Cassandra's parents made the decision for them, they couldn't go. That left Haddie.

Everyone expected her not to go, and if it were up to her father she wouldn't. King's instant response was No. He wouldn't be part of their wrongdoing or put his child inside the Lion's den. He had his own sin to deal with, and he didn't need to add others to it. Her mother was different, saying it would be the neighborly thing to go, but she wasn't going to force her.

Haddie's friends had their own reactions when they realized she had yet to refuse the invitation. Tina told Haddie that she couldn't go, asking her to vow on their friendship that she would do anything in her power not to go. Hadassah laughed in her face, she wasn't going to vow on anything, she told Tina. She was going to make her own decision, and if Tina kept pressuring her, then she would go. Cassandra said that she should accept the invitation and find out a secret about the Joneses. Danielle shrugged, saying it didn't matter what she said since Haddie's parents were going to be the one making the decision.

But Haddie wasn't sure whether she wanted to go. She contemplated the decision in her mind for several days.

Finally, she decided to reject the invitation, thinking that it was better to avoid trouble. She told her mother about her decision two nights before the dinner.

Jane King stared at her daughter. She didn't ask for an explanation, she just nodded.

"Then go tell them that," she said once Hadassah told her. Haddie was confused. Go tell them what?

"Go tell them that you can't come," Jane said answering Hadassah's unspoken question.

"Can't I just slip the invitation back under their door?" Haddie asked, hating the whining tone in her voice. Jane shook her head, and instead ushered her daughter out the door. Haddie considered not doing what her mother asked, but knew somehow, she'd be found out. She made the trek up the two flights and knocked on the Joneses' door.

Like the previous time, Thomas Jones opened the door dressed in sweats. He smiled when he saw Hadassah.

“Haddie,” he exclaimed.

“Hadassah,” she said correcting him. He motioned her in, and although she shook her head, he insisted.

Stepping once again into the large living room, she couldn’t help but feel like she was in a different building instead of a different apartment. She saw Mrs. Jones, Harriet and Hope watching “Family Matters” on a TV bigger than anything Haddie had ever seen before. Hope was spread out on the floor, while Harriet sat next to her mother on the couch. All three turned when Hadassah came in, with Hope’s smiling face turning into a scowl when she saw her.

“How are you, Hadassah?” Mrs. Jones asked, smiling. She mumbled fine. She heard the door close behind her and felt her stomach twist. She turned around and faced Mr. Jones.

“MymamasaidtotellyouthatIcan’tcometodinner,” the words were spoken so low and so fast that it took a minute for Thomas to understand them. Hadassah saw him look at his wife over her head, and when she looked back, Mrs. Jones had an unreadable expression on her face. She heard a snort from the floor and turned to look at Hope, who met her gaze.

“Why?” Thomas finally asked.

Haddie tried to think of an excuse.

“Because she’s scared,” Hope said.

“I ain’t scared of anything, especially not people like you.” Silence followed and Haddie realized what she had said. She began to apologize when Harriet spoke.

“Then stay,” Harriet said. Everyone looked at her. She raised her eyes to Haddie. Unlike other times, her expression remained steady. “Stay, if you’re not scared, then you will make up for not coming to the dinner.”

Haddie tried to think of an excuse that would keep her from staying, but couldn’t find one. She slowly pushed off her shoes and walked to the couch, sitting on the floor next to Hope’s head. A few minutes later, she heard Thomas sit next to his wife. The five of them sat watching *Family Matters*, laughing whenever Carl yelled at Urkel. After two episodes, Mrs. Jones turned off the TV, and Haddie watched as all four of the Joneses began to get ready for dinner. She tried to keep her mouth from gaping open when she saw Mr. Jones help set the table. Her father never set the table.

No one asked if she wanted to help and she didn’t offer. They pulled a fifth chair for her. She sat down and watched as they began to eat and speak, Mr. Jones asking his two girls about school and telling them about his day.

She didn’t join in the conversation until Harriet asked if the person who bombed a building in Oklahoma had been caught.

“Someone bombed a building?” she asked, incredulous. “Did anyone get hurt?” Thomas gently smiled. He nodded.

“168 people, unfortunately,” he said. “And yes, Harriet, he was caught.”

Thomas directed the conversation elsewhere, seeming to think that the bombing was not a good dinner topic.

“My wife told me that what you and your friends do out there is called Double Dutch? It looks like fun,” he said. “Now I had a thought, why don’t we try jumping some Double Dutch after dinner?”

“Here?” Hadassah asked looking at the apartment. It was certainly big enough, but she knew that her parents would kill her if she jumped inside the house. Thomas nodded.

“That sounds like fun,” Harriet said.

“I doubt she would want to teach us,” Hope said, rolling her eyes.

Haddie said she would. After dinner, Thomas moved the chairs and TV against the wall. Haddie was surprised that the Jones already had ropes. Mrs. Jones knew how to turn the ropes, so Haddie taught Harriet.

“Turn it into one another,” she instructed.

She then told Hope and Mr. Jones to jump in when they saw an opening, demonstrating by jumping in herself.

They missed it several times, with Thomas getting the rope stuck between his legs, and Hope stepping on it. But after a while Hope got it and she and Haddie jumped together.

Haddie forgot where she was. She found herself laughing and playing with the Jones. She laughed at Thomas constant misstep, and the way Mrs. Jones teased her husband. She didn't want to leave.

When everyone became tired, Mrs. Jones brought out ice-cream. Haddie, Harriet and Hope sat on the floor eating it.

She watched the way Mr. Jones snuck some ice cream off his wife's plate on the dining table. She listened as Harriet and Hope spoke to each other, and admired the constant way Hope protected her sister, although Harriet was older.

When the night was over, she thanked the Joneses, feeling guilty for rejecting their initial invitation.

As she walked down the steps toward her own apartment, slowly taking her time, she wondered what will happen in the morning when everyone knew what she had done. She didn't know what she would tell her friends, her father, or her mother. She didn't know how she would act towards the Jones when she saw them again. She didn't know if she would invite Harriet and Hope to play Double Dutch with her, Tina, Cassie and Danielle. She didn't know what would happen the next day. But at that moment, it didn't matter.

## Road Trip

Anderson jolted forward in the seat of the blue Hyundai as his sister, Antonia, slammed her foot on the brakes of the car to keep it from hitting the black BMW in front of them. They were among a horde of cars trying to get out of New York City on a Friday evening. Anderson groaned inwardly. He had told Antonia that they should leave the next morning, when there would be fewer cars on the streets of Manhattan. But she'd refused, saying it was better to leave Friday evening. The result, of course, was being stuck in traffic, with the lights of Times Square behind them and the glow of the setting sun in front of them.

Anderson looked out of the car window and watched as crowds of people walked by speedily, trying to get home for the weekend. He was thrown forward once again as Antonia gunned the engine, almost hitting another car. He would have volunteered to drive, but knew that his offer would have been turned down. Antonia had always been sure to let him know that she didn't need his help with anything. He doubted by her constant abrupt stomp on the brakes that they would make it to Alabama in one piece. Traffic picked up and Antonia was finally able to turn the car towards the direction of Lincoln Tunnel. She made another turn into the highway. They were on their way.

Their journey had begun earlier that week when Antonia had called Anderson Monday morning to tell him that their great Aunt May wanted to see them. At first, he thought that something bad had happened. Aunt May had been going in and out of the hospital for the past year without any real diagnosis. Both he and Antonia knew that it was almost time to say goodbye.

He had thought that perhaps she had been admitted again to the hospital. When he asked Antonia, she told him through what sounded like gritted teeth that she didn't know why Aunt May wanted to see them, she just did. Guessing that Aunt May was fine, he told her that he couldn't call off work, but would see them after.

When he knocked on Aunt May's door later that night, Antonia appeared in blue sweat pants and sweater and a silk scarf on her head. She looked like she was ready for bed; Anderson guessed she was going to stay with Aunt May that night.

"Thanks for gracing us with your presence," she hissed before walking inside, leaving the door open for him.

His sister had never been one to hide her disdain and he had stopped trying to fix their relationship.

Walking inside, he closed the door behind him and turned to face the white-walled room. Coming to Aunt May's always made him feel like he was in a different world. Every part of the room was white: the walls, the sitting sets, and the middle table. Next to one of the sitters was a white rocking chair where Aunt May sat in. She sat facing the wall, which was covered with pictures of family members and scriptural verses.

Anderson walked to the rocking chair and bent to kiss his aunt. She sat with a green shawl over her body. Despite her age, Aunt May's brown oval face still held the sharpness and beauty she had when she was younger. Other than her small stature, and failing health, it was hard to believe that she was 88 years old. The only part of her that Anderson wished he could change was her eyes, which always looked sad to him.

"You came," she said, her brown eyes following him as he sat down on one of the sitters, across from Antonia. His aunt was all he and Antonia had, their parents having died when they were younger. She'd raised them.

The two of them looked at Aunt May, who had a bundle of brown envelopes on her lap.

"I want to take a trip," she said her hand on the envelopes. Anderson looked at Antonia, who had the same confused expression that he knew was on his own face.

Aunt May slipped an envelope out of the bundle. She fingered the seal, and handed it to Anderson.

Anderson felt even more confused. Aunt May was not one to hide things. Since he and his sister were young, she'd always emphasized the importance of being open about everything. Yet, the letter he held in his hand showed that there was something that she hadn't told he and his sister.

Taking a deep breath, he lifted the seal of the envelope and slipped out a folded white lined paper. Unfolding it, he began to read it out loud.

*May,*

*I feel my soul slipping away, moving beyond this world and going into the next. Yet I can't leave, not yet. Each day, you're on my mind. Our little girl is on my mind.*

*I remember the first time I saw her. She was so small and tiny. The nurse brought her to Louis and I, and I instantly fell in love. It didn't matter that she didn't come from my own womb, or that her blood was not mine. In my eyes, she was God's own gift to me.*

*Her head was full of hair: curly golden hair. And I thought to myself, she must have her mother's hair. Her eyes were strikingly blue, and her lips were so red.*

*I asked the nurse if I could see the mother, thank her, and assure her that this child would have a great life. I was disturbed when the answer was no. It wasn't just the "no," but the way the nurse said it. They told me that she had been dropped off at the hospital, but I knew there was more to it than that.*

*I should have let it go. I shouldn't have pushed. But my curiosity has always been my weakness. So, I asked again and again, until another nurse, the one you gave her to, told me about you.*

*She said it was a miracle that a black woman could give birth to someone so white. I asked if she was certain that you were really her mother. She was certain. She was amazed at it all, while inside I screamed in horror.*

*At that moment, I wanted to give her back. I wanted to yank her away from Louis's hands in rage. I walked back to do exactly that. But then she opened her sweet eyes, and I once again fell in love.*

*How could it be? Perhaps the Almighty was playing a trick on me, I thought. For years, Louis and I struggled to have a child of our own. And the child we finally found was a product of a sin. A product of an act against nature; a white man and black woman together. I didn't know what to do.*

*I didn't want to give her back. I couldn't give her back, but I knew that I couldn't let her know where she came from either. It never occurred to me that her skin could change, that she might not look the same forever.*

*So, I asked the nurse where you stayed and she gave me your address. Remember my first letter? Remember how I asked you to stay away? Yet I was the one that couldn't stop writing to you.*

*Only you know the secret of my heart. And although we've never met, I feel connected to you.*

*Every breath I take hurts more and more, and this could be the last time you hear from me. So, I leave you with a gift, a final farewell.*

----

Anderson stared at the letter in his hand, questions filling his head. He hadn't known that Aunt May had a daughter. She never married. Yet, the letter in his hand said the opposite. He looked up at her, wanting to ask her when she had the daughter, why she gave her up, but the tears in her eyes silenced him.

"She left an address," Aunt May said. "I want us to go there."

His first thought was to protest. He was not the type of person to leave his life and go somewhere at a whim. He opened his mouth to say just that. But before he could speak, Antonia got up and sat on the arm of Aunt May's rocking chair, placing her arms around Aunt May.

"Wherever you want us to go, we will go," Antonia said. The two women glanced at Anderson, waiting for him to agree. He told them that he would think about it.

He spent the week contemplating the idea of travelling to Alabama. He called Aunt May on Wednesday to tell her that he couldn't go, suggesting that she didn't either. She told him that she had no choice. This was her only chance to see her daughter, whom she had given away over fifty years ago. This

was her only chance to right a wrong. When he asked her what wrong she meant, she didn't answer. He didn't push her.

It was Antonia who finally convinced him. She called him on Thursday, and yelled at him for always putting himself first above his family. As she listed off all the reasons he was so selfish, Anderson kept silent on the phone. He knew that there was nothing that he could do to convince his sister that what she saw as selfishness, was cautiousness. He didn't know enough about the situation, and he didn't want to see Aunt May get hurt.

"She took care of us, Andy. We owe her this. It would be the last time that we will all be together," Antonia said in a final effort to move her brother. With a sigh, he agreed. They both knew that Aunt May's days were numbered. Taking this trip would be a way of honoring her. Plus, he doubted that he and sister would ever agree to be in the same space again, especially if Aunt May wasn't there.

Antonia agreed to pick him up from work, even though that meant driving through Manhattan. She didn't want to fly to Alabama, she said. She wanted to drive, although the drive would take over sixteen hours. When Anderson said that, she said that they would take stops, citing Aunt May's age as her reason for not wanting to fly. But Anderson knew it was because Antonia was afraid of flying, especially since their parents died in a plane crash.

It took five hours to get to D.C. Antonia booked one room for them at a hotel. Anderson offered to pay for another room, but she refused, telling him that he didn't have to throw money at her face. He stopped speaking after that. Money was one of the many reasons he and Antonia never got along. While Anderson had gone from college to a great paying real-estate job in the city, Antonia had struggled in college before finally dropping out. When he offered to pay her debts, she stopped speaking to him for a month, only breaking her silence at the urging of Aunt May. After that, he had learned to let her be when it came to finances.

But the idea of the three of them staying together in one room seemed ridiculous to him, especially when they didn't have to.

Before going to the hotel, they went to a small diner.

Entering, Anderson saw that it was packed despite the late hour. They sat in a booth by the entrance, Anderson and Antonia ordering burgers and fries, Aunt May ordering eggs. Both he and Antonia scarfed down their food, but Aunt May slowly stared out into the silent D.C. streets. She turned back to see both her great niece and nephew looking at her. A sad smile appeared on her face. She slowly picked up her spoon and began to eat.

Anderson wondered who the father of the child could be. He wondered what Aunt May had been doing in Alabama over fifty years ago. It didn't seem like the kind of place someone like her should have been.

"Why did you give her up?" he asked, and ignored the sharp look from Antonia. It was a question that had been on his mind since he read the letter. Giving up a daughter was not something Aunt May would do, yet she had. He wondered why.

Aunt May placed her fork down.

"I had to. I fell in love with the wrong man, I got pregnant and I knew that I had to give her up once I saw the color of her skin. She wouldn't have survived with me," Aunt May said. She picked up her fork and started to eat again. She didn't offer any other information, and Anderson was didn't know if it was appropriate to push her.

They didn't leave the diner right away, although they all felt exhausted due to the driving. Anderson was about to suggest that they leave, when Aunt May dug into her bag, pulled out the bundle of brown envelopes, slipped one out, and slid it across the table to him.

"Read it to me, please Andy," she whispered. He opened it and removed the lined white paper. Aunt May closed her eyes. Andy took a deep breath, cleared his throat and began.

1965

*May,*

*There's talk in our town of a Nigger being beaten to death because he was caught in bed with a white woman. The police are sniffing around here trying to find his body. People here are saying that it's*

*just like that boy. You know his name, don't you May? Emmette Till. Apparently, all he did was whistle at a white girl, and he was killed.*

*I've often wondered what happened to my girl's father. I guess he never stuck around, otherwise why would you give her up? There are men like that. They only want to taste what seems exotic to them, they never want to finish the whole meal.*

*But I guess I should thank him because without him, I would have no daughter. I imagine that his skin is as pale as hers. She still has the golden curls on her head, although they get darker and darker every single day. But even now, she doesn't have a hint of your color in her. Every time someone looks at her, I hold my breath waiting for them to see you in her. But they don't. They never do.*

*It still amazes me day by day that she could come from your womb. I imagine if the woman caught with the Nigger gave birth to a black child, our whole town will be in uproar.*

*I saw the nurse again. She told me that you moved. She said you went to New York. They say the North is better for people like you. I doubt it. But it doesn't matter to me. As long you remain as far away from us, I don't care where you go.*

----

Anderson couldn't sleep. It might have been the fact that he was on a cot. He sat up trying to adjust his eyes to the darkness. He could hear the soft breathing of Aunt May and Antonia on the bed a few feet away from him. Lying back down, he closed his eyes, trying to force himself back to sleep. But he jumped up a few minutes later. His mind was filled with too many questions. He kept thinking about the letter that he had read at the diner. Aunt May hadn't cried, she just listened. He wondered what would happen when they got to Alabama. He knew Aunt May expected to find her daughter, but what if she wasn't there. And if she was there, then what? What was she planning on saying? How would she explain the choice she had made?

With a groan, he pulled on his pants, grabbed the hotel key by the nightstand and walked out of the room.

When he got outside of the hotel, he cursed himself for not having taken his jacket and jammed his hands inside the small pockets of his pants. Looking up, he was amazed at how clear the moon was. He realized that it had been a while since he looked up at the sky and didn't see tall buildings or advertisements on the skyline. He felt a jolt of electricity surge through him. There was something about being able to look at the clear sky that made him realize the magnitude of the world. He sat down on one of the hotel steps, thinking about the last few days.

Anderson had always been aware of his race: at school, at work, everywhere he went. He remembered the first time he had recognized the difference between white and black.

It was the first day of kindergarten. He had been playing with one of the other kids, his small brain not registering the child's skin color. To young Anderson, people were people.

The young white child pulled on the afro pigtailed of Anderson's sister and while Antonia had scowled, promising to tell the teacher, young Anderson and his new friend had giggled, covering their mouths to contain themselves. Antonia made due on her promise.

The teacher, who was a black chubby woman in her mid-thirties, marched up to the desk of both Anderson and the young boy. With her small chubby hands, she pulled Anderson off his seat, making him yowl in pain as her aggression led his foot to bang against one of the silver legs of the beige school desk. She dragged him outside, squeezing his wrist so hard he thought it would break off.

She pulled him into the blue hallway, filled with handicrafts of past students and bent down to his eye level.

"What is the meaning of this, Anderson?" Her brown eyes bore into him and he felt his throat tightened and his head swell up. Finally, he gave in to the waters that filled his eyes and let them rush down his face.

He couldn't understand why he was the only one being punished. All he had done was laugh. He hadn't pulled his sister's pigtails.

Unhindered by his tears, the teacher said, "your sister is family. More than that, she's your kind. That boy-" she pointed a finger inside the classroom, while placing a hand on her hips, "he's not your kind. He would never be your kind."

She made him stay in during lunch, while all the other kids went out and played.

Ever since then, the color of his skin was a badge he wore. It kept him from truly being a part of the group, even though he was part of the group. It either made those around him guarded or made them too comfortable. Some made racial jokes or comments that sometimes silenced him, other times bewildered him. But even as attacked as he felt in those moments, he didn't know what it felt like to be hated because of the color of his skin. He didn't know what it felt like to give up the one you love because of race. He wondered what it would have been like for him over fifty years ago? Would he have survived? His skin was not charcoal black, but it was close to it. He doubted he would have made it to sixteen.

He knew that for Aunt May to have given up her child, she must have felt like she had no choice. He wondered again about the father. Did he leave because he had to or because he was only using Aunt May? Did Aunt May fall in love with the wrong man because of race or because he had left her? He had a feeling it was because of both.

The cold and silence became too much and he got up, making his way back inside. As he walked back, he couldn't chase away the feeling that he was being watched.

Aunt May woke up the next morning, anxious to get back on the road. She was agitated, and became more so when Antonia and Anderson tried to convince her to stay so they could eat something. She refused. Antonia obliged and she and Anderson grabbed bagels from the hotel cafeteria. As soon as they hit the road, Anderson fell asleep.

He woke up hours later when he felt the sun against his closed eyes. He opened them and squinted as the brightness of the sun made it hard for him to see.

He turned his head towards the window and tried to figure out where they were. He only saw trees and mountains. Looking to the driver side, he saw that Antonia's visor was down to shield her eyes. He could hear her softly singing to herself, and he listened. Her voice was always something he admired. She had inherited it from their parents.

Their parents; another reason he and Antonia were always at odds. While Anderson was not one to dwell on the past, Antonia was the opposite. She had spent years after the death of their parents, trying to keep their memories alive. She spoke about them constantly with Aunt May, asking for every detail of their lives. When she tried to speak to Anderson about them, he would walk away. He wanted to move on. They were dead, there was nothing to be done. Even at a young age, he always felt that there was no reason to dwell on things like that. Antonia saw that as a betrayal, as him not loving their parents enough. He never corrected her. He hardly knew them.

The even breathing of Aunt May told him that she was asleep. The sun cleared a little bit and he saw a highway sign. They were on I-395 south, but he didn't know what state.

"Where are we?" he asked, his voice deeper than normal due to sleep.

"I think Virginia, but I'm not sure," Antonia replied softly. Her voice lacked the anger that it usually had when she spoke to him. They still had a long way to go.

"We should take a break soon, or I can drive," he said.

"I'm fine," she replied briskly. But, she wasn't fine. Her singing and hard concentration on the road told him that she was fighting sleep. He sighed.

He had sometimes wondered if he and his sister would be closer if their parents were alive, but he didn't think so. Perhaps they would treat each other better, but probably never be best friends. They approached life differently, and Antonia was too sensitive.

Other than his reaction to their parent's death, she also never forgave him for going far away for college. He went to Georgia State. She saw it as him leaving the family, him leaving her. Even when he came back, her actions told him that she was never going to forgive him.

Things became worse when he rented Aunt May's apartment for her. She didn't speak to him for almost a year. Once again, she thought he was showing off his money, trying to make her feel bad for what she couldn't do. After that he stopped trying to make things with his sister better.

"We should at least stop to get lunch," Anderson said after being silent for a while. Antonia didn't respond.

"I'm going to miss her," she finally said, her voice cracking. Anderson didn't have to ask who it was she was talking about. He was surprised that she was even revealing it to him, but he understood. He was going to miss Aunt May as well. He thought of a way to respond, to comfort his sister.

"Me too," he finally said.

Looking behind him, Anderson saw Aunt May's bag and the bundle of letters sticking out.

He wondered how many letters she had. He felt a desire to read more, and to know more.

He mechanically reached for the bundle. He slid one envelope out, and began to read, raising his voice slightly in hopes that it would keep his sister awake...

1968

May,

*I saw the nurse again today. My sweet girl had a slight fever and I took her to the hospital. The nurse saw me and recognized me right away, gasping when she saw my baby.*

*I asked if she had seen you again, she said no, but the two of you write. I guess the times really are changing if someone like her could befriend someone like you. She gave me your new address, I hope you don't mind.*

*She suggested it, and I should have said no. But something inside made me say yes, something inside me wanted to write to you again.*

*No one around here understands. They don't understand why I'm so scared. They don't see why I keep my girl so close to me. Even Louis. He says that I'm too strict, but I'm not. I'm only trying to protect her*

*Sometimes I look at her and I think her skin is changing, like she's growing darker. I keep waiting for someone to bring it up and say, "she looks like a mulatto," or whatever they call people like her in England. But they never do.*

*And then I see that it's my imagination. When she's outside with her friends, she blends in with them. Sometimes I straighten her curls, so that even if there's a small amount of doubt, the straight golden hair on top of her head will put an end to it*

*Sometimes I feel like I would die from this secret. But I don't.*

*Yesterday, we learned that they killed the Nigger preacher. Louis said that this proves that God don't care for the Nigger man. He rambled on and on about how the Nigger man should just be accepting about what he has. I didn't speak. I couldn't speak.*

*If only he knew where the daughter he holds so close to his heart came from. If only I could tell him.*

---

1979

*May,*

*Two decades. A lot has changed. Today, Louis and I gave our daughter away. All throughout the ceremony, I kept thinking about you. I thought about whether she would ever have had this moment if you had kept her. I don't know.*

*Maybe she would have married a man like you? I know that the instant people recognized that you were her mother, the fact that she doesn't look like you won't matter.*

*I felt what you felt when you gave her away. Even though, she is 21, I felt like I was giving away my life. Did you feel worse than that May? I know that I will soon see her, that she will soon visit me. But you knew that she was never coming back. I don't know what I would do if she never came back.*

----

Anderson read more letters, learning that Aunt May had kept sending each new address to the nurse. He realized that she probably did that so that the letters would keep coming. He wondered why she never went back to Alabama before now.

They stopped for dinner in North Carolina and stopped again for breakfast in South Carolina. He could feel eyes on them as they ate their breakfast at the McDonald's they stopped at. Aunt May didn't seem to notice, she was in her own world. Antonia bit angrily into her food, glaring back at the eyes she caught. Anderson looked outside.

He wondered again what would happen in Alabama. He was no longer skeptical about the trip, but a part of him still feared for Aunt May. He knew that even if they found her daughter, the possibility of them being turned away was still high. From the letters, Anderson had gathered that the daughter had the same attitude of the father that had raised her. And he doubted that she would want to know that her actual mother was black. Yet, the address had been sent. He wanted to voice his concerns to Aunt May, but he feared discouraging her.

He understood the wrong she was righting. She had taken part in a system and had not fought it. This was her little way of fighting back. But he also knew that she was doing this for herself. She wanted to see her child. It was more than righting a wrong. It was a final goodbye.

They ate and left the McDonald.

Antonia allowed Anderson to take the keys from her, exhaustion keeping her from protesting. He drove through the day on I-95, only stopping for gas and more food. He became more and more anxious as he drew closer to their destination. Antonia slept throughout, but Aunt May fell in and out of sleep.

"What about her real father Aunt May?" he asked when he saw that she was alert.

She met his eyes through the rearview mirror.

"He left. We would have never survived together in that world," she said.

"Did he know? Did he know about her?" Anderson asked.

"No. I made the choice for all of us," she replied.

She looked away, and closed her eyes again.

They got to Alabama after midnight on Monday morning. Anderson drove them to the nearest motel. He saw the shock on the clerk's face and gathered that there weren't many black people that stayed at the motel. The clerk said that there was only one room; they decided to take it. There was no Cot, which meant that Anderson would have to sleep on the floor. He decided to take a shower before he slept. When he stepped out, he saw Aunt May on the bed, the night light on, reading one of the letters. Walking over to her, he sat by her foot.

"I found out I was pregnant after Henry and I separated," she said still looking down at the letters. "When she came out of the womb, I didn't wait a day, I took her right to the hospital. I should have thought about it more, but I couldn't. If I had waited one second, I would have kept her."

"Did you see them adopt her?" Anderson asked.

She shook her head.

"I only gave the nurse my address in case they needed any information, I didn't expect her to give it out. I didn't expect her to tell the mother," she said.

Silence.

"What if your daughter is not at the address or she doesn't want to see you?" Anderson asked. He didn't want to hurt her, but he also wanted to make her see that she could be doing more damage than good.

Her hands stilled over the letter.

"It's my last chance Andy," she said looking up at him. "It's my only chance."

Anderson knew that he should let it go, go to sleep, and not ask her any other questions. But a question still tugged at him.

"Would you have done it again?" he asked. "If you can do it all over again, knowing what you know, would you still give her away?"

"Without a second thought," she said.

Antonia took control the next morning, driving the remaining forty minutes to Clarkson. They turned into a suburban neighborhood and stopped at the third house on the left. It looked empty. Anderson heard Aunt May unbuckle her seatbelt. Antonia got out first, and walked around to open the door for Aunt May.

But she didn't get out. She just sat inside the car, her eyes looking straight ahead. Antonia slid in beside her. Anderson could hear the birds chirping out of the car. He heard Aunt May taking long deep breaths, trying to calm herself.

No one spoke. Anderson stared at the house. It had a long driveway with two black cars parked on it. The house itself looked old and the bricks were the color of dirt. Turning to look at Aunt May, he saw that she was also looking at the house.

"We can come back another time," Antonia said, breaking the silence.

But, he knew they weren't coming back another time. This was the only time they had.

Anderson looked outside the car and began to take an inventory of the houses on the block. They all looked the same: big houses that could fit twenty people inside, perfectly trimmed green lawns, and expensive cars in the driveway. Each house stood alone, not connected to the next. Some houses had carved pumpkins in front of them; a tribute to the upcoming Halloween. Anderson's attention drifted to the house that Aunt May's daughter might live in. He noticed a basketball hoop in the driveway and a garden by the steps leading to the house.

Anderson glanced at Aunt May. He saw her pupils enlarge and turned to look out of the window.

The door of the house opened to reveal a woman in her 50s with long dirty-blond curly hair. She wore Jeans and a grey sweater. She walked down the steps, towards the Toyota Sienna in her driveway. A small boy appeared at the entrance of the house and Anderson watched him watch the woman. The woman opened the car door, and pulled out a long rectangular box. She closed the car door, walked back up the steps, ushering the small child in before shutting the door of the house behind her.

"That's her," Aunt May's voice was shaky but clear.

“Are you sure?” Anderson asked. He knew he shouldn’t be surprised, especially after reading the letters, but the woman didn’t look like he expected Aunt May’s daughter to look like. He knew that Aunt May’s daughter had been able to pass for white, but shouldn’t there be some part of her physique that showed her other race.

“I can go and just check it out and figure out--” Antonia began.

“No,” Aunt May said, closing her eyes. Her lips moved and Anderson knew she was saying a small prayer. She opened her eyes, and took a deep breath.

“I’m ready,” she said. “Let’s go.”

## Piano Lessons

I always loved Mr. Dill, so it was a surprise when I heard what he did. I knew something was wrong the moment I received a note during third period, telling me that my parents would be picking me up after school. My parents were both Doctors and worked different shifts; Mama working nights, Daddy working days. I knew that the only reason they would come to my school together was because something bad had happened.

A thousand scenarios crossed my mind. Did someone die? Did something bad happen to my sister, Dharma? Did my parents lose their job?

Throughout the rest of the day, I couldn't concentrate. Every class seemed to drag on forever. Every assignment seemed pointless. When the final bell rang, I rushed to my locker, grabbed my things and ran outside. I looked through the rows of school buses and cars, trying to find my parents. I saw Mama standing outside our Toyota Sienna at the corner of the school.

I ran towards her, but slowed down when I got closer to her.

She didn't see me at first, her mind, thousands of miles away.

"Mama," I said, my voice so soft that I couldn't hear myself. She didn't move, her eyes looking above my head. I called her again, louder and she looked down at me as if seeing me for the first time.

For a long time, she just stared at me, different emotions running through her eyes. And then she reached down and pulled me close to her, so tightly I could hear the pounding of her heart. I saw Daddy in the driver seat of the car, looking at the two of us. He looked so helpless that I almost started crying. I thought for sure that something bad had happened to Dharma. Mama released me and we both entered the car.

The car ride back home was silent. My belly flip flopped the closer we got to the house. I wanted to ask about Dharma, but was too scared that my thoughts would be confirmed. To calm myself, I looked out the window and stared at the different houses we passed, each of them telling the story of the immense wealth of our town. I looked to the front to see Mama and Daddy holding hands, occasionally glancing at each other.

When we pulled up to our house, I saw that I was wrong. It wasn't Dharma, it was Mr. Dill.

Police cars lined his driveway and officers went in and out of his blue house.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice shaking. Neither of my parents responded. They shared a look. Daddy put the car in park and I unbuckled my seatbelt, rushing out of the car, towards Mr. Dill's house. Mama rushed after me, and caught my hand.

She forced me back to our house and Daddy followed behind us. They closed the door and locked it. We never locked our doors.

Dharma was already inside, sitting on the floor of our large living room, her books in front of her. The fact that she was fine didn't console me.

"What happened to Mr. Dill?" I asked, turning to my parents. Dharma looked up.

"Let's talk about that later," Daddy said. He walked past me to his and Mama's room, a tired expression on his face.

"I already told Dharma, but I want the two of you inside today," Mama said. She reached for my face, but I instinctively swatted her hand away. She sighed and followed Daddy into their room. I heard them whispering.

I turned back to look at Dharma, but she had already returned to her work. I wanted to ask her if she knew what was going on, but we had never had a good relationship. From the time, I was in kindergarten, and she, in the third grade, my sister and I have been at odds. We argued constantly. She thought that I was too dramatic and I thought that she was too much of a goody-two shoes. My sister was everything my parents wanted. She wanted to be a Doctor just like them, and usually did everything they asked without questions. I was the opposite. I wanted to go into show business, something my family didn't understand.

I knew Dharma wouldn't tell me what happened to Mr. Dill, so I walked to my room and dropped my bag on my bed. Walking over to my window, I slid half my body outside and looked over at Mr. Dill's house.

His house was directly next to ours. It had a patch of grass in front, but everywhere else was concrete. He had once told me that he had no desire to take care of lawns, which was why the house was perfect for him. The color of his house was a faded blue, making it look outdated compared to all the other houses on our street. But it also made it unique, which was what I had grown to love about it. It was different from my own white house with a large lawn that both my parents complained they didn't have time to take care of, but still trimmed and worked on during their off days. Mr. Dill's house was simpler to me, what you saw was what you got.

That day as I sat by my window looking at his house, I wished that I could see what was going on inside. I didn't understand what the police were doing there. My throat tightened as I imagined every worse thing that could have happened to Mr. Dill. Did he die? Did someone break into his house?

My eyes trailed from the house to the neighborhood, and I realized how quiet it was. It was too quiet for 4pm. At 4pm was when all the kids were back from school. It was when it was common to see boys chasing girls, teenage boys bouncing basket balls, and girls running and jumping around. There was always some activity going on. But on that day, I heard no sound, and saw no child.

Instead all I heard was the soft chirp of birds and the sounds of the police officers. Every yard was empty. Every door closed. Each child had been condemned to remain inside his or her house. Only the cars in the driveways suggested that people were home. This lack of activity only added to my anxiety. Now I knew for certain that only death could lead to this sudden change of routine. I wanted to run to my parents and demand that they tell me what had happened. But I didn't. Instead I spent the hours until dinner pacing my blue-walled room and sitting by the window sill looking out at Mr. Dill's house.

It was at dinner that I finally found out.

I couldn't eat. I constantly looked at my parents, waiting for them to say something. Daddy's face was strangely guarded. He kept eating slowly, almost like he was forcing himself to push the food down. Mama only drank water, her hands shaking as she took small sips. Dharma was the only one who had an appetite. She began to speak about her plans for the summer, and Daddy suggested a medical summer

camp. They started discussing the logistics of the camp: how much it would cost, where the camp was located, etc.

My anxiety turned to anger. It was a feeling I was familiar with when dealing with my family. I felt like there was an invisible wall that separated the three of them from me. I waited for them to acknowledge me, to acknowledge what had happened to Mr. Dill. But they didn't. It was like I wasn't even in the room. Dharma's plans consumed them. Daddy said that the camp would be helpful when she applied to college in a couple of years. He was in the middle of telling her what he had done the summer before his junior year of high school, when I yelled in anger, unable to take it anymore.

"WHAT HAPPENED TO MR. DILL?" I asked.

Mama spilled her cup of water on the table, Daddy dropped his fork, Dharma sucked her teeth. The three of them turned to look at me, surprised. It was like they had forgotten that I was in the room. No one moved or spoke, and then Mama got up and started to clean up the water.

"We don't yell at people in this household," Daddy said, his voice rising slightly. "I told you that we will talk about it later."

"No, I want to talk about it now," I said, leaning back in my chair and crossing my arms. "If we can talk about Ms. Perfect's summer plans, why can't we talk about Mr. Dill?"

"O My God, Sarah. He got arrested!" Dharma yelled. "He got arrested because he's an abuser. He abuses girls and ra-"

"Dharma!" Daddy yelled. He hit his hands on the table in frustration. "I said we will talk about it later."

"What do you mean he abuses girls, Dharma?" I asked my sister, ignoring my father. I couldn't understand what she meant. Mr. Dill's face flashed into my mind: his warm green eyes, his yellow toned skin, his beautiful smile. The Mr. Dill in my mind was not someone that abused girls. Dharma was surely mistaken, I thought.

“What do you mean Dharma?” I asked again, looking at my sister’s tan face. She didn’t respond. She looked away from me. No one answered my question. Instead Mama picked up her fork and began to eat. Daddy and Dharma followed suit.

“If you don’t do the summer camp Dharma, you can always volunteer at the hospital,” Mama said, raising a piece of chicken to her lips. Their conversation picked up once again where it left off. Mama said she would speak to the hospital’s director about Dharma volunteering. It was like we never spoke about Mr. Dill. And I should have let it go, but I didn’t. I couldn’t.

“He didn’t,” I whispered, as they made their plans. I wasn’t sure if they heard me, but I knew I had to say it. “He didn’t do it. He would never do that.”

“You’re going to be a star,” was the first thing Mr. Dill said to me, a year before he got arrested.

I was sitting on the steps of our Long Island home, singing loudly, watching my sister and her friends walk up and down the sidewalk, past the boy she liked. I sang over the noise of the kids on our street playing and laughing with each other.

It was a habit of mine to sit on the steps and watch the other kids. It wasn’t that I couldn’t join them, it was that joining them never did anything for me. I didn’t understand why they wanted to run around and get dirty, and they didn’t understand why all I wanted to do was sing and perform. And I couldn’t sing inside my house because every time I did, Mama would wake up and yell at me to stop.

I didn’t see Mr. Dill approach me. His voice startled me. I looked to my left and there he was with a big smile on his face, looking at me over the yellow fence that separated my house from his. He had on a white long sleeved shirt over blue jeans and a Giants cap. It was not the first time we had spoken, but it was the first time he had addressed me directly. I’d known Mr. Dill since he moved to our neighborhood three years earlier. We didn’t know much about him, but I had no reason to fear him. He was the nice neighbor that kept to himself, yet still found a way to help shovel the snow during the winter, attend cook-outs during the summer, and carol with us at Christmas. Other than those events, he kept to himself. I was surprised that he addressed me.

“You’re going to be a star,” he said again.

“I know,” I replied, shrugging. I pulled my knees up, hugging them to my body.

I had always known that I wanted to be the next Marilyn Monroe or Whitney Houston. I came out of the womb with my lungs blaring, ready to sing. I was ready, but my parents weren’t. Singing was not a real career to them.

“How do you know?” Mr. Dill asked, his eyebrow raised.

“You just know these things,” I said, looking at him sideways. I waited for him to tell me that I couldn’t just know, that my desires would change. It was something Daddy said all the time.

“You’ll grow out of it and see that it’s not a good idea,” Daddy would say, when I talked about wanting to go to Hollywood and get a big-time role.

Mama would roll her eyes and say she wasn’t funding a starving actress’ dream.

But Mr. Dill didn’t tell me any of that. Instead he waited for me to continue and tell him how I knew.

I told him that I wanted to go to Hollywood as soon as I could. I told him that in four years I would be able to do just that, leave my parents and family, like so many celebrities. I revealed to him that I also had a desire to be on Broadway. I wanted to be an Opera singer, but I could barely sing in a high soprano voice. At some point in our conversation, he walked from behind the fence and sat next to me. And I stopped in awe.

No one had ever sat with me before. They would usually tell me to stop singing, or ask me to come play if they needed an extra person for a game of soccer or dodgeball, but they never joined me. In that moment, I felt an overwhelming happiness.

I continued to speak, telling him about my favorite singers, actresses and movies. I had recently seen the newly released *Pride and Prejudice* with Kiera Knightly on DVD, and I gushed about it. However, I told him that my all-time favorite film was *West Side Story*.

Mr. Dill’s eyes grew wide. I thought he would say that I was too young to see it, like Mama and Daddy did when they saw me watching it on TV.

“But it’s so sad,” he said. I laughed.

“But so is Romeo and Juliet,” I responded. I told him that the music numbers in the film made it magnificent to watch. The film fed my desire to want to take voice and acting lessons, something I had been begging my parents for since I was five.

“They think it’s a phase,” I said to Mr. Dill, making a face.

“Well, I can teach you,” he said. My eyes grew wide and he laughed. I jumped off the steps and hugged him tightly. He patted my back, still laughing.

After I sat down, he finally began to tell me about himself.

“I used to be a pianist,” he said. “Actually, I used to travel all over the country playing concerts.”

He told me that he had to give up his dream because he had financial troubles.

“What financial troubles?” I asked. It was the kind of question that would have made my parents wince. They would have told me to mind my business. But not Mr. Dill, instead he told me that he had trouble paying the bills. So, he got a practical job, but still gave piano lessons to children. He said he wouldn’t make me pay for my lessons.

“You have such talent,” he said. “It’s hard work, but I trust that you’re willing to put in the time and energy.”

“I’m willing,” I said. “I am so willing.” He laughed.

“What did creepy Mr. Dill say to you?” Dharma asked later that night as we ate dinner. I looked up in surprise. I didn’t know that she had seen us.

My parents, who had been talking about a tough operation my mother would have to do the next day, stopped their conversation and looked at me.

“Mr. Dill?” Mama asked, her brow furrowed. “He said something to you?”

Glaring at Dharma, I stuck my tongue out at her.

“Not only that, she hugged him,” Dharma said, sneering back and sticking out her own tongue.

“Why did you hug him, Sarah?” Daddy asked. He put down his fork and folded his hands on the table. All three of them stared at me waiting for an answer. I considered telling them the truth. I looked at my father’s dark-skinned face, and thought about telling them. But it occurred to me that Daddy could say no. He didn’t want me to be an actress or singer. None of them did.

Staring at the digital clock above my father’s head on the white wall of our kitchen, a thousand thoughts raced through my mind. Should I lie? Should I tell the truth? Should I just pretend that I didn’t hear them? Finally, I told half of the truth.

“He said that I am going to be a star,” I said, stabbing a chicken on my plate with my fork and pushing it into my mouth.

“Chew with your mouth close, please,” Mama said. “That’s why you hugged him?” She didn’t believe me.

I nodded at my mother and slowly chewed my chicken, avoiding eye contact with my family.

“Finally, she found someone as delusional as her,” Dharma said, rolling her eyes.

“Dharma, please,” Daddy said sharply. “Sarah, I would like you to tell me the truth. Why did you hug Mr. Dill?” My father’s tone suggested that he was not in the mood for games.

“I hugged him because he said that he would-he said that-that-I don’t remember why I hugged him,” I said.

Dharma snorted.

“I don’t,” I said again, more pronouncedly this time.

They didn’t believe me. But Mama had to go to work, and Daddy was too exhausted to try and make me tell the truth. The only person who taunted me about it was Dharma.

She came to my room when Daddy was asleep.

“Tell me the truth,” she said. “Why did you hug him?”

I kept my story; I didn’t remember.

I knew that if I told Dharma about Mr. Dill wanting to train me, asking her not to tell our parents, she wouldn’t listen. She never listened to me. So, I got rid of her the only way I knew how.

“GET OUT!” I yelled. Just like I predicted, Daddy yelled at us to keep quiet. Dharma shook her head at me and walked out of my room. I knew that I had silenced her for the moment, but I didn’t know how long I could keep her from finding out.

I realized the next day after school that I couldn’t keep my secret forever. Seeing everyone outside made me nervous. If I walked over to Mr. Dill’s, everyone would see me. Dharma would see me, and I would be found out.

It was Mr. Dill who saved me. When he came over the next day. He told me that it was probably best to speak to my parents before he began teaching me anything.

“But they will say no!” I exclaimed. With a wink, he simply told me to be patient. He would take care of it. He handed me a worksheet.

“Voice exercises,” he said. “Practice it every day and night and your voice would be stronger.”

Then he left.

I didn’t wait for the night. I started to practice that very moment.

It’s surreal how it all happened, but Mama and Daddy agreed to let me train with Mr. Dill. Mama said that Mr. Dill convinced them that it would look very good on my college applications to have a broad range of interests, not just scientific ones. They gave me a two second lecture about lying.

Dharma was the only one who didn’t like the idea. She told my parents that it didn’t make any sense since I wasn’t in high school yet.

“Colleges mainly care about the activities you do in high school,” she said.

But for the first time, they didn’t listen to her.

For the next few months, I spent every day at Mr. Dill’s. Monday through Sunday, I was there. We’d practice the voice scale he gave me, and then he would teach me notes on the piano.

The first time I went to his house, I was surprised by how different it was from mine. While my house often smelled of Clorox and other cleaning supplies mixed with Febreze air freshener, Mr. Dill's house smelled like rain. It reminded me of how rain smells when it first starts to drizzle or even after it stops; fresh, earthly, like a new beginning. Mr. Dill's house was simple. He had two brown couches, and a small table in his living room. He had a long black piano at the far corner of his living room. I automatically walked to it, amazed by how big it was.

That first day, we explored his house. He showed me his kitchen. He had a simple white fridge, that was almost empty.

"I'm not a cook," he said. "But we can always order pizza." I laughed, pizza was okay. He showed me the bathroom, which was pink. I laughed when I saw it, and he explained that he never got the chance to change the color when he moved in. After that, the tour was over. He didn't take me upstairs, and I didn't ask to see it.

Most of the time, I sat next to him on the piano, singing, playing the white and black keys, his hands guiding my fingers as he taught me different songs.

There was something about sitting with Mr. Dill on that piano that made me feel good, regardless of the kind of day I was having. Sometimes I won't even go home when the bus dropped me off from school. I would head directly to his house. He always had the door unlocked for me. Sometimes he wasn't in the living room and would only come downstairs when he heard me playing the piano. Whenever we sat down to play or sing, I felt like I was in a different world. I was part of something, part of the music, part of a world only he and I understood.

At times, all we would do is sit on the couch, watching the latest movie. We watched *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and more. We would sit with a black blanket over us, I would lay my head on his lap and he would stroke my hair mindlessly. He never made me uncomfortable during those moments. I never thought that he wanted to use me. Never did his hands stray beyond my hair.

He was always aware of me and I of him. He knew when I was sad and I knew about his troubles as well. He told me that he had lost contact with his family. He told me that at times he wished that he could speak to them.

Sometimes all we would do is sit, talk, and eat ice-cream.

“Tell me how big of a star you want to be Sarah?” he’d ask, a spoonful of ice cream in his mouth. He already knew the answer, but it was a game we played.

I would smile.

“When you say Whitney, who do you think of?” I’d ask.

“Houston,” he’d reply.

“When you say Dolly, who do you think of?” I’d ask again.

“Parton,” he’d respond.

“When you say Jennifer, who do you think of?” I would ask again, smiling this time around.

“Well,” he’d pretend to dwell on it. “There are many Jennifer’s. There’s Jennifer Lopez, Jennifer Aniston, so who you think of?”

“Both!” I would declare, laughing. “I want be all of them: Jennifer, Dolly, even Shirley!”

“You’re too small to be Shirley,” he would say, with mocked thoughtfulness.

“I could always shrink,” I’d respond, as serious as he was. And the two of us would laugh.

On and on we would go, talking about nothing, but about everything.

It was those memories that I thought of when I heard that he was accused of being abusing girls. Mr. Dill was not only my piano and voice teacher. He also gave private lessons to other girls in Long Island. One girl had told her parents that Mr. Dill molested her. That led to the parents of other girls he taught asking their daughters, who confirmed that Mr. Dill also had sex with them. The story was all over the news, with the girls’ names being concealed because they were minors.

I couldn't understand it. I thought of being in Mr. Dill's house for the past year. I thought of sitting by him, his hand guiding mine through the piano. I thought about laying my head on his lap. I thought about moments when we couldn't get anything done because we were laughing so much.

I was almost thirteen. I knew that a man like Mr. Dill should never have sex with a girl my age. I was aware of the differences between men and women. Yet, Mr. Dill was not a man to me, not in the sense of the word. He was Mr. Dill, and I was Sarah. The man that I knew didn't have sex with underage girls. The man that I knew was not an abuser. He was my friend.

When I found out, I became even more isolated than I was before. I stopped going outside. I would sit by my window watching Mr. Dill's house, longing to go inside but knowing I couldn't. I longed to play the piano with him again, I longed to sit on his couch again, to just be there and feel like I was where I belonged. But I couldn't. Mama and Daddy had Dharma watch my every move. I didn't sing anymore because I knew it made my parents nervous. I stopped talking about wanting to go to into show business. My parents registered me for a low-level medical camp for the summer. I didn't protest.

No one asked me directly about my relationship with Mr. Dill during those first few weeks after we found out what he did. I saw it on their expressions, but they never asked. They all treated me like a child, not mentioning his name in front of me. It was Dharma's friend who finally asked the question.

She came for an assignment that she and Dharma were working on.

Mama was asleep, and Daddy had gone to work. They had given Dharma the instructions to watch me.

I had been passing by Dharma's room, and saw the girl sitting on the floor.

"Where's Dharma?" I asked. She looked up from the textbook on her lap, her brown hair falling over her face as she did. A surprised look entered her eyes. It was the same look my parents had the night I demanded they tell me about Mr. Dill.

"She's in the bathroom," the girl said. Her name was Jess. I nodded and started to walk away.

"I'm sorry Mr. Dill did what he did to you," she said. I turned around.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, feeling my heartbeat increase.

“Well he molested you, didn’t he?” she asked. I could see pity in her eyes and I wanted to slap it off.

Before I could respond, Dharma appeared.

“Leave my sister alone, Jess,” she said. She turned back to me. “Can you leave? We are working.” I rolled my eyes and walked out. Dharma closed the door. I stood still, listening.

“Is she going to testify against him as well?” I heard Jess ask.

“I don’t know,” Dharma replied. I heard her open her drawer.

“How could you not know? She was over there all the time,” Jess replied.

“She never said anything about it,” Dharma said. I heard the inflection in her voice and knew she was losing her patience.

“Didn’t your parents ask?” Jess asked. “My parents would ask us if we found out that the man we practically lived with was a sex offender.”

“She didn’t live with him, Jess,” Dharma snapped back.

“She was over there all the time,” Jess said. I thought that the matter was closed and was about to walk back to my room, when Jess spoke again.

“He probably did molest her,” she said. “Your sister is the type of girl--”

“I don’t know what he did or did not do to my sister Jess,” Dharma said her voice higher than before. “I don’t know. Let it go, will you? And don’t ask her anymore questions.”

They went back to doing their homework. I walked back to my room, and went to the window. I heard Jess leave and Daddy come back home from work. I heard my parents and Dharma set the table for dinner. But I didn’t leave. I just stared out, watching as the sun slowly came down and the moon made its way up.

I didn’t leave my spot at the window until Dharma came to get me for dinner.

“He didn’t do anything to me,” I said to her.

“What?” she asked, standing at the doorway. I could only see half of her face, from the light coming in from the hallway.

“Mr. Dill,” I said. “He didn’t do anything to me.”

“If you say so,” she said. “Just come down for dinner.” I watched her walk away, not sure if she believed me or not, not sure I cared. I didn’t know how to feel about anything anymore.

A month passed before Mama and Daddy finally asked me. I was sitting by the window, the music notes given to me by Mr. Dill in my lap. I had found it in my backpack and contemplated throwing it away, but decided against it. Below me, I could hear the squeals of kids playing outside. I could see some parents outside, carefully watching over each move their child made, glancing nervously at Mr. Dill’s house as though expecting him to come out and grab their children any moment.

Daddy and Mama found me peering out. They came together, a united force.

Mama asked me to sit on the bed and sat next to me, while Daddy pulled a chair and sat in front of us. They wanted to speak to me about my relationship with Mr. Dill. Before they even asked, I knew what they wanted to know.

“Did Mr. Dill--” Daddy began, holding my hands in his.

“He didn’t do anything to me,” I said before he could finish his question.

“Sometimes we might think someone is doing the right thing, but what they’re doing is wrong,” Daddy said. I didn’t understand what he meant. He sighed.

“Did he ever kiss your cheeks?” he asked.

“That’s normal,” I said. “It’s only in our family where we don’t hug, but every family hug and kiss. Plus, that’s the way all the actors and actresses kiss each other.”

“He’s not your family. I am, your mother is, Dharma is. And you’re not an actress,” Daddy said.

I didn’t respond.

“Sarah,” Mama began. I turned my attention to her. “Are you sure that he didn’t touch you or make you do anything that you didn’t want to do?”

“I’m sure,” I said.

“Would you tell us if he did?” Mama asked. “Be honest.”

I tapped my foot on the tiled floor of my room, and looked towards my window.

From my bed, I saw the roof of Mr. Dill's house. I thought of his smiling face, and patient eyes. I thought about being in his living room and taking turns playing the piano with him. I thought about our ice-cream sessions and the way he laughed. I didn't know whether he did what they were accusing him of. The man that everyone was now describing was not the man I knew. And I didn't think he did it. But even if he did, I knew why the girls would have trusted him. I knew why they would have waited a long time before telling anyone. They would have trusted him for the same reason I did.

"No," I said softly. I looked back at my parents. "I wouldn't tell you."

## Friday Night Special

It took Sam two hours of searching on the computer before she found the minimum prison facility where he was: the Elmira Correctional Facility. She found out that visiting hours were between 9am and 3pm on a Saturday. She took an Uber, and got there at 8:45. Anxiety ate away at her as she stood outside the big burgundy building in the cold October air, waiting to go in.

She walked in at 9:15, going through security. The guard raised an eyebrow at her when she walked in with her audio bag. She had to explain that she was a journalist, doing a story on one of the prisoners there. She didn't tell him that the prisoner was her father, or that she hadn't seen him for twelve years.

She was taken into a big room filled with tables surrounded by chairs. She was glad when she saw that a couple of people were already sitting, waiting for their loved ones and that she wasn't the only early visitor. She sat in the middle of the room trying to calm herself, holding her hands tightly to still them.

While she waited for him, she took out her recorder, a pen, and a paper. When she had pitched a story on children of the incarcerated to her producer, Paul, she never thought that the story would bring her to her father.

Working for NBC News had always been her dream, and when she had gotten the job six months earlier, she had been ecstatic. She was finally going to be a reporter in a big market. She had thought all her hard work had paid off. No more working in low market stations barely able to keep food on her table, no more taking pointless stories about cats and good school lunches. NBC News gave her the chance to finally be a real reporter; to tell the hard stories. That's why she pitched the story about children of the incarcerated. She thought it was unique. And it was. But the more she interviewed prisoners, their children and family members, the more she knew that she had get her own story in there. She had to speak to her father.

She waited for him, glancing at the circular clock above the door, watching as the minutes ticked by. She caught pieces of conversation around her, and allowed the audio recorder to run collecting the sounds. A wife told her prisoner husband about their kids, another promised his loved one that his time was almost over. Another prisoner spoke about the kinds of foods that he missed on the outsider. She heard laughter behind her. Sam wondered if there was any food that her father missed.

Twenty minutes came and went and he didn't show up. More and more people entered the room. She watched as prison guards moved around, their eyes watching each interaction, as though waiting for something to go wrong. Their constant movement made Sam restless. She raised her hand to her lips, almost biting her nails, a habit that annoyed her fiancé, Jack. She placed her hand back down on the grey table and began to tap her fingers in a descending motion. Her engagement ring caught her eye and she contemplated keeping it on or taking it off. Finally, she slipped it off and put it in her front jean pocket.

She looked up to see him come out of the room where all the prisoners came out of. Their eyes met, and he paused, a surprise on his face. Another prisoner bumped into him and he regained himself and began to walk towards her.

"You look like her," he said as he sat down across from the white table that separated them.

Sam curled and uncurled her hands as she stared at her father. It had been so long that a part of her had wondered if he would look the same. He didn't look any different, except for the overgrown beard on his brown face and the Afro on his head. He wore a black long-sleeve prison shirt. He had bags underneath his eyes and she noted that he had lost a lot of weight since she last saw him.

Andrew Wilson folded his hands in front of him, and pushed in his chair. His eyes roamed over his daughter's face and Sam wondered what he saw when he looked at her. Did he notice the pimple on her chin? Did he notice the fact that her big eyes were like his? Or that her nose was as full as his?

"Who do I look like?" she asked. She could feel her heartbeat increasing and she tried to tell herself that this was just another story, another subject, another part to a whole.

Andrew's eyes went from her face to the audio recorder on the table.

“The first thing you do when you come visit your old man in twelve years is bring sound equipment?” he asked. His voice was deeper than she remembered it to be, hollower.

“I’m on an assignment,” Sam responded. The room suddenly felt too crowded and too loud. She wondered whether her recorder would be able to get the sounds. She resisted the urge to check the levels and instead focused on Andrew.

“Who do I look like?” she asked again.

“What assignment are you on?” Andrew responded, his eyes still focused on the table. He reached for the recorder, picked it up and turned it over in his hands.

“I’m doing a story on prisoners and their families,” she said. Andrew placed the recorder down. He finally raised his eyes to hers.

“Naturally you thought of me?” He asked.

“Naturally,” she answered. “Who do I look like?”

“Your mother. The same flat nose, the same big eyes, the same chocolate skin tone. I thought you were her,” he said. “For a second. Then of course, I knew.”

“Oh,” she said. She didn’t think she looked anything like her mother.

For a second neither spoke. Sam noticed a guard walk by them, and smelled the scent of his strong apple-like cologne. She looked towards the clock and noted that she had been there for an hour. She could no longer pick out distinct conversations, instead everything blended together.

She looked down at her notepad, at her first question. It seemed like an obvious question. Why did you kill him? she had written down. But she knew the answer to that.

“What do you want to know, Ms. Reporter?” Andrew asked, breaking Sam out of her thoughts. She looked up at him, surprised. She hadn’t expected him to still be as easygoing as she remembered him to be. But even though his tone revealed that nothing was wrong, his eyes were unreadable. She had been able to read them before.

She took a deep breath.

“Did you ever think of me?” she asked. She hadn’t planned on getting to this question so early, but it was the only one that made sense. Andrew blinked at her.

“When?” he responded.

“When you did it,” she said. She couldn’t bring herself to look at him in the eyes. Instead, her eyes trailed to his hands, laid flat on the table.

“When I did what?” he asked. Sam looked up at him sharply. He didn’t seem to be mocking her, but she wondered why he would ask her what he already knew the answer to.

Sam opened her mouth to speak, but couldn’t. For a second she considered walking out of the room, and telling Paul that she couldn’t interview her father; that she had tested the waters and realized that it was impossible. But she wondered what type of journalist she would be if she was willing to probe at other people’s pain, but hid her own inside. She took a deep breath and tried to answer his question.

“When I killed him? Is that what you’re trying to ask? When I killed the man your mother wanted to leave me for?” he asked. He folded his hands again, and pushed his chair closer to the table.

She nodded.

“Did you ever think of me?” Andrew asked. Sam tried to keep the surprise out of her face. She heard another laugh behind her. She told herself once again to treat this like another story. She cleared her throat, sat up, grabbed her pen, and inched her notepad closer.

“Just answer the question,” she said, removing the cap of her pen. “Did you ever think of me?” Andrew laughed. Sam swallowed. She knew he could see right through her reporter façade. Andrew drew his chair back, and crossed his arms in front of his chair.

“Every day of my life,” he said and she nodded. She looked back down at her notepad.

“In that moment,” Andrew began and Sam looked up, all signs of humor were gone from his expression. “In that moment, you were the one thing on my mind. You were my driving force.”

“How could I drive you to kill someone? How could I drive you to separate our family forever? How could I drive you to turn my life upside down?” She asked, trying not to raise her voice with each question. She silently cursed herself for losing control.

Andrew shrugged.

“I’ve always been able to protect you,” was his cryptic answer. “I answered your question, will you answer mine?”

“What about walking away?” Sam asked, ignoring him. “Why didn’t you just walk away from mom? Why didn’t you just divorce her, take me away from her? Why-”

“Why didn’t you come hear my side of the story? Why didn’t you visit?” Andrew asked, interrupting her. She could hear his own annoyance rise as he spoke. He sat up and began to drum his hands on the table. “Why are you doing this Samantha? Why now? Why this way?” He gestured to the recorder.

Sam placed the pen down and folded the corner of her notepad.

“It’s for my story,” She said, shrugging.

“I’m not your story Samantha, just your father,” he said, his eyes bore into hers.

“I don’t have a father,” she responded quietly. He blinked. “I haven’t for twelve years.”

He sat back and for the first time she noticed that he looked older.

“Then you don’t have a story either,” he said. Silently he got up and walked out of the visiting room.

Sam watched his back until she couldn’t see it any longer. She glanced down at her notepad, looking at the questions she had written down. She lifted the page and ripped it out, crumpling it up in her hands. She stopped the recorder and put all her things in her bag. Dazed, she walked out of the room, past smiling families, into the cold October afternoon.

It was when she got back to the city that she felt she could finally breathe. When the Uber driver dropped her off in front of her tall apartment complex, she decided to take a walk and headed towards 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. She passed numerous pizza shops, Five Guys, Starbucks, her nose taking in the smell of each restaurant. She passed Rockefeller Center, the place that housed her job at NBC News. She took her time, thinking of what she would tell Paul on Monday.

She considered telling him that she will only keep the interviews she had previously done. Plus, those interviews included videos of people. Her father's interview only consisted of sound. But she doubted that Paul would allow that. He'd been excited about the project.

His response when she had compiled her package together was that it was flat. He thought that it was interesting, but there was nothing driving the story forward. He had asked her to tell her story. She had blinked at him. She knew what he was talking about, and the thought had crossed her mind. But, she didn't want to go that route. So, she played dumb.

"I had thought that the reason you pitched this was because of your Dad," he admitted, when she looked at him with pretended confusion. He asked her to think about interviewing her father. She told him she would consider it, knowing she had no intention of doing such a thing.

But the more she thought about the idea of interviewing her father, the more she couldn't find a reason why she shouldn't do it. So, she woke up the next morning and decided to go see Andrew, test the waters, see if it could work.

But now after the mental exercise her father had put her through, and the pain and strangeness of seeing him after all these years, Sam didn't know if she could do it. She didn't know if she had the strength or boldness to do what Paul was asking. She wasn't sure she wanted to.

As she got closer to Times Square, the crowd got bigger and the lights became brighter. She saw different screens ahead of her and passed by billboard signs displaying Broadway shows. She saw many people taking pictures. And for a second she stood in the middle of Times Square making a 360, looking at her surroundings, feeling like a small kid in a candy shop.

Her eyes caught the Hershey chocolate store, and she began to walk towards it. She entered the store and allowed the smell of chocolate to overwhelm her. This was always her favorite store. It was always their favorite store.

The first time her father had brought her to Times Square, he had told that he had a treat for her. It was the Hershey store. Back then, her six-year-old mind felt like she was in Wonderland. She had squealed and ran around the store, exclaiming loudly at every new candy she saw. She and Andrew had

left the store with six full bags of candy. They came back whenever they could. It was their place. New York City was their city.

After he got arrested, Sam had found it hard to come back to the city. Now that she was finally back, she couldn't ignore the immense influence Andrew had had on her loving New York City. He was the reason this was her favorite place. He was the reason she loved Times Square so much and refused to eat pizza at any other state, but New York. He always told her that even the worst New York Pizza was better than pizza anywhere else. His love for news had led to her following the reporter path. She couldn't help but wonder if Paul was right. Had she wanted to do this story because of her father?

A cameraman came with Sam on her next visit to Elmira. Paul had talked to his bosses and the executives were in love with the idea, but only if Sam got the interview with Andrew Wilson. Paul called Elmira Prison and asked them to set up a private room for Sam and her father. The next interview was to take place Tuesday morning.

The room they were given felt too dark to Sam. It also felt too small. Other than a brown table with two chairs on either side, there was no other furniture in the room. The room was rectangular and had no windows. Sam and her cameraman pushed the table to one side of the wall.

Feeling that it was too warm, she took off her black blazer and set it on the chair. She placed the two chairs in the middle of the room, making them face each other. She sat down on the chair on the left and watched as the cameraman began to arrange the camera. He placed it on the stand, and faced it so that both chairs were in the frame. He handed Sam a body microphone and she attached it to herself. She sat down and waited.

Unlike her first visit, she didn't have to wait a long time for her father. He didn't seem surprised by the camera. She had wondered if he would sit in front of a camera for an actual interview, part of her hoping he won't and the other part, hoping he would.

He sat down in the chair across from her. He wore white this time. His face was clean-shaven, and his hair, cut low. He looked more like she remembered.

“Got to get ready for my close-up,” he said at the surprise look on her face. He sat down and crossed his legs.

Sam nodded and got up to grab her notebook from her bag. Paul had told her to ask the deep questions.

“Make him uncomfortable,” he had said to her earlier that morning as she was leaving the station.

“I thought I didn’t have a story?” she asked Andrew, sitting down with the notebook, flipping through it until she found her questions. At the top of the page, she saw that Paul had written down in Red: At what point did you decide to kill him?

“You might not have a father, but I still have a daughter. And she needs my help, so I am going to help her,” he replied. Sam looked up and saw a small smile on his face.

“I don’t need your help,” she said. His smile faltered.

“You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t,” he said, uncrossing his legs.

She didn’t know what to say. She took a deep breath and looked at the cameraman. He walked over to her father and placed a body microphone at the neck of his uniform, and hid it in the seat.

Sam glared at the white part of her notebook. She suddenly had the desire to run away. She wished the camera wasn’t in the room. She wished she didn’t have to do the interview.

“You still have the same expression.” His voice startled her out of her thoughts. She looked up from her notebook.

“What?” She asked, rubbing her head.

The corner of Andrew’s lips turned up into a half smile.

“When you’re thinking, you still get the same narrowed look and pursed lips.”

“Glad to know some things haven’t changed,” she responded, then winced the moment the words were out of her mouth.

“I thought reporters are supposed to be unbiased?” he asked, smiling slightly. If she didn’t know any better she would think he was teasing her.

“Do you regret it?” she asked instead of answering his question.

“Killing him?” he asked her, shifting in his seat.

She nodded.

“I regret a lot of things in life,” he responded.

“But killing him isn’t one of them?” she asked.

He shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said. Then he seemed to think it over. “Do you hate me because I did?”

“Does it matter?” she responded.

“What do you think?” Andrew replied. Sam rolled her eyes. She bit her lips and turned the question over in her mind.

“I don’t know,” she finally said. “I don’t know how I feel.”

“Yet you’re here,” he said, all signs of teasing gone. He sat up.

“Yet, I’m here,” Sam responded. Taking a deep breath, she turned to the cameraman. He gave her a thumbs-up, they could finally begin.

“What about your mother?” Andrew asked before she could ask Paul’s question. She looked up at him, confused. His hands were gripping his seat.

“What about my mother?” she responded.

“Do you hate her?” he asked. Sam felt her head begin to pound. She didn’t want to speak about her mother.

“This isn’t about mom,” she said.

“This is all about your mother,” he said leaning back again.

“How?” she asked leaning back into the wooden chair as well.

He smiled.

“She kept you away from me, didn’t she?” he asked. “She filled your head with lies about me.”

“What lies?” Sam asked, shaking her head in disbelief. “Was it a lie when she said that you beat her?”

“You should have come to hear my side of the story,” he said, pulling his legs underneath the chair. “We were more than father and daughter, we were best friends.”

“So, you didn’t beat her?” Sam asked. She held his gaze, daring him to deny it. He didn’t say anything.

“Let’s not play this game Dad,” she finally said.

“I only want my daughter to give me the chance to explain my side of the story,” he said quietly.

“Fine,” Sam said, turning her notebook face down. “What’s your side of the story?”

“I loved your mother too much,” he said.

“What about me?” Sam asked. “Did you love her more than you loved me? Was your love for her worth twelve years in prison?”

“Like I said, you were my driving force,” Andrew responded. He offered no other explanation. Sam nodded. She turned her notebook over, but a thought popped into her mind.

“I went to the Hershey store after my last visit,” she said slowly. Andrew smiled. “It’s still my favorite place to go even after all these years.”

“Chocolate was always your favorite,” he said.

Sam shook her head.

“Going with you, that was my favorite,” she replied.

“Maybe one day we will go back together,” he said. Sam shook her head again.

“We can never go back together,” she responded. Andrew sighed.

“That’s what I’ve never understood,” she began. Andrew looked at her quizzically. “In one moment, you changed our lives forever. So, when did you make that choice? When did you know that you were going to kill him?”

He tilted his head.

“I didn’t,” he said.

“It just happened?” she asked, trying to keep the disbelief out of her voice.

“No it didn’t. I know what I did Sam, but at the time I wasn’t in control,” he responded.

“Was that what happened when you beat Mom as well? You lost control?” Sam knew she sounded mocking. Andrew smiled humorlessly.

“Believe it or not Samantha,” he said slowly. “I’ve spent the last twelve years trying to learn not to lose that control again.”

“How come I never knew?” she asked, her voice as soft as his. “How come I didn’t know that you beat her? I should have known, I should have realized it.”

“You would never have known,” he responded. “You only saw what we wanted you to see.”

“I lived in the same house with you,” she said, gripping the notebook on her lap tighter.

“We were always going from one adventure to the next. Our adventures, trips to the Hershey store, Times Square, Barnes and Nobles, they weren’t just for you,” he said.

“She never was able to come with us,” Sam replied.

“She never felt well enough to come with us,” he responded back, shrugging.

“What about-” she began.

“I’ve always wondered what would have happened if I never did what I did,” he said, interrupting her. “What if I never killed that man. What if I had allowed your mother to divorce me like she wanted to. Would you have gone with me? Would you have chosen me?”

The question caught Sam off guard. She imagined herself at twelve. Her father was her everything, he could do no wrong in her eyes then. She didn’t doubt that she would have left with him. At least until the truth came out.

Andrew suddenly got up out of his chair, not waiting for her to respond.

“wait—what are-” Sam began, but he was already walking out the door. She looked at the cameraman, whose expression mirrored her own.

They waited for Andrew to come back, but he never did. They gathered up their equipment and left.

She told about her fiancé Jack about Andrew’s sudden exit from the interview.

“It was strange,” she said mindlessly drawing circles on the back of Jack’s hand.

They sat in the corner of a pizza shop in Manhattan, with a half-eaten pie between the two of them.

“What did Paul say when you told him?” Jack asked, picking up a slice off the pan and biting its tale.

“Go back tomorrow,” Sam answered. Paul had looked at all the footage she had and nodded. The fact that her father hadn’t really said anything substantial didn’t bother him. He wanted more.

“What are you going to do?” Jack asked between bites. Sam reached forward with a napkin to wipe off the spots of cheese on the corner of his lips. He caught her hand and kissed the inside of her palm before letting it go.

She smiled.

“Go back tomorrow,” she said. Jack nodded. She sighed.

Being with her father made her feel exhausted. She had tried to think of reasons why he left the interview and couldn’t think of anything. She was also bothered by Andrew’s words that she was his driving force. Her mind kept trying to remember the days before her father had killed the man. She tried to think of what she might have done to drive him to that point, but she didn’t remember doing or saying anything. All she remembered was being happy.

“What do you want?” Jack asked, breaking her out of her thoughts. She looked at him and noted that his face seemed lighter over the yellow lamp above them.

“What?” she asked. Did she miss something?

“What do you want?” he asked again. He reached for her hand, his fingers playing with the ring on her left hand. She glanced at it and then back at him. “Why are you doing this story? What do you want from your father?”

“Nothing,” she said. Jack raised an eyebrow. Sam sighed, pulled her hand back and leaned away from him. She thought of his question and stared at the ring on her finger.

“I don’t understand it,” she finally said. “How could this man that I know- that I knew - the one who made life fun, turn to become a person who hit my mother, and killed someone?” She paused. “Didn’t he think about me? Didn’t he think about what it might do to me? Didn’t he think about the many lives he will be destroying?” She looked down at the pizza on her plate, and played with the crust.

She could feel Jack’s eyes on her, and didn’t want to look at him, fearing the tears underneath her eyes.

“I just want him to explain it to me,” she said. “But then he does, or tries to, or says he was thinking about me.” She bit her lips. “How? How could he be thinking about me? And then he tries to guilt me and make me feel like I’m the one at fault for not talking to him, for not coming to him.” She looked up to see Jack staring at her intently. He reached for her hand again, but she drew back. She didn’t want to make a scene and she was already on the brink of tears.

“I’m fine,” she said. He shook his head. “No, honestly I am. I’m just exhausted. I have all these holes in my head that I’m trying to fill, and the more I try to fill them the bigger they get.”

“What’s really bothering you about it?” he asked.

“That I didn’t know. That my life was a lie. That I didn’t figure it out. It makes me scared” she said. She looked back down at her pizza to keep him from seeing the tears as they slid from her eyes, down her cheeks, onto the slice on her plate. “What else is a lie? Who else is lying to me?”

“Remember our last night?” Sam asked the next day as she sat across from Andrew. He stared blankly at her. “Remember how Mom had made this big meal and we had so much fun just talking and laughing?”

She had come wanting to know more. She didn’t want to play ping pong anymore, she wanted to be the one in control. She wanted to finish the story.

“Mom made this big meal, and told us about how when she was in college she had fallen asleep only to be awoken by her own fart. We laughed and the two of you let me stay up until 12 in the morning. Remember that?”

“What about it Sam?” he asked, there was no playfulness in his eyes. He folded his hands in his lap.

“Was it planned?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” he replied.

“Did you plan it?” she asked again.

He shook his head.

“Did she plan it?” she asked. He shrugged.

“Your mother plans a lot of things,” he responded.

Sam nodded. She thought about Jack’s question the night before.

“I wish you didn’t kill him,” she said, looking her father in the eyes. “I wish you didn’t abuse mom. But what I wished the most, I wish that I could go back and see you for who you were, and not the man that’s in my head.”

“What man’s in your head?” he asked.

“The man who is loving and caring,” she said. “You’re not that man. You’ve never been that man.”

“You never gave me the chance to be that man,” he responded, holding her eye. “Twelve years Sam. Twelve years without my family, without my daughter. Don’t you think I’ve learned something? Don’t you wonder if I’m different? I know what I did. I don’t need you to throw it in my face. I remember every time I wake up, every time I think of you, of your mother.. I think of all the things that I’ve missed. I’ve missed seeing you grow up, get engaged,” He pointed to the ring on her finger. “I’ve missed your laugh, your smile, your stubbornness. I’ve missed hearing you laugh. It kills me Sam to think that you’re like this because of me.”

“Like what?” Sam asked, not knowing what he meant.

“You’ve been here three times, and not once have you smiled. I may have killed someone, but I’m still me. I still have remnant of myself inside. But you’re different. You don’t know the man I am. You don’t have the right to make that judgement. You’re not letting yourself see it. You won’t let yourself see it. You’re guarding yourself.”

“I don’t want to be lied to again,” she replied.

“I never lied to you,” he said. He paused. “I don’t know if I regret killing him. I know I regret not seeing you for so long. That’s what I miss the most. Not the pizza dates, or the chocolate, or even the city. Not even your mother. What I miss the most is not being there to see you grow up.”

Sam felt the pressure in her throat increase, and swallowed.

“Why did you abuse her?” she asked, changing the subject.

“I don’t know,” he answered sincerely. “I guess it’s the same reason I killed him.”

“Which is?” she asked.

“Fear. I thought I might lose her. I thought I might lose you,” he admitted.

“Yet you lost her anyway,” Sam said. Her mother had remarried.

“But not you,” he replied, his smile returning.

“How do you figure?” she asked.

“You’re sitting right in front of me, aren’t you?”

Sam sat in the dark editing room watching her father on the Mac desktop on the table in front of her. She resisted the urge to look at the time. She had spent hours putting the whole package together, including all the interviews. She felt bare, and she wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

She turned to her side and saw Paul looking at the computer intently, listening as her father spoke. He looked at her when the screen went black, a pensive expression on his face.

“You don’t like it?” she asked, feeling like she might cry. She couldn’t have done all this work, just for him to throw it away. She tried to tell herself that he wouldn’t do that. Would he?

“This is about the children of the incarcerated?” he asked slowly.

“Yes, and I have the other interviews in there,” she said. She started to rewind so that she could show him. He stilled her fingers.

“We have Andrew Wilson, we don’t have his daughter,” Paul said.

She didn’t understand what he meant.

“Where’s your interview?” he asked. Sam resisted the urge to groan. Paul looked at his watch, he got up.

“Put your side of the story in there, then it’ll be complete,” he walked towards the door. “Good luck.” He left, closing the door behind him.

Sam sighed, and looked up at the ceiling.

She logged out of the news software and exited the room. Walking to one of the studios, she asked the cameraman there if she could borrow it. He agreed. She had fifteen minutes before it would be used. They used a regular DSLR, and Sam inputted her SD card. She allowed herself to be mic’d. She stared straight at the camera. She didn’t know what to say.

Jack’s question once again popped into her mind. What did she want? She wanted to not feel guilty. She wanted to see her father for who he was twelve years ago.

Staring at the camera, she cleared her throat and began.

“I don’t hate you, I wish I could. I wish I could hate you for what you did to Mom, what you did to me, or what you did to that man. I just feel confused. It was like I knew you and then I didn’t. I feel like you led me on, deceived me. And I wish that you would acknowledge it. But even now you won’t, you don’t. And it makes me wonder if I’ve ever known you. Have I just been lying to myself all this time? And the more I think about that, the more I realize that although I could never hate you, there’s one person that I despise in all of this: me. I hate myself for trusting you, believing in you, for loving you. You say I wouldn’t have known. But the truth is, I didn’t want to know.”

THE END