

Brownies



BY OUR SECOND DAY at Camp Crescendo, the girls in my Brownie troop had decided to kick the asses of each and every girl in Brownie Troop 909. Troop 909 was doomed from the first day of camp; they were white girls, their complexions a blend of ice cream: strawberry, vanilla. They turtled out from their bus in pairs, their rolled-up sleeping bags chromatized with Disney characters: Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Mickey Mouse; or the generic ones cheap parents bought: washed-out rainbows, unicorns, curly-eyelashed frogs. Some clutched Igloo coolers and still others held on to stuffed toys like pacifiers, looking all around them like tourists determined to be dazzled.

Our troop was wending its way past their bus, past the ranger sta-

tion, past the colorful trail guide drawn like a treasure map, locked behind glass.

"Man, did you smell them?" Arnetta said, giving the girls a slow once-over, "They smell like Chihuahuas. *Wet* Chihuahuas." Their troop was still at the entrance, and though we had passed them by yards, Arnetta raised her nose in the air and grimaced.

Arnetta said this from the very rear of the line, far away from Mrs. Margolin, who always strung our troop behind her like a brood of obedient ducklings. Mrs. Margolin even looked like a mother duck—she had hair cropped close to a small ball of a head, almost no neck, and huge, miraculous breasts. She wore enormous belts that looked like the kind that weightlifters wear, except hers would be cheap metallic gold or rabbit fur or covered with gigantic fake sunflowers, and often these belts would become nature lessons in and of themselves. "See," Mrs. Margolin once said to us, pointing to her belt, "this one's made entirely from the feathers of baby pigeons."

The belt layered with feathers was uncanny enough, but I was more disturbed by the realization that I had never actually *seen* a baby pigeon. I searched weeks for one, in vain—scampering after pigeons whenever I was downtown with my father.

But nature lessons were not Mrs. Margolin's top priority. She saw the position of troop leader as an evangelical post. Back at the A.M.E. church where our Brownie meetings were held, Mrs. Margolin was especially fond of imparting religious aphorisms by means of acrostics—"Satan" was the "Serpent Always Tempting and Noisome"; she'd refer to the "Bible" as "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth." Whenever she quizzed us on these, expecting to hear the acrostics parroted back to her, only Arnetta's correct replies soared

over our vague mumblings. "Jesus?" Mrs. Margolin might ask expectantly, and Arnetta alone would dutifully answer, "Jehovah's Example, Saving Us Sinners."

Arnetta always made a point of listening to Mrs. Margolin's religious talk and giving her what she wanted to hear. Because of this, Arnetta could have blared through a megaphone that the white girls of Troop 909 were "wet Chihuahuas" without so much as a blink from Mrs. Margolin. Once, Arnetta killed the troop goldfish by feeding it a french fry covered in ketchup, and when Mrs. Margolin demanded that she explain what had happened, claimed the goldfish had been eyeing her meal for *hours*, then the fish—giving in to temptation—had leapt up and snatched a whole golden fry from her fingertips.

"*Serious* Chihuahua," Octavia added, and though neither Arnetta nor Octavia could *spell* "Chihuahua," had ever *seen* a Chihuahua, trisyllabic words had gained a sort of exoticism within our fourth-grade set at Woodrow Wilson Elementary. Arnetta and Octavia would flip through the dictionary, determined to work the vulgar-sounding ones like "Djibouti" and "asinine" into conversation.

"*Caucasian* Chihuahuas," Arnetta said.

That did it. The girls in my troop turned elastic: Drema and Elise doubled up on one another like inextricably entwined kites; Octavia slapped her belly; Janice jumped straight up in the air, then did it again, as if to slam-dunk her own head. They could not stop laughing. No one had laughed so hard since a boy named Martez had stuck a pencil in the electric socket and spent the whole day with a strange grin on his face.

"Girls, girls," said our parent helper, Mrs. Hedy. Mrs. Hedy was Octavia's mother, and she wagged her index finger perfunctorily,

like a windshield wiper. "Stop it, now. Be good." She said this loud enough to be heard, but lazily, bereft of any feeling or indication that she meant to be obeyed, as though she could say these words again at the exact same pitch if a button somewhere on her were pressed.

But the rest of the girls didn't stop; they only laughed louder. It was the word "Caucasian" that got them all going. One day at school, about a month before the Brownie camping trip, Arnetta turned to a boy wearing impossibly high-ankled floodwater jeans and said, "What are you? *Caucasian*?" The word took off from there, and soon everything was Caucasian. If you ate too fast you ate like a Caucasian, if you ate too slow you ate like a Caucasian. The biggest feat anyone at Woodrow Wilson could do was to jump off the swing in midair, at the highest point in its arc, and if you fell (as I had, more than once) instead of landing on your feet, knees bent Olympic gymnast-style, Arnetta and Octavia were prepared to comment. They'd look at each other with the silence of passengers who'd narrowly escaped an accident, then nod their heads, whispering with solemn horror, "*Caucasian*."

Even the only white kid in our school, Dennis, got in on the Caucasian act. That time when Martez stuck a pencil in the socket, Dennis had pointed and yelled, "That was *so* Caucasian!"

WHEN YOU lived in the south suburbs of Atlanta, it was easy to forget about whites. Whites were like those baby pigeons: real and existing, but rarely seen or thought about. Everyone had been to Rich's to go clothes shopping, everyone had seen white girls and their mothers coo-cooing over dresses; everyone had gone to the downtown library and seen white businessmen swish by importantly,

wrists flexed in front of them to check the time as though they would change from Clark Kent into Superman at any second. But those images were as fleeting as cards shuffled in a deck, whereas the ten white girls behind us—*invaders*, Arnetta would later call them—were instantly real and memorable, with their long, shampoo-commercial hair, straight as spaghetti from the box. This alone was reason for envy and hatred. The only black girl most of us had ever seen with hair that long was Octavia, whose hair hung past her butt like a Hawaiian hula dancer's. The sight of Octavia's mane prompted other girls to listen to her reverentially, as though whatever she had to say would somehow activate their own follicles. For example, when, on the first day of camp, Octavia made as if to speak, and everyone fell silent. "Nobody," Octavia said, "calls us niggers."

At the end of that first day, when half of our troop made their way back to the cabin after tag-team restroom visits, Arnetta said she'd heard one of the Troop 909 girls call Daphne a nigger. The other half of the girls and I were helping Mrs. Margolin clean up the pots and pans from the campfire ravioli dinner. When we made our way to the restrooms to wash up and brush our teeth, we met up with Arnetta midway.

"Man, I completely heard the girl," Arnetta reported. "Right, Daphne?"

Daphne hardly ever spoke, but when she did, her voice was petite and tinkly, the voice one might expect from a shiny new earring. She'd written a poem once, for Langston Hughes Day, a poem brimming with all the teacher-winning ingredients—trees and oceans, sunsets and moons—but what cinched the poem for the grown-ups, snatching the win from Octavia's musical ode to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, were Daphne's last lines:

You are my father, the veteran
When you cry in the dark
It rains and rains and rains in my heart

She'd always worn clean, though faded, jumpers and dresses when Chic jeans were the fashion, but when she went up to the dais to receive her prize journal, pages trimmed in gold, she wore a new dress with a velveteen bodice and a taffeta skirt as wide as an umbrella. All the kids clapped, though none of them understood the poem. I'd read encyclopedias the way others read comics, and I didn't get it. But those last lines pricked me, they were so eerie, and as my father and I ate cereal, I'd whisper over my Froot Loops, like a mantra, "*You are my father, the veteran. You are my father, the veteran, the veteran, the veteran,*" until my father, who acted in plays as Caliban and Othello and was not a veteran, marched me up to my teacher one morning and said, "Can you tell me what's wrong with this kid?"

I thought Daphne and I might become friends, but I think she grew spooked by me whispering those lines to her, begging her to tell me what they meant, and I soon understood that two quiet people like us were better off quiet alone.

"Daphne? Didn't you hear them call you a nigger?" Arnetta asked, giving Daphne a nudge.

The sun was setting behind the trees, and their leafy tops formed a canopy of black lace for the flame of the sun to pass through. Daphne shrugged her shoulders at first, then slowly nodded her head when Arnetta gave her a hard look.

Twenty minutes later, when my restroom group returned to the cabin, Arnetta was still talking about Troop 909. My restroom group had passed by some of the 909 girls. For the most part, they deferred

to us, waving us into the restrooms, letting us go even though they'd gotten there first.

We'd seen them, but from afar, never within their orbit enough to see whether their faces were the way all white girls appeared on TV—ponytailed and full of energy, bubbling over with love and money. All I could see was that some of them rapidly fanned their faces with their hands, though the heat of the day had long passed. A few seemed to be lolling their heads in slow circles, half purposefully, as if exercising the muscles of their necks, half ecstatically, like Stevie Wonder.

"We can't let them get away with that," Arnetta said, dropping her voice to a laryngitic whisper. "We can't let them get away with calling us niggers. I say we teach them a lesson." She sat down cross-legged on a sleeping bag, an embittered Buddha, eyes glimmering acrylic-black. "We can't go telling Mrs. Margolin, either. Mrs. Margolin'll say something about doing unto others and the path of righteousness and all. Forget that shit." She let her eyes flutter irreverently till they half closed, as though ignoring an insult not worth returning. We could all hear Mrs. Margolin outside, gathering the last of the metal campware.

Nobody said anything for a while. Usually people were quiet after Arnetta spoke. Her tone had an upholstered confidence that was somehow both regal and vulgar at once. It demanded a few moments of silence in its wake, like the ringing of a church bell or the playing of taps. Sometimes Octavia would ditto or dissent to whatever Arnetta had said, and this was the signal that others could speak. But this time Octavia just swirled a long cord of hair into pretzel shapes.

"Well?" Arnetta said. She looked as if she had discerned the hidden severity of the situation and was waiting for the rest of us to catch up. Everyone looked from Arnetta to Daphne. It was, after all,

Daphne who had supposedly been called the name, but Daphne sat on the bare cabin floor, flipping through the pages of the Girl Scout handbook, eyebrows arched in mock wonder, as if the handbook were a catalogue full of bright and startling foreign costumes. Janice broke the silence. She clapped her hands to broach her idea of a plan.

"They gone be sleeping," she whispered conspiratorially, "then we gone sneak into they cabin, then we'll put daddy longlegs in they sleeping bags. Then they'll wake up. Then we gone beat 'em up till they're as flat as frying pans!" She jammed her fist into the palm of her hand, then made a sizzling sound.

Janice's country accent was laughable, her looks homely, her jumpy acrobatics embarrassing to behold. Arnetta and Octavia volleyed amused, arrogant smiles whenever Janice opened her mouth, but Janice never caught the hint, spoke whenever she wanted, fluttered around Arnetta and Octavia futilely offering her opinions to their departing backs. Whenever Arnetta and Octavia shooed her away, Janice loitered until the two would finally sigh and ask, "What *is* it, Miss Caucausoid? What do you *want*?"

"Shut up, Janice," Octavia said, letting a fingered loop of hair fall to her waist as though just the sound of Janice's voice had ruined the fun of her hair twisting.

Janice obeyed, her mouth hung open in a loose grin, unflappable, unhurt.

"All right," Arnetta said, standing up. "We're going to have a secret meeting and talk about what we're going to do."

Everyone gravely nodded her head. The word "secret" had a built-in importance, the modifier form of the word carried more clout than the noun. A secret meant nothing; it was like gossip: just a bit of unpleasant knowledge about someone who happened to be

someone other than yourself. A secret *meeting*, or a secret *club* was entirely different.

That was when Arnetta turned to me as though she knew that doing so was both a compliment and a charity.

"Snot, you're not going to be a bitch and tell Mrs. Margolin, are you?"

I had been called "Snot" ever since first grade, when I'd sneezed in class and two long ropes of mucus had splattered a nearby girl.

"Hey," I said. "Maybe you didn't hear them right—I mean—"

"Are you gonna tell on us or not?" was all Arnetta wanted to know, and by the time the question was asked, the rest of our Brownie troop looked at me as though they'd already decided their course of action, me being the only impediment.

CAMP CRESCENDO used to double as a high-school-band and field hockey camp until an arcing field hockey ball landed on the clasp of a girl's metal barrette, knifing a skull nerve and paralyzing the right side of her body. The camp closed down for a few years and the girl's teammates built a memorial, filling the spot on which the girl fell with hockey balls, on which they had painted—all in nail polish—get-well tidings, flowers, and hearts. The balls were still stacked there, like a shrine of ostrich eggs embedded in the ground.

On the second day of camp, Troop 909 was dancing around the mound of hockey balls, their limbs jangling awkwardly, their cries like the constant summer squeal of an amusement park. There was a stream that bordered the field hockey lawn, and the girls from my troop settled next to it, scarfing down the last of lunch: sandwiches

made from salami and slices of tomato that had gotten waterlogged from the melting ice in the cooler. From the stream bank, Arnetta eyed the Troop 909 girls, scrutinizing their movements to glean inspiration for battle.

"Man," Arnetta said, "we could bumrush them right now if that damn lady would *leave*."

The 909 troop leader was a white woman with the severe pageboy hairdo of an ancient Egyptian. She lay on a picnic blanket, sphinx-like, eating a banana, sometimes holding it out in front of her like a microphone. Beside her sat a girl slowly flapping one hand like a bird with a broken wing. Occasionally, the leader would call out the names of girls who'd attempted leapfrogs and flips, or of girls who yelled too loudly or strayed far from the circle.

"I'm just glad Big Fat Mama's not following us here," Octavia said. "At least we don't have to worry about her." Mrs. Margolin, Octavia assured us, was having her Afternoon Devotional, shrouded in mosquito netting, in a clearing she'd found. Mrs. Hedy was cleaning mud from her espadrilles in the cabin.

"I handled them," Arnetta sucked on her teeth and proudly grinned. "I told her we was going to gather leaves."

"Gather leaves," Octavia said, nodding respectfully. "That's a good one. Especially since they're so mad-crazy about this camping thing." She looked from ground to sky, sky to ground. Her hair hung down her back in two braids like a squaw's. "I mean, I really don't know why it's even called *camping*—all we ever do with Nature is find some twigs and say something like, 'Wow, this fell from a tree.'" She then studied her sandwich. With two disdainful fingers, she picked out a slice of dripping tomato, the sections congealed with red slime. She pitched it into the stream embrowned with dead leaves and the murky effigies of other dead things, but in

the opaque water, a group of small silver-brown fish appeared. They surrounded the tomato and nibbled.

"Look!" Janice cried. "Fishes! Fishes!" As she scrambled to the edge of the stream to watch, a covey of insects threw up tantrums from the wheatgrass and nettle, a throng of tiny electric machines, all going at once. Octavia sneaked up behind Janice as if to push her in. Daphne and I exchanged terrified looks. It seemed as though only we knew that Octavia was close enough—and bold enough—to actually push Janice into the stream. Janice turned around quickly, but Octavia was already staring serenely into the still water as though she was gathering some sort of courage from it. "What's so funny?" Janice said, eyeing them all suspiciously.

Elise began humming the tune to "Karma Chameleon," all the girls joining in, their hums light and facile. Janice also began to hum, against everyone else, the high-octane opening chords of "Beat It."

"I love me some Michael Jackson," Janice said when she'd finished humming, smacking her lips as though Michael Jackson were a favorite meal. "I *will* marry Michael Jackson."

Before anyone had a chance to impress upon Janice the impossibility of this, Arnetta suddenly rose, made a sun visor of her hand, and watched Troop 909 leave the field hockey lawn.

"Dammit!" she said. "We've got to get them *alone*."

"They won't ever be alone," I said. All the rest of the girls looked at me, for I usually kept quiet. If I spoke even a word, I could count on someone calling me Snot. Everyone seemed to think that we could beat up these girls; no one entertained the thought that they might fight *back*. "The only time they'll be unsupervised is in the bathroom."

"Oh shut up, Snot," Octavia said.

But Arnetta slowly nodded her head. "The bathroom," she said.

"The bathroom," she said, again and again. "The bathroom! The bathroom!"

ACCORDING TO Octavia's watch, it took us five minutes to hike to the restrooms, which were midway between our cabin and Troop 909's. Inside, the mirrors above the sinks returned only the vaguest of reflections, as though someone had taken a scouring pad to their surfaces to obscure the shine. Pine needles, leaves, and dirty, flattened wads of chewing gum covered the floor like a mosaic. Webs of hair matted the drain in the middle of the floor. Above the sinks and below the mirrors, stacks of folded white paper towels lay on a long metal counter. Shaggy white balls of paper towels sat on the sinktops in a line like corsages on display. A thread of floss snaked from a wad of tissues dotted with the faint red-pink of blood. One of those white girls, I thought, had just lost a tooth.

Though the restroom looked almost the same as it had the night before, it somehow seemed stranger now. We hadn't noticed the wooden rafters coming together in great V's. We were, it seemed, inside a whale, viewing the ribs of the roof of its mouth.

"Wow. It's a mess," Elise said.

"You can say that again."

Arnetta leaned against the doorjamb of a restroom stall. "This is where they'll be again," she said. Just seeing the place, just having a plan seemed to satisfy her. "We'll go in and talk to them. You know, 'How you doing? How long'll you be here?' That sort of thing. Then Octavia and I are gonna tell them what happens when they call any one of us a nigger."

"I'm going to say something, too," Janice said.

Arnetta considered this. "Sure," she said. "Of course. Whatever you want."

Janice pointed her finger like a gun at Octavia and rehearsed the line she'd thought up, "'We're gonna teach you a *lesson*!' That's what I'm going to say." She narrowed her eyes like a TV mobster. "'We're gonna teach you little girls a lesson!'"

With the back of her hand, Octavia brushed Janice's finger away. "You couldn't teach me to shit in a toilet."

"But," I said, "what if they say, 'We didn't say that? We didn't call anyone an N-I-G-G-E-R.'"

"Snot," Arnetta said, and then sighed. "Don't think. Just fight. If you even know how."

Everyone laughed except Daphne. Arnetta gently laid her hand on Daphne's shoulder. "Daphne. You don't have to fight. We're doing this for you."

Daphne walked to the counter, took a clean paper towel, and carefully unfolded it like a map. With it, she began to pick up the trash all around. Everyone watched.

"C'mon," Arnetta said to everyone. "Let's beat it." We all ambled toward the doorway, where the sunshine made one large white rectangle of light. We were immediately blinded, and we shielded our eyes with our hands and our forearms.

"Daphne?" Arnetta asked. "Are you coming?"

We all looked back at the bending girl, the thin of her back hunched like the back of a custodian sweeping a stage, caught in limelight. Stray strands of her hair were lit near-transparent, thin fiber-optic threads. She did not nod yes to the question, nor did she shake her head no. She abided, bent. Then she began again, picking up leaves, wads of paper, the cotton fluff innards from a torn stuffed

toy. She did it so methodically, so exquisitely, so humbly, she must have been trained. I thought of those dresses she wore, faded and old, yet so pressed and clean. I then saw the poverty in them; I then could imagine her mother, cleaning the houses of others, returning home, weary.

"I guess she's not coming."

We left her and headed back to our cabin, over pine needles and leaves, taking the path full of shade.

"What about our secret meeting?" Elise asked.

Arnetta enunciated her words in a way that defied contradiction: "We just had it."

IT WAS nearing our bedtime, but the sun had not yet set.

"Hey, your mama's coming," Arnetta said to Octavia when she saw Mrs. Hedy walk toward the cabin, sniffing. When Octavia's mother wasn't giving bored, parochial orders, she sniffled continuously, mourning an imminent divorce from her husband. She might begin a sentence, "I don't know what Robert will do when Octavia and I are gone. Who'll buy him cigarettes?" and Octavia would hotly whisper, "*Mama*," in a way that meant: Please don't talk about our problems in front of everyone. Please shut up.

But when Mrs. Hedy began talking about her husband, thinking about her husband, seeing clouds shaped like the head of her husband, she couldn't be quiet, and no one could dislodge her from the comfort of her own woe. Only one thing could perk her up—Brownie songs. If the girls were quiet, and Mrs. Hedy was in her dopey, sorrowful mood, she would say, "Y'all know I like those songs, girls. Why don't you sing one?" Everyone would groan, except me and Daphne. I, for one, liked some of the songs.

"C'mon, everybody," Octavia said drearily. "She likes the Brownie song best."

We sang, loud enough to reach Mrs. Hedy:

"I've got something in my pocket;

It belongs across my face.

And I keep it very close at hand

in a most convenient place.

I'm sure you couldn't guess it

If you guessed a long, long while.

So I'll take it out and put it on—

It's a great big Brownie smile!"

The Brownie song was supposed to be sung cheerfully, as though we were elves in a workshop, singing as we merrily cobbled shoes, but everyone except me hated the song so much that they sang it like a maudlin record, played on the most sluggish of rpms.

"That was good," Mrs. Hedy said, closing the cabin door behind her. "Wasn't that nice, Linda?"

"Praise God," Mrs. Margolin answered without raising her head from the chore of counting out Popsicle sticks for the next day's craft session.

"Sing another one," Mrs. Hedy said. She said it with a sort of joyful aggression, like a drunk I'd once seen who'd refused to leave a Korean grocery.

"God, Mama, get over it," Octavia whispered in a voice meant only for Arnetta, but Mrs. Hedy heard it and started to leave the cabin.

"Don't go," Arnetta said. She ran after Mrs. Hedy and held her by the arm. "We haven't finished singing." She nudged us with a single look. "Let's sing the 'Friends Song.' For Mrs. Hedy."

Although I liked some of the songs, I hated this one:

Make new friends
But keep the o-old,
One is silver
And the other gold.

If most of the girls in the troop could be any type of metal, they'd be bunched-up wads of tinfoil, maybe, or rusty iron nails you had to get tetanus shots for.

"No, no, no," Mrs. Margolin said before anyone could start in on the "Friends Song." "An uplifting song. Something to lift her up and take her mind off all these earthly burdens."

Arnetta and Octavia rolled their eyes. Everyone knew what song Mrs. Margolin was talking about, and no one, no one, wanted to sing it.

"Please, no," a voice called out. "Not 'The Doughnut Song.'"

"Please not 'The Doughnut Song,'" Octavia pleaded.

"I'll brush my teeth two times if I don't have to sing 'The Doughnut—'"

"Sing!" Mrs. Margolin demanded.

We sang:

"Life without Jesus is like a do-ough-nut!
Like a do-ooough-nut!
Like a do-ooough-nut!
Life without Jesus is like a do-ough-nut!
There's a hole in the middle of my soul!"

There were other verses, involving other pastries, but we stopped after the first one and cast glances toward Mrs. Margolin to see if we

could gain a reprieve. Mrs. Margolin's eyes fluttered blissfully. She was half asleep.

"Awww," Mrs. Hedy said, as though giant Mrs. Margolin were a cute baby, "Mrs. Margolin's had a long day."

"Yes indeed," Mrs. Margolin answered. "If you don't mind, I might just go to the lodge where the beds are. I haven't been the same since the operation."

I had not heard of this operation, or when it had occurred, since Mrs. Margolin had never missed the once-a-week Brownie meetings, but I could see from Daphne's face that she was concerned, and I could see that the other girls had decided that Mrs. Margolin's operation must have happened long ago in some remote time unconnected to our own. Nevertheless, they put on sad faces. We had all been taught that adulthood was full of sorrow and pain, taxes and bills, dreaded work and dealings with whites, sickness and death. I tried to do what the others did. I tried to look silent.

"Go right ahead, Linda," Mrs. Hedy said. "I'll watch the girls." Mrs. Hedy seemed to forget about divorce for a moment; she looked at us with dewy eyes, as if we were mysterious, furry creatures. Meanwhile, Mrs. Margolin walked through the maze of sleeping bags until she found her own. She gathered a neat stack of clothes and pajamas slowly, as though doing so was almost painful. She took her toothbrush, her toothpaste, her pillow. "All right!" Mrs. Margolin said, addressing us all from the threshold of the cabin. "Be in bed by nine." She said it with a twinkle in her voice, letting us know she was allowing us to be naughty and stay up till nine-fifteen.

"C'mon everybody," Arnetta said after Mrs. Margolin left. "Time for us to wash up."

Everyone watched Mrs. Hedy closely, wondering whether she would insist on coming with us since it was night, making a fight

with Troop 909 nearly impossible. Troop 909 would soon be in the bathroom, washing their faces, brushing their teeth—completely unsuspecting of our ambush.

"We won't be long," Arnetta said. "We're old enough to go to the restrooms by ourselves."

Ms. Hedy pursed her lips at this dilemma. "Well, I guess you Brownies are almost Girl Scouts, right?"

"Right!"

"Just one more badge," Drema said.

"And about," Octavia droned, "a million more cookies to sell." Octavia looked at all of us, *Now's our chance*, her face seemed to say, but our chance to do *what*, I didn't exactly know.

Finally, Mrs. Hedy walked to the doorway where Octavia stood dutifully waiting to say goodbye but looking bored doing it. Mrs. Hedy held Octavia's chin. "You'll be good?"

"Yes, Mama."

"And remember to pray for me and your father? If I'm asleep when you get back?"

"Yes, Mama."

WHEN THE other girls had finished getting their toothbrushes and washcloths and flashlights for the group restroom trip, I was drawing pictures of tiny birds with too many feathers. Daphne was sitting on her sleeping bag, reading.

"You're not going to come?" Octavia asked.

Daphne shook her head.

"I'm gonna stay, too," I said. "I'll go to the restroom when Daphne and Mrs. Hedy go."

Arnetta leaned down toward me and whispered so that Mrs. Hedy, who'd taken over Mrs. Margolin's task of counting Popsicle sticks, couldn't hear. "No, Snot. If we get in trouble, you're going to get in trouble with the rest of us."

WE MADE our way through the darkness by flashlight. The tree branches that had shaded us just hours earlier, along the same path, now looked like arms sprouting menacing hands. The stars sprinkled the sky like spilled salt. They seemed fastened to the darkness, high up and holy, their places fixed and definite as we stirred beneath them.

Some, like me, were quiet because we were afraid of the dark; others were talking like crazy for the same reason.

"Wow!" Drema said, looking up. "Why are all the stars out here? I never see stars back on Oneida Street."

"It's a camping trip, that's why," Octavia said. "You're supposed to see stars on camping trips."

Janice said, "This place smells like my mother's air freshener."

"These woods are *pine*," Elise said. "Your mother probably uses *pine* air freshener."

Janice mouthed an exaggerated "Oh," nodding her head as though she just then understood one of the world's great secrets.

No one talked about fighting. Everyone was afraid enough just walking through the infinite deep of the woods. Even though I didn't fight to fight, was afraid of fighting, I felt I was part of the rest of the troop; like I was defending something. We trudged against the slight incline of the path, Arnetta leading the way.

"You know," I said, "their leader will be there. Or they won't

even be there. It's dark already. Last night the sun was still in the sky. I'm sure they're already finished."

Arnetta acted as if she hadn't heard me. I followed her gaze with my flashlight, and that's when I saw the squares of light in the darkness. The bathroom was just ahead.

BUT THE girls were there. We could hear them before we could see them.

"Octavia and I will go in first so they'll think there's just two of us, then wait till I say, 'We're gonna teach you a lesson,'" Arnetta said. "Then, bust in. That'll surprise them."

"That's what I was supposed to say," Janice said.

Arnetta went inside, Octavia next to her. Janice followed, and the rest of us waited outside.

They were in there for what seemed like whole minutes, but something was wrong. Arnetta hadn't given the signal yet. I was with the girls outside when I heard one of the Troop 909 girls say, "NO. That did NOT happen!"

That was to be expected, that they'd deny the whole thing. What I hadn't expected was *the voice* in which the denial was said. The girl sounded as though her tongue were caught in her mouth. "That's a BAD word!" the girl continued. "We don't say BAD words!"

"Let's go in," Elise said.

"No," Drema said, "I don't want to. What if we get beat up?"

"Snot?" Elise turned to me, her flashlight blinding. It was the first time anyone had asked my opinion, though I knew they were just asking because they were afraid.

"I say we go inside, just to see what's going on."

"But Arnetta didn't give us the signal," Drema said. "She's supposed to say, 'We're gonna teach you a lesson,' and I didn't hear her say it."

"C'mon," I said. "Let's just go in."

We went inside. There we found the white girls—about five girls huddled up next to one big girl. I instantly knew she was the owner of the voice we'd heard. Arnetta and Octavia inched toward us as soon as we entered.

"Where's Janice?" Elise asked, then we heard a flush. "Oh."

"I think," Octavia said, whispering to Elise, "they're retarded."

"We ARE NOT retarded!" the big girl said, though it was obvious that she was. That they all were. The girls around her began to whimper.

"They're just pretending," Arnetta said, trying to convince herself. "I know they are."

Octavia turned to Arnetta. "Arnetta. Let's just leave."

Janice came out of a stall, happy and relieved, then she suddenly remembered her line, pointed to the big girl, and said, "We're gonna teach you a lesson."

"Shut up, Janice," Octavia said, but her heart was not in it. Arnetta's face was set in a lost, deep scowl. Octavia turned to the big girl and said loudly, slowly, as if they were all deaf, "We're going to leave. It was nice meeting you, O.K.? You don't have to tell anyone that we were here. O.K.?"

"Why not?" said the big girl, like a taunt. When she spoke, her lips did not meet, her mouth did not close. Her tongue grazed the roof of her mouth, like a little pink fish. "You'll get in trouble. I know. I know."

Arnetta got back her old cunning. "If you said anything, then you'd be a tattletale."

The girl looked sad for a moment, then perked up quickly. A flash of genius crossed her face. "I *like* tattletale."

"IT'S ALL right, girls. It's gonna be all right!" the 909 troop leader said. All of Troop 909 burst into tears. It was as though someone had instructed them all to cry at once. The troop leader had girls under her arm, and all the rest of the girls crowded about her. It reminded me of a hog I'd seen on a field trip, where all the little hogs gathered about the mother at feeding time, latching onto her teats. The 909 troop leader had come into the bathroom, shortly after the big girl had threatened to tell. Then the ranger came, then, once the ranger had radioed the station, Mrs. Margolin arrived with Daphne in tow.

The ranger had left the restroom area, but everyone else was huddled just outside, swatting mosquitoes.

"Oh. They *will* apologize," Mrs. Margolin said to the 909 troop leader, but she said this so angrily, I knew she was speaking more to us than to the other troop leader. "When their parents find out, every one of them will be on punishment."

"It's all right, it's all right," the 909 troop leader reassured Mrs. Margolin. Her voice lilted in the same way it had when addressing the girls. She smiled the whole time she talked. She was like one of those TV-cooking-show women who talk and dice onions and smile all at the same time.

"See. It could have happened. I'm not calling your girls fibbers or anything." She shook her head ferociously from side to side, her Egyptian-style pageboy flapping against her cheeks like heavy drapes. "It *could* have happened. See. Our girls are *not* retarded. They are *delayed* learners." She said this in a syrupy instructional voice, as

though our troop might be delayed learners as well. "We're from the Decatur Children's Academy. Many of them just have special needs."

"Now we won't be able to walk to the bathroom by ourselves!" the big girl said.

"Yes you will," the troop leader said, "but maybe we'll wait till we get back to Decatur—"

"I don't want to wait!" the girl said. "I want my Independence badge!"

The girls in my troop were entirely speechless. Arnetta looked stoic, as though she were soon to be tortured but was determined not to appear weak. Mrs. Margolin pursed her lips solemnly and said, "Bless them, Lord. Bless them."

In contrast, the Troop 909 leader was full of words and energy. "Some of our girls are echolalic—" She smiled and happily presented one of the girls hanging onto her, but the girl widened her eyes in horror, and violently withdrew herself from the center of attention, sensing she was being sacrificed for the village sins. "Echolalic," the troop leader continued. "That means they will say whatever they hear, like an echo—that's where the word comes from. It comes from 'echo.'" She ducked her head apologetically, "I mean, not all of them have the most *progressive* of parents, so if they heard a bad word, they might have repeated it. But I guarantee it would not have been *intentional*."

Arnetta spoke. "I saw her say the word. I heard her." She pointed to a small girl, smaller than any of us, wearing an oversized T-shirt that read: "Eat Bertha's Mussels."

The troop leader shook her head and smiled, "That's impossible. She doesn't speak. She can, but she doesn't."

Arnetta furrowed her brow. "No. It wasn't her. That's right. It was *her*."

The girl Arnetta pointed to grinned as though she'd been paid a compliment. She was the only one from either troop actually wearing a full uniform: the mocha-colored A-line shift, the orange ascot, the sash covered with badges, though all the same one—the Try-It patch. She took a few steps toward Arnetta and made a grand sweeping gesture toward the sash. “See,” she said, full of self-importance, “I’m a Brownie.” I had a hard time imagining this girl calling anyone a “nigger”; the girl looked perpetually delighted, as though she would have cuddled up with a grizzly if someone had let her.

ON THE fourth morning, we boarded the bus to go home.

The previous day had been spent building miniature churches from Popsicle sticks. We hardly left the cabin. Mrs. Margolin and Mrs. Hedy guarded us so closely, almost no one talked for the entire day.

Even on the day of departure from Camp Crescendo, all was serious and silent. The bus ride began quietly enough. Arnetta had to sit beside Mrs. Margolin; Octavia had to sit beside her mother. I sat beside Daphne, who gave me her prize journal without a word of explanation.

“You don’t want it?”

She shook her head no. It was empty.

Then Mrs. Hedy began to weep. “Octavia,” Mrs. Hedy said to her daughter without looking at her, “I’m going to sit with Mrs. Margolin. All right?”

Arnetta exchanged seats with Mrs. Hedy. With the two women up front, Elise felt it safe to speak. “Hey,” she said, then she set her face into a placid, vacant stare, trying to imitate that of a Troop 909

girl. Emboldened, Arnetta made a gesture of mock pride toward an imaginary sash, the way the girl in full uniform had done. Then they all made a game of it, trying to do the most exaggerated imitations of the Troop 909 girls, all without speaking, all without laughing loud enough to catch the women’s attention.

Daphne looked down at her shoes, white with sneaker polish. I opened the journal she’d given me. I looked out the window, trying to decide what to write, searching for lines, but nothing could compare with what Daphne had written, “*My father, the veteran,*” my favorite line of all time. It replayed itself in my head, and I gave up trying to write.

By then, it seemed that the rest of the troop had given up making fun of the girls in Troop 909. They were now quietly gossiping about who had passed notes to whom in school. For a moment the gossiping fell off, and all I heard was the hum of the bus as we sped down the road and the muffled sounds of Mrs. Hedy and Mrs. Margolin talking about serious things.

“You know,” Octavia whispered, “why did *we* have to be stuck at a camp with retarded girls? You know?”

“*You* know why,” Arnetta answered. She narrowed her eyes like a cat. “My mama and I were in the mall in Buckhead, and this white lady just kept looking at us. I mean, like we were foreign or something. Like we were from China.”

“What did the woman say?” Elise asked.

“Nothing,” Arnetta said. “She didn’t say nothing.”

A few girls quietly nodded their heads.

“There was this time,” I said, “when my father and I were in the mall and—”

“Oh shut up, Snot,” Octavia said.

I stared at Octavia, then rolled my eyes from her to the window. As I watched the trees blur, I wanted nothing more than to be through with it all: the bus ride, the troop, school—all of it. But we were going home. I'd see the same girls in school the next day. We were on a bus, and there was nowhere else to go.

"Go on, Laurel," Daphne said to me. It seemed like the first time she'd spoken the whole trip, and she'd said my name. I turned to her and smiled weakly so as not to cry, hoping she'd remember when I'd tried to be her friend, thinking maybe that her gift of the journal was an invitation of friendship. But she didn't smile back. All she said was, "What happened?"

I studied the girls, waiting for Octavia to tell me to shut up again before I even had a chance to utter another word, but everyone was amazed that Daphne had spoken. The bus was silent. I gathered my voice. "Well," I said. "My father and I were in this mall, but *I* was the one doing the staring." I stopped and glanced from face to face. I continued. "There were these white people dressed like Puritans or something, but they weren't Puritans. They were Mennonites. They're these people who, if you ask them to do a favor, like paint your porch or something, they have to do it. It's in their rules."

"That sucks," someone said.

"C'mon," Arnetta said. "You're lying."

"I am not."

"How do you know that's not just some story someone made up?" Elise asked, her head cocked full of daring. "I mean, who's gonna do whatever you ask?"

"It's not made up. I know because when I was looking at them, my father said, 'See those people? If you ask them to do something, they'll do it. Anything you want.'"

No one would call anyone's father a liar—then they'd have to

fight the person. But Drema parsed her words carefully. "How does your *father* know that's not just some story? Huh?"

"Because," I said, "he went up to the man and asked him would he paint our porch, and the man said yes. It's their religion."

"Man, I'm glad I'm a Baptist," Elise said, shaking her head in sympathy for the Mennonites.

"So did the guy do it?" Drema asked, scooting closer to hear if the story got juicy.

"Yeah," I said. "His whole family was with him. My dad drove them to our house. They all painted our porch. The woman and girl were in bonnets and long, long skirts with buttons up to their necks. The guy wore this weird hat and these huge suspenders."

"Why," Arnetta asked archly, as though she didn't believe a word, "would someone pick a *porch*? If they'll do anything, why not make them paint the whole *house*? Why not ask for a hundred bucks?"

I thought about it, and then remembered the words my father had said about them painting our porch, though I had never seemed to think about his words after he'd said them.

"He said," I began, only then understanding the words as they uncoiled from my mouth, "it was the only time he'd have a white man on his knees doing something for a black man for free."

I now understood what he meant, and why he did it, though I didn't like it. When you've been made to feel bad for so long, you jump at the chance to do it to others. I remembered the Mennonites bending the way Daphne had bent when she was cleaning the restroom. I remembered the dark blue of their bonnets, the black of their shoes. They painted the porch as though scrubbing a floor. I was already trembling before Daphne asked quietly, "Did he thank them?"

I looked out the window. I could not tell which were the thoughts

ZZ Packer

and which were the trees. "No," I said, and suddenly knew there was something mean in the world that I could not stop.

Arnetta laughed. "If I asked them to take off their long skirts and bonnets and put on some jeans, would they do it?"

And Daphne's voice, quiet, steady: "Maybe they would. Just to be nice."

Every Tongue Shall Confess



AS PASTOR EVERETT MADE the announcements that began the service, Clareese Mitchell stood with her choir members, knowing that once again she had to Persevere, put on the Strong Armor of God, the Breastplate of Righteousness, but she was having her monthly womanly troubles and all she wanted to do was curse the Brothers' Church Council of Greater Christ Emmanuel Pentecostal Church of the Fire Baptized, who'd decided that the Sisters had to wear *white* every Missionary Sunday, which was, of course, the day of the month when her womanly troubles were always at their absolute worst! And to think that the Brothers' Church Council of Greater Christ Emmanuel Pentecostal Church of the Fire Baptized had been the first place she'd looked for guid-

ZZ Packer

despite what she'd told him, despite his disbelief. Anyhow, she disapproved. It was God he needed, not her. Nevertheless, she remained standing for a few moments, even after the rest of the choir had already seated themselves, waving their cardboard fans to cool their sweaty faces.

Our Lady of Peace



THE CHROME-TOPPED vending machine in the Baltimore Travel Plaza flashed *Chips! Chips! Chips!* but no one could have known it was broken unless they'd been there for a long time, like Lynnea, having just escaped lackluster Kentucky, waiting for a taxi, watching a pale, chain-smoking white girl whose life seemed to be brought to a grinding halt by an inability to obtain Fritos.

The white girl kicked the vending machine, then cracked her knuckles. After a few spells of kicking and pouting, she found her way to the row of seats where Lynnea was sitting, then plunked down next to her.

"I'm going to kill myself," the white girl said.

Lynnea turned in the girl's direction, which was invitation

enough for the girl to begin rattling off the story of her life: running away, razor blades, ibuprofen; living day to day on cigarettes and Ritz crackers.

Outside the Travel Plaza, Baltimore stretched black and row-house brown. Traffic signals changed, dusk arrived in inky blue smudges, and slow-moving junkies stuttered their way across the sidewalk as though rethinking decisions they'd already made. This, she thought lamely, had been what was waiting for her in Baltimore.

But any place was better than Odair County, Kentucky. She'd hated how everyone there oozed out their words, and how humble everyone pretended to be, and how all anyone ever cared about was watching basketball and waiting for the next Kentucky Derby. Her grandparents had been born in Odair and so had their parents. Her family was one of four black families in the county, and if another white person ever told her how "interesting" her hair was, or how good it was that she didn't have to worry about getting a tan—ha ha—or asked her opinion anytime Jesse Jackson farted, she'd strangle them.

Nevertheless, she'd gone back to Odair County after college and started working at the Quickie Mart. One night—while in the middle of reminding herself that the job was beneath her, and that once she'd saved up enough, she'd move to a big city—four high school boys wearing masks held up the place with plastic guns, taking all the Miller Light they could fit in their Radio Flyer wagons. She hadn't been scared, and the manager had said she'd done the right thing. Still, she smoked her first cigarette that night, and spread a map of the country over her mother's kitchen table.

When she'd ruled out the first tier of cities—New York (too expensive), L.A. (she had no car), Chicago (she couldn't think of any reason why not Chicago, but it just seemed wrong)—Lynnea had

settled on Baltimore. She took an apartment sight-unseen, her last few hundred dollars devoured by a cashier's check for a security deposit, signed to a landlady named Venus.

Now that she had arrived in Baltimore, she'd begun to have doubts. There was no taxi in sight, and the white girl next to her droned on, describing preferable methods of suicide.

"Tibetan monks light themselves on fire," the girl said.

Lynnea held her head in her hands and tried to ignore the girl. She stared at the floor, its checkered tiles marbled by filth; she looked outside to see if any taxis had arrived. She even cast her eyes about the bus station crowd, but the white girl *still* would not shut up.

"Eskimos kill themselves by floating away on icebergs," the white girl said.

"If you can find an iceberg anywhere near Baltimore," Lynnea finally said, "I'd be glad to strap you to it."

HER LANDLADY, Venus, was a tiny sixtyish woman who walked in quiet, jerky steps. Her complexion was the solemn brown of leatherbound books—nearly the same shade as Lynnea's—but atop her head, where presumably black hair should have been, Venus wore a triumphant blond wig. Lynnea had been living in a damp efficiency below Venus for nearly three months when she spotted the woman taking out the garbage, readjusting her wig as though Lynnea were an unexpected guest.

"Oh my. Shocked me near to death. How's the moving going?"

"I moved in three months ago," Lynnea said. "I'm pretty much finished moving in."

"I thought you were moving out."

"No. Not that I know of."

Lynnea always paid her rent late and hadn't paid last month's at all. She slurped black bean soup straight from the can, used newsprint for toilet paper, had tried foreign coins and wooden nickels in the quarters-only laundromat. By the end of three months she'd decided freelancing at the weekly paper was not enough; she would need a job that paid for dentist visits, health insurance, toilet paper.

Then she read about a teaching program that promised to cut the certification time from two years to a single summer. This, she knew, was for her. Inner-city Baltimore students would be nothing like the whiny white girl from the bus station. Lynnea would become an employee of the city, and have—at long last—benefits.

"We're going to do a few exercises," the director said on the first day of the certification program. "What you're trying to do," she said widening her eyes, "is disappear."

Lynnea waited for her to explain what she meant by "disappear" but the director just smiled as though disappearing were easy and fun. Lynnea looked around the classroom to see if others were as lost as she. A man who had previously introduced himself to Lynnea simply as Robert the Cop stared at Evelyn, then winced as though he'd been asked for a urine sample.

"Miss Evelyn," Robert the Cop said, his hands holding a box of imaginary no-nonsense. "I'm a cop. I'm new at this teaching business. You gotta break it down for me. What do you mean by 'disappear'?"

"Disappear. You know. To go away, to vanish."

Lynnea sighed and looked down, watching a roach scramble across the floor. Then Jake Bonza, the man second-in-charge, a

teacher for twenty years, took over. "What Ms. Evelyn Hardy means is this: one a y'all is going to pretend to be the teacher. The rest of y'all are going to abandon your adult selves and act like students. Not the goody-two-shoe students, but the kinda fucked-up students you know y'all were or wanted to be." He paused, looking at them as if to sear his words into their heads before he continued, "This'll prepare you for the freaks of nature who'll throw spit wads at you while you try to take attendance."

Bonza browsed the room, flashing an ornery grin. "Yeah." He nodded. "We'll see which one a y'all's cracks and bleeds. Which one a y'all's bends over and takes it from behind."

DURING THE training sessions, adults playing students took their roles as miscreants to heart: they got out of their seats, wanting to pee and eat and smoke: Robert the Cop stood and lit a Marlboro while some pink farm girl from Vermont went through her lesson on subtraction in tears, her shaky hand gripping the chalk so hard it broke. They'd ask questions like how much wood could a wood-chuck chuck; one teacher felt liberated enough to discharge a sulfurous fart. Lynnea sat with her chin resting on her desk, eyes trained on the chalkboard, refusing to believe her students would act this way, refusing to participate in team-spirit badness.

But after eight weeks of role-play, Lynnea was in front of a real classroom. Freshman English. After she'd written her name on the chalkboard, a tall boy, the color of a paper bag, hitched up his droopy jeans and exclaimed, "Two G's, yo!" splaying two fingers like a sign of victory, the other hand in an arthritic semblance of a "G." The replies were immediate and high-pitched. "Yeaah boyee!"

"What up, yo!" Then a trio found each other from the maze of Lynnea's carefully organized seats and high-fived elaborately before leisurely sitting back down, happily grabbing their crotches.

Throughout the first day, she kept hearing this phrase; students in the hallway yelling, "2 G's! 2 G's!" She finally pulled two girls aside and asked what it meant. The girls looked at each other, tottering coltishly in their clunky Day-Glo shoes, all enlarged eyes and grins, muffling giggles on each other's shoulders. Finally one girl composed herself enough to explain, "It mean two grand. Two thousand dollars. Like the Class of 2000. Get it?"

Lynnea nodded her head quickly, feigning remembrance of something she'd momentarily forgotten. She had wondered what the Class of 2000 would call themselves when she and people she called friends gathered in the Taco Bell parking lot to celebrate their own graduation. "What're they gonna call themselves? The class of Double Nothing?"

AT THE end of the first week of teaching, Lynnea found herself having to raise her voice to get their attention—something she wasn't used to doing. They didn't quite yell and scream, but their collective whimsical talk was the unsettling buzz of a far-off carnival. When she sent them to the principal's office, they snickered and bugged out cartoon eyes, heading toward the office for a few paces, then bolting in the opposite direction. She found herself sharking the room, telling duos here and trios there that they should not be talking about their neon fingernail polish or the Mos Def lyrics in front of them, but the novel at hand, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. They were quiet for a moment, controlling their grins as if they

were hiding something live and wriggling between the covers of their notebooks.

One day into her second week of school, students had begun slipping to the edges of their seats during the lesson, stunt-falling to the floor whenever an anonymous ringleader gave the signal.

"STOP IT," Lynnea said, teeth clenched. As soon as she spoke, a wave of students dropped to the floor, stricken by an invisible three-second plague. She gritted her teeth and tugged at her hair. The students hushed and slid back into their chairs, then sat straight again as if watching to see what gesture of pain she'd make next. She tried counting to ten, but only got to five when she caught the unmistakable scent of marijuana.

"All right. Who's been smoking?"

"Smoking's bad for you," someone said.

First came guarded giggles, then a blossoming of laughter.

EVERY FRIDAY after school all the teachers in the program met at a bar called The Rendezvous Lounge, ostensibly to swap teaching stories and commiserate before they got drunk. The first time she'd gone to The Rendezvous, she and Robert the Cop had smoked together, making fun of Bonza.

"Forget that crack-and-bleed song and dance," Robert the Cop said. "All I want is for the students to do what I tell them. All I want is for my fucking health care to kick in so I can get rid of this rotten molar."

Just a week ago, Lynnea would have agreed, but now, at the end of her second week of teaching, she just wanted to be able to teach without having to shout above the students. One of the teachers at

her school had said that whenever the students got loud, he whispered, forcing the students to shut up in order to make out what he said. But this little trick didn't work for Lynnea. Her whispers went as unheeded as her yells.

She ordered a DeGroen's and scanned the crowd of teachers, the barroom air smelling of beer and smoke. Then, to Lynnea's surprised joy, Jake Bonza strode through The Rendezvous in a pantomime of majesty, glancing right and left; surveying the crowd before picking the person he believed would soonest buckle under the pressure of his loud piss stream of talk.

"How's it hanging, Davis?" Bonza called out to Lynnea. Bonza took out a cigarette and lit it, blowing smoke from his nostrils like a hero in an old western before aiming the cigarette Lynnea's way. "You think you gone pull through this, hon?"

"Of course I'll pull through," Lynnea said. "Why shouldn't I?"

She hadn't told him anything about the past two weeks, and now felt insulted that he'd assumed—correctly—that something was wrong. Lynnea searched Bonza for an elaboration, but Bonza just winked at Evelyn, then downed half of his beer.

"I've been through some tough times," Lynnea said, thinking back to her days of working at the Odair Quickie Mart. She would have to pull through: she wouldn't get paid until the end of the month. And she was running out of toilet paper.

A FEW days later, Lynnea caught two girls nonchalantly plunking packages of fake hair onto their desks. The packages were labeled by color: Burnished Rum, Foxy Black, Champagne Kiss.

"What do you think you're going to do with those?" she asked

mid-lesson, her shaky finger still pointing to a vocabulary word on the chalkboard: *expiate*.

One of the girls, Ebony, looked her up and down, then rested her eyes at a point beyond Lynnea's glare. "Whatever the hell I want to." Ebony took out a strip of hair from the long plastic bag, doubled it, and hooked it around a spongy black clump of Kyra's hair, then proceeded to braid. The room was quiet.

"Out!" Lynnea said.

"No," Ebony said, then sucked her teeth as though annoyed she'd been forced to answer. Ebony kept braiding at a steady pace, as if determined to show the rest of the class she wasn't paying attention to Lynnea. It was this calm, this nonchalance, that infuriated Lynnea most of all, and she gripped Ebony's bony shoulder, leaned until her mouth was flush against Ebony's ear, and blared, "OUT!"

Ebony whipped up from her seat and backhanded her, strands of Foxy Black slapping across Lynnea's face. Chairs clattered to floor, students stood, screaming like cheerleaders. "*Shit!* Did you see that! Ms. Davis got *banked!*"

Lynnea felt her face. No blood. Barely a sting. The girl was gone. Lynnea blinked slowly, then walked out of the classroom. Behind her the class had become a noisy party, and ahead of her, a few yards down the hallway, she saw Ebony make the corner—a flash of short skirt, yellow plastic go-go boots, a trail of fake hair. She heard the squeak of sneakers and knew half her class was on its way down two flights of stairs and out the massive doors.

LYNNEA WROTE out a suspension sheet for Ebony, though no one in the school could track the girl down to give it to her. When

the final bell rang, Mr. Morocco, the principal, sat down with Lynnea in her empty classroom. In low, clear tones, he spoke about the need for "greater classroom management." Then he left, closing the door the way a parent might after grounding a child.

Alone in her classroom, Lynnea thought of Charlesetta Flew, the history teacher down the hall who carried a dish towel to wipe sweat from her face. She was a stocky, penny-colored woman, her looks reminding Lynnea of her quiet aunt Selma, but when a student so much as whispered in Ms. Flew's class, Charlesetta Flew threatened to sit on them. They believed her and sat at their desks with the solemnity of pieces on a chessboard.

Mrs. Flew would laugh at Lynnea, how Lynnea approached the chalkboard crabwise, afraid that if she turned her back to write anything on it, the students would rearrange their desks. Or a student might just up and leave, or curse her out. Or hit her.

Without quite knowing what led her, Lynnea made her way past a sprinkling of after-school students in the lime green halls, nearly slipping on confetti left over from a pep rally before finally reaching the main office. She plunked her quarter in the normally broken pay phone and called Bonza, who promised to meet her as soon as he could.

She waited outside for Bonza in the gray weather. The front of the school was deserted and the four skimpy trees that dotted the dirt-packed school lawn evaded any pretense of bright New Englandesque fall colors, heading straight to dried-out beige. She could just make out the thunk and dribble of a basketball game getting started on the far eastern side of the school. The boys preferred to primp on the basketball courts where teachers would be less likely to catch them smoking blunts packed with weed. Lynnea had seen—and smelled—them once, watching the boys swirl and fake each other

out. Most of the audience comprised girls she'd seen leisurely walking the halls. They wore their makeup like stains, propped themselves against the school walls, yelling names and dares and sexy invitations. But no one loitered where she waited on the school's front steps, the wind making her eyes water.

Bonza drove up in a Pinto that looked like it had been dipped in acid. He rolled—then pushed—down his broken car window.

"Having problems?" Bonza drawled. He lit a cigarette and slammed the car door. His head bobbed up and down, as if in agreement with himself. "Thought you said you'd seen some tough times." He began to walk the perimeter of the school and she followed.

"They mill around whenever they want, they won't shut up, they—they couldn't care less about—I mean, when you're teaching, don't you ever see a—light in their eyes?"

The Baltimore Public School System ran a series of Vaseline-smearing camera shots of students eagerly raising their hands to answer questions, students traipsing through fields to release butterflies into the wild, smiling students clad in black graduation robes, a teary-eyed teacher, beaming from the front row. In each of these shots, the camera zooms in on one student, until their eyes are the size of fists on the television screen, with a twinkling star of light flashing through each retina.

"A light?" Bonza covered his mouth with his hand, then doubled over in an exaggerated bow, and when he finally came up, his hair flew back like that of a Labrador flicking off the waters of a mountain stream.

"Ohhh boy." Bonza shook his head.

Lynnea felt her eyes narrow on him. "What's so funny?"

He regarded the burning ash, turning serious. "Maybe," he said,

"you became a teacher for all the wrong reasons, hon. Maybe you just don't care enough about them."

"Listen," Lynnea said. "I care. It's the students who don't care."

"All right. So they don't care. Whaddya do?"

She knew this was one of his little tests. She stuttered, but didn't answer. He snapped his fingers to signal she was out of time and smiled his disapproval. She'd expected him to come up with one of his handy one-liners about teaching—*teachers don't teach, they coach; dilemmas aren't solved, they're managed*—but all he said was:

"Robert the Cop quit teaching."

Lynnea looked at him. "Doesn't surprise me," she said.

"Yeah. He's a cop down in his blood." Bonza seemed to lament this, and she could see why: during Robert the Cop's role-play as teacher that summer, all the adults pretending to be students in his class pulled the same antics they'd pulled in other role-plays. But Robert the Cop never lost his composure. He gave them all detention, goose-stepping to each pretend student, pounding his fist on their desks for quiet. He ended by telling them they were all sorry motherfuckers, said they'd all amount to nothing, zero, zilch, nada, if they didn't respect authority.

Before he began teaching school, Robert took night shifts so he could attend his classes during the day. After his turn at role-play teaching, he drove to a black part of town called Hollander Ridge and parked his unmarked Mazda at an intersection where the traffic lights never worked.

"Yep. I nabbed 'em," he admitted the day after he'd given the tickets. "I needed to get my quota." He'd handed out eleven speeding tickets and three vagrancy charges. Fourteen in all. "Payback."

Lynnea knew it was revenge on the fourteen pretend students

who'd given him hell in role-play, and she somehow felt complicit, as though she'd had the power to stop him but didn't.

"It's better that he quit." Bonza leaned toward her, his black hair battered by the wind. "Robert didn't have the heart for it. Not like you, hon."

The wind jerked the four trees of the schoolyard until it gathered a shower of dead leaves to carry away; it swung open the flaps of Lynnea's cheap green jacket so hard the lapels hit her face. She could see Bonza's eyes scanning the school steps: no students. He threw his cigarette to the concrete, snuffed it out with his shoe, then grabbed her, kissing her with full, sloppy thrusts of tongue, his mustache scrubbing her face with its bristles. Lynnea pushed him away and gasped for air, trying to wipe away the saliva ringing her mouth, only to find both hands locked solidly in Bonza's.

"C'mon. Let's blow this joint."

"*Joint?* I'm sure you have to get back home to your wife." She used the steady bad-ass eyes she'd practiced in the mirror for her class. Bonza chuckled his head to the side as though his wife were some sort of poem he'd read, hadn't understood, and had dismissed.

Lynnea tried to pull away, but couldn't. "No," she said. "And I mean it."

Bonza let go and looked at her as though he was tired and she was keeping him from getting his sleep. "Listen. Do you wanna learn all the right tricks or what?"

TWO WEEKS after the Bonza incident, Lynnea got a new student. The guidance counselor, Mr. Knight, handed her a thick, bulging folder.

"Sheba Simmons. Those are all her records, transfers."

As Lynnea glanced down at the heavy folder, the guidance counselor whispered into her ear, "She knifed a teacher at her old school."

"Yippee," Lynnea said.

A girl walked into the office. She was over six feet tall and the legs under her miniskirt looked like those of a bodybuilder.

"Are you my new student?" Lynnea asked.

"Question is, You my new teacher?"

Mr. Knight pulled Lynnea outside the office and gave her the rundown on Sheba: Sheba did not live with a family but in a home for girls. Every afternoon a bus with iron grillework on the windows was going to pick her up, take her to Hollander Ridge. According to Mr. Knight, the place was a large formstone building with OUR LADY OF PEACE in bas-relief above the entrance.

Before Sheba entered the classroom, Lynnea told everyone that they would have a new student, and as soon as she said the name "Sheba," Terra Undertaker howled, "Sheba. That a *dog's* name!" The class began to bark wildly in various pitches, ranging from Chihuahua to Doberman.

When Sheba stepped into the room, the barking trailed off to nothing. Sheba sat in the chair closest to Lynnea's desk, took out her notebook and pen, eyed the board, and began copying the day's notes. No one moved, Lynnea included. Sheba, sensing that it was a bit too quiet, turned her head around to the class.

"Why y'all all back there?"

Lynnea didn't know what she was talking about until she noticed that the desks and seats had traveled to the back half of the room, leaving her and Sheba in the front.

"Everyone," Lynnea began, using her orchestra-conducting voice, "move your desks forward."

A few pushed their desks, but that was it. Five students had come forward. Sheba stood and scanned the classroom.

"Y'all hear the woman! The woman say *move!*"

Desks clattered, seats edged across the tiled floor with persistent fart noises, girls dragged large fake designer handbags behind them like migrant workers told to flee the land. Sheba flitted her eyes as though all of this wasn't quick enough for her, but would suffice. The students sat straight in their desks, not daring to speak. Sheba sat back down slowly, primly smoothing down her short skirt against her thighs before edging into her seat. Lynnea stood. The silence lasted almost a full minute. Finally, Sheba looked at Lynnea and said, "Is you gone teach us or what?"

VENUS WAS raking the same patch of leaves over and over. The leaves leapt from the broken prongs of the rake and settled back to where they'd originally lain. "Hello," Lynnea said. "Venus. Venus? Hello?"

"Oh." Venus turned, still raking. "How you doing?"

"Fine. Teaching. You know how that goes."

"Ohhhh do I. They all crack babies. None a them's got a bit a sense to them. Ought a skip schooling and send them all to the military."

Without looking up from the leaves she said, "So. When you say you was moving out?"

IN THE following weeks, they finished reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and moved on to *The Great Gatsby*. The class was quiet with Sheba in it. If a student began to talk, Sheba would stand and

say, "Y'all need to shut up and learn something." Everyone would remain seated.

One day after school, Lynnea lifted her head from its defeated position on her desk and found a pair of eyes staring at her, as though she were a problem Sheba was trying to solve.

"Miz Davis, I got to talk to you."

"Yes," Lynnea said, glancing at the clock.

"We can't go on like this. I mean, nobody want to learn about no metaphors and symbolisms and—I don't know what all."

"Well, that's what we have to learn for exams."

"*You* don't have to learn nothing. We the ones—"

"Anything," Lynnea corrected.

"What?"

"Go on." Lynnea sneaked another glance at the clock.

"Maybe we can learn it, but not by you just yapping at us. Nobody wanna hear nobody else talk for no hour. It just get boring. Maybe we could act out some of the book, like a soap opera or something. Or when people wanna say their opinions, like a talk show."

So they tried the soap operas and talk shows in class.

"I still think Myrtle is a ho and Daisy—" Jerron searched the ceiling for words. "If she tried that shit—I mean stuff—where I live, some guy woulda clocked her long ago."

"But you gotta understand," Ramona said, "them was white folks, back in the twenties, when they just had invented cars. Daisy didn't even know she'd run Myrtle over. They just did stupid shit like that."

"All right," Lynnea said. "Could you quit it with the cursing? We're not on the streets."

"I don't live on no street!" an anonymous voice piped up.

In return, Sheba glared at the class and said, "If you don't *live* in no street, then don't *act like* you live in *no street*!"

The class was absolutely silent. Lynnea felt awkward and feeble breaking the silence. "Thank you, Sheba. Very well put."

The rest of the class they discussed *The Great Gatsby* with the quiet reserve of golf commentators describing a stroke. When the bell rang, they shambled out of the room quietly, but Sheba stayed.

Though class had ended well, it had still been a long day. Lynnea slumped over her desk, forehead resting on a pile of ungraded homework.

"Well," Sheba finally said, "they read the book. They understand. That's what you gotta keep in mind."

Lynnea raised her head and slowly nodded in reply, though Sheba was gone.

For a few weeks things went well. She was finally finishing her copying and lesson planning early enough to leave when the other teachers left; she was finally able to pack up her lessons and leave the building before the janitors kicked her out. Before Sheba, she used to spend at least an hour at her desk, paralyzed, recovering from her day. Now when she passed the school basketball court, she smiled and waved.

THEN SHEBA stopped coming to class regularly. When she did come, she would smack her lips, occasionally casting a feeble glance Lynnea's way. One day when Lynnea was trying to explain etymologies to the class, the class grew noisier and noisier, books scattered on the students' desks, wads of papers strewn about the floor. Lynnea couldn't even hear herself speaking; the room sounded like a football arena, everyone talking—all save Sheba, who'd come to class after three weeks of spotty attendance. Sheba sat in her chair, the cuffs of her too-small rabbit fur jacket starting way past her wrists. In the

midst of the noise and confusion, Sheba surveyed the scene, arms folded like a cigar-store Indian.

Lynnea heard a girl yell, "He pushed his thang up against my jeans and *whoool!*"

"All right, April," Lynnea said. "Out! Now!"

April stood, and for a moment looked as if she was going to say something, but shook her head, furiously, as though what she would have said would have been too foulmouthed even for her.

"Hurry up, April," Lynnea said. "We don't have all day."

Sheba stood up from her chair so suddenly the chair nearly toppled backward. She glared at Lynnea. "Now, everybody else *in here* talking. Why you gone call on April? If you had your *act* together you'da stopped the yakking before it got to this!"

The class applauded.

"Sit down, Sheba."

"Make me," Sheba said.

Lynnea considered this. Why couldn't she make Sheba sit down? Wasn't that one of the basic things a teacher should be able to do? "Well, Sheba. You can leave with April. Out."

"I'll get out. I don't care no more. Sick a this class."

Lynnea sighed. "Well, get out." She'd felt that up until now, up until Sheba's absences, she and Sheba had been a team: a crazy, lop-sided one, but a team nonetheless. For a moment, she dared to meet Sheba's gaze head-on, and in that moment thought they'd reached some sort of *détente* of stares. It was then that Lynnea knew she would have gladly endured Sheba telling her off, cursing her out, stomping her foot, as long as Sheba stayed. *Stay*, she wanted to plead, but Sheba was the one to twist her eyes away first, and Lynnea heard herself say, "GET OUT!"

And so Sheba made a production of leaving: stashing papers into

her notebook with grand, though haphazard, flourishes, slamming each book onto her desk before stuffing it into her bag. April's eyes followed Sheba slamming books and she began packing her supplies as well. Just as the girls got to the door, the guidance counselor arrived.

"Ms. Davis. I'm here for Sheba."

"That was fast. I was just sending her out. April needs to go, too."

The guidance counselor turned to April and narrowed his eyes with mock seriousness, "April, what you doing getting in trouble? I thought we put a end to that." He winked at April as though to remind her of a secret deal.

April tottered her head and flashed a set of lipstick-stained horse-teeth for him.

"*Oh Mistah Knight!*"

Mr. Knight straightened to all his six-five bulk and resumed his guidance-counselor voice for Lynnea. "I wasn't coming here to take Sheba to the principal's office. She's got a doctor's appointment, but I'll take both these young ladies downstairs." They left chattering on either side of him.

As soon as they had gone, Ebony, the girl who'd hit Lynnea, cheerily called out, "Miz Day-vis!"

"Yes, Ebony. What do you want?"

"You don't know Sheba got a baby in the oven?"

Lynnea tried not to let her surprise show. "That's not a matter for classroom discussion."

The students thought it was a perfect matter for discussion.

"*Uhh uhhn!*" one girl squealed. "Sheba pregnant! No she *didn't* go and get knocked up!"

"And she a big girl, too," one boy said. "I'd be afraid to steer that wheel."



A FEW days before the winter break, while she was sitting in her car thinking, she spotted Sheba through the frost of her windshield. Sheba was watching the boys' basketball game, her hands clutching the chain-link that fenced in the basketball court. Though Sheba was no less than a few feet away from a crowd of people, she looked utterly alone. Winter was beginning to chill the air but Sheba still wore miniskirts, fishnet stockings, high heels.

Lynnea tried to see what it was that Sheba saw, but when she looked at the basketball court all she saw was gray concrete, the long-faded free-throw line, the school mascot painted in the center so weathered and chipped that the whole thing looked like an ancient mosaic. The boys who smoked weed all through the fall had vanished, leaving behind two short, skinny boys playing a hard, fast game. Perhaps Sheba only cared about the boys. More likely than not, she cared about how hard they were playing, that they could want to win so badly that neither dared back down.

Lynnea got out of her car and walked over to Sheba. A few students she recognized looked at her, but she pretended not to see them. "C'mon," Lynnea said, "I'll give you a ride home."

Sheba looked at Lynnea with annoyance, then resignation, as though she'd weighed her options and had decided she might as well get a free ride. Sheba walked with Lynnea to the parking lot, and got in the car without speaking.

"Where do you live?" Lynnea asked.

"You know where I live."

"Our Lady of Peace. I know *that*," Lynnea said, "but where is it?"

"Hollander Ridge."

"Where in Hollander Ridge?"

Sheba's eyes bugged out. "C'mon, Miz Davis. You really don't know?"

"No, I don't." They stared at each other. Sheba sighed. A cloud of her breath hung in the cold car interior.

Lynnea pulled off and headed down Thirty-third Street in the general direction of Hollander Ridge.

Sheba gave her a jumble of directions: Erdman, Moravia, Bel Air Road, and Frankford Avenue. Then the streets got small and narrow, with turns where Lynnea hadn't expected streets to be at all.

"Scared yet?"

Lynnea didn't answer. Sheba called out turns; otherwise the rest of the ride was silent.

Our Lady of Peace was its own planet: singular, immense, imposing. The statue of the Virgin Mary was larger than Lynnea thought statues of Virgins should be, and was covered with pigeon droppings. A sign with a picture of a lightning bolt on it was attached to the high electric fence that ran around the building. A whitewash of floodlights illuminated the sign. Next to it, another sign, wooden and hand-painted, read: TRY TO GET IN OR OUT WITHOUT PERMISSION AND DIE.

"Well. Here you are," Lynnea said. She thought for a moment, then said, "If you need something, or want me to visit you, give me a call."

"I don't think I'll be needing your help. But thanks for the ride." Sheba slammed the car door and clomped up the sidewalk.

Lynnea stretched her head over to the passenger window and clumsily rolled it down. "Be good. Take care of that baby."

Sheba stood, eyes still and unblinking.



OF COURSE she had said the wrong thing: Sheba obviously hadn't wanted the baby, but what was said was said, Lynnea thought. On the way back, Lynnea sailed through the red lights hoping to get home as quickly as possible. There she could think. Cry. Maybe fry herself an egg. She went the wrong way down one-way roads. Streetlamps buzzed here and there, but most were broken and did not flicker at all.

She came to an intersection where the traffic lights were out, looked both ways, and zoomed through. The single *Whuurp!* of a police siren stunned her for a moment, but she kept driving, only slower now. She thought of herself as an ant, foolish enough to believe that if she kept ambling along, the giant foot above wouldn't come smashing down. The police car trailed her. A voice barked through megaphone static, "Pull over."

The policeman got out and his door made its official-sounding slam. He walked over to her car, hitching up his pants as if preparing to recite a blasé Miranda. She rolled down the window. The policeman bent his head down to greet her. It was Robert the Cop.

"Hey, man. How's it going?" She smiled up at him.

Robert the Cop whipped out his ticket pad. "You were speeding."

Lynnea kept the smile pasted on her face. Robert the Cop wrote something on his pad. When he flipped the page and kept writing, her smile deserted her. "I just dropped off a student, O.K.?"

He walked to the back of her car to take down her license plate number. She thought about running him over. No one in Hollander Ridge would care. One less cop.

He came back around driver side and stuck his head in again.

"It's Lynnea. Lynnea Davis. Remember me? Teacher training? Bonza? Role-play?"

"Yep. I remember. Did you know you were speeding? Through red lights?"

Lynnea tried counting to ten to calm herself, but only got to three. "Do you know what it feels like to want to go home?" she asked. "To have worked one long motherfucking day with a bunch of kids who want to strangle your ass and you want to strangle theirs and you think about that sentimental shit—that 'if I can only reach one' shit—and you don't reach anyone?"

He nodded once. "Yep," he said. He tore the ticket from the pad.

SHE SPED out of the maze of streets. There was a green light and she whooshed through it faster than the reds. She could see the outlines of two boys walking across the street the way Baltimore kids walk, sauntering and primping and strolling all at once. They were the sort of kids who thought they had all the time in the world; time to play around, time to disobey, time to do whatever they wanted. They were the types of kids who seemed to love watching faces curse noiselessly on the other side of the windshield, their vengeance against the world. Lynnea knew they weren't going to make it across at the speed she was driving. She would have to slow down. She pressed on the horn so hard it braced her in the seat. The horn bleated.

"It's a green light! Get out of the way!" She knew the kids could only see her yelling, that they heard none of the words. One short outline flashed her the finger like a hearty salute. The taller one saw that she was going too fast and tried to limp a bit quicker, but the

finger-flasher held on to him, as though to say, *They gone stop. Make 'em wait and get mad and shit.*

She had a chance to slow down, and she didn't want to. She'd scare them, for once. *Make* them run. Her foot slammed the accelerator for what seemed like no time at all, but when she changed her mind, trying to brake, she knew it was too late, she couldn't stop in time.

Somehow she heard the strange hissing before she heard the brakes screech. She'd never associated hissing with car wrecks, at least not the ones she'd seen in movies, where metal crunched, tires squealed. On television, cars spun like compasses gone haywire, only to regain their sense of direction, speeding off to create other wrecks. She no longer saw the boys—the limper, the finger-flasher.

She promised herself that if these boys lived, if they turned out all right, she'd visit Sheba at Our Lady of Peace; she wouldn't just pretend to care but would actually do something about it.

Just as she made this promise to herself, she heard the boys cursing and wailing somewhere near the front of the car's grille. One boy howled, struggling to one foot, holding his knee, hopping around as though he were searching for someone in a crowd. The other one banged the passenger window with heavy thumps and curses. They were alive.

Lynnea closed her eyes. Of course she knew leaving the accident scene would be the wrong thing to do, just as she knew she'd never see Sheba again, knew that her teaching days were over.

She could still hear the boys, even as she reversed, even as she took off. Even as she imagined how ridiculous it would be to visit Sheba, to watch as the girl hitched up her scary fishnet stockings, her eyes narrowed and unforgiving, speaking up for every pissed-off kid in the world, "C'mon. *Make me.*"

The Ant of the Self



OPPORTUNITIES," my father says after I bail him out of jail. He's banging words into the dash as if trying to get them through my thick skull, "You've got to invest your money if you want opportunities." It's October of '95, and we're driving around Louisville, Kentucky, in my mother's car. Who knows why he came down here, forty miles south of where he lives, but I don't ask questions that are sure to have too many answers. I just try to get my father, Ray Bivens Jr., back across the river to his place in Indiana. Once we're on the Watterson Expressway, it seems as if we're about to crash into the horizon. The sunset has ignited the bellies of clouds; the mirrored windows of downtown buildings distort the flame-colored city into a funhouse. I can already see that it'll be one of those days when the sunset is extra-brilliant, though without staying power.

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My father just got a DUI—again—though that didn't stop him from asking for the keys. When I didn't give them up, he sighed and shook his head as though I withheld keys from him daily. "C'mon, Spurge," he'd said. "The pigs aren't even looking."

He's the only person I know who still calls cops "pigs," a holdover from what he refers to as his Black Panther days, when "the brothers" raked their globes of hair with black-fisted Afro picks, then left them stuck there like javelins. When, as he tells it, he and Huey P. Newton would meet in basements and wear leather jackets and stick it to whitey. Having given me investment advice, he now watches the world outside the Honda a little too jubilantly. I take the curve around the city, past the backsides of chain restaurants and malls, office parks and the shitty Louisville zoo.

"That's your future," he says winding down from his rant. "Sound investments."

"Maybe you should ask the pigs for your bail money back," I say. "We could invest that."

He doesn't respond; by now he's too busy checking out my mom's new car. Ray Bivens Jr. doesn't own a car. The one he just got his DUI in was borrowed, he'd told me, from a friend.

Now he takes out the Honda's cigarette lighter from its round home, looking into the unlit burner as though staring into the future. He puts the lighter back as if he'd thought about pocketing it but has decided against it. He drums a little syncopation on the dash, then, bored, starts adjusting his seat as though he's on the Concorde. He wants to say something about the car, wants to ask how much it costs and how the hell Mama could afford it, but he doesn't. Instead, out of the blue, voice almost pure, he says, "Is that my old dress jacket? I loved that thing."

"It's not yours. Mama bought it. I needed a blazer for debate."

The words come out chilly, but I don't say anything else to warm them up. And I feel a twinge of childishness mentioning my mother, like she's beside me, worrying the jacket hem, smoothing down the sleeves. I make myself feel better by recalling that when I went to post bail, the woman behind the bulletproof glass asked if I was a reporter.

"You keep getting money from debate, we could invest."

When most people talk about investing, they mean stocks or bonds or mutual funds. What my father means is his friend Splo's cockfighting arena, or some dude who goes door to door selling exercise equipment that does all the exercise for you. He'd invested in a woman who tried selling African cichlids to pet shops, but all she'd done was dye ordinary goldfish so that they looked tropical. "Didn't you just win some cash?" he asks. "From debate?"

"Bail," I say. "I used it to pay your bail."

He's quiet for a while. I wait for him to stumble out a thanks. I wait for him to promise to pay me back with money he knows he'll never have. Finally he sighs and says, "Most investors buy low and sell high. Know why they do that?" With my father there are not only trick questions, but trick answers. Before I can respond, I hear his voice, loud and naked. "I *axed* you, 'Do you know why they do that?'" He's shaking my arm as if trying to wake me. "You *answer me* when I ask you something."

I twist my arm from his grasp to show I'm not afraid. We swerve out of our lane. Cars behind us swerve as well, then zoom around us and pull ahead as if we are a rock in a stream.

"Do you know who this *is*?" he says. "Do you know who you're *talking to*?"

I haven't been talking to anyone, but I keep this to myself.

"I'll tell you who you're talking to—Ray Bivens Junior!"

He used to be this way with Mama. Never hitting, but always grabbing, groping, his halitosis forever in her face. After the divorce he insisted on partial custody. At first all I had to do was take the bus across town. Then, when he couldn't afford an apartment in the city, I had to take the Greyhound into backwoods Indiana. I'd spend Saturday and Sunday so bored I'd work ahead in textbooks, assign myself homework, whatever there was to do while waiting for Ray Bivens Jr. to fart himself awake and take me back to the bus station.

That was how debate started. Every year there was a different topic, and when they made the announcement last year, it was like an Army recruitment campaign, warning students that they'd be expected to dedicate even their weekends to the cause. I rejoiced, thinking that I would never have to visit Ray Bivens Jr. again. And I was good at debate. My brain naturally frowned at illogic. But I don't think for a minute that my teachers liked me because of my logical mind; they liked me because I was quiet and small, and not rowdy like they expected black guys to be. Sometimes, though, the teachers slipped. Once, my history teacher, Mrs. Ampersand, said, "You stay away from those drugs, Spurgeon, and you'll go far." That was the kind of thing that could stick in my stomach for days, weeks. I could always think of things to say about a debate topic like U.S.-China diplomatic relations, or deliver a damning rebuttal on prison overcrowding, but it was different with someone like Mrs. Ampersand—all debate logic fell away, and in my head I'd call her a bitch, tell her that the strongest stuff in my mother's house was a bottle of Nyquil.

WE'VE CROSSED the bridge into Indiana but my father is still going. "THAT'S RIGHT! YOU'RE TALKING TO RAY BIVENS JUNIOR! AND DON'T YOU FORGET IT!"

Outside, autumn is over, and yet it's not quite winter. Indiana farmlands speed past in black and white. Beautiful. Until you remember that the world is supposed to be in color.

LATER, calm again, he says, "Imagine a stock. Let's say the stock is the one I was telling you about, Scudder MidCap. The stock is at fifty bucks. If it's a winner, it doesn't stay at fifty bucks for long. It goes to a hundred let's say, or two hundred. But first it's gotta get to fifty-one, fifty-two, and so on. So a stock *increasing* in price is a good sign. That's when you buy."

I make sure to tell him thanks for telling me this.

"Doesn't matter what you invest in, either," Ray Bivens Jr. says. "That's the beauty. Don't gotta even think about it. That's something you won't hear from an accountant."

"You mean stockbroker. A stockbroker advises about stocks. Not an accountant."

His face turns bitter, as though he's about to slap me, but then he thinks the better of it and says, "So you know who to go to when you get some extra cash."

"Look. I just told you I don't have any money." I try to concentrate on looking for gas station signs in the dark.

"You will, Spurgeon," he says. He puts an arm around me like a prom date, and I can smell his odor from the jail. I don't have to see his face to know exactly how it looks right now. Urgently earnest, a little too sincere. Like a man explaining to his wife why he's late coming home. "I'll pay back every penny. I mean that."

"I believe you," I say, prying his arm from where it rests on my neck.

"You believe me," he says, "but do you believe *in* me?" He puts

his arm back where it was, like he's some suburban dad, a Little League coach congratulating his charge.

"I believe in you."

His arm falls away of its own accord as he settles deeper into his car seat with this knowledge, the leather sighing and complaining under him. I take the exit that promises a Citgo, park at a gas pump. You don't usually see insects in this weather, but the garbage can between the diesel and unleaded swarms with flies. The fluorescent lights stutter off and on as I begin pumping gas. I can hear what my mother would say, that my father is a cross I have to bear, that the Good Book says, "A child shall lead them," and all that crap, which basically boils down to "He's *your* father. Your blood, not mine." Ray Bivens Jr. leans against the car and stretches. Then he cleans the windshield with a squeegee. After that he sniffs and looks around as though he's checking out the scenery. When I'm finished filling the tank he says, "Hey, Spurgeon. How about breaking off a few bills? You know they frisked me clean in lockdown."

I give him a twenty and wait in the car. He's in the Citgo for what seems like half an hour. He's in there so long I get out and wipe off the squeegee streaks he left on the windshield. Finally, he comes back with a six-pack of Schlitz and a family-sized bag of Funyuns. "Listen," he says, handing me a beer, "we have to make a quick stop to Jasper."

Jasper, Indiana, is where his ex-girlfriend Lupita lives.

"I knew it," I say, and hand back the unopened beer before starting the car. "You're in trouble."

He opens the can, looking as though both the Schlitz and I have disappointed him. One of the fluorescent lights overhead blinks out. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Why do we have to go to Jasper all of a sudden?"

"If you *shut your mouth* and go to Jasper you'll find out."

"This is mama's car," I remind him. "She wants it back."

"Why you gotta act like everything I ask you to do is gonna kill you? You my *son*. I tell you to do something, you obey."

I *do* obey, and hate myself for it, turning the car out to the service road. I try to imagine the worst that can await him in Seymour, figure out what he's running from: men who'll tie him up at gunpoint and demand the twenty dollars that he owes them, policemen waiting at his door, but those thoughts give way to the only thing we'll find in Jasper: Lupita, watching TV, painting her toenails. I've been to Lupita's place twice, but that's more than enough. It's full of birds. Huge blue-and-gold macaws. Yellow-naped Amazons. Rainbow lorikeets who squirt their putrid frugiverous shit on you. Tons of birds, and not in cages either. I don't think my father liked them perching on his shoulders any more than I did, but the birds could land anywhere on Lupita and she'd wear them like jewelry.

Then it occurs to me that this is the only reason he cleaned the windshield. "You're going to make me drive you and Lupita around so the two of you can get drunk. I knew it."

"If you don't shut up—"

I don't speak to him, he doesn't speak to me. We pass a billboard that reads, WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS, MAKE LEMONADE. I try to think of what my mother will say. She knows I had to get him out of jail, that's why she let me borrow the car. But she wasn't about to pay bail, and she definitely won't want me coming home at midnight, her car smelling of cigarettes and Mad Dog.

My father sees me fuming and says, "I told you I was going to get your money back, right? Well, there's going to be a march, tomorrow. A million people in Washington, D.C. One. Million. People."

"No," I say. "Dear God, no."

"Exactly," he says.

Even though the windows are closed, I feel a breeze pass through me. At one point, I wanted to go to the March; I imagined it would be as historic as King's march on Washington, as historic as the dismantling of the Wall. The men's choir of my mother's church was going, but I didn't want to be trapped on a bus with a bunch of men singing hymns, feeling sorry for me being born with Ray Bivens Jr. for a father. And what's more, I have a debate tournament. I imagine Sarah Vogedes, my debate partner, prepping for our debate on U.S. foreign policy toward China, checking her watch. She'd have to use our second stringers, or perhaps even Derron Ellersby, a basketball player so certain he'd make the NBA that he'd joined the speech and debate team "to sound smooth for all those postgame interviews." This was the same Derron Ellersby who ended his rebuttals by pointing at me, saying, "Little Man over here's going to break it down for ya," or who'd single me out in the cafeteria, telling his friends, "Little Man's got skills, yo! Break off some of your skills!" as if expecting me to carry on a debate with my tuna casserole.

I'd never missed a day of school in my life, and my mother had the framed perfect-attendance certificates to prove it, but the thought of Sarah Vogedes's composed face growing rumpled as Derron agreed with our opponent makes me feel something like bliss; I imagine Derron, index cards scattered in front of him, looking as confused as if he'd been faked out before a lay-up, saying, "Yo! Sarah V! Where's Little Man? Where he at!"

For once I'm glad Ray Bivens Jr. is scheming so hard he doesn't see me smiling. If he could—if he sensed in *any* way that I might be willing—he'd find a way to call the whole thing off.

"That's in Washington, D.C.," I remind him, "nearly seven hundred miles away."

"I know. But first we're going to Jasper," he says. "To get the birds."

TECHNICALLY, the birds are my father's, not Lupita's. He bought them when he was convinced that the animals were an investment. He tried selling them door to door. When that didn't work and he couldn't afford to keep them, Lupita volunteered to take care of them. Lupita knew about birds, she'd said, because she'd once owned a rooster when she was five back in Guatemala.

It is completely dark and the road is revealing its secrets one at a time. I ask, once more, what he plans on doing with these birds.

He tells me he plans on selling them.

"But you couldn't sell them the first time."

"I didn't have a million potential buyers the first time."

For a brief moment I'd wanted to go to the March, perhaps even see if Ray Bivens Jr. got something out of it, but no longer. I tell him that I can take him to Jasper, Indiana. I can take him home, even, which was what I was supposed to do in the first place, but that I absolutely cannot, under any circumstances, cut school and miss my debate tournament to drive him to D.C.

"Don't you want your money back?" he says. "One macaw alone will pay back that bail money three times over."

"What are a million black men going to do with a bunch of birds? Even if you could sell them, how're you going to get them there?"

"*Would you just drive?*" he says, then sucks his teeth, making a noise that might as well be a curse. He stretches out in his seat, then starts up, explaining things to me as if I'd had a particularly stupefy-

ing bout of amnesia: "You're gonna have Afrocentric folks there. Afrocentrics and Africans, *tons* of Africans. And what do Africans miss most? That's right. The Motherland. And what does the Mother Africa have tons of? Monkeys, lions, and guess what else? *Birds*. Not no street pigeons, but real birds, like the kind I'm selling. Macaws and African grays. Lorikeets and yellow napes and shit." He might as well have added, *Take that*.

He's so stupid, he's brilliant; so outside of the realm of any rationality that reason stammers and stutters when facing him. I say nothing, nothing at all, just continue on, thinking quickly, but driving slowly. He hits the dash like he's knocking on a door to make me speed up.

Off the interstate, the road turns so narrow and insignificant it could peter out into someone's driveway. The occasional crop of stores along the roadside look closed. We pass through Paoli Peaks and Hoosier National Forest before finally arriving in Jasper.

We pull into Lupita's driveway. In the dark, her lawn ornaments resemble gravestones. Motion-detector floodlights buzz on as my father walks up to the house. Lupita stands on her porch, wielding a shotgun. She's wearing satiny pajamas that show her nipples. Pink curlers droop from her hair like blossoms.

"What do *joo* want?" Her eyes narrow in on him. She slits her eyes even more to see who's in the car with him, straightening herself up a little bit, but when she sees that it's just me, just nerdy ol' Spurgeon, she drops all signs of primping.

I stay in the car. She and my father disappear into the house while I watch the pinwheel lawn daisies spin in the dark. The yelling from inside the house is mostly Lupita: "I am tired of your blag ass! Enough eez enough!" Then it stops. They've argued their way to the bedroom, where the door slams shut and all is quiet.

But the calm doesn't hold. Lupita breaks out with some beautiful, deadly Spanish threats, and the screen door bangs open. My father comes out clutching cages, each crammed two apiece with birds. I can hear birdseed and little gravelly rocks from the cages spill all over the car interior when he puts them on the backseat. The whole time he doesn't say a word. Looks straight ahead.

He makes another trip into the house, but Lupita doesn't go in with him. He comes back with another cageful of birds.

Lupita follows him for a bit, but she stops halfway from the car. She stands there in her ensemble of sexy pajamas and pink sponge curlers and shotgun.

"Don't get out," Ray Bivens Jr. says to me. "We're going to drive off. Slowly."

I do as my father says and back out of the driveway.

Lupita yells after us, "Joo are never thinking about maybe what Lupita feels!" For a moment I think she's going to come after us, but all she does is plop down on her porch step, holding her head in her hands.

ONCE THEY get used to the rhythm of the road, the birds swap crude, disjointed conversations with one another. The blue-and-gold macaw sings "Love Me Do," but recent immigrant that it is, it gets the inflections all wrong. The lorikeet says, repeatedly, "Where the dickens is my pocket watch?" then does what passes for a man's lewd laugh. If there's a lull, one will say, "*Arriba, 'riba, 'riba!*" and get them all going again.

"Bird crap doesn't have an odor," my father says. "That's the paradox of birds."

"She loved those birds," I say. "And you just took them away."

"They learn best when stressed out," he says. "Why do you think they say *Arriba!* all the time? They get it from the Mexicans who're all in a rush to get them exported."

He almost knocks me off kilter with that one, but I stick to the point. "Don't try to make excuses. You hurt her. And what about the birds? You didn't think to get food, did you?"

"You are a complete pussy, you know that?"

He'd only used that word once before, when I was twelve and refused to fight another boy, and said if I didn't whup that boy the next day that he'd whup me.

"You *need* to go to this March. When you go, check in at the pussy booth and tell 'em you want to exchange yours for a johnson."

I check the rearview mirror, then cross all lanes of I-65 North until I'm on the shoulder. It's the kind of boldness he'd always wanted me to show to everyone else but him.

"You better have a good reason for stopping," he says.

"Get out," I say, as soon as I stop the car. The birds also stop their chatter, and when I turn around they're looking from me to him as though they've placed bets on who will go down in flames.

Ray Bivens Jr. clamps his hand to his forehead in mock dumbfoundedness. "You ain't heard that before? Don't *tell me* nobody never called you no pussy?"

"Get out, *sir*," I say.

"Yeah. I'll *get out* all right." He opens the passenger-side door just as a semi whooshes by, and even I can feel it. He slams the door and traps the cold air with me.

IT'S LATE: past midnight. I stop at the next exit to call my mother. She says if I don't get my tail back in her house tonight,

she'll skin me alive. I tell her I love her too. She likes to pretend that I'm the man of the house, and says as much when she asks me if I've locked all the doors at night, or tells me to drive her to church so she can show off what a good son she has. But it's times like this when it's clear that the only man of the house is Jesus.

I buy a Ho Ho at the gas station and as I separate the cake part from the creamy insides with my teeth, I think about how Derron would have shrugged Ray Bivens Jr.'s schemes away with a good-hearted hunch of the shoulders. "Pops is crazy," he'd say to the mike in an NBA postgame interview, then put his gently clenched fist over his heart like someone accepting an award, "but I love the guy."

I get back in the car and the birds squawk and complain at having been left alone. I return to the last exit before heading north again, going slow in the right-hand lane. When I see my father, I pull off to the shoulder, pop open the electronic locks. He acts as though he knew I would come back for him all along. We don't talk for nearly an hour, but everything is completely clear: if I am not a pussy, I will cut school, forget about debate, and go to D.C.

JUST OUTSIDE Clarksburg, West Virginia, I pull over. I can't make it to the exit. Twice I almost nodded off. When I slump onto the steering wheel my father gets out and rouses me enough for us to exchange places, even though he's not supposed to be driving.

I don't know how long I've been asleep, but I wake to the umbrella cockatoo chanting, "Sexy, sexy!" My eyes adjust to the dim light, first making out the electric glow of the dash panels, and then the scenery beyond the cool of the windows. We are on a small hilly road. It is so dark and so full of conifers I feel like we're traveling through velvet.

Ray Bivens Jr., I can tell, has been waiting for me to wake. At first I think he wants me to take over the wheel, but then I realize he wants company. He raps on the car window and says, "In ancient Mesopotamia it was hot. There was no glass. What they did have was the wheel—"

The yellow-naped Amazon breaks into the Oscar Mayer wiener jingle before I can ask my father what the hell he's talking about.

"Shut up!" he yells, and at first I sit up, startled, thinking that he's yelling at me. The bird says "Rawrk!" and starts the jingle over, from the beginning.

He sits through the jingle, and as a reward, there is a peculiar silence that comes after someone speaks. For once in his life, he has had to use patience. "Here's why windows are called windows," he says with strained calmness, but the lorikeet interrupts: "Advil works," the bird says, "better than Tylenol."

My father blindly gropes the backseat for a cage, seizes one, and slams it against another cage. All the birds revolt, screeching and shuffling feathers, sounding like bricks hitting a chain-link fence. One of them says, almost angrily, "And here's to *you*, Mrs. Robinson!"

But Ray Bivens Jr. raises his voice over the din. "The Mesopotamians cut out circles, or O's, in their homes to mimic the shape of the wheel, but also to let in the wind," he yells. "And there you have it. Your modern day window. Get it? Wind-o."

I look to see if he is taking himself seriously. He used to say shit like this when I was little. I could never tell whether he was kidding me or himself. "You're trying to tell me that the Mesopotamians spoke English? And that they created little O's in their homes to let in the wind?"

"All right. Don't believe me, then."



WE MAKE it into Arlington at seven in the morning, park the car at a garage, and take the Metro into D.C. with the morning commuters. White men with their briefcases and mushroom-colored trenchcoats. White women with fleet haircuts, their chic lipstick darker than blood. The occasional Asian, Hispanic—wearing the same costume but somehow looking nervous about it. More than anything though, we see black men—everywhere—groups of black men wearing identical T-shirts with the names of churches and youth groups emblazoned on them. Men in big, loose kente-cloth robes; men in full-on suits with the traditional Nation of Islam bow tie.

My father hands me two cages. He hefts two. While the morning commuters eye us, he breaks down the bird prices loudly, as though we're the only people in the world.

When we get to the Mall, all you can hear from where we stand are African drums, gospel music blaring from the loudspeakers, and someone playing rap with bass so heavy it hurts your heart. Everything has an early-morning smell to it, cold and wet with dew, but already thousands have marked their territory with portable chairs and signs. Voter registration booths are everywhere; vendors balance basketfuls of T-shirts on their heads; D.C. kids nudge us, trying to sell us water for a dollar a cup. The Washington Monument stands in front of us like a big granite pencil, miles away, it seems, and everywhere, everywhere, men shake hands, laugh like they haven't seen one another in years. They make pitches, exchange business cards, and congratulate one another for just getting here. But most of all they speak in passwords: *Keep Strong, Stay Black, Love Your Black Nation.*

The birds are so unnaturally quiet I can't tell if they don't mind being jostled about amid the legs of a million strangers or if they're dying. As we work our way through the masses, Ray Bivens Jr. keeps looking off into the distance in perpetual search for the perfect customer. I try to follow my father, but it's hard to plow through the crowd holding the cages.

"Brother," one man says, shaking his head at me, "I don't know if them birds males or not, but they *sho ain't* black!"

I nod in my father's direction and say, "Looks like you've got a customer."

He shoots me an annoyed look. "Let's split up," he says. "We'll cover more area if we're spread out."

"O.K., chief," I say. But I pretty much stay where I've been.

AFTER A few speeches from Christian ministers, a stiff-looking bow-tied man gives an introduction for Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam. I'm so far back that I have to look at the large-screen TVs, but as Farrakhan takes to the stage, the Fruit of Islam phalanx behind him applauds so violently that their clapping resembles some sort of martial art.

I make my way toward the edge of the crowd to get some air. Though I'm already as far from the main stage as one can be, it still takes me a good half hour to push through the crowd of men, most of them patting me on the back like uncles at a family reunion. Although I've seen a sprinkling of women at the march, some black women cheer as they stand on the other side of Independence Avenue, but others wave placards reading "Let Us In!" or "Remember Those You Left Home." Quite a few whites also stop to look as if to see what this thing is all about, and their hard, nervous hard smiles

fit into two categories: the "Don't mug me!" smile, or the "Gee, aren't black folks something!" smile. It occurs to me that I can stay here on the sidelines for the entire march. A hush falls over the crowd, then they erupt into whistles and cheering and catcalls, and though I can barely see the large convention screen anymore, people begin chanting, "Jesse! Jesse!"

I look at the screen and see him clasping hands with Farrakhan, but he doesn't do much more than that. If anything, I'd like the chance to hear him speak in person, purely for speech and debate purposes, but it seems as though the day will be a long one, with major speakers bookended by lesser-known ones.

Now a preacher from a small town takes to the platform. "Brothers, we have to work it out with each other! How are we going to go back to our wives, our babies' mothers, and tell them that we love *them* if we can't tell our own brothers that we love them?"

At first it sounds like what everyone else has been saying, breaking a cardinal rule of public speaking: One should reiterate, not regurgitate. He reads from a letter written in 1712 by William Lynch, a white slave owner from Virginia. It occurs to me that Farrakhan read from this same letter, the content of which got lost in his nearly three-hour speech. The letter explains how to control slaves by pitting dark ones against light ones, big plantation slaves against small plantation slaves, female slaves against male ones. The preacher ends by telling everyone that freedom is attained only when the ant of the self—that small, blind, crumb-seeking part of ourselves—casts off slavery and its legacy, becoming a huge brave ox.

"Well, well, well!" An elbow nudges me. "Wasn't that powerful, brother?" A man wearing a fez extends his hand for me to shake.

I shake his hand, but he doesn't let go, as if he's waiting for me to agree with him.

"Powerful!" the fezzed man shouts above the applause.

"Yes," I say, and turn away from him.

But I can feel him looking at me, staring through me so hard that I'm forced to turn toward him again. "Powerful," I say. "Indeed."

I must not be convincing enough because the guy looks at me pleadingly and says, "*Feel* this! The *power* here! This is *powerful*!"

I look around for someone to save me from this man, but everyone is cheering and clapping for the next speaker. I decide that my only recourse is to shut the man up with the truth. Maybe then he'll leave me alone. "Don't get me wrong. I love my Black Nation," I say, adding the mandatory chest thump, "but I'm just here because my father made me come."

The fezzed man screws up his face in the sunlight, features bunched in confusion. He puts his hand to his ear like he's hard of hearing.

"My father!" I yell. "My father made me come!"

People twenty deep turn around to shoot me annoyed looks. One man looks like he wants to beat the crap out me, but then looks apologetic. I in turn duck my head in apology and murmur, "Sorry."

"*Made* you come? *Made* you? This, my brother," he nearly yells, "is a day of atonement! You got to cut your father a little slack for caring for your sorry self!"

Everyone's eyes are on me again, but I'll be damned if this man who doesn't even *know me* sides with Ray Bivens Jr. "I thought the whole point of all this was to take responsibility. Put an end to asking for slack. If you knew my father you'd know that his whole damn life is as slack as a pantsuit from JCPenney!"

"Hold up, hold up, hold up," a voice says. The voice comes from a man with a bullet-smooth head, the man who earlier looked as if he wanted to stomp my face into the ground. Now that he's turned

toward me, the pistils and stamens of his monstrous Hawaiian flower-print shirt seem to stare at me, and suddenly his face is so close I can smell the mint of his breath.

"You need to learn that *responsibility* is a two-way street!" The Hawaiian-shirt guy points to my chest. "*You* have to take responsibility and reach out to *him*."

Now many, many people have turned to look at us, and though I try not to look guilty, people know the Hawaiian-shirted guy is talking to *somebody*, somebody who caused a disturbance. The Phalanx of Islam is on its way, moving in the form of crisp, gray-suited men wearing stern looks and prison muscles. The Hawaiian-shirted guy sees them and waves me away with his hand as though I'm not worth his time. Then, suddenly—despite the Fruit of Islam weaving through the crowd toward us—he decides to have another go at it. "Let me ask you a question, my brother. Why are you here? You don't seem to *want* to atone—not with your pops, not with anybody."

Those around me have formed a sideshow of which I seem to be the villain, and they look at me expectantly. The Hawaiian-shirted man folds his arms across his chest and jerks his chin up, daring me to answer him.

"Atoning for one's wrongs is different from apologizing," I begin. "One involves words, the other, actions." I don't want to dignify all this attention with a further response; don't want the four men who are now brisk-walking straight toward me to hurt me; don't want to say anything now that the air around me is silent, listening, now that the sun in my eyes is so hot I feel like crying. I continue, delivering a hurried, jibbering philippic on the nuances between atonement and apology, repentance and remorse. What I'm saying is right and true. Good and important. But I can feel myself getting flustered, can feel the debate judge mouthing *Time's up*, see the dis-

belief and disappointment in the men's faces, nearly twenty in all, and more turn around to see what the disturbance is about. An Oxford-shirted security guard grabs me by the arm.

"What," he says, "seems to be the problem, son?"

"Look," I say finally to him and anyone else who'll listen, "I'm not here to atone. I'm here to sell birds."

I finally spot my father, the cages balanced on his shoulders, when the marchless march is pretty much finished. The sky is moving toward dusk, and though there are still speakers on the podium, you'd stick around to listen only if they were your relatives or something. My father and I get pushed along with other people trying to leave.

I don't bother telling him how security clamped me on the shoulder and sat me down on the curb like a five-year-old and gave me a talking-to, reminding me of the point of the March. I don't tell him how they fed me warm flatbread and hard honey in a hot plastic tent that served as some sort of headquarters, or how they gave me three bean pies, some pamphlets, and a Koran. I know he can tell how pissed off I am. Anyone can.

And he can see I haven't sold any birds, and I see he hasn't either. I wonder if word got around to his section about how security took me out of the crowd for "safety purposes," but apparently he doesn't give a shit. Ray Bivens Jr. grabs a passing man by the arm. The man's T-shirt reads: "Volunteer—Washington D.C."

"Where's a good bar?" my father asks. "That's cheap?"

The man raises his eyebrows and says, "Brotherman, we're trying to keep away from all that poison. At least for one day." His voice is smooth and kind, that of a guy from the streets who became a counselor, determined to give back to the community. He smiles. "You think you can make it for one day without the sauce, my brother?"



THE BAR we end up in is called The Haven, and it's nowhere near where we left the car. Before we left the March, I asked Ray Bivens Jr. how he felt knowing that he'd come nearly seven hundred miles and hadn't sold a single bird. He didn't speak to me on the Metro ride to the bar, not even when the birds started embarrassing us on the subway.

The bartender looks at the birds and shakes his head as if his patrons never cease to amuse him.

Even though he's sitting in the place he loves most, Ray Bivens Jr. still seems mad at me. So do the birds. None of them are speaking, just making noises in their throats as though they're plotting something. I ask the bartender if the birds are safe outside; if someone will steal them.

"Not if it's something that needs feeding," the bartender says.

"Speaking of feeding," my father says, "I'm going to get some Funyuns. Want any?" He says this more to the bartender than to me, but I shake my head though all I've eaten are the bean pies and honey. The bartender spray-guns a 7 Up in a glass for me without my even asking, then resumes conversation with the trio of men at the end of the counter. One man has a goiter. One has processed waves that look like cake frosting. While those two seem to be smiling and arguing at the same time, the third man says nothing, smoking his cigarette as though it's part of his search for enlightenment.

The smoker ashes his cigarette with a pert tap. "You been at the March, youngblood?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

They all laugh, but no one tells me why.

The bartender towels down some beer glasses. "Anybody here

go?" When nobody says anything, he says to me, with a knowing wink, "These some *shiftless* niggers up in here!"

There's general grumbling, and to make them feel less bad about missing the March I say, "I didn't get all pumped up by the speeches, but in a way I was glad I was there. I think I felt more relieved than anything else."

"Relieved? What about?" the smoker asks, his voice wise and deep, even though he's just asking a question.

I try to think. "I don't know. I'm the only black kid in my class. Like a fucking mascot or something," I say, surprised that I said the f-word out loud, but shaking my head as though I said words like that every day. "I just get tired of it. You skip it for a day and it feels like a vacation. That's why I was glad."

There's a round of nodding. Not sympathy, just acknowledgment.

"Man," the guy with the goiter says, "I'm happy to hear that. You got the *luxury* of feeling tired. Back in the day, before you were born, couldn't that type of shit *happen*."

He seems to be saying less than he means, and looks at me, his eyes piercing, his goiter looking like he's swallowed a lightbulb. "We the ones *fought* for you to be in school with the white folks." He looks behind him, as if checking if any white people are around, though that's about as likely as Ray Bivens Jr. going sober for good. He lowers his voice so that he almost sounds kind. "We sent you to go spy on them. See how the hell those white folks make all that money! Now you talking 'bout a *vacation*!"

They all laugh like it's some sort of secret code that got broken.

"You'll be all right, youngblood," says the smoker. "You'll be all right."

Just as I begin to realize that they're humoring me, Ray Bivens Jr.

comes blustering in through the door like he lives there. He flashes a wad of money. "Luck," he says smiling, "is sometimes lucky."

The trio at the bar high-five one another and laugh in anticipation of free drinks.

"Who," I say, "did you take that from?"

"*Take?*" He chucks his thumb toward me as if to say, *Get a load of this guy*. He counts out the bills so fast that he can't actually be counting them. "Sold a bird. Rich white dude. Convenient store. I said, 'I got birds.' He said, 'I got money.' Six hundred bones."

I'm upset, though I don't know why. Six hundred bucks. Who in this neighborhood even *has* six hundred bucks? I lean toward him and whisper, "I bailed you out of jail, remember."

"Don't worry," he says, "I'll buy you a drink."

THREE HOURS pass, and my father has beaten all the regulars trying to win money from him at pinochle when a woman appears out of nowhere. Her skin is the color of good scotch. She sits between me and my father, twirls around on her barstool once, and points a red-enameled finger toward the goiter man changing songs on the jukebox. "Play 'Love the One You're With.' Isley Brothers."

"I was going to," says the Goiter, "just for you."

She spins around on the barstool again so that she's facing the bottles lined up on display. "Farrah," she says and extends a tiny limp hand in my direction. "Farrah Falana."

"That's not," I say, "your real name."

"Yes it is," she says dreamily. "Farrah Falana. I was named after that show."

Now I see that she's going on fifty. She smiles at me with her mouth closed, and for a moment she looks like a beautiful frog.

My father takes a long, admiring look at her seated behind. "Farrah and Ray," my father says. "I like how that sounds." For a moment, he looks like Billy Dee Williams. The smile is the same, that same slick look.

"I like how it sounds, too," Farrah says. She actually slides on her barstool and leans toward him, leans so close it looks as if she might kiss him.

"Farrah and Ray," I say. "That sounds like a Vegas act."

"It *does*!" she squeals.

MY FATHER and Farrah get drunk while I play an electronic trivia game with the Goiter. He knows more than I gave him credit for, but he's losing to me because he bets all his bonus points whenever he gets a chance. The Goiter and I are on our tenth game when Ray Bivens Jr. taps me on the shoulder. I look over to see him standing very straight and tall, trying not to look drunk.

"You don't love me," he says sloppily. "You don't *understand* me."

"*You* don't understand you," I say.

Farrah is still at the bar, and though she's not saying anything, her face goes through a series of exaggerated expressions as if it were she responding to someone's questions. I plunk three quarters in the game machine. "Your go," I say to the Goiter.

"Does anybody understand themselves?" he says to me softly, and for a second he looks perfectly lucid. Then he says it louder, for the benefit of the whole bar, with a gravity only the drunk can muster. "Does *anybody*, I say, *understand* themselves?"

The men at the bar look at him and decide it's one of their many

jokes, and laugh, though my father is staring straight at me, straight through me as though I were nothing but a clear glass of whiskey into which he could see the past and future.

I grip my father's elbow and try to speak with him one on one. "I'm sorry about what I said at the March."

"No you ain't."

"Yes," I say, "I am. But you've got to tell me how to understand you." I feel silly saying it, but he's drunk, and so is everybody else but me.

He lurches back then leans in forward again. "Tell you? I can't *tell* you." He drums each word out on the counter, "That's. Not. What. It's. A-bout. I can *tell* you about Paris, but you won't know 'less you been there. You simply under-*stand*. Or you don't." He raises an eyebrow in clairvoyant drunkenness before continuing. "You either take me, or you *don't*." He throws his hands up, smiling as though he's finally solved some grand equation in a few simple steps.

"Please," I say, giving up on him. I beckon the Goiter for another game of electronic trivia, but he shakes his head and smiles solemnly, a smile that says he's more weary for me than for himself.

"Let me tell you something," Ray Bivens Jr. says, practically spitting in my face, "Lupita *understands* me. That woman," he says, suddenly sounding drunk again, "*understands*. She's It."

Farrah, suddenly sober, smacks him on the shoulder and says, "What about me? What the fuck about me?"

ANOTHER HOUR later he says, all cool, "Gimme the keys. Farrah and I are going for a ride."

I've had many 7 Ups and I've twice asked my father if we could

go, told him that we either had to find a motel outside the city or plan on driving back soon. But now he's asking for the keys at nearly three a.m., the car all the way over in Arlington, and even the Metro has stopped running.

"Sir," I say. "We need to drive back."

"I said, Spurgeon, dear son, that Farrah and I are going for a ride. Now give me the keys, dear son."

A ride means they're going to her place, wherever that is. Him going to her place means I have to find my own place to stay. Giving him the keys not only means he'll be driving illegally, which I no longer care about, but that the car will end up on the other side of the country, stripped for parts.

"No," I say. "It's Mama's car."

"Mama's car," he mimics.

"Sir."

"Maaaaaaaa's caaaaar!"

I leave the bar. I'm walking for a good minute before I hear him coming after me. I speed up but don't run. I don't even know how I'm going to get back to the car, but I pick a direction and walk purposefully. I hear the *click click click* of what are surely Farrah's heels, hear her voice screaming something that doesn't make sense, hear his footfalls close in on me, but all I see are the streetlights glowing amber, and the puffs of smoke my breath makes in the October air. All I feel is that someone has spun me around as if for inspection, and that's when I see his face—handsome, hard-edged, not the least bit sloppy from liquor.

Sure. He's hit me before, but this is hard. Not the back of the hand, not with a belt, but punching. A punch meant for my face, but lands on my shoulder, like he's congratulating me, then another hit, this one all knuckles, and my jaw pops open, automatically, like the

trunk of a car. I try to close my mouth, try to call time out, but he's ramming into me, not with his fists, but with his head. I try to pry him from where his head butts, inside my stomach, right under my windpipe, but he stays that way, leaning into me, tucked as if fighting against a strong wind, both of us wobbling together like lovers. Finally, I push him away, and wipe what feels like yogurt running from my nose into the raw cut of my lip. I start to lick my lips, thinking that it's all over, when he rushes straight at me and rams me into something that topples over with a toyish metal clank. Sheaves of weekly newspapers fan the ground like spilled cards from a deck. I kick him anywhere my foot will land, shouting at him, so strangely mad that I'm happy, until I finally kick at air, hard, and trip myself. I don't know how long I'm down, how long my eyes are closed, but he's now holding me like a rag doll. "What the hell are you talking about?" he says as if to shake the answer out of me. "What the *hell* are you talking about?"

I only now realize what I've been screaming the whole time. "Wind-o!" I yell at him. "You and your goddamn 'wind-o'! There was never any 'wind-o'! And you don't know *shit* about birds! *Arriba! Arriba!*" I say mockingly.

When he grabs my collar, almost lifting me from the ground, I feel as though I'm floating upward, then I feel some part of me drowning. I remember something, something I know will kill my father. My father dodged the draft. They weren't going to get this nigger, was his view of Vietnam. It was the one thing I'd respected him for, and yet somehow I said it, "You didn't know fucking Huey P. Newton. You never even *went* to Vietnam!"

That does it. I had turned into something ugly, and of all the millions of words I've ever spoken to him in all my life, this is the one that blows him to pieces.

"Vietnam?" he says, once, as if making sure I'd said the word.

I'm quiet. He says the word again, "Vietnam," and his eyes somehow look sightless.

I try to pull him back, begging in the only way you can beg without words. I go to put my hand on his shoulder, but a torrent of people, fresh from the March, it seems, has been loosed from a nearby restaurant. They slap one another's backs, smelling of Brut and Old Spice, musk-scented African oils and sweat. I go to put my hand on his shoulder, but already my father has gone.

RAY BIVENS JR. left with the car and Farrah left with someone else. The birds are gone. My blazer is gone. After I have a scotch, the bartender says, "Look. I can float you the drinks, but who's going to pay for that, youngblood?" He points to one of the bar's smashed windowpanes.

After I pay him, I have no money left for a cab or a bus. The bridge over the Potomac isn't meant for pedestrians, and it takes me half an hour to walk across it. For a long time I'm on New Hampshire Avenue, then for a long time I'm on Georgia. I ask for directions to the train station and someone finally gives them to me.

I wonder if he's right about Lupita. When she sat on the porch and held her head, it seemed she felt more sorry for him than she did for herself; not pity, but sympathy.

I pass by an old-fashioned movie theater whose marquee looks like one giant erection lit in parti-colored lights. People pass by, wondering how to go about mugging me. A well-dressed man asks if I'm a pitcher or a catcher, and I have no idea what he means. I tell myself that it's good that Ray Bivens Jr. and I fought. Most people

think that you find something that matters, something that's worth fighting for, and if necessary, you fight. But it must be the fighting, I tell myself, that decides what matters, even if you're left on the sidewalk to discover that what you thought mattered means nothing after all.

"WHERE DO you want to go?" the Amtrak ticket officer asks.

"East," I say. "Any train that goes east this time of night."

"You're in D.C., sir. Any further east and you'll be in the Atlantic."

Of course I'm not going east anymore. I'd been going east the last day and a half, and it's just now hitting me that I can finally go west. Go home.

After the events of the day, I'm not surprised that I get the snottiest ticket officer of the whole damn railway system. I look into the his gray eyes. "West, motherfucker."

The ticket officer stares at me and I stare right back.

The ticket officer sighs. He looks down at his computer, and then at me again. "Where, pray tell, do you want to go? West, I'm afraid, is a direction, not a destination."

"Louisville, Kentucky," I finally say. "Home."

He enters something into his computer. Tilts his head. He smiles when he tells me there is no train that goes to Louisville. The closest one is Cincinnati.

I walk away from the counter and sit down, trying to think of how I'm going to pay to get to Cincinnati, then from Cincinnati to Louisville. The only other white person in the station besides the ticket officer is an old woman in a rainbow knit cap. She's having quite an intelligent conversation with herself.

I'll have to call home, ask my mother to give her credit card number to this prick. I start to try to find a phone when a man approaches the ticket counter, his half-asleep son riding on his back. He probably just came from the March. Probably listened to all the poems and speeches about ants and oxen and African drumming, but still had this kid out in the hot sun for hours, then in the cold night for longer. It's almost five o'clock in the morning, and all this little boy wants, I can tell, is some goddamned sleep.

"Hey," I say to the man. When he doesn't respond, I tap him on the non-kid shoulder. "It's pretty late to have a kid out. Don't you think?"

He puts his hand up like a traffic cop, but apparently decides I'm harmless and says to me, "Son. I want you to promise me you'll go clean yourself up. Get something to eat." He produces a wallet from his back pocket. He hands me a twenty. "Now, don't go spending it on nothing that'll make you *worse*. Promise me."

It's not enough to get me where I'm going, but it's just what I need. I sit down on a wooden bench. The old white woman next to me carefully pours imaginary liquid into an imaginary cup. The man with the kid goes up to the ticket officer, who stops staring into space long enough to say, "May I help *you*, sir?"

"Do y'all still say 'All aboard'?"

"Excuse me?" the ticket officer says.

"My son wants to know if y'all say 'All aboard.' Like in the movies."

"Yes," the ticket officer says wearily. "We *do* say 'All aboard.' How else would people know to board the train?"

Now the boy jiggles up and down on his father's back, suddenly animated, as if he's riding a pony. The ticket officer sighs, hands grazing the sides of his face as though checking for stubble. Finally

he throws his arms up in a "Sure, what the hell" kind of way, and disappears into the Amtrak offices for what seems like an hour. The father sets the boy down, feet first, onto the ground. An intercom crackles and a voice says:

"All aboard!"

The voice is hearty and successful. The boy jumps up and down with delight. He is the happiest I've seen anyone, ever. And though the urge to weep comes over me, I wait—holding my head in my hands—and it passes.