

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO

AUTUMN
ALLEN

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Autumn Allen

With lyrics by Kahlil AkNahlej Allen



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Phoenix and Michael Graves, "Speak Out: Graves Assails Apathy, Laments End of Activism," Black Liberation 1969 Archive, accessed January 6, 2023, <https://blacklib1969.swarthmore.edu/items/show/308>

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"our living, Black manhood" – "A Eulogy for Malcolm X," Ossie Davis, February 27, 1965

John Lewis, "Speech at the March on Washington," 28 August, 1963 <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/lewis-speech-at-the-march-on-washington-speech-text/>

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*In the Name of God,
the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful*

*I dedicate this work to my brother,
to our mother,
to Black youth everywhere and always,
and to the child inside all of us.*

Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

We can't always wait for all the facts to be in, for all the facts are never in. Succinctly, stop being so rational and move. Awaken your soul.

—Michael A. Graves, "Speak Out"

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GIBRAN

Massachusetts / September 1995

The bass is thumping. I can feel it in my bones. It's begging me to bob my head, laugh, and shout. In another place, I would get up, my boys in step with me, rush the stage, dance. But in Thatcher Hall, at Lakeside Academy, I freeze.

Three white boys—two seniors and a junior—bounce onto the stage, smirking. The bass becomes a warped noise as my eyes take in every inch of their costumes.

Six pairs of sneakers, all mixed up on three pairs of feet. Yellow and red. Red and black. Black and green.

They're high-top sneakers—good ones. Expensive ones. And they're brand-new. No doubt bought on their parents' credit cards, just for this one stunt.

They march back and forth, pretending to warm up to the music, acting like they're going to rhyme. I watch those sneakers, obsessed with the fact that they'll never wear them again.

They wear baggy jeans so new, they're creased and saturated with dye.

Crisp white T-shirts, extra extra large.

The jeans, the shirts—they won't wear those again either.

They got the brands right mostly, but their ignorance shows in the details.

Their Red Sox caps betray them. Faded all over and frayed at the edges. If they knew anything about us, they'd know you can't perform in that. The contrast is almost funny.

But those mismatched shoes. And the walk. An exaggerated pimp walk. Dip, hop, dip, hop. Arms swinging, greedy grins on their faces, swaying to a rhythm that doesn't match the beat still rattling my bones. Mics held to their thin lips, their mouths move, but I can't hear the words they're lip-synching. I can barely hear the muffled laughter of the other white students who watch.

I tear my eyes away from the stage and scan the audience. The boys' friends crack up and cheer them on. Other white students cover their smiles with one hand, wide-eyed, not sure if they should find this funny.

The boys onstage are laughing. Their blue, green, hazel eyes gleam with something that feels sinister. They wear a confidence that was never taken from them. I want to steal it now.

What can I do? Stop the show? Bash the speakers? Slap the microphones out of their hands? I savor the fantasy, but there are too many witnesses. To be the aggressor in front of the whole school—that would guarantee my expulsion. I wouldn't mind; it could be worth it. If only it weren't for my mother's tears. My family's pleas. *You're almost there, Gibran. Just graduate. Finish your last year.*

Like it's easy. No. The longer I'm here, the harder it gets.

On my right, James's dark eyes are narrowed, following the boys across the stage, trying to figure out if this is for real.

On my left, David glares at the wall behind them, expressionless, holding himself together.

The three of us make eye contact and exchange thoughts silently.

Here we go.

These dudes.

Are they serious right now?

I check for the other Black students. The new ones are surprised and confused. The student-of-color orientation ended today—that blissful week of brown and Black faces making this place our own. Now, this “talent show,” the first all-school event of the year, reveals what Lakeside is really like.

The rest of the Black students stare—at the stage, at the floor, some at the wall—determined not to be provoked. Not to put their emotions on display. They wear their discomfort, disbelief, and disgust as lightly as possible, trying not to offend. They wait. Wait for it to be over.

None of these white people, students or faculty, can see what I see. The boys onstage commit the offense, but we're the ones being careful.

I can't do it anymore.

I get up. I'm thinking I'll go outside, get some air, wait til this insult is over, and come back. It's not much—barely a protest—but it's something. At least I can liberate myself. I walk toward the auditorium door. But I slow down as something catches my eye.

The speaker is plugged into an extension cord that runs by the door to the hallway. It's an old building in an old boarding school—several hundred years old. Its prestige comes from age and pedigree. My eyes travel the length of the wire.

People accuse me of acting without thinking. The thing is, though, I'm *always* thinking. I just calculate differently. I think one thing: Right or wrong?

Is it right for me to let everyone else sit here, subjected to this nonsense, while I go get some air? No.

Is it right for me to stop this show if I can do it without damaging any property or injuring any bodies? Hell yeah.

So I continue out the door. And as I go, I bend down and yank the cord out of the wall. The music stops. The roaring in my ears stops. My back feels lighter, and my chest opens up. I can breathe.

There is a sweet moment of silence.

Then the reactions begin.

Gasps. Murmurs. A boy calls from the low stage, "Hey, what the—"

A voice from the Black students: "Ohhh snap!"

I let the door swing behind me.

I cut swiftly through the hallway, where the old stuffy white guys on the walls stare down at me. I resist the urge to give them the finger: *How ya like me now?* I act casual, just in case. I could maybe pretend it was an accident.

I reach the door to outside and shove the brass bar to open it. It creaks and falls closed behind me with a clang. The night is warm, and the stone steps glow silver gray. I take a deep breath and smile.



I'm slurping instant oatmeal and bobbing my head to Mobb Deep when Mom rushes into the kitchen. Her soft suede jacket and boots meet at her knees, layered over jeans and a blouse. She caresses my head as she passes me. She opens the fridge, scans its contents, checks her watch, and closes the fridge. She never eats breakfast. I don't know why she pretends to consider it every morning.

I finish scraping the bottom of my bowl and then find Mom looking at me. I reach to pull off my headphones, but she beats me to it. She shakes them at me, her silver bracelets jingling, and then drops them in my lap.

"These things are the death of the family unit."

"Sorry," I say, suppressing a smirk. I only wear headphones at home when I'm playing music with "explicit lyrics." Which is most of my music. But that's not why she calls them "the death of the family." She thinks I don't listen to her. But it's not the headphones. "What's up?" I ask.

"I said, are you going to make your bus?"

"Oh yeah. I got plenty of time."

"Famous last words."

I stand up. "I'm heading out right now. Don't worry."

She exhales. "Okay." She squares her hips and points her finger. This is her lecturing stance.

"Be careful," I recite for her. "Follow the rules." I get up and rinse my bowl in the sink.

She pulls me around to face her with surprising strength for her petite frame. The concern in her eyes makes me shift

my gaze to her freckled nose, her soft curls, her beaded earrings.

"Listen," she says. "You are there for one reason and one reason only."

"I know—"

"I said listen. It doesn't matter what anyone else does or says. Don't let it bother you. You have to work—"

"Twice as hard to get half as far," I chime in.

She raises her face to the ceiling. "I tried, God."

I wonder if she thinks she failed. But then she gazes at my face, puts her arms around my middle, and squeezes. "I hate being at separate schools," she says into my chest.

Until high school, I went to White Oak School, where she teaches. In my earliest memories, the four of us rode to school together after a mad rush to get everyone out the door, backpacks in one hand and egg sandwiches in the other. Now the house is quiet. Ava at college and Ashanta married. We usually have someone who's down on their luck staying in one of our extra rooms for however long they need, but right now it's just me and Mom.

At first I was excited to go to a bigger school with more Black kids, but it didn't take long to realize Lakeside is just another prep school full of rich white kids. The few students of color are supposed to try to blend in. Without Mom as a buffer between me and the faculty, it's even harder to stay out of trouble. I don't miss her chasing me down the hallways. I do miss knowing she was in the building—that someone who believed in me had my back.

Mom finally releases me. "My baby," she says. Her eyes crease with worry. "Almost a man. I can't believe you're

about to be eighteen.” Another sigh, then she pokes my chest with each command. “Be good. Be careful. Take those off your head the moment you step onto campus.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I joke.

When I started at Lakeside, Mom dropped me off and picked me up every day. I decided getting myself there and back could give her one less thing to stress about, so now I take two buses. She was relieved in a way, but now that she doesn’t have the car ride to lecture me, she has to check me before we’re out the door.

She inspects me from my hairline to my shoes.

“Yeah, you know I’m lookin fly.” I grin and flip up the collar of my sports shirt.

She’s finally smiling. “Okay. I’m late.” As she backs out of the kitchen, she calls out, “One more year. Nine months.”

“Yup.” I send my voice out behind her. “I got this.”

Maybe.

What I don’t say

Every year on the first day of classes, I remember our very first day in private school: you as new faculty, us as new students. The memory isn’t real, but it’s real to me. Like something alive, it changes and grows. Instead of fading with time, it brightens. A black-and-white photograph developing slowly, and then touched up in color. It’s a created memory. An origin story, a myth, a legend of you, my mother.

You were baby-faced, and your summer glow was fading. Petite and slender, you wore your typical uniform: tall leather boots, soft suede jacket, and dangling earrings

made of beads. You held my hand and Ava's in your strong artist's hands. Ashanta ambled alongside, lost in her own thoughts, her backpack stuffed for third grade. You walked us from the faculty parking lot through the sprawling, impeccably landscaped grounds. We felt free in the expanse, and we longed to run, but your firm grip kept us close.

A blond woman with aggressively tanned skin came out of the building and started to hold the door for us, but you slowed down and stopped far from the entrance. The woman let it close and walked past us with a cheerful, "Good morning!" You shaped your face into a performative smile, trembling with the effort.

Other children skipped past us. Parents shrieked at each other, "OhmyGod, hiiiiii, look at you!" They hugged and chatted about their summers and their families before returning to their shiny cars with a wave.

You knelt in front of us and fiddled with us for the thousandth time that morning. You smoothed Ava's bangs, creased my collar, folded Ava's lace socks, and tugged on my plain ones. You straightened the straps of Ashanta's backpack. You looked at the building with its sparkling glass doors.

"Listen," you said, your voice low, almost conspiratorial. "You are not here to make friends." You glanced at the families going in and out, laughing together. "I mean . . . they don't have to like you. They may not like you. But it doesn't matter. You're only here to learn. Don't worry about what anyone else thinks. Okay? Do you understand?" You looked at each of our faces.

We said nothing. We did not understand. It would take

years for us to understand. For a long time, we would think there was something wrong with you.

You pulled us close for a hug and breathed us in: our hair grease and our new, off-brand clothes. I squeezed you back, hoping somehow to restore the mom I knew from home. The mom who taught us to draw and paint. The magical mom who took us to Brigham's for ice cream and had all of our friends over at the same time and treated every child like her own and gave until there was nothing left.

Before you let us go, you whispered something, so softly that I'm not sure you really said it.

"Don't trust them."

A warning to us, a reminder for yourself, or both? It echoed in my ears, knocking at the back of my mind until the days became years and the years dragged on and the long, long years finally taught me what it meant.



First day of classes, senior year. Mr. Wheatley, my advisor, looks pained to see me. The feeling is mutual, but I might be better at hiding it than he is. In his office, sunlight streams in through the old, wooden window, highlighting his sparse hair, peeling sunburn, and the dust on his elbow-patched tweed jacket. He closes a folder and rests it on his lap, crosses his legs, and adjusts his brown-framed glasses.

"Welcome back," he says without a hint of warmth in his voice. "I hope you had a nice summer."

I don't have a chance to respond before he continues.

"We've got a few important notes to discuss. You are

aware that your disruption at the talent show last week goes into your permanent disciplinary record?"

I let that sink in. "Now I am."

"Now you are. So you are also aware that one more appearance before the discipline committee will earn you not suspension but expulsion from school?"

My mouth goes dry. "Okay."

"Two more small strikes like the talent show or one big strike such as inappropriate conduct with another student, and your final year will be cut short. Is that understood?"

I attempt to smile. "Got it."

"Good." He folds his hands together like he's about to say grace. "Gibran, I would hate to see you waste this wonderful opportunity—"

Blah, blah, blah. I tune him out. I can recite this speech from memory. I've heard it so many times from so many people with different intentions. As if he personally knows my family and what sacrifices were made to get me here. Please.

The funny part is when people like Mr. Wheatley say I can talk to them about anything. Yeah, right.

What if I tried to explain why I pulled the plug at the talent show? What if I told him I did it for all the Black kids? I can predict how that would go.

Everything isn't always about race, Gibran.

They didn't mean to offend anyone.

I don't want to hear all that.

And they don't want to hear me either. If they did, they would have asked me why I did it before they went and put it in my record.

When he takes a breath, I interject. “Are we all set here, Mr. Wheatley?”

He sinks in his chair and looks deflated. Maybe he thought I’d have some big moment of enlightenment. “Well . . . I suppose we are. Unless you have any questions about your schedule or college counseling or—”

“I don’t.” He’s already told me everything I need to know.

He rubs the arm of his chair, annoyed. “All right, then.” He pulls out a sheet of paper and an envelope. “This is your schedule, and this letter goes to your parents. I presume I can trust you to deliver it.”

“Of course.”

I fold the envelope and put it in the back pocket of my jeans before throwing my backpack over my shoulder and leaving his office.

The hallway is lined with students holding recommendation forms and other papers in their hands. Their meetings will go differently. Mr. Wheatley will smile when they walk in, genuinely happy to see them. He’ll ask how their summer vacations were—what internships they completed and where they traveled overseas—before discussing their schedules with them, making sure they’re happy with their courses. He’ll encourage them to keep up their strong academics and extracurriculars. He’ll want details about their college visits and application plans.

I don’t know if he knows that I’m already going to Howard. With my test scores, I only had to write a few essays to qualify for early admission with a nice scholarship for their business administration program. I’m not sure I’ll like business, but I figure it could help me be more in control of making my music.

I'm not even sure I want to spend four more years in school after this, but it's what my mom and her parents expect, so it's the path of least resistance.

My admission and scholarship depend on my successful high school graduation, of course. For anyone else, that should be easy. But for me, with one strike left? It's like they're holding the door open, waiting for me to walk right out.



My schedule is filled with the usual—honors calculus, physics, AP English, Spanish—but I do have one class to look forward to.

Lakeside is proud of its elective seminars, and the teachers love them. They offer topics they're passionate about, going deep into niche subjects like social persuasion or *Hamlet* with juniors and seniors. I've heard about Mr. Adrian's African American history seminar since freshman year. Older Black students hyped it up, so most of us take it when we can.

My mom's generation fought to have Black studies in colleges. She used to tell me the stories of the Black students taking over the administration building at Boston University to get the school's attention to their demands. She would laugh when she remembered how they answered the main phone line during their occupation: "Black BU!" She stopped telling me those stories when she saw that I had a rebellious streak in me too.

I bet they thought by now Black studies would be included

in the required curriculum. Instead, we're still supposed to feel grateful to have this one elective class about ourselves while "Western civilization" gets twelve years.

By the time I enter the classroom, I'm almost resentful. I can't help it—whenever I sense that gratitude is expected and not deserved, I go hard in the opposite direction. But Mr. Adrian's open smile disarms me. I am the last to arrive, and instead of checking the clock, he looks at me, excited, like I'm the person he's been waiting for.

"Gibran! Welcome."

He seems sincere. I have to give it to him; he's the only teacher who doesn't shrink when he sees me or avert his eyes. He's a full head shorter than me too. His bright blond hair wisps around his balding head.

The large oval oak table is lined with students sitting in heavy wooden armchairs, crisp notebooks open in front of them. I take a seat next to James, who wears his favorite Champion sweatshirt and baggy jeans. I lift my chin to nod whassup to David, who sits across from us, next to another soccer player. There are more brown faces in here than I've seen in any of my classes ever. It's nice. Comfortable. Though it'd also be nice if more than five white kids cared enough to be here.

Mr. Adrian leans on the tabletop, his fingers spread like a runner's getting ready to race.

"Welcome, everyone." His voice sounds like tires on gravel but in a warm, relaxed way. "Let's discuss what we expect from a course on African American history. What is the relationship between African American history and American history in general?"

Does he want my real answer? African American history is what you learn at home, when Moms drops names over dinner or when you go through your parents' and grandparents' bookshelves. So-called American history is the white his-story you learn at school for twelve years until, if you're lucky, you get one "special seminar" to throw some color in there. Black history messes up the hero narrative of white history, so for the most part, Black history is left out.

James is the first to raise his hand. Let's see how diplomatic he'll be. "I mean, they're supposed to be one and the same, right?" he says. "Like, without African Americans, there would be no America. And without America, there would be no African Americans. So they shouldn't really be divided."

"Yeah," Lisa says, pushing her glasses up her nose. Her tight curls are pulled back in a puffy ponytail, and her dimples dig deep into her cheeks as she talks. "They're totally interdependent. But people treat African American history like it's . . . supplemental."

"Okay." Mr. Adrian turns to the blackboard and writes *interdependent*. Then he leans on the table again. "Other thoughts?"

A white boy named Eric cocks his head. "I guess I thought of American history as including African American history," he says. "American history is general. Then when you focus on African American history, it's more . . . specialized? Or exclusive, I guess?"

"Pfff." I can't help myself.

Mr. Adrian and the other students turn my way.

"I'm sorry," I say to Mr. Adrian.

“Please,” he says, “respond.”

I clear my throat. “I mean, when you say it’s exclusive, that’s kind of funny to me, because really, it’s American history that’s exclusive. Black people and Native Americans are like a footnote or a sidebar in most American history books. The fact that there’s a separate class for African American history kind of proves that the general curriculum focuses on white people. Everything that was skipped over gets squeezed into these special seminars that aren’t even required.”

Some of the Black kids nod. Eric frowns and fiddles with his pen.

“So you’re saying,” Mr. Adrian responds slowly, “that African American history is not separate or exclusive, but separated and excluded. In curricula. In classrooms.”

“Yeah, even in the culture overall. Schools just reflect society and reproduce the same old systems.”

He writes *separated* and *excluded* on the blackboard and turns back to the class, one hand in the pocket of his khakis and the other twirling the piece of chalk. White dust covers his fingers.

Kate, a white girl wearing a faded Dartmouth T-shirt, speaks next. “I don’t think of them as separate. Or separated or whatever.” She pulls at the ends of her auburn hair. “We have learned about, like, African Americans before. We read *The Bluest Eye* in English last year.”

I take a deep breath.

Mr. Adrian blinks. He opens his mouth and then shuts it.

David says, “Yeah, we also read *Huckleberry Finn* in eighth grade.”

“Exactly!” Kate says as if he’s proving her point.

David, James, and I glance at each other and then back at Kate.

“Did y’all read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* too?” I ask, keeping a straight face.

“What?” Kate asks, confused.

The other Black kids stifle laughter. Lisa tries to hide it, but her dimples give her away.

Kate turns red and frowns at me.

“Well,” Mr. Adrian says, scratching his neck. “We can at least agree that there’s more to learn about African American history than what’s been included in the general history curriculum. That’s why we’re here today, right?”

Kate trains her eyes on him.

Mr. Adrian lets a silence stretch for almost a minute. Eric looks like he wants to say something, but he just twists his mouth. Finally, Mr. Adrian continues. “Well, we won’t have time to dive deep into every era this semester. Your research project will give you a chance to go deeper into a topic of interest to you.”

He straightens a stack of papers and hands it to the student on his left, who takes a sheet and passes on the stack.

“I want you to really bring your creativity to this project. You can work alone or in pairs. You can meet with me any time to talk about your ideas. Your project should pose a big question about African American history: the presence, contributions, and/or struggles of Black people in this country. It’s entirely possible you won’t find an answer or resolution. I’d like you to focus on presenting

your questions and your research in a way that is thought-provoking and engaging.”

Mr. Adrian fields questions about the project and about the syllabus. For the last fifteen minutes, he gives a mini lecture about the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the colonies. When class ends, notebooks slap shut and chairs scrape the floor. Students shuffle out of the room.

I walk with David and James toward the dining hall. It felt good to talk about our history in class for once. It feels easier to speak up when more of us are in the room too. I wonder how much further we’d get if we didn’t have to wait for the white kids to catch up.



At home, I leave the letter from the school on Mom’s dresser. Between her overflowing jewelry boxes and her art supplies, there’s a chance it’ll go unnoticed for a few days.

Wrong. She hasn’t been home for ten minutes when she bursts into my bedroom, pulling the letter out of the envelope.

“What’s this?” She lowers herself onto my bed. Worry lines form all over her face. “What . . . what did you do?”

“Nothing.”

She glares at me.

I shrug. “I guess I kinda, like, tripped over the extension cord in the middle of the talent show? The cord came out of the wall and—”

“Boy. You can’t even get that lie out your mouth with a straight face. Tell me what happened.”

I drop my head. "Aight, I didn't trip. I kinda did it on purpose. But Ma, it was ridiculous. They deserved it. These white boys—"

"Of course they deserved it," she snaps. "That is not the question. The question is, do you deserve the punishment you're going to get for giving them what they deserve?"

I suck my teeth.

"Don't suck your teeth at me."

"I'm not."

She holds the letter so tight she might rip it. "Jesus," she whispers. She shoves the letter back into its envelope and stares at the floor. "This is not good. You know what this means, don't you?"

"Yeah."

She grinds her teeth. "Don't give them another excuse, Gibran."



On Thursday, we have our Brother Bonding meeting. After school, I wait for James outside of Thatcher Hall, pacing across the wide stone steps from one oversized Roman column to the other. I practice some new lyrics while I wait.

*I wake up in the morning, I give thanks for living,
Then leave the house wit my mind focused on banking riches
I handle business
and still I witness
my people dying
The sun keep shining*

Other students push open the heavy doors and bounce outside. I laugh to myself as they make a wide arc around me, parting for me like the sea for Moses. They cross the street to the library or to the snack bar, or race to the campus green. As the flood of students slows to a trickle, I stop pacing and rhyming and watch the door. Maybe James forgot we were walking over together and went out a different way. I scratch my scalp with my cap and start missing my locks again. Mom made me cut them off for high school, but I don't even need my dreads to scare white people anymore.

I'm about to start strolling toward the meeting when the door flies open and James jogs out.

"Sup, G?" We clasp hands and pull away with a snap.

"What's up with you? Had a brother standin out here all day."

"Pshh. Five minutes. My bad. I had to ask Mr. Murphy for a recommendation. You don't know about that life though."

"Nope."

It's a good thing I don't. I can't think of a single faculty member here who would write me an enthusiastic recommendation. Maybe Mr. Adrian, but this is my first class with him. Mom was more relieved than I was when I got admitted to Howard. For her, it seemed like the light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. A weight lifted. Until she saw that letter from my advisor.

We follow a concrete path through the grass toward Carroll House, a two-story brick building built in the early

days of the school. In the grass, boys throw Frisbees and girls tuck up their sleeves, hoping the sun burns strong enough to give them one last tan.

“So you wrote some new lyrics?” James says. “Lemme hear what you got.”

“You sure you’re ready for this?”

“Oh, you got jokes? Aight, bet, let’s go.” He gives me a beat, and I flow.

*We do the knowledge, speak the wisdom so you see
the science*

*The power structure full of demons so we be defiant
Mental warfare ain’t for the likes of the feeble-minded
The truth is all around you just have to seek and find it
I hear your silence*

*That’s how we move cause the mind a weapon
And find our blessings
In the weed cause we high as heaven
I’m a teacher*

I give my shorties a private lesson

“Oooooh!!!” James laughs, then cups his hands around his mouth and plays the crowd of astonished fans. “Word, you got that, you got that.”

It’s my turn to make a beat, and he freestyles. We take turns spitting rhymes and egging each other on.

“Aight,” I say as we reach the path to the dorm where the Brother Bonding meeting has started. “Those lyrics were nice, but you gotta admit defeat.”

“What? You buggin.”

"I mean, we can take it to a third party to judge if you really wanna embarrass yourself. . . ."

"Whatever!"

We open the door to Carroll House and pause for a second to let our vision adjust to the dim indoor light. In the common room, ten brown boys sit on couches and chairs, chatting. My shoulders relax as soon as I walk in.

"Whaddup, y'all," I say, nice and loud to everybody. I make the rounds, dapping everybody up.

David's wearing his soccer shorts and shin guards so he can run over to practice from the meeting.

"What's up?" he says. "Nice of y'all to join us."

"His fault," I say, pointing at James.

"Anyway," James says. "We miss anything?"

"Not really. We're introducing ourselves to the freshmen and assigning mentors for the new boarding students." David picks up a piece of paper from a table by the door and runs his finger down a list. "Gibran, you have Chris, who is . . ." He scans the room. "Right over there." He points at a scrawny, wide-eyed boy in a striped polo shirt. He's sitting in the corner with his hands folded in his lap, listening to the other boys.

"Aight, cool."

"And James, you have Zeke." David points out a tall boy with dark skin and thick glasses. "You know the drill. Check in with them, let 'em know how to get in touch with you and all that."

"No doubt," James says.

I pull up a chair across from Chris. "Chris! My man!"

"Hi!" he says. "Nice to meet you." He looks like I'm the

latest in a series of surprises that have come at him since he arrived at Lakeside.

"I'm Gibran."

"I know."

"Oh, word? I hope you've only heard good things."

His eyes go wide as golf balls.

"I'm just messing with you, man. Relax. I know if it was white kids talking, you probably thought I was the boogeyman. Anyway, the good news is, I'm your senior mentor. That means nobody should be messing with you, 'cause they know I'll handle it, nahmsayin?"

Chris blinks.

"I'm not trying to scare you," I say. "I'm just sayin, white kids have a habit of stepping out of line. So you gotta nip it in the bud from jump. Let 'em know you're not the one."

Chris shifts in his seat and sits on his hands, looking down at his knees. He's so open and vulnerable. That makes him an easy target. I can protect him this year, but next year I won't be around. I have nine months to teach him how to hold his own. Operation Man Up begins right here and now.

"Where you from?" I ask.

"Chicago."

"Dang, that's far! I think you're the only student I've met who's from outside the Northeast. Well, I live twenty minutes from campus, right in Boston. Definitely let me know if there's anything you need anytime. I got you."

"Okay. Thanks. They also gave me a . . . host family? Like, a day student who can host me when I want to get off campus or something?"

"Right, right," I say. "They white?"

“Well . . . yeah.”

“Mm. They like to adopt us. Like pets, nahmsayin. It makes ’em feel good. They may smile in your face, but that don’t mean they have your back. Remember that.”

Chris kicks the legs of his chair.

“You know what though,” I say, “don’t worry ’bout all that yet. Be cool, be comfortable. Just lemme know if anybody bothers you.”

“Kay.” I can barely hear him over the voices around us.

“You play any sports?”

We chat for a few minutes, and I learn that Chris is not an athlete either, but that he’s into science and math and is thinking of joining the debate club. Soon David calls for everyone’s attention.

“Aight, listen up. Some of us have to get to sports practice, so before people leave, anyone want to put stuff on the agenda for this year?”

I raise my hand. “The Million Man March.”

Sounds of surprise, interest, and trepidation break out around the room. I wait for the voices to die down.

“We should do something,” I say.

“That’d be tight,” David says. “Like what?” He twists his torso, then bends his knees to get warmed up before his jog down to the field.

“I mean, ideally, we should go.”

“What?” Trey squints at me. He’s a junior who’s been here since middle school. He’s built like a footballer but acts like a little kid.

“Yeah, in our dreams,” James says. He pulls his cap off his head and puts it on his knee.

“Hold up,” I say. “They got a French trip, a Spanish trip, a freakin national debate competition in a different state every year. Why’s it so crazy to think we could go to DC? Anything for a Black man is outta the question?”

Silence.

“I mean, I feel you,” James says. “I’m just sayin. It’s not the kind of event the school would support. So we’d be on our own.”

“Plus, it’s coming up soon, right?” Trey asks.

“Yeah, it is,” David says. “Middle of October.”

“That might be enough time to propose an off-campus trip,” I say.

James and David look skeptical.

“Well, let’s find out,” I say. “Show of hands, how many of us would be interested if we could actually go?”

David and James raise their hands high. Everyone else looks around like it’s a trick question.

“Yo, it’s not a promise! Damn,” I say. “Aight, raise your hand if you would potentially, maybe, possibly be interested.”

One at a time, five more boys raise their hands, two of them twisting their hands in the universal “maybe” signal. The freshmen, including Chris, are still too surprised to consider the question.

I chuckle. “Aight, cool. We’ll look into it, find out what kinda rules we’d be up against.”

“Sounds good,” David says. “We could also think about hosting something on that day. Like, take the day off and do something together. Maybe with Black students from other schools or something.”

“Yeah,” James says, “aren’t they saying that people who can’t go are doing a Day of Absence-type thing? Like, don’t go to work or school?”

“Okay, now I’m listening,” Trey says, rubbing his hands together.

Everyone laughs.

“That could definitely work,” I say.

“Cool,” David says. “Let’s talk more about it before next meeting and come up with a plan.” He checks the clock above the fireplace. “All right, we’ll see everyone here next week, same time, same place. And we’ll see you around campus too.” He heaves his gym bag onto his shoulder and gives his mentee daps before turning to me and James.

“What y’all doing this weekend?” James asks. He’s a boarder and usually spends at least one night at my place or David’s each weekend, just to get off campus.

“Colin’s having a party on Saturday,” David says.

“That’s right,” James says.

“Oh, word?” I feign shock. “Someone’s having a party and didn’t invite moi?”

“Yeah—actually,” David says, “he specifically asked me not to bring you.”

“Me too!” James says.

“For real?”

We crack up.

I do my best nasal voice: “‘Oh yeah, and, um, your friend, the troublemaker, please don’t bring him, he’s a little too Black for us?’”

“Yup,” James says. “They scared of you, nigga.”

“Bet,” I say, “I can’t wait to go check out Colin and his lil party now. It’s on!”



On Friday during a free period, I go to the library to ask Mrs. Johnson what she thinks about us proposing a trip to the march. Other than the principal, Mr. Clarke, one staff member, and the dining hall and maintenance crew, Mrs. Johnson is the only Black adult on campus. You might think having a Black principal would be great for us, but not really. It’s like he has something to prove, so it ends up being almost worse than having a white principal and knowing what we’re up against from jump. We’ve gotten over the disappointment by now, but we still get caught off guard from time to time. Mrs. Johnson is cool though. She’s typically the go-to person for stuff we need.

Mrs. Johnson is helping a student with the card catalog when I come in, so I stand by the desk. The other two librarians look up, smile skittishly, and go back to sorting books. Fine with me.

“Hello, Gibran,” Mrs. Johnson says as she walks around to the other side of the desk. She adjusts her tortoiseshell glasses and pushes her thick bangs to the side.

“Hi, Mrs. Johnson, how you doing?”

“I’m all right, thanks. How’s your senior year going so far?”

“Not too bad,” I say. I’m guessing she knows about my disciplinary status, but even though I’m relieved that I stayed out of “trouble” all week, I don’t bring it up. I put my

backpack at my feet. "I have a question for you."

"Sure, what is it?" She leans her forearms on the desk.

"If a group of students wanted to take a short trip out of state—like either a day trip or overnight—how would we get approval for that?"

"Ooh," she says. "Out of state, huh? This would be on a weekend, right?"

"Well, actually, we might need one day off school."

"Oh, I see. That might be tough—but it's been done before. The Office of Extracurricular Activities has the application forms for trips. Of course, you'd need a faculty sponsor as a chaperone, and that person has to sign the application."

"Okay." I drum my fingers on the desk, considering.

She tilts her head. "Can I ask what the trip is about?"

"Yeah," I say. "Actually, maybe you can tell me if you think we should bother proposing it. We were talking about trying to go to the Million Man March next month."

She straightens her shoulders and raises her eyebrows. "Oh! Hmm."

"You think we have a chance of getting approved?"

"Well," she says. "I haven't served on the committee before, but . . . I suppose it would be a hard sell."

"Yeah, that's what we figured. But it's a historic event. I mean, didn't people skip work and school to go to, like, the March on Washington and stuff like that?"

"Well, yes, they did. But that wasn't exactly mainstream either. They were actually seen as pretty radical at the time."

"For real?"

"Oh yes. Now they teach it as if everyone loved Dr. King and what he stood for. But it was quite divisive. Some people

thought it was too much, too pushy. And that was a pretty tame event. Whereas the Million Man March . . ." She smiles. "Actually, it's funny, part of what offended some people about the March on Washington was that it was integrated, and now we have the opposite. The Million Man March is controversial in part because it's specifically for Black men."

"See, that's the thing. People always want to tell us how to protest. If those same people were helping correct society, we wouldn't have to protest in the first place." The march isn't even a protest, really, and that's part of why I want to go. It's not for other people to hear our message. It's for us to come together. Something I never get to do.

She looks sympathetic. She must be used to these barriers. Maybe she doesn't even think about it much.

She glances behind me. Another student is waiting. One of the other librarians who didn't offer to help me bounces over to help him.

"Well, I really want to try and go. But we can't think of a sponsor who would take us there."

"I wish I could help you with that," she says, "but I don't do long-distance trips with students."

"No, I understand. We wouldn't ask that of you." I bite my lip. "Our other idea was, if we can't go, maybe we could plan our own Day of Absence. Organize an event for Black students on that day or attend something in Boston."

"That might be easier to get approved," she says. "Although you'd still have to make a strong argument for why it's important. How it enhances your education."

"Right. I can do that." I'm not thrilled with this compromise, but it's probably the easiest way to participate. "Well,

I appreciate your help, Mrs. Johnson. We'll let you know what happens."

"Any time, Gibran. Good luck."

I pick up an application at the Office of Extracurricular Activities. Five pages full of red tape. I spend the rest of my free period thinking about our options for getting to the March.

My uncle Kevin lives in DC. He's invited me down a few times when I've seen him at my grandparents' house for holidays. But whenever I've asked my mom about going down to see him, she would shake her head like he wasn't serious or it wasn't a good idea. She never explained, and after a while, I stopped asking. He never visits us either. It seems like Mom's always making some excuse not to invite him up.

I'm sure Uncle Kevin will be going to the march. Anything having to do with Black people, he's all about it. I'm old enough to get to DC by myself. The school may not approve, but if I could convince Mom to let me go and stay with Uncle Kevin, maybe some friends could come with me. Instead of a school-sponsored trip, we could sign them out to my house and go from there.

It's a long shot, but it's worth a try. The Day of Absence is a decent plan B, but I want to be at the march.

2

KEVIN

New York City | Thursday, April 4, 1968

At five thirty, the other Columbia undergrads close their books and ask their tutees if they're all set, in that tone that leaves them no room to say anything but *yes* and *thank you for spending your precious time with me*. Assured that they've done their good deed for the week, they pick up their own books and shuffle off to their other activities or to their dorm rooms, to the library or to the dining hall for an early dinner.

Valerie and I stay in our seats.

Mike, my assigned tutee, is working so much faster than he was in the fall. I wait until he finishes the last problem on his math homework, and then I stand and applaud.

"Mike finished math *before* leaving today!" I shout.

He ducks his head and twists his mouth to hide a grin as other students join in the applause.

"Seriously—this is cause for celebration, man," I say, punching his shoulder lightly. "Good job."

"Thanks." He shuts his notebook and joins the other

students who are joking, laughing, and debating.

Jerome sits across from me. "Kevin, could you help me with this essay question?"

"Of course," I say. "Let's see."

After another half hour, the homework is done, and we've moved on to talking about the students' families, their neighborhoods, their schools. Their love for Harlem and the work they're doing to hold on to it. Their hopes for the future. I wish I had their focus when I was in high school.

When it's too dark inside to see by the light of the windows, we straighten up the room instead of turning the lights on, a rule Valerie and I came up with after some parents got upset about their kids coming home late. We leave as a group and walk each student home, covering half of Harlem. The students talk about an upcoming rally for tenants' rights and compete over who's invited more people.

"You're coming, right?" Sandra asks me and Valerie.

"If you want us, we're there," Valerie says.

"Definitely," I agree.

Sandra lists the community groups that are organizing the rally and the people in power who they hope will pay attention. The second list includes the entire administration at our university.

By the time we've said goodbye to the last student, the streetlights have flickered on, illuminating the city streets. Valerie and I walk back up toward our sparkling campus on the hill. We pass by Morningside Park, one of Harlem's only green spaces. Behind a chain-link fence, the construction site of Columbia's new gym threatens to swallow the park whole.

The neighborhood protested to save the park from being taken over by Columbia. Almost everyone objects to the construction of the gym—militants to conservatives. Only the white athletes and the administration are for it. The administration says it will benefit Harlem residents, but only the bottom two floors of seven would be accessible to community members unaffiliated with Columbia—and they would use a separate entrance at the bottom of the hill. The racist, elitist design is how it earned the nickname Gym Crow. Despite the continued protests, they broke ground in February. My jaw tightens as I survey the darkness beyond the fence.

“This is the part of the walk that I hate,” I tell Valerie.

“Am I too boring for you?” I can hear her smiling without seeing it.

“Please,” I say. “You make it tolerable. It’s the dread of getting back to campus. If it weren’t for you, I might not come back.”

“You have somewhere else to go? I can walk you there.” She stops midstride, calling my bluff.

“I wish.”

We continue on, her boots echoing on the concrete.

“How’d that exam go?” she asks. “Western Civ?”

I groan. “I haven’t gotten it back yet. But I can guess how he’ll react to my answers about our so-called democracy.”

“Hm.”

“What?” I ask.

“What what?” she says.

“You have an opinion,” I say. “Spill it.” When I see the golden crown on the campus gate, I pick up a stone and

throw it. It pings off the crown without leaving a mark.

"Eh. I'm not gonna waste my breath." She zips her lips with her hand and throws away the invisible key.

I lower my eyelids. "Fine. Where are you studying tonight?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Remember last time you came to 'study' with us? No one could concentrate. All your debating. We almost got kicked out of the library."

"Oh, come on. You were into it too."

"I know," she says. "That's how I learned my lesson. Kevin and studying do not mix."

"I see. So that's how it is."

"That's exactly how it is."

"Well, I have something with me that might make you change your mind," I say.

We stop at the entrance to Barnard's courtyard. I pull out a brand-new, first edition copy of *Black Power*.

Her jaw drops. "Ohhh—where did you—Micheaux's?"

"Of course."

She reaches for the book. I hand it to her, and she opens it reverently, holding it up to the dim light to pore over the table of contents. She smiles so eagerly I have to smile too. "Right on," she says.

I let her enjoy it for a minute, and then I ask, "Now can I study with you?"

She laughs. "No. But you can lend this to me when you're done."

"Using a brother for his books."

"You know that's right."

"Well, if that's all I'm good for," I say, reaching into my bag, "you can keep that copy."

She looks up at me, and I show her the other copy I bought.

"Really?" she asks.

"Yeah. I need my partner to stay on her toes. My debate partner, that is."

It sounds corny, but her eyes truly sparkle. I love that she's as excited as I am about the book. She'll probably finish reading it tonight too. I put my copy back in my bag and shove my hands in my jacket pockets. "I can't believe it's already April."

"Yeah," she says, hugging her new book. "It'll be finals and then summer before we know it."

"You know," I say, "I keep thinking about the mentorship we've been talking about."

"Me too," she says.

"I think we should tell the students about it before the end of the school year. We can test it out now and roll it out in the fall. What do you think?"

"I guess so," she says. "I'm excited to start, only . . . I still wonder if we should run it by the other Black tutors."

"You know what they'll say. They're so proud of giving their time as tutors. They don't have the vision."

"True." But still she hesitates.

"I say we go for it. Full speed ahead. The other tutors can join if they want to once they see how to really make a difference. Besides, it's a separate thing, if anyone asks. We may have met most of the kids through Columbia's tutoring

program, but our mentoring program is separate.”

“Right.” She nods. “Okay. Let’s meet on Saturday to finish up our proposal.”

“All right, sistah. That’s what I’m talkin’ about.”

She laughs.

“And our proposal is for information, not asking permission.”

“Oh Lord,” she says. “You’re a mess.”

“Part of my charm, right?” I offer my handsome-movie-star smile.

“Fool. We’re gonna miss dinner.”

“Right. Better hustle. Hey, if there’s nothing good left, come throw a rock at my window. I’ll be happy to run back to Harlem to get us some real food.”

“You would, too.”

“Of course I would!”

“Don’t tempt me. Bye, Kevin.”

“Be cool, sister.”

She heads to the women’s dining hall at Barnard, and I break into a light jog to make it to John Jay Dining Hall.

For the hundredth time, I think how nice it would be for my sister to meet Valerie. And for the hundredth time, I remember that my sister isn’t interested in anything I’m doing now.



Charles rushes into the dining hall just before dinner service ends, probably coming from an intense study session at the library. He spots me and heads my way. When he

sees my nearly empty plate, he keeps his book bag on his shoulder.

“Go ahead and put your stuff down, brother,” I say, marking my page in my book.

“Aren’t you getting ready to leave?”

“I’m not in a rush.”

“Don’t you have finals to study for? Papers to write?”

I wave those thoughts away. “We have a month until finals. I’d rather be reading this.” I hold up my copy of *Black Power* proudly.

His shoulders sag dramatically. “For your sake,” he says, dropping his bag in the seat opposite mine, “I hope you do get your Black studies courses created before you graduate. You need to get credit for all this extracurricular reading.”

Leave it to Charles to not be excited about a first edition hardcover of Stokely Carmichael’s and Charles Hamilton’s brand-new book.

“Why do you say ‘your,’” I ask him, “as if you’re not one of us? It doesn’t make a difference to you that this entire university doesn’t have a single class about our people?”

“I’m a science major,” he says as if that answers my question.

“And? Do they talk about the work of George Washington Carver in your science classes?”

“I studied Black folks for twelve years before I got here,” he says. “Probably the one benefit of going to a segregated, one-room school. I bet I know more about Black history than all of your political science professors combined.”

He pops a leftover meatball from my plate into his mouth

and maneuvers his way through rows of tables and chairs to get food.

“You don’t act like it,” I call after him, sulking a little as I turn back to my book.

When he returns, I flip back to the preface and read aloud to him.

“‘This book is about why, where and in what manner Black people in America must get themselves together. It is about Black people taking care of business—the business of and for Black people. The stakes are really very simple: if we fail to do this, we face continued subjection to a white society that has no intention of giving up willingly or easily its position of priority and authority. If we succeed, we will exercise control over our lives, politically, economically and psychically.’”

“Mm,” Charles mumbles, glancing around at other tables between bites.

“Oh—am I making you nervous?” I joke, raising my voice. “What’s wrong? You don’t want to be seen listening to radical militant propaganda?”

“Nope.” He keeps eating.

“Man, you’re ridiculous.”

He chuckles. “And you’re funny. I still think you should have gone to a Black college.”

“Ha. No thanks. My parents went to Howard. It’s no better than Columbia or Harvard or anywhere else. Maybe worse. They’re trying so hard to imitate these places. I bet they’re still using the paper bag test.”

“Hm.” He chews and swallows, then points at me with his fork. “You’d pass it though. They’d love you there.”

Charles is probably the only person who can get away with saying something like that to me. He knows I don't like being so light-skinned. I know in some ways my life would have been even harder if I had Charles's dark brown complexion. But you couldn't tell me that when I was eight years old hearing kids count "eenie, meenie, minie, moe, catch a nigger by the toe."

"Anyway," I say. "You know anyone who graduated from a Black college with a Black studies major?"

He leans back in his seat, looking at me.

Of course he hasn't. He's the first person from his small town to go to college.

"Well," I mumble, "they don't exist. So-called Black colleges are about preparing Negroes for the white man's world. That's where they train up the Black bourgeoisie. We need to change the white man's world, not just join it."

"Right," Charles says. "That's why you're here at Columbia. To change it. And if you don't pass your classes, you won't be changing much. So maybe you should study . . . a little bit?"

"You sound like my parents."

"I like your parents."

I throw a balled-up napkin at him. "Man, get outta here."

He laughs, dodging it, and gets up, saying, "I do have to go. *I* have studying to do."

"Mm-hm."

He stacks my tray underneath his.

"Thanks, man," I say. "I'll finish reading this to you later."

"I'm sure you will." He sounds less than thrilled.



Hours later, in my dorm room, I resist the urge to finish my new book. I save the last two chapters for later and open an old favorite, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*.

When a Negro has finished his education in our schools, then, he has been equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man, but before he steps from the threshold of his alma mater he is told by his teachers that he must go back to his own people from whom he has been estranged by a vision of ideals which in his disillusionment he will realize that he cannot attain.

Voices in the hallway startle me, and I lose my place on the page. People are yelling. Shrieking? What the hell is going on? Are people drinking already? It sounds like everyone on our floor. I stay still and listen.

The voices build and gather, like a flock of geese approaching.

I put my book face down and listen for a moment from behind my closed door.

“This can’t be happening. . . .”

Is someone crying?

“It’s because he spoke out against the war, man. . . .”

“. . . that radical talk . . .”

I crack my door open and peek out. A crowd of students fills the hallway, and more come to join them. Their faces are pale or red and blotchy, streaked with tears. They pace or stand still. They rake fingers through their hair or lean their hands against the wall. Eyes are bloodshot or staring in shock. They are all white.

When I enter the hallway, they see me and go silent. They look from me to one another, and the air between us fills

with what they won't say. A chill runs through me.

I walk in the opposite direction, toward Charles's room, and knock on his door. Waiting for a response almost brings me to a panic. Then I remember I never knock on Charles's door. Charles doesn't want to be distracted. He knows I'll walk in whether he answers or not.

Inside, Charles sits at his desk, hunched over books and notebooks, a lamp shining on his papers. The sight of him studying is a momentary relief. I look back at the crowd in the hallway. They talk in low voices now. I shut the door firmly behind me.

"Hey," I say, my voice almost a whisper.

He holds a finger up in the air while he writes. Finally, he puts his pencil down. "What's happening? You want to go to the library?"

"No—there's something going on out there. Didn't you hear those voices in the hallway?"

He looks at the door, listening.

"People were yelling and stuff."

His face is blank.

"I went out there, but they didn't talk to me. . . ."

"No surprise there."

"I'm serious. It's something big."

A knock on the door makes me jump. My heart thumps hard in my chest.

Charles eyes me like I brought trouble. I'm just glad we're together.

He gets up slowly and pauses with his hand on the knob before opening it.

Richard, an upperclassman, stands there in his collared

shirt and sweater-vest, with two other brothers behind him. Sweat gathers at Richard's temples, and his wingmen look up and down the hall like bodyguards.

"We're checking on people," Richard says. "You two all right?"

Dread fills my belly. We stare at him, and his face changes.

"You haven't heard?"

Neither Charles nor I can speak.

"It's Dr. King. He's been shot."

Charles stumbles backward as if he's been shoved. I gulp for air.

"No."

"In the neck," Richard adds.

"Is he—"

"We don't know yet. He's in the hospital." He reaches out and grabs each of us by the shoulder. It steadies me. I feel the solid ground beneath my feet.

"There'll be an emergency meeting tomorrow morning to talk about what to do. Some brothers are gathering in Melvin's room tonight."

A shout moves through the crowd of people down the hall. Someone turns a radio up full blast.

Again, this just in. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was being treated for a bullet wound at St. Joseph's Hospital after being shot on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, has been pronounced dead. . . .



In Melvin's room, fifteen brothers sit together in shock. We seek comfort in each other's presence. Someone's brought a radio, and we listen to newscasters' announcements, politicians' damage control, and crowds of people in distress. We think of our families and our hometowns. Our new reality settles over us. Shock gives way to anger. Pain gives way to rage. Despair lurks at the edges, and we try to fend it off.

We part before midnight, agreeing to try to get some rest before the SAS meeting in the morning. I gave up on the Society of Afro-American Students early in my first year here, but everything feels different now.

Charles and I cross the cool campus lined with towering buildings of brick and limestone. The names of ancient European philosophers haunt us from the carved walls. Will King's name ever join theirs? The Alma Mater gazes out from her perch on the steps of Low Library. Below the wreath on her head, stains run down the green patina on her face, giving her the look of a bleeding Jesus stuck with thorns.

In the dorm, Charles follows me into my room and sits on my bed, staring into space and worrying his hands. I open my window and lean out, gazing at the chaos the night has brought forth.

Harlem is on fire. Orange flames reach out of broken store windows and lick the sidewalks. Black smoke escapes through iron bars, rising to reach the sky. I can almost smell the smoke, almost hear the tinkling of shattered glass. It brings me calm, relieves my tension, as if I'm out there throwing things and screaming at the world too.

“You think the riots will reach campus?” Charles breaks me out of my reverie.

I imagine Columbia students fleeing a burning campus, facing the devastation of an oppressed people instead of tsking from afar. “I almost wish they would,” I say.

Charles joins me at the window. He watches the clouds of smoke, and he trembles. “No,” he says quietly. “No, you don’t. You think you do, but you don’t.”

We stand in silence for a minute.

“Remember when we burned those newspapers?” I ask him. “So close to the student center, people thought we were gonna burn this mother to the ground.” We had asked the campus newspaper to apologize for its “joke” about the new Black fraternity on campus, but we were met with claims of free speech and humor. So we broke into the newsroom, collected the newspapers, and made a bonfire outside, right in the middle of campus.

Charles gazes out the window. He wasn’t with the group of brothers who burned the newspapers, but he heard about it, like everyone else did.

“Violence is the only language some people understand,” I say.

Years of peaceful protests. Change is coming, but how slowly? How many lives have been lost chasing integration? Because they’re disposable lives. Let a threat come anywhere near a place like this, then we’ll start to see some change.

Charles turns away from the window, and I think he’s going to storm out of my room. Instead, he turns again and paces back and forth. “Violent revolution is not an option,” he says. “We can’t win.”

“That’s what Dr. King said.”

Charles stops pacing and wipes his face with his hands.

I can’t tear my eyes away from the smoke. A distress signal. A warning. If we can take the rest of the country down with us, self-destruction feels better than doing nothing.

Charles is anxious about his future. His college degree. If the riots reach Columbia, how long will school shut down? Will we have to repeat the semester? Will graduation be delayed? Charles’s plan to become a successful doctor and take care of a long list of family members has been in place since he was little.

He has everything to gain here. If this chance slips through his fingers, his everything is lost. That’s the burden his family sent him with.

For me, the expectation is casual. Of course I’ll get my degree. Just like my father did, and his father and mother before him. I’m not allowed to call my family’s pressure a burden. I’m supposed to be grateful for the leg up.

Tonight Charles can’t study. He stays in my room until the uprising ends. It stops far short of Columbia’s gates and not long after midnight.

Harlem is our neighbor, but it is a separate world. Not even the murder of the King of Peace can bridge that divide.



Thin rays of light stream through my dirty window. I barely remember Charles leaving, and I don’t remember falling asleep. I stare into space for a minute and relive last night.

The shouting in the hallway. The radio. Richard. Melvin's room. The fires. The fires. Harlem.

Mike.

I sit up quickly.

How could I not think of him last night?

The flashing lights were red, not blue, so I let myself hope the police were standing down. No billy clubs, snarling dogs, or bullets. I hope.

I have to go see him. If I know his mother, she had him locked inside, and I'm glad. Mike, tall and broad-shouldered but baby-faced, is a boy often mistaken for a man. There will be a day soon when his mama can't hold him back anymore. I know this because I see myself in him, I see my cousin Robbie in him, I see the desire to know, to make a place for himself in the world, and I see the world saying no, just like it said no to us. But he hasn't given up yet, and I hope he won't.

I change clothes quickly and put on my watch, a gift from my dad. Its elegant face reminds me I'll have to call home soon. I push the thought away and calculate how much time I have to get to Harlem and back for the ten a.m. SAS meeting. Ninety minutes. I can do it if I hurry.

I jog down the stairs and through the common room. Small groups of students sit and stand together, speaking in hushed tones. A bulletin on both sides of the front door announces, *Morning classes canceled due to national mourning*. So they expect us in class this afternoon. I shouldn't be surprised.

I make my way toward the gate on Amsterdam Avenue, scanning the campus green for Black folks. A few brothers

stand close together, talking intensely. Lots of white students sit around looking stunned. Some coeds from Barnard huddle together and comfort one another openly. I pass through the black, cast-iron gate topped with golden crowns, and turn north toward Harlem. Block by block, the landscape changes. The buildings, the streets. Even the color of the sky.

Alone in Harlem, I think of Robbie, my cousin who first brought me here, sneaking me out when I was barely a teenager to make me listen to Malcolm X on the crowded corner of 125th and Adam Clayton Powell, back when it was 7th Avenue. I was terrified and thrilled and forever changed. If I am perfectly still, I can hear the echoes of the microphone and the crowd on that hot day in late summer. Especially when I go to Micheaux's bookstore, Malcolm's ghost welcomes me.

After ten minutes of walking, I reach the damaged parts of town. Broken glass shines in the sunlight like diamonds and crunches under my shoes. Iron bars that used to protect store windows have been pulled down so their tops touch the ground. Shelves sit emptied of overpriced milk and diapers.

When I reach Mike's apartment building, I'm relieved that homes are not damaged. I ring his bell and stand back on the sidewalk, where he can see me from his window. His face appears four floors above me, and I wave. Thirty seconds later, he bursts out the front door, still putting his arms through his jacket sleeves, laces undone on his worn shoes. I make a mental note to find out his shoe size.

We clasp hands, and I can't help myself—I bring his head

to my shoulder in a protective embrace. He groans and I let go.

“All right, all right. I was worried. How are you holding up?”

He shrugs his shoulders and sits on the stoop. “Ain’t nothing new. Was only a matter of time before they killed him too.” His jaw is tense, and his brown eyes hold a hardness that I haven’t seen before.

I sit beside him on the stoop.

We have seen so much death. I was ten when the violence became visible, broadcast on national and international news. He would have been six. Police watched racists drag activists from lunch counters and attack freedom riders as they escaped burning buses. I picture Mike at nine years old seeing photos of Black girls a few years older than himself who’d been killed in a church bombing. Watching President Kennedy crumple in his convertible, bleeding out in the First Lady’s lap. Mike would have been twelve when Malcolm X was killed just a few blocks away from here.

Mike and I are closer than some of the other pairs in the tutoring program, the university’s attempt to show some investment in the local population. Giving with one hand while it steals—land, buildings, and hopes—with the other. Like ambassadors or spokespeople, we are supposed to show them that Columbia, and the world, can and should be theirs too. But this offering, this road map out of the ghetto, becomes meaningless when the world keeps showing you that no matter how educated you are, no matter how well-spoken or religious, respectable or middle class, you will always be Black, and that is all that will matter.

An elderly woman in a blue housedress arrives at the stoop and holds on to the railing, catching her breath. Mike and I stand to let her pass.

"Good morning, Mrs. Washington," Mike says in his talking-to-grown-folks voice.

"Mikey. How are you today? And how's your mama?"

"We're fine, thank you. You need any help getting upstairs?"

"Aren't you precious. No thank you, sweetheart. You enjoy your visitor. Who is this fine young gentleman?" She looks me up and down as if she could gobble me up.

"This is Kevin, my tutor from Columbia."

I hate being introduced as "from Columbia" when I'm in Harlem, but there's no explaining that, so I keep letting it happen.

"Ooooooh, my my my!" Mrs. Washington puts her hand to her chest. "Handsome *and* smart?" She beckons me closer and mock-whispers, "I have a granddaughter, you know." She giggles like this is the funniest thing in the world. Then she actually pinches my cheek, which is already hot.

Mike laughs at me. As she climbs the stairs, I recover enough to say, "Nice to meet you, ma'am."

"You too, darling," she calls. "See you later, Mikey."

"Yes, ma'am."

We sit on the stoop again. I'm grateful for the spring breeze.

"Mom won't let me go anywhere," Mike says, "even though the riot's over. And it wasn't nearly as bad here as it was in other cities. She still thinks I might get in

trouble. Does it look like trouble out here to you?"

"Maybe not. But you know parents. She's scared."

Mike glares down the street. "I bet my friends were out last night. Getting stuff their families need. I heard nobody got hurt and there was hardly any arrests."

I nod. "It definitely could have been worse. That doesn't mean it was safe though." I feel selfish, worried more about Mike's safety than about his integrity as a young man. I know that living every moment safely is hardly living at all. I know that being forced to stay calm rots the soul. I admit, "I wanted to be out here last night too."

He pauses. "You did?"

"Yeah. The rage is real. There's no denying it. We can't get used to it. It keeps building. You don't want to feel helpless. You don't want to accept what's happening. I feel that. We all feel it. I bet your mom feels it too."

He scoffs. "Not her. 'Patience and the Lord.'"

"That's where some people get their strength. Faith can protect a person so the rage doesn't destroy them. It doesn't always mean they have to stop fighting. Sometimes it can help them to keep fighting." I'm thinking of my cousin, but I don't mention him.

"Well, if she's gonna keep me in like this, I'm gonna have to sneak out or something. She knows about the student coalition. She supported it before. But now she's talking about lying low and letting things quiet down."

A window opens above us, and his mother calls out.

"Mikey?"

He stands up and faces her. "Yes, ma'am."

"Bring that boy up here for something to eat."

“Oh!” I stand too. “Thank you, Mrs. Hammond, but I can’t stay—”

She puts her hand up to shush me. “While it’s hot!” The curtains fall closed.

I check my watch and tell Mike, “I have a meeting soon.”

“Too late now,” he says. “Eat quickly.”

He opens the door, lets me in, and looks down the street both ways before following me inside. The hallways are dark, even in the daytime, and reek of mildew. On the walls are flyers for the upcoming rally.

“Hey, did you put these up?” I ask him.

He puts his finger to his lips, grinning. “Don’t tell.”

I follow him up four flights of stairs and wonder how older ladies like Mrs. Hammond and Mrs. Washington make this climb every day. Mike knocks on his own apartment door, letting his mother know we’re entering. His manners always impress me.

His mother stands in the tiny kitchen, serving up a plate of food that reminds me of my nana’s house. “Come on in.” She sets the plate on the table along with a fresh cup of coffee. “What’s this nonsense about not having time to come upstairs?”

My stomach rumbles as I gaze at the plate and savor the aromas. Grits and gravy and fried eggs with buttered toast vie for my attention. “This is incredible,” I say. “You really shouldn’t have—”

She holds up her hand again, and I shut my mouth. Like my nana, Mrs. Hammond doesn’t want praise and thanks. She wants to watch me eat. So I do.

“I appreciate it,” I tell her, picking up my fork. “I just came

by to check on Mike and make sure you were doing okay.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you,” she says.

Mike stands at the window in the living room, watching the street. I wonder if he held vigil there all night like I did from my room.

“Michael,” Mrs. Hammond says. “Aren’t you going to sit with our guest?”

He joins us at the table as I’m stuffing my mouth.

“There’s more,” she tells him.

“No thank you,” he says, confirming my fear that she cooked this spread just for me.

“They’re saying Harlem was nothing compared to some other cities,” she says, folding over the newspaper. “Chicago. DC.”

“Is that right?”

“Mm-hm. They’ve got the National Guard out in several cities. The army in DC.”

“The army?” I repeat, dumbfounded.

“The army, Kevin.” She puts the paper down and sighs. “I should let you eat. No use ruining your appetite. How are you students doing on campus?”

“Well,” I say, between bites, “mostly it’s a lot of shock. I stayed in last night.”

Her eyes send I-told-you-so darts at Mike, who looks away.

“But this morning . . . It feels different somehow. Like, maybe there’s going to be a deeper divide?”

Mrs. Hammond fans herself. “That’s how it goes,” she says. “One step forward, ten steps back. People who haven’t been paying attention have no idea how we got here. This

one really struck me though. I know some people thought he went too far supporting the sanitation workers' strike. And criticizing the war. Still . . ." She shakes her head. "I can't hardly believe they would shoot down that man. For his principles. Mm."

My throat tightens. It was a shock. At the same time, it is not only believable but inevitable. I trace a circle around my plate, sopping up the gravy and egg yolk with my last bite of toast. I chew slowly and fight the urge to lick my fingers.

Mrs. Hammond watches me approvingly and reaches for my empty plate. "I'm going to serve you some more."

"Oh no, please," I say quickly. "Thank you so much—this was delicious. I haven't eaten like that since—since I was last home, I guess! But I really do have to get going. We have a meeting, the Black students, in . . ." I check my watch. "Oh, twenty minutes. I have to get back. I will come by again though." I nod at Mike.

Mrs. Hammond eyes me skeptically, one fist on her hip, the other hand holding the plate.

I pat my stomach, offer my best I'm-so-satisfied smile and push out my chair. "Do you mind if I take a look at the paper before I go?"

She hands me the newspaper and refills my half-finished coffee mug.

Mike drums his fingers on the tabletop. He looks like a bird trapped in a cage. I unfold the newspaper and scan the lede lines and photographs. Other cities are still burning. There are places that resemble war zones. The riots advanced to only blocks from the White House. I check

for Boston, thinking of my sister. There were riots but no casualties. That's a relief.

The president, mayors, and other men with loud voices chastise the people who display their anger in the city streets. Dr. King lived and died for nonviolence, they say. Let us honor his memory and be peaceful in our grief.

They do not quote King directly. They do not promise to heed his advice to eradicate these displays of grief by eradicating the causes of the anger, despair, and discontent. They do not talk about equality and jobs and justice. They haven't even caught the killer. All those policemen surrounding the Lorraine Motel and not one saw a suspect running from the crime scene.

As I refold the paper, an envelope falls out and drops to the floor. I bend to pick it up, but Mrs. Hammond says, "I'll get that," and scrambles to grab it. In the second before she takes it, I catch a glimpse of block letters stamped on the outside of the envelope: EVICTION NOTICE.

Mrs. Hammond tucks the envelope into the pocket of her apron and folds her hands over it protectively. She glances at Mike and then back at me with a small, tight smile.

My mind races. Is she hiding this from Mike? She's trying to keep home, and this would fuel his fire even more. But how long can she pretend?

I place the newspaper gently on the table, as if to prevent more devastation from tumbling out. I have so many questions, and I can't ask any of them. I take a final sip of coffee, which I can no longer taste, and place the mug gingerly on the table.

"Well," I whisper, standing.

Mrs. Hammond pats my arm and beams at me with the confident eyes of the faithful. I bend down and give her a hug. Maybe I hold on for a second too long.

"You come by anytime, Kevin," Mrs. Hammond says. "We'll be right here."

How long? I wonder.

Mike walks me back downstairs.



I consider walking the long way to pass by Robbie's office, but I don't want to be late for the meeting. I hurry toward campus with that envelope on my mind. Is a notice a warning? Does it mean eviction is imminent? How can I talk to Mrs. Hammond in private to find out what's going on? Not that she wants me in her business. She sees me as a kid too. But maybe I can help. Maybe if she's behind on rent, Dad could help out. But what if it's not about overdue rent? What if Columbia is pushing them out to get control of their building?

Every time the university expands, people get displaced. The university has been trying for years to "clean up" surrounding neighborhoods to make them more desirable and offer them to the families they want to teach and work here. I've heard horror stories of people getting pushed out by the university. Evictions of the most vulnerable. Increasing rent while being worse than slumlords—releasing rats into buildings to make it impossible to stay. What if it's not about overdue rent? And what if it's not only their family?

But I've heard success stories too. Tenant organizations

that fought the university, using all sorts of tactics to stay in their homes. We've supported some of those groups in the past. We need to make this a top priority now. I decide I'll bring it up at the SAS meeting.

I'm lost in my thoughts when I rush past the statues, through the tall iron gates and into campus. I edge my way around a mass of students who are moving slowly.

Behind me, someone calls out, "Excuse me! Hey!"

Then a hand grips my shoulder. I throw it off as I turn around and put my fists up, ready to fight. A group of brothers got into it with some athletes a few weeks ago, and I'm always on guard. This isn't a student though. A campus security officer in a crisp, beige uniform holds his hands up.

"Easy," he says. "Sorry to startle you. I just need to see some ID."

He thinks this will calm me down. As if I won't notice I'm the only person he's stopped.

This is not the first time this has happened, and it won't be the last. But I can't help it. Every single time. A part of me is angry, and a part of me is incredibly sad.

Looking into his dark brown face, I want to see a brother. I want *him* to see a brother when he looks at me. Instead, I see an agent of the system, using his uniform for authority against his own.

And what does he see? A bougie young Black man he can take down a notch by humiliating me? By reminding me this is not my territory? Does he see that by stopping me, he's stopping himself? Does he think I can't belong here because he never could? I crave the proud smiles of

Mrs. Hammond and Mrs. Washington now.

I put my hands on my hips, considering my options. Refuse on principle and escalate the situation, or give in and be angry all day.

I try not to sound as defensive as I feel. "I'm a student. I left through this gate an hour ago."

"Okay," he says amicably. "I just need to see your ID."

I watch some white students pass by unbothered. I grind my teeth.

I want to be calm. This man is older—not old enough to be my father but close enough. No hint of malice shows on his face. Maybe I can wake him up.

"Tell me," I say, "were you instructed to stop only Afro-Americans? Or did you make that decision yourself?"

He looks me up and down.

"What about that large group of white people who came in at the same time I did?" I point after them. "You didn't ask for their IDs."

Something crosses his face. He's forming a new opinion of me. His voice becomes gruff. "Look, I have a job to do, and I'm doing it. I have to make sure everyone's affiliated—"

"What exactly makes you think I'm not affiliated with Columbia?" My voice is too loud, but I can't bring it down.

He blinks at me with steady eyes. The black visor on his cap shines in the sunlight. He smirks and looks to the side, like he's decided who he's dealing with. He fingers his walkie-talkie.

That's when I decide I would rather miss the SAS meeting than pull out my ID.

I look pointedly at his hip. "Need to call for backup?" I fold my arms and broaden my stance.

From the corner of my eye, I see another guard pacing at the gate, watching us. The other guard is Puerto Rican, and he looks younger than this one. He looks like he's considering coming over. Would he defend his colleague or me?

A familiar voice at my side jars me, and our standoff is interrupted.

"How's it going, officer?" Charles. He holds up his ID for the guard. "He's with me. Always leaving his ID in the dorm. Right, Kev?"

I can't even look at him.

"Everyone's kind of tense today," he says to the officer apologetically. "You understand."

The officer looks between us for a few moments. Then he nods once at Charles. He adjusts his cap, turns slowly, and strolls back to his post at the gate. He hooks his thumbs in his belt loops and pretends to monitor who's entering campus, but he's still watching me.

The guards are trained to look for outsiders. I am always an outsider.

Charles puts a hand on my shoulder and starts walking. "Let's go. We're already late."

I shrug his hand off me.

"Were you gonna stand there all day arguing with him and his supervisor and the head of security?"

I might have, but I don't respond. The clean walkways, the manicured lawns, the memorials, and tall Roman columns make me want to break things.

"We have to get to the meeting," he says. "It's important."

I scoff. "It's always important. Doesn't mean anything gets done."

Charles says nothing. We walk across the plaza, past students standing on steps and sitting cross-legged on squares of grass.

I let out a forceful breath. "You Negroes love to think that just being here is doing something," I say. "If we don't even stick up for ourselves, we're not changing this place, so what does it matter that we're here?" My hands are clenched, and my whole body is tense. "Defending this place is even worse," I mumble, mostly to myself.

Charles puts his hands in his pockets. "I know it's not right, the way they stop us, but . . . I think you're a little hard on them. From their perspective, they think they're just doing their job. They need these jobs. Just like the cafeteria workers and everyone else. They don't have this opportunity we have." He sighs. "I try to be patient with them."

I do not understand Charles sometimes. Patience? Where has that gotten us?

"By the way," he says, probably eager to change the subject before I can wax political again, "I saw Rich and Wesley at breakfast. They say we're taking our grievances straight to the president today."

I say nothing, but I pick up my pace, eager to see what that will look like.



A year ago, Charles came home with me for spring break. Ever since he visited our suburban home, I think he's been less tolerant of my politics. Maybe he decided I have nothing to complain about. To change his mind, I'd have to go way back. And still, I don't know if he'd understand.

Charles didn't have money for a ride home for spring break, so he planned to stay in the dorm. I wanted to pay for his ticket home, but I knew he wouldn't accept it, and I feared he'd be offended if I offered. So instead, I asked if he wanted to come visit my home in Finchburg. A bus ticket as my guest wasn't too big a deal. He smiled so wide, I was immediately glad I had thought of it.

He was like the son Mom and Dad never had. He sat quietly with Dad, appreciating his jazz records. I showed Dad some of my new books from the bookshop in Harlem, maybe hoping to provoke an argument for old times' sake. Mom glanced over nervously. Dad simply peered over his glasses at the titles and said, "Uh-huh!" Like I was a six-year-old showing off my crayon drawings.

Charles complimented Mom on her cooking at every single meal and made polite small talk too. He asked her about the art displayed throughout the house and listened, truly fascinated, as she told him about the cultures from which they hailed. He refilled the bird feeder for God's sake and sat outside watching the sparrows and robins land, peck, and fly away, his face radiating delight. He made it seem easy to get along with my parents.

He called home once, and he described our little brick house to his sister like it was a small palace.

"He has his own room, with an extra bed!" he said. "And

they have two bathrooms, both inside the house. One upstairs, one downstairs!”

On the bus back to the City at the end of the week, I claimed a pair of seats near the front. Charles glanced nervously at the bus driver before stowing his bag and sitting next to me. I faced the window as more passengers got on, but I could feel his gaze on me, so I turned to him.

“What?” I asked.

He chuckled. “You really have no idea how lucky you are, do you?”

I turned back to the window. There were things I couldn’t explain to him without sounding like the ungrateful son our parents already thought I was. Even if I could explain, he would have gladly traded my struggles for his. So I didn’t try. I trained my eyes out the window and said, “Yeah. Of course I do.”

On the bus, I pretended to sleep, but really, I let myself remember the first time we saw that house.

August 1956

Mom and Dad had been house hunting for weeks. Dad’s new job in Albany wanted him to start as soon as possible, and Mom and Dad wanted us settled before the new school year began. Normally Dawn and I stayed in Brooklyn with Nana while Mom and Dad went upstate for the day, hunting for homes to rent or buy in the suburbs of Albany. They would return in the evening tired, frustrated, not quite defeated, but more discouraged with each passing week.

This time, they were confident. So confident they brought us with them.

It was August. Hot in the City but not unbearable. Dad drove with the windows down, and he and Mom smiled at each other every now and then, sharing thoughts without speaking. I felt my shoulders relax in the back seat—I hadn't noticed how much I had been worrying. I started to imagine our new town. What would our school be like? What parks would be nearby? What sports would the neighborhood kids play?

Dawn was unusually quiet in the car. She gazed out the window and stared up at the sky. I would glance at her, and sometimes she would catch my eye and giggle like we had a secret.

This was the beginning. This car ride. The four of us—quiet, in our own thoughts, but together too. Expecting.

The drive was long, about three hours, and as we pulled off the highway, we sat forward in anticipation. We were ready to see the place, to turn the idea of it, the promise, into our reality. As we entered the suburbs, the houses flattened and spread out. Concrete gave way to grass and trees, yards and gardens, cars and bicycles parked outside. We practically leaned out the windows, inhaling that fresh air, adoring the sunlit green. Dawn scanned the yards for people, gasped slightly when she saw a child her age. Neighbors chatted, leaning over fences, and I wondered what they thought when they watched our car pass slowly by.

Dad referenced the directions, scribbled in his illegible doctor's script, as he drove carefully through the calm streets. Finally, Mom said, "That's it!" And Dad turned onto

Melon Street. I read the street sign, thinking I would need to memorize our new address.

We pulled up to a brick house with white shutters and flowerpots out front. Number eighteen on the white mailbox. He parked the car and shut off the engine. We sat looking at the house for a few moments, holding a collective breath, sensing, perhaps, that we were saying goodbye to Before and crossing a threshold into After. Our Happily Ever After at last.

“Well,” Dad said. A man of few words.

Mom turned to him, broken from her reverie. They both looked back at us and smiled. Mom appraised our faces and hair and double-checked our clothes. Were my shoes still shiny, my slacks clean and pressed, my collar straight? Was the bow of Dawn’s dress tied, her curled bangs in place, her Mary Janes still unscuffed? Mom nodded her approval, then smoothed her own short black hair and the pleated skirt of her summer dress.

Finally, Dad opened his door, then the three of us opened ours. Dawn squinted against the sunlight as I rounded the car to stand next to her. Dad put his arm gently on Mom’s back, and we followed them up the slate path toward the porch.

I wonder at what moment they regretted bringing us along.

When the front curtains rustled and then closed? When the owner stepped out onto the porch and closed the door behind him instead of stepping aside to let us in?

“Hello!” he said, a bit too loudly. His brown hair was hastily combed away from his face. His short-sleeved,

button-up shirt was tucked into his creased slacks.

“Mr. Adams.” Dad stuck out his hand.

Mr. Adams took his hand and shook vigorously. “Great to meet you. So, you’re, uh, you’re Dr. Wilson?”

“I am,” Dad said. “And this is my wife, Mrs. Wilson. And these are our children, Kevin and Dawn.”

We were lined up on the side of the porch, gazing at the yard, and we plastered polite smiles on our faces at the sound of our names.

“Lovely,” he said. “Beautiful family.” He stood in the shade of the covered porch. The air was much cooler than in the City, but Mr. Adams had begun to sweat. He dabbed his temples with a handkerchief and placed it back in his breast pocket.

“It’s a very nice street, as you mentioned.” Dad reached for something to say.

“Oh yes, absolutely. Best neighbors a person could want. Nice families in every direction, I tell you. Very open and accepting.” He looked off down the street. Cleared his throat.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Dad said. “I was pleased that we came to an agreement over the phone. It’s a relief to have found a place in time for the children to enroll in school. We would love to see inside before signing the papers.” He gestured toward the door. “Shall we?”

Mr. Adams shrank. He scanned the street again, as if there might be spies. It was eerily still. “You see, the thing is . . .”

Mom’s feet shifted in her low heels. Her eyes widened and flew to Dad’s face, and Dad’s face dropped. Her Beside me, Dawn started to fidget.

"I, uh, I don't know . . .," the man said. "I don't know if this will work after all. I mean, I wasn't aware . . . You see . . . Well, this is the kind of neighborhood where everyone knows each other, see? Everyone knows that Grace and I are leaving. So they're counting on us to sell to a family that will be . . . the right fit for the place." He looked everywhere but at our faces. "I hope you understand."

Dad put his hands in his pockets and cocked his head. He was no longer smiling, but he didn't look angry either. To a stranger, his face looked blank, but I watched a shadow draw the warmth from his eyes.

Mr. Adams kept talking to cover Dad's silence. "If it were me, I'd have no problem with it, see. I treat everybody the same. I believe in equality, I really do. How are we going to learn to get along if we can't live together, right?" He smiled. A heartless, broken smile. He peeked, finally, at Dad's face. He glanced at the window behind him. "Well," he said, "I would show you the place, but it's, uh, it's not a good time, and I . . . I just don't think it's going to work after all. I am sorry."

"I'm not sure I understand, Mr. Adams," Dad said. "We spoke on the phone a few hours ago, and you assured me we were agreed—"

"Right, right. I truly am sorry about the misunderstanding. Someone called—a bit after we spoke . . . a friend . . . and they're considering buying, and—well, there was no way to reach you to tell you not to come, so . . ." He sniffed, looked down at his shoes and then at me and Dawn with a pitying frown.

Mom folded her arms and drew her eyebrows together.

She opened and closed her mouth as if gasping for air, for words, for sense.

Dad took in the house, as if appraising it from the outside, imagining its interior. Finally, he said, "I see." He extended his hand again. "Mr. Adams." They shook, and Dad wished him a good afternoon before turning us toward the sidewalk.

Mr. Adams stood on the porch, watching us walk away. Dawn looked back at him, at the house, at the window, where the curtains parted slightly again. I didn't want him to think we were longing for what he was denying us, so I put my arm around her and said, "Come on." Knowing somehow that our dignity was on the line.

We piled back into the car, closed and locked the doors. As Dad started the car and drove back the way we had come, we all stared straight ahead.

Friday, April 5, 1968

Charles and I slow down as we approach the lounge where SAS is meeting. The room is packed with Black undergraduate and graduate students. Fatigue shapes every face. The sisters from Barnard sit on one side of the lounge. Some have red, swollen eyes and cheeks raw from wiping away tears.

I think of Dawn again. How hard is she taking this day? When we were younger, I would have been the first person she'd want to talk to at a time like this. Now I'm not even sure if I should call her.

Valerie sits with the Barnard sisters. Her soft, brown

afro is fluffed cloudlike around her head. Her normally vibrant face is drained and somber. Her intense dark eyes are focused on Wesley.

"This is a moment of reckoning," Wesley says. "It's a time to reassert our demands and priorities. We need to push this institution to change. It's our duty and our obligation."

"That's right," other voices add on.

The strong language and forceful tones take me by surprise. I haven't been to an SAS meeting in over a year. I had expected the group to be an activist space, but when I got here, the conservative members were in control, so the radical members couldn't get very far. Instead of sitting around arguing with bougie Black folks, I took my energy to the tutoring program, where the need was real.

It's not that I couldn't have done both. I didn't want to. Something about the differences between Black students on campus made me feel like a third wheel. I wasn't integrationist like the other middle-class Black students, but I wasn't down like the radicals, most of whom were working-class or poor. Or maybe that was all in my head.

Maybe I shouldn't have stayed away for so long. It looks like I've missed a big change. The leaders now are more radical, and almost all the Black students are here today. From the nods and murmurs around the room, it sounds like everyone wants some action.

Good, I think as I pull up a chair. It's about time.