“Black Girl Magic and Lemonade”
A Collection of Short Stories by Nicole Huff

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Preface

My African American Literature class provided me with the materials that sparked my interest to conduct a SIP surrounding the concept of blackness, and more specifically, black feminism. The coursework that I have completed throughout my time at Kalamazoo College, were mostly literature and writing classes. Most of the literature classes that I took somehow always centered themselves around the topic of race and racism, and the way that we analyze literature of previous-colonized people in America. African American Literature, Junior Seminar, and Intermediate Fiction were the classes that I consider the most important to the growth and development of my SIP topic. My newly understood knowledge of different theories and my ability to apply them to my fiction to create an understanding of bigger topics come from my work in Junior Seminar.

During my African American Literature class, I wrote a lengthy paper on Audre Lorde’s idea of self-actualization in black identity in correlation with the relationship between black and white females as well as black males and females. I did this after reading a few chapters in her compilation of speeches and essays, *Sister Outsider*. Lorde’s interpretation of these relationships between black men and women as well as black women and white women generated higher interest in the relationship between black women and white males as well. This idea sparked by my research paper from African American Literature, was further supported through the other materials that were used in that class. In the collection that I have created, every story contains a relationship between a black female and either a black or white male or female, which was an idea sparked by the research paper that I wrote in African American Literature about self-actualization in black female culture.
Content from my literature classes that resonated with me are mostly books and speeches that I read in African American Literature. Specifically, W.E.B. Dubois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* and his idea of double-consciousness and life underneath the veil sparked some of my ideas for my writing due to my own dealings with those two concepts on a personal level. Double-consciousness speaks to the inability to have a single unified identity. This single element serves as a building block for the overall concept of blackness. Blacks do not have the ability to claim one unified identity because they feel as though they belong to each specific category of their identity separately rather than as one single entity. Likewise, life underneath the veil speaks to blackness in terms of the oppression that blacks face. The veil represents oppression, specifically, the oppression that black Americans face. It metaphorically shrouds the black population by making blacks and their struggles invisible to those outside of the veil. Both concepts are crucial to approaching blackness because they call attention to both the inner struggle and outer struggle of blacks, which serves as a foundation for being black in America. These concepts that scaffold blackness help me structure the fiction that I began working on in my writing sequence classes.

Much like Dubois’s idea of double-consciousness, feminist theory criticizes the issue of representation and disrupts the belief that women can be represented one single way. For the vision of my SIP, in regards to representation, *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde provided me with a new way to think about feminism by giving it a name, black feminism. Black feminism supports arguments that there is not one way to represent women as whole, but rather there are separate groups of women and not all of them are the same. Black feminism relates specifically to blacks that identify as women. However,
Audre Lorde calls attention to the distinction of black feminism in her opening line of “Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface,” when she says, “Black feminism is not white feminism in blackface. Black women have particular and legitimate issues which affect our lives as Black women, and addressing those issues does not make us any less Black” (Lorde 60). The lives of black women are not the same as the lives of all women or all blacks. Therefore, black feminism speaks to a specific blackness and feminism. It speaks to the relationships that black women hold with those of dominant cultures, which are white men and women as well as black men. Audre Lorde’s analysis of these relationships are another building block for the fiction in my collection. Her work helped me focus my attention to the voices of black women.

Likewise, the style and construction of Rankine’s, Citizen, provided me with a vision of my SIP in which style aided in the overall portrayal of theme. Rankine’s writing was a form of writing that I wasn’t yet familiar with until I read Citizen in African American Literature. The way that she uses short, direct pieces of prose to convey harsh concepts helped me tighten up my own work. Rankine also has an organizational style of shifting between longer and shorter pieces of prose. She uses this organization method as a way to really drive the point that she is trying to make home. This style impacts a collection as a whole by intermixing quickly read, hard-hitting, and raw prose and stories with longer, more plot-driven, thematic pieces. Short pieces feel more urgent, more immediate because they read fast. They reinforce the urgency and immediacy the reader should feel about the issues at hand. Similarly, she uses colloquial language to encourage casual, easy, reading but the rawness of them make them more powerful. Rankine’s uses
of raw and casual language, as well as her intermixing of short and long pieces in a single collection provided the vision for the construction of my SIP.

Along with the material that I read in my African American Literature class, the workshops and coursework from both Creative Writing and Intermediate Fiction Writing contributed in the construction of my SIP. These two classes provided me with skills in character development, and the use of time as a way to convey a theme such as in the pieces in my collection. Not only did these two classes give me the skill set I needed to construct my SIP, but they also gave me the opportunity to expand my writing style through the different assignments. Specifically, in Intermediate Fiction Writing, one of the prompts that was given for a weekly turn in was to write about a historical figure. This assignment gave me a chance to write a piece that fit into the vision of what my SIP could be. The piece that I turned in for this specific class assignment was titled, *The Man Full of Black Pride*.

In *The Man Full of Black Pride*, I use historical figure, Elaine Brown, a former Black Panther, as the main protagonist. This was done through a fictionalized telling of historical events through the perspective of Elaine Brown. The piece reads almost like a journal of her retelling the events that took place during her time as a member of the Black Panthers. After writing this piece in Intermediate Fiction, I decided to turn the piece into a longer, more intense piece. In order to do so, the male characters, especially Huey, needed to be further developed. Developing Huey’s character into a more evidently patriarchal male of power speaks to black feminism and the way it operates under the relationship between black males and females. This initial piece, after a few editing sessions, soon became *Don’t Hurt Yourself (Love God Herself)*, which is the third
piece in my collection. The initial writing of this piece in my Intermediate Fiction Workshop prompted me to create a collection in which every protagonist is a black female.

Both postcolonial theory and feminist theory were the major components used to scaffold the framework of my stories and the characters within them. The two theories work together and create a concept that combines the two theories known as black feminism. Black feminism operates through the lens of feminist theory due to the conversation it holds with challenging representation and unified identity. Creating a specific type of feminism, black feminism, challenges the idea that all women fall under the same identity and can therefore be represented in the same manner. However, black feminism pays attention to the specificity of black culture and specifically black womanhood. The attention to black culture brings in a postcolonial lens because the focus is on a previously colonized group of people, black women. In black culture, there is a very specific hegemonic structure that is at work, and this structure greatly affects women and black womanhood. Black womanhood is a topic that, in this day and age, has been brought to the forefront of black culture. More often than not, black womanhood associates with feminism and the challenging of traditional gender roles. However, the alteration of these gender roles is much more visible in black culture and relationships than in white culture. In an essay written by Nicole Fleetwood titled, “Black Women Performing Hypervisibility,” she discusses the way that black women are looked at in dominant cultures. She writes, “…the black female body always presents a problem within a field of vision structured by racialized and gendered markings… the black female body functions as the site of excess in dominant visual culture and the public
sphere at large” (Fleetwood 109). By referring to the female body specifically, Fleetwood exemplifies the over sexualizing of black females by dominant cultures. White men, black men, and white women are the dominant cultures over black females, which calls attention to black females while simultaneously rendering them invisible. This concept of black women being both invisible and hyper visible at the same time cause more tension when black women challenge both gender roles and social structure. The inability for black women to be socially accepted completely by the entire black community or the white community create complex relationships between them and those in dominant positions.

In order to completely discuss black womanhood, or black feminism, the relationship between black females and black males as well as between them and white males and females must be discussed. This discussion begins with Spivak’s analysis of subaltern studies in postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory is a concept used to talk about formerly colonized people, such as blacks and women. By using black women as the protagonists for this collection, it is already postcolonial in nature. But Spivak’s idea of the S/subject and the subaltern are also seen at work here. Spivak’s idea of the S/subject states that the big S subject is the portion of the subaltern, subjugated, group that has a voice and represents the entire subjugated group. In contrast the little S subject is the remainder of the subjected group without a voice that are spoken for by the big S subject. The subjugated group, in the case of each short story in this collection, are black women where the big S subject are black men and white men and women. These dominant cultures that attempt to represent the oppressed represent them as being hypervisible to the public. They make them hypervisible by representing them as
excessive both in appearance and personality, which creates further tropes that black women continue to be pushed into. Spivak’s theory explains the incorrect way that the little S subject is represented as well as it dives into the relationships that black women have with these big S subjects. The dynamics of each relationship differ in regards to both representation and gender roles, which hold separate values when a part of the black community.

As a self-identified black female, I am the little S subject speaking for the little S subject. Using my own understanding of history and my own experiences enables me to share the voice of the little S subject without becoming the big S subject. My representation of black women, as I know, isn’t the only representation. However, my voice belongs to the same group of the oppressed women that are underrepresented and made hypervisible by dominant groups, which strengthens the voice and overall theme of my collection.

Throughout my collection, specifically in *Don’t Hurt Yourself (Love God Herself)*, I demonstrate the fragile power dynamic between black men and women. A challenge of male authority, especially within a militant group like the Black Panthers, suggests a challenging of traditional gender roles. In order to challenge these roles in this piece, I have Elaine directly challenge the power of the antagonist, Huey Newton. The importance of her challenging his power is the threat it imposes on his masculinity. In black male-female relationships, black men hold delicate masculinity. When their power is challenged, they feel the need to defend their masculinity through overuses of power. Those in power see black women as outspoken, and aggressive, which is why black men retreat to white women to avoid the possibility of their manhood, or power position,
being tested. However, being a black woman means having troubled relationships with white men and women as well. Therefore, the representation of whiteness in this collection demonstrated by the white female and male characters in some of these pieces is crucial to understanding the complicated relationships black women have with other dominant figures.

One of the bigger issues that black women face when attempting to have relations with white men, is the issue of the white savior complex. According to Spivak, the oppressed group (black women) need a voice to speak for them since they do not have a power position within society. The voice ablest to speak for them is the voice of the colonizer himself, the white male. Because of the invisibility of the black woman, she often allows the white male to speak for her in order for her voice to be heard. In this collection, I attempt to challenge the white savior complex by shedding light on the situation as well as using my black female protagonists to overcome the issue. However, this isn’t the only dimension of the white male-black female relationship.

Hypervisibility of the black female body, or eroticizing, holds another element to the relationship between the black female-white male relationship. More often than not, white males see the black female body as something exotic, something mysterious to them. In “6 Inch,” a piece from my collection, the description of what the protagonist wears on a daily basis and her focus on her appearance are one of the first things introduces to the reader. Her need to be seen comes from the invisibility that her voice carries, where her physical appearance almost makes her a spectacle. Throughout the piece, there are multiple accounts of white men viewing her body in an excessive manner. After her body, that she seems to be extremely proud of, is violated she feels both
helpless and invisible. In order to deal with the hypervisibility of her body she straps on a pair of her favorite heels, and steps back into the world. Today, one of the ways that black females deal with this erotizing of their bodies is by embracing the characteristics that their bodies present. The embracing of the black female body is one of the main elements of black feminism. The most contemporary expression of black feminism is the music scene. Specifically, artists like Beyoncé in her most recent album, *Lemonade*, exemplify this element of black feminism.

Beyoncé’s latest visual album, *Lemonade*, has been coined as an anthem for black women everywhere. While the lyrics themselves are moving enough, the movie that accompanies it work in concert with the lyrics to draw out crucial topics involving, race, fetishizing, and police violence. Specifically, the lyrics call attention to the role of the black female in each of these topics. Beyoncé brings attention to the inability to represent women as a whole, but rather the necessity for a different mode of representation for black women (i.e. black feminism).

Through her visual album, Beyoncé exemplifies the different ways to represent black women through her showcasing of black female bodies, the poetry that is read throughout the visual portion, and her lyrics. Not only does Beyoncé bring black women into the societal light, she challenges the relationships between black men and women as well as between black women and white men and women. Lyrics like “You better call Becky with the good hair” refer directly to the idea of black men preferring white women, which further complicates the relationship black women have with white women. It complicates it by leaving the black females invisible to the males of our own race, which makes us resentful of white women in that sense. Likewise, in the poetry
voiced over by Beyoncé in the visual portion of the album, in the section titled “Anger” she says, “Why can’t you see me? Everyone else can.” By stating this, she directly refers to the extreme visibility black females hold in the eyes of white men and women, which make them view black women as erotic, but also the invisibility they hold in the eyes of black men. In a similar manner, Beyoncé showcases the different types of black women by having women of varying skin tones, ages, and body types as extras and dancers in her film. She displays the different ways black women look, but also has them dressed similarly in clothes that accentuate their bodies, or call attention to their bodies. Old style, traditional, dresses that would be worn by white women of early New Orleans that are large and eye-grabbing and modern-day, tight body suits and crop tops are the types of clothes these different black females wear throughout the film. By doing this, Beyoncé takes advantage of the already heightened visibility of the group in order to make outsiders from different cultures pay attention and to stop overlooking black women. She uses the stereotypes of black females being excessive when it comes to their physical bodies in order to draw even more attention to them rather than leaving them to fall back into invisibility.

However, critics such as bell hooks argue that Beyoncé’s embracing of the black female stereotype in Lemonade traps black women further into the tropes that they are already given of being angry, aggressive, and loud. She writes, “[...] women do not and will not seize power and create self-love and self-esteem through violent acts. Female violence is no more liberatory than male violence. And when violence is made to look sexy and eroticized, as in the Lemonade sexy-dress street scene, it does not serve to undercut the prevailing cultural sentiment that it is acceptable to use violence to reinforce
domination, especially in relations between men and women. Violence does not create positive change.” Through the violent acts that Beyoncé displays in this film, bell hooks argues that Beyoncé sexualizes black women, and reinforces the cycle of violence within the relationships between black males and women. Not only does hooks argue that Lemonade keeps black women within their given tropes, but also that the movement Beyoncé makes through the grieving process allows men to continue to put women through emotional trauma. She argues this by bringing up the inability to trust the ending scenes of Jay Z in which he appears caring and apologetic for the pain that he has caused Beyoncé. The argument is that Beyoncé demands black women to be strong through the hurt and the pain, and be able to deal with the bitterness that these complex relationships through their way, which allows men to continue to put women through emotional trauma.

Although Beyoncé does reach the reconciliation phase of grieving in this fictitious album, that does not go to say that men should continue to get away with the emotional trauma continuously inflicted upon women. Bell hooks only sees the surface action of the film, whereas Beyoncé sees deeper meaning and more complexity to the film and the lyrics of her album. It’s true that Beyoncé implies the reconciliation with the pain that black females are given. Beyoncé also uses this reconciliation as means of coming together with black males, and then calls for black women to come together in solidarity in order to cope with the common trauma that they are handed. In her final song of the album, “Formation,” she calls upon black women to stand together in strength and solidarity in order for their voices to be heard rather than turning to white men to project their voices for them. Again, through the clothing and movement of the black female
bodies, Beyoncé shifts the gaze of both white men and women and black men towards black women. All of the women in the dancing scenes are dressed in the same outfits, in staggered positions performing the same choreography. The significance of them being staggered represents the individuality of each woman, but the performance of the routines being in sync demonstrates the necessary to work together to overcome the similar struggles that they all endure. Similarly, in the pool scene of the video the group of women divides for a split second and then they physically come back together dancing in sync once again. This specific point in the video, once again, exhibits the coming together of black women. Beyoncé also implies that white men aren’t necessary to the salvation of the black female. Beyoncé uses “Formation” as a call to action for black women. She stresses the importance of solidarity amongst black females, which speaks to black womanhood as whole by deeming it essential to come together as a community in order to gain visibility.

In my own collection of fiction, I name each longer piece after a song off of this album. Each of the pieces that hold a title off of the album are pieces that end with the black female protagonists overcoming a wrong doing by a male in a power position. Not only do these protagonists overcome wrong doings, they are embracing themselves as black women, not hiding behind a male or white woman to bring them strength. They call upon fellow black females or themselves to come to a resolution. Likewise, giving each of these pieces a contemporary title when only one of the pieces specifies a time period reminds the reader that the persecution of black and brown female bodies continues to occur today and has been happening for years.
The collection I have put together is a combination of three long pieces of fiction (fifteen to twenty pages) and two short pieces (seven to ten pages). Similar to the writing style of the short prose pieces in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, I begin and end the collection with a shorter piece. Each of these short pieces focus on a single situation rather than a ton of exposition. Similarly, the two shorter stories focus on the thoughts and feelings of a single character, the female protagonist, as they try and muddle through their situations. They set aside any in depth history about the main characters, and get directly to the point. The first piece puts the reader in a place without a time, and the last piece does the same. But each piece leaves us feeling the weight of a black female’s situation and sets the stage for the more complicated situations that black women encounter in the longer pieces.

However, each of the longer stories are built off of the development of the side characters, rather than just the protagonist. The other characters that the women have interactions with, and exposition about their relationships, makes the biggest difference between the shorter pieces and longer ones. It makes sense for them to be the bulk of the collection, and the middle pieces, because they contain the most complex relationships and interactions held between black women and those of dominant cultures and sexes. Therefore, those pieces carry more weight and more emotion.

The first piece of the entire collection, *Jazz Lullabies for the Black Woman*, tells the story of a young woman that is half black and white living in a small apartment in Savannah, Georgia, supporting her drug-addicted step mother. Her mother, who died from a drug overdose was white while her father is locked away in jail for dealing drugs. Veronica, the protagonist, finds comfort in her saxophone and plays in a small jazz band.
The issue she runs into is the inability of her step-mother to take care of her while her father is locked up. She becomes the mother figure, and takes on the role her father held as the overall bread-winner in the family. She faces a very common situation that many black children face today, her father being in jail and having to step up to provide for her family. This very real situation poses her with a choice. Her choices are to continue scraping by with the money she makes off of small gigs on the weekends, or to take up a friend's offer to start selling drugs in order to bring in extra cash.

Family plays an important role in this first piece, which sets the tone for the entire collection. The importance of family and the roles within a black family are a large part of black womanhood, which is the purpose that this first piece serves. In this story, I surface the large stereotype of the absent black father. However, rather than having the father be absent by choice, his absence is forced, which is an even larger problem that black families deal with. For the black woman, this means the mother has to step up and take on the father role as well as the traditional mother role. In *Jazz Lullabies for the Black Woman*, the scene when Veronica visits her father in jail provides evidence of the need for the black woman to step up. I write, “I can’t keep taking care of Sam. She’s a mess” (Huff 6). Veronica refers to her white, drug-addicted step mother that she can’t continue to provide for. However, when her dad tells her that she must, she doesn’t question it, and later on in the story she takes on more responsibility in order to do so. This complex situation that Veronica has been forced into doesn’t cause her devotion to her father to waver. She steps up, as a black female, and takes on the traditional role of both the man and the woman of the household. However, this isn’t the first piece of the collection that this family dynamic is seen. The following piece, *Daddy Lessons*,
demonstrates a similar situation through the perspective of a mother rather than a daughter.

*Daddy Lessons* takes place in Kalamazoo at an ungiven point in time, very similarly to the lack of time reference in the first piece. This piece connects to the one before it because they both stress the importance of the role of the woman in a black family. However, this is not an interracial family and the relationship is between the protagonist, Loretta, and the father of her children, Quintin. Having this piece follow *Jazz Lullabies* extends the insight on the different elements of being a woman in a black family. Likewise, it dives deeper into the relationship of white women and black men, and how that affects the relationships between black men and women and white and black women. The fleshing out of these particular relationships surfaces in the scene when Quintin leaves to pursue his relationship with a white woman that he has met. I write, “Well you just described every Portage girl, I thought to myself. I moved my finger off of his chest and stepped aside, admitting defeat” (Huff 4). By admitting defeat to the white woman winning the affection of the man that she loves and the father of her children, she shows the horrible reality that every black woman faces, black women losing the competition for the attention from the men of their own community to white women. By losing Quintin to Allison, the other woman, Loretta is rendered invisible to the black man that she loves.

Although invisible to the father of her children, the problem of being overly visible to the white community erupts when she puts her kids in a school consisting mostly of white kids. She quickly discovers that they will not lead an easy life within a mostly white community, and calls on Quintin to comfort her sons. The action of calling
upon the man that can’t see her enough to stay with her demonstrates her willingness to step up and do whatever she needs to for her sons. Her family remains the most important thing, even in the absence of the man she loves. The ability for Loretta to move past her own complex relationship for her kids, shows how important black women have been, and continue to be, in their families. Loretta becomes stronger, and more brave as she takes on the responsibilities of the man and the female of the house.

Similarly, the subsequent piece, *Don’t Hurt Yourself (Love, God Herself)*, the reader further begins to understand the complex relationships between black men and women. Rather than the relationship between black male and female being family oriented, it becomes situated around sexual and communal relations. The piece is the first of the entire collection to be rooted in a specific time period, and focuses on historical figure, Elaine Brown, as the protagonist. Unlike the previous stories, the main focus of this one is the power dynamic between black men and women, and the savior complex of the white male when it comes to black and brown women.

The pinpointing of the time period in this piece was intentional in order to remind the reader that the time periods of the prior ones were never stated. Each of those stories could have taken place at any point in time in history. The nebulousness of time in this collection keeps the reader guessing. By having the piece set within the time of the Black Liberation Movement and placing it as third, middle, piece it reminds the reader that the hardships of black females are timeless. Both feminism and postcolonialism are not just things of the past, they continue to shape the way that black women operate in society.

Likewise, the two power dynamics that are occurring (black males vs. black females, black female vs. white male) influence the way black women behave in sexual
and communal relations. This piece, specifically, calls attention to the issues women in the Black Panther party faced during their time with the organization. Both Elaine Brown’s sexual relationship with party leader, Huey Newton, and her professional relationship were affected by overuses of power. The scene when Elaine explains the rough patch that her and Huey go through expresses the complicated relationship black women experience with black men. I write, “As my power grew, I could feel Huey becoming more and more resentful of me… Sometimes, we would have sex but even that felt distant… He never looked at me” (Huff 12). Because Elaine challenged his power position, he feels that his masculinity has been tested as well. In order to feel like a man, he uses his power to do as he pleases with Elaine when it comes to sex and when it comes to their work within the party. This example demonstrates the power dynamic between black males and women. But, in this piece, Elaine also has an odd dynamic with a white male, Jay Kennedy.

Jay Kennedy exemplifies the white male savior that Spivak addresses. Elaine’s obsession with Jay Kennedy bases itself on the way that he makes her feel visible. Which, she explains when she talks about him complementing her skin. The reader can see it more clearly in the end when Elaine wants to leave Huey and calls Jay to help her. When he shows up in his shiny new car, she recognizes the exercising of his white privilege and his expectancy to save her from her own culture. From a postcolonial lens, white men want to save black women from black men and feel that they are the ones to give black women a voice because of their position in society. However, Elaine doesn’t accept his invitation to save her, and instead decides to save herself by falling back on the women that she has befriended from the Black Panther Party.
In the last long piece of the collection, *6 Inch*, the relationship between black women and white men explores the element of fetishizing and its hindrance on the visibility of black females. Time is, once again, not specified. However, the details of the piece make it seem rather contemporary. Much like the essay by Nicole Fleetwood, this piece calls attention to the hypervisibility of the black female body. But, similar to Beyoncé it sheds light on the importance of black female empowerment.

Throughout this story, the protagonist, Naomi, faces numerous encounters with various white men that are only interested in staring at her body, and they quickly dismiss her as a person when she shows her disgust with their attempts. The story takes a large twist when the men that are objectifying her body are police officers abusing their power. When the police officers abuse their power to objectify her and her friend, the two of them are left feeling vulnerable and invisible. Towards the end, after the encounter with the police, Naomi has a moment in the shower that exhibits her invisibility. I write, “The water caused the make up on her face to run down until she looked like a sad clown painting… She brought her knees up to her chest and crossed her scrawny arms around them hugging them closer to her naked body. In here she couldn’t see herself through the hot steam” (Huff 17). Not only does she try and wash away that traces of her that are left in the shower in order to become more invisible, she can’t see herself through the steam. Her not being able to see herself through the steam symbolizes her inability to see past her physical appearance anymore, much like the police officers that assaulted her. Her extremely visible body has left her feeling invisible as a person. It isn’t until the end of the piece when she wakes up the next day that she feels visible again. She straps on her high heels and walks out the door to enjoy the day as if the night before didn’t happen.
This can be seen when she looks at herself in the mirror. I write, “Her almost invisible body shape infuriated her, and with that fury she ripped off the sweatshirt. She stood in the mirror in just her black Nike sports bra and sweatpants. The appearance of her skin and curves produced a satisfying grin across her face” (Huff 18). Her invisibility drives her crazy, and causes her to make herself visible again by embracing her black skin and female body.

The final short piece, and final of the collection, *A Good Woman in a Storm*, does not specify a time period but reads more contemporary, much like the previous piece, due to recent events that continue to occur in this country. *A Good Woman in a Storm* focuses on the protagonist, Angela, through the eyes of the teen girl that lives next door to her. Once again, this piece calls attention to an abuse of power by police and the way that these abuses of power indirectly and directly affect black women.

In Angela’s case, the shooting of her son by white police officers is an event that the entire community remembers. However, the narrator concerns herself with the well-being of Angela. After the narrator tells the story she reminds the reader that Angela shapes the focus of the piece. I write, “It’s been about a month since Angela’s son was killed, and I haven’t seen her cry since that night… Almost every day I see her as I get in my car to head off to school, and every time she manages to paint an alluring smile on her broken face” (Huff 6). Angela shows courage by smiling through the pain that she has endeavored. As a black mother, the loss of her son should be mourned, but to the narrator it seems like Angela focuses more on being brave. Angela does not have time to fill the role of the stereotypically hysterical, mourning mother. Instead, she must continue about her life. This impact carries through the community of women because through its
resonation with the narrator. By having an impact on the black female community it provides strength in a time when black men are being wrongly killed by the police. The scene provides emphasis of women being the back bone of the Black Lives Matter movement, because their sons are being killed, their husbands are being arrested, and they are asked to carry on and support their families and fight for their own visibility as well as the freedom and safety of black men. By ending with this piece, the collection leaves the reader in a more contemporary moment based on the recent events that have occurred in America regarding police violence, and its effect on women.

My SIP serves as a capstone for my trajectory as a writer because of my strong focus on both feminism and race/racism throughout the classes I have taken for my English major, and through the fiction writing I have worked on as well. At first, my writing was mainly on cookie-cutter plots about families and relationships, but as I continued through the major I started focusing on harsher, more interesting topics (race/racism and feminism). By writing short stories all under a black feminist theoretical framework, I am wrapping up all of the work I have done throughout the major. Likewise, it is applying all of the tools that I have developed as a writer involving character development and language throughout my time within my fiction trajectory. My use of modern albums in my critical analysis is how I’m asserting myself into the conversation of race/racism and feminism in more modern day terms. I think that is the most important part of my SIP, because most of the work we read in these classes is older, and not as applicable to today’s issues and the people going through these things. I’m offering a new way to think about topics that are ingrained into our everyday lives and have been since the creation of America.
Works Cited


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Veronica swiped her long yarn-like braids out of her face with a swoosh of her left hand as she used her right hand to swing the alto saxophone over her shoulder. Once the sax was in place, she placed her lips on the mouthpiece, and the cool brass relaxed her. She released the tension from her scrawny arms and shoulders and took a deep breath in, expanding her diaphragm. In a single blow she let out an effortless series of chords and notes. Her eyes were closed, and her skeletal fingers danced rhythmically along the keys. A crowd began to form around her, but she didn’t notice. This wasn’t the first day that she had played in Forsyth Park. Every day she hopped on her bike with her sax slung over her shoulder, and she rode to the park. She’d set her bike up against the fountain, and right next to it she’d lay down a large, black, felt hat. Once she felt settled in, she’d begin spewing out music. There was something mythical about the sounds that she created. The notes floated up into the sky and fell back down to the Earth where they then crept their way into the pit of your stomach and made you feel their weight.

Once the crowd got larger, she’d play a familiar song or two to keep them entertained. People passing by would throw their spare change into the hat that lay at her feet. She’d usually only play for a few hours, starting at about eleven in the morning and continuing on until about two. Normally, that was around the time that people were on their lunchbreaks. She always figured the park would be the best place to try and earn money, because a lot of people tended to eat lunch in the park, or take walks on their lunchbreaks. A stroll through the paths lined with moss covered live oak trees was beautiful enough to make a British royal guard smile. Veronica knew that live music could only make their breaks from their monotonous work days that much better.
On a good day, she’d bring home fifty dollars or so. She’d pull it out in wads from her leather bag and make sure every individual bill was unwrinkled. When she finished flattening and organizing her money, she would put it in the small portable safe that she kept in the back corner of her closet underneath a pile of boots and old clothes that she wasn’t quite ready to get rid of. She made sure to keep it hidden so that her step-mother never found it. If she ever came across that much money, Veronica knew how quickly it would be wasted on dope and booze.

Today, when she returned home, she was greeted by her half-asleep step-mother with her body draped over the red loveseat. Her white skin looked an ugly crocodile green and the track marks on her feet, which were usually covered by socks, were exposed and illuminated under the rays of the sun that peaked in through the large window behind her. A needle and a spoon lay on the glass coffee table in the center of the room and a tipped over bottle lay in a puddle of stale beer next to one of the legs of the table.

“Hard day lookin’ for work I see, Sam,” Veronica said with a sardonic tone.

“I don’t need that shit, little girl,” her step-mother replied.

She, almost exclusively, called Veronica “little girl” ever since she and her father started dating. Her father, Jermaine, seemed to be attracted to drug addicted, white women his whole life. She was thirteen when her father found her mother half-dead on the bathroom floor. It wasn’t until the ambulance got her to the hospital that one of the doctors announced her death. Veronica knew that her mother was addicted to her pain pills, and could recall the times that she found her sobbing and shaking when she couldn’t find the pills that her father would hide from her. She’d try to go a few days being sober,
but eventually she would give in to temptation. Temptation lurked around every corner for her mother in her line of work. She was a jazz pianist for a band that played in different bars in the area. But, where there was jazz music there were usually drugs. Her mother said it was something about the way the pain killers made her hands feel. “It’s like my hands are disconnected from my body,” she would say. “And they are free to make the beautiful music that they were meant to make.” The fabricated world her mother fell into when she was high and playing music was the world she wanted Veronica to experience playing her sax. But instead, Veronica was the only one of her band mates to stray away from drugs during performances. The high from the crowd when they were dancing and grooving to the music and the stage lights moving in sync with the melody was enough of a high to keep her going. Instead of feeling disconnected, like her mother did, Veronica couldn’t feel more connected to something. When she was playing, yes her fingers were free to do the magic, but there was a ghost-like meshing of her body with her sax whenever her fingers brushed across the keys.

“I thought you were gonna start lookin’ for a job, we could use the extra money,” Veronica said.

“I been lookin’, I don’t see you doin’ much better.”

“You know I’ve been workin’ extra gigs to keep the lights on.”

She, like her mother, was a part of a jazz band. They typically performed in small, swanky clubs filled with wealthy blacks from all over Georgia.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you’re a real fuckin’ hero.”

Veronica brushed aside her step-mother’s crude words like batting a buzzing fly out of her face and headed off to her room. When she closed the door, she turned the lock
behind her. Then, she poured out the change and bills from her leather bag and began counting and organizing. “Sixty dollars,” she said to herself with a half smirk on her face. After meticulously placing the money in her safe and jamming it back into it’s safe hiding place, she glanced over to the analog clock on her nightstand. When she saw that it read four o’clock, she hustled to put on her shoes, unlocked the door and then headed out of the apartment. She double checked to make sure that she had her leather bag securely sashed over her shoulder, and she headed to the Chatham Country Sheriff’s Office.

When she arrived, she hopped off her bike and smoothed out her light blue jeans and made sure her belt was cinched properly. After she adjusted her jeans, she locked her bike to a tree outside of the building, unable to find a bike rack. As she walked towards the building, she swung her long braids behind her shoulders, exposing her sharp shoulder bones and defined collar. The shrunken crew-neck t-shirt she wore looked wrinkled and short enough for her hip bones to peek out above her jeans and below her shirt. The officer that was working at the desk’s eyes widened at the sight of her slender body gliding into the room. He was a middle aged white man, and looked like most pudgy, bald-headed, middle-aged white men do. She was used to men like that gawking at her. Her mulatto skin seemed to make them think she was some exotic creature, like an African grey parrot flapping its wings about in the wild. This was a consequence of her father’s attraction to white women.

Veronica approached the desk swiftly, making direct eye contact with the man behind the counter.

“Excuse me, I know I’m pushing it, but are visiting hours still going on?” she asked.
“Well, uh, yes, ma’am,” the officer said. “Who are you here to see?”

“Jermaine McCall, please.”

“You an immediate family member?”

“Yeah, I’m his daughter.”

She watched his eyebrows squish themselves together creating a single fuzzy caterpillar of an eyebrow across his forehead.

“You’re confused on why I’m not as dark as him,” she said with a blunt sharpness in her tone.

“Uh, I mean no. Well, yeah, but…”

“Does it really matter?”

“No, but it’s just kinda hard to believe.”

“Hard to believe a black man can make a baby with a white woman?”

“No… Shit. I mean, well…”

“Here’s my I.D.” she said interrupting him as she slid the plastic Georgia license across the counter towards him.

He examined the picture for a while, and then made his way to the name and address, which matched her father’s.

“Okay ma’am, I’m going to need you to leave your purse here,” he said gesturing with his hand for her to hand him the leather bag. “Alright, now I’m going to ask that you don’t bring any sharp objects or…”

“Yeah, I know the drill. This isn’t my first time,” she said, surrendering a few hair clips from her pockets.
The officer and her made their way through the row of cells. Each cell had an ugly teal painted metal door with a skinny window and a number next to it. After walking down a long corridor, they approached a barred gate that opened with the push of a button. *How cliché,* she thought as he reached over and released the gate from its locked position.

On the other side of the gate was an impossibly large dark skinned man with a plain black do-rag on top of his head. His jaw line was sharp and square-shaped. His neck muscles protruded out and pulsed as he spoke. Veronica used to beg him to shave his beard, but now it was more scraggily and unkempt than ever. But that didn’t stop Veronica from running up and throwing her arms around his meaty neck.

“Hi, Pops,” she said as they continued to hug.

When she finally released her grip from around his neck he responded, “I’ve missed you so much, V.”

They made their way over to a bench in the middle of the white cement blocked room.

“Alright, Pops, when you getting’ out of here?” she asked.

“I don’t think any time soon, V.”

“You gotta get outta here. I can’t keep taking care of Sam. She’s a mess.”

“Please, do it for me.”

“I mean, of course I will. But I won’t be happy doing it.”

He smiled a big toothy grin and said, “that’s my girl.”

“Pops, she’s bad though. She still hasn’t found a job.”
She hated her father’s high level of patience. He was calm in every situation. Here he sat, a prisoner, still able to giggle and act like nothing was wrong.

“She’ll get better, V,” he responded. “You still runnin’ around with that band?”

“Yeah.”

“Be careful, V. Don’t let the drug game get to you. Look what it did to your mom and now me.”

She thought back to the day the cops showed up at the apartment. It was about a month ago, and they had brought him in for questioning about a big time coke distributor in the area. When he wasn’t working nightshifts at the steel factory, he was pushing cocaine. What he was doing was never large scale, at least that’s what he told Veronica. He never showed signs of abusing the drugs himself, but the people that came around their apartment were often quick to leave and more jittery than a frightened kitten.

On the day they arrested him, she was practicing a new arrangement she had just put together in her room. She was playing so loudly that she almost didn’t hear the knock at the door, but by the time she did it was too late. When she opened her bedroom door, the police had already had her father in cuffs and one officer was walking him out the door while the other came to console her. Sam was nowhere to be found, Veronica figured she had conveniently gone to the grocery store or wandered off somewhere to find more drugs. The last memory of her father outside of Chatham County Jail, tears were streaming down his dimpled cheeks as the officer guided him out of the door.

Now, as she examined his dried out sausage-like fingers and scarred arms she couldn’t help but start to cry.
“Awe, don’t cry, V,” her father said. “I’ll be out of here soon enough, I promise.”

Veronica used the back of her hand to wipe the tears off of her cheeks and pushed her braids back behind her ear. Before she could say anything else, a hand on her shoulder interrupted her.

“I’m sorry, honey, but visiting hours are over,” the officer said.

She stood up and let her father wrap his python arms around her tiny shoulders. They didn’t have time to share words before another officer put handcuffs on his wrists and began escorting him back to his cell.

After she left the county jail, and unlocked her bike. She headed for the apartment to change before her show that night.

By the time she arrived back at the apartment, the night had set in and the darkness made it hard for her to see her key as she fumbled around to unlock the front door. All of the lights were off in the apartment, and she called out for Sam. But Sam wasn’t there. Sliding her hand up against the wall, she felt around for the light switch. She flicked it on, but nothing happened. *Fuck, she forgot to pay the electricity bill again,* she thought to herself as she reached for her cell phone in her back pocket. Using the tiny flashlight that her phone provided, she managed to find her room, and lit a few candles on her nightstand for extra light. The vanilla aroma permeated the air in her small cozy room. Flickering light from the vanilla candles aided her as she pulled out a plum colored, long-sleeved, dress from her closet and slid it over her head. Examining herself in the full length mirror that hung on the backside of her door, she grinned at the sight of
her long scrawny legs. Her mother had the same body build, and often made fun of her legs by calling them “chicken legs” whenever she wore dresses or shorts.

Turning away from the mirror, she decided that she looked good enough to play tonight, and grabbed the large black case for her saxophone and set it open on her bed. She packed it full with the saxophone and the black strap she used to hold it over her shoulder. Then, she headed for the door.

Instead of taking her bike, she decided she would walk. The dark sky was lit up by the abundance of street lights that lined the sidewalks throughout Savannah. She took a short cut through Forsyth park, and admired the glowing lights that came from the large fountain. The Spanish moss that hung from the trees, reminded her of the rainforest and made her feel like she was walking through a tropical jungle. The fountain lights shined in between the gaps of the moss, and made the dirt path she was walking on glitter with light. As she made her way to the end of the park, she came across a bustling street lined with restaurants and bars.

The jazz bar that her band was playing in that night was very small. Only a few circle tables and a bar operated by a single bartender occupied the space. But, there was something cozy about it. The glow of the red colored lights warmed her skin as she entered the bar and headed behind the stage. Once she got behind the stage, she was greeted by the guitar player of their band. His name was Tyler, and his long slender body reminded her of her own. Tyler wore black slacks that fit loosely on his legs and a white button-up with a skinny black tie that was loose around his neck. He looked like the men that used to play alongside the greats like Duke Ellington.

“Hey, Veronica,” he said. “How are things?”
“Honestly, it’s been a rough day,” she responded as she began unpacking her sax from its case.

“Why such a rough day?”

“Sam forgot to pay the electricity bill again.”

“ Damn. Again? You would think she was the twenty-one-year-old, not you.”

The two of them laughed at Tyler’s comment, and started setting up the microphones and chairs on stage. Once they were finished they joined the rest of the band backstage. Normally, the rest of the band smoked before the show, some of them did a line of coke to get a quick jolt of energy if they were tired. Veronica stood on the outside and watched, thinking about her father, and her mother, and how she was going to come up with money to turn the lights back on in her apartment. Her thoughts were quickly interrupted when a stranger walked backstage and slid Tyler a wad of money in exchange for a large bag of pot. She couldn’t believe how easy Tyler made it look, how sly the transaction was.

“Tyler, what the hell?” she said gesturing to the wad of money he was now stuffing in his pants pocket.

“Shit, you saw that?” he asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t think anybody else did so you’re good,” she said. “How much did you just make off of that deal?”

“Two ten.”

“Two hundred and ten dollars!” she accidentally shouted and quickly covered her mouth with her hands.
“Yeah, it’s no big deal,” he responded. “Why? Would you be interested in buying?”

“No, I don’t smoke, sorry.”

As the band finished up their pre-show rituals of getting high, Veronica thought about how that kind of extra money could benefit her family. She could hear her father’s voice echoing through her head as she stepped out onto the stage, “Stay away from drugs, V,” like some kind of bad after school special.

Suddenly, her thoughts were blocked out by the soothing sound of a bass guitar. The bass bumped and the sounds of the steel guitar came in next, harmonizing with the bass. After the two played out for a few bars, her sax jumped in with a soulful howl. She snuck her notes in and interwove them, meshing with the two guitars. Her fingers jumped from key to key like they knew what to do without her brain actually telling them to do it. The notes from the other instruments swirled around her head into her ears, and she blew into the mouthpiece of the sax to answer the call of the notes that filled her head. Her cheeks became a cherry red and her forehead produced a few beads of sweat that dissolved into her hair line. She threw her head back causing her braids to swing back behind her shoulders and let out a few more wails into her sax before the guitars could finish. Releasing her lips from the mouthpiece, she looked up at the applauding crowd, but was blinded by the stage lights that pierced her retinas. It didn’t matter if she could see them, hearing them was enough to make her heart beat faster and faster until they were off stage.
As they made their way back stage, she adjusted her sax so that it stayed strapped over her shoulder but was on her back. She thought about Tyler, and the exchange from earlier and called out to him.

“Hey, Tyler,” she said quickening her strides to catch up to him.

“Great show, Veronica. You killed it again,” he said.

“Thank you, you were amazing,” she said. “But that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“I think I want to start…” Before she could finish her sentence, the manager of the bar pulled the band aside to hand them their payment for the gig. Her eyes widened as she admired the stack of cash that he handed her. Even without counting it, she could tell it was more than they had ever made from a gig.

“How the hell did we make this much off of one gig?” she asked.

“Well, there was a man in the crowd. He owns a couple of these jazz bars in Georgia. He liked y’alls sound. This is his payment. He wants y’all to be his new house band,” the manager said.

The whole group bounced around with excitement. Tyler wrapped his skinny arms around her scrawny waist picking her up and swinging her around, her sax still strapped to her back.

“What were you going to ask me, Veronica?” he asked.

She looked back down at the cash that still remained in her hands.

“You know, it’s not a big deal. We can talk about it later,” she said. “Let’s go and celebrate.”
Veronica left with the rest of the band, and they walked up and down the city streets well into the morning hours. When she started her walk home, a little drunk, the sun was starting to peak over the horizon causing the dark sky to turn to a deep shade of purple. She walked back through Forsyth Park and sat down on one of the benches near the fountain and pulled out her sax. Right now, she wasn’t ready to go back to her dark apartment. Instead, she would sit under the Spanish moss fingerling the brass keys of her saxophone, and waiting for the sun to rise and for the purple sky to fade into brilliant pinks and yellows that would light up even the darkest places.
Daddy Lessons

My boys and I never exactly had it easy. The ratty apartment building we lived in was tall and gloomy. Old dingy red brick that kept the building glued together crumbled away every time it rained. Air conditioners that protruded from the windows were rusty and rotted. Once inside the building, it wasn’t so bad. The staircase was standard and made from wood, and the elevator was old and unreliable. Often times, there’s a piece of paper with “out of service” written in black sharpie taped over the elevator buttons. Sounds of emergency sirens and the flashing lights from the streets below became soothing. They were our nighttime recording of ocean sounds that helped put us to sleep.

The oldest boy, Quintin, is eleven. James is nine and the twins, Roger and Brandon are seven. Quintin is the spitting image of his father, dark in complexion with a head of tight curls that were kept clean and organized on top and shaven on the sides. Everyone tells me that James resembles me more than anyone. He lets his curls go, but they aren’t as frizzy or hard to brush through. My curls are the same, tight but gentle. Only a little bit of coconut oil, or olive oil, hair serum is needed to tame them. The twins, on the other hand, share my looks and mirror their father’s personality. They are loud and boisterous, always getting themselves into mischief. Just the other day, the two came home from school covered in paint. When I asked what had happened, they both giggled but refused to answer me. That’s when I saw the notes stapled to their bags that explained the paint war they had started in their art class.

“What were y’all thinkin’ doin’ that?” I asked.
“We were just havin’ fun, Mama,” Roger responded. From the tone in his voice and the way he was looking down at his feet I could tell that he knew he had done something wrong.

“Both of y’all go get yourselves cleaned up for dinner. No T.V. or video games tonight.”

I met their father while we were still in high school. Both of us grew up over in the Northside neighborhood. Almost all of the kids on our street went to Kalamazoo Central, including us. Puppy love would be the best way to describe the relationship that we had when we were younger. He was always quick to get me alone, and quick to get me undressed. His smile was slick, a ploy to get me to melt into a puddle at his feet. The way he dressed resembled something of a professional athlete attending an important conference. His shirts were often too tight for his muscly top half, and his pants were always pressed and sat slightly low on his hip bones. The way he carried all six foot five inches of himself was as if he had the winning lottery ticket in his back pocket. His smirk never left his face. The man was smart, but being smart didn’t promise you a future as a black man. We all knew that. Not even just being a black man, but even being a black woman was hard. Black men got jobs working in factories, manufacturing plants, any job that required manual labor. He worked late nights in an old factory, while taking classes at Western. He had big dreams of one day leaving Kalamazoo and becoming a successful journalist, but finishing his degree was taking longer than he had planned. A long time ago, I wanted to be a teacher, but having kids set me back from ever going to college. At the time, their father’s shot at an education was important to both of us, much more important than mine. So, now I work as a receptionist at Hillside middle school. All of
my boys go to Kalamazoo Public Schools. Hillside is only a few blocks away from our apartment on Douglas Avenue. I was sure to find a job within walking distance, since their father took our only car the day that he left.

He left about a year after the twins were born. I remember staying up late with Quintin, waiting for him to walk through the door. Quintin and I sat in the large black leather recliner together. He insisted on staying up until his dad got home. Of course, he only made it to about nine o’clock before laying his head up against my shoulder and letting his eyes close. A small pool of his drool had collected around the rim of my collar bone. Careful not to wake him up, I stood up and slid him off of my shoulder and guided his head to the arm of the chair. The drool pool was absorbed by the cotton collar of my t-shirt. Being unable to find the remote, I walked over to the T.V. and pressed the power button. I was reaching for my book when I heard the sound of the door being thrown open and smacking the wall. I knew immediately that he was drunk again. The smack of the door was followed by a sad effort to kick off his shoes. The smell of cognac heavily coated his breath as he strolled past me sitting on the couch and dropped his heavy body onto the other end. His large drunk body hit the cushion with a thud. When I glanced over, his eyes were glassy and hardly open. This wasn’t the first time he had come home like this in the past week. Often times, the smell of the alcohol was accompanied by a faint aroma of an unfamiliar perfume.

“You didn’t have work tonight,” I said.

“What’s your point?” he responded through loose lips.

“My point is that you gotta start bein’ honest with me,” I responded. “Your son waited up for you. He hasn’t seen his daddy in two days.”
“I see the boys whenever I’m not in class or workin’ to keep these lights on in this shitty ass apartment.”

Although drunk, he still tried to speak in hush tones when he saw Quintin sleeping. But the sharpness of his tongue took me by surprise.

“You smell like perfume again,” I said. My voice quivered a bit, I had been pushing this talk off for far too long. I hid it away like a child hides under their heads under the covers from the possible monsters in their closets.

“Can you blame me? You don’t even touch me anymore.”

I tried to think about the last time we had sex. We had barely even slept together since the twins were born, let alone had sex. There just wasn’t enough time. My stomach twisted in pretzel like knots and guilt clouded my brain.

“I’m sorry, but you know it’s hard with the twins and both of us working and--”

“Those excuses are tired,” he said, cutting me off. “I can’t do this anymore.”

Those were the last words we shared that night. When I woke up the next morning, he was packing his things into duffel bags. The kids were still asleep, and I had moved the twins from our bed into their own. They still had a habit of crawling into our bed in the middle of the night. I watched as he folded up his things and placed them into his bags. He was careful not to wrinkle anything.

“You gonna go live with Her?” I asked. “What’s she like?”

Making sure not to look up at me he said, “I really don’t want to talk to you about this.”

I hustled over the end of the bed where his bag was sitting and stood in front of it. My anger caused me to push an accusing finger into his chest.
“You need to tell me about her right now,” I demanded.

“Well, her name is Allison,” he said. “She’s in one of my classes at Western.”

“That’s all you got?”

“She’s white, blonde hair, shorter than you and from Portage.”

*Well, you just described every Portage girl,* I thought to myself. I moved my finger off of his chest and stepped aside, admitting defeat. I couldn’t help but try and picture every blonde-haired, white girl that I’d ever known. My best friend growing up fit that exact description. All of the boys on our street adored her. I always assumed it was because of how different she looked, she lacked curves and her long skinny body fit perfectly into anything she ever wore. The girl was model material.

After he finished packing all of his things, he made a beeline for the car. He drove a 1999 Jeep Grand Cherokee. The car was still in great shape, and I was sad to see it pull away. As he drove down Douglas I sat down on the edge of the bed where his suitcase just sat. I looked back behind me to the left side, his side. Bringing my hands to my face, I began to sob quiet sobs being careful not to wake the children up. *How the hell am I going to explain this to the boys?* I thought.

Giving the news to the boys was hard, James cried and retreated to his room denying dinner and refusing to come out. The twins sobbed, and were reluctant to leave my side for about a week. On the other hand, Quintin seemed apathetic, numb. For about a year Quintin looked like he was running on fumes, flunked tests, and skipped school every now and again. Bologna sandwiches became a regular dinner for me after the boys’ father left. All of the money I made went towards keeping the lights on and making sure that my sons had some form of lean- meat, a vegetable, and starch on their plate come
dinner time. I always told them to keep a rainbow of foods on their plates, that way they know they’re eating a full meal. Their bodies were still growing like weeds. So, I settled for bologna on white. When I finally got tired of my dry sandwiches and the occasional scrambled eggs, I decided that it was time for me to pick up a second job, a weekend job.

On the walk over to school a few days ago I came across one of those fliers with the loose fringes of paper with phone numbers on them. The flier was for a woman in Portage that needed her house cleaned on the weekends. Perfect, I thought to myself as I ripped off a piece, and stuffed the number into my pocket. Assuming she was white made me slightly hesitant to dial the number when I got to work later that day. I stared at the phone hoping it would dial itself before I finally punched in the digits. The phone rang three times before an enthusiastic voice answered.

“Hello, this is Amanda Connolly,” she said.

“Hi, my name is Loretta Johnson, I’m calling because I saw your flier and I would be interested in filling the position.”

“Oh my goodness! I’m so happy you called!”

Her excitement made me roll my eyes behind the phone.

“When can you start?” she asked.

“I can start as soon as this weekend,” I responded.

The phone conversation ended with a quick goodbye, she seemed to be in a hurry. I was surprised to get hired to come into someone else’s home that easily. What if I was a thief or a murderer? I wanted to know what made her so trusting of a complete stranger.

She lived about a ten-minute bus ride away from my house, right on the border of Kalamazoo and Portage. Riding the bus was surreal. Getting on the bus, the initial
scenery was completely industrial. The crowded buildings, the rusted railroad tracks and foreclosed houses were swallowed up by the freshly-cut grass and immaculate white houses. Cute restaurants and clean grocery stores filled plazas, and neighborhoods consisted of identically manufactured houses snuck in-between the well-managed trees.

Once I arrived at the bus stop, it was a two-minute walk to the house. The house looked like all of the others, and smelled as if it was just built and the wood was fresh. Mrs. Connolly greeted me at the door with an alarmingly artificial smile wearing a blue pencil dress.

“Mrs. Johnson, thank you so much for coming,” she said.

“No problem, thank you for offering me this job.”

I could hear the pathetic tone in my voice. Cleaning up after a white woman in a suburban house was not an ideal way to make extra money. Hell, cleaning up after white people wasn’t ideal to me anyhow. But my kids needed to eat, and my bills needed to be paid. So, I did what any mother would do and I cleaned that house until it sparkled.

Sucking up my pride, I took a deep breath and examined the interior design of the house. It was clean for the most part, just filled to the brim with unnecessary junk. Every bedroom had a heap of both clean and dirty clothes on the floors, some still with tags on them. Her children’s play room had every Hasbro product ever created. This house looked like was going to bust at the seams and send toys and clothes flying out of every opening they could find.

Mrs. Connolly was very kind to me. She never hesitated to compliment my good work, and her checks never bounced. After working for her for a while, I started to consider living in the area. Whenever I walked to the house from the bus stop, kids were
playing outside. Usually a neighborhood game of kickball, or a game of tag. I never once saw the kids bullying each other. In our neighborhood, Quintin had started getting into fights and running around with the wrong crowd. He got in fights with the neighborhood boys almost every day. When he got caught with a boy that was selling pot on Patterson Street I decided it was time to save my boys.

The walls of our new apartment were covered in fresh paint that stung my nostrils and caused them to flare. Clean brown carpet covered the floor of the bedrooms and the living rooms and was soft like watered grass on my feet. Looking out of the big sliding glass door in the living room I could see Portage West Middle school, and an elementary school a few yards away from it. I felt light and easy as if the weight from the old apartment, the old life, was picked up and tossed into the street. The boys would start school in Portage at the beginning of September. I continued to live off of bologna to save up money for a used car. A green, rusted out, ninety-nine Dodge Neon would be reliable enough to get me to and from Hillside so that I could keep my weekday job.

On their first day of school, the oldest came home first and threw his backpack on the couch. “Mama, I don’t like this school,” he said.

“Why not, Honey?” I asked.

“I’m the only black kid in my class,” he responded.

“That can’t be true, there has to be other kids from the city that go to that school.”

“No, mama there ain’t any.”

“Well, are the kids nice to you at least?”

“No.”

“Have you tried to make friends?”
“Yes,” he responded. I was annoyed by his short responses.

“It can’t honestly be that bad, you’re bein’ dramatic.”

“Dad wouldn’t have ever made us do this. I miss my old friends.”

Everything around me stood still as I let those words impale my chest and cause me to gasp. Quintin had already slammed his door shut before I could let out an apology or an explanation. My thoughts were jumbled up like some type of syntax error that I couldn’t adjust. Maybe I had made a mistake moving the boys. They might be the only dark skinned kids in their class, but at least they were in school and not out fighting or selling drugs. My train of thought often digressed and I imagined what would happen if we were still living on Douglas. *Quintin would be in jail, James would get a girl pregnant and drop out of school and the twins would probably start selling drugs.* I shook my head and tried to shake the nightmares of what could have been.

Putting my sons in a school filled with kids that happened to be white didn’t strike me as being a problem. But the cold responses of my oldest son worried me a little bit that maybe I had been too quick to try and start over. The oldest was always causing a fuss and I figured he was lying about trying to make friends. I imagined that he was angry, and felt out of place around all of the white kids in his class. He got his temper from me. His father never let his frustration get the best of him, when he was sober.

“How was school today?” I asked as James walked through the door.

“It was fine,” he responded.

“Just fine? What did you do in class?”

“We did multiplication tables and I met some girl at recess.”

“That’s great!”
“Yeah, she kept asking me questions about my hair though. It was annoying.”

“What about it?”

“She asked if I ever combed it, and why it doesn’t move. Isn’t my hair normal, Mama? It’s just like my brothers’ hair, and just like daddy’s.”

“It is normal, baby!”

The more he talked about his interaction with this little girl, the more my blood began to boil. My boys had never really spent time with white people besides my childhood friend, but she wasn’t the average white girl. All of the people from our old neighborhood joke and say that she was an honorary black. No, her appearance didn’t fit the black female mold, but her attitude sure did. The boys loved spending time with her, and she loved them like they were her own sons. When their father left, she came over and played countless games of Uno with them, while I sat on the outside and watched the boys laugh and play.

It was about an hour later that the youngest boys got home from school.

“How was your day?” I asked as one of the twins went straight to his room and shut the door.

“It was stupid, Mama!” The other yelled at me.

“Why was it so stupid?”

“Well, a girl in our class called Marcus the ‘N’ word.”

I was taken back by the thought of my little boy being subject to such a hurtful word.

“What? Do you know the little girl’s name? Did you tell your teacher?”
“Her name was Bridget Connolly. The teacher didn’t believe Roger when he told, Mama.”

“Connolly you said was her last name?” I asked.

I looked at my paycheck sitting on the kitchen counter. I recognized the last name because I cleaned house for the little girl’s mother. I never had an issue with her mother before. I could feel my pulse pick up and I began to sweat a little bit as I thought about the princess wallpaper in this little girl’s room that I had cleaned so many times before. My thoughts began racing and I started to think about my stereotypical role in their whitewashed house. The black cleaning lady that comes and picks up after a wealthy white family twice a week. Being as upset as I was, I assumed that Roger was even more upset. Their father had always taught them the hateful meaning behind the “N” word. I knew that these words struck my poor son in a way that the little girl that said them would never comprehend.

I decided to call Mrs. Connolly to tell her what her daughter had said to my son. As the phone rang, I could feel a lump in my throat beginning to form as I thought about what I was going to say. Why am I nervous to stand up for my son? I thought as the phone continued to ring. The ringing went on for a while, and I assumed that she was not going to pick up. At what seemed like the very last ring a polite voice answered and a woman said, “Hello, this is Amanda.”

“Hi, Amanda, it’s Loretta Johnson,” I said.

“Hi, Mrs. Johnson,” she said, “Is there something wrong? Are you not able to come in to clean the house this week? I have a dinner party coming up this weekend and the kitchen could really use some cleaning up.”
“No, that’s not why I am calling.”

“OK, then what do you need?”

“Well, I wanted to talk to you about your daughter.”

“Oh, yes! Bridget told me that your sons attend her school now.”

“Yes, well today your daughter said something awful to my son.”

“What did she say?”

“She called him the ‘N’ word.” Now, my voice was strong. It was reinforced by anger as I imagined this little girl hurting my son with her ignorant name calling.

“Well, I mean, she’s only seven,” she said.

“That’s not a good excuse.”

“She probably doesn’t even know what it means, she didn’t mean anything wrong by it.”

A scream was climbing to the surface of my throat, looking for a way to get out. Instead, I choked it back and said, “You never taught her what that word meant?”

“I never had a reason to, Loretta,” she responded.

“I understand that,” I said. “But, I think your daughter should apologize to my son. What she said was unacceptable.”

“My daughter hasn’t ever been around other kids like yours.”

“You mean, black kids?”

There was a pause in the conversation for a split second. I could tell Amanda was trying to think up another excuse for her daughter. But instead she said, “Loretta, did you honestly think it was smart to send your sons to a Portage school? They don’t exactly fit in.”
“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Black kids around here go to Kalamazoo schools, Loretta, be serious.”

My eyes began to water, and I swallowed back the urge to throw curse words like daggers through the telephone. I wanted my words to make her ears bleed.

“You have a nice dinner party this weekend, but I will not be cleaning for you anymore,” I said as I hung up the phone and slammed it on the kitchen counter. My poor babies, I thought as I made my way to the twins’ room.

I opened the door to the boys’ room and asked, “How are you feeling, Roger?”

His little body was curled up in the bottom bunk of the bunk beds, gripping the stuffed alligator his father had one for him at the fair.

“I’m okay,” he said, “I’m just confused.” This was not the feeling that I was expecting to hear.

“Why are you confused?”

“Well, Daddy always said that the ‘N’ word was bad, but when I told my teacher that Bridget called me one she didn’t care.”

“The teacher didn’t care?”

“No, Mama. I got in trouble when I told her she was stupid, though.”

“So she called you the ‘N’ word and so you called her stupid. Is that what happened?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry I called her stupid.”

“Don’t apologize,” I said, “She is stupid for using that word. Her mama must not have taught her any better.”

“The kids at our old school weren’t this mean, Mama.”
“The kids at your old school weren’t all white.”

“What does being white have to do with being mean?” he asked with perplexity across his face.

“It shouldn’t really,” I said. “But it’s hard to accept people that look different. These kids at your new school haven’t ever spent time with black kids.”

“Your best friend is white though, Mama.”

“She grew up around black people though, so she doesn’t treat us differently. We’re what she is used to. The kids at your school aren’t used to black people being around.”

“That’s not fair,” he said.

“I know, honey.”

I closed his door to let him be alone for a while and went to the staircase where I sat with my head in my hands for about ten minutes. When the tears stopped, I glanced over at the check sitting on the counter. After pulling myself together, I grabbed the check and headed for the door. I decided to drive to the bank two blocks down so that I could be alone with my thoughts. Entranced, I drove over to the boys’ old school. Close by were my oldest son’s friends outside of the high school building most likely looking to push some of their drugs. The thought of sending them back crossed my mind. I can’t keep them in such a hateful environment, I thought as I stood outside of the elementary building. Just then I saw my oldest son’s friends making a deal with a fellow student. They were so smooth. To the untrained eye, it looked as though they were just giving each other daps as they were passing by. I was both impressed and terrified then the thought occurred to me, how can my kids feel safer in this environment? Then I realized
that I, too, felt safer than in the clean cut, white, wealthy environment that the suburbs provided.

When I got home, I picked up the phone and dialed in the familiar seven digits of their father’s cell phone. As the phone rang, my stomach flipped around doing gymnastics inside of my torso. After what seemed like would be the last ring, someone picked up.

“Hello?” A man answered.

“Q, it’s me, please don’t hang up,” I said.

“Loretta? Wh-what’s up?”

“Your son got called the ‘N’ word by some little white girl at school today.”

“Miranda told me that you and the boys moved to a new apartment. Give me an address and I’ll be there soon.”

“You asked Miranda about us?” I was in shock to hear that even in his absence he was thinking about us. His love for his kids was unwavering.

“Yeah of course, I had to make sure you guys were still doing okay,” he said.

“Alright, I’m leaving right now.”

About fifteen minutes later, the buzzer on the apartment door went off. I slid the switch to buzz him in. His heavy footsteps grew louder as he approached. A light rapping on the door finally forced me to get up and face him. When I opened the door, my eyes looked right past the man, and they focused on the woman accompanying him.

“I hope you don’t mind that I brought her with me,” he said as he pointed to the small white girl that stood next to him.
I was still holding on to the doorknob. My arm flinched as the first thought to slam the door in both of their faces bolted through my brain. After the flinch, I removed my hand from the door and slowly reached it out towards the woman. After reaching out my hand, she reached out hers in return. The darkness of my hand, made hers look like it belonged to a very petite ghost. I smiled, making sure to show all of my teeth and make eye contact.

“You must be Allison, it’s nice to meet you,” I said.

Moving my body out of the door way, I gestured for the two of them to come inside.

“Wow, this is a nice place,” Q said. “You’ve come a long way, Loretta.”

I looked at the smirk on his face, something I hadn’t seen since we were young. Then I adjusted my glance over to Allison’s pin-straight, blonde hair cascading over her shoulders.

“So have you, Q.”
Don’t Hurt Yourself (Love, God Herself)

I never used to wear my hair natural like I do now. Every Saturday my mama and I went to the salon and had our hair pressed to our heads as white as we possibly could. We pressed our hair until steam would roll from our heads like smoke rolling out of the barrel of a gun. That was before I moved to California, and before King died. Right before King died, Jay had convinced me to join the fight. Jay was a smooth talker and easy on the eyes. It was too bad that he was married. We met when I started working at one of the clubs in the city for a few extra bucks. I moved out here to try and make it big singing, but it wasn’t working out exactly like I had planned. I didn’t have any money for studio time, and that meant I didn’t have any samples to send to anyone. That’s how I started working at the club.

Jay tipped me well, and he complimented my caramel colored skin whenever he came in. Not in an annoying way, but more of a way of saying he was on my side. Most white men gawk over a dark skinned woman, but not Jay. He’d say things like, “Black is a beautiful color, baby. Embrace it.” When he said things like that, I couldn’t help but get hot and red-faced. Jay had a way of making me feel that way. He made my chest feel heavy, and my cheeks constantly glowed a crimson hue when he spoke to me.

We started going together quietly, but I knew that we wouldn’t get far with him being married. Our intoxicating romance ended when his wife started questioning him. A bill came through in the mail, and she discovered that he had been paying rent in a second apartment near the club. I guess that could spark suspicion in any woman. There was no room for me to be mad about him leaving, I knew what I had gotten myself into. And even though Jay and I weren’t together anymore, I still kept a lot of what he taught me in
the back of my brain. He and I were involved with the Black Liberation Movement for a while when we were living together. Now that Jay is gone I’ve had more time on my hands and have been going to these Black Panther meetings.

On the first day, I entered what appeared to be an old storage warehouse. The building itself was large, it appeared to stand about four floors in height. Only one of the floors seemed usable. The cement walls that held the place together wore brown stains and cracks that ran along the great length of the walls. The multi-panel windows on the upper levels were missing sections of glass. Holes from rocks being thrown through them were bandaged by old rotted pieces of wood. Hanging over the large front door of the building there was a sign made out of an old piece of wood that was painted white with big, red, painted letters that read “Black Panther Headquarters.” The unattractiveness of the building forced my hand to stop as I reached for the cool steel handle of the front door. By the time my brain told my hand to grab the handle, a man swung the door open so fast my fingertips had barely brushed the metal before the door was replaced by a tall well-dressed man.

“What’s your name?” he asked me. His hair was natural, and his voice seemed confident. He looked familiar to me, like I had seen him on T.V. or I had heard about him before. This has to be Huey Newton, I thought to myself. He carried himself very tall for only standing about five feet eleven inches, he seemed well over six feet. His jawline was sharp and defined. His jawbones pulsed as he pressed his bottom and top rows of teeth together every so often, and his dark brown eyes more closely resembled black holes to me. The tone of his voice was low, but his vast vocabulary and professional attire kept making my eyes scan him up and down. He wore a button up shirt with a collar that
resembled the wings of an airplane, every one wore shirts like that it seemed. His brown, corduroy pants hugged his skinny thighs making his legs appear longer than what they actually were.


When we walked further into the room, there were large tables with office chairs surrounding them. The dimly-lit, cement-blocked, room combined with the office chairs and desks to create an entirely grim atmosphere. However, the people inside did not. To my surprise the amount of women in the room was about even with the amount of men. I had never seen so many dark skinned people in one place. There was something comfortable about being in a room full of people wearing their hair natural and picked out. I stood a few feet behind Huey as he continued to the front of the group. As he made his way past, every female eye followed him. The women stared with quiet admiration while men glanced at the obvious sight of an equal. I took out the notepad that I kept snug in the back pocket of my bell-bottom pants, and took diligent notes on the behaviors in the room. Taking notes in my pocket notebook was a way for me to notice things, and not make a big deal out of them.

While in my note-taking trance, a woman sitting down gestured over to me waving her hand quickly in a “come here” motion. I noticed the chair next to her and sat down, stuffing my small notebook into my jacket pocket. “You gotta pay attention when
Huey’s about to talk, girl,” she said to me. “The man’ll make a fool of you if he catches you ignorin’ him.”

The woman’s curls seemed slightly tighter than mine, and other women around her. She seemed fairly young, early twenties. Her dark lipstick distracted me as she talked about Huey. “He’s taken us so far; we wouldn’t be anything without him!” she said with great assurance backing up her voice. The devotion she threw at Huey involuntarily caused my eyes to roll with disgust.

I started coming to meetings every day. I’d jot down notes about the things Huey said to the group and things he said to me in our one on one discussions. We both began staying after the meetings a while and talking. He talked to me about Karl Marx, and Malcolm X. These men seemed like the only thing he knew how to talk about. Huey would say, “We have to take up arms to survive! How else can we dismantle capitalism? Malcolm X wants us to use force to get what we want.”

Sometimes I found myself troubled by the militant rants Huey would go on. His face would get flushed, and light beads of sweat would appear at the edge of his hairline whenever he started one of his rants. Usually, I would just smile and nod in agreement and take out my note pad and scribble little bits about how funny his rants were to me. I wanted him to know I was on his side. I believed in his cause, I didn’t believe in the things he did.

His militant attitude wasn’t limited to talking about politics. He often times lashed out at the women in the group whenever they spoke out against his ideas, which wasn’t very often. Once, the same woman that I sat next to during my first meeting told him that the violent riots weren’t the route we should be taking, but rather the peaceful
protests that Dr. King preached. Huey was so infuriated that he slapped his coffee mug off of the desk in front of him in one clean swipe.

During our daily post-meeting talks, Huey would often times ask me to join him at dinner. A part of me, the part of me that spoke loudest in my notebook, thought it’d be a bad idea. But, there was something about those dark eyes. They gazed at me admiringly, like the way an artist admires their finally-finished painting. When I spoke, he listened. He wasn’t the same power-hungry Huey that I saw in meetings. He reminded me of a large dog that people feared, but in reality the dog is only scared so they bark to defend themselves. Huey wanted the same things we all wanted, equality. He felt so passionate about it that he would fight for what he loved. I respected him for that.

So, eventually I agreed to go out with him after one of his countless attempts to persuade me. We went out to a burger joint in the city. A greasy little place, with those red chairs that look comfortable but leave your rear-end sore after sitting on them for an hour.

We sat in the restaurant for a while, asking the classic “so where are you from?” questions that fill silence.

“I came here to pursue my career in music,” I said to him in between bites of fries.

“You sing?” he asked.

“Yeah. Only in clubs and things like that though.”

“What if I said I could get you some time in a recording studio?”

“Th-that would be wonderful,” I said.
I couldn’t help but blush. This wonderful, smart man barely even knew me but was willing to pay for studio time. I started working in the club that I met Jay in just so I could save some money for studio time. That money quickly was spent on living expenses. Rent was high if you weren’t white. All of the money I worked for disappeared at the hands of my landlord, along with my dreams of recording one of my songs. Now here I sat, in some slimy burger joint with a powerful black man that could buy me studio time.

“Do you write your own stuff?” he asked.

“Yeah I do!” I was overly excited that someone was interested in my music. I damn near sent my french fries flying into Huey’s lap with my response.

“Well, if you could write something that has to do with supporting the Panthers, I could buy you some time in the studio. I know a guy.” Huey always talked so cool, so smooth. His tranquil state was only broken during militant panther rants and riots.

It all seemed surreal and eventually I recorded a song to help support the Panthers like Huey asked me to do. The song I recorded seemed to please the women of the party. I caught one, Regina, singing it to herself as she walked into a meeting one day. Her eyes turned into saucers when she rounded the corner of the entrance and ran into me.

“Oh- oh my god,” she said. “You’re the sista that wrote the song for the party! I didn’t realize you were a part of the Oakland party.” She grabbed my right hand in both of hers and shook it wildly about, I couldn’t help but flash a half smile at her excitement.

Regina was one of the few that enjoyed the song I recorded, she said that the melody was smooth and the words cut deep in a non-dramatic way. I liked her description of it. Huey, on the other hand, was less than impressed with it. Not so much the song
itself, because he was in the studio with me when I recorded it. He clapped his hands and smiled his cool smile at me through the glass. But the fact that it didn’t sell dissolved all support he once had for my singing career. My song didn’t benefit the party like it was supposed to. Huey told me the words weren’t revolutionary, and I nodded in agreement, but in my notebook I called him a “distasteful, ignorant, asshole.”

Whatever Huey said was right, Huey’s way was the only way. I did everything he asked me to do. Clean his guns, go to rallies, even let him live out his sexual fantasies with me. He was like all men in the Panther party-hard headed intellectuals who were good with their words. Those men knew how to get what they wanted, especially from us women. We ladies often talked about what would happen to one of us if we stepped on Huey’s toes. I eventually found that out the hard way.

I had been working for the Panther party for a few months, doing Huey’s monotonous chores and fulfilling his sexual desires on our down time. The men of the party were in charge of the militant endeavors that I had a hard time of supporting, but I wanted to do something just as important to the group. Recording a song wasn’t enough, according to Huey. He thought the only way I would be of service to the party was if I was cleaning his guns. The thoughts I had on this were scratched wildly about the margins of my notebook. I had ideas. So one night, I sat down in the apartment that Huey and I shared and went through my jottings from weeks ago. I was careful not to let him see my notebook as he sat on the recliner on the other side of the room, watching the news. The news flashed brightly in the dimly lit room. They were airing a story about a local black child found dead on the outskirts of the projects. What the hell else is new, I thought to myself. My stomach churned at that thought. Children were being killed, and
dying on the streets. Blacks were being denied jobs, and so kids were fending for themselves.

I thought back to when I was a child, and my mother faked being white to get jobs. I was her only child, and my father wasn’t around so my mother did what she had to do to provide for us. Both of us were light enough in complexion that when we pressed our hair, and dressed right, we looked as white as can be. Landlords didn’t scam us on rent, and my mother always had a job. My mom even got a job working at a bank once because she put on her “white lady” voice during her interview and put on extra powder every day. I wished that every child had the luxuries that I had growing up. I never told Huey, or any in the party about this. I knew that if they found out, they would kick me out.

The day after going through my notebook and overhearing the news, I decided to pitch an idea at the panther meeting.

“What if we go and cook breakfast for inner city school children?” I asked. “Most of the families living in the projects can’t afford it.”

“I can dig it,” one of the men sitting next to Huey said.

“Yeah that’d be boss,” Regina said.

The group thought this idea was great, but when I looked across the room and saw Huey I could tell I had messed up. He sat there, arms crossed like a toddler about to throw a temper tantrum. I knew that once everyone was gone I was going to have to hear about it, and boy did I.

He was silent the entire ride back to our place. As soon as we entered the house that ended though.
“Who in the hell do you think you are?” He shouted.
“What are you so mad about?” I asked.
“You never asked if it was ‘coo to pitch an idea today.’”
“I never knew I had to do that.”
I guess telling him this made him madder because he kicked through the glass of our entertainment center. The glass imploded into tiny shards, and he exploded into a woman-hating fit.

“Just like a ho to think she can sneak ‘round behind her man’s back like that!” He screamed as he positioned his face centimeters from mine.

His hot breath burned the pores on my nose. The screaming didn’t let up until we went to bed that night. Huey must have called me every woman-hating name in the book, and I let him. On the inside, my blood boiled and I was ready to spit fire his way, but I thought back to my idea. My plan was going to make a difference, and it didn’t matter what Huey thought of it or that his pride was hurt. Instead of screaming back at him, I screamed into a pillow. Eventually I let my pen scream into my notebook after he was passed out, drunk, and snoring.

As the next few days passed, Huey and I became increasingly distant. I could feel the tension between us all the way down to my bones. Once my plan was up and running, I started taking on different responsibilities within the group. They started letting me head rallies, and protests. I stopped cleaning guns and was given one to use instead. Of course, I never used it. At times, I admired the shiny metal of the equalizer. The way the steel chilled the palm of my hand never made me feel more powerful. I still didn’t believe in all of the violent ways of the group, but it was the fact that they gave me a gun that
mattered. The women of the group envied me and my newly discovered power. Regina let me know how the rest of the women felt.

“You know, Elaine,” Regina said. “The rest of the ladies can’t help but think that your idea only got across because you been goin’ with Huey.”

“Huey didn’t even know about my idea,” I said. “Didn’t you see his face when y’all supported my idea? He wasn’t happy with me.”

“Well, I don’t know. The rest of the sistas don’t think it’s right. We never get a chance to voice our ideas. Those men think they are the only ones with a say because they throw around bullets and words like they the same damn things,” she said.

My throat began to constrict, and I was fighting back surfacing tears. I’m not the voice of these women, I can’t be the voice of these women. Who was I to step up and speak my mind in front of the whole party? I am the voice of myself. I am the voice of a woman within the Black Panther Party, not the voice of all of the women within the party. Guilt ripped my brain apart sending signals triggering different emotions and bodily reactions. I couldn’t shake the feeling. Regina must have read the guilt on my face.

“Not all of ‘em think that, though,” she said. “I’m just warning you that a fair few do. They wish they had as much power as you do. It’s all plain and simple jealousy, girl.”

“I wish they didn’t though,” I said.

*How could they want to be like me?* I thought to myself as I pretended to listen to another one of Huey’s speeches. This one seemed more aggressive than others in the past. His cool tone had been absent for days. Now, he wielded his fist around, and the sweat that usually lightly glittered his forehead was dripping down his sideburns. My racing thoughts made it impossible to actually hear what Huey was saying. His lips were
moving in sharp combative ways, but my ears could not process the formation of those words into sounds. My head began to pound at the sound of his roaring, and all I could think to do was to pull out my notebook and note the words he was saying without having any meaning attached to them.

Suddenly, my ears gave meaning to the words he was saying.

“Elaine!” he shouted. The piercing glare he gave me let me know that I should have been at least pretending to hang on to his every word.

“Why don’t you escort you and your sistas out of the meeting? Men only tonight,” he demanded.

His eyes were daggers stabbing right through mine.

“What? Huey you’re bein’ crazy,” I said.

“You think I’m crazy huh? Maybe if you had your head pulled out of your damn notebook, you’d understand the importance of what we were talking about. Get the hell out, Elaine.”

I was just as submissive as the rest of them. I picked up my notebook and slid it into my back pocket, pushed my body and the folding chair I sat in back away from the desk, and made my way to the door being careful not to look up at any of the faces of the other men in the room. From the neck down, all of them seemed pretty proud of Huey’s orders. Their bodies sat erect in their chairs, some with their arms crossed in a triumphant way. Others brought their hands together in their laps, interlocking their own fingers and looking down as if to make sure their fingers were following the commands that their brains were sending to them. It was as if these men didn’t see all that we were doing for them, like we weren’t going through the same struggle as them. We were their backbone,
but they couldn’t see it. Who else would clean their guns, clean up their messes, wait for them as they sat in jail waiting for someone to bail them out?

That night I went home to my apartment that I shared with Huey. The mundane cream color on the walls appeared coal-colored behind the shadow a cloud was creating. A few hours later, Huey came home.

“Hey, Huey,” I said as if nothing happened earlier that day.

He didn’t say a word, instead he went straight to the kitchen and began making a turkey sandwich. His dagger eyes from earlier were nonexistent now. He instead avoided all eye contact with me, looking at everything else in the room but me. I moved my body directly in front of him and tried to talk to him again.

“I’m sorry for what I did today that made you so mad,” I said. I wasn’t sure why I was apologizing, but it seemed like the only way to make peace with him.

Instead of answering me, he took a drink from the glass of water he had sat next to his plate.

“Huey, come on,” I said.

This time my tone changed. I sounded like I was begging for him to speak to me. My pathetic attempts at getting him to speak made my stomach hurt.

Finally, he looked up at me as he took another gulp of water. This time letting the water sit in his cheeks like a chipmunk. For a few seconds, his eyes dug into mine. Then, he released the water from his mouth, spitting it straight in my face. I let the water drip down my face for a minute before I picked up a towel and wiped the filth clean.

How could these women still want to be me? They didn’t want to come home to a man with a wounded ego every night. As my power grew, I could feel Huey becoming
more and more resentful of me. Spitting water at me was the most intimate encounter we had for weeks. Sometimes, we would have sex but even that felt distant. When we did have sex, he never looked at me. Instead, he would focus on something in the background, or close his eyes. And once we would finish, he would light his cigarette, slip on his underwear and walk into the living room where he would sleep on the couch.

I often thought of Jay when Huey started acting this way. Jay never let his pride get in the way. He just let his marriage get in the way instead. I never seemed to have an easy time with men. It didn’t matter if they were white or black, they were all the same. Their pride and egos were too much for me to bear. But even though I felt that way, Huey was in charge of the party. I had no say in how the men acted, and even when I eventually took charge of the Panthers they ignored me. What did a woman know about a political movement anyways?

I eventually left Huey, but not until after he dismantled my power position with the Panthers. Huey was still in power of the party, but I was voted in as chairwoman while he was being charged for manslaughter after a rally gone wrong. I always told him that his anger would eventually get the best of him. He fled to Cuba to hide from the authorities, so I was put in charge.

It wasn’t long after I started a liberation school in Oakland that Huey and his goons ended my time with the Panthers. I had Regina from the party teaching a few classes, but Huey was less than thrilled about my new accomplishment. I don’t know why, and I don’t know how it happened, but I do know that Huey and some of men decided she was unfit for the job. I was at the Oakland school myself the day that she was beaten damn near to death. Aaliyah, a fellow Panther, told me about the boys’ endeavors.
“Regina is in the hospital,” she told me.

“How could that be? I hadn’t heard anything about her being attacked. Was it one of those white radical students?” I asked. I had heard of white radicals getting extra violent with us, because of our reputation of violence. At times they would interrupt classes and scream racial slurs and the occasional cat-call.

“No… You didn’t hear about it because it was Huey.”

“What?” I asked.

As startling as the news was, I was strangely not surprised to hear this. My legs went frail at the thought of Huey and his goons beating up a defenseless woman. A twinge of pain surged through my head and an uneasiness settled in my stomach at the thought of going home to Huey. I hadn’t left Huey yet, because I didn’t have anywhere else to go. There was still work to be taken care of with the party, but I needed somewhere to live.

_I should have seen this coming_, I thought to myself. Earlier that day, before I headed to the liberation school, I received a letter from Huey. I almost didn’t read it, but I reluctantly opened it.

_Elaine_,

_It’s Friday night, and I’m getting packed up and ready to leave for the airport in the morning. I’ll be back in Oakland on Sunday morning. I’ve been in Cuba for a while now hiding from the feds. As you already know, they issued a warrant for my arrest after I shot an officer during a riot. Stupid, I’ll admit, but damn was it liberating. Sticking it to the white man, letting him know that he doesn’t own us. There’s no better feeling. When I_
come back, I’m going to try and stay under the radar for a while. We need to continue to take action, but we’ll have to do it in quieter, less attention-drawing, ways.

There’s something else I want to say, and that’s that I’m so sorry for the way I left things with us. You have contributed so much to both the party and to me, and I’m forever grateful for you. I’m hoping that you’ll be able to forgive me, and go back to the way things were before. The two of us are better, stronger, together than apart. I need your support to succeed. Please consider taking me back.

Love you baby girl,

HPN

When I first read the letter, I thought about what the two of us could do together leading the party. I thought of less violent rallies, and the two of us standing hand in hand at a podium throwing up an exultant black fist in front of a sea of fellow black men and women. This seemed like a dream come true, Huey coming back home.

In reality, Huey would come home for a week. A week that would be entirely spent listening to his long, violent, rants about the authorities. I would respond in agreement, but remind him that he had killed a man during that riot, and in reality he deserved to spend time in jail. He’d ignore me, and eventually the police would find him and take him to jail for manslaughter charges, and me to jail for hiding him from the authorities. These thoughts sent chills down into my toes. I couldn’t live that life. Instead of responding, I crumpled up the letter and tossed it into the waste basket on my way out the door.
As I thought about having to go home to my shared apartment with Huey, I headed to the nearby payphone and inserted a quarter. The phone rang two or three times before someone picked up. It sounded like a woman.

“Hello?” she said.

“Yes, is Mr. Kennedy there?” I asked. She quickly went and got him.

“Hello, this is Jay,” the man said.

“Jay, it’s me. It’s Lainey.”

“Elaine Brown. I never thought I’d hear from you again. Heard you been doin’ alright for yourself. Saw one of your rallies. You sounded amazing. The most powerful woman I know.”

“Thank you, Jay.” I wished he could see me blushing on the other end of the phone. He always thought it was cute when I would blush.

“You need something, honey?” he asked.

“I-I… Uh… I need you to come pick me up. I’m in Oakland. I’m quitting the party. I’m leaving Huey for good this time.”

“Did something happen?”

“I’ll tell you about it in the car.”

“I’ll be there in twenty, Lainey. Sit tight.”

When we hung up, I couldn’t help but feel a weight lift off of my shoulders. I lit a cigarette and sat on a bench while I waited for Jay. I could always count on Jay, but I really wish I could’ve counted on Huey the way my people did. He gave young black men hope, but he wouldn’t be able to do those things without the support system he found in the Panthers. Maybe I was better off without him, but I wasn’t sure I was better
off without the Panthers. I knew I’d feel better with Jay. I wanted to write all of my thoughts and feelings down in my notebook, but when I reached back into my pocket it was gone. A wave of panic swept over me as I checked my jacket pockets to find them empty as well. It was gone.

As I continued to pat my whole body frantically, the little hope I had of recovering the little pocket notebook drifted away. Not only did my hope vanish, but the words I had meticulously thrown onto the pages were gone, too. Yes, of course they were in my head. But, what good are words if they’re left inside your head? The churning in my stomach continued as I thought about the last thing I had written down; it was about Huey.

_Huey wrote me a letter from Cuba, I just got it today. He’s coming back. I can’t believe that he’s actually coming back. What’s he going to do without me? The man is smart, I’ll never deny that, but not as smart as he thinks he is. His ego and pride will most definitely be his downfall. He’s high on power, but how the hell did he get the power anyway? I can’t help but feel that the only reason he feels powerful is because of the women in the party. None of the sistas question him, or his ideas. The change that I saw in these women as I started pitching my ideas out of this notebook was an evolution to say the least. The evolution of these wonderful, black women, has been revolutionary. Yes, we all have a long way to come, but the movement is there. It is hard to remain a good role model for them though. They look up to me and praise me for my work, for my confidence. If only they knew. My confidence was tested every day that I was with Huey, and my confidence was derived from none other than a white man. Who am I to be the face of black women’s rights? I’m not all that, but I have to keep pretending. I have to do_
all I can to show men like Huey that we are capable, we are smart, and we are more than our curves and our hair.

The more I thought about my last entry, the more I wanted to cry. Losing my notebook, felt like my vocal chords had been cut and all that remained were their detached and frayed ends. I sat down on the edge of the curve and laced my fingers together and pressed them up against my forehead. My boney hands were trembling, and I began to feel like all that I had worked for was for nothing. Jay was on the way to pick me up and all I could think about was how he could help me. I pulled out another cigarette from the carton and pressed the soft end to my lips.

Taking a long drag, I couldn’t help but think, am I really going to let this white man save me again? I held my cigarette in between my fingers and used my other hand to massage my temples. Truthfully, I thought I was saving myself. I thought I could help the black women of the future find a voice as powerful as an ocean current. But maybe I was wrong.

I put out my cigarette, and flicked it into onto the sidewalk. The embers scattered across the concrete and eventually settled themselves into the concrete and burnt out. I walked into the nearby bathroom and stood in front of the dirt speckled mirror. Rummaging through my purse, I came across my hair pick. A few metal, at least I think that’s what they’re made of, prongs held together by a pink plastic handle. The handle fit in my hand perfectly. I ran the prongs through my hair, yanking upwards, pulling all of my curls loose towards the ceiling. The curls were tighter than I remembered. They were wrapped tight like the strings on the tuning pieces of a guitar that were one turn away from snapping. It had been a while since my hair had been relieved of pressure. I let the
prongs guide them to liberation and thought about the beauty of my caramel colored skin. Once Jay was here, he would remind me of its beauty every day, whereas Huey would never even mention it. I never knew any other man like that.

I walked outside and was greeted by the red glare of Jay’s shiny new Mustang. He stood up against the vehicle dressed in a casual suit with one leg crossed over the other. Typical, I thought as I let out a small laugh.

“Hey, baby!” Jay said.

“Hey,” I responded. Suddenly, I didn’t know what to say to him. I wasn’t sure what having him pick me up was going to solve.

“Lemme take you out, Lainey. Get you somethin’ to eat, maybe take you shopping,” he said. “Get in.”

As he opened up the car door, I found myself still in the same spot and unable to move my body. My feet grew roots in the pavement, I was paralyzed.

“I- I don’t think I can come with you, Jay,” I said. My voice quivered a bit as I choked out my response. His eyes filled with confusion the instant I responded.

“What, Lainey? Don’t be crazy,” he said.

“I need to call someone, anyone else,” I responded.

I turned my back on the candy apple red mustang and on the man I’d be leaving behind. Instead, I headed back towards the payphone. When I got to the payphone, I punched in Aaliyah’s number. I figured she’d be home by now. She answered the phone, surprised to hear from me.

“Do you know what hospital Regina is in?” I asked her.

“Well, yeah. You wanna come with me?” she asked.
“Yeah, girl.”

The phone call ended quickly. It was more like a business call, but it was business I needed to tend to. I had just enough change in my pocket to buy a new pocket-sized notebook, and even a new pen. The Panthers had a meeting later that day, but I wouldn’t go. Instead, I sat quietly by Regina’s side making sure she had everything she needed. Plus, I needed a place to sleep for the night. I prayed God would help me find a place to call my own. She has a plan for me and my people.
The clanking of high heels reverberated off of the tall buildings that surrounded Naomi’s apartment. She was used to strutting around in her high heels on the bumpy pavement. The sun was starting to peak out from behind the surrounding edifices. New York City’s air was cool at night and early in the morning, not much wind but a low enough temperature for Naomi to have to cross her arms for warmth. Her black leather jacket that she wore over her sparkly navy blouse was tight on her arms and trimmed to her waist. It made a good fashion statement, but was not something one would wear on anything colder than a fall night. She was thankful to escape the cold when she twisted the nob of the creaky apartment building door.

Naomi’s night had gone just like any other week night. She started applying her make up around seven o’clock. It was important that she start early. Every winged corner of her eye, and swoosh of the mascara brush was done very meticulously. When she was finished, her eyeliner looked like it had been tattooed on and her eye shadow resembled one of the Bratz dolls that she used to play with as a child. After her eyes were finished, she would do her hair. It was important to her that she do her hair immediately after she finished her eyes. It was just the way she needed things to be. She’d release her tight curls from the hair tie that she had them wrapped up in and let them cascade down her back. The appearance of the ringlets made her smile at her reflection. She always thought that her curls were the best part of her appearance and she took pride in them by never pressing her hair or dying it. After giving her curls a quick scrunch and rubbing coconut oil into the ends, she’d put on her typical work outfit. Le Bain was very strict about the way their bartenders dressed, but Naomi embraced the tight outfits and high heels. She
never left the house without a perfect pair of heels to match her outfit anyways. The outfit she wore on this particular night was a pair of black leather pants that hugged her curves in all of the right places, a sparkly spaghetti-strapped blouse with a collar that hung low but not low enough to expose her cleavage. She accompanied this outfit with a pair of strappy wedges on her feet and her black leather jacket. At eight thirty she was almost ready to walk out the door, but first she had to apply a deep shade of purple lipstick. The plum color was very flattering on her already full lips in accordance with her mulatto skin.

Getting home from work at four in the morning was normal, and usually she went straight to bed after taking off her make up. But tonight was a Thursday night, which meant the club was packed. She was greeted by her Rottweiler, Ranger, at five rather than four in the morning. He sat at his bowl, hoping she’d fill it up.

“You already ate twice today, dude,” she said.

She had barely made it through the door, but he was still pushing the metal bowl towards her with his nose. Ranger was ten years old with the attitude and spunk of a two-year-old. Naomi’s family had gotten him as a puppy when she was thirteen, and he was her dog more than anyone else’s. She was in charge of taking care of him, and when she moved from Detroit to New York City her parents let her take him along.

“Fine, you win,” she said as she walked over towards the cabinet and pulled out a large bag of Purina. His little nub wagged the best way it knew how as he waited for her to put the bowl down on the linoleum floor. Once she set it down, he began eating like a wild animal rather than a domestic one.
Naomi sat down on the couch and sank into its plush cushions. She pulled a stack of mostly fives and ones out of every tight pocket she had. *What a good night,* she thought to herself with dollar signs in her eyes. She never minded working later on Thursday nights, because it meant more tips. Not only more tips, but it was her last night working until Monday. After her money was counted, she walked into her room with the money folded in half and put it in a money jar on top of her dresser. The jar had a piece of paper attached to it that said “DEPOSIT TOMORROW.” This was her method of self-control, depositing her cash immediately so it was less likely to slip through her fingers at the register at Forever 21.

Once her money was safe and sound for the night, she finally unbuckled the straps of her wedges and placed them on the shelf in her closet next to her other wedges and heels. She grabbed a bottle off baby oil off of her dresser and a wash cloth to wipe the makeup off of her face. After every inch of her face was clean, she stared in the mirror for a second examining her natural face. She wasn’t embarrassed by her natural face, in fact she thought very highly of her natural face. Her mulatto skin, her honey colored eyes, and her dark eyebrows were beautiful to her and to everyone else that met her. She smiled one last toothless smile in the mirror and climbed into bed. Ranger had already made himself comfortable on the right side of her bed. She slipped her curvy body under the blankets next to him. Before she could close her eyes, she made sure to set the alarm for her phone for ten in the morning. *Only four hours away,* she thought to herself as she set the phone down on the nightstand. Shortly after setting her phone down, her eyes began to slowly close as if little sandbags were being added to each of her long eyelashes. Her eyes closed beyond her control as she let sleep take over.
Ten o’clock came quicker than she expected, and the sound of the alarm on her phone triggered Ranger to leap off the bed and grab his metal bowl. He dropped the metal bowl on the ground next to her bed and began a low whining noise. When the whining didn’t work, he crept his front legs up on to the bed and put a large paw on Naomi’s closest shoulder. The feeling of his large furry paw startled her and she quickly shook awake. She only had an hour to get to class which meant thirty minutes to get ready and thirty minutes to get to class.

In the shower, she made sure to speed up her process. She got ready the same way she always did, making sure to match her makeup and outfit with the fall weather and colors. Putting her hair in a half ponytail, she fanned out her curls at the top making them blend perfectly with the rest of her hair that was not in the ponytail. She put on her favorite jeans, the ones that made her butt look extra good and accompanied them with a pair of black boot heels. Before patting Ranger’s head and heading out the door, she stopped to admire her body in her full length mirror one last time.

The subway system was the quickest way to get to the other side of Manhattan from her apartment. She lived on the west side of Manhattan, walking distance from the club, and New York Law School was on the east side. The plastic seats on the subway were infested with different germs that Naomi didn’t care to deal with. Instead she stood up for the crowded, sticky, ride to school. In order to avoid hearing the tales of woe and misfortune that people told as they walked up and down the carts collecting any piece of change they could get their hands on, Naomi put her headphone in her ears. It wasn’t that she didn’t care, but she cared too much. If she could she’d give every penny she’d ever
made to every person that needed it. But then she’d be in the same predicament as them. No one could win.

As she stood holding the metal pole in the center of the aisle, she caught a man behind her staring at her butt. He wasn’t even trying to hide it. Instead of yelling at him, she continued to look forward ignoring him. She only looked back once at him. Of course he’s white, she thought to herself. Her teeth grinded together as she fixed her gaze down at her legs. Staring down at her legs, she tried to decide whether or not she liked the attention, or if she was annoyed by it. Those thoughts were interrupted when the man stood up and tapped her shoulder. Instead of taking her headphones out, she kept them in and looked the man in the eye. He stuck out his arm, gesturing to the seat he had just vacated. The man shot her a sly smile, as if giving up his seat was going to get her to talk to him. His blonde hair, and blue eyes made him stand out next to the two black men that stood behind him. She politely shook her head and smiled. When she turned around to face forward again, the man sat back down. As the song changed there was a moment where she could hear the people around her. She heard him mumble “bitch” under his breath.

Before she had a chance to turn around and tell him off, she glanced outside to see the sign for her stop. She shimmied her way past the sea of people and off of the subway. As soon as her nose caught a whiff of fresh air, she inhaled hard. Often times, the subway smelled like gym socks and body odor. She was used to it, but always felt it necessary to take a deep breath when she was finally off of it.

When she arrived to her Family Law class she quickly found a seat in the back next to her friend, Monica. Monica’s appearance was very similar to Naomi’s. Her hair
was curly, but a little bit of a lighter shade of brown compared to Naomi’s black curls.
Rather than having long curls that cascaded down her back, Monica kept her hair short.
Her light brown curls looked sleeker than Naomi’s. They both had a similar body build, curvy and long. Monica’s skin was just a hue darker brown, more of a caramel compared to Naomi’s lighter mulatto tint.

“Hey, girl,” Monica said. Just then, the professor walked in and began unpacking his things and prepping his computer for his lecture. “You look exhausted,” Monica said.

“What gave it away? The designer bags under my eyes?” Naomi said. The professor began flipping through his slideshow.

“You had work again?” Monica asked.

“When don’t I?”

“You gotta work this weekend?”

“Nope, I’m done until Monday. I was just going to get some studyin’ done this weekend.”

“Of course you were,” Monica said. “You always workin’, girl. You’re gonna kill the Bar exam. Let’s go out!”

Monica grabbed onto Naomi’s arm in the midst of her excitement. Naomi loved this about her. She had a way of making her smile, and reminding her to have fun.

“You’re right,” Naomi said. “Tomorrow night, let’s go to the club I work at. I can get us in.”

“You really think you can get us in there? It’s so hard to get in!”

“I work there; I think I can squeeze in a guest.” Naomi chuckled until she realized the professor was looking at them. They must have been talking louder than they thought.
Naomi and Monica darted out of the room the minute the clock hit twelve thirty. The pitter patter of both of their heels echoed through the stairwell as they hustled out of the building and headed for their subway stops.

“I meant to tell you,” Naomi said. “Another white dude on the subway tried to give me his seat after he checked me out.”

“Classic, he probably thought that if he offered you his seat you’d jump into bed with him,” Monica said. “A cute light skin girl is every white man’s dream, I swear.”

“I don’t get it, but whatever. I’ll text you later.”

“See ya.”

The next morning, she woke up at around ten in the morning after going to bed at around eight the night before. It was a treat to her to not have to wake up to an alarm. After feeding the dog and herself she decided to crack open her notes to study. Hours passed, and she was finally interrupted by a rambunctious Ranger. The sound of his squeaky tennis ball pierced her eardrums. She knew the only way to get him to stop was to entertain him. The two of them wrestled for a moment as Naomi tried to get the ball free from Ranger’s wide jaws. When she finally pulled it from his big mouth, a glob of slobber dripped off of it along with a piece of tennis ball fuzz and landed straight on her notes. *Nice,* she thought to herself as she shook the drool off of the paper. She walked over to the door, and grabbed the leash that was hanging up by her coats. A walk was going to be the best way to get out his energy.

Their walk was just a quick lap around the block. He might have acted young, but his body wasn’t as young as he thought it was. Naomi knew not to push him too far on walks, so a simple once or twice around the block was all that he needed. Likewise, she
didn’t want to run into anyone she knew dressed the way she was. So, the shorter the
walk the better. She wore a pair of grey sweat that were loose with an elastic band around
the ankle, a pair of black Nike’s and a blue Detroit Tigers sweatshirt. Her hair was in a
messy bun with untamable curls sticking out around her hairline. Usually those were laid
down flat. When they made the last turn onto their street, Naomi let the leash drop to the
pavement. Ranger knew exactly where he was going and stopped when he made it to the
front door of the apartment building. The raced each other up to the front door. Ranger
won by a few strides. She fumbled around in her jacket pocket until she found the key.
As soon as the door was open, he bounded up the stairs and she followed quickly behind.

When she walked in the door, she headed straight for the couch and plopped
down. Just then, her phone began to ring. She questioned why she ever made the chirping
noise her ringtone as she searched the couch for it. When she finally found it, it was
Monica calling. The selfie that Monica had set as her contact picture in Naomi’s phone
cought Naomi’s attention before the actual contact name did. In the picture, Naomi’s hair
was pressed and shiny and the weave she wore made her hair look a mile long. She liked
that Monica was wearing her hair natural now. The phone was probably on the last ring
when Naomi finally pressed the green “answer” button.

“Hey, Mon. What’s up?”

“I’m comin’ over soon,” Monica responded. She did this often, called at the last
second and showered at Naomi’s place. But Naomi didn’t mind.

“Alright. Comin’ to steal some of my shoes again?” Naomi laughed.

“Damn right, girl. Not my fault you have every type of heel ever made.”

“How long until you’re here? I’ll make us some dinner.”
“Twenty minutes, I just walked in the subway.”

“Sounds good.” She clicked the top button on her phone to hang up and looked at Ranger who was sitting at her feet wagging his little tail.

“Looks like we gotta make some dinner, dude.”

She headed into the kitchen and started heating up some left over ham and bean soup. Naomi loved hearty meals, her mother always made them in the fall or whenever it was cold outside. Her mother also used to make enough food to feed a family of fifteen, a trait that Naomi picked up. She had made the soup about three days ago knowing that she’d be able to just throw it in a pot and reheat it whenever she pleased. One night of prepping and a week worth of food.

The pot of soup simmered on a low heat, while she studied. She figured studying for twenty minutes would be better than none at all. But Monica arrived earlier than she had thought. The door’s buzzer sounded like the button that people pressed on Family Feud. She hated the sound of that buzzer. Of course, Monica pressed it over and over until Naomi finally made her way to the door and let her in the building. Once she knew that Monica was in the building, she unlatched the gold chain that kept the door unlocked and turned the deadbolt so that Monica could walk in without knocking.

Monica threw open the door. “What’s up, Ranger?” she said.

“Oh of course, you say hi to my dog before me,” Naomi said in her most sarcastic tone while simultaneously rolling her eyes.

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

Naomi made her way to the kitchen and started distributing the soup into two large bowls.
“Shit, I almost forgot to reheat the cornbread!” Naomi exclaimed. She quickly pulled the leftover cornbread out of the fridge and tossed it in the microwave.

“The reheat queen.”

Monica teased her as she rolled on the ground wrestling with Ranger.

The two sat down at Naomi’s small, two-person, table and stuffed their faces. Ranger sat at their feet hoping to pick up a dropped piece of cornbread. Naomi ate slowly, dipping her cornbread in the soup until it was saturated to her liking.

“You tryin’ to pick up a honey?” Monica said in-between bites.

“No, I’m not tryin’ to deal with that for a while,” Naomi replied.

“You think you’re ever going to find a guy or a girl even that doesn’t annoy you?”

“Yeah of course I am. I just don’t want to go to the trouble right now.”

“Trouble? You know we both got it easy when it comes to pickin’ up honeys.”

Naomi laughed at Monica’s comment. She knew it was true, she knew she was pretty. Both of them were.

“I mean, you’re not wrong,” Naomi said. “We’ll see what happens tonight.”

Once seven o’clock rolled around, they decided it was time to start getting ready for their night out. They figured this would give them enough time to change their mind about their outfits multiple times, have to redo their makeup and still make it out by nine to go get drinks. Naomi decided to wear a tight-fitting black dress that hugged her body in a way that she liked. It was mid-length, coming down just past her knee with a low V-neck collar that formed a point midway down her long torso. The built-in cups in the dress held her breasts so that she wouldn’t have to wear a bra. It had tight-fitting sleeves that stretched down the lengths of her long, gangly arms and a back that scooped down to
the midsection of her backside. She paired the dress with a pair of six-inch, gold and black colored, stilettos.

After getting dressed she started doing her make-up and hair. Instead of going with purples for eye make-up, she went with a dark brown look. She ran the dark brown eyebrow pencil through the tiny hairs until all of the lines were straight and filled in. Filling in eyebrows was as easy as coloring in picture of a coloring book for Naomi. Her eyeshadow pallet offered her a plethora of shades to use, and she chose each one carefully. When she moved on to her hair, she decided to go with a sophisticated pony tail look. She wasn’t going to deal with all of her hair sitting on her neck while dancing in a crowded club. That would be a recipe for disaster.

As she began lining her lips with a deep red pencil, Monica called out from her bedroom.

“You got boot heels that will go with my red dress?”

“Yeah, there should be a bunch of boot heels under my bed in a plastic organizer,” Naomi shouted. “You just here to eat my food and steal my shoes?”

“Duh,” Monica responded.

Naomi laughed at Monica’s response and turned back to her reflection in the mirror. Once her lips were a deep red, she stood back brushing some lint off of the front of her dress. She twisted a bit, admiring her backside as well. Her gaze shifted back up to the reflection of her face, and she smiled. *Lookin’ good*, she thought to herself as she put up her hands and gave her reflection the double-gun point and a wink. Monica walked in wearing a pair of six-inch, black, boot heels and ready to go.
They left Naomi’s apartment a little later than they had expected. Instead of going out to the bar before, they headed straight to the club. On their way down the street, Naomi paused.

“She! I almost forgot to call the bouncer to get us in the club.”

She quickly searched through her contacts and made the phone call. It was very brief, a series of “mhmm’s” and “yeah’s.”

“Okay, he said to just ignore the line and walk up to the door.”

They had been walking for about five minutes when they ran into a mob of people. It was the line to get in, and it snaked its way around the block. They strutted by the line, making a beeline around the corner and straight up to the bouncer.

The bouncer was a large black man wearing a black suit and a gold hoop earring in his right ear. His muscular build made him look more like a wall than a man, and Naomi couldn’t imagine getting thrown out of a place by him. One slight squeeze of her arm and she was sure he’d snap it like a twig. His intimidating appearance was broken when he saw Naomi and Monica walking up.

“Naomi! It’s good to see you,” he said as he wrapped his heavy arms around her scrawny body. “And you must be Monica,” he said.

“Hey, Rob, thanks for getting us in,” Naomi said.

“Anything for you, girl. Go on in, enjoy yourself.”

Walking in felt like crossing into a different realm. The bass from the music vibrated up their feet to their heads, and the lights that surrounded the DJ bounced to the beat around the entirety of the club. Dancing and bobbing to the beat became involuntary. The club played mostly hard techno and hip-hop. Most of the people that came to the
club were white, and had enough money to throw around to all of the homeless people in New York City. When the two walked up to the bar, Naomi immediately recognized her coworker. They made small talk and she introduced Monica. After a few minutes of chatting and laughing about the crowd at the club, her coworker poured them a few free drinks.

At the mention of free drinks, two guys approached them.

“Now, what do two beautiful women like you do that has gotten you free drinks?” One asked.

“I work here,” Naomi responded.

She was straining her voice over the loud music and talking about an inch away from his face.

“Oh, are you one of the dancers?” he gestured towards the stage near the DJ where four women were moving their hips and flipping their hair in small, tight, outfits.

“What? No.”

“Oh with those bodies I would’ve thought you were.”

Monica grabbed Naomi’s arm and ripped her away from the situation and inserted her own body between Naomi and the man.

“We’ve got to go,” she said. The tone of her voice was sharp like a knife.

“Learn how to take a compliment,” the man replied.

His other friend laughed at his response.

Naomi glanced over the shoulder of the second man and saw two, skinny white girls standing closely behind giving her and Monica an ice-cold glare. These must be
their girlfriends, she thought to herself. Once they were away from the guys, Monica came unglued.

“I do not understand why guys can’t just talk to us like normal!”

Naomi couldn’t tell if Monica was just trying to yell over the music at first, but the red on her cheeks and her clenched fists said otherwise.

“Whatever, girl. Just forget about them,” she responded and grabbed Monica’s arm leading her out further into the middle of the crowd.

Once in the middle of the dance floor, the air was thick with radiating body heat. Every so often, a blast of cool air would be shot down from the ceiling onto the crowd providing everyone a small moment of relief. The two danced for a solid three hours, transitioning back and forth between getting drinks from the bar and running back to the dance floor. They moved their bodies loosely through the crowd, dancing with strangers and forgetting about school and anything else that usually weighed heavy on their thoughts. Neither of them cared about the beads of sweat that trickled down from their hair lines, or about the sweaty bodies that were rubbing up on their expensive dresses. Once, their feet started to hurt from the heels after three hours of dancing they decided to head back to Naomi’s apartment.

By the time they left the club, they had sweat most of the alcohol they had put into their bodies out and onto the dance floor. When they approached the door, the line was still incredibly long and Rob was still standing guard at the door. Naomi waved a friendly goodbye, and the two headed toward her apartment. As the club music disappeared into the distance, the ringing in their ears started to subside. The ringing left behind a high frequency, ambient sound in their ears. There was dim light from
apartments above and the clubs in the distance. Suddenly, a trifecta of blue, red and white lights swirled around and spotted onto the buildings like the disco balls from in the club, and a low wailing noise grew louder as a police cruiser came to a halt on the street next to them.

The police officer stepped out wearing his navy uniform with a nametag that read “Briggs.” He was tall, standing about six feet three inches with neck muscles so big that his head reminded Naomi of a turtle retreating into its shell. When his partner stepped out, she was surprised to see an average sized male of a much smaller build with the name “Kline” stitched into his uniform. The two were quite the pair. Both white males of very different body types. Naomi imagined that the big one was the muscle in all situations while the small one did all of the talking, a classic good cop bad cop. Once Kline began to speak, she quickly realized how right her assumption was.

“Ladies, can I please check the inside of your purses,” Kline asked. “A lady that was in the club down the road said that she thinks one of you might have taken her wallet.”

Naomi rolled her eyes at the response and tried to think of who would accuse the two of them of such a thing. *Those evil-eyed girlfriends*, she thought.

“You can check, but I can assure you we didn’t take anything, Sir,” Naomi said.

When she glanced over at Monica, she noticed that her face was flushed. Not the flirty, cute type of flushed, but the nervous kind.

“Well we’ll just see about that,” he responded while Briggs shined a flashlight on Monica’s face.

The two cops began to whisper to one another, giggling like two little school girls.
“We’re going to need you to turn and put your hands up against that wall.” He gestured with a tilt of his head to the brick building behind the women.

“Is that necessary?” Monica asked.

“Do as I say, miss.” Kline’s tone had changed, and his voice became sharp.

As the two turned around and put their hands on the wall, the men continued to whisper to one another. That’s when Naomi heard it. “Look at the asses on these two,” Kline whispered to Briggs. “This is why I love black women.”

Before Naomi could say anything, Briggs’s hands were running themselves all over her body. In her head she screamed, *No stop! Please!* But she couldn’t muster up the courage to say no. She knew not to disobey the police. The internal screaming in her head continued as Briggs brought his hands up to her chest and slipped his meaty hands into the built-in-cup of her dress and rubbed her breast. Tears forced themselves through like a strong current, but no words could reach her tongue. Glancing over at Monica, she could see the wetness of her cheeks as Kline squeezed her bottom.

The men continued for about five minutes. Once they were finished, they handed the women their purses that they had taken from them and headed back to their cruiser.

“Have a good night, baby,” Kline said. He followed his goodbye with a kiss blown in the direction of Naomi as the cruiser began to pull away.

Naomi couldn’t feel the pain in her feet that she had felt earlier. The two said nothing to one another, and wiped their tears with the backs of their hands as they continued toward the apartment. When they entered the room, even Ranger’s wagging nub couldn’t get them to smile. They were frozen, numb. Naomi filled the bowl that Ranger had nudged toward her feet after kicking her heels off. When she glanced over at
Monica, she was still standing by the door with her arms crossed. Her eyes were wide, as if she had just seen a ghost. She never fixed her gaze upward, instead she stared at the ground.

“Are you okay, Monica?” Naomi asked. She knew that she wasn’t okay, neither of them were.

“I-I think I’m going to go home.”

“It’s late, you can just stay here if you want.”

“No, I really need to go home.”

Without any more words, she slid out of the apartment. Naomi watched her out the window as she walked to the subway. Monica never once looked up, only gazed at the ground. After making sure she made it to the subway safely, Naomi decided to take a shower.

She peeled the little black dress she had on, and laid it flat on her bed. Naked, and cold, she stood and stared at the fabric. It burned her eyes. She grabbed it and crumpled it into a ball like a wad of paper, and tossed it into the trash can in the corner of her bedroom and headed toward the bathroom. The tile of the bathroom was cool on her feet, and she turned on the water to let it heat up. As the water was heating up, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Stopping in front of it, she examined her body. The curves of her waist and hips, the darkness of her skin. She leaned in close to the mirror, staring at the pigment of her face. It wasn’t like looking at herself, though. The person in the mirror wasn’t her, it was a different girl, a girl she wasn’t familiar with. She looked in the eyes of the girl in the mirror and decided they weren’t as light as she had remembered, but dark and empty. The steam began to fog up the edges of the mirror,
inching their way closer and closer to the middle. Before the fog could cover the face, Naomi let out a large wad of spit straight onto the girl looking back at her.

Once in the shower, the water burned her skin. The image of Kline’s face appeared in her head. *Have a good night, baby*, the memory made her stomach churn and she wanted to go back and slap his lips off of his face before the cruiser could speed away. As she thought about it, she saw a drop of black water hit the white shower floor. The water caused the make up on her face to run down until she looked like a sad clown painting. Instead of standing for the remainder of her shower, she sat down on the hard surface of the wet floor. She brought her knees up to her chest and crossed her scrawny arms around them hugging them closer to her naked body. In here she couldn’t see herself through the hot steam. All she could see were the shapes and general patterns of her body and skin. Yet, here she’d sit, examining the crevices and crooks of her body until she was ready to come out and face the girl in the mirror again.

It wasn’t until she woke up the next morning from her short night of sleep that she was finally ready to face herself. It was a Sunday, which meant she’d start her day off by walking Ranger. She slipped on her grey sweat suit. The cotton felt comforting, like sitting snuggling up next to the fireplace on a cold winter night. Before walking out of the house, she made sure to stop in her mirror and look at herself. She hadn’t taken a good look at her face since the night before. The reflection that looked back at her appeared to be unchanged, but something was different. She tried to pinpoint it exactly and decided to rule out the bags that hung under her eyes. But she still couldn’t figure out what it was that was so different. Her eyes moved up and down the mirror, looking at her body hidden underneath the sweat suit. She didn’t like how concealed she felt. Her almost
invisible body shape infuriated her, and with that fury she ripped off the sweatshirt. She stood in the mirror in just her black Nike sports bra and sweatpants. The appearance of her skin and her curves produced a satisfied grin across her face.

She walked away from the mirror and went straight for her closet. Ranger sat next to the bedroom door, wagging his tiny tail, hoping that she would put the sweat suit on and walk him. Instead, she began rummaging through her closet, tossing different blouses and dresses behind her and onto her bed. A flowy, red, long-sleeve dress caused her to stop tossing around her clothes. She slipped it over her head. After patting down the dress and doing a half body twist to examine her lower half, she began looking for shoes to match. She pulled out her black, strappy wedges that she usually wore to work and strapped them onto her feet.

When she stepped out of her apartment building, she stopped right outside of the door. The city didn’t provide much admirable nature, but there were a few trees lining the sidewalk that had crisp orange and red fall leaves on them. She admired the few trees that were there, and began strutting down the sidewalk. The clinking and clanging of her heels on the pavement were pleasing to her ears. She listened to the sound bounce off of the tall buildings as she passed them. There was no real reason for her to be out and about this Sunday morning. But, she looked good and she didn’t care. She wanted the world to know that she was alright, and that a nasty police officer blowing kisses at her wouldn’t cause her to stop wearing her heels whenever she pleased.
Angela and her son lived right next door. They were so close that sometimes, when I was doing dishes, I could see through our kitchen window into their living room. Angela was always friendly when I saw her outside. She had a warm smile that made you feel inclined to say “hello” even if you just got fired from your job or broken up with. Word around the neighborhood was that she was raising her son on her own, like most of the other black ladies on the block. Her skin was a deep, dark, crisp black. It was as if she had been left out to bake in the sun for years. She wore the cracks and wrinkles on the side of her eyes like most single mothers do. Although she had a pleasant charm about her, her face was weathered stone. She carried her broad, battle-scarred, body like a superhero. Often times when I glanced in their living room window, she would be talking to her son with her hands on her hips, feet spread about shoulder width apart, like Superwoman. I imagined a cape blowing in a fictional breeze behind her with a lasso being held in her large hands.

The night that they shot Angela’s son, the roaring of the police sirens rang through the Lynwood neighborhood. Everyone hustled outside to post up in their front yards or on their porches. There was no way around it, Lynwood was the hood. The streets were lined with old houses made of shabby, off-red, bricks. Every house had a front porch that usually had a dog or two chained to it, and sometimes a mammy or pappy that sat in a chair with an iced tea in their hand. The front yards were home to the collections of all the kids’ and dogs’ toys sitting on top of a prickly, lifeless bed of Texas grass. None of the grass really survived in Texas. The air was too dry, and the sun burnt up all of the life that any of the grass ever had.
We were used to the police coming around, but when there was more than one everybody came running to see what was happening. Usually one cop meant a drunk driver, maybe someone speeding. Multiple usually meant that some rival gangs crossed, they caught a drug dealer, or there was a couple fighting and the husband needed to be detained and settled down. And there were always the kids in the neighborhood that would be right in the middle of all of the trouble. Angela’s son was not one of those kids.

The two of us went to high school together, and he was one of the few boys from our neighborhood with the promise of going to college after graduation. His name was Jalen. I never actually spoke to him formally before, in fact, he made me a little nervous. He wasn’t a scary person, quite honestly he was the exact opposite. Whenever I saw Jalen in the hallways, he wore a large toothy grin, and he was almost always saying “hello” to everyone he passed just like his mama did to everyone that passed her. He must have gotten that trait from her, and his incomparable kindness and charm are what made me nervous. Aside from being one of the kindest people I have ever crossed paths with, he was one of the top students in the school, and a shoo-in to get himself a football scholarship. Jalen carried our school’s football team to a state championship three out of his four years of high school. The old men on the front porches in our neighborhood often talk about him. I remember listening to the one that lives on the other side of Angela’s house with the blue-eyed Pitbull chained up on the front lawn say, “I swear, y’all, he would’ve taken those boys to another ‘ship if he hadn’t been shot before season could even start.” No one knew the exact reason why those cops shot Angela’s son that night. All I knew was what I saw through my living room window.
My mama was at work and my dad was upstairs getting ready to go work second shift at the factory when I heard the sirens just a house over from ours. In a little beat up silver Toyota Camry sat Angela’s son in his snug fitting letterman jacket. The wrinkle in his forehead displayed his concern, and he didn’t loosen up his grip on the steering wheel as the cop strolled over to his driver-side door. As he was rolling his window down to speak to the officer I quietly slid open the glass to the window I was looking out. Once the window was open, I could almost hear everything that was being said, but at times the voices mumbled together and the sound of other passing cars made it tough to listen. I missed the officer asking for his license in registration, because by the time the window was open he was already sitting in his cruiser running Jalen’s information. Still, I wasn’t sure what he had been pulled over for.

The officer returned to the window of Jalen’s car and leaned up against the open window allowing his arms to rest on the door frame. “Son, are you aware that you were speeding in a residential area?” The officer asked.

“Uh-yeah, uh-I-I was at a friend’s house and I didn’t wanna miss my mama’s curfew,” he responded. The stuttering words and saddened toned reminded me of a helpless puppy. I wouldn’t have ever compared a helpless puppy to Angela’s son until that night.

“At a friend’s house you say? Could you step outta the vehicle, son?”

“Officer, what’s the problem exactly?”

“Don’t argue with me, boy. Get out of the car!”
The officer’s tone took a one-eighty as he grabbed the handle of the driver’s side
door and threw it open. Jalen’s hands were still gripping the steering wheel and his
knuckles were beginning to turn white.

“Sir, why do I need to get out of the car? Is there something else wrong?” Jalen
asked.

“You hard of hearin’?”

Now the officer’s face had turned bright red, and he puffed out his chest a little
more than usual. Since Jalen wasn’t moving fast enough for him, he quickly grabbed him
by his arm and tried to rip him out of the car. Not only did he have to wrestle the seat
belt, but Jalen wasn’t a small guy. This officer stood about five foot eight with an average
build of a forty-year-old man, but Jalen stood six-foot four inches of pure muscle.

Once the officer had successfully untangled the seat belt, he gave up on trying to
move Jalen. Instead, Jalen complied with the officer’s request, no longer questioning it.

“Put your hands on the hood of the car, and spread your feet shoulder length
apart,” the officer demanded.

Adhering to the officer’s demands, he leaned his long body over the hood of the
car and did as he was told. He stood in this position as the officer patted his whole body.
A few beads of sweat could be seen falling off of his cleanly shaved head and plopping
down on the hood of the car. When the officer finished patting him down, he headed over
to his police cruiser and Jalen remained in the same position. The officer sat in his cruiser
with the hand-held radio pressed close up against his lips. I wasn’t able to hear what he
was saying, I couldn’t even read his lips. But not long after, another police car pulled up
with its bright lights swirling around against the darkness of the street. The sun must have
just set, because it seemed too dark to see the men anymore. Only the swirling red and blue lights and headlights lit up their faces.

When the other officer showed up, things took a further turn for the worse. Now, all I could go off of were the sounds of their voices and the occasional glimpse of their faces under the glow of the headlights. The darkness had consumed both the officers and especially Jalen. His dark complexion made it especially difficult to see him. It was in this confused darkness that he was killed.

“Jalen?” the voice of a woman called out into the twilight. It was Angela, and she was suddenly aware that down the road, the boy that was being hassled by the police, was her son. Her call reminded me of when our parents would call us in for dinner as the street lights came in. They’d all stand on the front porches, holler our names until we came bounding up the steps.

“Mama! Mama I’m so sorry!” he cried back.

“Shut up, boy!” the first officer yelled.

“Put your hands up,” the second demanded.

“Officers, I still haven’t been told what I did wrong besides speeding,” Jalen said.

“Who do you think you’re talkin’ to?” the first insisted.

“Didn’t I tell you to get your hands up?”

Jalen must have taken a step towards the officer as he said, “I’m really not sure what I did, I don’t have any weapons, or drugs, or anything you already checked me.”

I was sure he took a step forward, because once he was finished talking the loud BANG of the gun echoed through the street. The sound resonated, but not as much as the one that followed the gun shot. Angela let out a wail loud enough to cause almost every
screen door on the street to fling open. Porch lights flicked on, and lit up the street as women, children, and grandparents in their pajamas traipsed out onto their front porches looking towards the direction of the cry and the gun shot.

“Fuck, man. I-I didn’t mean to. He just- I thought…” the stammering second officer was now looking at the other officer wide-eyed as Jalen’s corpse lay at their feet.

“What the hell did you do that for?” The first said as he crouched to the ground, grabbing Jalen’s wrist. When he hung his head after feeling for his pulse, I knew that it was too late. Too late for his mother to run over to the scene and beg them to let him go. Too late for anyone to beg the officer to put down his gun. The resonating sound of the gun shot still hung in the air with the puffy rain clouds that began to fill the night sky while Angela’s cries rushed along with the blowing winds.

“Well, he’s dead,” he said. “You need to go, son.”

And without any further action, the second officer climbed into his car, and sped off. Meanwhile, the first officer began to set up cones and flares around the body. When he retreated back to his car, the sound of his radio static coming in and out as he communicated with fellow officers seemed almost mute compared to the continuing cries of Angela from her front porch. He made no attempt to give Jalen first aid, and he lacked a sense of urgency while he lethargically placed each cone around the body.

A second police cruiser showed up to the scene, and a man with a tie on stepped out.

“How the hell did this happen?” he asked.

“Well, this boy lunged at the new guy. I didn’t think he’d panic like that and shoot the poor bastard,” the officer responded.
“So you’re certain that the suspect was lunging at him? He was trying to be violent?”

“Absolutely, Chief.”

Soon, the ambulance arrived and peeled Jalen’s body off of the street and loaded it into the back of the truck just in time for the first strike of lightning to illuminate the darkness. We all watched as Jalen’s mom climbed into the back, and the emergency vehicle zoomed down the road. It wasn’t until the next day that the news aired the story.

“A young man on Roanoke Drive was shot last night by a first year police officer. The two officers involved say that he not only resisted arrest, but made an attempt to attack them. The young officer acted out of self-defense.”

This news report was the only story our neighbors were given, and it came equipped with clips of Angela blubbering as she got in the ambulance that took her son to the hospital.

It’s been about a month since Angela’s son was killed, and I haven’t seen her cry since that night. Whenever I do the dishes, I peek into the house more often than I did before, wondering if I’ll ever catch her crying on the sofa in the dark while the lights from the television flicker on her face. But that wasn’t the case. Almost every day I see her as I get in my car to head off to school, and every time she manages to paint an alluring smile on her broken face. When she goes on her evening walks, she stops by the memorial the neighborhood put out for her son and she never sheds a tear. Instead, she bows her head, signs the cross, and continues walking with her head up high. And, once again, I imagine a red cape blowing behind her in the breeze as she makes her way through Lynwood.