Healthy Living and Other Electives

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HEALTHY LIVING AND OTHER ELECTIVES

by

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B.S. December 2001, Old Dominion University

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Healthy Living and Other Electives is an excerpt of a young adult novel that follows a sixteen-year-old boy, Del Rainey, as he pursues a romantic relationship with a member of his church’s Purity Pledge class. In addition to romance, Del also seeks a better understanding of manhood through interactions with his peers and father. Along the way, we discover how messily intertwined the church, school system, and lives of teenagers are in Del’s small Virginia town. The novel examines themes of religion, bureaucracy, and toxic masculinity.
This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Adrienne, who fully embraced the struggle.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pastor Newsome’s rules for First Missionary House of the Lord were simple. Every head bowed (mine wasn’t) and every eye closed (nope) while he went on and on with his crazy freestyle prayers.

“Lord,” he shouted, gripping his podium as if fighting a holy tractor beam trying to drag him to heaven right before our eyes, “we know they need to feel that touch from your never changin’ hand, and we know someone is out there hurtin’ this morning…”

Hurtin’? For sure. Between my near-empty wallet forcing me to sit lopsided on that pew-of-steel and yet another infinity sermon, my pain was not in short supply. Newsome was on a roll that day. Ranting, throwing in weird stuff no one seemed to notice, the way he totally did all the time.

“…and we see the evil on our TV and in our news reports, Lord. Bless those endangered spider monkeys of the Amazon rain forests!”

Like that.

“Yes, Lord, Yes,” Mom mumbled. Her hand squeezed mine, nearly crushing my fingers with pulsing robot strength on each word. It sounded like she was co-signing on the old man’s insanity, but on a lot of Sundays her lips moved even when he wasn’t saying stuff. Not repeating Newsome’s lines. Having her own conversation with God, I guessed. Sometimes she cried, too.

No tears that day, though. And I wasn’t feeling my usual urge to gnaw my arm off, dive through a stained glass window, then Usain Bolt my way home. There was a reason.

Kiera Westing.
While Pastor Newsome ranted, I watched her. She sat across the center aisle, on the same row as me and Mom, so Prayer Peeking was the only time I could really look at her there. Otherwise she’d see me, too.

Head bowed. Eyes closed. Kiera leaned far forward, her promise-ringless fingers interlaced as she whispered her own prayer. She’d switched up her hair—a move I recognized thanks to my sister cycling through styles with pop star frequency when she was still at home. At school on Friday, Kiera had been happy, smiling, and rocking springy twist outs that bounced with her joy when she passed me in the hall. Since then, she’d flat-ironed her hair so it crested her dark bare shoulders like black waterfalls, reflecting a bar of golden sunlight beaming through a window arch. She hadn’t smiled once that morning, though she still looked hot hot. Volcano hot. Dragon hot. Summer barbecue in southern hell hot. Happy or sad, there was no changing that.

With effort, I tore myself away. There’s Prayer-Peeking and there’s Prayer-Staring. I wasn’t a creepy dude and there were other entertaining sights in the church. Plus, if all went well after service, I wouldn’t have to sneak glimpses anymore.

Along the side of the sanctuary, six prismatic windows stretched high. On sunny days, the east glass turned outside light rainbow and doused chunks of the congregation in paintball colors. All our varying shades of brown got psychedelic.

Missus Baines, the old lady in the pew ahead of me, who shambled in with a cane every week, and smelled like the inventor of cigarettes and peppermints, turned Oompa-Loompa orange. Almost had to squint to look at her. I liked her because she was unpredictable. For the moment, she was quiet, but at any given time she might catch the Holy Ghost, pop up from her pew, and sprint the aisle swinging her stick. Get too close she’d knock you out.
Turning, I spotted one of my other Prayer Peeking All-Stars across the center aisle, and
three rows back. Coach Scott was tinted Wicked Witch green, with his eyes squeezed shut hard.
He was one of the few First Missionary House of the Lord members I ever saw outside of
church. Usually barking at my school’s JV basketball team from the sidelines.

My boy, Qwan, perpetual bench warmer, said the man wielded curse words like a super
power. When the guys were goofing off in practice, he’d hit them with F-bombs that slammed
them into stuff. Here, in the house of the Lord, he was still loud, but high pitched, a weird
cartoon mouse voice. Hands raised and spread wide to catch all those blessings from Heaven. He
shouted, “Thank you, Je-SUS!”

A lot of little shows played out among the eighty or ninety people in the congregation
every week. There were nose pickers, and nail biters, and ear diggers— and all of them wanted
you to shake their nasty hands after service. Mom thought I was OCD the way I hit up that little
bottle of Purell in her purse on the ride home. It was funny to me. Seeing what I wasn’t supposed
to see, and knowing what I wasn’t supposed to know.

“We praise you, Lord! We love you, Lord! We need you, Lord!” Newsome, barely taking
breaths, kept at it. No sign of slowing down. Dude, stop! I got things to do!

Growing impatient, I couldn’t resist another peek, and was right back to eyeballing Kiera
and her family. The way I was with her, you’d have thought she was a new girl. A transplant
from some big city, here to shake up the status quo. Someone from another world. Like the
movies. Naw, though. We were born in the same hospital, right here in Green Creek, VA.

I’d known her since Kindergarten. Had a thing for her since Kindergarten. So, what’s the
deal? A smooth brother like myself must’ve made a move sometime in the last decade, right.
Right?
No. Because Kiera Westing had never been single. Nev. Er.

There was a brief window from Kindergarten to Fourth Grade, but I was shy and didn’t know we were working a deadline. On Valentine’s Day that year, Devin Thompson hit her with some sick game. A homemade purple “Do you like me? Yes/No/Maybe So” card. She circled yes, and they were like engaged all the way to sixth grade, where they realized they were different people with different dreams. By the time I heard about the breakup, later that afternoon, she was with Corey Thurgood, who wooed her with some lackluster saxophone play.

If she’d watched him drain his spit valves--think waterslide--something I witnessed during my brief stint as a band xylophonist, she probably wouldn’t have found it all that sexy. Neither here nor there. Corey was her boyfriend all the way to the summer before freshman year, when Corey’s mom got a job with some company in Chicago and his family moved, leaving Kiera heartbroken. We were down at my Grandma’s house in Florida when Grandma was still alive, so the heartbroken part I got from a Qwan text. Girls, gossip, and b-ball, in that order, were life for him.

**Qwan:** Dude! K. Westing is a free agent. Get your game right.

**Me:** I’ll be back in 3 days.

**Qwan:** I suggest you start running now.

Three days later, in the crappy Fort Lauderdale airport waiting to board our flight to Virginia, an alternating soundtrack of J Cole and Kendrick Lamar thumping in my headphones, I got the last text on the matter.

**Qwan:** Maybe next time. C Turner yo.

I snatched my headphones off, cussed loudly. It drew the attention of my sister, my parents, a passing TSA agent, and some lady’s toddler, who immediately started machine
gunning the four-letter word I’d released into the ether. If Mom wore pearls, she would’ve clutched them.

That kid’s mother did not accept my apology. Worse, they sat right behind us on the plane, and Dad wouldn’t allow me the use of my headphones so I had to listen to this mini Samuel L. Jackson I created all the way home. As unpleasant as that was, it had nothing on what waited back in Virginia. Kiera’s new boyfriend. Colossus Turner. “C” for short.

Who named their kid Colossus? Maybe psychics who knew their son would grow into a thick-necked state champ Wrestler incapable of un-shrugging his shoulders.

C. Turner’s and Kiera’s relationship...two years strong. He gave her a promise ring that she wears on her left middle finger. Wore.

I’d given up hope. Even though I saw her everyday at school, and here on Sundays, I came to terms with never having a shot with this gorgeous, perpetually involved girl. Until…

Me and Qwan were on a double-date the night before that fateful service. Sort of.

Really, he was on the date with some girl named Erin or Erica, engaging in backseat debauchery while I drove and my uninterested date, whose name I don’t even remember, rode shotgun. Over sloppy sounds of making out and my not-quite-loud-enough music, Erin or Erica’s friend said, “Oh my God!”

Then, she had the nerve to mute my music.

“Never touch my radio,” I said, ready to crank my barely alive tweeters back to Max.

She ignored me, twisted into the space between our seats with her phone held out like the Olympic torch, passing it to Erin or Erica. “Look! That hot wrestler boy from Green Creek broke up with his girlfriend.”
All the wet smacking stopped. The girls went Gossip Level Orange talking about C. Turner cheating, and how it was only a matter of time, and something about a heifer named Angie. I caught Qwan’s gaze in my rearview, but we didn’t say a word. We didn’t have to. It was my time.

#

Kiera’s deacon and deaconess parents were bodyguards on either side of her. Her mom was closest to me, but sat stiff and straight and didn’t obstruct my view despite a cream colored hat that was as wide as a UFO. Her dad’s consistently conservative blue suit looked presidential on her far side.

My plan: after service, I’d catch the Westings in the foyer, where they hovered every Sunday shaking hands and exchanging niceties—‘have a blessed week, brother’ and ‘have a blessed week, sister’. We all knew each other because Mom made me do volunteer work under Deacon Westing that past summer, building accessibility ramps at the homes of some elderly church members who couldn’t handle stairs too good anymore. So, I’d go to him first, like, “Deacon, are there anymore volunteer opportunities coming up?”

Just curious enough so all the Westings remembered what a fine young man I was, but not so gung-ho that I committed myself to any real work.

We’d chat like that a minute, then Pastor Newsome would come, right on schedule, talking church business with the Westings. Instead of Kiera huddling up in the parking lot with the other church girls, it’d be me and her. At the very least, I’m walking her to her Dad’s Cadillac. Talking her to her Dad’s Cadillac. I contemplated hitting her with some Langston Hughes poems, or some Drake, but this was short notice. No time to rehearse.
Anyway, I’d be letting her know, in no uncertain terms, that I’m into her, and I want that next boyfriend slot. Just needed Newsome to let church end. Then I could execute the pl—

Hold up.

Kiera stood. Excused her way past her mom, continued to the front of the church while her dad slow clapped. He wasn’t the only one.

The applause went viral throughout the congregation, creating a pattering echo under the high ceiling, while Newsome uttered, “Hallelujah, hallelujah.”

Kids I recognized from school rose and approached the altar, forming a line when they faced the rest of the congregation. Shanice Monroe, Ralph and Bobby Burton, Mya Hanson, Jameer Sesay, Helena Rickard. I knew them well enough to speak, but nothing more.

“Hallelujah, hallelujah,” said Newsome.

Over the last year, I’d gotten my black belt in daydreaming during sermons. Usually a good thing but this time I’d missed something important.

A lady approached the pulpit. She was a grown up, old, like twenty-five. I’d seen her around the last few weeks, but never met her. Flowery sundress. Plump cheeks, always raised in a smile. She looked friendly, though. Something everyone there couldn’t claim.

When she stepped to the pulpit, she reached for the mic, an act that seemed to make Newsome uncomfortable enough to abruptly cease his hallelujahs. He gave here the wait-a-minute finger. She did, patiently, still smiling.

One final, emphatic, “Hallelujah.” Then he handed over the mic.

The woman said, “Are there any other young people who’d like to join us on this wonderful journey?”
Oh! An opportunity: Go read to old folks at the nursing home. Help scrub graffiti off the community center. Maybe a college visit bus trip. Whatever it was, Kiera would be there. If I got in now, I could still execute the plan, with the added bonus of an obvious shared interest. We’d be volunteering together.

“Excuse me,” I said.

Mom’s head tilted all confused when I brushed by her. I know, I know. You didn’t have to make me this time. I’d hear about it in the car for sure.

I hit the aisle, the varnished wooden floor creaked loudly under my weight. Every eye in the place seared me, making my belly feel twisty and moist, giving me second thoughts. I only kept going because it would be more embarrassing to turn back, and I could not be embarrassed in front of Kiera.

While the other kids lined up to Kiera’s right, I took a spot to her left so we were side by side. It sort of wedged me between her and this potted fern Pastor Newsome kept near the pulpit, but I wasn’t going to risk anyone getting between us. Because I took that spot, when the lady stepped to us with the wireless mic, she came to me first.

“Tell us,” she said, beaming, the happiest happy-face emoji come to life, “why do you want to remain sexually pure until you’re joined in Holy Matrimony?”

I said, “Huh?”
“What’s your reason for wanting to remain sexually pure?” the friendly lady repeated, pushing the mic in my face like a gun in a stickup.

My stomach churned, so loud I was afraid it’d come through the surround sound. Everybody in the place was waiting. Kiera among them. Couldn’t mess this up.

I leaned in, said, “Because I love God.”

Church survival pro-tip, know the appropriate answers. When you do something good, and someone asks you why you did it, “Because I love God.” If you do something bad, and someone asks you why you shouldn’t do it again, “Because God loves me.” If you can throw a Bible verse on top of it, even better. I’m not so great at that, so I kept it simple.

Maybe too simple.

My heart rammed my sternum a half-dozen times in the silence that followed. A lone moth fluttered across the sanctuary, ascending and descending wildly.

Then, the church went stadium crazy. Claps, shouts, cheers. I might be getting a Super Bowl ring after this.

“That’s awesome,” said the woman, “bless you, young man.”

She moved on to Kiera, “And you?”

“I also love God,” she said, giving me serious side-eye, “and I want to be sure I’m with someone who loves me the way He does before I...”

Her answer was comprehensive. Debate Team worthy, like we should’ve had one of those green-yellow-red lights to keep time. She wouldn’t have gotten a red, though, not from me. I could listen to her talk all day.
She got those good chastity belt cheers, same as me, and the mic went down the line. Everyone’s answer was some version of what me and Kiera already said. Jameer Sesay was last to go. He was a dude I only knew by reputation. Golden Boy at school, with his name and face mounted in the cafeteria under our class banner every grading period for Honor Roll and Perfect Attendance. Type of guy who said hi to teachers he wasn’t even taking classes with. I expected a State of the Virginity address from him, but when asked the magic question, he gave the shortest answer. “God.”

By then, you could feel the end-of-service fatigue in the room; he stil got the victory cheers, though.

The lady--what was her name?!--wrapped it up with, “Purity Pledge will be a ground breaking, heart changing, soul enriching journey. At the end of this eight week period--”

Eight? Weeks?

“--these young people will be Godly ambassadors serving as positive influences for their peers and the community-at-large. The course culminates with our Purity Ball, where the parents, and any of you in the congregation who wish to attend, can bear witness as they pledge, before God, abstinence until the day they’re married. I’m so excited, by--”

“Amen, Sister Vanessa,” Pastor Newsome said, reaching for his microphone.

She--Vanessa--her smile faltered. It ticked down, just for a second, but revived itself as she passed the mic. Newsome swept a hand from us, to the congregation, giving us permission to return to our seats. Kiera broke formation first. Of course, I was right behind her, and the rest followed me.

The Benediction was as long as ever, padded with additional prayers for our troops overseas, emphasis on Wesley Westing, Kiera’s in-the-Army brother. Newsome made a point of
calling him by name every other Sunday. Which was cool. Wesley was the man before he left to serve.

Of course, any mention of the Westings got me zeroed in on Kiera, still thinking my plan could work. Further down her pew two arms raised. Wide at first, before crossing into an X, then wide again. Jameer Sesay, prayer-peeking like me. At me. Trying to get my attention.

He shook his head. Mouthed something. It looked like don’t do it.

“Amen!” Pastor Newsome said, the band giving us a free-to-leave musical cue. Everyone stood, and white-gloved ushers got to work extinguishing candles with brass snuffers, causing whiffs of sulfur to overpower spicy colognes and perfumes. Mom shook hands with folks around us. Some patted me on the back for, I guess, joining Purity Pledge. A thin sea of people parted as Jameer wedged his way through, toward me.

I told Mom, “Be right back.”

Skirting around folks, I met him halfway, all while flicking glances at the Westings. Didn’t want this interruption messing up my operation.

Jameer was a little shorter than me. Way skinnier. Wore the most pristine suits every Sunday with his neckties done in intricate knots I didn’t know were possible. I couldn’t tie one regular. His did tie gymnastics.

We’d only exchanged “what up” nods in passing. So, when he slapped my palm, and pulled me into a bro-hug, I thought this had to be about that Purity Pledge nonsense. Some kind of misguided bonding moment. It wasn’t that serious, bruh.

But, he whispered in my ear, “I know what you’re thinking. Don’t. The timing ain’t right.”

I backed out of the hug, stomach churning again. The obvious question hung between us.
“Yeah,” he said, “I’m talking about her.”

The Westings were in the foyer shaking hands. Folks hovered around Kiera, thicker than usual, giving her arm extra pumps of encouragement. I was missing my in.

Jameer laughed. *Laughed.* “You look so thirsty. Let me guess. You’re thinking she just broke up with C. Turner. You need to rush in, right now, profess your undying love.”

I was too stunned to play it off. “How did you--?”

“Please. You and half the school. Three guys already asked her to prom.”

Three? Prom was nine months away.

“Don’t eat a bullet yet,” Jameer said, “they all got ‘no’s’. You’re going to get a ‘no’ if you don’t listen to me.”

My head was all over the place. The other times I’d waited and lost. Three prom invitations. Those were see-a-roach numbers. If you saw three roaches, that meant hundreds were scurrying around you.

Was Jameer a roach? “How you know any of this? Why tell me?”

“Walk with me.” He took the aisle to the pulpit where a couple of Deaconesses tipped collection plates into buckets, the loose change smacking the plastic bottom like hail. The crowd in the foyer thinned. Pastor Newsome worked through a few straggler parishioners, his dark robe swishing, patting backs en route for the Westings. If I was going to execute my plan, it had to be now.

Jameer’s warning though.

He swung a sharp right and took a side door outside. I rushed after him, passing the women sweeping leftover ones and fives into their pails. I caught the door on its backward swing, emerged in a grassy, fenced-in side yard. A swing set, slide, and monkey bars on red and
yellow supports occupied a rectangular patch with a plank board border, filled end to end with crunchy broken seashells that definitely have and definitely will skin knees. Giggling young kids with sleepy-looking young parents played in the sun. They all waved at Jameer and he waved back as I caught up to him.

I said, “Does Kiera know what’s up? I mean, that I wanna get with her?”

“Not really. It’s shocking how oblivious she is about how many of you are unhealthily obsessed with her,” he leaned on the fence and stroked all three of his chin hairs, enjoying this.

“I know because you’re just not very original.”

“What?” Were we about to fight? That sounded like we should fight.

“You’re doing what everyone else is. The day after someone she thought she loved betrayed her. You want to get in on the ground floor when the building’s not open.”

“You a poet or something?”

“I dabble.”

Awesome analogies aside, I still had suspicions. “Why are you talking to me right now?”

“Because I seen you looking all enamored, staring in her face every Sunday. I know we don’t know each other like that, but you seem like a good enough dude.”

“Maybe you’re saying all this so you can snake me. Knock out a contender.”

He laughed at me. Again. “Hardly. Living within one hundred feet of her for as long as I can remember inoculated me. I’m immune to her charms. Thank God. I’d hate being like the rest of you puppies nipping at her ankles. Plus, I don’t know how much of a contender you are rocking a clip-on.”

My hand floated to my tie involuntarily. I forced it back down.

“Not to be all demanding,” Jameer said, “But I like my favors returned.”
“Favor? I didn’t ask for your help.”

“Be glad you didn’t have to. As I said, I’ll be collecting. Not sure what, yet. When I know, you’ll know.”

This guy. “I’m not promising you anything.”

“Re-evaluate.” He approached a latched gate that opened on the church parking lot. “You’re in this Purity Pledge with us now. Maybe you can get to know her better. Though, considering the class, what you probably have in mind might be a bit counter-productive.” He shook his head and was gone.

In a hurry, I took the side entrance back into the church. The foyer was clear. The Westings likely on their way home. I felt deflated, my clothes suddenly baggy on me. Mom sat in our pew, patiently flipping through a packet of paper I didn’t remember her having before.

“Here.” She thrust a dark burgundy folder into my hands. “From Sister Vanessa. You’d run off, so she gave it to me.”

A white mail label affixed to it read: Purity Pledge Materials and Activities. Spreading the folder wide, I noticed the first page was a schedule. Assignments and due dates. “There’s homework?”

“Apparently. Y’all meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school. I’m really proud of you. I had no clue this was a commitment you wanted to make.”

Yeah, Mom. Sometimes I even surprise myself.
A heavy, meaty aroma engulfed us when we crossed the threshold from our garage into our kitchen, and found Dad hunched over the open slow cooker. Steam clouds billowed up around his face and shaved head, making him look like a genie escaping a Crock-Pot prison.

“Hey you two.” He flipped a page in the spiral bound cookbook serving as today’s culinary inspiration.

Mom said, “That smells interesting.”

“Interesting? That’s all?” He swept mounds of diced onions and peppers off a cutting board into the cauldron. He replaced the slow cooker lid, silencing the bubble-boil sputtering inside. “Never want to give me my props. How was church?”

Mom delivered her standard line, in its standard tone: “You’d know if you’d go.”

Dad ignored the shade, like every Sunday. Then said, “Cressie called.”

Mom whirled, ripping the cordless phone from the wall mount. Panicked—since Grandma died and Cressie left—she said, “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine.” His voice was overly soft—his default when she got like this. “She doesn’t like her sociology professor.”

Mom had already dialed and pressed the phone to her ear. “Baby, hey. Are you all right?”

I couldn’t hear my sister’s side of the conversation. I knew she’d answered yes by the way Mom’s shoulders slouched and the muscles in the side of her face stopped pulsing. Mom left the kitchen, her heels clicking up the stairs where they’d talk about all things college and womanly.

Mysteries of the nightly meal intrigued me way more than my sister’s whining. Dad had been on a gourmet kick lately, talking about how much more economical it was to eat in instead
of getting takeout. He made all kinds of banging food to back up his claims. I spun his cookbook my way. “Slow Braised Beef Tacos?”

“Yep.” He went in a cabinet, came back with a stack of thin, yellow flap-jack-looking things wrapped in plastic. “Got some homemade corn tortillas from the Farmer’s Market.”

“You went out?” His bathrobe--the same one he wore when we left--defied the thought.

“Oh, no. Saw Mrs. Carmody when I was bringing the paper in. She said she was going, so I gave her some cash and asked her to bring back whatever looked good. She also got eggs, squash, tomatoes, and the biggest sweet onions I ever seen in my life. Look.”

In the fridge, multiple bulbs and gourds bulged against each other in the crisper drawer, arranged and stacked by color like real life Candy Crush. He wasn’t lying. Big onions.

“I got to thinking,” he said, “homemade salsa and what not.” Saran wrap stretched across a bowl of chunky goodness on a shelf above the veggie haul. “Wanna crack open some chips, play CoD? Those cats from Cali might be on. We can get a team going.”

Call of Duty on Xbox. A joint past time that had Qwan calling my dad Coolest Pops on the Planet. I couldn’t front, it was cool to hop on the military shooter with him for rounds of Team Deathmatch, or Kill Confirmed, or Uplink. We were both good because we competed against each other as much as the online players. We each had Kill/Death Ratios over 2.2, pro-style SCUF controllers, and even our own individual systems and TVs so we didn’t have to play split-screen. Mom wasn’t as enthusiastic about our hobby when Dad was dropping dough on that gear, but he was all “enjoy it while you got it” and of course I wasn’t going to disagree.

His offer to go a few rounds that afternoon was real tempting. But, “I got a shift today. Two to seven.”
Dad checked the blank calendar clamped to the fridge by a couple of alphabet magnets, a green “E” and a purple “X”. He said, “You’re supposed to--”

“I know. It’s not on the calendar because Tyrell called on the way home. Somebody’s out sick.”

“Well, I know how it is. A man does what he has to. Go on and get changed. We’ll hop on the box later if you feel like it.”

He seemed disappointed. I was, too, but we both knew how hard it had been for me to get any hours at the gig lately. I had a car—a hand-me-down from my sister, since Freshman couldn’t have cars at her college—and part of me having permission to actually move it from the driveway was I paid for my own gas and insurance. Something that seemed unlikely this month given how little I’d been at my place of employment.

Skipping this surprise shift was not an option, though Pastor Newsome often talked about how part of the world’s problems came down to people not honoring the little things, like keeping Sunday a day of rest. I’m not lazy or nothing, but I did like rest a lot.

Before I left the kitchen to get ready, Dad shuffled to me, his house slippers hissing on the linoleum. Hushed, he repeated the question he’d asked when we arrived. “So, how was church?”

His eyes flicked toward the ceiling, through the ceiling. To Mom above us. His real question: how was she?

We weren’t churchy, at lest not for most of my life. After Grandma died last year, Mom tried getting us into it with varying success. Dad thought Pastors were crooks and he never talked about God, or heaven, or hell. When it came to religion, Cressie was ‘agnostic’, her favorite SAT word. I looked it up, and best I could tell it really meant, “I don’t know”.
Maybe I was agnostic too, then.

I was careful not to admit that because me and Cressie could not be in agreement about anything. It was not the natural of order.

Before she left, my sister did a couple of Sundays a month, but used her college prep as an excuse when she’d partied too hard on Saturday and wanted to sleep in. With her gone, I became the sacrificial lamb, and got dragged to First Missionary “for my own good”. Really Mom’s own good. I knew she didn’t want to be alone.

To Dad’s question, I said, “She cool.”

He nodded. Satisfied. Rededicated himself to the taco meat.

Climbing the stairs, I unclipped my tie, and stuffed it in my jacket pocket. Mom’s voice echoed in the hall, cheery now, asking Cressie if maybe she didn’t like her professor because she was forcing my sister to stretch her mind in new ways.

How could some professor stretch what was already warped?

Cressie had been at school for two months and probably talked to Mom more than when she lived here. Why? She. Had. College. People. To. Talk. To.

Like I said. Warped.

I passed her old, sealed off room, the door so covered with stickers and decals from her favorite musicians you couldn’t see the wood. Then my parents’ room, the door cracked, a sliver of Mom sprawled on the bed, phone pressed to her ear, visible. Before I twisted the knob on my door, she said, “Del, you want to talk to your sister?”

“For what?” I locked my door behind me.

Peeling off my church clothes, I tossed them on the bed by a near empty tissue box. Excavating my closet floor, I found faded jeans, my official company shirt, and my catfish-
stenciled hat. Suited up, I grabbed my phone, ear buds, and car keys to pull a paper chase at the least appetizing restaurant in all of Green Creek.

#

“Welcome to Monte FISHtos! What are you casting your hook for?” I said.

Immune to the clotted smell of deep fried Old Bay batter, I was on autopilot. My register’s touchscreen glowed, and I tapped in an order of two Cra-Burgers with extra Sea Sauce, Filet Fries (they’re just regular fries, but the FISHto corporate handbook insisted on everything sounding extra), and drinks. “That’s $7.98.”

I’d been there an hour, and my first customer of the day, who reeked of musty weed smoke and trouble, handed me a crumpled expired 50% off coupon.

“Sir, I can’t take this.”

“What you mean you can’t take it?” He stared at me, expecting his red-eyed gaze to be the tiebreaker in our little dispute.

I said, “It expired last year.”

“No it ain’t.”

“Sir, this coupon is no longer valid and I, literally, can’t do anything about it. It’s got a barcode, and the system won’t even let me scan it.” I showed him—a red light and an error buzz from my register—like it’d matter.

“Hell, naw.” Now he was loud, his chest swollen and his fists clenched like he was about to make his World Wrestling debut. “I ain’t come here to be cheated out of my dough, lil’ man. Where the manager?”

“Tyrell!”
My manager, Tyrell, waddled around the corner, his belly stress-testing his button-up boss shirt that had a fancy version of the Monte Fishto mascot “The Count”—a red cartoon catfish dressed all British with a sword—stenciled over the heart, fronting like the Ralph Lauren polo horse. Tyrell had fat fingers, fat knuckles, and the kind of hair like the seats on public toilets. U-shaped, rimming the side of his head, while the rest of his scalp was completely bare. His eyebrows were raised so they were the closest thing to top-hair he’d had in a while. “What’s going on, Del?”

“This customer wants to use this coupon.” I handed the flimsy faded paper over, already knowing how this was going to end.

“I’m sorry about the inconvenience, sir.” Tyrell punched his manager’s code into my register, taking half-off the dick’s meal. To me, “Go grab his order.”

“Yeah, go grab my order, lil’ man.” He paid his $3.99 with a fifty he peeled from a thick wad of bills. He stared a hole in me, I could feel his eyes even as I turned away to meet the cook at the counter between the kitchen and the frontline.

When the food was claimed, and Weed-Douche bopped out with World Champ swagger. I waited for Tyrell to give his usual, post punking spiel. “Customer’s always right, Del.”

“Except when they’re wrong. Dude cheated us.”

“True. He seemed like a troublemaker though. What do we not want in our restaurant?”

He wanted me to say trouble. I said, “Rats. Might be too late, though.”

Stu, the cook, cackled. Amanda in Drive-thru shot Pepsi out her nose. Tyrell was not amused. He would’ve lit into me, but the door chimed. At the sight of this customer, I grinned. “I’m going on break, Tyrell.”
“Company policy says employees have to work a minimum of three hours before taking a maximum of fifteen minutes rest, and by my count—”

Qwan, my best friend, and former Monte FISHto co-worker, said, “Tyrell just give him a mop and let him improve these dirty floors.”

Tyrell’s crooked fingered waggled in Qwan’s direction. “You’re lucky I even allow you in here, thief.”

“Whatever, man. Del?”

I got a two handed grip on the nearest mop and used it to steer a bucket of stagnant gray water onto the main floor. “Call me if you need me, Tyrell.”

Given the non-existent flow of customers lately that was unlikely.

At the back of the restaurant, out of my boss’s sights, Qwan splayed in a booth like it was his living room couch. Ball cap cocked, blue hoodie jacket, matching LeBron’s with laces loose in a way that would make me lose a shoe. He dripped swag, as usual. Made lounging in a fast food dive look like a mix-tape cover. Made me want to be free of my wack uniform so I could do the same. But, money. I squeezed extra water from my mop and did the thing.

Qwan lifted a foot away from my swishing mophead. “Tyrell really still mad about those two nasty Cra-burgers?”

“He’s mad about you giving food away for free. You were wrong, dude.”

He flopped back, hands behind his head to support the wide grin on his face. “It was so worth it, though. I bet you wish you’d done it.”

The “it” he was referring to...he’d given that food away to a couple of bad Carolina girls who’d crossed the border into our part of the world for, I don’t know, reasons. I’d been working the drive-thru the night it happened. Tyrell caught him immediately. Fired him immediately.
From my window perch, I watched Qwan stroll into the parking lot, FISHto shirt untucked and flapping in the wind like an action movie hero walking away from an explosion. He enthusiastically accepted a ride from the grateful ladies. What he said happened after that, I want to believe it’s a lie, because if it’s not a lie, it makes him a legend.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “I know it’s not to eat.”

“Hell naw. I should whistle blow on this place. Tell the Environmental Protection Agency or something. I walked all the way up here to find out what happened with Kiera. You make a move?”

A particularly sticky milkshake stain snatched my attention.

“D,” Qwan said, “No.”

My mopping trajectory shifted and I left him in the booth. “I didn’t punk out. Timing wasn’t right.”

On his feet, he paced me. “Timing? If you didn’t do it now, it might already be too late. Kiera Westing is Green Creek’s Most Wanted.”

“You don’t think I know that? It’s different this time.”

“Damn right. Because if you’re not going to step to her, I might. That girl is ridiculous.”

I whacked him across the chest with my mop handle. He raised his hands in surrender.

“Joke, joke. I know Bro Code’s in effect here. Alls I’m saying is--”

“I’m working on it. See, we’re both in the Purity Pledge at church now. That’s going to give me some time with her.” Working backwards, tracing big wet arcs along the perpetually filthy tile, I left a cock-eyed Qwan stone-still on the other side of a widening soap-and-water moat. He shook off the momentary freeze and stamped alternating sets of Nike swooshes across my floor to re-join me.
“Purity Pledge?”

“Yeah, it’s when you agree not to--”

He sliced a hand through the air, cutting me off. “I know what it is. I saw a Netflix documentary on that creepy shit. Dads were taking their daughters to the prom.”

“I don’t know about all that.”

“It’s No-Bone Zone, though. Right? Voluntary celibacy.”

“If you’re going to be crass about it, I guess.”

He knocked the mop from my grasp, and the handle clattered loudly. “Worst. Plan. Ever. We already don’t agree about this one true love stuff you been on with Kiera since birt. But, fine. You haven’t necessarily let it hold you back. When’s the last time you got some, though?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Toya Thomas’s basement party. It almost doesn’t count because everybody got some. And it was two years ago. It’s like you took a Purity Pledge right after.”

A name I didn’t think about too often bobbed to the surface of my thoughts, like those Magic 8-Ball answers floating up from dark water. Cheyenne Griffiths. Me and her in Toya’s dark, private guest bathroom, a single candle burning on the marble sink.

“Get out the way!” I hit him with a NFL-caliber stiff arm, and snatched my mop up. “One of us cares about not being fired.”

“And one of us cares about you using your little wee-wee before you die.”

“Stop thinking about my wee--my penis, Qwan.”

“Somebody got to.”

We were back in front, and Tyrell leaned over a clipboard, jotting down managerial stuff.
I said, “Hey Tyrell, Qwan’s trying to convince me to steal a case of Flounder Patties. You should kick him out.”

Tyrell didn’t look up, but said, “Get out, Qwan.”

“Fine. I got chicks to check on anyway. Hopefully the stench of this place hasn’t stuck to me, messing up my game so that it’s like your game, Del.”

My mop became a bat, the mold-smelling drenched end cocked over my shoulder and ready to fling gross water. “You should go.”

He flipped both middle fingers and backed into bright afternoon sunshine. “Later, Mister Clean.”

Though he was gone, Qwan’s evaluation remained. Purity pledge. Worst. Plan. Ever.

That stung. But it also held weight because, statistically speaking, Qwan was mad successful with the ladies. Since he lost his virginity three years prior, he’d been obsessed with more, more, more. He treated Instagram like it was Amazon, always browsing, always sliding into some new girl’s DMs trying to hook up. He swore he smashed as much as he did because he didn’t do emotion. Been told me I shouldn’t do emotion, that girls liked it when you weren’t all soft and caring.

He meant well, he did. And his thinking wasn’t much different than most dudes at school.

Qwan thought I was too picky. According to him, if Kiera Westing didn’t exist, I’d be saving myself for some hot actress on TV because that’s the next level of unattainable after Kiera. I let him think it. It was easier than the truth.

Doing it the way he did, the way most dudes talked about, it seemed careless. Reckless. Scary. Okay?

Everyone at Green Creek High had seen how wrong it could go.
There’s a different way. More than after school sex before her people got home, then not saying two words to her the next day. I saw it with my parents. Not the recent taco meat and tension. But, back in the day, the way Dad used to sit on one corner of the sofa with Mom wedged in his armpit, her feet tucked under her, while we all watched *Jeopardy!* or *Big Bang*. How I watched them hold hands in the Costco when I was too young to skip the trip. That’s the kind of thing I wanted. With Kiera. And it wasn’t unattainable. I wouldn’t let it be.

I mopped until my arm ached. After, I stowed my bucket. There were three hours left in my shift. Then Tyrell let me know to adjust my math.

“Business is slow. Gotta send you home early, Del.”

Not the news I wanted. Two hours work for the whole week wasn’t even a full tank of gas. “Can I get on the schedule some evenings?”

Tyrell wouldn’t look me in the eye, held his clipboard to his chest like a shield. “I’ll call if I got something.”

#

Mom’s car was MIA when I pulled into the driveway. Inside, Dad’s loud snoring buzzed through his closed office door. I tugged my grease-stained FISHtos shirt over my head on the way upstairs. My room was as I left it, with two noticeable changes.

A fresh 3-Pack of Kleenex boxes were on my bed. Again.

The fu--?

Snatching up the oblong package, I spun in place feeling nauseous. Exposed. A cold and clammy sweat slicked my back, shoulders, and palms—especially my palms—despite warm furnace air hissing through my floor vents. I turned the lock on my doorknob.
Under the box, another less worrisome item. A permission slip I’d brought home weeks ago and forgotten about, with the Green Creek High crest printed at the top. It said:

**Healthy Living Elective Opt-In Form/Grade 11**

If you wish to opt your student into some or all of the grade eleven Healthy Living Elective (HLE) lessons, please complete this form and return it to your student’s Health/PE teacher by the Week 1 date on your welcome letter.

**PLEASE NOTE:** You MUST return this form if you wish for your student to participate in the Grade 11 HLE activities.

**CHILD’S NAME:** Delbert Rainey, Jr.

**Directions:** Please check ONLY those lessons in which you want your child to take part.

Below the instructions was a list of lessons, divided up over several weeks. I skimmed phrases like “the importance of conducting self examinations,” and “appropriate methods for affectionate encounters,” and “a thorough review of sexually transmitted diseases.”

There were more, and the boxes next to all the lessons were filled with black ink “X” marks, followed by…

**Parent/Guardian Signature:** Delbert Rainey, Sr.

New tissues and sex ed. I checked the corners of my room as if there was hidden surveillance equipment, nauseous over these unexpected gifts on my bed.

The first time this happened, I wrote it off as coincidence. Maybe there was a sale on tissues. A second time, though? Just as my last box was running low?
One, or both, of my parents knew what I’d been up to when I was alone in the late hours. They knew I knew they knew. Nobody was saying a thing.

My computer monitor was dark so my shadow reflection ghosted the glass. I tapped the space bar, waking it. After, entering my CIA-level fifteen character password, I checked my browser history to confirm it was as squeaky clean as it should be. My built-in webcam was an unblinking eye I never worried about before, but getting a covert tissue delivery the way I used to get Tooth Fairy money inspired a change of heart.

Rooting in my bottom desk drawer I found a roll of masking tape, tore off a stubby strip, and flattened it over the lens. My neck, cheeks, and forehead burned with the embarrassment, as if my parents were watching me make sure they couldn’t watch me.

Better safe than sorry.

I placed my Healthy Living/Sex Ed permission slip on my desk, next to my Purity Pledge materials. Then I stowed the massive tissue stockpile beneath my bed, before collapsing on my mattress, trying not to hyperventilate. As mortified as I was, there was no denying they’d come in handy.

No pun intended.
The next morning I barreled down the stairs loud enough to trigger a “Walk!” from Mom. At the front door, car keys jingling, I felt the rush of unsupervised transportation that still hadn’t gotten old. Before I could escape, Dad’s office door slid open. “Junior, let me holler at you sec.”

Was this about the tissues? Please don’t be about the tissues. “Dad, I gotta pick up Qwan.”

“Just a few minutes. You’ll be fine.”

Inside his office, my backpack tugged tight on my shoulders, I flopped onto the center cushion of his couch. It was shadowy in there, darker than he usually kept it. He had a sweet new job where he never had to go into an office. He was “work from home” and a “telecommuter”, terms that he tossed around at family functions when folks asked how things were going.

It was good he could say those things now. Better than when he was out of work and could only mention “prospects” and “you know how the economy is.”

He parted the drapes, letting in laser lines of sunshine between the cracked blinds. He winced while his eyes adjusted. In the new brightness I noticed a ball of tangled fabric in the floor, sticking out beyond the edge of the couch. The guest linens. Used for overnight company during holidays because Dad’s couch was the kind with a folding mattress in it. The next holiday was Thanksgiving, four weeks away. I had questions. Dad started talking before I could ask.

“Son, what’s up with this Purity Pledge thing at your mother’s church?”

My stomach fell into the crawlspace under the house. The same feeling I got on the rare occasion I’d watch a movie with my parents and there’s suddenly a sex scene no one knew was coming. “It’s like, a class. We learn about ways to not, you know.”
Dad took his high backed desk chair, swiveling to face me. In the tiny space his scarred up right knee and my denim clad left knee almost touched. His legs were bare because he was in the bathrobe, t-shirt, and shorts he’d been wearing when we caught him cooking tacos yesterday. It was his go-to work uniform lately.

“You mom told me the purpose,” he said. “I mean, why are you in it? We’ve talked about this stuff.”

The only time we ever came close to discussing anything remotely related to Purity Pledge was three years ago. I’d been in my room playing *Gears of War* and he’d just gotten home from a real office, back when he still wore pants.

“It’s time we had a conversation,” he’d said then, closing my bedroom door. I wondered what I’d done wrong.

Instead of him listing my crimes and passing my sentence, he pulled a shiny wrapper from his shirt pocket. Held it to me, gently, like precious treasure. The impression of a ring was clearly visible through the foil packaging. “You know what this is?”

A condom. Mike Brooks stole some from his brother’s closet and showed us at lunch one day, but I only said, “Yeah.”

“You know how to use one?”

“Yeah.”

Grinning with every tooth in his head, he said, “My boy.”

He laid the loose condom on my Avengers comforter, popped the latches on his briefcase, and removed the open twelve-pack that the loosie must’ve come from. He placed the box—one I still had tucked in the back of my underwear drawer—on my bed, too. “Then you know to always keep one with you. Gotta be safe son. Got any questions for me?”
“Naw.”

He clapped a hand on my shoulder, winked. “Good talk.”

In his office, his face was flat. Waiting. Were we remembering different things?

“What I’m trying to understand, son, is if this Purity Pledge’s some sort of reset for you? Because I assumed you’d been, you know.” He made a fist, did this weird slow extension punch that was some signal for sex, maybe.

Focusing on the rainbow spines of the various technical manuals lining his bookshelves, I conjured the most plausible lie I could manage. “Purity Pledge, it’s a, a volunteer thing. It’ll look good for, like, college applications.”

That hung between us awhile. His next words, “Seems kind of extreme. You could go fold clothes at the Goodwill, right?”

He didn’t mean extreme. That was his son-this-is-weird voice. That tone I’d heard too many times in my life. When I joined the band as freshman instead of the JV basketball team (like that was my choice, Qwan didn’t even choose me for his pickup teams). Or when he caught me trying to move the TV remote with The Force. Or when he thought I was too slow getting into girls.

Dad didn’t ever say what really bothered him, but I’d learned to complete his half-judgments on my own.

He pushed. “Aren’t there other volunteer opportunities at the church, or around town?”

“Like what, Dad?”

“You tell me. I’m not the one trying to get into college.” That was his version of ‘I don’t know.’ Like when I used to ask him what a word meant, he’d say ‘look it up, I can’t do everything for you’ meaning he didn’t know either, but he wanted to seem wise.
Leaning closer, he checked our perimeter like a cartoon spy about to pass me a big black cherry bomb in a briefcase. Grinned. “Are you really trying to tell me a Rainey Man doesn’t want to get some?’”

God. I blurted, “Kiera Westing’s doing it.”

Slow blink then. He’d caught me eyeing her at a parent/teacher night a bunch of years ago, and knew about my thing for her ever since. He pressed back in his chair, steepled his fingers. His posture was proud, his bathrobe draped his seat like a hero’s cape, and that warmed something inside me. “Oh,” he said. “Ohhhhhhh. I see now.”

With a fist pump, I blandly said, “Rainey Man.”

“Damn straight.”

“I gotta go, Dad. Qwan.”

“Of course,” a wider grin, and a laugh, “you two. I remember those days. Best time of your life, son. Enjoy it.” He stood before I did, like he needed to show me the door.

On my way out, I remembered the sheets hidden sloppily on the other side of the couch, sticking out like rabbit ears. I would’ve asked him about it, but when I faced him, he winked.

And I didn’t want to ruin that.

#

At school, the fallout from Kiera and C. Turner’s breakup hovered in the halls, and no one escaped the radiation sickness. Not that breakups weren’t a thing at Green Creek High. We had couples get together before lunch and be exes by final bell. But Kiera’s breakup swayed from the standard because of her relationship’s length, intensity, and effect on school morale.
Her and C. Turner had been class couple every year since they got together. There were
dumb rumors of them getting married at our graduation ceremony. Like the Principal’s gonna be
all, “Here’s your diploma, you may kiss the bride.”

The point was people rode hard for “Kee-Lossus”.

Yeah, that was a thing, too.

It didn’t help that C. Turner was on some true romance stuff with her when things were
good. Flowers on Valentine’s Day. Stuffed animals on her birthday. Most dudes got clowned for
such PDA. Most dudes couldn’t put you in a chokehold that’d have you sleeping through
college.

When either Kiera or C. Turner posted pics of them bowling, or strapping on helmets at
the Go-Kart Village, mad girls would repost those joints like they were celebrities.
#relationshipgoals or #BAEenvy. For them, “Kee-Lossus” was a Green Creek fairy tale.

Guys--myself included with the couple of not-so-serious girlfriends I’d had--saw a hard
standard to live up to. As Qwan once put it, “C. Turner take Kiera to Outback Steakhouse, then
every girl I’m trying to holla at need a Bloomin’ Onion. He must be stopped.”

Qwan got his wish. We both did. But the ripples were far and wide. Ask Angie Bell—the
aforementioned heifer from Saturday night’s revelations.

It was just mid-morning, and I’d heard seven or eight different versions of the weekend
betrayal. Angie knew C. Turner’s people were out of town and showed up at his house in a trench
ccoat, only a trench coat. Angie saw C. Turner at the Sonic Drive In, climbed in his backseat.
Angie *always* been into C. Turner, and wore him down after a fight with Kiera.
Everybody liked Kiera. So, what happened to the girl who did her dirty? *All the girl hate* got aimed at her, like when Superman redirects lava away from Metropolis...Angie Bell’s the next city over.

Neck deep in my locker, excavating for my math book, I heard a shady, cough-shout, “Ho!”

I turned as Angie passed me. Her head down, her face mean. A bunch of people laughed so I couldn’t tell who said it. Did it matter? Way I saw it, I owed Angie Bell a Fro-Yo.

“My dude,” Qwan said, suddenly at my shoulder. “You see Angie? It’s amazing how you can be around someone your whole life and never notice their inner beauty.”

“Really?” I shut my locker and joined the foot traffic to class.

Qwan kept pace. “I heard she’s got a sensual soul. Real deep.”

His emphasis...ewwww. “Never use the word ‘deep’ like that around me again.”

“I’m trying to appeal to your delicate nature, D. If you want the real...”

The rest of the way to class was Qwan’s rapid-fire, XXX version of what supposedly transpired over the weekend. Information he couldn’t possibly have, though that didn’t stop him from relaying it with HD-quality descriptions. He was still telling me about what Angie did, what Angie could do, and what Angie invented (like something called a “Yorktown Flap Jack” that involved syrup and tremendous dexterity) in excited whispers as we took our seats. While our teacher worked problems on the whiteboard, he continued his recap on sheets of loose-leaf with crude stick figure drawings.

That went on through lunch, where the buzz tapered because none of the gossip subjects ate at the same time as us. When we dumped our trays and headed toward the gym, Qwan’s perv battery ran low, and he moved on to the day’s other big topic. Healthy Living.
We both had our signed permission slips. Permission for what, we weren’t sure.

“Why you think they’re all parental approval with it this time?” I asked.

Qwan said, “I don’t know but I should be the one teaching it. Bet I know more than Coach.”

He might be right. Coach Scott never struck me as much of a ladies man, particularly with those Mickey Mouse prayers, but the point was moot. There was a new guy standing in the door of Health Sciences Room 1. Beyond him, at Health Sciences Room 2, an unfamiliar lady. Without being told, boys with permissions slips handed them over to the guy, while the girls with permission slips continued on to the next room. Those without slips kept on to the gym, where they’d probably run laps for the next forty-five minutes.

When I gave dude my permission slip, he shook my free hand, “Hi there,” he checked the paper, “Delbert.”

“Del,” I corrected. Not quick enough to cut off giggles from Qwan and a couple of guys behind him.

Inside the room I immediately spotted the rumpled, gray three-piece suit that had melded with Vice-Principal Terrier like the alien symbiote Venom in the Spider-man comics. Terrier never abandoned it for more stylish clothes. The suit gave him the enhanced proportional strength of a straight-up dick. He constantly sent dudes to detention and in-school suspension for the most minor stuff. When he showed up anywhere, you went on high-alert. Any offense was punishable, even if you didn’t know you were being offensive.

We took seats, everybody going for different levels of aloofness as we filled the 20-plus available desks, the same dudes in the same general sectors we’d occupied for most of our school careers. Slouched weed-heads gravitated to the center of the desk-grid, stretching legs into the
aisle between desks, playfully tripping those walking by. Burnouts of the back row settled in. The JROTC crew, led by future super soldier Mason Miles, came in all buttoned up in their uniforms, and took seats at the front. Me and Qwan were in the row closest to the door, him ahead of me. Slack, annoyed facial expressions were set. Any visible interest unacceptable.

Honestly, though, I was intrigued. Why bring in a stranger when Coach Scott read from the textbook just fine?

“Settle down, guys,” said the teacher. He said it twice more before anyone listened. By the sixth time, only those in the back row were still talking.

“Hey, I’m Gary Graham. But none of that Mr. Graham stuff! You can call me Gary, and I’ll also answer to ‘sir, yes, sir!’”

He paused, gave us the space to insert laughter. No one took him up on it.

“You might be wondering who I am and where I came from, right?” He bobbed when he talked. Strafed side to side. Smiled too hard. The Back Row Boys laughed, and I knew they were roasting Gary. He noticed too and bobbed harder, red blotches sprouting on his cheeks and forehead. “I’m part of a pilot program called Healthy Living, which select school districts are testing this year as an alternative to your traditional Family Living curriculum. It’s--”

Qwan’s hand popped up.

Gary seemed startled. “Question?”

“Yeah. How’s Healthy Living different from Family Living, though? Because the permission slip looks like a lot of the same stuff—”

Gary clapped his hands together, a single thunder crack, and eyed VP Terrier. “I’m glad you asked.”

Clearly, he was not.
“Healthy Living is a more...dynamic course. Meant to address the concerns of the modern student.”

It sounded like he was saying the stuff he would’ve said if Qwan never asked a question.

“In these times of ever-changing technology and social interactions, Healthy Living brings an updated approach to intercoursal education.”

Intercoursal wha?

Qwan said, “You mean sex?”

“No, no, no,” Gary said so fast it sounded like stuttering. “I mean, yes. Sort of. Among other things.”

Movement from the corner of my eye. Terrier standing, scribbling on a pad I’d seen more than a few times during my high school career.

Gary went mute. Everybody did. Terrier made the walk to Qwan’s desk, tore the original form from his pad while keeping the yellow carbon copy. He gently placed the detention slip in Qwan’s outstretched, waiting hand.

“For disrupting class, Mr. Reid.” Then, to Gary, “Continue.”

“As I was saying, Healthy Living is meant as a proactive approach to enlighten you all about the pitfalls of uncontrolled desires, uninformed actions, and unhealthy pacts.”

I straightened in my chair, understanding now. Qwan got it, too, evident by his chuckling, though he was careful not to say another disruptive word. He didn’t have to.

Pacts.

Call-me-Gary was talking about The Baby-Getters Club. #
One morning last spring, the bus turned onto the road leading to the school, and there was a city cop directing traffic with one of those Slow/Stop signs you flip when part of the road’s blocked and cars coming from both directions gotta use the same lane. Usually it’s because of roadwork, or a breakdown, or a storm knocking down a tree. That day it was news crews from Richmond.

All of the major networks sent blimp-like vans parked half on the road, half on the shoulder, with satellite arms stretched high. Reporters in suits held their big lollipop mics before bulky cameramen with bulkier cameras.

We nearly tipped the bus when everyone rushed the side closest to the cameras to see what was up. Of course, we got no direct info. During homeroom, Terrier announced that we should not let the media disrupt our school day, and though he couldn’t make us avoid the reporters once we were off school grounds, we should consult our parents before wah-wah-wah-wah

It took all of five seconds for people to get the scoop on their phones. When we did, it was a let down, because it wasn’t news to us. The reporters wanted to know about the pregnancies.

Something like nine or ten girls at Green Creek were expecting. Three were sophomores at the time like me and Qwan. A couple of freshman. One junior. The rest seniors. Word was they made a pact to get pregnant during the snow days we had back in December. The word was BS.

The timing of the snowstorm might work, but the girls weren’t tight like that. I mean, what senior’s conspiring on anything with a freshman?
The news liked the pact angle, though. Enough to run with it for a couple of days, throwing the word “alleged” in front of it, until they managed to get class clown Kent Oster on camera.

Reporter: “Young man, do you know anything about the alleged pregnancy pact that took place at your school?”

Kent: “Pact? Oh, you mean The Baby-Getters Club?”

That’s how Green Creek became the home of The Baby-Getters Club. It was also around the same time our little town won the championship belt for highest per-capita teen pregnancy rate in the state of Virginia.

Represent.

#

Call-Me-Gary told us more stuff about high-octane intervention, and announced, “We’re going to watch a movie, guys.”

Someone on the other side of the room yelled, “Is Lindy Blue in it?”

Cheers and claps. Lindy Blue was a porn star. I knew because, you know, I’d heard it around.

When the applause ceased, Terrier issued more detention slips.

Gary cast skittish glances over his shoulder, like a man reaching for something the pack wolves might find more appetizing than him, while he worked the ancient machine connected to the TV. He wasn’t loading a disc, but some sort of boxy plastic cartridge, the tapes people watched movies off before blu-rays and streaming. Gary got it going, leapt aside, and left us to a low-res narrator in a bleach-stained denim jacket and flannel.
“Hey there totally tubular dudes and dudettes! I’m here to talk to you about some important health stuff, and I promise it won’t be bogus.” Then he told us about cancer we could get in our balls.

When the bell rung, Gary hit the STOP button, ending the awkwardness, while promising more to come. “Awesome time, guys. See you on Wednesday.”

We staggered from the room in a daze, up the corridor that fed into the open gym. It was the end of the day, so athletes were already filing in and goofing off before their respective practices. A couple of Qwan’s basketball teammates lobbed half-hearted shots at the rim closest to us. He nodded, acknowledging them and they did the same. To me, he said, “What was that?”

“I don’t know. That video was old old.”

“No, this is old,” he held up the detention slip, crushed it. “Terrier, bro. Really, what did I do? I’m gonna be late for conditioning over this. Coach is gonna make me run hella laps.”

“Sucks. I mean, why--?”

“Why what?”

I was going to ask why Gary didn’t just talk about all the pregnancies? Like, directly. They weren’t a secret. But Jameer from church leaned on the bleachers by the half-court line, grilling me with his stare. Kiera, coming from the general direction of the girls’ locker room, smoothed wrinkles in her blouse, and joined him. She didn’t see me, or even look in me and Qwan’s general direction. Too busy being chased.

C. Turner skulked behind her. The Green Creek “G” on his letter jacket stretched across his broad back, ready to tear if he flexed any harder. I couldn’t hear what he was saying this far away, but I didn’t need to. He was expressive, emphasizing each word with his open, stubby paws. “Please, Baby, Please” in bootleg sign language.
Kiera shook her head, not having any of it. He reached for one of her hands, she snatched away. Jameer pushed off his bleacher perch like he might intervene, and I took a stupid step forward thinking, what if I...

A basketball player yelled, “Qwan, no look!”

There was time to register Qwan swiveling at the hip, dodging, right before a spinning orb eclipsed my vision and smashed my nose. A bright, white starburst exploded my world, and the pain followed quickly.

Bystanders emitted a collective “oohhhhh.” I went from upright, to sprawled on the floor like a kindergartener at nap time.

“D?” Qwan said. “D, you good?”

I was, definitely, not good. The blinding white from the collision faded to gray then to a fuzzy, pulsing view of beams and ventilation shafts overhead. I touched my fingers to my nose, they came away wet and red. With each thumping heartbeat, an invisible hatchet chopped me between my watering eyes.

Don’t. Cry. Do not cry.

The weapon, a basketball that might actually be made of iron, lazy rolled away from me.

Qwan said, “D, my bad, man. I should’ve caught it.”

The dumbass who threw it said, “I yelled ‘no look’.” Like that was absolution. How about “no aim”?

I rolled to my side, then to my knees, red drops leaking between my fingers to the floor. I sniffled, bit back a whimper. Don’t let them see you cry.

Every—God that hurt!—agonizing move I made getting to my feet was confirmation that I wasn’t crippled or dead. Lack of permanent injury gave my ghoulish classmates permission to
change modes, concern to comedy. Murmurs became snickers became deep throated, knee slapping laughs. I was their ridicule highlight of the day. Tears would etch this deeper in memory, making me a “Remember when Del Rainey…” Joke.

And I wanted to cry more.

Standing, but hunched, I pressed my shirt to my nose, ruining my outfit but, literally, saving face. I smeared blood into my leaking tears so my cackling peers wouldn’t know the difference.

Qwan gripped my bicep, taking on some of my weight. “I’ll help you to the nurse’s office.”

A solid plan, but I had other concerns. Were Keira and Jameer laughing, too?

I peeked over the bunched, stained fabric of my shirt to where they’d been before my mauling. Though C. Turner had come closer, smirking with the rest of my audience, my church mates were nowhere in sight.
The school nurse screwed cotton into my nose, and I drove home breathing through my mouth with a pink-ish swab protruding from each nostril. My phone rang. I thumbed the button on my steering wheel, exchanging music for Dad’s voice screeching through my speakers at max volume.

“HEY SON! YOU ON THE ROAD?”

I nearly tore the dial off spinning it left to save my hearing. Couldn’t lose two senses in one day. “I’m here. What’s up?”

“I was swamped with work all day and didn’t get a chance to go out. I’m texting you some things. Stop at Wal-Mart and pick them up, will you?”

“Sure. Whatever.” The call ended, and I felt the phone vibrate in my pocket. It vibrated again. And again. I knew better than to check it while driving, and only read the list when I was a sitting in the store lot.

A few things? There were at least thirty items spread over four text messages. What the hell, Dad?

His new job had “busy seasons”. He’d explained it to me and Mom—mostly Mom—a bunch of times. Usually when she was on him about not cutting the grass, or fixing the bent storm gutter slanting off the roof at the back of the house, or neglecting a bunch of other stuff he’d just stopped doing over the last year. He had to focus, though. Couldn’t risk not keeping his manager happy. Needed to be a top performer in case this new company started eliminating jobs like his last company did. He told Mom if that happened again, he wanted to survive.

I got it. I wasn’t stupid. I stressed money because I wanted to keep my car on the road. Mom and Dad had everything else to pay for. But…
Could you really call it a busy season if it was *all year*?

And was it so busy that he couldn’t bother to shower some days? The week before I brushed past him and he smelled like the zoo. He fixed it before dinner, joining me and Mom at table in a cloud of lavender soap, herbal shampoo, and cool deodorant. Still, his daily uniform only changed slightly. Different basketball shorts, a fresh t-shirt, maybe every other day. And he’d given up on professional haircuts and shaving. James Harden would’ve envied his gray-streaked beard.

My nose throbbed, and in terms of afternoon desires me being grocery boy ran a distant second to burrowing under a blanket and scrubbing the last two hours from my memory.

Was it possible to be busy and lazy simultaneously? When was the last time Dad even left the house?

On my way into Wal-Mart, I dumped my bloody swabs in a parking lot trash can and spent the next hour plucking baking soda, and liquid detergent, and chicken thighs from one shelf or another. Only to spend another twenty minutes in a roller coaster line at one of the two open registers.

Qwan hit me up while I waited, an appreciated distraction.

**Qwan**: yo, did the nurse amputate your nose?

**Me**: No. a-hole. What you want?

**Qwan**: angie was in detention w/ me. Got her number. Gonna see whats up.

**Me**: You don’t care people treating her like typhoid mary right now?

**Qwan**: Ty-who?

Damn, dude. Read. Something.

**Me**: She’s shunned
Qwan: Maybe by the girls

He had a point. Before he got the cold shoulder from Kiera, I’d seen C. Turner around the school, always surrounded by his team mates, always in mid-laugh or pre-fist bump. Dudes were giving C. Turner props all day. Even when he didn’t seem to want them.

I was thumbing my “good luck” response to Qwan when my dad broke in.

Dad: You almost done?

Me: Yeah, Dad. I got your Doomsday Prepper stash. In line @ the register

Dad: You got your emergency card?

Me: Yes!

How else was I supposed to pay for all this stuff? The credit card my parents gave me on the same day I got car keys was meant for dire situations (video game releases didn’t count). And crazy last minute errands.

Dad: Will you be home by 4?

Me: Probably

Dad: Great!! Awesome!!! Thanks, son!!!

My turn at the register. When I finished counting all those exclamation points, and the cashier was well into ringing me up, a final text came through.

Dad: By the way, let’s not mention this to your mom. Okay!

#

Dad stood behind the storm door glass like a trapped ghost. If I blinked and he vanished, I might put my car in reverse and never return. But I blinked, and he was still there, beckoning me with quick come here hand gestures.
I didn’t though. Not right away. Frustration puckered his face, and he spread his arms wide, palms up. The universal sign for “WTF dude?”

Yeah. WTF?

He was still in that bathrobe, had slept in his office last night, for sure. And why didn’t he just come grab some bags if he was in such a big hurry?

Again, I tried remembering the last time I saw Dad leave the house. Cressie’s graduation back in May? Naw. Her going away dinner at the Szechuan House in August, where he’d wedged himself in the corner of the booth, and kept checking his watch.

Time for another talk, I decided, finally carrying the bunches of plastic bags to my house. Only when I hit the porch did he crack the outer door, grabbing bags like a fireman snatching a water bucket next to a rapidly growing inferno.

“Hurry up, son,” he said, dipping inside with the goods.

In the kitchen, he moved between counter and cabinets as he stowed foods in the proper places, that robe swishing around him. He created a draft, and a soap scent like trees and snow trailed. At least he’d bathed.

“Dad?” I said. “You okay?”

He only paused to check the microwave clock, then transferred a cantaloupe into the fridge. “I’m good.”

I expected him to say, “why you asking?” or something.

Since he didn’t. “You’re acting weird.”

“What? Naw. I gotta get dinner started.”

“Why’d you sleep in your office last night?”
Shoulder deep in the fridge, he spoke with an echo, “It’s a busy season, son. This new project had me up late. I’m gathering artifacts for the MMIS manual we’ll need when we pitch our new software to the state of California. If the company gets this account, it’ll be huge. Gonna take a lot of work, though. If I’d gone to the bedroom last night, I would’ve woken up your mom.”

“Oh. But, it seems like—”

He emerged from the fridge, stretched to his full height, and stepped close enough so the three inches he had on me felt like twelve. “Boy, you want dinner or not? I can’t be answering fifty thousand questions while I’m trying to get food on the table. Now, go do whatever homework you got—don’t try to tell me you don’t have any—and I’ll call you when it’s time to eat.”

He smiled while he said it, but his tone made me five again, ordered to my room for drawing on the wall with crayons.

Dinner wasn’t good even though Dad put on real clothes. He picked a dud recipe, eggplant stir-fry that came out mushy, and Mom spent a lot of time staring at her phone. Honestly, dinners hadn’t been good for awhile, even when the food was.

I wanted to ask what was up, but there was something scary about them being together when I put my questions out there. Like, whatever answers they gave in front of each other couldn’t be secret, or taken back.

So, I ate what I could, then retreated upstairs, powering up my Xbox to unwind. Seven of my gamer friends were logged into the network. Dad’s username was among them because he’d forgotten to log off of the Xbox he kept in his office.
I checked his profile, noticed he’d racked up a few new trophies and achievements since the last time we played.

Quite the accomplishment for a guy in the middle of a busy season. How he pulled it off was on my mind when my parents went to bed, with their soft snores buzzing through my bedroom wall. They were in the same room tonight, and that felt good.

At my computer I brought up a private browser window, opened a fresh box of tissues, and searched for Lindy Blue.
“Welcome to Purity Pledge!” Sister Vanessa bounced on her toes in front of a wall-to-wall white board, a blue dry-erase marker in her hand, uncapped and ready.

We were in a Sunday School classroom at the back of First Missionary, a wood paneled box. Mostly empty corkboards lined the flanking walls. In the one occupied space hung a drawing of a giddy cartoon Jesus sitting on a rock, surrounded by cartoon kids of at least three ethnicities. There was a white kid, a black kid, an Asian kid and, for some reason, a happy goat. There was an overly yellow sun with sunshine spokes shooting over Jesus’s head, and a rainbow. The bubble print overlaying the blue sky read: *Jesus Loves Me, Yes I know!* It seemed to be encouraging, blasphemous, and silly all at the same time.

Rows of worktables aligned in a way that mirrored the pew set up in the main sanctuary created an aisle in the middle of the room, separating all of Purity Pledgers by gender. Boys on the left, girls on the right. Sister Vanessa’s head swiveled loosely between us.

“Who wants to lead us in an opening prayer?”

No one raised their hand. If no one went, there’d be a lottery. A bad lottery. Where Sister Vanessa would pick someone at random to do the thing they didn’t want to do, because adults always took moments like that as their duty to make you as uncomfortable as possible. To build your character.

I didn’t know any prayers other than the “God is great, God is good” one I learned as a kid, and wasn’t confident I could go off the top of my head like a bunch of people in the church seemed to do. That had me feeling exposed, like the go-to-school-naked dream.

While I stressed, my phone buzzed in my pocket. The tense “no volunteers” moment stretched another half second before Kiera rose from her nest of loose-leaf paper, fresh white
binder with “P. Pledge” written on the side in black Sharpie, highlighters, and multiple pens. She didn’t stand in place, but joined Sister Vanessa at the front of the room, clutching her worn Bible with colorful tabs protruding from the pages like the flags of tiny pastel countries.

My stomach unclenched when she went into a loud, from-the-diaphragm expression of spiritual gratitude. “Dear Lord, thank you for this opportunity to gather and discuss the temples you constructed, our bodies, and...”

Everyone’s heads dipped, their eyes sealed. I slipped my phone from my pocket and read the text.

**Dad:** Son, hey! You forgot barbecue sauce. Can you grab it on the way home?

Forgot? I scrolled up to the list Dad sent me yesterday. No. I didn’t *forget* barbecue sauce.

**Me:** You didn’t tell me to get it. Check your outgoing

**Dad:** I need you to get it now. Please stop on your way home.

**Me:** Ok. I’ll be late, tho. Purity Pledge today.

The response bubble flickered while he typed. At the front of the room, Kiera was on a roll, winded by such fervent prayer. “… oh Lord, please guard over Wesley the way he and the other brave men and women of our armed forces guard over us…”

She choked up on that mention of her brother, though she still got through with crisp enunciation. I got the sense she said that part a lot.

Sister Vanessa laid a gentle hand on her back, urging her on. My phone spasmed with multiple texts. I jammed the sleep button to silence the buzz.

**Dad:** Can you skip it?

**Dad:** Can I write you a note?

**Dad:** I need that sauce before your mother gets home
**Dad:** I’m really busy with work.

I didn’t know what to say, so thrown by the thought of a barbecue sauce emergency. I furiously thumbed a response indicating I couldn’t skip this just so he could make tonight’s chicken extra tangy, and didn’t notice Kiera had gone silent. When Jameer nudged my ribs I glanced into the wide, post-prayer gaze of Sister Vanessa.

Her smile did not falter, her rosy round cheeks plump and raised. “Del, would you come up for this next part please?”

Mya giggled when I stood. The sound became a contagion infecting the whole girls’ side of the classroom. This felt like the go-to-school-naked dream broadcast on a Jumbotron.

Kiera crossed her arms tight across her chest, and she had the stern teacher’s look I’d expected from Sister Vanessa. Our Purity Pledge leader remained sunny while I dragged ass to the white board, my phone slippery in my hand from instant palm sweat. I dropped it back into my pocket and anticipated a thousand different embarrassments to come.

“Where’s your Bible?” asked Sister Vanessa.

“Uh, I left it in the car.” So that was a lie, in church. Truth, I didn’t have my own Bible. I always read from the old, cracked-spine copies they kept in those wooden cubbies on the back of the pews. If she asked me to go to my car and get it, I’d probably just grant Dad’s wish and drive to the Wal-Mart, never to return to Purity Pledge.

Something hard and angular pressed into my palm. Jameer passed me his Bible.

Grateful, I gave him a nod.

Sister Vanessa’s gaze bounced between me and Kiera. “Can one of you find Psalm 51:10 while the other turns to Matthew 5:8?”
Kiera flipped her Bible open to a seemingly random section, leafed through a few pages, then said, “Got it.”

I was still dragging a finger down the Table of Contents. “Which one did you do?”

“Psalms.”

“Sweet. Love those Psalms.” I struggled to find the book of Matthew—was that in the Old Testament, or the New? Sister Vanessa prompted Kiera to read.

“’Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.’”

“Del?” said Sister Vanessa.

“Right. Matthew. Five-eight.” I was in the book, but overshot the chapter and verse. I flipped pages and tried not to look up, though all eyes were on me. Finally! “Got it. ’Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God’.”

“Excellent,” Sister Vanessa said, “Why do you think I asked you to read those verses? What do they have in common?”

Silence and shuffling, mostly from me. The question was tossed out casually, and maybe anyone could’ve answered. Kiera changed that dynamic when she said, “I’m sure Del knows.”

Inside, I crumpled. It wasn’t what she said, as much as how she said it. Her voice as cold as summertime A/C. If Sister Vanessa’s next question was, “Would you like to kick Del in the shin?” I think Kiera would’ve cackled and got a running start. But, why?

Sister Vanessa waited on my response. My chin dropped, but no words came from my gaping fish-mouth. I’d already forgotten the verses, so how was I going to BS my way through this?

Jameer with the save. “They’re about pure hearts, and that’s what we’re all here for.”
If Sister Vanessa minded the interruption, she didn’t let on. “Excellent Jameer! Pure hearts lead to pure souls lead to pure bodies. Please you two, sit down.”

Kiera rejoined the still giggling girls, but didn’t join in the fun. She scowled at me. I returned to my seat, confused.

“We’ve got much to cover in our sessions,” Sister Vanessa said, “We’re going to have so much fun.”

Was she using fun in some Biblical sense that I, as the resident heathen, was totally clueless about?

Sister Vanessa lifted a cardboard box that had been resting against the wall. Starting on the girls’ side, she circled the room passing out glue sticks and plastic kid scissors in varietal rainbow colors.

Hushed-voiced and a little frightened, I said, “What is this?”

“Wait for it,” said Jameer.

Sister Vanessa put the box away, approached a table stacked with the kinds of magazines you see in doctor’s offices. The kind about gardening and world events. Several pieces of blank poster board sat beside them. “Everyone, I want you to grab a poster board and a magazine. We’re all going to find pictures of things we think represent purity and make Covenant Collages!”

Across the room Helena Rickard squinted, and turned an ear toward Sister Vanessa like she’d misheard the direction. Mya’s nose crinkled like she detected a bad smell. Behind me, Jameer smirked and shook his head, the smug look of someone who’d predicted the worst possible outcome and been proven right. Similar cool, confused reactions played on everyone’s
faces with the exception of Kiera. As usual, she obediently led the charge, rallying the girls, “Come on. Like Sister Vanessa said.”

They complied, and it occurred to me that those girls—Mya, Helena, Shanice—were younger than Kiera. Freshmen at Green Creek with the exception of Shanice, who was still at the middle school. At the table behind Jameer were twin brothers Bobby and Ralph Burton. Also Freshmen. Me, Kiera, and Jameer were the elders of this Purity Class. That’s when I felt Kiera’s intense gaze sweep my way. Not as angry as before, probably because she wasn’t looking at me. Her attention was on Jameer. She made a jerky nod toward the magazines.

Jameer heavy sighed, and pushed up from his seat slow, like a weightlifter squatting mad iron. “Come on little duckies. Follow the leader.”

He lined up behind the girls, the twins followed, then me. We collected our arts and crafts materials. With Thanksgiving coming up, maybe we’d get to do handprint turkeys, too.

#

DEL

Written in graffiti-styled block letters at the top of my board, headlining snipped photos of a man jogging on the beach at sunrise, and a sweet red Mustang (how can a car not be pure?), and a business meeting. Crap, after flipping through the magazine three times for those pictures, I just started cutting anything that didn’t have a hot girl in it.

The door creaked. Pastor Newsome stepped into the room. I’d seen him up close before, but always in the Emperor Palpatine robes he wore in the pulpit. Now, in his high-waisted khakis with the tucked in golf shirt, he looked like a professor. A tiny one.
Sister Vanessa got stiff and her smile flickered the way old light bulbs do. “Hey everybody, take a moment to find a spot on the wall where you can hang your collages. We’ll keep them up for the rest of our sessions as reminders of how we recognize the pure.”

Without being told, Kiera retrieved a tape dispenser from Sister Vanessa’s other supplies, and began rolling short strips into sticky loops for her girls. That’s how I thought of them now, her girls.

Jameer rolled his glue stick along the back of his final picture. He flipped it over and it wasn’t a picture, but a block of text from some article, too small for me to make out. His whole poster board was that way. No actual photos. Only typeset words, under his name, which was spelled in individually clipped letters like ransom notes in movies.

He saw me watching, and his eyebrow arched, daring me to critique his art.

Both hands raised, palms out, I made myself a non-threat. Do you, Jameer. Patiently, I waited for my turn with the tape.

When all the collages were hung, Sister Vanessa ended the session with a prayer of her own, dismissed us, then stepped into the hall to speak with Newsome. The girls hustled out of the room in a tight, Kiera-led huddle while me and the other guys gathered our things with Sloth-like cool. Ralph and Bobby chatted about chores they needed to do after dinner. Jameer stared at me.

“You know that’s super annoying,” I said.

He didn’t respond until the brothers left the room. When they were gone, he asked, “You’re taking Healthy Living at school?”

“You’re just going to ignore me calling you annoying?”

“Answer the question.”

“Yeah. Sure.”
He checked over his shoulder, a schemer’s glint in his eye. “You know nobody else in here is allowed to take it.”

No. I didn’t know that. “Why?”

“Can you give me a ride home?”

Dude, apparently, can not answer a question straight. “Fine.” I checked my phone and saw Dad texted me back with a ‘don’t worry about the sauce’. I said, “I don’t have nowhere to be.”

We stepped into the corridor together, Jameer said, “Bye Sister Vanessa.”

She was so deep into her conversation with the Pastor, her hands moving around, explaining...something. I don’t think she heard him at all.

On the church steps, we found the rest of the Purity Pledgers waiting on their rides. It was one of those springtime warm nights that was very Virginia because it was Fall and it had been twenty degrees cooler at noon. If not for the sky darkening to purple when it was barely five p.m., we could’ve been in mid-May. Kiera noticed Jameer walking with me. Her classroom scowl returned.

“Jameer, my Dad’ll be here in ten minutes,” she said.

“Tell him I’m okay tonight. I’m riding with Del.”

“You’re sure?”

It wasn’t an upbeat ‘You’re sure.” Oh no. It was someone about to stick their hand in a port-a-potty to fish out some loose change they dropped. Like, you’re sure you want to do that, because I wouldn’t.

That ‘you’re sure’ had me doing something I never thought possible in all my Kiera fantasies. I scowled back. “Yeah. I got him covered.”
Maybe I did more than scowl, and maybe I was louder than I thought. Because everyone
turned my way, meerkat-style. I’m not going to call their matching expressions fear. Concern?
That was stuff I observed from the corner of my eye, because I was locked in a staring
contest with Kiera. Battle of the Mean Mugs.
She broke from her troop, came straight at me. This was like another dream I’d had, but
not nearly as fun. Because she still looked mean, and I sensed something ugly about to happen.
“Can I talk to you?” She clamped her teeth together after she spoke, like she needed to
sever the question off another string of less pleasant words she wanted to spit at me.
“Yeah. Okay.”
This was a sharp turn from my typical Kiera dreams. In those, I was excited-nervous, the
good kind. I thought if we talked in real life, I’d have to work extra hard to keep my shit
together. Here we were, though. I wasn’t excited-nervous. I was defensive-nervous. Maybe a
little angry. Her garbage attitude had me bristling.
“Around the corner.” She stomped over to church’s shadowy side yard, assuming I’d
follow.
I almost walked to my car. She was bossing me around all crazy, everybody watching.
Sure, our conversation might be private, but her owning me in front of the Purity Pledgers was
public domain now.
Facing Jameer, I gave the ‘what’s up?’ shrug. He mouthed I don’t know, but that felt off.
His intuition, and he didn’t know what this was?
Fine. I rounded the church, met Kiera in the dark. We ended up under a bulging globe
fixture that anchored an orbital spider web and drew a squad of moths in its wash of yellow light.
She poked a finger in my chest hard enough to hurt. “Delbert Rainey, I know what you’re doing, and I want you out of this class. Gone. Tonight!”

DEL-bert RAIN-ey! Spoken the way our first grade teacher, Mrs. Martin, used to say it. The way I hate.

“People call me Del now.” I said, feeling the strangeness of how little we’d been around each other, even to say hi, the last few years. And buying myself time to process the rest of her words. She knew what I was doing and wanted me out? Did Jameer snitch? Am I that see-through? Tilting, I leaned against the church brick, telling myself I looked cool. Very cool.

“I want to call you other things,” she said, whisper-screaming so her voice didn’t carry, “but I’ll settle for you agreeing this is your last night in the pledge.”

“So what?”

If she called me out about trying to get with her, I’d deny it. Double down. She was already mad, so there was probably no convincing her to see me in a good way tonight. If I was convincing though, given time, maybe. As Qwan said way too often, die with the lie.

She said, “I know about how you and your boy Qwan are out with different girls every weekend. People still talk about that little orgy you two were in at Toya Thomas’s Freshman year. And I know you’re only in this class so you can ‘get your stats up’ or however you nasty boys talk about your escapades.”

“Get my stats—what?”

“Right. Play dumb.”

I wasn’t playing though. She said so much in that one breath it actually made me dizzy.

“You’ve got it all wrong, Kiera.”

“I don’t think so. You and Qwan have reputations.”
Qwan. Qwan had a reputation. Him. I was just his transportation. I couldn’t say that, though. Bro code. You didn’t throw your boy under the bus. Not like she’d give me the chance.

“If you two want to be man-whores in this state and the next, it’s not my business. But I won’t let you be a predator with them.” She pointed back the way we came, to her girls. “All they see is a cute, older boy who’s rough around the edges. They don’t understand you the way I do. You want to keep up your little charade, I can’t stop you, but you won’t get near them. I’m betting once you see there are no easy targets in our group, you’ll get bored and move on. It’s programmed into you. So save yourself some time and get to stepping now. Before your nose gets busted by something worse than a basketball, Mister!”

With that, she smacked me in the chest and stomped away. I stood there a moment longer, stunned. Maybe for the wrong reasons. I’d been worried that she’d seen me get bopped by that ball yesterday, and now I knew. Maybe it would bother me later, but I was stuck on the other thing she said.

_All they see is a cute, older boy whose rough around the edges._

Was that their assessment, or hers?

“Del,” Jameer, lingering at the building’s corner, “You ready?”

When I returned to the main churchyard, Kiera wouldn’t bother looking at me, though all the girls she wanted me to stay away from were. Waving Jameer to me, I went for my car and settled behind the wheel. He drifted into my passenger seat all feathery, with the big ole grin.

“You have really pissed her off;” he said. “There may be hope for you yet.”
Jameer shuffled his loafers in the footwell, kicking aside empty water bottles, gas receipts Mom always insisted I get (even if I have to walk inside for them because “they can’t ever say you stole it if you got your receipt!”) and burger wrappers spotted with dried grease. He said, “I’m going to need new shoes after you drop me off.”

“You could walk.”

“Simmer down, tiger. Your anger is misdirected.”

I threw a plastic bottle from the center console cup holder at his feet with the rest. “You knew she was about to light me up, didn’t you?”

“It’s...complicated.”

“Uncomplicate it, Jameer. Tell me how she’s getting all that crazy misinformation!”

“So, none of it’s true? You and Qwan Reid don’t go out on dates with different girls on weekends?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Funny how that works.”

We sailed through the uncrowded, tree-lined streets of Green Creek. The one car ahead of us was nothing but glowing taillights. The scene in my rearview was ink black. I knew where Jameer lived because I knew where Kiera lived, had thought too often about ringing her doorbell, and coming inside to watch TV with Deacon Westing while she finished getting ready for our fantasy date. Something that seemed unlikely now. “Am I sunk?”

Jameer answered quickly, no trace of sarcasm, and I cautioned myself not to get too hopeful. “I don’t think so. You stood your ground, didn’t get all puppy dog like I thought you
would. That’s a good thing. You don’t want to be like everybody else who worships the ground she walks on.”

“I want out of that damned Purity class. It’s dumb.” For the first time since our association began, Jameer was quiet without someone telling him to be. “What?”

He said, “You can’t quit.”

“Okay. Explain this one to me.”

“God.” A pitch-perfect rendition of the Purity Pledge reasoning he’d given the congregation last Sunday. Then he laughed. And I laughed. When he was done laughing, he said, “Seriously, if you quit, you prove her right.

“I know.” And I really would be sunk.

“If you’re hanging in, I can help.”

“Awesome. Tell me what to do next.”

“For a price. You still owe me a favor.”

We slowed at a four-way stop, the only car on the road. A close cropping of bullet holes punctured the red octagon facing us. Stupid stuff. Green Creek wasn’t the mean streets of Chicago. Probably some dumbasses testing the sights on their hunting rifles. I considered asking Jameer to get out and examine the vandalism, then driving off without him.

Instead, I let off the brake and kept us moving down the empty neighborhood street.

“Spill it.”

“Next time you’re in Healthy Living, can you ask a question for me?”

That’s…weird. “Depends on the question.”

He faltered a bit, rubbing his hands along the fabric of his pants like he was trying to burn his palms off. “I want to know if sexy dreams are normal?”
I nearly swerved into a mailbox.

He squealed and grabbed the “oh shit” handle above his door. I righted the car and stopped in the middle of the street.

“You’re talking about wet dreams.”

“I...I suppose.” None of his smug confidence showed. He wouldn’t even look at me, just kept glancing through his window like he was waiting on some other ride to come get him.

“Dawg, we can look that up on your phone right now.”

“No,” he huffed. “We can’t.” He fished something like a clamshell from his pocket and passed it to me. It took me a second to realize it was an old-fashioned flip phone. I opened it at the hinge. The upper portion was a screen, but not touch like my iPhone, and no apps. You had to tap a D-pad to move a cursor across basic functions. MENU and BACK. I remembered Dad having a phone like this when I was a little kid, a decade ago.

I said, “This works?”

“At the most basic level. I can call my parents. They call me.”

That they still made phones like this was amazing. I didn’t get on him about it, though. I mean, it could be a money thing. Maybe all his people could afford. Only, his clothes told a different story. Always pressed. Always smelling like soap. Not everyone at Green Creek High was as fortunate. His shoes looked like they cost more than my game system.

Then ‘wet dreams’ popped back in my head, and derailed my flip-phone investigation.

“Look it up on my phone.”

I handed over my cell. Though, from experience I didn’t want to tell him about, I was sure wet dreams were pretty normal.

He shook his head. “I don’t want to look it up. I want a professional opinion.”
Call-Me-Gary? A professional? If he only knew. “I’m not asking that question in class. Not in front of everybody.”

“Do it after class. Or before. I don’t care.”

“No! I--”

Blue Xenon headlights on a jacked up truck blasted the inside of my car like an alien abduction beam, reflecting off my rearview mirror and sizzling our corneas. I’d forgotten I’d been idling mid-street, and this road was too narrow for that monster truck to pass. The driver tapped their horn lightly, almost polite. After issuing a raised hand road apology like Mom taught me, I drove on, and said, “Why don’t you ask yourself?”

“I already told you I’m not allowed.”

“What’s that mean, Jameer?”

“No one in Purity Pledge is allowed anywhere near that Healthy Living class. You’re the only one who’s doing both.”

He talked about Healthy Living as if it was a downed electrical line, or tiger that escaped from the zoo. I said, “Okay, but Wikipedia. Just Google that crap, bro.”

When I glanced right, saw him staring at the scrolling scenery and clutching the fabric of his pants with nervous little pinches, I backed off. “Your people really that strict?”

The window fogged when he spoke. “I do my homework in a computer nook next to our kitchen. My dad installed three different Safe Browse programs on it. Anything those don’t block, he reviews by checking my browser history and cache when I’m done for the night.” He faced me, shrugging the way you do when you’ve told an old, boring story. “My parents are that strict.”
Lindy Blue, and Instagram models, and Call of Duty Killstreak videos, and everything else I ever surfed on my Mac came to mind. I worried a little over how much Mom and Dad knew about private time in my room. They knew more than I liked—the tissues—and that came with a nice dose of mild paranoia. But, I never really expected them to go all Homeland Security, searching my personal stuff for unsanctioned activity.

I said, “Is it like that for everyone in the pledge?”

He shrugged again. “Maybe. Or I might just be special. You gonna ask my question for me or not?”

We turned onto his street, and his house was carnival bright, light beaming from every window. You couldn’t look at it without squinting. I braked at his driveway, and he waited for his answer.

“Fine,” I said, “I got you. Then I want some results on this Kiera thing. For real.”

Cue slick comeback, right? I expected something to put him back in charge. That’s how I thought of Jameer until that moment. In charge. But, he only said, “Thanks for understanding.”

Didn’t have the heart to tell him, no, I didn’t understand and I was glad not to.

When he disappeared into the blinding lights of his smothering home, I glanced toward the dark windows of the house next door, Kiera’s.

Soon.

I whipped a three-point turn and drove away.
In Wednesday’s Healthy Living class, there were no pre-historic videos. Only Gary Graham, with the artistic skill of a puppy rolling in paint, drawing anatomical stuff that looked more like horror movies than anything in the human body. We got a uterus that looked like a deformed minotaur. A rattlesnake that might really be a sperm cell...or maybe sperm from a rattlesnake. Not sure. A repeat of his testicle drawing from the other day, it had improved. When he scrawled the word ‘vagina’ on the board, one of the Back Row Boys mumbled just loud enough, “We know about that one already.”

Woots and palms slapped as loud as firecrackers. Gary looked like he might say something, but with no backup from Vice-Principal Terrier, who was off observing the girls’ class that day, he thought better of it. He started a new drawing, a set of squiggly parallel lines.

Qwan raised his hand, and a panicked I-just-want-to-draw look settled over Gary. “Yes, Mister Reid.”

“What is that?”

Gary’s hands fell at his sides, his marker dangling between his bony fingers. “The male urethra.”

It looked like Interstate 95 on Google Maps.

Qwan groaned. “Ain’t there better pictures in the health books?”

“Well, see,” Gary said. He shuffled his feet, and the Back Row Boys quieted because he was clearly uncomfortable and they were vampires for teacher misery, “the thing is, this year we’re not using books that contain the diagrams of these body parts.”

Qwan’s chin tipped up, amused. “Seriously?”
Normally, I might’ve let that ride. But since Terrier wasn’t here banishing people, I said, “Gary, the health books are on that shelf right there.”

It was a corrugated steel rack stacked with Lifelong Health and Wellness books meant to stay in the Phys. Ed. Rooms. They could’ve been in better shape, the spines peeling away from plain brown paper backing, but they were readable. Last year, Coach passed them out before class, and collected them at the end of class. I remembered the reproduction chapter.

Gary looked squeamish. “Yes. That may be the case. But we’re not using them. The school board has decided they may not promote the goals of Healthy Living.”

His drawings did, though? “What are the goals again?”

“Healthy Living brings an updated approach to--”

From the back row, “How to smash your mom!”

I don’t know if that diss was for Gary or me. Either way, those guys had no chill. They laughed us all the way to class change.

The Healthy Living room emptied steadily, but I lagged.

“You, son? You coming?” asked Qwan.

I felt my eyebrow hook involuntarily at Qwan’s sudden claim to my parentage. “Son? You from New York now?”

He was a light-skinned dude, so his embarrassment became instant sunburn, flaring red at his ears and nose. “Whatever. Get your stuff and come on.”

“I’ll catch up.”

“Why? There’s no book. He just told you that. What are you digging in your bag for?”

Qwan talked a lot of trash, only read SparkNotes and Wikipedia pages. Didn’t mean he was dumb. I stopped faking. “I gotta ask the teacher something. It’s private. Okay?”
He frowned. Not the prepping a nasty, soul crushing joke kind of frown. We knew when we needed to be serious with each other. “You good?”

“Yeah. This ain’t for me.”

A ‘nuff-said nod. “Hit me up later.”

“Sure thing,” then, with extra emphasis, “son!”

He flipped me off and left.

Gary Graham loaded his belongings urgently, sticking his materials in his satchel with the same short hard motions a prisoner might use to stick a shiv in another inmate. He mumbled as he did it, words I couldn’t make out, broken up with the sharp, traumatic cackles. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to be alone with him, but I felt committed.

“Gary?”

He jumped. His arms froze midway between his hips and a full-on fighter’s stance.

“You’re still here.”

“Yes. I had a question.”

“About how to ‘smash my mom’?”

“No. God no, I--” Yo. Gary was young. Up close I could tell. His tight sweater vests and barely-beard and being a teacher and all made him seem older. Now, he looked as old as one of my cousins. Like twenty or twenty-one. “I needed to ask about something that might be in the books, but since we’re not using them...”

“Go on.”

Was he going to relax, though? His obvious internal debate over talking or turning into a featherweight champion made me uneasy. This better be worth it, Jameer. “I need to know about
dreams. Sexy ones.” Digging in my bag again--no faking now--I pulled out a pen, and a notepad. Ready.

“What about them?”

“They normal?”

“Wait.” Gary lowered his fists of fury. “You’re asking a real question?” He looked to the door, skeptical. “This isn’t some kind of gag?”

“Naw. I want to know.”

“Dreams? I assume you’re referring to the kind that trigger a physical response.”

“Yeah.” My stomach got fluttery, and I focused on the off-limits textbooks.

“The technical term for what you’re referring to is Nocturnal Emissions. Though I’m sure you’re aware of the more common term.”

Wet dreams. Got it. I nodded so he didn’t have to say it. He seemed uncomfortable again.

“If you’re experiencing them--”

“This ain’t for me.”

“Sure. Of course.”

“I mean, for real. It’s not for me.”

“Got it.”

My shirt was sticky. Sticky. We were talking about wet dreams and I was thinking of being sticky. Ugh! Had to hurry this up. “Can you tell me anything else about them?”

I was deep in it now, and Jameer would not accuse me of being un-thorough.

“They’re the result of the hormone levels in your--I mean anyone’s--body changing. A result of puberty. You’re producing testosterone, and semen, and when you’re sleeping the
body’s doing some test runs to make sure the plumbing’s working, so to speak. Ejaculation is the result.”

Oh God, he said ‘ejaculation’. Scribbling fast and furious, I asked, “Girls don’t have them?”

“They can. It’s not as common and doesn’t have the exact same result. Obviously.”

“Doesn’t mean anything’s wrong with you, though? If you’re having them?”

Gary shook his head. “Quite the opposite really. It’s the mind and body doing what ensures there will always be new humans.”

“Got it. Thanks.” I just about ran for the door.

“Del.”

Facing him, I expected an interrogation. Why was I asking him? Was there anyone at home I could talk to about this stuff?

He said, “Hey, keep this chat between us. I’m not totally sure this is a topic the school board would be happy about me discussing in this context. Okay?”

This context? What context? Asking would’ve meant more conversation about…this, though. I wanted to be gone. “Uh, Okay.”

He got back to stuffing things in his bag, and looking nervous. It was catching.

I thought I’d feel better once I was out of the room, job done. Thought the rest of the night would be dinner, or Xbox, or…Lindy Blue.

Aside from dinner, I never got around to the rest of it. Homework—Math, History, and English—was a beast. Whenever I switched gears between subjects, Gary’s jitters came back to me. Why would the school board be mad at him for doing his job? Thought about it all night. Even in my dreams.
The next night me and Jameer met in the church yard before Purity Pledge. Nearby somebody was burning leaves. He leaned on my car, holding my ‘nocturnal emissions’ note with two hands, the torn spiral edges fluttered on an oaky brimstone breeze.

I said, “You happy now?”

Because he didn’t look happy. He’d been staring at the page for awhile. I didn’t write that much down. “Jameer?”

“Your handwriting is terrible. But, yes. Thank you for this.”

Maybe I should’ve asked more questions about it. I mean, why make me go through all that then look like somebody kicked his dog after I did it? Whatever. “Kiera. Now what?”

Creasing the sheet, he slipped it into his back pocket, said, “You need to win Purity Pledge.”

“Win it? Like the Hunger Games?”

“Kiera’s betting you’re an opportunistic lowlife who’ll quit if you get too uncomfortable. We have to make her think different. We need to turn you into the best Purity Pledger.”

Gravel crunched under the tires of a polished, blood-colored minivan turning into the church lot. The Burton Brothers hopped from the sliding side doors, gave us an enthusiastic wave, and jogged past Shanice and Helena, who sat on the church steps sneaking glances at me and Jameer and laughing into cupped palms.

Win Purity Pledge, huh. Weird thinking of it that way. I said, “How?”

Jameer lifted the flap on his satchel, produced a spanking new Bible. “That’s yours. No more borrowing. Read up on class topics ahead of time. Be proactive. After tonight, you’re the
first to answer at least two of Sister Vanessa’s questions each session. Got it? Should be enough to get you started. Don’t look at me like that.”

Were my teeth showing? Was I snarling? “I’m taking a lot on faith here.”

He swept a hand across the sky. “Great place for it. Have I led you wrong yet?”

“You haven’t led me anywhere.”

“Yet!”

Kiera emerged in the doorway, spotted me, rolled her eyes so hard they looked demonic white, then turned her attention to her girls, urging them inside. Away from me.

“Everybody else is in there,” Jameer said, checking his watch, “You ready?”

The internal debate was on. That class was a hot garbage fire. Covenant Collages? Please. But, if excelling at this silliness put me in Kiera’s good graces…

“Let’s go get pure.”

#

On Saturday, Dad was up before I was, his office door closed, and keyboard clacking. Mom got ready for her new obsession, Hot Yoga, at the mall forty-five minutes away. She had to drive forty minutes because we ain’t even have regular Yoga in Green Creek. She didn’t announce that she was going, not with words. Every water bottle thump, cabinet slam, and dryer door thud clued me in. Her movements were leaked frustration, spilling on every object in her path.

“Del!” she screamed in a signature tone reserved strictly for me.

I met her in the kitchen, hungry, but careful not to go for cereal from the pantry, or eggs in the fridge. Storm Mom’s path was unpredictable. Please don’t let whatever’s pissing her off this morning be my fault. “Yeah, Mom?”
“Be sure you check in on your father while I’m out.”

Not me, then. Sigh. Relief.

“Make sure he has food and water.”

There was no compassion in the command. Annoyance, sure. Dad was a prisoner in the hole, or a puppy in a doggy crate. Something that’d pee on the floor if left unsupervised.

I said, “Okay.”

“What’s going on with you and Monte FISHto? You working today?”

The snap change of subject was not good news. I answered slowly, bracing myself. “Naw. Tyrell couldn’t get me on the schedule.”

“Maybe it’s time you looked into getting on someone else’s schedule. What good is a part-time job where you get no time? We had a deal, young man. That car you drive isn’t charity.”

Here we go. She hated my car. Hated that Dad bought it for Cressie the minute he got that first check from his new gig. So she—me, now that she’s gone—could help out. Run errands when they got busy. Learn about independence before it was my turn to go off to school. That’s all he told her, and that’s what she’d been calling BS on since we drove home from the lot. Maybe if she knew about my after school shopping trips on Dad’s behalf, she’d back off.

But I had a sense going there was a bad move, even if I didn’t know why, then.

So, “Not charity. I know.”

“Do you? I bet you’re going out with Qwan today, though. Burning up gas, seeing movies. If you’re not making money, you’re spending it. Do you know that?”
There was no correct answer here. Yes, would get me the “well-then-you-need-to-be-more-assertive-with-that-manager-of-yours.” No, would get me “ohhhh-so-you-think-money-grow-on-trees-well-go-pluck-some-Benjamins-off-that-spruce-out-back.”

Evade. Evade. “I got some Purity Pledge stuff to read. Was gonna work on that.”

The muscles in Mom’s face spasmed. Some complex electrical reaction tugging her between aggravation over my nonexistent work schedule and awe over my unforced churching. She couldn’t seem to settle, so she whipped her bag’s strap over her shoulder, and stomped into the garage with her duffle bouncing on her hip. “Tell your father I’ll be back later.”

“Have fun at Yoga!”

When her screeching tires faded to silence, I poured that bowl of cereal I’d been craving, carried my swishing cornflakes and a bottled water to Dad’s office door. “Hey, you good in there?”

Papers rustled. That one wheel on his rolling chair mouse-squeaked. The office door slid open.

“I’m good.” He stood in the doorway, scruffy. Streaky, mismatched stubble painted his cheeks and chin in gray-black zebra stripes. Dad looked old. Older than he should. Older than I liked.

Handing him the water, I asked, “Everything okay with you and Mom?” I thought it’d be difficult, but I blurted it out. With just me and him there, the man-to-manliness of it felt okay.

“Yeah. Of course.”

“She seemed mad when she left.”

“Son, you’ll see one day that, sometimes, with women, they need a little space. It’s not that anything’s going on. It’s just our jobs, as men, to be a cooler about…situations.”
“What kind of situations?”

Dad didn’t answer fast enough, so memories filled the gap between breaths. The last time there was a “situation” we called it “unemployment.” We’d all been at the kitchen table when Mom broke the news about tightening our belts, and Cressie reigning in her college expectations, state school instead of NYU. That’s when I started a job search that eventually ended at Monte FISHto’s.

I said, “Is everything all right with work?”

“Fine. Fine.” He backed away, inching the door shut, rude in slow motion. “I’d love to chat with you, but this project…”

“Busy season. Yeah, I know.”

He shut me out, our new normal. Me and my parents had become this math problem I didn’t get. Dots on a graph, plotted in different places, our separation wide and significant.

Halfway up the stairs I thought I heard his thumb lock clack, but didn’t bother verifying. My cereal was getting soggy and I knew better than to waste it.

#

We’d reached the “Mind Makeover” part of my Purity Pledge materials. At my desk, hunched over Sister Vanessa’s packet, I fought drowsiness while I read.

*What you consume is what you’ll emit, despite your best intentions. A pure mind cannot exist when it is bombarded with impure stimuli. And there’s a lot of it out there. Some of it’s obvious. Pornography...*

My spine locked, and my cheeks flared. I glanced around to ensure I was still alone. Kept reading.
...graphically violent or sexual movies, Nintendo games, magazines at your grocery checkout featuring scantily clad women, comic books, even some books without pictures.

Again, I stopped reading. Not from guilt—though I guess I was supposed to feel guilty because that list encompassed everything in life. I was confused. Why Nintendo games specifically? Those are, like, the mildest games around. Who didn’t like Mario?

Also, I’d recognized something. That part about the women on magazine covers, I’d heard it before. In one of Newsome’s sermons.

It was only the second or third time I’d been to First Missionary with Mom, and it was Newsome’s first truly epic rant. The pastor got everybody going by having one of his minions bring this big ole stack of magazines to his podium. Newsome let them sit there for a full minute, letting the congregation wonder what was happening. Then he plucked a magazine off the top of the stack and showed us the cover.

“High Fashion,” he said, pointing to the title. “Established in 1943. Any of you recognize this Reality Show Actress here?”

Of course. Everyone with a TV, Twitter, or Instagram knew her.

“Tell me, what you think she’s acting like? In her bikini, with her ‘Secrets to a Perfect Booty’? I think she acting like a Jezebel, an Oscar-worthy performance. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The ‘amens’ were loud and plentiful. When he tossed the magazine in the floor, and peeled the next glossy mag off the stack to show us a famous tennis star in a short skirt, bare arms, and exposed belly. He repeated his analysis, to even more applause.

With those memories in mind, I flipped to the cover page inside my Purity Pledge folder. At the bottom-center, I saw what I didn’t care to look for before.
Original Materials by:

Pastor Jessup P. Newsome

&

Vanessa D. Newsome

The Pastor and Sister Vanessa were related?

Well, shit.
It felt like one of Newsome’s Old Testament miracles that Jameer’s ancient phone could send and receive texts. It did, though, and I hit him up because now I had questions.

Some were about Sister Vanessa’s relation to Newsome—his daughter, right? Most were about an activity in the Purity Pledge packet. It said “Mind Makeover Testimony – Youth Sunday”.

Youth Sunday was tomorrow.

When my phone buzzed, it wasn’t Jameer. Also, it wasn’t a surprise.

Qwan: Yo let’s go see that new Marvel joint tonight. Doctor Hulk or Captain Ant, whatever it is.

Qwan: I been DM’ing with a couple a shorties on the Gram. They trying to come

Qwan: The one I got you is a dime. For real this time.

Qwan: D?

Qwan’s no-car-having-self begging me to be his chauffeur, like every Saturday. If he didn’t do it, I’d know he’d been kidnapped or something.

Qwan: D!

Me: Can’t. Getting this Kiera thing together.

Qwan: You with her right now? My DUDE!

Me: Naw. I’m gonna see her tomorrow. Gettin ready.

Qwan: You ain’t going out TONITE ‘cuz you gonna see her TOMORROW?

Me: I said I got something to do. Get somebody else to drive you on that wack date.

Qwan: Alright, man. Come get me.

Me: The hell? I JUST TOLD YOU I GOT SOMETHING TO DO!
Qwan: I know, Kiera. Come get me so I can help. I owe a debt. Too many wack dates. Got it.

He wanted to help? No ulterior motive? Rare. But not unheard of. Summer before last, when we were too young for real jobs, but I needed to earn because my parents’ money troubles were starting to be a thing, I mowed lawns for extra cash. He spent a couple of hundred-degree afternoons helping me bag up the loose grass, dripping sweat and cooking in the heat. When I tried to give him some dough, he wouldn’t take it, even though his mom didn’t have much money either. Qwan wouldn’t touch the measly five bucks I pushed at him, even when I got mad about it.

“You gonna beat me up until I take your money?” he said, “You always been backwards, D.”

That made me madder. Everything was a stupid joke to him. Got to a point I really did feel like beating him up.

We’d never come to blows. I wasn’t really a fighter, and Qwan’s been on a residency tour of Green Creek’s tougher neighborhoods most of his life. Him, his mom, and his sister moved to a different worn down apartment or raggedy rental house every couple of years. Places that came with mean neighbors. He’d had to stick up for himself way more than I did, and would probably demolish me if the brawl-for-it-all went down.

That day, in that heat, when I yelled foul stuff at him, and threw balled up money in his face, he never got angry. All he said was, “I ain’t taking it because you trying to act like you don’t need it. I’m used to struggling. I’m just giving you time to adjust. Now pick your money up, and pay me back some other way when your people are all good again.”

Everything a joke with him. Until it wasn’t.
So, yeah. Maybe I wasn’t as salty over the chauffeur-act and all those garbage double-dates as I made him think. Payback didn’t always mean cash.

Before I felt too bad about snapping on him, and gave in to our usual weekend routine, Jameer’s response popped on my phone. After I read it...

**Me**: You really down to help? No shade?

**Qwan**: What! No! Come get me.

**Me**: On the way. But we gotta make a stop after.

#

When I was little, Mom took me to the Green Creek Library every weekend and let me lay on the rainbow carpet in the children’s section with *WE HAD A PICNIC THIS SUNDAY PAST*, or *WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE*, spread in front of me. She’d rest in a nearby chair reading her own grown up books, and we’d eventually leave with a haul that’d keep us busy until the next trip. I remember flipping those pages and feeling like I’d found portals to all worlds and possibilities.

One day a long time ago, I heard Mom and Dad arguing through the wall. Teachers were sending notes-- “Del seems withdrawn” and “Del’s gotten some light teasing during recess”--home. Dad thought I spent too much time alone. My books and comics and the being stuck in my own head wasn’t going to help me be socially well-rounded.

His solution, City League basketball. Because him and Uncle Kendall played ball. They were stars on the Green Creek High Team back in the day. Dad was good enough for a scholarship until he wrecked his knee. Their skills were the currency that let them walk on to any court, in any neighborhood, and fit in immediately. It’d help me be a better “Rainey Man”.

Not quite.
Never really took to the sport. I did get to know Qwan while we sat on the bench together.

Beside me again, his head out the window, he yelled “what’s up ladies” to some girls who sneered and rolled their eyes as we passed. We stopped at the next light, close to our destination. It cycled to green and, for the briefest moment, I couldn’t remember how to get to our destination. The Green Creek Library.

No GPS needed. There were only so many options when it came to navigating our town. The situation was more ‘take the next right, or the one after’? That’s how long it’d been since my last trip to where the books live. Used to love the place, now I could barely find it.

It was the first right, and we pulled into the parking lot of the giant’s shoebox. That’s how I used to think of it. The building was an oblong, white rectangle that felt smaller than I remembered.

Jameer emerged from the entrance, waiting on us. Me and Qwan approached and an anxiety wave crashed into me. I needed to introduce them. What if they hated each other?

But, Qwan took the initiative. “What up.”

Jameer slapped his palm. “Hey.”

Okay. Worried for nothing.

Jameer said, “I got us a study room.”

“For what?” I said.

“To make sure you give the Mind Makeover Testimony to end all testimonies tomorrow.”

We followed him in. The spicy moist scent of old pages hit me, knocked me into a time tunnel. Did they still have that rainbow carpet? Somewhere in the tiny building a baby cried, and
I bet that carpet would be there as long as there was paper, and mothers, and kids who wanted to explore the universe through words and pictures.

Jameer led us to a back corner. Qwan—I’d filled him in on the way over—said, “So you’re the man with the master Kiera plan.”

Jameer didn’t get the chance to answer because someone called my name, someone I hadn’t heard from in a long time. “Del?”

Cheyenne Griffith rounded the “Fiction S-T” shelf, and she wasn’t alone. She carried the crying baby I’d heard—her daughter—on her hip, dabbing at the kid’s tears with a food stained bib.

“Chey!” I said, happy to see her until I thought harder, and the happiness became something less comfortable.

Cheyenne Griffith was someone I’d grown up with. We’d spent a memorable hour together in a bathroom at a certain party a couple of years ago. And she was a charter member of Green Creek’s Infamous Baby-Getters Club.

“Hey yourself.” Her attention was on the baby when she spoke, inserting and re-inserting a pacifier in the child’s mouth. As soon as Cheyenne put it in, the baby puckered her mouth and ejected it so it went bobbing on a strap clipped to her onesie, forcing Cheyenne to fish for it, then try again. She said, “Hey Qwan.”

“Chey.”

“And,” her eyes flicked to the third member of our trio, “Jamal?”

“Jameer,” he corrected.

“Yeah, right. Sorry. We were in Social Studies together last – oh shit.”

Not shit, thankfully. The baby vomited on her, giggling the whole time. Throwing up must be much more pleasant when you’re that age.

Cheyenne grabbed for a cloth from the big bag at her hip. From its open mouth, I saw several puffy diapers protruding, a couple of capped bottles, a container of baby wipes. Me, Qwan, and Jameer shuffled our feet. A familiar dance for Green Creekers who found themselves in the presence of a Baby Getter with nothing to say. Nothing we could relate to.

That was the case most of the time. With me and with Cheyenne it was different. Because of our secret. The one I was so ashamed of.

While her mother dabbed at her chin and bonnet, the baby girl reached for me with a chubby, damp hand. I leaned toward her. “Hey to you, too.”

She squealed with delight, limbs she couldn’t quite control whipping about. “Hold still,” said Cheyenne, a tired quake in her voice. “You got us both smelling like spoiled milk.”
“Cheyenne, you ready?” A woman—an older, bigger, more tired version of Cheyenne—emerged from the stacks with several books cradled in her arms. I glimpsed words like “Résumés for Dummies” and “Your Career in the Medical Field” on spines among a few colorful picture books. While I eyed her books, Cheyenne’s mom eyed us, frowning. Suspicious.

My stomach clenched.

“Little girl,” Cheyenne’s mom said. Both Cheyenne and the baby flinched at the sound.

“I’m ready, Ma.”

The older woman proceeded to the check out desk, never bothering to speak or acknowledge us beyond her distrustful scowl. From what I’d heard, boys and/or men were pretty much non-factors at their house these days.

Cheyenne’s shoulders slumped, and her daughter pawed at her hair. “Good to see you, Del.”

I lied and said the same. She trudged away, a mother joining her mother. And I went for the study room, avoiding eye contact with Qwan. Move along. Nothing to see here.

#

That secret. None of the people closest to me knew it. Not Qwan. Not my parents. Not anyone at school. Cheyenne, though, the girl I’d been locked in a bathroom with two years ago, my co-star in a lewd, Lindy Blue worthy sexcapade that traveled the halls of Green Creek High with other mythical re-tellings of Toya Thomas’s basement party, she knew.

Confession: We—me and Cheyenne—didn’t do it, or anything, that night. No third base. No second base. No first. There wasn’t even a ball game. Not even close. At the legendary orgy where “everybody” got some, I did not.

I was still a virgin.
“Here,” Jameer said, tapping a pencil on the notepad he’d scrawled all over, “you’re going to want put emphasis on this part because...Del!”

Jameer’s shout snatched me from the window I’d been staring through since watching Cheyenne’s mom pick her and the baby up fifteen minutes ago. Before that, I’d only been half-dialed into the Mind Makeover speech Jameer had been writing with me. For me. Even Qwan got some good feedback in between communicating with whatever girl, or girls, he was texting.

Jameer’s face was ice. I was wasting his time. My phone buzzed in pocket, and when I peeked, Jameer sighed and dropped the speech on the table.

Qwan: You cool?

Right in the room, but checking on me covertly.

Me: Cool.

He sucked his teeth and shook his head, seeing through that lie. Though he never picked up on the biggest lie I’d ever told.

It was summer, Toya’s birthday. Billed as a barbecue-cake-ice cream thing, not even my Mom had an issue with it. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas would be there the whole time! Us kids would play music and watch movies. No big deal.

Except, the Thomas’s house was huge, one of the biggest in Green Creek, making supervision this fluid thing. Either the parents stayed in the exact same room as us at all times, or they didn’t exist. Mr. Thomas vanished to the golf course early. Mrs. Thomas lost track of time with her friends over a bunch of margaritas waaaayyy upstairs. And, wouldn’t you know it, the basement door locked from the inside.
Toya set it off with the Spin the Bottle app on her phone. That escalated to Truth or Dare. Nobody even fronted like truth was an option, so when Cheyenne was up, her challenge came directly from the hostess herself.

“Cheyenne, I dare you to lock yourself in the bathroom with…Del! And don’t come out until you’re a woman!”

Cheyenne hit Toya with a wide-eyed, horrified look I’d think of later when it got around school their relationship morphed from sorta-friends, to frenemies, to outright enemies (something that took all of a day). But, in that instant, I was horrified, too.

Was Cheyenne hesitant (angry? disgusted?) because it was my name in the dare? Would she have jumped and cheered if it was Qwan, or Mason Miles, or Rashad Jackson?

Braced for a refusal, that horror went away when Cheyenne hopped to her feet without a word, grabbed my hand, and led me to our assigned location. She closed and locked the bathroom door behind us.

New hope and fear collided: was this happening? I patted my back pocket, confirming the lone condom Dad insisted I carry at all times was there. Check!

Cheyenne, looped her arms around my neck, tilted her chin up, and brought my face close to mine. Not a kiss, she shifted left, and put her mouth close to my ear. “Don’t even think about it, Del. Here’s what’s going down…”

The next five minutes was spent rustling the shower curtain, and thumping the door with my sneaker at odd intervals while Cheyenne issued the occasional Moan of Ecstasy. When the nosy a-holes on the other side of the door applauded, we giggled into cupped hands. Soon, the crowd outside dispersed to what we’d later learn was their own—real—debauchery. But we hung
out in the space we claimed for a whole hour, talking in whispers, enjoying each other’s company in the stress-free wake of fake sex.

When someone knocked—they really needed to use the bathroom—we made our pact. Die with the lie.

After that party, me and Cheyenne barely spoke. Plenty of people spoke about us. There was even this short-lived shipping situation—“Chey-Del”, which had no ring to it—that sparked then died a quick death once upperclassmen took notice of her. I’d only ever discussed the bare minimum details about our time in the bathroom with Qwan, yet the stories I heard about my own deflowering were way more limber than I remembered. Some of it was flattering, but most of it was about her. How good she was supposed to be at things that never happened. Cheyenne went from unnoticed, to coveted.

I remembered when her clothes got tighter, her walking around the halls with her stomach poking out extra far while she massaged her lower back. Her belly button protruding a little farther than everything else, like the baby was trying to show everyone at Green Creek its thumbprint. Then, one day, Cheyenne was just gone.

Qwan sent me another text.

**Qwan:** Your daughter’s cute bro. Got your smile. ;)

Snatching a sheet from Jameer’s pad, I balled it up, and hurled it at Qwan’s forehead with force that would’ve made it lethal had it been a baseball. Since it was paper, it bounced off his cap, while he erupted into belly laughs.

Jameer, clueless, got mad. “What are you two doing?”

“Nothing,” Qwan said. “Inside joke.”
It was one of those inside jokes no one but him found funny. Of course Cheyenne’s kid wasn’t my kid. Even if we’d actually had sex back in the day, that math didn’t work out. It was just one of Qwan’s more dickish go tos.

Jameer, annoyed at having his time wasted, said, “Are we doing this or what?”

“Yeah man,” I struggled recalling what he’d said a moment ago, “You want me to emphasize…something.”

He leaned over the speech, pointed his knobby pencil tip at different underlined words and headings. Explaining the power of what he’d put together. “You’re going to want to go last tomorrow. The closer.”

Qwan leaned in with us, three different colognes mingled into a mild, spontaneous tear gas. On his review of the speech, he said, “That’s a lot of shit to remember.”

Jameer countered. “A lot of good…ish.”

“Did you just drop the ‘t’ then re-arrange the letters in shit?”

“Leave him alone,” I said, “Jameer’s trying to help.”

“So am I.”

“How?” Jameer asked. “Criticizing the length isn’t going to—“

“Bullets,” Qwan said. So sudden and strange, it shut down Jameer and had me wondering if he wanted me to shoot somebody. I made a finger gun and shrugged.

“Naw, man. The little dots in a list. Bullet points. Like Mr. Phipps be using in science. You’re not going to be up in front of the holy rollers reading off paper. It makes you look sloppy. If you go up there empty handed, I know you, you’ll get nervous and forget. So, bullets. You glance down at them, get back on track. You amateur ass dudes should’ve recruited me a long time ago.”
The choir sang three selections. The collection plate went around twice. Missus Baines led a long prayer for the sick and shut-in First Missionary House of the Lord members. Then Pastor Newsome granted Sister Vanessa the mic to introduce our Purity Pledge class.

Stress sweat prickled under my shirt, rolled down my back and chest. I shimmied out of my suit coat to get cooler, jostling Mom who’d been giving me more and more weird looks lately. Couldn’t deal with that now. My index cards were damp in my hand, the ink on the top card’s header smudged, but not unreadable.

When you’re pure, you:

• Avoid misinformation and rumors, people know your true heart
• Are naturally drawn to other pure people
• Can support other pure people in their journey
• Love God (no, no...used that one already)

“Hey kids,” said Sister Vanessa, “come on up.”

Sliding into the aisle, I met Jameer, and the Burton Brothers, and Kiera’s girls with Kiera bringing up the rear. We didn’t form a lineup like our first Sunday in front of the congregation. We were a loose huddle of pressed shirts, slacks, and dresses twitching behind Mama Bear Vanessa.

She passed the mic to no one in particular, but Mya leapt forward, more eager than I’d ever seen her.

“To me, being pure means...” and she told a sweet story of not being distracted as she went on to college, and law school, and became a “high-ranking government official.” Though
she didn’t specify the role, someone in the congregation shouted, “Be the President, Baby!”

Triggering applause, and Mya perked up like, yeah, President.

The microphone made its way from hand to hand, though neither me or Kiera went out of our way to grab it. Down to the last three, Jameer said his piece then extended the mic to Kiera, preserving my finale. I ran the bullets down again, in case it had to be me. *Misinformation. Other pure people. Support.*

Kiera took her turn, spun toward the congregation in a way that made the hem of her dress fan at the hip, knocking my bullet points and pretty much all other words from my brain.

“For me,” she began, “being pure is about more than *just* me. It’s about gratitude I have for all my family has done for me, my blood relations and my spiritual family. It’s about the example I set for others who watch me.”

I yanked my eyes from her waistline. Something strange was happening.

In the back pew, a couple of women stood like something bit them. One pointed at us, the other clasped hands to her mouth as if to hold in a shout—something people didn’t usually bother holding in here.

Kiera stuttered, noticing it too, “But I--I mean, being pure is--”

Now more members of the congregation stood. Some clapping. A general joyous buzz swept through the place, like The Wave at a baseball game.

The church was excited about our public pledge, we all knew that. Not this excited.

A flash of olive green passed me, a new person inching very close to Kiera. He tapped her on the shoulder, and said, “Hey, Tu-tu!”

*Tu-tu?*
Startled she leapt around, recognition slapped her and she spilled tears in a crazy gush.

“Oh, oh, oh!”

Dropping the microphone, Kiera set off a shrill whining feedback throughout the sanctuary, and flung herself at this newcomer who wasn’t really new. She sobbed helplessly, turning the lapel of his Army uniform darker with her tears.

“I thought I’d have to hide back there all night waiting for you to do your speech,” he said to her.

Kiera tried to respond, but was too much of a mess to form real words.

Deaconess Westing joined us. Her handkerchief dangling from her fist like the tail of a crushed animal. She pressed into her daughter, embracing her from behind, while Deacon Westing kept his distance, nodding proudly.

The church rejoiced. The organ player went crazy banging keys in short quick blasts. Folks spread arms wide, screamed thank yous to the heavens. Mom stood still, smiling, more reserved than some, the tears cutting tracks down her cheeks glistened in the stained glass light.

I folded my cards, slid them in my pants pocket. Relieved. And disappointed. Didn’t know it was possible to be both at the same time. Silent and forgotten up there in the pulpit wasn’t winning Purity Pledge. All that work, I didn’t get to tell Kiera, the congregation, or anyone else what being pure meant to me. They didn’t care.

Wesley Westing, Kiera’s big brother, had come home.
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Publication History

Novels and Collections

UNTITLED NOVEL, HarperCollins 2020
AFTERBURN, HarperCollins 2019
LIFT OFF, An Anthology of YA Stories, Penguin Random House (as Editor) 2018
HEALTHY LIVING AND OTHER ELECTIVES, HarperCollins 2018
OVERTURNED, Scholastic Press 2017
ENDANGERED, HarperCollins 2015
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Short Stories

“Long’s Division,” www.yareview.net 2013
“Power and Purpose,” WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT, Kensington Publishing 2007
“The Track,” DARK DREAMS, Kensington Publishing 2004

Professional Experience

We Need Diverse Books (Non-Profit), Bethesda, Maryland 2014 - Present
Sr. Vice President of Communications and Development
• Co-Founder
• Work with executive committee and volunteers to recognize internal and external communications opportunities and solutions, and define and execute appropriate strategies to support them