

Why You Talk So White?

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## Dedication

During my last year of grad school, I started working as a substitute teacher for public schools in the Chatham County school system. One day while subbing at a predominately black middle school where the teachers and students must walk through metal detectors before entering the building, where we weren't allowed to let the students go to the bathroom alone, where the lesson plans ask that we just try to keep them in the building, one little girl asked me what I studied in college. I told her and her only response was, "Please write stories about little black girls. Not white, not mixed, not boys. But little black girls." This thesis is dedicated to her and every other person who still opens a book in hopes of finding themselves within its pages.

## Acknowledgements

There's so many people you should blame for having to read these stories that I don't know where to start. I'll just list the guiltiest. My parents, for not laughing when I told them the title and for all their support in my two years at SCAD—emotional and financial; my thesis committee, professors James Lough, Lee Griffith, and Andrea Goto, who read early and late versions of these essays and never told me to just stop it already; Dr. Harrison Scott Key, who taught me that anything that made people laugh uncomfortably was worth writing about; Brittany Smith, for advising that I use my ex's real names because they deserve what's coming; Jake Jones, for the tough love and bad jokes; and Matt Cole, for feeding me on days when I didn't have the time to feed myself, for listening to me complain and worry, and most of all, for the beer.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....Page 1

Princess..... Page 2

Why You Talk So White? .....Page 14

Praying Out Loud.....Page 30

White Boys.....Page 47

## **Why You Talk So White?**

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**May 2015**

This thesis is a collection of hopefully humorous yet poignant essays that detail parts of my life from childhood to present day, specifically parts that deal with my initial rejection and eventual acceptance of the color of my skin and everything that comes along with being a millennial African-American female in the Deep South. These stories start with me as a socially awkward child, growing up in my hometown where I was one of the few black kids and span until college, where I was still just as awkward but began to finally define my blackness and what it means to me. These stories are cumulative of my experience in finding my own cultural identity as well as the experience of learning to use humor to write though a very personal and taboo subject.

**keywords:** *culture, identity, personal essay, memoir, black, African-American, humor*

## Princess

Before middle school, before I was old enough for sleepovers across town, and before I came to fully understand what it meant to be black, much less understand what it meant to be the only black family on the block; I had one friend. Her name was Hillary and she lived next door to us in a small white house. We met one afternoon when we were each playing in our own separate backyards—she on a blue trampoline and me on a rusty swing set-slide-monkey bar combo.

“HEY!” Hillary shouted at me from her yard. I looked up and saw her standing still on the trampoline, watching me.

“Hey!” I waved.

Hillary jumped down and started running towards the hedges that separated our yards, the place where our dads stopped and turned their lawn mowers around every Sunday morning with a quick nod and a wave. Our entire neighborhood was set up that way, with bushes or fences keeping a clear line between yards, making sure every dad knew where to stop cutting grass and where to start judging the neighbors’ yard. I hopped out of the swing and walked over.

“I like that jungle gym,” Hillary said, her hands in the small bushes. I looked back at my rusty little jungle gym. Jungle gym was a nice way of putting it, seeing as it was really just a swing, some metal bars and one slide.

“I like your trampoline,” I replied, because it was true. I’d begged my parents for a trampoline for years, but they’d refused. I’d actually seen a round white man, Hillary’s dad, setting up the trampoline in their backyard a month ago and I’d cried out of jealousy. My parents still refused.

Hillary swatted at a mosquito. I blinked in silence and pulled leaves off the bushes, watched them helicopter to the ground one by one. I was bad at this. The only friends I had were at school and they all spoke to me first, encouraged me to sit with them at lunch and play with them at recess. I went to school every day convinced that they'd changed their minds and would no longer want to be friends with me, surprised to find they still knew my name. Hillary, tired of waiting, took the lead.

“Wanna play princesses?” she asked, squinting in the sun. Without waiting for an answer, she stepped through the bushes from her backyard into mine, becoming the first neighbor to set foot in our yard since my family had moved to Byron eleven years earlier. Because my family had moved in before I was born, this house and neighborhood were all I knew. I was only six when Hillary came across those bushes, teaching me that neighbors weren't just the people who watched and judged each other from their separate yards, but could be friends as well.

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Hillary and I got along perfectly.

Hillary was a grade below me in school, had shoulder length blond hair, and crooked baby teeth. She had a country accent too thick for even me to understand and a special squeak she put in her voice when she wanted something—usually asking her parents if I could spend the night, if we could stay up later, or if we could have cake for dinner. Depending on who she asked and when, she usually got her way. She was constantly conning her way out of bad grades and into a later bedtime, while I watched fascinated from the sidelines.

“Your teacher called,” her mom would say coming into Hillary's room where we sat and watched cartoons. “She said you talked all day and wouldn't pay attention in class.”

“Mommmmm,” Hillary would squeak without taking her eyes off the television. “We’re watching Rugrats!”

“Hillary Ann Chastain. We will talk about this later—I promise you that.”

I tried it out at my house on my parents. Since there was no bad behavior at school to get out of, I tried asking for things, special favors and treatment.

“Momma, can I have cake for dinner?” I asked, putting that special squeak in my voice.

“I believe you’ve been hanging ‘round that white girl too much,” she said. “You’ve lost your mind.” She laughed and shook her head as she loaded my plate with collard greens and pork chops.

“Daddy,” I said, batting my eyelashes. “Can I please stay up and watch more TV?”

“Ariel,” he said, pronouncing it R-rail, which he often did when he was tired. “You better get your behind to bed.”

I didn’t understand. At Hillary’s house, everything went. Hillary not only did pretty much whatever she wanted, but her family did too. Her mother smoked inside; her dad never wore a shirt. Her parents couldn’t be trusted together in the same room without one yelling at the other, but in the end they gave Hillary whatever she wanted—whether it was Kraft Mac n Cheese for breakfast or a new Barbie car. It was territory foreign to my house, where we ate all home-cooked meals, prayed before each one and where my parents still kissed in front of me.

As I spent more and more time at Hillary’s house, spending the night, watching Disney princess movies, eating junk for breakfast, my mom often asked me if I was outstaying my welcome.

“Aren’t you over there too much, Ariel?”

“No, Hillary is my friend and we like to hang out.”

“But are her parents tired of having you over?” she asked. “Are they nice to you? Treat you right?”

I told her they were very nice to me, which was partly true. In reality they never seemed to notice I was there, much less mind how often I came over. It was easier for them to have Hillary occupied with a playmate instead of constantly asking them for things, freeing them up for smoking and yelling.

“And Hillary?” my mom continued. “She’s a sweet girl?”

I told her Hillary was a very sweet girl, which was a bold faced lie. Hillary, in reality was spoiled. I often felt bad for her parents, even wondered if they’d stop yelling at each other so much if Hillary stopped asking for things. But being her friend came with great perks—unlimited time on the trampoline, endless junk food, and hours of cartoons and I didn’t feel bad enough to give all of that up.

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In the time Hillary and I were friends, I only saw our parents interact with each other a few times. Usually they communicated through us.

“Make sure you tell Hillary’s parents we said thanks for letting you play over there,” my mom said before sending me out the door.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Make sure you ask Hillary’s dad to wear a shirt when he cuts the grass,” my dad said.

“Nobody wants to see that mess.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ariel, please don’t you listen to your daddy,” my mom said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

One particular Friday after school when Hillary and I had already made plans for me to spend the night at her house, I found myself with a bag strapped over my shoulder, staring out of the window, watching rain pour down in thick heavy sheets.

“Momma, can you drive me next door?” I asked.

“Ask your daddy.”

I found him in the den watching a football game. “Daddy, will you drive me next door?”

“Mercy,” he said, pronouncing it *muh-cy* which he did often when he didn’t want to be bothered.

I sat in the passenger seat in his black Chevrolet, hugging my bag close to my chest as my dad pulled out of the driveway.

“Baby,” he said, his eyes still on the side view mirror. “Remember your momma only asks you all those question because she wants people to treat you right.”

“What questions?”

“Asking if Hillary and her folks are nice to you,” he said. “We just worry.”

“Oh,” I said. “Yes, sir.” He pulled into the Chastain’s covered garage and cut off the engine.

“You don’t gotta come in,” I told him, not because I was old enough to think of my dad as embarrassing, but because I knew he’d rather get back home and watch football.

“No, I’d better say hello.” I didn’t know why he had the sudden interest in talking to them. For as long as I remembered, he’d been content to stay on his side of the bushes, giving nothing more than a friendly “Mornin’” when he found himself outside at the same time as one of Hillary’s parents.

I reached the steps and moved to open the door.

“R-rail!” my dad nearly screamed, grabbing my arm. “Knock! You can’t just be goin’ in folks’ houses like that. You don’t live here.”

I struggled to not roll my eyes and silently cursed the weather that made it necessary for my dad to be here in the first place. I knocked on the door.

“Yeah?” came a rough voice from the inside that I recognized as Hillary’s mom.

“It’s Ariel!” I shouted through the door.

I heard some movement and then the door swung open. Hillary’s mom was in a nightgown and slippers. When she saw my dad standing there faded Levy’s and his Atlanta Braves cap, she moved to stand behind the door and held her nightgown closer to her body.

“Well, hi,” she said. “You must be Ariel’s father.”

My dad took his cap off and held it in his hands. I'd never seen him do this before. He looked younger somehow, standing there wringing this hat in his hands, nodding at this woman, and averting his eyes from her short nightgown.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "That's me. I just wanted to say hey and thanks for letting my baby play over here."

"Oh, she's a delight," she said. "We love having her."

I looked up at Hillary's mom and wondered why she was being so nice. She wasn't a mean person, but she never spoke to me when I was in her house. How did she know I was a delight?

My dad patted my head. "That's good to hear," he said. "Have fun, baby. Be good."

He nodded again at Hillary's mom. "Alright, now."

"Hmm?" Hillary's mom cocked her head to the side.

"Oh, I was just sayin' bye."

"Oh!" she seemed embarrassed. "All right then. Bye. Nice to meet you. Okay, bye."

Exhausted by the awkward conversation, I moved past Hillary's mom, headed inside to Hillary's room.

"Umm, Ariel," I heard from behind me. I turned and Hillary's mom was pulling a cigarette from a pack. She patted herself for a lighter. "Honey, can you please tell us before your parents come over here next time?"

"Oh. Yes, ma'am."

She squinted with her hands on her hips, looking at me like she was seeing me for the first time, her cigarette now lit and dangling from her lips. I stood there looking back at her, not sure if she wanted to say something else.

“All right,” she said. “Go play.”

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When the weather was nice, we'd meet outside to play, using just our imaginations to turn the whole of our combined backyards into a magical kingdom complete with castles, dragons, knights in shining armor and of course, two princesses to rule over it all. We were obsessed with princesses.

Sometimes we'd act out our favorite Disney movie of the week, each of us playing several different characters and taking turns playing the princess. When I was Prince Charming, I slipped her dirty flip-flops back on her feet over and over again. I played the teacup and the kettle in *Beauty & The Beast*, while she ran her hands over tree trunks like Belle in her library while she also hunched over and grunted angrily like the Beast. When I was Ariel and she was Prince Eric, she dragged me across the yard because I didn't have my human legs yet.

One summer afternoon, we'd decided to act out scenes from *Aladdin*. Hillary quickly asked if she could be Jasmine.

“Hillary,” I said. “You were the princess last time, though. How 'bout if I'm Jasmine this time and you can be her next time.”

Hillary kicked at grass tufts in the yard. “Well, yeah, you could,” she mumbled. “But you know, Princess Jasmine isn't black.”

I looked up at my friend. “But she’s—” I started to say before Hillary cut me off.

“And she’s got long hair and yours is kinda short, so...” Hillary trailed off but I’d already heard the conniving squeak in her voice, the tone I’d heard her use so often with her mom and dad to get her way. I knew this wasn’t going to be easy.

“Well,” I said, starting off slowly and taking deep breathes. “I was Ariel and she’s not black. And it’s just pretend anyway. And you were Cinderella and Rapunzel and Snow White. And, you know, Jasmine isn’t white either.”

It wasn’t until I finished talking that I realized I’d been rambling and my cheeks were flushed.

“She’s closer to white than she is to black,” Hillary said, her face scrunched up like when she tried to figure out a math problem at school.

“Nuh-uh,” I said. “She’s brown. Like me!”

“You can’t do it!” Hillary shouted. “It just don’t make sense!”

“You’re always the princess,” I yelled back, taking a step closer to her. I didn’t know what I was doing or why I suddenly wanted to be Jasmine so bad. “I’m not doing it unless I’m Princess Jasmine!”

“Fine,” said Hillary. “Aladdin is a stupid movie, Jasmine is a stupid princess and you’re stupid too.”

My face got hot. With the threat of tears in my eyes, I suddenly felt vulnerable. I didn’t know where it came from, but I pushed Hillary hard, knocking her over into the dirt.

“We aren’t friends anymore,” I screamed as Hillary looked up at me, stunned. “We weren’t ever real friends and we won’t ever be!”

As I started to walk away I heard Hillary yell behind her.

“Fine! My mom says you leave grease on my pillow when you sleep over anyway!”

I thought about turning around and shouting something back at her, maybe something about how her mom couldn’t even cook, but I didn’t. I felt heavier somehow and embarrassed to see my family with tears in my eyes. But there was nowhere else for me to go, so I just kept walking, stepping over the bushes and back into my own yard headed for home.

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“Momma, is Jasmine black or white?”

The next day, determined to prove Hillary wrong, I decided to ask for a second opinion on the race of this fictional character.

“Who?”

My mom was busy making baking pound cakes in the kitchen, her hands covered in flour and her mind elsewhere. I came in under the pretense of helping, but planned to leave as soon as I got my answer.

“Princess Jasmine. From Aladdin.”

“Oh,” she said. “Umm, neither. Isn’t she Indian?”

“What’s Indian?”

“It’s like—” she stopped, bending down to be face to face with a measuring cup full of milk. She poured another splash of milk in the cup, then stood. “It’s like, being in-between black and white.”

I stood there unconvinced and watching her turn on the oven. She turned back to face me, hands on her hips, head cocked to the side. If she had lighter skin and a cigarette in her mouth, she could’ve been Hillary’s mom.

“What makes you ask that?” she said.

In a completely honest way that I’d later learn to avoid, I told my mom everything. “Hillary said I couldn’t play Jasmine because Jasmine wasn’t black but I said she’s closer to black than white and she said that Jasmine was stupid and now we’re not friends.”

My mom came to the other side of our small kitchen and sat at the table, motioning for me to join her. I sat in her lap, something I had recently decided I was too old for, but at the moment I needed to feel her softness under me, surrounding me. She happily hugged me closer to her.

“I’m sorry that happened, doll baby,” she said. “But it won’t be the last time.”

“I’m never talking to her again,” I said.

“Hillary won’t be the only one to point out your skin color. It’s going to happen a lot. Some people just don’t like it.”

I pulled away and looked up at her, again confused and unconvinced.

“Why not?”

The next few minutes my mother gave me brief and biased history lesson. She told me about people like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Jim Crow. She told me that some things had changed since then and some things hadn't, that we should be happy about the things that had changed, and understand that the other things might not ever change. She punctuated her speech by reminding me that she thought I was beautiful and could grow up to be whatever I wanted, regardless of what anyone else thought, but when she finished I felt less beautiful and more like I had just been gifted a heavy box that I now had to carry around with me for the rest of my life.

Throughout my life, sometimes I would pretend the box wasn't there. "What box?" I'd say. "There's no box. You need to be colorblind to the box." Other times I would hold it proudly, showing it off, shoving it into people's faces. "See this box?" I'd say. "This is MY box and I've carried it all my life. Look how strong I am!" Sometimes I would set it down and try to leave it behind me only to notice later that it was still strapped to me, that I'd just been dragging it behind me the whole way and now the box was getting a little dirty.

## Why You Talk So White?

“No, just try it,” I said and turned up the volume on the little blue boom box. Slow piano notes trickled out of the speakers and Britney Spears began to whine.

It was summer and I was in Ft. Valley, Georgia at my grandmother’s house, listlessly waiting around for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Today I was outside with my cousin, Charneeka trying to convince her that Britney Spears was the next big thing in pop music.

“She’s so lucky,” I sang, bringing my fists to my chest and rocking side to side. I did a small two step and used my hands to encircle my nonexistent breasts like I’d seen Britney do in one of her music videos. “She’s a star! But she cry-cry-cry in her lonely heart thinkin’—if there’s nothin’ missin’ in my life, then whyyyy—”

The music stopped. I looked over to see that Charneeka was replacing my CD with her own.

“Ain’t nobody finna listen to this mess,” she said without looking over her shoulder at me. Charneeka was the cousin closest to my age. The rest of them were older and allowed to walk around the neighborhood while we had to stay in my grandma Pearl’s front yard. “I’m puttin’ on Black Street Boys.”

“Backstreet Boys?” I said, hopeful. “I like them too!”

Charneeka shot me a look that I was coming to know all too well.

“Why you so *white*?”

This wasn’t a new question. At this point in my life I’d heard it from almost everyone. I heard it from other cousins when I asked if we could watch something other than BET’s

106&Park. I heard it from the black kids at school when I read Harry Potter and aced the Accelerated Reader test that followed. When I answered the house phone with a crisp “Hello?” my uncle Nat hung up and called back.

“Child, I thought I had the wrong number,” he said when I explained that it was, in fact, me on the other end. “You sound jus’ like a lil’ white girl ova the phone.”

Sometimes I would tell them that, according to my mom, I spoke not white, but “distinctly”. That only made things worse. So now, “yes, sir,” was the only way I knew how to respond. “Would you like to speak with my dad?”

He’d chuckle, his voice deep and raspy over the phone. “You sure you Kenny’s chile?”

My dad, known around his siblings as Kenny, had a perfectly loud and country accent just like the rest of his 8 brothers and sisters. Getting them together was like going back in time to when they were all carefree kids running around the streets of Ft. Valley. At family reunions, other family members not only gave up on trying to be a part of their conversation, but also covered their ears or simply got up to leave. Mixed with his tendency to say words like “negro” when he got really mad, sometimes I really wasn’t sure that I was his child.

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Ft. Valley, where I spent every summer day as a kid, is the type of southern town that can’t seem to make up its mind. It’s the predominately black county seat of Peach County and encompasses everything from corn fields to projects to a crumbling historic district to a Blue Bird Bus Corporation that employs more than half the town—all in only 5.3 square miles. Ft. Valley is the type of town that prides itself on having a university that first recognized talent in Dallas Cowboys offensive tackle and member of the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame Larry Rayfield

Wright just as much as it boasts holding the title of the World's Biggest Peach Cobbler. It's a strange place but growing up, I wanted nothing more than to have had the same childhood experience as my dad.

My dad was born in 1955, five years after Ft. Valley gave up on making additions to the historic district and 20 years before the 1975 tornado came through and ripped it all up anyway. He lived with his mother, Mrs. Mattie Pearl, two brothers, and six sisters in a squat three bedroom brick house on a street named Vienna Circle. The road is indeed a circle, curving around a park and ending up where it starts, going nowhere. Mrs. Mattie Pearl, a woman that most of Ft. Valley still remembers fondly, was a tree of a woman—tall, sturdy and brown— a friendly neighbor, deliverer of homemade pies and someone who would always offer to break off a tree branch and beat your children with it if you were too busy.

While driving around his hometown with me in the passenger seat, my dad likes to point out his old hangouts. He shows me where he played basketball in the street, the paths they took to school, half other people's backyards and half woods, where he raced against his friends in his first car—a shiny red Thunderbird. He paints his childhood in a picturesque way—humble, full of boyish tomfoolery and spattered with people and places that never left.

“You see that corner store,” he'll say for the hundredth time while driving to Grandma Pearl's house. “We used to walk there after school and buy bologna and doughnuts and make a sandwich.” Noticing the look on my face, he'll add, “What? Doughnuts are bread. And it was cheap.”

He tells me that his sisters would often sit on the front porch braiding each other's hair or using a pic on their afros while he and his brothers walked around Vienna Circle looking for

trouble. Sometimes they would all go visit Mrs. Lou down the road, who sold soda, chips, and candy from her house near the other end of the street. The whole group of them would stand in Mrs. Lou's small living room with sticky fists full of quarters or go through her freezer for an Orange Crush.

I nod and smile. I like listening to my dad talk about his childhood. I like looking at the old brown stained photos of them all wearing bellbottoms and colorful button up shirts. My dad's smile is huge as he leans against his mother's wooden fence. It all looks so perfect, making me nostalgic for a time and place I'd never experienced when the whole neighborhood was like family, when kids walked to school through the woods and ate sandwiches made out of doughnuts.

"And these train tracks," he'll say as we bump over them in his little black truck. "They used to keep the town completely segregated. Man, good times."

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It's true. There are railroad tracks that split Ft. Valley almost in half and it's easy to imagine them doubling as a fence over which people never crossed. The year my father was born blacks and whites were going to different schools, churches, and water fountains. They didn't speak to each other, much less influence each other in their musical tastes. But the way he talked about his childhood, so casually as if he'd never struggled, never knew any sort of heartache, I grew up imagining segregation more as a suggestion than a rule.

I imagined the people, black and white, waving and smiling at each other from their separate water fountains and schools. Even when he told me that they were so poor that my Grandma Pearl had to wake up every morning and go door to door working as a maid cleaning

up after white folks, I knew it had to be because she wanted to. Never could I have fathomed my grandma, the scary one who could whoop you until it was hard to sit down and in the same breath ask if you wanted some pound cake, would be servile to anyone for any other reason.

“Didn’t really matter,” my dad says. “Whole town was poor anyway.”

Then, in 1970, a court order did away with all that nasty segregation anyway. Hunt High and Ft. Valley High School were no more and Peach County High was born. My dad, who started high school at the all-black school that is now the crumbling building of the Board of Education, likes to tell the story of when the two high schools integrated. Because they would be the first graduating class of Peach County High, the students got to pick the new school’s colors and mascot.

“See, the white kids’ school was blue and gold,” he says. “Our school colors were red and gold. So they let us keep gold, told us we couldn’t choose blue or red—to be fair. We voted on black.”

Knowing I would go to that same school one day and cheer for those same colors, I smiled. It felt like he’d just finished telling me a bedtime story. Not only was everything now right in the world, but my dad had been a part of it. Again I longed for a childhood like his where the neighbors were friendly and you could walk to school and eat sandwiches made out of doughnuts.

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After high school my dad joined the military and met my mother, whose upbringing was only slightly more rural in that she lived on an actual farm and her mother taught her how to kill

chickens when she was still a kid. Their story was the typical friendship turned lovers story where my mom refused my dad's hand in marriage twice before she finally said yes.

"I didn't say no," my mom would protest when my dad told this story. "I said wait until I finished school."

"I heard no," my dad would tell me, winking.

It only strengthened my unrealistically saccharine view of my dad's upbringing when, after getting married in my mother's hometown of Marvel, Arkansas, they returned to Vienna Circle and set up shop in a tiny green house surrounded by family. In the few years my dad had been away, his siblings had taken over Vienna Circle, spreading around their mother like roots around a giant oak tree—a tree that was getting Alzheimer's and needed to be watched carefully. My family was now related to every single person living on the street.

My mom and dad lived contently in that house for a while, staying up late nights playing each other on the Atari and visiting with family. After a few years my mom gave birth to my older sister. It's a testament of their environment at the time that they named her LaWanda, which according to her is French for "the wonderful one."

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LaWanda was everything I was not. Regardless of the fact that she only lived on Vienna Circle until she was five, she fit in perfectly in Ft. Valley and stuck out like big black thumb in Byron. Often times I was sure I wasn't related to her either and not just because she liked to tell me that *her* mom found me in a trashcan on the side of the road. LaWanda listened to Biggie religiously, hung posters of a shirtless Tupac above her bed. For Christmas she asked for FUBU

jackets and gold hoop earrings, while I asked for Nancy Drew books and the new N'sync CD. She even spoke with the same laid back attitude towards subject verb agreement that our dad did.

“All the girls at school hate on me,” she'd explain when asked why she'd gotten into a fight at school. “They mad.”

She was seemingly born with a sense of pride in being black and a small but noticeable distrust of white people. When she wasn't writing Black Panther manifestos in her journal—a secret that resulted in a black eye when she caught me snooping in her room—LaWanda also had a habit of skipping class. She always seemed to magically know someone older, usually with a car and a willingness to get her out of school for the day. I don't know how. She got suspended often for fights or just cussing out a teacher who she thought wasn't treating her fairly. My sister was so notorious that when I arrived at each new grade, teachers recognized my last name on the roll.

“Felton?” they said, peering at me from the tops of their glasses and clucking their tongues. “Let's hope you're nothing like your sister.”

I quietly assured them all that I wasn't, while secretly wishing that I was. I spent a lot of time convincing people that we were nothing alike and then going in my room, locking the door, and practicing lines I'd heard her say. “You ain't my daddy!” I shouted at my mirror. “I'm grown!” I told my stuffed animals. But I didn't even have the balls to say it to anyone's face, so I just spent my days making straight A's, trying to stay out of her way and watching her shine. Instead of peanut butter and jelly, we were more like peanut butter and something really lame.

During the summers when we went back to Vienna Circle to visit, she fit in perfectly with my cousins. They did some of the same things as their parents had done years before, including walking the circled street looking for trouble. One of my dad's sisters, my Auntie

Della, had moved in Mrs. Lou's house and taken over her snack business, so my sister and cousins took to stealing quarters from their mother's purses in order to buy Orange Crush and bag of Fritos. The girls would still pick a porch to sit on and practice braiding each other's hair, only now the braided patterns were more intricate, sometimes spelling out their names. They didn't eat bologna and doughnut sandwiches, but one of my cousins, Mikey, did honor the memory by holding at gun point the same corner store where my dad had spent so much of his time years before. I remember when we got the call back in Byron that Mikey had been locked up. My dad answered the phone and I could tell it was one of his siblings because he immediately got louder.

“What did you say?” he screamed. “Not the sto’!”

After he got off the phone, he told us what had happened.

My mom shook her head. My sister cried. I stared. My dad told me once again about the good times he had growing up.

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“Ariel! Yo turn!”

I tried my hardest to blend in with the brick wall of the carport behind me.

“Girl, stop!”

One of my cousins, Fallon, came over, grabbed my arm and dragged me to the middle of the yard where the rest of my female cousins were standing in a circle around a boombox blasting Petey Pablo. For the past thirty minutes they'd been using the circle to block the eyes of any adult who might happen to come by and see one of them “dancing” in the middle.

I don't know if you can call them dance moves. Sure, there was music. But their bodies weren't really moving. Just their butts. But I guess their butts were moving enough to make up for the fact that the rest of them was standing completely still. Now that I was in the middle, it was my turn to make my butt move like that. They were already screaming my name.

“Go Ariel, go Ariel, go Ariel!”

*Maybe this is my chance*, I thought. At this point I was in middle school and I had tried out for the dance team. To my surprise, I'd made it and was often placed in the front of our dance formations at basketball and football games where pointed my toes in all my kicks, eight-ball-changed and swung my arms around with passion. *I must be a decent dancer*, I thought.

The song changed. Lil' John began ordering me to rock with it.

“Go Ariel!” they continued. “Lean wit' it!”

I'd seen this dance plenty of times—on TV, with black kids at school, my dad even did it when he wanted to make my mother leave the room. I knew my arms were supposed to take turns going out in front, while my body rocked from side to side, then I was supposed to stop and look up as if I'd thrown something and was waiting for it come down. Then, when it did come down I was supposed to act like it had hit me on the head.

I began nodding my head in order to catch the beat. *5 and 6 and 7 and 8*. On eight, I proceeded to have a seizure—a seizure that I threw up in the air and then came back down and hit me on the head.

My cousins laughed.

They fell down and held their stomachs.

They wiped tears from their eyes and called me stiff.

They laughed some more.

Some even got back up and imitated my moves. I didn't want to stand there and watch, couldn't watch the way they threw their hands around wildly, pretending to be me. I headed towards Grandma Pearl's house. *Nancy Drew and The Ghost of Blackwood Hall* was waiting for me anyway.

After a while I stopped trying to make a spot for myself in my circle of cousins. I went to Ft. Valley every summer until my parents considered me old enough to stay at home alone. Then I was free to read or watch MTV cribs without judgement and I had my own friends in Byron who liked the same things as me. By the time it was time for me to go to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I'd more or less stopped obsessing over my diction or the lack of dance moves.

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Because Byron had no high school, I attended Peach County High school in Ft. Valley. Whereas both Byron elementary and middle school were predominately white schools sprinkled with a few awkward black kids, Peach County High school was the exact opposite. It hardly looked like the school had been integrated all those years before. *Where were all the white kids?* In neighboring private schools, I learned once the friends I made in middle school got shipped there as well. Brittanys and Bryans had been replaced with Ciaras and Antwans.

The first thing I noticed about high school was the lack of lines. In middle school when we changed classes we did it in an orderly line, all of us standing in the third tiled square on the floor. When the bell rang in high school, kids jumped up and ran out of class. The hallways looked like overpopulated watering holes. Nobody was headed to class. Instead they were

leaning on their lockers, talking in circles in the middle of the hall, just in general being in the way. Those who were walking, did so very slowly and four deep across the hall so there was no way to pass them if, for instance, you were trying to get to class on time.

I sometimes saw my cousins in the hallway, most of them seniors at this point. They seemed so comfortable in this sea of dark bodies. Each of them had their own group—the football players, the flag girls, the ones that wore blue, the ones that wore red. When I saw them, I attempted to wave and catch their attention. Maybe they could tell me why I'd never seen the swimming pool the other seniors kept talking about. They all promptly ignored me. Again, I eventually stopped trying and instead made my own group of friends, friends that I had more in common with, friends who understood the musical genius of Avril Lavigne and thought my dance moves were on point. It was, admittedly, a small group.

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The second thing I noticed about high school was that nobody liked me. I wasn't so much bullied as I was completely misunderstood and therefore the subject of too much attention and questions that assumed too much. Only now I couldn't escape it by running inside and hanging out with my grandma. Every time I opened my mouth, someone had something to say about the way I spoke.

“I think Dickinson is saying that her hope can withstand hardships,” I said.

“*Hardships?*” someone would repeat. “Why you talk like that? You think you better than me?”

Her question didn't make sense to me and I found myself struggling to come up with an answer. Apparently, "That's the correct way to pronounce the word hardships" was not the correct response.

"You must don't like black people?" they asked when I sat with my friends during lunch. And when I chose to play badminton at P.E., they asked me if I knew badminton was a white only sport.

"May I have a side of macaroni and cheese, please?" I would ask the lunch lady daily.

"Why you talk so white?" the lunch lady would say. I couldn't escape it.

At the end of 9<sup>th</sup> grade, in an effort to find a group of people who genuinely liked me for me, I decided to try out for my school's dance team, the Golden Girls. I'd been going to the footballs games with my dad since I could remember and was always awestruck at half time when the girls marched out, toes pointed. I'd heard them compared to The Rockettes and that they won awards at band camps and competitions all around Georgia. More importantly, they were the only group besides football to get their own jackets—slick black rain jackets with gold capes that could be zipped into a slightly pointy hood for rainy Friday night games. I wanted my name on one of those jackets.

The tryouts were held in the gym during the same week as flag girl tryouts. Golden Girls and Flag Girls were enemies and had been for years. Golden Girls were ladies with actual dance shoes who performed kick lines and wore their hair in ballerina style buns. Flag Girls wore their hair however they wanted and threatened to hit people with their practice flags. A few of my cousins were Flag Girls. Sometimes I watched Charneeka, with a practice flag in her hand, yelling at the potential flag girls.

“Ya’ll ain’t gonna make it lookin’ like that!” she told them. She circled around them pointing out their mistakes and her fellow Flag Girls laughed along with her. “You too stiff! You gonna have to learn rhythm somewhere else. I can’t teach you that.”

That week was probably the most stressful week of my entire high school career. Every afternoon after the bell rang, I raced to the gym, changed quickly and started practicing on my own before the previous Golden Girls came out to go over the routine. I kicked and twirled and smiled and pointed my toes all over the place, all the while trying to stay out of the way of the heavy twirling flags on the other side of the gym and imagining myself walking through the hallways of school wearing a jacket with my name on it.

Thursday came and I was confident. All during school I ran through steps in my head. Kick-ball-change on 7 and jazz hands by 8. I visualized myself nailing double pirouettes and toe touches. The last bell rang and I hurried to the gym. I put a gold scrunchie in my hair, hoping it would make me stand out when it came time to judge. The coach, Mrs. Keys, explained the process of the tryouts, handing us each numbers to pin on our shirts, then sent us into the hall outside of the gym. Instead of watching the first few girls come back in tears or biting my nails until my number was called, I took this time to run through the routine one last time, facing a far wall out of everyone’s way.

“Five—six—seven—eight,” I said out loud and prepared to do the first move.

“Like, five, six, seven and eight!” I heard someone say in a mock cheerleader tone, high-pitched and nasally.

I turned to see a few old Flag Girls standing with their hips cocked and flags propped against the other wall, watching me. One of the girls was Charneeka’s co-captain and she pointed

and laughed. She was a big girl, already shaped like a woman in places that I'd become convinced I'd never grow. Her weave was tied up in a high ponytail which she swung around her head.

“Like, totally!” she said.

I walked a few steps further down the hall and tried again, this time counting to myself. I went through the first three 8 counts before I heard the group of girls erupt in laughter again.

“Girl, you is stiff!” the co-captain called again. I stopped, knowing I couldn't practice like this. The group continued to laugh and I fell into my trademark silence, knowing that I wasn't witty enough to make a comeback or strong enough to fight her if she decided to barrel into me with a flag. I turned with my back against the wall and slide down to a sitting position.

“You might as well leave now,” she called again. “You may can count but those moves make you look like a robot or somethin’.” The fact that I wasn't dancing anymore did nothing to convince this girl that she'd sufficiently embarrassed me. She didn't stop even when I let my head drop and became engrossed in tying and retying my shoes.

“What you mixed wit' girl? Because I know you can't be all—”

The sound of quick footsteps, plastic hitting the ground and the unmistakable sound of chaos that follows when a hallway full of girls sees some drama going down. I looked up and saw Charneeka, her flag in one hand and her co-captain's hair clutched in the other—her co-captain still attached.

“Take it back, you stupid bitch!” Charneeka yelled while swinging this girl by the hair. Charneeka wasn’t a small girl by any means, but I could see her struggle against the weight of her co-captain as she tried to fight back. “Take it back!”

The hallway of girls was split evenly between Golden Girls and Flag Girls, but since the fight was among only one side, Golden Girls simply scooted down, pretending not to notice. The Flag Girls were paralyzed, not knowing whether to cheer on their captain or help the co-captain dislodge her hair from their Charneeka’s fist. I found myself in the same point—stuck.

Soon the co-captain lost her balance and Charneeka was dragging her by the hair down the hall. This didn’t last long before the fake ponytail ripped off and Charneeka was left panting in the middle of the hallway with it still in her hand.

“You crazy bitch!” the co-captain spit at her. But she didn’t move toward her to continue the fight. She sat up and held out her hand, asking for her hair back.

“Nu uh,” Charneeka said. “I said take it back.”

“Hey, ‘Neeka,” I squeaked from the corner, hoping the use of her childhood nickname would bring her down. I walked to stand behind her and looked at the girl with on the floor with her hand still out. “It’s okay—I’m okay—”

“Ariel, shut the hell up,” she cut me off. I shut the hell up.

“I take it back,” the girl mumbled from the floor.

“Naw, I didn’t quite hear you,” Charneeka said. “Ariel, what you say when you can’t understand somebody? She need to speak—what?”

“Distinctly.”

“I said I take it back!”

Charneeka tossed the girl her hair just as Mrs. Keys came into the hallway and called my number. She stopped short and took in the scene.

“Ladies. What is the problem here?” she asked, directing it at Charneeka and I.

“We was just playin’,” Charneeka said. “We straight. Cuzzo—tell the lady we straight.”

I looked at Charneeka as she picked up her dropped flag and straightened her shirt nonchalantly and for a moment I thought I understood—her and every other black person who’d ever made assumptions of me based on the way I talked. Sometimes the situation calls for correct plurals, suffixes and subject verb agreement such as when you’re speaking in class or talking to your boss or trying to persuade someone to listen to Britney Spears. And other times such as when you’re comfortable, when you’re home, when your cousin just showed you the difference between actual bullying and simply shooting the dozens, it’s sufficient, even preferred to say, “Yeah, we straight.”

## Praying Out Loud

“Jesus.”

I was nine years old and my mom was driving us back home from Peachtree Baptist Church. Her hands were gripping the steering wheel hard, but her eyes were lifted upward. This turned out to be the last Sunday we went to Peachtree Baptist, but I didn't know that at the time.

“Jesus,” she said again. She said it like she's tired, like she needs some help, like he's right there in the car and can hear her and will soon come to her aid. She said it like she's crazy.

“Jesus,” she said for a third time. “You know, Jesus. You know.”

“What?” I asked from the passenger seat. I didn't know what Jesus knew, but I didn't think she had to remind a guy like Jesus of information he already had. From what I learned in church, I knew Jesus was a pretty smart white guy with long hair who sometimes cried.

“Nothing, baby,” she said. “I'm just praying out loud.”

In my family, my mom was the leading crusader in all things religious. She was raised by a God-fearing mother in Marvell, Arkansas, a place where there isn't much else to believe in. She was “raised right,” my mom likes to say and she made sure to do the same with her own children. The only trouble was, she could never find what she considered a decent church. She picked which churches we attended based on loose criteria that included word of mouth, the pastor, and how well the church accepted us. Sometimes we left because the sermon was too short, sometimes we left because she didn't agree with what the pastor was saying—not enough fire and brimstone for her taste, I guess.

Peachtree Baptist Church is the first church I remember. It was a small friendly-looking building very close to our house in Byron. We were the only black family there, but I didn't think about that at the time. Instead I was more interested in the church library, where I rented religious cartoons like *The Adventures of McGee and Me* or *Psalty, The Singing Songbook*. Psalty was a giant blue talking hymnbook who, looking back, really should've had his own rap videos. His chest was decorated with a huge golden music note and he would often cross his short blue arms in front of him and said things like, "Jesus is the man." His group of friends, all children, were called his Lil Praisers. Every Sunday afternoon I skipped around the house singing, "I'm a lil' praiser, I'm a hallelujah raiser and I stand about three feet tall."

I remember always having fun in church back then. I have vague memories of large open windows spilling Sunday morning light onto a light blue tiled floor, wood paneled classrooms for Sunday school and everyone singing along politely from one of the red hymnals found in the back of the pews. There were coloring books, baskets of free lollipops for the kids and even a set of twins my age named Whitney and Courtney, with whom I made fast friends. The pastor, George Grimes, a tall white man with greying hair, stood behind the podium as he read into a microphone from the Bible. I remember looking over at my mother while he spoke from behind his podium and thinking she looked happy enough. Often after church was over, she would stay behind, talking and praying with him while I sat patiently in the pews.

That's why when my mom announced we were going to a different church, I was more confused than upset. She told me on a Saturday night, while tucking me into my small twin sized bed.

"Set your alarm for 7:30," she said. "We're going to Shiloh tomorrow."

I knew Shiloh Baptist, had seen it when we drove past it on the way to my grandma's house in Ft. Valley. It was a huge cross shaped brick building that sat on the corner of East Church Street. I was not excited about this. I already had mixed feelings about Ft. Valley, knowing it was where my dad was born and raised and where his entire side of the family still lived, but also starting to tire of never fitting in when I went to visit. My cousins and I were learning that we didn't understand each other, that we practically spoke different languages. They asked me all sort of questions like "Why you talk like that?" and "Why you always reading?" and "Will you please hush?" Now instead of only suffering the summer with them, I had to go to church with them too. I wondered if their church was as nice as ours, if their Jesus was the same I'd seen in the coloring books, and most important—if I'd still get to hang out with Psalty after church was over.

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"JESUS!"

That next morning, after arriving to church late, my mom, sister and I entered a room with light pink walls used just for a group morning prayer. Noticing the room was mid-prayer my mom hushed me before stepping quietly through the door. Several metal fold out chairs faced a podium and people were sitting or standing with their heads bowed low as we tiptoed inside. The screaming voice, coming from somewhere in front of the room, went off again, sounding like a siren.

"I SAID JESUS!"

I jumped and grabbed my mom's arm, sure that someone up front was being stabbed. She pushed me off and placed a finger over her mouth. We stepped up to the last row of chairs in the back of the room. Taking advantage of all the closed eyes and bowed heads, I looked around.

*Everyone here is black, I thought and immediately had many questions. Do they let white people come to this church? Isn't Jesus white? Where is the basket of lollipops?*

"YOU are the light, Jesus. ONLY you, Lord God!"

"Yes, Lord," everyone murmured in simultaneous agreement.

*How do they know when to do that? Is there a routine?*

We were standing beside three older women wearing funny shaped hats with feathers and rhinestones. The women nodded rapidly with their eyes closed, causing their hats to look alive and ready for flight.

"We thank YOU, Jesus!"

The voice was coming from the smallest woman I'd ever seen, standing behind a music stand, wearing her own bird hat and an all pink suit set with matching pink kitten heels. *Why is she screaming?* I thought. *Doesn't she know that Jesus can hear everything, even our thoughts?* Then I thought I better stop thinking because if Jesus was listening in he probably wouldn't be pleased that I wasn't praying along with everyone else. I closed my eyes and bowed my head. Someone clapped twice and amens and glorys rippled through the crowd.

"In your name we pray, amen."

"AMEN!"

I looked up at my mom, convinced she would see how weird this place was, that we didn't fit in here and take me and my sister home immediately, but she still had her eyes closed and a small smile was spreading across her face. It looked like we were staying. I wondered if I'd make friends in Sunday school, how long church would last, and if their God was hard of hearing.

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After the group's morning prayer, the three of us were bombarded.

"Is this the baby?" women asked. "LaWanda, you're so tall—lookin' like yo momma!"

My mom would smile and pat my back as a gesture to tell me it was okay and I'd walk forwards to be enveloped in hugs and wet cheek kisses.

"She looks just like Kenny! Baby, do you remember me? You went to Pre-K at Mrs. Pittman's with my baby!"

I nodded, but I did not remember them or their babies that I went to Pre-K with. What I did remember about Pre-K was getting into a screaming match with Mrs. Pittman over why people yawned. She said something about our brain needing more air. I told her she was stupid. I stood in the corner for the rest of the day. I didn't have fond memory of the place.

I didn't feel bad about not remembering the other kids in Pre-K because they didn't remember me either. When I walked into my Sunday school class, nobody even looked up, nobody talked about the good times we'd had in the sandbox. They continued to talk to one another instead. One girl, who already had breasts bigger than mine, bigger than my mom's, bigger than everybody's, was leading the discussion.

“You know what I heard?” she said, leaning in to the group and lowering her voice for the affect. “I heard Sister Jackie is pregnant.”

The other kids let a chorus of “Ohhh” and “You for real?”

Normally a shy kid, I took the braver, stupider route and spoke up.

“Why is that bad?” I asked. “My mom says it’s nice being pregnant because she likes babies.”

Everyone turned to see who had dared interrupt their gossip session and found a skinny dark skinned black girl in a bright yellow dress made completely out of ruffles and white socks, also made of ruffles, pulled up to her knobby knees. The first girl that had spoken, rolled her eyes at me.

“And who the hell is you?” she asked.

*She just cursed, I thought. In church!*

Resisting the urge to duck underneath a chair to avoid being accidentally struck by lightning for being near her, I cleared my throat and tried to sound confident.

“I’m Ariel,” I said. “Felton.”

“You don’t sound like a Felton,” she said.

I wasn’t surprised they knew the last name Felton—most people in Ft. Valley did. My dad grew up with eight siblings, they each had at least 5 children, and then those children had a few more. I also wasn’t surprised that she said I didn’t sound like that. I got this comment a lot and knew how to respond.

“My mom says I just speak very distinctly and that’s not a bad thing.”

“Does *distinctly* mean white?” she asked, raising her hands to make air quotes around the word distinctly.

The room exploded in laughter. “Yeah, she do talk like that!” they said.

Just as I was contemplating running out of the room, out of the church, and down the street to my grandma’s house, the older woman who screamed the morning prayer walked in.

“What’s so funny, Miss Hillman?” she asked the girl in the front leading everyone in laughter. She wasn’t yelling anymore, but everyone still stopped laughing pretty quickly.

“Would your grandfather find it funny?”

Miss Hillman smacked her teeth and crossed her arms in a huff.

“Miss Hillman, don’t you make me forget my Christianity in the house of the Lord,” she commanded in a voice that made me think maybe she was already starting to lose her Christianity. “This is perfect for today’s lesson—look at you, sinnin’.”

Miss Hillman uncrossed her arms, sat up straight, and the older woman proceeded to teach us that we were all horrible sinners—“*all of us is sinners, baby, even me*”—and how God was gracious because he loved us anyway, but if we sinned too much then he wouldn’t love us anymore—“*Jesus does not love folks that kill and have sex, ya’ll. And he don’t love people who ain’t been baptized.*” It was the scariest lesson I’ve ever learned.

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After Sunday school, everyone flooded into the main part of the church for the sermon. Two rows of pews went all the way to the back exit with a walkway in the middle. My sister got

to sit in the back with our cousins, but I sat with my mom in the second row and looked around. The room was tall, the walls meeting the ceilings so high up I had to lean my head all the back to see where they connected. The walls were adorned with fantastic stained glass windows showing colorful, intricate, and horrifying scenes from the Bible—Jesus on the cross, bleeding out everywhere, the young savior in a manger, smiling evilly at his mother, a set of giant black hands clasped together in prayer. The windows, with all their deep colors, turned the morning sun from yellow to deep reds and blues, making the room seem dimmer, more serious, less like a place where anything fun could happen.

The cushioned pews faced what could only be called a stage, a raised platform reached by maroon carpeted steps. Behind the stage was the choir seating, and behind them, a curtain which I'd soon learn hid a giant tub for the monthly baptisms. Entrances sat on either side of the platform where children and parents milled in and found their seating.

My Auntie Janie, a large brown woman with moles on her cheeks, stood in the choir seating area and announced the name of the first song, “Brought Nigh by the Blood.” She started to sing softly, almost whispering, like she was afraid to interrupt the conversations sprinkled throughout the pews. A woman took a seat at the piano and played slowly.

*A sinner I am, deserving nothing but hell,  
Unworthy to stand before a holy God*

At that point, I didn't know what hell was exactly—it sounded like a pretty crappy place to hang out—but I was happy to see they still sang there at that weird church. I didn't know what the word nigh meant either, but without knowing the words, I tried to hum along with my Auntie Janie. At least the pews were the same, at least my mom was still sitting beside me, at least we wouldn't be here forever.

The music stopped.

I looked up to see if maybe the lady on the piano had forgotten the next notes, but she was looking up at the choir. Were they about to change songs? Had someone messed up their notes? I waited to see what was going to happen.

My aunt opened her mouth wide and let out a note, not a word exactly but just a sound—loud and high and a lot like a scream from someone who was running away from something. The lady on the piano brought her hands down hard on the keys and the music started back up again, faster this time. My aunt continued to shriek, she bent at the waist and then straightened back up rapidly, she pumped her fist in the air. She looked like she was really mad at her microphone. In all the chaos someone had magically produced a tambourine which she grabbed, dropping the microphone on the floor, and hit against her right leg while hopping around on her left leg.

*What the hell is this?* I thought.

A curtain in the corner dropped and there was little black boy on the drums, drums with cymbals, drums with a bass. He wasn't beating them in a rhythm so much as trying to break his two drum sticks by hitting them as hard as possible. The rest of the choir was also standing now, swaying from side to side and clapping their hands high in the air. They all wore baggy black robes that made them look like a mass of floating heads.

“Sing wit' me!” auntie Janie screamed from the stage and the rest of the church was immediately at attention, also screaming.

At Peachtree we had politely recited lyrics from a choir book in front of us, but here, everyone knew the words by heart. People were actually clapping and dancing, rocking their hips from side to side. Then, just as suddenly, the song began to fade.

First the churchgoers sang softer and then not at all, then members of the choir one by one sat, until again, only Sister Jolly stood singing, "*I'm brought nigh by the blood He shed for me on Calvary.*" It had lasted less than a minute and left me confused, a lot like a flash flood.

I looked at my mom in her eyes, tried to signal to her with my own eyes that this place wasn't safe, that we should leave, maybe try to grab my sister on the way out, but not to the point where we would sacrifice ourselves in the process. But my mom was using a program to fan herself while rocking left and right in her seat and didn't notice the look on my face.

Auntie Janie picked up her forgotten microphone with one hand and wiped sweat from her forehead with the other.

"And now, Pastor Hillman."

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Pastor Hillman made his way to the stage, a glass of water in one hand, a Bible in the other. He's wearing a robe like the choir's and it trailed and billowed behind him, making him seem bigger and more menacing. His head was square with patches of silvery grey on his chin and head. He was huge and I understood why Miss Hillman straightened up when threatened with his presence.

"Let the church say *Amen.*"

The church responded, "Amen."

Pastor Hillman's voice was deeper than any man I had ever known. Everything he said seemed ominous. He took deep raspy breaths in between words that drew out his sentences and

punctuated each verse from the Bible. It seemed to me, as he looked down from the stage, pointing and yelling, that he was trying not to have a heart attack.

“Church,” he spoke again. “Turn your Bibles to Psalms. Chapter 51. Verses 1-4.”

He waited for the rustling of pages to die down, then began reading. Each time he took a breath someone from the crowd punctuated it with a praise.

“Have mercy upon me, O God—“

*“Yes, Lord!”*

“--according to thy loving kindness—“

*“Well....”*

“--according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.”

*“Amen!”*

Gone were the polite churchgoers of Peachtree Baptist. All through the pews, men and women reacted to Pastor Hillman’s voice. Some nodded and shook their heads, eyes closed. Others clapped in-between verses and some held up open palms to the sky. All wore mixed expressions of contemplation, yearning, and satisfaction on their faces, as if they had been thirsty to hear these words all their lives and now they could drink plentiful from the source.

“WASH ME!” continued Pastor Hillman, pounding his ham hock fist on the podium and sounding like he was trying to cough out a giant hairball.

*“Please, Jesus!”* came a cry from the back of the church.

“Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and CLEANSE me, Jesus, from my sin.”

For the next four hours, Pastor Hillman talked about those few verses, sometimes walking back and forth across the stage, jumping or stomping his feet and sometimes leaning all his weight onto the podium. Four hours. I waited for the podium to give as I watched him, his knees bent and no longer supporting him, his voice becoming hoarse in the microphone.

That Sunday and every Sunday afterwards, I would feel the energy in the room shift as Pastor Hillman got louder and louder. It wasn't just the sizzle of the cymbal growing in the background or the people standing and clapping in the pews or in the middle of the aisles. The room itself seemed to beam with pride and thanks. Often times, especially in the first few months, I would look over at my mom and see tears rolling down her face, her hands clasped together in front of her chest. I feared this was the beginning of something the older people at Shiloh called The Holy Spirit and that soon my mother would be one of the churchgoers shouting out, dancing and convulsing, even running through the aisles. These passionate displays of praise made me think of the "Animaniacs" but with less fun and crazy antics and more embarrassing eye averting. My mom never full catch The Holy Spirit though, she never did anything more than cry and clap.

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"I don't think I can do to church today," I said from my bed, trying my hardest to look like I was going to vomit. "I don't feel well."

"Get up," my mom responded. "You're going."

We went through this routine for years. The younger I was, the more I fought my mom on Sunday mornings. I pretended to be in such a deep sleep that she couldn't wake me. Sometimes I feigned a headache or a sore throat, even purposefully tore holes in my stockings all

to get out of going to church. I dragged around the house, fainting dramatically on random pieces of furniture.

“Oh, I don’t know if I can make it,” I explained. “I’m sick. And I’ve got homework to do. And I don’t have a clean dress. Or stockings.”

She successfully ignored most of my pleas, except for one.

“I wanna go back to Peachtree.”

My mom had yelled at me before, sure, but her heart was never in it. If I was going to be punished or denied anything, it was my dad who had to take care of it. She was too soft and thought of me as too precious, no matter how much of a brat I was being. But I could see her anger grow every time I mentioned going back to Peachtree.

The first time I told her I’d rather go to Peachtree, she said, “Don’t say that.” The next few times, her response was, “Ariel, no. We don’t go there anymore.” It slowly turned into, “Ariel, I swear...” delivered in an icy tone with her eyes closed.

I continued to push the issue. I hated Shiloh. I hated the long and loud sermons, I hated when people caught the Holy Ghost and went running through the aisle, and I hated Miss Hillman, whom seemed determined to ruin what could’ve been a perfectly good day. Every time I was there, she was there, commenting on my dress, my voice, my choice of friends.

“Ariel only likes white boys,” she’d say. I wasn’t sure how she knew that since we weren’t going to the same school and didn’t have the same friends, but she did. “Ariel and Whitey, sitting in a tree!”

After a while I stopped mentioning Peachtree Baptist. As I got older those memories faded, but I never went easily to Shiloh. Like most things I wasn't fond of at the time, I was never able to understand and articulate my dislike of the church. Sure, it was loud and the sermons lasted all day, all things I complained about to my mother. But what really bothered me was that everything about the church—the people and the songs sung by the choir, the stained glass portraits of Jesus bleeding on the cross, even Pastor Hillman's sermon and my sister and cousins huddled in the back pews—was just another reminder about how I didn't fit in this world. They didn't want me there and I'd decided I didn't want to be there either.

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Another Sunday morning rolled around and this time I was almost 16. My legs had gotten longer, my hair was straighter, but mostly I looked the same. The only difference was that my hatred for Shiloh had been boiling inside of me for almost seven years, making me mean every Sunday morning.

My mom came into my room. When she opened the door I could already here her gospel music wafting in from the radio down the hall and it made me mad.

“Baby, time to get up.”

I rolled over. “Momma, please not today. I literally don't feel like it.” I used the word literally a lot back then.

“Ariel, get up,” she said. “We don't want to be late.”

She left the room and I got up. I dressed slowly, dreading the moment when I had to step into that church. I did everything to slow us down—taking too long in the bathroom, insisting on

changing my outfit several times, even going as far as hiding upstairs when I knew it was time to go. I could see my mom patience failing, but I didn't care.

"Ariel, come on here," she yelled up the stairs.

I came down slowly and stood on the bottom step.

"Momma, please," I begged. "I really literally don't like this place. Why can't we have church at home or something?"

She put her face close to mine and I could see it in her eyes. She wanted to slap me, tell me I was being stupid and selfish, but she wouldn't. "Ariel, don't speak to me for the rest of the day. Now get in the car."

I waited until she had turned her back to roll my eyes dramatically, but I joined her in the car anyway. She reached for the radio control as we pulled out of the driveway and I feared she was going to play more gospel music. What she put on was much worse: James Earl Jones, reading from the Bible. This was one of her favorite things to listen to on the way to church and of course, I hated it. She didn't just play any old section of the Bible—she played Matthew 1:2-17.

"Abraham begat Isaac," he started, his voice deep and dawdling. "And Isaac begat Jacob, and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren, and Judas begat..."

While he spoke, I thought about Shiloh and Miss Hillman and Pastor Hillman. I thought about the fact that my dad didn't have to go to church. I thought about the old women who would get the Holy Ghost. I thought about their bad grammar. I thought about how I'd sit there and watch my mom cry and not understand it, but instead be embarrassed about it.

About the time that Zorobabel begat Abiud, I was breathing heavily. I had forgotten her threat and I needed her to know how ridiculous this all was—how ridiculous she was.

“This is so dumb,” I said, preparing for a rant. “I don’t want to go to this church. Nobody there likes me and I don’t like them. Why do I have to—“

Her hand came quick and hard. She slapped me and my head hit the passenger side window. My ears rang. She slapped me again and it landed on my neck. She slapped me a third time and my forehead bounced against the glove compartment. It popped open and her collection of napkins fell to my feet. The whole time she was shouting.

“Shut up!” I dared to look at her and saw that her eyes were no longer on the road. She was staring at me, her face and eyes shaking. “You’re a stupid girl! I said this is where we’re going—that’s it! You don’t know nothin’!”

The car swerved onto the side of the road and she straightened it quickly. A passing car punished us with its horn. We drove the rest of the way in complete silence, except for James who continued telling us who had begat who.

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Later that night, my mom and I would have a talk. She apologized for hitting me and I apologized—although halfheartedly—for being stubborn. She told me she loved me, that she just wanted me to have a little Jesus in my life, that she thanked God every day for me and thought I should know God too.

I nodded as she talked, not sure where she was headed. Turns out she was headed nowhere. We continued to go to Shiloh Baptist every Sunday morning until I graduated high

school and moved to college. My feelings about the church never changed, but I never protested again.

It wouldn't be until years later in an email when my mom and I would speak about it again and she would finally admit to me why we left Peachtree Baptist church. Pastor Grimes had confided in her that he was leaving to take another church, just a few weeks after he told her about a lady who considered joining the church but, she wouldn't as long as the church had black members.

"Since, he was leaving," she wrote, "I figured that maybe I should leave too - and leave well before he left. I guess I didn't want to tell you that—you liked it so much. By the way, when is the last time you've been to church, Ariel?"

Blindsided by news that cast a new light on my hazy and cheerful memories of Peachtree, I never emailed her back. But I did dig up my old children's Bible, the one she'd given me when I was only one. In between the Bible stories made shorter and simpler, the drawings that showed a white Adam and Eve conversing with a pink snake, a sad looking Jesus holding children on his laps, I saw my own scribbled handwriting writing my name over and over again in different color crayons. I read and reread the note she'd written on the inside of the front cover, "*I love you so much, Ariel! But imagine how much Jesus loves you!*" I sat there, thinking about God and love and all the different quiet ways people show that love. Quiet a kiss on the knuckles. Quiet like clasped hands on a Sunday morning.

## White Boys

“Take the picture!”

I’m standing in front of my best friend and roommate at the time, while I hold my shirt up, exposing the right side of my torso and my painfully new tattoo. She takes the picture and I grab my phone back to look at it. The tattoo, part of a Langston Hughes poem called Theme for English B, reads, “Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love. I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.” We’d read this poem recently in one of my English classes and it stuck with me, the parts about Hughes being 22 and liking normal things, but also being black and 22 and figuring out what that means. I’m 22 at the time and I think I’ve come to terms with everything this quote means.

I post the picture on Facebook and moments later my phone rings—John Mayer, “Slow Dancing in a Burning Room.” The ringtone lets me know it’s Kyle and I’m giddy. It’s not something I would normally listen to, but he had insisted it was our song. The night he played it for me was also the night he told me his parents didn’t approve of him, a white man, dating me, a black woman.

“They aren’t racist,” he’d said firmly, while he slow danced me around my tiny living room and John Mayer crooned in the background. “They just think I can do better.” Having heard this many times, I ignored it and let him twirl me.

Kyle had thought the song was fitting, that it was about being together no matter what. I know it’s actually about being together until you burn to death in a fire one of you started. But that was a year ago and we’ve been working on it, figuring it out, planning ways to ease Kyle’s

parents into the idea of me and show them that I'm not what they think I am. I've put it all behind me, knowing we'd work through it.

“Hey,” I answer, trying not to sound as happy to hear from him as I am. I do not succeed.

“Hey, legs.” He always calls me legs. “You didn't tell me you were getting another tattoo. What, do you wanna be one of those girls with arm sleeves and shit?”

Kyle was raised in the country, where girls cooked, cleaned, and only got one tattoo—either a tramp stamp or a butterfly on their ankles. I've forgiven him for that among other things.

“No,” I answer. “I really like this poem. You didn't even ask what the quote means.”

He still doesn't bother to ask.

“When are you gonna get a tattoo of my face?” he jokes. “Or at least one about me? So you can remember me forever.”

I don't have the heart to tell him that this tattoo is about him. It's about him and it's about every other white guy who has ever let me down and it's about me.

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The first white boy I kissed was Matthew Terrell. We were in 1<sup>st</sup> grade on the playground, sitting in one of those red tube made from the plastic that scratched your knees as you crawled from one slide to the other. Friends played lookout on the sandbox below. I don't remember if the kiss was a dare or if I just legitimately found him intriguing with his dirty blonde hair covering both eyes. I do remember that it was hot in that red tunnel. I remember feeling nervous. I remember that his lips were flaked with dry skin, my lips were sticky, and that we didn't so much

kiss as we pressed our closed lips together hard enough to make my teeth hurt. I remember it was magical.

Matthew and I didn't live far apart, but his lifestyle was different and exotic to me back then. He was an outside kid—always tan, always a little bit dusty. When the bus picked him up and dropped him off it was in front of a small yard with no grass, littered with dirt bikes and four-wheelers. His mom drove a pick-up truck with a confederate flag sticker in the corner. He had an older brother that also rode the bus, wore only black t-shirts and looked like Sid from *Toy Story*.

We didn't stop with that first kiss. We kissed on the bus to and from school, ducking behind the torn brown seats. We kissed more on the playground, behind a prickly bush or through the fence that separated the sandbox from the swings. We even kissed in corners of the hallway at school. If anyone noticed they didn't say anything and we continued to smack lips in our secret spots any time we could. It was an exciting first love affair during that time, but like most love affairs, it got complicated.

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“If it's meant to be, my shoe will fall off.”

Matthew looked at me confused. We were behind our favorite bush on the playground. He had leaned in for a kiss and I had started talking instead. I guess I was worried about where this relationship was headed.

At home my parents kissed every day—over coffee, before going to work, when they tucked me in at night. I knew or at least thought I knew what love looked like. It looked sweet. It looked easy. It didn't look like stolen sticky kisses behind uncomfortable bushes. I thought, if we

were ever going to move forward I needed some advice. So I asked my mom how she knew my dad was the right one for her.

“When he kissed me the first time, he knocked my shoes right off my feet,” she said.

When I heard this I was crestfallen. Matthew and I had been kissing for weeks now and my shoes had stayed firmly on my feet. Was he not the one? Always the hopeful romantic, I reconsidered. Maybe we hadn't been trying hard enough. Maybe Matthew didn't know he was supposed to try to knock my shoes off. Maybe I was wearing the wrong shoes. I decided to try again, to let him know that he was supposed to knock my shoes off. Furthermore, I decided that if I didn't feel my shoe magically slipping off my foot like in some fairytale, I'd take the damn thing off myself.

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If it's meant to be,” I said, slowly repeating myself and putting an icy tone in my voice like I'd heard my mother do when she knew people weren't listening, “then my shoe will fall off.”

“Oh, okay,” was his response.

I steadied myself and got ready for what I was sure would be a life-changing moment. He leaned in and I leaned in as well.

We kissed.

We kissed some more.

Nothing happened.

No trumpets, no fireworks, no singing crabs, no fairy godmother telling me I'd found the one. Stubborn as I was, I slipped my big toe into the back of one delicate brown sandal and let it fall to the ground.

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Matthew and I went on kissing for a while longer until we were found out. Not by a teacher or the bus driver, but by his brother. It was a Friday after school. We had swapped several rushed kisses during the bus ride home, peeking around the edge of the seats to making sure we hadn't been seen. The bus was pulling up to his stop when he reached for another. I pulled away, somehow still shy.

"It's time for you to get off," I told him.

He persisted, staying there with his eyes closed and his lips puckered. At the time I thought, "*his face looks weird like this.*" But now, when I look back and see his little face so close to my own, I think of the moment more tenderly, perhaps because of its blunt contrast to the moment that followed.

"Are you trying to kiss a nigger?"

I looked up and Matthew's older brother was leaning over the top of the seat behind us, pointing at his little brother. Matthew opened his eyes in shock, unpuckered his lips and grabbed his book bag.

"NO!" he said to Sid as he got up and left me there.

I looked away and studied my hands, picked at the chipped pink nail polish stolen from my sister's room. I cleared my throat. I heard the doors of the bus open, heard the bus driver yell at them to hurry up.

I don't know if he tried to make eye contact with me as I continued to stare down. I wish I would've looked up, if only for the slim possibility that he was looking back and mouthing "sorry" to me as he exited the bus, but I didn't.

Surprisingly it wasn't the word that stung, even though it was the first time in my life I'd heard it directed at me. In fact, at that age I thought the word "nigger," or more correctly, "nigga" was our word—a secret grown-up word for black people only and that one day maybe I'd get to use it the way my cousins and uncles did, not spitting it out like venom, but as a friendly greeting. When he used the lingering *er* sound instead of the short, clipped *a*, I thought he'd simply mispronounced it.

What did sting, of course, was Matthew's reaction. He'd dismissed our weeks of stolen romance in seconds. I would come to know that sting well, usually dismissing it as "their problem" and considering myself better off. I called them narrow-minded, I summed it up to a dying generation who didn't know what they were missing by not getting to know me and my amazing accomplishments—my high school diploma, my English degree, my chemically straightened hair, the way I distinctly pronounced the "g" at the end of my gerund phrases. But that day on the bus I hadn't yet learned the art of pretending to let things roll off my shoulders.

My shoe, already halfway off in the preparation of the kiss that never happened, slipped completely off and hit the floor of the bus.

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There's a common belief that a girl will unconsciously perpetuate her bad relationship with her father over and over again with a different undeserving boyfriend each season. If the father was absent, she will choose men who are never there for her. If the father was abusive, she will choose men that make her feel inadequate. This is not the beginning of that story. My dad, other than the scary way he refuses to talk when he's angry, is perfect. He went to my soccer games, picked me up from band camp, taught me how to unashamedly sing "War" by Edwin Starr at the top of my lungs. There was no hint of my father in this relationship, nor the next eight disastrous relationships with white boys that I'd casually fall into until the age of 25—unless you count my stubborn pride and their silence.

People often ask why I kept falling for these boys. "*You must don't like black boys?*" they asked. When I got older, I admitted to myself that a pattern was emerging and found myself asking the same question. Was I not into black men at all? And why, in all the places in the world, did I think the Deep South would be the place to start an interracial love affair? Looking back, my collection of Lil' Bow Wow posters that appeared on the walls of my room circa middle school proved that no, my preference had nothing to do with race.

When asked, I answered that question with another: Why was I only approached by white boys? Black boys—or boys of any other race for that matter—never seemed to hit on me. Or at least not in way that was the smallest bit flattering. The black boys I ran into said, "Hey, shawty" or "God bless that body, lil' momma" or "Sup, blue shirt?!" They didn't ask me my name, what I studied in college, if I'd like to go down to a bar, get drunk on Miller Lite and sing Vanilla Ice on karaoke night. That, I would've responded to.

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Regardless of the reason, there's a whole list of them, these pale-skinned boys who broke my heart over and over again. I was a magnet for Chads with fathers who hunt and clean AKs over dinner, Trevors carrying around moleskin notebooks of original handwritten poetry, and Spencers in Sperry Topsiders bragging about their summer lake house. Some broke my heart in style, aggressively hammering away at the brick wall of the race issue until their little fists couldn't fight anymore. Some were more passive aggressive, choosing to stay silent in the face of their fathers, then saying things to me like, "You know, you're not even that dark." Others were lazy about it and simply asked me why I couldn't be white.

In middle school it was Johnathon, a short boy with freckles, who listened to a lot of Breaking Benjamin and wore leather bracelets. He was different, he was cute, and most important, he'd chosen me that day in study hall when he slid a note across the table that read, *I think you're really pretty, but also smart. Will you go out with me?*" I was smitten.

Our relationship caused a panic in the hallways of Byron Middle School. We were the first interracial relationship that predominately white school had seen. It's hard to tell whether Johnathon noticed the stares we received or if the rumors were blocked out by the music blaring in the headphones he always wore, but I noticed it all. I saw the white kids squint, secretly trying to figure us out. I saw the black kids shake their heads in disapproval. I saw the teachers roll their eyes and tell everyone to keep it moving.

My close friends were all very supportive. They said things like, "Oh my god, it literally doesn't even matter that you're black." Or "You know it's just like, skin pigments." Or "My mom says your family has a nicer house than all of us anyway, so whatever." I successfully ignored the looks and the comments for about a month. And that's when Bobby got involved.

Bobby was new to Byron Middle School and everyone was afraid of him. He was tall—too tall for 6<sup>th</sup> grade—and it was rumored that he'd gotten kicked out of his old school for killing another student in a fight. He certainly looked capable of it. He had actual muscles, his arms the envy of every other 6<sup>th</sup> grader and some of the teachers. Bobby wore the same thing every day—wrinkled white t-shirt, khakis, black Jordan's. More than once I'd seen him get up and leave class after telling a teacher he didn't want to be there anymore. The teacher, whom I guessed was frightened, usually just let him go.

Bobby spoke like no white person I'd ever met before and exactly like most black persons I had met or seen on TV. His mouth stopped words right before they actually ended and made up new verb tenses freely. Instead of telling the Social Studies teacher that he'd learned this lesson in his previous school, he said, "Man, I been done knew this." And instead of telling his friends that he is almost always watching TV, he said, "I stay watchin' Cops."

He not only talked "black" but he hung around only the black kids in school. It was a small group and he was easy to spot. He liked the things the black boys in school liked—basketball, science class, and carrying around a rag to wipe scuffs off their shoes. He sounded blacker than me, acted blacker than me, had more black friends than me—all of which the rest of the black kids at school thought they should point out to me on a regular basis.

"Pssh, Bobby's blacka than you," they said when they caught me singing "Ms. Jackson" in the hallway.

"Bobby, tell this girl how much you love soul food," they said when I complained about my family's Sunday dinners of hog jaws and collard greens.

“Ariel, if you like white boys so much at least date Bobby,” they said. “Maybe he’ll make you black enough.”

Without ever saying anything to me directly, Bobby became someone I didn’t like very much. The constant comparison, where he ironically exhibited everything I was told to be, made me avoid him at all cost. I knew it wasn’t his fault and I never voiced my dislike towards him, just kept my comfortable distance—until the day he made that impossible.

“Aye!”

I turned around and saw a 6-foot Bobby running full speed toward me after recess, his hands cupped around his mouth.

“AYE!”

Surely he wasn’t talking to me. I turned back around.

“Aye, girl! I know you heard me!”

I turned back around and he was already close, slouching nonchalantly, one hand balled into the fist of the other, not even breathing heavy. As ridiculous as it is, for a moment I found myself thinking he was effortlessly handsome. For all his weird ways, Bobby had a fully formed square jawline and blue eyes protected by long lashes that touched his cheeks when he blinked.

“I didn’t know you were talking to me,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Nah, it’s cool,” he said, scratching his head which was buzzed short. “Aye, so you really go wit’ Johnathon? Skinny white kid—with the bangs?”

I stopped thinking about Bobby’s facial features and started thinking of all the ways this conversation was about to go wrong.

“Um, yeah,” I said.

He laughed. “You know y’all’s babies gonna be like, green and purple, right?”

Then he took off running past me and into school.

As he ran away, I stood there wondering a lot of things. Why did Bobby feel the need to say something so useless and hurtful to me? Had I upset him somehow? Why didn’t he understand the basics of human genetics and skin pigmentation? Did he actually know what green and purple looked like?

Regardless of the stupidity of his comment, again I felt that sting, the one that spreads from the base of the throat to the back of the chest. In a matter of minutes, I found myself crying in one of the worst places you can cry in middle school—the lunch line. My friends crowded around me, trying to block me from everyone’s view, but it was useless. Sixth graders can sniff out drama just walking into a room. By the time we grabbed our trays and sat down to eat, everyone knew what had happened and everyone had something to say about it.

Some shook their heads and said Bobby was the rudest boy they knew. Others said, “Well, I don’t think you guys are a cute couple, but I’d never say that to your face.” My closest friends said more supportive things like, “Want me tell him how poor he looks?” Most surprising was what Johnathon had to say: “I’m gonna fight him.”

Its common knowledge that the rumor of a middle school fight is always more thrilling than the actual fight. This fact is especially true when you happen to be the offended damsel whose honor is being protected. I may have actually smiled when Johnathon first walked up to Bobby during lunch and said through clenched teeth, “After school in the car rider lot.”

Someone, a particular someone who also thought I was pretty, was now standing up for me. It

was all so exciting. Kids commented on how much Johnathon must care if he was willing to fight for me and I agreed. It felt good to have our relationship receive a bit of positive gossip for once. The feeling was only slightly mitigated by the fact that I knew, in my heart of hearts, that my boyfriend, no matter how valiant his effort, was about to get his ass beat.

There was no possible way Johnathon was going to survive this. He was as short as me and possibly skinnier, but when the last bell rang, he marched bravely up to me and kissed me on the cheek, then walked slowly outside to meet Bobby, me and all his friends following behind. Outside they didn't speak to each other, just nodded at each other and squared off—Bobby on the left, Johnathon on the right. A crowd had gathered around them and somewhere in it, an obnoxious boy said, "Go!" and they went.

It didn't last long. Johnathon immediately went low, a smart move since he only came up to Bobby's chest anyway. He ran into Bobby's stomach with full force, trying to knock him down, I suppose, and gain the advantage. Bobby barely moved. He took a step back and while Johnathon, now leaning on nothing tried to catch his balance, Bobby punched him in the eye. To his credit, Johnathon waited until there was no one left other than me to start crying.

Johnathon stuck around for about a week before the relationship gradually faded along with his new black eye. After the train wreck of a fight, parents were called, motive was given, and his dad ordered him to break up with me. Like a gentlemen, he still took me to the dance where, in a show of his devotion, he transferred Chew Spree Candies from his mouth, to his hand, to my mouth as we sat at the top of the dark bleachers. I knew that this would be one of our last moments together, so I gobbled the half-soggy, bittersweet candy greedily and let him put a hand on my knee.

The disastrous ending to my relationship with Johnathon was enough to keep me away from dating white guys for a while. Instead in an effort to fit in and do what was expected, I experimented with dating the black guys at my school. I wasn't really picky, saying yes to any of them that got up the courage to ask to hold my hand or carry my books, but still each relationship ended, this time in slower and less dramatic fashions. I dated Corey, a tall light-skinned basketball player until he said the word "unmature" and meant it. Charles, the color of molasses, had the deepest most perfectly circular dimples I've seen to this day, but we broke up because I didn't like the way his mom called me her future daughter-in-law. John was from Alaska and was in a rock band. In the predominately black community that surrounded our small-minded high school, he was considered whiter than me. I don't even remember why we broke up—we should've been perfect together.

None of these relationships broke me because I never felt invested in them. The boys were nice enough, but because there was nothing to fight for, no soap box to stand on and preach about injustice, I felt time pass slowly and uneventfully. Eventually I got bored with the whole thing and stopped trying to date anyone. I experienced each high school rite of passage with friends instead—homecoming games, prom, graduation. I didn't exactly miss out, I was just bored out of my mind. I didn't really fall for another white guy until Teddy.

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Teddy Story and his six brothers and sisters were each homeschooled until middle school, which gave them the quiet, soft-spoken manner that made you think they were either smarter than you or quite possibly just didn't know English. No one at my school had met someone who was homeschooled before, so naturally we thought Teddy was a freak when we first met him. We knew he liked soccer, tested well enough to be in the gifted program and that's it. I actually don't

recall him speaking until high school, when he surprised and delighted us all by being really normal.

We were also delighted to find out his family had a pool. This meant we had somewhere to swim besides the local public pool which was always crowded with elementary school kids and their birthday parties. His parents didn't seem to mind us being there all day. In fact they were probably excited to know their son had grown out of his awkward stage and made a group of friends. They seemed especially interested in me, the gangly black girl jumping in their pool and eating all of their food. They asked a lot of questions.

"You speak so well," they said. "Are you adopted?"

"No, ma'am."

"Well, what are you mixed with?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Do you need a swimming cap for the pool?"

"Yes, please."

His mom was the type to read constantly from the Bible, buy magnetic crosses for the fridge and make daily posts on her blog called *The Seven Story House*. Mr. Story was the type to glare at me from the inside of their screened in porch and shake his head. His mom was nice, although seemed nervous around me. I got the feeling she worried about what I'd think of her house, or worried I'd notice that her husband's eyes got squinty around me. She spent a lot of extra time making sure I was comfortable. I wanted to tell her that I was used to being the only black kid in the group and that if she wanted to make me comfortable then she and her husband

should stop staring at me in my Hollister bikini like I had come to steal their son away and get him addicted to the dangerous world of black sex.

I mean, I did. But not until after we'd graduated high school and really, was I the only one to blame?

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Teddy and I started dating the summer we graduated high school. We were brought together by a combination of growing adoration for one another, the loneliness that accompanies preparing to leave for college, and too many summer days seeing each other half naked in swimsuits. Having seen the way his dad looked at me, I expected Teddy to keep the news quiet. But Teddy was adorably ignorant. He not only told his parents we were dating, but he started holding my hand in front of them, kissing me on the cheek, bragging about how *color blind* he was. He meant well, but I knew the only color he was really blind to, was the angry red one in his parents' cheeks when they realized what was happening. I tried to warn him and because I didn't want to hurt his feelings, I tried to be subtle about it.

"Your dad's a racist," I said.

"What?" he said. "He's like 1/8 Asian."

"Asians can be racist," I informed him.

I told him how I caught his dad staring suspiciously at me across the dinner table and shaking his head when we showed any affection toward each other, but he didn't believe me. He knew his dad had flaws—being cheap, walking around without pants on when they had company—but he couldn't imagine his dad not liking me.

Regardless of how his dad felt, Teddy's mother kept inviting me over for dinner, making me wonder if anyone in this family really paid attention to Mr. Story or his facial expressions at all. But the promise of home-cooked Sunday dinner that included a lot of pizza instead of collard greens but instead was worth sitting at the same table as Mr. Story no matter how much he hated me.

Teddy and I were sitting in their living room, playing Mario Kart on his family's Wii while his mother moved around the kitchen cleaning and setting the table and his father napped upstairs. Teddy and his siblings were all still dressed nice from church and I felt like a bum for not putting on something dressier before I came over.

"Alright, guys," I heard Mrs. Story say. "You kids wash up and I'll go wake up your dad!"

All nine of us rushed toward a bathroom in a different end of the house. Teddy and I ended up in the same room, giggling and splashing each other with water. He tickled me as I playfully punched him in the arm. Leaving the bathroom we heard Mrs. Story call Teddy into his parents' bedroom. He rolled his eyes and left me in the hallway.

I went back downstairs and found an empty seat at the table, hoping our bathroom frolicking didn't get him in trouble. His brother Ian, in middle school at the time, started talking to me about Mario Kart.

"After dinner, I'll show you how to beat Teddy," he said. "He's got this secret thing he does where he—"

There was a loud crash from above our head, followed by a scream and a slammed door. Nobody moved. We sat around the table and looked at each other. Claire, the youngest, looked like she might cry.

Heavy footsteps thumped down the steps and soon Teddy appeared in the kitchen with a towel wrapped around his hand. The towel was turning red and dripping blood. The sight finally kicked me into gear. I stood and rushed over to him.

“What happened?” I said. “Let me see!”

He pulled away. “Let’s go outside.”

He turned and headed for the back porch, stopped and waited for me to open the glass door for him. I closed it behind us. We sat on the wooden bench near the pool, where all the Story kids had carved their names when they were young. I waited for an explanation.

“You can’t stay for dinner tonight,” he said.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“My dad won’t eat with us if you’re here,” he mumbled.

I nodded toward his bleeding hand. “So...?”

“I hit the wall.”

“Did it help?”

He didn’t say anything and I knew he wasn’t pleased by my attempt to make light of the situation. But, looking back, I’m proud of 17-year-old self in those next moments, the calm way I nodded, stood, and told him it was okay. I headed back inside, seeing the rest of the Story

children still sitting around the table but turned to look at us through the glass door. Teddy, stubborn as he was, walked me to my car, kissed me on the forehead before I left, even called me after dinner. He told me it didn't change anything for him, but I went the rest of the summer without stepping foot into that house again.

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Teddy gave me really good directions.

He didn't just print off the list of turns from Google Maps. He wrote step by step instructions, showing me where I would enter each new town, pass the old Macon mall, and go over the railroad tracks. He drew little pictures along the way, an arrow for each left and right turn, a red circle reminding me to reset the trip odometer and at the last step, when I'd finally finished the four hour drive from Valdosta to Athens, he had drawn two cartoon people embracing in the middle of the road, the headlights of the car still on. We were only 18.

It was late January in Athens and there were still remnants of snow on the ground when I pulled up to a university parking deck that night. I was visiting Teddy for the first time since we'd left for different colleges in August. He was standing just before the gate of a parking deck with his hands shoved in his pockets.

With him there, caught in my headlights, I realized I'd forgotten how tall he was. At least 6'7, his head disappeared as I pulled the car closer. He was skinny, all arms and legs and still slightly awkward, just standing there waiting for me. A soccer player almost all of his life, his calves were the only muscular thing about him. The last time I'd seen him, he had a dark summer tan, but now he was pale, almost made blue by my headlights.

After I parked, he had to duck to scoop me out of my tiny car. He picked me up effortlessly, said “Hey” in his goofy way and squeezed me to him. Teddy always smelled like a mixture of grass, simple boy musk and the Gap men’s cologne I’d bought him for Christmas last year. I pulled away, took a minute and looked at his face: round chin and thin lips, long nose, blue eyes and bushy eyebrows. He started planting neat little kisses on my face—my forehead, my eyelids, nose and cheeks. It wasn’t long before I was pressed against the still running car, leg almost hiked.

Kissing Teddy was still new and exciting. I liked the way I had to stand on the tips of my toes to reach his lips, the way our noses crisscrossed back and forth, and the way his hands, even though they politely started on the small of my back, now gave me urgent tugs by the belt loops of my jeans. A truck full of boys drove by and honked at us causing us to jump apart.

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I didn’t think much about my virginity before Teddy. In high school, I had only a handful of boyfriends and my parents confined our “dates” to my living room couch. That, combined with the fact that I didn’t get my braces off until senior year and I was, as my mother always unapologetically stated, “a late bloomer,” left me free to think about other things. I didn’t mind. I thought of my virginity not as something I would “lose”, but as something I would hand over at the age of 30 when I eventually got married.

But as Teddy and I got closer, the way high school friends desperately cling to each other in the first few months of college away from home, we discussed it several times. Over the phone in our separate dorm rooms, miles apart, we had awkward conversations, initiated with stops and starts, incomplete sentences and more questions than answers.

“Have you ever...?”

“No. Have you ever...?”

“No.”

Well...I mean—do you want to...?”

“Do you want to?”

In the end, we decided that we would.

That night, too young for the bars downtown, we went to a house party with Teddy’s roommate, Al. The house and the yard were covered with a giant tarp, blocking it from the outside view. “So cops can’t see underage people drinking,” explained Al. We spent that night drinking hunch punch from red Solo cups, singing karaoke and listening to Al play the Harry Potter theme song on his violin. I was already a seasoned drinker having grown up with an older sister who thought it would be funny to dare me to take shots of tequila when I was 12, but Teddy had no such experience until now. I dared him to drink more, beat him relentlessly in cards and used a heavy hand when I fixed him a new drink. I figured if we were going to talk about losing our virginity to each other that night, it’d go easier if we were both drunk.

At some point, I left the group in search of the bathroom, walking down hallways and opening up random doors. Finding it locked, I leaned against the wall to wait. A few minutes later, the door opened and Al stumbled out, obviously drunk. He saw me and refocused his gaze.

“Heeyyyy, you,” he said. “I know what you’re here for.”

I blushed. Of course Teddy had told him. They’d gotten close since he’d moved to Athens, going to parties together and kicking around a soccer ball on the front lawn. I mumbled

something about having to pee and tried to move past him into the bathroom. He blocked the door.

“Why Teddy?” he asked. “Why not someone else?”

It may have been an innocent question, but his tone wasn't. I looked at him and realized he was leaning in too close. He wasn't an unattractive guy. Skinny like Teddy, but with deep brown skin and thick lips. He had freckles sprinkled on his cheeks and a clean cut hairline. I felt my cheeks flush. It wasn't that I couldn't muster up the courage to push him away, but at this point I was 18 and had never been kissed by a black man. I was curious. I closed my eyes and waited.

I heard footsteps in the hallway and jerked away. It was Teddy, also drunk thanks to me, and stumbling toward us, fast.

“I lost you,” he screamed as he barreled into me with a bear hug. Over his shoulder, I saw Al, shaking his head and reaching into Teddy's back pocket for the keys. We wouldn't be going to a hotel that night after all. I never mentioned the almost kiss. That night in bed, with Al snoring in the bunk above us, Teddy was beginning to sober up and we talked about the next day.

“Are you nervous?” Teddy asked.

For some reason I wasn't. I felt coldly and logically decided about the whole thing, but I felt that he was and said I was too.

“You know we don't have to,” he said. “It's not a big deal to me if you want to wait.”

Surprisingly, losing my virginity to Teddy was an easy decision for me to make even knowing what his dad thought of me. I had heard plenty of horror stories about girls who ended

up regretting the decision and having to live with it forever. *But it's Teddy*, I thought, as if that explained everything. *Teddy*. His name was synonymous with harmless. Already he'd given me a promise ring, one that he designed himself in the shape of a shooting star that wound around my finger, a minuscule diamond in the center. It wasn't the overwhelming love I'd read about in books or seen in movies, where two people can't stand to be apart. Instead it was simple and comfortable. I figured, even if we didn't get married one day, I wouldn't mind remembering him forever. He was the nicest person I knew. I assured him that I was ready and we fell asleep.

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The next day we toured downtown Athens for hours, stopping at Junkman's Daughters' Brother, a huge store filled top to bottom with random trinkets. He bought me a wax stamp with the letter 'A' and a purple wax candle so that I could write him more letters. I bought him comic books and a fake flower pin that squirted water. We ate lunch at a sub shop, sitting outside on the patio and watching grass force its way through leftover snow. When we had run out of things to do, we found ourselves parked in front of a CVS, talking about condoms.

"What, um, kind should I get?" he asked me.

"Um. The sturdy kind," I joked. He didn't laugh.

"Well, I Googled it and apparently—" he stopped short at my laughter. "What?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's just, you Googled it? Really?"

"Says the girl who won't go in the store to buy them," he said. I stopped laughing.

Ten minutes later he returned to the car with a box of condoms and the biggest container of lube I'd ever seen—the only container of lube I'd ever seen. *Did we even need lube? Did we*

*need that much of it?* Suddenly it occurred to me that this wouldn't be a one-time performance. Once we had sex, we would probably continue to have sex, because that's how it worked. While I felt okay losing my virginity to Teddy, somehow the idea of continuous sex made me feel nervous—like I had something to prove and wasn't sure exactly how to prove it.

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Not realizing that most hotels had an age minimum for guests, we went to hotel after hotel, getting turned down. Teddy would hop out and head to the front desk only to get sent back four times in a row. Eventually we found a hotel on the outside of the city. I watched the desk clerk's bored face as he nodded and Teddy turned around to wave me inside. We paid and went upstairs to our room.

The room was so tiny that everything touched; the window touched the bed, the bed touched the nightstands and the nightstands touched the television. After I set down my bag, I had to climb over the bed to reach the bathroom. I looked behind me to see Teddy already taking out the condoms from his bag.

"I'm gonna go to the bathroom real quick," I said.

"Need to freshen up?" he asked with wink and a smile. I winced at his bad joke and closed the bathroom door.

I stood in the bathroom, looking at the mirror. I didn't think about losing my virginity or my innocence, I didn't think about growing up, getting older and more mature, I didn't think about the future at all. Instead I thought about the past. I thought about my parents, the only role models for romance I'd ever known, the times when my mom would ask if my friends, all white, were treating me okay. I thought about my dad, who went to segregated schools until his senior

year. I thought about all the boys, white and black, who had disappointed me before. I wondered if it would be weird, knowing I'd lost my virginity to a white guy after going through all of those relationships before. I wondered if I should even be doing this.

Teddy knocked, asking if I was okay and I opened the door.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m good.”

“You sure?”

“Yup.”

We went to center of the room and when I saw that he had put rose petals on the bed, I almost started to cry. It was corny, yes, but that wasn't the reason. The threatening tears were because this thing, this patience, these roses, were the nicest things any guy, white or black, had ever done for me. Teddy just happened to be white. I felt as if that was backwards and not how it should be, while simultaneously acknowledging that it shouldn't matter, but most likely would always matter.

“I just wanted it to be special,” he said.

I let him undress me. He was sweet. He was careful and gentle and kept asking me if I was okay. It wasn't a horror story at all, but I wasn't even in it. I was miles away in my head, feeling like I was stealing from him, although he seemed more than happy to give. I knew how his parents felt about me, even as Teddy continually downplayed the situation. I knew that I was taking him from them one step at a time. But I didn't say anything. I just focused on the rough texture of the stucco ceiling, because I had to look somewhere. Teddy was the only interracial relationship I had that ended for reasons other than race and that is how I remember him. He

stands out from the Kyles, the Johnathans, even the Matthews. The image of him is tattooed in my brain, him, standing there in his boxers and trying to make me happy.