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Tahmika Ruth
College Scholars Project
April 22, 1998

Lead the River to Kneel before the Tree

Memphis, TN Born in 1975

Moved to Cheyenne, WY

Headstart- 1st Grade

Little Rock Air Force Base, AR

2nd through 6th Grade

- Dirty
- One is Silver and the Other Gold
- Chocolate Bar
- Zebra
- Memphis Sundays

Alconbury Air Base, England

6th through 9th Grade

- The Duke
- Blue Line Dancing

Aviano Air Base, Italy

10th through 12th Grade

- Marigolds

University of Tennessee, Knoxville


- Milkshake
 - Hair
 - Tonight You Sleep With the Fishes
 - The Rain in Spain
- 

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Introduction

There are those who would say that I have had an opportunity to live a privileged life. My mother is enlisted in the United States Air Force, and, as a result, I have lived in many places and seen many different types of people. I have lived in Tennessee, Wyoming, Arkansas, England and Italy. But everywhere I go, there are two things that remain constant no matter who I am talking to or what the topic of conversation. I am Black and I am female. Just because I have had opportunities that many of my class and gender have not been exposed to does not make me immune to the restraints and prejudices that apply to every African-American woman living in the United States today. In fact this "privilege" has provided greater exposure to (for better or worse) the virulence of racism, sexism and classism. This, "privilege" for Black people is a two-edged sword without a handle.

The following is a collection of short stories written by myself based on my own life experiences. Again, while I have had some unique experiences, there are certain universalities that are clear no matter your race. I have used themes that recur throughout my life that have taught me a lesson, brought me to an epiphany or that continue to elude me. By using my life as a canvas, I will illustrate the complexities of contemporary racial issues and realities. Not all Blacks get along; not all Blacks hate whites. Black self-hate, intra-racial prejudices, and anger are directed at everyone and no one.

My generation is dealing with the same problems our parents faced plus a few new ones. Among the unresolved issues are the difficulty in pursuing an education, the need to address the crisis caused by fathers who do not support their families along with the need to support mothers that are forced to sacrifice to take up the slack. In addition here is a new intermingling between the races that some find disturbing, new ideas about ages-old religious values, and out-dated stereotypes from slavery which tenaciously linger like a foul odor.

This paper assumes that every person's experience is not the same although I feel most carry many of the same colorings. Anything that facilitates debate and discussion is a serious step in the right direction in this time of social change and debate. This paper will provide a step on what will undoubtedly be a long journey toward racial justice and reconciliation.

Dirty

The dreaded bath and hair combing ritual over for the night, I am standing in front of my Snow White and the Seven Dwarves bedspread, hands on narrow hips appraising my new school clothes. The bright over head light makes it day inside while the night settles comfortably in its place over all the cardboard cutout houses on my street. Absently scratching the dry place lotion missed on the back of my calf, my face is serious, trying to find the perfect outfit for the first day of school. My older sister's large T-shirt slips off my shoulder at a crazy angle as I bend over to choose the red button down and blue corduroys with red knit socks. Not too dull, but still respectable enough for class. With a satisfied smile I hang the other skirts, pants and shirts back in the over stuffed closet I share with my younger sister. I walk over to the door to hang the chosen outfit on the door handle, then turn the lights out. Oblivious to Anissa's snores in the next bed, I adjust my stocking cap over my braids to keep my hair from getting messed up by morning. Settling under the covers, I watch the streetlight burning outside my window. Excitement makes sleep a long time coming as I wonder about third grade, riding a school bus without my sister, and all my new school supplies.

Walking in the morning sunshine, nervousness adds speed to my gait. Even though I have practiced going to the bus stop over the summer, this is no longer a trial run. The designated site of cracked sidewalk is already swarming with kids and parents. Swinging my backpack up onto my shoulders, I am careful not to scuff my new boots. Hurrying up the street I feel rather than see someone behind me. Instinct warns me to hasten my step as the hairs rise on the back of my neck. Settling in behind the other students to wait, I have an opportunity to look at the boy that was behind me. Brian is a stocky boy with more muscle than fat that lives six or seven houses down from mine. Watching sun glint off his summer blond hair, I see cold blue eyes twinkle as he gossips with his friends. Ducking behind taller, older students I vow to stay away from him at all costs. When the yellow bus heaves and clanks its way to our stop, I take a seat close to the front, far away from him and his friends.

Lost in the rush of the first weeks of school, it is some time before I notice Brian and his friends laughing and pointing at me in the mornings. Always ahead of him no matter how late I leave from my house on the corner, I hear him snickering behind me: my cheap hand-me-down clothes, my nappy hair, or my tar black color. Ears burning and pulse racing, it becomes a morning run to the bus stop. As if sensing the tenseness of a trapped animal, the dirty whispers become loud enough for me to hear; then loud enough for everyone to hear.

I am so excited to be wearing my sister's jacket I do not care about Brian and his stupid taunts. Not everyone has a sister in high school or one that lets them wear her jacket. My smile cracks the mask of cold skin that is my face as I pull the collar up around my ears to mimic Fonzy on Happy Days. Strutting and primping my step falters as I see Brian emerge from his house blowing smoke rings into the morning from a fake cigarette. When he looks at me, I cross over to the other side of the street with my head held high. Stuffing his hands into his red jacket I look over my shoulder in just enough time to see him wipe his snotty nose on the cuff of his fraying sleeve. Snapping my head back around and down I know he has seen me see his indiscretion. Knowing my prayers will not be answered, I hear his sneer across the avenue.

"What are you looking at, tar baby? Why don't you go home and take a bath. If you weren't so dirty," he emphasizes with a filthy knowing smirk, "you wouldn't be so dark!"

"I take a bath every night, so shut up! I'm cleaner than you are!" I find myself yelling back. Never before have I confronted him in any way. It has shocked him as much as me because it takes him a minute or two to retort with his usual remark.

"God just left you in the oven too long. You got burned up, darkie!" Watching him run to join his friends a vile taste forms in my mouth. I hate baths, I think, but I do take them. Nevertheless, I find myself rubbing my hands constantly over my jacket whose brown now seems to show all manner of spills and stains. Hanging my head and letting my own nose run, I spend the morning scraping underneath my fingernails until the sound of the bus allows me to lift my head and join the other children crowding around its door.

The afternoon is unusually warm for the season, and I revel in being able to take both my jacket and sweater off as I gather my books from the green vinyl seat of the bus. As the other kids bustle pass me to meet friends and parents at the stop, I realize with a sick dread that Brian and I are the only ones left on the long stretch between the stop and my house. If ever he is going to try to jump me, this is the time with no one around to stop him. Chewing the inside of mouth, I hastily climb down and shift my backpack to both shoulders. Looking back and forth, I know he is about 15 feet behind me swinging his full backpack to and fro. Just as his house comes into view over the hill, I hear a loud *thunk* behind me. Spinning around expecting to see anything, I am surprised to see he has lost his hold on his backpack strap. The strap is hanging limp on the concrete, broken at the base of the pack. Thinking to make some type of peace offering, I see him standing with legs apart and mouth agape. Taking a deep breath and putting on my best smile, I bend over to retrieve his bag. Holding it out in both hands to him, I say in what I hope is a disarming voice, "Here you go. You dropped this."

I never knew the human face could change color so quickly. Before he even speaks, my smile runs hiding as I see the hate and anger in his eyes. Red blotches appear on his round cheeks and rolling neck as his lips compress in a line tight enough to make them disappear.

"Put my backpack down, you stupid blackie! Leave my stuff alone," he shouts arms flailing as his legs start to churn, feet slapping the ground hard and fast. Dropping the backpack, I turn to run toward my house. Knowing he is behind me and bigger than me makes me scared, but I know I can outrun him. I chance a quick look back over my shoulder. My head whips back around as I see him heave his backpack at me intending to knock me over. It misses and lands just behind me, but his words, screamed at the top of his lungs, do not.

"Get out of here, nigger! Don't you look at me! Don't you look at me! I hate you, you stupid nigger! I hate you!"

Scared more of his words than his fists, I shoot all the way home and lock myself in my bedroom. I heard the word nigger before when my sister and her friend were having a

conversation about the Ku Klux Klan. Maybe Brian was a member of the KKK, or knew someone who was. If I was a nigger, did that mean that someone could come and burn my house or kill my family? Looking in my mirror I see a girl with long hair in ponytails and bright eyes. Smooth skin and large teeth looked back at me, the same as on every other day. But today, I see something different and for the first time. I saw a dirty little nigger with nappy hair and skin that is too dark. With no right to feel pride or beauty, I resign myself to my new role. No one had argued against Brian and his taunts, not even the adults at the bus stop, so it must be the truth. For three days I agonize over his words and their import. For three days I do not eat and have a gnawing feeling of emptiness. My stomach feels squeezed out and dry everyday as I go to school. Brian no longer talks to me though. He does not need to, since he has accomplished his task of teaching me my place.

Still not truly understanding, though, I feel I must talk to someone who can explain things to me. Catching my mother after the workday is a difficult task, but one I set out to accomplish. Drawing her to my little room toward the back of the house, I sit her down across from me in the overstuffed knit chair. I can smell the sweat and heat from the flightline as she has not bothered to take off her camouflaged uniform to talk with me. Settling her tired body onto my bed, she sets her hat on her knee and rubs her hand over her face as if to wipe away the trials of the day. Knowing my mother is tired and works hard, a little lump grows in my throat to be bothering her with this new situation I am dealing with. Starting earnestly I ask her why people call other people names like nigger and things like that. Seeing her sit up straight and get a hard look in her eye, I feel foolish and ashamed to have to tell her the story that she demands. I can feel a different kind of heat flow from my young mother as I tell her about Brian and all his names for me. She stands up so suddenly that it scares me, and with a sinking heart I wish I had not told her. Surely, he will be even more upset with me. Turning to stride out of the bedroom she turns back and kneels beside me, putting her hand on my knee.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner, Tahmika?" It is a gentle question but no less threatening for all that.

Lowering my head and lifting my thighs to sit on my hands, I shrug my bony shoulders. Not knowing how to explain the empty feeling your belly has after having the flu for three days, I mumble a quiet, "I don't know."

Watching my mother practically run from the room after I tell her where he lives, I hear her shout Frenzica's name. Brian's older sister is a blond haired blue eyed friend of hers. Still sitting in my same position, head down, feet turned in on each other, I hear the front door slam. I am waiting to find out if I will still be a nigger tomorrow.

One Is Silver and the Other Gold

Fifth grade is a time of Chinese jump rope, first crushes, sworn enemies and best friends. My best friend was Laurie Levin--that's Lev' in, not Leave-in; she used to hate that. If you can imagine a pair of girls totally inseparable, that was us. When I moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, it was a totally different experience than living in Wyoming. Laurie made everything wonderful; she was the perfect best friend. We studied together all the time, competing for the highest score on tests, racing to get our hands up before each other and everyone else. We compared answers and double-checked writing assignments. She boasted better penmanship, but I reigned supreme at math. And that was all right. Nothing was a bitter competition between us, just two friends testing their mettle-- constantly! We wore the same type of clothes, and I wanted my coarse thick hair to fall exactly like her beautiful perfectly straight black locks. We shared everything: secrets, lunches, homework, even glasses. When she got new pink glasses, I used to borrow them to see the chalkboard on occasion. Lo and behold, six weeks later I had my own pair because my vision was getting as bad as hers. At school, we were such tight companions that, no one ever referred to either one of us separately as Laurie or Tahmika. It was Tahmika-and-Laurie or Laurie-and-Tahmika. We loved it that way.

Her home life was the envy of my world. I swore that when I grew up my home would be just like hers. Her house was near the base lake and was taken care of totally and efficiently by her mother. A world-traveling Air Force officer, her father met and married her mother while on one of his many tours to the Orient, thus explaining Laurie's beautiful hair. Her father was a colonel, and her mother stayed at home cleaning and cooking all day. Their home was immaculate. I will never forget that it was the first home at which I was told to take my shoes off at the door before I went inside. Her mother made Laurie jam-packed lunches every day and had a snack waiting the minute she stepped through the door after school. My mother and father both worked so I made my own skimpy lunches and went straight to chores after walking home from

LRAFB Elementary. Their parents never fought, and Laurie's grandmother knitted sweaters for her in the winter. This was the life of perfection in my eyes, and I vowed it would be mine as soon as I was in a position to attain it. My husband would work; I would stay at home with beautiful children, make my home appealing to the eye, and NEVER fight with my mate. I never grudged Laurie her luxuries; we were friends on equal footing. She loved me and everything about me, and I certainly adored her. That's what friends are for, to overlook any little faults, be there when you are sad, and pledge undying loyalty.

So this was the state of things between us. No malice, just love, and acceptance. I will never forget that day as long as I live; it was the day things changed. It was crisp and bright, one of those days the sun looks down and decides that it is time that spring show its face. While crossing the little zebra crosswalk to the playground, Laurie leaned over to me and whispered confidentially, " I can't believe it! I can't believe Christy's mother lets her date Black boys!" I had no response for her as I looked at her sideways to ascertain whether this was the same Laurie as yesterday. Was she the same Laurie that invited me to her home and shared her food with me, and I with her? To this day I have no idea how she wanted me to respond to that statement. At the age of eleven it is often hard to label your feelings, and I had no idea what to call what I was feeling at that moment. We had been friends for...forever it seemed. I felt betrayed, confused and suspicious. How can it not be all right to date Black boys, but be perfectly okay to be best friends with a Black girl? What if my brother had lived with my family? Would he have been all right, or would he have been stigmatized like Christy's boyfriend? I did not understand then, and to this day I do not accept that scenario. Laurie moved away soon, as all military children do. She wrote me tons of letters, some of which I responded to, others I read and put away. That was my very first lesson in betrayal and inequality. Such lessons do not always come from a stranger chewing tobacco and driving a pick-up sporting a rebel flag. Laurie's story is one that I keep tucked away and pull out for those times I need to be reminded to be on my guard. You will

never know what a person is truly thinking, they may never really know. And if they do, they may never tell you. The injustice may be a simple matter of not introducing you to certain people, or not taking you certain places. Since my return to the South, I have had numerous opportunities to relive this story, and remember that not all friends are created equal.

Chocolate Bar

Nine year old summer is Kool-Aid, icees, water sprinklers and child adventure. Groups of friends race on cumbersome banana seated bicycles with no gears and bad brakes. Some days you win and some days you lose, but on those days you are too busy laughing, shouting and heaving. You hold your aching sides like Old Thomas with his crazy dog who is always yelling for you all to "get on away from here." You and your gang use friendly houses on the block to hide behind during hide-and-go-seek. Every tree is your tree, friends are true to the end, and they swear it by becoming your blood sister or brother. Your job is to be a kid and have fun, so you start the mission at 9:00 a.m., then race the streetlights home to beat curfew. You eat and bathe against your wishes then sleep hard and do it all over again until school starts.

Gina is older, popular and enviable. It is obvious to me that she has everyone, adult and student alike, wrapped around her little pink finger. She is bouncy and confident with sunned hair that swings about her shoulders when she laughs. Being in fourth grade, neither I nor my best friend Michelle have any chance of being Gina's friend. Most mornings on my walk from the little green house on Oregon Avenue to Little Rock Air Force Base Elementary, I spot Gina with her friends smiling and gossiping as her neon green tote hangs limply from her shoulder. I have no idea what ever made her notice me.

I am due to begin my new job of escort service to and from school for a chubby kindergartner next week. As usual, it is all my mother's idea, and I have yet to meet the little girl. Strolling along the long empty street leading home, my thoughts are filled with how much money I can save making a dollar a week in a year, and what I can buy with my new found cash. The sun is just starting to lose its warmth as bright yellow-orange glints off parked car windows. People must be coming home from work so I quicken my steps while my mind turns over the notion of how soon it would be appropriate to ask for a raise.

"Hey, chocolate bar."

My steps slow as my neck cranes around left and right. Seeing nothing and no one, I assume the voice must be talking to someone else.

"Hey, you. That's right, chocolate bar. I'm talking to you."

Spinning around I find Gina standing with fists balled on skinny acid washed hips. Her lips are curled in a strange way, sort of pulled to the side in a smile gone wrong while the sun behind makes her hair a glowing halo.

"Are you talking to me?" I stumble over the words, confused and uncertain. Gina has finally noticed me, but not in the way I had hoped.

"You are just a dumb dark chocolate bar. So that's what I'm gonna call you. Do you have a problem with that?" she challenges, weight shifting from one Ked to the other.

Chewing the inside of my bottom lip, I wish she could not see the fear and confusion creeping plainly across my face. Shoulders humped, head down, I think that she will now throw something at my back as I continue home. Gina follows me for four blocks screeching, "Chocolate bar, oh chocolate bar," in a loud sing-song. My backpack is full of rocks as the cracks and grass in the sidewalk blur together in an unintelligible wet jigsaw puzzle. I cannot avoid the cracks. I do not have strength to try.

Monday morning rises warm and exciting for me because today I start making money. I meet the little girl, with brown cheeks round with baby fat and pulled tight by her open smile. The money quickens my pulse, but close physical contact makes me flustered and inconsiderate. Her little fingers continue to grab eagerly at my own. For a few blocks I walk with my back extra straight cautioning her about traffic, forcing her to walk on the inside so that if a car comes careening down the boulevard I can throw her to safety and block the vehicle by sacrificing my own body. This child thinks I am important, and her round cherry eyes glisten as we walk.

Further ahead I spot Gina's trademark neon bag. I slow my steps to avoid her and tug too hard at the little hand in mine. Her smile never falters, though.

Walking back home at the end of the day with the child in tow, I am again stopped by the shrill voice singing, "Chocolate bar, chocolate bar." My legs churn through quicksand while my stomach is full of lead.

Heat shoots up my face and lingers about my ears as I jerk the girl on quickly behind me, her legs pumping and tripping as we go. I wish like mad that the girl had not been there, but she was. She saw and heard as she continues to see and hear for weeks until I give up the job, not caring about the lost money.

It is two months before Gina tells me why she follows me every day. Two months before she explains that I am a discarded trifling thing, and the fault is entirely my own. Sitting in a dying fall tree, green bag thrown on the grass in the middle of my secret short-cut home, the avenging angel spreads her arms for balance. Looking down her nose and somewhere off over my shoulder, she explains that I am simply dumb and Black. There is nothing I can do right and she can call me chocolate bar whenever she likes because it is, after all, the truth. All blackies are dirty and ugly, just like me.

Feelings of hurt and defeat at her treatment fade as anger like a slow storm cloud cracks the horizon. Ugly and Black I may be, but dumb I am not. Another month of before and after school "education," and violence hot and sickening flares through my body at the mention of her name.

Steam puffing from my nose like a bull in a cage, I have her shirt collar in my hands, pulled choking about her neck before I realize what I am doing. Even as she looks down at me, I am charged by her wide dilated ice eyes and gaping mouth. I am shorter but realize I am stronger. The group of kids across the street does not bother me.

"You want to fight, Gina, fine," I hiss, rushing blood drowning out any response she may have made with guppy lips moving without sound. "Meet me across the street from school after class today." Shoving her taunt body back I stomp off to class.

The heat of the incident begins to fade as my class prepares for the play scheduled for 2:15. As the teacher's aide, I am in charge of stapling construction paper grass around the stage. Lost in a construction paper forest world, I am shocked to find an older reading group behind one of our partitions. Gina and nine

of her classmates sit around in short-legged plastic chairs reading along with their teacher. I feel with certainty that the whispering after my own unexpected appearance is Gina telling her teacher about our situation. Calm is how I feel as one rough red flower keeps turning over and over in my hands. Relief at not having to fight now does nothing to slow my heart whose goal is to be outside of my chest. I am certain, though, that the teacher will punish her for all her bullying which is better than anything I could have inflicted upon her with a ten year old fist.

Stepping over to the teacher as I am beckoned, Gina still looks scared, twisting a sad string from her jacket and tugging it into sweaty knots.

"That's the one, Miz Clark," she whines, pointing an ugly pink finger at me.

"Gina tells me you threatened her this morning. She says you were going to beat her up," came the crisp tight voice of authority. Not able to speak and feeling the hairs on my neck stand up, I concentrate on the pointy shoes of the woman. This being the truth, I nod mutely.

"I know you do not want me to get the principal involved here. You would get into a lot of trouble. So, just apologize to Gina now, and we can all just forget about this little incident."

Ice settles around my belly as my legs lock fast. My head snaps up to look Ms. Clark in the eye, my own mouth hanging slack, eyes wide. Seeing nothing but a hard straight nose supporting old teacher glasses over a harder straighter mouth, I know I will not be given a chance to explain. Good girls do not get sent to the principal's office.

"I am . . . sorry, Gina," comes haltingly from dry cracked lips as my mind reels with not being able to comprehend. There is nothing to be done for the pain behind my eyes except learn my first lesson in social power.

Milkshake

Some might say that Kingston Pike is a main artery between the body and heart of Knoxville, Tennessee. On this particular wet Saturday, the winding road is washed clean of a week's worth of dirt and grime. Tire-sized potholes are the road's way of protesting its forced service as a four lane highway where anyone could see it was only meant for two. Shrubs and bushes hanging precariously over the road appear to be unreal vermilion plants existing on a diet of oil, gas and exhaust. The veil of heaven's tears simultaneously hides the ugly while enhancing the beauty of nature's handiwork tamed by man. The watercolor sun is weak and infrequent through the overcast sky.

The owner of the little white 1988 Volkswagon is inordinately proud of it as it continues humping along taking each turn with assurance. It is a dependable car, cracked windshield along its entire length notwithstanding. But to its credit, it is braving the potholes and defying skid oriented oil slicks, remaining steady and true.

As other cars and trucks whiz by, Brook's eyes dance a whiskey jig in contrast to the steel blue pressing overhead. Grizzly bear hair matching two days' of chin shadow falls into eyes flickering continually across the road then back to his companion in the passenger's seat.

"No, really! It's the best place in Knoxville for chocolate shakes. Made with chocolate ice cream, of course. The right way," he explains, smiling teeth shining.

"So, then tell me again why I have never heard of it," I retort, incredulity a thin film over my voice that is laughing on the inside.

"Ahh...,but the best treasures are always hidden," he proclaims with gusto as he whips a sharp right, crossing over with his dominant left hand into the not quite deserted parking lot of Long's Drug Center.

Two rapid-succession slams precede warm conspiratorial giggles carried away by the moist chill breeze. Allowing him to reach around me to open the squeaky glass door for me as he always does, I am struck by our murky reflection in the grim tinged glass. He is a head taller although slouching, milk skin spiced with cinnamon and vanilla. Me standing erect, hip reaching only his runner's thigh, coffee eyes looking through

brown owl glasses, skin the rich bark of mahogany. Both of us with matching full lips pulled up and around strong straight teeth.

Our outside voices are too much for the small shop as we boom all over it with our laughter about nothing. Little things in America give me pleasure. I am impressed with high swivel stools at the counter like something out of a fifties movie. They still sell some brand of soap I think has not been sold in any other store for decades. Smiling and sharing, we wait some time before the lack of welcome or any noise becomes apparent. Being two of the only three customers in the crammed store, it is odd that both attendants are gathered at the other end of the counter from where we stand waiting. Doing that machismo jaunty thing he does with his hand in his pocket, Brook leans on the counter flashing that "come hither and be merry" smile to the two ladies.

One is somewhat older and weathered, but both have the matching hair of Aqua Net and rat combing. Matching painted lips stand out like red fire balls against equally rouged cheeks. As if just noticing our arrival, the younger woman takes us in, looking about just enough to convey the hope that some other person might arrive to distract her from our service. Her smile, though, is ready as she looks at the older woman as if waiting for some signal. Her skin is orange from years of sunbathing and pulled taut around the older attendant's sagging chin. Looking at Brook, then to me the frown deepens as she turns purposefully away harumphing as she spins. I have seen the look before with slow eyes that widen in surprise at the sight of the two of us together. The conclusion is we must be dating or something similar but not "nice." A private laugh begins to bubble up when somewhere around my throat it withers and dies.

Asking to be excused twice, Brook seems unconcerned that the young woman is wiping the same grime spot on the counter over and over again. An estranged cousin of the smile for the older woman is taped to her lips now as she ambles over to him. Standing behind and to the side of him, suddenly the smell of old things mixed with soap and disinfectant becomes stifling for me. Ordering two chocolate milkshakes, he turns to me to confirm his choice. My smile and a nod are noted by the older woman who has now found pressing business in the magazine rack behind us. My ironic smirk is shared by him as we continue our college talk

of nothing, co-conspirators once again.

Her fragrance is sickeningly sweet, cloying as she ascertains that the only way to reach the front of the store is to bustle through our conversation. No excuse me. No apology. No out of my way. A dismissal without a look or sound except the scratch of panty hose rubbing together above the squeak of thick soled shoes against linoleum. Eyebrows rise high on my forehead while my eyes dilate and jaw drops slightly. No, she didn't. It is a look Brook knows well as it is turned first on him then on her. With a wave of his hand and roll of his eyes he leans back against the wall, a picture of nonchalance.

Saying nothing out loud about the incident appears to have been ill-advised as big hair can think of nothing better to do than repeat her performance, this time heading back toward the rear of the store. She must turn to come between us as I have instinctively stepped toward my friend. Still, no words or any obvious purpose. Eyes blazing and jaw clenched, I look purposefully around to see if there are any other causeways that could have been utilized by the store clerk. Why, yes. The entire large, empty aisle on the other side of the store near the door, which appears to be closer to her final destination as she angles directly away from where Brook and I stand. Whiskey and coffee eyes meet and mix for an instant, his frank and steady, mine searching and wavering. There is a constricting feeling around my throat making it hard to swallow the anger, the humiliation, the feeling that his blues ain't like mine. The linoleum underfoot takes up my eyeview.

Paying for the shakes and leaving the business behind, we find that the white VW appears the same and yet different. Still talking and smiling, we enter the car, which gives a small groan as we slam the doors. I take a minuscule sip because this is important to him, and I try to ease the constricting feeling that starts at my tongue and continues to grip my stomach. My eyes turn to seek my heart in the eyes of one who can understand. He was there; he heard the silence and felt the words not spoken in our presence, although surely gossip tongues wagged after we quit the establishment. And he did, he said so. But for the first time, I could no longer look my best friend in the eye.

The Duke

Fog has stolen into the tent through seams to drown us like a blanket come alive, wet and groping. Turning over, all my major and some of the minor muscle groups groan from the strain of yesterday's fourteen mile hike through wood and fields, up and over green hills. My initial disorientation at seeing two sleeping bags is replaced by a grunt of annoyance as I remember the night before. After talking to the other hikers and putting away my camping gear, I found Monty snoring to wake Jerusalem in my tent with Maggie. Consequently, I was relegated to the old three-man tent with Brighten and Bruce for the night. I am not surprised to see Bruce's sleeping bag already rolled into a tight bundle atop his sleeping mat and hear him outside rustling the map, impatient as ever. Pulling on dew drenched boots, Brighten's slender form casts waif shadows back into the tent from the front flap. Rubbing sleep and grime from my face, I climb out of the relative warmth of my blue thermal sleeping bag fully dressed to open the back flap. The fresh air is cold but welcome as it sweeps a night's worth of breathing out with it. Rolling up my own sleeping bag and stuffing it into its pouch with lethargic weariness, my head perks up as I hear my name in the conversation outside.

"The girls are still asleep and so is Monty, but we should be moving out soon," Bruce growls in his gruff no-nonsense manner.

"Nah, Tahmika is moving around in there. But let Maggie and Monty sleep for another fifteen minutes, it's only 6:45. So, which way first this morning?" That is Brighten's lighter voice, practical as always with a slight nasal tone.

Stepping out into the translucent sunlight, I am greeted with snickers and knowing smiles from the two as I head down to the river to wash my hands and face. Feeling the icy swiftness of it, I am tempted to let the filth stay instead. At least it is already warm. Frowning with a resigned sigh, I plunge my hands in and splash my face, letting the water run behind my neck and over my ears. Coffee has nothing on the instant rejuvenating effect of ice water.

Walking back to the cook stoves the boys have set up, I am consciously aware of the dark English sky hanging down like a lid on a coffin. Awake but not excited about it, I sit down crossed-legged and gratefully take the offered cup of chocolate coffee from Bruce. They have even boiled water for my oatmeal. There are no complaints out of me this morning as I lean over to study the map of today's trail.

"So, how far today, guys, and please do not say as far as yesterday. I don't think I can take it," I laugh good-humoredly but with a grimace of truth ringing through.

"No, not so far, but the way will be a little steeper early in the day. See the close set of the contour lines," Bruce explains. He likes to think that I cannot read a map as well as he can, so I indulge him with a nod and a practiced inquisitive look. "We have two more days to finish our thirty-six mile hike, but the last day will be so easy. Lots of flat places and towns are over there, so it should take no time at all. Actually, I think I'll go and take a look around before we head out. Be back in twenty minutes. That should be enough time for everyone to be up and moving," he openly hints while shouldering his pack that is twice the size of me.

He lopes off, acting the part of the American Indian scout he so desperately wishes he were. Actually, he's just plain Mexican-American, but his camping tricks have come in handy a few times over the last four hikes we have all been on together. We are a family, all striving to attain the silver medal in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme program. Once you complete the gold medal, you meet and are congratulated by the Duke of Edinburgh himself. That, however, is not our goal this cold dank morning. Our goal is to make it to lunch, then to the campsite, then home the next day for showers and real food. Everything is one step at a time.

Turning toward me Brighten is about to speak when Monty comes lumbering out of his tent picking his high top hairstyle. For who, we do not know. He swears Mariah Carey is just beyond the next hill, and he has to look his best just in case. Pulling Maggie along behind him they head down to the river to wake up and wash out breakfast dishes. Stumbling and sleepy, Maggie manages to drawl, "Morning ya'll," before she is herded away.

Stretching and laughing, Brighten and I pull down the rest of our tent and load our packs and water bottles. By the time Bruce blusters back into the site, cheeks stained pink from running, the whole camp is a bustle of energy.

"Good, you're up! This place is beautiful! Tonight we have got to watch the sun go down if it looks anything like it does in this area. Come on, let's go!" he shouts, physically pulling on Monty and Maggie and helping me with my pack all at the same time. Brighten unfolds from his sitting position, and we are off to cover twelve more miles before the sun starts to set.

We head out on a path that is really more of a memory of past footsteps than a trail. The water soaked sun has managed to push aside the low clouds for clear hiking, making a marvel of the stop light green grass beneath our feet. As usual, Bruce and Brighten have strolled off ahead while Monty, Maggie and I bring up the rear. The first four miles are relatively easy, being passed with laughing and storytelling. There is all sorts of gossip from back at school to talk about, and time passes quickly. All five of us take turns reading the map and direction decisions are group decisions. Even after I start to tire around lunch time, it is no big deal. We stop, sweaty and thirsty, in a big clearing marked on the map for its high ground. Watching the town below us crawl with ant people, we rest and wrap blistered feet.

Moving into the afternoon, my feet drag as they become blocks of cement bogged down in the soggy ground. My hips have bruises from the weight of my pack while my feet slide around in boots just a half size too big. No longer cold, I have stripped to undershirt and shorts from the exertion, falling farther behind. Brighten's willow thin form moves out beyond my vision. Halfway up the next hill, I call out that I have to rest. A collective groan from the group makes me hang my head and wither to the ground. I can see them all standing around, frustrated and tired themselves. Over my head falls a long dark shadow. I look up to see Brighten standing there, pale but definitely not from being tired. Looking into his eyes for a long moment in

resignation, I hear him call out to the others to go on. We will meet them at the top of the next rise. Sitting next to me in silence I expect some kind of lecture.

Brighten and I have been in the same math classes for two years even though I am a year behind him. Our relationship has grown out of passed notes and tests as well as study sessions. He hates using the FOIL method and I hate word problems, so we swap and do each other's. Huffing and tired I cannot imagine what he has to say, so I jump the gun.

"Brighten, I just cannot do it. We have five more miles to go," I whine. "Five! My feet are killing me and my muscles hurt. I'm hungry and tired. I can't even make it up this hill. I know all of them are getting mad, but I just can't help it. *You* never get tired. *You* never even break a sweat out here. Being tall and having long legs must be some kind of advantage. You guys can just leave me here for half an hour or so, and then I will come along. I have a photocopy of the map, so go ahead. It's no big deal," I end feeling defeated and alone. This last hike has gotten the best of me.

"Are you finished?" he asks quietly, eyes squarely focused on me.

"What? Finished with what?" I ask, puzzled.

"Now, you know we cannot leave you here by yourself. You could get hurt or lost. So forget that. Maggie is just as short as you are and she is doing fine; height has nothing to do with it. Even if we could leave you here, you know we would not. I would not," he emphasizes while easing my pack off my sore indented shoulders. Standing up with my pack and his, he holds his free hand down to me. "Let's go."

For the first time it seems, I notice Brighten Miller outside of his classmate role. His brown hair is the color of spring twigs and lays thin and oily on his scalp, dark in contrast to his pale nondescript skin tone. A few freckles spray his nose underneath his glasses, and he has lines on his forehead from hours of concentration. His tennis hands are large but smooth and strong. He towers over me when I am standing, but now he seems to have grown ten feet.

"What are you doing?" I question, uncertain about the hand thrust down to my face.

"We will do it together. I will carry your pack for a while, then it won't seem so hard."

His smile is so sure and his tone so matter-of-fact that I believe I can do it, even though five minutes ago I was ready to give up. Hand in hand we climb the rest of the way getting mud on our pants and animal presents stuck in our boots. Expecting grief at the top I duck my head when we see the others spread out over a large sun baked boulder. On the contrary, everyone is energized and relaxed. It seems the unexpected stop actually did more good than harm. Maggie shouts a phrase about sheep and farmers that I do not understand but take to be encouraging and supportive. Monty actually breaks out in some broken rendition of the latest hit by Mariah, and Bruce takes my pack from Brighten with as close to a smile as I have ever seen.

Heading out at a little slower pace, Brighten and I talk and laugh while holding hands. Still sore but not so tired, my laugh is rejuvenated and strong when he tells me a bad joke with a worse punchline. The stories and conversation keep my attention so long that before I know it I am feeling better. Bruce is more than happy to return my pack, but shows me a better way to wear it so as not to feel the pull so much, tightening it around my waist instead of letting it hang.

There is a passing stile over an old, hand built rock wall. Years of constant English rain and fertile ground have made it a study in horticulture, with many different branches and vines creating another wall over and around the steps. Brighten swings his legs over first, never letting go of my hand, then pulls down the scratchy trip hazards to help me over. The only time we lose contact is when my ankle gets snagged. I lean on his thin shoulders letting his long fingers work the catch out of my socks. The entire time he keeps conversation going, even while catching my fall on the other side. With my mind on his words and not the distance we have traveled, his voice has become a golden life preserver to which I cling tenaciously, barely thinking of the knots in my thighs. He shortens his stride as I lengthen mine; we accommodate each other.

The way is still hard, but before I realize the damage we have reached the next X on the map, which is the campsite. Letting out a whoop and holler, I collapse in an ungraceful heap by the river, legs sprawled not caring that my pack is being crushed underneath. Not staying down

too long, I remember that Brighten has promised to teach me to shuffle a deck of cards and play Spades. Shoving away from the ground on matchstick arms, I help Maggie pitch our tent then go down to the river to get water for dinner. Brighten is there hunched over, watching leaves and twigs float by. Holding a pan in his limp hand he seems to be day dreaming.

Sitting down with a small contented sigh, I tap his shoulder to get his attention. Turning his aquiline head toward me, his tight lips relax into an easy smile. His brown eyes give a little twinkle as he turns back to dip his pot into the river.

"I just wanted to thank you, Brighten, for helping me this afternoon. I know you could have walked a lot faster on your own. I also know that I could not have made it without your help."

"Oh, yes, you could have," he responded in his absolutely certain way. "You would have made it regardless of what I did, but I'm glad you think you needed me. I needed you, too, you know."

"No, you didn't," I reply, not ready to believe that bit of ego stroking.

"Sure, I did; we're a team. You have strong points that I lack, like being able to really feel like I belong here with you guys. Now, at least I know that I can contribute. The whole group knows it, too. So, now things seem more even."

"Well, I never thought about it, but we all do have our roles that we play to keep the group together. Bruce pretty much keeps us on the right trail. That is definitely important," I add with a laugh.

"And you know Maggie is always playing the peacemaker and diplomat. Monty keeps us laughing," he added.

"But you always seemed like the lone man, Brighten."

"Well, I'm not anymore. I told you we would do it together," he grinned.

For splashing river water in my face, I chase him all the way back to camp, the sun fading away behind us. We finished the hike the next day, then soothed aching muscles with bubble

baths and home cooking. No man is an island. Change cannot be done alone. I have won many awards and been honored many times over, but nothing can compare to earning my silver medal award with the help of a man that was willing to hold my hand the entire way home.

Zebra

Summer nights more often than not found me with my two sisters, Frenzica and Anissa, and two older cousins Wendy and Cherry. Memphis nights in the summer sit on a body like a sauna turned down five degrees. It is cool enough not to sweat but hot enough to make you wish you could. Being young even in my eyes, it was my great and wonderful surprise when I was asked if I wanted to join the older kids in seeing a movie. Still in elementary school, it is an honor indeed to be asked to join high school students in doing anything, and if that anything is out in public it only cements the idea that one really is moving up the ladder to coolness. Of course, the fact that my aunt told them to take me had little bearing on the matter.

As we stand outside of the theatre waiting for Wendy's boyfriend Barnard to pick us up after the show, I am watching a young couple living out the love story plot in the parking lot. The girl is tall with slender brown legs peeking out beneath her fashionably short skirt. A cocoa complexion, her face is a masterpiece of high cheekbones, pouty lips and large painted eyes. Not trashy or sleazy, her long dark hair blows in the meager wind. When she smiles her face lights up with bright teeth and sparkling eyes that toss meaningful glances to her companion. His is the face of every handsome man on television. Tall and lithe his tanned arms hold her close to him around her slender waist, smiling with his eyes. His hairstyle is also very popular with a shaggy cut on top and already light tresses streaked blond. Leaning on an expensive red convertible, I wonder what these models are doing out of their picture magazines and in this dim dirty parking lot.

With a wistful look in my eye, I long for everything the woman represents. I already have long hair, but I can never get it to flow like that. Her legs and self-confidence are intangible goals to me. And most of all I would like to marry a good looking and charming man exactly like the one holding her. Looking around at the people outside, some waiting for rides, some just waiting, I check an involuntary sneer. The Black boys with their wooly heads and crusty lips are hideous and vulgar to me. I could never date a man that was as loud and obnoxious as these fools out here

laughing and singing loud enough to wake the dead. The problem with Black men, I think, is that they are all dangerous and intent on hurting their women. At twelve years old, it seemed only logical to find the most sought after men attractive and the unpleasant ones unattractive. To be dating a white man would give me a status that I could never hope to achieve with any of these boys spitting and sucking pickles in the parking lot.

Turning back to my model couple, I hear my oldest cousin sucking her teeth next to me. Crossing her arms over her ample bosom, she shares some kind of secret with her sister. Wendy is tall to me, with light skin that I treasure even though she has an oily jherri curl hairstyle. She is smart and knows things that I want to know. Eavesdropping on her conversation I hear the word "wannabe." Looking down at my feet, I cannot hear anymore no matter how hard I strain. Confused about her meaning, I look up at her and ask,

"What's a wannabe, Wendy?"

"You're so dumb, Tahmika," Frenzica snaps, whom I ignore.

"That girl is a wannabe," Wendy replies.

Not wanting to admit that I think she is beautiful for fear of ridicule, I continue,

"A wannabe what?"

"She wants to be white, that's what. She ain't gone get it by dating some white guy. She's still just as Black as I am, even if she is high yellow."

Now I know it is a bad thing to want to be with a white guy, but that doesn't really change my feelings. I just have to be careful about what I admit out loud. Slyly keeping my eyes averted and my tone nonchalant, I query,

"So, what's wrong with her dating a white guy. He is kinda cute."

"What?" she asks incredulous, craning her neck to look down at me. "They ain't nothing but a zebra couple. They make me sick," she spat. "Come on, there's Bernard."

Climbing into the darkcar beside my sister who is refusing to speak to me now, I begin to wonder. This is the first incident involving race hate from within my own family, and I do not

know quite how to react. Riding with the windows down brings a bite into the air that had not been there before. Rubbing the chill bumps on my arm I listen to Wendy tell Bernard about the interracial couple. I begin to wonder where the designation splits. White is apparently bad, but also high yellow? I thought the old saying light is good, but white is right was pretty much true when it came to attractiveness. Wendy and Cherry's father is a very fair-skinned man, and so is the father of one of our other cousins. Why then is it okay to marry a man whose appearance is two generations from white, but not totally white. I have never heard this type of hostility before. I do notice that my sister, for all her desire to be included as one of them, has not said anything about whether or not she thinks it is permissible for races to intermingle.

That night getting ready for bed, Frenzica whispers that not all black and white couples are bad then rattles off the names of a few from on base back home. Standing in front of the television watching the news I see all types of crimes and accidents, but both the perpetrators and victims are always the same. Watching the sea of sharp, greasy black faces of men, some not much older than myself, I vow to never accept any ugly violent criminal man to be my mate. I do not care what the cost, I will find and secure a white man and save myself the trouble of getting hurt by a black one.

*This mentality followed me for many years to come—all the way throughout middle school. It seemed as if there were no good looking black men anywhere. Not all white men were attractive, but no black men were. Never within my immediate family, but within my extended family this was quite an issue of concern. It was generally believed that I would marry outside of my race, since I did finally state that as my intention. But this was never accepted without an argument about how the children would never feel like they belonged anywhere or how abandoned I would feel. It is possible and it does happen: Black people can believe the same stereotypes the rest of the world fall prey to about their race. Not only believe it but internalize it. It was a reflection of self-hate and displaced anger on my part. It may be necessary to add the my views have indeed changed, though not to the degree that my cousin professed on that night.

Blue Line Dancing

The day has dawned warm and bright, contrary to usual English weather patterns for the time of year. There is no threat of thunder or lightening from above, but that does not make the tension in the car any less. Sitting behind my mother, I watch the back of her head much more intently than the countryside speeding by. A happy smile full of nervousness continues to spread across my face against my will; logic tells me that smiling will just make her mad. But sitting back here on the way to my boyfriend's house, I still cannot believe that my mother has consented to having dinner with his family.

It took me two weeks to convince my mother to pack up the whole family and take them twenty-five minutes back toward the base to have a meal prepared by the father of a boy that is not supposed to be my boyfriend at all. Terry and I have been trying to get my mother to relent and let us date for months even though I am only fifteen. There is a rule in my family that we are not allowed to date until we are sixteen, but I know that if she will give Terry a chance she will change her mind. The last few months in my home have been fraught with arguments and hostilities over this issue. This dinner is my mother's way of giving a little; I know she cannot pretend she does not know what is really at stake. This is more than any little meal over a neutral friend's house. This is a very big deal.

Lush green bushes and fragrant flowers overrun the yard at his home as we turn into the driveway. Trying not to appear too eager (it would not seem appropriate), I lead my mother and two sisters up the round concrete footpath to the front door. I can feel the stiffness in my mother's back without looking behind me. Since my older sister and Terry's older sister have a lot of classes together, I am not worried about her. Anissa is actually being sweet and charming today, thank God. My only worry is my mother. I offer a silent prayer as I ring the doorbell with a shaky hand.

He must have been waiting by the door because it opens seconds after I ring. Standing in a freshly ironed white button down and jeans, he stuffs his hands in his pockets and smilingly

asks us to come in. I can also tell he has had his light brown hair cut for the occasion and is clean-shaven despite the razor burn I gave him last week trying to shave him myself. Terry's light gray-green eyes dance as we share a conspiratorial look behind my mother's back. Warm Italian smells are wafting in from the kitchen as introductions are made around the living room. Bustling out of the kitchen, all smiles and wiping his hands on a towel about his waist, Mr. Colucci introduces himself to my mother and family. Immediately he engages her in conversation while both of our older sisters head upstairs already talking and laughing, surely at some poor kid from school's expense. My little, sister, in her clean jeans and cute hair immediately plops down in front of the television where Terry is showing her how to work the video game controls.

After five or ten minutes, Mrs. Colucci saunters into the living room, plump and quiet—the exact opposite of her husband. She greets my mother and suddenly the tension I had felt melting refreezes in the base of my neck. The greeting between the two women is too cordial, too polite. My mother stands to shake her hand with “The Mask” firmly in place. I have seen the mask many times. Usually it is used when she is either talking to someone she does not like or someone she feels is trying to take advantage of her. Turning toward Terry, I give a little moan of frustration and sadness; this will never work if my mom is already drawing battle lines in the sand.

With my little sister in tow, Mr. Colucci heads back toward the kitchen to finish up last minute details and show her the secret of authentic Italian marinara sauce passed down through the generations in his family. Shouting for everyone to be ready in fifteen minutes, he shoos Terry and I upstairs. Turning the corner, I give a startled gasp to see life sized standing cutouts of Spock and Captain Kirk from Star Trek in the hallway. Laughing, Terry pulls me by the hand into his room at the head of the stairs. We are careful to leave the door open as we collapse on his bed.

“What were those in the hallway?” I ask, laughter bubbling on my lips.

"My mom's a real Star Trek buff. She's had them for the longest," he replies, getting far too much enjoyment out of my discomfort.

"Well, good. That's my mom's favorite show, too. I hope they have lots to talk about. Do you think this will work? I mean, letting my mom getting to know your family and all?" I ask worried.

"It certainly can't hurt. She already hates me, so it absolutely cannot get any worse."

"She doesn't hate you. She hates me for loving you. Believe me, it's me she is mad at and it has nothing to do with who or what you are. You could be the man in the moon for all she cares. But, I don't think your mother likes me."

Surprise makes his eyes grow big as he begins in a reassuring voice.

"No, you don't have anything to worry about. She likes you; what reason does she have not to?"

Holding hands we sit on his bed sharing secrets and stories and I love yous until we hear the call for dinner. Washing our hands together in the tiny bathroom across the hall, we get more soap and water on the floor than on our hands. Bounding down the stairs two at a time, we arrive in the dining room while everyone is still milling around trying to find seats. Pulling out a chair beside Terry, I am preparing to sit down in front of a veritable feast when his mother corrects me in a disturbingly chill voice.

"No, dear. Terry, you come sit by me. Tahmika, there's your place there near the end."

Moving around to my place, I am amazed. Mr. Colucci has outdone himself. There is salad, pasta, chicken parmigiano, as well as rolls and two different types of sauces. When I am nervous I tend to spill things. In my mind's eye, I see red wine or fruit juice staining the beautiful white tablecloth in front of me. Resolving to be extremely careful, I share in the conversation, which inevitably leads to grades since four out of the five students at the table are honor roll students. His older brother, Larry, has never been so talkative and conversation is never lacking. Except for one occurrence, the meal goes off without a hitch.

As the bread or salad runs out on the table, Mr. or Mrs. Colucci asks one of the kids to go to the kitchen to refill it. Asking for a number of things at one time, I offer to go with Terry to help. Smiling at the look of approval from both my mother and his father, we catch up in the kitchen.

"How do you think it's going?" he whispers bending down close enough to my ear for me to smell his spicy aftershave.

"Really well, don't you think? I can't believe it! My mom is actually at your house, and she's having a good time," I run on excitedly.

"Let's hope our luck lasts," he said then gave me a quick harmless kiss that sent my blood racing. As if sensing my flush excitement, the next time I offer to retrieve ice cream out of the kitchen, Mrs. Colucci intervenes swiftly to tell me to go ahead and keep my seat. Larry could help Terry this time. Next to me I feel my mother stiffen, but she continues the conversation without so much as a breath to signal disturbance.

With dusk falling we move the group into the living room to chat and show pictures. Sitting on the floor purposefully closer to Larry than Terry, I laugh at ridiculous stories of the boys growing up and coo over pictures taken in the bloom of innocence. Somehow, the lightheartedness from dinner seems to dissipate as the evening wears on, no matter the hilarity of the stories. Just as silences begin to draw out, Anissa gives a huge yawn as she lays curled up on an overstuffed pillow at my mother's feet. As if that is our cue, my mother stands announcing our intentions to leave. Thanking the Colucci's for a wonderful evening, only I notice the stiffness between our mothers. Unless it is some trick of light, Mrs. Colucci and my mother both seem to breathe a sigh of relief as Terry and Mr. Colucci walk us to the door. Turning out of her lethargy, Anissa pipes up about next week.

"Mr. Colucci, are you still going to show me how to make pizza next week?" she asks eyes hopeful stance timid.

"You got it! If that's alright with your mother. Tahmika, call us and let us know. I'd love you have you guys out here again," he says with a wave and a smile.

"I sure will! Thank you for everything," I shout back. "See you at school, Terry." Call me, I mouth to him as I duck in the back seat of the red VW.

Itching with excitement I cannot ride all the way home in silence.

"So, Mom, what did you think?" I pipe from the back seat.

"About what?" I hate it when she tries to be coy.

"About Terry and his family," I push, as if this is not the obvious thing I am going to ask about.

"His father is very nice. You still can't date him, though, if that's what you want to know." She delivers this dagger to the heart as if I had asked for turkey but all we have is bologna. Feeling let down and hurt, my face draws up into a tight jumble ready to spill tears at the slightest provocation.

"Why not?"

Raising her eyes from the road to look into my in the rearview mirror, she asks,

"Have you ever thought about what his family thinks?"

"His family really likes me. I talk to his dad all the time at the base library. Larry and I were friends to start with and his sisters are too old to worry about anyway," I rationalize.

"And his mother?"

"What about her?" I hedge, trying to remain aloof.

"I think she has a problem with your color, Tahmika."

"Just because they are white doesn't mean they are prejudiced, Mom," I spit out, as if the thought is vile and beneath me.

"No, not just because she is white, but she has a different mentality from her husband; she grew up in a different time and place from Terry, too. I really don't think it would have work out anyway," she finishes, then turns back to the road.

Sitting back with only my thoughts to comfort me, I remember my mother's tenseness from the very beginning of the evening. Cursing under my breath, way under my breath, I know she is blaming her own poor judgment on Mrs. Colucci. I am sure she will like me after she gets to know me better. I had always thought my mother stubborn and relentless about many different things. Her concession of dinner aside, I began to wonder what type of race hangups my own mother must have to not be able to overlook my age, and blame the whole situation on someone else's supposed feelings. I think that I should be allowed to face the problem, if there is one, on my own and in my own way. Arms crossed and eyes rolling, my anger makes me stiff and unyielding. Suddenly, unbidden, a new thought comes to me. Shock and dismay make my face drop all its tightness to leave my mouth literally hanging open. Is my own mother prejudiced herself? Is she using the age problem to cover up her own feelings of inadequacy or shame? Too stunned to broach the topic that night, I never asked my mother about it. As it turns out, that night was the first and last time I ever wondered if my mother was a racist.

Hair

As a baby I had the smallest crown of fuzz around my head. In our community this is seen as a very good omen: the child will grow up to have a lot of hair, which is a prized commodity. As children both my older sister and I had matching long ponytails, hers a dark brown mine jet black. How fortunate, my mother was often told, that they have such "good hair." My younger sister, on the other hand had the coarse, cain'tcha don'tcha hair (as in cain't you comb it, don't you try) that no one desired. The fact that her hair was much more stylish and hip at fourteen than mine at twenty did not seem to matter. I have what is loosely termed "Indian" hair. It is dark, straight and shiny. It never holds curls or afros or relaxers or any of the fashionable styles nearly as well as other types, but somehow it is seen as superior, as if this is some birthright that I can bank on as others bank on the fairness of their complexion. It was a stated and unbroken rule in our house that I could not cut, color or perm my hair until I was sixteen. It was strictly enforced then and highly discouraged now. Especially the cutting part. If my hair were short, how would I stand out from other people? How could I still be attractive and have something to offer?

The hallways during break at Alconbury High School are crowded as usual. The thick air from hot 7th through 12th grade bodies makes one long for the outside and open spaces. Everywhere I look I see the older kids my sister is so popular with passing me by, calling me "Little 'Zica." Rolling my eyes and clutching my Algebra notebook, my hand and arm give a limp imitation of a wave. My sister is the only reason I stand out in this huge school as a member of the youngest class. I desperately want to make friends other than the ones I brought with me from elementary school, so standing out in any way is a good thing.

I see the group of three coming toward me from the other end of the hall. Confusion then panic set in as I realize three of the most popular girls in junior high are heading toward me.

Weight shifts from one ankle boot to the other as I lift my right foot the scratch the sudden furious itch of my left calf. My eyes try to take in everything but seemingly nothing as I chew on the inside of my cheek and lick my lips repeatedly. Suddenly, I do not know what to do with the notebook in my arm.

“Hi! My name is Tasha and this is Mary Beth and Candy,” she chirps, nodding to her two friends.

Mary Beth and Candy fade into the background as I take in Tasha, the obvious leader. At least five inches taller than myself, she is wearing the perfect color blue jeans for the year and has both ears pierced twice. She is light-skinned with short dirt brown hair greased heavily and curled under tightly, although that does not keep it from sticking away from her head like a dusty halo. Her nose is straight and long with full pink lips underneath. Each piece of her face alone is average; taken together it is a Picasso jigsaw puzzle.

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you. My name’s Tahmika. What year are you guys?” My smile is tentative but genuine. If she likes me, I know the group will accept me immediately.

“We’re in eighth. So, what are you mixed with?” she asks with frank appraisal.

“Uhh, what?” I return, my eyebrows knit in confusion.

“Your hair, it’s so nice. So, what are you mixed with? Is your mom Asian or something?”

“No,” I respond slowly, “both of my parents are Black, as far as I know.”

“Oh,” she says, disappointment fills her face. But her eyes light up with another question, “What about your grandparents? Any of them mixed?”

Hesitating to think, I remember an old story my mother told me years ago. “Well I have a great, great grandmother that was Indian on my mom’s side.”

"Yeah, that explains it. Oh well, you sure have nice hair," she calls as I watch the teeming bodies engulf her and her friends, pulling them away with the current. Apparently, I did not pass the test.

The Black Cultural Center is an old looking building with creaky wood floors that smell of years of dust and Pledge. The groaning AC unit is welcome after the sweaty heat of Freshman Orientation outside. White smiles and brown skin are every where and in every shade. I find that my excitement about finding a sorority escalates in an effort to join the laughing and jokes on all sides of me. I am new and in unfamiliar territory, but people are people and I smile to be accepted as one of them. The new accents from Memphis and Georgia jar me as I have to replay whole sentences in my mind to understand them. Overhearing a conversation between two young Black women I am reminded of living in England: the words are the same, but the language is totally different.

The rooms in the back are filled with colors, patches and insignias like high school football teams. Pink and green, red and white, black and gold. Everyone seems to know everyone already so my feet wander from room to room, shoulders high, smile glued tightly hoping for a friendly voice directed my way. The appropriate etiquette is lost on me. The Alphas in their dark room of gold bricks and black cloth are joking and jovial. Their smiles convey more than an attempt at friendly conversation while encouraging me to become a Sweetheart. The Kappas are pretty boys just like I have been told, twirling their ever present candy-cane sticks. The pick up lines are obvious and stale, but laughable just the same.

The pulse of the house seems so alive it renews my determination to find an all-girl group. The Deltas' space is decorated red and white. The three young ladies animated conversation ceases once I enter the room. Unsure of how to react to the now stilted silence, the smile jumps back in place even as my breathing comes faster and more irregularly.

“Hi, how are you?” I offer, hoping for an entrance into discourse. What I get are three smirks, not even smiles, and an almost simultaneous crossing of the arms barring any discussion. My own voice dies some where in a back corner falling far short of its destination, my own accent (or lack thereof) sounding strange here. My eyes eat the rug as my feet hurriedly carry me anywhere but there.

I have heard of the AKA’s and am eager to meet them, hoping they will prove more encouraging. Immediately among the pink and green it becomes apparent that there is a pattern to fit to belong to this sorority. They are all thin with medium to very light complexions. Two of the four ladies appear to be interracial: fine wispy hair, light eyes and pale cream brown faces. They all look very intelligent and trendy with expensive clothing and perfect make-up. Suddenly I am very aware of the duskiess of my own skin, downright black compared to theirs. I become painfully aware of my flat nose and full lips. Not for the first time, I feel that I am too dark to be accepted. As I turn to the table laden with their memorabilia, I feel the claws rake down the back of my neck. It is suddenly hot as a single bead of sweat rolls behind my ear like venom. Without ever speaking directly to me, I hear:

“But she has such pretty hair.”

I turn around, look at each pair of painted eyes then walk past them, out of the coolness of the house and into the burning sun.

The phone conversation had already gone on for thirty minutes before I told my boyfriend in Columbia, SC, that I had a hair appointment the next day in preparation for his arrival that weekend. Lying back on my green pillow, on my green sheet and blankets, under my green loft, I wrapped the green cord of the phone around and around my index finger, bracing for what I knew was coming next. It is time for a change, I explain to him, and I would like to start with my hair. It simply has no life. His response is typical.

"Don't cut it," he admonished. "Whatever you do, do not cut it."

"Why? It's just hair."

"I know that, just don't do it."

"It will grow back. Even if I cut it to my ears it would grow back in a year."

"Well, a year is quite a while, don't you think?"

"No, I do not. What's the big deal, anyway? It's MY hair!" I flare. Silence on the other end. We have been through this before. No matter what the length, any amount less than is presently on my head is too much.

"Dave, you know your opinion matters to me, but really what is all the drama about hair?"

"You are beautiful, and your hair is part of that beauty. Honestly, I prefer long hair on women, you know that already," he explains.

"Really? So, my long hair makes me attractive. Would you prefer if I were light-skinned and weighed 100 pounds, too? Or maybe if I were white, none of this would be an issue." Dripping with sarcasm and hurt feelings, I am prodding for a fight. Hoping, wishing, holding my breath for an altercation. He does not bite, he never does. But his words are clipped and concise.

"No. Do whatever you want to do with it. How long do we have to be together for you to realize that I love you? You, not your hair or your body or your face. You are not pieces that I take apart and love separately, but all together. I really don't care if you're bald if that makes you happy."

"I'm sorry," I utter. And I truly am. Whatever issues I have with my hair and my identity are my own, not something he has imposed on me.

"Yeah, I know."

"No, really, I am," I affirm.

"I know you are. You can do whatever you like, I won't say a word."

"You'll like it, I promise. You always do."

"I'm sure I will. Look, I've got to go. You take care of you, okay?"

"I will. You, too."

Memphis Sundays

Through the bathroom door I can smell the sweet burnt scent of Sunday morning hair being hot combed, then curled for church. Everything in the crowded dark bathroom is painted green or some unnamable shade of pink, so as I fill the tub with hot water and Ivory dish detergent, I imagine I am in an outhouse in the forest all alone. Grandma says a cap of liquid soap is enough so I squeeze until my hand hurts, and there's a long trail of murky white liquid dancing along the bottom of the tub which is spotted with aqua rubber shells. She says these are to keep me from slipping, as if it were a bad thing to slip and slide around a soap soaked jungle gym. I hate baths and I hate church, but bubbles and the buttery smell of fresh biscuits to be dipped in Karo syrup almost make summer Sundays at my grandmother's bearable.

I have been in my bubble heaven for only five minutes with admittedly more splashing than cleaning going on when Grandma just walks right in to tell me to get out and hurry. Goose bumps jump out on my arms and chest as I freeze like a deer in headlights, eyes wide and staring at her round face framed in the open door. The wind created by the door half cracked makes me even colder as I sink into the water floating underneath on my elbows. She's always doing that. Walking right on in without knocking or anything whenever I'm naked or changing. I never get dressed so fast as when I am at that neon green house on a hill in Memphis.

After being shined up with Vaseline then dusted down with powder from the pink lady container on her dresser, but before I get dressed, I am allowed to indulge in my second treat of the morning. But once the last plump piece of biscuit with sticky syrup is gone, it is the last of the fun for the entire day. I hate my hair with its crazy fly away curls that adults insist I wear. Those white stockings and I are at war, but they win on Sundays along with the beige slip two sizes too big. Wearing jeans to church isn't really an option, but it is a pleasant if unrealistic fantasy.

Sitting on her massive four poster bed and listening to the white man with whiter hair on television drone on about the coming of our Lo-ord and savior, I watch my grandmother get herself ready. Never a day goes by that she does not wear white underwear and a white or beige bra snapped uncomfortably under the rolls of the smooth vanilla extract skin of her back. Her large breasts that frighten and fascinate me are pulled in, tucked away and powdered before she pulls a dark pair of knee-highs up and over her ample calves. Crawling into any one of her fashionable dresses she completes the ritual by patting her already perfect hair into place. We bustle out of the door with her feet wearing slide houseshoes, the shiny painful Sunday shoes tucked under her arm.

Even 10:30 worship in Memphis is hot in the summertime so our arrival is a blur of "How you, Sister White" and "Bless you, Brother Jones," mixed with hustle, bustle and sweat. Fanning heavily, sweat rolling down her dark round face, Grandma and my two sisters and I sit all together. Grandma is not yet old enough to sit in the coveted elder seats up front, nor so kind to sit in the back near open windows and away from other bodies.

Service begins as a thunder roll of voices from the congregation and choir. Everyone except for me knows the words to the gospel music. I never see the point in pretending to know the words or coming in on the chorus like my sisters, so I sway from side to side clapping and side stepping to the swell and eddies of the music. Even without accompaniment the people form their own split harmonies developed through years of singing the same hymns together. To cover my own embarrassment for attending church only in the summer and not knowing the songs, my arms swing faster and hands clap louder, but I never move my mouth except to smile at my sisters or the cute boy two rows back. The fervor is much slower to stop than it was to begin, so it is some time before we are allowed to sit down among rustles and amens.

Hunting for the right Bible book is always a test, but reading the chosen chapter and verse in unison is the best part of the service because it is the last understandable moment; the

rest of the time is only to be endured. As the preacher stomps back and forth across stage bellowing God's word, he becomes superhuman to the nine to fivers in the pews. Shaking his angry fist with flowing robes billowing out behind him, it is difficult for me not to fear him and whatever he represents. Brown faces that had been creased into smiles and laughter earlier are low and moaning, all traces of happiness suspended, placed on a shelf to be put on again like fine masks after the show.

I am not so young that I can opt to sleep in the pews like my younger sister, all tucked away from disturbing confessions and horrible incantations. Always at the highest pitch of the wailing and amens, one woman steps out from the churning waters filled with the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is loud and speaks in unknown tongues. Brown arms throw wild empty punches, purses drop carelessly to the floor. A large woman kicks off her shoes and begins the witching mantra that leads others to pray and me to beg for forgiveness, wide eyed and afraid. Jerking spasms accompany stutter steps while her voice rises in pitch and octave, ostensibly bowing humbly to the Creator and communicating with Him in His own language. Spinning and clapping, yelling and praising with hands raised, she collapses to the floor, her wind gone leaving only deep heaving and hot tears mixed with the sweat that covers her face and bosom. The elders gather around her while the minister places large slick palms on her forehead to bless and keep her within the grace of God. Energy spent, she is a large rag doll, dress askew, hair sticking up in stiff curls atop her head. My own heart is racing, and my throat is dry and constricted. When she passes by me I invariably step back and hold hard air in aching lungs. The manifestation of the church's power is overwhelming every Sunday without fail as I try to disappear in the seat cushions. Eyes never leaving her, in like manner as when one is drawn to a terrible tragedy, I am both skeptical of a God that desires this activity and frightened that I do not measure up. Every week it is an inexplicable pull to join the chosen woman, but I never give in. Never do I truly seek to jerk and spasm in that way; a sign that I am doing the right thing is what I desire. To fit

in with these people who yell loud and long and angry, to not always be an outsider is my subverted goal of church.

My grandmother can always sense my need and hesitation. I need to belong; I hesitate to avoid looking the fool. When another round of intense singing and praising begins, the air leaves my lungs forcefully. Body limp and head tired, I collapse on the pew and invoke a sincere look of disappointment, however brief, from my grandmother who does not pry. My stomach slowly relaxes as the tornado of music winds down. This is always the signal for the passing of the money plate and the end of the worst day of the week. Walking away from church is always a thirty-minute ceremony. My brows crease and uneasy feelings of relief and confusion always threaten to overpower me as I watch made-up faces fall back into place as if the real person were the singing demon inside, not the smiling head-patting ones that start their engines and race home to Sunday dinners.

Marigolds

The smell of fresh soap and mint toothpaste mingled with little girl excitement rise warm in my nose. I am ready. I have bathed, eaten and dressed myself in my favorite party dress, the yellow one that twirls into a fan when I spin like a top on my patent leather feet. I am a ballerina at my grand performance, and my father is my partner tossing and catching me while many stand amazed at his handsome face and my beautiful dress. Leaping about with grace and finesse, I suddenly realize that I will be very tired when he arrives if I keep dancing so much. Ladies don't leap, they sit with their legs crossed and wait for their fathers to pull into the long driveway in big, shiny expensive luxury cars.

I must take two deep breaths to calm my body down. Perched on the edge of the bench seat at the bright bay window in the living room, the sound of birdies in the yard catch my attention. Crawling into the window itself with my arms resting on the pane, I watch little red and blue birds together shaking the dew off the flowers in the yard. I imagine that after their worm breakfasts, they are also taking showers to cool down for the hot afternoon that lies ahead. Half their bodies are sunk into the deep grass so I cannot see their claw feet. The pool of water from the rain last night exposes their fluffy underbellies, round and warm.

Twisting my hair around and around my absent-minded fingers, I watch the shadows shorten to nothing from my window. I suppose my father has his air conditioner going in the car to keep out the steamy hotness of Arkansas. It's a long drive from Memphis-- two hours at least-- so I know no one could stand the heat that long. Oh! Mom has made spaghetti-O's and sandwiches for lunch. She knows it is my favorite. By the time I finish, he will surely be here to take me away with him, at least for a while. I shall eat very, very slowly.

The sun always takes on a kind of golden, not yellow, color at this time of day. The shadows on the flowers are back but now they are on the other side. The marigolds my mom and I planted last year are so strong and bright, playing catch with the sun's rays. Even though rain is

mostly bad for me, the flowers like it just fine. Live for it in fact. Those would be just the thing to make my father happy, aside from my yellow dress, of course. Legs pumping I skid around the front door to pick out the seven best marigolds growing. I examine them from each angle and gently pluck them from the bottom so that he will have long stems. Clutching them eagerly, I watch my long, long shadow fall away behind me to form its own trail to nowhere. I hurry back in the house to dinner. From the square concrete porch I give a last look down the road, but that's all right. One should never drive on an empty stomach.

Fried chicken and mashed potatoes are the best dinner because if you want you could eat it all with your hands. But all through dinner I keep his marigolds clutched in my left hand so I can use my fork. I don't even have to do the dishes, so I watched the street lights come on from my living room window. If you look closely you can see all the grass and flowers and bugs, too, even, saying good night to each other and the sun. But the day is not totally over.

My black striped pajamas are on my bed so I put them on, but I am sure to be awakened in the middle of the night. Carefully laying our marigolds on the bed, I unzip and hang up my fan dress for tomorrow or the next day. My mom leaves the door cracked just a little so I can hear him when he comes to get me. I fall asleep with the flowers in my hand. In the morning seven marigolds are dead on my pillow.

My father is a short man, round in the stomach and balding on his head. There is no one more important to a girl than her father, no matter what he may think to the contrary. His close family consists of a wife and two sons although he happens to have two older daughters as well. For five years of my childhood he lived in Memphis while I lived in Little Rock--about a two hour drive over the bridge of the Mississippi. He is loud and sarcastic, but funny in his own way. Dark-skinned, in the summer he likes to wear white shorts and long white socks so that his knees stick out like flies in milk.

As children my older sister and I would lie on her bed and make up stories about our father. Two girls with matching plaits and cheap summer short sets swishing back and forth, making the waterbed wave while we whispered. He was a scientist and rich, and he would come along any day now and rescue us from our crazy existence of fear. No matter that our stepfather was the one who had raised us both: he was not our real father so it made us different from him in some intangible way. We knew, of course, that our father had married some woman other than our mother, and we hated her too in a good-natured, family gossip kind of way. In our fantasies, our dad was tall and handsome with a smile like sunshine. He was King Arthur and Romeo and ours completely. The one thing we could never understand is why he never wanted to see us. We were smart, got good marks in school and I looked exactly like him. Every single daydream the two of us shared began with, "You know he's not our real dad." Our fantasies ended with the late but sincere knight in shining armor rescuing all three of us kids and our mother. Somehow we could form the perfect family overnight that way.

Whenever my grandmother told me to call my father, I knew it was a fifty-fifty chance that he would have enough time to stop by to see me or take me to his house. My stomach always did flip-flops all day long until I knew one way or the other whether he would have time for me.

When I did see my father it was always with a mix of elation and trepidation. My face would hurt from smiling while waiting for him to arrive at the back room of my grandmother's house. I could barely control myself I was so eager. Doing a unique version of the pee-pee dance, I shuttled nervously from room to room until I heard a strange car pull up the long inclined driveway. Rushing to the back room to be as still as possible on the far end of the couch, I would listen to his man voice greet my sisters and grandmother along with a chorus of other child voices. Sitting on my hands, I heard my heart become very loud and rattle around my rib cage. Suddenly I would have to go to the bathroom, but not wanting to move I sat feeling the

strange tickle inside my belly. Sometimes he would come to the back where I was, or what I hated was when he sent one of my young brothers to get me. I felt I was being checked to see if I passed inspection. I felt sick to my stomach hoping he would not be so tired this time or have to run off so soon. Always too late I worried about my hair or clothes not being just right.

Years later, coming home from England I still harbored a keen sense of awe concerning my father and for that summer he really lived up to all my fantasies. He taught my sister how to drive a car and allowed me to rub his fuzzy scalp in his new blue living room while watching a comedian I was far too young to see. The last summer I spent time with my grandmother, my father seemed always available, like a boyfriend coming over to talk to me at my aunt's house after work. In a crushed velvet sitting room with low light and heavy conversation, he told me that of all his children he thought I was the most like him. I felt proud and very close to him, like I thought a father and daughter should feel. He was the most handsome man in the world and I adored him. Picking out a prom dress with him and his wife, I learned that summer that she was no mean witch, but the one who actually seemed to run the house. Still, though, there was that problem of how I fit in with the rest of his family. I was my father's daughter but not my brothers' sister. That uneasiness remains.

All my dreams restored, it was somewhat of a shock when I sat down some years later to decide how my father fit into my life, as opposed to how did I fit into his. Every once in a while (three times in three years) he would call me in Italy, and I was always excited to hear from him. Approaching college, I began to ask my mother questions about my father that heretofore had seemed unimportant, even irrelevant. Dead-beat dad seemed too harsh, but when the facts are laid out, well, that is the term we use in 1990's America. I learned that I was conceived during a welcome-home reunion between my parents, unplanned of course, but really at the dying end of their relationship. According to my mother he never helped financially with our upbringing; not that she asked him to, but apparently he did not offer either. It was at this time that my mother

began to press ever so lightly that I sue for back child support. With tuition and moving coming up, I should have seen the practicality of the thing, but I did not want to hurt his feelings or suggest he would not take care of me should the need arise. I did not want to make him mad at me, but I had seen the toys my brothers grew up with, the games and things for Christmas and birthdays -- why never a card or gift for me? So I asked for a gift and he got it for me: a letter jacket that's hanging somewhere collecting dust at my sister's house right now.

And then at college the arguments began. What began as longing had become hostility. I could not understand how he could say I was important and never call, never come see me as a child, never call to find out how I was doing. I wrote him a letter asking for proof that he wanted to be a real part of my life. In short, I told him that to start with he could write and call me more and help my mother and me pay for school. Living in a foreign country with only my mother's paycheck from the military, I thought he might be able to help some. Apparently not as he berated me, angry and indignant, for wanting to starve his own family just to put me through college. In a heated argument in which he told me yet again how irresponsible and immature I was, he also began to outline a father's right to tell his daughter certain things whether she likes it or not. So, I yelled about what he owes me as a father first before he began claiming any rights, certain everyone in the hallway beyond my door could hear. A quick temper that I obviously get from him had me standing in confrontational position, prepared for a fight so typical and long overdue. And so I was not unprepared when he coolly mentioned that after 18 he does not owe me anything anymore, as if he had been waiting to tell me that for a long time. So I shot right back with what I had really wanted to ask him all along. I questioned if that was what he had been waiting for, for me to grow up so he wouldn't have to give me anything or take any responsibility. He answered no too quickly, forcing me to apologize in a rush of guilty feelings although I have yet to receive an answer to my question.

And that is the nature of our relationship. On again, off again. He and my older sister get along famously, but I cannot reconcile the past as both he and my mother have often told me to do. For some reason I cannot get over the abandonment. I cannot pretend that nothing ever happened. What has passed has passed, but that makes the uncertainty no easier. I do not love him in the sense that I love my mother or sisters, but I do not hate him. I worry that some day my children will not have any type of grandfather if I do not do something soon. He is the only anomaly in my life right now with my feelings and desires for him changing all the time. I want a father that I can trust and love without being afraid he will hurt me. I want a father without hassle. I feel guilty asking my father for anything now, financial, emotional or otherwise. We only talk when I call him in a mood of reconciliation. Our last conversation was cut off in the middle, and, since he did not give me his number, I had no way to reconnect. He promised that our relationship would get better. I'm waiting.

Tonight You Sleep With the Fishes

He has sold me. Sitting in the half empty classroom watching old chalk dust settle on Marty's shiny brown loafers, I have decided that the dapper young man and I will be companions this summer on the adventure of my life. Southwestern has roped me into three of these meetings where they glorify the book selling promise of hard work but vast rewards. Before now I was a little skeptical, but it has all fallen into place. May will see me packing my bags for the northwestern part of America, sparsely populated and hot but better than sitting around Knoxville at some five and dime store picking out bargain sales and counting back change. Marty beams as I tell him the good news, his tie carefully choking him in a nonchalant manner.

Flying across campus and into my dorm room I yell at my roommate, "I'm doing it!"

"Great!" Beverlee replies, looking up from a bed full of text books but reading a Harlequin romance novel. "Doing what?"

"I'm going to sell books this summer," I continue stepping across the battlefield of shoes, boxes and clothes that have become a health hazard in the middle of our floor. Flopping on my unmade bed I begin to recite all the benefits to her. Lots of money. Easy exercise to drop a few pounds. Making lots of friends. And last but certainly not least the all expense paid trip to the top 30 sellers in our area the next year. Counting the money I will make I suggest we order pizza then promptly proceed to call David to tell him the good news.

"Hello?" his perfectly cultivated voice picks up.

"Dave, guess what? I'm going out West this summer to sell books! I'll make tons of money and meet all kinds of interesting people. What do you think?" I gush all at once.

"This would be that Southwestern thing, right? Well, have you done your research on the company, called the Better Business Bureau, that sort of thing? If you feel safe and comfortable, go ahead, but be sure to get all the facts. I'm sure you'll have a great time," he rationalizes.

Knowing he is leaving for a study group as he usually is, I let him go and ride cloud nine until later that night. This is just the opportunity I've been looking for to show my family how responsible and independent I am. I actually get up to make my bed and stack my books into some semblance of order on my desk. I leave the floor for later since it's mostly Beverlee's junk anyway. I'm tired of asking for money from my mother and sister, as I am sure they are tired of my borrowing it from them. Turning the ac unit on high, I pick up the telephone and quickly dial my sister's number from memory, sure she will be happy the hear my reliance on her funds is at an end.

She answers in that nasty honey tinged with vinegar way she has adopted since moving to the South three years ago. As I expected she is overjoyed to hear that I will be gainfully employed for at least three months. Chatting along amiably about me finally growing up she offers,

"What about Black people?"

"What about them?" I ask.

"You know there aren't many of us out that way. Won't you feel uncomfortable?"

This is exactly the sort of mindless drivel I have come to expect from my once worldly now increasingly narrow minded sister. The Black population here at UT is around 8%, but I never hear her talk about me being uncomfortable here. .

"No, Frenzica, I will not. I've never been around a lot of Black people, and certainly not since coming here to school. Don't worry about that. I need practical advice, girl."

"Well, all I know is most of them haven't even seen a Black person except on TV and every other one is a member of some cult or another. So, watch yourself. Where exactly are you going anyway?"

Not really knowing I steer the conversation to other matters since it's her dime anyway. We talk about family gossip, school and our boyfriends for a while then hang up. Lying on my

back kicking my shoe off and on with my toes, I contemplate my future. Now all I have to do is tell my mother what I'll be doing for the summer. No sweat, but I think I will put it off until tomorrow or the next day. Whistling, I gather my things to take a shower, hoping to beat my suitemates and Beverlee who likes to shower for two hours.

Going back to gather more specific information, Marty seems even more ingratiating than before. We don't know exactly where we are going yet, but anywhere will be fun and exciting. No nothing is guaranteed, but if it gets very bad we will send a seasoned rep with you. Now, this never happens, but if you really hate it we will find a way to send you home.

Armed with enough information to tackle my mother, I take a deep breath and sit on my bed listening until it stops squeaking. Bouncing again, I let the squeaks drone on, then hold the receiver like the sword in the stone and dial my mother's number fast, like a shot: the quicker the stab, the less the pain. The line crackles and pops like all international lines as her sleep filled voice, droning with no interest comes over the speaker.

"Hey, mom, how have you been?" I cast around trying to gauge her mood through subtle voice nuances.

"I'm fine...oh, hey Meek, how are you?" Slow recognition. That is a bad sign since we have been fighting lately. Since there is no easy way to do this, the direct method is best.

"Mom, I have decided what I'm going to do this summer," I begin strong. With confidence.

"Oh, really." Sarcasm. Another bad sign.

"I am going out West to sell books for a large established book company with a very good history of success. Me and a group of other college students are going to sell encyclopedias and other learning material to families that might not otherwise have the kinds of opportunities we are offering." I continue on in this manner, putting the best face on Southwestern and selling

it at every opportunity. Not pausing for breath let alone questions, I am certain she will agree that this is the most mature decision I have made since entering college and support it with enthusiasm.

"No." Flat and final.

"What? Why not?" I ask, truly perplexed.

"Where will you stay?"

Good question. "They are going to help us set up housing when we get there."

"You mean you won't have guaranteed housing before you leave? What if you can't find some where to live? And what if you fall behind on your book selling? One or two bad weeks, and you fall so far behind you never get out of their debt."

"But the chances of that happening are very slim, Mom. You're just looking for problems to down me," I retort, chafing under her criticism. This was not supposed to happen.

"And food? How will you eat? Who will provide those initial books you are supposed to sell? And transportation? You mean to tell me you are going to hitch a ride with someone for almost 2000 miles and not have a reliable way to get home? No, Tahmika, there are just too many loopholes here. I am very uncomfortable with this. You do not have my permission at all," she states, case closed.

"I was not asking for your permission, I was simply telling you about my plans for the summer," I respond, voice edgy and dry. Hot tears threaten to leave snake trails down my cheeks.

"Well, fine." Click.

Just like that. Confused and angry, I am splashing water on my face when the phone rings again, twenty minutes later. Spinning from the sink, certain it is my mother calling to apologize, I answer with triumph and new found certainty.

"Hello?!"

"Hey, Tahmika, this is Frenzica." What does she want?

"Hey, what's up?"

"Well, the family has been talking and we don't think it's a good idea for you to go do that book selling thing," she announces.

What? "Excuse me? Who exactly is the family and why do they care whether or not I sell books in the summer?"

"You know, (Great) Aunt Mattierie, Aunt Betty, Wendy and Cherry and Tim, too. None of us think it's smart for you to go traipsing off to God knows where with God knows who. I told them I'd talk to you about it."

Stunned, with jaw slack and eyes burning I bore into the messenger.

"Wait, none of these people even speak to me all year, now all of a sudden you've had some kind of conference?" I explode. "How did they find out about it anyway, Frenzica?"

"I told them of course. This is family business, you know that."

"No, actually, I did not know that. I thought I would decide what I would like to do with my summer by myself. I can't believe you all would talk about me behind my back like that and expect me to just take it," I exaggerate flailing my hands and pacing along my bed. "I'm not some child, Frenzica, and I suggest you take that back to the family. I'm going."

"Well, we'll see."

The clincher to the whole saga is that I wasn't even that adamant about selling books, but opposition really makes you gung-ho for an idea. I am an adult, I keep telling myself, able to make my own decisions. Over and over I repeat these words as I stomp over to David's dorm indignant and self-righteous to tell him the day's events.

Sitting in a stairwell, knees shaking, voice strained I tell him the whole story while he holds my wet hand in his. Stroking my hair with his other hand, he insists that my family is just having a hard time adjusting to my growing up, but that they would come around. The whole

family, I wail not believing these people would care one way or the other. Nosy busy bodies, the whole pack of them. Just then, Lester, Dave's roommate, comes into the stairwell to tell us I have a telephone call.

"Hello?" I begin uneasily, not sure who to expect on the line after the call from my sister. As I realize it's Beverlee my sigh of momentary relief turns to apprehension as I wonder what would make her track me down.

"Tahmika, your uncle Greg called. He said for you to call him back collect as soon as you get his message. It sounded pretty important. Is everything all right?"

Suddenly, it is hard to swallow past the Utah-sized lump in my throat. Calling in my favorite uncle from California is a low blow. This blow to my confidence is severe and tells me just how important this whole book thing is to somebody.

"Uncle Greg, this is Tahmika. I got your message," I begin, hoping not to start any trouble. I am sure he will understand my side of the story.

"How are you, young niece?" When my uncle speaks, it is sort of soft and whispery, no Southern accent detectable. In fact it's rather like an Italian Mafia godfather. Sort of.

"I was fine until this afternoon. This is about Southwestern isn't it? Why'd they call you? Does the whole family know?" I wail.

"We all talked except Fenzy and that's only because he is in Korea. So, yes, the whole family is involved. But why don't you tell me the story first? What is all this about selling books and how does it work?" he pacifies.

Happy to unload, I tell him all the benefits. It's like boot camp, it'll make a man out of me, that sort of thing, but no ugly green uniforms to wear. While explaining the whole thing anew to him, I hit all the high points, but it seems hollow, like reciting a cheap ad with no substance.

"You know your mother doesn't want you to go, right?" he rasps.

"Yeah, neither does anyone else, I just can't figure out why. I have to make my own mistakes you know. Everyone can't keep making the big decisions in my life for me."

"This is true," he rationalizes, "but why this one? The whole family is against it. You will have no more support from us. Tahmika, the truth is if you buck on this one you will be cut off from the family, you know that. Your family is a net. Up until now we have all woven together underneath you to catch you if you fall, but we can squeeze like a steel glove. Don't forget that."

"But why?" I cry. "Why does it have to be that way? I just want to do something interesting with my vacation." My bamboo will is bending, creaking in the wind.

"Have you never noticed how protective your family is of you?" he asks. Of course I have. Case in point. "You were the last grandchild your grandmother Lorrain knew before she passed away. You were her favorite, and she told us to watch you very carefully. She said you were special and that we should all take care of you. We take that very seriously. We have tried to guide you gently, but this time...well this time I think you need more serious persuasion. This is not good for you, and you should not go."

A last ditch plea. "But you would let Nigel or Bakari go, and they are both younger than me."

"Well, you are not either of the boys, are you? Is it worth it? Is it worth really upsetting the family? Pick another battle, Tahmika. You cannot win this one. What do you say?"

All right Godfather. "Okay, I won't go. I guess I can do something else. Mom will be happy. Thanks for calling me," I pout, graceless in defeat.

"Good girl. I love you."

I love you, too, Geno. La familia, mama mia.

The Rain in Spain

The midday sun spills through the glass doors onto the tile floor of the kitchen, painting my legs under the oak table golden bronze. Sitting at the head of the table twisting a bread bag tie back and forth, I am listening to my mother talk about life. This summer from college has opened an entirely new channel of communication between this other woman and me. About 5'5", my mother still wears a size eight after forty years and three grown children. Most men find her open eyes and dark hair attractive; some find them mysterious. Nevertheless, as she stands mixing eggs, beef, bread, and onions for meatloaf in the red mixing bowl I cracked many years ago, she is simply my mother. Pushing her glasses back up her short nose with the back of her greasy hand she begins again, talking about my life, not hers.

"I knew you would be happier at a smaller school, but you just wouldn't transfer. I told you that you ought to," she says, looking down her nose.

"No, Mom," I begin in the least antagonistic way possible, "you did not. But that's okay," I pacify, "even if you had I would not have listened anyway. Knoxville is all right. I'm practically finished now, anyway."

"Well, be that as it may..." she trails off. "You know your father went to UT, don't you?" she tosses over her shoulder while bending to check the oven temperature.

I have been waiting for an opportunity like this since the conversation started an hour ago. As a rule, my mother is serene, clammy even. She does not speak of her past very often. Whenever she does, I find out something new about my family or about a friend of the family. It is the rare occasion that sitting in a quiet house on an Italian Saturday I learn something about her. I cannot let the opportunity pass without testing it thoroughly. Sitting upright hands stilled for the moment, I am poised to question and learn.

"So, Mom, whatever happened between you guys? I have heard a lot of different stories, but what really happened?"

Wiping her hands on an old threadbare towel hanging on the back of a high-backed chair, she takes an audible breath through her nose and says,

"Nothing. He came home from school when I was pregnant with you and told me that he just wasn't sure if he wanted to be with me or with Gloria up in Knoxville. I said, 'Let me get this straight. You aren't sure if you want to be with me whom you have known for five years, or this woman you have known a semester? Have a nice life.' Then I walked away. That's really all there was to it. I took the decision out of his hands at that point," she states matter-of-factly.

I have heard a version of this story before, but it still fascinates me that she could cut off such a long relationship with a snap decision.

"But didn't you miss him?" I romanticize, swinging my crossed leg back and forth. "I mean, he was the love of your life, right?"

"And what, choose him over my children? I don't think so. Sure I missed him, but what can you do? You press on with life. At eighteen, I had my future and two other people to think about. You cannot wait for a man to come along and fix things for you. If you do you'll be waiting all your life," she mutters the last under her breath, but the meaning is not lost on me.

"You know, Tahmika," she preempts me, "you cannot remain angry at your father forever. He is his own person, you know. I have no idea why he made the decisions he did. Nor why he continues to make the types of decisions he does now. The only way to figure that out is to ask him, not me," she admonishes.

The conversation is about to take a turn in a direction I do not want to go in right now; I feel the need to interject a yield sign. Yield, and go another way. Any other way.

My mother and I have the same hands, square at the thumb and small in width. Staring at my set, I feel a question bubbling in the back of my mind. Watching her deft hands form the loaf in the pan, I wonder why she chose to get married instead of going to nursing school as she planned in high school. A small itching question that I have never asked before. Lifting my head to look her in the eye, I ask her,

"Mom?"

"Hmm?" she replies without lifting her eyes from her work.

"What would be the worse thing that you could go through again? I mean, if you had to relive some part of your life over, what would you want to skip over entirely?"

Her head does snap up at that, with her square lips slightly frowning. Her brow creases where her eyebrows should be; her neck seems to stretch longer and lower at the same time. Mixing ingredients for cornbread, her weight shifts from one slippered foot to the other. She waits so long that I do not think she is going to answer me. Unconsciously I have leaned forward in my seat, failing miserably at trying not to look too eager for her story. My mother has had many hard lessons in her life. I expect to hear she would have escaped from her violent, controlling marriage of eleven years, or would have sacrificed to go to nursing school, or not let my father go, or any myriad of things. I am even prepared to hear she would not have had two children in high school or joined the military. The bugs and birds outside begin their evening calls to one another as if they, too, would hear the answer.

"Well," she begins slowly, picking each word with care, "I would not want to go back on welfare." Head still down, she nods slowly, but with certainty. "No, of all the insults that was the worse. I do not think my pride would ever let me do that again, not for anyone."

My jaw drops an inch or two and the twist tie falls softly to the floor. Welfare? I am twenty years old, and had no idea my family was ever touched by welfare. If I had not been sitting already, the queasy churn in my stomach and liquid in my knees would have knocked me down. How does a mother keep a secret like that for twenty years?

"What? Why? When were you on welfare?" I stammer. "For how long?"

"Well, after your father made it clear that he was not going to help, I had to feed you all some way. I did some sewing for people and went on relief. Never again, though. I knew there had to be some better way to handle things than to ask for aid, even if it was to feed you all. I met Larry right around that time. So, I got married."

"You got married to feed your children?" I question, incredulous.

"You do what you have to do. It didn't work though. Every penny in the house was his. I had to ask for money to grocery shop, to buy clothes for you. Anissa was on the way by then. The day I had to beg for money for personal items for myself, I drew the line. You cannot imagine the shame of having to justify asking a man for money to buy sanitary napkins. I swore that would never happen to me again or any of my daughters," she explained, with far less emotion than I felt listening to the story. The spoon whipped around the mixing bowl at a greater speed than before, a resigned punishment of the batter she has control over.

"So, that's why you joined the military?"

"Yep. I was walking down the street, saw some advertisement, and was in the recruiter's chair that day. Since I joined, I have always put a little aside for myself in case of any emergency or hardship." Fixing her liquid eyes run through with steel on mine, she continues. "If you never listen to another word I say, do not ever let a man run your life to the point where you cannot even take care of your own body without his permission. I will not stand for that."

"But why did you have to go on welfare in the first place?" I ask, confused and frustrated for a humiliation that is now my own as well. "Why didn't you take Jimmie to court? Sue for child support like you're always advising me to do?" My voice has taken on a plaintive high-pitched tone that I cannot control.

Her back has taken on a rigid stance with both feet planted firmly side by side.

"He was ordered to pay child support; he just didn't do it."

I am stunned. Until now, I had grown up believing my mother just walked away from my father, too proud to ask for his help. Surely, he did not know about this ruling of the court. Surely, he did not turn his back on his children knowing they needed help.

"You mean, a court actually drew up papers and ordered him to help you? Are you sure he knew about it?"

"Of course they did and of course he did. His signature and admission of fatherhood were required for me to receive any aid."

"He knew you were on welfare because of him and he did nothing?" I balk, my voice almost straining in disbelief. "Why didn't you sue him for not paying then, since he had already been ordered to?"

"I did not see the point in a Black woman dragging a Black man into court so that a White man can force him to do the right thing by his own children. That didn't seem right to me," she states quietly.

My mouth is suddenly dry as my lips snap together. Sitting back in my seat, I must blink rapidly a few times to think clearly. Looking at the work worn hands putting the finished bread into the oven, I am painfully aware that I am not this woman's equal. We are similar but not the same. She is still my mother, but now so much more. She has lived what I have only read about in sociology textbooks. I now see the pride and dignity in how she moves, the way she speaks the clothes she wears as integral to her being, not just personality traits. Her backbone has been hammered straight and strong over time; she could not do otherwise if she tried.

As the smell of baking food drifts through the house, she suggests we sit on the porch until dinner is ready. The sun still filters through the branches of tall trees in the yard making a patchwork of the grass and driveway. We sit in silence listening to the birds meet and greet one another. The time for talk is done, for now. With my head in her lap, she strokes my hair as I stare in wonder at the sun sinking low and brilliant behind mountains that cannot be moved.

Conclusion

Being a minority American evokes many different responses within a single human being: fear, pity, resistance, and anger. There is no way any single person can put a stereotyped label on "how Blacks feel." Every child goes through a time of confusion; they wonder about their place in society. They wonder whether or not they will be accepted, trying to prove themselves worthy. But a Black child has a different experience that cannot be fully understood unless you have lived it. One grows tired of proving oneself time and again. While most of these stories deal with rejection and acceptance, there are many varied themes and conclusions to draw from the material. While this conclusion is by no means exhaustive, it will give a concise guide to using this collection of stories to deal with broader issues than the ones explicitly dealt with in the body of the work.

Firstly, it must be understood that those who are willing to learn new information, skills and techniques are the only ones who can bring about any substantial change. What is written in textbooks about slavery or the Harlem Renaissance is not enough. We are real people who are living the experiences so many blindly believe are behind us, or only apply to the ignorant. Do not forget about past wrongs, but there are plenty of current wrongs that go unnoticed and unrectified every day. Good faith efforts and speeches by key public officials do nothing to help young Blacks feel they have any course for redress through the channels that are supposed to be established for exactly these reasons. As in "Chocolate Bar" and "Dirty," those the system has in place to help people in need do not put forth the effort they should. Parents, teachers and bystanders have to become actively involved or the status quo will never change. There should certainly be no surprise when one finds Black Americans wary of any governmental promises to right past wrongs. Affirmative action and least of all guaranteeing the right to vote as the great equalizers have had very little commitment for the long haul.

It is an uncertain world Black Americans live in. Integral to this uncertainty is the definition of the race by an "other." No one should have to wait around to find out his or her label, as the little girl in "Dirty." But not all injustice comes from an antagonistic outsider. Even those who are "friends of the Negro" or personal friends can spurn you leaving you more alone than when you began. There is the double-edged sword that tells Blacks to fight for their rights, but not too hard. Again, "Chocolate Bar" is an excellent example of bureaucracy adding more confusion to an already complicated situation. Many Blacks grow tired of dealing with situations where obvious wrongs are being perpetrated and ignored by those claiming to be friends or at least enlightened. "Milkshake" has many themes, but one is a reiteration of this idea of self-preservation at the cost of another. If it does not affect a person directly, it is not their problem, whether or not they witness the situation. Rights have been given to and taken away from Blacks indiscriminately since they entered this country. There is no reason to assume that this will miraculously cease in the 1990's.

Blaming the victim for his suffering is neither justified nor logical, but there are many injustices heaped upon Blacks by other Blacks. Intraracial segregation according to appearance is a form of internalized self-hate; it is also self-defeating. The story "Hair" deals with this idea of good traits versus bad traits. Because Blacks have long been unable to truly define themselves, there is confusion about what being Black truly is. At different times it has been popular to be fair; comedians joke that the only good time to have a dark complexion is during Black history month. "Zebra," too, discusses this mixed media message both young and old in the Black community receive. An interracial couple is seen as negative while their offspring are deemed beautiful. Stereotypes are not all them against us. Oftentimes it is us against ourselves.

Women have always had to take care of their children. The recent rash of persecution of fathers who abandon their families is merely the courts' reflection of what society is demanding. This is true for all hues of the population; Black families do appear to be disproportionately represented, however. There is the problem of the defeminization of Black women with no

chance for the issue to be redressed. While women work outside of the home supporting families on their own, it is seen as emasculating the Black men. If women did not work outside of the home, many families would literally starve as my mother so eloquently put it in "The Rain in Spain." No woman should have to choose between her mate and her children. Not every Black man is on drugs or in prisons; that is a myth also perpetrated by propaganda. But there is a problem with men choosing themselves over their children. The long-term affects can be devastating.

Rights are not given to Blacks on some golden platter as so many in privileged positions might suggest. We fight for them every day inch by inch. The battle is being waged by our children as well as our women and men. And the struggle is not one-sided. There are whites willing to reach out ("Blue Line Dancing" and "The Duke") and stand as equals for their own sake, not what others might believe to be appropriate. While most of the stories involve some conflict over the status quo and my perception of what it ought to be, one thing should become obvious. I keep trying. Our parents had race riots and peace marches. The struggle is not over, and the Dream is not dead. People have to help people who are willing to help themselves. There is no other way for this fiery issue to be resolved without active participation from all sides; a yielding of ground so that we may all meet in the center of the green.